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**Manuscript Title:** Exploring lesbian and bisexual Catholic women's narratives of religious and sexual identity formation and integration

**Authors:** Marie Houghton (MSc) & Fiona Tasker (PhD)

**Authors' Affiliation:** Department of Psychological Sciences, Birkbeck, University of London, Malet Street, Bloomsbury, London, UK WC1E 7HX

**Corresponding author:** Fiona Tasker, [f.tasker@bbk.ac.uk](mailto:f.tasker@bbk.ac.uk)

**Exploring lesbian and bisexual Catholic women's narratives of religious and sexual identity formation and integration**

Many LGBT people with a Christian upbringing experience conflict between their religious and sexual identities. Many resolve this conflict by leaving Christianity, others by moving to affirming churches. Some research has examined the experiences of LGBT people who choose to attend conservative churches; however, there has been very little research on the experiences of non-heterosexual women in the Catholic Church. Narrative and thematic analyses of data collected through qualitative interviews with six non-heterosexual Catholic women revealed several ways participants had integrated their faith and sexuality: acceptance from other Catholics, distinguishing between the Church and God, meeting other LGBT Christians, and developing a personal relationship with God. These reflect strategies adopted by gay Catholic men and LGBT Christians attending Protestant churches. Nonetheless, participants reported that their experiences varied from those of gay Catholic men due to gay men being more visible and more subject to prejudice within the Church.

Keywords: sexual identity; women; Catholic; religion; narrative analysis; thematic analysis

## **Introduction**

There is a growing body of research looking at the inner conflict LGBT people may experience between their sexual and religious identities. Research suggests that the majority of LGBT people with a Christian upbringing experience conflict and most resolve it either by leaving Christianity, for example choosing instead to identify as spiritual rather than religious, (Figueroa & Tasker, 2014; Pietkiewicz & Kołodziejczyk-Skrzypek, 2016; Tuthill, 2016) or by moving away from conservative denominations, such as the Catholic Church, to gay-affirming churches, such as the Metropolitan Community Church (Barton, 2010; Dahl & Galliher, 2012; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000; Schuck & Liddle, 2001; Walsh, 2016).

Some studies have examined the experiences of LGBT people who choose to remain within conservative churches; however, these have tended to feature samples that are either exclusively or predominantly male (Pitt, 2010; Radojic, 2016; Walton, 2006; Yip, 1997). Nevertheless, previous research has indicated that LGBT people's experiences of religion can be impacted by their gender (Dahl & Galliher, 2012; O'Brien, 2004; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000; Rostosky, Danner & Riggle, 2010; Shekrat, 2002). There has been very little research specifically focused on how non-heterosexual women who are actively practicing Catholics experience their religious and sexual identities, the topic of the present study.

### **Research on LGBT Christians**

Most studies of LGBT people's experiences of Christianity have featured samples in which all or the majority of participants come from Protestant religious communities, either by upbringing (Barton, 2010; Dahl & Galliher, 2012; Levy & Reeves, 2011) or in terms of current affiliation (Hickey & Grafsky, 2017; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000; Walton, 2006; Wilcox, 2002). However, the religious community an LGBT person belongs to can make a difference to how they experience their sexual identity: those who are part of conservative

communities that are condemning of homosexuality find it harder to accept their sexuality than those involved in more liberal communities (Levy & Reeves, 2011; Mahaffy, 1996). Despite some recent softening of rhetoric under Pope Francis (Hale, 2015), the official Roman Catholic teaching remains that homosexuality is a “tendency ordered toward an intrinsic moral evil” and “an objective disorder” (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1986). It therefore seems likely that the experiences of openly LGBT people in the Catholic Church may be different from those in more affirming communities.

Few studies have employed samples where all or the majority of participants are Catholic and, those that have, have tended to feature gay men who were brought up Catholic but no longer actively practice (Figueroa & Tasker, 2014; Garcia, Gray-Stanley & Ramirez-Valles, 2008; Pietkiewicz & Kołodziejczyk-Skrzypek, 2016). Pitt (2010) examined the experience of gay men in a range of conservative denominations, including the Catholic Church. O’Brien (2004) explored what being openly queer and Christian meant to men and women from both the Catholic Church and a variety of Protestant denominations, although the proportions of participants in each group were not specified. Yip (1997) surveyed 121 members of a British LGBT Catholic organisation, the majority of who attended Mass at least weekly; however, 90% of his participants were gay men. Similarly, Radojic (2016) studied two chapters of the American LGBT Catholic organisation Dignity but noted that almost all members were white, middle class, gay men aged over 65. Tuthill (2016) provides a rare example of a study focused specifically on lesbians’ experiences of conflict between their sexuality and their Catholic upbringing. Nonetheless, the vast majority of Tuthill’s participants were no longer actively practicing Catholics at the time of the study.

Existing research suggests that the experience of non-heterosexual Catholic women may differ from both that of non-heterosexual women in other Christian denominations and that of gay Catholic men. Several studies have found gender differences in LGBT people’s

experience and resolution of conflict between their sexual and religious identities. For example, Shekrat (2002) found that gay men were significantly more active in religious organisations than were non-heterosexual women. However, some findings appear contradictory. On the one hand, Dahl and Galliher (2012) found that LGBT women reported experiencing more conflict between their sexuality and religion than LGBT men. On the other hand, Rodriguez and Ouellette (2000) found that, compared to gay men, lesbians were significantly less likely to have experienced conflict between their religious and sexual identities, and were more likely to have successfully integrated these identities. It therefore seems that gender can make a difference to an LGBT person's experience of, and feelings about, religion, but clearly more research is needed to understand the exact effect.

### **Life Course Theory**

Life course theory (Elder, 1996, 1998) emphasises the importance of understanding people's lives in context. It highlights identity development as a process which happens throughout a person's life and which is impacted by the historical time and place in which a person lives, as well as by the narratives and discourses available in that cultural context (Hammack & Cohler, 2009). Further, individual lives are linked to the lives of others through family relationships, partnership, friendship, and community (Elder, 1994). Nevertheless, despite these contextual constraints on the possible trajectories we can choose from, life course theorists posit that we each exercise personal agency by constructing our own life out of the options available to us (Elder, 1998; Hammack & Cohler, 2009).

