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Homosexuality and Faith: When Identity Developments Intersect

Rebecca J. Wieferich

The lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) community is one that has been growing in visibility at institutions of higher education across the country. There has also been a visible increase in support that is available to students on campuses. Religion/spirituality/faith is becoming more apparent in students' lives, and there is often a lack of support for this development on campuses. An even greater challenging question for the LGBTQ community is: where does religion/spirituality/faith fit for them? While many students question and develop in this area, the struggles faced by LGBTQ students who ask this question often present more challenges as they search to combine and live in both of these dimensions of their lives and identities. This article will look at the identity developments of religion/spirituality/faith and homosexuality. In doing so, the issues of how and where the two developments intersect along with positive support systems that are needed will be addressed.

Often in the field of higher education and student affairs, professionals become very focused on what their specific roles are in students' lives. It can be easy for professionals to forget about their role as part of a bigger entity that is concerned for the whole person (Love & Talbot, 2000). The lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) community is one that has been growing in student visibility, with increasing attention being given to student needs (Herbst & Malaney, 1999). However, religion/spirituality/faith is often lacking in visibility as well as in the support offered on campuses (Love & Talbot). This is especially apparent at both public and non-religiously affiliated private institutions (Jablonski, 2001). Without this support, a compounded challenge for the LGBTQ community is in considering the question of where does religion/spirituality/faith fit for them. While many students question and develop in this area, LGBTQ students who ask this question often face additional challenges as they search to combine and live in both of these dimensions of their lives and identities. These two areas of identity development are often deemed opposite or combative, but they are also part of one person and can be strengthened by one another when given the chance.

This article will look at the identity developments of religion/spirituality/faith and homosexuality. In doing so, the issues of where the two intersect will be addressed. When looking at the development of students, there are numerous theories about different kinds of identities that comprise a person; at some point these multiple dimensions need to be considered together (Jones & McEwen, 2000). Along with the review of relevant literature and theories, this article will give suggestions regarding what can be done for this group of students.

Faith Development

There are numerous definitions for each of these three words: religion, spirituality, and faith. Some try to use them interchangeably, while others are very specific about how they use each one. According to Love (2001):

Religion is a shared system of beliefs, principles, or doctrines related to a belief in and worship of a supernatural power or powers regarded as creator(s) and governor(s) of the universe. Parks (2000) [as cited in Love] views spirituality to be a search for meaning, transcendence, wholeness, purpose, and "apprehension of spirit (or Spirit) as the animating essence at the core of life" a search more personal than public. (p. 8)

It is noted that some sources view the terms religion and spirituality as being intertwined, whereas others look at them separately. One may hope that they would overlap, but that may not always be the case either.

The two researchers who appear most often when researching faith development are Fowler and Parks. Love (2001) stated:

Faith is a process of meaning making, which is the process of making sense out of the activities of life and seeking patterns, order, coherence, and relation among the disparate elements of human living. It is the process of discovering and creating connections among experiences and events. (p. 8)

Faith is a word that can be used to include religion, spirituality, or both depending on the preference of the person using the word. The work of Fowler and Parks is used in this article to demonstrate the available theories. For this reason, the

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word faith will be used in order to be consistent with their usage (except when a citation uses a different phrase), while remembering that both religion and spirituality can be included in faith.

Fowler's Stages of Faith

Before stage one actually begins, Fowler (1981) identified the time of infancy and undifferentiated faith. This is a time when a person is learning to adapt to the world, but adaptation can depend on the process of maturation as well as the environment. Early childhood is when stage one, intuitive-projective faith, begins. In this stage, adults can permanently influence children as children are in a phase of imitation. The next stage is mythic-literal faith and is reached during the school years. This stage occurs when "beliefs are appropriated with literal interpretations, as are moral rules and attitudes" (Fowler, p. 149). Stage three follows with the synthetic-conventional faith happening during adolescence. At this time, the adolescent's world is growing in complexity as more responsibilities are given by entities outside of the family. During this stage, "faith must synthesize values and information; it must provide a basis for identity and outlook" (Fowler, p. 172).

The next stage, individuative-reflective faith, may emerge in young adulthood, but many people do not explore this stage until their thirties or beyond. The identity of self, outside the relative meaning that others assign to this self, begins to play a larger role as people make their own judgments and interpretations. Because the individuative-reflective stage is often not reached until later on, stage five, conjunctive faith, is often not met until mid-life or later. Here, the self is looked at together with unrecognized viewpoints from stage four: The past is re-examined and people find their own voices (Fowler, 1981). Finally, the stage of universalizing faith can happen, but is rare. These people are often described for their "heedlessness to self-preservation and the vividness of their taste and feel for transcendent moral and religious actuality [that] give their actions and words an extraordinary and often unpredictable quality" (Fowler, p. 200).

