THE ILLUSION OF INCLUSION: HOW PROGRESSIVE THEOLOGY BOOKS MAY

PERPETUATE INEQUALITY

by

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviation	Description
LGBTQIA+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, Plus
LGBT	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender
LGBTQ	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning
LG	Lesbian, Gay

ABSTRACT

Utilizing a qualitative content analysis on ten theology books advocating for the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ identities in the Christian religion, the current study examines how these books may potentially challenge and/or perpetuate gender and sexual inequalities. Findings indicate that these books reify the privileging of heterosexuality by heralding heterosexual allies as unbiased sources of advocacy, and by underscoring the virtue of grace when dealing with sexual marginalization. Further, the books' authors offer conditional acceptance of nonheterornormative individuals by demanding monogamy and Christianity for morality. Salvation comes through the viewing of heterosexual pornography and conforming to traditional gender behavior and/or minimizing the saliency of sexuality. However, salvation can also come directly from the marginalization that LGBTQIA+ Christians experience—adding a potential negotiation of sexual identity that challenges the privileging of Christian heterosexuality. By utilizing the intersections of gender, sexuality, and religion, the current study extends the literature by offering analyzation of the social construction of sin and the pervasive gender and sexual inequalities inherent in even "progressive" movements for inclusion.

I. INTRODUCTION

Gender scholars have documented how religion as an institution perpetuates gender and sexual inequality. Researchers have found that some religions, such as Christianity, rely on a "religious gender binary" (Darwin 2020) that reinforces traditional gender roles, behaviors, and attitudes, privileges masculinity, and devalues femininity and nonheteronormative identities. For example, Christian congregations emphasize men's paternal stewardship while relegating women to supporting roles both in congregations and in the homelife (Bartkowski 2000; Burke 2014; Heath 2003; Sumerau, Barringer, and Cragun 2015; Sumerau, Padavic, and Schrock 2015). The emphasis on the dichotomy of men and women pressures nonbinary individuals to either adhere to the binary or risk ostracization from their religious community and invalidation of their religious identity (Darwin 2020). The rise of a "softer masculinity"—focused on more emotional connection with the family unit and other Christian men—has underscored gender and sexual inequality (Bartkowski 2000; Heath 2003) by encouraging men to adopt strategies and behaviors that are simultaneously devalued when used by women and nonheteronormative individuals (Burke 2014; McDowell 2017). The belittlement of queer Christians results in many negative implications such as chronic shame (Moon and Tobin 2018; Tobin and Moon 2019), identity conflict (Fuist 2016; Houghton and Tasker 2019; Sumerau, Cragun, and Mathers 2016; Wedow, Schnabel, Wedow, and Konieczny 2017), and the perpetuation of "godly homonormativity" (Mikulak 2019). Godly homonormativity allows for the continued privileging of heterosexuality (Mathers, Sumerau, and Ueno 2018; McQueeney 2009), the continued marginalization of women (McQueeney 2009; Sumerau 2012; Sumerau, Barringer, and Cragun 2015; Sumerau,

Padavic, and Schrock 2015), and the erasure and "othering" of transgender, bisexual, nonbinary, and other sexual minorities (Darwin 2020; Houghton and Tasker 2019; Mathers, Sumerau, and Cragun 2018; Sumerau et al. 2016; Sumerau, Cragun, and Mathers 2016b; Sumerau, Mathers, and Lampe 2019).

Despite the long-standing permeation of disparaging sexuality attitudes in Christian teachings, there are some Christians who consciously challenge the exclusion of nonheteronormative individuals from the Christian faith. Theologians and Christian authors have written books combining contextual biblical interpretations and personal experiences to combat homophobic arguments supporting the degradation of LGBTQIA+ individuals in Christianity. These books are marketed towards straight and queer Christians who seek to reconcile nonheteronormativity with Christianity. I conducted a qualitative content analysis of ten theology books that argue for the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ sexualities in the Christian religion. Drawing on the "doing gender," (West and Zimmerman 1987) "doing religion," (Avishai 2008) and the "godly homonormativity" (Mikulak 2019) frameworks, I analyzed how these books may either challenge or perpetuate gender and sexual inequality by answering the following research questions: Do these books' messages contain godly homonormativity (Mikulak 2019)? Do these books privilege heterosexuality? Do they contain advice or rhetoric that erases nonheteronormative identities? In this study, I argue that these seemingly progressive books underscore pervasive sexual and gender inequalities by commanding conditional acceptance of LGBTQIA+ individuals and the privileging of heterosexual Christians while also implying that spiritual and social salvation comes from heterosexuality, the minimizing of sexual saliency, and the marginalized sexual identity itself. These

strategies implement the modus operandi of past Christian movements: tout the

movement as "progressive" by seemingly acquiescing to critics' calls for inclusion and

equality while perpetuating gender and sexual inequalities through covert means

(Bartkowski 2000; Heath 2003).

Christian Masculinities

During the 1990s, a movement by the Promise Keepers began to change Christian masculinity. The Promise Keepers were Christian men, mostly of the evangelical denomination, who were trying to combat the wave of feminism that erupted in the 1980s and 1990s (Bartkowski 2000; Heath 2003). These Christian men were concerned that changing gender roles between men and women would diminish their power in the family unit, as Christian men historically have claimed sovereign right as the head of the household (Bartkowski 2000; Heath 2003; Sumerau, Barringer, and Cragun 2015). To combat this change in power, a new Christian masculine identity that utilizes feminine qualities, characteristics, and norms—recoding them as masculine to continue to perpetuate an essentialist ideology that privileges straight men over women or nonheteronormative individuals—was created (Bartkowski 2000). Heath (2003) calls this new Christian masculinity "soft-boiled masculinity." Soft-boiled masculinity relies on being more emotional, more family-oriented, and more caring than the hypermasculine, secular "other." For example, a staple of the Promise Keepers movement was the implementation of support groups for Christian men to create accountability for maintaining this new masculinity (Bartkowsi 2000; Diefendorf 2015; Heath 2003). Though support groups are typically considered more feminine (e.g., support groups talk about feelings, are designed to encourage, and share personal details, etc.), Christian men were able to partake in them with the added benefit of maintaining their masculine identities through both Christianity and traditionally hypermasculine contexts (e.g., holding meetings in a sports stadium or using sporty rhetoric; Bartkowski 2000; Heath

2003). Christian support groups for men are generally men-only—creating a fraternity that perpetuates the exclusion of women while appropriating feminine qualities that would devalue them outside of this context (Bartkowski 2000; Diefendorf 2015; Heath 2003; McDowell 2017). The men in these support groups often emphasize essentialist understandings of gender as rationale for why excluding women is necessary. They claim that they would be uncomfortable with women present because of the effeminate nature of the group or the subject matter of participation (Diefendorf 2015; Heath 2003; McDowell 2017). Heath (2003) found that Christian men involved in the Promise Keepers support groups excluded women because they were afraid of judgment due to the emotional nature of the group. Christian men who attended an abstinence-before-marriage support group opposed co-education because of the preconceived notion that women were very much against sex, and therefore would judge the men based on their sexual conversations (Diefendorf 2015). Bartkowski (2000) also found that Promise Keepers believed that women struggled with different sexual issues than men (e.g., masturbation) due to essentialist understandings of women's sexuality. In a study conducted on hardcore Christian punk (McDowell 2017), women were excluded due to the hypermasculine atmosphere of punk shows—perpetuating the idea that women cannot handle or have no interest in being around violence and expressions of anger. These men judge the interested women as not "doing gender" (West and Zimmerman 1987) adequately and the women are subsequently labeled as sexually promiscuous who are temptresses as well as unclean/unattractive (McDowell 2017). By blaming the exclusion of women on women themselves, the new Christian masculinity allows hegemonic masculinity to go unchallenged.

The use of essentialism when understanding gender also allows Christian men to justify the natural "God-given" authority of men over women and children—relegating women to the subordinate supporter rather than equal partners (Colgan 2018; Heath 2003; Sumerau et al 2015). Essentialist understandings pit the genders in contrasting, false dichotomies in what Eaton (2005) calls the "logic of domination" whereby the more desirable ends of the dichotomies (the male characteristics) are considered the normal to which all else is "othered." This process underscores the naturalness of domination of one group by another (here, men over women). With the "logic of domination," the Promise Keepers movement sought for men to be placed back into the leadership role of the family, as the feminist movement had begun to allow women the chance to take care of their family financially as well as emotionally. They used biblical interpretations and essentialist ideology to support this mission. Some called upon the story of Adam and Eve's genesis—maintaining that God made Adam first and Eve out of Adam's rib so that Adam may protect Eve and be a leader to her (Colgan 2018; Heath 2003). Not only does this imply that men must protect women (perpetuating heterosexism), but the reliance on this biblical story allows Christian men to hide hegemonic masculinity behind "doing religion" (Avishai 2008). In Heath's (2003) study, the men use language to convey feigned humble resignation over being imparted with such strong responsibility over the marriage and family: this power opens them to more scrutiny in the eyes of God which puts more pressure on them than women. While these men describe themselves as victims, their wives are subordinated to men's power both in society and in their religion.

