Many people believe that the relationship between religion and homosexuality is antipathetic. They assume that people who identify as LGBT want nothing to do with religion because religious communities see homosexuality as a sin, reluctantly accepting the “sinners” while condemning their behavior. But the story is more complicated than that. The second half of the twentieth century in the United States was a time when many people who identified as homosexual discovered traditional religious communities as a resource and a place of healing. Others made their own religious paths.

Gay historians have demonstrated that World War II was a critical turning point that provided opportunities for men and women to experience and act on same-sex attractions; John D’Emilio described the era as a “nationwide coming out.” But this tolerant atmosphere changed radically after the war, when society’s goal was to return to “normalcy” and a renewed emphasis on the nuclear family. There would be no room for sexual deviance in postwar America. Men and women who had discovered their homosexual desires and had begun to form relationships, create communities, and fight for their civil rights found themselves persecuted and prosecuted. Although legislators and others made reference to “the sin of Sodom” and other biblical passages in their condemnation of homosexuality, religion did not play a large role in these efforts in the 1950s.

Yet thanks to the social acceptance of Freudian psychology, homosexuality was also beginning to be understood as a medical condition in need of therapeutic intervention. Sympathetic to this point of view, liberal Protestants of the era played an important role in
supporting early homophile groups. As Heather White discovered, the use of the term homosexuality first entered translations of the Bible through liberal Protestant efforts at modernization. When they published the Revised Standard Version in 1946 to replace the King James translation, they were signaling this new understanding of homosexuality as a disease rather than a sin and hoping to help homosexuals find a cure.

In the early 1960s, a group of liberal Protestant ministers in San Francisco, led by the pastors of the Glide Methodist Memorial Church, became public and vocal supporters of homosexual rights. The goal of these liberal Protestants, as White explains it, was to end legal persecution and deal with sexual deviance through more enlightened therapeutic avenues. As part of their urban ministry in newly forming gay neighborhoods, these ministers initiated a dialogue with homophile organizations, resulting in the founding of the Council on Religion and the Homosexual (CRH) in 1964. Their conversations produced a plan. They would hold a dance at California Hall to raise money for the nascent organization and test police behavior toward this community. They negotiated with police in advance to make sure there were no raids or harassment planned, and ministers and their wives were in attendance to protect the safety of the participants in case these negotiations were not honored. The dance was held on January 1, 1965. When the police broke their promise and arrested and intimidated attendees, the clergy responded with a press conference the following morning denouncing police brutality.

Thinking this model was helpful, East Coast homophile organizations followed the example of their counterparts in San Francisco, inviting clergy to support the protests they began to organize. The most notable was the “Annual Reminder,” a peaceful and dignified demonstration held each year from 1965–69 at the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia on the Fourth of July. Homophile groups formed in cities all around the country also in this era, adopting the
same pattern of seeking liberal Protestant clergy support for legislative change, facilitating pastoral counseling, and, ultimately, building a national coalition of homophile organizations that often met in church basements.

Inspired by the civil rights movement, homophile leaders began to change their tactics and become more militant. They began demanding not only freedom from legal harassment but also claiming political rights and making assertions that—like “black is beautiful”—“gay is good.” In response, some Christian leaders began to recognize and write about the necessity of understanding homosexuals (including those in their congregations and clergy who did not reveal their sexuality) as victimized by society and deserving of support in their quest for equal treatment. Some even began to challenge the medical model of homosexuality as a disease, accepting biologist and sex researcher Alfred Kinsey’s assertion that it was simply a human sexual variation. Some clergy even went so far as to pronounce long-term intimate homosexual relationships as morally acceptable for Protestants. This acceptance from the clergy helped gay activists challenging the medicalization narrative, compelling the American Psychiatric Association to remove homosexuality from its categorization as an illness in 1973.

These little-known events and efforts laid the groundwork for the emergence of the gay liberation movement in the 1970s. The Stonewall riots of June 1969 became the founding myth of the gay liberation movement and remain at the heart of the LGBT movement’s own lived religion, commemorated each year with parades around the country and functioning as a place of pilgrimage and a sacred site.

The post-Stonewall organizing that developed in the 1970s began a new phase of activism. For many gay liberationists, religion was central to the system of oppression, and they wanted no part of it. Yet for others it was not so simple; their religious and spiritual affiliations
were a valued part of who they were, and they were not ready to sever their ties. As gay men and lesbians began to come out and demand responses from religious groups, those groups were compelled to confront the LGBT people who were not content to leave their religious affiliations behind.

Many religious Christians found a way to bring religion and sexuality together in the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC), founded in Los Angeles in 1968 by Troy Perry. Perry is an evangelical pastor who was forced to leave his church because of same-sex relationships, but he could not let go of his faith commitments. MCC was built on an old model of forming new denominations to meet new needs or resolve differences. MCC developed gay-centered musical traditions, liturgies, and rituals, and it incorporated a variety of worship models so that LGBT Christians and their allies from all different denominations would be comfortable with at least some aspects of the worship service. The church grew exponentially and became the model for similar LGBT synagogues (beginning in 1973) and the Catholic organization Dignity, founded in 1969. In 1982 Carl Bean founded Unity Fellowship Churches for LGBT people of color. Buddhist groups also began in the 1980s, with Muslim and Hindu fellowships starting at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

MCC and these other groups were based on traditional religions, but other groups formed alternative religious spaces. LGBT persons found a comfortable home within Wiccan groups that celebrate sexuality, gay and straight, and do not insist on monogamy. The founder of the Mattachine Society, Harry Hay, who had a strong dislike for organized religion, founded a loose network, Radical Faeries, in 1979, which also follows pagan-style rituals similar to Wicca. Another alternative group, the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, which also started in 1979, combines satirical drag performance with social services similar to those of traditional orders of
women religious. Still others, particularly lesbians who weren’t interested in or didn’t feel welcome in organized religion—as much because of patriarchal structures as their same-sex desires—developed their own spirituality commitments in alternative cultural spaces.

