Religious and Sexual Identities in Motion: Challenging Stereotypes, Exploring Nuance

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Abstract The relationship of religion, gender and sexuality is frequently the subject of controversy and debate within media, public discourse, and policy modifications. However, the debates about these categories and their relationship often essentialize the topics as incompatible markers, requiring mediation in order to produce policies that do not offend one over and above the other. These essentializations ignore the lived intersectional identities of individuals who are religiously, gendered or sexually diverse and who exist across these identity possibilities. Drawing on data from the Religion, Gender and Sexuality Among Youth in Canada project (RGSY) this chapter will explore the ways young people in Canada are developing, negotiating, and understanding the dynamics of religion and sexuality. The RGSY project is led by Pamela Dickey Young (Queen's University) and is a mixed methods study of 18 to 25-year-olds in Canada, comprised of an online survey, semi-structured interviews, and video diaries. While legal challenges, and the media coverage of these challenges, often represent both religion and sexuality within narrow parameters, on-the-ground research continues to debunk stereotypes about both categories of identity.

Keywords Religious identity · Sexual identity · Religious practices · Sexual practices · Gender · Public policy · LGBTQI+ · Stereotypes · Nonreligious

1 Introduction

Notions about religion and sexuality, and their relationship to one another, are frequently drawn from public debates and controversies as they are portrayed in media and played out in legal disputes. These public debates and their representation in media and legal decisions, however, narrowly construe both categories of identity and continue to perpetuate misunderstanding about the complicated relationship of

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(non)religiosity and sexuality, historically and in contemporary society. Sexuality is a topic of frequent consternation within religious doctrine and teaching, however, it recently has also become a core area of analysis within the study of religion, with a trend towards considering how both religious and sexual identities are framed and regulated in relation to one another (Hunt and Yip 2012; Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2003; Pellegrini and Jakobsen 2008; Wilcox 2009). Increasing research attention on these categories as tied to one another has developed out of these public debates and anxieties about religion within public spaces, and the tensions that are witnessed as religious voices are heard contesting space for gender and sexual diversity (Boisvert 2013; Pellegrini and Jakobsen 2008; Young 2015).

Normative attitudes towards gender and sexuality continue to permeate policy and discourse and are the subject of ongoing critique and analysis. Religious normativity is an increasing area of research which sheds light on the ways the relationship between religion and sexuality is perceived and, as more research on intersectionality is conducted, how religious and sexually diverse identities are experienced on the ground (see for example Lefebvre and Beaman 2014).

Both religion and secularism are categories embedded with ideological assumptions and frequently contested as to the genealogy of their meanings (Beckford 2012; Pellegrini and Jakobsen 2008; Woodhead 2013). Strategic deployment of the category of religion and the category of secularism offers important insights on perspectives about religion and its relationship to gender and sexual diversity. Religion is frequently assumed to be irrational, exclusive, and inherently opposed to rights based on gender identity or sexual diversity; secularism, on the other hand, is portrayed as the "bastion" of inclusivity, rationalism, and openness towards minorities, especially gender, racial, and sexual minorities (Aune 2015; Shipley 2016; Young 2014). The deployment of these pervasive norms regarding both religion and secularism in national and international politics and policies is connected to larger debates about religious identity, religious freedom, and "acceptable" religiosity. Nations that consider themselves "secular" frame themselves as inclusive and welcoming, while simultaneously portraying "religious" nations as intolerant and exclusive. There are numerous examples of exclusive policies, including state-sanctioned violence towards gender or sexual difference, that can be used to support these dichotomous categorizations (see for example Chan and Huang 2014; Chinwuba 2014), but what ought not be lost in those examples is the reality that pervasive forms of discrimination exist towards minority identities in "secular" or nonreligious nations and spaces (Aune et al. 2008; Shipley 2016).

This chapter will consider the ways two participants in the Religion, Gender and Sexuality among Youth in Canada project (led by Pamela Dickey Young, Queen's University; funded by the *Religion and Diversity Project*, University of Ottawa) construct and negotiate their (non)religious, gendered and sexually diverse identities as intersectional, fluid and evolving. Challenging the assumption that the secular sphere is inherently inclusive, Colin's experiences at a public high school continues to impact his perceptions and acceptance of his sexual identity. Michelle's conversion to Islam is complicated by her queer, trans, and polyamorous identity; her current practice and engagement with Islam is subsequently shaped by her

identity as a combination of markers. These two stories are just part of the larger picture of young people's negotiation and construction of (non)religious, gendered and sexual identities in contrast to prevailing norms and assumptions about these categories.

The RGSY project is a mixed methods study of 18–25-year-olds in Canada, comprised of an online survey, semi-structured interviews, and video diaries. Drawing on results from that project, highlighting Colin and Michelle's narratives, I will challenge common perceptions about religion and sexuality, exploring the ways nonreligious spaces (such as a public high school) can be seen as disciplining spaces for gender and sexuality. I will also explore the narrative of conversion to Islam for Michelle, to reflect on the ways religious, gendered, and sexually diverse identities develop together. While legal challenges, and the media coverage of these challenges, often represent both religion and sexuality within narrow parameters, on-the-ground research continues to debunk stereotypes about both categories of identity.

There is still much to be studied in this rapidly expanding field that connects religion and sexual diversity. The preponderance of literature on young people and religion has been developed out of U.S. research projects, although research initiatives in Canada, the U.K., and Europe have increasingly examined subjects within their own national contexts (Lövheim 2008; Taylor and Snowdon 2014; Yip and Page 2013). Generating geographically specific research serves to broaden analytic discussions for a more robust international dialogue.