The soft-boiled masculinity created by Christian men allows them to conduct behavior that is homosocial while that same behavior is devalued and condemned when

applied to nonheteronormative individuals. It encourages Christian men to physically hug

and touch other men (Bartkowski 2000; Heath 2003), be emotionally vulnerable with

other men (Bartkowski 2000; Diefendorf 2015), and profess love for other men

(Bartkowski 2000; McDowell 2017). The privilege of heterosexuality also expands to

sexual behavior. In a study on Christian sexuality websites, Burke (2014) discovered that

"pegging" was a popular discourse in this online community. Many heterosexual couples

were actively and openly engaging in a sexual act that is socially defined as homosexual

whereby the man is anally penetrated with an object to achieve prostate stimulation.

Rather than defining this act as nonheteronormative, these men used their wives and God

as validation of their masculine identities. While this in turn places emphasis on the

wife's responsibility to provide validation to her husband, it also highlights the social

constructionism of sexuality itself: sexual acts do not inherently "belong" to one sexuality

over another. However, instead of considering this perspective, "doing gender" (West and

Zimmerman 1987) and "doing religion" (Avishai 2008) intersect to reaffirm heterosexual

privilege and heterosexual male privilege.

Godly Homonormativity

The religious gender binary (Darwin 2020), and subsequently the Christian

masculinities and femininities resulting therein, create religious gendered expectations

that both heteronormative and nonheteronormative individuals are required to follow.

Though the religious gender binary affects all Christians, the effects are arguably more

salient to LGBTQIA+ Christians, as their nonheteronormative status creates a kind of

double-bind regarding expectations of "doing gender" (West and Zimmerman 1987) and

"doing religion" (Avishai 2008). Though some views have become more progressive,

Christians are still more politically conservative and hold less egalitarian social views on matters such as abortion and same-sex relations than some other religions (Schnabel 2016). Often, heterosexual Christians put pressure upon LGBTQIA+ Christians to denounce their sexuality as sin to receive God's grace—resulting in a phenomenon known as sacramental shame (Moon and Tobin 2018). Here, shame becomes a sacrament, an outward sign of love for God and understanding of his teachings, which heterosexual Christians demand of nonheteronormative Christians to validate their Christian identities. This requirement disparages nonheteronormative Christians, as this shame is chronic rather than episodic—resulting in internalization of shame that can produce intense prolonged fear, panic, anxiety, isolation, and other negative mental health outcomes (Moon and Tobin 2018). Alternatively, this type of shame does not affect heterosexual Christians because of the heterosexual privilege associated within the religious gender binary (Moon and Tobin 2018; Tobin and Moon 2019).

To combat this devaluation, LGBTQIA+ Christians partake in a process Mikulak (2019) calls "godly homonormativity." This process is derived from homonormativity (Duggan as cited by Mikulak 2019) whereby nonheteronormative individuals adhere to heteronormative practices and behaviors to reclaim validity in a community or society that devalues them. Mikulak (2019) extends this idea to include Christian heteronormativity and how LGBTQIA+ Christians might navigate the expectations that result. Godly homonormativity may encourage nonheteronormative Christians to conform to traditional gendered expectations set forth by the religious gender binary (Moon, Tobin, and Sumerau 2019). In their observational research at an LGBTQIA+ church, Sumerau et al. (2015) noted palpable before and after changes made to the

organization after hiring a new, gay pastor to lead the congregation. Before he was appointed, the congregation was led democratically and equally based on volunteer services; however, the pastor's arrival led to a replication of the gender hierarchy whereby the lesbians and queer women were relegated to "housekeeping" duties and clerical work while the men continued to lead committees, read scripture, and manage finances (Sumerau, Padavic, and Schrock 2015). The pastor, and subsequently the men of the church, justified this gendered division labor using essentialism derived from Christian doctrine as well as the parameters set forth by "doing religion" adequately: namely, paternal stewardship. Further, to validate their identities as Christians, some LGBTQIA+ churches minimize the salience of their sexual status and encourage their members to put their Christian identity first—leading to "sexuality-blindness," or the obscuring of sexual inequality due to the belief that it is an irrelevant factor in daily interactions (McQueeney 2009) and "embattled identities," or the repression of sexual identity in favor of the religious identity in order to pass as heterosexual (Wedow et al. 2017). Heterosexual Christians have implemented these strategies towards nonheteronormative individuals (Moon and Tobin 2018), so it would seem that LGBTQIA+ churches are adopting these heteronormative strategies which not only disparages nonheteronormative individuals in general, but especially denigrates sexual minorities that do not conform to Christian ideals.

Godly Homonormativity and Sexual Inequalities

The requisites for godly homonormativity demand nonheteronormative individuals to create a superior moral identity as compared to secular individuals and other sexual minorities. This moral identity relies on conforming to Christian tenets of

spirituality (McQueeney 2009; Sumerau et al. 2016), monogamy (Loseke and Cavendish 2001; McQueeney 2009; Mikulak 2019; Sumerau 2012; Sumerau et al. 2016), sexual conservatism (Houghton and Tasker 2019; Loseke and Cavendish 2001; McQueeney 2009; Sumerau 2012; Wilkins 2009), marriage (Wilkins 2009), and romantic love (Loseke and Cavendish 2001; Sumerau 2012; Wilkins 2009). These tenets are disparaging to sexual minorities including lesbians, bisexual and transgender individuals, and polyamorous couples.

Because of their own devalued status, LGBTQIA+ Christians create a moral career whereby they "other" secular individuals. To do this, they may essentialize religion—necessitating Christianity to claim innate morality which marginalizes non-believers and reinforces non-heteronormative Christians' superiority (Sumerau et al. 2016). Heterosexual Christians also employ this strategy to validate what they perceive as a marginalized status of religiosity (Wilkins 2009). Further, nonheteronormative Christians may seek to distance themselves, morally, from secular LGBTQIA+ individuals. Sumerau et al. (2016) found that some nonheteronormative Christians claim that their ability to forgive their abusers put them at a moral and spiritual advantage as compared to their secular counterparts—putting the onus on marginalized individuals to forgive their abusers rather than demanding the abusers seeking forgiveness from their victims. Researchers also found this sentiment in LGBTQIA+ inclusive Catholic newsletters whereby nonheteronormative Christians are admonished by the organization for feeling anger, impatience, and pessimism towards injustices rather than righteous love, patience, and optimism (Loseke and Cavendish 2001). McQueeney's (2009) participants maintained that their ability to focus on their spirituality rather than their

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sexual status made them positively different from other gay individuals. Mikulak (2019) also found this strategy in their analysis on LGBTQIA+ organizations in Poland: nonheteronormative Christians rhetorically distance themselves from popular depictions of LGBT individuals to win the acceptance of heterosexual Christians. This distancing allows nonheteronormative Christians to conform to godly homonormativity while simultaneously marginalizing secular heteronormative individuals and the LGBT community.

Christianity reinforces heteronormativity by emphasizing the importance of monogamy, marriage, abstinence, and romance. While heterosexual Christians use these tenets to produce a superior moral identity (Wilkins 2009), LGBTQIA+ churches have deployed the same demands on their nonheteronormative members to validate their marginalized sexual status. A content analysis of newsletters distributed by Dignity USA, a popular Catholic organization dedicated to lesbian and gay Catholics, revealed that, though seeming to redo religion by advocating for the presence of nonheteronormative individuals in the Catholic faith, Dignity USA subsequently confirms heteronormative Christian tenets by emphasizing Christian tenets of monogamy and long-term relationships (Loseke and Cavendish 2001). The newsletter qualifies the acceptability of nonheteronormativity to include only relationships that are between two individuals who love one another; promiscuity is forbidden (353). Many nonheteronormative Christians weaponized promiscuity by making it an essential quality of lesbians (McQueeney 2009; Sumerau 2012)—perpetuating gender inequality even between sexual identities. McQueeney's (2009) participants strategically utilized monogamy and traditional qualities of masculinity and femininity to normalize their sexual statuses within

Christianity. These individuals renegotiated the definition of "good" Christian relationships from a historical "doctrine of complementarity" whereby "God created male and female as incomplete opposite—with different roles in reproduction, and possibly different personalities—to complete each other in marriage" (Moon et al. 2019:589) to a definition where love, respect, and sexual conservatism were indicators. However, these same individuals also embraced gender portrayals in relationships that showcased traditionally masculine and feminine gender roles and behaviors to claim validity and normalcy (Moon et al. 2019). Though their churches prided themselves on inclusivity, their emphasis on monogamy deterred other marginalized sexual minorities such as lesbians, polyamorous, and sado-masochist individuals from participating in the congregations.

Christian heteronormativity heavily disparages bisexual, transgender, and nonbinary individuals. "Cisgendering reality," coined by Sumerau et al. (2016b), is a process by which Christians reinforce cisnormative assumptions about their world that seek to erase, marginalize, and punish transgender and nonbinary individuals. They do this by ostracizing transgender and bisexual members from the community (Darwin 2020; Houghton and Tasker 2019; Sumerau et al. 2016), claiming transgender and bisexual individuals are unnatural (Mathers et al. 2018; Sumerau et al. 2016), questioning transgender and bisexual individuals' commitment to God (Sumerau et al. 2016), and outright implying transgender and bisexual members are of the devil and belong in hell (Mathers et al. 2018; Sumerau et al. 2019). The LGBTQIA+ church studied by Sumerau (2012:480) erased nonbinary and transgender experiences by claiming that individuals are "born gay or straight." Moreover, religious communities reinforce a gender binary

using cisgendered ideology and language (Darwin 2020) which renders nonbinary individuals invisible. This cisgendering creates a toxic environment for bisexual, transgender, and nonbinary individuals—arguably more so than for gay and lesbian Christians (Mathers et al. 2018; Sumerau et al. 2019; Woodell and Schwadel 2020).

