

“Still Looking for My Jonathan”: Gay Black Men’s Management of Religious and Sexual Identity Conflicts

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This article looks at homosexual Black men who are heavily involved in fundamentalist African-American churches. These men describe themselves as “out as same-sex loving individuals” even though the messages preached by their church leaders and the doctrines of their churches are, at the very least, heterosexual, but more likely to be stridently anti-homosexuality. Not only do these men attend the churches they are parts of, but they are viewed as leaders in these churches in positions ranging from associate pastor to director of facilities management. The study uses structured interviews to understand how these men manage the conflict between a committed gay identity and a strong religious identity that says the two cannot coexist.

KEYWORDS *Homosexual, African-American, masculinity, religion, sexual identity, Black church, Richard Troiden*

While nearly four centuries worth of surveys show that Black Americans are less approving of homosexuality than their White counterparts (Lewis, 2003), further examination of those findings suggests that these ethnic differences may be more attributable to religiosity than ethnicity. The church is often identified as one of the most oppressive environments that gay men encounter (Oswald, 2001; Yip, 1999). Religious attitudes (Larsen, Cate, & Reed, 1983), levels of religiosity (Herek, 2000), church attendance (Battle & Lemelle, 2002), and the degree to which a person has internalized their

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religion's values (Herek, 1987) are all strongly correlated with negative attitudes toward homosexuals. Eighty-five percent of Blacks report that religion is very important to them, and 60% claim to attend church at least once a week (Pew, 2008). Ironically, Black Christians are more likely than White Christians to self-identify as liberals/moderates and vote for Democrats, even as the values that they embrace on Sunday mornings often seem to be in stark contrast to those they support politically (Greeley & Hout, 2006). In many Black churches, the messages preached by leaders and inscribed in the doctrines of the church are at the very least heterosexist, but are more likely to be stridently critical of homosexuality (Douglas, 2003; Ward, 2005; Woodyard, Peterson, & Stokes, 2000).

While some of this homophobia can be traced to literalist translations of scripture, heteronormative constructions of masculinity are also an important component of its continuing strength in the Black church. The word "homosexual" may rarely be used in a Black pulpit. Instead, it is replaced by code words—punk or sissy—that reflect not only a distaste for how a man might behave in the bedroom, but how he might behave outside of it. In spite of the fact that all Black gay men do not exhibit effeminate behaviors, the rhetoric spoken from Black pulpits indicts their romantic–sexual performance by accusing them of flawed gender performance. By conflating sexuality with gender, the performance of Black masculinity becomes predicated on a particular performance of Black sexuality.

Like the larger culture in which it is embedded, the Black community believes that "real men" are gainfully employed, provide for and maintain leadership in their homes, and in other ways are able to exhibit control over their own destiny. Black manhood, then, depends on men's ability to be provider, progenitor, and protector. But, as the Black male performance of parts of this script is thwarted by racism and capitalist patriarchy (Ferber, 2007; hooks, 2004; Majors & Billson, 1992; Staples, 1982), the performance of Black masculinity becomes predicated on a particular performance of Black sexuality and avoidance of weakness and femininity. If sexuality remains one of the few ways that Black men can recapture a masculinity withheld from them in the marketplace, endorsing Black homosexuality subverts the cultural project of reinscribing masculinity within the Black community. As Johnson (2003) argues, "The Black homosexual becomes the site of displaced anger for the Black heterosexual, the scapegoat used to thwart his own feelings of inadequate manhood" (p. 37). Black masculinity is, thereby, fortified by the Black church's rhetorical rejection of men who share both the romantic attractions, and presumably other traits, of women.

So what of gay men who participate in these religious communities in which their religious identity is strengthened while their sexual identity is stigmatized and condemned as reprehensible? How do these men arrive at a coherent and positive sense of themselves as gay Christians in churches that condemn homosexuality? This article examines how these men resolve the

conflict between a committed gay identity and a strong religious identity that says the two are oppositional and cannot coexist. These strategies reportedly used by gay men—rejecting the sexual identity, rejecting the religious identity, compartmentalizing the two identities, and integrating them—provide the framework I will use to organize the analysis of my conversations with these men (Rodriguez & Oulette, 2000). I show that the strategies other gay men might use to do this are not easily adapted to the Black context, principally because of the role of the Black church in the lives of members of the Black community.

