“Maybe I Need Christ or Maybe I Just Need Me”: Functions of Religion among Young Black Members of the LGBTQIA Community in the United States

Sandra Lynn Barnes

Abstract: This qualitative study examines the functions of religion for a group of 76 young Black members of the LGBTQIA community ages 18–30 years old based on the question: What are some of the functions of religion that make continued congregational involvement viable for members of this community? Emerging adulthood theory suggests that late adolescence is a period of self-discovery and societal critique. To my knowledge, this theory has not been used to study the religious experiences of young Black sexual minorities. Content analysis shows the functions of religion as a controlling mechanism during childhood, a conflict mechanism during teen years, and religion/spirituality as a cathartic mechanism during late adolescence.

Keywords: functions of religion; Black young people; sexual identity; religious coping; Black Church; spirituality

1. Introduction

A legacy of heteronormativity and homophobia has meant that many Black churches in the United States (U.S.) do not welcome and/or affirm Black members of the LGBTQIA community (Balaji et al. 2012; Barnes 2013; Dangerfield et al. 2019; Douglas 1999; Foster et al. 2011; Fullilove and Fullilove 1999; Griffin 2006; Hill and McNeely 2013; Lefevor et al. 2020; Quinn et al. 2015; Young 2023). Despite such negative treatment, certain Black sexual minorities continue to participate in religion and the Black Church (Pitt 2010; Quinn et al. 2015; Sorett 2022). What are some of the functions of religion and the Black Church in the U.S., both negative and positive, for members of this community? The current study informs existing research by considering this query to illumine some of the functions of religion, in general, and the Black Church in the U.S., in particular, for a cadre of 76 young Black persons ages 18–30 years old who self-identify as gay, straight, bisexual, and transgender. Emerging Adulthood theory and content analysis are used to answer the above question. This study is important for several reasons. First, the findings will help document some of the religious experiences for members of this community as well as help illumine whether and how they endeavor to understand and reconcile these experiences. Second, Emerging Adulthood theory has generally been used to examine how young straight White people understand worldviews, love, and/or work. To my knowledge, this is the first study that examines religion as a worldview for young Black sexual minorities based on this theory. Readers should note that, in this study, the term “the Black Church” reflects the institution as a collective and “Black church” when specific congregations are referenced. Use of the former term should not suggest to readers the lack of diversity among Black congregations based on factors such as denomination, theological focus, worship style, programmatic efforts, and community involvement. Moreover, although definitions can vary, in this study, the acronym “LGBTQIA” stands for “Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender/Transsexual, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, and Asexual.” The “A” can also represent “allies, aromantic, and/or agender”.

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2. Religion and Spirituality: A Summary

Religion is largely understood to be a multidimensional construct that includes beliefs, affiliations, and practices that manifest differentially based on dynamics such as culture, history, ecology, socioeconomics, and demographics (Huss 2014; Saroglou 2011; Wulff 2019). Broadly defined, religion often refers to a formal set of beliefs, values, and rituals under the authority of a non-corporal being (i.e., God among Christians). Common Christian practices include involvement in corporate worship, praying, and following the Bible (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). Spirituality is not generally associated with organized, communal, and institutionalized practices, but tends to reflect a less value-laden system focused on human beings’ connections to one another and the universe; openness; and seeking (Daniel 2011; Nouwen 1986). In contrast to religion’s tendency toward the formal, spirituality often celebrates informality as well as dynamics such as holistic wellness, belief in a Higher Power, self-discovery, nature, self-reflection, and personal empowerment (Thurman 1999, 2007; Wulff 2019). Other studies provide insights about religion and spirituality that emphasize their interrelatedness rather than their distinctiveness (Park 2005).

Huss (2014) challenges binaries between religion and secularism, phrases such as “spiritual, but not religious” as well as the existence of distinct categories between religion and spirituality (also see Daniel 2011). He posits that spirituality reflects a new cultural construct that calls into question such dichotomies. This same author chronicles historical tendencies to use the concept “spirituality” to describe appropriate Christian conduct and religious piety. In other instances, religion and spirituality have been used interchangeably. He notes, “the term ‘spirituality’ as used in the late nineteenth and twentieth century retained its reference to the metaphysical, un-corporeal, and immaterial but also came to refer to the core or quintessence of universal religiosity” (Huss 2014, p. 49). In addition to New Age, spirituality has been associated with consumerism, yoga, martial arts, health, and gardening. Like the next scholar, Huss (2014, p. 51) posits, “most scholars see religion and spirituality as universal phenomena, which exist, in different forms, in all human cultures”.

The seminal cross-cultural analysis by Saroglou (2011) presents four psychological dimensions of religion—believing (an external transcendence and its relationship with humanity), bonding (connectedness between oneself, other people, and the deity), behaving (identifying and following moral mandates), and belonging (the need to be in relationship and establish group identity)—purported to be universally present across religious contexts, but in culturally nuanced ways. In addition to documenting the cognitive, moral, emotional, and social aspects of religion, this same study links religion and spirituality in several ways. For example, “a preferential emphasis on believing in and bonding with transcendence is at the heart of spirituality [emphasis is the author’s], be it within or outside religious traditions and institutions” (Saroglou 2011, p. 1331). Moreover, collective forms of belonging also link religion to spirituality; “religious groups vary greatly on a continuum going from exclusive identity (e.g., sects, ethnic religions) to inclusive identity (modern spirituality)” (Saroglou 2011, p. 1333).

Although not the emphasis of Saroglou’s (2011) study, each of his religious dimensions, particularly bonding, behaving, and belonging, is especially salient in the U.S. Black community given the history of racism and discrimination, linked fate mentality, and self-help tradition (Billingsley 1992; DuBois 2003; Frazier 1964; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). However, moral beliefs about homosexuality inform unwelcoming religious spaces (Quinn et al. 2015). Black churches have a legacy of offering valuable religious and non-religious benefits and support to the U.S. Black community (Billingsley 1992; Diamant and Mohamed 2018; DuBois 2003; Frazier 1964; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Barnes 2013, forthcoming). Embracing spirituality can also provide positive outcomes in general (Carrico et al. 2017; Nouwen 1986; Thurman 1999, 2007; Barnes Forthcoming). For Black sexual minorities, spirituality can have beneficial social, psychological, and academic effects (Dangerfield et al. 2019; Drumhiller et al. 2018). Spirituality has also been positively linked to stress relief; positive self-images; validating the inherent value in humanity; and, promoting peace and overall wellness (Foster et al. 2011; James and Moore 2005). Reduced drug use
and condomless anal intercourse (Dacus et al. 2018; Lassiter 2016; Watkins et al. 2016); increased self-esteem and self-respect; and positive decision-making are other possible benefits (Carrico et al. 2017; Drumhiller et al. 2018). Research suggests that religion and spirituality have been considered as blurred concepts; conflated; distinct belief systems; reflective of a continuum of beliefs and practices; related dimensions of typologies; and/or a stance where the former is a manifestation of the latter (Daniel 2011; Huss 2014; Saroglou 2011; Wulff 2019). Ultimately, religion and spirituality are both considered “forms of the sacred” (Huss 2014, p. 55). This study considers the functions of religion and the Black Church for young Black people in the U.S. who embrace diverse sexual identities.