Gaps in the Literature

I am interested in potential messaging sources that may perpetuate godly homonormativity. Previous literature has shown that best-selling self-help advice books perpetuate disparaging messages on gender (Colgan 2018; Klement and Sagarin 2017), but none have focused on the rhetoric involving sexuality. I wanted to know if books that advocate for LGBTQIA+ inclusion in Christianity contain similar messages that encourage nonheteronormative individuals to adhere to the Christian gender binary. Do these messages contain homonormative justifications for catering to the binary? In other words, do these authors imply that adherence to the gender binary is necessary to validate LGBTQIA+ religious identity? Do they emphasize homonormativity (i.e., "acting heteronormative") to gain acceptance from the Christian community? Is "sacramental shame" (Moon and Tobin 2018) implied as necessary to receive God's grace?

Further, I wanted to know what messages these books may be advocating regarding nonheteronormative individuals to potential straight Christian allies. Allyship is important for social change, but some research suggests that allies can counterintuitively privilege heterosexuality, tokenize and fetishize nonheteronormative individuals (Brodyn and Ghaziani 2018; Levesque 2019; Mathers et al. 2018b; McQueeney 2009), and invade safe spaces due to heteronormative privilege (Brodyn and Ghaziani 2018). Indeed, even LGBTQIA+ inclusive churches and organizations "sanctify" their allies' participation in

their congregations—claiming that heterosexual members gave their organizations validity (Levesque 2019; Mathers et al. 2018b; McQueeney 2009). This sanctification reifies heteronormativity and godly homonormativity as legitimate while perpetuating sexual inequality. Therefore, I want to know if these books encourage the privileging of heterosexuality. Do these books provide conditional acceptance which further marginalizes other sexual minorities? In other words, do these books encourage disparaging forms of allyship? Researchers have not used content analysis to explore the potential for this sanctification of allies; thus, my study fills a gap in several areas.

Sumerau et al. (2015) directly calls for continued research on how homonormativity shapes the religious identities of LGBTQIA+ individuals. This study adds to this literature by analyzing book sources that may influence those identities. Further, Mathers et al. (2018b:860) claims that research must "analyze the ways LGBTQ people and their allies make sense of heterosexuality." My analysis of bestselling books renders information critical in that assessment by exploring the messages and themes regarding sexuality being imparted by the authors, and subsequently the LGBTQIA+ organizations recommending these authors, on both LGBTQIA+ individuals and potential allies in the Christian community. Finally, researchers have lamented the lack of research regarding transgender, bisexual, and nonbinary individuals in religious contexts (Darwin 2020; Houghton and Tasker 2019; Mathers et al. 2018; Sumerau et al. 2016b; Sumerau et al. 2019). While my study does not focus specifically on the transgender, bisexual, and nonbinary experiences, it does allow a deeper look into the potential messages these books are deploying about sexualities in general—facilitating a conversation about the potential cisgendering of Christianity.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

West and Zimmerman (1987) introduced a revolutionary theory that asserts that gender is socially constructed through everyday interactions rather than essential qualities: your identity as masculine or feminine is in constant flux, as different social contexts shape different acceptable masculine or feminine behaviors. They coined this process "doing gender" (West and Zimmerman 1987) to adequately depict the flexibility of gender as a performance rather than an innate characteristic. Alternatively, Deutsch (2007) created an expansion of the doing gender paradigm that permits the possibility of "redoing gender." Redoing gender acknowledges the ability of individuals to use the process of interaction to renegotiate gendered behavior—recreating the meaning of masculine or feminine attributes. Utilization of the doing gender (West and Zimmerman 1987) and redoing gender (Deutsch 2007) frameworks allows me to analyze the books' messages of how Christian gender should be performed including leadership and relationship roles while also keeping analysis open to how messages may encourage the inversion of traditional gender roles, practices, and behaviors. Research has indicated that LGBTQIA+ individuals may be better equipped to redo gender as compared to their heteronormative counterparts (Connell 2010; Kelly and Hauck 2015).

Building on the doing gender framework (West and Zimmerman 1987), Avishai (2008) maintains that religious people constantly perform their religion—negotiating their identity as shaped by interactions in pursuit of being validated as a superior individual as compared to the secular "other." Importantly, Avishai's (2008) study emphasizes the importance of the interaction between gender and religion and asserts that some aspects of doing gender can be consecrated through doing religion and vice versa.

As is the case with doing gender and redoing gender, Darwin (2018) asserts that religious practices can be redone through interpersonal interaction. "Redoing religion," Darwin (2018:348) explains, can also be done through redoing gender because they are "intertwined systems of accountability." Darwin (2018) illustrates this idea with a study on Jewish women and the masculine religious rite of wearing *kippot*. While wearing kippot, some women would reaffirm their feminine identity by decorating their kippot using glitter, soft colors, and flowered fabric to combat others' hostility over the perceived gender betrayal. These women were redoing religion while simultaneously doing gender. However, some women refused to do this to challenge gendered practices—redoing both gender and religion (Darwin 2018). Both doing religion (Avishai 2008) and redoing religion (Darwin 2018) are useful frameworks in my analysis, as I seek to analyze how inclusive messages regarding LGBTQIA+ Christians may confirm or challenge religious practices that rely on traditional gender roles, practices, and behaviors.

Lastly, I utilized the "godly homonormativity" framework (Mikulak 2019). Godly homonormativity essentially combines the doing gender (West and Zimmerman 1987) and doing religion (Avishai 2008) frameworks to analyze whether the constraints of both processes encourage LGBTQIA+ individuals to adhere to heteronormativity to receive validation in their religious identity. This framework aids in my analysis by specifically considering what messages may perpetuate traditional gendered roles, practices and behaviors that disenfranchise LGBTQIA+ Christians while simultaneously requiring them for Christian practices and beliefs.

IV. METHODS

To explore messages about gender and sexuality in contemporary Christianity, I conducted a qualitative content analysis of 10 theology books, published from 2013-2019, that argue for the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ individuals in the Christian religion. Qualitative content analysis allows me to analyze textual messages—deconstructing the written text to explore underlying, implicit thematic messages (Klement and Sagarin 2017) that contribute to how individuals construct meaning and reality through language (Colgan 2018; Moran 2016). The deconstruction of text permits me to look beneath the surface of the written words in books that encourage inclusion to explore whether implicit themes ultimately perpetuate gender and sexual inequality.

I analyzed the following books: *God and the Gay Christian: The Biblical Case in Support of the Same-Sex Relationships* (2015) by Matthew Vines, *Unclobber* (2016) by Colby Martin, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality: Reframing the Church's Debate on Same-Sex Relationships* (2013) by James V. Brownson, *Torn: Rescuing the Gospel from the Gays vs. Christians Debate* (2013) by Justin Lee, *Transforming: The Bible and the Lives of Transgender Christians* (2017) by Austen Hartke, *Walking the Bridgeless Canyon: Repairing the Breach between the Church and the LGBT Community* (2014) by Kathy Baldock, *UNFAIR: Christians and the LGBT Question* (2013) by John Shore, *Space at the Table: Conversations Between an Evangelical Theologian and His Gay Son* (2016) by Pastor Brad Harper and Drew Stafford Harper, *Messy Grace: How a Pastor with Gay Parents Learned to Love Others Without Sacrificing Conviction* (2015) by Caleb Kaltenbach, and *Embracing the Journey: A Christian Parents' Blueprint to Loving Your LGBTQ Child* (2019) by Greg and Lynn McDonald.

I chose these books based on recommendation, stated purpose, and date of publication. I identified these proposed books using book recommendations from five LGBTQIA+ Christian sources, the Reformation Project, QSpirit, Queer Grace, Strong Family Alliance, and Gay Church as run by the God's Agape Love (put) Into Practice (GALIP) foundation. Each of these sources state that their mission is to offer resources for Christians seeking to reconcile Christianity and LGBTQIA+ identities. I cross-referenced these book recommendations with three popular literature retailers' best seller lists, Goodreads, Barnes and Noble, and Amazon to ensure the popularity of each book. The selected books were recommended by at least two of these sources (see Table 1). To narrow down book selection, the books' focus must be on making Christianity more inclusive for LGBTQIA+ individuals by either 1) Changing the way Christian doctrines are perceived, or 2) Changing the way Christians look at LGBTQIA+ individuals. I evaluated each book on this focus by examining book titles, book reviews given by the LGBTQIA+ sources, and summaries provided by Amazon, Goodreads, and Barnes and Noble. This criterion excluded books that were advice books specific to the coming-out process or queer dating in the Christian community. I also excluded recommendations whose main use was for discussion guides or bible study materials, as I wanted complete resources rather than truncated versions meant to facilitate group studies. I did not include a restriction on book type though most of the books are classified by the sources as theology books mixed with personal memoir anecdotes (only two books are clearly classified as memoirs). The lack of this restriction allows me to examine the egalitarianism of biblical evidence offered for arguments while also analyzing how authors' personal experiences might reflect broader gender or sexual inequality

processes, what advice might be given from these personal experiences, and whether this advice challenges or perpetuates heteronormativity. Further, I am interested in analyzing current messages about navigating gender and sexuality in the Christian religion. Subsequently, I excluded any books that were published before 2013, a scope that allowed one of the most recommended books across 7 out of 8 sources: *Torn: Rescuing the Gospel from the Gays vs. Christians Debate* (2013) by Justin Lee.

