

have a little

FAITH

the interaction between religion and LGBTQ identity

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RUBICONLINE

Queerness and faith are often considered to be two mutually exclusive identities and for a good reason. Throughout history, LGBTQ+ people have been persecuted, villainized, imprisoned, and murdered by several organized religions for merely being "other." This constant harassment from religious groups has made participation in classical worship inaccessible for countless queer individuals and families. Simultaneously, as more and more faithful communities become more vocal about their approval of queerness (such as Pope Francis's recent open support for same-sex marriage), many more queer people, especially young adults, are rebuilding their relationships with religion. I am honored to present some of SPA's queer community's personal stories, experiences, and thoughts regarding religion.



Gray Whitaker-Castañeda (they/them)

While junior Gray Whitaker-Castañeda does not subscribe to a distinct set of religious beliefs, religion still plays a role in their identities. Their father was raised Catholic, and their maternal grandmother is a regular churchgoer. That said, their apprehension surrounding religion does not directly stem from their family ties.

"I haven't had any conflicts with people who practice religion, or any specific religions, but I do take issue with how, specifically, the Bible can be interpreted and used against queer people," Whitaker-Castañeda said.

This general concern around the usage of holy texts, like Leviticus 18:22, to condemn queer people has significantly contributed to Whitaker-Castañeda's anxiety in religious areas.

"I tend to get somewhat nervous entering religious spaces, whether that be churches, or I shadowed DeLaSalle [a Catholic high school in Minneapolis] in my high school process, and spaces like that that do tend to make me tense up a little bit, just because I get scared to be open about my queerness in those spaces."

Although they haven't had any distinctly ill-willed experiences with their father or grandmother, there's still a small part of Whitaker-Castañeda that tells them to be wary because of their family members' religious beliefs.

"I do often wonder about my grandma's religious beliefs and my dad's affiliation with religion; I don't know how deep that runs in him, but I do always wonder how that plays into how they view me. And it does make me a little nervous, sometimes, just kind of the general fear and doubt that's that people aren't 100% accepting even if they say they are."

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Max Spencer (he/him)

Sophomore Max Spencer, while more scientifically and rationally-inclined, regularly worships with his family at St. John the Evangelist Episcopal Church in St. Paul. His parents, originally members of the Catholic Church, left to join the Episcopalian community after several disagreements with the Church's policies, including ones surrounding the LGBTQ+ community. Spencer himself does not believe in God but instead relies on his faith for personal guidance.

"[The Episcopalian] belief in the Bible is a lot looser, however, the moral foundations on which the Bible was created like "love thy neighbor," and all of those really important messages on morality, that's something we value above a lot of the religion stuff like believing in God," Spencer said. "That part of my moral compass, I guess, it's developed in community and I value it because it keeps me morally grounded."

Spencer especially appreciates one of his pastors, Rev. Craig Lemming from Zimbabwe, who is an openly gay man. Spencer has often found solace in having an openly queer adult as one of church's primary worship leaders, especially when Rev. Lemming finds ways to incorporate queer culture into his teachings.

"[Craig] gave a sermon one day about drag queens, and if I had the balls to do so I probably would have talked about how great that sermon was, and how awesome is that we can have in our church community a sermon about drag queens and learning to be yourself rather than some boring stuff by some dad or whatever."

And while Spencer continues to take pride in his religious community, he still takes issue with some aspects of religion as a whole, especially when interpreting scripture.

"It's important sometimes in modern religious communities to remember what your religion was founded off of. Like, say if you have a holy text and that is the base of your religion, like Christianity with the Bible—consider who was writing the Bible. What were their beliefs, what would they want to say in there, and how would they have put that in there?"