3. The Black Church and the Black LGBTQIA Community in the U.S.

A large body of literature documents how Black Church sexual politics in the U.S. have fueled heteronormativity and, ultimately, negative religious experiences, including church estrangement, for many Black members of the LGBTQIA community. This section provides a summary of these tenuous factors. Dynamics such as Victorian sexual mores; biblical authority linked to conservative theology; racialized representations of Black bodies and Black sexuality; stereotypes; a focus on procreation, natural law, and Black masculine tropes; and, depictions of homosexuality as a White perversion have resulted in trauma and estrangement from Black churches by many Black members of the LGBTQIA community (Fullilove and Fullilove 1999; Griffin 2006; Lefevor et al. 2020; Quinn et al. 2015; Sorett 2022). In addition to fostering trauma, these dynamics often mean that Black sexual minorities are unable to avail themselves of the religious and non-religious resources and support available in such congregations (Billingsley 1992; DuBois 2003; Frazier 1964; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Quinn et al. 2015). Negative religious experiences among Black sexual minorities often resulted. White racism, stereotypes, customs, myths, and laws meant African Americans were often historically portrayed as sexually promiscuous to justify their exploitation, oppression, and manipulation as well as to maintain White supremacy (Griffin 2006; Sorett 2022). Douglas (1999, p. 29) summarizes this past: “White society’s preoccupation with Black women’s and men’s sexuality is about more than fascination and fear. It has to do with maintaining the status quo of White power in American society”.

Some members of the Black community accepted the White devaluation of African American bodies. Black churches that capitulated often embraced a conservative theology around sexuality, gender, and respectability politics that fostered heterosexism and homophobia as informed by biblical passages such as Genesis 19:1–29, Leviticus 18:22, Leviticus 20:13, I Corinthians 6:9–10, and 1 Timothy 1:8–10 (Griffin 2006; Sorett 2022; Barnes Forthcoming). In the seminal text, Their Own Receive Them Not: African American Lesbians & Gays in Black Churches, Griffin (2006, p. 59) notes; “In order to gain respectability and simply to survive, Black people adopted a sexual conservatism, if not sexual prudishness...such a reaction has led a Black majority to adopt harsh attitudes toward lesbian and gay people, their relationships and equality.” As a symptom of the larger struggles in the United States around race, gender, and sexuality in general (West 1993), homosexuality is too often framed in Black congregations as a danger to the Black community and the Black family (Griffin 2006; Sorett 2022).

Anti-gay messages undermine the benefits associated with Black Church participation in the U.S., such as racial affirmation; a sense of belonging; the ability to develop friendships, relationships, and networks; opportunities to share one’s abilities and talents; increased life satisfaction; coping skills; and other forms of well-being (Dangerfield et al. 2019; Lefevor et al. 2020; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Quinn et al. 2015; Sorett 2022; Barnes 2013). Germaine to the present analysis, these benefits may be considered important functions of religion and/or Christianity for individuals in this study. According to Greenway et al. (2022, p. 131), “many Black gay men and lesbians feel that if they publicly affirm their homosexuality, they risk exclusion from the nurturing resources of the church. For many of them, estrangement from the church may be a cost that is too much to bear, leaving many Black gay individuals to attend nonetheless.” Yet negative religious rhetoric and
ill-treatment can cause internalized homonegativity, alienation, shame, guilt, gossip, discomfort, loneliness, self-loathing, and rejection that can fuel risky sexual behavior and drug use (Balaji et al. 2012; Carrico et al. 2017; Garrett-Walker and Torres 2017; Quinn et al. 2015; Watkins et al. 2016; Woodyard et al. 2000). In such instances, religion often functions as a deterrent to self-affirmation and positivity.

Yet for some Black members of the LGBTQIA community, the benefits of organized religion and Black Church involvement outweigh the costs (Pitt 2010). Studies show that God is often presented as a motivation to remain HIV-free and fulfill one’s God-given mission to maintain good health (Watkins et al. 2016). Moreover, religion can be a psychological and emotional barrier against depression and risky behavior when persons initiate conversations about condom use and HIV status with potential partners (Smallwood et al. 2015). Additionally, welcoming Black churches can encourage inclusivity, foster advocacy, reduce heterosexism, and provide health-related resources (Barnes 2013; Foster et al. 2011; Hill and McNeely 2013; Sorett 2022). More recent studies document growing numbers of welcoming and affirming churches and denominations in the U.S. such as the Metropolitan Community Church and the United Church of Christ; question past research that tends to overgeneralize Black people and the Black Church in the U.S. as universally homonegative (Lefevor et al. 2020; Quinn et al. 2015; Young 2023); and document the increasing numbers of Black churches in America that promote the civil liberties of the LGBTQIA community (Battle et al. 2017). Based on the above summary of the possible benefits and challenges associated with religion and Black Church involvement for young Black people with diverse sexual identities in the U.S., it is important to examine some of the functions of religion for this populace.

4. Emerging Adulthood Theory and the Young Black LGBTQIA Experience in the U.S.

This study is informed by the Emerging Adulthood theory advanced by Jensen Arnett (1998, 2000, 2011, 2012, 2014) that documents developmental changes that can take place among individuals aged approximately 18–25 years old that are distinct from those of both adolescence and young adulthood. The theory examines specific demographic, cultural, and subjective dynamics of residents in highly industrialized countries like the U.S. This time of self-discovery enables persons to be largely independent of normative expectations and social roles as they explore dynamics such as love, worldviews, and work. Although varied experiences and personal change are expected during this period, several key characteristics reflect emerging adulthood. Persons in this age range are less confined by role expectations; residually unstable and often move back and forth between college and parental residences; semi-autonomous but still dependent on parental support; and typically unmarried. This in-between phase also means many individuals do not “feel” like adults because they do not make completely independent personal or financial decisions. Yet they are often afforded great latitude to pursue their possible personal identities (i.e., who they are and plan to be), careers (i.e., preparation for adult work roles), love relationships (i.e., intimate and life partners), and worldviews as they are exposed to different people, cultures, and beliefs. Many persons are pessimistic about what the future may hold but continue to remain optimistic and confident in reaching their goals.