METHODS AND SAMPLE

The data presented in this article were collected through semistructured interviews with 34 Black gay men. The corpus was not randomly selected. Given the stigma associated with being gay in the Black religious community, the population that these men represent is not easy to find; thus, a representative sample is difficult to achieve and, therefore, the findings reported in this essay should not be deemed completely generalizable. The respondents were recruited primarily through personal contacts and snowball sampling, that is, many of them were referred to the project by other respondents. Most of the interviews were recorded in person in the city where the informants live either at the interviewee's home or at their place of business. Some (42%) were interviewed by phone or by e-mail conversations. The average interview was one hour. Fieldwork was carried out between July 2006 and January 2009.

Because some of the participants and I socialized within the same community, there was concern that the interview might create a potential imbalance in power, as I would have access to personal information about participants at any future meetings. I allowed participants to ask about my sexual orientation and experiences with my religious community following each interview. This exchange equalized power during the data collection and allowed for the mutual experience of learning. Although this discussion was not included as part of the formal data under analysis, it further sensitized me to concepts and experiences that were important to the men interviewed.

Each interview began with an introduction in which I explained the project and answered questions. I also had each informant complete a brief survey that included a series of basic background questions (e.g., level of comfort with stated sexual orientation, age, level of education) and questions about (a) the degree to which they are "out" with their sexual orientation to various communities, (b) the influence of various items on their religious and sexual identities, (c) their feelings when their church community and church leadership deals with homosexuality, and (d) how strongly they agree with a set of statements about human sexualities, relationships, and

religion. In the interview, I encouraged the men to describe the ways they experienced their identities within their religious community. An exploratory style of interviewing was adopted, in which I used open-ended questions and nonbiasing prompts, such as, "Tell me how you arrived at this level of comfort [with your dual-identities] from the point where you realized you were attracted to men and that this attraction was unacceptable within your religious community."

Respondents ranged in age from 18 to 61 years, with an average age of 33. Most of the interviewees were single, that is, not in long-term relationships (62%). A majority had at least some college, including 60% with a four-year college degree or higher. They were affiliated with a variety of religious traditions, ranging from Roman Catholicism to nondenominational Protestantism. Most (93%) of the men described themselves as gay; the remaining men described themselves as bisexual. They ranked the Bible highest in terms of its role in how they live out their religious identity; the gay and lesbian community is ranked lowest. Conversely, personal experience ranked highest in terms of its role in how they live out their sexual identity; their church's authority and doctrine ranks lowest. The emotions they expressed most often when they think about how their church community deals with homosexuality are distress, upset, and irritability.

These men also hold fairly orthodox views on moral issues. When asked, most of my respondents indicated their displeasure with their pastors' coupling of homosexuality with "real sins" like adultery, fornication, and drug abuse, suggesting that they believe that there are clear rights and wrongs in the Bible. They just do not believe that homosexuality is one of the wrongs. They feel very strongly that Christianity should be concerned more with responsible behavior and justice to individuals, rather than the acceptability of certain kinds of genital acts. They also believe that the traditional biblical explanations about homosexuality are inaccurate and that sexual morality is a personal choice and a personal matter. But, not surprisingly, they are as likely to report beliefs about religion that look very much like those reported by non-gay Black Christians (Ellison, 1993; Ellison, Hummer, Cormier, & Rogers, 2000). They find strength and comfort in their religion and believe that a good Christian believes in God without question. They attend church at least twice a week (on Sundays and Wednesdays); believe that Satan, Heaven, and Hell all exist; pray at least once a day; and describe themselves as somewhat religious.¹ They were unanimous in their assertion that "The Bible is the inspired word of God, but not everything should be taken literally, word for word."

FINDINGS

My analysis focuses on a particular subset of Black gay men. First, these men claim to be committed to a gay identity and that identity has salience

for them. By salience, I mean that the identity is one that is meaningful to them and is one that is likely to be enacted in different social circumstances. In describing themselves—as “gay,” “same-gender loving,” “in the life,” “family,” etc.—these men tend to speak of their sexual identity positively. While most of the men indicated a very high (average 8 on a scale of 10) degree of comfort with being gay or bisexual, they were mixed in the degree to which they were “out of the closet” with their family, friends, coworkers, and church community. They were least likely to be “out” to their extended family and most likely to be “out” with their friends. They tended toward closetedness with their immediate family, coworkers, and church community. This suggests that, while these men are comfortable with the gay identity, they still recognize the stigma associated with it in the Black community and in the larger community around them. The usual mechanism whereby people become committed to an identity is stifled here. A person becomes more committed to an identity the more they have to people who interact with them in that identity. This effect is heightened by the emotional strength of those ties (Burke & Reitzes, 1991). In many of their social networks (and aside from friendships, some of the most meaningful ones), people are not interacting with these men as gay or bisexual. In spite of this, they still indicate that they are as likely to respond in many situations as gay men as they are Black men, as Alfred does here:

