

RESEARCH ARTICLE

"They Just Don't Stand for Nothing": LGBT Christians' Definitions of Non-Religious Others

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In this exploratory study, I examine how a group of LGBT Christians conceptualized non-religious others. Based on over 450 hours of fieldwork in an LGBT Christian church located in the southeastern region of the United States, I demonstrate how a group of LGBT Christians defined non-religious others as (1) morally suspect and untrustworthy, (2) in need of salvation and guidance, and (3) poor representations of the LGBT community. Although these LGBT Christians used "non-religious" as a catchall term without ever specifying exactly who it captured, they used the first two definitions to apply to non-religious people in general regardless of sexuality while explicitly focusing on non-religious sexual minorities in their third definition. Moreover, I show how these definitions echoed mainstream religious rhetoric in America used to marginalize both sexual and religious minorities. In conclusion, I draw out two central implications of this work: (1) how religious depictions of non-religious people may reproduce societal patterns of inequality; and (2) the importance of analyzing how religious people define and interpret non-religious others.

An emerging line of research convincingly demonstrates that non-religious people face significant marginalization in contemporary American society (see, e.g., Cragun et al., 2012; Hunsberger and Altemeyer, 2006). Many Americans would have trouble, for example, voting for a non-religious candidate (Jones, 2007), accepting non-religious romantic partners for their children (Edgell et al., 2006), dealing with non-religious people in an unbiased manner (Gervais, 2011), or believing non-religious people share their vision of America (Edgell et al., 2006). Further, these studies have found that both abstract and personal depictions of non-religious people may evoke hostile responses from others (Swan and Heesacker, 2012), and that self-identified atheists – people who openly disclose their lack of religious practice or belief – often face considerable discrimination that may include slander, ostracism, or the denial of services (Hammer et al., 2012). While these studies have importantly revealed societal patterns of marginalization experienced by non-religious people, we know less about the ways religious people make sense of non-religious others. How do American religious people talk about non-religious others in the course of their ongoing social interactions?

At the same time that studies have been unearthing the marginalization of non-religious people, another line of research reveals that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) Americans who are religious often face tremendous conflict when attempting to integrate their seemingly

disparate religious and sexual identities (Sumerau, 2012a; Thumma, 1991; Wolkomir, 2006). Specifically, these studies have shown that LGBT religious people in America draw upon elements of religious and queer cultures to integrate their sexual and religious identities. In so doing, however, researchers have found that religious sexual minorities in America often, regardless of their intentions, reproduce societal patterns of racial, classed, gendered, sexual, and religious inequality (see, e.g., Sumerau, 2012b; McQueeney, 2009; Wilcox, 2009). While these studies have dramatically expanded our understanding of queer religious cultures, they have thus far left the ways that religious sexual minorities in America conceptualize non-religious people unexplored. How do religious sexual minorities make sense of non-religious others?

The significance of these questions extends well beyond the context of American sexual and religious politics and experience. Examining the relationship between religion and national identity in Britain, for example, researchers have shown that collective notions of non-religious "others" may facilitate the conceptualization of immigrants as a threat even in countries with lower levels of religiosity (see, e.g., Day 2011; Storm 2011a; Storm 2011b; Storm 2013). Similarly, researchers have shown that religious sexual minorities in other countries experience many of the same identity conflicts as those within the American context while working to fashion authentic religious selves (see, e.g. Valentine et al. 2010; Yip 1997; 2002; 2004). Rather than limited to American sexual-religious dynamics, these studies suggest there may be much to learn from the ways sexual minorities in various local, regional, national and religious contexts make sense of non-religion while constructing religious selves.

Although typically examined in isolation from one another, each of the aforementioned lines of research converges upon an examination of the reproduction of social inequalities (see, e.g., Schwalbe et al., 2000). In their examination of discrimination faced by non-religious people, for example, Hammer and associates (2012) demonstrate that discrimination faced by non-religious people mirrors the experiences of marginalization embedded within contemporary LGBT experiences. In a similar fashion, O'Brien's (2004) examination of religious and sexual identity integration reveals recurring tensions between secular and religious LGBT social organizations. As a result, the experiences of religious sexual minorities in America provide an intriguing opportunity to explore the interrelation of these two fields. How do religious sexual minorities in America talk about non-religious people in general and non-religious sexual minorities specifically, and what consequences do these actions have for the reproduction of inequality?

I examine these questions through an ethnographic study of an LGBT Christian church located in the southeastern region of the United States. Specifically, I analyze the ways a group of religious sexual minorities defined non-religious people during their social interactions. In so doing, I extend analyses of religious sexual minorities and non-religious people in the United States by demonstrating ways religious people's definitions of non-religious others may facilitate the ongoing marginalization of both sexual and religious minorities. It is important to note that it is not my intention to generalize these findings to the larger population of LGBT Christians or other religious people within the United States or elsewhere. Rather, I use the data from this study to examine the ways that religious people, LGBT, American, or otherwise, define non-believers in ways that reproduce sexual and religious inequalities.

