



**Clara Marlijn Meijer**

**Sexuality, stigma and religion**

The negotiation of sexuality and religion among  
sexual minorities in Ghana



# Clara Marlijn Meijer

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# SEXUALITY, STIGMA AND RELIGION





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Clara Marlijn Meijer

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Edmonton, November 2021

*Clara Marlijn Meijer*



## Abstract

In research on religion and sexuality, dominant academic discourses have often been “sex-negative”. Religious views concerning sexuality are presented as conservative and constraining, particularly with homosexuality. In contrast, secular spaces are often understood as progressive and supportive of non-heterosexual sexualities. However, in the everyday lives of religious sexual minorities, this dichotomy is too simplistic and does not capture the multiple ways sexuality and religion can intersect. This study contributes to the study of religion by giving nuance to the religious-secular dichotomy and destabilizing the related assumption that being religious entails being sex-negative.

While the effect of stigma on sexual minorities has been widely studied, only a few studies focus on religiosity and stigma among sexual minorities, especially in the Global South. In contrast to most Western countries, Ghana has one of the highest percentages of religiously affiliated populations globally. Religion is part of everyday life. Almost every one grows up belonging to a religious community. Even though there is a high level of stigma in Ghana against homosexuality and non-heteronormativity – a stigma deeply rooted in religious institutions – many grass-root organizations aim to support sexual minorities in different ways, among them affirmative religious communities.

Although religious discourses stigmatize homosexuality and non-heteronormativity, there is a great deal of resilience and empowerment to be found among religious sexual minorities in Ghana. This study highlights these experiences and analyzes sexual stigma and ways of empowerment and resilience. By doing this, the study aims to increase the awareness of sexual stigma experienced by sexual minorities in Ghana that goes beyond pure academic interests. I pursue these two aims with the main research question: How do young adults who identify as sexual minorities understand and negotiate their religious and sexual identities in Ghana?

The study was a part of the project ‘Young Adults and Religion in a Global Perspective’ (YARG), led by Professor Peter Nynäs. The methods used to gather the material were the Faith Q-Sort, surveys, and semi-structured interviews. The Faith Q-Sort is a new method for analyzing religious positions and subjectivities. Professor David Wulff initially developed the method. It was further developed in YARG in collaboration with Wulff. I collected the material for this study in the spring of 2018 in Accra. Thirty-one young adults who identified as sexual minorities participated in the study. During this study, I collaborated closely with the non-governmental organization (NGO) Solace Initiative in Accra. Solace Initiative is a local NGO working to

promote and protect human rights, specifically the rights of LGBTQ+ people in Ghana.

The gathered material focuses on religion, sexuality, change, and stigma. In this study, the Faith Q-Sort was used as an instrument to open the interviews and highlight the participants' key experiences in relation to religion and sexuality. In addition, the analysis of the thirty-one Faith Q-Sets identified five religious positions among the participants. These five positions provide a new perspective on sexual minorities and their diverse relationships to their religiosity. Moreover, these five positions go beyond the popular academic discourse of sex-negativity and provide nuanced views on non-normative sexualities, gender, and religion.

The study also highlights how sexual stigma impacts sexual minorities in Accra. The process of sexual stigma is thoroughly analyzed, and the study illustrates how religious institutions and religious leaders reinforce sexual stigma and its effects. On the one hand, the study demonstrates the lack of support for sexual minorities provided by many religious institutions and leaders. On the other hand, it illustrates the possibilities of support and collaborations provided by queer communities, such as Solace Initiative, and the significance of affirmative religious communities to decrease sexual stigma and support sexual minorities.

## Abstrakt

Inom forskning om religion och sexualitet har de dominerande akademiska diskurserna ofta varit "sex-negativa". Religiösa perspektiv på sexualitet betraktas som konservativa och begränsande, speciellt i relation till homosexualitet. I kontrast till det här förstås sekulära utrymmen ofta som progressiva och stödjande vad gäller icke-heterosexuella sexualiteter. Den här dikotomin är emellertid för enkel när man ser på sexuella minoriteters levda vardag. Dikotomin fångar inte in de många sätt på vilka sexualitet och religion kan mötas och den här studien bidrar till studiet av religion genom att nyansera dikotomin religiös-sekular och genom att kritiskt granska sådana utgångspunkter.

Effekten av stigma på sexuella minoriteter har visserligen studerats ingående men det finns endast ett fåtal studier som fokuserar specifikt på religion och stigma bland sexuella minoriteter, speciellt i Den globala södern. I kontrast till många västerländska länder är invånarna i Ghana bland de mest religiösa i världen. Nästan alla hör till en religiös gemenskap och religion är en del av det dagliga livet. Även om det i Ghana finns ett tydligt stigma i relation till homosexualitet och icke-heteronormativitet – ett stigma med djupa rötter i religiösa institutioner – finns det också många gräsrotsorganisationer som stöder sexuella minoriteter på olika sätt. Bland dessa organisationer hittar vi även religiösa gemenskaper.

Religiösa diskurser stigmatiserar homosexuella och icke-heteronormativa i stor utsträckning men det återfinns också en hel del motstånd och handlingskraft bland religiösa sexuella minoriteter i Ghana. Den här studien lyfter fram de här upplevelserna och analyserar sexuellt stigma och former av motstånd och handlingskraft. Genom att göra det här strävar studien till att öka medvetenheten om det stigma som sexuella minoriteter upplever i Ghana på ett sätt som går utanför enbart akademiska intressen. Dessa två målsättningar förs samman i avhandlingens huvudsakliga forskningsfråga: hur förstår och förhandlar unga vuxna, som identifierar sig som sexuella minoriteter i Ghana, sina religiösa och sexuella identiteter.

Studien var en del av projektet 'Young Adults and Religion in a Global Perspective' (YARG), som leddes av professor Peter Nynäs. Följande metoder användes för att samla in materialet: Faith Q-Sort, enkäter och semi-strukturerade intervjuer. Faith Q-Sort är en ny metod för analys av religiösa positioner och subjektiviteter. Metoden utvecklades ursprungligen av professor David Wulff och vidareutvecklades inom YARG i samarbete med Wulff. Materialet för studien samlades in våren 2018 i Accra. Trettioen unga vuxna som identifierade sig som sexuella minoriteter deltog i studien. Materialet samlades in i nära samarbete med den ideella organisationen Solace Initiative. Solace Initiative är en

lokal organisation som jobbar för att understöda och skydda mänskliga rättigheter, speciellt LGBTQ+ personers rättigheter i Ghana.

Det insamlade materialet fokuserar på religion, sexualitet, förändring och stigma. I den här studien har Faith Q-Sort använts för att öppna upp intervjuerna och för att lyfta fram nyckelupplevelser bland deltagarna i relation till religion och sexualitet. Analysen av de trettioen Faith Q-sorteringarna identifierade fem religiösa positioner bland deltagarna. De här fem positionerna ger ett nytt perspektiv på sexuella minoriteter och deras relation till religiositet. De fem positionerna sträcker sig utanför den populär akademiska sex-negativitetsdiskursen och ger ett nyanserat perspektiv på icke-normativa sexualiteter, genus och religion.

Studien visar också på hur sexuellt stigma påverkar sexuella minoriteter i Accra. Den process som berör sexuellt stigma analyseras grundligt. Studien visar hur religiösa institutioner och ledare förstärker sexuellt stigma och dess effekter. Å ena sidan visar studien på den brist på stöd för sexuella minoriteter som religiösa institutioner och ledare erbjuder. Å andra sidan visar den på den möjlighet till stöd och samarbete som queera gemenskaper, som t.ex. Solace Initiative, ger och betydelsen av stödjande religiösa gemenskaper när det gäller att minska sexuellt stigma och stödja sexuella minoriteter.

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# 1. Introduction

While gender as a category is currently often studied in combination with religion, sexuality is still a fairly new subject area in the field of religious studies. Particularly research on sexual minorities or non-normative sexualities and religion is sparse. In the last decade, an increasing number of studies have focused on sexuality and specifically on the role of sexuality in religious communities, beliefs, practices and in relation to lived religion, globalization and diversity (see, e.g., Boisvert and Daniel-Hughes 2017, Browne et al. 2010, Hunt and Yip 2012, Nynäs and Yip 2012, Shipley 2014, Taylor 2016, Taylor and Snowdon 2014a, 2014b, 2014c, Yip 2010, Yip and Page 2013, Young et al. 2015). However, there is a need for diversification in the study of religion and sexuality (see, e.g., Ream and Roderiguez 2014, af Burén 2011), as studies predominantly focus on heterosexuality or homosexual men in 'world religions' in Europe or North America.

As Ream and Rodriguez describe it in *Emerging Adults' Religiousness and Spirituality* (2014, p. 215):

In the social scientific study of gay, lesbian, and bisexual people of faith, there has been a call for research to reflect a wider range of diversity, including issues of race/ethnicity and gender minorities, along with both non-Western religious practices and Eastern spiritual beliefs.

Nevertheless, comprehensive studies, such as the study by Yip and Page (2013) in the United Kingdom, which was followed by another similar study in Canada (Young and Shipley 2020), have highlighted how, among young adults, sexuality is intertwined with religious identities and how various challenges are managed. One of the most important findings is how diverse these challenges and navigations are in relation to sexuality and religious identities. These findings are contrary to the dominant academic discourse, which often portrays religion as "sex-negative" (Yip and Page 2013, p. 2); as constraining and restricting sexuality.

In popular media, religion is often depicted as conflicting with homosexuality or any sexuality that does not fit heteronormative norms. At the same time, assumed secular countries or places are seen as supportive of sexual minorities and equal rights. Religious settings are often assumed to be conservative, whereas secular settings are assumed to be progressive (see, e.g., Asad 2013, Brown 2006). Sexuality thus relates to the dichotomy of secular-religious, where secular is sex-positive and religious is viewed as sex-negative (Yip and Page 2013).

However, this dichotomy is too clear-cut and excludes, among others, experiences of sexual minorities who belong to religious communities. This study aims to bring the discussion beyond this dichotomy by exploring religious positions and sexual identities among young adults in Ghana who identify as sexual minorities. Following other scholars in the field of religion and sexuality, this study “offers to scholars of religion a new angle of vision on contemporary religious phenomena” while, at the same time, “studying sexuality through the lens of religion offers to sexuality studies a new angle on the themes of queerness” (Wilcox [2012] 2016, p. 38). It highlights lived religion and the different religious positions of sexual minorities in Ghana. It is based on a mixed-method approach that includes the Faith Q-Sort, a survey, and semi-structured interviews of thirty-one Ghanaian young adults who identified as a sexual minority.

## 1.1 Research environment

Although my decision to pursue this research in Ghana came with its challenges and limitations, I chose the country on purpose to be able to contribute to the study of religion and sexuality with research outside of Western countries, which, as noted above, has been the dominant area of research in this field. I collaborated with Solace Initiative, a non-governmental organization based in Accra that lobbies for the rights of sexual minorities in Ghana. Before the section on previous studies, the collaboration and work of Solace Initiative are further explained.

In order to go beyond the secular-religious dichotomy, this study avoids any essentialist definition of religion. Instead, I approach religion as descriptive rather than analytical, based on the participants' interpretations of the study. This approach is influenced by the larger project that this study is part of: Young Adults and Religion on a Global Perspective (YARG), which was attentive to the everyday, individual use of the term religion, and critically reevaluates how religion is conceptualized (Nynäs et al. 2022).

Being part of a large international research project has had implications for this study in different ways. Some aspects have supported me in pursuing this study, such as the funding, the international network, and the solid methodological approach that includes the Faith Q-Sort. However, aspects have also restricted or limited this study in certain ways.

In general, this doctoral study differs from others not part of a research project. During my first two years as a doctoral candidate, I positioned myself in the research project and prepared my study by going through the data that were already collected. When I started my doctoral studies in September 2016, YARG was well on its way, and the

data from thirteen participating countries were sent to the core team at Åbo Akademi University to be reflected on and analyzed.

Only one month after I started, by the end of October 2016, I presented parts of the project at the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion (SSSR) in Atlanta, USA, together with Karoliina Dahl, who became my close friend within the project. Among others, I met David Wulff, who developed the Faith Q-Sort (FQS) before its application in YARG. This first international conference was only the tip of the iceberg of what came after. Rapidly, but with much enjoyment, I was introduced to the methods, the analysis, and everything involved in a large international research project. I contributed to international workshops, meetings, and conferences and read the relevant literature concerning the project. I analyzed data and communicated with research assistants in other countries. Before I had a clear idea of the outline of my study, I knew the methodology of the research project and its theoretical aims well.

This process was an advantage, as I was well prepared to collect my data. For instance, I could adjust some of the methods based on the reflections of research assistants who collected data earlier on. However, this process also included some restrictions, as I set out my study with a methodology and some theoretical perspectives that were not specifically chosen for this study. The methodological chapter covers all these implications and adjustments that I have made to the methodology.

A central part of YARG is the methodology that explores worldviews and positions beyond the dominant categories in the study of religion, such as religious, secular, and spiritual. In this study, the methodology captures the worldviews and experiences of sexual minorities and demonstrates the different ways in which sexuality and religion intertwine.

In addition to going beyond dominant religious categories, this study contributes to the field of sexuality by blurring dominant strategies that are often described in studies on religious sexual minorities (compartmentalization, integration, or rejection of either the sexual or religious identity (see, e.g., Rodriguez and Ouellette 2000)). It emphasizes an intersectional approach that considers other aspects of life, such as age and class, to understand sexual stigma as not singly defined by sexuality, gender, and religion. This approach provides an analysis that blurs categories such as religion and sexuality and challenges dominant perspectives such as the notion that being religious aligns with sex-negativity.

This study also aims to increase the awareness of stigmatization experienced by sexual minorities in Ghana that goes beyond academic interests. The structure of this thesis, the analysis, and the qualitative approach foreground the interviews and participants' narratives. I

decided on this approach for two reasons. One, I want to give the participants the space in my thesis to share their experiences to increase awareness about sexual stigma, which was an often described wish of the participants of this study. Their experiences in my study demonstrate the lack of support provided by many religious institutions and leaders. They also illustrate the possibilities of support and collaborations with queer communities, the importance of inclusive religious communities, and how these communities can empower sexual minorities in Ghana and beyond. Two, the analysis of the interviews demonstrates the complexity of categories such as religion and sexuality and highlight lived religion, which is the methodological approach in this study. These reasons have made the interviews the central empirical material of this study.

Research on young adults, sexuality, and religion has been done in different Western contexts, mainly in presumed 'secular' countries such as the United Kingdom and Canada (see, e.g., Taylor and Snowdon 2014c, Yip and Page 2013, Shipley and Young 2016 and Young and Shipley 2020). However, Ghana, which has one of the highest percentages of religiously affiliated populations globally, provides an entirely different context to the discussion on religion, gender, and sexuality.

Religion is part of everyday life for most Ghanaians. As Birgit Meyer (2015) describes, "religion in Ghana is not confined to a specific subsystem but happens all over the place, so to speak" (p. 13). Besides the actual numbers of religious affiliation and the interviews with the participants, I observed how religion was part of everyday life in Ghana. There were numerous examples from the moment of my arrival until my departure. Along the roads, I would see large billboards promoting religious leaders and events on my way home from doing interviews. *Tro-tro*'s<sup>1</sup> that would pass me by were often decorated with religious citations and illustrations. During some of my field trips, I would watch the religious channels inside these minibuses. One of my friends, who owned a business in Accra, told me that some of his employees would show up late or sleepy at work several times a year as they had attended all-night-long prayer sessions.

Soon after my first weeks in Accra, I recognized the time of exams at the campus of the University of Accra as small groups of students would gather around to pray for good luck. I would hear discussions about neighbors' noise nuisance of religious buildings, as prayers, songs, or preachings could be heard from far away. When I visited a religious gathering at a popular pentecostal church, I felt as if I was going to a concert, as there was a designated parking area and a particular minivan that drove visitors to the church entrance due to the distance. This

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<sup>1</sup> Privately owned minibuses that are used for transportation around the country.

minivan pickup was necessary as thousands of people came to the service. I saw promotions on posters and flyers around the city by religious leaders for religious gatherings in stadiums to have enough space for people to come. Whenever I talked to a taxi driver and told them that I was working in the religious studies department, I received surprised responses when I told them that I was not religious. In Ghana, being religious is the norm. Identifying as not is the exception. The interviews with the participants include more examples of how important religion is in their lives. For example, they highlighted the relationships and support that are to be found within a religious community and the close relationships within a family that is supported through religious practices.

However, related to this significance is the other side which includes power and authority. Religious leaders often have authority beyond their religious community. Many are involved in national politics. Examples are councils, for instance, the Christian Council of Ghana, that pressure the president to speak out on specific issues. Regarding the issues of gender and sexuality, specifically homosexuality, these religious authorities often push for a withdrawal of progressive laws and lobby for a law that would criminalize homosexuality. Although not every religious leader might hold these opinions, these discussions have become more intense in the last decade in Ghana, and many religious authorities support them strongly.

One can thus, today, in 2021, notice an increase in homophobia in Ghana, and homophobic discourses are shared more frequently through popular media. Recently, in July 2021, a bill was proposed in parliament that imposes sentences targeting non-heterosexual persons (or perceived to be) (Mckenzie and Princewill 2021, HRW 2021b). Being in a homosexual relationship, whether as a man or a woman, is not accepted in Ghana and can lead to prosecution under the Ghanaian Criminal Code section (see, e.g., COC 2016, Solace Initiative 2018, HRW 2018). Although this rarely happens, the acceptance of homophobic discourses by a majority of the public increases violence and homophobia against non-normative persons in public and private places.

A dominant argument strengthening homophobia is the claim that homosexuality is 'unAfrican'. According to this argument, homosexuality is seen as something brought to Africa by Western colonizers. Threats by Western countries, such as the UK, to stop aid if the Ghanaian president refuses to legalize homosexuality<sup>2</sup>, are seen as colonial pressure in this discourse. The argument that homosexuality is a

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<sup>2</sup> In 2011, David Cameron said publicly that aid would be cut to countries "which failed to respect gay rights" (BBC 2011, November 2).

colonial heritage has been countered by several researchers who focus on the existence in West Africa of multiple sexualities in precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial times (Epprecht 2013, Chitando and Van Klinken 2016, Van Klinken and Chitando 2016, Msibi 2011). Despite these studies, this homophobic argument is dominant in Ghanaian discourses on sexuality (Anarfi and Gyasi-Gyamerah 2014, Asante 2019).

The latest report on 'LGBTQ rights' in Ghana by the Human Rights Watch (2018) stresses the role of religious communities in the stigmatization of sexual minorities. The report emphasizes the stigmatization of sexual minorities reinforced by religious institutions and authorities, which are intertwined in state politics (see, e.g., Tweneboah 2019). In recent years, there has been an increase in publications on the debate of gender, sexuality, homosexuality, politics, and religion in West Africa, especially in sexuality and gender research (see, e.g., Nyeck 2020 and Spronk and Hendriks 2020). Outside the field of sexuality research, there have been numerous critical publications from different disciplines, often with interdisciplinary perspectives, such as the study of religion (Soothill 2007, Gunda 2010, Van Klinken 2016, 2019, Chitando and Van Klinken 2016, Van Klinken and Chitando 2016, Grillo et al. 2019), global development studies (Epprecht 2013), education (Msibi 2011) and law (Tamale 2011, 2013, 2014). However, most of these studies outside of religious studies focus on debates such as sexuality, (post)colonialism, and marginalized African communities, whereas the studies in religion often focus on religious authorities and discourses on sexuality. As a result, the diverse religious positions of sexual minorities and their negotiation of religion and sexuality in Ghana remain primarily invisible. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring how sexual minorities understand and negotiate their religious and sexual identities based on their experiences.

## 1.2 Research aims

The research aim of this study is twofold. Firstly, as discussed above, it aims to contribute to the study of religion, especially the field of religion and sexuality, by giving nuance to the dichotomy of religious-secular and destabilizing the related assumption that being religious entails being sex-negative. Secondly, it aims to increase the awareness of stigmatization experienced by sexual minorities in Ghana beyond academic interests. I pursue these aims in the main research question: *How do young adults who identify as sexual minorities understand and negotiate their religious and sexual identities in Ghana?* I answer this question through the four following sub-questions:

1. What kind of religious identities can be found in Ghana among young adults identifying as sexual minorities?
2. What kind of religious views on sexuality and gender do young adults in Ghana identifying as sexual minorities hold?
3. How do young adults in Ghana identifying as sexual minorities negotiate their religious and sexual identities in relation to sexual stigma?
4. How do religious institutions and authorities underpin stigmatization against sexual minorities or provide individual support or empowerment?

As mentioned, there has been an increase in publications in the study of religion, and especially in the study of sexuality in West Africa. Some key publications from these fields are introduced below to provide a background for this study and some context for the most recent developments in these rapidly changing political debates in West Africa and Ghana. These parts are separated into two sections, 1) previous studies in the field of religion in Ghana and 2) previous studies in sexuality in Africa with a focus on sexual minorities and religion in Ghana. Before the section on previous studies, the collaboration with Solace Initiative, the NGO I worked with, is further introduced.

### 1.3 The collaboration with Solace Initiative

I gathered the material of this study in the fall of 2017 and the spring of 2018 during a two-and-a-half-month fieldwork stay in Accra. The participants in this study were gathered through my collaboration with Solace Initiative.

I organized my initial visit in November 2017 to explore further collaboration with the local non-governmental organization (NGO) Solace Initiative in Accra. Through social networks, I learned about Solace Initiative, which Sadiq Yussif directed. Before the visit to Accra, we established contact through e-mail, and I introduced my study to him. During a Skype meeting between us, Yussif discussed his and the organization's interest in my study.

Solace Initiative, formerly called Solace Brothers Foundation, was established in 2012. They aim to initiate and implement "programs and projects that are aimed at supporting the realization of LGBTQ+ human rights by working with grass-root LGBTQ+<sup>3</sup> people who face social

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<sup>3</sup> LGBTQ+ refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and plus. The plus is often used instead of writing out LGBT TTQQIAA (transsexual, two-spirit, queer, questioning, intersex, asexual and ally). Since there are often discussions on who is included or excluded by these acronyms, I use the term 'sexual minorities' and the self-identifications



injustices, discrimination, and continuous human rights abuses because of their sexual orientation or gender identity” (Solace Initiative n.d.).

Yussif was one of the initial directors of the organization and was seen as a gatekeeper of the queer community in Ghana. Together with my supervisor, Dr. Sofia Sjö, I met Yussif and his sister on the 26th of November at our hotel in Accra. Yussif elaborated on the situation of stigmatization against sexual minorities in Ghana. I introduced myself, my positions on religion and sexuality, the aims of my study and the methodology. It became clear that there was a shared interest, as Yussif and I were both interested in possible collaborations between religious communities and sexual minorities. Yussif told me that as long as I would be transparent about my positions, being heterosexual and my understandings of sexuality (i.e. spectrum of sexuality and gender, not having a strong belief in rigid categories of sexuality or gender in lived experiences), which was my intention, people would feel comfortable to participate in the study. He told me that my European background could be an advantage at this point in time, since I would be trusted for not holding any stigmatizing views against non-normative sexualities. At the same time, I knew that since I was an outsider and the Ghanaian context was unknown to me, I had to do thorough preparations and give the participants the possibility to ask questions or comment during the process.<sup>4</sup> We agreed on two pilot interviews during the rest of my stay and an interview schedule for the spring of 2018.

Sadly, I never met face to face again with Yussif. Yussif fell ill, and after being hospitalized, he passed away on the 11th of December 2017, a few days after my return to Finland. Our last correspondence was on the pilot interviews, possible participants, and his health through WhatsApp. Through contact with one of the former project managers, Lariba, I became aware of his passing. His loss was a significant loss for the queer community in Ghana, as he was a well-known openly gay Muslim who had created an advocacy network throughout Ghana (see, e.g., Meigashi 2017. Macaulay 2018).

In December 2017, Lariba discussed the further procedure of the collaboration with me. Everything would proceed as agreed upon with Yussif. I started to establish a stronger relationship with Lariba and send information about the call for participants and the interview procedure. We agreed on an incentive for the participants and payments for Lariba’s contributions (reaching out to the first participants) and the use of the facilities of Solace Initiative.

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of the participants primarily in my study. However, the acronym is used in reference to sources or citations that use it.

<sup>4</sup> These issues are further discussed in different sections in the third chapter Methodology. For a critical account of the category of sexuality, see section 1.5 Previous studies: sexual minorities and religion in Ghana. .

On the 20th of February 2018, I returned to Accra to collect the data. The first weekend of my stay, I was invited to a two-day workshop held by Solace Initiative for queer advocates throughout Ghana. In addition, I joined Lariba at a queer women's meeting at a swimming pool during the same month. These workshops and meetings were relatively informal but led to important contacts throughout West Africa and established trust between possible study participants and me. It became apparent that because of my initial contact with Yussif, I was trusted in the community.

During the writing stages of this thesis, the contact with Solace Initiative has been sparse since I have no direct contact with any of the participants. I stay in contact with Lariba, who keeps me informed about the ongoing challenges that sexual minorities experience in Ghana. Despite the challenges that increased at the time of writing (October 2021)<sup>5</sup>, Solace Initiative is active and remains an NGO that promotes and protects the rights of LGBTQ+ people in Ghana.

## 1.4 Previous studies: the religious landscape in Ghana

Although religion is part of everyday life in Ghana, religious traditions in West Africa are often misrepresented in the study of religion. Christianity and Islam, two of the most significant religious traditions in Ghana, are often seen as foreign to Africa. African Indigenous Religions, which is the third most significant religious tradition in Ghana, were often excluded from the study of religion because they were not considered to meet the criteria of religious traditions. As Chitando, Adogame, and Bateye argue in *African traditions in the study of religion in Africa* (2012): "the academic study of religion has its roots outside the continent, and the very category of religion itself has a European history" (p. 1).

To provide context to the three major religious traditions, I start with a historical introduction to Christianity, Islam, and African Indigenous Religions and the most important denominations in Ghana and Accra, where this study took place. Before those parts, an overview is given of the religious landscape in Ghana and a discussion of religious affiliation and religious hybridity.

Globally, Ghana has one of the highest percentages of religiously affiliated populations. Only around six percent of the population describes themselves as having 'No Religion' (GSS 2012, Pew-Templeton 2010). The largest religious communities in Ghana are Christians,

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<sup>5</sup> In May 2021, twenty-one people who visited a workshop for sexual minorities were arrested in the Volta region in Ghana. In July 2021, a bill was proposed by members of the parliament to "proscribe and criminalize any advocacy of LGBT identity". This bill is currently under review at a committee of the Parliament in Ghana (HRW 2021b).

Muslims, and persons who belong to African Indigenous Religions. The percentages of these groups and their denominations vary slightly between studies, but there is consent on Christian communities being the majority and Muslim communities being the most significant religious minority in the country. Muslims are a religious minority, except in the Northern region of Ghana, where Islam is the dominant religion with sixty percent of the population (GSS 2012). These percentages are presented in figure 1.

Figure 2 shows the percentages of religious affiliation in Greater Accra, which is the region that includes Accra. As the figure shows, in Accra, the percentage of affiliation to Islam is smaller in comparison to the national percentages. Religious affiliations such as African Indigenous Religions ('Traditionalist'), Other, and No religion are also smaller in Greater Accra. The percentage of Christians is larger with a more significant percentage of pentecostal<sup>6</sup> followers and Protestants in comparison to the national percentages.

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<sup>6</sup> In this study, the term 'pentecostal' uncapitalized is used deliberately to appropriately refer to traditions that either identify as Pentecostal, charismatic, or neo pentecostal. (see for further discussion Yong 2005, Yong 2010 p. 7).

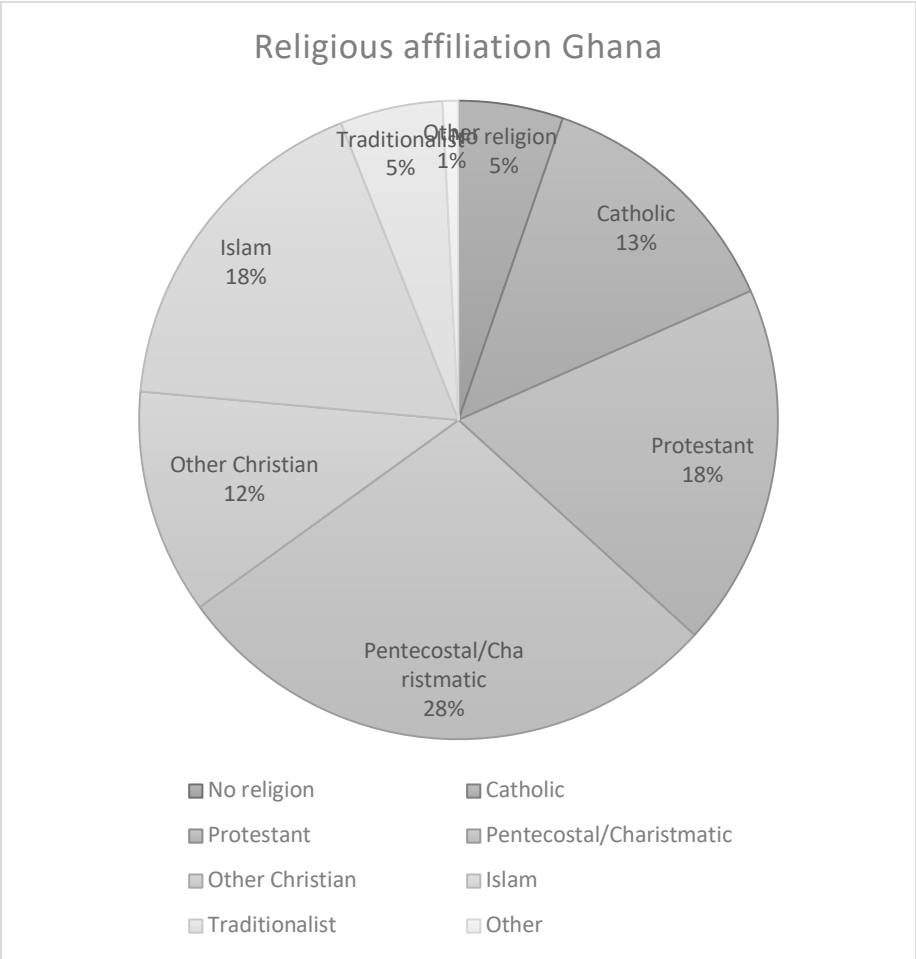


Figure 1. Religious affiliation in Ghana (GSS 2012)

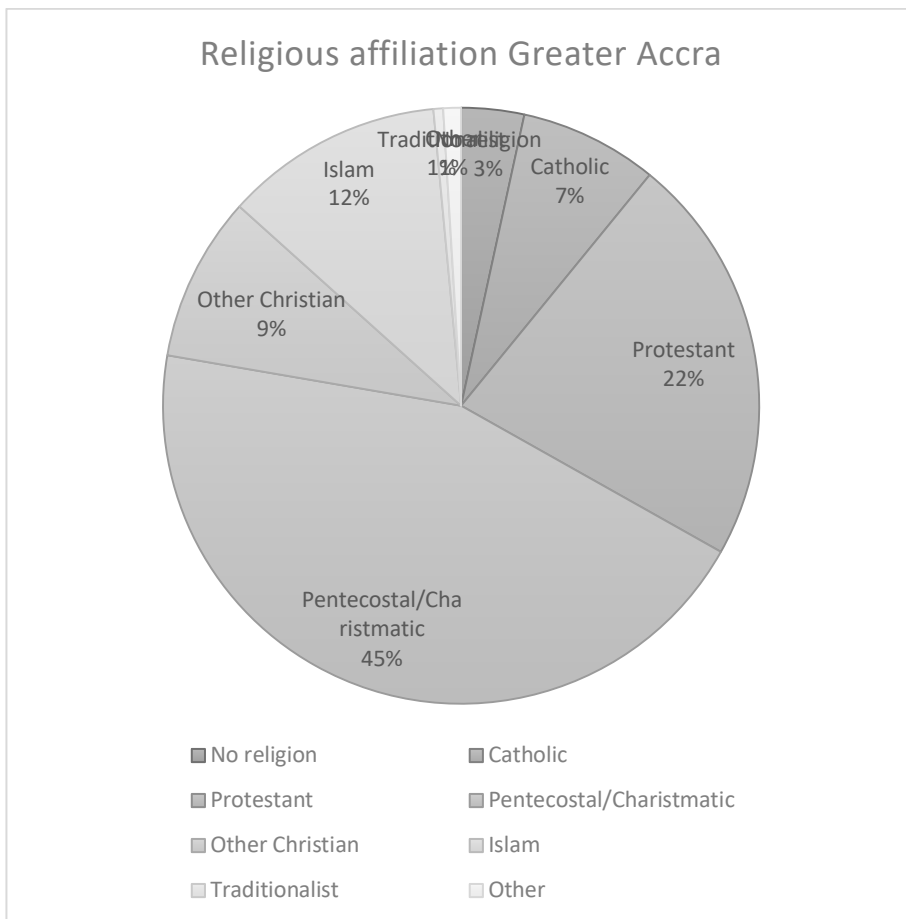


Figure 2. Religious affiliation in Greater Accra (GSS 2012)

In addition to the above-mentioned religious groups, measured by the GSS (2012), Pew-Templeton (2010) also identified people who identified as Buddhists (1%), Hindus (1%), and Jews (1%) in Ghana. Presumably, most of these religious traditions have come to Ghana through immigration and are situated in Accra, the capital. However, many young adults have noticed the Buddhist community, as it was often referred to during my interviews.

As these percentages demonstrate, the religious landscape in Ghana is quite diverse. In addition to the religious diversity in Ghana, religious hybridity is also relevant (see, e.g., Grillo et al. 2019), which is sometimes also referred to as syncretism or pragmatism (Soothill 2007); persons often follow a plurality of religious beliefs and practices. In her book *Gender, Social Change and Spiritual Power* (2007), Soothill describes that the number of people who belong to a “plurality or ‘traditional’ religions” is about twenty percent of the Ghanaian population (p. 1). Therefore, she emphasizes that religious practice is

“more pragmatic than it is prescriptive or dogmatic” (p. 11). Individuals simultaneously practice different religious practices, such as African indigenous practices, and Christian practices, such as reading the bible or praying. Sometimes there is a difference between identifying religiously as Christian or Muslim and ethnically as belonging to an indigenous community.

In other cases, there is an influence from African Indigenous Religions in specific Christian communities, such as African indigenous churches (AIC), in which Christian communities have indigenized Christianity and emphasize African agency (Grillo et al. 2019). At the same time, there is a colonial legacy in other Christian communities where African Indigenous Religions are seen as a “less advanced kind of religion” (Meyer 2011, p. 154). For example, many pentecostal communities oppose African Indigenous Religions. AIRs are viewed as dark and evil by pentecostal preachers, who go on television and radio to get this message through (ibid.). Concepts such as spirits are often used negatively by pentecostal religious leaders.

In addition to these examples of how religious groups relate to each other, religious hybridity also comes forward in interfaith marriages. Growing up in an interfaith household was often discussed as to why some of the participants in this study identified as both Christian and Muslim or perceived different religious communities as very similar. Because of Ghana’s religious diversity and hybridity, rigid categories of religious affiliation do not often portray the complexity of the religious landscape (see, e.g., Van Klinken 2019 on this issue in Kenya).

From a postcolonial perspective, these examples also show how “the subconscious depths of African societies still exert a great influence upon individuals and communities, even if they are no longer the only final source of reference and identity” (Mbiti 1990, p. 38). Therefore, it is essential to, one, consider the history of the major religious traditions in Ghana, which is further described below, and, two, to emphasize how the participants in this study themselves understand and practice their (non-)religious beliefs.

#### 1.4.1 Christianity in Ghana

In Ghana, Christianity was introduced during the 15th to the 17th century through Portuguese colonizers. The Portuguese settled in different places along the Ghanaian coast, for example, in Elmina, where they built a large castle with a church. The Dutch later used the castle for the slave trade and continued to be used by the British (Grillo et al. 2019, Dantzig 2016). However, whether or not Christianity is a colonial legacy in Ghana is difficult since religious traditions have adapted since then

(for example, the African indigenous churches) (see, e.g., Grillo et al. 2019).

The colonial period did increase the emergence of Christianity, as there was a colonial infrastructure throughout Ghana (especially along the coast and the center regions). Different Christian denominations emerged through these periods, as diverse missionary societies throughout the country. In Ghana, the Catholic and Protestant churches (Presbyterian and later Methodist) emerged (Grillo et al. 2019). During the colonial period, missionaries supported white supremacy and the idea that indigenous communities needed to be ‘civilized’. As a result, African Indigenous Religions and customs were discouraged while colonial customs and beliefs, that is to say, Christianity, were applauded. Until today, in many Christian religious traditions in Ghana, African Indigenous Religions are seen as less worthy and backward (Grillo et al. 2019, Meyer 2011).

For these reasons, Christianity in Africa is often viewed as a colonial import. However, as Grillo et al. argues, approaching Christianity in Africa as a colonial legacy leaves out the agency of Africans. Some African individuals converted and became missionaries. At the same time, there were missionary activities by Christians of African descent (Ibid.). In the 20th century, this led to an increase of African indigenous churches, also referred to as African independent churches or African initiated churches (Grillo et al. 2019). An example in Ghana is the history of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana, which became a self-governed church with indigenous leaders.<sup>7</sup>

This emergence is also referred to as the “African Reformation” (Anderson 2001). Most of these churches relate to pentecostalism or charismatic traditions, as they are “characterized by the practice of spiritual gifts and the power of the Holy Spirit” (Soothill 2007, p. 35). However, there is an ongoing debate on categorizing these religious traditions, as many are neither strictly ‘Pentecostal’ nor ‘Charismatic’ (see, e.g., Soothill 2007, Yong 2005, 2010). Terms that are commonly used to describe these traditions are neo-Pentecostal, Pentecostal/charismatic, or born-again churches (Soothill 2007). In this study, I follow other researchers in the field and use the term ‘pentecostal’ deliberately uncapitalized to refer to traditions that either identify as Pentecostal, charismatic, born again or neo-Pentecostal (Yong 2005, 2010, Tweneboah 2019, 2020).

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<sup>7</sup> Between 1815 and 1843, several missionaries were sent from Denmark to Ghana to start the Presbyterian Church of Ghana. In 1918, more and more indigenous leaders were appointed in the church as the size of the church kept growing, and there was only a small number of staff left. Soon after, Dr. Wilkie, part of the staff, decided that the church should become a self-governing church (Presbyterian Church of Ghana 2020).

Pentecostal traditions have multiplied throughout Ghana (Tweneboah 2019, Meyer 2011, Soothill 2007). The popularity of pentecostal traditions is not only visible in public spaces, through, for example, large banners, but also noticeable in the political arena, where “Ghana’s pentecostals have become indispensable” (Tweneboah 2019, p. 10). Even throughout Madina, a primarily Muslim neighborhood in Accra, pentecostal churches are built to attract more followers. Soothill (2007) points out that “[pentecostal churches] have made an enormous impact on Ghana’s religious scene, especially in Accra where they now occupy many of the city’s disused cinemas, industrial buildings, and other formerly secular sites” (p. 1). The public sphere is filled with what Birgit Meyer (2010) calls “Christian imagery”, and pentecostal traditions use television, radio, posters, stickers and social media to spread their messages (Meyer 2004, 2008, 2010). These pentecostal traditions are distinguished by a “combination of a modern style of presentation, the use of popular forms of communication, a global orientation, and a theological emphasis on prosperity” (Grillo et al. 2019, p. 79).

Most pentecostal traditions are independent churches, but some have become pan-African or global denominations (Grillo et al. 2019). One of these worldwide denominations is the Nigerian Winners Chapel International, one of the most prominent pentecostal traditions in Accra today (also known as Winners’ Chapel). Accra’s other prominent pentecostal traditions are the Action Chapel International and the Lighthouse Chapel (for a more thorough discussion, see Soothill 2007). The spread of pentecostal traditions and their beliefs is also visible in this study’s material, as most participants visited pentecostal churches or had heard about them. In addition, pentecostal religious leaders are one of the most vocal ones in preaching against sexual minorities (see also Tweneboah 2020). Following these pentecostal traditions, the Protestant church, including Presbyterians and Methodists, and the Catholic church are the largest Christian communities in Accra.

#### 1.4.2 Islam in Ghana

The second-largest religious tradition, and therefore largest minority religious tradition in Ghana, is Islam. From the GSS (2012) data, around 18 percent of the population identifies as being Muslim. These numbers slightly differ in other studies, where Muslims have been estimated at a lower percentage of around 16 percent (Pew-Templeton 2010, Soothill 2007).

Islamic influence in West Africa dates back to the 15th century, through trading routes of Muslims from Western Sudan towards Ghana



(Dumbe 2013, Grillo et al. 2019). Through ‘Islamization’<sup>8</sup>, Islamic elements were incorporated into the “culture of states” and eventually in the “sociopolitical system of the north” (Dumbe 2013, p. 9). This is reflected by most Muslims who live in the north of Ghana, mainly in the old kingdoms called Gonja, Dagbon, Mamprusi, and Wala.

Grillo et al. (2019) describes three phases to the origin of Islam in West Africa that aligns with Islam’s origin in Ghana. The first phase is called ‘minority Islam’, in which the religious tradition was introduced by North African traders in West Africa, which happened in Ghana with traders from Western Sudan. The second phase is where members of the ruling classes converted to Islam, followed by the third phase, where the society embraced the religious tradition (Robinson 2004).

Islam is a majority faith in the northern parts of Ghana. However, during the early nineteenth century, before the British colonization, Islam was also introduced in the southern part of Ghana. During this period, Muslims moved and settled in Accra (Dumbe et al. 2015).

Compared to other countries in Africa, especially in the east and the south, Islam is stronger in West Africa. This is due to the long history and indigenization of Islam in West Africa (Grillo et al. 2019). In Ghana and other countries in West Africa, early onwards, religious leaders were indigenous and not from Arabic countries. As a result, religious leaders combined indigenous practices with Islamic practices. This combination is still visible in Ghana today, as many Muslims consider themselves part of indigenous traditions and have combined practices from their indigenous tradition with Islam.

In Ghana, the largest Muslim denomination is ‘Sufism’, which started with the Muslim revivalist tradition Qadiriyya, replaced mainly by the Muslim revivalist tradition Tijaniyya (Dumbe 2013, p. 12). Sufism in Ghana is part of what scholars of Islam describe as ‘African Islam’. African Islam refers to a “system of syncretism”; “the simultaneous practice of more than one tradition” (Grillo et al. 2019, p. 58). It relates to what I described above, the religious hybridity of indigenous religious traditions and Islam.

In addition to African Islam, the term ‘Islam in Africa’ (Ibid.) refers to Islamic orthodoxy and is seen as identical to Salafiyya-Wahabi and Islamist influences. This form of Islam encourages literalist approaches to scriptures, values Arab customs, and rejects esotericism (Ibid.). In Ghana, in the last decades, there has been a resurgence of Salafism, which is currently the most dominant Muslim group in Accra and the second largest Muslim tradition in Ghana (Dumbe 2011, 2013). As

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<sup>8</sup> ‘Islamization of Africa’ is also understood as the process of Islam in Africa which “aspires to propagate an Islam that is considered to be free of African customs but loaded with Arab culture” (Grillo et al. 2019, p. 59).

Dumbe (2011) describes, Salafism “preaches a return to the study of the basic sources of Islam, the Quran, and the Sunna, and rejects the taqlid (blind imitation) and accepts ijtehad (individual interpretation of the law)” (p. 89). Among these Muslim communities, forms of religious hybridity are not embraced, and there are more minor traces of integration between indigenous religious practices and Islam. Other Muslim traditions, such as Shi’ism and the Third Universal Theory of Qadhafi, are practiced in Ghana, but they are religious minorities.

### 1.4.3 African Indigenous Religions in Ghana

African Indigenous Religions are mostly called ‘African traditional religion’ to refer to indigenous beliefs and practices throughout the continent of Africa (see, e.g., Idowu 1973, Mbiti 1975, Awolalu 1976). However, the latter term has been criticized for being too singular and presenting a “fixed and timeless idea of the concept traditional” (Grillo et al. 2019, p. 17). The critique against the term ‘African traditional religion’ is not new, but often the concept traditional was explained as indigenous, present, and as a living religious tradition:

We need to explain the word „traditional“. This word means indigenous, that which is aboriginal or foundational, handed down from generation to generation, upheld and practiced by Africans today. This is a heritage from the past, but treated not as a thing of the past but as that which connects the past with the present and the present with eternity. This is not a “fossil” religion, a thing of the past or a dead religion. It is a religion that is practiced by living men and women. (Awolalu 1976, p. 1)

At the same time, these scholars, such as Awolalu (1976), did not agree with the image of the plurality of African Indigenous Religions. In contrast, Awolalu (1976) emphasizes the similarities: “everywhere there is the concept of God (called by different names); there is also the concept of divinities or spirits as well as beliefs in the ancestral cult. Every locality has its local deities, festivals, and names for the Supreme Being, but in essence, the pattern is the same. There is that noticeable “Africanness” in the whole pattern” (p. 2).

Another criticism against the new term African Indigenous Religions is that the term is not firmly established, especially not among the public in Ghana. As Musa W. Dube points out in an article on ‘Postcolonial Feminist Perspective on African Religions’ (2012), “the term African Indigenous Religion(s) is, therefore, best understood as a category imposed from outside – either by anthropologists or some western-trained African scholars of religion” (p. 129). None of the participants used terms such as ‘African Indigenous Religions’. If the topic came up

for discussion, 'traditional religion' or 'traditionalism' was used, or there was a reference to indigenous communities such as the Fante or Akan.

Although the term African Indigenous Religions might be relatively new and used mainly by Western scholars, I use it in this thesis to avoid a fixed idea of indigenous religions and emphasize plurality. I also chose to avoid confusion with the term 'religious tradition'. At the same time, I do not use the concept 'traditional' or 'traditionalism' as it can easily be thought to refer to or associated with matters that are seen as old-fashioned, from the past or not modern. Concepts that participants use during the interviews remain unchanged.

African Indigenous Religions are the third-largest religious tradition in Ghana. They relate to ethnic groups that are spread over Ghana. Ghana's population includes at least seventy-five ethnic groups (GSS 2012, Soothill 2007). The majority of the population belongs to the Akan, mainly living in the Ashanti region. After the Akan, the Mole-Dagbani, who live in the Northern region, and the Ewe, who live in the Volta region, are Ghana's largest ethnic groups. In Greater Accra, which includes Accra, the most prominent groups are the Akan, the Ga-Dangme, and the Ewe (GSS, 2012). Each group has its deities, spirits, and ancestors (Lugira 2009).

AIRs are oral religions. Practices and beliefs are sustained via oral transmission, from generation to generation (Awolalu 1976, Grillo et al. 2019). The most significant difference between AIRs and Christianity and Islam is, as Grillo et al. argue, the focus which is on the world that we are part of: "devotees call divinity into this world to support them and their community" and "the physical world [including the human body] is considered a manifestation of the invisible spiritual realm" (Ibid. p. 19).

Another significant characteristic of AIRs in Ghana is that divine beings are often beyond gender or a combination of both male and female. For example, in Ghana, Akan names for the divine are 'Onyame', which means "the Great and Shining One who is high and above all" (Awolalu 1976, p. 10) or 'Ataa Naa Nynonmo', "Father Mother God" (Dube 2012, p. 134). These characteristics are essential to understanding gender relations in Ghana. They demonstrate a "long history of contested masculinity and femininity" in, for example, the Akan community (Miescher and Miescher 2005, p. 8-12, O'Mara 2007). They also show how non-binary forms of gender have always been a part of Ghana's cultural understandings.

## 1.5 Previous studies: sexual minorities and religion in Ghana

Recently, more research has been done on religion and sexual minorities in Africa. While most studies focus on (religious) institutional frameworks that either oppress or empower sexual minorities in Africa (see, e.g., Tweneboah 2019, 2020, Benyah 2019, Epprecht 2013, Msibi 2011, Chitando and Van Klinken 2016, Van Klinken and Chitando 2016, Gunda 2010), there is a growing number of studies which focuses on religiosity among sexual minorities in Africa (see, e.g., Banks 2012, 2013, Van Klinken 2016, 2019).

In 2013, Williams Banks wrote his dissertation on *Queering Ghana: Sexuality, Community, And The Struggle For Cultural Belonging In An African Nation*. His focus was on saso<sup>9</sup> identifying people, kinship, and indigenous priests in the south of Ghana. In his study, Banks demonstrates the critical role indigenous priests play in queer communities by conducting engagement rituals, officiating weddings, and serving as spiritual advisers. Besides Banks' dissertation, two recent volumes have been published with studies focusing on Ghana and sexual minorities: *Routledge Handbook of Queer African Studies* (Nyeck 2019) and *Readings in Sexualities from Africa* (Spronk and Hendriks 2020).

A majority of the *Routledge Handbook of Queer African Studies* (Nyeck 2019) chapters are situated in Ghana. Among others, the subjects discussed are Ghanaian media discourses around homosexuality, language and sexualities, queer self-making, silence and sexuality, and sports and sexuality. Religion does come forward in these chapters, but primarily as religious authorities and institutions connected to homophobia and stigmatization (Mohammed 2019).

In *Readings in Sexualities from Africa* (Spronk and Hendriks 2020), Dankwa, who has published before on 'female same-sex intimacies' in Ghana (2009), writes about the latest developments around homophobia in Ghana, heteronormativity, female intimacy, and the role of the media. This chapter and previously mentioned ones introduce dominant discourses on homosexuality in Ghana, further discussed below. They highlight the most recent developments and the relation to religion, especially religious institutions and authorities.

In both recently published volumes and previously mentioned individual studies, there is a postcolonial approach to conceptualizing sexuality in Africa. This approach centers on the work of Sylvia Tamale, who is one of the most well-known scholars and human rights activists

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<sup>9</sup> Saso is a term used to refer to queer communities in the southern part of Ghana (Banks 2013, p. 1).

writing on sexuality in postcolonial Africa (see, e.g., Tamale 2011, 2013, 2014).

### 1.5.1 African sexualities: understanding sexuality

Tamale situates the category of sexuality as socially constructed and intertwined with gender. She writes, “sexuality is deeply embedded in the meanings and interpretations of gender systems” (2014, p. 16). These ‘gender systems’ are impacted by other factors such as class, age, religion, race, ethnicity, culture, locality, and disability (Ibid.). Tamale emphasizes the importance of thinking in “multiple sexualities” (Ibid., p. 17). This concept refers to a political call “to conceptualize sexuality outside of the normative social orders and frameworks that view it through binary oppositions and labels” (Ibid.).

This understanding of sexuality is critical to avoid essentialism, which Tamale claims is often present in research on sexuality. As an example, she explains that these conceptualizations do not only include the “narrow spectrum of the sex act”, but rather multiple dimensions of sexuality, such as “sexual knowledge, beliefs, values, attitudes, and behaviors, as well as procreation, sexual orientation, and personal and interpersonal sexual relations” (Ibid.). Her conceptualization of sexuality is similar to that of Yip and Page (2013) in their study on sexuality and religion in the UK, who emphasize a broader understanding of sexuality, not solely sexual activity. Throughout their study, they avoided a focus on categories of sexual orientation but focused on attitudes and behaviors related to sexuality and religion.

Tamale (2014) underlines the importance of a nuanced understanding of sexuality concerning the representation of sexualities in Africa: “Because in Africa many acts that are associated with sexualities are criminalized or highly stigmatized, analysts need to tread the territory with care and sensitivity” (Ibid., p. 17). This is not to say that sexuality in Western countries is much more liberated. However, research done in Africa on gender and sexuality, including historical works written from colonial times onwards, has a long history in representing a homogenizing monolithic view on sexuality. These representations are often still visible in common stereotypes about African sexualities.<sup>10</sup>

Tamale emphasizes the importance of being aware of the “historical legacies inscribed in cultures within Africa by forces such as colonialism” (Ibid., p. 42). An example is sexual identity markers such as

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<sup>10</sup> Tamale gives a few examples of common sexual stereotypes such as: “Black men have larger penises than white men, she wears a religious veil and is therefore sexually submissive, she is disabled and therefore has no sexual desire, he is openly gay and therefore his life is exclusively defined by the sex act, etcetera” (2014, p. 18).

gay, lesbian and transgender, which are underpinned by Western identity politics. Even though participants in this study use these identity markers, the meaning and content are used differently than in Western contexts, as there is “a much larger focus on a fluid understanding of sexuality in Ghana” (Gyasi-Gyamereh and Sjøgaard 2019, p. 263). Gyasi-Gyamereh and Sjøgaard, who both published on homosexuality among young adults in Ghana, argue that young adults take

...positive connotations of homosexuality from foreign movies and online sites, the positive aspects of the Ghanaian society, add on the idea of sexuality as fluid, and merge them together into something new but not yet defined. (Gyasi-Gyamereh and Sjøgaard 2019, p. 264)

This resonates in this study, as often, participants would have different arguments for using specific identity markers and would connect different meanings to them. To allow for this in this study, the emphasis is on the interviews with the participants to avoid any unwanted categorizations. Sexual identity markers used by the participants are presented as such, including Ghanaian terms such as ‘kojo basia’<sup>11</sup>.