Life course theory concepts are very relevant for the current study. For example, the importance of considering the development of sexual and religious identities across the life course has been shown by Rodriguez and Ouellette (2000) who described the integration of these identities as a process that can happen over many years, and by Mahaffy (1996) who

found that how a person resolves conflict between their faith and sexuality can change over time. Furthermore, the impact of cultural and social context on the development of an integrated LGBT Catholic identity has been revealed by studies indicating that growing up in a socially conservative, Catholic community can lead gay people to feel reconciling their Catholicism and homosexuality is impossible (Figueroa & Tasker, 2014; Pietkiewicz & Kołodziejczyk-Skrzypek, 2016). Moreover, research has demonstrated that LGBT people who are accepted by their families find it easier to integrate their religious and sexual identities (Levy & Reeves, 2011).

### **Research Aims**

The present study focused on non-heterosexual women who were actively practicing Catholics, a group who have been under-represented in previous research. The research took a life course perspective to examine how these women narrated their religious and sexual identities over their life course, the dilemmas they had encountered, and whether and how these were resolved.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Participants were recruited via two LGBT Catholic groups based in the UK, which shared details of the study with their members through their newsletters and Facebook groups. A flyer advertising the study was placed on the noticeboard of an LGBT bookshop in London. Details of the study were also sent to the Catholic and LGBT societies of a number of universities. In addition, a Facebook page advertising the study was created and details of the study were shared on Twitter and posted in several ecumenical LGBT Christian groups on Facebook.

The research featured six participants, who generously gave their time and help with the research. All participants were women aged 18-65 years, who openly identified as non-heterosexual (participants' preferred terms for their sexuality are reported in Table 1) and as actively practicing Catholics. Demographic information for participants is provided in Table 1 with details aggregated. Pseudonyms have been used for all participants to ensure anonymity. All participants were resident in England when they were interviewed, but two did not have UK nationality. Four participants were white and two were of other ethnic backgrounds. None of the participants identified as transgender. With the exception of Charlotte, who was at university at the time of the study, the current or most recent jobs of all participants would be classified as middle class occupations. However, Frances and Kim identified as working class, whereas Adela, Charlotte, and Eleanor self-reported as middle class. Jennifer did not identify with a social class. Three participants considered their lives to be at least partially affected by disability. At interview, two participants were single, two were in relationships (not cohabiting), and two were in civil partnerships. None of the participants were in relationships with each other.

Two participants were actively involved in LGBT Catholic organisations. One participant was a member of an LGBT Catholic organisation and also was involved in online ecumenical LGBT Christian groups. One participant was actively involved in the ecumenical LGBT Christian community on social media, but was not a member of any specific Catholic groups. Two participants were not involved in any LGBT Catholic or Christian groups or organisations.

## **Interviews**

The research was conducted via face-to-face semi-structured qualitative interviews lasting between 45-90 minutes at a location chosen by each participant (university office,

quiet coffee shop, or the participant's home). Upon expressing an interest in the research, potential interviewees were sent an information sheet about the study before they agreed to participate. This sheet included information about consent and confidentiality as well as the opening interview question and areas that the interview would cover: childhood experiences of religion and how they developed their Catholic faith, how they became aware of and came to accept their sexuality, their experiences of coming out, their involvement with the LGBT community and the Catholic Church, how they felt about their faith and sexuality, and how they felt these identities interacted. As the interview covered potentially sensitive topics, this helped to ensure fully informed consent was obtained, and allowed participants to think about what they wanted to say before the interview took place. Ethical approval for the study was given by a University Institutional Review Board.

The interview opened with an invitation for the participant to share her experiences of sexuality and religion across her life course. This approach enabled the participant to tell her story as she would to a stranger who listened attentively and responded with empathy and interest, with further questions asked only as necessary to prompt the continuation of the narrative or to gain clarification or further detail (Hollway & Jefferson, 1997; Riessman, 2008). The interviewer (first author) was a heterosexual woman in her early thirties who had been raised Catholic but did not identify as Catholic at the time of the interview. Unless requested, the interviewer's religious background and sexual identity were not disclosed to participants before the interview.

Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by the interviewer, with any potentially identifying information removed or disguised at this point. Once completed, the transcript was sent to the participant who then had two weeks to review it and state if they wanted any data removed or edited. Analysis only began after this two week period had elapsed. No participants requested any changes be made to their transcript.

## Qualitative Analyses

The potential benefits of combining two methods of qualitative analysis have been emphasised by Frost et al. (2010) and Moran-Ellis et al. (2006). Two types of analysis were performed: thematic and narrative. The thematic analysis followed the method laid out by Clarke, Braun and Hayfield (2015). Each transcript was summarised line by line with codes describing data content. These codes were then grouped by similarity to identify sub-themes from each participant's transcript. Subsequently, these individual sub-themes were brought together and themes that appeared across the different participants were identified. As much as possible, the codes, sub-themes, and themes reflected the *in vivo* language participants themselves used. For the narrative analysis, the interviewer summarised each participant's story after the interview and reviewed this again post-transcription. Each summary was then re-written as a macro-narrative and analysed according to Labovian principles (Labov, 1972; Patterson, 2008).

The findings presented below bring together these two forms of analysis. Analysis of participants' macro-narratives is presented first to indicate the different pathways towards identity integration revealed in the data. The thematic analysis is then presented using the four themes identified as sub-headings. As much as possible, a participant's preferred term for her sexuality is used when discussing her experiences. Within the transcript extracts presented below, brief pauses are represented by ..., the removal of text is demonstrated by (...), and information that has been added for clarification or removed to help protect the participant's identity is demonstrated by [text].