The only restriction set upon the authors of the book was that they had to self-identify as Christian. I verified this criterion through explicit confirmation of Christian identity in each books' Amazon summaries, or through the authors' personal web page. Verification of Christian identity allows me to ensure that the messages and arguments set forth are done so by Christian individuals who are theoretically more cognizant of Christian doctrines, the history of those doctrines, and the current climate of Christianity in terms of attitudes, beliefs, and debates than secular individuals. Any Christian denomination perspective is acceptable and encouraged (e.g., Catholic, Evangelical Protestant, etc.), as I am interested in analyzing books across the broad Christian religion rather than strictly any particular denomination. For similar purposes to denomination identity, I did not set a restriction on authors' sexual or gender identity. Of the chosen books, two were solely written by individuals who identify as gay men, one was solely written by a bisexual transgender man, and one features a co-author who identifies as a gay man. For the remaining books, four were solely written by individuals who identify as straight men, one was solely written by an individual who identifies as a straight woman, one was co-authored by an individual who identifies as a straight man, and one was co-authored by married individuals who identify as a straight man and a straight

woman (see Table 1). The authors' sexual and gender identities were publicly available
either through explicit identification in the books themselves, book summaries, the
authors' personal websites, or in book reviews featured on any of the eight resources used
to gather book samples. Though none identify as nonbinary, the array of sexual identities
allows me to analyze potential differences in messages of heteronormative and
nonheteronormative individuals regarding sexuality in Christianity.

Table 1. Book Information and Demographics of Authors					
Book Title	Resources Recommended	Author	Gender Identity	Sexual Identity	Race
God and the Gay Christian: The Biblical Case in Support of the Same-Sex Relationship (2015)	Queer Grace, Strong Family Alliance, GayChurch, Amazon, Goodreads, Reformation Project	Matthew Vines	Man	Gay	White
Unclobber (2016)	Queer Grace, Strong Family Alliance, GayChurch, Amazon, Reformation Project, Barnes and Noble	Colby Martin	Man	Straight	White
Bible, Gender, Sexuality: Reframing the Church's Debate on Same-Sex Relationships (2013)	Queer Grace, Strong Family Alliance, Goodreads, Reformation Project	James V. Brownson	Man	Straight	White
Torn: Rescuing the Gospel from the Gays-vs.-Christians Debate (2013)	Queer Grace, Strong Family Alliance, GayChurch, Amazon, Goodreads, Reformation Project, Barnes and Noble	Justin Lee	Man	Gay	White

Transforming: The Bible and the Lives of Transgender Christians (2017)	Queer Grace, Goodreads, Reformation Project, QSpirit	Austen Hartke	Transgender Man	Bisexual	White
Walking the Bridgeless Canyon: Repairing the Breach between the Church and the LGBT Community (2014)	Queer Grace, Strong Family Alliance, Reformation Project	Kathy Baldock	Woman	Straight	White
UNFAIR: Christians and the LGBT Question (2013)	Queer Grace, GayChurch, Goodreads	John Shore	Man	Straight	White
Space at the Table: Conversations Between an Evangelical Theologian and His Gay Son (2016)	Queer Grace, Strong Family Alliance, GayChurch, Barnes and Noble	Pastor Brad Harper & Drew Stafford Harper	Man & Man	Straight & Gay	White & White
Messy Grace: How a Pastor with Gay Parents Learned to Love Others Without Sacrificing Conviction (2015)	Amazon, Barnes and Noble	Caleb Kaltenbach	Man	Straight	White
Embracing the Journey: A Christian Parents' Blueprint to Loving Your LGBTQ Child (2019)	GayChurch, Reformation Project, Barnes and Noble	Greg and Lynn McDonald	Man and Woman	Straight and Straight	White and White

Based upon themes found in the literature, I initially coded for the books' overall

arguments for inclusion, how the books present nonheteronormative individuals, how

they present heteronormative individuals, rhetoric surrounding heterosexuality,

monogamy, and romantic love, advice given to straight Christians for potential allyship,

advice given to LGBTQIA+ Christians on how to navigate their sexual and religious

identity, whether the books mention nonbinary, transgender, bisexual, or any sexual

minorities other than lesbian or gay, and portrayals of gender. I immersed myself in the

data, reading the books and taking detailed notes in a Word document. I then used these

notes to openly code both for preliminary themes and themes that may inductively arise

as I read (Klement and Sagarin 2017; Stokes 2015) in an Excel spreadsheet. Once I

developed these codes, I focus coded the detailed book notes to both refine existing codes

and gather more data based on the codes created.

V. FINDINGS

Two overarching themes emerged in my qualitative content analysis: 1) what is

and is not acceptable for LGBTQIA+ Christians and Christian allies (what I call

"commandments"), and 2) what behaviors or beliefs make LGBTQIA+ individuals true

Christians (what I call "salvation"). LGBTQIA+ Christians are expected to show grace,

patience, and compassion to straight Christians who may not affirm their identity as well

as sanctify them for their allyship. Moreover, to be validated in their Christian identity,

LGBTQIA+ Christians are expected to prescribe to traditional tenants of Christian

monogamy: any nonheteronormative relationship outside of the Christian religion and

bounds of monogamy is unacceptable. Salvation comes through the viewing of

heterosexual pornography and conforming to traditional gender behavior and/or

minimizing the saliency of sexuality. However, salvation can also come directly from the

marginalization that LGBTQIA+ Christians experience—adding a potential negotiation

of sexual identity that challenges the privileging of Christian heterosexuality. I want to

note that, for this analysis, I do mirror the language utilized by these authors including

terms such as "homosexuality," "homosexual," and the blanket term "gay" for any

nonheteronormative individual. As Chávez (2004) points out, these terms are not

preferred, as they have disparaging clinical and patriarchal origins. However, like Chávez

(2004), I believe this reflection is useful for emphasizing the problematic rhetoric of

Christianity that stems from and perpetuates sexual and gender inequalities.

Commandments

  Thou shalt be gracious to straight people. Many of these books were written by

straight Christian allies. In fact, four out of ten books were solely written by individuals

who identify as straight and cisgender with one book written by a straight cisgender co-author (see Table 1). Though the majority were then written by those who identify as LGBTQIA+ Christians, these books sanctified allyship in a way that privileged heterosexuality over nonheteronormative identities. The authors validated straight Christians as morally superior to LGBTQIA+ Christians as well as instructed LGBTQIA+ Christians to be more open to the straight Christian community in understanding, sympathy, respect, and graciousness, even in the face of marginalization.

Some of these authors underscore their heterosexual identity as a reason why their advocacy for the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ identities in Christianity are more valid that nonheteronormative individuals' advocacy. Kathy Baldock (2014:414) sanctifies heterosexual allies by delineating hardships that the allies might go through to become affirming:

> All of us who are allies and advocates have experienced [being uncomfortable]. Whatever each person's motivation, at some point he or she took that first uncomfortable step. *What makes these ordinary people extraordinary* is that they kept walking forward, even in their discomfort; they walked forward until they got answers. Most lost friends; some lost their reputation, their job, or a position of leadership. But all gained characteristics of Jesus that now shine through their lives. (Emphasis added)

Here, Baldock (2014) further emphasizes the privileging of heterosexual allies by calling them "extraordinary" for being affirming. Not only does this normalize oppressive behavior within the Christian community (non-affirming individuals are defined as

ordinary), but it treats affirmation as martyrdom—something to strive for to be more

valid in their Christian identity rather than because one believes in inclusion as a basic

human right. This finding corroborates McQueeney's (2009) study showing that straight

Christian allies moralized their allyship as superior to other Christians. McQueeney

(2009) notes that this moralizing perpetuates heteronormativity and the privileging of

heterosexuality because it neglects to challenge the heterosexual privilege that makes

"inclusion" necessary. Indeed, none of these authors tackle this issue specifically.

Instead, they make sure to emphasize straight allies' "unbiased" mission for inclusion as

validation of their morality:

> The power of being a straight advocate is [that] I have no hidden agenda.
> I'm not doing it because I needed to come to terms with my sexuality, or
> because I have a gay kid and need to reconcile my faith. I'm an advocate
> because love dictates that I stand for the rights and freedoms of all people.
> (Betsy, cited in Baldock 2014:415)

> I think my position as a straight ally is potentially very powerful, as I have
> no personal 'agenda' in terms of working towards inclusion. (Lisa, cited in
> Baldock 2014:417)

Moreover, when recalling a conversation with a gay man whose life he had influenced,

Colby Martin (2016:114) mentions:

> He had told me that he had, over the previous year, consumed a lot of
> biblical scholarship on the [bible verses on homosexuality]. The most
> helpful for him turned out to be my series of UnClobber videos because,

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as he put it, "You are not gay. You don't have a dog in the fight. For some

reason your words, your arguments, landed differently for me." I thanked

him for his kind words...

Martin (2016) takes the compliment without question, implying that he does not have an

issue with the man's praises of his impersonal connection to the inclusion movement.

Further, this quote underscores the perception that some LGBTQIA+ individuals have

about allies: straight allies are more valid for their opinions than those that are perceived

to be "biased" towards the movement (i.e., members of the LGBTQIA+ community).