Throughout this study, sexuality is understood aligned with Tamale’s work; in a non-essentialist way and based on the descriptions of the participants of this study. Sexualities, as in multiple, is used throughout this thesis to emphasize the multiplicity of sexuality as a category. I have also chosen to use the terms sexual minorities or non-normative behavior to avoid any unwanted categorization of sexual orientation.

### 1.5.2 Colonial legacies: the need for a broader understanding of sexuality in the study of religion in Africa

In studies on sexuality in Africa, homophobia is often discussed, and African countries are usually represented negatively concerning homosexuality. In his book *Sexuality and Social Justice in Africa: Rethinking Homophobia and Forging Resistance* (2013), Marc Epprecht emphasizes how the persecution of sexual minorities in Africa is the dominant representation when homosexuality is discussed, either by the media or in academic research. An event that was given worldwide attention was when Uganda presented its proposal of the ‘Anti-Homosexuality Bill’ (Ibid, p. 2). Often there is a representation of these

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<sup>11</sup> Kojo basia means female Kojo in Akan. Kojo is a Ghanaian male name, so it refers to female male. This term is often used to refer to a feminine man. It is often a derogatory term that stabilizes hegemonic masculinity (Ampofo and Boateng 2011). However, individuals can also use it as an identity marker, in which case it can be a positive term (see Gyasi-Gyamereh and Sjøgaard 2019).

issues as a “clash between liberal Western and conservative African values” (Ibid, p. 3).

This representation is done by the media, politicians, and academia in Europe, North America, and Africa. For example, African human rights non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are framed as if they promote Western ideologies, primarily when they are financially supported by well-known Western organizations (see, e.g., Baisley 2015). Ghanaian politicians call for ‘decolonization’ and getting rid of these ‘Western values’ concerning promoting LGBTQ+ rights. At the same time, Ghanaian human rights NGOs are calling for ‘decolonization’ and refer to pre-colonial forms of sexualities (Ibid.).

As these examples demonstrate, and Epprecht argues, the discussion on homophobia is much more complex than a clash between “liberal Western and conservative African values” (Epprecht 2013, p. 3). Europe and North America have only a recent history of sexual liberty, which remains restricted and limited in certain places. Meanwhile, some of the most homophobic pentecostal traditions in Africa are supported by “ex-gay or sexual reorientation ministries” from the United States (Ibid.). An example of these kinds of supports is the recent heterosexist bill proposed in parliament in Ghana, in which ultra-conservative movements from the USA are involved (see, e.g., Mckenzie and Princewill 2021, HRW 2021b).

Meanwhile, these negative portrayals of ‘African homophobia’ are often represented in these issues in Europe and North America. As a result, progressive developments such as African politicians who speak up for the decriminalization of homosexuality, affirmative religious groups, LGBTQ+ activism, and art are often neglected (see, e.g., Van Klinken 2019). The invisibility of these developments and the dominant negative portrayal of homosexuality strengthen a colonial image of Western countries as ‘liberal’ and African countries as ‘backward’.

These dichotomies that reinforce colonial representations are examples of why it is essential to be aware of the colonial legacies and continue those legacies in current times. Therefore, Tamale calls for a postcolonial approach to study sexuality in African countries: “researchers should develop a keen awareness of all the historical objectifications and derogations in research experiences on the continent” (Tamale 2014, p. 43). Most recent publications on sexualities and religion in Africa start from Tamale’s approach. These studies have a more comprehensive understanding of sexuality, not limited to sexual acts or negative encounters, but emphasizing pleasure, intimacy, and love (see, e.g., Van Klinken 2019).

Adriaan Van Klinken points out in his book *Kenyan Christian Queer* (2019) that explicitly concerning gay men, African sexuality tends to be seen as primitive, uncontrolled, and excessive. Consequently, gay men

are represented as promiscuous, and stories involving them are primarily about sex (Ibid.). In contrast to this and aligned with Yip and Page (2013), Van Klinken focuses on experiences and narratives of religious sexual minorities to emphasize a broader understanding of sexualities. He highlights how their stories incorporate 'narrative theologies' and argues that

...by identifying which pathways or strategies move queer people closer to that kind of integration, we may find resources for grassroots African queer theology.<sup>12</sup> (Van Klinken 2019, p. 128)

Another critical point Van Klinken makes concerning sexual minorities is the concept of 'coming out', which does not relate to the Kenyan context. He discusses how coming out, as seen as an empowering event in Western countries, might not work in African contexts. He emphasizes how it can be important to keep one's sexuality private, specifically towards parents who might be more conservative, which does not mean that persons are opposed to homosexuality but instead that sexuality is not discussed (Van Klinken 2019). He refers to the power of silence, described by Foucault (1990), which is also highlighted by Tamale (2014) regarding African sexualities:

...in many African cultures silence can be as powerful and as empowering as speech. Studies have shown there is a legitimate silence surrounding the sexualities of some African women that is ambiguous and not able to be engaged. (Tamale 2005 cited in 2014, p. 19)

These contextual differences are considered throughout this thesis in different ways. For example, it has influenced the structure of this thesis, as it is centered on the experiences of the participants of this study to allow for a broad understanding of sexuality and religion and to identify strategies that oppress or empower religious sexual minorities in Ghana.

To further contextualize this study, the following section describes recent studies on the discussion of dominant discourses on homosexuality and homophobia in Ghana.

## 1.6 Dominant beliefs and attitudes towards homosexuality and sexual minorities in Ghana

As previously mentioned, homosexuality is often argued to be a colonial import in Africa and is seen as 'unAfrican' (Epprecht 2013). This

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<sup>12</sup> Van Klinken refers to identity integration, one of the four identity strategies that is often discussed in relation to sexual minorities who belong to religious communities (see Rodriguez 2006).



argument is also popular throughout Ghana. Homosexuality, or non-normative sexualities, is often discussed as “foreign to the Ghanaian culture” and against “the nation’s major religions”<sup>13</sup> (Gyasi-Gyamerah and Søggaard 2019, p. 256).

However, as many researchers have pointed out, this is not the case. Same-sex relationships in Ghana are pre-colonial and have always existed. However, as Owusu et al. (2013) point out, sexual orientations in Ghana have been redefined due to colonialism and with the arrival of Christianity, which has “different bases and perceptions than those of traditional African religions” (Ibid., p. 178). Currently, homosexuality is often viewed according to these lines in Ghana: as an import and not in line with Christian or Islamic values.

In the last decade, several human rights- and LGBTQ+ non-governmental organizations (NGOs) emerged and have been active in raising awareness and lobbying for equal rights and health care for sexual minorities and against discrimination and violence in Ghana. Being in a same-sex relationship, whether as a man or a woman, is not accepted in Ghana and can, as already noted, be prosecuted under the Ghanaian Criminal Code section 104 (1,2)<sup>14</sup> (see, e.g., COC 2016, Solace Initiative 2018, HRW 2018). Although there has been a minimal amount of court cases supported by this law, it contributes to the general idea that same-sex activities and relationships are illegal and can be prosecuted. It also reinforces violence and discrimination in public and private places against people who do not seem heterosexual or gender normative.

Campaigns and activities against homophobia and promoting equal rights have pushed debates on issues such as homosexuality, HIV, and violence towards sexual minorities onto the political agenda and into public media. On several occasions, debates in public media have counteracted positive developments and led to an increase in negative portrayals of sexual minorities. Moreover, these homophobic debates have been reinforced by the media. To better understand the structures of sexual stigma towards sexual minorities in Ghana, these public debates are briefly described below (see, e.g., Gyasi-Gyamerah and Søggaard 2019 and Mohammed 2019).

In 2006, the Gay and Lesbian Association of Ghana (GALAG) president announced a conference for sexual minorities in Accra to demand legal recognition for lesbian and gay rights (Thomann and Currier 2019).

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<sup>13</sup> Christianity, Islam, and African Indigenous Religions.

<sup>14</sup> This section from the criminal code dates from the British colonial era. It is still in force: “(1) Whoever is guilty of unnatural carnal knowledge” and “[...] (2) Unnatural carnal knowledge is sexual intercourse with a person in an unnatural manner or with an animal”, part of the Ghanaian Criminal Code section 104, chapter 6 (see COC 2016, Solace Initiative 2018).

However, the association took distance from the alleged conference. At the same time, GALAG published a bullet point letter answering questions that came up after the announcement. Some of these answers were represented by the media. For example, one point that was framed in a homophobic way, which connected homosexual men with being HIV-positive, discussed that “about half of Ghanaian MSM are also having sex with women, creating a potential ‘crossover’ for HIV/STDs between the gay and heterosexual populations”<sup>15</sup>. Public media focused on this point and portrayed homosexual men as HIV-positive and therefore as a health threat.

In 2011, the debate continued with publications on HIV-positive homosexual men in Ghana. News articles based their information on supposedly an informant who participated in a “basic facts HIV and AIDS” training for health workers organized by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). These publications did target not only homosexual men but also women. An example would be the article titled “Majority of gays in 2 Ghana regions are HIV-positive” (VibeGhana 2011). These events and how they were framed in the media sparked a massive national debate about homosexuality and HIV. During these events, British Prime Minister David Cameron threatened to cut aid to African countries that did not decriminalize homosexuality during the same year.

In the fall of 2017, Ghanaian president Nana Akufo-Addo stated in an interview with Al Jazeera that activism is “bound to happen” and that “those are the same processes that will bring about changes [compared to the history of LGBTQ+ rights in the UK] (Al Jazeera 2017). Compared to the last two presidents, who were both outspoken against homosexuality, Akufo-Addo seems to have another perspective towards homosexuality in Ghana, despite the pressure of the Christian Council to further criminalize homosexuality and male same-sex activity (Nyabor 2017). However, his statements can be interpreted in several ways, such as taking no further action in relation to the issue or claiming that social movements will slowly book progress without political initiative (Adjepong 2019)<sup>16</sup>.

Recently, in the spring and summer of 2021, homophobia has increased significantly. There is a surge in support from political and religious groups to stigmatize anyone perceived as non-normative and marginalize them. Several arrests and raids were organized by the police targeting people who worked or attended gatherings at NGOs that

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<sup>15</sup> The bullet point (number six) provided an answer to the question of how many LGBT people there had to be in Ghana (GALAG 2006, September 15).

<sup>16</sup> In the early Spring of 2021, Akufo-Addo publicly said that he would not support same-sex marriage when he is president. At the same time, the Inspector-General of Police said that “LGBTQI activities remain illegitimate in Ghana” (Citi Newsroom 2021).

support sexual minorities. In March 2021, an LGBTQI+ community center was raided by the police. At the end of May 2021, twenty-one people were arrested by the police because they attended a training session organized by an NGO that supports sexual minorities (HRW 2021a). Among these people was a person with whom I closely worked. She was in jail for several days, her photo has been spread through the media, and currently, while I am writing this, she has to move from place to place to secure her safety. Meanwhile, in July 2021, a bill was proposed at the parliament to criminalize anyone who is perceived as non-normative, including organizations that support these kinds of people (Mckenzie and Princewill 2021, HRW 2021b).

While human rights- and LGBTQ+ NGOs have tried to present sexual diversity as “inherently African” through a decolonization framework and lobbied for equal rights from a human rights perspective, opponents have used the same perspectives in a different way (Baisley 2015, p. 384). Political leaders have often framed homosexuality as colonialist and against Ghanaian values. Religious leaders have framed sexual minorities as deviant, comparing them to either people with mental illnesses or describing them as people who are possessed by demons or demonic spirits. Political and religious leaders have publicly spoken against sexual minorities (Solace Initiative 2018).

The events described above have led to an increase in stereotyped and discriminative media portrayals of sexual minorities. This has also increased discrimination and violence. As it became more publicly accepted to perform violence or discriminate against sexual minorities, over hostility and politicization grew (O’Mara 2018). Two studies have found a high level of stigma against same-sex behavior in Ghana (Gyasi-Gyamerah and Akotia 2016, Owusu et al. 2013) among all age groups. There is also a high level of violence against sexual minorities in Ghana (COC 2016). Feminine men seem especially vulnerable since their non-normative behavior or looks visibly expose them.

Gay men face a high level of violence because of the widespread hatred of gay men. Feminine gay men face an even higher level of violence compared to more masculine gay men. Lesbians and bisexuals also face violence but less so compared to gay men. (COC 2016, p. 8)

Two other studies have shown a positive association between religiosity and religious affiliation and prejudice and stigma against homosexuality in Ghana (Anarfi and Gyasi-Gyamerah 2014, Parker et al. 2020). Persons with variables of higher religiosity expressed more negative attitudes than those less religious (Ibid.). These findings align with the latest report on ‘LGBTQ rights in Ghana’ by the Human Rights Watch (2018),

which stresses the role of religion in the stigmatization of sexual minorities in Ghana. It states:

Religion, particularly Christianity, has strong influence in Ghana and since the law does not operate in a vacuum, the combination of strong anti-homosexuality religious beliefs and criminalization of consensual adult same-sex conduct increase the vulnerability of LGBT people to violence in the home and in public spaces. (Human Rights Watch 2018, p. 13)

This citation emphasizes the stigmatization of sexual minorities reinforced by religious institutions and authorities, often intertwined in state politics (see, e.g., Tweneboah 2019). However, as the other studies on prejudice and stigma against homosexuality demonstrate, “the negative sentiments about homosexuality, however, go beyond the influence of the churches” (Gyasi-Gyamerah and Søggaard 2019, p. 256). Homosexuality is viewed as immoral. It does not lead to procreation, which many religious communities uphold (Ibid). In addition, the stigma against homosexuality is intertwined, especially for homosexual men, with the stigma against HIV.

HIV is one of the most stigmatized diseases globally (UNAIDS 2007). In Ghana, stigmatization against HIV is high and affects the prevention of HIV, as many people are either blocked from access to health care services or too afraid of further stigmatization to access health care services (Tenkorang and Owusu 2010, 2013, Mumin et al. 2018, Gyamerah et al. 2020). As Tenkorang and Owusu (2013) explain, stigma against HIV in Ghana is “rooted in misconceptions and myths about the spread of the disease, beliefs associated with certain kinds of sexual activity and fear about becoming infected. Myths include the idea that HIV/AIDS is a supernatural disease and is spread by witches as a punishment for potential victims who engage in sexual promiscuity” (p. B). Even though HIV in Ghana is mainly transmitted through heterosexual intercourse, a person who becomes HIV-positive is suspected of “illicit sexual behaviors” (Ibid.), which is often interpreted as same-sex relationships between men. Of course, this belief also works vice versa. Homosexual men are often assumed to be HIV-positive. This is how the stigma of HIV and homosexuality are intertwined. Many of these ‘misconceptions’ are associated with homosexual men, as they are believed to be unhealthy, unsuccessful, and might die young. Often being HIV-positive as a gay man is further argued to be caused by an evil spirit or demon who possesses them or as a punishment from a divine being.

Due to the stigma that these individuals experience, situations such as becoming unhealthy due to no access to health care services are a reality, and this can sometimes lead to self-stigma if individuals start believing the homophobic discourses. The Queer African Youth

Networking Center (QAYN 2012) reports that among sexual minorities, there is the common belief that being a lesbian, transgender person, queer, or WSW<sup>17</sup> is illegal in Ghana. A report of Solace Initiative (2016) describes that “the level of violence against LGBT people is high, though many choose not to report such violence as they believe their sexuality would be used against them if they did” (p. 8). The high level of stigma, and the increase of violence towards sexual minorities, have decreased access to health services, education, and public services such as the police in Ghana.

## 1.7 Outline of the volume

In the next chapter, chapter two, the theoretical framework and approach are discussed; stigma, sexual stigma, intersectionality, and lived religion are addressed. After that follows the third chapter, which discusses the methodology of this study, including ethical considerations and limitations. The fourth chapter introduces the material of this study. It presents the five prototypes from the Q-pattern analysis of the Faith Q-Sort. It also presents shared views and values on religion and sexuality-related issues (such as same-sex marriage) among Ghanaian university students and the participants of this study. In chapters five, six, seven, eight, and nine, the prototypes are discussed individually based on the interview material. Key experiences on the issues of sexual stigma strategies navigating stigmatization and religiosity are presented in these chapters. Throughout these chapters, comparisons between the prototypes and participants who share similar views and experiences are drawn. The conclusion summarizes the findings of these chapters related to the four sub-questions of this thesis, reflects on the study's methodology, and ends with suggestions for future research in the field of religious studies on religion and sexuality.

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<sup>17</sup> Women who have sex with women.

## 2. Theoretical framework and approach

Stigma theory, specifically sexual stigma, and heteronormativity, constitutes the theoretical base of this study. The focus is on three types of sexual stigma and how these intertwine. To enrich this analysis, I have chosen an intersectional approach, prioritizing religion and sexuality and including other aspects such as gender, age, and class. Lastly, this thesis focuses on lived religion to bring these elements together and go beyond dichotomies such as the religious-secular. This approach provides a framework where neither religious positions nor sexualities are unitary or fixed. Instead, they are seen as dynamic, ongoing, and blurred. These three theoretical entry points are introduced separately to examine their background and explain their purpose and application in this study.

### 2.1 Stigma-theory

The concept of stigma entered research in 1963 through the work of the Canadian sociologist Erving Goffman in his book *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. After this key publication on stigma, the concept has been applied to many different academic fields. This has resulted in diverse definitions, theoretical frameworks, and a universal concept without specific significant components. This has led to a call for further conceptualization and application of stigma in research to avoid an unspecified understanding (Link and Phelan 2001, Parker and Aggleton 2003). However, initially, Goffman had a specific conceptualization of stigma in mind, a conceptualization that avoids many of the latter critiques.

Following Goffman's definition of stigma, a person who is stigmatized against does not pass normative expectations that are supported by the majority of people in a society. Goffman introduces the stigma process by stating that this person "is reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one" (1963, p. 2). Goffman explains that the attribute or characteristic that makes this person tainted is viewed as a stigma: "especially when its discrediting effect is very extensive; sometimes it is also called a failing, a shortcoming, a handicap" (Ibid.). Someone who is stigmatized against is believed to be "not quite human" (Ibid., p. 5).

A 'stigma-theory' is constructed, that is to say:

An ideology to explain his inferiority and account for the danger he represents, sometimes rationalizing an animosity based on other differences, such as those of social class. (Goffman 1963, p. 5)

This stigma-theory, an ideology, justifies prejudice and discrimination and often leads to a reduction of “life chances” (Ibid.) for the person who is stigmatized against. An example is limited access to health services, education, and the job market among the study participants, which reduces their ability to live healthy and financially secure lives. The definition of stigma-theory presented by Goffman is how I understand stigma in this study; *it is the ideology* related to a specific characteristic or attribute. Therefore, it is only explained by analyzing *the experiences of stigmatization* and not by examining the actual characteristic that is stigmatized against.

Often in research, a definition of stigma is used to focus on *the characteristic*. A majority of the research on stigma in the field of social psychology focuses on the social cognitive approach to understanding “how people construct categories and link these categories to stereotyped beliefs” (Link and Phelan 2001, p. 364). This approach results in stereotyping rather than the structural conditions of stigma (Parker and Aggleton 2003).

As Link and Phelan (2001) point out, many authors base the concept of stigma on a limited definition given by Goffman (1963). In this case, stigma refers to “an attribute that is deeply discrediting,” and the person in question goes from being “a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one” (Goffman 1963, p. 3). This limiting definition causes stigma to be more about “something in the person stigmatized” than a “designation that others attach to that individual” (Parker and Aggleton 2003, p. 15)

This definition focuses on individuals instead of groups; it emphasizes the discrediting attribute belonging to someone. This limited approach has two effects on studying stigma: 1) a misunderstanding in the presentation of individuals who are stigmatized against with an increasing distance between the researcher and ‘the researched’ and 2) a focus on individuals *as being the stigmatized* (2) (Ibid.).

Link and Phelan (2001) point out that many researchers who study stigma but do not belong to the stigmatized group tend to focus more on the theories than the actual lived experiences of their participants. This results in prioritizing scientific theories rather than the interpretations and experiences of the participants, and this leads to the development of false assumptions (see, e.g., Fine and Asch 1988 on the experience of disability); in other words, an increasing distance between the researcher and ‘the researched’. In addition, participants may be victimized by their researchers, and the distance between participants and researchers can increase. Finally, the study will not contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of *the stigma-theory* or

stigmatizing ideology but might reinforce stigmatizing beliefs related to a specific person.

The second effect of this limited conceptualization based on Goffman's work is the focus on stigmatized individuals. The most significant issue focusing on individuals is the exclusion of the stigma-theory and the absence of power structures. A focus on the individual might reveal how stereotyped beliefs affect their daily lives, but it does not provide any insights into structural discrimination, social exclusion, and it neglects the different types of stigma among individuals of a marginalized group.

In their work on HIV and AIDS-related stigma, Parker and Aggleton (2003) argue that understandings of stigmatization and discrimination need to be reframed and conceptualized as social processes "that can only be understood in relation to broader notions of power and domination" (Ibid.). This results in discussing more broadly "how some individuals and groups come to be socially excluded, and about the forces that create and reinforce exclusion in different settings" (Ibid.). In this study, as indicated above, I base my understanding of stigma on the more thorough definition provided by Goffman, which emphasizes that a stigma *does not* refer to the actual attribute or characteristic but refers to *the process*, i.e., ideology, in which a group of people stigmatizes a person based on prejudice against a specific characteristic that this person has. Goffman also describes this process as a "language of relationships" (1963, p. 2). The "language of relationships" refers to the meaning of a relationship between a person *and* an attribute or characteristic given by other people and believed to be accurate.

The definition that I use, based on *stigma-theory*, also calls for an active way of writing. On purpose, I avoid writing a *stigmatized* person and turn it around, a person who is *stigmatized against*. This formulation emphasizes the ideology held against this person and the people who stigmatize, rather than solely on the person who experiences it. In this way, I try to avoid a passive portrayal of the participants in this study and bring their experiences forward.

Goffman (1963) distinguishes between three types of stigmatization: 1) abominations of the body, 2) blemishes of individual character, and 3) tribal stigma (such as race, nationality, religion) that can be transmitted through lineages and equally influences all members of a family. Persons stigmatized against based on sexuality and/or gender are among the second type of stigmatization. Characteristics of the stigma-theory of this stigmatization are to be perceived as "weak, domineering or unnatural passions, treacherous and rigid beliefs and dishonesty" (Ibid., p. 2).

The stigma-theory leads to a rationalization of anger and disgust against people who are stigmatized against. For example, in *Sexual*



*Stigma: An interactionist account* (1975), Ken Plummer examines the relationship between homosexuality and stigma and describes how being recognized as a homosexual leads to stigma: "To be called a 'homosexual' is to be degraded, denounced, devalued or treated as different. It may well mean shame, ostracism, discrimination, exclusion or physical attack. It may simply mean that one becomes an 'interesting curiosity of permissiveness'. But always, in this culture [United Kingdom], the costs of being known as a homosexual must be high" (p. 175). In this case, Plummer demonstrates how stigma-theory is dependent on its societal and cultural context and how it can lead to different outcomes.

In other words, as previously mentioned in Goffman's definition of stigma-theory, this rationalization of anger and disgust can include additional aspects. In this study, this is exemplified with the difference of stigmatization against homosexual men and women and the different experiences of stigmatization between masculine and feminine men and women, or the additional aspects of class and age.

Another aspect considered in this study is the role of embodiment, including behaviors and expressions. Many participants of this study experience stigma based on their behavior, expressions, and way of dressing, especially those who do not align with the traditional gender binary man/woman; masculine/feminine. Research has shown that persons are more vulnerable to stigma when the stigmatized characteristic is visible (Herek et al. 2013). This aligns in this study with the experience of the participants and the stigma against homosexuality. Participants who do not align with the traditional gender binary are often assumed to be homosexual and experience stigma against homosexuality. Often their stigmatizing experiences are worse than others who are not assumed to be homosexual based on their embodiment, as the former persons are more vulnerable since their sexuality is visible publicly.

This visibility of a characteristic that is stigmatized against refers to what Goffman (1963) describes as being 'discredited'. He describes discredited as the difference between a person "who assumes their differentness is known about already" or is evident in interaction with others, which is the opposite of being discreditable, to "assume it is not known or immediately perceivable" (p. 4).

Being discredited is not the same as having a visible differentness. It depends on other factors as well; "whether or not they [others] have previous knowledge about him - and this can be based on gossip about him or a previous contact with him during which his stigma was visible" (Ibid., p. 49). This is an important distinction as sexuality does not have to be a visible characteristic. Some participants in this study are discredited because of their embodiment. Others are discredited

because of previous knowledge and gossip. Persons often have both experiences of being discredited and discreditable, as the *stigma-theory* is dependent on which places a person is in and which people the individual is seeing and can change in different circumstances. For instance, participants in this study might experience stigma in their religious community based on their embodiment, but their embodiment might not be stigmatized against among their university peers. The difference between discredited and discreditable is thus crucial as it demonstrates the conditions of stigma-theory, and at the same time, it opens up a discussion on how to limit or address these conditions.

### 2.1.1 Sexual stigma, negotiation, and identity strategies

Sexual stigma against sexual minorities and their well-being has been a popular academic theme for the last two decades, particularly in psychology. One of the main findings is that among social institutions, the highest rates of sexual stigma have been experienced in religious organizations (Herek et al. 2009). As previously mentioned, studies have also shown that in Ghana, there is a positive association between religiosity and religious affiliation and prejudice and stigma against homosexuality (Anarfi and Gyasi-Gyamerah 2014, Parker et al. 2020).

Among sexual minorities, religious affiliation has been positively associated with religious difficulties, religious-sexual identity conflicts, and self-stigma (see, e.g., Lauricella et al. 2017, Henrickson 2007, Ison et al. 2010, Ream and Savin-Williams 2005, Rodriguez 2006).

These findings have led to a further increase in studies on religion, identity strategies, and well-being among sexual minorities. Another issue that has come up in these studies is the double burden of religious sexual minorities; how they feel not included in 'secular' LGBTQ+ communities because they are religious and face challenges in religious circles for their sexuality (see, e.g., Taylor and Snowden 2014b). This is also found in African countries, where sometimes LGBTQ+ groups are suspicious of affirmative religious groups or members (Van Klinken 2019). It is also reflected in this study findings, as many participants feel stuck between their religious communities and LGBTQ+ organizations. Often, they distance themselves from their religious communities and become somewhat suspicious of others who have not.

The navigation of these challenges is discussed in research on identity strategies to resolve identity conflict (see, e.g., Rodriguez 2006, Rodriguez and Oullette 2000, Jaspal 2012, Van Klinken 2019). Four identity strategies are described: 1) integration, 2) compartmentalization, and 3) removing either the religious or 4) sexual identity.

I have found two limitations based on my material on identity strategies concerning sexual stigma. First of all, identity strategies assume that there is an identity conflict. However, even though one might experience stigma against one's sexuality, for example, in one's religious community, this might not cause an identity conflict. Although there is the inclusion of 'integration', this assumes that specific identity dimensions, such as sexuality and religion, are not integrated from the start. This does not relate to participants' experiences, as some see a difference between the stigma from their religious community and their religiosity.

Second, with the categories of the four identity strategies, it quickly seems that there is a linear process of having an identity conflict towards one of the four options. Then some are better than others, as compartmentalization is worse than integration. However, there is no linear process in reality, and these four strategies are messier and often blurred together as "identity development is a fluid process" (Dahl and Galliher 2009, p. 92, Rodriguez 2009). For example, in their study on sexuality and religion among young adults in the UK, Yip and Page (2013) point out that they noticed a shift of institutional religiosity towards post-institutional religiosity. This relates to their participants navigating challenges of sexuality and embodiment and their religiosity in their daily lives. They note that some participants would distance themselves from their religious community while others adjust. However, in agreement with Dahl and Galliher (2009), these processes were not linear or horizontal but rather messy or 'vertical':

It is also not a clear-cut rupture from the past, moving horizontally on a unidirectional temporal trajectory, from tradition consolidating and institution-privileging belief and praxis, to a destination that is more democratic and agentic. Rather, we would argue that the trajectory is more accurately characterized by a vertical progression, building on what came before, jettisoning what does not work anymore, and adapting critically the established, in the construction of the present and the future. (Yip and Page 2013, p. 158)

As shown with the above examples from other studies, these identity strategies might not be helpful in an analysis of everyday experiences and religiosity. For example, everyday experiences might show that a participant goes through a process in which they might integrate their identity and then compartmentalize or reject. Alternatively, it might be in general challenging to categorize their strategies into these four strategies.

To exemplify with material from this study, one of the participants described that he does not feel any conflict internally. However, he partly compartmentalizes his life by keeping his sexuality hidden in his

religious community and his family. In addition, with certain biblical scriptures, he sometimes doubts whether homosexuality is accepted within Christianity. Despite this, he feels the love of the divine and is sure that he is the way the divine created him to be, as a homosexual man. This example demonstrates that daily experiences are not easy to categorize according to these identity strategies. Therefore, it is crucial to be aware of over-theorizing and instead focus on the actual lived experiences of the participant.

Therefore, in this study, I focus on analyzing sexual stigma and the negotiation of sexuality and religiosity instead of identity strategies. The term negotiation refers to the idea of an ongoing process depending on experiences of stigma, dimensions of identity (age, gender, and such), circumstances such as place and time. Theoretically, it opens up the discussion of sexual stigma and demonstrates how different types of stigma are intertwined.

I build on the concept of sexual stigma and the three types of sexual stigma discussed by Gregory M. Herek (2007). A theory of sexual stigma addresses how a society collectively accords negative associations, inferior status, and relative powerlessness to “any non-heterosexual behavior, identity, relationship or community” (Herek 2007, p. 906-907). Most importantly, Herek emphasizes that sexual stigma should be conceptualized as a cultural phenomenon “that exists independently of the attitudes of any one individual” (Ibid.). Since sexual stigma is conceptualized as a cultural phenomenon, it is essential to analyze the social processes “through which a stigmatized condition acquires its meaning in different situations” as these change and evolve (Ibid.). Because of this, the participants’ experiences are the main focus of this thesis, as they highlight the different types of sexual stigma and the conditions for them.

Herek further defines heterosexism in relation to sexual stigma as a “cultural ideology [*the stigma-theory*] embodied in institutional practices that work to the disadvantage of sexual minority groups even in the absence of individual prejudice or discrimination” (Ibid.). Herek’s conceptualizations are based on the North American context. However, they relate to the Ghanaian context in the case of sexual stigma on several points. In his conceptualization, heterosexism makes those who belong to sexual minorities invisible by promoting a heterosexual assumption. Individuals who are non-heterosexual become visible and are “problematized” by heterosexism; they are regarded as “inferior, requiring explanations” and ultimately “targets for hostility, differential treatment, and discrimination and even aggression” (Ibid., p. 908).

In this study, I use the term heterosexism or heteronormativity alternately. Heteronormativity, also referred to as compulsory heterosexuality (Rich 1980, Butler 1990), is the institutionalization of

heterosexuality which makes heterosexuality natural and “regulates gender as a binary relation in which the masculine term is differentiated from a feminine term, and this differentiation is accomplished through the practices of heterosexual desire” (Butler 1990, p. 30). Heteronormativity naturalizes heterosexuality, is based on the traditional gender binary female/male, and excludes any other kind of sexual desire. More clearly than the concept of heterosexism, heteronormativity shows how masculinity and femininity, i.e., gender, are related to sexual desires in a heteronormative structure. Any sexuality or gender expression that is deviant or non-normative is stigmatized against in a heteronormative scheme or a heterosexist society.

The extent of sexual stigma as a cultural phenomenon depends on the societal context. In the case of Ghana, as previously mentioned, there is a high level of sexual stigma, which often results in violence and aggression against sexual minorities (Gyasi-Gyamerah and Akotia 2016, Owusu et al. 2013, Solace Initiative 2016). Heterosexism is the norm, and anyone who does not visibly align becomes easily vulnerable to sexual stigma. At the same time, heterosexuals are presumed to be natural or ‘normal’, and this ‘natural’ dimension is often supported with religious arguments. Herek’s framework of sexual stigma also emphasizes how sexual prejudice against sexual minorities cannot be equated to any other form of sexual prejudice (for example, against heterosexuals), as the latter forms are not part of a cultural phenomenon; they are not part of a larger ideology, or in any way institutionalized such as heterosexism is. This relates to the definition of *stigma-theory*, an ideology of stigma; “when prejudice rests on a cultural foundation of stigma, it has meaning and significance that it lacks when it is simply an expression of individual attitudes” (Herek 2007, p. 912).

Herek mentions three types of sexual stigma: 1) enacted stigma, 2) felt stigma, and 3) self-stigma. Enacted stigma is any form or behavior of sexual stigma through actions. This can be verbal or physical. Examples are homonegative preaching in a religious community or violence against sexual minorities on the street. It also includes threats, as they are a verbal expression of sexual stigma. Sexual minorities mostly experience enacted stigma. However, anyone associated with them, such as friends or family, could experience it too. This is described by Goffman (1963) as a courtesy stigma. Especially when sexual stigma is normalized, and at a high level, as is the case among participants of this study, courtesy stigma is more common too. The risk of courtesy stigma can lead to family or friends distancing themselves from the targeted individual to avoid enacted stigma and any association.

Research has shown that the experience of physically enacted stigma is associated with more psychological trauma than other kinds of violence. Persons who experience physically enacted stigma show higher levels of depression, stress symptoms, anxiety, and anger (Herek et al. 1999). In case of a risk of courtesy stigma, enacted stigma can also lead to isolation for persons who are stigmatized against. In this study, this seems to increase levels of depression, as persons who encountered enacted stigma expressed that they felt even more alone and without any support.

Felt stigma is the “individual’s expectations about the probability that sexual stigma will be enacted in different situations and under various circumstances” (Herek 2007, p. 909). Felt stigma leads to adjustments of behavior to avoid enacted stigma. Felt stigma can be experienced by someone who has never experienced any enacted stigma as it is only about the expectation that enacted stigma might happen. For example, if news outlets repeatedly write about violence against sexual minorities in their society, individuals might experience felt stigma as they are afraid they could experience violence too. Felt stigma leads to what Herek calls “stigma consciousness” (Ibid., 910). Stigma consciousness leads to stigma management strategies, avoiding enacted stigma, and passing as a heterosexual. For persons who experience felt stigma and actively engage in avoiding enacted stigma, psychological stress and physical illness increase (Ibid.).

Felt stigma is not only experienced among sexual minorities. It is also experienced by heterosexuals who are afraid of sexual stigma. This can lead to heterosexuals who want to avoid being seen as homosexual, for example, by avoiding physical contact with same-sex friends or any kind of behavior and expressions that could be seen as non-normative. Felt stigma among heterosexuals can also motivate them to enact sexual stigma against sexual minorities “to prove to their peers that they are heterosexual” (Ibid.). Herek argues that this is common among men to demonstrate their masculinity. However, in this study, it is also discussed among sexual minorities as a way to avoid sexual stigma and ‘pass’ as a heterosexual.

Self-stigma is the last and third form of sexual stigma and is also known as internalized stigma or internalized homophobia (Weinberg 1972). Both sexual minorities and heterosexuals can experience it. Among heterosexuals, internalized stigma manifests as sexual prejudice, or in other words, homophobia or homonegativity. However, following Herek’s (2007) definition, I use self-stigma to refer to internalized sexual stigma among sexual minorities. Self-stigma is the acceptance of negative attitudes and values in society as part of your value system and self-concept. From the three forms of sexual stigma, self-stigma is often discussed as having the worst effect on physical and psychological well-

being (Ibid.). In this study, experiences of self-stigma were often discussed with the idea of having to change or depression and feelings of hopelessness. However, some studies (Herek and McLemore 2013) show different results, in which felt stigma has an equal effect on psychological well-being, as persons are conscious of being part of a stigmatized group regardless of internalization. Though that particular study (Herek and McLemore 2013) relates to the experience of people whose physical appearance makes them vulnerable to be stigmatized against. This is important with this study, as embodiment plays a role in the stigmatization of homosexuality and heterosexism.

Previous studies have shown that these three forms of sexual stigma are often related or intertwined. A study on the correlation between enacted, felt and self-stigma among people with HIV (Herek et al. 2013) shows how felt, and self-stigma are intercorrelated and felt stigma is correlated with experiencing enacted stigma. This means that in that case, the experience of felt stigma or enacted stigma does not automatically lead to self-stigma. In the case of enacted stigma, often there is an increase of anger, indifference, and perhaps felt stigma. Both felt stigma and self-stigma are positively correlated with symptoms of depression and anxiety (Ibid.).

As the theoretical framework of sexual stigma from Herek is based on the idea of a cultural phenomenon, it is essential to consider a recent study on sexual stigma in Ghana. As previously discussed, sexual stigma against sexual minorities in Ghana is significant. In studies on HIV prevention and treatment in Ghana, sexual stigma is often discussed as a barrier to HIV prevention. A recent study (Parker et al. 2020) explores stigma decreasing strategies in Ghana to progress HIV prevention and treatment.

Parker et al. (2020) show that stigmatization against MSM<sup>18</sup> and FSW<sup>19</sup> in Ghana is mainly rationalized through “religious and cultural concerns” as behaviors and practices of both groups were perceived as immoral and not part of the value system of the community (p. 109). Four stigma reduction strategies were found to decrease stigma against MSM and FSW: 1) the need to know and understand the other, 2) the need to be true to one’s moral values, 3) the need for empathy towards others, and 4) the recognition of the value of all people within a collective whole. These four entry points were related to religious and cultural values relevant to the Ghanaian context. For example, the need to be true to one’s moral values could be related to religious values that are part of a religious community. They also demonstrate how sexual

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<sup>18</sup> Men who have sex with men

<sup>19</sup> Female sex workers

stigma is currently part of Ghanaian society and the role of religious authorities and communities.

Solace Initiative (2016), the local NGO that I collaborated with for this study, also emphasizes the need for larger organizations similar to theirs that can offer legal support and the need to have social gatherings and share experiences and knowledge. These needs and decreasing stigma strategies are important to be aware of for the context of sexual stigma in Ghana.

### 2.1.2 Sexual stigma, strategies, agency, and religiosity

In research on managing sexual stigma in religious communities, there is also the discussion of specific strategies such as concealing your sexuality (Yip 1997), distancing oneself from or rejecting the religious community and having individual faith (Rodriguez 2006), minimizing stigmatization by focusing on private religious practices (Yip 2000), searching for affirmative religious communities (Rodriguez and Ouellette 2000, Van Klinken 2019) and remaining in the religious community with the hope of change inside the institution (Yip 2003). As Yip (2005) explains, these strategies are often used as a defense and to create a space where one feels included. These strategies are further discussed in the chapters to reflect on different types and consequences of sexual stigma, religiosity, and sexuality among the study's participants.

Another aspect that I have included in my analysis of sexual stigma is the concept of agency. Sexual stigma affects the behavior of the persons who experience it. However, this does not have to be described in a victimized or relatively passive way. In contrast, participants in this study often have active strategies to manage or resist sexual stigma. For this reason, I have focused on agency and strategies among participants of this study to show ways of resistance and resilience. An example of behavior that is affected by sexual stigma is the response to enacted stigma or felt stigma, to minimize or adjust behavior to a heterosexual norm to avoid sexual stigma. This response could be identified as self-stigma, as someone who internalizes homophobia or heterosexism and adjusts their behavior. However, often participants of this study actively choose to do so to avoid sexual stigma. Minimizing non-heteronormative behavior is even discussed in some queer communities in Accra as a strategy to avoid sexual stigma in public places.

An often-used definition of agency is the understanding that it refers to "the human capability to exert influence over one's functioning and the course of events by one's actions" (Bandura 2009, p. 8). There are three different modes of agency in which people exercise their influence. There is 1) personal agency, 2) proxy agency, and 3) collective agency



(Ibid.). The first mode of agency is exercising influence individually in a directly controllable situation. The second form of agency is influencing others who might have the resources to control the situation. For instance, when children try to influence their parents to get what they want. This is a mode of agency where individuals do not have direct control over their situation. Finally, the third mode of agency is collective agency, which refers to working together to achieve a common goal. Collective agency often means that individual interests have to be less prioritized to reach a common goal.

In the case of personal agency, there have been many discussions on how agency can be understood to religiosity and submission (see, e.g., Bracke 2008, Mahmood 2005). One significant response to this discussion is the contribution of Mahmood (2005), who critiques understandings of agency as resistance or to understand agency in relation to progressive politics. This is relevant for this study, as understanding agency as resistance limits the participants' experiences. For example, the strategies where people minimize behavior might not clearly show 'resistance' to the heteronormative norm but can still be identified as agency rather than a passive person. Therefore, I build on Mahmood's (2005) definition of agency, who works with Foucault's conceptualization of agency and writes:

Instead of limiting agency to those acts that disrupt existing power relations, Foucault's work encourages us to think of agency: (a) in terms of the capacities and skills required to undertake particular kinds of moral actions and (b) as ineluctably bound up with the historically and culturally specific disciplines through which a subject is formed. (Mahmood 2005, p. 29)

Agency defined in this way includes 'docility', "the malleability required of someone in order for her to be instructed in a particular skill or knowledge" (Ibid.). To clarify, this means that actions, beliefs, or views do not have to disrupt existing power relations to be identified as agency. Awareness, recognizing stigmatizing discourses and strategies to minimize those kinds of experiences, even if there might be negative consequences, can be seen as agentic and empowering too and should not be neglected. Similarly the choice to be part of a religious community and act in certain ways to stay part of that community is understood as agency. This is exemplified in the following chapters, where some participants stay in their religious communities while being stigmatized as they experience other forms of support from that community or from practicing their religion by being part of that community. The participants' experiences in this study show how complex it is to manage sexual stigma, with interrelated strategies that may change depending on the circumstances. Therefore, agency is understood as the "capacity

for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create” (Mahmood 2001, p. 203). This understanding contributes to the aim to break away from the negative presumed relationship between religion and sexuality and create space for affirmative religious narratives among sexual minorities in this thesis.

## 2.2 An intersectional approach

In this study, intersectionality provides a theoretical lens that opens up the intertwined dimensions of identity to experiences of stigma. It highlights categorical differences in the experiences of the participants of this study, for instance, different stigmatizing experiences between masculine lesbians and feminine lesbians. It takes other dimensions of identity into account in addition to religiosity and sexuality, such as gender, age, and class.

Intersectionality was introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw, an American civil rights advocate and prominent scholar in critical race theory, in her article *“Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence against Women of Color”* (1989). She highlights the importance of intertwined social categories to exclusion, discrimination, and injustice through an intersectional analysis. Crenshaw demonstrates how black women are systematically excluded in civil rights organizations in the United States because civil rights organizations are based on a single or unitary identity.

An intersectional approach demonstrates how social categories are intertwined in structures of oppression and privilege. The importance of intersectional thinking is:

...the awareness of the fact that everybody is situated on a number of important axes of social systems of meaning, such as gender, ethnicity, class, sexuality and nationality’ and its purpose is to prevent exclusions of marginalized groups and breakthrough binary and hierarchical thinking that would reinforce dominant power constructions. (Wekker and Lutz 2001, p. 2)

This conceptualization of intersectionality described by Gloria Wekker and Helma Lutz is a widely used conceptualization of intersectionality which has been applied to many gender-based analyses inside and outside of academia (see, e.g., McCall 2008, Yuval-Davis 2006, Schiek and Mulder 2016, Taylor et al. 2010, Lykke 2010, 2011). The emphasis of intersectionality is on the intersection of different axes of identity and avoiding seeing them as additive components. These intersections with experiences of oppression have also been referred to as a “double burden” (Collins 2000).

Even though the focus on an 'intersection' might sound like a fixed or stable position, it is the contrary in an intersectional approach; identities and experiences are seen as dynamic rather than static, as lived experiences depending on time and space that cannot be unitary or fixed. This does not mean that they are neglectable, as they change continuously. Instead, it means that they are understood as social constructs; related to a specific time, place, and societal context. This is exemplified by Tamale when she writes on the relationship between gender and sexuality in *Sexuality and Politics: Regional Dialogues from the Global South*:

Sexuality and gender go hand in hand; both are creatures of culture and society, and both play a central, crucial role in maintaining power relations in our societies. They give each other shape and any scientific enquiry of the former immediately invokes the latter. (Tamale 2014, p. 16)

The emphasis on dimensions of identity as social constructs is relevant for this study, as stigma-theory is based on assumptions associated with specific dimensions of identity, such as sexuality, but can be different depending on contextual circumstances and other intertwined categories of identity (such as age or class). In other words, both dimensions of identity and stigma-theory are approached in this thesis as social constructs and, therefore, never as static.

## 2.3 Lived religion

The concept of lived religion is central in this study, as it offers a different perspective on religion with a focus on "individuals, the experiences they consider the most important, and the concrete practices that make up their personal religious experience and expression" (McGuire 2008, p. 4). Generally, lived religion focuses on the experiences and practices of religious individuals instead of religious institutions and authorities and thus opens up for more complexity that goes beyond often used categories such as religious, secular, or spiritual. It is a theoretical approach that enables one to capture the

...ways in which individuals interweave their religious faith with their everyday life, engaging with enabling and constraining potentials in explicitly religious spaces as well as secular spaces. (Yip and Page 2013, p. 4)

Lived religion is a term introduced by Meredith B. McGuire in *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (2008). In the book, she problematizes the concepts of religion, religiosity, religious traditions, religious commitment, conversion, and religious identity. McGuire

argues that religion should not be seen as timeless and unitary but as dynamic and diverse.

In addition, she argues that the focus should shift from how *religions* change to how *the understanding of religions* changes. McGuire suggests that this can be done with a focus on religious individuals' experiences, expressions, feelings, and practices, which would move away from religious institutions. However, it also allows for more complexity as, for instance, extensive sociological surveys that measure religious self-identification fail to capture practices or experiences.

In the case of this study, the theoretical approach of lived religion is essential as it emphasizes the ongoing change and complexity of daily religious practices and beliefs. Participants in this study often identified as belonging to multiple religious communities or as not religious but believing in a supreme being. Their practices are different and sometimes change during specific periods. The concept of lived religion includes these experiences and avoids unitary religious categories or identities.

“Realizing the complexities of individuals' religious practices, experiences, and expressions, whoever, has made me extremely doubtful that even mountains of quantitative sociological data (especially data from surveys and other relatively superficial modes of inquiring) can tell us much of any value about individuals' religions.” (McGuire 2008, p.5)

The concept of lived religion translates to methodologies such as interviews and Q-methodology which avoid a timeless and unitary presentation of the concept religion. Instead, it aims to present the complexity of lived religion through the expressions and beliefs of the participants. Furthermore, interviews are a useful method for the study of lived religion, as “there are many things that we [researchers] might not able to observe” (Ammerman 2021, p.214), such as the feelings and expressions shared by the participants in this study.

McGuire emphasizes that the assumption that persons belong to one unitary, religious community is false (Ibid.). This is significant to this study, as religious hybridity, as previously discussed, is expected in the religious landscape of Ghana, and thus a focus on religious individuals' experiences and beliefs allows for this complexity. At the same time, the conceptualization of lived religion is helpful in this study as it opens up the possibilities of discussing religion and religiosity with sexuality beyond negativity. Focusing on the individual's experiences and practices and not on the religious institution, different relationships between religiosity and sexuality among sexual minorities can be identified.

The term religiosity is used in this thesis. However, it is used as a descriptive term based on lived religion, as

...at the individual level, as an ever-changing, multifaceted, often messy – even contradictory – amalgam of beliefs and practices that are not necessarily those religious institutions consider important. (McGuire 2008, p. 11)

Because the framework of lived religion focuses on individuals' experiences and beliefs, they are portrayed as active agents instead of passive followers of a religious institution. This is important to experiences of sexual stigma, as many of the participants in this study experienced enacted stigma in their religious communities. However, at the same time, many participants received support from their own religious beliefs, practices, and gatherings outside of their communities. Lived religion thus demonstrates the diversity of agency of these individuals, which is often neglected in relation to religion (Bracke 2008, Mahmood 2005). Furthermore, it aligns with the understanding of agency previously explained, that agency is recognized beyond disrupting existing power relations and can be collective or proxy in addition to personal agency.

Lived religion aligns with these ideas as it centers on beliefs, practices, and experiences. Especially in the case of this study, discussing sexual stigma among sexual minorities is of importance as it avoids a passive portrayal of the participants and allows one to demonstrate the diverse relationships between religious practices and beliefs and sexualities among sexual minorities.

Lived religion provides a theoretical framework where neither religious nor sexual identities are considered unitary or fixed but rather dynamic, ongoing, and diverse. Furthermore, instead of portraying persons as passive followers of a religious institution or authority, it portrays them as active agents practicing their beliefs that are shared and built on within (affirmative) religious communities.

### 3. Methodology

This study is part of the research project ‘Young Adults and Religion on a Global Perspective’ (YARG), and, as indicated in the introduction, it has followed the mixed methodology that has been used in the project. YARG started in 2015 and ended in 2019. It was a research project led by Professor Peter Nynäs that explored the religious subjectivities and value priorities of young adults globally. The main objectives of YARG were to explore the characteristics of the latter, analyze the main discourses that shape these religious subjectivities, and reflect on the methodological and theoretical implications of the results concerning the conceptualization of contemporary religion.

A mixed-method approach was developed to reach these objectives, which included the Faith Q-Sort (FQS). The FQS is a new instrument developed by David Wulff (2009, October 23-25) that was further developed for its application in this project (Kontala 2016, Wulff 2019, Nynäs et al. 2021). The mixed-method approach was one of the critical aspects of this project to further advance methodological developments for cross-cultural projects in religious studies. Thirteen countries participated in this project: Canada, China, Finland, Ghana, India, Israel, Japan<sup>20</sup>, Peru, Poland, Russia, Sweden, Turkey, and the United States of America. In all of these countries, there was a team of researchers who would collect and analyze data following the project’s methodology.

The methodology allowed for macro and micro analyses and comparisons between different national and cultural contexts (Nynäs et al. 2022, Nynäs, Illman et al. 2022 forthcoming, Moberg and Sjö 2020, Klingenberg and Sjö 2019). It included three parts; (1) a survey that includes the Portrait Values Questionnaire, (2) the Faith Q-Sort, and (3) a semi-structured interview.

This mixed-method approach provides the data to answer all four of the research questions in this study. The material of the FQS, which is analyzed through a Q-pattern analysis, provides an answer to the first research question on what kind of religious identities can be found in Ghana among young adults identifying as sexual minorities. It addresses the variety of religiosities among the participants. These results are discussed in chapter four.

The data of the FQS and the semi-structured interviews provide further answers to research questions two and three on the religious views on sexuality and gender and the negotiation of sexuality and religion in relation to sexual stigma among young adults in Ghana identifying as sexual minorities. These are described in chapters five, six,

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<sup>20</sup> Only the survey was collected in Japan.

seven, eight, and nine, structured by the five prototypes that resulted from the FQS (presented in chapter four).

The fourth research question is answered through information collected through the semi-structured interviews on the support or stigmatization by religious institutes and authorities against sexual minorities in Ghana, and is presented in the following chapters. The survey data provides demographic information about the participants, which is used in this study as an introduction to the interviews in chapters five, six, seven, eight, and nine.

The emphasis in this study is on the qualitative parts of the mixed method, a qualitative reading of the FQS, and the semi-structured interviews as they provide answers to the majority of the research questions of this study.

This chapter starts with explaining the data collection process and the gathering of participants. Afterward, ethical considerations and safety measurements are discussed. After this, all three components of the mixed-method approach and their form of analysis are explained. Finally, the chapter ends with a discussion of the limitations of the mixed-method approach in this study.

### 3.1 Gathering participants and the data collection process

The process of gathering participants was different in this study compared to the YARG project. In Ghana, the data gathering process of YARG started with survey respondents at the University of Ghana. Based on results extracted from the initial survey results, selected interview participants were invited to do the Faith Q-Sort and a semi-structured interview from that data sample.

