

Navigating the Religious Gender Binary

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This study illustrates the regulatory impact of binary gender ideology upon religious practitioners through interview data from 44 religious and formerly religious nonbinary people (who do not identify as simply men or women). Results indicate that nonbinary people who wish to maintain religious ties must either adjust religion to accommodate their nonbinary gender or accept misgendering to accommodate their religious tradition, with very few alternative options. They must overcome ideological, liturgical, and ritual obstacles while navigating the regulatory barrier that this article calls “the religious gender binary.” Challenges intensify for religious minorities in practice-based traditions due to structural constraints. These findings contribute toward the sociology of religion by (1) demonstrating how nonbinary people experience the binary (cis)gendering of reality across religious traditions and (2) illuminating the need for more research that centers gender minorities and religious minorities, as the sociology of gender and religion expands beyond cisnormative and Christonormative frameworks.

Key words: transgender; nonbinary; religion; Judaism; Christonormativity

INTRODUCTION

Sociologists have long been fascinated by religion and gender as individual categories of analysis, but the relationship between religion and gender remains relatively undertheorized even within this flagship journal (for exceptions, see [Avishai 2016](#); [Jacobs 2000](#); [Neitz 2004, 2014](#); [Sleep 2000](#); [Sumerau et al. 2018a](#)). Moreover, the limited research on religion and gender that *does* exist focuses disproportionately upon the experiences of socially dominant groups such as

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Christians and cisgender¹ men and women. Sumerau et al. (2016) contend that this systematic omission of transgender people's perspectives and experiences contributes toward the "cisgendering" of reality, whereby cisgender people's experiences become representative of everyone's experiences.

Many sociologists have analyzed power imbalances between cis men and cis women (Bartkowski 2001; Bush 2010; Burke 2012, 2016; Burke and McDowell 2012; Griffith 1997; Ingersoll 2003; Irby 2014b; McDowell 2017; Rao 2015; Rinaldo 2019; Sullins 2000; Sumerau and Cragun 2015). However, women are not the only ones who experience marginalization within traditionally patriarchal religious traditions. Although the binary gendering of religious norms and practices certainly restricts women's access to power, this same binary system also erases the very existence of those who defy the man/woman categorical system—such as nonbinary people, who do not identify as simply men or women. This study illuminates a new angle of the gender/religion nexus by centering the religious experiences of nonbinary people, a gender demographic that has only recently begun to attract sustained attention from sociologists (Barbee and Schrock 2019; Darwin 2017; Garrison 2018; Risman 2018; Rogers 2018; Shuster 2017).

Forty-four semistructured in-depth interviews with nonbinary people illustrate how they negotiate not just the "cisgendering" of reality (i.e., the erasure of transgender people), but also the binary gendering of reality (i.e., the erasure of those who defy man/woman frameworks). To some extent, the binary gendering of reality overlaps with the cisgendering of reality, but these processes are not entirely interchangeable. Although this distinction might seem like a matter of semantics, it is an important distinction to make in the interest of highlighting the diversity that exists within trans and nonbinary populations (Schilt and Lagos 2017). Some trans men and trans women are happy to live their lives as men and women following their gender transitions; thus, the binary gendering of reality does not inhibit their ability to "do" their gender (West and Zimmerman 1987). Meanwhile, the binary gendering of reality does directly impede nonbinary people's ability to "do" their gender (Darwin 2017). In recognition of these particularities, this article theorizes a process that I call the binary (cis)gendering of reality. By placing the "cis" prefix in parenthesis, I acknowledge that not all nonbinary people identify as transgender and that transgender people are not the only ones who are negatively affected by binary gender segregation—women are often disadvantaged by this arrangement as well.

The binary (cis)gendering of reality produces a regulatory barrier that inhibits nonbinary people's access to religious subjectivity and ideology across religious traditions, as this article will demonstrate. Significantly, the contours of this

¹"Transgender" or "trans" refers to someone who identifies with a gender other than the one that was assigned to them at birth; meanwhile, "cisgender" or "cis" refers to someone who identifies with the same gender that was assigned to them at birth.

barrier vary by religious category: nonbinary religious minority interviewees contend with structural obstacles within their practice-based traditions that Christians do not similarly report. I conclude with suggestions for future research that might illuminate even more angles of this gender/religion nexus. This article contributes to the sociology of religion in two important ways, by (1) highlighting particularities of religious experience that problematize extant cisnormative and “Christonormative” frameworks and (2) illustrating how the binary (cis) gendering of reality structures religious experience.

DOING GENDER, DOING RELIGION

West and Zimmerman (1987) famously proposed that gender is something that people achieve through their daily interactions, rather than some innate quality. Centering Garfinkel’s (1967) case study of a trans woman named Agnes, they demonstrated how people find themselves accountable to others’ gender ideals and expectations on at least three levels: internal, interpersonal, and institutional (Hollander 2013). Due to the omnipresence of these systems of accountability, West and Zimmerman originally contended that “doing gender” is inevitable. However, when their model later came under critique for foreclosing the possibility of egalitarian social change, they conceded that perhaps gender could be “redone” as the range of socially viable gender norms, practices, and ideals expand (West and Zimmerman 2009).