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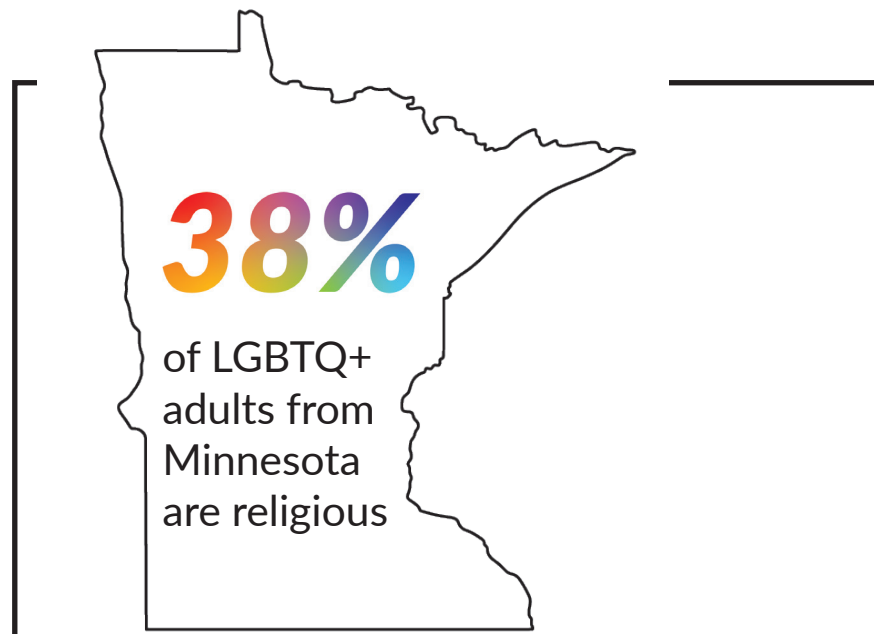
Linnea Cooley (she/her)

Sophomore Linnea Cooley was raised as an atheist and has continued to practice not-practicing as she grows older. Even though she's admittedly never fully understood religion as an identity and not a "fun hobby people do," she still feels affected by it as a queer person.

"Internally, I have no conflicts because I have no religion, but I know there are some religious communities that have some problems with the queer community," Cooley said. "And, personally—I also don't know a lot about religious texts—but I know that in the Bible it's just very open to interpretation, and I feel that people choose to interpret it in a way that just benefits them. I feel that people kind of interpret it as oh, you shouldn't be queer because that goes against my religion. I feel like that really isn't the point of the religion."



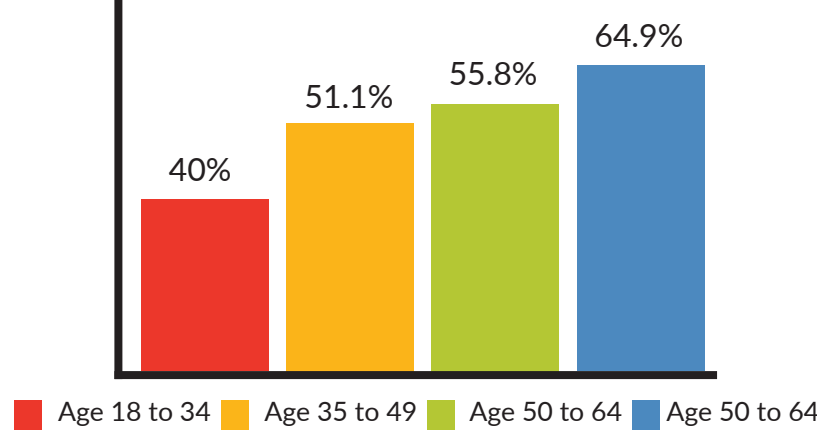
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INFOGRAPHIC: Maren Ostrem and Evelyn Lillemo
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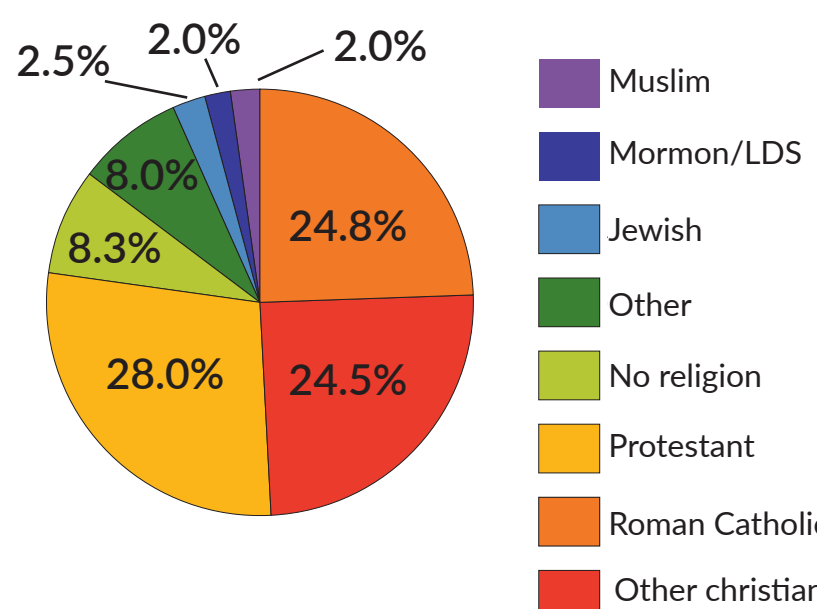
5.3 million LGBTQ+ adults in the U.S. are religious that's nearly 1/2 of LGBTQ+ people in the U.S