## Findings

### Macro-Narrative Analysis – *Different Pathways to Identity Integration*

All six women's macro-narratives ended with them having found a way to integrate their sexual and religious identities and to accept themselves as non-heterosexual Catholics. (Although, one participant (Eleanor) thought that she would join another faith group when she no longer needed to be seen as a member of a Catholic community because of her job.) The macro-narratives of all participants also began in the same way: they were brought up Catholic and were still involved in the Catholic Church when they, at varying ages, discovered their sexuality. However, considerable divergence could be observed in the pathways participants took from initially identifying their sexuality to integrating their identities. Three participants remained active in the Catholic Church throughout their self-discovery process, whereas three others stepped away from the Church for a time. Furthermore, participants' narratives also varied depending on whether the resolution they reached between their faith and sexuality required them to remain single. These similarities and differences between participants' macro-narratives are represented in Figure 1.

Whether participants felt the need to step away from the Church does not seem to have been associated with any decline or change in their belief in God, but rather seems to have depended on the extent of the conflict they experienced between their faith and sexuality. Upon accepting their sexuality, Frances, Jennifer, and Kim all stepped away from the Church. For example, Kim described how, as she started to identify as bisexual around the age of 17 and began to explore her sexuality, she stopped attending church because she "felt like a hypocrite". Frances and Jennifer also described feeling unable to reconcile their sexuality and their faith upon discovering their attraction to women, in their twenties and thirties respectively. This caused them to feel deeply uncomfortable attending Mass and they stopped attending their respective churches. Nonetheless, Frances, Jennifer, and Kim were eventually able to reconcile the conflict they felt and returned to the Church. For Frances and Kim, a key point in their journey back to the Church was realising that God loved and

accepted them regardless of their sexuality. Kim also connected her return to the Church with meeting her loving and accepting partner, and meeting LGBT friends who helped her to realise it was possible to be both bisexual and religious. For Jennifer, returning to the Church came about through studying Church teachings and meeting other LGBT Catholics who were happy in their identities.

In contrast, Adela, Charlotte, and Eleanor remained active in the Church while exploring and developing their sexual identities. Charlotte was the only participant who felt that remaining Catholic required her to stay single, although she still identified as gay. Charlotte realised her attraction to other girls as she entered her teens and around the age of 16, after much thought and prayer, had decided that she accepted the Church's teaching that gay people are called to a life of celibacy. While having to remain single seemed "like the end of the world" at first, realising that she would not be alone forever because her soul was ultimately destined for marriage to Christ helped Charlotte to accept her sexuality and even come to see being gay as "a really wonderful part of my life". Adela was in her thirties when she discovered her attraction to women and entered into a lesbian relationship. Adela never considered leaving the Church but, on reflection, recognised that she had for some time compartmentalised her sexual and religious identities. Through joining an LGBT Catholic organisation, Adela had come to integrate her identities more fully and to develop a deeper faith. Eleanor had recognised herself as gay from a young age and had at first resolved any potential conflict by not acting on her attraction to women. At university, Eleanor attended an Anglican college and enjoyed being involved with a Church of England community which provided a more liberal faith environment than she had experienced previously. Nevertheless, upon leaving university, Eleanor decided to remain within the Catholic Church, in part because of the career she pursued. In her late twenties, Eleanor met her current partner and they began a relationship. Eleanor continued to attend Mass and felt "able to just put on one

side” the Church’s views on homosexuality which she believed “just has yet to catch up with the rest of us”. Eleanor’s ability to do this seems to have been facilitated by the fact that her frustrations with the patriarchal nature of the Church (which for her was a bigger problem than the Church’s views on homosexuality) had already caused her to question Church doctrine and she saw, for example, the refusal to allow women to be priests as “ridiculous”. Eleanor planned to leave Catholicism and join a more liberal Christian community when she retired.

**Thematic Analysis – *Love, Acceptance, and Invisibility: Living Out Faith and Sexuality as a Non-Heterosexual Woman in the Catholic Church***

Participants’ macro-narratives showed the different pathways taken to identity integration. Thematic analysis allowed the commonalities and differences between participants’ experiences to be further illuminated. Four themes emerged from the analysis and are explored below: ‘My sexuality and my Catholicism are both part of who I am’, ‘Distinguishing between the Church (which is rejecting) and God (who is accepting)’, ‘Despite official Church teaching, many Catholics are accepting – but acceptance cannot be presumed’, ‘Occupying a distinct, invisible space – disconnected and not fully part of, or accepted by, either community’.

**Theme 1: My sexuality and my Catholicism are both part of who I am.** All participants conveyed a sense that being non-heterosexual and being Catholic (or, as Eleanor defined herself, Christian) were both important self-identity concepts for them. For Frances, Jennifer, and Kim, feeling that two key aspects of their identity were incompatible had caused them considerable distress and led them to search for ways to reconcile their faith and sexuality. For example, Jennifer said:

there was a real period of turmoil for me in my life because I didn't see that it would be possible to reconcile both (...) I know many people who have chosen to go and walk away from their faith, I didn't feel that was an option for me because being Catholic is just who I am, just as I'm gay is who I am.

Not all participants experienced inner conflict regarding their religious and sexual identities, but all participants had over time come to integrate these two identities and spoke about ways that their faith and sexuality were connected or had influenced each other. For example, Eleanor stated: "I don't see them as separate identities particularly; I see myself as a gay Christian (...) or a Christian gay. I don't know, you know. [*Laughs*] Both." Jennifer felt that her Catholic values had influenced how she thought about sex and relationships, making her search for a long-term relationship rather than something casual, whereas her sexuality had helped her realise the importance of working to reform the Church so it can be a place where everyone feels welcome. Frances, Jennifer, and Kim believed that being non-heterosexual and experiencing conflict between their faith and sexuality had had a positive impact on their lives, making them more compassionate towards other minority groups and causing them to develop a deeper personal relationship with God. Both Kim and Jennifer stated that they felt "lucky" to be non-heterosexual.

All participants were clear that experiencing same-sex attraction was not a choice, or something they could control, and therefore could not be a sin. For example, Charlotte stated she had "always" been attracted to girls and, while she chose not to act on this attraction, she confidently affirmed: "having an attraction isn't a sin in any way". Furthermore, Frances described the sense of self-discovery that came with realising her sexuality: "you kind of get this sense of revelation about yourself and you think 'Oh yes that is me'." However, participants held different opinions on what might cause a person to be non-heterosexual. Kim strongly espoused essentialism: "it's something that's innate to who we are." In contrast,

Adela, Charlotte, and Jennifer were more open to the idea that sexuality might be due to a range of factors or that sexuality could change and develop. For example, Jennifer believed sexuality had different causes for different people. She spoke of how she had not had childhood or teenage crushes on girls (or boys), which led her to question whether she had been born gay or whether this developed later for her.