The constraints of binary gender ideology come into sharpest relief when studies center the lived experiences of transgender people—hence, West and Zimmerman’s decision to feature Agnes within their original model. Indeed, transgender people must constantly negotiate their accountability to binary gender ideals at all three levels of interest to the “doing gender” model: within themselves through identity work (Darwin 2017; Garrison 2018), within daily interactions with strangers, coworkers, and loved ones (Shuster 2017; Vidal-Ortiz 2002; Westbrook and Schilt 2014), and within institutional settings such as the workplace, medical clinics, and the legal system (Connell 2010; Johnson 2015; Meadow 2010; Schilt 2011). Moreover, transgender and nonbinary people contend with additional challenges in their quest for social recognition that cisgender social actors do not similarly encounter; therefore, some argue that these interactions are not reducible to “doing gender” (i.e., “doing cisgender” according to Sumerau and Mathers 2019), but more specifically constitute “doing transgender” (Connell 2010) or “doing nonbinary” (Darwin 2017).

Of course, gender is but one of the many systems of power operating within society, alongside race, sexuality, class, disability, and religion. Therefore, while “re/doing gender,” people also “re/do” other parts of their identity, including but not limited to religion (Avishai 2008; Darwin 2018; Irby 2014a; Rao 2015). Indeed, just as gender is something that people “do,” Avishai (2008) contends that religion is something that people perform while negotiating their accountability

to religious norms and ideals. According to Avishai, “doing religion” provides practitioners with “a mode of being, a performance of identity, and a route toward achieving strategic ends” (Avishai, Jafar, and Rinaldo 2015). Others have since built upon Avishai’s work by demonstrating how people simultaneously negotiate their accountability to gender norms and ideals while “doing religion” (Darwin 2018; Irby 2014a; Rao 2015; Rinaldo 2019). As Darwin (2018) observes, “doing gender” and “doing religion” function as intertwined systems of accountability; therefore, the redoing of gender within a religious community also necessarily precipitates the redoing of religion itself.

These studies contribute to the ever-expanding corpus of sociology of religion research that documents the felt impact of gender essentialism. As scholars have demonstrated, this complementarian ideology shapes people’s identities (Burke 2012; Gerber 2015; Griffith 1997; Ingersoll 2003; McDowell 2017; Rinaldo 2019; Rodriguez and Follins 2012; Wilcox 2009), relationships (Bartkowski 2001; Burke 2016; Irby 2014b; Wolkomir 2006), and religious practices (Brown 2019; Burke and McDowell 2012; Darwin 2018; McDowell 2017; Rinaldo 2019; Wilcox 2018). It is clear that people hold coreligionists accountable to their religions’ gender ideals. Systems of accountability that reinforce conformity wield a particularly diffuse effect in certain cultural fields, such as the “Bible Belt” in the United States (Barton 2012).

What happens when people deviate from these normative gendered religious scripts? Although little research exists on transgender or nonbinary experiences of religion, literature on gay and lesbian Christians lends important insight into the consequences of deviation (McQueeney 2009; Wolkomir 2006). In some cases, people are held externally accountable to normative ideologies through coreligionists’ discriminatory practices and beliefs (Barrett-Fox 2016; Bean and Martinez 2014; Bush 2010; Mathers et al. 2018; Pitt 2009; Sumerau and Cragun 2018; Sumerau et al. 2018b). Additionally, people also sometimes hold *themselves* accountable to normative ideals that they have internalized (Creek 2013). Scholars who research gay and lesbian Christians theorize this internalized conflict between gendered and religious scripts as an “identity dilemma” (Charmaz 1994; Dunn and Creek 2015; Wolkomir 2006). Some resolve this dilemma by leaving homophobic churches in favor of gay and lesbian religious communities (Gerber 2008; Wilcox 2003, 2018; Wolkomir 2006). Others remain within mainstream religious communities while muting their sexuality (Barton 2012; Creek 2013; Gerber 2008; Wolkomir 2006) and displaying a particular type of affect that Moon and Tobin (2018) call “sacramental shame.” Finally, some gay and lesbian Christians insist that they experience no conflict whatsoever within their mainstream religious communities (Fuist 2016). Moon et al. (2019) theorize that a person’s experience of conflict will vary depending on which narrative of religiosity they uphold as authoritative.

This corpus usefully highlights some dilemmas that people encounter when they deviate from normative scripts for “doing gendered religion” (Darwin 2018). However, this body of literature is limited in scope to the experiences of cisgender

social actors; as a consequence of this trend, [Sumerau et al. \(2016\)](#) contend that the sociology of gender and religion has become tantamount to the sociology of cisgender and religion. Sumerau and associates have gone to great lengths ([Cragun and Sumerau 2017](#); [Sumerau 2012, 2017](#); [Sumerau et al. 2016, 2018a](#); [Sumerau and Cragun 2018](#)) to demonstrate how this “cisgendering” of reality manifests not only within the academic study of religion, but within religious communities as well, when “religious leaders and members socially construct and maintain cisnormative interpretations of the world through their ongoing teachings, rituals, and other faith-related activities” ([Sumerau et al. 2016](#): 296). This phenomenon can account for how and why cisgender Christian women justify discriminatory treatment against transgender people through selective interpretations of biblical texts ([Sumerau and Cragun 2018](#)), as well as how and why transgender Christians sustain trauma through religious participation ([Sumerau et al. 2018a](#)).

