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Sunsets and Solidarity: Overcoming Sacramental Shame in Conservative Christian Churches to Forge a Queer Vision of Love and Justice

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Abstract

Drawing from our interdisciplinary qualitative study of LGBTI conservative Christians and their allies, we name an especially toxic form of shame—what we call sacramental shame—that affects the lives of LGBTI and other conservative Christians. Sacramental shame results from conservative Christianity's allegiance to the doctrine of gender complementarity, which elevates heteronormativity to the level of the sacred and renders those who violate it

as not persons, but monsters. In dispensing shame as a sacrament, nonaffirming Christians require constant displays of shame as proof that LGBTI church members love God and belong in the community. Part of what makes this shame so harmful is that parents and pastors often dispense it with sincere expressions of care and affection, compounding the sense that one's capacity to give and receive love is damaged. We foreground LGBTI Christian movements to overcome sacramental shame by cultivating nonhubristic pride, and conclude by discussing briefly their new understandings of love and justice that could have far-reaching benefits.

Shame is a painful emotion in which a person feels exposed to others as defective and fears rejection from the community on the basis of that exposure. Drawing from a qualitative study of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI)¹ conservative Christians and their allies, we name an especially toxic form of shame—what we call *sacramental shame*—that affects the lives of LGBTI and other conservative Christians. When any community unjustly stigmatizes and shames a group of people, the stigmatized typically understand that the community deems them unworthy of membership or relationship (the capacity for deep, egalitarian, mutual connection and recognition of equal personhood). Sacramental shame complicates this dynamic by both posing as love and locating the shame in the shamed person's own constant failures of will. It makes being recognized as a person—in the eyes of God and others—contingent on constant displays of will to change things most LGBTI people cannot change, instilling shame as an enduring, conscious mental state.

Although we locate it in conservative Christianity, there are five reasons feminist and queer thinkers should understand sacramental shame: First, the sacramental quality helps us to understand oppression through the lens of a particular dynamic of dispositional shame, namely, the experience of making chronic shame a requirement for the recognition of one's personhood. Second, LGBTI Christians who have overcome this shame offer insight into healing. Third, in resisting the harm of sacramental shame, many LGBTI Christians bring unique insights to solidarity with antiracist, feminist, and other movements that may benefit far more than just Christians. Fourth, many LGBTI people self-identify as conservative Christians, so justice for LGBTI people should not overlook the experiences and contributions of people at this intersection. Finally, given the considerable influence of conservative churches in American and global politics (Fetner [2008](#)), this movement sheds light on dynamics of shame, pride, and justice that exceed the boundaries of conservative Christianity.

Feminist philosophers and sociologists have noted how people experience social belonging and threats through emotions (Bartky [1990](#); Scheff [2000](#); Moon [2004](#); Wolkomir [2006](#); Gould [2009](#); Shotwell [2011](#); Creek [2013](#); Ahmed [2015](#)). Sociologists have examined how (mostly) lesbian and gay people and their allies in conservative Christian groups respond to these groups' feeling rules and manage their emotions to ensure continued acceptance (Wolkomir [2006](#); Creek [2013](#)). They also note the way shame and sympathy work to maintain heterosexuals' authority and superiority in such situations (Moon [2005](#); Cragun, Williams, and Sumerau [2015](#)). However, they have been slow to consider the substance at the intersections of religion with gender and sexuality (Avishai, Jafar, and Rinaldo [2015](#)), avoiding the visceral emotions inspired at this juncture.

Some feminist and queer scholars have analyzed the substance of shame and related emotions, locating shame's harms and liberatory potential in its ambivalence (Bartky [1990](#); Sedgwick [2003](#); Gould [2009](#); Shotwell [2011](#); Ahmed [2015](#)). Shame, dispensed unevenly and unjustly amid social hierarchies, often becomes an instrument of oppression, sometimes becoming instilled as a disposition in members of stigmatized social groups. But feeling shame also indicates a desire to belong (Sedgwick [2003](#)), confirms love (Ahmed [2015](#)), and provides the potential to reconstitute the self against systems of oppression that partially constitute us (Shotwell [2011](#)).