Other scholars have discovered similar findings in secular contexts (Levesque 2019;

Mathers et al. 2018b): members of gay-straight alliance groups uplift heterosexual allies

for legitimacy which reifies heterosexuality and perpetuates the devaluation of

nonheteronormative identities. These books perpetuate this sanctification of allies—

teaching potential straight Christian allies that they are more important and valuable than

LGBTQIA+ Christians for the fight against oppression and morally superior because they

do not have a "personal agenda" for caring. Moreover, this message perpetuates godly

homonormativity (Mikulak 2019), as it implies to LGBTQIA+ Christians that

heterosexuality is necessary for validity.

Nonheteronormative Christians are also expected to show grace to non-affirming

straight Christians. Speaking directly to LGBTQIA+ Christians, Kaltenbach (2015:147)

asserts:

Many people have studied the Bible texts and decided that marriage is

defined between a man and a woman, and they aren't homophobic or any

less loving because of it. Don't shut people out of your life because they

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don't see eye to eye with you or the person you're in a relationship with.

Don't do to others who disagree with you what you would be afraid of

them doing to you. (Emphasis not added)

Kaltenbach (2015) argues that differences of opinion regarding the morality of

LGBTQIA+ relationships should not be reduced to homophobia and that peace should be

maintained regardless of these differences. Other authors echo Kaltenbach's (2015)

sentiments about patience and grace. Stafford Harper (2016:29) speaks directly to gay

children about their straight parents:

> Society too often accepts that an eye-rolling, hostile lump of flesh is how
>
> teenagers "just are." While that make work for some, I think that if you're
>
> gay, your parents are conservative Christians, and you're still at home, you
>
> ought to work harder than the average teenager toward building respectful,
>
> effective communication and gracious relationship with them.

Stafford Harper (2016:122) also advises gay children that though their straight parents

may say or do hurtful things after they come out:

> These things may hurt you or make you angry. That's okay! But also have
>
> patience with them. Like you may have been for a long time, they're
>
> frightened and unsure of how to move forward. As weird as it may feel,
>
> you may have to hold your parents' hand throughout the process;
>
> especially at the beginning.

These authors place the onus of peace and reconciliation on the marginalized individual,

not on the non-affirming Christians who are perpetuating their oppression nor the

systematic institutional marginalization these individuals experience. Loseke and

Cavendish (2001) found that a Catholic newsletter utilized this strategy to formulate the "Dignified Self." This identity formation demands the repression of "self-righteous" anger in favor of compassion, patience, and forgiveness—normative Christian values (Loseke and Cavendish 2001). Calling upon Christian values of forgiveness and compassion to judge the validity of someone's Christian identity reinforces godly homonormativity (Mikulak 2019): LGBTQIA+ Christians are encouraged to "do" religion (Avishai 2008) correctly by tolerating their oppression. This strategy that is encouraged by some Christians victim blames and obscures the responsibility of the oppressor in the oppression—reinforcing the privileging of the heterosexual oppressor.

Thou shalt conform to prescribed sexual behavior. Though most of these books are advocating for the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ identities within the Christian church, the authors presuppose certain conservative sexual tenants to argue what is appropriate and what is sanctioned by God and Christianity. Martin (2016:154) asserts that like heterosexuality, homosexuality has appropriate sexual acts and inappropriate ones: "I'm hoping we can find a place, guided by the Spirit and Scripture, where all people, regardless of orientation, are invited to enjoy *some* expressions of sexual intimacy and avoid others." What is and is not acceptable revolves around monogamy and God-centered committed relationships.

Many of the authors who argue for the inclusion of nonheteronormative relationships do so while constructing qualifiers for those relationships, especially around the idea of monogamy. Matthew Vines (2015:159) asserts that "sin is what separates each of us from God. Sin also mars the image of God in our being. But strikingly, those aren't the consequences of affirming lifelong, monogamous same-sex unions." John Shore

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(2013:5) points out that there are differences in what sex acts the Bible condemns (gang rape, orgies, promiscuity) and "consensual homosexual sex between loving and committed homosexual partners." These authors juxtapose what is sin (what the Bible "actually" condemns) and what behavior is acceptable to the authors themselves according to their faith: lifelong monogamy. This juxtaposition is used as a tool to define what sexual behavior will be tolerated from nonheteronormative Christian individuals. This conditional acceptance of LGBTQIA+ Christians based on monogamy is common among Christians, even from those that are part of the marginalized identity (Houghton and Tasker 2019; Loseke and Cavendish 2001; McQueeney 2009; Mikulak 2019; Sumerau 2012). Moreover, though I am not implying monogamy is inherently heterosexual and foreign to LGBTIQIA+ individuals, scholars have argued that *presupposing* monogamy upholds heteronormativity which perpetuates the disparaging of marginalized sexual identities (Connell 2015; McQueeney 2009; Mikulak 2019; Williams, Giuffre, and Dellinger 2009). Williams, Giuffre, and Dellinger (2009) argue that emphasizing monogamy as "normal" erases gay identities and upholds heterosexuality as the dominant identity. Requiring monogamy for validation as Christian alienates those who may not be interested in monogamy (e.g., polyamorous individuals) and creates a hierarchy within an already marginalized community—further devaluing those that do not fit into this condition (see Sumerau 2012 for similar findings).

Along with monogamy, these authors add the condition that nonheteronormative relationships are acceptable only if they are defined as Christian. Baldock (2014:4) admits that her non-affirming religious beliefs were not confronted when she made secular "gay and lesbian friends:"

My expanding network of gay and lesbian friends started challenging

assumptions I held. Still, in all those years, I hadn't met a gay person who

said they were a Christian. That was fine with me. With no one pressuring

me to examine my restrictive evangelical beliefs, I saw no need to look

inward and scrutinize them for myself. Gays couldn't be Christians; the

Bible said so.

However, Baldock (2014:244) insinuates that her non-affirming stance was challenged

only through the meeting of LG Christians who abided by the tenants of monogamy and

Christianity:

I, too, once thought the Bible was crystal clear on [verses on

homosexuality]. As I began to meet gay and lesbian Christians who

embodied the Spirit of God and were involved in committed, long-term

intimate relationships, my understanding of the verses was challenged. My

friends professed their faith and showed changed lives.

Baldock's (2014) perceptions of prevalent stereotypes regarding the LGBTQIA+

community may have been challenged with secular LG friends (though she never really

specifies what stereotypes were challenged), but she was not confronted with religious

stereotypes of these individuals regarding monogamy or spirituality until she met LG

Christians. Her ability to understand LG individuals' "moral careers" (Sumerau et al.

2016) was hindered by the disparaging juxtaposition of a "morally bankrupt" secular

LGBTQIA+ community. In other words, within her book, Baldock (2014) relegates the

ability to be monogamous and committed only to those LG individuals who are

Christians, as they share her convictions of what is an appropriate way to act, sexually.

Sumerau et al. (2016) saw similar findings: the gay men they observed essentialized religion—requiring Christian convictions for people to be considered morally good. This condition allows for the continued devaluation of a secular "other" and perpetuates unequal treatment of secular LGBTQIA+ individuals by both nonheteronormative Christians and potential straight Christian allies. While these authors are actively trying to "redo" religion (Darwin 2018) by advocating for the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ identities in Christianity, they are effectively maintaining a traditional "doing" of religion by stipulating monogamy and Christianity as criteria to be fulfilled—resulting in the undermining of their original mission for inclusion. These authors are not interested in total inclusion otherwise they would not give qualifiers for this inclusion.

Salvation

Sin for me, but not for thee. The crux of non-affirming Christians' argument against the inclusion of nonheteronormative identities within the church or the religion itself resides in the idea that the sin of queerness is everlasting and universal (Schnabel 2016). There are practices that many Christians currently observe that were once considered sinful including eating shellfish, having sexual intercourse during a woman's period, and divorce. However, some behavior revolving around sex and sexuality are still taboo. Activities such as the viewing or owning of pornography are heavily discouraged among Christians (Perry 2018; Sumerau and Cragun 2015; Thomas 2016). Some of the authors talk about Christianity's view of pornography directly. Drew Stafford Harper (2016:73) recalls when he was taken to an ex-gay meeting by his mentor to heal his "sexual brokenness:"

Alex sometimes took me to Prokope meetings (*prokope* is Greek for

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"progress), the group [Brad Harper] helped lead where young Christian

men from [Brad's] university got together to support each other in their

'*sexual brokenness*.' While that meant something different for everyone,

and while in theory I appreciated the chance to normalize myself by

sharing my struggles in the context of other Christian males' attempts to

live *biblically*, the experience of sitting around in a circle listening to these

dudes talk about their battles with masturbation and *straight porn* was not

my cup of tea. (Emphasis added)

Stafford Harper's (2016) experience with the group highlights Christian churches'

perspectives of pornography: straight individuals who view heterosexual pornography are

equally as sexually "broken" and living as heretical as those who are queer. An essay

from a gay man that Shore (2013:59) shares echoes the religion's parallel between

homosexual identity and sexual addictions:

I was still attracted to men and not women...so I decided to give therapy

another try, this time through a program aimed at sexual addictions. It

wasn't a perfect fit, but since ex-gay theory regards homosexuality as

something akin to a sexual addiction, I was considered to be just another

broken struggler by the program. (Emphasis added)

Ex-gay ministries run and funded by Christian churches perpetuate the idea that sexual

addictions such as the viewing of pornography are on par with the homosexual identity as

undesirable behaviors that need to be cured. When talking about how straight individuals

can show grace and love to the LGBT community while also being truthful to them about

their unbiblical sexuality, Caleb Kaltenbach (2015:106) gives an example of how to

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"*accept* others as friends or family without *approving* of their life choices:" "I know for a fact that every Sunday I shake hands with men who have secretly been on websites they shouldn't be on, and yet I still accept them." Though Kaltenbach (2015) doesn't explicitly say so, it is implied that these are pornography websites. Baldock (2014:142) notes that the Moral Majority, a "religiously based, politically motivated group" whose mission was to "identify, register, educate, and rally conservative religious voters," sought to "push back the 'degradation' of the liberal culture rooted in such evils as feminism, abortion, *homosexuality, pornography,* and sex education in schools" (emphasis added). The experiences of these individuals and this goal of a high-profile Christian organization emphasizes the negative perspective of Christians for both those who view pornography and those who identify as queer.