The majority of studies based on this theory focus on the White experience. Yet some studies consider the minority experience and constraints that prevent certain minority groups from participating in emerging adulthood due to factors such as structural forces, ethnicity, and economic problems that require them to transition into adult responsibilities and roles (Arnett 2000, 2014; Bynner 2005; Cote 2000, 2014). This means that for young Black persons who embrace diverse sexual identities, dynamics linked to racism, homophobia, classism, and sexism in the U.S. may affect their ability to participate in this period of exploration and self-reflection. Also important and understudied for sexual minorities, emerging adulthood can be a period of increased risk for behavior such as binge drinking, substance use, and unsafe sex (Arnett 1994, 2014; Salvatore and Daftary-Kapur 2020). Self-discipline that fuels reflection, intentional decision-making, role accountability, and cautiousness
beyond parental supervision reflects a healthy transition from emerging adulthood into young adulthood (Arnett 2014). It will be important to consider how individuals in this study consider their religious experiences in the context of daily challenges with which Black sexual minorities often contend. Social support, education, and mentoring can enable persons to successfully transition through this development phase and foster the requisite capacities and knowledge to become productive young adults (Arnett 2012, 2014; Choi et al. 2021; Mortimer et al. 2016; Nelson 2020). Although some scholars critique this theory’s validity and its lack of focus on socioeconomic constraints and diversity (Bynner 2005; Cote 2000, 2014), research overall suggests its merits for broad application. Moreover, because studies about this model have focused on White heterosexuals in America (Bynner 2005; Cote 2000, 2014; Salvatore and Dafftary-Kapur 2020), it is valuable to examine its robustness in assessing the religious experiences and choices of young Black sexual minorities in the same country. I consider whether and how features of emerging adulthood manifest around religion as a worldview for them, including religious identity exploration, decision-making, and self-reflection.

5. Developmental Dynamics among Young Black Members of the LGBTQIA Population in the U.S.: A Summary

During late adolescence, individuals are often considered “adult” in terms of certain societal parameters (for example, purchasing cigarettes and alcohol at 21 years old, and entering the military without parental approval at 18 years old) (Berk 2018). Yet other arenas in their lives such as family, school, employment, income, and future expectations are unstable (Arnett 2014; The State Adolescent Health Resource Center 2021). This period of reflection and self-discovery can be both exciting and challenging for persons with intersecting, multiply marginalized identities due to racism, heterosexism, classism, and ageism (Barnes Forthcoming; Blockett 2017; Nelson 2020). Early research on adolescent development rarely included the LGBTQIA population (Berk 2018). The complex emotional, psychological, and biological changes common during this period can result in the exploration of sexual behavior as “quick fixes” for problems such as awkwardness, loneliness, or family problems (White and DeBlassie 1992). The American Academy of Pediatrics’ official acknowledgment of adolescent homosexuality in 1983 prompted recognition of this group’s needs over previous views that considered their identity a “passing phase” (Bolton and MacEachron 1988).

Developmental challenges are often exacerbated for late adolescents who feel misunderstood, isolated, and/or different based on racial and/or sexual identity (Strayhorn and Tillman-Kelly 2013). Regardless of one’s sexual orientation, institutions like schools and, germane here, churches and families have been shown to affect sexual decision-making among late adolescents (Barnes Forthcoming; Brooks-Gunn and Fustenberg 1989; Nelson 2020; Smallwood et al. 2015; Barnes and Streaty-Wimberly 2016). Paralleling an Emerging Adulthood framework, research suggests that identity development, worldview development, and relationship dynamics are particularly salient for young Black persons in America who embrace diverse sexual identities even when they face incongruent experiences individually and collectively (Cook et al. 2018). Ultimately, subjective feelings of self-efficacy and autonomy from parental control position emerging adults to embrace the responsibilities of adulthood (Mortimer et al. 2016). Overall, capacity-building experiences and programs can help enhance aspirations, quality of life, and life chances in this group. Given the importance of religion and the Black Church in the Black community in the U.S., it is important to examine their salience in influencing sentiments, religious decisions that can impact their futures, and less affirming functions of religion that can undermine quality of life.
6. Materials and Methods

6.1. Data Collection and Participants

This study is based on a sample of 76 young Black members of the LGBTQIA community who participated in an intensive prevention program to combat Hepatitis C and HIV in a medium-sized metropolitan southern city in the U.S. The prevention program was designed to promote positive decision-making among young persons aged 18–24 years old to foster healthier sexual, racial, and religious identities. Issues of spirituality were an unanticipated program outcome. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the grant-receiving university; all participants signed consent forms to participate. Recruitment took place using snowball sampling via flyers, social media, word of mouth, and community partners. Based on grant requirements, participants represented the pre-determined selection criteria of race (Black or African American), self-identified sexual behavior (men who have sex with men or MSM), age (initially 18–24 years old), and self-identified negative HIV status. Individuals were screened for eligibility. Persons were not required to be sexual minorities or provide specifics about their sexual identities beyond the broad BMSM designation for program participation (refer to the next section for details on this topic). Demographic data were captured, such as sexual identity, gender, age, education level, and race/ethnicity. Most persons were Black/African American (97.2%) and 66.2% self-identified as Latinx/Hispanic. Also, 7.0% were transgender (Table 1). Most self-identified as male (n = 61). When sexual identity was assessed, about 46.5% (n = 33) self-identified as gay, 29.6% (n = 21) self-identified as straight/heterosexual, 16.9% (n = 12) considered themselves bisexual, and 7.0% (n = 5) identified as Other. In addition, 39.4% earned a bachelor’s degree or greater. Additionally, slightly over half of participants were unemployed; most were single. The mean age was 22 years old.

Table 1. Demographic Information of the Research Partners (N = 71).

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<th>Bisexual</th>
<th>Gay or Lesbian</th>
<th>Other ¹</th>
<th>Total (%)</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>N (%)</td>
<td>21 (29.6)</td>
<td>12 (16.9)</td>
<td>33 (46.5)</td>
<td>5 (7.0)</td>
<td>71 (100)</td>
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<td>23</td>
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<td>15</td>
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<tr>
<td>22–25 years</td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>20 (29.4)</td>
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<td>26 years and up</td>
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<td>31</td>
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<td>21</td>
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<td>71</td>
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Table 1. Cont.

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<th>Heterosexual</th>
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<th>Other $^1$</th>
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<td>33</td>
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<td>5</td>
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<td>1 (1.5)</td>
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<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>20</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Key: Demographic data overall are missing for 4 participants. Missing data for each variable are Race [whether Black/African American] (n = 2), Age (n = 3), Education level (n = 5), Employment status (n = 1), and Relationship status (n = 4). $^1$ The Other category includes persons who indicated they prefer not to say, are unsure, or other. $^2$ Participants could indicate more than one racial identity. When identifying multiple races, all persons still identified as Black or African American.

