

**GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND RELIGION:
A Critical Integrative Review and Agenda for Future Research**

Landon Schnabel¹
Cornell University

Eman Abdelhadi
University of Chicago

Katherine Ally Zaslavsky
Jacqueline Ho
Angie Torres-Beltran
Cornell University

Abstract:

This article sets forth a critical integrative review of the study of gender, sexuality, and religion. Treating religion as a cause, an effect, and an intermediary factor in relation to gender and sexuality, it draws on and synthesizes multiple theoretical approaches including gender and queer lenses on religion, cultural analysis, and intersectionality. The article is structured around ten big-picture questions about gender, sexuality, and religion and argues that gender and sexuality are a key symbolic boundary and cultural divide in religious and political life in the United States and around the world. It concludes with an agenda for future research.

Key Words: Gender, Sexuality, Religion

Last Revised: **2021/12/31**

Running Head: Gender, Sexuality, and Religion

FORTHCOMING AT *JOURNAL FOR THE SCIENTIFIC STUDY OF RELIGION*

¹ Direct correspondence to Landon Schnabel, Department of Sociology, Cornell University, 323 Uris Hall, Ithaca, NY 14853. Email: schnabel@cornell.edu. Abdelhadi, Ally Zaslavsky, Ho, and Torres-Beltran contributed equally and are listed in alphabetical order.

In 1985, Margaret Atwood published *The Handmaid's Tale*, a dystopian novel set in a fundamentalist, patriarchal, and anti-choice theocratic state where women are forced to reproduce. Those in command seem less interested in religion for religion's sake than for the power it provides, using it to impose and legitimate unequal power relations. The limited status available to women can only be accessed by playing along, while sexual minority women and others who do not participate in the cisgender heteronormative reproductive agenda are cast out as "unwomen."

Although limited as a social commentary—for example, its handling of race is limited at best—the history of the way U.S. society has received *The Handmaid's Tale* highlights the intersection of gender, sexuality, and religion as a cultural cornerstone and key site where power, which is receiving renewed attention in the social science of religion (Edwards 2019), plays out. The book was written during the Reagan years, which saw an uptick in intense religion and the "emergence of the Religious Right as a force in Republican Party politics" (Hout and Fischer 2002, 168; Schnabel and Bock 2018). And the widely popular television show based on the book (released 2017), as well as the follow-up book (published 2019), came at a time of another president leveraging religion for power and renewing debate about a woman's right to reproductive control.

Division over *The Handmaid's Tale*, abortion, and other issues of gender and sexuality demonstrate the complicated role religion plays in American politics. Paradoxes abound. In 2016, many women—and especially white Christian women—voted for Donald Trump over the first woman nominated for U.S. president by a major party. In 2020, Supreme Court confirmation hearings were held for a woman, nominated by Trump, who opposes a woman's right to choose abortion. The contradictions do not begin with Trump, women have always played an active role in gender conservative Christian movements (Johnson 2019). Yet rather than being a betrayal of his women voters, this nomination was a fulfillment of a promise they hoped he would uphold.

These considerations lead us directly into foundational questions of agency, power, identity, beliefs, and politics social scientists have long grappled with. This article is structured around 10 big-picture questions related to gender, sexuality, and religion. The first few are big-picture orienting questions where our answers will follow suite. Then, we will get into questions answered in more empirical detail before zooming back out for a bird's-eye view of possibilities for what is next in the study of gender, sexuality, and religion. We are reviewing the literature and what we say will in many ways reflect the literature, which is often U.S.- and Christianity-centric (Smilde and May 2015; C. Smith et al. 2013), but will point to some of the broader work being done and highlight the need for research representing the global diversity of religious and non-religious experiences and expressions.

QUESTION 1: WHAT'S THE DEAL WITH GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND RELIGION?

Gender and sexuality have long been closely intertwined with religion; issues of gender and sexuality now operate as a key symbolic boundary for many religious communities (Schnabel 2016a; Tranby and Zulkowski 2012) and are arguably *the* current cultural divide in the United States and around the world (Inglehart and Norris 2003b; Norris and Inglehart 2011). How did this come about?

Religion in the United States, especially white religion, became increasingly divided over social issues rather than theology (O'Brien and Abdelhadi 2020; Wuthnow 1988). As rapid change occurred through the mid to late 20th century in the gender and sexual revolutions that normalized such things as women working, premarital sex, and autonomy, religious backlash followed. Evangelicals became more involved in politics (and more consistently involved on one side), joined Catholics in the anti-abortion cause, and the Religious Right emerged. In a new era of colonialism, Westerners exported their beliefs, values, interests, hierarchies, and political concerns under the guise of evangelism at the same time that highly religious non-Westerners sometimes perceived the social liberalization occurring in the West as a sign of Western decadence and depravity. Religion became increasingly politicized, politics became increasingly divided by religion, and issues of gender and sexuality became the key

hot-button issues in the United States and around the world that they still are today (Norris and Inglehart 2011; Schnabel 2016a; Tranby and Zulkowski 2012). Liberals and moderates, frustrated with its conservative politicization, increasingly disaffiliated (Hout and Fischer 2014).

We are now left with paradoxes that may seem contradictory, but make sense upon closer examination. For example, why would women often be more committed to an institution that is typically run by men, often seems patriarchal, and is arguably looking to the past for its gender and sexual politics (Edgell, Frost, and Stewart 2017; Schnabel 2019)? Why would a religion whose key figure told people to turn the other cheek be promoting aggressive masculinity and even holding mixed-martial arts (MMA) in houses of worship (Greve 2014; Rivers 2017)? And why would religions that used to seem more concerned with theological questions now be so focused on political issues and power (Du Mez 2020; Whitehead and Perry 2020)?

QUESTION 2: HOW CAN WE MAKE SENSE OF GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND RELIGION?

Scholars have developed a few frameworks that are particularly useful for studying gender, sexuality, and religion: (1) gender and queer lenses, (2) cultural analysis, and (3) intersectionality and complex religion. We think these frameworks are compatible, can be synthesized and drawn on together (as we will attempt in this article), and share core components. All three are ways of seeing, all three explicitly consider power, and all three examine and frequently critique the status quo.

Gender/Queer Lens

Gender and sexuality had been long neglected in the study of religion—despite religion being a key site for gender and sexuality and gender and sexuality important factors for understanding religion (Avishai 2016b; Neitz 2014). While there is now much excellent work on the topic, there is room for growth and scholars could do more to meaningfully incorporate gender and queer theory (Avishai and Irby 2017; Avishai, Jafar, and Rinaldo 2015; Sumerau, Mathers, and Cragun 2018).