Heterosexual pornography, though damning for heterosexual individuals, is treated as a saving grace for those who come out as gay or lesbian. Some of the authors recall friends or family encouraging the viewing of heterosexual pornography to curb their same-sex attractions. Justin Lee (2013:110) speaks on an instance where a Christian acquaintance gave him a *Playboy* magazine:

> When I told [the acquaintance] I was gay, he grew concerned and promised to do all he could to help. Days later, he came to me with a brown paper bag and a serious look on his face. 'Listen,' he said, 'I would *normally really frown on this*, but I care about you, and *desperate times call for desperate measures*.' He handed me the bag, and I opened it up. Inside was a *Playboy* magazine. 'I thought maybe this would help awaken your natural desires,' he said. (Emphasis added)

This Christian acquaintance of Lee's (2013) acknowledges that in any other situation (read, if he were speaking to a heterosexual male), he would not be encouraging the consumption of pornography, as he morally "frowns" on that type of behavior. However, because Lee (2013) is gay, the acquaintance feels as though the consumption of heterosexual pornography may cure Lee's same-sex attractions—transforming what is sin for heterosexual Christians into a saving grace for gay and lesbian individuals. Similarly, when Greg McDonald told his wife, Lynn McDonald, that he had found pornography on their son's computer, McDonald admitted that "in that second, as I looked at my husband's pain-filled expression, all I could think was *Let it be women. Don't let it be one of* those *websites.* Yes, my first thought on hearing that my son was looking at porn was a hope that it would be 'just' heterosexual porn" (McDonald and McDonald 2019:5; emphasis not added). Here, McDonald is more afraid for her son to be possibly looking at gay pornography (making him gay, in her mind) than she is upset that he is looking at pornography at all. In fact, the presence of heterosexual pornography would make her feel relieved in this situation, as the alternative would reveal her son's nonheteronormative sexuality. These reactions from Christian individuals emphasize the social construction of sin—combatting the notion that sin is inherent and universal and underscoring the sexual inequalities implicit in that construction. Social construction of sin plays well into the "doing" religion concept (Darwin 2018), as what is considered sin is negotiated and re-negotiated based on interactions between sexual identities, ideologies, and situational contexts. Moreover, that method of salvation is ultimately heterosexuality, regardless of the means to which one must take to get there—marking it the desired and acceptable sexuality for Christianity. Indeed, queer identities are treated

as so much inferior to heterosexual identities that what is an undesired sinful behavior for heterosexual individuals is salvation for queer individuals. This finding echoes Burke's (2014) study whereby certain sexual activity is renegotiated through heterosexual relationships to be acceptable to Christians. In Burke's (2014) study, this sexual activity was anal penetration and prostate stimulation of husbands by their wives. Husbands were able to use their wives' validation of their masculinity and the piety of the marital context to justify their identities as Christian men while engaging in what is traditionally understood as "nonheteronormative" sexual activity. In the current study, heterosexual pornography is renegotiated as acceptable only for those whose identity as Christian is threatened by their queer identity—perpetuating heteronormativity as the "true" Christian ideology.

My body is a gendered temple. Salvation for nonheteronormative individuals can come from gender and sexuality presentations, as well as the saliency of the Christian identity over the sexual identity. Though these books tout the progressive stance of including LGBTQIA+ identities into Christianity, some authors imply stereotypical gender and sexuality presentations for nonheteronormative individuals—obscuring the complexity and nuance of these presentations and potentially alienating those that do not prescribe to these stereotypes or conservative presentations. While trying to argue that sexual orientation is biologically induced and thereby should be considered natural and acceptable, Baldock (2014:213), perhaps unintentionally, categorizes gay men and lesbians by their similarities to heterosexual women and men, respectively:

> Homosexual men, like heterosexual women, are generally more
>
> empathetic than are straight men, as well as being better with verbal

fluency, spatial distances, and language skills. Conversely, lesbians, like heterosexual men, tend to hear lower-pitched sounds, and, on average, throw objects (softballs, basketballs, footballs) better than heterosexual women.

This absolutism regarding gender performances and natural skills has been criticized by many scholars for perpetuating essentialist understandings of gender and sexuality (Cooky and Dworkin 2013; Fine and Duke 2015; Gottschalk 2003). Essentialism emphasizes a deterministic, individualistic understanding of gender and sexuality and obscures how social forces and institutions, such as religion, can play a part in the defining and sanctioning of performances—resulting in gender and sexual inequalities on a structural level. Are heterosexual women and gay men "naturally" more empathetic, or is it gender socialization that demands women be more empathetic and passive, and the stereotypes of sexuality presentation that demand gay men present feminine and therefore take on the traditional gender norms of women? This traditional categorization of what is stereotypically "normative" gay behavior is also illustrated in McDonald and McDonald (2019:42). Greg McDonald claims that he had "known when he was a toddler that Greg Jr. wasn't like other boys" and was struck with the question "Could our son be struggling with being gay?:"

> Greg Jr. would rather play with his sister's Barbie dolls than the trucks and cars we bought and put all over the house for him. He didn't want to roughhouse with his cousins; he'd rather stay inside and draw pictures for his grandmother.

McDonald's differentiation of his son from other boys creates an "othering" process

whereby the behavior of other boys is solidified as normal (heterosexual), and his son's behavior is solidified as abnormal (gay). Moreover, McDonald's suspicions imply that a gay child will inherently be attracted to the norms and behaviors of the opposite sex, and that any deviation from traditional gender behavior (i.e., not "doing" gender correctly; West and Zimmerman 1987) automatically calls a person's sexual orientation into question. Again, this essentializes gender and sexuality performances—perpetuating denigrating sexual and gender stereotypes which have been used to oppress and marginalize nonheteronormative identities from the Christian religion.

While some books set up what is stereotypical of gender and sexuality performances for gay and lesbian individuals, other books delineate what is acceptable gender and sexuality performances for those individuals who want to be validated as Christian. Stafford Harper (2016:51) recalls being disappointed by his ex-gay counselor's gender presentation and demeanor:

> Small in stature, his chin dressed with a not-quite-successful goatee, he was not the strapping paragon of rough-and-ready masculinity I had hoped for. Where was the Paul Bunyan I had anticipated would lead me, flannel-clad and axe-swinging, into the sunlit woods of fully realized manhood?

Of course, in this situation, Stafford Harper (2016) was attending counseling sessions to actively convert from gay to heterosexual with an ex-gay ministry. However, he recalls reacting to his counselor this strongly because he resented the "kind of gay man" he had become:

> Even after accepting my orientation, I remained insecure about my male gender presentation, pissed that I ended up as the kind of gay man who

keeps a collection of fur coats and works in musical theatre rather than the

kind who wears Carhartt overalls and can change a flat tire in the parking

lot outside the leather bar. Years after embracing my gay identity, I still

berated [Brad Harper] and Mom for not pushing me into things that I was

sure would have made me a man's man instead of the sissy I felt I grew up

to be. (Harper and Stafford Harper 2016:30)

As a Christian, Stafford Harper (2016) recalls express discontent with being a more

feminine presenting gay man. While he knew he could not change his sexual orientation,

he felt that he could change his gender presentation to be more acceptable to the Christian

community, his Christian family, and his Christian friends. In other words, though

Stafford Harper (2016) was effectively "redoing" gender (Deutsch 2007) by presenting

more feminine and "redoing" religion (Darwin 2018) by accepting both his sexual

orientation and his Christian identity (at the time), the conflict felt during the interaction

between the two identities led him to "do" religion (Avishai 2008) traditionally by

seeking to "do" gender (West and Zimmerman 1987) traditionally. Stafford Harper's

(2016) changing of gender presentation and behavior to conform to traditional gender

norms for validation echoes the findings of Sumerau (2012). Sumerau (2012) found that

gay men in a LGBT church emphasized masculine leadership, authority, and stoicism to

validate their church as an authentic Christian church and themselves as authentic

Christians. Moreover, the gay men in Sumerau's (2012) study also constructed an internal

hierarchy of sexualities by differentiating between gay men they saw as "queens/sissies"

and gay men they saw as "real gay men" (476) based on traditional gender behavior (i.e.,

queens present more feminine while real gay men present more masculine). Similarly,

Stafford Harper (2016) was constructing what he saw as an acceptable gender presentation for himself as a gay Christian man which relied on traditional gender norms—perpetuating the devaluation of femininity and upholding traditional masculinity. The creation of acceptable and unacceptable presentations ensures the continued oppression and marginalization of those who do not conform to what it accepted (e.g., more feminine presenting gay men, lesbians, transwomen, cis-women, and heterosexual women), and it adds toxic pressure to nonheteronormative individuals, like Stafford Harper (2016), to change their presentation based on what is desired by Christian churches to be validated within those contexts (godly homonormativity; Mikulak 2019).