This study was informed by two cross-sectional data sources, a survey provided by the grantor and completed no more than 30 days after the program’s end between 2016 and 2019 (the survey response rate was 47.3%) and in-depth, follow-up interviews with this same group between 2018 and 2019 (75% face-to-face and 25% via telephone). Data collection was required as part of the prevention grant and to document participant experiences for research purposes. The survey was comprised of closed-ended and several open-ended questions completed via hard copy or online. A total of twenty-seven open-ended questions were created by this writer based on existing research on the Black LGBTQIA experience and less studied topics for the populace (i.e., self-care and religiosity). Questions focused on demographics, religion, self-care, overall life and identities, and support. Only these open-ended questions were asked during the 45 minute to 2 hour interviews that were audiotaped by this author. Interviews were transcribed by a program member who is a trained transcriber. Data reliability was checked and vetted by this writer (the lead investigator) and the program evaluator. Study participants received USD 50 gift cards at the end of the program and upon survey completion and received a USD 25 gift card after the follow-up interviews. Generalizability was not the objective here. However, the results may be broadly applicable to segments of this population in the U.S.

6.2. Describing Diverse Sexual Identities in This Study

The use of designations such as MSM are common in epidemiological circles. In medical research, Black male members of the LGBTQIA community are often referred to as Black men who have sex with men or BMSM. Scholars such as Kaplan et al. (2016) and Young and Meyer (2005) critiqued reductionist categorizations and binaries. Research partners in this study did not seem opposed to the concept BMSM (i.e., Black men who have sex with men) as described in the prevention program grant because they had opportunities to self-identify. The majority did so using terms such as African American, Black, multi-racial, multi-ethnic, transgender, male, female, gay, queer, bisexual, straight, gender non-conforming, and, in several cases, human. Their self-definitions, when provided, are
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6.3. Analysis and Research Questions

The study seeks to identify some of the functions of religion, in general, and the Black Church, in particular, for a cadre of young Black persons with diverse sexual identities. The following question undergirds this analysis: What are some of the functions of religion and the Black Church, both negative and positive, for young Black members of the LGBTQIA community in the U.S.? Content analysis was used during the primary analysis to identify emergent themes and patterns in responses (Mayring 2021; Neuendorf 2016). The data were systematically examined by hand by the author using two processes: open-coding, in which concepts were categorized and labeled, and axial coding, in which linkages between these concepts were assessed to create possible phrases. First, line-by-line coding was used to identify common verbiage and frequently occurring concepts (i.e., words) that guided the subsequent primary analysis. This first stage was important to uncover whether individuals used specific terminology that could be associated with the utility of religion, Christianity, and/or the Black Church in literature (for example, racial affirmation or a sense of belonging as well as dynamics such as to foster homophobia or heterosexism). These concepts became part of the codebook used during the next analysis phase.

In addition to documenting specific ways individuals discussed functions of religion, this process allowed for the identification of frequently used phrases about the topic. I also took brief handwritten notes during and after each interview to inform interview content (i.e., facial expressions, gestures, laughing, etc.). Lastly, phrases were grouped together to create broad themes. Representative quotes were identified during this phase. In several instances, I identified and confirmed the biblical “address” of certain passages that were paraphrased by individuals. The multiple data analyses used during this process provide confidence in the frequently occurring concepts, phrases, and themes. This study benefits from detailed narratives and thick descriptions that may include whether persons embrace God or a Higher Power or religion and/or spirituality. Results, including themes and representative quotes, are provided below. Pseudonyms are used; self-defined sexual identities are included when provided by individuals.

7. Results

The young Black members of the LGBTQIA community who shared their stories suggest that religion has or does function in at least three ways for them. The three themes are not mutually exclusive; some persons made cross-thematic connections. Themes differ in the concepts and processes they emphasize. Theme 1: Religion as a Controlling Mechanism examines the role of religion and the Black Church as experienced during childhood in the U.S., including examples of socialization, and in some instances, indoctrination. Theme 2: Religion as a Conflict Mechanism considers experiences as individuals aged (often early adolescence) and began to recognize negative functions of religion as their sexual identities emerged. Theme 3: Religion/Spirituality as a Cathartic Mechanism chronicles present-day processes by which individuals began to concertedly reject aspects of organized religion and the Black Church and embrace spirituality as young adults. In addition to documenting how functions of religion change over time, the reflections below illustrate how Emerging Adulthood theory broadly manifests when considering the religious experiences of individuals with intersecting, multiply marginalized social identities as well as how these same persons are adaptive and resilient. Chronology is tacitly implied in most of the narratives. Overall, comments represent transitions across
time indicative of maturation-informed changes in attitudes and behavior (Arnett 1998, 2000, 2011, 2012, 2014; Byrnes 2005; Cote 2014; Nelson 2020). Unless otherwise noted, experiences refer to Black churches in the U.S. Also, in most narratives, individuals reflect back on their religious past and comment on their present-day beliefs and behavior. Thus, comparisons and contrasts can be assessed based on the chosen theoretical lens. Each theme and the representative quotes are provided below.

7.1. Theme 1: Religion as a Controlling Mechanism

Theme 1 centers on childhood religious socialization and how, upon reflection, some individuals believe they were often being indoctrinated. For several persons, initial church enjoyment changed upon the realization that religion functioned to directly or indirectly control or attempt to control their attitudes and actions about sexuality. The voices of Tina, Benji, Brad, and Tommy illustrate how religion, embedded in religiosity and enforced by families, functioned to shape their early lives—and provide initial exposure to heteronormativity (Balaji et al. 2012; Dangerfield et al. 2019; Griffin 2006; Lefevor et al. 2020; Quinn et al. 2015; Sorett 2022).

In the remark below, 25-year-old Tina, a transgender teacher’s aide, details the diverse church traditions in which they were reared. They describe enjoyable religious experiences in church as a child and continuing to embrace traditional Christian tenets (i.e., the Trinity):

> I believe in God. I believe in the whole Higher Power aspect too, but if somebody comes to me about a Higher Power, his name is God and He had a son named Jesus Christ who died for our sins. I just stand on that, but I respect other people’s beliefs too. I was raised in a church—been in church as long as I can remember. I would say I’m religious ’cause I still abide by religious protocol. I’m Christian of course . . . and then also I’m spiritual.

Tina seems to prioritize religion and its formalities (i.e., “protocols”) over spirituality, yet easily embraces the latter belief system, albeit unclearly. Family guidance, particularly from their grandparents, means Tina continues to adhere to church practices such as belief in God, reading the Bible, and prayer. They continue:

> My mom was raised Pentecostal, but she went to a Catholic school . . . she raised me with those strict tendencies, reading the Bible, going to church, and then growing up, we were in the Church of God and Christ Church, so I’ve always been around it . . . When my mom wasn’t going, I was still going. My grandparents picked me up every Sunday to take me to church with them. If I wasn’t going to church, I was mad. I’ve always loved God. I’ve always like talked to Him 24/7 [pray].