But not all LGBT religious people sought to leave their institutional homes, and those traditions had to come to terms with how they would integrate them. One solution was that LGBT people and their allies founded supportive networks within denominations and encouraged individual church groups to become welcoming spaces. Mainline Christian groups took the lead. Integrity, a group that formed within the Episcopal Church in 1974, and the Methodist Reconciling Churches (1972) were among the first. Early examples also include More Light (Presbyterian, 1974), Open and Affirming (United Church of Christ), and Welcoming and Affirming (American Baptist, 1972). Other groups not affiliated with mainline Christianity, including Seventh Day Adventists, Christian Scientists, Mennonites, and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, followed a similar pattern later in the decade.

For some LGBT individuals, reconciling their religious and sexual identities was more difficult. Frank Worthen, for example, received a revelation from God to abandon homosexuality in 1973, and he sought to help others to do the same. He founded New Hope Ministry, a therapeutic intervention that provides a space for lesbians and gay men to strengthen their Christian commitments so that their struggles to renounce their homosexual desires can happen in a supportive context. Although most participants in this and other ex-gay movement groups found themselves unable to achieve the goal of conversion to heterosexuality, choosing celibacy was affirmed and backsliding accepted as part of the process. The umbrella movement known as Exodus International served this end for Protestant Christians, while JONAH supported Jews and Courage was created for Catholics, through the end of the century. They were all based on the
assumption that homosexuality is a choice rather than an essential part of one’s identity. In this they partially agreed with more radical elements of the LGBT movement, who also affirmed same-sex desire and behavior as a chose, but a welcome one. In contrast, the Catholic Church, along with more traditional mainline Protestant and Jewish groups, believe that one’s orientation is fixed but disagree about whether acting on it is a choice one can realistically make.

Other mainline Protestant contexts accept that homosexual orientation is a human variation that is fixed at an early age and therefore must be accommodated in the churches. The question of how to make that accommodation has been raised time and again. For some, creating welcoming spaces was sufficient. But liberal LGBT Christians (and Jews) began to demand equal rights to ordination and marriage rituals in the 1970s. These demands remained contentious for several decades, causing ruptures in a number of denominations. It was not until the 1980s that the most liberal religious groups, like the Unitarian Universalist Church, United Church of Christ, and Reform and Reconstructionist Judaism, began to ordain openly gay and lesbian clergy. Along with the Quakers, who do not have clergy, these groups also permitted clergy to perform religious commitment ceremonies for gay and lesbian couples and publicly supported secular efforts to legalize gay marriage and end discrimination in housing, employment, and the military. The fights over ordination and marriage have been more contentious (and have been resolved differently) in Methodist, Presbyterian, Baptist, Episcopal, Evangelical Lutheran, and Mennonite spaces, as well as among Conservative Jews.

The bitter battles over marriage and ordination, and general support for LGBT economic and social rights in American society, have been used to explain the weakening of mainline churches in the latter part of the twentieth century. Evangelical and nondenominational Christian movements grew stronger as, along with the Catholic Church and Orthodox Jews, they made
their stand against LGBT rights in secular society as antipathetic to their own religious freedom. To them, homosexuality is immoral, and religion and homosexuality are simply incompatible.

Their powerful and passionate voices overwhelmed liberal efforts to reconcile or celebrate gay religion. But although their story is the accepted narrative that defines gay religion as an oxymoron, it must rather be understood as a backlash against gay religious movements.

The efforts of the Christian right to beat back legislation to protect gay rights did not begin in earnest until 1977, when Anita Bryant, a popular singer, spokesperson for the Florida Citrus industry, and devout Southern Baptist, developed a successful campaign called “Save Our Children” to repeal a Dade County, Florida, ordinance to prohibit discrimination against gay men and lesbians. Christian evangelical leaders, including Jerry Falwell, joined the effort. Parachurch organizations—such as Falwell’s Moral Majority (1979), Focus on the Family (1977), the Christian Coalition (1980), the Family Research Council (1981), and the Promise Keepers (1990)—and churches like Fred Phelps’s Westboro Baptist argued that God ordained, and the Bible explicitly commands, heterosexual marriage. They blamed homosexuality for society’s ills, including AIDS, 9/11, and the sexual abuse scandals in the Catholic Church, and they countered legislative efforts to end discrimination against LGBT persons. They supported their efforts with slogans like “God made Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve,” “God Hates Fags,” and biblical quotations from Leviticus and Romans. Many people believe that this activism constitutes the definitive religious view of homosexuality. This perspective was not only promulgated by these groups on the Christian right, but the incompatibility between religion and homosexuality was also affirmed by the media, secular queer studies scholars, and LGBT rights organizations like the Human Rights Campaign, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance against Defamation (GLAAD), and the National LGBTQ Task Force.
Beginning in the late 1990s, scholarship on gay religion began to appear that countered this narrative, providing the evidence of connections between religious and LGBT communities on which this essay is based. The evidence these scholars uncovered documents the robust relationship between religion and homosexuality in American life during the second half of the twentieth century and gives lie to the idea that religion and homosexuality are always incompatible, as we are so often led to assume.

Selected Bibliography