For five of the participants there was also a very clear sense of Catholicism as an identity. This identity did not necessarily depend on them choosing to be Catholic or even upon them going to church; it was just part of who they were. Jennifer believed that being Catholic was “more intrinsic” than whether you attended church, and both she and Frances still considered themselves to be Catholic during the period they spent away from the Church. Kim emphasised that, while she knew other denominations would be more accepting, going to another church would feel like “making do”. Discussing the Church of England, Kim stated: “they are a lot more open (...) but I’m Catholic. (...) that’s what I’ve been my whole life.” Frances conveyed a similar sentiment even more passionately when she said:

I love the Church. It drives me mad (...) and I do feel very rejected by the, the official Church teaching and find that deeply painful but it doesn’t stop me loving the Church and wanting to stay part of the Church.

For Frances, the Church was like family: even if you have disagreements, “you’re still family”. Further, Adela described Catholicism as “a gift” she received from her parents and she preferred to work to reform the Church than to move denominations. This was a perspective shared by Jennifer and Frances, who raised the question of who would change the Church if all LGBT Catholics left.

Eleanor was the only participant who did not talk about loving, or seeing something special in, the Catholic Church. Eleanor was also the only participant planning to leave

Catholicism in the future. Eleanor saw herself as a Christian and gave purely pragmatic reasons for why she chose to practice her Christian faith in the Catholic Church.

**Theme 2: Distinguishing between the Church (which is rejecting) and God (who is accepting).** For all participants, to varying extents, there was a sense that the Church and God were distinct and differed in their response towards LGBT people. Participants felt that the Church's rejection of LGBT people did not reflect the will of an always-accepting God. For example, Kim highlighted that Church teaching had been detrimental for her self-acceptance; however, she also acknowledged that the Catholic Church had introduced her to God's continuous love and support, which were vital in helping her to accept herself. As she struggled to accept her sexuality, Kim had experienced "really, really dark times" but she noted: "having that relationship [with God] is the thing that's helped me to pull through (...) And that's a gift from... the Church."

Charlotte, Frances, and Kim spoke very movingly about how God loved and accepted them as they were, and how realising this had helped them to accept themselves. For example, Frances stated: "I think I've come to a point of reconciliation, in so far as I feel God totally accepts me regardless of my sexuality". Frances also quoted Psalm 139 to describe how "God creates us (...) and knows us better than we know ourselves and, and if God accepts me to that degree then, then I can accept myself to that degree".

In contrast to their belief in God's acceptance, participants had either experienced rejection from people within the Church, or were concerned about this painful possibility if they disclosed their sexuality to the wrong person. For example, Charlotte emphasised that some Catholics could be "somewhat aggressive or disrespectful" towards LGBT people and Jennifer stated that she had "heard really awful things" from some priests she had discussed her same-sex attraction with. Furthermore, Eleanor, Frances, Jennifer, and Kim described

feeling rejected by Church teaching on sexuality, and both Frances and Jennifer observed it was rare to meet people who had happily integrated their Catholic and LGBT identities as so many LGBT people left the Church because of the negative messages they heard.

Five participants expressed the idea that, in contrast to God, the Church is human and therefore flawed and imperfect. Eleanor, Jennifer, and Kim emphasised that many Church traditions (such as celibacy for priests) were defined by humans and not by God. Furthermore, Adela recognised that, while she loved the Church, it did have a “pretty bleak history” in terms of some of the things it had done, and Frances contrasted the Church’s refusal to welcome and fully accept LGBT people with the behaviour of Jesus who sought out those on the margins and did not turn anyone away. Eleanor observed that the idea of original sin meant “we’re all sort of intrinsically disordered” yet the Church placed a special focus on the ‘disordered’ nature of LGBT people, something she concluded was probably because a lot of priests are themselves gay: “perhaps the problem is that they are battling with themselves and therefore it’s easier to battle outwards.” The high proportion of gay men in the priesthood was also discussed by Adela and by Jennifer, who added that “personal agendas and things to hide” influenced the way some Catholic clergy approached matters of sexual ethics.

Their same-sex attraction meant that all participants had had to consider the Church’s teachings on sexuality and what those teachings meant for their lives. Adela stated that she preferred to focus on Christ rather than the minutiae of Church teaching: “I always want to engage with what He said and what He represented, uh rather than... the structure of the Church and the hierarchy and all of those rules and regulations”. Frances and Jennifer emphasised the importance of following your conscience, even if this went against the Church’s teaching. Indeed, Jennifer highlighted that the primacy of conscience (so long as one’s conscience has been properly informed) is actually enshrined in Church teaching.

Furthermore, Adela, Eleanor, and Kim challenged Biblical condemnations of homosexuality by emphasising the need to understand such statements within the context they were written in.

Notwithstanding the scholarly critiques participants made of specific Biblical passages, the Bible was still seen as an important part of their faith. Frances quoted a Psalm during our interview, and both she and Jennifer talked about the life of Jesus and the time he spent time with outcasts. Both Eleanor and Jennifer mentioned accepting Biblical and doctrinal prohibitions on promiscuity and infidelity. Furthermore, despite disagreeing with the Church's teaching on homosexuality, Jennifer stated that she did believe in "so much of the teaching of the Catholic Church", and these shared "values and beliefs" were a key aspect of why she chose to remain part of the Church.