1.1 Canadian Identities: Religion and Sexuality, Past and Present

The relationship of religion and sexuality in Canada, as with elsewhere, is one of tensions and conflicts, as well as one of intersections and complex nuance. Religion is most often seen as the primary source of constraint when it comes to gender norms and sexuality, both publicly and privately. The role of religion in setting boundaries for normative expressions of both gender and sexuality has been evident since the earliest settlers arrived from Europe in the seventeenth century (Wilson 2015). Public attitudes and public policy towards gendered and sexual stereotypes have shifted in the last several decades in response to grassroots feminist activism and movements, most vocally in the 1960s and 1970s. Recognition of women as persons (1929), the right to vote (1916–1940, though for First Nations women it wasn't until 1960), and wartime labour needs during both the First and Second World Wars that saw women in the workforce in new and unexpected ways, spearheaded subsequent movements that actively challenged policies, ideologies, and restrictions placed on women based on gender.

Lesbian and gay rights movements found a home under the umbrella of women's movements in the 1970s (Smith 1999). While neither feminist nor lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex (LGBTQI+) movements are monolithic, the mission

to challenge negative and discriminatory treatment and policies based on gender and sexuality has been a foundation of both LGBTQI+ and feminist movements. Pay inequality, the inability of same-sex couples to marry or adopt children, restrictions regarding access to abortion, and discriminatory hiring policies are just some of the systemic disadvantages that have been imposed on women and LGBTQI+ individuals, rooted in ideological presumptions about normative gender and normative sexuality. In the last decades of the twentieth century, activists and scholars began insisting on the consideration of intersectional disadvantages (Crenshaw 1991): that many individuals experience these systemic forms of discrimination across more than one minority identity. Within intersectional studies, the spaces for individuals who identify across religious, gendered, and sexually diverse identities have not yet received a great deal of attention, though the voices within these spaces have increased (Taylor and Snowdon 2014; see for example Native Youth Sexual Health, <http://nativeyouthsexualhealth.com/>).

Beginning in the 1960s, the Quiet Revolution in Québec was a time which saw intense challenges to the dominance of the Roman Catholic Church in state and social policy; state policies regarding abortion, education, and the treatment of minorities were directly challenged and overturned. Similarly, in other parts of Canada, the primacy that had been accorded to Christian ideologies within education and public policy was being challenged in public and legal spaces (*Big M* 1985; *Zylberberg* 1988). The movement for marriage equality, which began in the 1970s, is often equated with a movement to remove overt forms of religiosity from public policy (Farrow 2007; MacDougall and Short 2010). Although this ignores engagement by religious groups in support of marriage equality, the push to redefine marriage to include same-sex couples was a challenge to what many religious groups felt had been a religiously preordained definition, intended for procreation and based on gender "complementarity" (Interfaith Coalition on Marriage and Family 2003). In addition to marriage equality, adoption rights, family benefits, and the right to be protected from discrimination are all areas in which rights based on sexual orientation have been successfully challenged (Hurley 2007; Shipley 2016). However, the reality is that these rights predominantly benefit particular subsets of the LGBTQI+ communities—i.e. monogamous, lesbian and gay couples who wish to get married and/or wish to have children—and do not encompass all challenges faced by members of the LGBTQI+ communities (Shipley 2016).

Today in Canada, shifting statistics regarding Canada's religious makeup are the subject of much recent research about religious identity, how it is understood, and what has transpired to cause these shifts in Canadian religiosity. In the most recently released statistics (National Household Survey 2011) regarding religious identity, Canadians selected Christianity as the majority religion, which is not surprising given Canada's migration patterns, however the figure of 67.3% for 2011 is down from the 2006 census which held 77% of Canadians identifying as Christian. The most noticeable surge in these changing demographics was in the nonreligious category, with 23.9% of census participants identifying as nonreligious—up from 16.5% in 2006. While there are, of course, cautionary notes about the numbers and their meaning, there is clearly something changing within the Canadian religious landscape regarding self-selected affiliation and how contemporary Canada is

identifying regarding the religion question. Unfortunately, the census does not provide the same set of figures for reporting sexuality or sexually diverse relationships—both because of the design of the questionnaire (the census does not ask such detailed questions) and also as a result of a flaw in the census (an assumption in the matrix which presumed that two people of the same-sex living together were in a relationship).

While the involvement of particular religious groups and ideologies are present, both in history and in contemporary debates, the picture of religion and sexuality in Canada is much more complex. Restrictions imposed on access to services for sexual minorities are not simply relegated to religious contexts. Shifting perceptions about both religious identity and sexual diversity make the perceived relationship between these two categories ever more nuanced.

2 Project

The *Religion, Gender and Sexuality Among Youth in Canada* research team consists of Pamela Dickey Young (Principal Investigator, Queen's University), myself (Collaborator, University of Ottawa) and Ian Cuthbertson (Research Assistant, Queen's University). It is funded by the *Religion and Diversity Project*, a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Major Collaborative Research Initiative (SSHRC MCRI) hosted at the University of Ottawa and led by Lori Beaman. RGSY is a mixed methods project, which involves an online survey (open from July 2012–July 2013), semi-structured one-on-one interviews, and video diaries. The project was developed with the support of the *Religion, Youth and Sexuality: A Multi-Faith Exploration* project, led by Andrew Kam-Tuck Yip and funded by the Religion and Society Programme (U.K.). The Canadian project was developed as a way to connect everyday religion and everyday sexuality, exploring youth identities as they connect with lived religion and lived sexuality.

The RGSY project has four primary aims:

- To explore the construction and management strategies undertaken by young adults (aged 18–25) concerning their religious and sexual identities, values, and choices;
- To examine the significant social, cultural, and political factors that inform the above-mentioned processes;
- To study how these young adults manage their religious, sexual, and gender identities;
- To generate rich qualitative and quantitative data that will contribute new knowledge to academic and policy debates on religion, youth, sexuality, and gender.