In my study, the mixed-method approach was done all at once. The gathering of interview participants was done in collaboration with Solace Initiative through snowball sampling. Lariba, who was in charge of gathering participants, started asking friends and colleagues and spreading the call for research participants. An interview schedule was made for the first week, and as information about the study spread, participants continued to sign up.

There was an emphasis on gender balance (according to sex, female/male) and religious diversity. The call for participants was as follows: 'young adults between 18 and 30 years who would identify as LGBTQ or have same-sex romantic relationships and have a background in tertiary education'.

The condition of tertiary education was there to have a comparable group of young adults to the Ghanaian group who participated in

YARG<sup>21</sup>. Initially, and for future publications, I aimed to gather participants among university students to compare results to the initial results of YARG in Ghana. However, one of the consequences of stigmatization against sexual minorities in Ghana is the limited access to education. Therefore, the focus was not on university students but on anyone who had followed tertiary education or education of a similar degree. As a result, there was a more considerable age difference among the participants. In addition, some participants started to study, and some were in between jobs and studied part-time if they could finance it.

In the last weeks of the data collection, there was an imbalance between queer young men and young women. Lariba and I tried to reach out to queer young women. Lariba explained to me that it was often more difficult for them to have time due to family responsibilities or work, or both. This made the interview schedule for the last three weeks more stretched over certain days, but we succeeded in reaching out to queer young women and obtaining a diverse group of participants.

### 3.1.1 The data collection process

The entire data collection process went as follows; it started with a contract and interview agreement, followed by the survey including the Portrait Values Questionnaire, the Q-sorting procedure of the Faith Q-Set, and finally, a semi-structured interview. In total, this process took between two and three hours. Because it was time-consuming and the interviews could be quite emotionally loaded, a regular field workday included only two interviews.

One interview would usually start around 9.30, and a second would follow, after a break, until around 15.00 in the afternoon. All the interviews took place in the office of Solace Initiative, in a separate room, as this was a safe place for participants to come to.

Another reason why the interviews often took some time was the location's circumstances. I cannot be happier with using the office of Solace Initiative, as it was a trusted, safe community location. However, the interviews were held in hot conditions due to the weather circumstances. The room did offer a ceiling fan, but that could not be on the highest level as it caused noise disturbance on the recordings. Not surprisingly, during every interview, the interviewee and I would have several drinking breaks. In the form of cookies and bars, some snacks were provided as well. To create a safe atmosphere, curtains and doors were closed, and windows partly opened.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> YARG focused on young adults who were university students.

<sup>22</sup> This might sound overcautious, but one must imagine people working outdoors next to the building who would otherwise be able to listen in on the conversations. Since



Every participant was instructed by Lariba, a former project manager of Solace Initiative. Lariba informed participants about the process, conditions, and interview topics. I recorded each interview with a recording device. At the beginning of an interview, the participant was told once again about these conditions and the process concerning the interview agreement. This included instructions that indicated that the participants did not have to answer any questions if they did not feel like it; they could stop at any given time and ask questions about anything related to the process.

In addition, two moments of reflection were included during the data collection process during which the participant could reflect, comment, add, or question something. These moments were after the Q-sorting procedure and after the entire interview. This time was often used to open up on previously discussed issues. After the entire procedure, participants received an incentive that covered their travel costs. In addition, they could keep a copy of the interview agreement, which stated my contact information and their rights but, on purpose, no information related to the specificities of this study (sexual minorities, sexuality) which could expose the participant in any way to stigmatization if other people would be able to read the agreement. This was one of the ethical considerations concerning the vulnerability of the participants of this study. These are discussed in more detail below.

### 3.2 Ethical considerations

Even though this study follows the mixed-method approach of YARG, the ethical considerations were vastly different due to the participants' vulnerability. Because of their vulnerable positions, I prepared, conducted, analyzed, and wrote this entire study with sensitive research methodologies.

Sensitive research is defined as research involving sensitive themes, which may involve behavior that is "intimate, discreditable, or incriminating" (Renzetti and Lee 1993 cited in Liamputtong 2006, p. 2). Therefore, according to Professor Pranee Liamputtong (2006), participants involved in these studies need special care from researchers. Special care relates to more extensive ethical considerations, such as safe and mostly risk-free participation in the study, considerations of psychological effects, and considerations of their socioeconomic needs that might limit the participants' ability to take part in the study.

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Solace Initiative does not publicly publish its exact address, these safety considerations were taken quite seriously.

In addition to these considerations, sensitive research does not only extend to more thorough ethical considerations towards research participants but also towards the researcher. Therefore, sensitive research is best described as “research which potentially poses a substantial threat to those who are or have been involved in it” (Lee 1993 cited in Liamputtong 2006, p. 5). To avoid substantial threats, several safety measurements were taken during this study.

### 3.2.1 Safety measurements

As part of the data collection process, an interview agreement was signed at the beginning of every interview. This allowed participants to know what data is disclosed and how the material is used. Researchers also need to have full consent on participation. I established this through interview agreements, following the guidelines of YARG.

To ensure the anonymity of the participants, they could either consent by signing a contract or by verbally agreeing to the contract.<sup>23</sup> In that way, they did not have to fill in their names, phone numbers, or email addresses and their signature. Furthermore, the contract’s emphasis was to ensure their rights of participation and my contact information, should they have any further questions or comments.

Because the study was conducted in English, which was often the participants’ second language, it was essential to discuss the process beforehand and some of the themes that would be introduced. This ensured that the participants knew what they were consenting to before the actual interview. It also strengthened the participant’s trust, as I fully disclosed the process and how the material would be used afterward.

As Liamputtong (2006) points out, some participants have to deal with the consequences of taking part in research because of the disclosure of the research at conferences and in publications. These consequences should be minimized as much as possible. One way that I have considered doing this is by doing the interviews as anonymous as possible in my thesis and during data collection. In the case of my study, the social wellbeing of participants is at risk, as they are stigmatized against, and their sexualities are often believed to be illegal to a certain extent. Therefore, only the participants who agreed to sign a consent form have written their names down; those who did not have never written their names anywhere. The consent forms are kept separately from all other data records at the department at Åbo Akademi University. None of the other material includes their real names. Names of friends or family, places, or locations mentioned during the interviews were not transcribed. The participants were made aware of this before

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<sup>23</sup> See an example of an interview agreement in the appendix.

the interview started. Information that could reveal their identities, such as indigenous communities they were part of or names of religious minorities, were left out in this publication. Since the homophobia increased severely during my last months of writing this thesis, I have reread all my chapters to ensure that there are no paragraphs that include several specific points of information that could reveal someone's identity (age, work, family, study). This kind of information has sometimes been left out or generalized (instead of a specific religious denomination, the person is either Christian or Muslim). Other data, such as the completed surveys, do not contain identification such as names, phone numbers, or email addresses. These are stored with the interview recordings at Åbo Akademi University. Digital back-ups of the recordings, transcriptions, and survey results are kept on my professional laptop and on one external hard drive for safekeeping, which are both in my possession.

To ensure the safety of participants, the interview agreement did not contain any specific information about the content of my study, but rather that of YARG, so that it could not lead to any stigmatization if anyone outside of the study would read it. The Board for Research Ethics at Åbo Akademi University has approved all the instruments and methods of the YARG project. It has been approved in the respective countries according to local practices and regulations. This included the methodology used in this study conducted in Accra.

Another safety measurement was related to contact with the participants during fieldwork. Most of the participants were interested in staying in touch with me through social media networks. However, I avoided any connections on social media where people could recognize each other. This guaranteed further anonymity amongst the participants themselves.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, I did maintain contact with some participants through WhatsApp and meetings in real life. In addition to a workshop and a women's queer meeting at the beginning of March, I joined a night out in April. During this evening, I visited a popular gay club in Accra. This visit was strategically at the end of the fieldwork, as some participants had strong views against the club.

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<sup>24</sup> Especially after the first month of interviews, it became apparent that certain participants did not know each other or about each other's sexuality. Some of them clarified that they were not ready to share their sexuality with others besides the interview. Because it would be evident that they were part of the community if they would be friends with me on social media, I avoided these connections and stayed only in touch through individual contact via email or WhatsApp.

### 3.3 Survey

For the purpose of this study, the entire survey, including the Schwartz value survey (PVQ) used in YARG, was included in my methodology. However, since I am concerned with experiences shared during the interviews, the survey provides demographic information as an introduction to the interviews.

In addition, in Ghana, a team based in Accra at the University of Ghana, led by researcher and lecturer Ben-Willie Kwaku Golo, gathered the material for YARG in the spring of 2016. For this study, most of this material has been left out, as it does not focus specifically on sexual minorities. However, the gathered survey material, which consists of a larger sample (N=436) than the survey material of this study (N=31), is included to provide some background information on religious affiliations among young adults in Ghana and particular views on sexuality and religion (see chapter four).

The original survey from YARG was sixteen pages long and consisted of six sections reflecting on a range of themes, including 1) current life situation, 2) social life, 3) sources for news and information, 4) views and convictions, 5) wellbeing and happiness and 6) personal details. Section two, social life, included questions on religiosity and religious practices (see appendix for a copy of the survey). The data collected from the survey was further complemented by the Faith Q-Sort and the semi-structured interview, especially on religiosity, religious views, values, and practices.<sup>25</sup>

In addition to these themes, the survey included the Schwartz's Portrait Values Questionnaire (PVQ-RR) (Schwartz 1992, Schwartz et al. 2012). The PVQ questionnaire consists of 57 portrait items with a six-point Likert-scale ranging from "exactly like me" to "not at all like me". Results of the PVQ offer a value profile of the participants and enable comparisons between individuals and groups (see, e.g., Sawsan et al. 2022).

The PVQ questionnaire is included in the data collection for this study. However, since the original version is gendered, an adjusted questionnaire was written to avoid gendered statements.<sup>26</sup> On the one hand, this might limit the comparison of this particular dataset to other studies which have used the PVQ questionnaire; on the other hand, it

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<sup>25</sup> This is important because studies have shown that surveys do not gather the complicity of religious views and practices (McGuire 2008).

<sup>26</sup> In its original form (Schwartz 2009), respondents either respond on a list of statements stated in his or her form, depending on whether they identify as male or female. For my study, the statements were edited to a gender-neutral form by changing statements from "It is important to him/her to form his/her views independently." to "It is important to me to form my views independently". This adjustment was made after two pilot interviews where one of the respondents commented on the gendering of the statements.

enables the inclusion of individuals who might not identify as male/female, which was a relevant consideration for this study. The results of the PVQ questionnaire have not been used in this study.

The thematic sections of the survey were adjusted slightly for this study. In the first section, current life situation, the question on relationship status (A1) was changed by including “same-sex romantic relationship” as one of the options. In the last section, personal details, a question was added on sexuality (F5): “How would you define your sexuality?” with the options “lesbian, gay, homosexual, heterosexual, bisexual, queer, asexual, I do not define my sexuality, other please state...”. The options of open answers to both of these questions were crucial since some participants unofficially got married as a non-heterosexual couple or did not want to use any of the answers on the question of sexuality.

The survey data of YARG in Ghana included 436 survey respondents. This data was collected in the spring of 2016 at the University of Ghana in Legon, Accra, by a team led by senior researcher Ben-Willie Kwaku Golo. The sample is a convenience sample which means it does not represent young adults in Ghana. The University of Ghana has approximately 37,940 students, making it the largest university in Ghana. Survey respondents were collected at the College of Basic and Applied Sciences, the College of Health Sciences, and the College of Humanities. The first survey was filled out on the 8th of February 2016, and the last one on the 13th of April 2016. All of the surveys were filled out by hand on paper. There were no incomplete responses. From this data, the results of section four are used in this study. Section four gives insights into shared views on sexuality and religion among young adults in Ghana. This is used as a contextual introduction in the section ‘Material’.

The survey collection among the participants of this study included thirty-one respondents. The data collection started in the fall of 2017 and continued in the spring of 2018. Similar to the YARG project, this is not meant to be a representative sample. The first survey was filled out on the 27th of November 2017, and the last one on the 29th of March in 2018. All of the surveys were filled out by hand on paper. There were six incomplete responses. Most of the incomplete responses missed answers in the Schwartz Portrait Values Questionnaire. From the survey data among the thirty-one participants of this study, the sections on personal details (6), current life situations (1), and social life (2) are used to provide demographic information as an introduction to the analysis of the interviews.

### 3.4 The Faith Q-Sort: an introduction to Q-methodology

The Faith Q-Sort (FQS) is the most significant part of the mixed-method approach of the project Young Adults and Religion on a Global Perspective (YARG). It is a Q set used for collecting Q sorts, developed in the field of religious studies, which follows the procedure of Q-methodology (see Watts and Stenner 2005, 2012) and provides insights into a person's viewpoints, beliefs, and attitudes. Furthermore, because it is based on the participant's interpretation and is thus participant-led, it is one of the most critical methods of the mixed-method methodology concerning the aims of YARG: to gather religious subjectivities that go beyond the categorization of religious, spiritual, and/or secular.

The FQS provides my study with the Q-pattern analysis as a way to open up the themes of religion and sexuality with the participants in the semi-structured interviews. The FQS worked well in my study since it is participant-led and emphasizes lived religion based on the experiences and views of the participants. In addition, it provided the participants with space to relate statements to their sexuality and their religious views and values.

The statements of the FQS are related to (non-)religious views, practices, values, and attitudes. However, due to the focus of this study on sexuality, statements were interpreted in different ways compared to other datasets of YARG. This does not mean that the results are faulty, as this is how Q-methodology works. It shows how versatile the FQS is. In this case, the FQS demonstrates the variety of (religious) positions among the participants, which relate to their views on sexuality and religion.

Q-methodology is a method from the field of psychology and was initially developed by William Stephenson (Stephenson 1935). Q-methodology aims to collect "subjective expressions and viewpoints" (Watts and Stenner 2005). It has been argued to be a well-suited method to collect views and values from marginalized groups since it is led by research participants' perspectives, understandings, and definitions (Kitzinger 1999, Brown 2005, Capdevila and Lazard 2008).

The goal of Q-methodology is thus to collect subjectivities, expressions, views, and values. In addition, it aims to avoid pre-given categories and rejects the idea that people can be divided into categories. This makes Q-methodology a critical qualitative method (Watts and Stenner 2005). Q-methodology consists of the Q-sorting procedure and the Q-pattern analysis (Watts and Stenner 2005). These are further explained separately below.

The FQS was in YARG developed for different cultural contexts and translated into several languages through a double forward and back translation process. The FQS includes 101 statements focused on

(secular) worldviews, religion, spirituality, and faith.<sup>27</sup> The collection of the Qs always included a follow-up interview.<sup>28</sup> After the sorting of the statements, the participants were asked to comment on and explain the statements that were most and least descriptive of them. In addition to the participants explaining their sorting of the statements, the follow-up interviews included open-ended questions in my study related to gender, sexuality, and religion. Most of the time, these were follow-up questions to some of their explanations of statements.

In my study, I also included several questions to reflect on the process, for instance, how the participant felt after sorting the statements and if there were any neutral cards that the participant wanted to comment on (since it is debatable what 'neutral' cards mean to the participant).<sup>29</sup> These follow-up interviews are recorded and interpretations can be compared to each other with the results from the Q-pattern analysis. The interviews give insights into the shared views and whether participants who relate to an imagined subjectivity share similar interpretations of the shared statements.

### 3.4.1 The Q-sorting procedure

The Q-sorting procedure of the FQS includes three phases: 1) sorting the cards into three piles, 2) detailed sorting into columns on the layout, and 3) an interpretation of the statements sorted into the most descriptive and least descriptive columns.

In the first phase, the participant sorts the cards into three piles: a pile of cards with statements that feel closest to this person's views, a pile of cards that the person does not feel close to at all, and the third pile of cards that the person is more or less neutral towards.

In the second phase, the participant lays out the cards into twelve columns. These range from plus four to minus four. The participants start sorting the pile of cards that feel closest to their views in the plus four, three, and two columns. They continue after that with the pile of cards that they do not feel close to at all, on the right, in the minus four, three, and two columns. After that, they are left with a pile of cards that

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<sup>27</sup> See a list of the statements in the appendix.

<sup>28</sup> A follow-up interview that allows participants to explain their sorting of cards and their interpretation is not always included in Q-methodology.

<sup>29</sup> Sometimes neutral cards, cards sorted in the zero and one column, can be relevant to the participant, demonstrating life changes. For instance, a statement might have been important to them but is no longer in their current life. Neutral cards can also be relevant if many statements in the most or least descriptive columns share a similar interpretation and push some statements into more 'neutral' columns. Finally, they can be relevant in the comparison between prototypes as well. To avoid skipping neutral statements, I included the question in my interview whether there were any neutral statements that the participant wanted to comment on.

they felt more or less neutral towards, which they can sort in the columns that are left empty (often the plus one, zero, and minus one column).

At this point, I would ask if the participant was happy with the sorting or if they wanted to change anything. Often these changes, or shifts, of cards already happen during the sorting process, but sometimes the participant takes time for this after the sorting.

When the participant felt satisfied with their sorting, I would ask how they felt about the sorting. This was a crucial reflective question as participants often shared their first thoughts and feelings about the themes we discussed. Some examples of these responses are given below.

*Example 1. Response on sorting the cards*

Marlijn: Okay. So, first question is actually, how did it feel to do this?

Participant: Oh, [laughs]. It is a little bit difficult. Because it is like the questions about spiritual and social life and how to - you do not really know about how to - be the most important in your life or less important. Especially me, when it comes to religious and personal life - and sometimes I find it difficult to - I do not know what to prioritize as my first need or second, because I have some family who are very, very religious. Yes, so.

*Example 2. Response on sorting the cards*

Marlijn: Okay, so my first question is actually how did it feel to do this?

Participant: Some questions are very, very tactical.

Marlijn: Tactical, okay. What do you mean by that?

Participant: Well you need a deeper understanding before you can choose negative, neutral or positive.

Marlijn: Hmm. And where there any specific things that you were thinking about when you were-

Participant: Yeah. I was checking myself, like I am really sure what I was going to do.

*Example 3. Response on sorting the cards*

Marlijn: Yeah, [laughs], it is good? Okay, so how did it feel to do this?

Participant: Hm. I will say, hm, a bit confusing but

Marlijn: Confusing?

Participant: Yes, because sometimes you battle with some of these things. Like, eh, I think I placed one here like 'feels distance from God or the divine'. Yeah sometimes I feel - I feel being gay, I am being distant to God or something. Yeah.

After these initial questions, a break was offered before the follow-up interview would start. This refers to the final phase of the Q-sorting process, a discussion of the statements in the most describing and least describing columns. During this part, the participants are asked to



reflect on the statements and explain why they are important. For example, I would ask the participant to reflect on each statement in the +4, +3, and -4, -3 columns. In addition, I would ask them to reflect on any relevant ones in the other columns. This interpretation interview often took the longest, from forty minutes to an hour.

The Q-sorting procedure of the FQS has a solid qualitative point, as the participant decides to discuss certain statements and allows for personal interpretation (Lassander and Nynäs 2016). Furthermore, this allows for a broad reflection on religiosity and religion, as the worldviews of individuals who identify as non-religious are also explored with this method (see, e.g., Kontala 2016).

The FQS is a unique and robust method to reflect on religiosities and sexualities. It helps to open up the semi-structured interviews, as the FQS is participant-led and does not pressure the participant to start discussing specific sensitive issues but instead allows the participant to decide what to talk about. The use of this method thus made it more comfortable for the participants during the interpretation of the statements to shift to the semi-structured interview and discuss specific experiences more thoroughly.

#### 3.4.2 The Q-pattern analysis

During the Q-pattern analysis, the total number of collected Q-sorts of the participants are analyzed in a factor analysis. This analysis produces ideal subjectivities based on the Q-sorts and identifies “groups of participants who make sense of (and who hence Q’ sort’) a pool of items in comparable ways” (Watts and Stenner 2005, p. 68). These groups of participants are commonly referred to among Q-methodologists as a *factor*, an *imagined* (or ideal) *subjectivity*, or in YARG as a *prototype* (see, e.g., Wulff 2019, Kontala 2016). All these terms refer to a shared position among some participants who contributed with their sorts (see, e.g., Watts and Stenner 2005, Robbins and Krueger 2000, Capdevila and Lazard 2008, Kitzinger 1999).

The FQS method thus does not only result in individual (religious) positions but also prototypes which some of the participants share to a lesser or greater extent.

Prototypes are based on differences and similarities in the FQS sortings of all the participants. They do not represent a group but are based on differences and similarities. They give insights into trends on shared religiosities, worldviews, attitudes, and beliefs. Individual participants’ load to a certain extent significantly to one of these ideal subjectivities. These shared positions are significant as they demonstrate shared views, but also, in the case of this study, shared

experiences (of, for instance, sexual stigma) that have impacted these views.

### Initial results through Ken-Q software

The Q-pattern analysis was done with the help of the software Ken-Q. Ken-Q is a free web application for Q-methodology which results in all the matrix calculations and factor rotations in a downloadable file.

The Q-pattern analysis was done on the 4th of December 2018 using Ken-Q version 1.0.4. It is based on the 101 statements of the FQS and the 31 complete Q-sorts that I collected. The data was loaded into the Ken-Q software with a CSV file that I prepared for analysis. This file included the statements and the Q-sorts.

Eight principal components were extracted of which five factors were used for rotation. The components six to eight were excluded (see figure 1.0). This means that factors six to eight were not selected for further interpretation. This decision was made based on standard Q-methodology requirements: “to select only those factors with an eigenvalues [characteristic value] in excess of 1.00” (Watts and Stenner 2005, p. 81). Factors six to eight were all valued from 1.4 to 1.2 but still unselected because they were below 1.5.

As Watts and Stenner (2005, p. 81) point out:

This is undoubtedly a somewhat arbitrary criterion in the criterion of Q methodology. It is well known, for example, that several factors with eigenvalues in excess of 1.00 might be extracted even from random data, as random patterns will always arise and be detected. On the other hand, it is a generally accepted means of safeguarding factor reliabilities and factors which go below this minimum will ultimately serve no data-reductive purpose as they explain less of the overall study variance than would any single Q sort.

In other words, a characteristic value below 1.00 has less explanatory power than a single Q-sort. However, this study brings it up to 1.5 to have a more substantial explanatory power. This requirement excluded factors six to eight. Instead of eight factors where the last three factors

only included four defining sorts, the analysis was reduced to five factors, with the minor factor having three defining sorts.

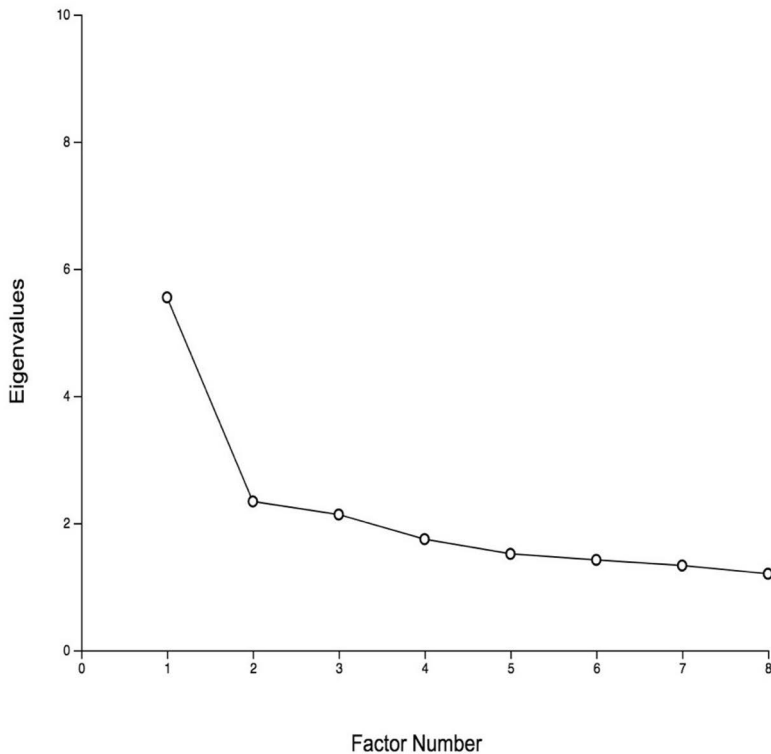


Figure 3. The extracted factors (horizontal scale) and the 'eigenvalues' (vertical scale).

A varimax rotation was used in the Q-pattern analysis. A varimax rotation pursues “a rotated solution which maximizes the amount of variance explained by the extracted factors [positions/prototypes]” (Watts and Stenner 2005, p. 81). This rotation technique is often preferred in Q-methodology, in comparison to by hand or judgmental rotation because it often ties into the aim of researchers using Q-methodology; “to reveal the range of viewpoints that are favored by our participant group” (Ibid.).

Other requirements were auto flagging set to  $P < 0.05$  and a majority of common variance. The first setting in the Ken-Q software refers to flagging (highlighting) sorts that are loading to a prototype. This resulted in twenty-five sorts out of thirty-one that loaded to a prototype. The second setting, a majority of common variance, refers to the

exclusion of sorts which load to more than one prototype (see, e.g., Watts and Stenner 2005 or Banasick 2018).

### Consensus statements

There were four consensus statements from the 101 statements of the Faith Q-Set. This means for the analysis that in all prototypes, these statements do not distinguish between any pair of prototypes. They were consented to by the participants in all of the prototypes. In quantitative terms, they are seen as non-significant.

The statements loaded either at  $P > 0.01$  or  $P > 0.05$  by all the five prototypes. These included statements 11, 12, 17 and 81 (see Table 1.0). These four statements were not significant and were sorted in either the neutral column (0) or the minus or plus one column (-1, 1) by the participants. This means that besides participants consenting to these statements, they were seen as not relevant by most participants.

<b>Sig.</b>	<b>Statement</b>
P > 0.01	11. Has a strong sense of a spiritual or higher order of reality in the midst of nature.
P > 0.05	12. Participates in religious activities chiefly on special occasions.
P > 0.05	17. Becomes more religious or spiritual at times of crisis or need.
P > 0.05	81. Is positively engaged by or interested in other people's religious traditions.

Table 1. Consensus statements

In addition to the consensus statements, each prototype has its own set of distinguishing statements, which refers to significant statements ( $P < 0.05$ , and \* as  $P < 0.01$ ). These are further discussed with the five prototypes in the section 'Material'. This includes a discussion on defining statements of a prototype, which refers to statements sorted in either plus four or minus four columns but are not quantitatively significant statements for the prototype.

### 3.4.3 The results of the Q-pattern analysis

Out of thirty-one Q-sorts, twenty-five were flagged by the Ken-Q software to be a defining sort of a prototype. A sort is seen as defining if it is similar to the prototype by fifty percent or more<sup>30</sup>, or if it is forty percent similar to the prototype by less than thirty percent to any other factor. This resulted in the following outcome: six defining sorts in

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<sup>30</sup> Except if the sort loaded to another factor by forty percent or more.

prototype one, six defining sorts in prototype two, five defining sorts in prototype three, five defining sorts in prototype four, and three defining sorts in prototype five (see table 1).<sup>31</sup> Concerning the sorts in prototype five, one of them is loading negatively. This means that these sorts relate to the prototype in opposition to the ones that relate to it positively. In other words, it means that, most likely, the person holds opposite views compared to the other two persons in this prototype.

<b>Prototype 1</b>		<b>Prototype 2</b>		<b>Prototype 3</b>	
Sort nr.	Loading %	Sort nr.	Loading %	Sort nr.	Loading %
011	0.4311	009	0.3584	003	0.4392
015	0.4319	026	0.5575	017	0.4634
022	0.4408	014	0.5823	007	0.4806
018	0.4889	006	0.6069	023	0.5817
027	0.5546	008	0.6681	029	0.6695
025	0.5662	001	0.7072		

<b>Prototype 4</b>		<b>Prototype 5</b>	
Sort nr.	Loading %	Sort nr.	Loading %
019	0.45	012	-0.454
021	0.5227	024	0.549
020	0.5686	030	0.6277
016	0.655		
031	0.7283		

Table 2. Defining sorts per prototype

The results from the Q-pattern analysis were used as a point of departure for this study, as they provide a structure and give insights into different and diverse patterns of shared views, especially on religious beliefs and values. A first overview of the Q-pattern analysis is given in chapter four. The results of the prototypes are further enriched in chapters five, six, seven, eight, and nine, with the experiences of the three strongest loading persons from each prototype reflecting on religion, sexuality, and stigma.

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<sup>31</sup> The full factor array and the set of Q-sort items can be requested through the author; [mmeijer@abo.fi](mailto:mmeijer@abo.fi)

### 3.4.4 The interpretation of the Faith Q-Sort

In the field of Q-methodology, there have been different ways of interpreting the results of a Q-pattern analysis. Of course, Q-methodology is already participant-led, as “participants in the study [are] in control of the classification process. A factor cannot emerge unless participants sort items in ways that enable it to do so” (Rogers 1991, p. 130). However, prototypes which emerge from the Q-pattern analysis have to be interpreted by the researcher, which is the most subjective part of the methodology:

...it is in interpreting factor arrays that the researcher’s own biases and limitations may be most apparent and may result in meanings being inadvertently imposed on research participants. (Kitzinger 1999, p. 269.)

Researchers have come up with several interpretation approaches for the subjective part of the methodology. Often participants are involved in these approaches. For example, one of the most used approaches is to have follow-up interviews where participants are asked to comment on statements after the sorting (see, e.g., Rogers and Kitzinger 1995, Roper et al. 2015). These are then included in the researcher’s analysis.

Some strategies go even further by allowing participants to assist in interpreting factor arrays and labeling them (Snelling 1999). This final step of interaction with the participants is often preferred when reflexivity and reducing the researcher’s bias is considered (Robbins and Krueger 2000).

In YARG, the interpretation approach followed the former strategy, a follow-up interview after the sorting, reflecting on the sorted statements. This follow-up interview provides:

...valuable information regarding what the statements mean or do not mean to the participants and on how the participants themselves interpret and personally relate to the vocabulary employed in the FQS. (Lassander and Nynäs 2016, p. 166)

I followed this methodology, including a follow-up interview after sorting the statements to provide more information for the Q-pattern analysis done by myself. I interpreted the Q-pattern analysis following the guidelines of YARG. This interpretation was the so-called *commentary style factor interpretation* of a prototype in YARG. It refers to a written-out presentation of a prototype which is in a first brief commentary style factor interpretation. These included each prototype’s distinguishing and defining statements and a brief summarized profile based on the statements.

The participants' interpretations in the follow-up interviews are not part of the commentary style factor interpretation. Therefore, the interpretation or assumed connections between certain statements are not yet proven. However, the commentary style factor interpretations are often written by the researcher who has collected the sorts and did the follow-up interviews and, thus, has gathered knowledge about how certain statements relate to each other. Therefore, the commentary style factor interpretation provides a start in reading the results of the Q-pattern analysis.

After I wrote out the commentary style factor interpretations of the five prototypes, I explored the results of the Q-pattern analysis further by going through the follow-up interviews. I did this by doing several thorough readings of the transcriptions of the entire procedure (Faith Q-Sorts, follow-up interview, semi-structured interview). Then, using the software program NVivo, statements that were either distinguishing or defining for a prototype were highlighted, including the participant's interpretation.

Each label for the prototype is based on the commentary style factor interpretation; on statements shared among participants of that particular prototype. The labels are explained in the presentation of each prototype in chapter four. In chapters five, six, seven, eight, and nine, there is a reflection on the labels and how the participants relate to the prototypes.

### 3.4.5 Terminology of the FQS

In the study of religion, there is an ongoing discussion on concepts such as religion, spirituality, and faith. Many of these concepts are also used in statements of the FQS and, therefore, quickly return in follow-up interviews with the study participants. However, these concepts are interpreted by the participants, and there is no definition given prior to collecting the data or the analysis. The approach of YARG was to include young adults with diverse backgrounds and go beyond a theoretical discussion of the categories religious, spiritual, and secular. Theoretically, it is based on the idea that religion is a dynamic and hybrid category instead of a unitary and fixed concept.

This study is in alignment with this approach. I follow other researchers in the study of religions, such as Grillo et al. (2019), who are not preoccupied with the theoretical question of what religion is but instead focus on what religions do: religious beliefs and practices among persons. This is also described by Yip and Page (2013) in their study on religion and sexuality among young adults. According to them, one should avoid simplistic understandings of religious individuals or communities and instead aim for a "nuanced understanding of how

individuals perceive and live their religious faith under specific circumstances” (p. 8).

The terms I use in this study are descriptive, not analytical, and the participants give interpretations or understandings through the FQS. This study is also qualitative, and aspects such as religiosity, faith, or being (non)religious are not measured. Instead, these categories are explored by looking into shared understandings, beliefs, and practices among the participants of this study. Nevertheless, to avoid any confusion, I introduce some of the terms and their use in the study of religion. However, as a reminder, the reader should know that understandings among participants differ and that these are further explored throughout the chapters and the included interviews and that there is no pre-given definition of any of these terms.

### *Faith and the use of religiosity*

13. Views religious faith as a never-ending quest.

8. Longs for a deeper, more confident faith.

100. Supports individual freedom of choice in matters of faith and morality.

*Some of the FQS statements that include the concept faith*

Faith is a widely used concept among the participants and in the statements of the FQS. In the Encyclopedia of Religion (Pelikan 2005), faith is defined as “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (p. 2955). Concerning religion, one often writes about religious faith, and this can be defined as the “belief or devotion to a particular religious tradition or ideology”, a “quality of commitment or belief” (Bass 1999, p. 247). Faith can also be found outside of religious traditions, for instance, having faith in humanity: “faith may be expressed in terms of family or ethnic tradition, personal conversion, intellectual assent, institutional membership, existential experience, social service, worship, ritual or sacramental practice” (Ibid.). In this study, faith is related to the experience or understanding of an individual and not a collective or a religious ideology unless further specified.

To describe religious faiths among the participants in a prototype, I use the term religiosity in relation to religious positions or the religious characteristics of a prototype. Religiosity in this sense refers to religious behavior and relates to “the way people and communities are influenced by religious ideas and shape social reality accordingly” (Darity 2008, p. 162). Religiosity is often a term used in more quantitative studies on religion; to study the relation between being religious and mental health, for example. The definition of religiosity and how to measure it



is another debate in the study of religion (see, e.g., Holdcroft 2006). However, I understand religiosity as based on different dimensions such as religious affiliation, private religious devotion, and participation in, for instance, religious activities or religious communities. I take this definition loosely, as this study does not aim to measure religiosity quantitatively, and these dimensions are subjective.

### *Religious and spiritual*

12. Participates in religious activities chiefly on special occasions.

15. Considers the meaning of religious texts and teachings to be clear and true.

16. Being religious or spiritual is central to whom he or she is.

20. Relies on religious authorities for understanding and direction.

25. Feels contempt for all religious institutions, ideas and practices.

Statements of the FQS that included the concept religious

11. Has a strong sense of a spiritual or higher order of reality in the midst of nature.

17. Becomes more religious or spiritual at times of crisis or need.

24. Takes no interest in religious or spiritual matters.

33. Feels spiritually moved and deeply sustained by music, art, or poetry.

43. Is consumed by day-to-day responsibilities, leaving little or no time for spiritual matters.

*Statements of the FQS that included the concept spiritual*

The terms religious and spiritual are used in many statements of the FQS and during the interviews with the participants. As the statements show, the term religious is often related to activities, institutions, authorities, texts, or scriptures. In these cases, it is self-explanatory what the concepts mean, although participants give examples of experiences that clarify what they are discussing. In the case of statements such as sixteen, being religious or spiritual, it is more questionable what 'religious' refers to. With the term spiritual, it is more questionable what it refers to in general.

However, the participant always interprets these statements and demonstrates the diversity of religious beliefs, understandings, and practices. I do not attempt to define these concepts, as they hold different meanings for different people. To ensure that participants did not mean different things with the concepts of religious, religion, or spiritual, I included an interview question about what religion and spiritual meant to them and if there was a difference between them. Often participants used the concepts religious and spiritual alternately. If the interpretations of these two concepts were different, they often

explained their interpretation, and it will be mentioned in the analysis if it was relevant for the results.

### 3.5 Interviews

As previously mentioned, the mixed-method approach includes two interviews. The first is a follow-up interview after the FQS, which allows participants to explain their interpretations of the statements. The second is a semi-structured interview. The semi-structured interview, which follows directly after the first interview, relates to obtaining more data on the participant's experiences and their negotiations between religion and sexuality.

The follow-up interviews that I did follow the procedure of YARG. However, the semi-structured interview was guided by my research questions for the purpose of this study and thus focused on the themes of religion, sexuality, coping, and change. This is different in comparison to the interviews conducted in YARG, where the emphasis was on religion, self-understanding, current life situations, and the broader social and cultural contexts in which the participant was embedded.

Both interviews derive from the same ontological and epistemological position, where "people's knowledge, views, understandings, interpretations, experiences, and interactions are meaningful properties of the social reality" (Mason 2002, p. 63). As Mason (2002) claims, semi-structured interviews have the following core features; 1) the interactional exchange of dialogue, 2) a relatively informal style, 3) a thematic, topic-centered narrative approach, and 4) they operate from the perspective that knowledge is situational and contextual (p. 62-63). Even though semi-structured interviews might have an interview guide, the interview itself is loosely based on those themes and does not follow a "complete and sequenced script of questions" (Ibid.). This is how I conducted my interviews, as often the semi-structured interview was opened up by discussing the interpretation of the FQS statements. This means that the participant often started with bringing up specific issues or experiences, after which I followed up with certain questions.

#### 3.5.1 Follow-up interview after Q-sorting process

The follow-up interview is focused on the Q-sorting process. The questions are related to the statements and how the participants have sorted them. The participant gets the space to explain their interpretations and reflect on the whole process.

Every interview started with a short reflection on how it felt to do the sorting. After that, the participants described the most and least

descriptive statements and why they sorted them in that particular order.

Because the Faith Q-Set was developed in YARG and mainly covered holistic statements on worldview, religion, faith, and spirituality, sexuality was not always the first theme up for discussion. However, for most of the participants, many of the statements that touched on religious practices or communities would remind them of experiences of sexual stigma or their negotiation of sexuality and religiosity. As participants were told that the interview was on religion and sexuality, many of the statements were also interpreted in relation to sexuality. This shows how versatile the FQS is and Q-methodology in general. It provided me with a way to open up the themes of religion and sexuality with the participants

“I do feel guilty, I think maybe God is not blessing me.”

“I am not getting everything I want because I am gay.”

“They make me feel guilty. Someone like my mommy, coming out crying about.”

*Three responses to statement five, ‘Feels guilty for not living up to his or her ideals’, and statement sixty-nine, ‘Feels a sense of guilt and personal inadequacy’, of the FQS.*

### 3.5.2 Semi-structured interviews

The semi-structured interview was an in-depth interview focused on religion, sexuality, coping, and change. It started with general questions about the participant's background, religious upbringing, sexuality, and essential relationships such as family and friends. Then, it continued with elaborations on specific experiences. The approach of the semi-structured interview is based on the idea that knowledge is situational (see, e.g., Mason 2002), and therefore instead of focusing on factual questions or what people would do in certain situations, participants were asked to elaborate on how certain situations were essential for them in relation to their sexuality or religiosity.

Themes guided the semi-structured interviews, which covered questions on different sections: religious background, understandings of religion, sexuality, popular ideas about homosexuality such as possession, well-being and coping, affirmative communities, social media, Ghanaian culture, and politics, life changes, and future goals.<sup>32</sup> Even though some of these topics are sensitive and personal, a discussion on these issues came naturally. This was partly due to the trust established through the collaboration with the host organization

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<sup>32</sup> See the appendix for the complete interview guide.

Solace Initiative and partly through completing the FQS, which naturally opened up many interviews.

### 3.5.3 Analysis of the interviews

The interviews were recorded and transcribed digitally, and the transcriptions were analyzed using the coding software Qualitative Data Analysis Software NVivo. The coding technique was applied according to the interpretive tradition, which refers to “moving back and forth between our own data, our experience and broader concepts” (Coffey and Atkinson 1996 cited in Mason 2002, p. 180). This approach relates to the ‘abductive research strategy’ (see, e.g., Blaikie 2000, Mason 2002), where theory, data generation, and data analysis are developed simultaneously in a dialectical process.

However, it would be naive to claim that this study began in a theoretical vacuum, especially since it was part of YARG. Therefore, the emphasis is on the dialectical process in this study and moving back and forth between the data, fieldwork experiences, and broader theoretical concepts. This approach enabled me to further explore the experiences in the participants’ narratives with the results of the FQS and the participants’ interpretations, understandings, and experiences of religion, sexualities, and sexual stigma.

During YARG, I was part of some discussions in the core team on whether the FQS was an abductive or deductive method. There was no consent on this in our team. I would argue that my methodological approach, including the FQS and the semi-structured interviews, relates to the moving back and forth of a dialectical process and that there are no absolute forms of research strategies:

...it is certainly debatable whether ‘pure’ forms of, for example, inductive, deductive, abductive or retroductive reasoning are every actually practiced. (Mason 2002, p. 181)

The semi-structured interviews were experience-focused and took a phenomenological position. A phenomenological position relates to this study's research questions, which aim to explore situational life experiences related to sexuality and religion. It involves a

...detailed examination of the participant’s lifeworld; it attempts to explore personal experience and is concerned with an individual’s personal perception or account of an object or event, as opposed to an attempt to produce an objective statement of the object or event itself. (Smith and Osborn 2008, p. 53)

To analyze the interviews, I followed guidelines of how to do a qualitative content analysis according to a directed qualitative analysis

approach (Miles and Huberman 1994, Huberman et al. 2019). This meant that after collecting the semi-structured interviews, and the Q-pattern analysis, I started reading the interviews. First, I *labeled* relevant words, phrases, sentences, or paragraphs using NVivo. Afterward, I started *coding* and *indexing* these parts; I created a list of potential subjects, and from those, I created *categories*. Then another reading of the interviews followed, and relevant activities, attitudes, specific behaviors, and experiences were marked. These were added to the coding scheme. As the last step, *categories were further organized* into larger categories, from which the three main themes of my chapters emerged.

This analysis provided me with three main themes (categories), which structure how the interviews are discussed in the chapters: 1) stigmatizing experiences, 2) religiosity, and 3) strategies and agency. Parts that were selected during the interview analysis and thus related to these themes were included in the chapters. Other parts of the interviews that were not related to these themes were excluded from the chapters and further discussion.<sup>33</sup>

### 3.6 Limitations

There are some limitations with this study that need to be addressed. Most of these limitations are related to language and the application of the FQS in Accra in relation to religion and sexuality. There are around fifty languages spoken in Ghana, of which the indigenous language Akan and Ewe are the two spoken by most people (Anyidoho and Dakubu 2008). Among these fifty languages are two languages belonging to different language families, including English. English is viewed as the official language of Ghana. However, as Anyidoho and Dakubu (2008) point out, it is *very few* people's first language or mother tongue. English is primarily spoken in urban areas, such as Accra and in higher education.

Although the FQS was initially developed with a double back and forth translation, it was developed in English for university students in Accra. There was much less of a language barrier among these students since they use English for everyday life and academic purposes.

I had a different experience with the participants in my study. Sometimes there was a language barrier which led to different interpretations of statements of the FQS or confusion regarding certain statements. It has likely been a barrier for sharing certain experiences

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<sup>33</sup> There are parts in interviews that were not relevant at all, as some people would start discussing not related things in length following from an interpretation of the FQS.

that people could have explained better using their mother tongue. This is particularly the case with sexualities.

To understand possible language barriers, I conducted two pilot interviews in the fall of 2017. At that moment, I did not experience any language barriers. I also allowed people to explain certain concepts in their mother tongue and would have them write certain concepts down for me (such as the concept of *kojo basia*). Many participants self-identified in English terms, which might be a result of the NGOs in Accra working primarily in English as well. However, I am aware that if I had spoken Akan or Ewe or had an interpreter or translator with me, it would have been easier for participants to explain or share certain understandings and experiences.

Part of the reason for the language barrier in this study is that I worked with a marginalized group of participants. Many participants experienced discrimination and were forced to leave higher education at a young age. Many participants also experienced poverty and did not have the financial stability to secure higher education. For these reasons, the level of English was sometimes not comparable to students at university. In these cases, the semi-structured interview would work fine, as the participant would lead them. However, some of the concepts used in the FQS statements were difficult for some to comprehend. Below are two examples of participants who do not understand statements fifty and ninety-seven.

*Example 1.*

Marlijn: Eh, [statement] fifty, 'has used methods of attaining altered states of consciousness'.

Participant: Hm.

Marlijn: What do you think about that?

Participant: I don't understand that, please.

*Example 2.*

Marlijn: 'Is an active contributing member of a religious or spiritual community'.

Participant: Yes. Is an active contributing member of a religious or a spiritual community. Hmm. [Laughs]. Well. I don't use the word contributing. Cause you can't see that contributing the bible, or the word of God. No.

Marlijn: Hmm. That is why you placed it there?

Participant: Yes. You can't contribute to it.

Marlijn: Are there any other ways that you do contribute?

Participant: On the whole thing you contribute, I know you can contribute in churches. During [noise from outside] that is what I also have to help or support, the work of God. Apart from that, the bible, you cannot contribute, that is what God gives you.

These misunderstandings have not significantly affected the results, as the misunderstandings were minor. Nevertheless, in some cases, it has led to more diversity among persons of a particular prototype as they interpreted one or two defining statements differently. The examples above show this diversity; in one case, a participant does not understand the statement at all; in another case, the participant understands the concept of contributing in a way that differs from other participants. However, the last example is not problematic, as the participant can explain their understanding.

A benefit of the mixed-method approach that I used in this study is that these limitations were clarified during the follow-up interview when the participant could explain how they understood the statement. Even if participants did not understand a statement, there was room to discuss the themes of the study with other statements and in the semi-structured interview that followed. Because of this procedure, I did not encounter any interviews with misunderstandings that were carried through during the entire process. This is the strength of the mixed-method approach. The example shows how these methods are not additive but work together to collect and analyze the data; the methods support each other.

## 4. Shared views and the five prototypes: an introduction of the gathered material

This chapter introduces religion and sexuality among young adults in Ghana and the five prototypes based on the data gathered during this study. The first two sections provide a background to religiosity and views on same-sex couples among university students in Ghana and the study participants. These sections are based on results from the data collected among university students in Ghana in 2016 and the survey results from participants of this study. Results that provide information on religious affiliation, practices, beliefs, views, and convictions on statements involving same-sex couples are introduced to give an idea of shared views and attitudes among young adults in Ghana.

After the background information on young adults in Ghana, this chapter introduces the five prototypes that structure chapters five, six, seven, eight, and nine. The results from the Q-pattern analysis are explained with a commentary style factor interpretation, a summary, and other interpretations from the interviews.

The FQS in this study is not a strict analytical tool but a lens through which I explore how religion and sexuality intertwine. The method brings up specific issues and highlights certain themes. The results of the Q-pattern analysis do not represent definite religious positions, but they do help me identify characteristics among the participants. The analysis that follows in chapters five, six, seven, eight, and nine demonstrates this with a more in-depth analysis of the interview material and a focus on stigma, religion and strategies, and agency.

### 4.1 Religiosity among Ghanaian university students

The survey data gathered for the YARG project in Accra in 2016 included 436 respondents. Two hundred seventeen respondents (49.7%) identified as male, whereas 219 respondents identified as female (50.3%). The majority of respondents were born in 1993 or 1994. Five respondents did not have Ghanaian citizenship. A vast majority (97.9%) said that they were single. Most respondents lived in the city (83.9%), which is logical since the data were gathered at the University of Ghana in Legon, Accra. On question A5, which relates to class, "In considering your family's monthly income relative to the average in your country, is it?", more than a third answered (37.2%) 'about the average'. A large number (20.9%) indicated that they did not know.

Concerning discrimination, it seems that, in general, Ghanaian university students do not experience a high level of discrimination, as a majority (74.5%) *did not* describe themselves as being a member of a



group that is discriminated against. However, those who mainly did reported being discriminated against based on ethnicity (10.8%), religion (7.6%), and gender (6.9%). Despite the representational significance of this sample, the results on this question should not be taken for granted, as there are no further explanations of the interpretations of these responses, and they represent subjective discrimination<sup>34</sup> (see, e.g., Meijer et al. 2022).

For instance, gender could be interpreted as having to do with traditional gender roles or as in sexuality. Furthermore, these results do not describe multiple causes of discrimination but only report a single descriptive cause of subjective discrimination (see Meijer et al. 2022). Despite this, it can be argued that Ghanaian university students, on average, do not experience a high level of discrimination due to the large number of respondents who answered 'No' on this question.

In addition to the data provided by the GSS (2012) and Pew-Templeton (2010), these survey results give further information on religiosity among Ghanaian university students. Similar to the population in Ghana, Ghanaian university students, in general, belong to a religious group, community, or tradition (65%). A majority described themselves as belonging to Christianity (Catholic, pentecostal, protestant, Adventist), and a minority described themselves as belonging to Islam. In addition, some described themselves as belonging to 'ATR' or 'traditional religion', sometimes in addition to another religious community.

On a ten-point Likert scale, 71% of Ghanaian university students identified as being religious from 6 up to 10 (very religious), with an average of 6.7 in total. In addition, almost a quarter (24%) described their family as being very religious (10), with an average of 7.8. More than half of the university students (57%) attended religious ceremonies or services more than once a week, and 8% attended every day. Private practices, such as worship and praying, were done by more than half of them (54%) daily.

These descriptive results from the data material collected in Ghana for YARG support the findings from the GSS (2012) and Pew-Templeton (2010) on the high level of religiosity of the Ghanaian population. They also indicate that the younger generation identifies almost as religious (6.7) as the family they grew up in (7.8) and that they continue practicing their religion regularly as young adults at university.

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<sup>34</sup> This means that the participants believed that they were discriminated against based on an identity factor. However, since percentages could be higher if participants are, for instance, more aware of certain discriminatory practices, these percentages should not be considered representative without additional clarification from the participants (see Meijer et al. 2022).

## 4.2 Presentation of the participants of the study

Among the thirty-one participants of this study, the average age was twenty-three years, with nineteen being the youngest and twenty-eight being the oldest. Fourteen participants identified as female, fifteen as male, and two as other. Thirteen of the female participants identified as lesbian and one as bisexual. Nine male participants identified as gay, five as bisexual, and one did not identify his sexuality. One of the non-binary participants identified their sexuality as queer and the other as very fluid.

As previously mentioned, these categorizations should not be taken as definite. During the interviews, participants would often open up and give a different perspective on their sexuality, gender, or religious beliefs.

“Myself, it is kind of like, I don’t know. Um. Well, I don’t see myself as a man, though.”

*Example of a participant who identified as male in the survey but explained he does not see himself as a ‘man’.*

Almost half (14 out of 31) wrote that they were in a same-sex relationship of the thirty-one respondents. Most of the other participants (14 out of 31) said they were single, two were married, and one person was separated.

Seven out of the thirty-one respondents reported that they *did not* experience discrimination in the survey. Twenty-six participants experienced discrimination, of which sexuality (19 out of 31), religion (11 out of 31), and gender (4 out of 31) scored the highest.

Regarding class, ten out of thirty-one did not know whether their family’s monthly income was relatively average to the average family monthly income in Ghana. Nine out of thirty-one said it was much lower than the average, seven said it was somewhat lower than average, and five said it was about the average.

Most of the participants (22 out of 31) lived with their parents. Some of them lived in an apartment or a shared student accommodation. Almost all the participants grew up in the city, except for two who grew up outside Accra in the countryside.

Fourteen out of thirty-one said that they belonged to a religious community. Most of them identified as Christian, and some of them as Muslim. On a ten-point Likert scale, the answers varied greatly on the question ‘how religious would you say you are’. Many people identified as very religious (10) or not religious at all (0). The average was 5.1 among all of the participants. However, among the participants who said they *did not* belong to a religious community (sixteen participants), only

seven identified as being not religious at all, while five identified as being very religious, and four were in between. Often during the interviews, participants who said they did not belong to any religious community would feel differently about this. They would identify, for example, as Christian or Muslim. The survey question of whether they belonged to a religious community was viewed differently from the question if they were religious.

On the question 'how religious would you say the family you grew up in was' the average was 9.1. Many participants saw their family as being very religious (10). This discrepancy between the religiosity of the family and the participants themselves aligns with the interview material. Many participants viewed their family as more religious. This discrepancy is often related to the experience of family members adhering to religious homonegative beliefs and participants who would distance themselves from religious communities due to stigmatization. This difference is more considerable in comparison to the university sample and might relate to the stigmatization experienced by sexual minorities.