Percent of LGBTQ+ adults who are religious



54% of LGBTQ+ adults from the South are religious

Religious affiliation of LGBTQ+ adults in U.S



Tilney Kaemmer (she/her)

Senior Gracie Tilney-Kaemmer, a self-proclaimed hipster and lover of all things spiritual, reflected on her experiences as a young child with organized religion and interpretation.

"I'm not a huge fan of when the Bible is used to justify homophobia," Tilney-Kaemmer said. "Because from my reading of the Bible—because I did grow up reading it, you know, we went to church as a family—and when I was a kid I never felt particularly passionate about pursuing it any further. But we did go to church and I never, in my understanding of the Bible, felt that it was able to justify homophobia."

Along with her childhood memories of church, Tilney-Kaemmer also sings with a Christian choir outside of school, a community in which she surprisingly found a large amount of support.

"I [came out to] my choir manager who's very heavily Christian, and she told me that God loves me, and not in like 'God loves you, even though you're gay,' it was like, 'God loves you as a person no matter who you are.' And I'm not particularly religious, but I appreciated the sentiment that I'm accepted regardless of my sexual identity."

Although Tilney-Kaemmer is not a part of a specific religion, she firmly believes that there is not anything holding queer back from fully participating in whatever faith they choose.

"I think it's so not hard to just be gay and Christian, or gay and Muslim, or gay and Jewish. Like there's really nothing written in religious scripts that expressly forbids homosexuality," Tilney-Kaemmer said. "If you're saying it's a sin, you're not saying it's a sin because you're a 'good Christian,' you're saying it's a sin because you're homophobic."

Despite her belief that queer people can, and should, be able to practice all faiths openly, Tilney-Kaemmer did offer a solid piece of advice for straight and cis religious group members.

"If you are a person that practices organized religion, and that organized religion is one that people use as an excuse for homophobia, or if you are [someone of faith] that is accepting of the LGBTQ population, is accepting of queer people, you need to make that very clear because so many queer people throughout history have been traumatized by religious organizations, and that is unacceptable and that cannot be happening now."



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Sam Gilats (she/they)



Sam Gilats is a 9th grader who belongs to the Shir Tikvah Synagogue in Minneapolis. While she does not believe in a higher power or God, she has still found plenty to identify within the Jewish faith.

"A big part of Judaism is about being a good person and treating other people well, and I connect with that a lot, and I find a lot of comfort in that," Gilats said. "Additionally, I don't necessarily believe in a higher power but I still take a lot of comfort and enjoy a lot of the practices and rituals associated with trying to connect with whatever form of God you believe in."

When it comes to her religious community, Gilats feels extremely fortunate to be a member of such an open-minded and respectful synagogue.

"I'm really lucky to have always been exposed to religion in a really supportive way. My temple actually started because the head Rabbi was gay and wasn't allowed to continue being a rabbi at the synagogue he was at before.

And so I've been surrounded for as long as I can remember by Jewish queer people and people of color in a very, very accepting community."

Despite the more progressive nature of their community, however, Gilats has still had to face gender and sexuality conflicts rooted in early Hebrew scriptures. One especially notable instance concerning the Torah portion they had to read for her bar mitzvah: the infamous Leviticus 18:22.

"You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination." Obviously, this Torah portion did not sit well with Gilats.

"So much of homophobia and arguments against the LGBTQ plus community are based in religion, and so I struggled with the idea of, can I be religious and still accept my identity?" she wondered.

Thankfully, because of her community, Gilats has been able to find peace and acceptance in their identity.

"Religion, for me, has always been about family and community. And I think that's the core of it, is about being the best person I can be. And it's not about following every single thing these ancient texts say to the letter, it's about using the related religious principles to help myself and the people around me."

Ultimately, Gilats shared why exactly their temple is significant support in their life.

"Judaism has a belief that all people are created in God's image. And I and my Rabbi and my temple have taken that and use it as, like, God created you the way you are for a reason," Gilats reflected. "So, really, for me, my religion helps me be authentic and myself, and I think religion should be something that helps you and makes you feel safe or teaches you things, not suppresses yourself. You should be comfortable with your religion and yourself."