The project was open to youth of all faith or nonfaith backgrounds and identities to share their thoughts and opinions on religion, gender, and sexuality as youth living in Canada. The majority of our respondents self-identified as Christian 61% (n = 252; various denominations, and in some instances paired with non-Christian identities). Our next largest grouping was in the nonreligious, spiritual-but-not-

religious (SBNR) and "other" categories (43.7%, $n = 181$). This number correlates with recent statistical data on the religious makeup of Canada which I have mentioned already (NHS 2011) and offered us the ability to consider more fully the relationship of religion, nonreligion, and secularism in relation to gender and sexuality as experienced and reflected on by our participants.

The survey was designed with sets of questions organized in categories: religious views, attitudes towards sexuality, values and practices, behavioural influences, and attitudes and experiences related to gender. In the one-on-one interviews we were able to expand on topics from the survey, as well as explore questions and issues that had been raised in the survey responses that we had not intentionally asked about (i.e. media and education). The video diaries were daily 10–15 minute entries made by participants and submitted to us through secure servers. We created a general set of guidelines for the video diaries, however we let the participants themselves decide which topic(s) to address during the daily video diary entries.

Two main thematic observations that emerge from this data is that young people's identities are very much under construction; they are negotiating, developing, challenging and constituting their identities in real time – their (non)religious, gendered and sexual identities are shaped by multiple influences and sources, and ultimately they see themselves as the primary authors of these identity constructions. The research has also shown to us the need for a new grammar of identity (Shipley 2016). Participants in our study are well versed in contemporary language and nuance about gender and sexuality, they discuss their own identities on continuums and with reference to feminist and queer theoretical analysis and debates. But the language of (non)religion serves as a barrier when they seek to describe and explicate the same nuance for their ideological, ethical and value-driven characteristics.

In the following section, I will explore the narratives of two of our participants as described in their interviews, Michelle and Colin. Michelle and Colin's identities both challenge common assumptions about the relationship between (non)religion, gender, and sexual diversity. Their narratives also demonstrate the two core themes that have emerged through our project—their identities are under construction and the language available to discuss core components of their identities is limited. These two narratives offer a pathway for teasing out complex negotiations of identity norms as religious and sexually diverse youth, as well as the real, lived process of complex identity development.

3 Real-Life Narratives: Religion, Secularism, Sexuality

3.1 Conversion and the Development of Identities in Tandem: Michelle

Michelle is a 22-year-old convert to Islam who arrived at the interview in a burqa, escorted by a male partner. Once she determined that there were no males present and that none would be looking in the window, she took off the burqa for the

interview (her male companion waited outside for her). She self-identifies as trans, is currently in a polyamorous relationship with two men, of differing religious and nonreligious identities, and describes herself mostly as an "online Muslim."

Michelle was raised Catholic, describing her family as pretty strict Irish-Catholics who attended mass every week, fasted at Lent, and attended Catholic school. She moved away from religion in her teen years, feeling that religion "was something only old people did", but reconnected with various religious practices after high school. Her paternal grandmother had become Buddhist, a few Muslim kids had moved in to her neighbourhood, and she started to read up on differing Christian traditions to get a better understanding of Christianity beyond Catholic teaching. In college her boyfriend and close friends were all atheist and, feeling that being "without a religion" meant she was an atheist too, Michelle says she regularly argued with all her religious friends, telling them their beliefs were stupid. When she began reading about religion again what she discovered was a personal connection to the teachings she uncovered within Islam. Describing herself as being in a crisis during this time, it was her atheist boyfriend who finally said to her "Well, if you're going to do all this weird Muslim stuff, why aren't you just a Muslim then?"

Michelle's process of experiencing, rejecting, and redefining her personal religious identity is particular to her, but it is also a process that many young people in Canada describe. Participants in the RGSY project frequently describe childhood encounters with religious traditions and beliefs as connected to their families and the process of negotiating their identities in relation to early encounters and experiences. For some, this means moving away from parental religious influence. For others, it can involve moving away and returning. And still others do not move away but describe themselves as redefining these early religious teachings in light of their own perspectives and experiences.

While Michelle's narrative is unique, it connects with sentiments expressed by many religious and nonreligious young people: the sense of exploring and "becoming" religious or nonreligious as a process, frequently positioned in relation to family practices in childhood and also expressed as something that can change later in life. Many participants who do not currently engage in any religious practices, and do not define themselves as religious, also express the possibility of re-engaging with religion later in life—in order to be married in a religious institution, to raise their children within a religious tradition, and so on. These "imagined futures" (Page et al. 2012) involve their consideration of the role religion might play in later life, which is not felt or seen as required—yet.

Michelle's narrative involves multiple aspects of identity negotiation and development—religious, gendered, and sexual. These aspects of who she is developed in relation to one another and in relation to her family, her community, and her friends. This sense of identity exploration as something unfolding throughout her life is prevalent in Michelle's exploration of her identity history, as is her sense that, while she considers the mosque to be inhospitable—to herself and many others—she hopes that this will change so that she can find a physical space to engage with Islam.

The intersections of multiple marginalized identities in Michelle's narrative challenge assumptions about the relationship between religion, sexuality, and sexual behaviours—in this case, specifically Islam and queer sexualities. Michelle's behaviour, both conservative (arriving in a burqa with a male chaperone) and progressive (identifying as trans and polyamorous) undoes rigid notions about the "facts" of the relationship of these categories in lived experiences. Michelle is aware that her current affiliations are not the norm—for religion or for queerness—but they are identities that have developed together for her. Her hope for a more open mosque experience is the result of her belief that it's not the religion that is restrictive but rather the people interpreting the religion.