To this end, my analysis draws upon symbolic interactionist articulations of inequality reproduction (see Schwalbe et al. 2000 for a review). Examining decades of (mostly American-based) research for patterns of inequality reproduction, for example, Schwalbe and associates (2000) found that one of the primary ways people – both dominants and subordinates – claimed creditable selves was by defining members of disadvantaged groups as deficient "others" (see also Sumerau and Cragun 2014). Whereas researchers have thus far left the ways religious people may "other" non-religious people unexplored, countless studies have shown that people in a wide variety of contexts claim positive selves by denigrating the "morality" of other social groups (see, e.g., Deeb-Sossa 2007; Holden 1997; Kleinman 1996). As I demonstrate below, the LGBT Christians at the heart of this study accomplished the same feat by positioning non-religious people in general and non-religious sexual minorities specifically as morally – and thus socially – deficient. In so doing, they simultaneously claimed positive (e.g., moral) selves while symbolically reproducing the marginalization of non-religious people in both American and international contexts.

Setting and Method

Data for this study derive from participant observation in a southeastern American church affiliated with the Metropolitan Community Churches (MCC). The MCC is an international denomination comprised of over 300 congregations, which promotes an inclusive doctrine based on "the recognition of the inherent value of each individual regardless of sexual orientation, race, class, gender, gender identification, age, or abilities" (MCC, 2009). The church at the heart of this study developed in 1993 when LGBT Christians who felt excluded by churches in their area formed two Bible study groups. Over the next fifteen years, these groups expanded into an organization that purchased its own property and now holds multiple forms of weekly services.

My involvement with the Church (all names are pseudonyms) began when I contacted their office and explained my research interest. At the time, I was seeking to study the development of American religious and LGBT organizations over time. The representative I spoke with explained that since they were currently without a pastor I would need to propose my study to the board of directors. At the next board meeting, I introduced myself as a bisexual, white, atheist, genderqueer male raised in a working class Baptist home in the southeastern United States, and presented members with a proposal for my study, professional references, and some articles I wrote while working as a journalist. Two weeks later, the members granted my request to study their church.

Importantly, my own identification as a non-religious person often became salient in subtle ways throughout my participant observation. As noted above, I voluntarily disclosed my lack of religious belief and practice to the membership at the outset of the study. As a result, many members adopted me, as a lesbian woman named Patricia¹ put it, "like a pet project for the church." Rather than explicitly questioning my motivations for non-belief, however, the members typically implied that I should learn the importance of religion from them. As a lesbian woman named Carla told me over coffee one morning, "It seems like such a waste that you are here for all our events, and yet, you haven't had your own revelation yet. I guess it is just a matter of time before you realize that you belong here too." Similarly, a gay man named Micah invited me to dinner one night by explaining that, "I feel like it is my duty to talk to you son. Like you, I grew up in fundamentalism, and I understand how difficult that can be. You need to realize that God still loves you, and so we'll talk about it." In order to manage these interactions, I accepted them as – especially after witnessing similar interactions with visitors to the church – part of the process whereby church members responded to non-religion in their presence (see also Sumerau 2014), and took detailed notes about each experience.

Alongside statements like these, members often made comments during social events that suggested I was a believer, which I also noted in detail. As the gay male pastor² told a group of people during a dinner party, "You do know that he's one of us already, one of God's children, he just doesn't realize it yet." Similarly, a lesbian

woman named Whitney told visitors that I was, "Our little conversion project. He came here to study us, but he'll leave here wrapped in God's glory." Further, members would often stop in the middle of statements about non-religious people as if to gauge my reaction, ask me to lead prayers at gatherings, seek me out to talk about the importance of "being saved," and begin conversations with me by saying things like, "So, you do realize you're really just like us, right" or "I don't know how you feel about this stuff, but let me explain why this is so important for all of us." Although none of the members ever treated me in any way that could be characterized as overtly hostile, I was continuously reminded that, as a non-religious person, I did not completely fit the norms of the church. In fact, especially at times when I was asked to participate in religious rites, I often felt "othered," and later came to realize that such experiences aligned with the members' definition of non-religious people as others in need of guidance and salvation.

In fact, Church members had ample opportunity to "convert me" because I spent a total of 36 months actively involved in all aspects of the Church. During this time, I observed and participated in worship services (190), board meetings (30), Bible studies (45), choir practices (10), outreach efforts (5), and social events (105) with members. I also participated in the process whereby members acquired the services of a gay male pastor raised and trained in the Southern Baptist tradition, and witnessed a major shift in the population dynamics of the church. Further, I collected newsletters, newspaper pieces, emails, hymnals, pamphlets, and publications by the congregation and the denomination. On average, I spent about one-to-three hours with members during each visit conducting informal interviews before and after each activity. During my fieldwork, I audio-recorded every meeting and took shorthand notes whenever possible. Afterward, I used these resources to compose detailed fieldnotes, transcribed audio recordings in full, and took notes on any materials gathered in the field.