Our study advances recent work in these areas and sheds light on how faith, gender, and sexuality constitute one another. We draw from our interdisciplinary ethnographic study of conservative² Christians in the United States who are working to change the way their ministries deal with questions pertaining to sexuality and gender, creating space for LGBTI conservative Christians to contribute and thrive. We began gathering and analyzing relevant documents (news stories, blogs, other publications) in Spring 2013. Since February 2014, we have conducted approximately 485 hours of participant-observation with organizations involved in this movement, and 104 qualitative interviews averaging 94 minutes. The organizations include The Marin Foundation, which fosters respectful conversations across differences pertaining to faith, gender, and sexuality; the Center for Inclusivity (CFI)³ which fosters similar conversations and strives to be “a place of peace at the intersection of faith, gender, and sexuality”; The Reformation Project (TRP), which equips Christians to engage in their conservative churches’ discussions of scripture, sexuality, gender, and racial solidarity; and the Gay Christian Network (GCN), which provides support and community among LGBTQIA conservative Christians. As the research proceeded, we coded transcripts, field notes, and publications (blogs, commentaries, news reports) for recurrent themes; this coding informed subsequent interviews and observations and grounds our analysis (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw [1995](#); Strauss and Corbin [1998](#); Charmaz [2006](#)).

We begin by contextualizing the conservative Christian doctrine of gender complementarity, which elevates heteronormativity (Warner [1993](#)) to the level of the sacred. We show how its proponents effectively mandate that “same-sex [or multisex] attracted” and gender-nonconforming people constantly display shame for their alleged violations of complementarity as proof of their faithfulness to God, and as a necessary condition for community membership (see also Wolkomir [2006](#); Sumerau [2012](#)).⁴ We then examine the dynamics of this religiously imbued chronic shame, what we call *sacramental shame*, when its performance is “lovingly” mandated as a sign that someone wishes to deserve God's love and dwell in God's presence. People often dispense this shame believing it will help their loved ones to conform to God's will and to spend eternity in heaven. However, we show that the sacramental shame dynamic grows out of and serves to protect theologies that ground recognition of personhood in a particular binary understanding of gender and sexuality. Finally, we explore the specific modes of resistance some in this movement enact by cultivating a form of pride that both overlaps with and diverges from common Christian and secular notions and by forging new understandings of love and justice. Our analysis thus contributes to justice movements for LGBTI people both in conservative Christian communities and beyond.

Sacred Dichotomy

US historians have traced today's dominant understandings of gender to the Victorian era's growth of capitalism and the ensuing separation of spheres (see D'Emilio and Freedman [1988](#)). As white men's work moved outside the home, middle-class white women's realm became that of moral formation, legitimated at the time by suppositions of women's moral superiority to men and responsibility to guide them (Moselener [2015](#)). The *de facto* dominance of white women in the religious sphere threatened to drive white men out of religion altogether; Margaret Lamberts Bendroth argues that white male fundamentalist leaders in the early twentieth century therefore developed theological principles for interpreting scripture in ways that restored men's authority in the church (Bendroth [1993](#)). The notions of “muscular Christianity” that emerged during this time later assuaged men's fears that religion was “sissy” stuff and “reassure[d] men that Christianity did not require the compromise of their God-given, masculine traits” (Moselener [2015](#), 56, 58). This discourse of gender also helps rationalize discrimination against people of color on the basis of supposedly shameful gender and sexual differences from the white “ideal,” a sexually stigmatizing dynamic compounded for sexual and gender minorities within, for instance, black churches in “respectability politics” (Higginbotham [1993](#); Douglas [1999](#); Collins [2005](#)).

During the social upheavals of World War II, women took on many traditionally male roles, and the 1950s were a time of retrenchment toward a strict gender binary that idealized families where men worked outside the home for pay and women tended home and children. This mid-century retrenchment coincided with doctors developing the technology to “correct” the ambiguous genitalia created by nature. The cultural understanding that sex *should be* binary gave doctors the impetus to create the impression that that binary occurs “naturally,” as they began routinely altering the bodies of intersex infants to conform to the binary sex system (Fausto-Sterling [2000](#); Preves [2002](#); Davis [2015](#)).