Participants therefore continued to see many things of value within the Bible and Church teaching, but their personal relationship with God was the lens through which they interpreted their life and faith. In varying ways, all participants highlighted the need to reach one's own understanding of God's will through developing a personal relationship with God through prayer, instead of just attending Mass or blindly following Church teaching. For example, Kim said: "Everyone has to create their own understanding and their own relationship [with God] in their own way. (...) people who are just doing it as routine, you're never actually really... connecting." For five participants, thought, prayer, and reflection, informed by their relationship with God, led them to believe that the Church's teaching on homosexuality was wrong and should change. Furthermore, while Charlotte, in contrast to the other participants, fully accepted the Church's teaching on same-sex relationships, this was a decision she had reached only after much reflection:

I don't want to either follow it simply because that's how I was raised, and I don't want to not follow it simply because that might be easier (...) and so I thought a lot about it, prayed a lot about it.

**Theme 3: Despite official Church teaching, many Catholics are accepting – but acceptance cannot be presumed.** In contrast to the rejection of LGBT people in Church teaching, all participants had experienced being accepted by individual Catholics, including family members, friends, fellow parishioners, and priests. However, participants also noted that there were still Catholics who were not accepting, making it difficult for LGBT people to be completely open within the Church.

All participants had at least one Catholic parent and no participants had been rejected by their parents due to their sexuality. Most parents were openly accepting and supportive, and had welcomed participants' partners. For example, Frances said: "my mum was really good about it... My sister's you know very accepting and [partner]'s part of the family." Adela described how there were some things, such as sex and relationships, which were not openly discussed in her family; however, her family were aware of her sexuality and she "never, ever, ever felt a sense of being rejected or unloved". Adela also talked about the love and acceptance her mother, who was Catholic, showed towards a close friend who was gay. Adela felt that her Catholicism did not cause her to feel negatively about her sexuality because these positive experiences of acceptance and love stayed with her more than any negative messages she had heard from the Church.

Charlotte was perhaps the only participant who did not feel fully accepted by her parents. She acknowledged that, when she came out, her parents "weren't mean or anything like that" but the conversation was "very uncomfortable" and her parents had never mentioned it again. Charlotte said that her parents considered even talking openly about

homosexuality to be “almost sinful”. However, Charlotte had come out to several Catholic friends and found them to be accepting. Further, around the time she was coming to terms with her sexuality, she had discussed her same-sex attraction with her youth minister and found him to be non-judgemental and “beyond supportive”. Charlotte identified this support and acceptance from people within the Church as something that had been incredibly valuable in helping her to accept herself as a gay Catholic and to integrate those two identities.

Adela, Frances, and Jennifer described experiences of being accepted by priests they had discussed their sexuality with. For example, recounting an experience she had in confession, Adela said: “And I thought to myself ‘I’ve actually come out to a priest, and to my Church, and he and my Church are accepting.’” Further, both Eleanor and Frances had members of their parishes who knew and accepted that they were each in a civil partnership with a woman.

However, despite some Catholics being supportive, all participants noted that there was wide variation between priests, between parishes, and between individual Catholics. For example, Charlotte said: “I still find it quite, um, difficult to tell people in the Church because I don’t know what I’m going to get and you can get quite a wide variety.” In particular, there were still very conservative clergy and parishioners in the Church who were not accepting. Kim had not discussed her sexuality with anyone in her congregation, which she described as “really traditional”. Furthermore, while Charlotte, Eleanor, Frances, and Jennifer had discussed their sexuality with certain members of the clergy and some members of their current or previous parishes, none had told their current priest or were completely out at church. For example, Frances stated:

I feel ok in myself as a gay Catholic. I just wish, I wish it was easier to be open about that, because I’m not, I’m not officially out in my own church. (...) although I can be

totally honest with God, it's hard to be or to feel that, that honest I suppose with, with other Catholics.

This difficulty in being totally open with other Catholics led to participants feeling that they could not fully be themselves at church. For example, Frances said that although being out at church would not change how she worshipped, it was “hard, just not being able to be fully myself when I'm there”. Furthermore, Eleanor described how adopting a “don't ask, don't tell” approach, particularly with priests or people she thought were likely to be judgemental, was often the easiest option, although this required maintaining a certain distance. The only instance where any participant described feeling comfortable being totally open about their sexuality at church was when Jennifer spoke about services she occasionally attended at a church with a visible LGBT community. Thus, even though participants were comfortable with their sexual identities, being out at church, especially if there were no other openly LGBT people, remained extremely difficult.

**Theme 4: Occupying a distinct, invisible space – disconnected and not fully part of, or accepted by, either community.** A sense of disconnection was shared by several of the participants who described feeling they were not fully part of either the Church or the LGBT community. This view was expressed succinctly by Charlotte, who stated: “in a strange way like being both you kind of end up in your, your own kind of separate space um because you just have a different perspective that other people might not have.”

Four participants described feeling unable to fully participate in the life of their church congregation. Frances observed: “I think a lot of gay people probably go to Mass and just sneak away at the end, probably don't talk to many people.” She highlighted that conversations between parishioners after Mass were often “all about families” and LGBT Catholics “don't fit into that”. Frances believed this led to many LGBT Catholics feeling

unable to be fully part of the social and communal life of their congregation and to instead “feel on the margins of the Church, kind of there but not fully accepted.” These sentiments were mirrored by Kim who described how she was no longer as involved in her church as she had been before starting to identify as bisexual, and did not socialise with the congregation. Furthermore, Eleanor said: “I have deliberately excluded myself from nearly everything but the coffee rota, because um it just complicates things to have very friendly relationships with a priest who then can’t approve of you”.

It was also a source of great sadness to Eleanor, Jennifer, and Kim that they were not able to fully participate in the sacraments due to being unable to get married in a church. For example, Kim said:

I want to get married in a church. I’ve grown up in the Church. I’ve done all of my sac-, my sacraments in it... that’s the final one and I want it to be where... it should be and I don’t have that... And that’s really sad.

Whereas heterosexual relationships are visible within the Church through ceremonies such as marriage and the baptism of children, currently there is no possibility for non-heterosexual women to have their sexual partnership with another woman officially recognised.

Furthermore, as discussed in Theme 3, many non-heterosexual women within the Church choose not to disclose their sexuality to other members of their congregation. The impact of this lack of visibility of non-heterosexual women within the Church on young Catholic women struggling to come to terms with their sexuality can be observed in what Jennifer noted about her decision to step away from the Church for a period: “I stopped going to church, because I felt, when I went I just saw um young, uh Catholic families (...) there wasn’t anyone I could see that represented who I was and what my values were.”