#### 4.2.1 Views about the rights of same-sex couples among Ghanaian university students

The views and convictions among university students in Ghana are studied with the help of section D in the YARG survey focusing on two questions. Section D explores views and convictions and included five statements with a five-point Likert item.<sup>35</sup> The first two statements involved same-sex couples: 1) 'Same-sex marriage should be treated the same as marriage between a man and a woman' and 2) 'Same-sex couples should have the same rights for adoption as heterosexual couples'.

University students strongly disagreed with both of the statements, with almost ninety percent (88.5%) reporting that they strongly disagree with the first statement and almost eighty (79%) with the second statement. These shared views confirm findings of other studies (Gyasi-Gyamerah and Akotia 2016, Owusu et al. 2013) that there are opposing views against homosexual people in Ghana and that they are not seen as equal to heterosexual couples.

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<sup>35</sup> A five-point Likert item goes from point 1, Strongly disagree, towards point 5, Strongly agree.

#### 4.2.2 Views about the rights of same-sex couples among the participants of this study

The participants of this study hold different views on these two statements. A majority strongly agreed with both statements, with 65% strongly agreeing with the first statement and 77% with the second statement. In regards to both statements, only 6% of the respondents (two respondents) strongly disagreed with the statements, which is a considerable difference in comparison with the results of the university students.

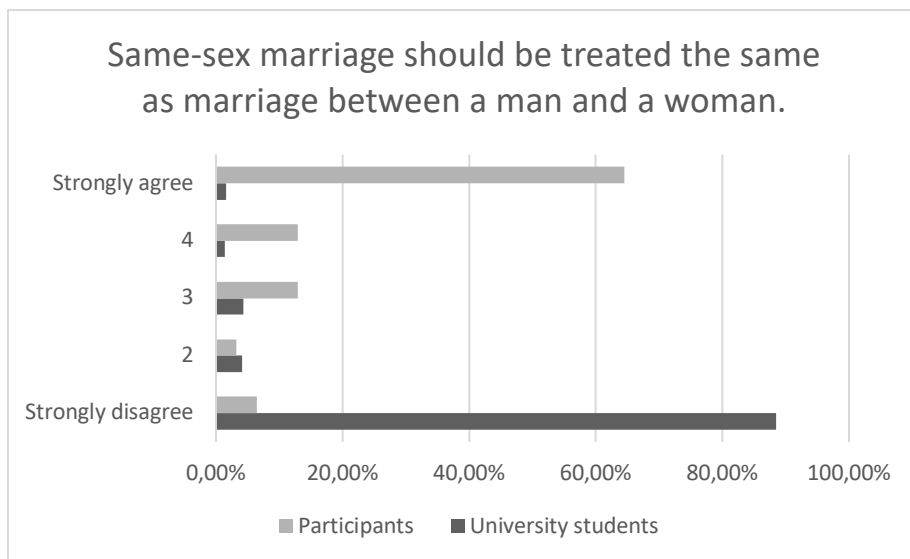


Figure 4. Comparison between the responses of the university student sample and the study participants to the statement 'Same-sex marriage should be treated the same as marriage between a man and a woman'.

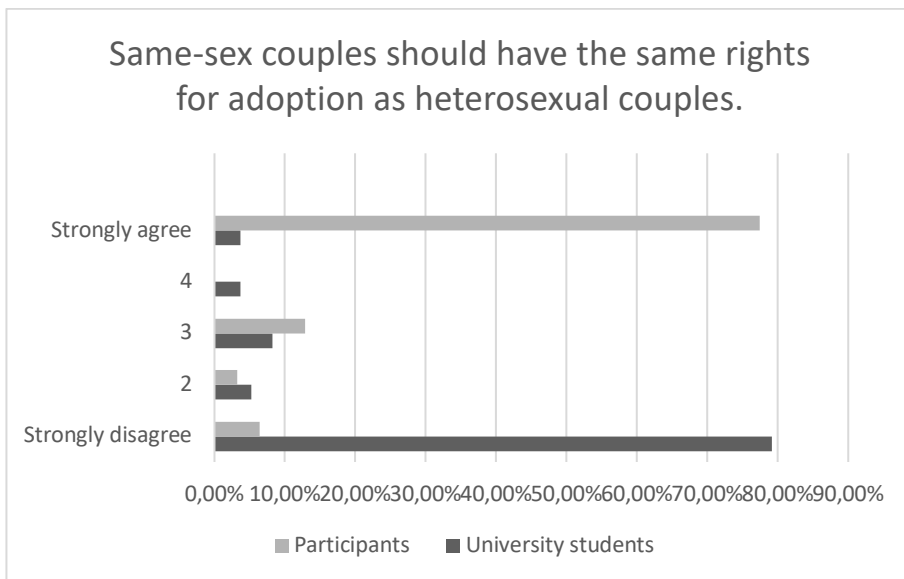


Figure 5. Comparison between the responses of the university student sample and the study participants to the statement ‘Same-sex couples should have the same rights for adoption as heterosexual couples’.

However, these results do not claim that sexual minorities generally hold more progressive views overall. First of all, due to the small sample size of this study, the group of participants is not quantitatively representative of young adults who identify as sexual minorities in Ghana. Secondly, and most importantly, in the other statements of section D, which concerned statements on pregnancy, abortion, and euthanization, the respondents of this study shared more conservative views, which are similar to the sample of Ghanaian university students.

For instance, on the statement ‘If a woman became pregnant as a result of rape, she should be able to obtain a legal abortion’, 42% of the participants of this study strongly agreed, while 23% strongly disagreed and 13% disagreed. On the statement ‘Doctors should be allowed to end the patient’s life if the patient requests it’, 65% strongly disagreed, and 19% strongly agreed. These results are similar to the results from the university students, where 35% strongly disagreed, and 18% strongly agreed with the statement ‘Doctors should be allowed to end the patient’s life if the patient requests it,’ and 25% strongly disagreed and 26% strongly agreed with the statement ‘If a woman became pregnant as a result of rape, she should be able to obtain a legal abortion’.

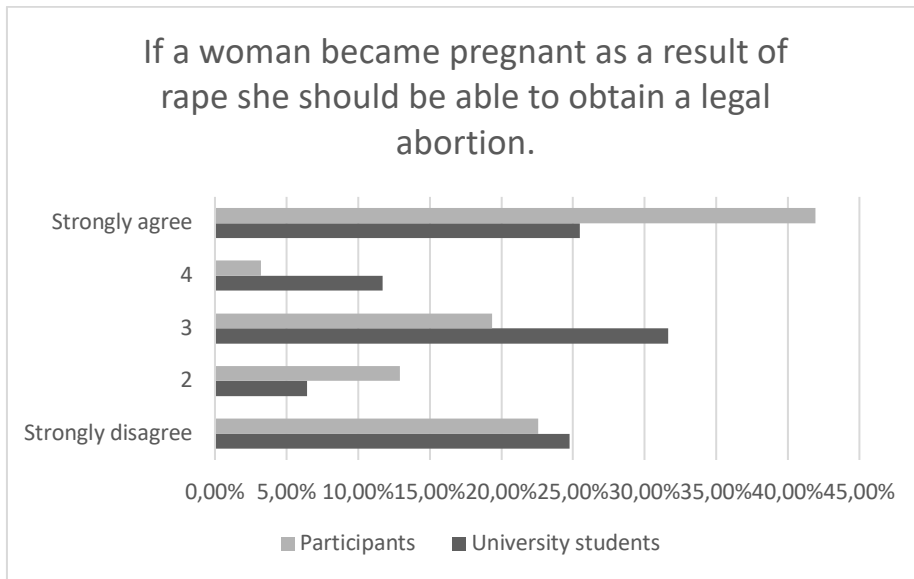


Figure 6. Comparison between the responses of the university student sample and the study participants to the statement 'If a woman became pregnant as a result of rape she should be able to obtain a legal abortion'.

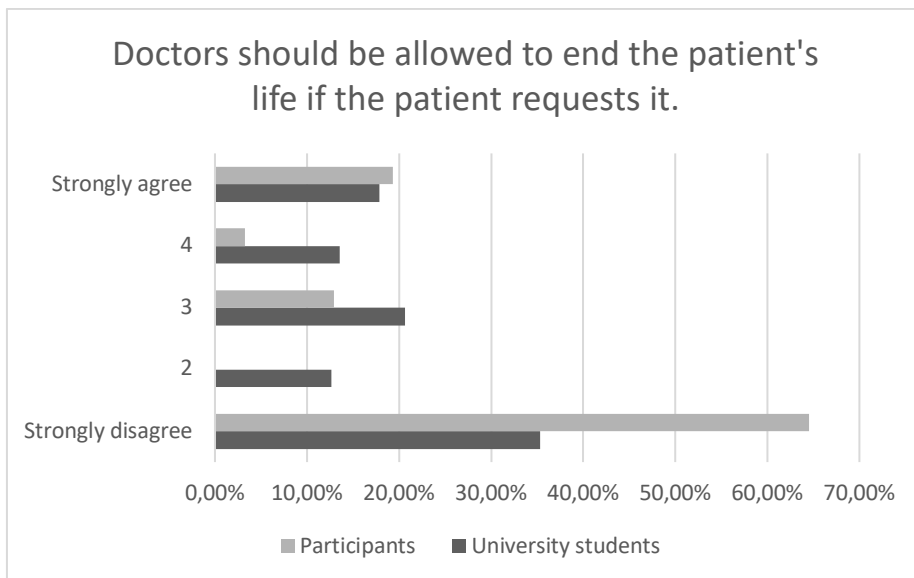


Figure 7. Comparison between the responses of the university student sample and the study participants to the statement 'Doctors should be allowed to end the patient's life if the patient requests it'.

This comparison shows that while there are major differences in views concerning sexual minorities and their rights, respondents are similar in

their views on other issues related to gender, sexuality, family, and health.

Furthermore, it became evident from the interview material that the participants of this study often desired a heteronormative gender traditional relationship with their partner, which included feminine and masculine roles, marriage, and starting a family. These desires tie into some of the more conservative values regarding pregnancy, marriage, family, and health, based on a heterosexual relationship and often supported by religious communities.

### 4.3 Results from the FQS: Q-pattern analysis

The point of departure in this study is the Q-pattern analysis results from the Faith Q-Sort. As previously presented in the section methodology, thirty-one participants completed the Faith Q-Sort. In addition, a Q-pattern analysis led to five prototypes, which represent chapters five, six, seven, eight, and nine of this thesis.

However, as these chapters emphasize follow-up interviews, the participants' experiences, and their interpretation of statements, this analytical chapter presents the results from the Q-pattern analysis and the more technical side, which includes the order of statements of each prototype. This is the so-called commentary style factor interpretation, which means it is the analysis based on the Q-pattern analysis. Some parts of the commentary style factor interpretation include short interpretations based on the interview material to clarify certain statements. After the commentary style factor interpretation, I have included a summary and a first look at interpretations to introduce each prototype further.

From the 101 statements of the Faith Q-Sort, four statements were consensus statements among the groups of participants. These included statements eleven, twelve, seventeen, and eighty-one (see Table 5, below). Even though they are consensus statements, these statements are included in the Q-pattern analysis of each prototype but should be interpreted carefully as they do not stand out for one prototype specifically.

<b>Statement</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
11 has a strong sense of a spiritual or higher order of reality in the midst of nature.	0	-1	-1	-1	-2
12* participates in religious activities chiefly on special occasions.	1	1	0	0	0
17* becomes more religious or spiritual at times of crisis or need.	-1	-1	-1	0	0
81*is positively engaged by or interested in other people's religious traditions.	1	0	0	0	1

Table 3. Consensus statements per prototype

Each commentary style factor interpretation includes a statements list that presents the descriptive statements of that prototype. These lists include defining statements that are more significant to the prototype. Statements considered as defining are:

- All statements scored +/- 4 with indication which are distinguishing at  $p < .01^{**}$  or  $p < .05^*$
- Statements scored +/- 2 or +/-3 if they are distinguishing at  $p < .01^{**}$  or  $p < .05^*$
- Statements scored -1, 0 or +1 if they are distinguishing at  $0.01^{**}$
- Other statements used in the interpretation text if they are relevant in context, e.g., used to support or elaborate interpretation.

Statements list follow an order from strong sorted statements (columns plus and minus four) to neutral sorted statements (column zero). After the lists of descriptive statements, a commentary style factor interpretation follows, which is a first description of the prototype based on the order and significance of the statements. The commentary style factor interpretation provides a title for each prototype based on the defining statements. The five commentary style factor interpretations are now presented, each with a summary and additional relevant interpretations from the interviews. This chapter ends with a summary of the five prototypes.



## 4.4 Prototype 1: 'Open-minded Confident Believer'

### Descriptive statements

- 54\* Thinks that men and women are by nature intended for different roles. (+4)
- 48\*\* Values his or her own purity and strives to safeguard it. (+4)
- 83 Believes that one can be deeply moral without being religious. (+4)
- 95 Believes that human progress is possible on a worldwide scale. (+4)
- 51 Actively works towards making the world a better place to live. (+4)
- 35\*\* Feels adrift, without direction, purpose, or goal. (-4)
- 29\* Is inclined to embrace elements from various religious and spiritual traditions. (-4)
- 73\*\* Thinks that ritual or practice is more important than particular beliefs or mystical or spiritual experiences. (-4)
- 34 Sees this world as a place of suffering and sorrow. (-4)
- 85 Finds it difficult to believe in a benevolent divine being in the face of evil. (-4)
- 15\*\* Considers the meaning of religious texts and teachings to be clear and true. (+3)
- 97\*\* Is an active, contributing member of a religious or a spiritual community. (+3)
- 86\*\* Is committed to following a spiritual path that is in harmony with the environment. (+3)
- 5\* Feels guilty for not living up to his or her ideals. (-3)
- 49\*\* Seeks to intensify his or her experience of the divine or some otherworldly reality. (-3)
- 1\*\* Gives substantial amounts of time or money to some religious organization or worthy cause. (+2)
- 74\* Feels personally protected and guided by a spiritual being. (+2)
- 41\* Thinks of the divine as a sheltering and nurturing parent. (+2)
- 43\* Is consumed by day-to-day responsibilities, leaving little or no time for spiritual matters. (-2)
- 82\* Is reluctant to reveal his or her core convictions to others. (-2)
- 61\*\* Feels threatened by evil forces at work in the world. (-1)
- 99\*\* Takes comfort in thinking that those who do not live righteously will face suffering or punishment. (0)

Double asterisk (\*\*) indicates significance at  $P < .01$ , Single asterisk indicates \*  $P < .05$

### 4.4.1 Commentary style factor interpretation

Prototype one has a positive and open-minded worldview. This is emphasized by the support of "Believes that human progress is possible on a worldwide scale",<sup>36</sup> "Actively works towards making the world a

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<sup>36</sup> 95: +4

better place to live”<sup>37</sup> and the rejection of seeing “this world as a place of suffering and sorrow”<sup>38</sup>. This is combined with an open-minded worldview regarding gender roles and morality, which shows support of “Thinks that men and women are by nature intended for different roles”<sup>39</sup> and “Believes that one can be deeply moral without being religious”<sup>40</sup>. Statement fifty-four, “Thinks that men and women are by nature intended for different roles”, is interpreted in the sense that men and women, and anyone else, can do anything they want; they have “different roles”.

These open-minded views are important and acknowledged by supporting “Values his or her own purity and strive to safeguard it”<sup>41</sup>. This prototype’s interpretation of this statement is to live by your principles and protect those to be “pure”. This is further supported by the commitment to “following a spiritual path that is in harmony with the environment”<sup>42</sup>. Environment relates to the surrounding communities that prototype one is part of, which is, in this case, a combination of religious communities and LGBTQ+ communities.

The open-minded worldviews are combined with religious beliefs or values, as prototype one holds onto a particular religious community which shows in supporting statement “Is an active contributing member of a religious or a spiritual community”<sup>43</sup> and “Considers the meaning of religious texts and teachings to be clear and true”.<sup>44</sup> Therefore, prototype one is not “Inclined to embrace elements from various religious and spiritual traditions”<sup>45</sup> and takes distance from African Indigenous Religions through the rejection of the statement, “Thinks that ritual or practice is more important than particular beliefs or mystical or spiritual experiences”<sup>46</sup>. This statement, seventy-three, is often associated by participants with African Indigenous Religions because of the word ‘ritual’. The religious beliefs of persons of this prototype are lived out in the sense that they “give substantial amounts of time or money to some religious organization or worthy cause”<sup>47</sup> and are not “consumed by day-to-day responsibilities, leaving little or no time for spiritual matters”<sup>48</sup>.

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<sup>37</sup> 51: +4

<sup>38</sup> 34: -4

<sup>39</sup> 54: +4

<sup>40</sup> 83: +4

<sup>41</sup> 48: +4

<sup>42</sup> 86: +3

<sup>43</sup> 97: +3

<sup>44</sup> 15: +3

<sup>45</sup> 29: -4

<sup>46</sup> 73: -4

<sup>47</sup> 1: +2

<sup>48</sup> 43: -2

This prototype is confident in their beliefs and views, as they do not “feel adrift, without direction, purpose, or goal”<sup>49</sup>, and do not “feel guilty for not living up to his or her ideals”<sup>50</sup> and do not feel “threatened by evil forces at work in the world”<sup>51</sup>. Their religious beliefs partly support them by making them “feel personally protected and guided by a spiritual being”<sup>52</sup> and “thinks of the divine as a sheltering and nurturing parent”<sup>53</sup>. However, in contrast to the other prototypes, prototype one stands out by being neutral on “takes comfort in thinking that those who do not live righteously will face suffering or punishment”<sup>54</sup>. This could indicate that prototype one does not feel like there are straightforward ways of living righteously; or that there might be multiple ways, which would emphasize their combination of open-minded worldviews and to belong to a religious community where these views might not be supported.<sup>55</sup>

#### 4.4.2 Summary and a first look at statement interpretations

The title of the first prototype – Open-minded Confident Believer – is based on the distinguishing and defining statements among the persons of the prototype: they are active contributing members of their religious communities<sup>56</sup>, confident in their religious views and practices<sup>57</sup>, and aim to contribute towards progress and making the world a better place to live<sup>58</sup>.

A first reading of the interviews shows different perspectives on gender and sexuality among persons of this prototype. While some have found harmony and hold affirmative religious views to their sexuality,

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<sup>49</sup> 35: -4

<sup>50</sup> 5: -3

<sup>51</sup> 61: -1

<sup>52</sup> 74: +2

<sup>53</sup> 41: +2

<sup>54</sup> 99: 0

<sup>55</sup> How to interpret statements marked as zero is a continuous discussion among researchers who use Q-methodology (see, e.g., Watts and Stenner 2005). It is not clear whether participants are neutral or, for example, do not care at all about the particular statement. However, the fact that it is marked as zero does mean there is a shared view about this statement being zero, and therefore it is included in the analysis. The interpretation or meaning of a zero statement has to be further explained with interview data or in comparison to other prototypes.

<sup>56</sup> This refers to statement 97, ‘Is an active, contributing member of a religious or a spiritual community’, a distinguishing statement among persons of this prototype.

<sup>57</sup> This relates to, for instance, statement 15, ‘Considers the meaning of religious texts and teachings to be clear and true’, which is a distinguishing statement among persons of this prototype.

<sup>58</sup> This relates to statement 51, ‘Actively works towards making the world a better place to live’, and 95, ‘Believes that human progress is possible on a worldwide scale’, which are the most defining statements among persons of this prototype.

others seem to hold more constrained religious views. This relates to their views on gender and sexuality; diversity is emphasized by those holding affirmative religious views, while traditional gender roles and heteronormativity are emphasized by those who hold constraining religious views.

The similarity among persons of this prototype is the religious character. Religion is important in their life; it is an integrated part of their daily lives. They rely on their religious beliefs for support and on religious activities for social relationships. There is more diversity among persons of this prototype concerning their negotiation of religion and sexuality. Some persons of this prototype strategize against stigma by concealing their sexuality and prioritizing their religiosity, while others have found strategies that harmonize their religiosity and sexuality. These findings are exemplified below with shortened interpretations of distinguishing and most descriptive statements.

**15. Considers the meaning of religious texts and teachings to be clear and true.**

“Religious texts and teachings to be clear and true. Yeah. Like, the bible- yeah there is stuff in the bible that is true. Yeah.”

**48. Values his or her own purity and strives to safeguard it.**

“Yeah. I believe that as I said it, nobody is pure. So, God gives purity so, I am safeguard about it. I am okay, I am sure, I move freely.”

**54. Thinks that men and women are by nature intended for different roles.**

“Yes. I think that men and women are by nature intended for different roles cause we have, they have, men and women have different features, physically. So, we have having different features that means we have different role we are supposed to play.”

“If they are not intended for different roles, they would be the same. But since they are intended for different roles, you will have to perform diversity so. I see differences and differences make to a combination. Yeah. If we were all the same, we know about LGBT and we are not all of it so. Differences make a combination.”

“Yeah. I would say, men and women are created for different roles, when God created Adam, he was alone. So, he decided to create him a woman. So that they can live together. So that is why God created a man to pleasure a man back, now the world has changed. And everyone like, the world has changed. We all men, and women. [LG] So the world has become something else. For me, I believe in like, men having a feeling to a man is not a sin.”

**97. Is an active, contributing member of a religious or a spiritual community.**

"Yeah. I'm an active member in my church. I'm part of the choir."

"Yes. Yes, very active. In my church, we have societies and I am [anonymized] of my society."

**51. Actively works towards making the world a better place to live.**

**95. Believes that human progress is possible on a worldwide scale.<sup>59</sup>**

"I believe human progress is possible. Yeah. Because, you progressing and stuff, helps like- I don't know how to put it, but it helps the world to go on well."

"Yeah, it is possible on a worldwide scale because, an issue like the gay I am talking about, if there were supposed to be a lot of vulnerable people around who had that kind of situation, they would have taken it more tactically. I believe that people understand why people face certain situations."

"I have attached my religious life to it, by praying to God, and doing some of the things the bible teaches us to do. Like, you should give small, you have more blessing, there is more blessing in giving than receiving. That's why I placed- so I blend the two, and all the social life into card fifty-one that's why I put it there."

The responses to the above statements exemplify the findings discussed. In all of the statements, the religious character of persons of this prototype comes through. Religious scriptures are seen as essential and accurate, the divine is seen as an authority, religious activities in religious communities are important and religious beliefs are mingled with attitudes on making the world a better place to live.

The differences concerning gender and sexuality also come through, especially in statement fifty-four. One person emphasizes traditional gender roles while the others emphasize diversity related to sexual minorities. Statement forty-eight and fifty-one give more interpretations towards affirmative religious views towards sexuality. While there are different views on these issues among persons of this prototype, there are many similarities in their religiosity. The findings from the interviews demonstrate different strategies to navigate stigmatization among persons of this prototype related to these views. It also shows that while there is a similarity in the religious character among persons of this prototype, it does not mean that views on gender and sexuality are similar.

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<sup>59</sup> Statements 51 and 95 are not distinguishing but most defining statements among persons of this prototype.

## 4.5 Prototype 2 'Guilty-feeling Non-religious Individualist'

### Descriptive statements

- 77\*\* Is profoundly touched by the suffering of others. (+4)  
101\*\* Considers hypocrisy not practicing what one preaches to be common in religious circles. (+4)  
83 Believes that one can be deeply moral without being religious. (+4)  
100 Supports individual freedom of choice in matters of faith and morality. (+4)  
51 Actively works towards making the world a better place to live. (+4)  
64\*\* Centers his or her life on a religious or spiritual quest. (-4)  
97\*\* Is an active, contributing member of a religious or a spiritual community. (-4)  
71\*\* Believes that religion should play the central role in the ruling of the nation. (-4)  
73 Thinks that ritual or practice is more important than particular beliefs or mystical or spiritual experiences. (-4)  
72 Has moved from one group to another in search of a spiritual or ideological home. (-4)  
5\*\* Feels guilty for not living up to his or her ideals. (+3)  
69\* Feels a sense of guilt and personal inadequacy. (+3)  
44\* Senses a divine or universal luminous element within him- or herself. (-3)  
76\* Mainly associates with persons of the same religious tradition or outlook. (-3)  
31\* Is critical of the religious tradition of his or her people. (-3)  
28\*\* Believes in some way, but does not view him or herself as religious. (+2)  
91\* Takes delight in paradox and mystery. (+2)  
39\*\* Feels uncomfortable or fearful in turning to the divine. (+2)  
46\*\* Feels that one should remain loyal to the religion of one's nation. (-2)  
30\*\* Considers regular attendance at places of worship to be an essential expression of faith. (-2)  
87\*\* Views religious content as metaphoric, rather than literally true. (0)
- Double asterisk (\*\*) indicates significance at  $P < .01$ , Single asterisk indicates \*  $P < .05$

### 4.5.1 Commentary style factor interpretation

This prototype has a challenging journey regarding their religious beliefs and practices. There is an evident dissatisfaction with religious institutions and ways of passing as religious, which is demonstrated by the strong support of "Considers hypocrisy not practicing what one preaches to be common in religious circles"<sup>60</sup> and the rejection of "Is an

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<sup>60</sup> 101: +4

active, contributing member of a religious or spiritual community"<sup>61</sup> and "Considers regular attendance at places of worship to be an essential expression of faith"<sup>62</sup>. Instead of searching for ideologies, this prototype distances themselves from religious and or ideological traditions, being it a new one or the one that he or she was brought up in, which is exemplified in the rejection of "Has moved from one group to another in search of a spiritual or ideological home"<sup>63</sup> and "Mainly associates with persons of the same religious tradition or outlook"<sup>64</sup>.

The dissatisfaction with religious institutions and hypocrisy comes further through in supporting a nation that would not be ruled, or steered, by religious beliefs demonstrated in the rejection of "Believes that religion should play the central role in the ruling of the nation"<sup>65</sup> and "Feels that one should remain loyal to the religion of one's nation"<sup>66</sup>. However, even though this prototype is very critical towards religious institutions and the idea of a religiously governed nation, they are not "critical of the religious traditions of his or her people"<sup>67</sup>. This statement is often interpreted in relation to the religious beliefs or practices of one's family. In alignment with the open-minded confident believers, these religious beliefs do not relate to AIRs, from which they take distance through the strong rejection of "Thinks that ritual or practice is more important than particular beliefs or mystical or spiritual experiences"<sup>68</sup>.

It seems that this prototype takes distance from religious beliefs and focuses on individual choice through the support of "Supports individual freedom of choice in matters of faith and morality"<sup>69</sup> and "Believes that one can be deeply moral without being religious"<sup>70</sup>. In addition to a focus on the individual rather than on being part of a religious group, this prototype experiences feelings of guilt and personal inadequacy, which shows in supporting "Feels guilty for not living up to his or her ideals"<sup>71</sup> and "Feels a sense of guilt and personal inadequacy"<sup>72</sup>. This might relate to a personal relationship to religious traditions, where one does not pass or is welcome. This is further supported with the wish to change the world and empathy towards others who suffer, which is reflected

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<sup>61</sup> 97: -4

<sup>62</sup> 30: -2

<sup>63</sup> 72: -4

<sup>64</sup> 76: -3

<sup>65</sup> 71: -4

<sup>66</sup> 46: -2

<sup>67</sup> 31: -3

<sup>68</sup> 73: -4

<sup>69</sup> 100: +4

<sup>70</sup> 83: +4

<sup>71</sup> 5: +3

<sup>72</sup> 69: +3

supporting "Is profoundly touched by the suffering of others"<sup>73</sup> and "Actively works towards making the world a better place to live"<sup>74</sup>. However, religion or spirituality does not play a part in their lives when they work towards a better world with less suffering as they reject the statement "Centers his or her life on a religious or spiritual quest"<sup>75</sup>.

The struggle with not belonging to a religious community and feelings of guilt are further demonstrated in the support of "Believes in some way, but does not view him or herself as religious"<sup>76</sup> and yet "Feels uncomfortable or fearful in turning to the divine"<sup>77</sup>. In addition to being fearful, this prototype does not feel connected or supported by a divine being with the rejection of "Senses a divine or universal luminous element within him- or herself"<sup>78</sup>. Believing in some way but distancing themselves from majority religious communities, they take "delight in paradox and mystery"<sup>79</sup>, demonstrating their ambivalent attitude towards Ghana's central religious institutions and beliefs.

#### 4.5.2 Summary and a first look at statement interpretations

The identifying characteristic of this prototype is the non-religious character. In comparison to the first prototype, this second one is the opposite regarding religious beliefs and activities. Persons of this prototype do not attend religious gatherings and do not practice religious activities. In comparison to any other prototype, this is the most non-religious prototype. This characteristic does not mean that persons of this prototype are not religious. However, they share views and values that relate to being not religious, such as the rejection of 'centering their lives on a religious quest'<sup>80</sup>. In Ghana, this is quite exceptional as religion plays a central role in daily matters. It is common to belong to a religious community and participate in (at least) weekly gatherings. Often persons of this prototype have a religious background, but they distance themselves from either religious gatherings or religion in general, including private religious practices or the belief in a divine being.

In addition to being non-religious, most persons of this prototype have to take care of themselves. They cannot depend on anyone. They socialize less with young adults, and they have complicated

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<sup>73</sup> 77: +4

<sup>74</sup> 51: +4

<sup>75</sup> 64: -4

<sup>76</sup> 28: +2

<sup>77</sup> 39: +2

<sup>78</sup> 44: -3

<sup>79</sup> 91: +2

<sup>80</sup> This refers to statement 64, 'Centers his or her life on a religious or spiritual quest', which is a distinguishing rejected statement among persons of this prototype.



relationships with their family members. The fact that most of them have to depend on themselves, or either work towards that to gain more freedom in being themselves, leads to future ideals of being financially independent. Persons of this prototype share a focus on individual goals. At the same time, individualism comes through in religious practices. Those who still believe in a divine being practice their faith privately and individually to avoid stigma in their religious communities. These shared individual notions relate to the label 'individualist' in the title of this prototype. At the same time, persons of this prototype feel touched when others are suffering. Their experiences of sexual stigma have led most of them to be very emphatic towards others who are suffering because they have lived through it themselves.

The feelings of guilt come through in different ways among the persons of this prototype. Some people feel guilty towards their family for letting them down because they are not heterosexual. Others feel guilty because they have internalized the idea that they are cursed because they are homosexual, and they view sexual stigma as a punishment from the divine. In general, persons of this prototype seem to struggle with their sexuality in relation to their faith. For instance, they have feelings of guilt to the divine after hearing homonegative sermons in their religious communities. This last experience is similar to those of persons of the first prototype. However, in contrast to them, the persons of this prototype often do not hold affirmative religious views but rather distance themselves entirely from their religious community and faith.

To exemplify these shared characteristics from the Q-pattern analysis, I selected interpretations from persons of this prototype in the citations below.

**77. Is profoundly touched by the suffering of others**

"I've been through a lot, anytime I see someone who has been through hardship, it makes me feel so sad. I wish I had the power to help." "I feel really bad when I see people suffering."

**101. Considers hypocrisy—not practicing what one preaches—to be common in religious circles**

"The leaders are all hypocrites." "They do not practice what they preach." "They practice what they are preaching against." "We are all sinners. One way or another."

"I see it to be a big hypocrisy." "I being gay, my county will tell me it is against my religion."

**5. Feels guilty for not living up to his or her ideals**

**69. Feels a sense of guilt and personal inadequacy**

“I do feel guilty, I think maybe God is not blessing me.” “I am not getting everything I want because I am gay.” “They make me feel guilty. Someone like my mommy, coming out crying about.”

**64. Centers his or her life on a religious or spiritual quest**

**97. Is an active contributing member of a religious or a spiritual community**

**71. Believes that religion should play the central role in the ruling of the nation**

“No, I am not”. “I don’t go to church that often. [Laughs]”

The non-religious characteristic shared among persons of this prototype is reflected in the three statements (64, 97, and 71) above. These statements were not commented on in detail during the interviews, mainly because they were so apparent to the participant. Therefore, a short explanation of “I am not religious” was often enough. These statements were also linked to each other, as persons did not see themselves as religious, and most importantly, they did not attend any religious gatherings. Being non-religious relates to the shared view on hypocrisy in religious circles (statement 101). Everyone in this prototype agreed that hypocrisy was a significant issue in religious circles, especially concerning religious leaders.

Persons of this prototype argued that it is a hypocrite that religious leaders are preaching against homosexuality while they are (a) homosexual themselves or (b) while there are other ‘sins’ in life that are as bad and as common as homosexuality. In general, religious leaders are not seen as trustworthy and caring by persons of this prototype. They view them as hypocrites because they can preach against things, such as homosexuality, while living their lives in any way they want (often using drugs, having affairs while being married). This notion of hypocrisy in religious communities was often brought up as another reason to distance themselves from a religious community or not be religious anymore.

## 4.6 Prototype 3 'Religiously Active Doubting Believer'

### Descriptive statements

- 46\*\* Feels that one should remain loyal to the religion of one's nation. (+4)  
21\*\* Takes part in religious activities to form or maintain social relationships. (+4)  
83 Believes that one can be deeply moral without being religious. (+4)  
100 Supports individual freedom of choice in matters of faith and morality. (+4)  
33 Feels spiritually moved and deeply sustained by music, art, or poetry. (+4)  
86\*\* Is committed to following a spiritual path that is in harmony with the environment. (-4)  
85\*\* Finds it difficult to believe in a benevolent divine being in the face of evil. (-4)  
90 Affirms the idea of reincarnation, the cycle of birth and rebirth. (-4)  
91 Takes delight in paradox and mystery. (-4)  
41 Thinks of the divine as a sheltering and nurturing parent. (-4)  
16\*\* Being religious or spiritual is central to whom he or she is. (+3)  
99\*\* Takes comfort in thinking that those who do not live righteously will face suffering or punishment. (+3)  
94\*\* Views symmetry, harmony, and balance as reflections of ultimate truth. (-3)  
37\*\* Has experienced a profound change in religious or spiritual understanding or commitment. (+2)  
15\*\* Considers the meaning of religious texts and teachings to be clear and true. (+2)  
2\* Has frequent doubts about long-held religious convictions. (+2)  
84\* Has a vague and shifting religious outlook. (-2)  
65\*\* Furnishes his or her living space with objects for religious or spiritual use or inspiration (+1)  
95\*\* Believes that human progress is possible on a worldwide scale. (-1)  
51\*\* Actively works towards making the world a better place to live. (0)  
40\*\* Expresses his or her convictions by following certain dietary practices. (0)  
39\*\* Feels uncomfortable or fearful in turning to the divine. (0)  
Double asterisk (\*\*) indicates significance at  $P < .01$ , Single asterisk indicates \*  $P < .05$

### 4.6.1 Commentary style factor interpretation

This prototype feels close to the majority religious community of Ghana as it strongly supports "Feels that one should remain loyal to the religion of one's nation"<sup>81</sup>, and takes a distance from the idea of reincarnation and dietary restrictions, which is only supported in the minority

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<sup>81</sup> 46: +4

religious communities in Ghana (“Affirms the idea of reincarnation, the cycle of birth and rebirth”<sup>82</sup>, “Expresses his or her convictions by following certain dietary practices”<sup>83</sup>). Besides a very loyal attitude towards major religious institutions, this prototype has a deep spiritual connection with the divine through art (Exemplified through the strong support of “Feels spiritually moved and deeply sustained by music, art or poetry”)<sup>84</sup> and is very active in their religious community to maintain social networks (Exemplified through the strong support of “Takes part in religious activities to form or maintain social relationships”<sup>85</sup>).

For this prototype, religion is not only practiced through these activities but central in their lives, which shows in supporting the statement “Being religious or spiritual is central to whom he or she is”<sup>86</sup>. Even though they support the idea of choice and morality without being religious (Believes that one can be deeply moral without being religious<sup>87</sup>, Supports individual freedom of choice in matters of faith and morality)<sup>88</sup>, they hold a more traditional perspective about living righteously as they support the statement “Takes comfort in thinking that those who do not live righteously will face suffering or punishment”<sup>89</sup>. It is not a surprise then, that they do not have the perspective that being a member of the LGBTQ+ community is in harmony with their spiritual paths, as they reject the statement “Following a spiritual path that is in harmony with the environment”<sup>90</sup>. The concept of ‘environment’ is often interpreted as LGBTQ+ communities.

However, this prototype has gone through some changes regarding religious beliefs (shown in the support of “Has experienced a profound change in religious or spiritual understanding or commitment”<sup>91</sup>) and did have doubts about particular beliefs or perspectives (exemplified in the support of “Has frequent doubts about long-held religious convictions”<sup>92</sup>). But a “vague and shifting religious outlook”<sup>93</sup> is not close to this prototype, and instead, it seems that this prototype holds onto their beliefs through at least private religious practices because

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<sup>82</sup> 90: -4

<sup>83</sup> 40: 0

<sup>84</sup> 33: +4

<sup>85</sup> 21: +4; These activities (social and artistic) are often intertwined, for example singing in a choir.

<sup>86</sup> 16: +3

<sup>87</sup> 83: +4

<sup>88</sup> 100: +4

<sup>89</sup> 99: +3

<sup>90</sup> 86: -4

<sup>91</sup> 37: +2

<sup>92</sup> 2: +2

<sup>93</sup> 84: -2

religious texts still seem to be meaningful to them, which is exemplified through the support of the statements “Considers the meaning of religious texts and teachings to be clear and true”<sup>94</sup> and “Furnishes his or her living space with objects for religious or spiritual use or inspiration”<sup>95</sup>.

These belief changes come forth further in their ambivalent relationship to the divine. On the one hand, the divine is not seen as a nurturing parent (Rejects the statement “Thinks of the divine as a sheltering and nurturing parent”<sup>96</sup>), but on the other hand, the divine is seen as benevolent when they have negative experiences (Rejects strongly the statement “Finds it difficult to believe in a benevolent divine being in the face of evil”<sup>97</sup>). It might be that this prototype has a struggle with certain beliefs or views and while supporting those, they are reflected in an ambivalent and neutral relationship to the divine (“Feels uncomfortable or fearful in turning to the divine” is sorted zero)<sup>98</sup> and neutral or negative approach to change and progress (“Believes that human progress is possible on a worldwide scale”<sup>99</sup>, “Actively works towards making the world a better place to live”<sup>100</sup>).

#### 4.6.2 Summary and a first look at statement interpretations

The most shared characteristic of this group is the religious character, similarly to prototype one. This prototype relates to statements of loyalty towards the nation’s religion, being active in religious communities, and viewing religion as central to whom he or she is. This aligns with the religious descriptions that persons of this prototype gave in their survey answers. They describe themselves and their families as very religious (ten out of ten). In contrast to prototype two, but similar to prototype one, persons of this prototype share being active and contributing to their religious community. Loyalty towards the religious community is seen as necessary. Nevertheless, at the same time, there are some views shared among persons of this prototype that indicate doubt, which might relate to stigmatizing experiences within their religious communities.

To exemplify these shared characteristics, I have selected some interpretations from persons of this prototype in the citations below.

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<sup>94</sup> 15: +2

<sup>95</sup> 65: +1

<sup>96</sup> 41: -4

<sup>97</sup> 85: -4

<sup>98</sup> 39: 0

<sup>99</sup> 95: -1

<sup>100</sup> 51: 0

**21. Takes part in religious activities to form or maintain social relationships.**

“Because I believe in God, so I think I need to take part in it, because that's for people- where people- that's what I believe in. So, I need to find myself in the activities that are going on.”

“Yes. If we are having something in the family, although my mom doesn't talk to me, but I still want to go. So, she doesn't say maybe when she sacked me from home, I didn't want to get closer, I still go, because I know it is part of my family. Yeah, so I still go.”

**16. Being religious or spiritual is central to whom he or she is.**

“It is important for me to be going to church. Although I am a lesbian, it doesn't mean I don't have to. And if I am going to church, I believe in God inside, not the church. So, I can choose not to go to church but I still believe in God.”

**99. Takes comfort in thinking that those who do not live righteously will face suffering or punishment.**

“Yeah, that's what my mom always says. Because when she realized, I was a lesbian, yeah. They were always thinking like, if you're a lesbian, you don't have to be going to church. When they are going, they don't want me to follow them.”

**37. Has experienced a profound change in religious or spiritual understanding or commitment.**

“Yes, yes, it has really changed. Yes, it has changed. It has changed- a lot. [...] If it is not my wish to be a gay. But because of the difficulties that I am having, so whilst my friend has been able to change and has been acquainted into a new distinct person, I know one day too, my prayers will to Him will be answered surely.”

**15. Considers the meaning of religious texts and teachings to be clear and true.**

“Whenever I feel maybe bored or something, I sometimes take the bible and read it. I feel I think an inner understanding. I try to understand What the verse is talking about. To understand my- what the reason- the main reason why I feel so sad and all. To encourage myself.”

The religious character of persons of this prototype is mainly exemplified in the interpretations above. The first reading of the interviews shows that some persons sorted statements how other people perceived them. For instance, in statement ninety-nine above, the participant relates the statement to her mother's view. It does not reflect her own opinion. In this case, her example shows that she experienced sexual stigma from her close family members supported with religious stigmatizing beliefs.

The analysis of the interviews also shows that persons of this prototype are Christian and come from very religious families. This explains their religious character and their shared preference to be active in religious communities. Another shared belief among persons of this prototype is that homosexuality is not correct, and they wish to live up to heteronormative expectations, which the church supports. Examples are heterosexual marriage, the idea of a nuclear family, and their wish to be either a masculine man or a feminine woman; to align their biological sex to a heteronormative gender.

Another important aspect concerning the experiences of the persons of this prototype is other significant issues in their lives that influence their ways of managing stigma. Most of them have either struggled with poverty or still do. Some of them experienced difficult childhoods without their parents to care for them. Another person is a single mother who experienced rape at a young age and had to drop out of school because she was pregnant. Religious communities were often a form of support in difficult times, with people who, for instance, offered some financial help to cover school fees.

Persons of this prototype describe poverty as the most difficult struggle in their lives that must be dealt with before anything can be done against sexual stigma. For persons of this prototype, this argument comes through as they have little or no resources to manage stigma and have to prioritize taking care of themselves and their families. Therefore, religious capital, being part of a religious community, is important to these persons.

#### 4.7 Prototype 4 ‘Deeply-connected Private Believer’

##### Descriptive statements

- 93\* Sees personal self-realization as a primary spiritual goal in life. (+4)
- 99\*\* Takes comfort in thinking that those who do not live righteously will face suffering or punishment. (+4)
- 77\*\* Is profoundly touched by the suffering of others. (+4)
- 53\* Believes in a divine being with whom one can have a personal relationship. (+4)
- 74 Feels personally protected and guided by a spiritual being. (+4)
- 59\*\* His or her sexuality is strongly guided by a religious or spiritual outlook. (-4)
- 32\*\* Considers all religious scriptures to be outdated or misguided. (-4)
- 34 Sees this world as a place of suffering and sorrow. (-4)
- 55 Personally finds the idea of divinity empty of significance or meaning. (-4)
- 60 Views religion as the illusory creation of human fears and desires. (-4)
- 78\*\* Is often keenly aware of the presence of the divine. (+3)

- 9\*\* Thinks about the ultimate as a life force or creative energy rather than a supernatural being. (-3)
- 90\*\* Affirms the idea of reincarnation, the cycle of birth and rebirth. (-2)
- 45\* Feels distant from God or the divine. (-2)
- 2\* Has frequent doubts about long-held religious convictions. (-2)
- 29\* Is inclined to embrace elements from various religious and spiritual traditions. (-2)
- 98\*\* Willingly gives up worldly or bodily pleasures for religious or spiritual reasons. (+1)
- 97\*\* Is an active, contributing member of a religious or a spiritual community. (+1)
- 66\*\* Deeply identifies with some holy figure, either human or divine. (+1)
- 71\*\* Believes that religion should play the central role in the ruling of the nation. (-1)
- 68\*\* Has sensed the presence or influence of specific spirits, demons or patron saints. (0)
- Double asterisk (\*\*) indicates significance at  $P < .01$ , Single asterisk indicates \*  $P < .05$

#### 4.7.1 Commentary style factor interpretation

This prototype has a close and personal relationship with the divine. They believe in “a divine being with whom one can have a personal relationship”<sup>101</sup>, “feels personally protected and guided by a spiritual being”<sup>102</sup>, “Is often keenly aware of the presence of the divine”<sup>103</sup> and do not feel “distant from God or the divine”<sup>104</sup>. Their religious beliefs are focused on the individual (they support the statement “Sees personal self-realization as a primary spiritual goal in life”)<sup>105</sup> and less related to religious institutions, communities, or public religious activities (they are somewhat neutral towards the statement “Believes that religion should play the central role in the ruling of the nation”<sup>106</sup> and “Is an active, contributing member of a religious or a spiritual community”)<sup>107</sup>. This could be related to the strong rejection of “His or her sexuality is strongly guided by a religious or spiritual outlook”<sup>108</sup>.

However, they have strong beliefs or views which are reflected in supporting statements such as “Takes comfort in thinking that those who do not live righteously will face suffering or punishment”<sup>109</sup>. The

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<sup>101</sup> 53: +4

<sup>102</sup> 74: +4

<sup>103</sup> 78: +3

<sup>104</sup> 45: -2

<sup>105</sup> 93: +4

<sup>106</sup> 71: -1

<sup>107</sup> 97: +1

<sup>108</sup> 74: -4

<sup>109</sup> 99: +4



idea of 'righteously' could either relate to personal experiences from which they suffered and which they do not wish for others (as they strongly support the statement "Is profoundly touched by the suffering of others")<sup>110</sup> or it could relate to religious views taken for example from scriptures (as they strongly reject the statement "Considers all religious scriptures to be outdated or misguided"<sup>111</sup>). Or it might be a combination of the two since they do not have to exclude each other and are both critical for this prototype.

It is noteworthy that this prototype has an optimistic worldview regardless of their experiences (as they strongly reject "Sees this world as a place of suffering and sorrow"<sup>112</sup>) and religion is an essential contribution to that view (which is exemplified in the rejection of "Personally finds the idea of divinity empty of significance or meaning"<sup>113</sup>, "Views religion as the illusory creation of human fears and desires"<sup>114</sup> and "Has frequent doubts about long-held religious convictions"<sup>115</sup>).

Even though there is a rejection of affirmative religious guidance regarding their sexual orientation, religion is so important that the statement "Willingly gives up worldly or bodily pleasures for religious or spiritual reasons"<sup>116</sup> is slightly supported, and embracing other religious or spiritual traditions is rejected ("Is inclined to embrace elements from various religious and spiritual traditions"<sup>117</sup>). The presence and closeness to a divine takes a central role in these views (as the statement "Deeply identifies with some holy figure, either human or divine"<sup>118</sup> is somewhat supported and "Thinks about the ultimate as a life force or creative energy rather than a supernatural being" is rejected)<sup>119</sup>.

Where religious institutions, communities, or public religious activities might lack in being supportive of their sexual orientation, this prototype turns to their relationship with the divine for support, protection, and guidance, which in return results in a neutral perspective on the fear or danger of demons and spirits<sup>120</sup> ("Has sensed

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<sup>110</sup> 77: +4

<sup>111</sup> 32: -4

<sup>112</sup> 34: -4

<sup>113</sup> 55: -4

<sup>114</sup> 60: -4

<sup>115</sup> 2: -2

<sup>116</sup> 98: +1

<sup>117</sup> 29: -2

<sup>118</sup> 66: +1

<sup>119</sup> 9: -3

<sup>120</sup> Fear against demons and spirits is quite common among the participants in Accra. This results from African indigenous beliefs about spirits and the shared belief among most often Christians in Ghana that a demonic spirit possesses homosexuals. In this case, it

the presence or influence of specific spirits, demons or patron saints”<sup>121</sup>).

#### 4.7.2 Summary and a first look at statement interpretations

Persons of this prototype care deeply about their religious life and feel a solid connection to the divine. There are similarities with the religiosity of the persons of the first prototype, the ‘open-minded confident believers’, who rely on their faith and hold affirmative views to the divine and their sexuality. However, concerning the issue of sexuality, there are noteworthy differences.

There is an awareness among persons of this prototype that their sexuality is not strongly guided by a religious or spiritual outlook<sup>122</sup>. This indicates that they experience sexual stigma, most likely in their religious communities. Due to their consciousness of sexual stigma, persons of this prototype experience felt stigma. While persons of prototypes two and three, the ‘Guilty-feeling Non-religious Individualist’ and the ‘Religiously Active Doubting Believer’, also share the view of their sexuality not being strongly guided by a religious outlook, it is a more strongly supported view among persons of this prototype. In addition, persons of this prototype believe that those who do not live righteously will face suffering and punishment<sup>123</sup>. These two shared notions indicate a particular conflict with religion and sexuality among persons of this prototype. They are aware that their sexuality is not religiously supported, and they believe that those not living righteously will be punished, which can relate to themselves.

Another shared value among persons of this prototype supporting this argument is being profoundly touched by the suffering of others<sup>124</sup>. As persons of prototype two, the ‘Guilty-feeling Non-religious Individualist’, have demonstrated, this view is often motivated by personal experiences of suffering related to sexual stigma. It indicates that persons of this prototype have been through these experiences, and there is a relation to their religious beliefs or religious communities. However, despite these experiences of stigma, persons of this prototype

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seems that prototype four feels protected by the divine because of their close relationship to the divine, and as a result, they do not fear or are neutral towards the idea of demons or spirits.

<sup>121</sup> 68: 0

<sup>122</sup> This relates to Statement 59, ‘His or her sexuality is strongly guided by a religious or spiritual outlook’, a distinguishing statement among persons of this prototype.

<sup>123</sup> This relates to Statement 99, ‘Takes comfort in thinking that those who do not live righteously will face suffering or punishment’, which is a distinguishing statement among persons of this prototype.

<sup>124</sup> This relates to Statement 77, ‘Is profoundly touched by the suffering of others’, a distinguishing statement among persons of this prototype.

share many positive views, which is visible in the rejection of ideas such as 'Sees this world as a place of suffering and sorrow'<sup>125</sup>.

These Q-pattern results indicate that persons of this prototype are less confident in their religious views or their sexuality compared to the first prototype, the 'Open-minded Confident Believers'. Contrary to persons from the second prototype, the 'Guilty-feeling Non-religious Individualist', they hold on to their religious beliefs and hold more positive life views. Nevertheless, they focus more on private religious practices than communal religious activities; religious communities are not so significant as for persons of the third prototype, the 'Religiously Active Doubting Believer'. To exemplify my first reading of the Q-pattern results, short interpretations of distinguishing and defining statements among persons of this prototype are provided below.

**93. Sees personal self-realization as a primary spiritual goal in life**

"You know, sometimes, you wouldn't like to share what you think, or, to people cause you don't know what, the person perception about you. So, sometimes keeping it, doing everything on your own- I think it is the best."

"If I don't know myself- I mean, it could be possible that I wouldn't be able to do anything, because people always look down on me."

**53. Believes in a divine being with whom one can have a personal relationship**

**74. Feels personally protected and guided by a spiritual being<sup>126</sup>**

"It is believed, but when you are in a very confined area, all in one, and you pray and call on him, he will visit you, we've had instances."

"Because I have faith in God, I believe he is protecting me."

"Yes, we all created individually, and so we have a personal relationship with our creator, exactly. So, I believe that we could have a relationship with the one who protect you."

"God should change me and protect me."

**99. Takes comfort in thinking that those who do not live righteously will face suffering or punishment.**

"We all know it. It is in the bible, that you have to be righteous. If you not, then you can face the suffering and you go to hell. Everybody believes that. So, I think, it should."

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<sup>125</sup> Statement 34 of the Faith Q-Sort is a least defining statement among persons of this prototype.

<sup>126</sup> Statement 74 is a most defining (+4) statement among persons of this prototype.

**77. Is profoundly touched by the suffering of others.**

“If you want to help someone and it is from your heart, it doesn't really matter the amounts or the quantity, so far the person is going to be happy. Or their heart will be at peace, when a person receives it. You can give a little to that person.”

“When I see, even people who I don't like, and I see them suffering, because of who they are, to their own faith, it is really kind of worrying.”

**59. His or her sexuality is strongly guided by a religious or spiritual outlook.<sup>127</sup>**

“I would say it is not guided. It is against it, so.”

**32. Considers all religious scriptures to be outdated or misguided.<sup>128</sup>**

“Hell no. The bible is life guidance. Okay. It guides us through life. To make our choices. Like- the bible says okay this is the way.”