In much conservative Protestantism, the heteronormative “common sense” that two distinct sexes occur in nature has been elevated to the level of a sacred commandment in the doctrine of gender complementarity, which posits that God created male and female as complementary opposites to be united in marriage (Cragun, Williams, and Sumerau [2015](#); Sumerau and Cragun [2015](#)). Complementarian theologians explicitly refer to their view of gender as “common sense” or “obvious” to justify positions against same-sex marriage and sometimes feminism (Gagnon [2001](#); Mohler [2014](#)). Many conservative Protestants see complementarity as analogous to gravity in a story about a plane crash: the eternal condition of possibility, so obvious as not to need mention (Hamilton [2014](#)). In this worldview, complementarianism is laid out in the first two chapters of Genesis, and without it, Christians are left “without any authoritative revelation of what sin is” or “what it means to be human” (Mohler [2014](#), 18–19).⁵ Conservative churches have been among those to create in daily life the impression that creation is “naturally” binary by exiling or censoring anyone whose existence contradicts that claim (Sumerau, Cragun, and Mathers [2016](#)). Violations of gender complementarity may be read as a grave and willful affront to God; a pastor told a respondent who was born intersex to “change your ways” or leave the church (see also Sumerau and Cragun [2015](#)).

Countering such claims, James Brownson points out that scripture does not actually say that male and female are only complete in heterosexual marriage (Brownson [2013](#)). Citing Thomas Laqueur's discussion of the nineteenth-century emergence of binary notions of sex (Laqueur [1990](#)), Megan DeFranza shows that Scripture actually addresses the existence of intersex people, suggesting that its authors recognized that God did not create humanity as a strict binary (DeFranza [2015](#)).

A Sacrament of Shame for LGBTI Christians

Within the sacralized ideology of gender complementarity, same- and multi-sex attraction and gender variance are considered sinful; these attractions and experiences are believed to indicate rebellion against God (Strachan [2014](#)). Some conservative Protestant communities hold individuals responsible for having cultivated these feelings and for ridding themselves of them. Others concede the lack of volition, but liken it to genetic dispositions to potentially destructive impulses such as alcoholism, holding people accountable never to act on these desires. Such communities see simply *identifying* as LGBT (and sometimes intersex) as a willful identification with sin and against God (Creek [2013](#); Bailey [2014](#); Lambert [2014](#);) or failure to be a good person (Wolkomir [2006](#); Sumerau [2012](#)), so some LGBTI conservative Christians resist claiming such identities and say, for example, that they have “same-sex attractions”—often necessitating mental gymnastics on the part of bisexual, trans, and intersex people—or keep their feelings secret to uphold their churches’ teaching.

Christian theology has traditionally emphasized feeling guilt over one's moral transgressions, but members of the communities in our study experience shame over a sinful disposition and feelings they consider sinful (such as lust or greed) as an appropriate emotional response because it indicates recognition of one's moral *flaws* (and not just one's moral wrongdoing) and desire to repair broken relationships with God and others. Shame is a complex, ambivalent emotion in which a person feels exposed as defective, and fears rejection from the community (and in these cases, God) on the basis of that exposure; shame indicates both a desire to hide or withdraw and a yearning for recognition and belonging (Lewis [1971](#); Scheff [2000](#); Velleman [2001](#); Sedgwick [2003](#); Calhoun [2004](#); Shotwell [2011](#); Ahmed [2015](#)). The shame heterosexual, cisgender Christians dispense toward one another and feel for their own sinfulness often leads to confession, prayer, and reduced temptation, creating the potential for redemption by fostering moral improvement and restored relationships. Many have not been *routinely* shamed, in this area at least, and have not had their worth as persons constantly called into question, so coming to feel ashamed for significant moral flaws can be restorative because the shame is temporary and can be resolved (Shotwell [2011](#), 93–94; Ahmed [2015](#), 107).

Our observations and interviews suggest that conservative church membership and the shame that regulates it look very different for those who experience same- or multi-sex attraction and/or gender variance. Ministries that see such attractions and experiences as sinful end up (often unintentionally) treating shame almost as a special sacrament (an outward indicator of God's presence) just for LGBTI members, requiring that they constantly display shame as the sign that they have not “turned their backs on God” (Wolkomir [2006](#); Sumerau [2012](#)). Many Protestant churches recognize no sacraments at

all, and others do not posit sacraments as necessary for salvation, so the existence of a nonformalized, indispensable sacrament only for LGBTI people teems with ironies.

The *sacramental shame* dynamic emerges because conventionally conservative Christians see “same-sex attractions” (including those experienced by bisexuals) and “gender deviance” as temptations akin to their own; they expect that feeling ashamed of this “sinfulness” will work redemptively in these cases too. However, our research reveals two reasons that shame does not have the expected redemptive effects with regard to being LGBTI. Christians maintain that feelings they consider sinful can respond to willpower; however, sexual orientation and gender identity do not usually respond to acts of will, so shame becomes a perpetual requirement. More important, sexual orientation and gender variance do not in themselves rupture relationships, as sins do, but are part of the basis from which a person relates to others. Rather than helping people to restore relationships, sacramental shame relentlessly attacks their ability to form them.