Parks' Faith Development Model

Parks' four stages of faith development focuses on the faith development process during college years. Parks' model begins with the adolescent, or conventional, as stage one. This stage is where people still look to authorities and depend on them for information and definitions of self. Next is the move into the young adult stage where individuals become more independent and "need a community in which to explore" (Hamrick, Evans, & Schuh, 2002, p. 65). Tested adult, stage three, is for older students who are "more secure and confident about their decisions and values" (Hamrick et al., p. 65). This is also the time when finding others with similar beliefs is important. The final stage is the mature adult where commitments and connections to the world are reached. This stage is most likely not encountered during college but is one that people may come closer to during midlife (Hamrick et al., 2002).

Homosexuality Development

Though this paper is written to include lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgender, and questioning students, there is very little information available on transgender or questioning students regard to development theory. For this reason, the following information will specify which group or groups are included in the research.

Cass' Model of Homosexual Identity Formation

Although Cass originally presented her model in 1979, it is still the most frequently cited theory, which may demonstrate the lack of further research in this area. This model was originally formed using gays and lesbians but does have applicability to bisexuals as well. Cass noted that not all homosexuals go through the same development since decisions a person makes play a role in his or her development and not all go through every stage (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998).

Cass model begins in stage one with identity confusion. This stage is the realization of thoughts, feelings, and attractions that are not heterosexual. A person will experience confusion and anxiety with this realization. If positive reactions by the self occur, then it will lead to the next stage. However, if a person reacts negatively, foreclosure, the inability to progress to the next stage, may occur. The next stage is identity comparison when the person accepts that he or she may be gay or lesbian and issues of social exclusion are addressed (Evans et al., 1998).

Stage three, identity tolerance, is when individuals "have acknowledged that they are probably gay or lesbian and seek out other gay and lesbian people to reduce their feelings of isolation" (Evans et al., 1998, p. 93). If positive interactions occur, then the person will move into the next stage, which is identity acceptance. However, if negative interactions

occur, foreclosure may again ensue. During identity acceptance, positive meaning is placed on homosexual identity. Social groups will influence how an individual acts, either being publicly out, selectively out, or passing as heterosexual (Evans et al.).

Upon reaching stage five, a person develops identity pride. In this stage there is a focus on homosexual issues, activities, pride toward gay matters, and anger toward non-gay matters. A person may become an activist and confront a society that is oppressive; if the person receives negative reactions to this, it can lead to foreclosure. Identity synthesis is reached in the final stage. Homosexual and heterosexual worlds become less separated at this point. Individuals are judged more on personal qualities not solely on sexual identity. The person will start to let public and private identities become more unified, while homosexual identity is now part of their identity and not the entire self-identity (Evans et al., 1998).

D'Augelli's Model of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Development

D'Augelli's model was published in 1994 and is one of the more current development models for lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) identities (Evans et al., 1998). D'Augelli included only LGB peoples in his model and pointed out that social construction has an effect on development. D'Augelli identified processes that a person goes through but points out that these are not a sequence of stages. The beginning process is that of exiting the heterosexual identity by recognizing one's feelings and attractions as non-heterosexual. During this process a person also begins to identify themselves as lesbian, gay, or bisexual to others. The second process is when a person develops a personal LGB identity status with more stability and starts challenging internalized fears and myths. This development needs to occur alongside others to help confirm ideas about the meaning of being non-heterosexual (Evans et al.).

The third process is the development of an LGB social identity by creating a support network of others who accept their sexual orientation. Fourth is the process of becoming an LGB offspring; this process involves informing one's parents about LGB identity and then redefining familial relationships. The fifth process is developing an LGB intimacy status, which can be more difficult than heterosexual relationships because of a lack of lesbian and gay couples visible in society. The final process is entering an LGB community by beginning to commit to social and political actions (Evans et al., 1998).

Where the Two Identity Developments Intersect

The development of faith is something that any person may go through. As noted by Parks, college is an important time in that development (Hamrick et al., 2002). Even though most people will develop their sexuality identity as they mature, homosexuality development is only experienced by some members of society. The question may be whether the issues of faith and homosexuality, combined together, are important enough to address with college students. The answer should be yes. When considering the numerous services on campus, all students do not utilize a large number of them, but they are still important for those who need them. It has been shown that LGBTQ students are in need of support networks that are available on campus (Herbst & Malaney, 1999). It is then important to look at all aspects of that support, not solely at individual aspects of student development (Jones & McEwen, 2000; Love & Talbot, 2000). One example of this can be found in research conducted by Herbst and Malaney (1999) where the importance of programming specifically on LGBT issues in residential living was reported by staff: "They noted that GLBT students do not always realize that what they are going through is normal. They also mentioned that the program provides role models that are important to the students' growth and development" (p. 115). This example is evidence of the importance that support services are available for LGBTQ students in a more general sense and not just from a specific office.