In the above statements 53<sup>129</sup>, 74<sup>130</sup>, and 32<sup>131</sup>, the religiosity of the persons of this prototype comes through. They view the divine as a protective source and feel close to it. They also view religious scriptures, such as the bible, as significant in their lives. However, statements 99<sup>132</sup> and 59<sup>133</sup> show some conflicts with sexuality. There is a shared idea about living righteously and a shared view that a religious outlook does not guide their sexualities. The Q-pattern analysis is unclear whether or not persons of this prototype internalize homonegative ideas, which may be related to the statement on living righteously.

Statement 93<sup>134</sup> demonstrates a certain individualism among persons of this prototype, related to the necessity to care for themselves. Moreover, it aligns with their support of statement 77<sup>135</sup>, which often relates to experiences of suffering. These last two aspects are shared

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<sup>127</sup> Statement 54 is a distinguishing rejected statement.

<sup>128</sup> Statement 32 is a distinguishing rejected statement.

<sup>129</sup> Statement 53, ‘Believes in a divine being with whom one can have a personal relationship; is a distinguishing statement among persons of this prototype.

<sup>130</sup> Statement 74, ‘Feels personally protected and guided by a spiritual being’, is a most defining statement among persons of this prototype.

<sup>131</sup> Statement 32, Considers all religious scriptures to be outdated or misguided is a distinguishing rejected statement among persons of this prototype.

<sup>132</sup> Statement 99, ‘Takes comfort in thinking that those who do not live righteously will face suffering or punishment’, is a distinguishing statement among persons of this prototype.

<sup>133</sup> Statement 59, ‘His or her sexuality is strongly guided by a religious or spiritual outlook’, is a distinguishing rejected statement among persons of this prototype.

<sup>134</sup> Statement 93, ‘Sees personal self-realization as a primary spiritual goal in life’, is a distinguishing statement among persons of this prototype.

<sup>135</sup> Statement 77, ‘Is profoundly touched by the suffering of others’, is a distinguishing statement among persons of this prototype.

with persons of prototype two, the 'Guilty-feeling Non-religious Individualist'. However, persons of this prototype hold onto their faith and seem to have more positive views on their lives than participants of prototype two.

## 4.8 Prototype 5 'Confident Scripture-driven Believer'

### Descriptive statements

- 6\*\* Spends much time reading or talking about his or her convictions. (+4)
  - 38\*\* Feels confident of attaining eternal salvation. (+4)
  - 92\*\* Takes for granted that particular religious claims are true. (+4)
  - 51 Actively works towards making the world a better place to live. (+4)
  - 95 Believes that human progress is possible on a worldwide scale. (+4)
  - 77\*\* Is profoundly touched by the suffering of others. (-4)
  - 5\* Feels guilty for not living up to his or her ideals. (-4)
  - 61 Feels threatened by evil forces at work in the world. (-4)
  - 39 Feels uncomfortable or fearful in turning to the divine. (-4)
  - 90 Affirms the idea of reincarnation, the cycle of birth and rebirth. (-4)
  - 94\* Views symmetry, harmony, and balance as reflections of ultimate truth. (+3)
  - 33\*\* Feels spiritually moved and deeply sustained by music, art, or poetry. (-3)
  - 50\*\* Has used methods of attaining altered states of consciousness. (+2)
  - 67\* Observes with great care prescribed religious practices and laws. (+2)
  - 73\*\* Thinks that ritual or practice is more important than particular beliefs or mystical or spiritual experiences. (+2)
  - 87\*\* Views religious content as metaphoric, rather than literally true. (+2)
  - 84\* Has a vague and shifting religious outlook. (+2)
  - 42\* Has a thorough knowledge of religious scriptures or texts. (-2)
  - 62\*\* Prays chiefly for solace and personal protection. (-2)
  - 69\*\* Feels a sense of guilt and personal inadequacy. (-2)
  - 34\* Sees this world as a place of suffering and sorrow. (-2)
  - 57\* Seldom if ever doubts his or her deeply held convictions. (+1)
  - 60\* Views religion as the illusory creation of human fears and desires. (-1)
- Double asterisk (\*\*) indicates significance at  $P < .01$ , Single asterisk indicates \*  $P < .05$

### 4.8.1 Commentary style factor interpretation

This prototype is very committed to religious views and values. They "spend much time reading or talking about his or her convictions"<sup>136</sup> and "Observe with great care prescribed religious practices and laws"<sup>137</sup>. This may not lead to the feeling of having "thorough knowledge of

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<sup>136</sup> 6: +4

<sup>137</sup> 67: +2

religious scriptures or texts”<sup>138</sup>, but it does give confidence in “attaining eternal salvation”<sup>139</sup>, which is essential to this prototype. This confidence relates to the idea that they “Take for granted that particular religious claims are true”<sup>140</sup>, even though they sometimes view “religious content as metaphoric, rather than literally true”<sup>141</sup>.

A contradiction comes forward in support of “Actively works towards making the world a better place to live”<sup>142</sup> and “Believes that human progress is possible on a worldwide scale”<sup>143</sup> but not at all being “profoundly touched by the suffering of others”<sup>144</sup>. It could be that this relates to the religious views of this prototype, whereby eternal salvation is strived for and doing good for others might mean that they can join their religious community to attain eternal salvation. Another reason could be that they simply do not view “this world as a place of suffering and sorrow”<sup>145</sup>.

Whatever the reason may be, this prototype feels confident in their goals and ideals as they do not feel “guilty for not living up to his or her ideals”<sup>146</sup> and do not “Feel a sense of guilt and personal inadequacy”<sup>147</sup>. Again, this confidence is boosted in feeling comfortable and supported by the divine (shown in a rejection of “Feel uncomfortable or fearful in turning to the divine”<sup>148</sup>) and not feeling threatened by evil forces (shown in a rejection of “Feels threatened by evil forces at work in the world”)<sup>149</sup>.

In contradiction to the ‘Open-minded Confident Believer’, religion is essential in every aspect and not a priority in case of protection or times of need (rejection of “Prays chiefly for solace and personal protection”<sup>150</sup>). This seems to relate to the more diverse and plural religious outlook this prototype has (support of “Has a vague and shifting religious outlook”<sup>151</sup>). For instance, they are affirmative towards rituals and practices as they support the statement “Thinks that ritual or practice is more important than particular beliefs or mystical or spiritual experiences”<sup>152</sup> which could be related to traditional religious

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138 42: -2

139 38: +4

140 92: +4

141 87: +2

142 51: +4

143 95: +4

144 77: -4

145 34: -2

146 5: -4

147 69: -2

148 39: -4

149 61: -4

150 62: -2

151 84: +2

152 73: +2

practices. In addition, they have “used methods of attaining altered states of consciousness”<sup>153</sup>, which could relate to AIRs religious practices or alternative ways of coping with life circumstances. Noteworthy is their rejection of “Feels spiritually moved and deeply sustained by music, art, or poetry”<sup>154</sup>, which in general plays a central role in many religious institutions in Accra, for example, by being active in a choir or dancing group in a religious institution or listening to religious music on the radio.

As public religious activities are not emphasized, it might be that this prototype spends much time reading or talking about their convictions<sup>155</sup> and wants to attain eternal salvation<sup>156</sup>, but it does not mean per se that this prototype firmly belongs to a religious community. The support of diverse statements<sup>157</sup> that differ from the other more religiously active prototypes (such as the open-minded confident believer) demonstrate a broader diverse religious outlook.

#### 4.8.2 Summary and a first look at statement interpretations

The most important characteristics were spending much time reading or talking about his or her convictions<sup>158</sup>, feeling confident of attaining eternal salvation<sup>159</sup>, and taking for granted that particular religious claims are valid<sup>160</sup>. In addition to these characteristics, these persons have some religious plurality. For instance, there is an affirmative approach to rituals or religious practices, which could relate to AIRs. From the participants’ answers in the survey, one identifies as a Muslim and the other two as Christian. However, during the interview with one participant, who identifies as belonging to an Islamic community, she describes herself as a Christian. Another participant, who identifies as a Christian in the survey, describes himself as “not really committed” to any religion during the interview. This prototype also expresses religious plurality among persons of this prototype through interfaith marriages: two of them have parents with different religious backgrounds.

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<sup>153</sup> 50: +2

<sup>154</sup> 33: -3

<sup>155</sup> 6: +4

<sup>156</sup> 38: +4

<sup>157</sup> See statements 84: +2 and 73: +2

<sup>158</sup> This relates to statement 6, ‘Spends much time reading or talking about his or her convictions’, which is a distinguishing statement among persons of this prototype.

<sup>159</sup> This relates to statement 38, ‘Feels confident of attaining eternal salvation’, a distinguishing statement among persons of this prototype.

<sup>160</sup> This relates to statement 92, ‘Takes for granted that particular religious claims are true’, which is a distinguishing statement among persons of this prototype.

The religious diversity among persons of this prototype gives a first hint of the diversity among persons of this prototype. Compared to other prototypes and the persons who relate to them, there is not as much coherency among persons of this prototype. This is a consequence of the small size of this prototype (only three persons) and because of the third person, Yilma, who relates negatively to this prototype<sup>161</sup>. This means that she should hold the opposite views and values in comparison to the other two persons of this prototype and that only the two others express similar views and values.

Despite the religious diversity, persons of this prototype express much interest in religion, as they spend much time reading or talking about their convictions, feel confident about eternal salvation, and take for granted that particular religious claims are valid. This is different in comparison to persons of any other prototype. The confidence about eternal salvation is not shared among persons of any other prototype. Persons of prototype three, 'Religiously Active Doubting Believer', share taking for granted that religious claims are valid. However, persons of this prototype do not share the same level of interest in participating in religious communities as they do.

Similar to persons of prototype one, 'the Open-minded Confident Believers, there is confidence among persons of this prototype. Persons of this prototype do not feel guilty for not living up to their ideals. This is similar to persons of prototype one, yet it is more expressed concerning religious beliefs, such as feeling confident of attaining eternal salvation.

The Q-pattern analysis did not indicate anything related to sexuality or gender. There seem to be no views or notions among persons of this prototype that directly discuss sexuality or gender.

#### **6. Spends much time reading or talking about his or her convictions**

"Yeah, sometimes you have leisure time, you can use that time to be reading and then thinking about yourself than thinking about others outside. [...] Most times I read about LGBT books, sometimes I will pause a little bit with television then I will come back again, reading."

#### **38. Feels confident of attaining eternal salvation**

"I just thought it was important to believe in that. [...] It is good for everyone to attain eternal salvation."

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<sup>161</sup> See chapter 'Material', prototype five, for more information.



**92. Takes for granted that particular religious claims are true**

“Yeah, like me being a lesbian, people will be taken me for granted. People will be thinking, maybe, I don't know what I am doing. Or maybe hmm, I don't know, maybe I am not beautiful for guys for asking me out. But they don't know why I am doing that.”

**51. Actively works towards making the world a better place to live**

**95. Believes that human progress is possible on a worldwide scale<sup>162</sup>**

“If they don't do activities, we wouldn't know much about this LGBT thing”

“If you live in a place and the place is not nice, you have to work towards it”

“Progress is important to avoid poverty”

**61. Feels threatened by evil forces at work in the world<sup>163</sup>**

“But me, I have never been threatened before. Because, I know my right. I know my right. I know where to act as a lesbian and where not to act as a lesbian.”

“I have never, like, I have never been threatened by evil so. I don't why, it is like. He [father] once tells me that some, there are some men, in the same house, like the man came to him but like- every night a man that was sleeping, walks in his sleep so. There is, fights in this spiritual world and stuff so. For me, like to me, I don't like, I don't believe myself in those traditional things so.”

What stands out from these interpretations is that sexuality is an issue that is discussed with the statements, although the statements might not perhaps include that term. For instance, statements six and ninety-two are both understood in relation to sexuality. What also stands out from these statements is that the interpretation among persons of this prototype relates to different issues, for instance, with statement 61, which one person interprets with sexuality and another with AIRs beliefs.

Persons of this prototype are proactive and want to help others. This comes forward in making the world a better place to live and working towards progress. Poverty is an issue that is relevant among persons of this prototype, similar to persons of prototype three. In the interviews, struggles with poverty were more in the foreground than struggles with sexual stigma. However, different than persons of prototype three, for one person of this prototype, the struggle with poverty is a factor that

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<sup>162</sup> Both statement 51 and 95 are most defining among persons of this prototype, but not distinguishing in comparison to the other prototypes.

<sup>163</sup> Statement 61 is most defining among persons of this prototype, but not distinguishing in comparison to the other prototypes.

makes him doubt the idea of the divine, not the stigma that he experiences against his sexuality.

#### 4.9 The five prototypes: a summary of the results

<b>Prototypes</b>	<b>Religious characteristic</b>	<b>Other significant elements</b>
1. Open-minded Confident Believers	Active member of religious community, strong relationship with the divine, affirmative religious beliefs	Feels confident and has a rejection of statements on guilt and feeling adrift
2. Guilty-feeling Non-religious Individualist	Non-religious, religious individualism, complete distance from any religious community	Feelings of guilt, independent characteristic
3. Religiously Active Doubting Believer	Active member of religious community, being religious is central to whom he or she is, reliance on religious authorities and scriptures	Doubtful element in relation to change in religious understanding/commitment and religious long-held convictions
4. Deeply-connected Private Believer	Religious individualism, strong and positive relationship with the divine	Awareness that sexuality is not strongly guided by religious outlook. Share the belief that those who do not live righteously will face suffering and punishment
5. Confident Scripture-driven Believer	Religious plurality, importance of eternal salvation, positive views on religious traditions including African Indigenous Religions	Participants in this prototype want to help others

Table 4. The five prototypes with summarized results

The table above summarizes the five prototypes, their labels, and the most relevant religious characteristics and other elements that stood out in the Q-pattern analysis and the first interpretations from the interview material. These results are further explored in chapters five, six, seven, eight, and nine through an analysis of the interview material from the participants who load significantly to these prototypes. This is done per prototype and follows the order of the above table.

## 5. Relying on religion

This chapter discusses the findings among the persons of the first prototype, which is called the 'Open-minded Confident Believers'. Of the five prototypes, this is the largest. It includes six persons out of the thirty-one participants in this study who have a significant match to this profile. In the following sections, the interviews of the four persons<sup>164</sup> who had the strongest connection to this prototype<sup>165</sup> are further explored.

Each interview is introduced with personal demographic information given in the surveys. From each interview, selections have been made to discuss religiosity, experiences of sexual stigma, and strategies navigating stigmatization, i.e., key experiences. This is done per individual to give space to the participants to share their experiences. The footnotes mention the defining or distinguishing statements of this prototype related to parts of the interview.

The chapter ends with a discussion on religion, stigma and strategies, and agency related to the experiences of persons of this prototype. It aims to identify the religious character of persons of this prototype, the kind of experiences related to sexual stigma, and the negotiation of sexuality and religiosity of these persons. It also contributes to identifying homonegative religious ideologies and institutional structures that underpin sexual stigma and any ideologies or institutions that provide individual support or empowerment. Finally, the discussion includes some comparisons to the other four prototypes, which continues in the following chapters and is concluded in the thesis's final discussion.

### 5.1 Key experiences shared by Adofo

*Adofo is a twenty-year-old man who does not define his sexuality. According to him, he is brought up in a not very religious family but views himself as more religious than during his upbringing. He finds himself belonging to a Christian church and visits the church at least once a week.*

Adofo is brought up in a family that is not very religious, according to him. In his upbringing, Adofo experienced freedom and understanding from his parents regarding his sexuality and choices of religion and morality. He has never suppressed his gender and sexuality. Since he

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<sup>164</sup> This chapter includes a fourth person, instead of three, due to one participant holding different interpretations of statements because of the recent passing of her mother.

<sup>165</sup> See for technical explanation section 3.4 The Faith Q-Sort in the methodological chapter.

was a child, Adofo has been feminine, and his parents have always stood by him. He feels that they support him and try to understand him.

They [his parents] understood me, they took me as their own. They just treated me, my parents treated me every time like they always do. The feeling I have and everything, they just treat me just so.

His time in high school (at a boarding school) was also important to him, as he experienced it was a time of freedom to experiment with romantic relationships. As he describes, it was a time when he had the freedom to do whatever he wanted sexually. Even though there was a code of conduct that forbids romantic relationships among boys, Adofo says that he felt understood by the school staff.

Actually, I had a lot of freedom, yeah, I had a lot of freedom. Because, at my school, I was alone. No parents, alone, you are alone in school.

Even if, um, you are caught having sex with someone, there is code of conduct that talks about it and even you still have your rights to talk and feel your emotions and I did remember I had a gay issue in school. I got caught, and they took me to the director and they asked me why I did it. And I said "Oh, that is how I am." So, he then asked me a lot of questions, he did not know much about gay and all that. And I said to him, and he was cool. I wasn't punished, I wasn't done anything.

When Adofo receives comments on his feminine character, he responds with the idea that everyone needs to understand and communicate with the divine, who is there to help. Adofo understands the divine as the guide in his life, as someone who can help him in his daily life, and as someone who answers prayers. If one does not receive an answer when praying about an assumed problem in life, it is probably nothing to worry about, or one might receive an answer later.

You just have to understand, talk to God, if he will help you out, because I have been basically talking to God about it [his sexuality]. And I have not had any answer, so probably in the future I will get one. That is what I believe in.

This religious perspective aligns with Adofo's argument that he was born like this; the divine made him the way he is. If homosexuality were not allowed, the divine would have done it differently. Adofo sees his sexuality as a part of his religious beliefs in the divine and his spirituality.

So, as me, I was born with girly styles, girly thoughts, no one talked about anybody in the community. So, the girly lifestyle, it came from the womb. I just, got it. Even if you see my childhoods pictures, you

will see that I was born like acting like a girl, talking like a girl, I was just like that. So, it came from childhood.

Concerning his religious beliefs, Adofo thinks it is essential to communicate with the divine through prayers and listening to music. His communication with the divine reinforces his religious beliefs and his belief that the divine supports him and his sexual orientation. According to Adofo, the divine loves everyone and understands everyone. Therefore, when he feels the need to talk to the divine, for instance, after having sex with another guy, he feels like the divine is understanding and answering his prayers.

God loves everyone. God understands everyone. Because I remember quite a number of times I had sex with males, but I have been praying and God is answering my prayers. And he understands, I talk to him.

### 5.1.1 Stigmatizing experiences

Adofo's religious beliefs have been challenged throughout the years. As he recalls, he has gone through some religious change. This change was mainly around Adofo's attitude in dealing with discrimination and stigma around his sexuality and religious beliefs. It was pushed onto him by experiences of discrimination. During the interview, Adofo is very open about his sexuality and says that most of his friends and family are aware of it. However, even if Adofo were not open about his sexuality, he is confronted with stigma in public spaces for being a feminine young man. Being a feminine young man is automatically related to being a homosexual. This has resulted in different challenges in his life, which are mainly in the religious community that he is part of at the time of the interview.

An example of a challenge is the unsupportive church that Adofo visits. At the time of the interview, he is in a choir, but he cannot speak openly about his sexuality because if someone finds out, he is sure that he will be excluded from the choir.

Yeah, I feel they [religious leaders] should understand us, because, I am part of the choir, that's, you hear, for instance, let me give you a scenario, if my pastor knows that I am gay, he won't let me join the choir. That is total discrimination.

Meanwhile, Adofo's pastor knows about his sexuality. Adofo told him openly about his sexuality. His pastor responded that they should pray to the divine and ask if his sexuality could be adjusted or changed.

Adofo: The pastor knows. I told him about it.  
Marlijn: He does know?

Adofo: Yeah, he said, he will pray to God about it to see if it can be adjusted and changed.

Christian youth or pastors, they don't understand us normally, they tend to hate us because the bible preaches against us.

Adofo does not seem to be offended or threatened by this. On the contrary, he talks about these instances calmly and explains that he does not mind these situations. He does not argue with his pastor but tells me that he believes Christianity is based on faith: "He [the pastor] too, does not know. You just have to comprehend and pray to the divine, he is author and finisher of our faith". According to Adofo, the divine decides how things will be, and therefore, it is not up to Adofo to change his homosexuality or feminine character.

Despite not challenging his pastor or leaving his church, Adofo speaks of times that he feels uncomfortable in the church because of discrimination. These uncomfortable feelings are primarily to other church members or church leaders. Adofo speaks of an angry, grieving, and discriminating atmosphere in the church, even though the church is where Adofo feels most in touch with the divine and can feel the presence of the divine.

Normally I feel safe with my friends. Because in the church itself, there is total discrimination there. There is a lot of anger and we grieve and all of that.

Sometimes, most particularly, my experience is that, when I do something bad and I go to church, it is when it calms my heart. Like you know, you are not the only person who has done this, look at the [people], if they don't have problems, they won't come to God.

This example shows that navigating stigma is challenging as a place can bring up different feelings. On the one hand, Adofo feels uncomfortable; on the other hand, it is a place for him to connect with the divine and feel at peace. He speaks of the church as a calming place. He describes the church as a place that people visit because they have problems too; it makes him feel not alone when he has problems. However, due to religious leaders preaching stigmatizing discourses on homosexuality, Adofo feels less comfortable and sometimes even guilty. His experiences show how important places of faith are and the necessity for inclusive spaces of faith.

Another challenging period in his life was during his years in high school, which Adofo returns to in the middle of the interview. He describes this as a period that could be seen as religious change. Adofo describes that he went through discrimination and humiliation during secondary education because he was a feminine young boy who walked and talked "too girly".

I had a phase where I thought God saw me as a wicked person. Because he kept bringing me such [misery], my life has been- to humiliate me, discrimination and all that you face in school. [Because] being me girly, talking as a girly person. Walking as a girly person. It is social discrimination, humiliating girly, talking girly and all that, your actions and all that. It is all about disgrace.

I was feeling a lot of trials, temptations, struggles. I mean, I am always feeling rejecting, neglected and I mean, it was a bad feeling. I said why, I though God is good. I thought God is so powerful. I thought God can do everything. So why am I facing such, like humiliating and people will be laughing at me. And discriminating me, how I behave, how I talk. How I walk. Everything was social discrimination. So, I was feeling very bad and not comfortable.

During this period, Adofo could not talk to people or open up. He believed in this time that the divine saw him as a "wicked person" and neglected and rejected him. This was because he experienced daily discrimination and humiliation, and he did not understand why the divine would take him through these challenges.

At high school, Adofo was accused of being together with other boys. He had to see the head of the school, and his parents were notified about these events. On his father's advice, Adofo tried herbal treatments and had to have his blood and urine tested to demonstrate that he was healthy and HIV negative.

Adofo: Yeah, I once used herbal medicines.

Marlijn: Okay.

Adofo: Yeah.

Marlijn: Was that part of like an advice of someone? Or?

Adofo: Yeah, the advice of my daddy. He was feeling very passionate about it, they [his parents] thought it [Adofo's sexuality] was a joke but they brought a lady to the room to seduce me and all that but nothing happened and so the issue was very serious. So, they had to, get recommendations, they thought I was a lie. But that was a lie, so they had to try all sorts of experiments in order to test my integrity.

[...]

Adofo: They put me to the doctor, to check my urine and my blood. They told there was nothing wrong with me, I am okay. I am not having HIV, my urine is good. Everything is okay

Adofo went through all of it, and the results came back negative. His parents treated him as they always did, recalls Adofo. They mainly were disappointed that Adofo kept his sexuality a secret for so long.

Simultaneously, in church, pastors responded with different methods to help Adofo get rid of his homosexual feelings and feminine character. They would tell him that he had something wrong in him, an evil spirit.

Adofo would go along with their remedies, for instance, praying or fasting and sleeping in the church while washing with a mixture of leaves. However, this did not help Adofo as he felt that his homosexual desires still "rather moved high". Instead of any positive influence, these remedies increased Adofo's feelings of rejection by the divine, and he struggled with his religious beliefs.

Adofo: Yeah. I told one pastor, he told me that I was a demon, I said the demon can be casted out, so you should cast it out for me.

Marlijn: And what happened?

Adofo: I slept in the church for a few days. I was washed by some leaves and all that. But still the feelings rather moved high.

On the one hand, Adofo does not believe that being homosexual is caused by the possession of a demon. However, on the other hand, Adofo does believe in demons or evil spirits, and sometimes during the interview, clarifies sexual experiences as being possessed by a spirit. At times this makes him feel guilty until he communicates with the divine, making him understand again that this is the way he is.

In a way, you feel like you have been possessed. Especially what happened to me last night. I was just there, I just came [to be with a friend] and you will be hearing a voice 'go, go' and it will be pushing you. [...] You feel bad. You feel like you have done the worst thing in the world but after some time you will be calmer.

Both of Adofo's grandparents practice African Indigenous Religions, which has influenced Adofo's views on possession and evil spirits. He does not deny they do exist, but he is not clear in which sense they do. To his belief, some spirits sometimes push him to do certain things at night, whether that is following a spirit to somewhere outside of the house where he lives or feeling desires for people he sleeps with. As he explains, he says that sometimes he feels possessed when he sleeps with a friend. Sometimes this makes him feel uncomfortable afterward. However, other times, he says that he feels good because he sees the person in his dream and feels affection for the person he is with. At this point in the interview, Adofo says that after having sex, he feels good and relieved of stress, but when he visits the church and hears the preaching against homosexuality, he sometimes feels guilty.

Sometimes when you are in it, you feel real good. If you mean it. Because sometimes you will be seeing the person in your dreams, the affections come there, so when you approach the person then it is like, it is connected. And you have sex with him, then you feel good, like you feel relieved of stress, of life, and you feel okay. But any time you



go to church, based on preaching and all that, you feel guilty sometimes, but, after some time you will be calmer.

It is clear from Adofo's story that his belief in spirits can sometimes explain his feelings, for instance, when he is scared or when he wets the bed during his sleep. However, in general, the negative feelings he describes after being intimate come from dominant views on homosexuality shared in his church. He explains that many people believe that 'LGBT' is all about sex and that it is an animalistic act; "they are portrayed as if they are animals". Such negative discourses impact Adofo in his feelings about his sexuality.

### 5.1.2 Strategies and agency

One of the most critical forms of support that has influenced Adofo during his life is the support of his parents. Adofo's parents are supportive and understanding, making Adofo confident in his views and goals. He is part of the choir in his church and had a high leading position on the student board at his high school.

What has made me for who I am today, is my parents. My parents are my major, major people that they stood by me. They stood by me in all my ways. Even in the point of death, even in the point of trials. Even in the point of temptations. I contact them and they are open minded, they are cool.

In addition to the support of his parents, Adofo does not feel questioned or punished by the divine but instead believes he follows the life the divine has given him, including his homosexual desires and his feminine personality. He holds affirmative religious views towards his sexuality which empowers him. This does not mean that Adofo has not experienced challenges related to his gendered sexuality or that he never questions his religion or sexuality himself, but he believes that the divine will guide him, including his desires and feelings.

God, he is the author and finisher of our faith. So, if he is all knowing or forgiving, he works miracles then I believe he should work in miracles. So, it can change the world.

His religious beliefs and support from his family give Adofo a feeling of empowerment, which he thinks is critical for any challenging situation. Adofo has experienced discrimination, but with the support from his family and religious beliefs, he feels he can be himself, making him more confident. This gives him a feeling of coping during challenging situations and makes him feel strengthened in who he is.

Self-empowerment is one little key, if you know you find yourself in any of these situations. Because I faced a lot of disgrace, a lot of silence, but these are tough situations that I overcame shyness. So now I don't feel shy of anyone, I can walk freely, I can base on experiences I was having problems here and there. And overcoming them, I feel strengthened each day by day, and I am cool to go.

To fill in the dimension of an affirmative church community, Adofo meets up with friends from a queer community who are religious and prays with them. This is reflected in his support of the statement 'is committed to following a spiritual path that is in harmony with the environment'<sup>166</sup>. Praying with his friends makes him feel free; feeling safe with them and worshipping the divine strengthens his religious beliefs further.

I have a spiritual path, I worship with them, because I feel safe within them. My faith moves with them, my spirit, my soul, my body, everything moves with them. So, I am free, I am cool.

I feel safe with my friends praying, because they understand. We are in the same home doing the same problems, we share the same ideas. The same values, customs, culture. And I think, I am okay with them. They grew up with me. They know what I am. They understand me more better than any [other person].

To counter homonegative discourses that influence Adofo's feelings about intimacy, he emphasizes his emotions, the attraction and affection towards a person, and his feelings. He humanizes the animalistic discourse that he is confronted with. Instead of stories of being possessed, Adofo emphasizes feelings of being in love.

After high school, Adofo's views changed. According to himself, being baptized at the end of his high school gave him a stronger connection to the divine. As a result, he became more aware of the divine's presence and support.

Yeah, I have a stronger connection because, anything that is going to happen to me personally, at first when I wasn't into Christ, if something is going to happen to me, I don't feel it. But now [since 2016], if something has been happening to me, I feel it strongly.  
[...]

Marlijn: So, what changed the at 2016?

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<sup>166</sup> This relates to statement 86, 'Is committed to following a spiritual path that is in harmony with the environment', which is sorted most defining (+4) by Adofo.

Adofu: When I realized myself, I took a critical look at myself, I realized hey, I was born into this world to make a change. So, I just thought about places with normal [heteronormative] kind of humans. But [...] we are all bringing anything to it. So, I will just believe in myself and be with my faith.

At the time of his baptism, Adofu describes taking a critical look at himself and realizing that he is the way he is to make a change in the world, as anyone is brought on earth for a reason. That realization gave Adofu the confidence to believe in himself and stick with his religious beliefs. After this challenging period, Adofu decided to 'dedicate his life to serve the divine'<sup>167</sup>.

Another experience in the church further supported this individual realization. At the time of being baptized, Adofu experienced nightmares at night and would wet his bed. Pastors were trying to help him by praying for him, but this did not help. However, when Adofu started praying regularly, it did change, and so Adofu felt comfort and safety with the divine, as he immediately answered Adofu's prayers. In the case of Adofu, it is clear that his religious beliefs, affirmative views, and the support from his parents and the queer community have reinforced his confidence and possibilities to stand up for himself. This is exemplified several times with the situations in church and at high school, where Adofu speaks back at stigmatizing ideas on homosexuality and where homonegative discourses decrease as he makes people realize homosexuality is as natural as any other sexuality. It is also reflected in Adofu's future dreams, which visualize change and progress for himself and others.

Adofu: Where would I see myself in ten years? Being the person I want to be, being accepted. I have vision of being a lawyer, a public speaker, one that advocates and then a dancer. So, where I will see myself in the future is working towards my dreams, after having a degree, I would like to further my education for masters, doing politics and international law. Um, in ( ), or Manchester University. I shall be teaching there, Ghanaian culture, that is my dream of being my best and doing public speaking. By doing international things. Actively speaking.

Marlijn: Yeah. And what would be you think the biggest obstacles?

Adofu: The biggest obstacles, is my kind of behavior. But-

Marlijn: Your behavior?

Adofu: Yeah-

Marlijn: Why?

Adofu: How I behave, like talk like a girl, walk like a girl-

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<sup>167</sup> This relates to statement 36, 'Has dedicated his or her life to serving the divine', which is sorted defining (+3) by Adofu.

Marlijn: Ah, okay, okay.

Adofo: You will find it very, very difficult to understand me sometimes. But there will be discrimination and all that. But, we are here for life. You make, situations and things will change. Maybe in ten years, this will be a normal thing. They will tend to understand it but whether it will be a chance for me. (()) I will be looking forward to that. All the world has for us.

## 5.2 Key experiences shared by Kessi

*Kessi is a twenty-three-year-old woman who identifies as a lesbian. She recently lost her mother and is actively grieving. She says she was brought up in a very religious family and views herself currently as less religious than her family members. She does not have the feeling she belongs to any religious community. Despite that, she does visit religious gatherings on special occasions and practices religion privately more than once a week.*

Kessi recently lost her mother at the time of the interview, and this loss might have taken Kessi back from the interview. Kessi shared that she wanted to change her sexuality and was convinced that eventually, she would change to a heterosexual woman. This was in line with some of her wishes for her future, to be married to a man and become a mother. However, it stayed unclear during the interview if that was Kessi's wish or expectations of her family that she wants to live up to, especially now that she lost her mother.

Kessi's family is, according to Kessi, very religious. Since her mother passed away, Kessi has lived with her grandmother and her siblings, as her father passed away while she was a young child. Both of her parents were Christians, and she describes her father as a "true Christian". Her grandmother is Christian too, and together with her and her siblings, Kessi visits the church at least twice a week. Her family is part of a Charismatic Christian church in Accra.

### 5.2.1 Stigmatizing experiences

Early in the interview, Kessi describes that she is very close with her grandmother, partly because of the grieving process and the support they give each other after the passing of Kessi's mother. However, she does not share her sexuality with her grandmother because she knows her grandmother holds homonegative beliefs. Kessi conceals her sexuality, as it remains a secret for her church members and most of her siblings. She did open up to one of her brothers, though, as she says that she knew he would be okay with it because he understands that this is what she wants.

Marlijn: Are you close with your grandmother?

Kessi: Yes.

Marlijn: Does she know that you're a lesbian?

Kessi: No.

Marlijn: Would you like to tell her?

Kessi: [Sigh] She would not like it.

[...]

Kessi: Yeah, but not too close. But, I am having another step brother and sisters. So, I am close with my step brother. But he is in Belgium.

Marlijn: He is in Belgium?

Kessi: Yeah. He is aware of my sexuality.

Marlijn: And he is okay with it?

Kessi: Yes. Because he feels that is what I want.

At the same time, Kessi does not seem to be sure during the interview if her homosexual desires are what she wants or are part of who she is. She is focused on working towards 'making the world a better place to live'<sup>168</sup> concerning her own life. Currently, she is a full-time student and, in the future, she wants to get a job to be able to live "a decent life". She expresses that you cannot feel any better if you are not doing anything. This relates to her mourning process, which she actively goes through with specific practices and symbols (such as wearing black clothes for an entire year). Even though Kessi is quite clear that she should not be a lesbian and needs to change, her doubts about her sexuality come from the stigma in her neighborhood and her religious community.

Kessi: A spiritual path. 'Is committed to following a spiritual path that is in harmony with the environment. I know how to put it but, you following the part, you see in an environment. See. There are parts, like, there are parts that the environment, that people in the environment don't like. You see.

Marlijn: Are you talking about your sexuality?

Kessi: Yeah.

Marlijn: So, environment as in like, the Ghanaian culture?

Kessi: Yeah. As in Ghana here, they don't like it. Yeah, so. It isn't something that you can feel free to do. Yes.

Marlijn: Okay, and would you like to be able to share it in the church?

Kessi: [Laughs] No.

Marlijn: Why not?

Kessi: Because it is not accepted.

Marlijn: And eh, how do you think they would respond?

Kessi: It would be bad.

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<sup>168</sup> This relates to statement 51, 'Actively works towards making the world a better place to live', which is a most defining statement among persons of this prototype.

Members of the church are not aware of her sexuality, even though Kessi says that she knows some lesbians in her church. She is not friends with them, but she knows a few of them through her friends. Despite that, she would not like to share her sexuality in her church community, as she says her community's response would be negative.

Regarding her views on her sexuality, Kessi is quite clear that her desires are not how they should be. Even though she says, she started liking girls when she was a teenager during secondary education (high school). This comes up for discussion when Kessi discusses how the bible is important to her. She believes that 'religious texts and teachings are clear and true'<sup>169</sup>, and there are some parts of the bible that are most important or inspiring to her. For instance, Matthew 7:7, 'Ask and it shall be given, seek and you shall find. Look, and the door shall open to you'. According to her, the divine will answer when you ask something with faith. This relates to her asking for help on daily matters, her views on her sexuality, and her wishes to change her feelings and desires.

Kessi: I am trying to- I am just- I am trying to change. Yeah. I can't just, change just like that. It's with time. I will feel it by sure, yeah.

Marlijn: So, what do you do? What do you do in order to change? Are there things that you do?

Kessi: As in change my sexuality?

Marlijn: Yeah.

Kessi: Like, you know by cutting off some people out of your life. You have friends who are like that. And because, I am trying to change it. Yes. So, there are some people that, I just, cut them off. I just tell them, I want- I have friends who have been changed. Yes.

Marlijn: Okay. And what about if they [religious leaders] are they saying anything or preaching anything about homosexuality?

Kessi: That is when I feel uncomfortable.

Marlijn: That is when you feel uncomfortable?

Kessi: Yeah.

Marlijn: So what kind of things would they say?

Kessi: They say it is, it's bad. Yeah. I feel uncomfortable, I feel bad.

Marlijn: And then, what do you do?

Kessi: I just, I just feel like changing. And that is what I am in now.

Marlijn: And do you think that will happen at some point?

Kessi: What?

Marlijn: Do you think-

Kessi: That I will change? Yeah.

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<sup>169</sup> This relates to statement 15, 'Considers the meaning of religious texts and teachings to be clear and true', which is a distinguishing statement among persons of this prototype.

During the interview, Kessi says that she is trying to change her desires but that it will take time. She believes that the divine does not want homosexuality and it is “not accepted”. For her, this religious belief is present in the bible. It makes her feel bad, and therefore, she wants to change. Kessi is supported in these wishes by some of her friends, who are primarily heterosexual. Another way of getting support to change comes from her faith; to pray to the divine for strength so she can change. Having strong faith is therefore very important to her, and it is also crucial for her to demonstrate; to show her connection to the divine to others in her religious community.

Kessi: As in what do I pray about? I just pray to God to give me that strength. So, I can just, change. Yeah.

Regarding views on homosexuality as being possessed, Kessi does not recall hearing those stories in her church. She does not believe in evil spirits or has had any experience. Sometimes, the preacher will call upon someone and talk about spirits in her church, but that is the only way Kessi hears about spirits. The decision to change is Kessi’s own decision. She feels it is the right thing to do, as “the bible is against homosexuality”. Some of her friends inspire her, as they argue that they have changed their homosexual desires. They agree with her and support her wishes with their bible interpretations.

Her dreams for the future also guide Kessi’s drive to change, which is supported by the Christian idea of having a ‘nuclear’ family. In ten years from the time of the interview, she wishes to be a married woman and become a mother.

Marlijn: Um, so and what are the things that you think that are the biggest obstacles?

Kessi: Being a lesbian.

Marlijn: Why do you think that?

Kessi: Because, you know, in Ghana here it is not accepted. And it- And if it is not accepted in your- you are just dreaming this- you are just being with your fellow woman and like- you can’t just be like that. That means, you are not making anything. Yes. Because you have to get married, and also get kids. Who will be there to replace you when you are gone one day.

Marlijn: Is this eh- what your family wants for you?

Kessi: That’s what I want.

[...]

Marlijn: What if it would be possible to get married with a woman?

Kessi: It is not possible. Here in Ghana, it is not possible. Yeah.

Marlijn: But would you like to if it was possible?

Kessi: No.

Marlijn: Why, why not?

Kessi: Because it is not right. Yeah.

Kessi says that the biggest obstacle is her sexuality because it is impossible in Ghana. When asked if she wants to be married to a woman, if possible, she says she would not want that because it is incorrect. In addition to that, she says that she has to get married and become a mother to have children that can replace her when she is gone one day. To achieve her future goals, she believes praying will help her get rid of her feelings for women. Kessi has internalized homonegative religious discourses. This is strengthened by friends who agree with these views and support Kessi in her journey of change.

### 5.2.2 Strategies and agency

Kessi describes several forms of coping in her life, mainly concerning the loss of her mother and her grief. Her faith and her family are most important to her.

Kessi: [Laughs] They [grandmother and siblings] are important to me because they have been taking care of me. My dad passed away when I was little, so you see it was not really, my mom can't do everything. You see, yeah. So, they were there for me, yeah.

Besides her faith and family, Kessi says that art plays a central role in her life. For example, at the time of the interview, Kessi wore completely black clothes, which she said, she would do for at least a full year. Clothing and fabrics are important to her, as she describes that every material and design has its meaning. For instance, wearing black expresses her sadness. She also, at that time, listened to country music, which was her mother's favorite music, and she wished to like it as much as her mother did.

Marlijn: Hmhm. Are there any other ways that you do it, like music, art and poetry?

Kessi: Yeah. Arts as well.

Marlijn: In what way?

Kessi: You see, as in, in art, you see. I do textiles, that this is kind of material and stuff. And you wear that, that every material has its meaning, and every design in it has its meaning. Yes, so, like, my mom passed away like this. I am in black. Meaning, I am sad.

Her church is essential, too, with grieving the loss of her mother. It plays a role in finding support with her family and from the divine. Moreover, it offers a type of structure and stability for Kessi, as she visits the church every week several times and prays at the beginning and the end of



every day. She mainly prays for protection and has prayed more for support when her mother was sick.

Kessi views a personal relationship with the divine as necessary, and she feels that she can talk to Him at any time through her prayers. Especially when she needs help, she focuses on asking for help in her prayers. Visiting the church is essential for her faith, as Kessi believes it shows her determination. This determination includes dressing up for the church and planning her church visits.

Kessi: Yeah, because you are adding that to your plans- getting up- adding it to your plans, getting up in the morning. Dressing up, and going to church. (( )) to spend money, so you even get dressed to church. That one- you having that mindset that, I am going on shoppings, just for buying church dresses. Shows how-

Marlijn: So how do you do this in your daily life?

Kessi: I- I go to church. Yeah.

Marlijn: But how do you show that you are committed?

Kessi: Oh, by- like me as in, putting everything aside. And going to church, shows how determined I am.

Kessi does not view her desire to change her sexuality as a struggle. At the time of the interview, the loss of her mother was the most challenging struggle she had experienced, as she describes how she had to help her mother when she was very sick and unable to walk. Without having time to say goodbye, her mother passed away. To cope with the loss of her mother, Kessi is often around her family; her siblings and grandmother. Despite this challenging time for Kessi, she strongly disagrees with the idea that 'the world is a place of suffering and sorrow'<sup>170</sup>.

This relates to her understanding of her faith; if you suffer, you are not living the righteous way of life; you are not following the divine's will. This is a motivation for her to believe she should change; because her experiences of discrimination and stigmatization are her fault by having desires for women in this perspective. It is an internalization of homonegative beliefs and heteronormativity. However, she believes she is doing okay despite not being very lucky. The thought that the divine is there for her is enough for Kessi to stay motivated.

### 5.3 Key experiences shared by Gyasi

*Gyasi is a twenty-five-year-old Catholic man who identifies as bisexual. He views his family as very religious, as is he. He visits the Catholic church*

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<sup>170</sup> This relates to statement 34, 'Sees this world as a place of suffering and sorrow', which is sorted least defining among persons of this prototype.

*more than once a week and practices religion privately every day. In addition to belonging to his religious community, he also feels that he belongs to another smaller queer group<sup>171</sup> that discusses societal issues and faith.*

Gyasi describes himself as a very religious Catholic. He lives with his parents and siblings. Gyasi says that he loves to blend his religiosity and religious values into his daily life at the start of the interview. This is exemplified with the notion of working towards making the world a better place to live<sup>172</sup>, which is a shared view among persons of this prototype.

Yes. Me, personally, I am very hardworking. I am doing my service and apart from my service, I am learning how to sew. To generate more income to me. And also, I have attached my religious life to it, by praying to God, and doing some of the things the bible teaches us to do. Like, you should give small- you have more blessing, there is more blessing in giving than receiving. So, I blend the two [religious values and daily life], and all the social life into card fifty-one.

Gyasi describes himself as a very hardworking person. At the time of the interview, he is working as a nurse in a hospital while finishing his studies in healthcare. His goal is to work in clinical psychology. Gyasi explains that he attaches his hardworking attitude to his religious life by praying to the divine and following the bible's teachings. He motivates this with the idea that "there is more blessing in giving than receiving".

Gyasi says that he views the divine as the supreme, which he should worship. The divine is everywhere and anything. This also means for Gyasi that nobody knows what the divine thinks or how he judges. He sees the divine as the only authority to be able to judge on matters such as sexuality and living righteously. Gyasi regularly asks the divine for forgiveness during his prayers and to "touch the heart of those people he might have offended". Praying is essential to him, as he feels it provides him with protection from the divine.

When I am praying- first of all, I start with acknowledging the God I worship that is the- the supreme. He is everywhere, he's anything, I give him that knowledge and for him being there as a father, as a mother, as sister as a brother.

Having faith and being part of the religious community is important to Gyasi. He does not view religion as more needed in times of crisis, but as something that is part of everyday life; "day in, day out". This relates to

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<sup>171</sup> This is anonymized to avoid identification.

<sup>172</sup> This relates to statement 51, 'Actively works towards making the world a better place to live', which is sorted most defining among persons of this prototype.

his private practices, such as praying. Faith, according to him, is never-ending. It should always be there. It gives him a sense of purpose in life. Gyasi is very committed to his religious community. He believes that if he changed from one religious community to another, he might lose his faith, and people would not take him seriously.

His commitment is reflected in his participation in his religious community. He is part of a choir, has a leading role in an activity group, leads worships, and sometimes organizes health seminars in the church. In addition, he visits his church at least twice a week, especially on Sunday, except if he cannot make it because of his work.

In addition to church activities, Gyasi donates money to organizations that work with mentally disabled people. He emphasizes that it is important to him to contribute to others in his life and, if possible, to help and support others in need. While Gyasi conceals his sexuality publicly, he often participates in activities in the queer community in Accra. There too, Gyasi offers his knowledge as a health worker if there is a need for health services or health-related activities. Gyasi describes these contributions as blending his religious values to his daily life; giving to others.

Even though Gyasi is active in his religious community and describes faith as one of the most critical aspects of his life, he sometimes struggles with religious beliefs regarding his sexuality. He has been through several stigmatizing experiences in his life and conceals his sexuality from his parents because he is afraid that they hold homonegative views. He believes that homosexuality is viewed as “the biggest sin of all” in Christianity. In the survey, he self-identified as bi-sexual, but Gyasi says he never had any feelings for women during the interview. Despite this, he has a girlfriend. Gyasi is confident in his faith and is trying to negotiate his sexuality and future according to religious views and values from his community.

### 5.3.1 Stigmatizing experiences

Gyasi experienced several significant stigmatizing experiences in his life. In addition to these experiences, Gyasi says that he struggles to trust people and experiences anxiety at night; he is afraid that people might come to look for him and hurt him. On an individual level, Gyasi emphasizes forgiveness to his faith, yet at the same time, he says that he finds it challenging to think about his sexuality with his faith.

At some point in his life, Gyasi hopes to be able to talk to his parents about his sexuality, but for now, he does not think they would respond well. He describes his family as very religious and says that in Christianity, “homosexuality is something which is the biggest sin of all”. Gyasi refers to the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, which is often referred

to in homonegative religious discourses. He says he struggles with these beliefs and that it makes him question his sexuality.

Gyasi: Sometimes like, as my friends who say, if you think you cannot be a gay just stop with it. Because, it's been-

Marlijn: Just stop with what?

Gyasi: I know, I can't be a gay anymore. I should just stop what I am doing, because- it is been a long time I entered a relationship or like- this gay relationship or gay something. It was when I started go through the teachings with the bible bombarding me around this. It has made my thought to be like- I will say, I am not confused but when it has come to my sexuality, like- because of religious, I am finding it a little bit difficult.

Even though Gyasi struggles with these beliefs, he believes that he should love himself for who he is. He does not have any feelings for women and says he cannot see himself not being gay. Gyasi tries to live his life according to the religious values of his community, which are firmly against homosexuality and promotes heterosexism. Gyasi has come to accept that he cannot change his sexuality. At the same time, he says that asking for forgiveness from the divine is important to him.

Gyasi: I don't see myself, not being gay.

Marlijn: And eh, and how do you think you can combine it with your religious- with your religious community for example?

Gyasi: Hm. That's why the bible, that's why God says "You should always ask for forgiveness of sins". And as willingly and whole utterly- that's what's have been comforting me. Day in, day out. That's why I don't joke with my prayers. Especially. Forgiveness, asking God for forgiveness of sins.

During high school, Gyasi was exposed by other students for being a homosexual. He describes this experience in relation to his faith and asking for forgiveness. Rumors spread around school that he was a homosexual, and they were also published on social media. Gyasi found out that one of his close friends was responsible. For Gyasi, this became a problem, as he was called to come into the office of the head of the school. Gyasi decided to leave the boarding school and stay nearby at his family's house to "hide". The school never called his parents, and the situation did not escalate. Gyasi returned to school at some point and passed his exams, after which he went to college. Gyasi describes that he questions the divine in these moments.

I ask God questions. God, why me? Look at the things they are doing in your church. Things I have been doing. Why me? I almost go according to what the bible says. Why me? Why have you forsaken me? Why have you abandoned me?

At those moments, he describes that he feels abandoned by the divine. Though he describes this feeling first concerning this stigmatizing experience, he then follows up with having the same feelings when he fails exams. This shows that experiences of stigma are not seen as that significant to his faith as he does not describe it as a more important experience compared to others. The stigmatizing experiences are normalized.

Similarly, Gyasi describes anxiety at night, when he fears that people or evil spirits might hurt him when he is sleeping. He also describes that trust is his most significant obstacle for his future as he got hurt by his friend who spread rumors about him.

Gyasi: The biggest obstacle? Ah. It is trust.

Marlijn: Trust?

Gyasi: I easily trust in people. And it has me taught me lessons, like I've really had experiences and lessons not to trust in people. Because if, I don't trust in someone, I am a type, if I have no trust in you, that means, I can't even call you, you can't even come close to me. So, trust has been my problem. [...] If you do something which really touched me, and even though I have forgiven you, it is very difficult for me to even come close to you. [...] And I think that one has also, it has really made me put back in one way or the other.

Gyasi's anxiety and trust issues are not discussed together with stigmatizing experiences. Gyasi does not emphasize or describe any stigmatizing experiences against his sexuality. However, some of his feelings and struggles, for example, his anxiety, are related to the stigma he experienced, either in the past in high school or because of stigmatizing beliefs in his religious community or family, who are so important to him.

### 5.3.2 Strategies and agency

Gyasi has different strategies to manage stigma in relation to his faith and religious community and in general. Gyasi expresses that his family and church are critical to him throughout the interview. He describes them as the most significant support in his life. In addition to support from his family, Gyasi also mentions how he has grown from being active in the queer community. Apart from physical forms of support, Gyasi has empowering personal views, such as emphasizing self-love and forms of self-empowerment. This also concerns his faith, as he views the divine

as a protector and believes in forgiveness. Gyasi also practices queer readings of religious scriptures, as he focuses on affirmative interpretations of the bible and has alternative interpretations of homonegative religious discourses.

One of the most significant affirmative religious values that Gyasi holds is the idea that life should be based on love: 'love thy neighbor, as thy love yourself'. This motivates Gyasi to be supportive of others and stay positive in life. He does not believe in the idea that homosexuality is caused by demonic possession and disregards the interpretation of Sodom and Gomorrah as being against homosexuality. Ultimately, he argues that faith is personal; it is between "you and your kin"; therefore, homonegative religious discourses spread by religious authorities do not matter.

In response to homonegative discourse in his religious community, Gyasi argues he takes the bible out of it and motivates his life and understanding of religion based on love. Anything you do should be based on love, and if so, it cannot be wrong: "Where there is peace, there is love. Where there is love, there is peace."

Gyasi has educated himself about teachings in the bible and counter interpretations against dominant religious views on homosexuality. For instance, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, which Gyasi interprets as a story where everyone is committing sins; people who commit adultery, who smoke (weed). Gyasi believes that the bible mainly focuses on same-sex relationships, but he focuses on other parts that relate to love.

In addition to these ways of managing stigma in his religious community, Gyasi emphasizes affirmative practices. For example, he experiences music, gospel music, as someone who is praying for you. Gyasi describes that the music "enlightens him and brings out the spirit". Therefore, whenever it is impossible to visit the church, he listens to the music and feels he is connecting to the divine. This also makes it possible to avoid the church when he feels uncomfortable and be in his room, where he feels comfortable and gets motivated.

That's how I see it, when I am listening to gospel tracks. You telling someone to pray for you but you don't have that particular time, you don't have the time to go to church, now you are telling someone that if you go to church, pray for me. And the poetry - yes, I have this, poetry that I have been listening through my phone. By one doctor who is also an evangelist. I put it this way, Christian poetry and stuff. Yeah, it motivates me, it moves me a lot.

A significant form of support for Gyasi is the queer community. He explains that he has grown with knowledge from activities in the queer community. Social media is important in this, as there are different platforms where Gyasi stays in touch with friends or meets with others.

These people are like family to Gyasi. He refers to one of his older close friends as his “second dad” who is supportive of him. Although Gyasi does not go out often, he meets up with his friends at house parties or the beach. In addition, he contributes to the community and his friends by providing help as a nurse, especially to people who are HIV-positive.