Providing a clear example of a literature led astray by inattention to gender theory, many scholars jumped to the false conclusion that there is a universal gender gap in religiosity. The idea was built on a conception of gender as an essential characteristics rather than a multilevel social structure (Avishai 2016a; Cornwall 2009; Risman 2004). In fact, a specifically multilevel gender lens on religion that takes into account both the multiple levels and aspects of both gender and of religion would likely be particularly effective (Schnabel 2019).

Cultural Analysis

Cultural approaches have a long history, have recently been revitalized as alternatives to market and secularization accounts, and provide a powerful way to understand gender and sexuality as a key cultural divide in the U.S. and global religious and political landscape (Edgell 2012; Schnabel 2016a). Culture influences attitudes and action through ideas, symbols, and metaphors that function as tools in a “cultural toolkit” (Swidler 1986). People draw upon these cultural tools to construct symbolic boundaries between themselves and others claiming membership in the worthy in-group and excluding the unworthy out-group (Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann 2006; Tranby and Zulkowski 2012).

Gender and sexuality are important dimensions along which boundaries are drawn, especially for socially conservative groups such as evangelicals and Muslims (Bartkowski and Read 2003; Guhin 2020). Cultural approaches also set forth ideas such as structuration theory (Giddens 1984; Sewell 1992), which stipulates how religion operates as both a resource and a schema, being both something that people draw upon and that shapes their thinking (Hoffmann and Bartkowski 2008; Schnabel 2021a). Concepts like symbolic boundaries, resources, and schemas are useful not just for understanding attitudes, values, and political divides, but also what motivates action, how people understand their behaviors, and so forth. For example, it could be applied to the question of gender differences in religiosity to recognize how different cultural contexts and institutional fields might be gendered in different ways, leading gender differences in religiosity to vary across groups.

Intersectionality and Complex Religion

Intersectional approaches are making headway across the social sciences and can help us understand gender, sexuality, and religion as they intersect and interact with one another and related identities, statuses, and experiences such as race, class, nationality, and ability (Collins 2000; Crenshaw 1991; Read and Eagle 2011; Stewart, Frost, and Edgell 2017; Yukich and Edgell 2020). Wilde (Wilde 2018; Wilde and Glassman 2016) has made an argument for “complex religion,” an intersectional approach to religion that accounts for the ways it intersects with social statuses and the ways those social statuses intersect with one another. Her focus has been largely on race and class, and the approach can be just as readily applied to gender and sexuality, including how they intersect with race, class, religion, and other factors (Schnabel 2016c, 2020).

Intersectional approaches help us perceive heterogeneity and recognize the need to examine both broader and more specific samples. Different backgrounds, experiences, and contexts produce different outcomes, and we cannot just assume that gender, sexuality, and religion always operate in the same way everywhere for everyone. Circling back to the example noted earlier, an intersectional approach to religion helps us recognize how a pattern found among one group may not generalize to others. Just as a gender and cultural lenses help us recognize how the gender gap in religiosity varies across religions and social statuses rather than being some universal fact, so too does an intersectional lens. All of them could be used to get us to a similar place, but each adds something to the picture and helps us more fully understand the mechanisms leading us to that outcome.

Our critical approach to gender, sexuality, and religion will seek to draw on and encompass all these frameworks in an integrative way, synthesizing both varied topics of study and varied approaches. We will strive to bring together literature that we think can, and perhaps should, have been in conversation all along. We believe looking at the literature as a whole will reveal it to be greater

than the sum of its parts and hope that the integrative viewpoint we offer can help set a foundation for stimulating research.

QUESTION 3: IS RELIGION A CAUSE, AN EFFECT, OR AN INTERMEDIARY FACTOR IN RELATION TO GENDER AND SEXUALITY?

One of the perennial questions in the social sciences is whether something is a cause, an effect, some sort of intermediary factor (e.g., mediator or moderator), or simply unimportant. We think it is fairly safe to say that religion is frequently important—often more important than scholars outside of the study of religion assume. We also think it is fairly safe to say that religion is not just a cause, not just an effect, and not just an intermediary factor; instead, it is all three in relation to gender and sexuality, especially as gender and sexuality are both also multifactorial social structures that include, among other things, demographics and identities (e.g., gender and sexual categories), social phenomena (e.g., roles, relationships, and so forth), and politics (e.g., attitudes, values, parties, and policies).

Even in relation to the same thing, such as gender and sexuality values, religion can be a cause, an effect, and an intermediary factor. On the one hand, religions have been shaped by existing gender and sexuality values in the social contexts in which they arose. But then as they were established and institutionalized, those gender and sexuality values took on a life of their own beyond their original context and shaped new social contexts. When some groups are more religious than other, including certain gender or sexual demographics, religion can then complicate gender and sexual politics leading to such things as women being more opposed to a woman's right to choose abortion than men (Schnabel 2021a). Throughout this article, we will discuss the varied ways religion operates as a cause, as an effect, and as an intermediary factor in relation to gender and sexuality.

QUESTION 4: DOES RELIGION EMPOWER OR DISEMPOWER WOMEN, SEXUAL MINORITIES, AND GENDER MINORITIES?

Given the gender and sexual conservatism of many religious traditions, scholars often ask whether engagement in religion facilitates or constrains agency and power for women and sexual and gender

minorities (Avishai 2008; Burke 2012; Zion-Waldoks 2015). Much of the literature on agency in religion focuses on women in conservative religions and the consensus seems to be that religion is complicated, both a cultural resource and way to express one's identity as well as a men-run institution that puts forward rules for women's lives (Hammer 2012; Prickett 2015).² But this question of agency can extend to secular spaces as well. Both religious and secular societies attempt to exert control over what women wear, with religious societies often telling women they must cover more and secular societies sometimes telling women, especially highly religious women, that they must cover less as illustrated by policy debates in countries such as France with minority Muslim populations being told to not wear religious garb in public. In such contexts, women are often told what to do with their bodies and their religious identities (which provide affirming communities) are challenged, thereby limiting women's agency in the name of women's liberation. As the next section will show, women and members of sexual and gender minorities find space for reinterpreting and renegotiating their religious community's restrictions (Halkitis et al. 2009; Pitt 2010b, 2010a). Sometimes, commitment to the religious space can stem from its ability to affirm other aspects of their selves that face structural-disadvantage, such as in the case of Black sexual and gender minorities in Black churches in the United States. In turn, as this activism takes place, religious communities' attitudes can shift. For example, Muslim Americans' acceptance of homosexuality has grown precipitously over the past decade (Abdelhadi and O'brien 2020). Rather than asking whether religion universally empowers or disempowers, we might better ask under what conditions it does either.

² Mahmood (2011) famously questions the idea of agency as an "ultimate good" altogether. In her study of revivalist Egyptian women, interlocutors subsumed their agency to cultivate a pious self. She sees scholars' search for agency in research subjects' lives as an imposition of liberal values that may not be universally shared.