Though expansive and truly groundbreaking, Sumerau and associates’ corpus has maintained a relatively homogenous focus on Christianity while analyzing transgender experiences of religion. The authors justify this selective focus by emphasizing the political influence that Christianity wields within the United States and beyond ([Sumerau and Cragun 2018](#)). Although this argument has merit, the omission of religious minority voices also reproduces the same issue that the authors critique in the gender context, whereby the experiences of the socially dominant group (Christians) come to represent the experiences of everyone. This tendency to generalize from Christian experiences is what I call “Christonormativity.” To their credit, [Sumerau et al. \(2018c\)](#) recently attempted to expand their scope of analysis beyond Christianity through a large-scale survey of bi+trans² people’s experiences with religion; however, this study ultimately yielded insufficient participation from religious minorities to draw distinctions between religious groups. The authors conclude this study by acknowledging the need for “comparative analyses of how various religious backgrounds may shape the experiences bi+trans people have in religious contexts” ([Sumerau et al. 2018c](#):18). They further note that interview methods would be particularly well-suited “to gather rich data on [...] how they navigate these dynamics in their day to day lives.” ([Sumerau et al. 2018c](#):17). This study directly answers this call for research, by using interview methods to comparatively analyze the experiences of gender-diverse social actors within a range of religious traditions.

This study deviates from Sumerau and associates’ approach, however, by explicitly centering the experiences of nonbinary people, instead of sampling those who identify with the transgender label. Although the social scientific study of transgender people has been blossoming since the early 1990s, this corpus tends to omit the voices of nonbinary people, relegate their existence to the footnotes, or otherwise obscure their particular experiences through “transgender umbrella” rhetoric ([Davidson 2007](#)). For the sake of this study’s focus on the regulatory

²Bi+ refers to those who are sexually attracted to two or more genders.

impact of the gender binary system, I intentionally center the experiences of those who identify and experience their gender in nonbinary ways—whether or not they claim the transgender label. The voices of this understudied and undertheorized demographic are uniquely positioned to highlight the felt repercussions of not just the cisgendering of reality, but more specifically the *binary* (cis)gendering of reality, within a variety of religions.

METHODS

After securing approval from the Institutional Review Board at my University, I conducted a total of 47 semistructured interviews with nonbinary people about the various ways in which they feel the effects of the gender binary system in their daily lives. I utilized video conferencing software while conducting these interviews to access a geographically disparate sample. The questions that I asked aimed to trace the contours of the gender binary. Beyond questions about demographics and identity, I also asked about people's encounters with gender binary restrictions in their childhood homes, school, and the workplace, as well as within religious institutions. This article focuses on the experiences of 44 interviewees who were either raised within a religion or currently identify as religious. Relevant interview excerpts illustrate the felt repercussions of the binary (cis)gendering of reality across religious traditions.

I conducted these interviews over the course of one and a half years between 2015 and 2017, utilizing “snowball sampling” methods. I initiated sampling through preexisting nonbinary contacts in San Francisco and New York City, informed by evidence that nonbinary people tend to gravitate toward the West and East coasts in the United States (Harrison, Grant, and Herman 2012). Once eligible participants completed their interviews with me, I asked them to share my advertisement with others in their social networks. The full sample includes ages ranging from 19 to 61 with an average of 27. The majority are white (or self-reportedly “white-but-Jewish”), which is undoubtedly a limitation of this study. However, the interviewees are geographically and religiously diverse. Though the majority ($n = 29$) were raised in some denomination of Christianity, 12 were raised Jewish and 2 were raised Muslim. This sizeable contingent of religious minorities enables the following comparative analysis.

I audio recorded these interviews, which lasted anywhere from 1 to 3 hours, while manually recording analytical memos for myself. My team of research assistants³ later transcribed and edited these audio recordings. My data consist of interview transcripts (approximately 1,000 pages), my analytical memos, and the notes that I transcribed about emergent themes during bimonthly meetings with

³I benefitted from the assistance of four different undergraduate research assistants per semester for a total of three academic terms.

my research team. I read each transcript four times throughout my manual coding and analytical processes, checking for transcription errors and thematic content, before conducting line-by-line open-coding to identify topics and themes that emerged (Charmaz 2006). I then checked these results against the analytical memos that my research assistants recorded and my notes from our bimonthly team meetings. Finally, I performed a round of closed coding which condensed open codes into broader thematic and processual categories (Charmaz 2006). Main obstacles that interviewees encounter while navigating the religious gender binary include the binary gendering of ideology, liturgy, and rituals.