3.2 Secular Sexuality Disciplining: Colin

Describing himself as being back and forth between nonreligious and spiritual-but-not-religious identities, Colin (26) explains that while his paternal grandparents were devoutly Irish Catholic, his own parents were much more relaxed about religion—at home and in terms of family attendance at church. He began "dabbling" in Buddhism as a teenager, eventually saying he settled into the SBNR or nonreligious category in his early twenties. Colin attends mass at a Catholic church near where he lives on occasion for the sense of community, and otherwise infrequently attends church with his mother at Christmas. Although his early encounters sexually were "strictly heterosexual" (although difficult), Colin describes himself as having a "major break" in his early twenties when he became polyamorous and embraced bisexuality. He states that this shift in his identity came as a result of two processes; the first was his realization that there were parts of monogamous relationships that didn't make sense to him (sexual exclusivity during a relationship but not before or after). The second part of Colin's process was realizing in conversation with another male friend, who suggested he had wanted to have sex with Colin's girlfriend at the time, that the idea of his girlfriend having sex with someone else did not bother him "in the slightest", and he began to examine why relationships were so closed in the first place.

Although the process of opening his relationships to polyamory is one that Colin found felt natural to him, what he had a more difficult time with was the reconfiguration of his own sexual identity narrative. He had always identified strongly as being straight and accepting this new sexually fluid identity proved more difficult for him than opening his relationship to other sexual partners. One of the messages Colin felt strongly growing up was the negative associations with, and treatment of, gay men. He traces these influences and notions about sexual normativity to the homophobic environment that was prevalent in his high school.

> Well the first influence that my peer group had on me sexually was in high school growing up in public school you really didn't want to be gay and I still kind of struggle with this whole bisexual thing, like I mean I don't, I don't identify as gay, I identify as MSM, if you'd like, man who has sex with men, or bisexual, and I think that, and I still have a lot of

> discomfort, it takes a long time for me to warm up to a sexual partner who is male and I do really strongly associate that with... the sort of homophobic environment that maybe still exists in high school but it certainly did when I was going through, especially for men.

Colin's experience of negative attitudes towards homosexuality, especially towards gay men, is not connected to particular religious teachings or ideologies; he attended a public school and the negative attitudes in high school were not declared from religious or ideological standpoints. For Colin, this continues to impact his personal identity as bisexual, being clear that his self-selected terminology of MSM or bisexual is a response to his wish not to be identified as gay. Although homosexuality was introduced into the sex education curriculum towards the end of his high school career, the atmosphere in his high school was "reductive" when it came to notions about gender and sexual identities, requiring a certain normative performance of masculinity "in order to avoid censure." It was in university that Colin's views on sexuality were broadened, influenced by a course in women's studies and by speaking with faculty in the women's studies program.

Colin's notions about acceptable sexuality in high school, and acceptable performances of gender and sexual normativity, mirror other participants' comments about the environment in high school regarding diversity contrasted to the feeling of openness they experience in university. Colin's comments about censure for non-normativity also connect with data on homophobic, transphobic, biphobic, and gender-negative experiences in public high schools in Canada (Naugler 2010; Taylor and Peter 2011a, b). His fluid, nonreligious identity, attendance and connection to Catholic mass on occasion, and further his identification in the nonreligious/SBNR categories, is not a source of contention for his own sexual identity or in his relationships. But the rigid heteronormative prescriptions learned in high school, and the impact of homophobic attitudes in the secular sphere, continue to influence his own personal notions about his sexual identity.

These two narratives are illustrative of the dynamic process that is identity development and negotiation in relation to childhood experiences and teaching, and in adulthood—be it through personal or formal education, peer networks, and identity formation. Colin and Michelle demonstrate the complex reality that is living across multiple identity categories, categories that are formally thought to be inherently oppositional.

4 Key Theoretical Concepts

The meta-narrative of *heteronormativity* developed out of challenges to rigid notions about the "biological complementarity" of males and females, which has been used to justify normative sexual relations as those which are procreative (Rich 1976; Rubin 1994; Warner 1991). Constructions of acceptable sexuality were tied to heteronormative prescriptions regarding the "acceptable" family, which was further enforced in policies where family and marriage were intertwined and seen as

"natural" expressions of gender and sexuality (Butler 1993; Cossman and Ryder 2001; Halberstam 1998). Early feminist critiques of heteronormativity challenged assumptions about normative gender identity and normative gender roles (Irigaray 1984; Rubin 1994). Adrienne Rich's (1980) critique of the ways that heterosexuality, as an institution, restricted women, was encapsulated by her articulation of *compulsory heterosexuality*; a framing which demonstrated the ways women were expected to orient their sexual desire to men, and formalized them through idealized notions such as the "big, white wedding" depicted in popular culture. Compulsory heterosexuality is designed and structured to meet the needs of heterosexual men and sex is defined and contoured to fit male eroticism and male pleasure, further institutionalized through such cultural norms as the association between sex and heterosexual vaginal sex (see Lewis et al. 2013).

All other forms of sex, be it lesbian or gay sex, bisexual sexual desire, or polygamous relationships, are therefore constructed as "deviant" and marked as problems to be corrected or punished (or both) (see Anapol 2010; Calder and Beaman 2014; Califia 2001). The taken-for-granted expectations that heterosexuality is the norm and all other forms of sexuality are deviations has resulted in constraints on non-heterosexual identities based on social expectations and stigmas (Jagose 1996; Warner 1991; Weeks 2011). Constraints run from gender and identity disciplining such as taunting and casual homophobia, often witnessed in schools (Seitz 2014; Taylor and Peter 2011a, b) but also in other social environments, including social media (Ringrose 2015). Further disadvantages include lack of access to health care benefits because of normative definitions of what constitutes "family status" (Cossman and Ryder 2001), and restrictions on adoption and fostering eligibility for same-sex couples—in some cases not as a result of direct discrimination but rather by covert discrimination, such as the limitation that adoptive parents must be married (Denike 2007).