QUESTION 5: HOW DO GENDER AND SEXUALITY IMPACT EXPERIENCES WITH RELIGION?

Religious teachings and practices are embedded in congregations, which are themselves embedded in broader cultural and geographic structures. To understand how religion intersects with gender and sexuality, scholars have paid attention to other social institutions to which religion is intertwined, such as marriage and the family (Edgell 2006; Edgell and Docka 2007), national, or regional culture—or a combination of all the above.

Formal and Informal Structures, Teachings, Expectations, and Practices

Congregation-specific research illuminates the differences in how these communities construct acceptance or rejection of marginalized identities. Tavory's (2016) account of an Orthodox Jewish neighborhood in Los Angeles highlights how strict gender roles are an important part of a dense, reliable, and cohesive congregation distinct from the surrounding area. In contrast with congregations that rely on traditional gender roles, Bulgarian Muslims' reliance on gender roles has shifted over time, from de-escalation under the influence of socialism to a perceived re-traditionalization modeled on conservative Arab organizations (Darakchi 2018). Across the United States and China, Buddhist temples teach that gender does not affect processes of spiritual advancement, but their treatment of gender differences shift by national setting (Di 2021). The growing religious diversity of China illuminates the processes of space making in a nominally secular society; expression of religious identity provides women the opportunity to express gender identity in more personal and specific ways, carving out space within the broader society (Jaschok and Shui 2011).

Specific doctrine and messaging are ultimately disseminated at the level of the congregation. Congregational structures influence how marginalized identities fit into religious spaces and how adherents translate religious doctrine into social attitudes, including the inclusivity of marginalized groups. For example, Bock (2021) highlights that religionists whose attitudes on abortion and same-sex marriage conflict with those of their congregation attend less often than their less conflicted peers.

Edgell and Docka (2007) find that the messaging and rhetoric at the level of a congregation across diverse racial and political contexts can create more accepting spaces for same-sex relationships, centered in family-oriented logics. Fuist (2016) finds that social context of a community provides support for integrating LGBT and religious identities. Black gay Christian men maintain their identity in dissonant religious spaces by asserting that negative attitudes toward homosexuality come from church leaders, not religious doctrine (Pitt 2010a).

Doctrine and messaging shape the language that religious actors use when they find or place themselves in religious spaces and gendered roles. Women in Islam and evangelical Protestantism center their expression of faith within cultural repertoires grounded in religious doctrine, which they interpret to justify and explain the particular intersection of their identity, their role within the religion, and the religious structures with which they interact (Bartkowski and Read 2003; Read and Bartkowski 2000). Gender and sexual minorities are frequently not recognized or established as sinful or illegitimate within some religious doctrines (Jaspal and Cinnirella 2010; Van Klinken 2015; Pitt 2010b). Transgender Christians situate their religious identities within the cisgendered reality of their religion, even as they combat such views (Sumerau, Cragun, and Mathers 2016; Sumerau, Mathers, and Cragun 2018). Among sexual minorities, recent acceptance of queer identities in organized religion has failed to increase religiosity of lesbians and bisexuals, who remain less likely to participate in organized religion relative to other groups despite being more likely to engage in some forms of spiritual practice such as meditation (Schnabel 2020; Sherkat 2016).

Negotiating and Performing Identities

In social contexts where sexual minority identities are most marginalized, their classification and experiences are often erased (Kaoma 2018) and feelings of incompatibility between identities drive broader trends in religiosity by sexual orientation (Sherkat 2002, 2016). If people's politics do not fit, if they do not conform to role expectations, or if they generally do not live their lives in the ways that

others expect, they are more likely to experience identity conflict and will need to engage in identity negotiation to resolve apparent conflicts. For example, identity work is often needed to integrate identities as both feminist and religious or gay and religious (Ecklund 2003; Izienicki 2017; Maclean, Walker, and Matsuba 2004; Wedow et al. 2017). High-earning women are less affirmed in religious congregations than those perceived as more committed to their families than work (Hastings and Lindsay 2013; Schnabel 2016c). Religious men face strict and complicated expectations for performing a masculinity that's at once loving, tough, gentle and distinctly not gay (Gerber 2015; Greve 2014; McDowell 2017) in the United States.

Straddling these complicated identity lines is often stressful and harmful, particularly for marginalized groups. In the United States, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer Mormons who reject the label of their sexual identity tend to be more religious than those who do not, but they are less comfortable with the lived experiences of their sexuality (Lefevor et al. 2020; also see Legerski and Harker 2018). At a U.S. Catholic university, gay and lesbian students often find themselves doubting either their religious or sexuality identity (or both), except in cases where they find support and accessible narratives to integrate and accept both (Wedow et al. 2017). International work on sexual minority Muslims highlights the similarities in constructing identity across vastly different cultural contexts—lack of social recognition, interpersonal and political opposition, and practical social sanctions (Hamdi, Lachheb, and Anderson 2018; Jaspal and Cinnirella 2010; Shah 2018). These studies find that when religious identities seem incompatible with gender or sexual identities, individuals seek to neutralize incompatibility or find affirming spaces.

On a global scale, many activities, choices, and attitudes historically embedded in religious doctrine and practice at the level of the congregation (such as reproduction, family structure, gendered power differentials, and gender performance) are now embedded in social life, though these processes are still tied to the congregational space (Ellingson and Green 2002). Furthermore, formerly religious

transgender people's transitions out of religion are based in the differences between acceptance they find in religious and nonreligious spaces (Mathers 2017), with people generally looking for identities, ways of performing their identities, and social contexts where they will be affirmed rather than disaffirmed—which has important implications for their commitment to religion and their likelihood to leave it as we will see in the next section (Edgell, Frost, and Stewart 2017; Schnabel 2016c).

QUESTION 6: HOW DO GENDER AND SEXUALITY IMPACT EXPRESSIONS OF AND COMMITMENT TO RELIGION?

Christian Women More Religious Than Christian Men

Scholars have long noted gender differences in religiosity, with many suggesting that women being more religious than men is a supposedly universal trend. However, the research that so consistently found women to be more religious than men suffered from a common limitation in much social scientific research: it focused on Western countries where the majority of people are Christian. More recently, research has begun to clearly demonstrate that the pattern of women being consistently more religious than men is a Christian phenomenon with reversed patterns in Jewish and Muslim contexts (Hackett, Murphy, and McClendon 2016; Schnabel 2015, 2018a, 2019; Schnabel, Hackett, and McClendon 2018). This context-specific pattern appears to be driven by some combination of the gendered nature of societies and religions such that women will be more religious than men when (1) they experience more inequality, lack of social status, and hardship and thereby have a greater need for social and psychological compensation, (2) a faith tradition provides social and psychological compensation to structurally-disadvantaged groups, and (3) a faith tradition and social expectations around it are gendered in such a way that women experience more affirmations for being religious and judgment for being non-religious (Edgell, Frost, and Stewart 2017; Schnabel 2016c, 2017, 2018a, 2019; Schnabel, Hackett, and McClendon 2018).