Not only may queer individuals feel pressure from Christianity to conform to traditional gender behavior, but they also may feel compelled to make their sexual identity less salient by de-identifying with the more "promiscuous" LGBTQIA+ community. Kaltenbach (2015:196) asserts:

> There is a difference between someone who identifies as LGBT and is sold out to Jesus and someone who is LGBT and isn't following Christ...there's a difference between a Christian who is trying to be sexually pure but slips up occasionally and someone who is freely indulging her same-sex passions.

This assertion pits the Christian LGBTQIA+ individual against the secular LGBTQIA+ community. The queer Christian cannot indulge in the behavior "associated" with the community, and, in fact, Kaltenbach (2015:186) recommends that LGBT should even be abolished from queer Christians' identity in general:

> So [straight Christians] shouldn't try to make gay people straight. Instead,

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we should try to help people whose overriding identity is *LGBT* to become

people whose overriding identity is *disciple*. They can replace a false

identity with a true identity in Christ. (Emphasis not added)

Kaltenbach's (2015) remarks highlight a strategy being used by nonheteronormative

individuals to validate their Christian identity to heterosexual Christians (McQueeney

2009). McQueeney's (2009) participants sought to minimize their sexual identity in favor

of their identity in Christ to reduce the saliency of their sexual minority status. By

encouraging this strategy, Kaltenbach, a heterosexual white man, is not only telling

LGBTQIA+ Christians that their sexual identity is "false" and a threat to their identity as

Christians, but he is explicitly encouraging potential straight allies to demand that their

fellow LGBTQIA+ Christian members forgo this identity. Similarly, Lee (2013) recalls

several instances when he was considering his sexuality where the promiscuous lifestyle

of the LGBTQIA+ community dissuaded him from accepting his sexual orientation as

gay:

> I already had an image of what gay people were like. They were sinners
>
> who had turned from God and had an "agenda" to mainstream their
>
> perverted lifestyles. I didn't actually know any gay people, but I had seen
>
> them in video footage of Pride parades, where they were dressed in
>
> outrageous outfits or wearing next to nothing at all, and I knew they were
>
> engaged in all kinds of deviant sexual practices. I had nothing in common
>
> with people like that, so how could I be gay? (32)

I'd tried leafing through gay magazines, but they seemed full of the same-

sex equivalent of sleazy, near-pornographic imagery I had always

diligently avoided in the straight world. As a Christian, I wanted to live a

life focused on serving God and others, not egocentric carnality. The

images I was seeing of gay people weren't me. And if that was what "gay"

was, I didn't want to be it...I didn't want to be associated with the kind of

hedonistic, sex-obsessed lifestyle that was my only image of gay people.

(150)

Of course, as Lee (2013) later points out, these promiscuous images of the LGBTQIA+

community do not fully define the community. It is not my intention to imply that it does;

there exists diversity and nuance within the community because we are dealing with the

diversity and nuance of human existence. However, as scholars like Mikulak (2019)

contend, defining what is and is not acceptable behavior based on a heterosexual

normality perpetuates heterosexuality as the "correct" sexual identity and underscores

heteronormativity. Some of Mikulak's (2019) participants reported feeling shocked when

they saw a "normal" Pride parade devoid of "feathers, nudity, and flashiness" (503).

Mikulak (2019) argues that what is normal is pitted against the elements that the

participants expected which makes these characteristics abnormal. Like Mikulak's (2019)

participants, Lee (2013) implies that Pride parades and gay magazines portray the

antithesis of what it means to be a LGBTQIA+ Christian—creating an "othering" effect

that encourages the continued marginalization of those who may not conform to

heteronormative Christian ideals.

This adherence to godly homonormativity (Mikulak 2019) in both gender and

sexuality presentation leaves hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity unchallenged. These authors delineate what is and is not acceptable for the LGBTQIA+ Christian identity which obscures nuance within the identities themselves. Further, these criteria create heteronormative expectations for potential straight Christian allies on what a valid queer Christian looks and acts like—allowing them "impartial" discernment on who deserves the social benefits of the identity and who does not.

On earth as it is in heaven. Lastly, salvation comes through nonheteronormative identities themselves. Many authors assert that LGBTQIA+ Christians' experiences that arise through their identities better enable them to teach God's messages about grace, love, and perseverance, allow them to break disparaging stereotypes and usher in the new world that God has promised his followers, and provide opportunities for a more authentic relationship with Christ. Together, these assertions allow LGBTQIA+ Christians to construct a Christian identity that is defined as more valid than heterosexual Christian identities.

Some authors of these books explicitly contend that nonheteronormative Christians may be more adept at teaching God's messages than heterosexual Christians. Lee (2013:243-244) believes that Christianity's salvation lies with gay Christians:

> In a culture that sees gays and Christians as enemies, gay Christians are in a unique position to bring peace and change minds. We're Christians who know firsthand what it's like to feel like outcasts and to be hurt by the church, and that gives us important perspective that the church needs...When it comes to sharing our faith, *we have more credibility* because of what we've been through, and we know the reasons many

people outside of church are so resistant to our culture's version of

Christianity. If Christians in our culture are killing Christianity, the gay

Christians just might the ones who are able to save it. (Emphasis added)

Some authors introduce other LGBTQIA+ individuals that echo these sentiments:

When I think about the sexual minorities or gender minorities who Jesus

was speaking about here, yes, I believe they have something to teach

society about courage, because they have to overcome so much to just live

from day to day. (Lawrence, cited in Hartke 2017:108)

At times, I still think it would be a lot easier if I was not gay. But I also

realize that if I weren't gay, I would be a totally different person than I

am, and would not be able to touch others in the same way God now uses

me to...God has given me—and all Christians who also happen to be

gay—an opportunity to make a mark for the glory of Christ in the Church

Universal and in society as a whole. (D.S, cited in Shore 2013:71-72)

I'm so thankful God created me gay. He has shown that the Word of God

can be transmitted through a gay man! God uses earthly vessels to get His

message of love and power into the earth. He uses unique vessels. The

LGBT community is a unique vessel. (Randy, cited in Baldock 2013:368).

These individuals find meaning in their oppression by highlighting the ways their

marginalization aids in their identity as Christians. Namely, by being outcasts in society

and in the Christian institution, LGBTQIA+ Christians better understand how to provide

unconditional love and support to others and can even save the Christian religion from straight Christians whose reputation to the secular world has mostly been tainted by hatred and marginalization. This finding corroborates a study by Houghton and Tasker (2019). Houghton and Tasker (2019) found that lesbian and bisexual Catholic women reported believing that their marginalized sexual identity within the Christian community allowed them to cultivate a more compassionate understanding of oppression to help bring God to others. This strategy of re-negotiating their marginalized identities as advantageous for God's messages may be a way of challenging heterosexuality as the ideal sexuality in Christianity—effectively "redoing" religion (Darwin 2018).

Part of God's message to the world is the promise of a new life free from oppression and pain—bringing God's kingdom to earth as it is in Heaven. These authors assert that LGBTQIA+ Christians are an integral conduit for ushering in this change. Austen Hartke (2017:99) asserts that transgender individuals are destined to break societal molds:

> God did not ask the eunuchs to pour themselves into the mold of Israel's previous societal norms, nor to bend themselves to fit by taking on specifically gendered roles in the current system. Instead, God called for a transformed community that looked like nothing the people had ever seen.

Hartke (2017) advocates against both godly homonormativity (Mikulak 2019) and the cisgendering of reality (Sumerau et al. 2016b) by encouraging transgender individuals to align themselves with the eunuchs of the Christian bible and create a new world system that erases binaries and gendered norms. Similarly, James Brownson (2013:253) comments on a vision that affirming Christians have for the inclusion of queer Christians:

In this vision, the inclusion of committed gay and lesbian unions represents, not an accommodation to a sexually broken world, but rather an offbeat redemptive purpose in the new creation. That purpose can destabilize the assumed exclusivity of the heterosexual majority, challenging all of God's people to discover more deeply the richness of interpersonal communion, beyond socially constructed roles and responsibilities shaped by a heterosexual majority that is too often oblivious to the ways it can oppress minority voices.

Though Brownson (2013) does limit the ability to usher in this new creation to monogamous commitment (conditional acceptance), he emphasizes how nonheteronormative relationships force Christians to learn how to have deeper, more meaningful relationships that are not defined by and confined to gender and sexuality norms that often perpetuate inequality for those outside of heterosexual maleness. In sum, these books argue that while heterosexual Christians perpetuate an imperfect world dominated by sin by conforming to the oppressive molds created by imperfect humans, LGBTQIA+ Christians are the ones who can bring God's perfect plan for the world to fruition by challenging and changing those oppressive molds through "redoing" gender (Deutsch 2007) and "redoing" religion (Darwin 2018).