Normative expectations and standards regarding *religious identity* also permeate the landscape, where non-normative expressions of religiosity are similarly disciplined and constrained (Bakht 2012; Barras 2014; Beaman 2013). The growing body of literature on *lived religion* in relationship with doctrinal religion seeks to expand on the restrictive assumptions about religious identity as experienced by individuals, beyond formal teaching (Davie 2014; Day 2011; McGuire 2008; Ammerman 2014). Acceptable and unacceptable forms of religious expression continue to be central topics of debate across numerous national contexts. In Canada, this includes restrictions on religious clothing and jewelry in public spaces—be it to access public services or for those who work in the public service (Montpetit 2016). There is both implicit and explicit reference to *national values* when debates about public religiosity are connected to debates about national security; when the Hutterian Brethren lost the right to have driver's licenses without photographs (*Hutterian Brethren* 2009) the decision was supported by reference to concerns about identity and national security (*Hutterian Brethren* 2009, at para 4). Statements within legal and public discourses about *religion* and *secularism* often posit that

"secularism" is an inclusive space for gender and sexual diversity, but that the "secular" sphere is one without preference for any particular religiosity (Alcoff and Caputo 2011)—thus justifying the restrictions on *non-normative* religious practices (Beaman 2013). In reality, certain expressions of normative religion continue to permeate the so-called secular sphere, having been reclassified as secular, nonreligious, or Canadian "heritage" (Beaman 2013).

Exploring the challenges for individuals at the intersections of multiple minority identities, Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1991) pioneering work on *intersectionality* as the experience of systemic discrimination on multiple levels also offers key insights when considering normative and non-normative identity constructions, and the relationship of identities imbued with these normative assertions. Considering the ways young people negotiate their identities across religious, secular, gender, and sexually non-conforming identities is critical to developing a more nuanced framework for identity research and, further, to combat problematic misrepresentations of these categories. We have all been witness to the ongoing debates, nationally and internationally, regarding the relationship between religion and gender equality and religion and sexual diversity. These debates and controversies are not new. However, they have been cementing certain notions about the relationship of these categories to one another (Allen 2005; Fetner et al. 2012; Freitas 2008; Shipley and Young 2016) and, particularly in a contemporary context, have been fueled by supplementary debates about religion and secularism, sometimes in the form of considerations of the separation of church and state, for example.

These key concepts require systematic analysis and interrogation; their role in directing both academic and public lenses is frequently challenged, and yet normative mainstays regarding sexual relationships, acceptable religiosity, and the presumption of secularism's inclusivity continue to be reaffirmed through discourse, media, and popular culture. In order to develop a more sound understanding of these complex notions, it is necessary to begin from the ground up by challenging assumptions and stereotypes and integrating empirical and theoretical analysis.

5 General Findings

The RGSY project has found that our respondents are quite comfortable bringing together religious, nonreligious, spiritual, and secular principles in order to develop their own unique views of ethics and morals. These bridging exercises combine family influence, peer networks, online information, and formal education. Even participants who align themselves within a particularly doctrinal aspect of a religious tradition demonstrate negotiated understandings about the teachings.

Survey respondents were overwhelmingly female, as demonstrated in Fig. 1 ($n = 476$):

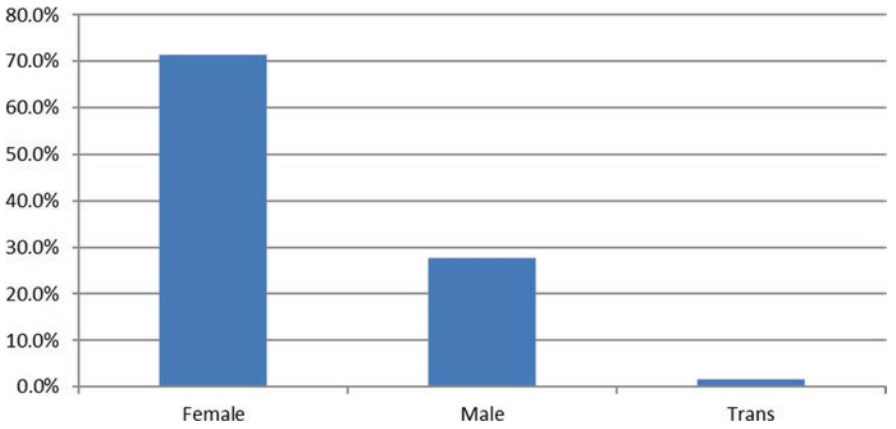

Fig. 1 What is your sex?

The majority of our survey respondents identified as Christian, though some paired this identity with other non-Christian religious identities, and others complicated their religiosity by explaining that they were baptized Christian, though largely only participated during the holidays with their family.