Being gay affects all kinds of things for me: how I dress, what shows I watch, the kind of people I choose to be around. I always try to tell myself that it really doesn't matter, that it's just a part of my life like anything else, but when I think about it, it really does play a role in how I look at the world. When I watch the news and they're talking about something about gay people, I notice it. That same thing doesn't happen for other things that are a part of me like my job. I mean, I don't pay any extra attention when they talk about accountants. (Alfred, 32 years old)

These men are also very committed to their religious identity. Most of them attend church regularly and, for many of them, their connection to their religious community is not simply a laymember connection. With few exceptions, the men I interviewed are actively involved in ways that would heighten their commitment to their religious identity. They've taken on visible roles in their churches that increase the ties to people who interact with them in the religious identity. These men are involved in a full range of roles and activities in church, including pulpit ministry (preachers, ministers), service ministry (hospitality, education), performing arts ministry (choir directors, drama coordinators), and other support ministries (construction, food service, public relations, security). What's more, a number of them lead the ministries they participate in, thereby raising their visibility in the church and heightening the interactions they have with people in these

roles. Because there is, generally, no stigma attached to the religious identity, these men experience identity-confirming interactions with people both inside and outside of their religious community.

Richard Troiden's (1989) four stage-theory of sexual identity development offers a loose framework in which we can understand how these men might make sense of the dissonance they may experience. His stages—sensitization, identity confusion, identity assumption, and commitment—are often used to describe the coming out experience. Embedded in his explanations of the developmental process one might go through as they move from recognizing a possible homosexual orientation to embracing that orientation are a number of behaviors one might exhibit in each step of this process. I do not use Troiden's stages to show that these men move, in a step-wise fashion, through a process of coming out; for many of these men, they were "out" before their decision to manage the religious and sexual identity conflict. Troiden's approach is useful because there are definite similarities between the behaviors he describes and the approaches these men (and gay Christians in general) might consider as they try to reconcile being gay with strong cultural and religious messages against homosexuality.

REJECTING THE HOMOSEXUAL IDENTITY

One approach that gays and lesbians use to alleviate conflict between their sexual and religious identities is to reject one or the other. Some attempt to reject the homosexual identity. In Troiden's (1989) model, this strategy is characteristic of his "identity confusion" stage. In that stage, the person recognizes their thoughts and behaviors as homosexual, finds them unacceptable, and then seeks to reject the identity by inhibiting those thoughts and behaviors. For religious individuals, attempts to do this range from minor actions like "praying for deliverance" to much more drastic measures like attempting reparative therapy. Without exception, my respondents had a time in their lives when they sought to reject the homosexual feelings they were experiencing. Many of these men suggest that they have asked God to take away the same sex attractions at some point in their lives. More than one of them mentioned the biblical story of Paul, recorded in Corinthians 12:7, in which Paul prayed that God would remove a "thorn in his flesh." They had internalized the messages their churches were giving them and sought, primarily through prayer, to be free of this "abomination."

For many of them, this prayer, like the struggle they were having, was personal and private. But some of the men approached family members or church members to pray for them, thereby "outing" themselves but only with the pretext of changing their sexual orientation. While some of these attempts to share their inner struggle contributed to conflict with family members (and, in one case, public ridicule at his church), some men

described the experience as surprisingly positive: “My mother said she already knew and had been praying about it already. I expected her to be disgusted or upset and almost didn’t know how to handle the compassion about the whole thing that she showed” (Patrick, 22 years old).

In discussing their own failed attempts to reject the homosexual identity, a number of the men ridicule so-called “ex-gays,” arguing that they do not believe that God has truly taken away the person’s homosexual orientation. They suggest that the men have only changed their behavior, but that there has been no actual change in their feelings or orientation toward men. For example, one man states, “I have met a lot of these people who claim that God delivered them. If you’re so delivered, why are you still at the club and hanging out with us?”