Just as it can be difficult to come out to Catholics as LGBT, five participants highlighted that it can also be challenging to come out to LGBT people as Catholic (Jennifer

described this as the “double-edged challenge” of being an LGBT Catholic). Charlotte stated: “most [gay] people that I know are quite hostile to the idea of the Church.” Adela and Frances concurred that many LGBT people find it hard to understand why they remain part of a Church that does not fully accept them, and Jennifer said that LGBT people often felt you were “letting the side down” by supporting what they considered to be a repressive organisation. Eleanor said that she did not really consider herself part of the LGBT community, and for her, Frances, and Adela, their involvement with the LGBT community was limited to LGBT Christian/Catholic organisations.

In contrast, Kim was quite involved in the LGBT community and was the only participant to talk about the community in a purely positive light, stating: “I love the gay community”. For Kim, relationships with LGBT friends had been very important in helping her accept herself as bisexual. Furthermore, while the LGBT community as a whole was not felt to be amenable to LGBT Catholics, several participants described supportive relationships with non-Catholic LGBT people. For example, Jennifer’s girlfriend was not Catholic but was supportive of Jennifer’s involvement in the Church, and her support had helped Jennifer accept herself and become more comfortable in her identity as a gay Catholic.

While large segments of both the LGBT community and the Catholic Church have claimed it is not possible to be an LGBT Catholic, meeting other LGBT Christians helped some participants realise that reconciliation between their faith and sexuality was possible. For example, discussing spirituality with an LGBT friend who had been brought up as a Jehovah’s Witness helped Kim to see that she did not have to choose between her faith and sexuality. Furthermore, Jennifer identified joining an LGBT Catholic organisation as an important factor in helping her integrate her sexual and religious identities as it was through the organisation that she first met “people who were happy with both [identities]”.

However, Adela, Frances, and Jennifer also observed that older gay men tended to dominate LGBT Catholic groups. Jennifer estimated that the membership of one LGBT Catholic organisation she belonged to was “over 95% male” and she emphasised that, as a young Catholic gay woman, finding people to relate to, even within LGBT Catholic groups, was “extremely difficult”. Furthermore, Frances chose to be involved with ecumenical LGBT Christian groups largely because LGBT Catholic organisations were dominated by gay men. Adela believed that things were changing and described how one of the LGBT Catholic organisations she was involved with had gone from being “very male, and you know very stuck in its ways” when she first joined, to now having “a lot more women involved”. Yet, she also observed that gay men within the organisation had resisted these changes: “they sort of [said] ‘Why do we want to talk about women’s issues?’ (...) And a lot of the old men didn’t like it and they left.” Thus, being lesbian or bisexual was also marginalised within the LGBT Catholic community.

Several participants discussed ways in which they felt the experiences of gay men and non-heterosexual women differed. For example, both Frances and Jennifer believed gay men had, in recent decades, experienced greater stigmatisation and persecution than non-heterosexual women, with Frances saying: “especially the time of AIDS, when that was big, (...) there was a real sense that, that gay people were the real lepers. I mean gay men, because nobody thought of gay women at that point”. Similar ideas of gay men being stigmatised while non-heterosexual women remained somewhat invisible were also expressed about life within the Church. For example, when discussing the Church’s condemnation of homosexuality, Eleanor stated: “I have a suspicion that they aren’t thinking about women, for a start. I mean I think we are, to an extent, uh slightly invisible (...) and slightly surprising”.

Participants in the current study were able to attend Mass and practice their faith without being challenged. They disclosed their sexuality to carefully selected others but

otherwise kept it largely to themselves, and the Church on the whole seemed willing to not ask questions but rather accept them as asexual women. Indeed Eleanor stated: “frustrating as it is um to be a gay person in a Catholic church, actually the Church itself is prepared to turn a blind eye in a way that sometimes other people aren’t”.

### **Discussion**

The sexual and religious identities of the six non-heterosexual Catholic women interviewed in the current study had developed over time. All participants had been brought up in the Catholic faith and, by the time they were interviewed, all had found ways to integrate their faith and sexuality: being non-heterosexual and being Catholic (or Christian, in Eleanor’s case) were both important parts of their identity. Key things that had helped participants to reconcile their sexuality with their Catholicism were: developing a personal relationship with God and trusting in His love and acceptance, distinguishing between the Church and God, acceptance from other Catholics, and meeting other LGBT Christians. Accepting a life of celibacy was an important part of reconciling Catholic faith and a gay identity for only one participant.

The majority of participants in the current study disagreed with the Catholic Church’s views on homosexuality and were hurt by the Church’s refusal to accept and welcome LGBT people. Nonetheless, these women remained Catholic because they loved the Church and because being Catholic was part of their identity. This was mirrored by participants in several other studies of LGBT Christians who reported choosing to stay in a non-affirming denomination either because they shared many of its other beliefs and values, or because they had been brought up in that tradition and it felt like home (Brennan-Ing, Seidel, Larson & Karpiak, 2013; Hickey & Grafsky, 2017; Radojcic, 2016; Walton, 2006). Furthermore, despite feeling rejected by official Church teaching, participants experienced support and

acceptance from individual Catholics which, as suggested by Levy and Reeves (2011), had helped them to accept themselves as non-heterosexual Catholics.

Reflecting findings from other studies of identity integration among LGBT Christians, our participants believed that God loved and accepted them regardless of their sexuality, and this enabled them to also accept themselves and to reconcile their faith and sexuality (Barton, 2010; Brennan-Ing et al., 2013; O'Brien, 2004; Schuck & Liddle, 2001; Walton, 2006; Wilcox, 2002; Yip, 1997). As the Church was seen to reject them, this led participants to distinguish between the Church and God. Participants remained part of the Church, and the Bible and Church teaching continued to have value for them; however, as in many other studies with LGBT Christians from a wide range of denominations, participants thought that the Bible needed to be understood in context and the Church itself could only ever be human and flawed (Barton, 2010; Garcia et al. 2008; Mahaffy, 1996; O'Brien, 2004; Pitt, 2010; Schuck & Liddle, 2001; Walton, 2006; Wilcox, 2002; Yip, 1997). Participants were not afraid to question or reject Biblical passages or Church doctrine that did not fit with their personal experience and understanding of God's love. This approach mirrors the religious individualism described by Wilcox (2002) in her study of members of the Metropolitan Community Church.