I also conducted 20 life history interviews with members of the church. Interviews lasted between 3 and 4 hours, and I audio-recorded and transcribed each one

in full. I used an interview guide that consisted of a list of orienting questions about members' religious and social background and involvement in the church, but otherwise the interviews were unstructured. My sample consisted of 8 white lesbian women, 2 African-American lesbian women, and 10 white gay men including the new pastor. Each respondent held informal or formal positions of power in the church at some point during my study. All respondents held middle and upper-middle class jobs, and all but one had been raised in American Protestant churches.³

As noted above, the population of the church experienced a dramatic shift during the course of my fieldwork. After acquiring the services of a new pastor, the church underwent a significant shift from an inclusive organization predicated upon democratic decision making, egalitarian relations (see Sumerau 2012a for an examination of this version of the church) to a more "traditional" Evangelical church predicated upon pastoral authority and hierarchical relations (see Sumerau et al. 2014 for an examination of this version of the church). As **Tables 1** and **2** show, this process dramatically altered the makeup of the church, and as a result, my overall study captures the interpersonal and organizational dynamics of two religious groups within one space. In the course of these shifts, however, the definition and discussion of non-religious people remained constant. As such, my analysis draws from data gathered during both phases of congregational development, and captures the overall interpretation of non-religious others throughout the entirety of the study.

In order to capture the overall interpretation of non-religious others within the Church, however, it is important to note that the composition of the church as well as its relationship to other religious organizations may have played a role in the definitions outlined below. In terms of composition, for example, the Church drew members from a wide variety of religious backgrounds including but not limited to conservative Protestant (e.g., Baptist, Pentecostal, Church of Christ, and Mormon), mainline or liberal Protestant (e.g., Methodist, Presbyterian, and Anglican), Catholic (both Latin and Roman variants), Orthodox Christian, Jewish (Reformed), Muslim,

Demographic Category	Subgroup Characteristics	Population at time of Pastor's Arrival	Population One Year After Pastor's Arrival
Women	Lesbian	59	15
	Transsexual	3	0
	Heterosexual	4	0
	Total	66	15
Men	Gay	25	30
	Transsexual	3	0
	Bisexual	2	0
	Heterosexual	2	0
	Total	32	30
Total Church	Total	98	45

Table 1: Gender and Sexual Characteristics of the Church Over Time.^{5,6}

Race / Ethnic Category	Social Class Category	Population at time of Pastor's Arrival	Population One Year After Pastor's Arrival
White	Upper Class	12	3
	Middle Class	58	17
	Lower Class	18	18
	Total	88	38
Black	Middle Class	2	1
	Lower Class	3	5
	Total	5	6
Hispanic	Middle Class	1	1
	Lower Class	4	0
	Total	5	1
Total Church	Total	98	45

Table 2: Race and Class Characteristics of the Church Over Time.

non-denominational Christian (Universalists), Secular Humanists (e.g., former members of atheist groups), Wicca, and Buddhist traditions. Similarly, the Church regularly engaged in interfaith services, charitable activities, and political collaboration with, for example, Muslim, Jewish, Methodist, Unitarian Universalist, and Catholic organizations in their local community. Whereas Church members consistently differentiated between religious and non-religious others, they were surprisingly open to religious people from other faith traditions, and never characterized members of these groups as non-religious. Rather than capturing an articulation of American Christian versus other, my analysis demonstrates the definition of non-religious people as utterly "other" to religious people regardless of religious background and practice.

Building on these observations, my analysis developed in an inductive fashion. Throughout my fieldwork, Church members regularly commented on the lack of moral fiber among "some" LGBT groups. Seeking to understand this phenomenon, I began asking my respondents their opinions on non-religious sexual minorities when I conducted fieldwork and added this question to my interview guide.⁴ As a result, I captured statements about non-religious people made by 91 members during my fieldwork, and formal statements made by all 20 life history respondents on the same subject.

Drawing on elements of "grounded theory" (Charmaz, 2006), I began coding the members' definitions of non-religious sexual minorities, and organizing them based on their content. Doing so revealed patterns that I sorted into thematic categories. Further, I examined literature concerning sexual minorities and non-religious people, and began to see the responses of the members as part of the process through which they distanced themselves from negative depictions of LGBT people. Building on this insight, I generated labels to capture the three ways they defined non-religious others: (1) morally suspect and untrustworthy, (2) in need of salvation and guidance, and (3) poor representations of the LGBT community. Rather than attempting to demonstrate all of Church members' statements, however, I use representative examples drawn from both observational and life history data throughout

my analysis to illuminate some ways religious people may define non-religious others.

LGBT Christians' Definitions of Non-Religious Others

What follows is an analysis of how LGBT Christians talked about non-religious people during social interactions. First, I examine how LGBT Christians defined non-religious people, LGBT or otherwise, as morally suspect and untrustworthy. These definitions assumed that religious belief and practice were essential elements of being a good person. Then, I show how LGBT Christians defined non-religious people – regardless of sexuality – as in need of salvation, and non-religious sexual minorities as in need of guidance, which involved emphasizing the supposedly detrimental effects of non-religion. Finally, I analyze how LGBT Christians defined non-religious sexual minorities as poor representations of the LGBT community. While these definitions allowed LGBT Christians to make sense of non-religious people, they ultimately reproduced the marginalization of both religious and sexual minorities. Before presenting my analysis, however, I briefly sketch the context of contemporary American debates concerning religion and sexuality wherein my respondents' negotiations of nonreligious others occurred.