Albeit positive, Tina’s diverse childhood religious experiences still reflect religious control in light of their prior continued involvement (i.e., “I was still going” and “every Sunday”) and their continued support despite their diverse views now. Tina’s story illustrates some of the positive utilities of religion for sexual minorities (Dangerfield et al. 2019; Lefevor et al. 2020; Quinn et al. 2015). Findings related to this theme document the consistent functions of religion in socializing persons about the importance of both God and a consistent prayer life (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Park 2005; Saroglou 2011).

The following comment from Benji, a 28-year-old bisexual factory worker, parallels Tina’s about familial influence on youth religious socialization. Yet his religious experiences, particularly church involvement, during childhood were largely semi-involuntary (Ellison and Sherkat 1995); his present views are also less favorable than Tina’s. Benji is comfortable referencing the Bible (i.e., “the Word”) for guidance and navigating church control by questioning past parental and pastoral regulation:

> A lot of African Americans and Latinos, so I’ll just say people of color, come from strong religious backgrounds. You come from being told right from wrong and . . . [but] it’s not always what momma say, what daddy say, what pastor say—it’s what does the Word say or what do I interpret from my experiences. So, I
think it’s just their respect for their own mind and embracing individuality that allows people to break away from religion . . . sometimes it takes having your own experiences to say, “Well maybe I need Christ.” Or, “Maybe I just need me.” I don’t really miss church. It’s something I can get anywhere. You can commune and fellowship anywhere [emphasis throughout is his] without it being directed toward any religion.

For Benji, maturation means “embracing individuality” and “to break away from religion” such that young people can make their own decisions about religion (Nelson 2020). Benji’s suggestion to follow one’s own wisdom rather than the model of Christ represents a means to overcome religion’s control, but it means rejecting emulating Jesus Christ—a foundational Christian principle found in biblical passages such as Ephesians 5:1–2, 1 John 3:16, and 1 Peter 2:21 (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). For Benji, being irreligious means being open to Christian and non-religious beliefs and behavior, including alternatives to church attendance (James and Moore 2005).

Like Tina and Benji, 18-year-old Brad details the role of family in shaping his childhood Christian experiences in the U.S. A college freshman who self-identifies as gay, like Benji, his church involvement was semi-involuntary (Ellison and Sherkat 1995). An initial lack of interest was compounded by a growing realization of the homophobia embedded in that space:

due to how I grew up, even though me being gay, I used to go to church all the time, but not because I was heavily invested in religion . . . I pulled myself back from that because it’s kind of awkward. They constantly say if you do this, you’re going to hell. There are plenty of sins that can make you go to hell, so why are y’all singling out this one [homosexuality]? It’s a very judgmental space. Religion is too judgmental for me. So, I want to step out of that because I don’t want to deal with it. I felt unwelcomed.

Central to this theme are the processes by which individuals began to recognize the controlling mechanisms in organized religion, in general, and in churches and families, in particular, that were often linked to conservative theological interpretations of homosexuality (Griffin 2006; Sorett 2022). For Brad, control was reflected in totalizing views (i.e., “singling out”) that prioritized a particular “sin” (i.e., homosexuality) over others. Religion’s function as a means of control is apparent in his frequent exposure to homophobic religious rhetoric (i.e., “constantly say . . . going to hell”) that resulted in judgment and exclusion paralleled in Quinn et al. (2015, p. 5) below:

The Black Church is more than a religious institution and extends into many individuals’ social, familial, and cultural lives, making it difficult to separate the Church from other aspects of one’s life . . . In addition to explicit messages of homonegativity, non-heterosexual churchgoers may encounter casual microaggressions and community gossip that reinforce homonegativity.

Brad ultimately chose to distance himself (i.e., “pulled myself back” and “step out”) from religion. Yet its controlling influence appears to linger, given his inclusion of homosexuality as a sin rather than an innate, positive part of one’s identity (James and Moore 2005).

In contrast to Tina, Benji, and Brad, Tommy’s child-rearing differed from the majority of individuals here. He was not consistently exposed to religion until his teen years, but rather influenced by parents who encouraged him toward open-mindedness. Like Benji, Tommy is irreligious. Unlike Benji, the lack of childhood exposure to heteronormativity in church means Tommy appears to appreciate certain dimensions of religion (Billingsley 1992; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990):

No, not really. I think I haven’t found an occasion to believe that there’s a Higher Power. I wasn’t raised very religious. I was raised with some sense of a Higher Power out there, but never in a church. My parents were conscious of letting me come to a sense of God on my own, and I just haven’t found one. I do admire people who believe in a Higher Power, who believe in them as a guiding force
in their life, who have that level of faith in something that is intangible . . . Some would say I’m an atheist, agnostic. But I’m fine with where I am in my process of spirituality.

Per the above comment, the 25-year-old graduate student history major, who self-identifies as gay, is comfortable being irreligious. His stance provides an example of the effects when both religious exposure and the family as religious socializing conduits are absent. The foci here illustrate both religious mechanisms that controlled aspects of the lives of Tina, Benji, Brad, and Tommy as well as how these same constraints ultimately functioned to foster queries and self-reflection.

Conclusions

As anticipated during this period of emerging adulthood, Theme 1 focuses on reflections on childhood religious socialization, largely via Black congregations in the U.S. (Arnett 2000; Nelson 2020). In one instance (i.e., Tina), past church experiences were positive and fostered bonding and belonging (Saroglou 2011); for most, it was semi-involuntary and resulted in tensions in early adulthood. Religion’s control of their young lives was precipitated by both familial as well as congregational influences and largely functioned to shape the level and extent of church engagement via frequency and consistency. This process is common in Black Church youth socialization (Wimberly et al. 2013). For several individuals, early religious control in churches was a form of indoctrination designed to undermine non-heterosexual identities and behavior (Greenway et al. 2022); becoming agentic included distancing themselves from certain facets of religion and church life and being comfortable choosing dynamics, such as belief in God and prayer, that continue to have positive functions in their lives (Park 2005).

7.2. Theme 2: Religion as a Conflict Mechanism

Individuals included in Theme 2 often continued to be involved in a local church and associated with organized religion. However, an increasing pattern of negative experiences and observations began to sour their views about religion. As a result, religion became a point of conflict and contestation that required redress. This theme is illustrated by the following research finding in Quinn et al.’s (2015, p. 19) analysis of the religious experiences of young Black male members of the LGBTQIA community, “as they got older and began to identify as gay or bisexual and acknowledge their sexuality, the perceived incompatibility of homosexuality and religion became even more pronounced.” Fred, Tommy, Juana, and Jemmon shared their stories.