My positionality warrants clarification since it is both a limitation and a strength of this study. As a cisgender woman, I approach this research with a particular perspective and set of guiding interests (Charmaz 2006). To account for the possibility of misinterpreting my interviewees' words as an outsider, I always invite my interviewees to provide me with feedback on working manuscripts before I submit them for publication. Nevertheless, future research by nonbinary scholars will inevitably reveal dynamics that this article does not address. Simultaneously, my positionality as a Jewish person is a strength of this study, insofar as it endows me with a critical perspective on pivotal differences between religious majority and religious minority experiences. My Jewishness also likely influenced the disproportionate number of Jewish people in my sample, given dynamics of "snowball sampling" that produce demographic similarities to the researcher (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981). This religious diversity enabled me to notice and analyze different systems of accountability that people encounter across religious groups. Unfortunately, the same dynamics of snowball sampling resulted in the disproportionate whiteness of this sample. Future studies should purposively sample for a variety of racial minority groups to analyze the intersection of gender, religion, and race.

RESULTS

One unexpected and striking finding from this research is that nonbinary religious minorities remain accountable to the religious gender binary post-transition due to their lingering affiliations with these religious groups; meanwhile, most who were raised within the socially dominant Christian religion have ceased to identify with Christian community and/or religion. Of the 29 who were raised within Christianity, only 3 continue to identify as Christians, whereas the rest have come to identify as atheist or agnostic.⁴ In contrast, the religious minorities in my sample continue to claim group membership within their childhood religious group even if they also identify as atheist or agnostic. Some

⁴Some atheist former Christians clarify that they practice Wicca or Buddhism, but do not consider these to qualify as religions.

Jewish interviewees clarify that this label reflects their affiliation with the peoplehood more so than the religion, as Kennedy explained, “Nazis don’t care what I call myself. They think I’m Jewish, so I’m Jewish.” However, the ethnic component of Jewish identity might not be the only factor determining people’s continued identification with their minority peoplehood: my two interviewees who were raised Muslim also indicated that they never considered disidentification as an option. Whatever the reason for their ongoing affiliation, religious minorities disproportionately find themselves involved in religious rituals and community following their gender transition and thus continue to contend with the “religious gender binary.”

In general, respondents were eager to speak about the role that religion played in their households growing up and in their developing gender identity. Those who remain religiously Christian ($n = 3$) or who were raised within religious minority traditions ($n = 14$) had the most to share about the struggles that they encounter as nonbinary religious practitioners. Additionally, some nonreligious people shared valuable insights into how and why their early encounters with the religious gender binary drove them away from religion. I provide illustrative quotes from these groups of respondents verbatim, while referring to them through pseudonyms (some chosen and some assigned) as well as their specified pronouns.

The obstacles that people currently or formerly encountered while navigating the religious gender binary fall into three broad categories: ideological, liturgical, and ritual. Jewish and Muslim respondents encountered these obstacles much more rigidly within their practice-based religions than my Christian respondents; therefore, these respondents are disproportionately featured in the results sections that follow. Moreover, religious minorities who were assigned female at birth (AFAB) appear to struggle with the gender-bifurcation of religious practices (such as communal rituals) more so than those who were assigned male at birth (AMAB) due to the subordinate status of women’s religious spaces and practices. These findings highlight many opportunities for future research into topics such as the various repercussions of the binary (cis)gendering of reality across religions; structures of accountability that impede the redoing of binary (cis)gendered religion; and AMAB privilege within practice-based religions that segregate people according to their assigned sex.

Ideological Obstacles

Abrahamic religious traditions are indelibly influenced by the binary ideological framework presented in Genesis. This binary ideology influences official religious beliefs on numerous subjects, including—but not limited to—gender (Sumerau et al. 2016). According to this biblical text, nonbinary people do not (and should not) exist: “And God created man in His image; in the image of God he created him; male and female He created them” (Gen. 1:27). The consequences of this passage for transgender people have been profound, as

Sumerau and associates have documented within Christianity. My respondents further clarify that they contend with the ideological ramifications of the binary (cis)gendering of reality across religious traditions. Moreover, these experiences differ depending on whether the religion is faith-based or practice-based; this is because binary gender ideology structures religious law and interactions in practice-based traditions such as Judaism.

Jewish movements vary in their sense of accountability toward a conservative code of conduct called Jewish law or *halachah*. Reform Judaism does not emphasize these outward displays of religious observance; meanwhile, other movements including Renewal, Reconstructionism, and Conservative Judaism all encourage followers to practice *halachah* if it deepens their spiritual experience. In contrast, Orthodox Judaism and some Conservative Jewish congregations as well, maintain that *halachic* observance is not optional, but rather an obligation. As a result of these pivotal differences, multiple Jewish cultural fields have emerged that uphold different sets of Jewish gender norms and practices. However, they all coexist within a greater Jewish order that constructs some Jewish people as somehow “more Jewish” than others, with this designation typically reserved for those who follow *halachah*. Darwin (2018) refers to this conservative power arrangement as “Orthodox hegemony.”