Contemporary American Debates concerning Religion and Sexuality

Although some Christian traditions – both American and international – began issuing statements about the "problem of homosexuality" as early as the 1940's (see Wilcox 2001), conservative Christian movements in America – such as the Religious Right (Fetner 2008), abstinence-only sexual education groups (Fields 2008), and the Ex-gay Ministries (Robinson and Spivey 2007) – have consistently placed homosexuality at the center of their opposition to racial, gendered, and sexual civil rights in America over the past four decades (see also Warner 1999). Within this context, conservative Christian leaders have consistently defined homosexuality as an abomination capable of destroying the moral fabric of America. Further, conservative Christian congregations and communities have drawn upon these discourses to justify prejudice and

discrimination against sexual minorities in both American public policy and interpersonal interactions (see also Barton 2012). As a result, Church members – like countless other sexual minorities – experience their sexual and religious lives at the center of ongoing conflicts about what it means to be both moral and American.

Alongside the ongoing denunciation of homosexuality by conservative Christian groups, the rise of the MCC at the end of the 1960's provided sexual minorities with the opportunity to worship in an American church that respected same-sex sexual relationships as natural manifestations of God's plan (Kane 2013; Wilcox 2001), which led many sexual minorities to abandon other religious traditions. Similarly, major secular activist groups, such as the Human Rights Campaign and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, created coalitions with faith-based groups during the 1980's and 1990's, and shifted their focus from full sexual equality to more conservative issues like marital and adoption rights (see Broad et al. 2004; Fetner 2008). Finally, some liberal Christian denominations – especially in the last 10 years – began to accept and affirm some sexual minorities (see McQueeney 2009; Moon 2004). Rather than fully embracing sexual diversity and equality for all, however, many of these developments – like the efforts of Church members captured below – ultimately served to benefit the most "normal" sexual minorities while reproducing other racial, classed, gendered, and sexual hierarchies.

Within this political and historical context, Church members – like countless other Christian sexual minorities in America (see, e.g., McQueeney 2009; Thumma 1991; Wolkomir 2006) – all recalled facing significant conflicts between their sexual and religious identities, and resolved these conflicts through active participation in the church (see Sumerau 2012a; Sumerau and Schrock 2011 for examples of the ways they accomplished identity integration). In fact, many members admitted that they still struggled with feelings of guilt, shame, and fear at times, and drew heavily upon the examples of their fellow congregants to manage these emotions (see also Wolkomir 2006 for similar dynamics in other LGBT religious groups). Although they never explicitly linked their own identity conflicts to their definitions of non-religious people, they often attempted to transfer the stigma homosexuality typically carries within American Christianity onto non-religious people by arguing that lack of religion – rather than sexuality – was the "real" source of immorality. As the following analysis reveals, their efforts ultimately reproduced the marginalization of both religious and sexual minorities in America.

Morally Suspect and Untrustworthy

Church members were knowledgeable about dominant Christian discourses throughout American society that defined them as sinners, deviants, and abominations in the eyes of the Lord (see, e.g., Moon, 2004; Wolkomir, 2006 for examples of such discourses in other settings). As a lesbian woman named Whitney explained in an interview:

For the heterosexual Christian crowd, we are basically no better than the devil. I mean, obviously everybody doesn't say that, but that's all you ever hear about us. They talk about how we're ruining the family or the moral fabric of the country or whatever.

Similarly, a gay man named John noted: "One of our major issues is explaining to the rest of the world that not all gay people are automatically anti-religion. Some of us have morals after all." Seeking to refute these depictions, Church members argued that a lack of religion, rather than a specific sexual identity, was the heart of the problem. Specifically, they claimed that non-religious people, LGBT or otherwise, were the real problem. In so doing, they managed their own marginalization by cooperating in the "othering" (Schwalbe et al. 2000) of non-religious others.

Church members defined non-religious people as morally suspect. Specifically, this tactic involved defining non-religious people in general, rather than sexual minorities specifically, as people lacking creditable moral codes. As a lesbian woman named Sandra explained in the middle of a meeting devoted to public outreach:

The first thing we have to do is make sure everyone knows we're a church. That is beyond important – we can use signs, symbols, maybe hand out those little crosses we use at Easter. We just have to be easily identified as Christians so people don't automatically assume we're just another gay group. Since most people think gay groups are all anti-religion, we have to make sure people can see that we have morals.

Similarly, a gay man named Micah explained: "It is important to be recognized as moral, and basically, the way to do that is to go to church and be part of God's plan. Otherwise, you're just doing whatever you please." Echoing this sentiment, a gay man named Daniel noted: "I think it's just what happens when you have no religion, you just become selfish and don't know which way is the right way." Similar to many other religious people in America (see, e.g., Moon, 2004 for examples), Church members reproduced the marginalization of non-believers by asserting that religion is a necessary component of moral personhood.