Sacramental shame also works differently from other sacraments and rituals. Rituals, including sacraments in some churches, serve as markers of the presence of God in community (as in communion), often in times of liminality (birth, marriage). Defined broadly, sacraments are ceremonies or rituals, dispensed by the church, that provide tangible opportunities to experience God's presence in and through community and that some churches deem necessary for salvation. But sacramental shame typically creates feelings of isolation rather than community, it has no prescribed end, and it does not make people feel closer to God. For those who have internalized complementarian teachings and who spend years trying everything to rid themselves of their attractions or suppress their experience of gender, the absence of change creates the feeling that no matter how desperately they love God, God's back must be turned on *them*. Some commit to celibacy in order to remain faithful to their churches' (and their own) understanding of sexual intimacy as reserved for male–female marriage (see Creek [2013](#)), but this approach proves livable only for some. Some *formerly* celibate respondents reported having felt like they had to cut off *any* relationship that began to feel too much like love, lest they harm those they cared about just by loving them.[6](#)

Ahmed's emphasis on the connection between shame and love (desire for connection) helps further explain this dynamic:

In showing my shame in my failure to live up to a social ideal, I come closer to that which I have been exposed as failing. This proximity of shame can, of course, repeat the injury (the shamed other may return love through identification with an ideal that it cannot be, so that the return confirms the inhabitation of the [nonnormative]). Shame may be restorative only when the shamed other can “show” that its failure to measure up to a social ideal is temporary... in order to allow us to re-enter the family or community. (Ahmed [2015](#), 107)

By requiring that LGBTI people constantly display shame to prove that they remain faithful to God and desire belonging, these churches compel LGBTI people to “come closer to” a normative ideal—cisgender heterosexuality—that they cannot acquire. This shaming dynamic forces a “choice”: between

positing one's orientation as always not-yet-changed in order to be recognized as belonging and (conditionally) loved, or claiming an identity as an LGBTI person, which is often read by the community as grounds for expulsion from the church and even from God's love.⁷ The impossibility of being loved *as they are* produces a shaming dynamic that is enduring rather than temporary, and often results in shame being instilled as a disposition.⁸

Dispositional shame is not the type of shame heterosexual, cisgender Christians experience as a morally beneficial response to sinfulness.⁹ When people bear shame as a cultivated disposition, they experience the elements of painful exposure, fear of rejection, and powerlessness over their identity not as sudden, unexpected intrusions into an otherwise undisturbed consciousness, but as a way of feeling emotionally at home in the world (Bartky **1990**; Lehtinen **1998**; Woodward **2000**). Acute episodes of shame affirm their sense of inferiority and tend to yield not a healthy check on self-righteousness, but self-loathing or self-abasement sometimes to the point of self-destruction (Lewis **1992**; Pattison **2000**).

“Compassionate” Sacramental Shaming

Before naming their feelings of difference, many of our participants report mounting fear of exposure of their “defects” and of rejection. Sacramental shame intensified as they began to disclose (or be outed) to others. Some loved ones responded by enacting what was feared, exiling them either permanently or until they could “fix” themselves and restore their worthiness. Although this response is still common, it is increasingly giving way to “compassionate” shaming of “love the sinner, but hate the sin.” This form of sacramental shame is often dispensed with affection by loved ones who sincerely believe that they are helping the “sinners” to resist their sinful temptations and become better people. Yet as Ryan Cragun, Emily Williams, and J. E. Sumerau argue, displays of sympathy can send a “dual message” by performing care while affirming moral and institutional superiority (Cragun, Williams, and Sumerau **2015**, 302). Brownson sees “compassionate” shaming's toxicity as coming from the doubleness of the messages: “We love you, but we abhor the way you operate emotionally” (Brownson **2013**, 216). What feels like love to those trying to save their loved one, does not feel like love—or feels like a confusing, conditional, entrapping, and harmful form of it—to the person being told constantly to mistrust and fix their very capacity to relate to God and others. Not feeling loved by those who appear so clearly loving can compound the feeling that something is wrong with the person's capacity to give and receive love. The feeling intensifies when church leaders bar them from serving the church for fear that their “damaged” capacity for relationship will harm others.