Several participants in the current study did not hold purely essentialist views of sexuality. This is in contrast to a number of other studies which have found that adopting an essentialist view of sexuality formed an important part of resolving identity conflict for many LGBT Christians (Brennan-Ing et al., 2013; Loseke & Cavendish, 2001; O'Brien, 2004; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000; Schuck & Liddle, 2001; Walton, 2006; Wilcox, 2002; Yip, 1997). However, no participants in the current study saw their same-sex attraction as something they had chosen or could control. Further, several participants believed being non-heterosexual had led them to have deeper faith and to be better people, a view shared by

participants in several other studies (Hickey & Grafsky, 2017; O'Brien, 2004; Schuck & Liddle, 2001).

Many of the identity conflict resolution strategies employed by participants in the current study appear to be very similar to those used by the 90% male sample of non-heterosexual Catholics surveyed by Yip (1997) and by LGBT Christians from a range of Protestant denominations. However, despite this commonality, there seems to be one strategy – celibacy – which is most commonly employed by those in the Catholic Church. Accepting life-long celibacy has rarely been reported as a conflict resolution strategy adopted by LGBT Christians in Protestant communities; yet, one participant in the current study and 20% of participants in Yip's study of non-heterosexual Catholics reported believing LGBT people were called to a life of chastity.

The strategies used by our participants do not appear to be unique to LGBT Catholics. Studies have indicated that heterosexual Catholic women who used artificial contraception (Mishtal & Dannefer, 2010) or who disagreed with the patriarchal nature of the Church (Ecklund, 2005) employed similar conflict resolution strategies and felt similarly able to disregard some Church teachings without needing to reject their Catholic identity. Furthermore, many of the participants in Ecklund's study reported staying within Catholicism because they believed they could work to reform the Church. The need to change, rather than leave, the Church echoed through most of the interviews in the current study and chimed with the idea that LGBT Christians are called to help reform the Church found in other studies also (Hickey & Grafsky, 2017; Loseke & Cavendish, 2001; O'Brien, 2004; Radojcic, 2016; Yip, 1997).

Increasing the visibility of LGBT people within the Church was seen by participants as a key way to enact change and increase acceptance of homosexuality within Catholicism. However, being totally open about one's sexuality at church remained incredibly challenging.

In this way, participants seemed to occupy a middle ground between the “acceptance through silence” described by Walsh (2016, p. 1246) in her study of Black lesbians living in the American Bible Belt and the activist identities adopted by the gay Catholic men studied by Radojcic (2016). Four of the six participants in the current study were in long-term, committed same-sex relationships. However, as participants were very cautious about disclosure and since none of those in relationships attended church with their partners (who were not themselves practicing Catholics) most other Catholics they met would have viewed these participants as single women. Yet, participants did not opt for total silence, but chose to disclose their sexuality to some congregation members and priests. Our participants believed the Church needed to change and wanted to help bring about reform, but they did not identify as activists in the way that Radojcic's participants did. Whereas Dignity offered Radojcic’s participants a community where they could share fellowship and practice their faith with other white, middle class, gay Catholic men, our participants did not have a community of non-heterosexual Catholic women to withdraw to. Practicing their faith largely depended on them maintaining tolerable relationships with people in their parish, and they did not feel compelled to needlessly advertise their sexuality. The invisibility of non-heterosexual women within the Church therefore appeared to act as both a help and a hindrance for participants. Participants were able to practice their faith and remain part of the Church they loved while, in most cases, being part of long-term same-sex partnerships. However, they felt unable to fully be themselves at church or to fully participate in the communal life of their congregations, which often revolved around heterosexual family life. Likewise, participants remained a marginalised minority within LGBT Catholic groups and experienced difficulty in finding other non-heterosexual Catholic women for support and fellowship.

The current study had several strengths but also limitations. The wide age range of participants meant women at different stages of the life course were sampled. There was also

some diversity in terms of race, nationality, and self-defined sexual identity. Further, participants were not all members of one LGBT Catholic organisation but had varying degrees of involvement with the LGBT Christian community. Nevertheless, most participants were educated to university degree level and all participants either came from middle class backgrounds or had been employed in middle class occupations in their current or most recent job.

The experiences collected from this small sample of cisgender women may not reflect those of LGBT Catholics from a wider, more diverse group. Crucially, all our participants were resident in Britain and research has shown that the majority of British Catholics hold views that are considerably more liberal than official Church teaching on issues of sexuality (Clements, 2014; Park, Bryson, Clery, Curtice & Phillips, 2013). The experiences of our participants are therefore likely to be different from those of LGBT Catholics living in more socially conservative or strongly Catholic countries (Figueroa & Tasker, 2014; Pietkiewicz & Kołodziejczyk-Skrzypek, 2016). Furthermore, the study did not include any participants who had converted to Catholicism. Catholicism had been part of all participants' identities from a young age, a fact which seemed to motivate their efforts to integrate their sexual and religious identities. Additional research would be needed to understand whether LGBT people who convert to Catholicism develop different strategies to integrate their identities. As with any study of this nature, the sample was comprised only of women who were willing to discuss their experiences of sexuality and religion in an interview. Those who are still struggling to reconcile both identities, or have had traumatic experiences of being rejected due to their LGBT or Catholic identity, may be less likely to volunteer for an interview study. Nonetheless, our study does provide insight into the strategies used by some non-heterosexual Catholic women to reconcile their sexuality and their faith.