Not surprisingly, my respondents who have only experienced progressive Reform Jewish cultural fields reported few if any obstacles as nonbinary people. Meanwhile, those who have experienced or encountered the Orthodox Jewish cultural field voiced an uncomfortable awareness of the binary (cis)gendering of reality that structures Orthodox Jewish ideology: “I feel like, categorically, the Orthodox world is very black and white. Yeah, there are some shades of grey, but those shades of grey are usually determined by the Rabbi” (Corey, Conservative Jewish). When life does not fit within this black-and-white ideological framework, rabbis are called upon to make an informed decision about how people should proceed. Thus, although change is slow, it is possible; nevertheless, *halachah* has yet to adjust in acknowledgment of gender diversity. As a result of this “structural lag” (Moen and Orrange 2002), “observant” (i.e., those who follow *halachah*) Jewish people do not know how to react when they encounter a nonbinary person. River experienced this discomfort firsthand while cycling through Williamsburg, a Brooklyn neighborhood that is popular among ultra-Orthodox Hassidic Jews:

I think it was interesting in the Hassidic area because men will literally physically turn their heads to not look at ciswomen...it was almost, I would imagine for them a bit rough scenario: when they look at you, they think that you're a cisman and then get a little closer and whip their head away.

Although River's anecdote about ultra-Orthodox Jewish behaviors might seem like an extreme example, it highlights the behavioral impact of the black-and-white ideology described by Corey.

Meanwhile, nonbinary Christians (and some former Christians) within my sample also report frustrations with the cultural impact of binary gender ideology within their congregations. For example, Morgan, who was raised Baptist, recalls early discomfort with the binary structuring of their father's church community:

It was really horrible, actually, because it was just so...like, you would see all basically mom and dad, mom and dad, throughout the whole church. And there was no crossing any boundaries of gender, any boundaries of sexuality. Every man was very masculine, every woman was very feminine. And it was even taught that way.

Morgan goes on to explain that their childhood church mandated heterosexuality and polarized gender expression among the congregants, creating an environment that they experienced as oppressive and hostile toward their own nonbinary gender and sexuality.

Of course, not all churches that uphold the gender binary are openly hostile toward gender difference, though they may also systematically invalidate nonbinary gender. For example, Addison feels very affectionately toward their Quaker faith, while admitting, "I do not know of any tradition within Quaker culture that allows for being nonbinary." Similarly, Logan reflects positively upon their upbringing as Salvationist, while acknowledging that their church problematically reinforced binary gender ideology:

There was definitely a binary thing happening there. When I was growing up I always used to be, like, "Oh, this is what I have to do. You know, like, because I'm female bodied, I have to...this is like...the role I've been put into." And it never really quite fit, but I just had to go along with it.

The Salvationist church encouraged Logan to adhere to binary gender roles and norms, according to the sex and gender that were assigned to them at birth. Like Morgan, Logan ultimately resolved this dilemma by leaving the church. Of note, in all three of these Christian anecdotes nonbinary people encounter difficulties primarily due to the effects of cultural lag (Ogburn 1957) within their religious communities. Their churches were not obligated by religious law to structure community life around the gender binary; rather, the churches' cultural investment in binary-gendered ideology and politics justified this division as a matter of preserving "tradition."

Nonbinary people evidently contend with the ideological ramifications of the binary (cis)gendering of reality within a range of religious traditions. The obstacles that people encounter vary, however, depending on the relationship between ideology and practice within the given religious tradition. Gender essentialist ideology directly structures practice within *halachic* Judaism; therefore, nonbinary people find themselves held externally accountable to the religious gender binary within this arena due to structural lag, as much as cultural lag—after all, even culturally progressive Orthodox Jews are obligated to follow *halachah*. Respondents also experience externally enforced accountability to the religious gender binary within the Christian communities under discussion; however, in this context

coreligionists enforce gender segregation due to cultural custom more so than religious law. In either case, interviewees indicate that it is extremely difficult—if not impossible—to resist the religious gender binary when other people and other cultural forces hold them accountable to it. They have little recourse within these religious communities but to accept their gender's erasure or leave the religious community altogether, an impasse that presents a lose–lose scenario in either case.

Liturgical Obstacles

Binary religious ideology produces concrete obstacles that nonbinary people must navigate while participating in religious practices. One such obstacle is the cismasculine gendering of God and the assumed speaker within traditional liturgy. Feminist and egalitarian congregations sometimes advocate for the substitution of masculine pronouns with feminine ones and male God imagery with female God imagery to address the androcentric politics that underlie this traditional language structure (Adler 1998; Falk 1987; Heschel 1983; Plaskow 1990; Ramshaw 1995). However, such binary-swapping does not help nonbinary people achieve representation. To pray without misgendering oneself or cisgendering God, nonbinary people have to develop creative alternative pronoun and naming practices.

Whether people substitute in “Universe” or simply the word “God,” they can and do find gender-neutral ways to address the divine. For example, Addison, who is a devout Quaker, avoids assigning any pronouns to God whatsoever: “For myself, obviously, I don’t even use any pronouns at all for God. I’ll just call it God’s self and God. It’s also very difficult for me to think about pronouns that don’t have that much of an anthropomorphic conception of God.” Addison does not think of God in a concrete human way, so pronouns do not make sense to them in this context. Similarly, Ashton—who currently identifies as atheist, but was raised Jewish and continues to participate in the occasional Jewish ritual—feels similarly: “I’ve started saying ‘Thank the Universe’ instead of ‘Thank God’, because I kind of do believe in Universal flow and forces of sorts. Because I’m over the idea of a God that is similar to Man in a way.”