According to 24-year-old Fred’s experience, shared below, a specific church leader, the pastor, was influential in their decision to continue to embrace God—but outside the U.S. Black Church. Studies document the power wielded by Black clergy inside and outside church walls (Billingsley 1992; DuBois 2003; Frazier 1964; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Pattillo-McCoy 1999). Fred’s views place the onus on how scripture, a key church element, is interpreted and imparted by clergy as well as whether sermons empower or disempower:

We [biased Christians] exiled them from church while they were growing up. So, that’s why I feel like now the Millennials are at a point where they don’t go to church . . . I’ve seen it happen many a times. I’ve seen a pastor have a sermon ready, but when he see a room of gays . . . [imitating pastor] “I had a feeling that I wanted to change my sermon!” And I’m sitting here like, you didn’t have no feeling. You just looked in your crowd, but you’re probably one of us sitting in this pulpit . . . At the end of the day, we are still part of the Black community. Therefore, instead of hurting us, you should be building us up . . . We look like fools and dummies to the other races . . . we need to stop doing that. We need to take back our power to let people know that we can stand together and not fight each other. (Nonbinary college student, completing a degree in management)
In the above critique, Fred posits that decisions to intentionally weaponize scripture point to prejudiced pastoral agendas (Barnes 2013) in contrast to the community-building challenge that “Christians are called to bear witness to the truth that God has gathered all people into one family” (Nouwen 1986, p. 45). Moreover, he concludes that the homophobia and heterosexism embedded in Black Church culture in the U.S. ultimately disempower the African American community as a structural force, undermine collective efforts to rally against racial discrimination and other common concerns, and have dechristianized his generation (Balaji et al. 2012; Cohen 1999; Wimberly et al. 2013). Fred’s comment also alludes to both the possible collective power of the over 8.2 million estimated Black sexual minorities in the United States, and sexuality as a vital component of interlocking identities among Blacks to be harnessed rather than diminished (Bowleg 2013; Cohen 1999; Greenway et al. 2022).

Participants included in Theme 2 identified other ways in which religious socialization during childhood extended beyond church walls. Tommy, a 25-year-old graduate school history major who embraces being gay suggests that the educational system negatively influenced the formation of his religious, spiritual, and sexual identities (Bynner 2005; Cote 2014):

I went to this Christian school and one of our first field trips was this movie. I thought it was cool because we got to see a movie at night [and] I got to see all my friends. But it was a very messed up movie called *Escape from Hell*. The premise was this doctor wanted to induce his own death and then be revived to see if there’s a heaven. But he ends up going to hell. And it’s the most torturous thing for the next hour and thirty minutes. Me, as an impressionable young middle school kid, I’m like, what the hell! Then I’m learning that gay people go to hell.

Per the above memory and Emerging Adulthood theory, systemic effects during one’s formative years can be particularly enduring (Arnett 2000; Nelson 2020). Tommy describes a traumatic incident as a Christian school student during which a seemingly informational movie translated into years of fear of hellfire, in general, and damnation due to his sexual orientation, in particular. His comment also illustrates the connections between religious institutions, in this case, churches and Christian schools that may jointly function to socialize youth about heteronormativity that can vilify homosexuality (Griffin 2006). As was the case with Fred, internal conflict resulted that took years to reconcile (Greenway et al. 2022; Quinn et al. 2015). Fred and Tommy’s commentaries above parallel research on the universality of homophobia in religious spaces in general; “anti-gay and -lesbian prejudice as a function of individual religiosity is common in major religions” (Saroglou 2011, p. 1333).

A 20-year-old transgender female who identifies as straight, Juana does not self-identify as religious or spiritual. She alludes to dangers associated with her sexual identity that a Higher Power enabled her to circumvent. Her disdain for religion and the Black Church is apparent as she describes church hypocrisy that includes prioritizing indiscretions and a preoccupation with an antiquated book of instructions (i.e., the Bible) of questionable origin and translation that has been embraced by many U.S. Black Christians without question:

Black people and Christians are the biggest hypocrites, and they like to pick apart a book [the Bible] that is (laughs) very, very flawed, a book that was written down however many hundreds of years after it was orally dictate to somebody, translated from one dead language to another, given to kings and queens around the world to be used. And, religion is a tool that has been used to control the masses since the beginning of time. So, nobody wants to go somewhere and be judged…Stop gay and trans shaming . . . if you gonna call one person out, call everybody out . . . when your pastor is one to sleep with the boys and the girls. If you’re gonna call somebody out about something, call out the child molesters. Call our gluttonous Sister Patterson . . . she got to eat before everybody and pass the ham.
The above conflict overlaps Themes 1 and 2 by contrasting religion with control (i.e., “the masses”) across time. Juana suggests that present-day control often takes the form of judgment and shaming of sexual minorities (Garrett-Walker and Torres 2017; Quinn et al. 2015; Watkins et al. 2016) while ignoring biblical censure against sins such as pedophilia and gluttony. Another important dimension of Theme 2 is the critique of intra-racial inequality with origins in White supremacy in general that participants consider an illogical, divisive function of religion (Cohen 1999; Douglas 1999; West 1993).

The final comment below from Jemmon, a 19-year-old sophomore Business Administration major who self-identifies as gay, reflects a different conflict: “When you start to run a church in an ungodly manner and look at it as a business, you’re not doing God’s work . . . there shouldn’t be all these fees . . . the pastor’s living in a mansion with a Range Rover . . . But is that what God intended the church to be for?” Jemmon’s critique also arises among heterosexuals and suggests that some Black sexual minorities have problems with the Black Church outside of heteronormativity, with what they consider to be intra-racial economic exploitation in American spaces. He calls into question behavior that seems to be secularly focused and preoccupied with expanding coffers and subsidizing pastors’ lavish lifestyles (Tucker 2011; Barnes 2013). For Jemmon, such materialism contradicts the Black Church’s mission in the United States.

Conclusions

Several patterns emerge from the representative remarks in Theme 2, including descriptions of past trauma and conflicts linked to the unwelcoming and non-affirming church, clergy, and congregant beliefs and behavior. Individuals critique Christianity for being preoccupied with homosexuality and prioritizing indiscretions. Responses also evidence critiques of the religious “status quo” expected during emerging adulthood (Arnett 1998, 2000, 2011, 2012, 2014; Nelson 2020); with age, individuals have become more cognizant of inequitable treatment, theological inconsistencies, and exclusionary practices in U.S. churches. Another central dimension of this theme is the tendency to reject intra-racial divisiveness that functions to undermine racial unity and the collective mobilization to combat inequality and discrimination; persons often associate this tendency with White-influenced sexual conservatism in Christianity in America (Cohen 1999; Douglas 1999; Griffin 2006; West 1993).