## Conclusions

The current study explored how the sexual and religious identities of six non-heterosexual Catholic women had developed over time. In line with Rodriguez and Ouellette's (2000) description of identity integration as a process, participants' sexual and religious identities had become more integrated over time. As suggested by life course theory, the relational and cultural context participants existed within impacted this integration process: support from other LGBT Christians and acceptance by family members helped participants to reconcile their faith and sexuality. Furthermore, participants' stories showed the importance of individual agency: they had all integrated their identities in different ways. However, there were several strategies for resolving potential conflict between their sexuality and Catholicism which all or the majority of participants used. These strategies were found to mirror those used by gay Catholic men and, with the exception of celibacy, by LGBT Christians from both affirming and conservative Protestant denominations. Nevertheless, the experience of non-heterosexual Catholic women varied from that of gay Catholic men due to non-heterosexual women's relative invisibility within the Church and marginalisation within the LGBT Catholic community.

Previous research has suggested that gender and religious background may impact how likely LGBT people with a Christian upbringing are to experience identity conflict and to leave Christianity. However, the present research suggests that, among those who choose to remain actively practicing Christians, gender and denomination do not have a strong impact on the strategies used to reconcile faith and sexuality. In addition, these strategies do not appear to be unique to LGBT Christians, with studies showing heterosexual women who faced potential conflicts between their Catholicism and their feminist views, or their use of contraception, employed similar strategies. We have described these strategies as religious individualism; however, this is not to imply that participants did not take their faith seriously.

Participants had thought deeply about what they believed and their faith was very important to them. Though they disagreed with the Church and recognised its faults, they loved the Church and valued their participation in it. While being a non-heterosexual Catholic remains challenging, the current research shows it is possible to be happy being both.

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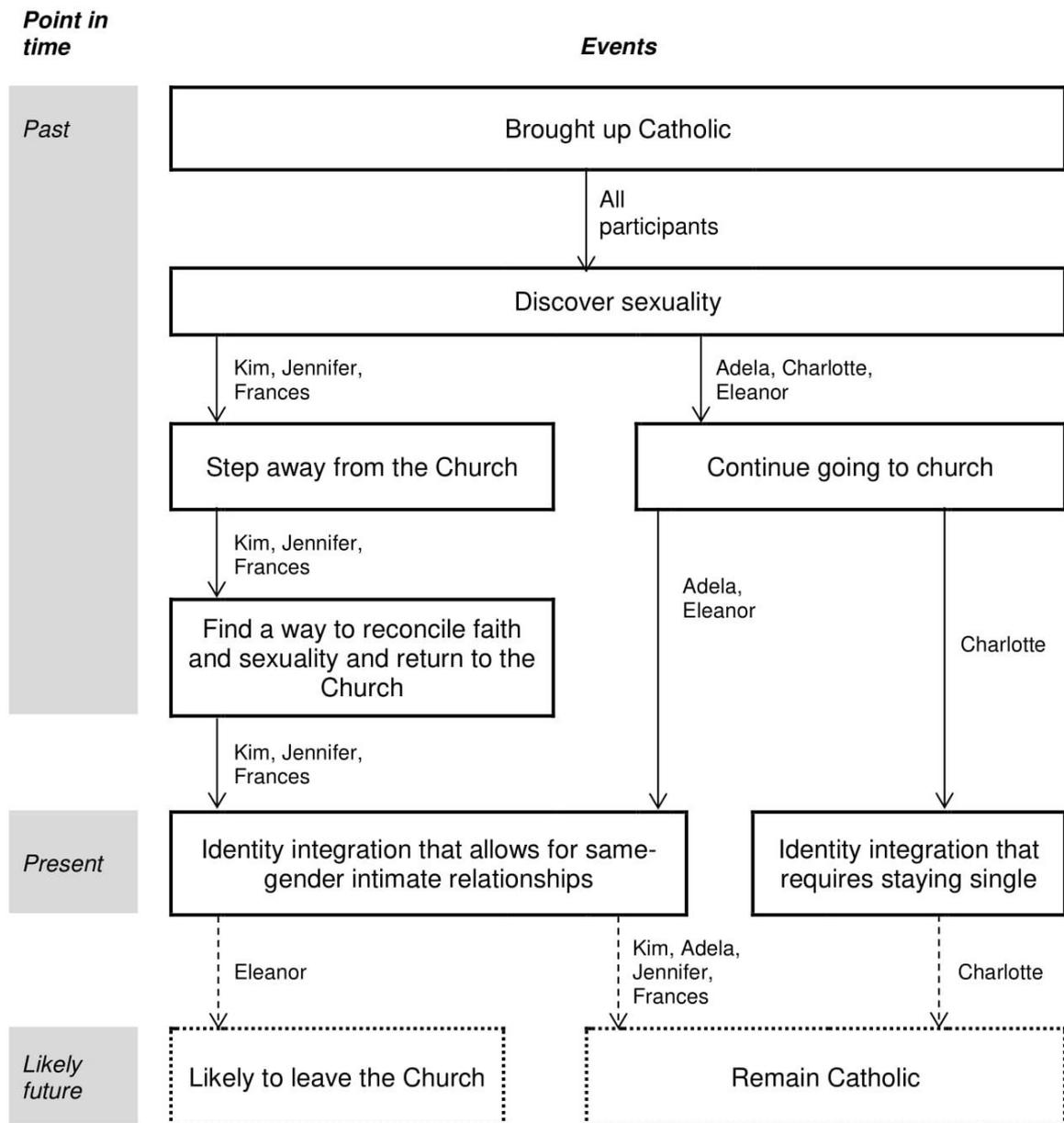
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**Table 1.** Demographic information on participants

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age (years)</b>	<b>Current residential location</b>	<b>Participant's preferred term for their sexuality</b>	<b>Relationship status</b>	<b>Highest education level</b>	<b>Considers self to be disabled?</b>
Adela	50+	City	Asexual	Single	BA	No
Charlotte	Under 20	City	Gay/ bisexual	Single	Studying for BA	Yes
Eleanor	50+	Small town on outskirts of big city	Gay	Civil partnership	MA	No
Frances	50+	Small town in rural area	Gay	Civil partnership	BA	Yes
Jennifer	20-29	City	Gay	In a relationship	PhD	No
Kim	30-39	City	Bisexual	In a relationship	A-levels	Partially



**Figure 1.** Schematic representation of participants’ macro-narratives