Conservative Christians often dispense “compassionate” sacramental shame by first invoking one's status as a “child of God,” a person of sacred worth, to deny that they could be LGBT.¹⁰ In a heartbreaking confession shared to help other parents to love their LGBT kids, Linda and Rob Robertson describe their response when their son Ryan, at age twelve, told his mother he was gay. They say they felt shock and fear, but responded with overt expressions of their deep unconditional love coupled with equally explicit “conditions.” They recall telling him:

We love you. We will always love you. And this is hard, really hard.... [but t]he feelings you have had for other guys don't make you gay.... Your identity is not that you're gay anyway. You are a child of God.... Since you know what the bible says, and since you want to follow God, embracing your sexuality is not an option. (Robertson and Robertson [2013](#))

In her keynote address at TRP's 2016 conference, Julie Rodgers described how after being subject to years of unsuccessful therapies to make her heterosexual,[11](#) she realized that her same-sex attractions were not fleeting and would not be overcome with will power. When she tried to come out as gay, her community rejected her claim to this identity:

"Y'all, I'm gay, like, I'm really gay.... I love Jesus. I'm all in for this vision but I am a lesbian," and they would be like, "No, you're not gay. You're a child of God." And I was like, "No, no, I know. I'm a gay child of God." And they're like, "You're a beloved daughter of the King, who struggles with same-sex attractions." (Rodgers [2016](#))

After insisting that a person is not LGBT, but *instead* is a child of God, parents and pastors then work to "help" that person secure their Christian identity, which often takes the form of frenzied mobilization to fix the person's allegedly sinful sexuality or gender experience. The Robertsons write of their frantic efforts involving daily prayer teams and binders of scripture passages in the bathroom, and Rodgers tells of her youth being dominated by the project of not being gay: "My whole sort of upbringing was like, 'Okay, don't wear sweater vests. Don't play softball. Don't be gay. Don't be gay.'"

Adding to the confusion, complementarian thought explicitly defines homosexuality and bisexuality as gender problems, which may be cured by restoring a person's gender identity (Moberly [1983](#); Erzen [2006](#); Robinson and Spivey [2007](#); Gerber [2011](#); Waidzunas [2015](#)), and trans and intersex people are often discredited as "homosexual" because they challenge the complementarian binary, appearing to willfully reject God's plan. The community's efforts usually focus on fixing the person's "broken" gender. The Robertsons channeled Ryan into masculine activities and friendships with manly, straight men. Rodgers's therapy was intensely focused on healing her "broken" femininity:

the idea was that... there was something in me that was like brokenness in my femininity, and that if I could just embrace my inner femininity, I would [heal...] and begin to feel attracted to men. So I learned to wear makeup in the ministry and... they got me in jeans that fit a little bit better. They taught me to walk with my hips first instead of my shoulders first.... (T)hey were trying to girl me up. (Rodgers [2016](#))

Others recount similar experiences, within or independent of reparative therapy.

Nonaffirming[12](#) Christians often dispense "compassionate" sacramental shame with good intentions (Erzen [2006](#); Wolkomir [2006](#)), yet these attempts to love do not heal or restore one's ability to relate to others. Instead, participants report emotional isolation, despair, self-hatred, substance abuse,[13](#) eating disorders, reckless behavior, suicide, and even severe physical health consequences—including heart failure and an autoimmune disorder—as a result of attempting to suppress their attractions and cutting themselves off from relationship.

Why so Afraid?

On all sides of “compassionate” sacramental shame, people report that their dominant emotion was fear. LGBT participants describe being terrified when coming into the realization that they had same-sex attractions or didn't identify with the sex they were assigned at birth, crying “ugly tears” on bedroom floors, begging God to fix them, and so afraid of this “sin” that they could not even speak it out loud. Heterosexual, cisgender parents also describe paralyzing fear when their children came out to them. The frenzy and desperation with which some parents try to fix their children affirms that people are terrified. No sin seems to yield this level of panic, and none so threatens a person's Christian credentials; a white gay respondent in her twenties grew up knowing that “murdering someone was probably forgivable and being gay wasn't.”

Sexual and gender variance provoke intense fear responses in these communities because they posit normative gender (and therefore sexuality) as essential to humanity and God's order. We see this in the Robertsons' (2013) description of the shock they felt when Ryan came out to them because he was “unafraid of anything, tough as nails, and ALL boy” (Robertson and Robertson 2013)—his gender identity, his presumed masculinity, was suddenly in question—and in the way loved ones corrected Rodgers when she said she was gay. A twenty-two-year-old white trans man recalled his college ministry friends' response when he came out to them as, “We love you but it's not okay to act on these feelings. You're, like, really a beautiful woman of God.” They advised him to wear tighter tee-shirts.