When looking at faith, it is reported that "the college experience appears to have a mitigating effect on development of religiosity on the part of students" (Hamrick et al., 2002, p. 164). If this is in fact true, then it is important to address the issue. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) believed that the process of maturing in and of itself cannot be the sole reason for why there is a decline in students who are active in conventional religious practices (Hamrick et al.). Love & Talbot (2000) expressed that spiritual development can either be affected positively or negatively based on the environment in which students develop. This correlates well with Cass' homosexuality identity development stages, which can be positively or negatively affected based on the reactions by the self and others (Evans et al., 1998). In either case, college can be that environment. Marso (1991) stated:

Traditional age college students face a vast array of developmental tasks and issues. Lesbian and gay students, in addition to the developmental stages of non-gay students, are also frequently struggling with their sexual identity and development and the range of problems and emotions associated with it. (p. 2)

During the process of spiritual development, there are often crises in which growth becomes interrupted and the past is looked at from a new and deeper level (Jones, Wainswright, & Yarnold, 1986). This is where the intersection of spiritual and sexuality development can occur. As McNeill (1988) stated, "Lesbian and gay people, because of their sexual orientation, ask different questions, have different needs, and, therefore, need to work out the special theological and spiritual implications that are rooted in the gay and lesbian experience" (p. xii).

McNeill (1988) also spoke of the two options that most homosexuals think they have when struggling between their religion and their sexual identity: either they choose to remain in the church and try to repress all homosexual feelings, or they accept their homosexuality, thus feeling they must repress all religious beliefs. McNeill's desire is that there is guidance for homosexuals so that they can accept themselves and challenge the church, thus deepening their own faith. This again is where support is needed to address these issues together, not as separate experiences.

In Evans & Wall (1993), the idea of combining one's self-concept with one's sexuality became the focus of self-view. This idea is from DuBay who advocated looking at sexuality as just one part of a person's identity as a whole (Evans & Wall). This relates back to looking at the whole student and multiple identities together (Love & Talbot, 2000; Jones & McEwen, 2000). In the end, there is no reason why faith and homosexuality should not be addressed together.

Implications and Conclusions

The information presented thus far shows that the areas of homosexuality and faith development are in need of support and attention from dedicated, trained professionals. Here are just a few of the possible ways to help students in these areas of faith and homosexuality development:

- (a) Create a space on campus for all students to explore different religions, discover spiritual methods, and learn about faith development. This space may include professionals who are open and educated about the different definitions that these three words can take on and resources available for further education.
- (b) Create a center, if there is not one already, where all students can learn and become more educated about the LGBTQ community. The center could provide support for those students going through homosexuality development, as well as for educational awareness to others.
- (c) Have programming planned by either a faith center or a center for LGBTQ issues around the topic of faith development and what that can mean as students face the development of their LGBTQ identity.
- (d) If a center cannot be made to address the faith development issues of students, then consider a library of resources for LGBTQ students that will allow them to research and explore religions and spirituality on their own.

There is a real need for a professional with training to help guide students in this very personal exploration. These students need to know that these two developmental issues can happen together, and that one does not need to be given up to live the other.

This article covers only a small piece of the information that is available about these two topics. Since there is very little scholarship about the two issues together, here are more questions to guide future research in this combined area:

- (a) What might faith development look like for transgender students?
- (b) Does faith development follow the same stages for questioning students? How is this process different when a student is going through this questioning while simultaneously searching for faith?
- (c) What religions are most accepting of the LGBTQ community? What religions have made progress in being more accepting? Do LGBTQ students need to have a defined religion to feel connected to their faith?
- (d) What spiritual methods are most inclusive for the LGBTQ person? Is spirituality an easier path to follow for faith development?

All college students need guidance in numerous areas of their development. That guidance and support often takes place within student affairs. As the years progress, more and more areas are identified in which students are struggling. Student

affairs professionals have thus begun to find ways to research and give support to those areas. Regardless of whether one views religion, spirituality, and faith as one, two, or three issues, students need guidance in these areas. The scope of this paper does not allow for an in-depth look at specific religions, but uses faith as guidance for the experiences that students may face as they explore personal religiosity and specific religions. When considering the homosexual identity development that some students go through and where conflicts with faith development arise, further research is required. The implications listed above are ways to help this group of students find themselves whilst they experience two distinct identities that often conflict. Fortunately, with appropriate guidance and resources, both processes can prosper.

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