Church members also defined non-religious people as untrustworthy. While members typically focused these specific comments upon non-religious sexual minorities, they always connected the absence of religion with their inability to place moral confidence in other LGBT people. As a gay man named Marcus explained when talking about attending LGBT community events:

I always feel like I have to watch out for the gay groups, and often, I just feel more comfortable with the religious ones. Don't get me wrong, I don't blame the other gays for being a little flighty or strange, I mean what do you expect from people

that don't have God in their lives? But, I don't know, it just makes me a little uncomfortable when I have to depend on them to get something done. I just always feel like something will go wrong, and I don't really feel that way when we work with other churches.

Echoing this sentiment, a bisexual man named Dana explained: "A lot of the trouble you run into is that you just can't count on other queers. It's like they have no proper training, and that's one of the reasons I only date people that have already found God. You can trust them." In a similar fashion, a lesbian woman named Patricia noted: "It's like with some lesbians, they just don't stand for nothing, and even though God has a plan for everyone, they just choose to ignore it. And if you're going to ignore God, how can I believe you'll take anything else seriously?" Echoing the rhetoric Religious Right leaders used to describe homosexuals in the 1980's (Fetner, 2008), Church members defined non-religious sexual minorities as untrustworthy, and attributed this characteristic to their lack of religious practice and belief.

While members often employed the previous two types of statements in this section in isolation from one another, they generally combined the two when talking about the ways mainstream American society depicted LGBT people. Specifically, the tactic asserted that the negative assumptions people had about LGBT Americans relied upon the assumption that they were non-religious. As a gay man named Michael explained: "The problem is that we are not the deviants or the sinners. The deviants and the sinners are the gays that get all the media attention, but many of us are good, God-fearing, trustworthy people." In a similar fashion, a lesbian woman named Nina asserted:

If you think about it, you really can't blame people for thinking we are crazy or irresponsible or whatever else. If you think about it, that is all they see in the media. You don't see people like us that follow God and live for Jesus. No, you see the other gay groups out there partying like a bunch of heathens, and making all kinds of noise. What we need is to either get those people into church where they belong or find ways to let the rest of the country see those of us that know how to live right.

In addition, a lesbian woman named Sandy noted: "The problem is you have all the "political" groups out there protesting churches, and making a bad name for the rest of us. If they would just learn to act right, we wouldn't face half the troubles we do now." A gay man named Bob explained: "You have to understand that religion is what gives people morals, and without it, like some of the other gay groups you see, people just don't know how to behave, and so you can't really expect them to be good people." As these illustrations reveal, Church members ultimately sought to remove their own marginalization by transferring negative depictions of sexual minorities onto non-religious people.

In sum, these LGBT Christians responded to American discourses painting sexual minorities in a negative light by asserting that lack of religion, rather than possession of a specific sexual identity, led to immorality. Rather than challenging negative depictions of sexual minorities, they simply transferred these depictions to non-religious people by defining said people as morally suspect and untrustworthy. While not all members made these statements, all members affirmed them by either not responding at all or responding in positive ways when they were uttered. As a result, they collectively reproduced negative depictions of both sexual and religious minorities by defining religion as an essential element of moral personhood, and defining all non-religious people – regardless of sexuality – as the ultimate threat to morality.

In Need of Salvation and Guidance

Church members were intimately familiar with American Evangelical discourses defining the salvation of non-believers as the primary form of true Christian practice (see, e.g., Smith et al., 1998). As a lesbian woman named Carla explained in an interview:

Salvation is our job. That is what we are here to do. As Christians, our purpose is to spread the word and share the truth with the world. God wants everyone in his kingdom, and it is our job to save those that have been lost. They need God too even if they don't know it, and so we work hard to show them the right way to live.

Further, a bisexual transwoman named Alice noted: "People really want to be saved, but sometimes they don't even know they are lost. That's one of the problems in our community – we need to be teachers that guide people to God's love." Like many other Christian groups (see, e.g., Fetner 2008; Robinson and Spivey 2007; Wilkins 2008 for examples of similar Evangelical discourse in varied American Christian group contexts), Church members believed it was their God-given duty to convert as many non-believers as possible. As a result, they defined non-religious people – LGBT or otherwise – as lost souls in need of guidance and salvation.

Church members regularly suggested that people were non-religious because they had yet to receive proper instruction and care. As a lesbian woman named Marnie explained: "I don't think people actually want to be separated from God. No, that's not it. What I think happens is that people are never shown the power of God's love, but once you show them, kind of lead them into the light, they come along really quick." The gay male pastor of the church further elaborated on this idea in an interview:

Salvation is the ultimate gift we can give other people. Especially in our community, people have sometimes been left with the impression that God doesn't care about them, and so they get used to living without faith. I think that happens everywhere, but it is really bad in our community. And what happens is, well, people get lost and don't

know the right way to live, which makes our job that much harder, but that much more important too. So we provide that guidance and leadership for people, and allow them to see how God can transform their lives in so many wonderful ways.