I had a friend who is positive [HIV status]. And when he first said it, he was like ‘Oh God, my world is coming to an end. And, the way I was being, is that I was putting myself in his shoes, that okay, if I am the person, who like I have known my status, that I am positive - what would I do. The way he was going through this when there was emotional pain, emotional torture. How will I- because I was- I have never examined my- in like, my emotions very, very well - if it were to be me. What would I do? So, there, I dared to do some small counseling. To make him feel a little bit ease.

Gyasi is very determined and committed to his beliefs and values. This makes him confident and could be seen as a form of self-empowerment. He believes that he would not know where to go in life without a purpose or goal: “it is like when the wind blows, the wind will just carry you through where the wind is going”. Gyasi cannot relate to this. He feels that one cannot become happy without a goal in life. His determination is evident in his religious life too. Gyasi is determined in his faith and religious community and views it as a weakness if one would be shifting ‘from one religious community to another’<sup>173</sup>. Regarding his sexuality and the homonegative discourses in his community, Gyasi mentions that his faith is something between him and the divine and that nobody can take it away from him; it is always present no matter what he does.

If you lose your faith in something, that thing won’t, will never work for you again. So, I have faith. And I always pray to God, that he increases my faith in him. Like he will always protect me from the words of the evil ones. If you don’t have faith, if you don’t have faith in your mom, you won’t go for your mom to ask for anything.

Gyasi also says that he has taken the time to read about homosexuality and sexual minorities, and Christianity. Reading up on these issues made him more engaged in his religion and affirmative towards his sexuality. It is one of the reasons he, during the interview, emphasizes that he loves to blend the two; his Christian religious knowledge and the knowledge he has on same-sex relationships.

There will even be a day that I change that- no, never, never, never. Because, the stage of- because of the stage I have grown in my

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<sup>173</sup> This relates to statement 72, ‘Has moved from one group to another in search of a spiritual or ideological home’, which is sorted not defining (-3) by Gyasi.

Christian life. Because- the stage- like, now, even my normal, how I have grown. Maybe someone will come and tell me, that gayism is spiritually possessed something. How I, my broad knowledge I have about the LGBT books I read and stuff. It is the same thing as my Christian life. The way I have grown, the stage I have gotten to know.

Marlijn: Yeah, yeah. What has made you so strong?

Gyasi: Oh. My experiences. My mother. My friends. The knowledge I have in certain things.

Marlijn: What kind of things?

Gyasi: The knowledge I have in same-sex relationships. Knowledge I have, Christian knowledge, combining them and other knowledge, social knowledge. Yeah. It has made me strong. It is has made me strong to the extent that if I have a problem, religiously, I know what to do to keep me moving. Yes. Because- sometimes, if I am having problems, I blend everything around me. I blend everything around me. And put it up to keep me going.

This phase of growth relates to a moment in Gyasi's life during high school. A friend told him that his sexuality was between him and the divine. No matter what another human being would say, Gyasi would be doing good things, and the divine would only recognize his faith, so therefore he could just dismiss what people thought of homosexuality and try to move on. Gyasi says that this conversation was a breaking point for him, where he realized that no one else except him knows his relationship to the divine.

Someone was telling that I, this thing [homonegativity], forget about it, it is your life, it is between you and your God. Anything you do is between you and your God himself. So- what will humans say, which will break you down, even when you do good, they will even provoke or part of the good, you are even doing, so why won't you forget that men? Move across. It is you. Yeah.

Gyasi is driven and has big expectations for his future. He wants to move to Switzerland because he has heard it is an excellent place to live. He wants to start a foundation to help other young people get their education and help people in need with clothing and food. In addition, he would like to be able to sponsor hospitals to help people who cannot afford health care.

Supporting people's education, sponsoring programs. Helping the needy like giving money out to churches, to go round. Help, pick the needies, cloth the needies. Sponsoring organizations who are, who also need money to support their projects which will help people. And having my hospital and making it subsidizing it for people to come in and yes. Like I don't know. My dream, I don't know, it is very, very big.



## 5.4 Key experiences shared by Ata

*Ata is a twenty-year-old participant who identifies as a non-binary queer. They feel like they belong to the Muslim community but do not view themselves as religious, even though they are brought up in a very religious family. At least once a month, they visit religious gatherings in addition to special occasions, and only on special occasions do they practice religion privately.*

Ata lives with their parents and has four siblings. Ata describes their mother as belonging to an indigenous group, she believes in African Indigenous Religions. Their father is a Muslim. Ata describes themselves as not religious in the survey, but during the interview, Ata says that they are Muslim and believe in the divine. However, Ata struggles with how the religious community in the mosque perceives them because the people there expect Ata to be more masculine and assume that Ata is a homosexual feminine man. Because of the stigmatization in their religious community, Ata feels that they do not have to be loyal to the religious community.

Because I am a Muslim, Muslims don't like being gay. So, I don't think, I don't practice loyalty, yeah. [...] Because mostly, what I hear from Muslims and that seeing a man dressing like a woman, it is a very bad thing. In our religion, they hate it.<sup>174</sup>

Despite the stigmatization in their religious community, Ata finds their faith and religious practices important. They do not seem to internalize stigmatization. Their religiosity and determination come forward in different views. They emphasize dedication to the divine<sup>175</sup>, regular religious practices and believe that 'particular religious claims are true<sup>176</sup>'. For them, religious scriptures such as the Quran are important, and 'actively working towards making the world a better place to live<sup>177</sup>' is intertwined with their religious practices such as praying for others.

It is very important to every human being in the world. Praying and all that stuff. To serve, to serve God is very important to every human.

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<sup>174</sup> This is said in response to statement 46, 'Feels that one should remain loyal to the religion of one's nation', which is sorted by Ata as a defining statement.

<sup>175</sup> This relates to statement 36, 'Has dedicated his or her life to serving the divine', which Ata sorts as most defining.

<sup>176</sup> This relates to statement 92, 'Takes for granted that particular religious claims are true', sorted by Ata as most defining.

<sup>177</sup> This relates to statement 51, 'Actively works towards making the world a better place to live', which is a most defining statement among persons of this prototype.

They believe that the divine is the creator of the world, and therefore, they have dedicated their life to serve him. Ata understands serving the divine as frequently going to the mosque to worship the divine and by doing good and being happy with oneself.

The stigmatization in the mosque, neighborhood, and family is challenging for Ata, mainly because they are read as a feminine man and thus assumed to be homosexual. However, this is not how Ata perceives themselves. During the interview, Ata explains how they see themselves, which is strongly based on African Indigenous Religions' beliefs that go beyond the binary idea of male/female. Ata explains that they experience stigmatization related to sexuality and is assumed to be homosexual.

Ata: Okay. When I was young. I don't, I see myself as a lady. Yeah, so I started when I was ten years, that's where it starts.

Marlijn: And how did your parents respond at that time?

Ata: In that time, they realized, maybe, they call it *kojo basia*<sup>178</sup>, a man that lives like a woman. And now when they see it, they will call you gay.

#### 5.4.1 Stigmatizing experiences

At the beginning of the interview, Ata describes being afraid of attacks when they are out in public. Their physical visibility of being non-normative increases the risk for stigmatization and it increases Ata's anxiety. They usually dress up feminine and walk around in their neighborhood but knows that neighbors and their own family members do not approve of their appearance. Their anxiety is exemplified in their description of being afraid to die at any time.

Ata: Sometimes, when I am afraid, maybe I might die anytime and I am going somewhere. Cause when you are going somewhere, you don't know what is going to happen to you there. So, it's like negative and positive. Yeah, so sometimes I am afraid.

Marlijn: And is this fear sometimes, is it like related also to your sexual identity?

Ata: Oh yeah, about my sexual, mostly, when I am going out and, I don't like dressing like a man. I like dressing like a woman, yes. So mostly my sexuality, I am afraid maybe they might held- they might beat me up or something. So.

Marlijn: And they would be like people in the neighborhood or?

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<sup>178</sup> *Kojo basia* means male-female literally in Akan and often refers to a feminine man. It is often used as a derogatory term that stabilizes hegemonic masculinity (Ampofo and Boateng 2011).

Ata: Yeah.

Marlijn: Or also your family? Or?

Ata: Yeah, my family, everyone.

This heightened anxiety for stigmatization increases the felt stigma, the belief that a person might verbally or physically violate you at any moment. Ata describes this when they speak about their family. They are close with their mother but conceal their sexuality from their family members. Even towards their mother, Ata describes feeling guilty sometimes because their mother would advise them to stop, and Ata does not want to. Sometimes they feel like they can share it with one of their siblings, but they are afraid it might turn out bad.

Ata: Yes, I sometimes, okay, let me say, my elder sister, she is very close to me. So sometimes, I feel like open up to her but I will be thinking of about what will come after when I tell, so I decided to not to tell her anything. Keep it to myself.

Marlijn: What do you think would come after that then?

Ata: I think, maybe it would be, she will spread it out. So, the trust is not there. The trust is there, but it is not that strong. Yeah.

Towards their family members, Ata says that they are not homosexual but prefer to dress feminine because that is who they are. However, in their religious community and neighborhood, this is not accepted, and Ata is read as a homosexual man. They will start to stigmatize Ata for appearing as they do.

Let me say if I am gay but they don't know about- maybe if I am dressing, the way I dress going out and someone sees me. He will start speaking bad, but he seeing me dressing like a lady doesn't mean I am gay. Yes, that doesn't mean I am gay. But some people, when they see you dressed like a - they will ask why, "are you gay or something". They don't understand.

Ata experiences stigma because their embodiment differs from the heteronormative expectations at their mosque and neighborhood. Ata discusses how they do not accept homosexual people in their community. Ata disagrees with this and feels that they cannot be loyal when their religious community holds these homonegative beliefs. Similarly, Ata has heard that Muslim men are not allowed to dress as women.

Even though Ata navigates this stigmatization and focuses on their private religious practices, it impacts their faith. They explain that this

is why they in the survey answered that they are not at all religious despite trying to maintain their faith.

I believe that I am not religious because I can't be loyal to all what they want me to do. Like in their religion. Like I am Muslim, like I am [indigenous name]<sup>179</sup>. So sometimes I feel like, I am not religious, I am not deeply religious, yeah.<sup>180</sup>

Ata mentions that sometimes when they hear homonegative preaching in the mosque, they have the feeling that they do not live righteously. These feelings are increased due to religious authorities that pressure Ata to change their feminine behavior. To satisfy the religious leaders, Ata has tried some of these remedies that should help with changing but has never experienced any change and believes they are who they are. Therefore, they started to avoid those people telling them to pray for change.

When they tell me that, I tell them okay, I will- I think praying, but anytime I pray, I think, I don't see any change, so I think it is in me. So, I am. [...] What they say, sometime they make me feel bad. But I try to avoid what they say and focus on my life.

As a consequence of feeling less comfortable in the mosque, Ata practices more religion at home. They describe how they are judged for not showing up in the mosque as often anymore and how they feel pressured to be there. An example of beliefs shared in Ata's mosque is the idea that evil or demonic spirits cause homosexuality. Ata does not believe this, but it distances them from their religious community. At the same time, homonegative religious beliefs are shared in their neighborhood when Ata walks around. People tell them that "God is going to punish gay people" and that "being gay is not good". This example shows how dominant homonegative religious beliefs are and that they are not only spread during religious services by religious authorities but also by ordinary people in the streets.

Sometimes when they are saying certain things, they are bringing ideas like "being gay is not good", "God is going to punish them", I feel [sigh] like I feel like, I feel very bad when they ask something about that, but I know- I see that as part of me, I cannot stop. I have tried several times to stop, but still. So, I think, it is also part of me, so I just see the thing, listen to them.

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<sup>179</sup> The particular native group is anonymized to avoid possible identification.

<sup>180</sup> This is said in response to statement 83, 'Believes that one can be deeply moral without being religious', which is a most defining statement among persons of this prototype.

Another example of the widespread stigmatization that Ata gives during the interview is the risk they take when visiting a queer bar in Accra. Ata describes that before Uber, there was a risk that people would wait around the bar to attack people who would leave the bar. They describe that they have to be conscious of people who might plan to harass them even at those places. These experiences increase a level of felt stigma, the idea that anyone can stigmatize you at any time.

So as for, when you go there [the local queer bar] and you, you dress girly and everything. No one is going to say but sometimes, today, other people, homophobians, when they come then, maybe then, let me say you have clothes from the club, so they will go and wait for you at the gate or somewhere. And they will start, they will beat you up and everything. So mostly, we do, like now Uber has come so, we do that the Uber comes and picks you up. That's where they come and go. So. I think it is, it is a bit safe now, but it is not that safe.

#### 5.4.2 Strategies and agency

One of the strategies that Ata uses to navigate stigmatization is queer readings, which include critiquing homonegative religious ideas and constructing counter affirmative beliefs towards non-normative persons. This empowers Ata. They distance themselves from the dominant idea that homosexuality is a sin, a shared belief in their religious community. Instead, they view the divine as an affirmative divine being with whom one can have a personal relationship and who is protective of them. These affirmative religious beliefs are a form of support and a characteristic among persons of this prototype.

Yes, I pray, all the time we all pray for protection, because you don't know, maybe something is going to happen. So, when you are going out you have to pray to God to protect you from where you are going and bring you back safely for everything. And thank him for everything to so.<sup>181</sup>

These affirmative beliefs allow Ata to focus on their religious practices and dismiss homonegative religious beliefs at their mosque or put any significance to stigmatization by religious authorities. Instead, the divine is seen as the only divine being who can judge. This perspective allows Ata to harmonize their sexuality with their religiosity.

Okay, let me tell about when you go to the mosque and they would be saying like maybe you are a gay, so God doesn't like it so. So, you are far away from God if you- that is something you are not going, if you

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<sup>181</sup> This is said in response to statement 62, 'Prays chiefly for solace and personal protection', which is sorted by Ata as a most defining statement.

pray, but God is always listening to you - when they say that I feel that I am far away from God. But myself, I believe that being gay is part of me. So, I said to - focus on my life.<sup>182</sup>

Besides Ata's navigation of stigmatization in their religious community, they have to manage the stigmatization from their family and around their neighborhood. One way of doing this is concealing their sexuality. Ata conceals their sexuality from their parents but embraces their femininity and views it as something people around them have to accept.

Yeah, they know I dress like a lady, I do my things like a lady, but they don't see bad, but outside there is talk. So, sometimes they advise me to come and I know how to- I should- [sigh] compromise, because the ways some people speak outside, it is not nice. I tell my parents, it is in me, so they can't show me or tell me what to do. It is my own life, that I am. So. I tell them, they should think about their own life. Yeah. [...] But they always say that when someone from outside thinks that, or behaves like eh, a woman or a girl, they tell them no. For me dressing like a lady or doing, being feminine or something, doesn't make me gay. Yeah. So, that is what they tell me.

Since Ata has to manage the visibility of their femininity, concealing their sexuality is rather difficult as particular gendered behavior is associated with certain sexualities. However, Ata embraces their femininity and supports it with affirmative religious beliefs that seem to originate from African Indigenous Religions, which might relate to their mother's beliefs. Ata describes that they "perceive myself as both, both man and woman"<sup>183</sup>. They explain that sexuality and gender "is part of the spirit in you". Ata mentions the concept of a 'juju man'<sup>184</sup>, who can be born as a man "but the spirit he worships is a woman", which is why they behave like a woman. Even though this does not relate to how the term 'juju man' is commonly used, the idea of worshipping a female spirit through the body of a man or receiving spiritual power through male ancestors as a woman is not uncommon in the beliefs and practices of African Indigenous Religions (see, e.g., Nkabinde 2008). Whatever the literal meaning might be, it is an empowering way to embrace their identity as it relates to people with spiritual powers.

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<sup>182</sup> This is said in response to statement 45, 'Feels distant from God or the divine', which Ata sorts as a least defining statement.

<sup>183</sup> This is said following from a discussion about statement 54 'Thinks that men and women are by nature intended for different roles', which is a most defining statement among persons of this prototype. Ata sorted this card as most defining too.

<sup>184</sup> 'Juju' is a term that is used to refer to objects that "have been infused with magical power" or the "belief system involving the use of Juju" (Cbanga 2016). Generally, a juju-man would be understood as a healer or someone who can work with spirits.

Ata: Ju-ju man.

Marlijn: And what is it? What does it mean?

Ata: Or like - or like, let me say, a priest. Yeah, first is priest. Maybe the spirit that he worships is a woman, but as for he, he is a man. But the spirit he worships is a woman, so you do everything like a woman. Yeah. And some people, they don't see it as a, that is why is he doing as somebody, they see it as a sexuality, they take it in some different way.

Marlijn: So that is how you see yourself or?

Ata: Hmm, yeah. I would say yes.

Marlijn: So, you, do you have the idea that your spirit might be a woman?

Ata: Yes. That's why, I mostly like to say that to my friends.

Marlijn: And is that the word that you used to describe it-

Ata: [Laughs] I would say, there is a diva in me.<sup>185</sup>

Similar to Adofo and Gyasi, Ata has a supportive network that helps them in times of need. This also increases strategies and agency, as they share knowledge on similar issues and can be themselves when they are together. Ata describes their queer friends when they discuss how they counter homonegative religious beliefs, such as the idea that homosexuality is the biggest sin. This is significant as these homonegative religious beliefs can increase self-stigma, and supportive systems can destabilize these beliefs.

Ata: ... I also think that this comfort in thinking that those who not live righteously will be facing suffering or punishment, that is why, when they [religious leaders] are saying being gay is bad, that is why I so feel that I am going to be punished. But some friends in the LGBT community, told me that it is not true. Because being gay is part of you. So, sometimes I feel comfort with what my friends in the LGBT, but sometimes, like, when I go to the mosque and they are preaching about that so. I become some way-

Marlijn: Like conflicted? You feel-

Ata: Yeah. [...] Yeah, they [friends] also encourage me not to listen to what people say, I should instead focus on my life and do what they say, that's what they also told.<sup>186</sup>

Besides their activities in the queer community, Ata is active as a peer educator. They want to educate heterosexual men, break down the stigma that only homosexual men can become HIV-positive, and prevent

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<sup>185</sup> This conversation is a response to statement 59, 'His or her sexuality is strongly guided by a religious or spiritual outlook', which is sorted by Ata as defining.

<sup>186</sup> This is said in response to statement 99, 'Takes comfort in thinking that those who do not live righteously will face suffering or punishment', sorted by Ata as a defining statement.

them from getting it. They see this as a possibility to fight the stigma against homosexual men. This is a challenge, as Ata is often denied access because they are perceived as homosexual, and therefore young men do not want to listen to them.

Ata's activities in the queer community and through sexual education relate to the idea that Ata believes that "you have to make the world better for you to live". They aim to achieve that by engaging with people who hold stigmatizing beliefs. At the same time, Ata visualizes an ambitious future ahead. They want to grow up and be independent to support themselves if they are exposed. They believe there will be a change in the future regarding stigmatization against homosexuality, either in society or within the queer community, by distancing themselves from religious communities. This does not mean they will not be religious anymore, but they envision organizing affirmative religious communities outside of dominant religious communities that hold homonegative views.

The world, we have to make it better for ourselves because no one is going to do, so I do all my possible best to make the world better for me, and for others who don't have or you can say they are poor. I do what I can to help them too, so to feel comfortable, feel that they also have hm- They also have um, confidence in someone coming to help them or something. So, I actively work toward making the world a better place to live. It is by yourself, you have to make the world better for you to live.<sup>187</sup>

## 5.5 Discussion

This prototype, the 'Open-Minded Confident Believers', is perhaps the most religious prototype compared to the other four. This is reflected in some statements on faith and being active in religious communities and the experiences shared by the persons of this prototype, such as their involvement in religious communities or their reliance on their faith.

After my first analysis, the Q-pattern analysis, it seemed that persons of this prototype would hold more affirmative views on their religious and sexual identity. It could include people who found a harmonious relationship between their faith and sexuality. The analysis of the interviews confirms this but also shows an outlier in the group; Kessi. A reason for this is her recent experience of losing her mother, which intertwined with her interpretations of the Faith Q-Sort and resulted in

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<sup>187</sup> This is said as a response to statement 51, 'Actively works towards making the world a better place to live', which is a most defining statement among persons of this prototype.



more diversity among persons of this prototype and their interpretations of the statements.<sup>188</sup>

Persons of this prototype hold affirmative views of their sexuality. However, experiences and views simultaneously are discussed that include self-stigma due to homonegative religious beliefs. From the statements and the analysis of the interviews, it is clear that religion is critical among persons of this prototype. However, the negotiation between religiosity and sexuality is diverse, as some persons seem to be going in the direction of affirmative religious views, with moments of realization, while others experience homonegative internalizations. This is different from the second prototype, presented in the following chapter, where people hold religious authorities and communities responsible for homonegativity and distance themselves from religious communities. To summarize, persons of the prototype discussed in this chapter see religiosity as one of the most important aspects of their lives, whereas other aspects, such as sexuality, tend to be seen as secondary.

Regarding the discussion about religiosity, a characteristic among persons of this prototype is determination. It is emphasized that it is important to be determined in one's faith and worship several times a day. It is also important to show this determination, be part of a religious community and show determination at a place of worship. This determination is shown in praying and in, for example, dressing properly for religious gatherings, being part of a religious community, and following their rules. In addition, it is part of being active and contributing to the community, for example, through leading positions in activity groups. Persons of this prototype have different roles in their religious community, for example, leading worship groups or participating in bible study groups. This religious determination is sometimes related to the aim to support progress and share knowledge about sexualities and stigma against sexual minorities.

Another characteristic among persons of this prototype is that faith is viewed as a leading form of support in their lives. Even though there are some indications of self-stigma due to homonegative religious discourses, faith is nevertheless viewed as a support system. Faith is explained as an individual connection to the divine, who is seen as the only one who can judge sexualities. Therefore, no matter the kind of homonegative religious discourses that might be spread in the religious community, it does not affect the faith of these persons, as they see faith as being personal and private. This is one of the most significant differences from persons of the following prototype, presented in the next chapter, where faith is rejected and taken distance from. Faith as a

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<sup>188</sup> This methodological discussion continues in the final discussion, reflecting on the use of the Faith Q-Sort in this study.

form of support is reflected in different strategies to manage sexual stigma. It relates to holding affirmative religious beliefs and harmonious views on sexuality and religion. These strategies and more are discussed in detail below after discussing experiences of stigma.

### 5.5.1 Experiences of stigma

Among persons of this prototype, experiences of stigmatization are primarily from within the religious communities that these persons are part of. Some similarities in these experiences relate to the homonegative religious discourses spread in the pentecostal Christian churches (see, e.g., Asante 2019) and in mosques. Persons of this prototype believe that homosexuality is seen in Christianity and Islam as immoral. Experiences of internalization are visible among persons of this prototype because of the homonegative beliefs shared in religious communities. These views affect their faith and sexuality, as they are aware that they are disapproved of in their religious communities. The characteristic among persons of this prototype to engage and be involved in religious communities leads to an increase in being confronted with stigmatization in the religious communities and an increase in the risk of self-stigma. There is a shared tendency to adhere to some extent to heteronormative norms and live up to religious values that are seen as the norm in their religious communities (such as a heterosexual marriage, having a nuclear family, or staying single and abstaining from sexual activities to avoid being identified as a homosexual).

Persons of this prototype experience enacted stigma, especially at a young age during high school and later in their religious communities. There are experiences of being exposed by friends and discrimination at their schools. Persons of this prototype did not experience any rejection from their families, but most do not want to share their sexuality because they are afraid that their family members would not be supportive. This form of felt stigma increases due to the homonegative discourses shared in the religious communities, of which persons of this prototype and their families are part. Felt stigma can also increase for those whose physical appearance makes them vulnerable to being suspected of being a homosexual, such as Adofo and Ata, who describe themselves as feminine, which is associated with homosexuality.

Persons of this prototype are active in their religious community. They often visit their place of worship, lead worship groups, and contribute to activity groups (choirs, religious scripture study groups). However, they are aware that if someone finds out that they are homosexual, they would be rejected from these groups. Simultaneously, they experience homonegative religious discourses that are preached

during religious gatherings. Examples of these preachings against homosexuality are comparing homosexuals to animals in a sexualized manner, using religious scriptures against homosexuality, and promoting the possibility of 'curing' or 'change' with remedies such as fasting and praying (also known as 'conversion therapy'). These preachings have a significant influence on the faith and sexualities of these persons, as they describe that they tend to feel guiltier about their sexuality after these services. This could increase self-stigma. In addition, several of them described feeling uncomfortable and hated in their religious community because of these services.

There are examples of self-stigma in the interviews of these persons that relate to the former described experiences, for instance, moments where a person said that they felt punished by the divine for not being heteronormative and not living up to those standards. Another example is Kessi, who believes she has to change her sexuality because the divine is against it. Meanwhile, she describes that she does not feel free to be herself. Another form of enacted stigma that seems to increase self-stigma is the experience of Adofo and Ata, who try remedies against their sexuality suggested by religious leaders (fasting, herbal diets, praying, and sleeping at a place of worship). These remedies are harmful (see, e.g., Horner 2010, Green et al. 2020 and Ogunbajo et al. 2021), but they can also be dangerous. Several participants of my study described that they experienced or heard of sexual harassment or abuse that occurred during these kinds of remedies at a place of worship, and trusted, authoritative figures carried that out.

Experiences of sexual stigma have consequences for psychological well-being as well. Although persons of this prototype do not describe feelings such as anxiety or trust issues with their experiences of sexual stigma, their psychological distress might still be related to sexual stigma. Examples of psychological distress can be trust issues towards people and experiences of anxiety, nightmares, bedwetting, and feeling unsafe at night (see also Herek et al. 2013 on psychological distress and stigma). These examples could relate to an increase in felt stigma, being conscious that one might at any time be stigmatized against due to the high level of stigma against non-normative persons. This could result in persons feeling unsafe at night because they fear there is a risk of violence when they are not vigilant. Another example of the connection between psychological distress and sexual stigma is the loss of trust in people, which could be explained by the experiences of exposure by close friends and discrimination in a religious community to which one feels one belongs.

### 5.5.2 Strategies and agency

A shared form of support among persons of this prototype is the support from their faith. Despite the stigma experienced in religious communities, persons of this prototype tend to have affirmative religious views, and they view the divine as a form of support in their lives. The support of faith is mentioned in the interviews in different ways.

Compared to other prototypes, what is exceptional for this is the form of support experienced from being active in religious communities. Persons of this prototype do not only experience support from their faith individually but also collectively. Examples are participating in activity groups, such as a choir or a worship group. Persons from this prototype also describe their visits to a place of worship as a structural support that gives them structure in times of crisis.

Of course, this ability to be part of a religious community is dependent on stigmatization in the religious community, as persons of this prototype describe how their place of worship might reject them if other members of that community know their sexuality. Therefore, one strategy for participating in religious communities is to conceal their sexuality (Yip 1997). This is a characteristic among persons of this prototype, which shows how religiosity plays a central role in their daily lives. Religiosity and being part of their religious community keeps them close with their families, provides them with moments to express themselves through (gospel) music and art, and most importantly, gives them a strong feeling of determination which motivates them to pursue other goals in life too (studies, career).

Even though persons of this prototype conceal their sexuality in their religious communities, they still experience stigmatization. This leads to other strategies to manage stigma, such as a focus on private religious practices (Yip 2000), being part of other affirmative religious communities outside of their own religious community (Rodriguez and Ouellette 2000, Van Klinken 2019), and queer readings (Yip 2005).

Persons of this prototype focus on private religious practices. They agree that participation in religious services does not resemble a person's religiosity; a person can be very religious without participating in religious activities, such as services at a place of worship. Persons of this prototype participate in religious activities, but they hold this view as they experience the stigma and are aware of how difficult it is to be part of their communities. Therefore, simultaneously, private religious practices become more important. Examples are listening to gospel music privately or (affirmative) preachers on the internet. These private religious practices have deeper meanings for the persons who practice them. For instance, listening to gospel music is described by Gyasi as

another way to pray or have someone pray for you when there is no time or place to pray yourself.

Persons of this prototype also try to be part of other affirmative religious communities. This is mainly organized between queer religious friends who meet and pray together or discuss religious scriptures. Local NGOs, such as Solace Initiative, are important for these meetings, as they provide a network for these kinds of groups. Social media are also mentioned as important in relation to this, as there are examples of WhatsApp- or Facebook groups that discuss these topics. Studies on queer religious youth and social media have shown how social media can be beneficial in exploring sexuality and religiosity (Taylor et al. 2014, Duguay 2016). Social media can be a more secure space without “highly embodied face-to-face encounters” and offers different time scales and spaces that can speed up and slow down expressions of queer and religious digital embodiments (Taylor et al. 2014, p. 1152).

This brings me to the last strategy to maintaining religiosity, queer readings. This is mentioned by those who are more active in queer communities, such as Gyasi, who describes that they are actively trying to ‘blend’ their religious knowledge with their daily life and the knowledge from queer communities. Gyasi mentions several examples of how he criticizes homonegative religious interpretations. The knowledge of affirmative religious views is a characteristic among persons of this prototype. Love is emphasized in different ways; for instance, how love is part of Christianity and the main focus in the bible. Another example of religious and queer knowledge is Ata’s description of their spirit, being born as a man who worships a female spirit, feeling both a man and a woman. Not only do they embrace their femininity and sexuality, but they also view it in an empowered and agentic way, as someone who holds spiritual powers.

In addition to the critique and construction of affirmative views, persons of this prototype also critique religious authorities, which is the second strategy of queer readings (see Yip 2005). There is a shared view that religious authorities spread hate against sexual minorities and that there should be more understanding towards sexual minorities. Even though persons of this prototype mention how they feel guilty when they hear religious authorities preach homonegative religious discourses, their critique decreases the authoritative power and the tendency to self-stigmatize.

In addition to these strategies to manage stigma, there are some other forms of support that are characteristic among persons of this prototype. The support of family is significant. In addition to family, friends are significant too, especially friends from queer communities with whom they can share problems and discuss issues.

Persons of this prototype describe moments where they felt self-empowered. Often these descriptions include conversations with friends. At these moments, they de-victimize themselves and distance themselves from stigmatizing discourses (see, e.g., Goffman 1963, p. 40). For instance, Gyasi realized faith is something between him and the divine being he worships, no matter what anyone else says. Adofo realized that he could not do anything about the stigma he experienced and that it was better to “move on” and believe in his abilities. He emphasizes how he learned that self-empowerment is key to any challenges in his life.

These examples show how confidence and self-empowerment relate to interactions with family or friends who support the person which is supported by other research on sexuality-related social support (see, e.g., Snapp et al. 2015 and McConnell et al. 2016). These interactions increase confidence and decrease the tendency to self-stigma. They also provide a community in which knowledge is shared, for instance, affirmative religious views. Persons of this prototype seem to have these kinds of support from both their families and friends from queer communities, which helps them manage stigma and negotiate their religiosity and sexuality.

This kind of support also enables engagement in ‘queer world making’ (see, e.g., Wagaman et al. 2018, Holland-Muter 2019, Riley 2021, Johnstone 2021). ‘Queer world making’ is another strategy that has been used in studies to include queer visibility in spaces or media. It is “a praxis that queer youth engage in daily and involves living visibly in such a way that lays claim to how one wishes the world would be, rather than adapting to how the world currently is” (Wagaman et al. 2018, p. 175). It is a resilient and resistant practice that enables thinking about possibilities beyond stigmatization and where stigmatization is not accepted as a social norm. It encourages queer persons to think about possibilities “beyond the boundaries that they may unconsciously have imposed upon themselves” (Ibid., p. 176). Among persons of this prototype, this strategy is visible and most likely derives from affirmative support from family and queer friends, who discuss possible future options. Future aspirations are shared in a way that does not accept the current social norms and stigmatization against homosexuality and goes beyond these boundaries in the daily lives of persons of this prototype. They visualize their possibilities, which is another form of self-empowerment and resistance against sexual stigma. As Adofo puts it: “You [general public] will find it very difficult to understand me sometimes. There will be discrimination and all that. But, we are here for life.”

## 6. Rejecting religion and feelings of guilt

This sixth chapter discusses the experiences of the persons who strongly related to the second prototype, the 'Guilty-feeling Non-religious Individualist'. Out of the thirty-one participants, this prototype was the second largest of the five. Six persons have a significant match to this prototype.

Persons of this prototype share many experiences of enacted stigma. Feminine and masculine embodiment, age, class, and stigmatization against HIV are related to these experiences. Due to the relevance of the shared experiences of enacted stigma, the following parts of interviews include descriptions of (child) abuse, violence, depression, suicidal thoughts, and other forms or consequences of stigma. Readers who want to avoid these parts are advised to continue reading the discussion at the end of this chapter.

The structure of the chapter follows the same structure as the last chapter. First, three persons of this prototype are introduced with their demographic information given in the survey. Afterward follows a presentation of the discussions during the interview, thematically structured. After the experiences of the final participant have been presented, a discussion follows, which includes reflections on religiosity, stigmatizing experiences, strategies, and agency. Finally, the discussion is enriched with a comparison to the findings in the last chapter among persons of the first prototype.

### 6.1 Key experiences shared by Abla

*Abla describes herself as a twenty-three-year-old female who identifies as a lesbian in the survey. She writes that she does not belong to a religious community. On a scale of being religious, she describes herself as not religious at all and her family as very religious. She never engages in any religious practices or attends any religious ceremonies.*

Abla tells me that she does not see herself as religious during the interview. She grew up in a Christian family and used to go to church but stopped after experiencing stigma in her religious community. Abla has experienced much stigma. In addition to this, for several years as a child, she lived among her extended family, where she experienced verbal and physical violence. Years later, when she was a teenager, she was exposed to stigma in her religious community. Abla distanced herself from her religious community and her faith at that time.

Okay. I am not really religious. I was brought up [religiously], [but] due to some couple of things that have been done to me. So, I don't really know, I don't even believe this God that yeah, [laughs]<sup>189</sup>

So, now, I use to love God. But now, I don't know if he exists. Cause I used to think to myself if he is there, why would he accept all things like this to be happening to me.

I dissociated myself from the church people.

Her exposure to stigma includes violence from a young age, death threats, and suspension from high school. Consequently, Abla has withdrawn herself from social activities, and during the interview, she shares moments where she expressed aggressive behavior towards people who stigmatize her. Some of her views on life seem to stem from depression, as she describes that life is full of suffering: it is not good to her. In addition, she feels like she is blamed for many things in her life. An example is the leader of her church, who told Abla's mother that a demon possesses Abla and that she is part of a cult, which her mother believes to be true.

Relating to me, this world is just full of suffering. Like, it's no fun. Everything is just not good to me. [...] Yeah. Always thinking. Just blaming yourself for things like, it's crazy. [Sighs] Like, my mom believes, I'm possessed. [Laughs] Yeah. Like, a pastor told her. She actually believed him. Like I am part of a cult. If a man of God can say something like this, then I do not believe there is a God.<sup>190</sup>

They told my mommy I am a demon. She believed. They told my mommy I am a part of a cult. And she believed and that brought hell in the house for me. Anytime I wake up, and you are this and you are that, and you are this.

At the time of the interview, Abla lives with her parents, who know about her sexuality due to exposure during her teenage years. Abla struggles with her mother, as she is against her sexuality and continuously refuses to care for her, both in terms of love and financially (such as school fees). To overcome these issues, Abla focuses on faith in herself and finding a job to become financially independent. While Abla is exposed to stigma in her close circles in her family, she does not internalize stigmatizing

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<sup>189</sup> This is said in response to statement 101, 'Considers hypocrisy not practicing what one preaches to be common in religious circles', which is a distinguishing statement among persons of this prototype.

<sup>190</sup> This is said in response to statement 34, 'Sees this world as a place of suffering and sorrow', which is sorted as most defining by Abla. Her sorting of the statement relates to her experience of felt stigma.



views. Instead, she has rejected communities that share these views and has searched for other supportive communities.

### 6.1.1 Stigmatizing experiences

In her life, Ablā has been continuously exposed to stigma. Stigmatizing experiences increased after Ablā was pointed out as a lesbian at her high school. She experienced violence and death threats from authoritative figures at her school. Her sexuality was discussed openly at school and with her family, including her parents, who found out about her sexuality without her consent. She was suspended from high school until she finished her exams.

And he [a teacher] asked me, are you a lesbian? I said no. He asked me again and I said no. And then he asked me to leave. And he sent for the rest [student peers], he questioned them, I don't know what they said. I was called back there the next morning. And, I was asked, am I a les--, and I said no. And by the time I realized, I was on the floor. He slapped me like, he gives me beats and slaps.

So, I was like, oh my God, so what am I going to say to my parents?

Then I went to break and then I was asked in front of them [school authority and her parents], am I a lesbian. I said no. So, the head mistress actually, [said], if I don't tell the truth, she is going to kill me. She told me, she was going to kill me if I didn't say the truth and I was like, okay, I am. Like, I was scared. So, I said, I am. I don't know what the other girls said to them. And, they were given four weeks suspension. But for me and my best friend, we were given indefinite.

Since this happened during her high school years, Ablā's home situation became worse since her parents also stigmatized her. Her mother often refuses to talk to her, cries about her sexuality, and shouts at her. Sometimes she stops paying Ablā's tuition fees for university.

Ablā: With my schooling now, it's shit.

Marlijn: Okay.

Ablā: Yeah. Cause, I feel like people can just change their mind, not paying my fees again.

Marlijn: So, it's your parents who pay your university now?

Ablā: Yeah. It's my mom.

Marlijn: So, you're depending on them?

Ablā: Yeah. So, because of this, I, um, I am really searching for a job.

She stopped giving me money. She stopped caring for me. So, I don't work. So, it was my dad that was supporting me.

These stigmatizing experiences have led to aggressive behavior, isolation, depressive life views, withdrawal of social activities, a desire to emigrate from Ghana, and feelings of guilt. It has also led Ablu to withdraw from her religious community and lose her faith after an intense period where she tried to change herself.

Ablu: Um. Actually, say with my life everything changed when I tried to be religious. That was when all these things started happening [the pastor saying that Ablu was possessed by a demon]. So, my mommy believed whatever the pastor said.

Marlijn: Hmhm.

Ablu: So. [Sigh] Since then, my life has been, something else. And now I feel there is no good at all, I can't even feel peace.<sup>191</sup>

Despite the stigmatization among her close family, Ablu does not share any experiences or views where she internalizes homonegative beliefs. This might be an effect of her close friends from queer communities who share affirmative views on homosexuality.

### 6.1.2 Strategies and agency

There are several strategies that Ablu uses to manage the stigma that she experiences. There are also several ways Ablu makes herself feel empowered and which could be identified as showing agency. First of all, Ablu took distance from her church. She rejected the stigmatizing beliefs shared at the church and took distance from her religious community and faith. Ablu's religious community was one of the places where Ablu experienced the most stigma. In addition, religious authorities influenced her parents' views, which increased the stigmatization of Ablu. By taking distance from her religious community and faith, Ablu does not internalize any negative views and is less exposed to stigma.

Ablu: My sexuality and religion? [Laughs] It is two different things. They are actually a sect, my kind of people. So, I don't also associate myself with them. I don't want to be them be hearing in God's head there is a [Noise]

Marlijn: Yeah.

Ablu: Like, I am so tired. I just want to be left alone.

Marlijn: And what were for you the biggest changes so far?

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<sup>191</sup> This is said in response to statement 75, 'Feels a sense of peace even in the face of life's difficulties', which is sorted as least defining by Ablu. Her sorting of the statement relates to her experience of enacted and felt stigma.

Abla: Now, I have my peace of mind. I don't hear God did this, go say this, don't do this, don't do that. I don't hear those kinds of stuff. And I don't believe to please anyone anymore. I just live my life.

Marlijn: And that kind of changed throughout the last years, since secondary high school, since that happened?

Abla: Yes, since I disassociated myself from the church people.

A second strategy, which relates to other participants in this study who are exposed to a higher level of stigma, is to focus on yourself. I describe this as a form of self-empowerment related to individualism, an increased focus on individual goals and having faith in yourself and your abilities, and not listening to people who believe in stigmatizing discourses. Throughout high school and the years after, when she experienced much stigma in her religious community, Abla became more isolated. She did not have any support from close circles, such as her family. Now and then, she leaves her parents' house to escape from conflicts. Her mother often threatens to stop paying her university fees. These experiences have increased an individual's focus in Abla's life, finding a way out and being happy. This is visible several times when she describes her future, her current life goals, and her beliefs:

Yeah, DJ. I just want to be able to fulfill everything I want to be. Anytime so. So, that, I don't listen to anybody else, I don't depend on anybody. Like, I just, live my life fully. Without any dictation.

I can't give up my sexuality because of what these people are saying yeah. [Sighs] At first, I wanted to. But I sat down and thought and thought and thought and thought and thought. I realized that my life, I am the only one who can live my life. So, if I should listen to what these people are saying then I'm just, they ruin my happiness away.<sup>192</sup>

Okay. Faith in myself, yeah, I have faith. I believe in what I do. I have faith in me. So, I don't need to go to any regular gathering [at church] to gather more faith. I can build that faith on my own without any religious as a stance.<sup>193</sup>

Yeah, trying to please people, like, something like, they wouldn't like, I am me. So, if they don't want to accept me, they can't be there. I just live my life how I want it so.<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> This is said in response to statement 98, 'Willingly gives up worldly or bodily pleasures for religious or spiritual reasons', which is sorted as least defining by Abla.

<sup>193</sup> This is said in response to the rejection of statement 30, 'Considers regular attendance at places of worship to be an essential expression of faith', which is a distinguishing statement among persons of this prototype.

<sup>194</sup> This is said in response to statement 48, 'Values his or her own purity and strives to safeguard it' of the Faith Q-Sort, which is sorted as defining by Abla.

When the concept of faith is discussed, Ablā describes that she only has faith in herself and does not rely on religious beliefs anymore since she experienced stigma in her religious community. Her self-empowerment increased her confidence, which she clearly describes when she realized that she should not change and that she is the only one who can live her life and take care that she is happy. Her self-empowerment has also sparked into being a role model for others. Ablā is open about her sexuality and does not hide it. She wants to help other young queer women and encourages them to live their lives fully.

Marlijn: And is that related to ‘Actively works towards making the world a better place to live’?

Ablā: Yeah.

Marlijn: And in what kind of ways do you do that?

Ablā: I’m actually, I don’t hide my sexuality.

Marlijn: Hmm.

Ablā: So, if you are cool, we are cool. If you are not, just leave me where you are. And just move on. Just make the people who are scared to come out. Just encourage them to do that.

Marlijn: Yeah. So also, in a way, maybe be kind of a role-model to others?

Ablā: Yeah. Yes.<sup>195</sup>

A possible driving force behind Ablā’s focus on herself and to have affirmative views is that she never felt that she was loved by her family but did feel loved by girlfriends and friends from the queer community. During the interview, she says: “I grew up to have no love until I got to second-grade school”, when she fell in love. Then she says: “I was able to understand who I am”. Ablā says that she is “antisocial” and keeps to herself, but simultaneously, she says that she discusses important issues with her girlfriend. In addition, she tells me that she got some support from a teacher of her studies if she decides to leave her parent’s house. Ablā also participates in female, queer meetings and has a small but steady group of friends by her side. Most likely, the support from the queer community, including her girlfriend, is significant for Ablā to live her life and move away from the stigma she experiences.

## 6.2 Key experiences shared by Kwesi

*In the survey, Kwesi describes himself as a twenty-six-year-old male who identifies as gay. He writes that he does not belong to a religious community, but he says he is religious on a scale of being religious<sup>196</sup>. He*

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<sup>195</sup> This is said in response to statement 51, ‘Actively works towards making the world a better place to live’, which is a most defining statement among persons of this prototype.

<sup>196</sup> Eight points out the ten-point Likert scale, where ten means ‘very religious’.

*describes his family as very religious. During the interview, he says that he is a Christian. He practices religion privately once a week and attends religious ceremonies less often.*

Kwesi: Yes. And I've been through hardship. Because so long being alone is not easy. Especially in our culture. It is not easy. At all.

Marlijn: In your culture being gay you mean?

Kwesi: being gay, yeah. Yeah being gay. So, eh, I had to stay with friends, some didn't even treat me well. I had to go to all sorts of pain. Emotional trauma. A whole lot. I have been through a whole lot. I don't even want to talk about it. Every time I talk about it makes me-<sup>197</sup>

Kwesi has been exposed to a high level of stigma during his life. He did not only experience stigma against his sexuality and his feminine character but also his HIV-positive status. The stigmatization Kwesi has experienced due to his status has severely impacted his mental health and his living circumstances among his family. Being HIV-positive is sometimes seen as a punishment by the divine for being gay. Despite the stigma that Kwesi is challenged within his religious community, he describes himself as religious, Christian, and he often prays at home. During the interview, Kwesi mentions that he believes that the divine might put him through all his suffering as a punishment. Simultaneously, Kwesi describes a moment in his life when he survived a severe car accident. At that moment, he says that he believed it was a sign that the divine still loved him.

You cannot understand God. The moment you understand God, that means that you're not a human again.

Later on, during the interview, Kwesi describes that he sometimes doubts if there is a divine since there is so much suffering. He ends by saying that no one can understand the divine, which is his answer to the question of why he goes through so much suffering in his life. Because of the stigma in his religious community, Kwesi separates his queer life from his religious life as much as possible.

I'm very comfortable when it comes to going to church but why I get a bit uncomfortable is when I get to church, I don't see anybody like me. That is when I get a bit uncomfortable. But, even that one, I just let it go. After all, does there have to be a gay in my church before I worship God? No. And, what if, someone might be gay and I might

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<sup>197</sup> This is said in response to statement 77, 'Is profoundly touched by the suffering of others', which is a distinguishing statement among persons of this prototype.

even don't know, so. Why would I worry my head about this, I am here to worship God and that is it.

### 6.2.1 Stigmatizing experiences

Kwesi has been through many stigmatizing experiences in his life. This is visible in the actual experiences that he shares and the way he feels about his closest family and friends, for instance, when he says, "nobody takes care of me". The stigma that Kwesi experiences is layered, as it is partly directed towards his sexuality from a young age and later on directed against his status of being HIV-positive. At the interview, Kwesi was very aware of the stigma he experienced, as he received help from a queer rights advocate center for some of the conflicts he experienced.

At the beginning of the interview, Kwesi shares his experiences of stigma in his religious community. He says that religious authorities, and Ghana as a country, are against his sexuality and would tell him that Christianity disapproves of it. He says that these arguments are supported with Biblical verses, such as the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. Kwesi is aware of these stigmatizing discourses, but it is not clear whether he internalizes some of them or not. An influence in this is that his close family, parents, and siblings believe in these homonegative discourses. These experiences cause anxiety and depression at times in his life.

Kwesi: We are all sinners. One way or the other.

Marlijn: But so, you did say that you disagree with that to see it as a sin? Being gay?

Kwesi: Yeah.

Marlijn: You don't think it's a sin?

Kwesi: I don't think it's a sin.

Marlijn: No. Okay.

Kwesi: Even though sometimes I am, I do battle with it, but I don't think being gay is a sin because I was born like this, and this is who I am so if I am not like this, God should-

Marlijn: yeah. In which way do you battle with that sometimes?

Kwesi: Sometimes I see people who I- my parents, my father is just still but my mother complains, my brother also complains about it. And I hear people complaining about it. And I feel like hm. What they are saying, is it really true?

Marlijn: Yeah, what kind of things do they say-

Kwesi: Am I a sinner? Being gay is an abomination, it brings a curse. You bring a curse upon yourself. Everything you do, you won't be successful, you cannot be happy, a whole lot. And sometimes, sometimes too, even though I try to be always a happy person, but

sometimes too I seem to be unhappy, most of times. Even yesterday, I was very very very unhappy. I even cried.<sup>198</sup>

[...]

Yeah so, in times like this I think being gay is a sin. But when I later realize and come back to my senses, I think no this is who I am. So, there's nothing I can change. So, one way or the other I have been battling with, with, eh what my religion is saying and who I really am.

Kwesi's experience is related to two well-known religious discourses. The first is that homosexuality is a sin, and the second is the idea that homosexuality brings a curse, an evil spell, on one's life. It is said that this could eventually lead to a life in poverty or dying at a young age. This belief is also related to HIV, which is often believed to be a curse that follows from same-sex relationships. Many of these homonegative religious discourses are supported by religious authorities with verses from the bible. Kwesi describes that for this reason, he does not feel like he understands the bible and sees the divine as a mystery or as someone who can never be understood.

In addition to these discourses shared in Kwesi's church, Kwesi also experienced direct stigmatization, as the pastor pointed him out for being gay. Kwesi used to go to his church every other week but has stopped his visits since this happened. His pastor publicly announced that the divine revealed to him that someone was gay, and he pointed at the lane in which Kwesi was sitting. This has significant implications for Kwesi being able to participate in his religious community among his fellow church members.

Kwesi: He said he saw someone who was homosexual. 'The person is being in this lane, the person is being in this lane' and he actually pointed in my lane. So, after service I went to see and he was like 'so why don't you stop'. And I told him I can't stop. This is who I am-  
Marlijn: Why don't you, what?

Kwesi: Why don't I stop. And I am like, I can't stop this is who I am. So, if he can help me to stop, fine. And I don't know, if today is the day he is going to help me to stop, [Laughs], I don't know. And eh, to say since that time until now I haven't been going to church. He has been checking up on me anytime on WhatsApp, to find out why I don't come to church.<sup>199</sup>

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<sup>198</sup> This dialogue followed from responding to statement 101, 'Considers hypocrisy not practicing what one preaches to be common in religious circles', a distinguishing statement among persons of this prototype.

<sup>199</sup> This dialogue followed from responding to statement 83, 'Believes that one can be deeply moral without being religious', which is a most defining statement among persons of this prototype.

Kwesi says that he did not stop visiting the church because of what happened, but he wanted to have a break. He also says that he thinks that the pastor knows that everybody is a sinner and that it is not only homosexual people who sin.

If that pastor were to be in some church I know here in Ghana, they wouldn't even let you in again. He wouldn't even talk to me. But this pastor has been checking up on me anytime, 'Hope to see you in church'. I have his chat on my WhatsApp, he has been, even just yesterday, three days before Saturday, he sent me, eh, 'Lobo [love] from the church', telling me to come and see him. But I didn't even go, yeah so. That makes me think even though he thinks homosexuality is a sin that deep deep down, he knows that the church itself are full of sinners so there's no way he can push me away.

Now and then, these experiences make Kwesi doubt whether he is sinning or not. These experiences increase the chances of self-stigma, as they push persons such as Kwesi to doubt their way of being. Moreover, it increases Kwesi's feelings of guilt and anxiety. He describes that these feelings come and go in periods where he feels depressed.

Like I said earlier sometimes I do feel guilty I think. I think maybe God is not blessing me, I'm not getting everything I want because I'm gay. Yes, and sometimes I do, I do battle with these things a lot. I feel very guilty. Yes. I feel very guilty sometimes.<sup>200</sup>

[...]

Because I have heard people saying if you are homosexual or you are gay then you are being, [Laughs], you are being possessed by an animal spirit or something. Yeah so sometimes, especially when I'm down or think about life, what I'm going to or certain things I have been through and all that, then I think like 'Wow'. It's whatever these people are saying to you or not sometimes and I'm like, or may be what they are saying is true, homosexuality is not the right thing. Homosexuality is a sin, I'm sinning against God and that is why God, God is allowing me to survive, to go through all these things. Like as in the things I'm going through.<sup>201</sup>

Kwesi has also experienced stigma from his close family since he grew up. This has never stopped, as his older siblings are not in contact with him and do not wish to be at the time of the interview. Kwesi's experiences of stigmatization increased since his HIV status was

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<sup>200</sup> This is said in response to statements 69 and 5, 'Feels a sense of guilt and personal inadequacy' and 'Feels guilty for not living up to his or her ideals', which are both distinguishing statements among persons of this prototype.

<sup>201</sup> This is said in response to statement 63, 'Battles with inner impulses that are experienced as dark or even evil', which was sorted most defining by Kwesi.



exposed on social media. Kwesi's brothers believe in the idea that homosexuality is contagious and brings a curse upon one's life.

I grew up, eh, I have been beaten by them [Kwesi's siblings] just because they think being gay is evil or it is a sin. I have been beaten, I have been going through a whole lot of things. Through them. It got to a point, my elderly brother had to stop paying my fees, because he thinks I'm gay. He doesn't even want me to talk to his children, because he thinks I might influence them to be gay or something.