The breakdown of religious identity from the survey is as follows:

- Buddhism 1.9% ($n = 8$)
- Christianity 61.0% ($n = 252$)
- Hinduism 0.9% ($n = 4$)
- Islam 4.3% ($n = 18$)
- Judaism 3.3% ($n = 14$)
- Non-Religious 20.3% ($n = 84$)
- Sikhism 0.2% ($n = 1$)
- Spiritual but not religious 14.2% ($n = 59$)
- Other 9.2% (includes theist, agnostic, wiccan, combination of religions, etc.) ($n = 38$)

The next largest grouping in the religion question from our survey was the nonreligious, spiritual-but-not-religious and "other" category (which included theist, agnostic, wiccan, and combinations of religious identities). Between these three categories, there is overlap from our respondents to the survey. Of the total number of individuals who checked these boxes (181), 159 of those responses are unique. That is, if we were to look at each of the three categories individually, the numbers would be:

- Non-Religious: 84
- SBNR: 59
- Other: 38

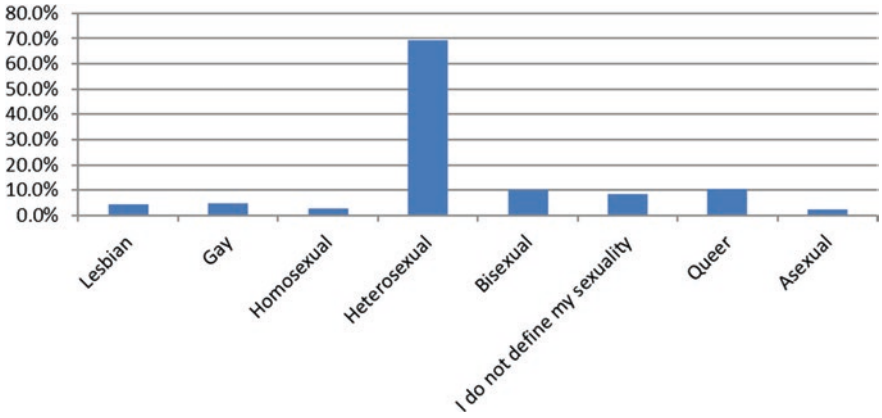

Fig. 2 How would you define your sexuality?

Some of the qualitative descriptors provided by the respondents for these identities included:

- Non-religious: atheist, agnostic, "it's complicated"
- SBNR: Baptized/Raised Catholic (i.e.) but non-practicing, Mohawk/Aboriginal beliefs, "I was born Muslim but I am spiritual and not religious"
- Other: self-defined, agnostic, unsure, and Unitarian Universalist

Religious identities as defined by our interviewees are as follows:

- Christianity: 56%
- Judaism: 6.3%
- Islam: 3%
- Nonreligious, SBNR, other: 47%
- Identity qualifiers: non-practicing, baptized within particular tradition, raised Christian (attends some services with family), "dabbles" in other religions, "currently Catholic", "agnostic Catholic"

In terms of sexuality, our survey respondents identified as such ($n = 401$) (Fig. 2):

Our participants were very savvy to current academic discourses about gender and sexuality, using queer feminist theoretical analysis to discuss their own gendered and sexual identities but also to discuss the ways that gender and sexuality are regulated and restricted, by both religion and by society more broadly. Respondents were predominantly inclusive towards a broad range of sexual behaviours for others, though exhibited much more conservative attitudes towards their own sexual practices.

When asked about gender roles and gendered norms, participants generally addressed male and female gender identities and expectations concerning straight and queer sexualities. Bisexuality and trans identities were less frequently discussed,

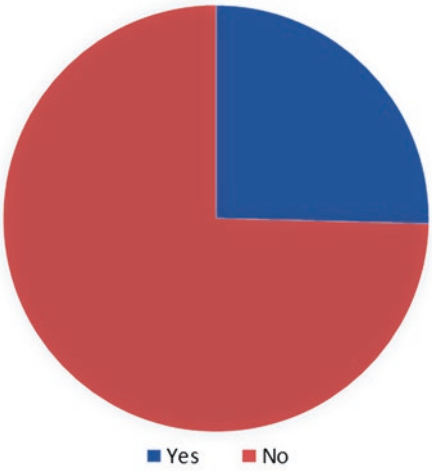

Fig. 3 Do you engage in casual sex?

though a number of participants acknowledged that there is a lack of understanding about sexual diversity. Parents were seen as having the strongest influence on gender identity, although they were less influential when it came to sexual practices. The influence of parental gender performances was quite strong, although some respondents contested gender modeling by parents and others admired it (and aspired to mirror it). In our interviews, we asked participants how important gender was to their overall identity. Interview participants were quite varied as to how they saw their own gender identity and as to how important they felt it was in their day-to-day lives. Although many acknowledged the pressures to conform to stereotypical gender roles, they did not personally feel the need to follow rigid ideas about gendered presentations of self.

Participants did not typically feel their parents had a strong influence on their sexual behaviours. Rather, peers and the internet offered more guidance for their own sense of sexual activity. The majority of our respondents identified on the liberal to very liberal side of the liberal-conservative scale (65.6%, $n = 261$), though we have noted that liberal attitudes towards other people's sexual behaviours are evidenced much more than with their own sexual behaviours. Respondents were quite open-minded towards the sexual behaviours of others, as long as it was consensual, however they placed more boundaries around what they considered acceptable for themselves. While they were quick to state that they had no issue with their friends or peers engaging in casual sex, very few actually indicated it was something they themselves engaged in (Yes 25.4%; No 74.6%) (Fig. 3).

Further, when we asked them about a list of sexual practices and whether they considered these practices to be acceptable outside the context of marriage or within the context of marriage, it was interesting to note that group sex and virtual sex both were seen as somewhat problematic outside and within marriage (Figs. 4 and 5).