Similarly, a gay man named Peter explained: "People just haven't had the proper teachers in their lives, and I think that's where this whole "secular" thing has come from. We just have to be the guides that bring them back where they belong." A lesbian woman named Whitney explained: "It is almost like trying to do a job properly without any training, some people haven't received the training they need to realize that no life is worth living without God's love. But that's okay, we can teach them that here." Similar to leaders of the Ex-gay movement (Robinson and Spivey 2007 for analysis of this movement) and some Evangelical college students (Wilkins 2008 for analysis of one such group), Church members defined non-religious people as those who needed to, as a gay man named Barney put it, "find their way home from the forest."

Church members also stressed the importance of salvation when talking about non-religious people. While this discourse was especially prominent when members talked about their families and friends, the overall theme suggested that all non-religious people needed to be saved from the dangers of a secular life. As a gay man named Raymond noted: "I get so sad talking to my non-churchy friends because they don't even realize that something is wrong and that they are missing something in their lives. They just don't realize they're in danger." A lesbian woman named Laney explained: "I don't want my friends, who are basically all the family I have at this point, going to hell. I just don't want that, but unless they get saved they are heading that way. That's why it is so important for me to help them." In addition, a lesbian woman named Karen noted:

Sometimes it can be especially hard for our people because we have already had to learn that there is nothing wrong with us sexually, but that doesn't mean there aren't other broken things about us that must be fixed. Part of accepting ourselves is recognizing that we need God and we belong in his kingdom, and sometimes that is hard for us because we learned to distrust religion first, and only realized how much we needed it later.

Echoing these sentiments, the gay male pastor observed in an interview:

I have this difficulty when I speak to other gay groups. I have to teach them that salvation is not just about souls and afterlife. It's really about understanding that something is broken inside of you, and taking the steps to fix that problem. You have to realize you've been disconnected from the essence of life, and that you can be fixed through Jesus. That is sometimes really hard for people to wrap their heads and hearts around, but it drives

home what salvation really means in this life and the next.

Further, a gay man named Marcus explained: "I've had boyfriends that just didn't get it. They thought they were fine, but I had to hold them knowing that they were lost and hurting inside. I had to figure out ways to try to push them toward the solution." Repeating rhetoric employed by Evangelical leaders and members to explain the "problem of homosexuality" (see, e.g., Robinson and Spivey, 2007; Wolkomir, 2006 for analyses of this movement's tactics), Church members stressed the importance of salvation, and in so doing, defined non-religious people in general as broken and fallen beings in need of religious correction.

Overall, Church members adopted Evangelical prescriptions to spread their religion to as many people as possible (Smith et al., 1998). As a result, they typically defined non-religious people, LGBT or otherwise, as lost souls in need of guidance and salvation that they could provide by educating these people about God's truth. In so doing, however, they reproduced Christian discourses defining religion as an essential part of a respectable American life, and symbolically positioned themselves above non-religious others (see, e.g., Robinson and Spivey, 2007 for discussion of symbolic maneuvering). Further, their efforts relied upon rhetoric used by the Ex-gay movement (Wolkomir, 2006) and the Religious Right (Fetner, 2008) to justify the subordination of minority groups. As a result, their dedication to "saving" other people ultimately facilitated the ongoing marginalization of both religious and sexual minorities.

Poor Representations of the LGBT Community

Church members were well aware of disparaging depictions of LGBT people promoted by religious and political elites (see, e.g., Fetner, 2008; Robinson and Spivey, 2007 for examples of such depictions). As a lesbian woman named Jenny noted: "We've all heard the comments by politicians, they think we're a bunch of wild animals out of touch with American values." In addition, the gay male pastor explained in an interview:

There has been a concerted effort on the right to paint our community as out of touch, un-American, or just plain crazy, and sadly, many people have bought this stuff. You can see this on television, in the newspapers, and really anywhere that you look these days. I think it is something that kind of follows you around because you hear it everywhere, and it doesn't matter if it's true because so many people repeat it all the time.

Rather than explicitly challenging these depictions, however, Church members responded to these symbolic attacks by suggesting that secular LGBT groups had given the rest of the LGBT community a bad name. Specifically, they defined non-religious LGBT groups as poor representations of the LGBT community. In so doing, they reproduced the same disparaging depictions they sought to avoid.

For example, Church members suggested non-religious LGBT people lacked moral fiber by highlighting supposedly deviant behaviors secular LGBT people and groups did in the course of their lives. As a bisexual man named Dana explained:

You can always spot the queers whether they are on television or in your neighborhood. They're all about partying like teenagers and having sex with everything that moves – you know the type I'm talking about. They have no morals, but they get all the attention so the rest of the world thinks we're all like that. I'm willing to bet most gay people have more sense than that, and like us, wish they would just knock it off and grow up already.

A gay man named Marcus observed: "They just need Jesus man, that's all it is. So many gay people just come out of the closet and go crazy, and they don't realize that the rest of the world uses them to convince people we're all crazy." As a transwoman named Alice recalled: "You run into this everywhere, and sadly, our own people create it. They're so happy to be free from the closet that they lose all sense of how to be decent, moral people, and the rest of us pay for it." Echoing these sentiments, a lesbian woman named Madeline recalled: "I remember coming out and thinking the only way to be "gay" was to be ungodly and promiscuous and all those things the political people say, but that is the wrong image. That is the way some people in our community act, but the rest of us know how to act." Like the Religious Right (Fetner, 2008) and Ex-gay Movement (Robinson and Spivey, 2007), Church members suggested non-religious sexual minorities lacked the moral fiber necessary for respectability in American society (see also Warner, 1999).