Nonheteronormative Christians' abilities to better teach God's messages and to usher in God's perfect world by breaking stereotypes create a more authentic Christian identity than what heterosexual Christians have. When a gay man wrote to Shore (2013:169) asking if he should tone down his feminine presentation, John responded:

Screw changing. Be the way you are. It's *good* for us to have men act like

(stereotypical) women, and women who act like (stereotypical) men.

Because those are the kind of people who are leading the way for all of us

to be *exactly who we really are*. People like you are the heroes of our

culture. (Emphasis not added)

Shore (2013) underscores the importance of "redoing" gender (Deutsch 2007) for

"redoing" religion (Darwin 2018): the blurring of lines between acceptable gender

presentation allows for people to be a more authentic version of themselves which can

allow for a closer and deeper relationship with God. Other LGBTQIA+ Christians feel an

importance to their nonheteronormative identity based on the oppression they have had to

face within the Christian community. Greg McDonald (2019) recalls a conversation he

had with a panel of LGBTQIA+ Christians. During the panel, McDonald (2019:110)

asked "If you could push a button today to be straight, would you push it?":

One person said, "I'm not entirely sure I'd be a Christian if I wasn't gay.

Being gay forced me to really examine my faith." Another agreed, adding,

"Nothing forces you to examine your faith like having everyone tell you

'You're not a Christian, God hates you, and you're going to hell.'

In Baldock (2014:391), Devin, a gay man, specifically emphasizes the importance of his

gay identity versus a heterosexual identity when he says "In my mind, without doubt, if I

were born heterosexual, I would not be as close with Christ as I am today. Through my

struggle of begging God to answer the question 'Why?', I got so much closer to God than

I could ever imagine." These individuals are validating their identity as Christian through

the oppression they experience with the heterosexual majority—arguing that their

marginalized status allows them to be more authentic as a Christian than heterosexual individuals. Moreover, they feel resolved in their religious convictions despite the marginalization of heterosexual Christians: denigration by heterosexual Christians brings them closer to God and their faith, it does not drive them away. Houghton and Tasker (2019) and Sumerau et al. (2016) had similar findings: gay men, lesbian women, and bisexual women reconcile their religious identity by claiming that opposition to their sexual identity is not God's doing but perpetuated by misguided and imperfect humans. Lee (2013:244) utilizes this strategy when he claims that gay Christians have had to "learn to put our ultimate trust in God instead of in the human institutions of the church." This strategy allows LGBTQIA+ individuals to deviate blame away from God and justify their continued involvement in Christian beliefs despite their continued marginalization—granting LGBTQIA+ Christians the ability to "redo" religion (Darwin 2018) by advocating for the inclusion of nonheteronormative identities while also permitting them to validate their Christian identities by juxtaposing the affirmation of a higher, perfect being with the disapproval of imperfect, sinful humans.

VI. DISCUSSION/CONCLUSION

Through a qualitative content analysis of ten theology books, my findings showcase pervasive sexual and gender inequalities in Christianity that are present even within messages of inclusion. While the authors claim they are affirmative in their beliefs and advocate for the affirmation of LGBTQIA+ identities in the Christian religion, their messages of such inclusion still emphasize conditional acceptance based on heteronormative assumptions of acceptable and unacceptable behavior. My findings corroborate several studies within the literature: these books promote the sanctification of straight Christian allies (Levesque 2019; Mathers et al. 2018b; McQueeney 2009), the forgiveness and patience of the oppressed to the oppressor (Loseke and Cavendish 2001; McQueeney 2009; Sumerau et al. 2016), and the presupposition of monogamy and Christianity for both identification as a moral person and a Christian (Loseke and Cavendish 2001; McQueeney 2009; Mikulak 2019; Sumerau 2012; Sumerau et al. 2016). Further, these authors conflate gender and sexuality which creates essentialized gender behavior based on sexual orientation—promoting stereotypical understandings of LGBTQIA+ individuals that may "other" those that do not conform to these stereotypes (Cooky and Dworkin 2013; Fine and Duke 2015; Gottschalk 2003). During this conflation, some of the authors underscore traditional masculine gender presentation as preferred (Sumerau 2012) and encourage LGBTQIA+ Christians to minimize their sexuality saliency by distancing themselves from the "promiscuous" secular LGBTQIA+ community and thinking of themselves as Christians only (McQueeney 2009; Mikulak 2019). In sum, these books encourage LGBTQIA+ Christians to "do" religion (Avishai 2008) "correctly" by adhering to heteronormative ideals—perpetuating the privileging of

heterosexuality and further marginalizing those identities that may not fit, or may not care

to fit, into the conditions set forth by these Christian authors (e.g., nonbinary individuals,

polyamorous individuals, queer individuals).

My findings also indicate that LGBTQIA+ Christians may be able to negotiate

their sexual identity and subsequent marginalization as integral to the validity and

legitimacy of their Christian identity (Houghton and Tasker 2019; Sumerau et al. 2016).

Many authors assert that their sexual identity makes them better able to be

compassionate, to love unconditionally, and to help others who are oppressed. They also

contend that their marginalization forces them to have a deeper spiritual relationship with

God through constant introspection and lack of resources available to them from the

Christian community—creating a stronger and more legitimate Christian identity. On the

one hand, this negotiation has the potential to "redo" religion (Darwin 2018) by

challenging the privileging of heterosexuality within the Christian religion. This strategy

also has the potential to combat "sacramental shame" (Moon and Tobin 2018), as what

was originally perceived as a source of constant shame and invalidation can be re-

negotiated into a source of pride and validation. However, if the LGBTQIA+ Christian

identity is formulated on conditional acceptance, like the identity qualifiers these books

have simultaneously stipulated, this source of pride could still be used to further

marginalize others. As the literature suggests, LGBTQIA+ Christians can still perpetuate

gender and sexual inequalities if they seek to conform to the very systems that maintain

these inequalities (Houghton and Tasker 2019; McQueeney 2009; Mikulak 2019; Moon,

et al. 2019; Sumerau 2012; Sumerau et al. 2015). It is of continued importance for

scholars to analyze how pervasive disparaging ideologies are even among those who

claim progressive advocacy.

This study also adds to the existing literature by finding that heterosexual pornography, while a sin for heterosexual individuals to partake in, may be seen as a "saving grace" for nonheteronormative individuals. Burke's (2014) findings are similar in that sexual behavior that is traditionally seen as nonheteronormative is made normative and acceptable in the context of heterosexual marriage. Burke (2014) notes the implications of the finding in terms of the social construction of gender, but I would like to argue that these findings imply the social construction of sin, itself. The intersection of "doing" religion (Avishai 2008) and "doing" gender (West and Zimmerman 1987) must also depend on the negotiation of what is and is not sin, as straight Christian individuals in some of these books believe that the viewing of heterosexual pornography would lead to LGBTQIA+ individuals "doing" both gender and religion, "correctly" (i.e., having "natural" heterosexual attractions as God "intended"). Future studies should expound upon this interaction further and seek to identify the social and individual processes that affect how sin is constructed and sanctioned. Specifically, it would be prudent for future studies to focus on the construction of sin and intersectionality. All of the authors are white and from middle-class backgrounds, so their perspective and advice come from a more privileged place compared to other, more marginalized groups. Due to the layers of marginalization for other groups, sin could be constructed more disparagingly— potentially underscoring intersectional privilege, even with sin.

There are several limitations with this study. Specifically, the books were all written by white individuals, meaning that these findings can only speak to the white experience. McQueeney (2009) found that some validation strategies employed by white

LGBTQIA+ Christians relied on privilege that black LGBTQIA+ Christians did not have—necessitating the further analysis of how race affects this process. In addition, because this is a content analysis, I am unable to directly ask the authors any follow-up questions, give them a chance to clarify thoughts or statements, or ask probing questions as I would be able to with in-depth interviews (see Webber and Byrd 2010). For example, "What advice would you give to someone struggling with their sexuality in their faith?"; "What advice would you give to a straight Christian on how to support their fellow LGBTQ sibling in Christ?"; and "What can Christian churches do to be more inclusive to the LGBTQ community?" would be potential in-depth interview questions to elicit information from the authors on how they think about allyship, identity navigation, and structural processes for inclusion. Finally, the findings are not generalizable to all Christians' experiences due to the non-random and small sample. For more generalizable findings, future research could conduct mixed-method studies on LGBTQIA+ Christians' experiences, as mixed methods utilize both quantitative and qualitative methods for a more comprehensive research design. This design allows the gathering of data from a large sample size through surveys and/or questionnaires while gathering nuanced data through focus groups, ethnographies, in-depth interviews, and so on (see Turner, Cardinal, and Burton 2017 for a review on mixed methods).

Though there are cultural lags, Christians have reinvented themselves over time to keep up with a changing society (Bartkowski 2000; Schnabel 2016). However, gender and sexual inequalities have persevered. In a society that has seen an increase in "performative progressiveness" (Brodyn and Ghaziani 2018) without actual egalitarian structural change, it is important for scholars to analyze what people say they are saying

or doing versus what the implications their words and actions have on challenging or maintaining inequality. My study, and other studies on the intersections of gender, sexuality, and religion, emphasize an important point that seems to get lost with these "progressive" Christian movements: the process of truly "redoing" gender and religion for inclusion cannot happen when we build upon foundations of inequality. Lukewarm inclusion is not inclusion at all. As God says in Revelations 3:16 "So because thou art lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spew thee out of my mouth." As a society, let us spew out this lukewarm progressiveness.

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