A key component of Christian conversion therapy is the reparative aspects of conversion from, presumably, a nonreligious identity to a religious one (Dallas, 2003; Payne, 1996). As such, these approaches aim to “cure” someone of homosexuality by introducing them to Christianity. An assumption of the therapy is that the homosexuals who are seeking to reject the homosexual identity don’t already share a deeply ingrained religious one. Respondents’ experiences with Christian conversion therapy ranged from reading books to attending ex-gay support group meetings. While they indicate that they found both approaches to be helpful in reducing their reliance on pornography or non-monogamous relationship as parts of their homosexual identity, none of them reported their experiences as “curing” them. In fact, because of the therapy’s emphasis on Christian conversion, an experience many of these men had as children, they often describe the experiences with the therapy or books as contributing to their belief that homosexuality was not incompatible with their religious identity:

When I was in college I read this book by Tim LaHaye. This was before he started writing about the tribulation and the whole point of his book was that [to get delivered] you needed to get saved, come to church, and get Christian friends. I do all of that and I’m still gay. (Sharif, 28 years old)

Generally, all of these men found trying to reject the homosexual identity a difficult and ultimately, fruitless, endeavor. Because their indoctrination in the heteronormative values of their religious traditions preceded their sense of self as gay men, many of them report holding some residual discomfort about their homosexual identity. This persists even for some men who describe themselves as “completely out” among family, friends, and coworkers. But, without exception, none of the men I interviewed are continuing a project of actively denying their attractions or trying to remove them.

REJECTING THE RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

Another strategy for dealing with the dissonance between the religious and the homosexual identity is to reject the religious identity. While not explicitly mentioned in Troiden's stages, this strategy is typical of people in his third stage, identity assumption, in which, the homosexual identity becomes salient enough that one seeks ways to legitimize the identity and neutralize the feelings of guilt promoted by society's rejection of the orientation. Because a primary source of that rejection may be the church, distancing themselves from the church becomes a way to develop a positive self-image as a gay man. In some cases, they may even become hostile to religion and the church. Singer and Deschamps (1994) have shown that more than 60% of gays and lesbians say that religion is no longer important in their lives. Rejecting the religious identity can take a number of forms: Affiliating with a religion that does not stigmatize homosexuals, no longer attending worship services, or even becoming an atheist. None of my respondents ever considered an outright rejection of the Christian identity. In fact, a number of them suggested that doing so would be as difficult for them as no longer affiliating with the Black community. For example, Davis (37 years old) states:

How could I possibly do that? Just like I believe I'm born this way, I believe that as a Christian I didn't really have a choice to get saved. I know God pursued me. You can say that with Christianity, I was born again this way.

Rather than divorce oneself entirely from the church, some of the men experimented with explicitly gay-affirming denominations such as the predominantly Black Unity Fellowship Church Movement. While they found a more tolerant religious community, they were mostly dissatisfied with their experiences at these churches and returned to the more conservative denominations. A primary reason given for this dissatisfaction was the absence of moral standards being championed consistently from the pulpit. This concern is expressed by one of the men who currently attends a Black apostolic congregation:

My partner and I tried to go to a Metropolitan church, but we didn't like it because they seemed to be more about gay than God. Since they couldn't say that homosexuality was wrong, I think they were afraid to talk about any kind of sin. I come out of a holiness church and I probably shouldn't say this, but I wanted a little hellfire and damnation every now and then. (Marcus, 40 years old)

Another alternative to remaining in overtly anti-gay churches is to seek out mainstream gay-tolerant denominations such as the United Church of Christ,

the Quaker Friends Meeting, or the Evangelical Lutheran Church. There are few predominantly Black congregations in any of these denominations, so most churches that one would attend would be predominantly White. Only two of the nine men who mentioned exploring these denominations stated that they had an acceptable experience with them. In this case, the problem wasn't an absence of morals; it was an absence of a cultural experience to which the men were accustomed. This point, strongly expressed by the remaining seven men, is typified in the following comment:

I don't go to those churches because of the religious organization I was raised in; that's the style of worship that I desire. [Black] churches are more emotionally expressive, the type of songs that we sing, the way the sermon is presented and delivered, just the overall atmosphere of the congregation. (Nathan, 24 years old)

While I recognize that men who were successful at rejecting the religious identity are not represented in my sample, these findings are a useful expansion to our knowledge of the multiple paths gay men who persist in religious institutions might consider.