Church members also suggested secular sexual minorities were out of touch with American values. Echoing public opinion polls about atheists (see, e.g., Edgell et al., 2006 for the results of such polls), they suggested that secular sexual minorities couldn't share their vision of America. Discussing what could be done to improve the image of sexual minorities in America, for example, a gay man named Barney suggested: "Well the first thing we have to do is get the rest of our community in line with the rest of America. We need to get them in the churches where straight people can see that we're not all that different after all." As a lesbian woman named Patricia explained in an interview:

I think the biggest problem facing our community is that we have people that don't seem to understand that they live in a Christian country. Churches have always been a large part of America, and yet, we have many gay and lesbian groups that attack religion. They need to realize that for most Americans, that is a bad thing. I think that is why it is so easy for people to be turned off about gay rights. They only see one version of us, and don't realize that we have the same kind of lives they do, and want the same things.

Similarly, a gay man named Michael explained: "It was probably easy to make us the villains back in the 80's because Americans are God-fearing folks, and most of the coverage our community gets shows people that are out of touch with that reality." In addition, a gay man named John explained in an interview: "You can't walk around saying bad things about the central element of American history and expect people to like you. Most Americans go to church and say their prayers – it is hard for them to get behind us when they don't know that we do that too." Echoing Religious Right (Fetner, 2008) and Ex-gay Christian (Robinson and Spivey, 2007) leaders, Church members defined religious belief and practice as central elements of American experience. In so doing, they perpetuated popular depictions of LGBT people as oppositional to religion.

Church members also emphasized their own alignment with contemporary American norms. Specifically, this tactic involved emphasizing the normative behaviors of religious sexual minorities. Explaining the importance of a collective church image to members during a Bible study, for example, the gay male pastor explained:

We have to understand that we are not what people think of when they think of gay. We are regular Americans living regular lives, and people don't know this. As a church, part of our job is to show this version of gay life to the rest of the world. We have to show them that we are just like everyone else, and that is why we should be taken seriously.

As a lesbian woman named Sandra explained: "The problem with focusing on the secular groups is we look different even though many of us are not. Take my family, we go to church, we raise our kids, we go to work, and we pray before meals. We are the picture of America, and that is what others need to see." A gay man named Tommy explained: "Well the whole reason for churches like this is to put a new face on the gay experience. We need to be out in the community and here in the church showing the world what good, Christian gays look like." Further, a lesbian woman named Whitney noted: "This is why you see us going to public debates, and events at other churches all the time. We need to change the idea people have of what it means to be gay. It doesn't just mean wild lives and crazy parties. We are also people that live normal lives, raise families, fall in love, and go to church like the rest of America." Similar to many lesbian and gay activists that chose to downplay more controversial topics in order to focus on more traditional American issues, such as marital, parental, and adoption rights (see, e.g., Fetner, 2008; McQueeney, 2009; Warner, 1999 for examples and criticisms of these tactics), Church members emphasized religion to claim respectability from mainstream society.

Church members sought to resist disparaging depictions of sexual minorities. To accomplish this, they defined non-religious sexual minorities as poor representations of the LGBT community while appointing themselves as the proper image of LGBT experience. In so doing, however,

they reproduced the same disparaging depictions of sexual minorities that they sought to resist in the first place, and extended these depictions to include non-religious people in general. Further, they accepted contemporary American social norms and inequalities (see Warner, 1999 for analysis of contemporary American sexual norms and inequalities). As a result, their desire to change the representation of LGBT communities ultimately reproduced the same discourses and power structures used to justify the ongoing subordination of minority groups – religious, sexual or otherwise – throughout contemporary American society (see also Collins, 2005 for discussion of contemporary American power structures) as well as contemporary American (see Edgell et al. 2006 for opinions on atheists in America) – and British (see Storm 2013 for opinions of British non-religious people) – notions of non-religious people as the ultimate "other" within their nation.

Conclusion

The LGBT Christians at the heart of this study possessed a working knowledge of the negative depictions lobbed at sexual minorities in contemporary American society. Rather than challenging these depictions outright, however, they sought to transfer this stigma to non-religious sexual minorities specifically and non-religious people in general. In so doing, they reproduced disparaging definitions of secular people used to facilitate the ongoing marginalization of non-religious experience in America. Specifically, they accomplished this by defining non-religious people, LGBT or otherwise, as morally suspect and untrustworthy, in need of salvation and guidance, and poor representations of the LGBT community.