Other respondents turn to the tradition itself in their search for gender-bending God-language. In the Jewish tradition, there are 17 official names for God; therefore, people enjoy considerable latitude within Judaism to find a God label that resonates with them on a personal level. After investing this intellectual labor, Corey settled on an obscure name for God that means “Father of the Womb”: “I really like *Av Ha’rachamim*. I think it’s the most genderqueer name for a God ever.” Although this name for God includes the word “father,” its conjunction with “womb” brings together the masculine and feminine elements that Corey experiences within their own gender. Marley, who is currently training to be a minister at a progressive Christian seminary, has also invested intellectual labor into finding a gendered rendering of God within their tradition that reflects their own image. In the Episcopalian context, this practice entails reimagining the gendered significance of the Holy Trinity:

I use male pronouns for Jesus and I use female pronouns for the Holy Spirit. And just God for God. So, like, in “Blessed Be” there’s one bit in the liturgy where it’s, “And Blessed Be His kingdom, now and forever.” I say, “And Blessed Be God’s Kingdom, now and forever.” [...] “She” for the Holy Spirit is not as common but it’s growing in popularity in order to have a sort of tri-part type binary in a non-binary God, who is both mother and father. The male son, Jesus, and the female, Spirit. Which is interesting and its own sort of thing, and I love that.

Marley uses “he” to refer to Jesus, “she” to refer to the Holy Spirit, and “God” to refer to “God.” Rather than conceptualize this trinity as a heteronormative family unit, however, Marley understands this system to represent a nonbinary God who is comprised of both male and female parts. Marley acknowledges that some coreligionists perceive their liturgical pronoun practice as a politicized “redoing” of religion, but they maintain that it is actually rooted in the religious tradition and thus a straightforward “doing” of religion.

Finally, some nonbinary people resolve this potential liturgical obstacle by trivializing the issue of gendered God language altogether. As Kazi explains: “Well...God in Islam is actually pretty gender-neutral. It’s just, they usually use ‘he’. I just use ‘he’ for God in that sense, too.” Kazi uses masculine pronouns to refer to God even though they understand the God concept to be essentially gender-neutral because the pronoun issue is a matter of pure semantics to them. Through similar logic, Donna, who runs an independent Church that is popular among LGBTQ people, has neutralized the God language dilemma:

To me, the language is not abusive. It’s what people’s intent is when they use the language. [...] When you’re using the language to manipulate or whatever, then yes, I have to stop you and say, “No, that’s not right.” But when you’re using the language out of an innocence, or a love, or a way of expressing your joy of life, then that’s a whole different story to me.

Donna emphasizes the significance of intention when considering the potential damage that cismasculine God language might wield. She does not believe that most people actually think of God as a cisgender man; rather, they use such language out of habit. In the interest of fostering a deeper connection between her congregants and God, she encourages them to use whatever language they desire. Driven by these reconciliatory logics, Donna and Kazi have both trivialized their religions’ liturgical traditions as nonissues.

Clearly, people within this sample have devised a range of strategies to negotiate this liturgical manifestation of the religious gender binary. Some “do religion” through traditional liturgy while inwardly expanding the meanings associated with the words. Meanwhile, others “redo religion” by outwardly expanding the gendering of their liturgical practices. Either way, interviewees report that this obstacle is relatively easy to resolve as a personal linguistic practice that has few externally enforced accountability systems in place. For Christians in ideologically progressive faith-based traditions, this liturgical obstacle might be the only one they confront in their daily religious practice; however, the religious minorities in my sample clarified that liturgy is not the only binary-gendered

obstacle that they encounter. As the next section will demonstrate, rituals are binary (cis)gendered as well, and segregation is rigidly enforced by external accountability structures.

Ritual Obstacles

Binary (cis)gendered religious ideology often mandates separate religious rituals for men and women within practice-based traditions. As a result, those who were assigned female at birth are gender-tracked into religious practices that are associated with women and femininity; meanwhile, those who were assigned male at birth experience a separate set of embodied practices in their youth. This begs the question: what does “embodied religion” (Davidman 2015) look like for people after they leave these binary gender categories behind? This section explores how nonbinary people grapple with their lingering accountability to these binary-gendered ways of “doing religion” within communal practice.

Of the 12 Jewish respondents in this sample, only two follow *halachah* as part of their daily religious practice: Drew and Corey. Nevertheless, the experiences of these two interviewees offer illustrative insights into how nonbinary religious practitioners experience the “religious gender binary.” Drew and Corey have had markedly different relationships with gender and with the binary gender structuring of traditional Jewish practice even though they are both in their twenties and white/Ashkenazic. Drew does not disclose their gender to others, nor do they claim the transgender label. At the time of this interview, Drew, who was assigned male at birth, was about to enter an Orthodox Jewish seminary to receive rabbinical training. In contrast to Drew, Corey does openly identify as both nonbinary and transgender and has begun to visibly transition away from the female sex/gender that was assigned to them at birth. Corey identifies with the Conservative Jewish movement and tends to follow *halachah*, though their interpretation of *halachah* is not always conventional. Most significantly, Drew and Corey find themselves situated on opposite sides of the *mehitzah* (a gender divider used in Orthodox and some Conservative religious services) due to the sexes/genders that were assigned to them at birth.