COMPARTMENTALIZATION OF THE TWO IDENTITIES

Another approach congruent with Troiden's identity assumption stage is for these men to lead "double lives" where they draw a bright line of separation between their homosexual identity and their religious one. For Troiden, this involves "passing" as heterosexual at church while maintaining a committed homosexual identity outside of the church. Rodriguez and Oulette (2000) suggest that "gays and lesbians can use this strategy by keeping their religion out of the homosexual parts of their lives, and keeping their homosexuality out of their religious lives." (p. 334). In theory, isolating the two identities would be possible because of the Black church's "don't ask, don't tell" approach to sexual orientation. Because the default expectation is that men at church are heterosexuals, few gay men are confronted with questions about their sexual orientation at church. As a result, some of the men assert that they reduce the stigma associated with being homosexuals at church simply by not expressing their homosexuality at church. Wayne (36 years old), the coordinator of his church's security team—a role that, unlike choir member, retains a high level of embedded masculinity—pointed out that people rarely assume he is gay (including other gay men he is aware of at his church) and that this allows him to experience church as something far removed from his sexual orientation:

I mean, honestly, I don't mix my sexuality with my religion. When I go to church, I'm not really there as a homosexual. I mean, that's not why I'm there. I'm there to praise the Lord and to hear a word. I'm not really thinking of the sexuality part even though it may come up in a sermon or something.

This is easier for some men than others because their involvement in church does not require them to engage issues of sexuality. For others, such as bible instructors and ministers, keeping their own views on homosexuality separate from the values they have to express as spokespersons for church doctrine becomes more difficult as explained by Rashawn (25 years old), who has encountered this problem as one of his church's few seminary-trained Sunday School teachers:

For example, how do I teach from Romans 1 without dealing with homosexuality? Even if I try to sidetrack it, somebody in the class always asks about it. I really cringe . . . because it is my job there to teach what the church believes and not what I believe.

For others, it becomes difficult to separate the two identities because of their romantic and social relationships. Some men describe their frustration with their church's ministry for singles or ministry for couples. Because those ministries are usually organized around heterosexual relationship issues, the men are reminded of the church's emphasis on heterosexual norms when they attend the meetings. As Marcus (40 years old), a respondent who is in a long-term relationship, stated, "Can I bring the man I've been sharing my life with for 11 years to a meeting to talk about how it frustrates me that he won't help with the dishes?"

A complete compartmentalization of the religious and sexual identities would require the men to deny their homosexuality in religious contexts, but it would also require them to deny their religious inclinations in homosexual contexts. This would, of course, require them to seek relationships with people who do not have strongly defined religious identities. Otherwise, they would suffer breaches in the barriers between the two identities and the identity conflict would be revived. Many of the men describe the difficulty in maintaining distance between the two identities for this very reason. Their desire to find friends or romantic partners who share their religious values brings the two identities together, as expressed by Bryan (23 years old), one of the single men I interviewed:

I don't want to be unequally yoked, so if I'm going to pick someone to date, he's probably going to be in the church. Most of the gay people I associate with are in somebody's church, so I see them on Sunday or at concerts or other religious events.

It might be argued, if homosexuality was just a question of sexual behavior, that Bryan and others might be capable of maintaining the kind of

rigid separation between it and their Christian identity that Baumeister, Shapiro, and Tice (1985) suggest is necessary for successful management of identity conflicts (or legitimation crises, as he terms them). In that case, Bryan could simply not think about his sexual behavior in church, as Wayne suggests that he does. Because verbal injunctions against sexual immorality are often free of direct references to sexual behavior (e.g., heterosexuals who live together in sexual relationships are accused of “shacking up,” which impugns their living arrangements rather than their sexual behavior), one could compartmentalize their sexual behavior in the same way anyone might do who is engaged in sexual, but nonmarital, relationships. Bryan’s difficulty resides in the fact that being religious factors into not only his choices of platonic relationships, but in his choices of romantic ones as well. As a result, a strict compartmentalization of identities that impact values and tastes as much as they affect behaviors and interactions is difficult for most of the men I spoke with.

INTEGRATION OF THE TWO IDENTITIES

The alternative to compartmentalizing one’s dissonant identities is to engage in what Troiden calls “identity synthesis,” where the gay man integrates his sexual identity and religious identity into an altogether different identity: gay Christian. Both aspects of the self are accepted and internalized as part of the total self-identity. Because Black gay men often find it difficult to sacrifice either identity or to construct a psychological barrier between the two, they create a complex identity in which aspects of their sexuality and religion complement and inform the other. The biggest adjustment, for Black gay men, tends to be in how they perceive the gay identity. Some of my respondents explained that settling into the gay Christian identity helped them see homosexuality as a lifestyle rather than a set of sexual behaviors. By rejecting the general stigma attached to the gay identity and seeing it (as some men described it) as “who God made me,” the men were challenged to change their sexual behavior. For many of these men, the integration prompted them to bring their sexual behavior more in line with the conservative Christian values that constrained their nonsexual behavior. For example, one respondent said,

Once I came to realize that being gay wasn’t my problem, I was able to hear the messages my pastor preached about trying to find self-esteem in multiple sex partners. I gave up some things that I felt went with being gay when it hit me that those things were plain old sin. (Brian, 25 years old)

This sentiment was echoed by men who believed that integrating the identities made it easier for them to pursue relationships that were more in line

with their beliefs that sex should only be practiced in committed relationships. Prior to the integration, these men moved in and out of what might have been committed relationships because Sunday morning always brought a new dose of guilt and shame about their homosexual behaviors.