Within these communities, it is possible for a man to be addicted to alcohol or to commit infidelity, theft, or even murder, and still be seen as a “man of God.” He may be a failed Christian; his actions disappoint the community's expectations for what it means to be *of God*, but not what it means to be *a man*. From these communities' perspective, violations of gendered expectations appear as a more fundamental rejection of God's first intention when creating humanity. These communities mobilize to fix allegedly sinful sexuality with gendered activities because one's ability to be recognized as a person created by God actually depends on one's ability to be recognized within the gender binary. The love available to those with same- or multi-sex attractions or experiences of gender variance is not the unconditional love available to all persons, because their difference calls into question their *very personhood*.

Patrick Hopkins has argued that gay men seem “monstrous” in the logic of masculinity (Hopkins 1998); within complementarian logic, the specter not just of a gay man, but of any LGBTI person, is monstrous. Ryan's same-sex “temptations,” should he not get a grip on them, threatened to destroy his personhood, to expose him as a monster (and his parents as the creators of a monster). Movement leader Brandan Robertson affirms that complementarian church members can find bisexuality to be just as disqualifying as homosexuality (Robertson 2016), and some trans participants in this movement speak of being subject to harsh treatments (ranging from exclusion to violent attempts at exorcism—see Anderson 2015) similar to those meted out to some LGB people.¹⁴

This analysis explains why shame is sacramentalized for LGBTI people in these communities, and what distinguishes sacramental shame from the dispositional shame imparted to oppressed groups in other contexts. Chronic shame about people's "sinful" sexuality or gender experience and constant displays of that shame assure the community that they affirm their church's understanding of creation, are trying to hold onto their "God-given" gender and thus personhood, and are working tirelessly to remain "of God." Rather than dispensing shame with the contempt that reminds stigmatized groups that they are irredeemably flawed (Bartky [1990](#); Woodward [2000](#)), their churches dispense "compassionate" sacramental shame as a sincere (albeit failed) attempt to love. Rather than outright denying full personhood, sacramental shame bestows upon LGBTI Christians the chance to try to achieve their (supposedly God-given) personhood (and then locates their "failure" to do so in their own failures of will). Displaying sacramental shame acknowledges that belonging is perpetually at risk; it is how monsters show that they know they are monsters but *want to be* persons.

Overcoming Sacramental Shame

Our LGBTI participants confront "entire theologies dedicated to the idea" that they do not exist as persons (Edman [2016](#), 110). Sacramental shame is a ritualized, spiritualized form of shame that both grows out of and serves to protect these theologies; when internalized, it disables LGBTI people from seeing who they are and from trusting what they see. Like other studies of both affirming (Yip [1997](#); Wilcox [2003](#); McQueeney [2009](#); Sumerau [2012](#); Yip, Keenan, and Page [2013](#)) and nonaffirming (Wilcox [2003](#); Erzen [2006](#); Creek [2013](#), Yip, Keenan, and Page [2013](#)) settings, our respondents show that claiming and affirming an identity as both an LGBTI person *and* faithful Christian, worthy to love and serve others, becomes a catalyst for healing for many of our participants. In the face of nonaffirming churches that often explicitly bar LGBTI people from loving or serving others, we argue that claiming such identities is an act of claiming personhood and trusting one's capacity to relate to other people not as a monster, but as a human being.

Elizabeth Edman helps articulate how LGBTI conservative Christians can overcome sacramental shame (Edman [2016](#)). Defining *queer* as an encompassing, collective, nonheteronormative identity, she observes that self-perception as a queer person very often happens through perception of queerness in another—which sparks an awareness, "I am not alone; I exist" (Edman [2016](#), 110). What she calls *queer pride* emerges in the context of recognizing and valuing the humanity in *other* queer people, which allows all to recognize and affirm their own humanity as queer people. This recognition in turn enables them to trust their (human) capacity to form relationships. They realize, claim, and sustain a sense of self-worth in and through relationship with others (111, 113). This form of self-love contravenes the self-destruction fostered by sacramental shame; it is a self-love that expands possibilities for loving other people because it is born in recognition and affirmation of the humanity shared by self and others (113). This pride protects them from internalizing the degrading messages of those who deny their personhood, without debasing those who actively shame them. For LGBTI Christians, pride is not the hollow cliché of rainbow merchandise, but the recognition that they (like every human being) are made in God's image, loved by God, and worthy to strive to be like Jesus. Pride

is also not a one-time cure to heal the wounds of sacramental shame. Shame has a haunting quality, especially when instilled as a disposition, and seemingly small incidents can drag a person back into its throes. Still, people can recover from these hauntings when they understand themselves as fundamentally of sacred worth and loved by God as they are.