In addition to varying across religious contexts, gender differences in religiosity also vary across social contexts among Christians in ways consistent with the noted importance of social and

psychological compensation and affirmation. Women with high-earning, high-status careers are not more religious than men in Christian contexts (Hastings and Lindsay 2013; Schnabel 2016c), which could be due to their access to alternative means of affirmation and a lack of affirmation from religious communities as a result of their careers. Similarly, among highly-educated political liberals, many of whom have professional careers, there are smaller to no gender gaps in religiosity (Baker and Whitehead 2016). The same context-specific social factors that lead women to be more religious in some contexts also tend to produce a reverse gender gap in religious dogmatism (i.e., religious certainty, judgmentalism, and intolerance) despite the link between religiosity and dogmatism. In other words, women tend to be more religious but less religiously dogmatic than men in Christian contexts, expressing their greater religiosity in more flexible, accepting, and tolerant ways (Schnabel 2018a).

Sexual Minorities Less Involved in Organized Religion

Whereas women, racial and ethnic minorities, and some other structurally-disadvantaged groups can find compensatory social and psychological comfort, affirmation, and community in religion, sexual minorities have more often than not found judgment and condemnation (Pitt 2010a; Wedow et al. 2017). Subsequently, sexual minorities tend to be less involved in and committed to organized religion—though, of note, the gender gap tends to be reversed among sexual minorities such that gay men are comparatively more religious and lesbians less so (Sherkat 2002, 2016). Nevertheless, sexual minorities still report relatively high levels of psychological compensation from their personal religion and spirituality and engage in forms of practice less tied to organized religion (e.g., meditation), suggesting that were it not for the condemnation the potential psychological compensation religion and spirituality can provide might have a similar draw as for other structurally-disadvantaged groups (Schnabel 2020, 2021a).

Some religion has become more affirming, but sexual minorities remain less involved in organized religion (Sherkat 2016). Not only are sexual minorities less involved in organized religion,

it appears that the condemnation of sexual minorities—and conservative values on issues of gender, sexuality, and autonomy more generally—appear to be a key part of why liberals and moderates, heterosexual and sexual minority alike, are distancing themselves from organized religion (Bock 2021; Hout and Fischer 2014).

Religious Exit by and over Gender and Sexuality

The share of Americans with no religious affiliation has more than tripled over the past 50 years (Hout and Fischer 2014). While a growing number of Americans were raised with no religious affiliation (Schwadel 2010), most nones were associated with a religious denomination before disaffiliating (Hout and Fischer 2002, 2014), making the study of “exit” from religion particularly salient. Exit resulting from condemnation and/or perceived conflict due to LGBTQ identity has been frequently highlighted especially in qualitative research (e.g., Wedow et al. 2017), but gender has been conspicuously underexplored in scholarship on exit—despite many reasons to expected disaffiliation may be gendered.

Men are more likely than women to disaffiliate from a religious denomination (Baker and Smith 2009; Thiessen and Wilkins-Laflamme 2020; Trzebiatowska and Bruce 2012). Work on the process of exit, like demographic work on nones, has often undertheorized the role of gender. Interview studies contend that exit from religious communities happens in stages (J. Smith 2011; Thiessen and Wilkins-Laflamme 2020) and that defection, like religiosity itself, can have intellectual, emotional and/or social dimensions (Brinkerhoff and Mackie 1993; Zuckerman 2015). These dimensions are often heavily gendered. Jacobs (1989), in a study of those who exited from New Religious Movements (NRMs) found that women respondents were more likely to cite dissatisfaction with patriarchal gender roles as a justification for leaving. Similarly, in interviews with former Orthodox Jews, Newfield (2020) found that men gave intellectual reasons for exit while women gave socio-emotional reasons. Yet both women and men spoke of gendered sartorial restrictions. Sex and sexuality played a role in exit narratives even from more mainstream, less restrictive denominations

(Bullivant 2019; J. Smith 2011; Zuckerman 2015). Indeed, quantitative evidence confirms that nones have more liberal views on sex, sexuality, and gender roles (Vargas 2012; Wilkins-Laflamme 2016). Collett and Lizardo's (2009) finding that women whose parents were patriarchal are less likely to be religious suggests that attitudes have causal power as well. Despite gender's importance in accounts, justifications, correlates, and potential causes of exit, process models continue to assume that women and men disaffiliate in the same ways.

The role and salience of religion shifts across stages of the life course (Sherkat 2014; Thiessen and Wilkins-Laflamme 2017), which are linked to gendered institutions like marriage, childbearing, and employment. Jennifer Glass' research demonstrates many of the intersections between gender, religion, and life course outcomes for conservative Protestants (e.g., Glass and Jacobs 2005; Glass and Nath 2006). The economic disadvantage accrued to those born to conservative Protestant traditions dissipates if they switch affiliations early enough to delay marriage and childbearing (Glass, Sutton, and Fitzgerald 2015). While Glass and her coauthors find this effect across genders, we do not know whether the same would be true for leave-taking from other denominations and/or traditions.

The role of gender in religious exit provides a new angle on one of the persistent puzzles of the sociology of religion. Namely, how do we explain women's continued (and often disproportionate) attachment to religion despite many traditions' arguably patriarchal values? We suspect that continuing to interrogate the relationship between exit and the life course will help scholars arrive at better understandings of ways exit is gendered. We know, for example, that religion and fertility are linked (Hayford and Morgan 2008; Schnabel 2021b), and we know that women carry a disproportionate childcare burden (Bianchi, Robinson, and Milkie 2006). Could it be that parents, and perhaps especially mothers, face social expectations from those around them to raise children in religion? Another potential life course transition to examine is marriage and partnership. We know that having a partner of a different faith increases the likelihood of religious disaffiliation (Thiessen and Wilkins-Laflamme

2020), but who is more likely to de/convert? In which denominations are there gender differences in homophily and what does that tell us about those traditions' gender regimes? As work on nones and on exit (appropriately) continues to grow, we hope scholars dig deeper into these questions.

QUESTION 7: HOW DOES RELIGION SHAPE BEHAVIORS AND LIFE OUTCOMES IN RELATION TO GENDER AND SEXUALITY?

Religion's intersection with other social institutions means that economic and other life outcomes are also patterned by religious affiliation, gender, and sexuality.