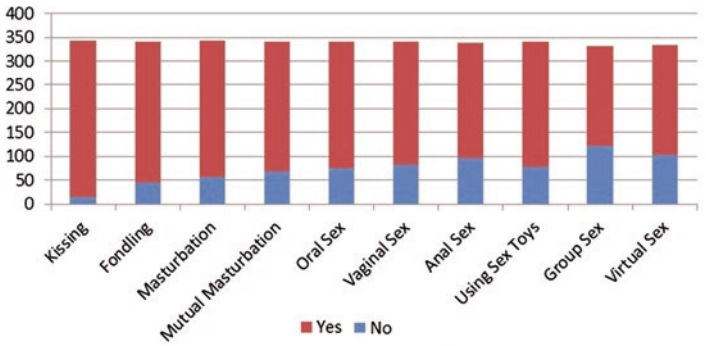

Fig. 4 Do you think the following practices are acceptable outside marriage?

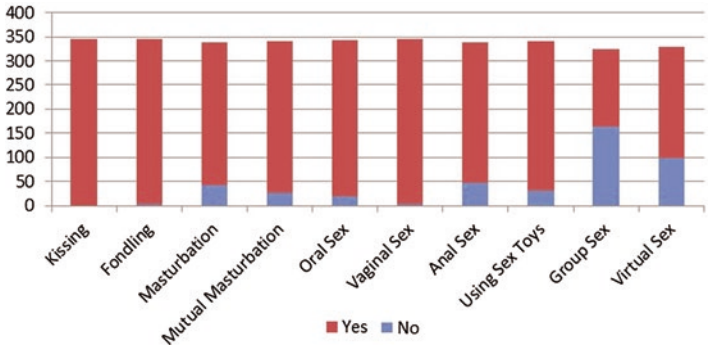

Fig. 5 Do you think the following practices are acceptable within marriage?

Continued consternation regarding non-monogamous sexual relationships is demonstrated in young people's attitudes towards group sex, especially within marriage. The challenges faced by polyamorous, non-monogamous relationships and sexual pairings are evidence of negative assumptions associated with non-monogamy, regardless of the lack of empirical evidence to support those associations (Johnson 2014). Furthermore, the variation between young people's attitudes towards other people's sexual behaviours and the scripts they follow themselves offers another pathway to dispel common assumptions about casual sex as a rapidly increasing "fact" among young people.

6 Current Challenges; Future Opportunities

As evidenced by the responses to questions regarding acceptable practices within and outside marriage, group sex continues to be cast as problematic, regardless of consent. The dominance of monogamy as the "acceptable" relationship standard is a long way from being fully explored; associations of polyamorous or polygamous relationships with being "unfaithful" are prevalent enough that it continues to be treated as a deviant sexuality. Monogamy is strongly endorsed, particularly in Western contexts, and current national debates about polyamorous relationships are frequently tied to assumptions about gender inequality and forced marriage. The common perception about polygamous relationships is primarily associated with notorious Mormon groups, in the U.S. those associated with Warren Jeffs and in Canada, Winston Blackmore. Polygamy is seen as patriarchal, abusive to women and children, and these negative associations are taken as a given (Calder and Beaman 2014). However, closer examination of the similarities between monogamous and polygamous relationships—as it pertains to harm towards women and children via domestic violence—reveals that polygamy is not more inherently harmful than monogamy (Calder and Beaman 2014). While there are clear examples of the ways polyamory can be exploitative and problematic, these examples are also evident across monogamous contexts (Johnson 2014).

Both of the narratives included earlier in this chapter are from young people who engage in polyamorous relationships, both in very different religious and social contexts. Survey respondents point to group sex (or sex outside monogamous relationships) as continually problematic, and this is affirmed by the experiences of both Michelle and Colin, whose experiences and choices are not always accepted by their family and friends. Although both Michelle and Colin engage in these relationships as consenting adults, with partners who are also consenting adults, the script about polygamy as inherently harmful is still strongly evidenced in their experiences and in public responses to media coverage of polygamous groups.

As noted earlier, although I am using the acronym LGBTQI+, it is clear that the progress that has been made regarding inclusivity, socially and in public policy, has primarily been progress made for some members of LGBTQI+ communities—bisexuality and trans identities are far from having the same levels of understanding or inclusion that (monogamous) same-sex couples have obtained (Califia 2001; Kinsman 1996; Irving 2008; Toft 2012). Toft (2012) exposes the false assumption that bisexual Christians face the "same" issues as lesbian and gay Christians, an assumption which continues to delegitimize bisexual identities and render their struggles invisible. Trans communities also face widespread challenges, which are often misunderstood and underrepresented (Irving 2008). Although these areas of research are beginning to grow, much is yet to be uncovered from exploring the challenges faced by bisexual, trans, and intersex identities, and even further when linked to other marginalized identities.

Cragun and Sumerau's (2017) examination of attitudes towards intersectional identities, considering five nonreligious identities and four gender/sexual identities, exposes the ways sexual and gender identities are seen to "pollute" religious identities. Considering attitudes towards religious and nonreligious identities as connected to sexual and gender identities, Cragun and Sumerau's study demonstrates preconceived negative attitudes towards atheism and nonreligion as connected to sexual and gender minorities: nonreligious sexual and gender minorities were more likely to be seen as acceptable than religious sexual and gender minorities (2017).

Attitudes towards atheism, nonreligion, and SBNR identities as connected to attitudes toward gender and sexual diversity are areas of research that are critical for future study. Understanding the nuance of religious and secular attitudes, the negative associations about nonreligion, atheism, and SBNR attitudes, and their relationship to sexual and gender diversity is necessary to explore the reality of intersectional identities but also the reality of the nonreligious and sexually diverse landscape, in Canada and elsewhere.

7 Conclusion

In line with other similar studies, RGSY respondents are articulate and possess a broad knowledge base when it comes to thinking through gender and sexuality as identity categories—they are comfortable discussing "my" gender and "my" sexuality as something they experience, seeing it as personal and political, but very much a continuing part of who they are (whether it's the most prominent part of their identity or not). Analysis of religion as a category remains bifurcated. "My" religion versus "religion" in general are very much separate categories for RGSY respondents.