However, it is challenging for LGBTI conservative Christians to cultivate that self-understanding and self-worth, not only because they have to overcome theologies that deny their existence (Lambert [2014](#)), but also because their communities are highly suspicious of pride. They name it as one of the “deadly sins” because they define it as hubris, which sets the self over and against other people and God and makes relationship impossible (Edman [2016](#), 115). For people whose fundamental worth as persons is never denied, it is easy to overlook the healthy forms of pride that back their self-worth, even as they define *pride* as sinful. Equating pride with hubris harms stigmatized Christians by discouraging and even punishing the cultivation of an emotion people need in order to understand their own worth and to love other people and God (115).

Sunsets and Solidarity

Overcoming sacramental shame sensitizes LGBTI conservative Christians to the harm done when others silence or refuse to listen to their accounts of their own experience—what one called a “failure of Christian love.” Many come to see listening with openness as a charge of Christian love. Listening with openness inspires some participants and leaders to expand their vision of Christian love to see it as mandating solidarity with other social-justice movements. For one thing, listening to bisexual, trans, and intersex people encourages participants to rethink the place of binary gender in Christian thought. Leading a workshop about bisexuality, Eliel Cruz mentioned the spectrum encompassed within pairings of seeming opposites in the books of Genesis and Revelations, like alpha and omega, and asked:

Can you stand with your feet in the muddy sand on the beach, waves crashing around your feet, tide slowly rising or falling, and honestly draw a clear line between sea and dry land?
(Cruz [2015](#))

Echoing Cruz, TRP founder Matthew Vines used similar reasoning in a 2016 Facebook post regarding anti-transgender legislation, remarking:

Literally no one looks at a sunset and says, “How tragic that the lines between night and day have been blurred in our broken world.” Even though night and day are creational categories listed in Genesis 1, just like male and female, with no exceptions mentioned! No, we intuitively understand that God's creation is bursting forth with diversity, with blurred boundaries, and with all the beauty that brings.... So my view: If you think trans and non-binary gender identities are broken, then you should think sunsets are broken, too. And if you aren't willing to say the latter, then perhaps you should rethink the former.

Such arguments disrupt the complementarian binary that has shaped even secular lesbian and gay political organizing in recent decades (Yoshino [2000](#); Fetner [2008](#); Stryker [2008](#)).

Second, listening to celibate gay Christians encourages participants to rethink the church's and late capitalism's emphasis on marriage as the ideal form of family, echoing feminist and queer theorists by calling for institutional support for a broader range of family forms, including friendship and committed, lifelong, celibate partnerships (Barrett and McIntosh [1990/1982](#); Warner [1993](#); Ingraham [1999](#); Warner [1999](#); Bray [2003](#); Tushnet [2014](#); Hill [2015](#); Talvacchia, Pettinger, and Larrimore [2015](#)). Finally, listening to people of color in this movement encourages white participants to examine the white domination of church and social institutions, to acknowledge their own privilege, and to organize intersectional movements for justice (Greer [2016](#); Lee [2016](#)). As white, trans, Baptist pastor Allyson Robinson remarked in a GCN conference keynote:

The trajectory of God's work in the world is justice for all. If you are distracted by your dearly won gains and say you're done [because the Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage], you weren't fighting for justice, you were fighting for yourself. (Robinson [2016](#))

None of these moves is ever complete. At TRP's 2016 conference, same-gender-loving black pastor Eronica King remarked that white church spaces may affirm her same-gender-loving identity but very often erase or deny her black spiritual identity, forcing her to exist as a fragmented spiritual self (King [2016](#)). Leaders of color insist that truly welcoming spaces let people, as CFI's director Alicia Crosby puts it, "express the fullness of who they are." Creating faith communities that are not merely welcoming but affirming of a full range of intersectional spiritual identities will require substantial effort and vulnerability to being transformed, but with an ethic of responsiveness, participants in this movement grow closer to this radically inclusive vision of community.