These findings reveal some ways that religious definitions of non-religious people may reproduce societal patterns of inequality. By defining religious belief and practice as an index of moral personhood and arguing that all people require religion to live respectable lives, for example, Church members reproduced conventional moral discourses that justify religious authority in American legal (Fetner, 2008), political (Robinson and Spivey, 2007), therapeutic (Erzen, 2006), organizational (Pitt, 2010), and educational (Wilkins, 2008) settings, as well as British opposition to immigration (see Storm 2013). Similarly, their definition of non-religious people, LGBT or otherwise, as poor representations of American society, essentially lost and misguided, and ultimately unreliable, reproduced rhetoric used throughout the last century to justify the ongoing marginalization of both sexual and religious minorities in contemporary American society and the larger world. Whereas researchers have already begun the important work of understanding the outcomes of sexual (see Ueno, 2010 for the effects of sexual oppression) and religious (see Hammer et al., 2012 for effects of religious oppression) marginalization, these findings reveal the importance of also examining the mechanisms – whether interactional, organizational or institutional – whereby religious people "other" (Schwalbe et al. 2000) non-religious people. By approaching marginalization from multiple vantage points, we may gain deeper insight into the underlying processes necessary for

both the reproduction and reduction of social inequalities as well as the marginalization of people and groups deemed "other" (see Schwalbe et al., 2000).

These findings also support previous research demonstrating the marginalization of non-religious people in mainstream American society (see, e.g., Cragun et al. 2012; Edgell et al. 2006; Hammer et al. 2012), and extend these treatments by revealing the importance of examining the ways that religious people – regardless of their intentions or their positions within other categories of oppression and privilege – define non-religious others. Whereas investigations typically focus on the use of racial, classed, gendered, or sexual beliefs to accomplish othering, my findings suggest that religious identities may also be used to differentiate privileged social locations from unwanted ones (see also McQueeney 2009; Sumerau, 2014; Wilkins 2008 for the use of religion to "other" groups). Similar to African-American men who claimed masculine privileges by denigrating the efforts of women during the Civil Rights movement (Collins 2005 for a review of this American history), or heterosexual women rugby players who claimed respectable feminine identities by denigrating lesbian women (Ezzell 2009 for such examples), the LGBT Christians I studied claimed religious privilege by denigrating non-religious people.

Making sense of the myriad ways that subordinates may reproduce the marginalization of religious minorities, however, requires asking questions beyond the parameters of this exploratory study. Researchers could, for example, examine how racial, classed, or gendered subordinates employ religious privileges to distance themselves from other minority groups or members of their own group. Further, researchers could examine ways that dominant notions of religious practice and belief facilitate these processes as well as outcomes for minority groups who engage in these efforts. Finally, researchers should explore variations in definitions of religious and non-religious people in terms of race, class, gender, sexualities, age, religious background, and / or nationality. Considering that researchers have already found some ways native-born citizens draw upon religion to reify national identities (see Storm 2011a for discussion of such attempts), it would not be surprising if the othering of non-religious people occurs in various ways across the world.

To fully understand the marginalization of non-religious people, we must analyze both the experiences of non-religious people and the ways that religious people define non-religious others. Specifically, this will require integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches to inequalities to map the experiences of religious subordinates within the context of dominant religious traditions. As this case study reveals, the definition of non-religious others relies upon the elevation of religious belief and practice as well as the devaluation of non-religious experience. Unraveling and comparing the variations in religious definitions as well as the outcomes produced by these actions may deepen our understanding of the marginalization of religious minorities, and suggest possibilities for social change.

Notes

- ¹ While I use pseudonyms for respondents, each pseudonym is mutually exclusive (e.g., there is only one Patricia, and the same goes for other pseudonyms in this study). Further, I introduce each respondent in relation to both their sexual (e.g., gay, lesbian, bisexual) and gender (e.g., man, woman, transgender) identities on each occasion to signify the way the respondents wished to be identified in social life, and to avoid patterns of scholarly, religious and social conflation and erasure of sexual and gender identities (see Warner 1999).
- ² Rather than inventing a pseudonym for him, I simply refer to the pastor throughout as "pastor" since this was his usual title in the Church.
- ³ The final one was also from America, but raised in a Catholic Church.
- ⁴ Since my entire sample was composed of American-born respondents, I did not expand these questions to cover international issues. For previous studies on the experiences and beliefs of LGBT religious people in other countries, see Hunt and Yip 2012.
- ⁵ Since the demographic composition of the church changed in the course of my fieldwork, I have separated Tables One and Two into the two primary time periods of observation (e.g., before and after the arrival of the pastor) that reflect the major demographic trends in the church throughout the overall period of observation.
- ⁶ All demographic characteristics except for social class were gathered via observation and discussion with the members concerning their preferred sexual, gendered, racial, and religious identities, and validated via comparison to the official roles and records of the Church. Social class was established by gathering the occupational and educational levels of the membership from observation and discussion with the members, and comparing these characteristics with the official roles and records of the church. Since the records and responses did not situate these elements into class categories, I created categories based on the combination of these variables (e.g., occupational (teacher) and educational (college educated) combined relates to American notions of middle class status or occupational (day labor) and educational (high school graduate) combined relates to American notions of lower class) to capture and demonstrate the social class composition of the congregation. All values were verified via informal conversations with members.

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Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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