Work, Earnings, and Education

Religion has the potential to facilitate or constrain a wide array of life outcomes, with conservative religion often pushing women and to a lesser extent men to prioritize family and other concerns over their careers. Among white women, for example, conservative Christian religion typically constrains educational outcomes, occupation choice, and wages (Glass and Jacobs 2005; Glass and Nath 2006; Uecker and Pearce 2017). More religious involvement, even in more moderate forms of religion such as mainline Protestantism and Catholicism, is also linked to lower wages for women (Beck 2016). Furthermore, elite careers seem to be perceived as relatively incompatible with religion in a way they do not for men, though this is less the case among Black Americans than among white Americans (Hastings and Lindsay 2013; Schnabel 2016c). Nevertheless, more progressive forms of religious subculture can actually boost women's and to a lesser extent men's career trajectories. For example, Horwitz et al. (2021) found that children, and especially girls, raised in a non-Orthodox Jewish habitus tend to get more education and attend better schools than children from a comparable social location.

Recent work on Muslim women in the U.S. found their religiosity does not affect workforce participation. Instead, education, ethnicity, and child-bearing are strongly associated with Muslim women's employment (Abdelhadi 2017). Abdelhadi (2019) also finds that Muslim women who wear the hijab have a much lower likelihood of employment than non-Muslim women or non-veiling Muslim women. While Abdelhadi's findings suggest that veiling women may face discrimination, the

veil has different effects in contexts where it is compulsory. Scholars have found that compulsory veiling laws in Iran and Saudi Arabia can lead to a decline in religiosity while bans on veiling can prevent social integration and increase religiosity (Carvalho 2013). Highlighting religion as both an independent *and* a dependent variable, research finds that Muslim women with limited economic opportunities are more likely to take on fundamentalist and traditionalist belief systems in order to enhance their value as a potential marriage partner (Blaydes and Linzer 2008). Beyond the individual-level research, contextual research finds that more religious countries tend to have less gender equity in outcomes such as education and work—there is relatively smaller difference between different religious cultures (e.g., Christian countries and Muslim countries) and more difference between more (more equal) or less (less equal) secular countries (Schnabel 2016b; Seguino 2011). As Abdelhadi and England (2019) show, net of other factors whether a country is Muslim or not does not predict women’s employment status.

Relationships, Family, and Fertility

Religion plays an important role in how people live out their sexual, romantic, and family lives. It shapes who they partner with and when, whether they embrace or deny their sexual orientation the roles they take on in their families, and their child-bearing choices. And it does all these things at both the individual and contextual levels. For example, more religious individuals have more children and more religious countries have more children with important demographic implications for the world population over time—for example, we can expect more religious countries to make up a growing proportion of the world population over time and for the proportion of the world who is religiously unaffiliated to peak and potentially decline around the middle of the 21st-century (Cutright, Hout, and Johnson 1976; Hackett et al. 2015; Hout, Greeley, and Wilde 2001; Schnabel 2021b). The influence of religion on fertility appears to operate via factors such as beliefs about and practices related to gender and sexuality, including gender attitudes and modern contraception (Schnabel 2021b). Beyond but

related to fertility, religion also shapes sex for pleasure, impacting such factors as premarital and extramarital sex. For example, whereas individual Hindus and Muslims are less likely to have premarital sex than Jews and Christians, everyone is less likely to have premarital sex in countries with a higher percentage of Muslims (Adamczyk & Hayes, 2012).

Religion shapes not only behaviors but also perceptions of behaviors. Moral incongruity between one's beliefs and behaviors can lead one to deny an identity (e.g., same-sex attracted individuals who have had sex with a member of the same-sex being more likely to deny LGBTQ identity) or perceive an addiction (e.g., conservative Christians report higher rates of pornography addiction) and suffer negative mental health consequences that wouldn't be denied or perceived by someone else engaging in similar behaviors (Perry 2019; Perry, Grubbs, and McElroy 2021).

Health, Happiness, and Wellbeing

Religion is often considered a protective factor for health, happiness, and wellbeing, both providing general positive associations on some wellbeing outcomes and buffering of negative consequences of hardship (Hastings and Roeser 2020; Schieman, Bierman, and Ellison 2013; Schnabel and Schieman 2022). However, recent studies have investigated the impact of religious affiliation and religiosity on gender and sexual minorities and demonstrated some heterogeneity in these apparent benefits.

Religious upbringing is linked to disproportionate depression and suicide among sexual and gender minorities raised in Christian, Muslim, and other religious contexts with high rates of opposition to sexual and gender minorities driven at least in part by identity conflict arising from the dissonance experienced between religious and LGBTQ identity (Ganzevoort, van der Laan, and Olsman 2011; Gibbs and Goldbach 2015; Walton 2006). Greater levels of "outness" to religious communities may be beneficial to the mental health of older LGBTQ adults—leading to lower levels of depression and loneliness (Escher et al. 2019). These findings suggest that religion may have a negative effect on the mental health of sexual and gender minorities, but that these negative

consequences can be mitigated by factors such as coming out (and feeling like one's community will be accepting enough to come out).

Many scholars argue that Christianity's characteristics and beliefs are linked to the prevalence of domestic abuse around the world (Nason-Clark 2004; Rakoczy 2004). However, some domestic violence victims regularly turn to their religion as a coping mechanism to sustain them during abusive marriages and some women have even reported fewer depression symptoms (Nason-Clark 2004; Watlington and Murphy 2006). In a similar vein, some scholars have found that in religiously conservative couples, men tend to drink less, suggesting that religious factors affect drinking—proposing that some religions could help protect women from domestic violence (Ellison, Barrett, and Moulton 2008). Beyond the question of domestic violence, research suggests that women who attend gender-traditional religious institutions report worse self-rated health than women who attend more inclusive congregations (Homan and Burdette 2021) but religion may still provide a stress-buffering effect for women as a structurally-disadvantaged group (Jung 2021). These results demonstrate the complicated relationship between religion and wellbeing for women and how it can, at one and the same time, be both helpful and harmful.

QUESTION 8: HOW DOES RELIGION SHAPE VIEWS ON GENDER AND SEXUALITY?

Religion shapes views on gender and sexuality. Through politics and policies, these views then shape the experiences of gender and sexual identity groups—whether women can get abortions, sexual minorities can get married, and Muslim women can wear head coverings in public. They also drive social divisions, evident in debates over sex education, voting patterns, and immigrant-host relations.