Several years before the interview, Kwesi found out he was HIV-positive. One year after he found out, a friend of his, whom he shared his status with, disclosed his status on social media without Kwesi's consent. From that day on, Kwesi's life took a drastic turn as he was exposed to discrimination and stigma from almost everyone around him.

Kwesi: I have been there before, so, I have been in a situation where I disclosed my status to a lady friend, who is also a lesbian, she later used it against me. That was the first time, I thought of committing suicide but I didn't even check.

Marlijn: But she used against you that you were gay?

Kwesi: Yeah, no and that I am HIV-positive, she posted my picture all over- all over social media.

As a consequence of all these experiences, Kwesi desires to emigrate from Ghana. He wants to be in a different place with better services and less stigma. He acknowledges the progression that is going on in Ghana of LGBTQ+ rights at the time of the interview.<sup>202</sup> However, he believes that it will take a long time before the stigma against homosexual men and HIV will decrease.

For me perse, I always say, Ghana is not a country, you have to move away because everything here is poor, especially being gay. Our health services is poor, everything is poor. [...] I also pray to God, God let me, take me out of this country. I just want to be out of this country. And I am not a demon in my life. [...]

I got some hope at that moment but later on, last month I heard, speaking a fellow man. He said there is no way that they are going to

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<sup>202</sup> A month before the interviews, the president of Ghana spoke out that "change is bound to happen" which was interpreted by LGBTQ+ advocates as a referral of progression of rights for people who identify as sexual minorities (Al Jazeera 2017, November 25). Many participants and people I worked with during my fieldwork were optimistic about the future due to the presidential interview. At the same time, local NGOs and queer communities became stronger; their network grew nationally and internationally, and several projects across the country were ongoing to unite queer people.

accommodate gays and lesbians in this country so. For the gays and lesbians in this country, we should even forget about it. But that was when I said to myself, no these things I don't think this thing [progress] is going to be very easy in my country.

### 6.2.2 Strategies and agency

Kwesi has had several strategies to manage the stigma he experiences throughout the years. As Kwesi has experienced stigma from a young age, being feminine as a young boy, he did not have much support from people close to him. After being exposed on social media for being HIV-positive, Kwesi became confronted with even more stigmatization. From then, several things happened during a period that made Kwesi feel empowered. He describes moments where he realizes that he is the only one who can take care of himself and that these realizations made him feel empowered, in charge of his own life and feelings. Meanwhile, during the period after the exposure, when he felt depressed, he received support from queer friends.

Allies and people from Solace Initiative who had similar experiences contacted Kwesi. They referred him to a queer rights advocate center, which helped him report the person who disclosed his status. During this time, Kwesi became more aware of his rights and surrounded himself with people who are supportive of people living with HIV. In addition to these strategies, Kwesi feels inspired by music and movies, another source of support.

Self-empowerment comes through in different ways during the interview with Kwesi. There are examples where Kwesi tries to empower himself through a particular practice, and he describes certain views that relate to self-empowerment. Like other participants, these forms of self-empowerment often refer to the future, such as relationship or career goals, and emphasize embracing one's identity. During the interview, Kwesi describes a 'mirror' technique, in which he motivates and affirms himself.

Especially when I'm happy I always say to myself, I look myself in the mirror, I looked into the mirror and tell myself this is who I am, there is nothing, that can change who I am. I even told someone yesterday, I would love to get married. To my partner, my new partner if I'm to be in another relationship or something. I would love to get married.<sup>203</sup>

This practice is a clear example of self-empowerment. In addition, Kwesi describes that he would like to get married, one of his future dreams. All

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<sup>203</sup> This followed from a discussion on statement 63, 'Battles with inner impulses that are experienced as dark or even evil', which Kwesi sorted as most defining.

of this relates to him embracing himself for who he is and enabling him to dream about his future possibilities. Self-empowerment also emerged when Kwesi got exposed, and he describes how he realized he had to stop worrying and believe in himself.

There was this moment when I said to myself, what are you saying, this is who I am and there's nothing that I can change. [...] I was scared, and thinking about life. Thinking about what I've been doing. Eh, the challenges, especially when something happens to me. I say to myself life is not fair, that is when I started thinking about it, I had enough, and have to work with who I am and why do society or or my religion thinks that what I'm doing is a sin then that's where it started. One day I was like no, actually this is who I am. I am human. I have to face challenges. The thing of facing challenges, the same way, someone was who's not gay is facing challenges. So why would I even have to worry myself and think about all this. So, eh I think it has been three years now that I said to myself that I am like that. I'm not going to let these things put me down. I just have to get my mind off it.

This part of the interview is significant as Kwesi does not only affirm himself but also rejects victimizing himself. He refuses to be put down by stigmatizing experiences and argues he needs to face the challenges as any other human being. This is significant as it devictimizes him and stops him from internalizing stigmatizing views. It also relates to his religious view in which he says that he "was born like this", and therefore it is up to the divine to judge if homosexuality is right or wrong, but Kwesi does not believe it is.

A strong form of support that increases self-empowerment is that Kwesi surrounds himself with people who support him. He has a group of friends from the queer community. When he got exposed on social media, Kwesi says that he did not think of committing suicide because of the help of his friends. They were also the ones who referred him to get legal support.

Another source of inspiration and support is music. Kwesi says that he is an emotional person and listens to music to release stress. The film *Prayers for Bobby* also comes up as an inspirational movie that motivates Kwesi. He has it on his phone and watches it with his little sister, his only sibling with whom he has a positive relationship. Kwesi said that it helped her to understand what he was going through. *Prayers for Bobby* (Mulcahy 2009) is an American movie about Bobby, a teenage homosexual boy who experiences sexual stigma among his close family. In the movie, Bobby commits suicide because of his mother's rejection.

I had this movie on my phone and I was with her. And she was asking a lot of questions like so what if I am gay? And she was like, 'do I care.

You are still my brother'. So, I'm taking things right. One step at a time. One day I will finally tell my sister.

Kwesi: I really love the movie because it is a movie about a young guy, called Bobby. Who is also participating in homosexuality. [...] so, I think, eh, Bobby killed himself because of the, would I say, stigma, yeah, the stigma and the discrimination alone, it is even from the family. And yeah, especially the mother, so, that is the main reason why I love the movie. Yeah, because the mother later realized, ah, she was the one who killed her own son and I agree to that.

Marlijn: Does it relate to yourself?

Kwesi: Yes, it relates to myself, but I think I want to be stronger than Bobby. Bobby on the other hand had no one to talk to. [...] He couldn't get anybody to. But in my case, I, with the help of friends and, I have important people in my life. I didn't even think of committing suicide or something.

As Kwesi points out, he has a strong group of friends who are there for him. He also discusses how he wants to help others by being supportive and making others aware of stigmatizing views. At the end of the interview, when I asked Kwesi whether he wanted to add anything or comment on something still, he replied by saying that the younger generation that is coming should be reached out to, to avoid suicides and to know that there is a close community for them to help them through difficult times.

All I want to say is that I think, the younger ones coming, the younger ones are coming who are facing difficulties in disclosing their sexuality or something to their parents or going through any sort of humiliation or discrimination or something, from their family. They need to be reached and need to understand, that being gay is a human right.

### 6.3 Key experiences shared by Aku

*In the survey, Aku describes herself as a twenty-two-year-old lesbian female who does not belong to a religious community. On a scale of being religious, she says she is moderately religious, and her family is more religious. She never practices religion privately and attends religious gatherings less often. Aku grew up in a large family, she has seven siblings, and her parents live separately. As a child, Aku stayed with her father for most of the time. She claims that because of that, she turned into a masculine woman.*

Aku says that she is "not really religious" during the interview. She says that she did not come from a very religious family, and therefore she did not become very religious herself. Her grandfather is a "traditional," and

her grandmother is a Christian. Her parents are "occasional churchgoers," but Aku says her mother does not believe in the divine. Aku goes to church occasionally and believes in "one person you can pray to". She is not sure what kind of Christian church they visit, except that it is not a church with strict dress rules.

So, when my dad goes, I will go with him, sometimes. Yeah mostly when I'm there with him, I will go with him. It's just to listen to the ones who are singing. [...] I don't remember what they call it [the kind of church]. But it's not Methodist or Pentecostal, it's just those churches where you [as a woman] can wear trousers and all.<sup>204</sup>

For the majority of her childhood, Aku lived with her father. She describes that because of this time, she looks more masculine. Her father would take her to the gym, and she copied the clothing style of her father and brothers. During high school, Aku stood out because of her masculinity. Early on, she got bullied because of this. At some point, Aku experienced stigma for being a lesbian. She got suspended from high school. Her father found out, and since then, Aku feels that they have not been close. Aku deals with anger issues. She says she had to teach herself to stay calm when she is in a situation where she experiences stigma. In addition to her experiences at high school, she also experiences stigma in her religious community. Because of her visible masculinity, Aku also experiences stigma in public places. In addition to these experiences, Aku describes several moments where she feels stigmatized by programs on television or in the media. As a consequence of her experiences of stigma, she has the desire to emigrate from Ghana.

### 6.3.1 Stigmatizing experiences

Aku experienced much stigma against her masculinity and for the assumption that she is a lesbian. The first experience she shared was during her high school years. Then, much gossip was going around about her, based on the idea that she was a lesbian. Aku says that she was furious during this time but taught herself to stay calm, ignore people, and stop talking to people.

Aku: I actually was, while I was growing up, I had angry issues.

Marlijn: Angry issues, okay.

Aku: So, I had to work on that. So, if, and then I had to, if you're working on your anger you have to work on everything, so I had to work on how to deal with issues around me. And if you go to high

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<sup>204</sup> This followed from a discussion on statement 83, 'Believes that one can be deeply moral without being religious', which is a most defining statement among persons of this prototype.

school in Ghana, you meet a whole lot of annoying and strange people. So, you have to know how to deal with. That's when I taught myself that.<sup>205</sup>

When I was in school, yes. It was mainly about that [her sexuality] and it was weird because I was like the talk of the school. So, but I, I actually always just thought, I always ignored them.

During this time in high school, Aku's father found out that she was a lesbian because she got suspended from school. The head of the school called her father to explain her suspension. Her father disapproved of Aku's sexuality and started to complain about her. Her parents are convinced that her sexuality is caused by an evil spirit and that a demon possesses Aku. Aku went along with their beliefs, and she was taken to a church. She tried to pray to change, to change her sexuality, and get rid of the demon. After a while, when she noticed praying did not do anything, she stopped.

All of them, parents. That's how they think, if you do that [same-sex relationships] they think it's spiritual demonic or something. The first thing they do is take you to church. Instead of maybe trying to talk to you to understand why you are doing that.<sup>206</sup>

I think at the point when I had the case with my dad, like he was complaining about me, blah blah blah. And those things. [...] So, I was praying then to try and change or something. But I noticed I was praying and it wasn't helping, nothing was changing. So, I just decided that it's my mindset, if I want to change, I will change. But just praying is not going to help.<sup>207</sup>

After this period, Aku was not that close to her parents. She says that her mother was sad, and her father did not want to talk anymore. Then, her pastor gave her religious scriptures to read. Aku says that they probably tried to make her more religious, but instead, she felt terrible about herself. So then, she stopped going to church and reading the bible.

Aku also experiences stigma in public places, for example, public transport, because of her masculine looks. In public transport, Aku often experiences being picked out by street pastors. It is pretty common in Accra to have a street pastor who starts to preach on a bus. She describes that when she is on the bus with a friend, another woman, they will assume that they are a lesbian couple. She says that she struggled most

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<sup>205</sup> This is said in response to statement 75, 'Feels a sense of peace even in the face of life's difficulties', which is sorted most defining by Aku.

<sup>206</sup> This followed from a discussion on statement 59, 'His or her sexuality is strongly guided by a religious or spiritual outlook', which Aku sorted as least defining.

<sup>207</sup> This is said in response to statement 17, 'Becomes more religious or spiritual at times of crisis or need', sorted as defining by Aku.

with this when her father found out that she was a lesbian. From then, her masculinity was always associated with being a lesbian. She wants to avoid this association to avoid further stigma, but at the same time, she wants to dress in her way.

Most [street] pastors see it on TV and talk about girls doing that, girls doing this, girls doing that. [...] And it's annoying but you can't do anything about it because that's the world we are living in now. And it's worse here because you can't even be free, you can't even dress the way you would like to dress.<sup>208</sup>

### 6.3.2 Strategies and agency

There are several ways in which Aku manages stigma. She uses strategies to avoid the stigma that she experiences in her daily life, and there are ways in which she empowers herself for her future. One of the different ways she avoids stigma is to withdraw herself from stigmatizing people. An example is her parents. She withdraws to her room at home and avoids talking to her parents. During the interview, she says she hides her sexuality from her parents. They knew about it after the suspension at school, but Aku tries to keep it a secret and hopes they are convinced that she has changed. Not only does she avoid stigma, but she also tries to secure her study as it depends on her parents' financial support. Another example of withdrawal is in her religious community; she no longer attends religious gatherings.

It was before when I had the case [at high school] with my- yeah then I was going to church I use to- yeah. I used to put my mind to it. But now I'm just here [at home].<sup>209</sup>

Other practical ways of avoiding stigma in public places are listening to music and having earplugs in. While this might not be the most effective, since people can still preach to her, Aku does not hear it. It helps to prevent any self-stigma. Withdrawal and isolation, these strategies of avoiding stigma might not be recognized as empowering strategies as the stigmatizing beliefs or people are not changed, but they are strategies to avoid stigmatizations that could help avoid further self-stigma. In addition to that, listening to music is a way to avoid hearing stigma. It is also a way to distract herself from negativity or feeling down, similar to watching inspirational movies or videos.

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<sup>208</sup> This is said in response to statement 101, 'Considers hypocrisy not practicing what one preaches to be common in religious circles', a distinguishing statement among persons of this prototype.

<sup>209</sup> This followed from a discussion on the statements 5 and 69, 'Feels guilty for not living up to his or her ideals' and 'Feels a sense of guilt and personal inadequacy', which are distinguishing statements among persons of this prototype.

Aku: Hm, I do ignore it. So sometimes when I noticed they are about to preach, I just put my earplugs in my ear. Yes.

Marlijn: And when you do feel down about these things, how do you cope?

Aku: Hm, eh, when I feel down I listen to songs.

Aku also attempts to interpret the bible in alternative ways instead of the mainstream homonegative discourses. Regarding clothing styles, she refers to the bible as not up to current standards anymore. She believes it does not make sense to follow the bible in a literal way. For her, faith is the idea of praying to the divine, one person you can believe in. These beliefs, the distancing from homonegative religious discourses and the idea of one divine being who is the only one to judge, might be the first step to an affirmative faith to her sexuality and masculinity.

And then the bible like, the bible is like in whole lots of visions. But they are all saying there is one. There is one person like God. Or whoever he is. But they are all. So, it makes it difficult for you to even decide on when they are even saying the truth or they are all just because everybody has their story. [...] But I just believe this. One person you can pray to.<sup>210</sup>

In addition to these strategies, Aku has several views on her future life that empower her. She explains that she feels like you "have to do something with your life" in the interview. At the time of the interview, she is studying at the university. She says that she feels more comfortable there, as most students mind their own business and you are more independent than during high school.

She dreams of marriage to a girlfriend, and she wants to help other people; organize care for homeless people who struggle with mental health issues. Even though she plans to emigrate from Ghana, she wants to become financially independent to tell her family who she is.

Financial independence will allow her to take care of herself if her family disapproves of her. These goals and views empower Aku, as they are affirmative to who she is and what she wants to achieve. They could be seen as the next steps of strategies that avoid stigma; plans to go beyond managing stigma but instead to being herself in an environment that is affirmative to her true self.

So, I just have plans to maybe when I get to a higher level when I take care of myself. I will tell them [her parents] about it [her sexuality]. If

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<sup>210</sup> This is said in response to statement 4, 'Thinks that the world's religious traditions point to a common truth' of the Faith Q-Sort, which is sorted as defining by Aku.



they still don't support then, I'm taking care of myself so you can't really decide what I have to do.<sup>211</sup>

## 6.4 Discussion

Persons of the 'Guilty-feeling Non-religious Individualist' are the least religious compared to persons of other prototypes. Persons of this prototype believe that religious communities and religious leaders are hypocritical and are not seen as trustworthy. They feel uncomfortable in their religious communities because of the stigmatization of non-normative individuals. At the same time, some of them cannot believe in a divine being while they experience such a high level of stigmatization in their religious communities spread by religious leaders. Most of them share the experience of being exposed in their religious communities for being homosexual.

Due to the stigmatization, persons of this prototype have distanced themselves and stopped going to religious gatherings or ceremonies. Religious gatherings or ceremonies are seen as not essential for being religious among persons of this prototype. Most persons of this prototype do not attend any religious gatherings, and if they do, they separate it from their private life. Religious gatherings are viewed as a way to worship and nothing else; there is no place for socialization with other members. This does not mean that many of them have increased private religious practices, as most of them have lost their faith entirely due to the stigmatization they experience.

Compared to the last prototype, the open-minded confident believers, these are some of the most significant differences between the two. While persons of that prototype experienced stigma, they were often very active in their religious communities. Some of them hold affirmative religious views on their sexuality. There was an increase in private religious practices for some of them because of the stigmatization they experienced in their religious community, but they never stopped with their religious beliefs.

Persons of this second prototype tend to distance themselves entirely and reject religious beliefs. Stigmatization is experienced so severely that for most of them, it is not possible to be part of their religious communities, as they are, for instance, continuously viewed as being possessed by a demon. Another significant difference between the two prototypes is that persons of the second prototype do not have support from their close families, which is one of the most prominent forms of support for persons of the first prototype. Most likely, family members

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<sup>211</sup> This followed from a discussion on the statements 5 and 69, 'Feels guilty for not living up to his or her ideals' and 'Feels a sense of guilt and personal inadequacy', which are distinguishing statements among persons of this prototype.

of the persons of this prototype more strongly believed in homonegative religious discourses than family members of the persons of the first prototype. These findings suggest that a family's support, or lack of support, is essential to religiosity and belonging to a religious community.

The lack of support and increased experiences of stigma made most persons of this prototype lose their faith. Some lost their belief in a divine being because they were suffering and not rewarded with progress even though they worshiped the divine. Persons of this prototype tend to view the world as a place of suffering. This relates to the idea that there cannot be a divine being when there is so much suffering for most of them. Others argue that there is a divine being, but it can never be understood by human beings, which justifies their experiences of stigmatization. Their beliefs of a divine being are not affirmative to their way of being, their sexuality, and gender. Again, this is a substantial difference compared to persons of the first prototype, who hold onto affirmative religious views.

While severe stigmatization is one reason that persons of this prototype are less religious, another is that some persons of this prototype were less religious, to begin with. They did not have a very religious upbringing and did not feel welcome in religious communities because of their sexuality, so they have never been interested in religious ceremonies or gatherings. Those who did grow up religiously feel the pressure to identify as a community member but do not feel comfortable with it.

Persons of the 'Guilty-feeling Non-religious Individualist' share the experience of a high level of stigma, especially enacted stigma from early on when they were children. They share the experience of being exposed, being pointed out by someone for being a lesbian or a homosexual man. This relates to the stigmatization of the embodiment of masculine women and feminine men. Therefore, most persons of this prototype were 'discredited': their differentness is known since it is visible to others (Goffman 1963). Their experiences align with other studies that argue that persons are more vulnerable to enacted stigma when the stigmatized characteristic is visible (Herek et al. 2013).

Some of the most significant experiences of stigma among persons of this prototype happened in their religious communities. As a result, they often reject their religiosity. At the same time, persons of this prototype tend to embrace their sexuality and believe in themselves for who they are. They are among the few of this study who publicly talk about their sexuality and do not hide their sexuality if someone asks them about it. They dress their preferred way and are involved in queer communities.

The stigma that persons of this prototype experience demonstrate how sexuality is intertwined with class (economic background, access to

education), age, and embodiment. Persons of this prototype share experiences of stigmatization against their embodiment: the stigmatization of masculine women and feminine men. The findings in this chapter suggest that women or men who do not live up to heteronormative behaviors are exposed to an increased level of stigma. They are more vulnerable to stigmatization as the stigmatized characteristic is visible in their embodiment. Another important aspect that increases stigma among persons of this prototype is sexual health and the stigmatization of HIV. Stigmatization against HIV adds another layer of complexity in discussing stigmatization against homosexuality. Sexual stigma and stigmatization against HIV are for most homosexual men intertwined in their experiences in my study. However, HIV-positive homosexual men face more difficulties navigating the stigma as they often have less access to health care, the job market, to name a few, which make their symptoms worse.

Many of the homosexual men among participants of my study experience stigma based on the idea that they are HIV-positive. This is based on the homonegative discourse that homosexual men will die young (due to HIV), and sometimes it is believed that this is their 'curse'. Often proof of not being HIV-positive can be a way to re-establish relationships in a family, such as showing that there is no curse. Alternatively, to show that one might be heterosexual.<sup>212</sup> This is the example of Adofo in the previous chapter, who assures his parents that he is healthy by doing an HIV test after they hear rumors that he is homosexual (see 5.1 Key experiences shared by Adofo).

For homosexual men who are HIV-positive, this is an entirely different experience. HIV-positive homosexual men can experience stigma in their otherwise ally groups, queer communities. At the same time, if their status is disclosed, people might be afraid to have a close relationship with that person because they do not want to be stigmatized against. I found in my study that persons who are HIV-positive often have to rely on themselves for more extended periods. Because of this loss of support and the heightened stigma against HIV, the chances of developing self-stigma increase. At the same time, homosexual men who are HIV-positive have no or less access to health care due to the stigma they experience in Ghana (Kushwaha et al. 2017). During the interview for my study, depression, and suicide was mentioned whenever living with HIV was discussed.<sup>213</sup>

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<sup>212</sup> Because if a man would be HIV-positive, it is often seen as proof that he is homosexual. If the person is assumed to be homosexual because he is, for instance, a feminine man, but he is not HIV-positive, this is sometimes seen as proof that he is not a homosexual.

<sup>213</sup> Either through the participant's experience or shared experience of a friend from the participant.

The experiences of stigma among persons of this prototype from early on have led to a more individual focus in their lives. Some cannot rely on other people, such as Kwesi, who also experiences stigma for being HIV-positive. Experiencing stigma against HIV can be as complex as the disease itself because the person can be confronted with “abandonment, social ostracism, school expulsion, denial of medical attention, lack of familial care and support and sometimes physical violence” (Tenkorang and Owusu 2013, p. A). Kwesi’s experiences are proof of this, as he has increasingly experienced stigma since his HIV status was disclosed publicly.

There is a clear emphasis on individual goals among persons of this prototype, such as being financially independent. There are also many individual shared strategies to manage stigma, from practical ones (wearing earplugs) to inspirational or motivational ones that are easily accessible (such as movies, music, or books). Another shared consequent behavior of stigma among persons of this prototype is the wish to emigrate from Ghana. Even though persons of this prototype are active in queer communities and local NGOs and recognize the progress being made, they believe that there are better possibilities for them outside of Ghana. This is another difference compared to persons of the former chapter, who often imagined their future dreams within Ghana.

#### 6.4.1 Experiences of stigma

Persons of this prototype share that they experience stigma due to their feminine or masculine embodiment. This exposes them to an increased level of stigma, as they are assumed to be homosexual women or men; they are discredited. The characteristic that is stigmatized against is visible in their daily life. This means they can never manage the stigma by hiding or adjusting their gender expressions to heteronormative behavior. In comparison to persons of other prototypes, this is one of the most significant differences between experiencing stigma and managing it. Persons of this prototype share the stigmatization against their embodiment, which they cannot hide or change.

This has led to experiences of stigma early on in their childhoods. It has led to exposure for being gay in their teenage years and early twenties. After going through these experiences, persons of this prototype have embraced themselves and publicly expressed themselves in their preferred way. At the same time, this makes them more vulnerable and exposed to stigma in public places, such as public transport, educational institutions, or religious gatherings.

Persons of this prototype experienced abuse, insults, and rejection from their family members. They have been threatened at high school by authoritative figures, and some of them experienced violence. High

school authorities discriminated against them by suspending them for supposedly being involved in same-sex relationships. Parents would receive this information and disapprove of homosexuality. For most persons, this led to more physical and mental abuse from their close family members.

Religious authorities often advise to “pray the gay away”<sup>214</sup>, and they give out certain scriptures to read. It is believed that if one appears to be more religious, i.e., involved in religious activities, it might change the person to being heteronormative. A shared experience among persons of this prototype is a short period, a year or so, of trying to be ‘more religious’. This is harmful, as it plays into the homonegative religious discourses and increases the risk of self-stigma: “the acceptance of sexual stigma as part of her or his own value system and self-concept” (Herek 2007, p. 910-911). It is also harmful because persons exposed to these kinds of practices, otherwise known as conversion therapy, often become depressed, have suicidal thoughts, symptoms of post-traumatic stress, and identity crises (Horner 2010, Green et al. 2020 and Ogunbajo et al. 2021).

The findings in this chapter suggest that experiences of enacted stigma do not automatically lead to self-stigma. Kwesi is the exception; he describes religious beliefs of self-stigma, such as the idea that the divine punished him. His internalizations most likely relate to prejudice against HIV spread by religious authorities that Kwesi was confronted with. After his HIV status was disclosed, he experienced violence from close family members and could not trust his former friends. For a while, he suffered from severe anxiety. In the interview, he describes that he never had any suicidal thoughts, but later on, he says that he did have that tendency after his status was disclosed. This relates to the description of HIV-related stigma by Tenkorang and Owusu (2013), who write that the stigma can be worse than the disease itself. Kwesi’s experiences demonstrate this, as he describes how the first experiences of stigma against HIV and his consequent fear and anxiety made him consider suicide. In the case of Kwesi, his experiences have made him tend to self-stigmatize.

However, the findings in this chapter do suggest that enacted stigma increases felt stigma. For instance, persons of this prototype describe consequent behavior such as aggression that results from felt stigma (Herek et al. 2009 and Herek et al. 2013). Aku and Abla both describe that they deal with anger issues from their teenage years onwards. They describe these moments with situations when they experience stigma. It

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<sup>214</sup> “Pray the gay away” is a common phrase used among religious leaders in different religious communities who believe in religious conversion therapy and hold homonegative beliefs. See also Sacks 2011, Fahs and Swank 2021 and Fadhillah 2019.

also reflects some of their views on life which become more depressive and pessimistic, such as the idea that life is full of suffering. These findings of increased depression and pessimism align with studies on religious queer youth who experience rejection from their families (see, e.g., VanderWaal et al. 2017). It demonstrates how significant the role of the family is in navigating stigma and maintaining religiosity, which is visible between persons of this first and second prototype.

The experiences of the persons among this prototype show how the three different types of stigma (enacted, self-stigma, and felt stigma) are intertwined. However, it also shows how an increase of enacted stigma does not automatically increase self-stigma, as self-stigma is relatively low among persons of this prototype. Likewise, experiences of violence or prejudice do not automatically increase homonegative internalizations, not even if family members or friends do them. However, felt stigma does increase. It is visible in the descriptions of feeling angry by persons of this prototype. This finding aligns with earlier research on the correlation between enacted, self-and felt stigma among people with HIV (see Herek et al. 2013), which points out that enacted stigma correlates with felt stigma and not necessarily with self-stigma.

The consequences of felt stigma are visible among persons of this prototype in their lost trust and anger towards religious communities and authorities. It is also reflected in their desire to emigrate from Ghana, as persons of this prototype believe they will be exposed to more stigma throughout their lives if they stay.

#### 6.4.2 Strategies and agency

Persons of this prototype share strategies to manage stigma and views and values that emphasize taking care of oneself; having an individual focus. This results from experiencing stigma among close circles, such as family and friends, and the necessity to rely on yourself. Persons of this prototype have been through times where they could only rely on themselves. Forms of self-empowerment are one of how persons of this prototype express themselves.

Self-empowerment comes through in different ways. It can be recognized in individual strategies to manage stigma, such as wearing earplugs in public transport or withdrawing oneself to avoid stigma in a family home. However, it is most visible among persons of this prototype in affirmative strategies. These types of self-empowerment go hand in hand with persons who have a more individual focus because they can only rely on themselves. This is the case with persons of this prototype. There are several examples of different forms of self-empowerment among them.

One example is the concrete expressions of affirmations to one's ability in life. During the interview, Abla does this several times with the concept of faith and her religious identity that changed over time. When the discussion comes up about faith, Abla says that she only has "faith in me"; being herself. Later on, she says, "I'm the only one who can live my life". Her expressions are similar to those of Aku and Kwesi. For instance, Aku emphasizes that 'you', as in yourself, need to do something with your life.

Kwesi has a concrete example when he describes the situation after his HIV status was disclosed. He says that he struggled with the situation but then realized that he "has to face challenges like anyone else". During that period, he often felt depressed, but if he felt optimistic, he would express affirmations in the mirror to motivate himself. His description is an example of a self-affirmation practice. Although there are opposing views on these practices and how much they help the person in need, some research suggests that self-affirmation speeds up feeling better with oneself (see Hales et al. 2016).

Although it is unclear whether or not these practices improve self-esteem, they lead to de-victimization, a rejection of internalized homonegative discourses. This is exemplified by persons of this prototype who express these moments of realization, reject homonegativity, and do not experience self-stigma. De-victimization relates to what Goffman describes as a stigmatized person who breaks "with what is called reality and obstinately attempt to employ an unconventional interpretation" of the stigmatized characteristic (1963, p. 10). This could also be recognized as a form of self-empowerment.

Moments of these realizations can be seen as "turning points": "the occasion of discovery that persons with his stigma are human beings like everyone else" (Goffman 1963, p. 40). In the case of the descriptions of persons of this prototype, they go together with affirmative practices, such as the ones described above. Persons of this prototype tend to have these moments due to severe stigmatized experiences they have been through and a period where they reflect on those.

These turning points rely not only on personal experiences but also on finding support among similar people and, for instance, inspirational or motivational books or movies. Supportive communities described by persons of this prototype are a form of empowerment that increases self-empowerment. Examples given were legal support, queer organizations such as Solace Initiative, and in general friends who are allies to the queer community. These groups are essential for persons of this prototype as they are communities where they feel loved and cared for, which is lacking in their own families.

Books, movies or music are important too. Among persons of this prototype, several examples of media inspired the person and increased

self-empowerment. One example is the film *Prayers for Bobby* (Mulcahy 2009) which Kwesi discusses with his own experience and the struggles with his family members. Not only does it help him to reflect on his own experiences, but he also watches the movie with his siblings to let them rethink their behavior and views on homosexuality. Abla has another example by referring to Beyoncé and her music. She views her as an inspirational pop star who shows that traditional gender roles do not fit current times. In addition to inspirational sources, there was a shared practice of listening to music to motivate oneself and distract oneself from hurtful experiences. Music and movies are another way to feel connected, supported, and strengthened, especially for isolated people.

Self-empowerment also leads to rejection from stigmatizing discourses. For instance, to stop listening to stigmatizing comments or texts and start believing in one's ideas and values. On the one hand, persons of this prototype are forced to do this because of the exposure to severe stigma. On the other hand, it increases their confidence as they do not hide their sexuality and embodiment. For example, Abla is open about her sexuality and publicly dresses in her preferred way. She is exposed to more stigma, yet it has pushed her to be a role model for others, and she aims to encourage others to believe in themselves. However, their experiences show that this is not an easy solution, to be yourself, but rather a challenge to navigate stigma and the need to be aware of one's safety.

The wish to help others is another characteristic among persons of this prototype. It relates to the openness of these people to share experiences, be a role model for others, and help others get into a secure financial situation. This is exemplified in their wish to become rich so that others can be supported too. Despite the severe exposure to stigma among persons of this prototype, there is a positive mindset about the future. Both Aku and Kwesi hope to get married to their partners eventually and hope that Ghana will legalize same-sex marriage. This relates to the practice of queer world-making, even though it might be framed with some boundaries in mind compared to the persons of the former chapter.



## 7. Finding allies in religious communities

This third chapter discusses the interviews done with the persons of the third prototype, the 'Religiously Active Doubting Believer'. This group includes five persons who relate to this prototype from the thirty-one participants.

The structure of this chapter follows the same structure as the former chapters. First, three persons of this prototype are introduced with their demographic information given in the survey. Afterward follows a discussion of the main parts of the interview, thematically structured into parts on religiosity, stigmatizing experiences and strategies, and agency. After the third interview, a discussion follows, including reflections on religiosity, stigmatizing experiences and strategies, and agency. Finally, the discussion is enriched with a comparison to the findings in the former chapters of persons of the first and second prototypes.

### 7.1 Key experiences shared by Abena

*Abena is a twenty-eight-year-old female who identifies as a lesbian. She is a single mother and lives with her parents. According to the answers in the survey, she does not belong to any religious community and does not view herself or her family as religious (zero out of ten). However, she attends religious ceremonies at least once a month and practices private religious practices daily. During the interview, Abena shares that she became unwillingly pregnant and had to drop out of school. At the interview, because of family tensions, Abena cannot see her daughter, who resides at the father's house. At the same time, Abena says she struggles with her mother because she does not accept her sexuality. Because of these struggles, Abena is staying at a friend's place.*

Abena says that she did not grow up very religiously. She describes her family as not religious. However, she tells me that her grandmother used to practice African Indigenous Religions and that her parents are Christians. Together, they used to go to church every week, but Abena does not go that often anymore. She said it changed because of her work, limiting her time to visit the church. Later during the interview, she says it changed because of her family's response to her sexuality.

During the follow-up interview of the Faith Q-Sort, it becomes clear that Abena sorted some statements according to how other people close to her, like her mother, perceive her. An example is a notion of not living righteously and the idea of being punished, which Abena relates to her mother's rejection of her sexuality. Her family's rejection of her sexuality

has changed Abena's religious practices. She explains that she prioritized private religious practices and stopped going to church.

I believe in God, you do not always have to go to church before people will see that you are a Christian. It is in your heart, so you always have to pray.<sup>215</sup>

In contrast to her answers in the survey and her first responses in the interview, religiosity does play an important role in Abena's life. Privately, it gives her support and something to hold onto. Outside of that, she needs to meet up with friends, family, and acquaintances at religious ceremonies. However, due to the stigmatized religious views on homosexuality shared in her religious community and her family, Abena has to manage stigma and the risk of self-stigma.

When Abena's mother found out about her sexuality, she went to their church and discussed it with the pastor. Since then, Abena has felt less comfortable in her church. She disagrees with the stigmatizing beliefs. This situation has increased her private religious practices, and she believes that one can be close to the divine by practicing religion at home.

### 7.1.1 Stigmatizing experiences

Abena is confronted with stigma because her mother exposed her sexuality to her religious community. This had a severe impact on her life, as she lost her job and struggled to find new work. At the same time, religious authority figures in her community try to persuade her to change her sexuality and continuously stigmatize her. Abena perceives that her mother believes that homosexuality is not righteous and those who are homosexual will be punished. She also believes that this idea is supported in her religious community. Abena's life has drastically changed since her parents found out she is a lesbian.

When she [her mother] realized, I was a lesbian. They were always thinking like, if you're a lesbian, you don't have to be going to church. When they [her parents] are going, they don't want me to follow them. Because my mom realized I was in it, so. They don't go to church with me. They go alone. So, I am always at home, although I believe in God. I believe that I have to pray. I don't have to go to church before God will answers my prayers or something. She [Abena's mother] said me

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<sup>215</sup> This follows from a discussion on statement 99, 'Takes comfort in thinking that those who live not righteously will face suffering or punishment', which is a distinguishing statement among persons of this prototype.

being a lesbian is a sin, so I will be punished. But I don't believe in that.<sup>216</sup>

Besides stigmatization by her parents and the rejection by her religious community, Abena lost her job and struggled to find new work. The pastor at her church told Abena that these struggles are happening because homosexuality is a sin, that "God is not opening a way for me [Abena] to work". The stigmatization and discrimination that she experiences, especially by family members, is explained as a punishment from the divine.

Because of I am a lesbian, it has blocked my way. So, I don't get a chance to work. [...] Everything is like, it is an evil [thing], so I should stop. Yes, so my mom does not talk to me. I am staying at a friend's.

When my mom asked me to move out, I went to stay with my sister. She is always preaching and talking about evil things I do. She said I am having a tattoo and I do not go to church, so I am not a Christian. She started complaining: I do not go to church, I am always at home with my phone or my friends. She was also saying that I do not go to church so everything I do is evil.<sup>217</sup>

Even though Abena said at the beginning of the interview that she did not believe homosexuality was a sin, the stigmatizing views expressed by the church and her family members affect her feelings and make her doubt whether her sexuality is right or wrong. As a result, she sometimes internalizes stigmatizing beliefs.

I was feeling bad. Because, it is true, maybe, I do not know how I believe, but- guys do not approach me. They do not approach me. If I get a job, the people will call me to come to an interview. They do not call. So, I was also believing in what the pastor said is true. But sometimes I believe, sometimes I do not believe.<sup>218</sup>

But time goes on, although the guys do not approach me, I do not, I did not know if what the pastor said was true or something. He [the pastor] said because I am a lesbian, guys do not approach me. But I do not have tom's friends [masculine homosexual women] so, I do not do things so people can find out I am a lesbian. Because I am always at home with my friend and if I am going out, I do not bring people

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<sup>216</sup> This follows from a discussion on statement 99, 'Takes comfort in thinking that those who live not righteously will face suffering or punishment', which is a distinguishing statement among persons of this prototype.

<sup>217</sup> This was said in response to statement 61, 'Feels threatened by evil forces at work in the world', which Abena sorted as defining.

<sup>218</sup> This follows from a discussion on statement 99, 'Takes comfort in thinking that those who live not righteously will face suffering or punishment', which is a distinguishing statement among persons of this prototype.

around. I do not go out around our area. So maybe one day, I will find a guy and then I will get over it.

In Abena's life, the exposure from her mother made her isolated as most of her acquaintances, and family members do not want to help Abena with anything anymore. This has influenced her view on life, as she explains that she sees this world as a place of suffering. The struggle in her family has been ongoing for three years. Three years ago, after a close friend visited Abena, her mother suspected her of being a lesbian. She started an argument and shouted at her. The tenants who lived at the same place heard the shouting. Abena left as she did not feel comfortable staying around.

She [her mother] was making me sad. And I thought maybe when she finds out, she will call me and then ask me how I got into that. But she did not, she was just insulting me and my partner. And we left.<sup>219</sup>

At the time of the interview, Abena lives at a friend's place to avoid the stigmatization of her mother. On the one hand, Abena tries to manage stigma by avoiding people who stigmatize her. On the other hand, sometimes, Abena mentions specific ideas or beliefs that can be recognized as stigmatizing. Especially concerning future goals, Abena wishes to become heterosexual and fulfill Christian heteronormative ideals, such as being married and having children. While having these future ideals, Abena also believes that as a lesbian, people should not aim to get married or engaged.

Abena: I think if you are a les [lesbian], it does not mean when you get engaged to your partner, that it shows that you're both lesbian or you love the person. I just believe that if you are a les [lesbian], you should be real, you should not add anything to it.

Marlijn: Why do you think that?

Abena: Because, although we are a lesbian, I know it is a sin. Because we do not have to, but we did not decide to do it. So, we do not have to add more into it, to get engaged or something. You should be real.<sup>220</sup>

During this moment in the interview, Abena opens up more about her views on her sexuality. She says that she does see it as a sin and wants to change. She wants to be married to a man and will stop dating women. When I ask her if her beliefs are related to her faith, she answers that

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<sup>219</sup> This is said in response to statement 34, 'Sees this world as a place of suffering and sorrow', which Abena sorted as defining.

<sup>220</sup> This is said in response to statement 21, 'Takes part in religious activities to form or maintain social relationships', which is a distinguishing statement among persons of this prototype.

they are not. They are merely how she wants to live her life. However, she does believe that her sexuality has been partly influenced because a young man raped her when she was a teenager. She says she has not been romantically involved with men since that happened. Nevertheless, when she describes her desires for women, she talks about early experiences at high school, a period before the violent experience. She seems to have a conflicting viewpoint on the rationalization of her sexuality which most likely relates to her exposure to sexual stigma.

From her interpretations of the statements, it is clear that Abena is very aware of the stigmatization of her sexuality. At some point, she says that she does not want her daughter to find out that she is a lesbian. At the time of the interview, her daughter is at the father's house, but Abena's mother shared her care for a long time. She takes her to church as well. During the interview, Abena describes that she does not want her daughter to find out that she is a lesbian because she is afraid she might be interested in women. Only if it is her decision, without knowing that her mother is a lesbian, Abena is okay with it. The stigma likely influences this reasoning that Abena experiences and her wish that her daughter does not go through similar experiences.

In the future, Abena wants to change herself. As a repose to the question, 'was there any time that you thought I want to be a different kind of person', Abena answers that she has tried many times, but "it did not work". She explains that she found out that the pastor knew about her sexuality through her mother, and therefore she did not believe that he could help her. Even though Abena does not believe her pastor and the help or advice he gives, she does internalize the idea that she should not be a lesbian. Abena is convinced she can change if she cuts off her friends.

If I want to change, I can't have the same friends. I am in lesbian groups and everything, I do not think I can change. Unless, I quit those things and stop talking about with my friends. [...] I think what can really change me is having a guy who understands me and then he will keep me away from those things

Another motivation for Abena to 'change' is to return to her mother's home. Before the interview ends, Abena explains that she wants to stay at home and change and become how she "used to be". She says that her father does not approve of her anymore because she became pregnant as a teenager. On top of that, recently, Abena was "sacked" from work because one of her friends, a lesbian, visited her, and Abena got reported for allowing lesbians in the store. Abena got transferred to another store to do night shifts, but because the store is not in a safe place, she cannot work there and arrive and leave during the night.

In addition to the stigma that Abena experiences, she has a complicated relationship with the father of her child. Abena did not know where her daughter was staying at the interview, and the father refused to say so. She found out which school she resided in and went there every day to see her.

Abena might see all these unfortunate events as a consequence of her sexuality, as her pastor tells her. Abena refers to wanting to return to “become whom she used to be” before she gave birth to her daughter and lived at her mother’s place.

### 7.1.2 Strategies and agency

Although Abena has few resources and shares views that show she internalizes certain stigmatizing beliefs, she also tries to manage the stigma. Most importantly, Abena tries to avoid stigma by withdrawing from her religious community and her mother’s home. In addition, she has found support at one of her friend’s families.

It is difficult to argue whether or not Abena’s religiosity relates to self-stigma or could be recognized as a form of support during periods of stigma. On the one hand, Abena describes that she can believe in the divine regardless of whether she is a lesbian. Her faith is important to her. She views it as a central part of her being. On the other hand, Abena is mainly confronted with stigmatized religious views against her sexuality. The pressure to change comes from her pastor and her mother. Both of them support their views with religious beliefs. Abena says that she doubts her pastor, yet at the same time, she is fasting and praying because she hopes it will give her some opportunities in life.

There are ways in which Abena tries to manage religious stigmatization against her sexuality. Most important is finding other religious resources that are affirmative towards sexual minorities. For example, Abena listens to the radio and different pastors on the internet. She explains that she does not like it when she hears preachers preaching against homosexuality, and at those times, she skips or searches for another, more affirmative, religious leader.

An essential source of support is the queer community that Abena is part of. To cope with the stigma in her family, Abena has joined several supportive groups on WhatsApp. She explains that people share stories in those groups, what to expect, and how to deal with certain feelings.

You should get over it, because if someone knows you and she does not know you are into that and finds out, she will react. So, it is something I should get used to.

Clearly, among these groups, the stigmatizing reactions among family members and church communities are seen as ordinary and challenging

to manage. However, these groups have an important effect on individuals. For example, when Abena, due to the continuous pressure from the pastor, decided she wanted to change, her close friend said, “it is not true, life is too short, and you should not worry about it”. Abena explained in the interview that this made her question the pastor’s authority and that she felt accepted by her friend.

Despite the support in these groups, they often are critical against religion. Abena tells me that she does not have many friends from church with whom she openly discusses her sexuality. Though, in her WhatsApp groups, she does not talk about her religion. She says, “I do not trust [them], so I cannot share it with them”. Abena separates her social life into her church community and queer friends via social media. When talking about this division, she says she is “okay with this”. This is another strategy to avoid stigma: compartmentalize different parts of one’s life to avoid further stigma.

## 7.2 Key experiences shared by Kobby

*Kobby describes himself as a twenty-five-year-old male who identifies as a homosexual man in the survey. He does not feel like he belongs to any religious community or tradition. However, he does view himself as very religious (ten out of ten) and his family. Every day, he practices private religious practices, and at least once a week, he visits religious ceremonies. He describes in the survey that he is married or in a registered relationship.*

Kobby has had a difficult life with experiences of poverty and stigmatization. His parents divorced during Kobby’s childhood, and his mother moved to another country. Kobby stayed with his father and stepmother, who did not treat him well. Kobby describes that he started going “clubbing” to get money from the age of six. He claims that he became a homosexual because of his parent’s divorce and needed money. When he was a teenager, he met an older foreign man who would give him money in return for the company.

Kobby started visiting a church in secondary school that tried to help him financially. They gave him money to finish his secondary education. At the age of seventeen, Kobby chose to get baptized, and since then, as he says, he has changed his “clubbing lifestyle”. He self identifies as a homosexual man in the survey, but during the interview, he says he wishes for a future where he is married to a woman, has children, and his own house. He wants to work on a flight crew and hopes he can secure enough money to continue to study at a university. Kobby says that he wants to stay “focused on Christ”. He is part of several activity groups in a Methodist church and an active member of the queer

community in Accra. Kobby describes himself as very religious. This is also reflected in some of the views he shares, such as taking for granted that religious claims are true.

Throughout our infants, and whether you like it or not, so far as that you are born, you have to either believe it or ignore it. [...] The word was there before we were born.<sup>221</sup>

On the question 'what makes you the person you are today', Kobby answers, "Jesus Christ". Religion is critical to Kobby, primarily since his religious community has supported him and has helped him off the street. He argues that it has changed his life. The financial and communal support that Kobby received changed his life because he did not need to keep people company in exchange for money, led a healthier life, and had the chance to finish his education.

Jesus Christ. He made me who I am today. Cause at first, even how to get food and eat was difficult. So, growing up, seeing the light and the confirmation of the Holy Spirit. [...] I was at first, I was in need of money after sacked [by his mother in law], but yes, now it has limited. It has limited. For now, I am in a relationship. At first, I used to sleep in different, different, different. And I could even be, I could easily get a disease. So, whilst I was brought up to the church at the earlier stage, I realize those whole lot of things, so it is Jesus Christ who has made me who I am today.

Even though Kobby's church is supportive in many ways, at the same time, they hold stigmatizing views against homosexuality. During the interview, it was not clear whether Kobby ever had any desires for fellow men or whether he was rationalizing his desires to pass as heteronormative. However, several times in the survey and during the interview, Kobby explicitly identifies as a homosexual man while explicitly arguing that he has to change as "it is not right" to be a gay man.

### 7.2.1 Stigmatizing experiences

The stigma that Kobby experiences is mainly religious; it is based on religious beliefs against homosexuality. Kobby has internalized many of these beliefs and is convinced that his sexuality has to change. Kobby believes that his sexuality is due to his parent's divorce. Kobby had to rely on himself from a young age, and he suffered from poverty. At the same time, Kobby experienced stigmatization against his feminine character.

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<sup>221</sup> This is said in response to statement 92, 'Takes for granted that particular religious claims are true', which Kobby sorted as most defining.



During the interview, when Kobby discusses his childhood, he exemplifies how stringent parents with their children take care that their children stay on the “right path” instead of turning into a “bad destiny”. He then says that his stubbornness should change in his case, “to become the child of God” and clarifies that it refers to his sexuality.

I cannot just wake up and say I am normal to this. Unless I keep on meditating the word of God, for him, to be guiding me. Chang- leading me to the right path. And I know one day, one day, I will get rid of it [the homosexual feelings].<sup>222</sup>

These parts of the interview indicate that Kobby internalizes stigmatizing religious beliefs that support the idea of becoming a heteronormative Christian. His justification for his sexuality is his childhood, and he blames his parents for his sexual desires and the poverty he experienced. The line between his sexuality and working as a sex worker is blurry throughout the interview. Kobby tells me he used to be involved in sex work with older men. He explains that he did not know any other way of supporting himself other than robbery or assault, which he did not want to engage in.

Working as a sex worker adds to the stigma he is confronted with, as sex work is another highly stigmatized line of work, which is illegal in Ghana. However, Kobby discusses his experience in line with the idea that he could quickly ‘stop being gay’ if he wanted to. During the interview, Kobby’s argument is a way to overcome the stigmatization against homosexuality, even though being a sex worker leads to stigmatization, but opens up the possibility of living a heterosexual life at some point. However, this stays confusing in the interview, as Kobby repeatedly identifies as a homosexual man. His explanations demonstrate how complicated it is to manage the stigmatization and poverty that he experiences with little resources and belonging to a religious community strongly against homosexuality.

I have passed through all that because my parents got divorced. Because of the divorce, I have to struggle. Rushing for help and friends when I am in need of something. A whole lot of insults. A whole lot of words, you do not even want to hear it. Just discriminating you in some ways. Because of my sexuality.<sup>223</sup>

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<sup>222</sup> This follows from a discussion on statement 83, ‘Believes that one can be deeply moral without being religious’, which is a most defining statement among persons of this prototype.

<sup>223</sup> This is a response to statement 77, ‘Is profoundly touched by the suffering of others’, which Kobby sorted as most defining.

If it is not my wish to be a gay [...] but because of the difficulties that I am having. [...] I think I can resist myself from being a gay. Because I do not have anyone to support me, yes, that is why I am so in it.<sup>224</sup>

During his childhood and teenage years, Kobby says he started to go “clubbing”, and at some point, he kept an older man company in exchange for money. He did not have a steady place to sleep, so he stayed with many different friends. In his teenage years, Kobby joined a religious community, a Christian church, and received financial support from them. They helped him to get off the streets and found him a job. However, he had to quit his job because he experienced stigma against his feminine character. At the same time, his religious community actively preaches against homosexuality, which Kobby internalizes. His experience quickly turns into a continuous cycle of stigmatization and poverty, which increases the chance of self-stigma as it supports the stigmatized religious belief that homosexual people cannot be successful.

I was working at a certain work place. One of them got to know and he started molesting me, everywhere that I go. So, it made me feel bad. Then I stopped with the work.<sup>225</sup>

Although Kobby has internalized stigmatizing views, he identifies as a homosexual and hides his sexuality in his religious community, as he is afraid of more stigmatization. He explains during the interview that regularly, pastors point people out in public for being homosexual. It is believed in his church that a spirit possesses these people. Kobby has internalized the idea that homosexuality is a sin caused by a demonic spirit, which makes him fearful of the divine. Rather than having a loving and affirmative relationship, he has one based on fear and punishment. He has internalized the idea that the divine rejects homosexuality. This is a very negative idea to internalize, as it increases self-stigma and, as a consequence, feelings of anxiety and guilt when one stays in that particular community.

Well, you may not know the thought once heard. Somebody will go and expose it. In this country for instance, some people begin to throw a lot of rubbish to you. So, I prefer it staying a secret among those that we know ourselves, in the church where I am from.

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<sup>224</sup> This follows from a discussion on statement 37, ‘Has experienced a profound change in religious or spiritual understanding or commitment’, which is a distinguishing statement among persons of this prototype.

<sup>225</sup> This is said in response to statement 77, ‘Is profoundly touched by the suffering of others’, which Kobby sorted as most defining.

Hm, before you turn to the divine, it is true that you are not that comfortable. Cause, the midst of people that does not want to like what you are [homosexual]. Let me use this, be me, gay. Someone does not know, that turning to the divine, newly, so with my experience, the first time that I entered the church, I was shivering within me. I thought God has just opened the sights of the man of God, so He exposed me in the midst of people. I was afraid. Maybe someone might know. When He [God] exposed me, I will feel bad within. So sometimes, I feel uncomfortable.<sup>226</sup>

Kobby is part of a religious gathering of young sexual minorities outside of the church to avoid stigmatization in the church. In contrast to some affirmative groups, this group supports the dominant idea that a Christian man cannot be homosexual and has to change. Kobby looks up to his peers in this group and sees their stories of change as motivation to do the same for himself.

One day we just had the meeting and then my master [leader of the group] called me that although he enjoyed being in this relationship, but he is okay, one day. He will change, just to seek for the kingdom of God. Yes, that is what he told me. I also responded, that is the same thing that I am also thinking.