This binary spatial assignment disadvantages Corey, who ambivalently finds themselves situated in the marginalized “women’s section” during religious services, separated from central activities such as reading from the Torah. Jewish women are technically “exempt” from many religious rituals due to an anachronistic and heteronormative assumption that they are too busy with childcare and domestic duties to attend synagogue. Over time, this “exemption” became tantamount to exclusion, while communal religious rituals became increasingly masculinized (Darwin 2016, 2018). Although the Jewish feminist movements of the 1970s successfully advocated for women’s access to these masculinized practices within the more progressive branches of Judaism, binary gender segregation remains normative within *halachic* Jewish cultural fields.

These *halachic* cultural fields wield a hegemonic influence within the greater Jewish order, in part due to Israel’s operation as an Orthodox Jewish governance.

No matter how progressive an individual Jewish person's community or practice might be, they ultimately find themselves held accountable to *halachic* ways of "doing gendered Judaism" when they visit holy sites in Israel, such as the Western Wall. As Reagan recalls:

When I went to Israel with my family it made me so upset when we went to the Wall and the women had this much space [indicates a small amount with their hands] and the men had this much space [indicates a larger amount with their hands]. And I witnessed—there was a Bar Mitzvah happening—and all the men were dancing and singing and having a blast and the women were lined up on the partition, on chairs, looking over. And just, like, wanting to celebrate, but they weren't allowed because they're women and it infuriates me.

Reagan's memory of the women standing on chairs, peering over the barrier into the men's section, haunts them to this day. They were so unsettled by Orthodox Judaism's adherence to the gender binary that they stopped participating in Jewish religious rituals altogether.

Unlike Reagan, Corey continues to fight for access to these masculinized rituals from which they were notionally "exempt" at birth. Such rituals were not a part of Corey's embodied Jewish practice during their formative years due to their assigned sex/gender. However, Corey eventually experimented with these rituals later in life. The euphoria that this binary transgression generated inspired Corey to question their inclusion in the "woman" category altogether: "I fell in love with *teffilin* [little boxes containing sacred texts that Orthodox Jewish men customarily wrap around their forearms and foreheads] at summer camp and I think that's sort of where my gender journey started. Because I felt super uncomfortable as the only person wrapping...and that's actually what catalyzed everything for me." Corey's nonbinary Jewish journey and nonbinary gender journey developed symbiotically as they rejected their boundedness along both axes.

When Corey attempted to engage in this masculinized Jewish practice in the "women's section" at the Western Wall [Hebrew: *Kotel*], however, they found themselves forcefully held accountable to the binary (cis)gendering of embodied Jewish practice by their female coreligionists:

I was under the impression that the men were the problem in terms of ritual stuff at the Kotel and I put on my tallis [prayer shawl] and started wrapping [with tefillin] and got attacked by a couple Orthodox women [...] They pushed me and shoved me and called me a Reform scum and told me to go to Robinson's Arch and never come back.

When Corey adorned themselves with *teffilin* and a *tallis* in the women's section, they posed a visible threat to Orthodox Judaism's binary (cis)gendered religious order. In response to this threat, Corey's more traditional female coreligionists attempted to delegitimize them through the epithet "Reform scum" (see [Sered 1997](#)) and erase their gendered difference by banishing them to Robinson's Arch, where "Women of the Wall" conduct egalitarian worship services. Presumably, Corey is welcome to "redo gendered Judaism" within that physically and culturally marginalized space, which the Orthodox women consider to be less sacred, but not within the confines of the Western Wall's main plaza.

Corey has not stopped participating in *halachic* Jewish practice, despite these negative encounters with “Jewish-policing” (Darwin 2018) and gender-policing. However, they are unhappy with their current situation because there is no section where they feel like they belong within communal ritual settings. When I asked if they would ever consider praying in the men’s section at synagogue, given their masculine gender expression and historically masculinized religious practice, they responded with deep ambivalence:

Probably. I mean, like, there’s a lot of navigation stuff that I haven’t really figured out. Part of me, knowing my gender identity, would totally do it, but also feel really uncomfortable. Like, what do I do when a guy wants to shake my hand? I know they won’t understand my gender identity without a lot of explanation and possibly a lot of soul searching, so it’s like, I don’t want to feel like that person who’s sort of not honoring their boundaries in some way.

This response reveals that Corey’s dilemma is not simply the product of externally enforced accountability structures; rather, Corey has also internalized a sense of accountability to their cisgender Orthodox coreligionists’ comfort levels. Of course, Corey also does not belong in the women’s section, but they feel some degree of entitlement to being there by virtue of their assigned sex—entitlement that they do not feel on the other side of the divider.