More religious Americans and especially conservative Protestants have more conservative views toward gender (Bartkowski and Hempel 2009; Moore and Vanneman 2003), abortion (Ellison, Echevarría, and Smith 2005), and sexual minorities (Powell, Schnabel, and Apgar 2017; Sherkat, DeVries, and Creek 2010). These results are driven by the attitudes of white Christians who have made

up a majority of the American public, though even members of racial minority religious groups who have more progressive economic attitudes still have fairly conservative social attitudes on issues related to gender and sexuality (Sherkat, DeVries, and Creek 2010). Attitude change on issues like women in the workforce and civil rights for sexual minorities has largely occurred across U.S. religious groups, with more religious people and conservative Protestants liberalizing as well—but not necessarily catching up, so that consistent differences persist (Petersen and Donnerwerth 1998; Schnabel et al. 2022). On certain issues, such as abortion, premarital sex, and same-sex marriage, there remain large, and even growing, differences by religion (Bolzendahl and Brooks 2005; Evans 2002; Schnabel 2016a).

Cross-national work finds that Protestants and Muslims are more strongly opposed to homosexuality than adherents of other religions and the non-affiliated (Adamczyk 2017; Adamczyk and Pitt 2009). Muslim societies have more gender traditional attitudes (Glas, Spierings, and Scheepers 2018; Norris and Inglehart 2012), as do Muslim individuals (Alexander and Welzel 2011), including African citizens (Charles 2020) and immigrants in European countries (Diehl, Koenig, and Ruckdeschel 2009; Röder 2014)—though the relationship between Muslim religiosity and attitudes may vary by gender (Kucinskas 2010).

Mechanisms for How Religion Shapes Gender and Sexuality Attitudes

What explains these patterns? One straightforward explanation is that gender and sexuality attitudes emerge from religious teachings. But these teachings are set forth in particular cultural and political contexts. Scholars attribute evangelical Protestants' conservative attitudes to their literal interpretation of the Bible and their politicized religiosity. Religious teachings provide schemas (Sewell 1992) that shape religionists "worldviews" (Emerson 1996) on issues like pornography (Perry 2019), gender roles in the household (Bartkowski and Hempel 2009), abortion (Ellison, Echevarría, and Smith 2005), and same-sex relationships (Martin 2009; Perry and Schnabel 2017). Frequent attendance draws congregants into a "moral community," where they may be sanctioned for their views (Olson, Cadge,

and Harrison 2006; Petersen and Donnenwerth 1998). Likewise, it is specifically frequently attending Pentecostals and Catholics in Brazil who are the most opposed to abortion (Ogland and Verona 2011), and it is religiosity—rather than religious affiliation per se—that explains conservative attitudes among both Muslim and non-Muslim Britons (Lewis and Kashyap 2013).

While a focus on religious teachings is useful for describing broad differences between religions and denominations, it is limited in its ability to account for attitudinal heterogeneity and change. To understand this complexity, it's helpful to conceptualize religion not as a static, coherent belief system, but as one type of cultural knowledge generated within social context (Edgell 2012) and situated in everyday practices (Ammerman 2020). Rather than simply adopting a preexisting theology, adherents are agentic interpreters of religious teachings. These interpretations depend on individuals' particular social locations, including how they define their identities against those of others through boundary work, and how their other intersecting identities shape their experience of religion (Abdelhadi and O'Brien 2020; Read and Eagle 2011; Schnabel 2021a). Finally, whether certain interpretations become institutionalized beyond the individual level depends on organizational factors.

Religious actors vary in how they interpret religious teachings. Because they have this interpretive agency, attitudes on gender and sexuality can shift over time through contestation and debate. In the case of Christianity in the US, scholars have documented debates over spousal authority relations among evangelical commentators (Bartkowski 1997), growing citations of non-biblical sources on the issue of homosexuality in evangelical media (Thomas and Olson 2012), how Ephesians 5:21-22 can encode wifely submission *or* mutual submission in different translations of the Bible (Perry 2020), and how evangelicals in the U.S. came to adopt an especially militant, patriarchal version of Christianity (Du Mez 2020), creating a cultural identity rather than merely conveying religious doctrine.

In the case of Islam, Glas, Spierings, and Scheepers (2018) argue that Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) publics are agentic rather than passively socialized into patriarchal norms

(e.g., Inglehart and Norris 2003a), and that women and highly educated Muslims are particularly equipped to adopt egalitarian interpretations. The presence of a robust civic sphere and women's movement may foster egalitarian interpretations, as in Egypt (Kucinskas 2010). Reformist Islamist women in Turkey use feminist lenses to frame the head covering as facilitating women's mobility in the public sphere (Marshall 2005), and feminist activists in Indonesia critically interpret Islamic texts through the lens of gender equality (Rinaldo 2013). Similarly, Muslim immigrants in Europe must navigate competing norms, and many gradually adopt more liberal attitudes on gender roles and homosexuality (Maliepaard and Alba 2016; Röder 2015; Scheible and Fleischmann 2012).

Among other factors, religious actors' interpretive work may be shaped by their boundary work and multiple intersecting identities. In terms of boundary work, research finds the content of people's attitudes is defined relationally, against those of groups they identify as different. This boundary work shapes attitudinal trends: while evangelical and more religious Americans have moved with the mainstream on gender role attitudes, they are increasingly distinguishing themselves when it comes to same-sex relationships (Schnabel 2016a; Schnabel et al. 2022). Qualitative work echoes this finding that attitudinal convergence is limited by boundary work. Some evangelicals distance themselves from "radical feminism," embracing women's right to work while opposing abortion and idealizing male headship (Gallagher 2004). Even simply imagining a threatening, secular "other" can shape evangelicals' stances on issues like trans rights (Diefendorf 2019).

Work on non-U.S. contexts similarly finds that attitudes are shaped by perceptions of threat and the resulting boundaries that are drawn. Jewish traditionalist women in Israel distance themselves from Orthodox *and* secular women, thus endorsing egalitarian spousal relations *as well as* sexual conservatism and traditional Jewish menstruation rites (Yadgar 2006). In the Netherlands, second-generation Muslims who are more embedded within their ethnic networks are more gender-traditional than their parents, suggesting a form of "reactive ethnicity" where their Islamic identities strengthen

in response to discrimination from the host society (Maliapaard and Alba 2016). Overall, whether boundary work moves attitudes in progressive or conservative directions depends on whether religionists define themselves against their conservative counterparts or the secular world.

Taking an intersectional or “complex religion” perspective, we see that members of different identity groups may experience religion differently, and therefore interpret religious teachings differently. For instance, men and women experience religion differently. Women may have a more literal interpretation of the Bible (Hoffmann and Bartkowski 2008), such that theological conservatism explains evangelical women’s gender traditionalism, but not men’s (Bartkowski and Hempel 2009). In addition, beliefs that appear to spring causally from “religion” may instead have been shaped by religion’s interaction with other dimensions of power and inequality, like race (O’Brien and Abdelhadi 2020; Yukich and Edgell 2020). Wilde and Danielsen (2014) show how progressive denominations’ sudden support for contraceptive legalization between 1929 and 1931 was driven by eugenicist concerns about the growing Catholic and Jewish immigrant population (also see Wilde 2019).