Sacramental shame is a form of religiously imbued chronic shame that gets instilled in many of our participants as a disposition. Dispositional shame, however it is cultivated, holds people in constant fear of being rejected or abandoned because of who they are, and causes immeasurable, sometimes fatal harm. However, sacramental shame is distinctive. Typically, shame dispensed toward stigmatized groups signals that community membership or relationship is threatened or withdrawn. In dispensing shame as a sacrament, conservative churches require LGBTI members to feel and constantly display fear of this break in relationship as an outward sign of their desire to deserve God's (supposedly freely given) love, and as a requirement for them to be recognized as persons (not monsters) eligible for (ever partial) relationship. Overcoming this toxic dynamic involves not hubris, but a form of self-love that grounds people in a sense of their own worth, while decentering the self and opening them to others. Their harmful experiences of being shamed lead them to adapt in order to love as they believe Jesus did, to expand their understanding of what love requires such that they cannot evade social justice. This form of pride that backs self-worth and generates humility could serve as a model for more inclusive secular social-justice movements as well.

NOTES

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1. We use different abbreviations because people in different identity categories can experience conservative Christianity in different ways. We refer to self-identified queers and asexuals (as in LGBTQIA) when referring to organizations that include them (at least in name), but not our study, for different reasons. Some asexuals (people without sexual attraction) participate in this movement; however, these churches exclude them in different ways. Although some participants identify as queer, most also identify as something else in this list as well, and the term queer invokes dynamics beyond the present scope.
2. “Conservative” here refers to Protestant communities that focus on individual, personal relationships with Jesus, a “high view” of Scripture, and other conventions of evangelical/fundamentalist churches (Bebbington 1989).
3. Through this research, Dawne Moon served on the board of CFI from August 2015–October 2017.
4. The vocal presence of bisexuals in this movement attests that the harms levied on “same-sex attracted” people also accrue to those with nonbinary attractions. Given that other researchers (Yoshino 2000; Cragun and Sumerau 2016; Cragun and Sumerau 2017) have found that heterosexuals and gays/lesbians negatively stereotype bi/pan/ambisexuals, the latter’s struggles are not likely to result solely from the complementarian narrative. However, the solidarity we discuss below mitigates some of the added stress bi/pan/ambisexual people endure.
5. This view of Christianity denies the faith of liberal Christians.
6. This is not to say that no one is “called” to celibacy or capable of appreciating its discipline without a calling, but that mandatory celibacy harms some of those who are not called to it (Brownson 2013; Vines 2014).
7. The options of finding a liberal/affirming church or leaving the church are not always viable.
8. We follow Ullaliina Lehtinen in distinguishing dispositional shame from episodic shame, in which painful exposure of one’s flaws comes on suddenly and disrupts a person’s ordinary ability to go about daily life as a valued member of the community (Lehtinen 1998). Our research shows that episodic shame, which is likely the kind of shame that heterosexual, cisgender Christians experience as redemptive, can have moral benefit for people with privileged identities (see also Shotwell 2011, ch. 5).
9. This is not to assert that LGBTI people are the only ones who experience this shame dynamic; some respondents suggest that purity culture instills the same kind of disposition to shame in heterosexual, cisgender women. White culture, including white church culture, chronically shames people of color. This same dynamic could be linked with the shame of heterosexual, cisgender men who fear exposure of their failure to live up to sacralized masculinity (Kimmel 2000).
10. It is not clear in our data that intersex people are routinely subject to this specific narrative unless they are seen as LGBT.
11. Reparative therapies meant to “correct” LGBT people were conducted by hundreds of local ministries until Exodus, their umbrella organization, closed in 2013 with a public apology from its president, but some of those ministries persist (Erzen 2006; Gerber 2011; Waidzunus 2015).
12. Nonaffirming refers to churches or individuals that do not affirm the rightness of LGBT and other nonnormative sexual or gender identities, same-sex marriage, or gender transitions.
13. Ryan’s story, sadly, went this route. Just before his eighteenth birthday, depressed and suicidal, he turned to alcohol and drugs and ran away from his family. After being missing for eighteen months, he reunited with his parents in a moving story of forgiveness, healing, and moral transformation on his parents’ part. But ten months into recovery Ryan relapsed and died.

14. Intersex respondents spoke of physical and other abuses as a result of their parents' shame about their failure to conform to complementarian images, but this is not limited to conservative Christian communities.

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Statement on Human Subjects

This research was done with the approval of and compliance with Marquette University Internal Review Board's standards for the protection of human subjects, under protocol #HR-2750.