How gay Black men come to integrate the two identities is as varied a process as any conversion process we might uncover. Some of the respondents describe it as a “journey,” arguing that there was no specific point in their lives where they decided to assume this new identity. Others point to encounters with other gay Black Christians, their independent study of alternate interpretations of the commonly used “anti-gay” texts, a “crisis point” in which they felt compelled to reconcile the two identities, or positive interactions with sympathetic heterosexual members of their religious communities. Many of these men describe a sense of relief once they were able to perceive of the homosexual identity as a valid part of their total sense of self.

While most of the men are single (62%), they all indicate a desire to be in a committed, romantic relationship. Troiden (1984) and others suggest that seeking or being in a relationship with someone of the same gender is the final stage in the process of acquiring a gay identity. Many of these men indicate a strong belief that monogamy or sexual exclusivity is the ideal arrangement for Christian same- (or opposite-) sex partnerships. Evidence of such thought is identified in Bryan’s comments:

While I know that I’ll never be able to have the fairytale relationship that straight people get, I still want to have someone love me like David loved Saul’s son, Jonathan. I’m not sure if they were gay or anything, but when Jonathan died, David said that Jonathan’s love for him was more wonderful and stronger than even women’s love for him. I want something like that. Someone who cares about me that much and someone I can care about like that. But I’m still looking for my Jonathan.

In Bryan’s description of the kind of relationship he is seeking, he uses religious imagery to reflect his sense that in the same way God accepted the, at the very least, homosocial relationship between David and Jonathan, God could and would accept his relationship with a man. He appropriates the kind of sentiment expressed by these two men as evidence of a religious sanction of his gay identity, thereby strengthening his belief that the two are not wholly incompatible.

CONCLUSION

My purpose in this article was to examine the strategies gay Black Christian men use to alleviate the conflict between their religious and homosexual

identities? While some of the men are completely convinced that God approves of their sexual orientation and that there is no incompatibility between their homosexual and Christian identities, most of the men suggest that they vacillate between complete acceptance and uncertainty. This is consistent with Troiden's (1984) model of homosexual identity development. Troiden argues that his stages are not necessarily linear, but that movement between the stages can stall, accelerate, or even reverse temporarily as a result of new encounters that challenge their worldview. The men generally have found it difficult to either reject one of the identities or compartmentalize them as separate spheres in their lives. Instead, they have endeavored to integrate the identities into one new identity that manages to draw on the values inherent in one (the religious identity) to strengthen their comfort with the other (the homosexual identity).

But the question remains: How does the gay Black man sustain the positive integration of the two identities when he receives reminders of their incompatibility from the Black church environment he is so strongly embedded in? Threats to the homosexual identity persist because the men continue to participate in religious communities in which the religious identity is strengthened, while the sexual identity is stigmatized and condemned as reprehensible. What's more, the messages advanced by the Black church suggest that in order to fully embrace the Christian (and, in some cases, Black) identity, they must shun the sinful homosexual identity. In other anti-gay religious traditions, there are para-church organizations that promote the religious-homosexual identity integration; for example, the Catholic "Dignity and the Evangelical "Good News" organizations (Thumma, 1991). These groups advocate a gay-positive religious message that helps the mostly White gay parishioners resist the social labeling and concomitant stigmatization that occurs in their churches. These alternatives to more gay-friendly or gay-positive denominations enable White gay men to embrace their homosexual identity without abandoning their conservative religious identities. This kind of organized approach to bridging the potentially incongruent homosexual and Christian identities does not exist in most Black church denominations. Therefore, future research must examine how these gay Black men, many of who are actively involved in churches that condemn homosexuals, persist in these churches while maintaining a coherent and positive sense of themselves as gay Christians.

NOTE

1. I am careful in noting this. Some of my respondents remarked that they did not like the question because they do not see themselves as religious, but instead prefer to talk about "being in relationship with God" or "spiritual."

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