Finally, whether certain interpretations become institutionalized in policies and practices depends on the organizational context within which attitudes are circulated and contested. Religious leaders respond to congregation members’ diverse interpretations of religious teachings, and these reciprocal interactions shape religious experience over time (Sumerau and Cragun 2015). Examining the organizational imperatives and constraints that religious leaders face can help us understand attitudinal change and stasis. Edgell (2006) shows how both conservative and liberal congregations in New York came to accommodate the more diverse family forms among their membership through incremental changes. However, most are constrained by the schemas of traditional family life embedded in their institutional practices of family ministry. Religious leaders, fearing a loss of membership, may also be hesitant to invite debate or adopt official statements on divisive issues like homosexuality (Djupe, Olson, and Gilbert 2006; Olson and Cadge 2002). However, with adequate

guidance from the denomination, congregations can invite discussion from members. In the experience of several Lutheran congregations, such discussions softened members' opinions about homosexuality (Cadge, Olson, and Wildeman 2008).

Overall, the literature reveals significant attitudinal differences between levels and types of religion, but suggests that they do not spring straightforwardly from coherent worldviews. Rather, attitudes emerge from the interpretations of religious actors, which are shaped by the boundary work they do within their sociopolitical contexts and the intersections among their multiple identities.

QUESTION 9: WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS OF RELIGION FOR GENDER AND SEXUALITY POLITICS?

Religion can act as a complicating intermediary force between social statuses, including gender and sexual orientation, and politics. For example, if women are more religious than men and religion impacts politics, then religion could have a disproportionate impact on women's politics.

Inequality, Religion, and Gender and Sexuality Politics

People often assume that it's men who are most likely to oppose women's right to choose what to do with their bodies. But as we see in ongoing debates around abortion and other issues, men do not have a monopoly on opposing reproductive freedom and other rights. In fact, men seem to be just as if not more likely to support abortion in the United States (Schnabel 2021a). On the surface this might seem paradoxical: Why would women be more opposed to a woman's right to choose?

Sometimes we forget that women (and men) are complex people with multiple aspects of who they are, a range of things they care about, and a diversity of life experiences (Collins 2000; Davis 1971; Priest and Edwards 2019; Stewart, Frost, and Edgell 2017; Wilde 2018). And these factors interact with one another in complex ways. Women are not just women: They also have a racial identity, a region where they live, a sexual orientation, and so on. And each of these can come with accompanying values and interests.

Importantly for questions of reproductive politics, women—like some other structurally-disadvantaged groups in the United States—are substantially more religious than their more privileged counterparts. Despite having more liberal politics as a whole, their greater religiousness promotes greater support for traditional politics on specific issues, like abortion, where their religious beliefs are now particularly salient (Schnabel 2018b). In fact, it is precisely because of their greater religiousness that women are less likely to support abortion than men. Religion trumps gender for many women’s politics more generally, which can help explain why so many women, especially white Christian women, voted for Trump over the first woman nominated by a major party in 2016 (Schnabel 2021a; also see Davis 1971).

Whereas women are not as progressive as might be expected on the basis of positionality and status theories of politics such as the “underdog principle,” sexual minorities are very consistently progressive. And religion can also help explain why: whereas women tend to be more religious than men which thereby suppresses gender differences in politics, sexual minorities tend to be less involved in and committed to organized religion than heterosexuals which amplifies sexual orientation differences in politics (Schnabel 2018b, 2021a).

Where gender and sexuality differences in religiosity vary and/or the relationship between religiosity and politics vary, religion does not operate in the same way in complicating gender and sexuality politics. In some contexts, where either group differences in religiosity are small or religion and politics are only weakly correlated, religion does not alter the relationship between group membership and politics (Schnabel 2018a, 2019). And in Muslim contexts where men tend to be more religious than women, religion actually appears to amplify gender differences in religiosity (Schnabel 2019). Accordingly, gender differences in abortion attitudes tend to be larger among Muslims (with women much more likely to support a woman’s right to choose) and smaller and sometimes even reversed among Christians around the world (Schnabel 2019).

Political Participation, Policy, and Activism

Religion can impact political involvement and could constrain or facilitate not just egalitarian ideology but also general engagement. Organized religion gives individuals a variety of civic skills and networks that encourage individuals to participate in politics. But the impact seems to vary by social statuses, with theologically conservative beliefs suppressing political participation for U.S. women (Cassese and Holman 2016). In other countries, such as Indonesia, Rinaldo (2013) posits that religious interpretation varies within political movements, specifically for Muslim women activists as part of their interpretation of feminism. While the LGBT movement has made significant progress in the US, LGBT individuals continue to face discrimination in their faith communities. Drawing on interviews with student activists at a range of Christian colleges, Coley (2018) shows that LGBT students are able to transform university policies and open up campus dialogue surrounding sexual minorities.

Importantly, however, our awareness and understanding of gender and sexual politics is likely skewed, with people being more likely to look for, highlight, and promulgate information about the “bad” of religion in some places while overlooking it in others. Using data from 35 years of New York Times and Washington Post reporting, Terman (2017) finds that U.S. journalists are more likely to report on women living in Muslim and Middle Eastern countries if their rights are violated and the coverage emphasizes women’s rights violations and gender inequality. Of note, Muslim contexts appear to have generally similar gender equity to Christian contexts once other country-level factors apart from religion are accounted for (Schnabel 2016b), suggesting the public imagination’s understanding of religion’s social and political implications for gender and sexual equality may be skewed to be overly positive in Christian contexts and negative in Muslim contexts.

QUESTION 10: WHAT’S NEXT IN THE STUDY OF GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND RELIGION?

We’ve considered some of the big questions in the study of gender, sexuality, and religion. We want to both highlight the breadth of research that has already been done and emphasize how much room

there is for more. Obviously, a single review article cannot cover everything; we have only listed ten questions and each of the questions we listed probably deserves a book-length treatment rather than the brief coverage we've given them. In what follows, we set forth an agenda for future research.

Future Directions in Ways to Approach Gender, Sexuality, and Religion

A bifurcation has occurred in the study of gender, sexuality, and religion with separate conversations occurring on the topic among distinct groups of scholars attending different conferences and publishing in different journals. Rather than one group of scholars working together, there has instead been the “religion” scholars looking at gender and sexuality and the “gender” and/or “sexuality” scholars looking at religion rather than a full integration of the areas of study. Avishai and Irby (2017) show that religion and gender journals tend to engage in conversations among themselves but not across subfields even when articles are on both topics, that scholars tend to publish within their “expertise” in either religion or gender and theorize and cite within their subfield even in generalist journals, and that few scholars span across subfields—they identified only three scholars who published across religion, gender, and generalist outlets. The bifurcation of subfields led to different conversations happening on different topics, using different approaches, and examining different samples with different methods—among the key differences is that “religion” approaches tend to be more mainstream, focused on Christians in Western countries, and less critical whereas “gender” approaches tend to be more feminist, committed to studying diverse populations, and more critical.