Our participants have clearly indicated that they think religion can and should adapt to contemporary society; many of our respondents do not think it has yet (or has enough) but think that the shift can occur (Young and Shipley 2015). They are comfortable pulling together teachings, beliefs, and practices from different sources to construct their own sense of religiosity/spirituality as they define it. In light of the shifting self-identification regarding religious/spiritual/ethical categories, it is clear that our respondents are comfortable "picking and choosing" (or mixing and matching) from multiple influences to create a personal set of values, beliefs, and attitudes.

Many of our respondents do not currently engage in any regular religious practices (i.e. attending religious services), however most see themselves as having a future relationship with religion—whether it's being married in a religious ceremony, or in a religious institution, or bringing their children to religious services. This is what Page et al. (2012) describe as part of young people's "imagined futures"; while they might not participate in overtly religious activities now, they

do not rule it out for their future lives. This is not how they would describe their gendered or sexual lives. There is not a separate, external engagement related to gender or sexuality that is "on hold" until they engage with it again in the future; these aspects of their identity are very much a part of who they are in day to day life—even those who are not currently in sexual relationships, who are abstaining, and so on.

Unlike gender or sexuality, our respondents do not ascribe an inherency to religious identity for the most part. The challenges of the language of the study of religion are very much evidenced in the ways our respondents wrestle with the category—particularly given the high numbers of nonreligious/SBNR/other participants. Religion (qualified also as nonreligion, spirituality, and so on) is still a much more complex category than gender or sexuality, at least at this particular moment in time with these respondents (although as I suspect this is shifting)—one that is often framed as an external force that they do or do not engage with at different points in their lives, and one whose conceptualization often hits a hard wall when delineating the nuances between "religion" and "my religion."

8 Questions for Critical Thought

1. What are the historical influences on our notions about both religion and sexuality?
2. What contemporary social changes have occurred to shift perceptions about religious identity and sexual identity?
3. What is the relationship between feminist and LGBTQI+ movements in North America?
4. What has influenced your own attitude towards sexuality and religion?
5. What should scholars be considering in order to develop more nuanced perspectives on the relationship between religion, secularism, sexuality and gender?

9 Online Resources

The Institute for Sexual Minority Studies and Services at the University of Alberta, directed by Kristopher Wells, has produced numerous online resources including fact sheets, recommended readings, and teacher guides for supporting students.

The United Church of Canada has produced a list of resources, online and hard copy, as well as scriptural interpretation in support of sexual diversity.

OPHEA has created teaching tools and recommendations for teachers to facilitate the implementation of sexual health curriculum changes.

Trans Student Educational Resources have created "The Gender Unicorn" as a tool for discussing gender identity, expression and presentation as well as sexual attraction and relationships.

10 References for Further Reading

Aune, K., Sharma, S., & Vincett, G. (2008). *Women and religion in the west: challenging secularization*. Farnham: Ashgate.

This book offers unique insight into the relationship of women, religion and secularism. Examining women's roles in and out of religion, the volume also considers questions of secularization specific to women's rights and inclusivity.

Brown, C. G. (2012). *Religion and the demographic revolution.* Woodbridge: The Boydell Press.

Brown examines the changing demographics of religion in Europe, Canada and Australasia in relationship to rapidly changing social and cultural changes – secularization, changing family structures and expectations, and in response to feminist activism and women's rights campaigns.

Hunt, S. J., & Yip, A. K. T. (2012). *The Ashgate research companion to contemporary religion and sexuality.* Farnham: Ashgate.

Hunt and Yip bring together a range of topics, geographies and methodologies in an innovative and complex text that considers religion and sexuality as subjects of research. This text offers critical theoretical and methodological guidance in the study of religion and sexuality, as well as providing much needed comparative data, helpful for students and scholars alike.

McGuire, M. (2008). *Lived religion: Faith and practice in everyday life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

McGuire's articulation of lived religion brought into focus language about the ways religion is practiced, expressed and felt by participants in contrast to the tendency toward doctrinal representation as to what 'counts' as religion.

Rasumussen, M. L., & Allen, L. (2016). *Handbook of sexuality education*. London: Palgrave.

The role of religion in relation to other categories, such as gender and sexuality, is considered and challenged in this text which examines sexuality education – education which is frequently the source of consternation, whereby religion (i.e. 'morality') finds itself placed as the counter point to teaching sexuality.

Wyn, J., & Cahill, H. (2014). *Handbook on child and youth studies*. Cham: Springer.

The most comprehensive text available on child and youth studies at an international level, this volume includes chapters on 13 separate themes, challenging the notion that analysis of children and youth should only focus on problems.

Yamane, D. (2016). *Handbook of religion and societ.* Cham: Springer.

The 2016 edition of this volume offers updated content to consider the relationship between religion and society in a contemporary framework, including a chapter on sexuality for the first time. This volume is comprehensive and wide ranging in topics as well as the application and analysis of theories and methods.

11 Researcher Background

Heather Shipley is an Education and Communications Advisor at the Centre for Human Rights, Equity and Inclusion at York University and has been Project Manager for the *Religion and Diversity Project*, (SSHRC funded initiative, University of Ottawa, led by Lori Beaman) since 2010. Her research focuses the construction, management and regulation of religion, gender, sexuality, and sexual orientation as identity categories in media, legal, and public discourse. Publications include: (2015) "Religious Freedom and Sexual Orientation: Equality Jurisprudence and Intersecting Identities," *Canadian Journal of Women and Law*, 27(2): 92–127; *Globalized Religion and Sexual Identity: Contexts, Contestations, Voices,* (2014, editor) Brill Academic Press.

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