7.3. Theme 3: Religion/Spirituality as a Cathartic Mechanism

Despite episodes of control and conflict during childhood and early youth, certain young Black persons with diverse sexual identities here have or are in the process of liberating themselves from the negative utilities of religion, including unwelcoming churches. Their catharses include realizing that the heteronormativity and homophobia in many U.S. churches have served to marginalize them and their peers (James and Moore 2005; Quinn et al. 2015; Watkins et al. 2016; Woodyard et al. 2000). Such religious inequities now function as examples of dynamics to avoid and/or push back against. Additionally, their catharses include concerted efforts to reconcile their sexual and religious identities. For some persons, this means exiting churches altogether; others pick and choose parts of religion that meet their needs (Van der Braak and Kalsky 2017). And still others do not appear to be running away from church, but rather running toward spirituality. Representative remarks by Leopold, Tina, Lonnie, and Brad suggest that such individuals want to have godly relationships and to live godly lives, but not necessarily to practice religion. Moreover, they appear to have reconciled many past challenges associated with Christianity and/or Black Church involvement and found solace and support in spirituality as a faith tradition (James and Moore 2005).

Part of the catharses illustrated in this theme has meant realizing that Black churches are imperfect places filled with imperfect people as well as learning to appreciate the benefits of what religion and some congregations have to offer (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Quinn et al. 2015; Barnes 2013). For example, Leopold’s personal experiences, noted
below, provide evidence of God’s existence. A 20-year-old gay, full-time college student, he associates his relationship with the deity with personal situations and succinctly describes the sermonic functions and benefits of church attendance:

Yes, I believe in God because I’ve seen Him do miraculous things for me in my life and bring me from places that I thought I could never return from. I believe I’m more of a spiritual person…for me religion is such a box. Yes, I attend church…I’ve learned to go to church, just to get a message from God.

According to the above reflection, supernatural experiences (i.e., “miraculous things” and “places…I could never return from”) evidence a powerful, supportive God. However, Leopold has found the freedom to embrace both spirituality and the parts of Christianity that he enjoys (i.e., church attendance and sermons). Yet he makes the distinction between religion as a structure (i.e., “a box”) and its positive functions. Also, part of his catharsis involved re-socializing himself (“learned to go”) to focus on the utility of church as a place to hear from God.

Theme 3 also emphasizes “multiple religious belonging”—comfortability picking and choosing beliefs and practices inside and outside religion that are valuable to them (Van der Braak and Kalsky 2017). Their beliefs and behavior parallel observations by Saroglou (2011, p. 1330) that “partially explain how, within the same religion, people (here Christians) may believe without belonging or behaving or may belong without believing or behaving or finally may behave without believing or belonging”. Similar to Leopold, 25-year-old Tina continues to be excited about certain dimensions of religion, but explains why they and their peers are embracing more practical forms of worship that reject the class-based respectability politics often associated with the Black Church (Douglas 1999; Griffin 2006; Sorett 2022):

No dressing up. No ties. None of that stuff. It’s just coming for God. I also feel like there’s still a standard. Our generation, they want God and they want something that works…They’re willing to push away the entire church building. (Transgender teacher’s aide)

Tina provides an example of a present-day burgeoning, progressive church that appears to be harnessing the best of organized religion in ways that are relevant to them and their peers—as recognized by the following scholar: “Some prophetic heterosexual Black church leaders are beginning to lead their congregations in becoming open and affirming houses of worship for gay congregations” (Griffin 2006, p. 206). Central to Tina’s catharsis is an ease in embracing the positive functions of both religion and spirituality, including supplanting the Trinity (i.e., “just coming for God”), continuing to embrace a godly standard for living, as well as attending non-traditional sanctuaries (Nouwen 1986). And for Tina, “pushing away” from traditional church tenets does not mean a lack of love for and accountability to God.

Next, Lonnie, an 18-year-old gay college freshman, reflects on being reared in a staunch Christian family wedded to the Jehovah’s Witnesses. Although inactive, he still expresses allegiance to this faith tradition despite its exclusionary theology. He still participates in certain religious practices like prayer to Jehovah rather than God:

I grew up as a Jehovah’s Witness and I still believe in it…So I pray. I pray to Jehovah. I don’t pray to anybody else…that sort of thing still sticks with me. I still have knowledge about my religion. I don’t really care to go to anybody else’s place of worship because I have my own religion. But I’m not an active member because of the fact that I am gay…I can’t fully go there and fully be myself, which of course I understand and still respect that.

Lonnie’s continued connection to a faith tradition that is unable to embrace him holistically parallels the difficulties some young Black members of the LGBTQIA community in the U.S. have in reconciling their religious upbringings with their sexual identities (James and Moore 2005; Quinn et al. 2015). Self-identified as spiritual, Lonnie appears to have reconciled the frailties of his religious upbringing such that he still respects the church
and continues to embrace tenets of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, while rejecting continued direct involvement.

Akin to Leopold and Tina, Lonnie acknowledges certain positive functions of religion—despite the homophobia and heterosexism he has experienced. For him, holdovers of his religious upbringing include denominational information (i.e., “knowledge about my religion”) and the importance of prayer. The positive utility of prayer is also central to Theme 3 as summarized by the following research finding that is particularly germane to reflection, growth, and maturation during emerging adulthood: “Through prayer people make themselves vulnerable to God. They share their emotions, their needs, and their wants . . . prayer, when used in the service of coping with life problems, provides many opportunities for self-reflection and examination and spiritual growth” (Taylor et al. 2004, pp. 79, 108). However, Lonnie’s comment suggests lingering tensions (i.e., “I can’t fully go there and fully be myself”) around this impasse reflective of the challenges some Black sexual minorities have in distancing themselves from churches that have had an indelible place in their lives. Quinn et al. (2015, p. 6) corroborate this conundrum: “Gay youth who leave the Church because of their sexuality experience lower levels of internalized homonegativity but also greater mental health consequences, potentially indicative of the struggle involved with distancing from the Black Church”.

Lastly, like 18-year-old Brad and many young adults in this study, embracing one’s sexual identity means questioning reductionist religious interpretations that automatically associate homosexuality with death and damnation. For Brad, the family and organized religion are intertwined, and they undermined how he felt about himself and religious involvement (Bowleg 2013). Despite past pain due to homophobia, heterosexism, and intersectional invisibility (Greenway et al. 2022), Brad remains certain of God’s unconditional love:

Hey, we have feelings, too. There are some gay people that believe in God, believe in going to church every Sunday, Wednesday, whatever. Let’s be open to the fact that God loves us all, actually! . . . Even outside of being gay, my generation, I would say we don’t attend church because we want to believe in what we want to on our own. We want to figure things out on our own instead of being pushed by a church to think a certain way.

Brad’s reflection summarizes the trauma, conflict, and control he suggests is often found in churches. He recognizes similar functions of Christian beliefs and practices among gay and straight adherents (Sorett 2022) and the same biblical promise of God’s love afforded both groups found in passages such as John 3:16, Romans 5:8, and 1 John 3:11. Part of Brad’s catharsis includes self-reflection, self-love, and the choice to distance himself (i.e., “figure things out on our own”) from organized religion and unhealthy churches; he suggests that his peers are doing the same.