We agree with Avishai and Irby that these topics that cross subfields are an opportunity for cross-fertilization and integration and hope future work will draw more broadly on a wider range of theories, methods, approaches, and samples. We also agree with Edwards (2019) on the importance of recognizing and examining power as a central factor and we suggested three frameworks—the gender lens perspective promoted by Avishai and others (Avishai, Jafar, and Rinaldo 2015), the cultural analysis frame set forth by Edgell and others (Edgell 2012), and the intersectional or complex religion

approach advanced by Wilde and others (Wilde and Glassman 2016)—that we believe can and should be integrated for the examination of power in relation to gender, sexuality, and religion. Intersectionality is in some ways a particularly timely approach and scholars working on gender, sexuality, and religion have an opportunity to bring religion into broader conversations, highlighting how religion—and perhaps especially ethnoreligious identity and other entanglements between religion and ethnicity, nationality, and culture—intersects with other identities in the matrix of domination (Collins 2000). Likewise, rather than simply trying to tell people religion matters, scholars working on gender, sexuality, and religion from a cultural approach can demonstrate how religion shapes key symbolic boundaries with important implications for contemporary cultural and political divides in our fractured nation and divided world. Renewed debates considering the criminalization of abortion may be a particularly salient site where the nexus of gender, sexuality, and religion could be examined and demonstrated to be of particular import to contemporary affairs.

We think scholars can and should go beyond integrating the study of gender and religion and integrate the study of gender and sexuality in relation to religion. Gender and sexuality are intertwined, with work by Pascoe (2005) illustrating how they are so entangled that terminology about one can end up referring to the other. In the contemporary political landscape and public discourse, gender and sexuality are often brought together either explicitly or implicitly and some hot-button issues, including reproductive issues and LGBTQ rights (T refers to transgender), encompass both.

Beyond the more theory-focused concerns in the future study of gender, sexuality, and religion, we could also consider methodological possibilities. The bifurcated conversations on gender and religion were separated not just by theoretical approach but also method with “gender” scholars more often using qualitative methods and “religion” scholars more often using quantitative methods. In the future, we hope there will be more integration such as mixed-methods approaches, quantitative

analysis of qualitative data (e.g., computational textual analysis), and critical approaches using quantitative data (e.g., intersectional quantitative research).

Future Directions in Areas of Focus in Gender, Sexuality, and Religion

The social science of religion generally, and the social science of gender and sexuality specifically, could greatly benefit from including more diverse groups and regions. Muslims and Muslim-majority countries are particularly understudied. Islam is the world's second largest religion and yet research in the "top" religion and generalist social science outlets rarely focuses on Muslims and Islam especially in comparison to some much smaller groups who get much more proportionate attention (e.g., U.S. white conservative Protestants and New Religious Movements) (Smilde and May 2015). With recent developments in cross-national research and global data available to researchers from various sources (e.g., World Values Survey, International Social Survey Programme, Global Barometer Surveys, and Pew Global Surveys), researchers can study global patterns with publicly available data that would previously been impossible without massive funding and herculean efforts.

In addition to Muslims being particularly understudied, some traditions, especially Eastern traditions, have been frequently poorly understood and conceptualized in the social science of religion. We have often tried to apply the types of measures we would apply to congregation-centric theistic religions and either said we've found high levels of secularism or thrown our hands up in the air. It is important to understand and measure traditions according to their beliefs, values, and practices rather than our own. Religious studies has a robust tradition challenging the projection of modern Western conceptions of religion onto other traditions (e.g., Pennington 2005) and lived religion approaches in sociology (e.g., Ammerman 2020) help us see religious life in more complex and inclusive ways that could be applied to the study of gender, sexuality, and religion.

In many ways, we are just scratching the surface of what there is to know about gender, sexuality, and religion around the world. Importantly for our understanding of gender, sexuality, and

religion, the regions and contexts that have been examined most frequently are Western Christian-majority countries and general patterns found in these contexts may or may not generalize to other groups and contexts. Religion clearly matters in the United States and many other Western countries, but some of these contexts are comparatively more secular than some of the less-studied regions where religion may matter even more and where attitudes and policies on gender and sexuality may be even more impactful (and often constraining) on people's everyday lives. For example, it is still illegal to be gay or obtain an abortion even to save a woman's life in many countries around the world and this is particularly common in highly religious—typically Christian or Muslim—countries. Scholars looking for areas of potential research could pick among a plethora of topics and make substantial contributions by looking at the patterns globally instead of locally. There are also many opportunities for contextual considerations of gender, sexuality, and religion that become possible when looking at data at both country and individual levels as illustrated by work being done by Adamczyk and others (Adamczyk and Hayes 2012; Adamczyk and Pitt 2009).

In addition to looking beyond Western Christian contexts to non-Christians around the world or to Christians globally, scholars could also make important contributions by examining less-frequently examined minority groups locally. For example, non-Christians in Western countries, underexamined racial and ethnic minorities, other underexamined groups such as the neurodivergent, and, particularly relevant for the study of gender and sexuality, underexamined gender and sexual identity groups. Transgender rights are a growing arena of public discourse and symbolic boundaries and our understanding of the role of religion in this arena is much less developed than in others (Campbell, Hinton, and Anderson 2019; Sumerau, Cragun, and Mathers 2016; Sumerau, Mathers, and Cragun 2018). We also know very little about other emergent topics in the study of gender and sexuality such as asexuality in relation to religion. Many “religion” scholars who consider gender and sexuality do not keep on top of the literature in these areas and thus enterprising early-career scholars

interested in gender, sexuality, and religion could benefit from becoming true experts and joining conversations within and across each subfield rather than siloing themselves in one or another.

The literature on gender, sexuality, and religion is much richer than one article can do justice to, but it's also an area with a vast horizon of possibility ahead of it. Just as we could only scratch the surface of what has already been done, what has already been done on gender, sexuality, and religion only scratches the surface of what could and should be done in this important and exciting area of research. We know much more about Christians in certain countries than about other groups and regions of world. And even in regard to majority groups in the nations most regularly examined there are ongoing debates and much more to be uncovered in relation to these questions as new generations of scholars take up new angles, approaches, theories, and methods. Beyond the possibility of better answers to the questions scholars have already been asking, new questions can and should be explored as ideas arise and social change occurs. For example, even as many religious groups are now finally starting to liberalize on same-sex relationships, new issues and topics are emerging in gender, sexuality, and religion that we know much less about, including how religion is implicated in views on things like asexuality, transgender rights, and the very notion of a strictly binary approach to gender.

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