Drew also feels a sense of entitlement to the section that corresponds with their assigned sex. Significantly, when asked how they felt about their placement in the “men’s section,” they responded with considerably less ambivalence than Corey: “It never felt like an outright lie for me to be on one side. It does speak to a part of me, if not the whole me. It speaks to, historically...the way most of my life, the way that I was seen by the community and how I saw myself.” Like Corey, Drew has reinterpreted binary gender segregation as a separation of the sexes—as opposed to the genders. They consider themselves to belong to the male sex and they experience their gender as comprised of both “man” and “woman” elements; therefore, Drew does not perceive their presence in the men’s section as prohibitively problematic. However, it is also important to note that Drew is incentivized to make peace with their placement in the men’s section, given the benefits of praying on that side: “My synagogue seating areas are totally apart, the women sit in the balcony. It’s quite high and I sit on the bottom where all the service happens.” This key spatial difference between Corey’s and Drew’s experiences indicates that AMAB people benefit from male privilege within religious communities that segregate congregants based on assigned sex as opposed to gender identity. Full religious participation is normative on Drew’s default side of the *mehitzah*; thus, they do not experience the religious gender binary as a prohibitive obstacle within their daily religious life.

It is also important to note that Judaism is not the only religion that structures religious practice around binary sex/(cis)gender classification schemas—Islam does as well. Kazi made this very clear to me when I asked about their encounters with the religious gender binary:

Islam's way more gender segregated than I think other religions are. Men and women can't even pray in the same room together. We have completely different forms, ways of praying. We have, like, different steps. There are overlapping rules for sure, but there are very different rules too.

Evoking the *mehitzah* dilemma, Kazi explains that Muslim people are sorted into different rooms during prayer in their mosque. Unlike Corey and Drew, however, Kazi cannot bring themselves to accept placement in either binary space: "I don't feel comfortable going to mosques. I do not pray for that reason, 'cause I don't know how I should be praying as someone who is nonbinary." Kazi refuses to accept misgendering as the cost of "doing religion." Instead, they have developed an individualized Muslim prayer practice that enables them to "do Islam" while "doing nonbinary gender." Piper, the other Muslim person in my sample, also no longer attends mosque, though they did not specify the reason for their private—as opposed to communal—prayer practice. Future research should explore nonbinary Muslim people's experiences of the "religious gender binary" in more detail with a larger sample.

The voices of these religious minorities illuminate the structural impact of binary (cis)gender ideology upon religious ritual practice. This insurmountable manifestation of the "religious gender binary" presents a key dilemma for my respondents: they must either accept misgendering as the cost of religious participation or terminate their participation within communal practices altogether. In effect, they find themselves having to choose between doing their gender or doing their religion, with very few opportunities for innovation or compromise. Those who resist erasure, such as Corey, hint at how people might redo gendered religion to accommodate gender diversity moving forward. However, for now, people like Corey are stuck wrestling with their commitment to a religious tradition that refuses to make space for them.

CONCLUSION

This study has illustrated the felt repercussions of the binary (cis)gendering of reality across religious traditions, as experienced by nonbinary people. I call the regulatory barrier that results from this binary (cis)gendering process, the "religious gender binary." The nonbinary people in my sample encounter ideological, liturgical, and ritual obstacles while negotiating their accountability to this religious gender binary. However, their experiences of these obstacles vary by religion. Religious minorities in practice-based traditions cited ritual obstacles as the most intractable barriers to their full religious participation, whereas Christian respondents did not mention ritual obstacles at all. This finding highlights the need for more research on gender minorities across religious traditions. The experiences of these religious minorities within practice-based traditions illuminate structural dimensions of the religious gender binary

that remained obscured within studies that focused on faith-based Christian movements.

The binary (cis)gendering of reality presents my religious minority respondents with a critical dilemma: do they accept misgendering to continue participating in their religious communities, or do they leave their religious communities behind and thereby refuse misgendering? Leaving the religion behind only appears to be a feasible option for those who were raised Christian. My Jewish and Muslim respondents continue to strongly identify with their minority religious communities following their gender transitions even if they clarify that they no longer regularly attend services or that they religiously identify as atheist. This same sense of unconditional lifelong tribal affiliation was not voiced by my respondents who were raised within mainstream Christianity. By excluding the voices of nonbinary religious minorities, research on gender and religion has overlooked this rich site of tension and drawn overly simplistic—and Christonormative—conclusions about how people reconcile conflicting religious and gender scripts.

By shifting the analytical focus to nonbinary religious minorities, this study has unveiled numerous avenues for future research. Future studies might critically interrogate the high report rates of nonreligion among LGBTQ people, given the likelihood that (1) a high percentage of these respondents are not simply formerly “religious,” but more specifically formerly Christian and (2) the religious/nonreligious binary seems not to apply to the experiences of religious minority respondents. Additionally, although there were clear differences between my Christian and non-Christian respondents’ experiences of the religious gender binary, it remains unclear whether these differences are attributable to the religious majority versus religious minority distinction, the faith-based versus practice-based distinction, or some combination of both. Future studies might disentangle this matter further by comparing nonbinary people’s experiences of practice-based Christianity against the experiences of nonbinary people in a practice-based religious minority tradition. There are ample opportunities for future research as the sociology of gender and religion evolves beyond cisnormative and Christonormative frameworks. As gender-diverse social actors continue to redo religion, the study of religion will inevitably expand in kind.

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