Conclusions

According to responses associated with this theme, religion in the U.S., specifically Christianity, often functions as a non-traditional litmus test of dynamics to avoid that can undermine catharses. This theme emphasizes comfortability, calm, and a sense of solace in terms of decisions about religion and/or spiritual beliefs. Most individuals appear to have reconciled certain frailties and flaws found in their early religious experiences and previous churches. They also realize that distancing themselves from certain parts of organized religion via church is vital for their emotional, psychological, and spiritual survival (Greenway et al. 2022; Griffin 2006; Quinn et al. 2015; Sorett 2022). Each person continues to believe in God or a Higher Power (Park 2005). Most maintain a prayer life (Saroglou 2011), and several persons periodically attend a local church. Also, multiple religious belonging is apparent around their religious/spiritual attitudes and actions that reflects maturation indicative of the Emerging Adulthood model as they strategically and proactively determine the facets of religion and/or spirituality that engender holism in their lives (Arnett 2000; Nelson 2020; Van der Braak and Kalsky 2017). In this way, part of
maturing appears to be recognizing that religion and/or spirituality are not fixed belief systems that require exclusive belonging. Persons included in this final theme do not “focus on bounded religious traditions but on hybrid expression of religiosity” (Van der Braak and Kalsky 2017, p. 663) that includes spirituality and secular practices. Their views do not mean that they exonerate sexually biased people and places, but rather make the choice not to allow such toxicity to continue to infect and affect their lives.

8. Discussion and Conclusions

According to Emerging Adulthood theory, late adolescence is a period during which individuals question the status quo and the organizations, institutions, and ideologies associated with it (Arnett 1998, 2000, 2011, 2012, 2014; Nelson 2020). Yet structural constraints may prevent Black sexual minorities from participating (Arnett 2000; Bynner 2005; Cote 2000, 2014). Findings in this study suggest that, when the topic is religion, young Black members of the LGBTQIA community in the U.S. are not exempt from this period of reflection and contestation. To my knowledge, this theory has not been used to focus on the experiences of young Black sexual minorities in America.

Experiences with Christianity and, typically, the Black Church in the U.S. have resulted in a pattern of control, conflict, and/or catharsis for persons in this study. Their responses suggest that Christianity as a religious belief system exhibited in Black churches in America often serves to maintain a heteronormative status quo that encourages heterosexism and homophobia (Greenway et al. 2022; Griffin 2006; Quinn et al. 2015; Sorett 2022). As an extension, the same religious beliefs and behavior directly or indirectly often serve to make religion, in general, as well as church spaces unwelcoming and non-affirming for Black members of the LGBTQIA community. Yet these same negative religious dynamics appear to fuel counternarratives and function as mechanisms for liberation when individuals reject marginalizing, discriminatory, oppressive beliefs, processes, practices, people, and places. This is a central finding here worthy of additional studies that address this study’s limitations to include longitudinal research that documents specific ages for responses and larger samples in the U.S. and internationally. However, reflections about the past and present provided here do allow for broad implications about how views changed with age.

Individuals describe changes in perceptions about the functions of religion, Christianity, and the Black Church as they aged. As children, persons often willingly participated in religion via churches despite their semi-involuntary involvement (Ellison and Sherkat 1995). Simply put, they participated because their parents told them to. Religious and non-religious resources meant that the functions of religion, specifically Christianity and the Black Church in America, were largely beneficial as children and youth experienced relationship- and friendship-building, support, racial affirmation, mentoring, and other intangible resources during events such as Sunday school, Bible study, children’s choir, and extracurricular activities (Barnes Forthcoming; Billingsley 1992; Frazier 1964; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). However, with age came the realization that many of the same events, beliefs, and practices often tacitly served to control their beliefs and behavior around sexuality.

The functions of religion also changed during late adolescence, as microaggressions, stigma, shame, alienation, and isolation left most persons marginalized and feeling invisible (Garrett-Walker and Torres 2017; Greenway et al. 2022; Quinn et al. 2015; Watkins et al. 2016). Over time, religion began to provide a non-traditional litmus test or measuring rod about what not to do if one wanted to experience self-love, unconditional acceptance, as well as reconcile their religious and sexual identities. Yet for certain individuals, a sense of catharsis emerged from periods of control and conflict. Thus, the same intersecting, often multiply marginalized identities based on factors such as sexuality, gender, race, and age functioned as buoys that moved them toward what they consider to be spiritually transformative lives. This finding suggests that, for this population, studying the functions of religion in the U.S. must also include the functions of spirituality in these same spaces. But it is important to note that some individuals are still in process and continue to be...
conflicted about their past religious experiences (Greenway et al. 2022; Lefevor et al. 2020). There is no definitive endpoint for the Emerging Adulthood process (Arnett 2000; Nelson 2020). For some, such trauma continues, even if they are no longer involved in organized religion. Yet according to studies, certain dynamics such as belief in a transcendent deity and rituals such as prayer tend to manifest universally across most cultures (Park 2005; Saroglou 2011) but seem to resonate uniquely for individuals here in Black Church spaces (Billingsley 1992; DuBois 2003; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Barnes Forthcoming). Many young Black persons who reside in the U.S. describe now moving down a path that includes spirituality, multiple religious belonging, belief in God or a Higher Power, a consistent prayer life, and periodic church affiliations as needed, particularly for racial affirmation and sermonic support. These direct or indirect functions of religion are invaluable and indicative of the holistic lives they endeavor to lead.

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Notes

1 Due to the timing of birthdays and/or continued participation in the program, a small group of participants were over the age of 24 years old when interviewed. Given the overall small sample size, I elected to retain them in this study.
2 “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” (Ephesians 5:1–2, NRSV of Bible 1989).
3 “We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers and sisters.” (1 John 3:16, NRSV of Bible 1989).
4 “For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps.” (1 Peter 2:21, NRSV of Bible 1989).
5 For example, according to the 2019 U.S. Census, there were about 48 million Blacks in the U.S. (14.6%) (quoted in Black Demographics 2021). If, according to the 2019 Black Census, about 17% of Blacks identify with a sexual orientation other than heterosexual [lesbian (3%), gay (3%), bisexual (7%), and other (4%)], this translates to roughly 8.2 million Black members of the LGBTQIA community. Research included here suggests that a certain percentage of such persons are already involved, if only periodically, in the Black Church.
6 “If any of you cause one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.” (Mark 9:42, NRSV of Bible 1989).
7 “They shall say to the elders of his town, ‘This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious. He will not obey us. He is a glutton and a drunkard.’” (Deuteronomy 21:20, NRSV of Bible 1989).
8 Also referred to as “syncretism” in some studies.
9 “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” (John 3:16, NRSV of Bible 1989).
10 “But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:8, NRSV of Bible 1989).
11 “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God, and that is what we are.” (1 John 3:1, NRSV of Bible 1989).
References


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