Among friends of this group, different paths towards change are discussed. All of these are related to religious practices and supported with the idea to change for religious reasons. Praying and fasting are examples, but meeting or being blessed by famous pastors who see themselves as prophets is viewed as a way to change. The idea that these practices can lead to change is harmful as they increase self-stigma. In addition, they are not accessible to individuals with little or no money, as meeting these famous prophets is often in exchange for a sum of money.

Kobby: I cannot just stand up one day and I will say I have stopped [being a homosexual].

Marlijn: Yeah. So, what do you think needs to happen to change?

Kobby: Just to memorize all the words of God. Pray. Fast. I believe in fasting.

I knew a friend who is into this [being homosexual] too. He too, took the decision, he does not want to be like that, he said. He keeps going to the church. Then he traveled all the way from Ghana to Nigeria. I do not know what you have heard about prophet TB Joshua<sup>227</sup>. He is

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<sup>226</sup> This is said in response to statement 39, 'Feels uncomfortable or fearful in turning to the divine', which is sorted by Kobby as defining.

<sup>227</sup> Prophet TB Joshua is "Temitope Balogun Joshua, commonly referred to as T. B. Joshua, a charismatic Nigerian pastor, televangelist, and philanthropist. He is the leader and

a big man of God in Nigeria. So, my friend too. He could not meet him one on one but he lays his fingers on him. So, my friend was telling me, he just reciting it within him, that although he could not tell the man of God the reason why he is here<sup>228</sup>, but whilst he has laid his fingers on him, he knows, he has seized being a gay. And ever since he came back from Nigeria, he seizes being a gay and he is now a man of God. So, it is a spiritual [thing].<sup>229</sup>

Religious practices that support ‘conversion’ are very harmful as they enforce the idea that homosexuality is unnatural. Studies have shown that people exposed to conversion therapy may experience depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, identity crises, and symptoms of post-traumatic stress (Horner 2010, Green et al. 2020 and Ogunbajo et al. 2021). In the case of Kobby, his faith is not a form of support. He says during the interview how he believes that he will feel closer to the divine once he has become heterosexual. This stigmatizing belief only increases self-stigma and does not leave any space for affirmative religious beliefs that could be empowering.

A factor that increases the exposure to stigmatization is that Kobby relies on his religious community. This makes sense, as they helped him when he was younger, and he does not have any resources. Therefore, he strongly relies on religious authorities and believes that religious scriptures are guidance in life. Compared to persons the other prototypes, this is different, as Kobby does not view these authorities as untrustworthy or hypocritical but instead relies on them and follows their advice. However, it increases self-stigma, as the religious authorities at his church promote conversion therapy and negative beliefs about homosexuality.

Yes, when I am going through some problems or troubles, I think the right place to go is to visit the church. Confront my pastor, this part is bothering me, and he will give me the directions because he is representing God on earth for now. So, he has some good advice that if I am submitting to this, I think he is the right person to give it to me.<sup>230</sup>

His reliance on religious authorities is sometimes helpful, in the case of help with nightmares or guidance in life, but they are harmful with the

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founder of The Synagogue, Church of All Nations, a Christian megachurch” (SCOAN International n.d.).

<sup>228</sup> Because there might be consequences if he would tell the prophet that he is a homosexual man.

<sup>229</sup> This is said in response to statement 37, ‘Has experienced profound change in religious or spiritual understanding or commitment’, which is a distinguishing statement among persons of this prototype.

<sup>230</sup> This is said in response to statement 20, ‘Relies on religious authorities for understanding and direction’, which is sorted by Kobby as defining.

stigmatizing beliefs about homosexuality. In the next part of the interview, Kobby explains how he views homosexuality as being possessed by a demon, a belief that his church spreads.

Kobby: Yes, I do believe that [homosexuality is caused by a demon] [...] Even being a gay, I think is the possession of the devil, because you cannot be moving around and you see a fellow man and you began to admire him. It is not the Christian, it's devil like, filled with that feelings within us. Yes, so I think it is part of being possessed.

Marlijn: So, you think that you are possessed partially?

Kobby: Yes, when it comes to that aspect of my life, I think it is possessed, yeah.

Marlijn: And what do you do about this?

Kobby: I keep on praying. I know I am gay, but God, I send my prayers to him.

This exchange shows how these stigmatizing beliefs are harmful as they increase self-stigma and practices that supposedly should cure the stigma, which they evidently will not. The shared beliefs by Kobby in these practices and the stigmatized view increase his own negative beliefs and thoughts.

### 7.2.2 Strategies and agency

In the case of Kobby, some of his strategies intertwine with stigmatizing experiences. The influence of his religious community plays a role in this as they spread stigmatizing beliefs about homosexuality. Kobby's religious community has been a support system for him. He relies on them for advice and financial support. He believes the religious authorities when they tell their interpretations of religious scriptures. This gives him motivation for certain things, such as pursuing his education, but it also makes him internalize negative beliefs about homosexuality. It is difficult to categorize in his case which parts of his faith or support of his community can be recognized as strategies or agentic and which increase self-stigma as these two dimensions are intertwined. Kobby's example demonstrates why it is more difficult for persons with little resources to reject communities who hold stigmatizing beliefs but want to help them in other aspects of their lives. It also shows that strategies to manage stigma for people who have little resources are very different from those who have access to more resources as they have to make different choices.

Compared to persons of the earlier prototypes, Kobby's strategies to manage stigma are pretty different. They are more or less intertwined with self-stigma, with opposing beliefs about homosexuality. It is unclear whether Kobby tells these explanations of his sexuality to avoid

further stigma or whether he believes in them. However, it can be seen as a strategy, as Kobby is confronted with less stigma and maintains the relationship with his mother. One key aspect of his strategy is the belief that homosexuality is not natural; Kobby explains that he became a homosexual due to his parent's divorce and the lack of a "good" role model. Although his mother is not content with Kobby's choice, she accepts his explanation, and Kobby maintains his relationship with her.

At first, she was trying to tell me it was very bad. But I took my time. And I narrated how it started. Because she was not close with my dad, if like the way they used to live, if they did not divorce at first, like definitely, both of them will know that this what I am involving or engaging myself into, they will tell me the path that your leading is very bad. Let us direct you to the right path. But because they are separated, I took it like, I am leading my own life. [...] So, I thought, if it was not because of the divorce, I would not have done any of this thing on myself or any act. Because I did not get the role models, like my parents, that is why I have engaged myself in this kind of acts.

Besides the motivation of his parent's divorce, Kobby also struggled financially when he was a child. He lived with his father and stepmother, but he says that his stepmother abused him. This made him go "clubbing" to get some money from the streets from a young age. Kobby expands on his earlier explanation with his experiences from childhood.

She [Kobby's mother] left me when I was just two years. I stayed with my dad and my stepmother, but the woman kept on maltreating me. Doing a whole lot of hurt to me. So, as I completed my junior high school, then I decided to find my own life. That is when I engaged myself in being a homosexual.

We [he and his friends] went to a nightclub one day. Some guy was sighting on me, then he called me. He was interested in me. I said, I am new and that I do not know anything about it. He said, I should come down and he will just take care of me. Then I said, okay. So, for a cause, I was in need of money, so once I heard he said he would take good care of me, I said, why not, there is no harm in trying. [...] He really loved me. He placed a ring on my finger, just to proof. In terms of finances, he helped me a lot.

The way Kobby speaks of his sexuality in this sense is almost a way of surviving instead of talking about falling in love or discovering he had feelings for men. During the interview, parts of rational explanations on why he became a homosexual overlap with the stigmatizing beliefs he holds against it. It can be seen as a strategy as homosexuality is viewed as unnatural in his religious community. Even though Kobby's religious community is against homosexuality, he has also found allies within the church community. Even though the church itself might not take an

affirmative stand on homosexuality, several people support each other and are not excluded from the church. This makes Kobby feel comfortable, active in church activity groups, and open about the person he is.

One of our masters in choreography also like that [homosexual]. So, the first time that we met, he just called me. There is something within me that I can sense or see that same thing within my palls. 'What is the thing that we have in common', he said. 'I am a homosexual and I can see that thing through my ally'. And I said, 'I am also that. [...] We became rather close. When I get myself into problems, then I call him and he will come to talk.

These kinds of groups within churches, secretive or not, help change inside dynamics. They secure the positions of people who could be otherwise marginalized. They help each other and can pose a resistance against stigma in the community. For example, with a small peer group in the church, Kobby maneuvers his way around. To support others, Kobby actively tries to speak to new church members he thinks are homosexual.

After I finished performing, whilst we closed the church activities, in the midst of this all, he said "Hey you, this boy, you sing like someone who is gay". That is what he said, so like I felt very embarrassed. Our master was standing behind me. He yelled back to the person that he should just shut up, who is he, for him to criticize about someone's [sexuality].

These inside groups are crucial for persons like Kobby who are confronted with stigma but do not want to leave their religious community. They enable a person to participate and resist the stigma. They have the potential to increase affirmative religious beliefs on homosexuality. For Kobby, it is crucial to continue within his community as he relies heavily on them. It has increased his faith, and he felt like he could start again, when being baptized, as a born-again Christian. He could close parts of his life that he did not like, such as the struggles with poverty and his "clubbing lifestyle".

When I entered the temple [the church], I said God, why did you not teach me these things earlier on? Cause I knew I have used my body for a whole lot of bad, bad things. So, I like, cried.<sup>231</sup>

Kobby's explanation that he became homosexual because of his parents and his poverty during childhood made him acceptable in church. After

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<sup>231</sup> This follows from a discussion on statement 90, 'Affirms the idea of reincarnation, the cycle of birth and rebirth', which is a least defining statement among persons of this prototype. Kobby sorted this statement as least defining too.

his junior high school, Kobby went to the pastor to tell him that his parents thought he was gay. He told the pastor that he had trouble continuing his education because he would no longer get any financial support from his parents. He also shared his view on his sexuality, that it was due to their divorce. The pastor tried to support him financially and encouraged him not to feel lonely or depressed. He introduced Kobby to a friend, who was a man who started seeing Kobby and giving him money in return. While the pastor did not know about this, he discovered what was going on after some time. Kobby said he did not have a choice:

If I do not do it, who will help me. It is not really that I can come to him [the pastor] or his wife for money or assistance, so, it is true, I am like this. He [the pastor] will be helping and remembering me in his prayers, so that I do change. [...] Later on, he said to that guy, is this my partner, and I said yes. He said okay, we should keep it to ourselves.<sup>232</sup>

Kobby relates his sexuality to his situation. First, he confronts the pastor with the argument that he does not have a choice because nobody else will financially support him. Second, he believes that if he were in a better financial situation, he would not be gay. However, he describes himself as a homosexual man, so even though the rationalization of his sexuality makes him acceptable in church, it does not mean that any conversion therapy, or the aim of it, has a positive effect.

Regarding sex, Kobby says he had to neglect the idea of giving it up for his religion: “Me, comparing to my Christian [...] I have to, you know, neglect it, that is why I placed it in the negative side” is his response to the statement ‘Willingly gives up worldly or bodily pleasures for spiritual reasons’<sup>233</sup>. This is the first time that Kobby refers to intimacy as a pleasure:

We say pleasure, comes in two things in mind. Either in the bad or the good way. [...] The bad way, let’s be real here, in terms of sex, sex is a pleasure.

Besides being an active church member, Kobby is also an active member of the queer community in Accra. He says that he is a social person and “interested in getting to know intentions about such people”. He also says that many people are interested in the queer community in his community, but they are afraid of being stigmatized. Kobby wants to work on this:

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<sup>232</sup> This is said in response to statement 20, ‘Relies on religious authorities for understanding and direction’, which Kobby sorted as defining.

<sup>233</sup> This relates to statement 98, ‘Willingly gives up worldly or bodily pleasures for religious or spiritual reasons’, which Koby sorted as least defining.



I told them, in our beloved countries, we deal with the law. So, no one can see you, molest you, harass you. When anyone tries doing that, you can just go to the police.

Despite Kobby's views on homosexuality, he has the opinion that they should not be discriminated, but he does not feel like his religious views are stigmatizing. However, Kobby says he feels most able to express himself when he is among his queer friends: "When I am around my LGBT people, I feel very proud to express myself".

### 7.3 Key experiences shared by Ato

*Ato is a twenty-one-year-old male who identifies as a gay man. He describes that he belongs to a Christian religious community. He views himself as very religious (ten out of ten) and his family. More than once a week, he visits religious ceremonies and practices private religious practices.*

During the interview, Ato was very family-focused. He is the eldest of his family and has four siblings. His parents used to live together with his siblings, but that is not the case anymore during the interview. His father left his family and got remarried, after which his mother left the country. One of his siblings got ill and had to be treated regularly for kidney dialysis, a financial struggle for Ato's family. His sister had a good job, but since she is sick, the family tries to put all their money together for the hospital fees. This has put Ato's study on hold and made him look for a job to support his family in this time.

I'm getting myself a job. Like with what I am getting three hundred a month. It cannot be anything for my sister. So that is my crisis now. But I just need to support myself. And I need to depend on myself. Because my sister is facing all these issues and all I need to give her is the courage and motivate she can do better in her life although she has this.

On top of this crisis, through something that happened, Ato's cousin found out that Ato is gay and told Ato's parents. Since then, Ato has a difficult relationship with his parents. He says he cannot deal with these issues since his family struggles with poverty. Ato is most focused on his education, finishing his studies, and getting a successful career. He hopes that the stigma against homosexuality in Ghana will change, and he contributes to that by supporting local NGOs.

Ato visits the church quite regularly and believes in the divine. He is very aware of the stigma against homosexuality and actively works against it. He does this in several ways, from within his church with finding allies to working for local NGOs and educating others. Through

his activities, Ato has several supportive friends outside of his family. He also holds affirmative ideas towards himself, his religious views, and progress against stigma in Ghana even though he is confronted with it daily.

I support myself, like, [...] as in comparing to my life choice. I chose to be an LGBT person and I think that is what I like. And that is what when I was born, what I feel. Because no one can change me, I think, you need to understand me, you cannot judge me. You need to support me in the way I am. [...] Sometimes when I just sit, I feel so bad. But I am thinking okay. It is because being gay in Ghana here, it is very, very, very difficult. Because either you find support or life is going to be miserable.<sup>234</sup>

### 7.3.1 Stigmatizing experiences

Due to Ato's femininity, he is exposed to stigma in public daily. He faces discrimination around his neighborhood and among his friends from his neighborhood. For example, one day, Ato got scammed by meeting a person his friend knew. This person started shouting that Ato and his friend were gay. These assaults happen regularly through dating apps, where homophobic individuals try to scam homosexual men. His parents found out about this incident because Ato's cousin witnessed it and told them.

I defended myself and when I talked to them [Ato's parents], I was like, it was not me, it was the guy who was like forcing me to do this kind of. Yeah, I cannot share it with them. Because when it comes to Ghana, when you share your sexual preference if your family is poor. If you are not like [rich], they cannot support you, they will be like, discriminating about you. There are certain powers. I think I need to keep it private on me.

Ato's example shows that his parents would not approve of homosexuality either and that he needs to keep it hidden from them. He explains that he is afraid his parents will stop supporting him financially since they already struggle with poverty. He believes that among families with little resources, there is more risk that they will discriminate against a family member who is homosexual.

Although Ato has always hidden his sexuality, his family believes he is homosexual because he is a feminine man. Because of this, Ato cannot avoid stigma even among his own family. He explains that his family's stigmatized beliefs are intertwined with their religious views.

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<sup>234</sup> This is said in response to statement 100, 'Supports individual freedom of choice in matters of faith and morality', which is a most defining statement among persons of this prototype.

My family, how they do everything for me, they discriminated. My family is so religious. So, when I was girly, they said 'when you are gay, you will die. You will definitely die in sickness. That is what my family believes in.

In the interview, Ato explains further that his family wants him to go to church and be active in religious activities to change his sexuality. However, it is not clear whether he agrees with them and if he internalizes any of these stigmatizing views.

I think they want me to be like, go to church, pray, worship, I have to believe in God. They expect me to be like so, because I am feminine, I need to pray.

The stigma that Ato experiences is based on his femininity, as he hides his sexuality. Being a feminine man is interpreted as being a homosexual, which makes Ato exposed continuously as his character that is stigmatized against is always visible. At work, Ato experiences discrimination because of this. Discrimination at work and being unsuccessful strengthen the belief that homosexuals cannot be successful. However, although Ato experiences discrimination at work, he does not believe in this idea. He aims to start his own company, so he can leave institutions that are discriminating against non-normative individuals.

People believe here gay people cannot achieve. Because when you go for a job and you will write an application, because maybe you are gay or girlish, feminine, they will know. They will not like call you for the job because you are very feminine. Me too, I work like in the healthcare services, and so maybe I should focus on that. But because I am feminine and everything, I won't get the support. In Ghana, yes. So, I have to start my own place and work.<sup>235</sup>

In his religious community, Ato is exposed to speeches against homosexuality. He attends a pentecostal church, which holds the idea that demons possess homosexuals. He believes that his religious community does not guide his sexuality.

When you are being gay or something, the church frowns about it. Like a spiritual something has you possessed. They discriminate about you. That is why I placed it [the statement] here. Because I found myself sometimes in [that situation]. [...] I do not want to say something back to them [the pastor or church members]. I just went

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<sup>235</sup> This follows from a discussion on statement 55, 'Personally finds the idea of divinity empty of significance or meaning', sorted by Ato as least defining.

away. Because when you say something, they are going to be like, prolong or something, they are going to say a lot of issues.<sup>236</sup>

Ato's experience resonates with other individuals in this study whose family is committed to Christian pentecostal churches. Unfortunately, family members often internalize stigmatizing views against homosexuality and stigmatize their children if they are non-normative. Often children are taken to the church to seek help from the pastor, who recommends religious practices to 'change' the sexuality of the child, which increases the risk of self-stigma of the child.

Although Ato experiences stigma from his religious community and his family, he disagrees with the belief that the possession of a demon causes homosexuality.

I do not see myself being a demonic spirit. Because I am African, I believe in demonic spirits, yes. I think, when I go to church and they pray on something, they just come through to the person and speak. But the person is not demonic. The person is not demonic, they [demonic spirits] just come to the person to say what they are about to do or if they are about to do anything. But I think, it does not basically relate to sexuality.

Ato's experience relates to his father's involvement in African Indigenous Religions, which pentecostal (charismatic) churches often demonize. The pentecostal church that Ato goes to actively opposes African Indigenous Religions (Tweneboah 2019, Van Klinken 2016). They represent spirits as evil spirits or demons that can captivate human bodies and make them ill. Homosexuality is seen as one condition that is a demonic spirit. These conditions can be relieved by a pastor or by religious practices recommended by a pastor. Although Ato does not believe in this stigmatizing idea, he claims he leads a healthier life because of the church. He changed his lifestyle and chose to have fewer sexual partners. He says that his religious community contributed to the fact that he could change his way of living and living a healthier, safer, more financially stable life. Some associations made to homosexuality in dominant beliefs, for example, non-monogamy, are ideas that Ato wants to distance himself from. This is not just because of church beliefs but also because of the expectations from his family, which can make Ato feel guilty from time to time.

When it comes to my siblings and family, none of them, I do not know. They are straight people and I am thinking me being gay, my mom is looking up to me. So sometimes, I feel guilty of it. And I need to brush

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<sup>236</sup> This follows from a discussion on statement 59, 'His or her sexuality is strongly guided by religious or spiritual outlook', sorted by Ato as not defining.

it off and just focus on like, work towards it. I need to work and become a good person, so I can support my family as well.

### 7.3.2 Strategies and agency

One of the strategies that Ato uses is to conceal his sexuality to avoid further stigmatization. He hides his sexuality and avoids discussions to avoid further stigmatization by his family or religious community. However, in addition to strategies to manage stigma, there are also strategies evident to fight for change and empowerment. As the other persons in this prototype, Ato is part of a supportive group within the church. This is not an organized group, but they support each other and go against stigmatizing views inside the church. It makes it possible for persons such as Ato to still be active in the church and be part of activity groups, such as the choir. It also enables him to have private conversations with church members to discuss stigmatizing views more personally. Ato points this out while discussing discrimination in the church.

They discriminate about it. You can't just go out in it. Just be yourself. But you can be active in the church, they will take it in privately and as time goes on it will definitely as our president said 'it's bound to happen'<sup>237</sup>.

Ato explains that he cannot be open about his sexuality or be himself in the church. However, that does not withhold him from being active in his religious community as he views his participation in religious activities and meetings as a critical element of his faith. He describes how he feels most comfortable in his religious community because people know him. His femininity is often explained as a consequence of being skinnier instead of being associated with homosexuality. Ato has found ways to navigate these stereotypes and avoid stigmatization by concealing his sexuality and “composing” himself, adjusting his gendered expressions/behavior.

I know how to take care of myself. Like you know, how to handle yourself. [...] Me, being a Christian, when I go to a place and you are Christian and there, I know how to compose myself to them. Not coming out, being my sexual preference or something. [...] When I go to church activities, I can just come in and I can be very feminine. But when it comes to churches in Ghana here, they do not, they cannot just say to your straightforward because you are feminine, you cannot

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<sup>237</sup> Ato refers to the interview where the president of Ghana spoke out that “change is bound to happen” which was interpreted by LGBTQ+ advocates as a referral of progression of rights for people who identify as sexual minorities (Al Jazeera 2017, November 25).

set a foot [inside], like that. But they think maybe, they will leave me, because I am thin, that is why I am being feminine. So, they won't say anything. But when they see you in key activities, social gatherings, then they attack you as a gay person.

Ato explains that he has to compose his feminine behavior depending on the place because people might think he is gay and will harass him. However, because Ato is known in his church, he feels more comfortable being who he is because he knows people cannot openly say what they think of him. At the same time, Ato argues that being in the church enables him to have private conversations with individuals and have constructive discussions on homosexuality. Being active in the church also allowed him to find allies, and together they formed a support group in the church. This is similar to the other two persons in this prototype, who discuss making changes within a small, supportive group inside a religious community. Not only do they aim for change, but they also support each other in the rejection of internalization of these stigmatizing views and to love themselves for who they are.

I have one friend, he was like 'I hope I stop being gay'. I do not know the reason why he said that. We went to church, he is not my church member, but so, we went and he was like 'I think this is bad. You know, I should be going, gay is bad'. And I was like: 'you know something, just be yourself. God knows the reason why you have been gay. He knows the reason why you are like that. So just give up on that and just worship God in a truthful way. Just focus on your true self.

This group of allies within the church also increases affirmative interpretations of religious scriptures that they share to motivate each other. These interpretations are related to the strategy of queer readings of religious scriptures. This strategy decreases self-stigma, as it increases affirmative religious views on homosexuality. The knowledge of these interpretations also opens up discussions on homonegative interpretations and undermines or critiques religious authority. Ato gives a few examples during the interview of interpretations that give him motivation in life. The bible is important to him, and he views it as a guide in life.

I forgot the verse. It is not Solomon. But anyway, he as the wisdom and the understanding, he asked God for everything, 'God give me wisdom and understanding'. At the same time, he is a king. [...] So as in like, you need to ask. Sometimes you need to have faith in yourself. [...] Have the energy, the power, to do what you want to do. And sometimes you need to feel calmness as well, the right time will come and you will come out of it." Ato describes how these kinds of stories give him an understanding of how to react to certain events in life: "Whenever I feel bored or something, I sometimes take the bible and

read it. I feel I think an inner understanding. I try to understand what the verse is talking about. To understand the main reason why I feel so sad and all. To encourage myself.<sup>238</sup>

As the above part demonstrates, these interpretations can be a form of support while experiencing stigma in religious communities. Ato describes how he feels connected to the verse, “feeling an inner understanding”, and how it encourages him. His faith has a supportive role in his life and is not a negative influence despite the stigmatizing views in his religious community. This is most likely because of the allies he found in his community and the opportunity to discuss these experiences.

Besides being active in his church, Ato is also an active member of several local NGOs lobbying for the rights of LGBTQ+ persons in Ghana. In addition, he has worked on different projects, which taught him more about his rights and enabled him to share that knowledge with others.

We went to educate people, we went to a study group at a small conference and studied a lot. Afterwards we went to [name of a city], in Ghana to talk to the chief and to have a good understanding. We discussed LGBT healthcare. We also reached out to the community and discussed comfortability, freedom and offered HIV tests.

You need to ask her what is the reason why she got molested. Did she get discriminated in the community? I think, maybe people do not like the way she does stuff. You need to tell her because in Ghana, it is not something that is legal. So, you need to maintain how she behaves and everything.

In the above segment, Ato describes a situation outside of Accra related to working for the NGO. In his opinion, caring for queer people works in two ways, 1) discussing these issues in the community that someone lives in and 2) discussing strategies with the person. Because homosexuality is not legal, Ato suggests to “maintain behavior” to avoid stigmatization: do not dress up and avoid walking and talking in ways that are not seen as heterosexual. At the end of the interview, he emphasizes that it is not a solution to “just open up with your sexual preference” as the person might risk violent responses. He tells me that one of his friends used to do this until he got beaten up by a group in his neighborhood. Ato’s remarks tap into the discussion of how to navigate stigma, manage it, and how to go against it. His argument is based on the idea that people first have to be safe and in a supportive environment before stigmatization can be tackled. His own experiences in his church

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<sup>238</sup> This is said in response to statement 15, ‘Considers the meaning of religious texts and teachings to be clear and true’, a distinguishing statement among persons of this prototype.

community, having allies there, are examples of this. He also describes the risks when this is not the process, and people may end up hurt as his friend did.

In addition to being part of supportive communities or having supportive friends, Ato emphasizes the need for resources. At the beginning of the interview, he says that he is confronted with more stigma among his family because of the lack of resources. He has no resources to live on his own, and the little he has is used for his sister, who is ill. If he were open about his sexuality to his family members, his poverty would align with the dominant belief that he is unsuccessful because he is a homosexual. At the end of the interview, Ato stresses that if he were financially independent, the discussions between him and his parents would change.

Like when I am working, I can just, my mom, I will not tell her straightforward but like [...] when you come to Ghana, when you are very, eh [...] when you are okay with money or financial issues, they praise you and they support you like that.

His example shows how difficult it is to manage stigma against homosexuality when the person also experiences poverty, which is related to being unsuccessful. Ato has to overcome poverty and secure work to break this cycle, which is problematic since he experiences discrimination. His focus is on education, to get a degree, so he has more chances of getting work. Like other persons in this study, he believes that financial independence would give him more freedom to be who he is, navigate the stigma among his family, and support others.

## 7.4 Discussion

Persons of the prototype 'Religiously Active Doubting Believer' are religiously active within their religious communities. Compared to the previous two prototypes, persons of this prototype seem to participate in their religious communities, rely more on religious authorities and scriptures, and believe it is significant to participate in their religious communities for their individual faith. Even though persons of prototype one, the 'open-minded confident believers', were active too in their religious communities, persons of this prototype seem to rely more on the authorities within those communities.

They have minor critiques against religious authorities and stigmatizing views shared by them. They rely more on their communities, not only in terms of faith but also in terms of support. Especially poverty plays a role among persons of this prototype, which makes them more reliant on their religious communities, who often offer help to finish school or have a place to live.



Concerning 'doubting', there is a variety among the persons of this prototype. It seems that in contrast to the interpretation of the Q-pattern analysis, the two statements 'Has experienced a profound change in religious or spiritual understanding'<sup>239</sup> and 'Has frequent doubts about long-held religious convictions'<sup>240</sup> are not associated with each other by persons of this prototype. Some people of this prototype hold the first view and share that they experienced a change in their religious life, such as Ato. He explains this concerning his sexuality; since his friend 'changed' into a heterosexual, he believes his religious practices can also help him do that. The second statement does refer to the doubt but not to sexuality, but rather to religious authorities and communities who stigmatize non-normative sexualities. Both Kobby and Abena share that they struggled with the stigmatizing views in their religious communities; their doubts about the stigmatizing views, and thus religious convictions, are reflected in this statement.

Persons of this prototype are careful in their navigation of managing stigma. The approach highlighted throughout the interviews among persons of this prototype is to change stigmatizing views from within religious communities, for example, by finding allies in the same community or having discussions on homosexuality in private conversations between members of the religious community. This navigation allows them to be part of religious communities while striving to change particular views and finding allies to increase affirmative religious views. However, these processes are not linear, and as the interviews in this chapter have shown, self-stigma can occur within these groups of allies. Being part of a religious community and religious family who hold stigmatizing views on homosexuality while trying to navigate and manage the stigma shows how intertwined stigmatizing structures and strategies to manage it are.

Furthermore, the persons discussed in this chapter show how stigma relates to other factors in life, such as health, teenage parenthood, poverty, and education. Persons of this prototype are dependent on their family and religious communities and have fewer resources. This makes it difficult to break from the dominant belief that homosexuals are unsuccessful, poor, and less healthy. To manage this stigmatizing belief, persons of this prototype try to conceal their sexuality, rationalize it, and focus on education and work.

#### 7.4.1 Experiences of stigma

Compared to the other two prototypes, persons of this prototype show more symptoms of self-stigma. Most likely, this is because they rely

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<sup>239</sup> Statement 37 of the Faith Q-Sort, distinguishing among persons of this prototype.

<sup>240</sup> Statement 2 of the Faith Q-Sort.

more on their religious communities and, most notably, their authorities. This exposes them to more stigmatization against homosexuality and increases the chance to internalize homonegative religious beliefs since religious leaders are often responsible for spreading those. The exposure to these beliefs does not necessarily lead to self-stigma, as Ato does not share any of those thoughts, but it often does. It is, for example, visible in how some persons of this prototype rationalize their sexuality. For instance, Kobby believes he became homosexual because he did not have 'good' heterosexual role models since his parents divorced.

Another example of self-stigma is the idea that homosexuality is not natural, which is shared by some persons of this prototype. This idea is an internalization of homonegative beliefs spread in their religious communities. Both Kobby and Abena are more active than persons in other prototypes in practices that should change them into heterosexuals (i.e., conversion therapy). Examples are fasting or praying. This is encouraged by religious authorities and is taken seriously by some persons of this prototype.

However, these practices might not be satisfying, as they do, of course, not work. Conversion therapy is harmful or any practice that promises change fueled by homonegativity. They may lead to depression and suicidal thoughts, among other things (Horner 2010, Green et al. 2020 and Ogunbajo et al. 2021). In this chapter, the interviews show that the belief in these practices, even if they do not work, fuels the wish to change. Instead of religious conversion practices, participants shift to changes in their personal life, such as the idea to cut off friendships. Abena suggests this when she explains that she wants to change.

Poverty is a significant issue for persons of this prototype and is sometimes intertwined with self-stigma and internalized homonegativity. In Ghana, there is a dominant belief that homosexuals cannot be successful and might die young. This is further explained by the idea that a demon possesses these individuals. Therefore, people might be discouraged from socializing with persons who are assumed to be homosexuals because they do not want to be affected by this demonic possession. In practice, people might not associate or socialize with homosexuals because they do not want to experience stigma. As for the persons who are stigmatized against, this dominant belief quickly becomes a reality as they face discrimination at the workplace or educational institutions and might not receive proper healthcare when they are ill.

Persons of this prototype have difficulties rejecting this dominant belief, as they experience poverty and struggle with finding a way out due to the stigmatization they face. An example is Abena, who often says that she might agree with her pastor that her life is "blocked" because

she is a lesbian. She has no job and does not get approached by young men to date. She believes that this might change if she were heterosexual. However, her recent job was lost because her boss discriminated against her for letting lesbians come into the store. In addition, she is not approached by young men because there are rumors she is a lesbian.

Moreover, she struggles with poverty because she had to drop out of high school and has no educational degree. At the same time, she has to take care of her daughter and her mother. However, the pastor explains these events differently and her family members.

Abena is viewed as not being able to be successful because she is a lesbian. In her case, being successful does not only refer to breaking out of poverty; it also refers to the heteronormative ideal of marriage and having a family. In these aspects, too, Abena could be seen as a failure, as she is a single mother. Abena internalizes these homonegative and heteronormative ideals, as she argues that lesbians should “not add anything to it”; they should not want to get married or engaged. In her opinion, that is only an option for heterosexual couples and not something homosexual couples should strive for.

Another example that follows the same line of argument is from Kobby. He experienced poverty from a young age and lived on the streets or with friends as a teenager. To survive, he was a sex worker. When he joined a church, this started to change, as the community supported him financially. He explains how he believes that the church and being baptized have changed his life during the interview. He relates his sexuality, being homosexual, to when he worked as a sex worker. For his future, he hopes he gets married to a woman and starts a family. The break from poverty, or recovery from poverty, together with the idea that homosexuality makes someone unsuccessful, has made Kobby believe his life has changed for the better. He has internalized the idea that homosexuality is not natural and that to have a successful life, he has to live up to the heteronormative religious expectation of getting married and starting a nuclear family.

Ato does not show signs of internalization, even though he also experiences poverty. However, the poverty in his family pressures him to accept particular stigmatizing views and take care of other issues in his family life. Ato explains that they look up to him because he is the eldest in his family. His family believes he is a homosexual because he is a feminine man. He experiences discrimination on the job market because of his femininity and thus the assumption that he would be homosexual. Not having a job makes Ato feel guilty and makes him try to adjust or pursue work in different ways, such as having his own company in the future to take care of his family still. At the same time, it would break the belief that he is a homosexual or that he cannot be

successful as a homosexual. Either way, the stigmatizing idea of not being able to be successful as a homosexual person is challenging when the person deals with poverty, as it is complicated to come out of poverty (especially when you experience discrimination at the same time). The examples of persons of this prototype show how poverty is intertwined with sexual stigma and complicates managing stigma.

#### 7.4.2 Strategies and agency

Among the persons of this prototype, several strategies can be identified. A well-known strategy in studies on stigma and homosexuality is to conceal your sexuality (Yip 1997). This allows persons of this prototype to participate in their religious communities and avoid conflicts with their families since most of them do not approve of homosexuality. Besides concealing, persons of this prototype also compartmentalize their lives. They keep their personal lives separate from their activities in their religious communities. Another strategy to avoid stigma is to minimize or adjust gendered behavior, which comes up with the discussion on feminine men by Ato. In his experience, he is associated with homosexuality because of his femininity, and adjusting his behavior in public places minimizes the stigma he is confronted with. These strategies might not challenge the people who stigmatize or the discourses that are stigmatizing, but they are helpful for the daily lives of the persons of this prototype.

A characteristic of persons of this prototype is the awareness of stigma and the emphasis on change from the inside by making small steps. The context of homophobia is important since strategies to manage stigma are very different depending on the level of homophobia. Ato refers to this when he explains that it is not a solution to come out as a homosexual among family or friends, as the person might risk being attacked or rejected. He points out that homophobia is such a norm that stigma is publicly accepted in Accra. Consequently, queer individuals have to be very careful with their strategies to avoid and challenge enabled stigma. The idea that 'coming out' to family or friends is liberating, which is often depicted in Western discourses on homosexuality, is not always the case.<sup>241</sup> Instead, strategies that carefully navigate stigmatization are preferred, such as the examples of persons of this prototype. Many of them find allies in their religious

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<sup>241</sup> The term 'coming out of the closet' has been critiqued as limiting and Western. However, most notably concerning stigma, the idea that 'coming out' to family or friends is liberating should not be seen as an ideal or as reality. Sharing your sexuality with family or friends does not always lead to a harmonized identity, empowerment, or increased self-acceptance (see, e.g., Klein et al. 2015). Especially concerning stigma, it can make persons vulnerable.

community, with whom they build support groups and discuss their issues. Another mentioned strategy is to have private conversations with fellow religious members to address homophobia and give different perspectives.

Compared to persons from prototype one, the open-minded confident believers, and two, the guilty-feeling non-religious individualist, this is quite a different approach. Persons of this prototype seem to prioritize their involvement in their religious community and try to address stigma within their communities. They do not leave their religious communities, which persons of prototype two often chose to do. However, they also do not speak up in their religious communities as persons from prototype one, but they navigate their ways and show resistance and resilience in subtle ways such as private discussions.

These strategies signify the importance of supportive groups, allies, or friends. Friends who went through similar experiences support each other, which can decrease self-stigma (although that is not an assurance if they support internalizations) and increase confidence. Supportive groups within religious communities can have strategies such as queer readings to deconstruct homonegative religious beliefs, critique religious authorities and share their affirmative interpretations.

An example of the importance of having supportive friends is shared by Ato, who tells how he motivated a friend to stop thinking negatively about his sexuality, be himself, and trust the divine to judge. These affirmations allow queer individuals to be part of religious communities, navigate their ways, and hopefully, over time, develop their affirmative religious beliefs and dismantle homonegative ones.

## 8. Connecting to the divine individually

This chapter discusses the interviews with the persons of the prototype 'Deeply-connected Private Believer'. Among the thirty-one participants of this study, this prototype includes five persons who strongly relate to this prototype. The interviews with three of them, who had the strongest connection to this prototype, are further explored in this chapter. The chapter follows the structure in the previous chapters. Interviews are thematically divided into religiosity, stigmatizing experiences and strategies, and agency. The chapter ends with a discussion on these themes and is enriched with a comparison with the previous findings from the persons of other prototypes.

### 8.1 Key experiences shared by Nana

*Nana describes herself as a twenty-two-year-old female who identifies as a lesbian in the survey. On a scale of being religious, she describes herself as religious and her family as a bit more religious compared to herself. She prefers to practice religious activities privately rather than going to religious meetings or ceremonies.*

Nana describes herself as religious in the survey and during the interview. During the interview, she explains how her mother has taught her about religion and its importance in her life.

I have been trained to believe that you need to have faith. And faith is something that is really in need, you should have faith until probably you die. [...] Religiously, if you claim to have faith, you should not have any issues. You keep growing. So that is why it really matters to me because it is what I actually do.

To Nana, her faith is something that gives her strength and brings her a 'sense of peace even in the face of life's difficulties'<sup>242</sup>. She shares that she feels close to the divine when she sings religious songs and that when she sings, the idea of the presence of the divine makes her feel calm. Praying, another form of an individual or private religious practice, makes her feel close to the divine. Religious practices give Nana the feeling that she is free from negativity. She explains that "it is believed that when you have faith, even in times of difficulties, you should be able to feel okay, cause no situation lasts forever".

In contrast, doubting her faith makes Nana feel insecure and unsafe. Nana's descriptions of herself as religious also show that she has a warm

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<sup>242</sup> This relates to statement 75, 'Feels a sense of peace even in the face of life's difficulties', which Nana sorted as defining.

and affirmative relationship with the divine. Her faith supports her, and she relies on her faith in challenging times.

We are told you can have a personal relationship with God. It is believed, when you are in a very confined area and you call on him, he will visit you. [...] I believe strongly that if I pray and what I want, I will get it. Besides there is an African belief that says your belief is what makes you. When you believe in something, it works for you.

Nana has experienced several challenges in her life. She lost her mother four years ago, and at the time of the interview, she lives in her parents' home with her siblings. She does not have any contact with her father. During her childhood, she experienced domestic violence, and her father left her mother.

They [her parents] weren't divorced but actually, he was, I mean, my dad was cheating. So, my mom had to through, um, I mean she went through domestic violence, yeah. [...] So, we also had to struggle. So, my mom, she does not believe in any entities or spirituality apart from God. So, she trained me that.

Nana's close and affirmative relationship to the divine is intertwined with the belief that women are closer to the divine and are emotionally and spiritually stronger than men. She argues that women might go through more challenging times, making them more successful than men. Her view shows the interconnectedness of her sexuality, faith, and the idea of women; she harmonizes her sexuality and gender with her religious beliefs.

Nana: Yeah, so for my sexuality, I believe women have the power, much more than men. Not physically, but emotionally, spiritually. The community I grew up in, women pray more often than men. And women are more, I mean, powerful than men. And it is believed that women are closer to God than men.

Marlijn: And why do you think that women are closer to God?

Nana: That is the belief. It's a belief that is there. Because, more women tend to spend time praying than men. And when you observe you realize that even though the men are strong, they don't spend time with God. Women only go through more hardship in the community, even in Africa as a whole. They go through more hardship. But because they are more prayerful, they still have the strength to hold up.

### 8.1.1 Stigmatizing experiences

Nana experiences sexual stigma because people assume she is a lesbian due to her masculine looks. She feels discriminated against as she cannot

get married to another woman because same-sex marriage is not allowed in Ghana. Nana shares several stigmatizing experiences. She says that she experienced sexual stigma from a young age because of her masculine looks. These stigmatizing experiences based on her looks made her doubt herself.

Sometimes I used to question myself, sometimes I question God, I mean why [do I] have a male structure? That I have come to it and I am not loving men. I mean, could there be something wrong? At other instances it just tells me that probably my male structure is for me to use it for something.

A stigmatizing experience at a young age that Nana describes is when she was a student in high school. She was asked to speak with the head of the school because there were rumors that she was a lesbian. Teachers told Nana to see a counselor for help. Later on, after graduation, these rumors persisted, and nowadays, Nana still experiences stigma through old classmates:

Recently, it was a group from the school I graduated, and one was talking about being gay. And the way she was talking, I did not like it, because they knew I was gay, so. I popped in and asked her why she is talking. Even if you want to tell me to stop being gay, the way you are saying it, there is no way I will stop.

Another place where Nana currently experiences stigma is in her religious community. Nana shares that religious leaders in her church often make comments about the belief that demonic spirits possess homosexuals.

Sometimes, going through some spiritual, I will go to the church and the pastor or priest will tell me someone wants to destroy you, someone is going to put you through shame or disgrace. Then personally, I believe, because I have faith in God, I believe He is protecting me. So those things [spirits] will not be able to do [anything].<sup>243</sup>

I do not believe it is right to tell anyone, it is not even supposed to, the person is suffering. If it is suffering from a good spirit or a bad spirit, you cannot tell, you do not have the eyes to see, you do not have the spiritual eyes to see.

Nana is exposed to these remarks because of her masculine looks and gossip that she is a lesbian in the religious community. Being homosexual, whether as a man or a woman, is often thought of as being

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<sup>243</sup> This is said in response to statement 74, 'Feels personally protected and guided by a spiritual being', which is a distinguishing statement among persons of this prototype.



possessed by a spirit who will negatively influence your life. Nana tries to avoid this stigma by concealing her sexuality in her religious community. She says she does this on purpose as “they [religious leaders] will discriminate, some will also go the extra mile just to make you become straight. And with that, I would not be comfortable”. For example, leading figures in the church would offer her counseling, seminars, and prayers.

Nana believes that most people in the church have a negative perspective on homosexuality. She says that religious leaders should support people and base their preaching on love, not towards discrimination:

Instead of the pastors preaching about accepting them [other members of the religious community], teaching them the right thing, they rather hear about it and start avoiding them. Calling you names, making you feel [...] some people commit suicide [...].

Another challenge that Nana experiences is the religious belief of procreation, that women should be with men to procreate. This is often shared in her church: “it is believed that as a woman, you need to, at some point, get married and bear children”. Nana says that these views make her doubtful about the religious beliefs in her religious community and that these beliefs are further supported in the Ghanaian society.

It is taught in the bible, it is in the bible. But then [Ghanaian] society had made it look so compulsory. That immediately you get to thirty, twenty-five, thirty, thirty-five, forty- you do not have a child and everybody starts pointing fingers at you. It is like either you have some spiritual, evil spirit attacking you or you do not look attractive enough for any man to come to you or I mean, there are so many reasons that people give.

Nana believes that there is no flexibility in marriage and starting a family as a same-sex couple: “when you are a woman who wants to marry a woman, it is not right”. It is clear that in the case of Nana, her gender and sexuality are intertwined in her life. There are specific gender expectations that she does not live up to, such as marriage, which become a struggle for her, as being not married is seen as an evil spirit and might create more suspicion that she is a lesbian.

Although Nana does not internalize the views from religious authorities and holds affirmative views towards the divine, she tells me that she sometimes doubts the idea of sinning to her sexuality.

Marlijn: “So what about sex between women? Is that a sin for you?”

Nana: “That one [...] Sometimes I doubt. Religiously, that is where we are told that it is not right. In the same religion, it also says that it is

the same to know that this thing that makes you happy, but you do not do it to make yourself happy, you see [...] there is always left and right. If I should stop being gay, that is what makes me happy, I will not be happy. Someone asks me what makes me happy. Being gay makes me happy and I am not making myself happy [if Nana stops]. It is also classified as a sin spiritual. Religiously so. I mean, this kind of thing can question me.”

This kind of questioning of her sexuality with her religion is shared with many other persons in this study. Nana does not internalize ideas such as evil spirits, yet the part above shows the impact homonegativity has: she is not sure either about how her sexuality aligns with her religious beliefs.

### 8.1.2 Strategies and agency

There are different strategies that I recognized from Nana’s interview. Some strategies are visible in her faith in the divine and religious practices, such as an emphasis on private religious activities, which make her feel close to the divine and safe. Activities such as singing and praying are examples of this.<sup>244</sup> They increase affirmative views towards her sexuality.

Her view on her religious beliefs, for example, that women are closer to the divine and thus are emotionally and spiritually stronger, seems to result from her childhood and her mother’s view of religion as a form of support. This idea increases the harmony between Nana’s sexuality and gender with her religious beliefs in her current life. It provides her with an affirmative relationship to the divine. Her strong position on these issues comes through in different strategies that Nana shares: contributing and participating in the queer community, queering religious readings, and believing in a “love” discourse.

The queer community plays an important role in Nana’s life. She describes the queer community as a family to her, a place where she was able to find herself and also found her partner.

For the LGBT world, that is where I found myself. Cause of the immense love for women. Not only, I mean, emotionally, but in terms of coming in and ongoing activities.

[...]

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<sup>244</sup> Nana discusses this in response to statement 53, ‘Believes in a divine being with whom one can have a personal relationship.’, which is a distinguishing statement among persons of this prototype.

I will describe her as, she is everything. She is a friend, a sister, everything. [...] Even if you do not accept me, I have her. She will accept me.

In addition to friends and social relationships, these communities are essential because they provide knowledge about sexuality that does not stigmatize homosexuality, for instance, through films. Nana mentions how knowledge is shared to navigate sexual stigma and normalize homosexuality.

I watch some of them. It would not only teach you about how to love a fellow girl, but it teaches you a lot, it teaches you that LGBT is not only about being intimate with your fellow girl, it is just like the normal world outside. You can do everything what you want to do normally. The only difference is, it is a girl and a girl.

And I blend them [the society and these stories] and see how possible it could be in favor to me. Yes, because the society does not go away. So, how it is going to fit and make me happy.

Queer communities and organizations play an important role in providing knowledge and organizing meetings where people come together to share their experiences. They do not only fill a social aspect but actively help people to navigate stigma and find their way.

A second strategy identified is queer readings of biblical verses that are often used against homosexuality. Nana describes how she got into a conflict with an old classmate who started to argue against her and used the story of Sodom and Gomorrah to stigmatize homosexuality. However, Nana disagreed with the heteronormative interpretation of the story. She argues that presenting that interpretation of the story against homosexuals is “not the whole truth”.

I read about it in the bible. It [the story of Sodom and Gomorrah] was about righteousness and being gay is not the only thing that makes you unrighteous.

As other people in this prototype, Nana argues that people should not judge and ask why someone is the way they are. Nana makes this claim by giving rational reasons why she became a lesbian. Then, she moves on towards the religious aspect, stating that: “religiously, if God should destroy the world, just like he did with Sodom and Gomorrah, I do not think anyone would be left alive because we are all unrighteous”. Her argument might not be up to the definition of queer readings (Yip 2005), which offers affirmative and inclusive interpretations of religious scriptures, but she does offer a different interpretation that moves the focus of these stories beyond homosexuality.

In Nana's interview, the third strategy is the love discourse that she believes in. Nana claims that instead of focusing on sexuality in religious discourses, or procreation, the focus should be on love.

He [the divine] did not say it is only a woman who can love a man. It was not told that way. When it is a woman and a woman, you see that it is not from your [heterosexual point of] view, you can see that it is not right, but both of them are in love. You cannot separate it, because the main thing that puts them together is the love, and the one that is present here, is also present there.

[...]

Besides even the bible said it that love is the greatest of all, yes, you can do all the things, all the positive things, but when you do not have love it is useless.

This is a powerful claim, as it disrupts negative interpretations of the bible against homosexuality and is more inclusive towards non-normative possibilities in life. In addition, it is supported by Nana's religious beliefs, and this view also ends marriage done out of pressure which might end up unhappy or violent, such as Nana's parents' marriage. Another critical part of this love discourse is that it does not focus on sexual activities, which is often the way queer people are depicted in the media, but on relationships and the shared need of human beings of love in one's life.

These strategies are essential, as they humanize Nana's sexuality and de-stigmatize and de-victimize it. In addition, it increases self-acceptance. Pursuing self-realization is another characteristic among persons of this prototype, which relates to the notion of self-acceptance and having an awareness of sexual stigma. This comes through in the significance of knowing yourself, which is emphasized by Nana, to avoid stigmatization of others. It also comes through in envisioning the future without any restrictions or boundaries set by sexual stigma, which relates to the strategy of queer world-making (Wagaman et al. 2018, Holland-Muter 2019, Riley 2021, Johnstone 2021). Rather than adapting to these restrictions, Nana views a future with an activist role; lobbying for women's rights.

In ten years, I see myself as one of the greatest, one of the biggest feminist Ghana has ever had. Working for the rights of women. One big feminist. I mean, one, confident and bold lady.

## 8.2 Key experiences shared by Efia

*Efia is a nineteen-year-old female who identifies as a lesbian. She describes herself as belonging to a Christian community. On a scale of being religious, she is moderately religious, and she describes her family as more religious than she is. She reports that she only goes to religious gatherings on special occasions and practices religion privately, not as often.*

Efia is a young Christian woman who identifies as a lesbian. During the interview, it is not precisely clear to me whether she wants to change her sexual desires or if she wants to change her lifestyle into a heteronormative monogamous lifestyle. Her religious beliefs play an important role in these decisions, as she wants to be guided by the divine and religious leaders, who make her feel closer to the divine.

Living righteously is a central topic in the interview with Efia. She believes she does not go as often to church as she thinks she should. She also does not read the bible as often as she used to. Efia had somewhat of a religious change, at least in her religious practices. She describes that she used to read the bible more often when she was a teenager living with her parents, but “you were forced to read, so there is no way, you would say, you would not read”. Religious leaders are important for Efia. She feels relieved when she gives all her attention to what the pastor is saying in the church: “Like I feel, I am out of trouble”.<sup>245</sup>

Regarding her sexuality and religious beliefs, it is difficult to analyze whether Efia believes she needs to change in being a heterosexual woman or whether she wants to adapt herself to stay in the religious community she is part of; as a way of managing stigma. For instance, she says she cannot be a full Christian until she stops with her lifestyle. However, she also says that she wishes the church would change, but it is not something she can do anything about.

That is what I know, I believe there is a God. [...] I do not do anything bad aside from the lifestyle I am living. So, I think, when I will stop with that one, I will be fully a Christian.

I would like it [the church and homonegativity] to change, but you know, it is within the church. [Laughs] It is within the church.

In addition to the stigma Efia experiences in her religious community, and the possible internalization of this stigma, Efia also experiences struggles in queer communities. This might be because she shares her views on change how she wishes to change, which is not a popular idea in queer communities. She also does not want to be close to people who

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<sup>245</sup> This is discussed in response to statement 78, ‘Is often keenly aware of the presence of the divine’, which is a distinguishing statement among persons of this prototype.

have distanced themselves from religion, which is common among people who have been exposed as homosexuals in their religious communities.

Some people will even tell you that there is no God. I have a friend like that, she said that there was no God. And that there is nothing like Jesus. [Laughs] Such people, I do not follow them.

I have a lot of friends. We all go, we have fun. But some of the friends that I have, they would not like, for you to tell you that pray. No, no, no, no. They do not like religion at all. Someone is like, if you are into this [being a lesbian], that is one way that God does not love you. God does, so you should pray.

The struggle of Efa to her sexuality and her religious beliefs has two sides. On the one hand, she is confronted with stigma in her religious community. From the interview findings, Efa partly internalizes homonegative views, which bring her further away from an affirmative view on her religious beliefs and sexuality. On the other hand, she experiences isolation among some of her friends from queer communities because they do not share the same views on religion. Consequently, she experiences isolation in her religious community, her family, and friends in queer communities.

### 8.2.1 Stigmatizing experiences

Before the interview, in response to a reflective question on the statements of the Faith Q-Set, Efa says that the statements brought up many issues concerning her sexuality. Especially how people criticize her for being a lesbian and what is being said about homosexuality in her church. Efa explains that freedom for her relates to her sexuality, which is seen as something negative in her church: "I do not think my religion supports it." [...] "That it is against the will of God, so they [Christians] won't support it".

Early on, during high school, Efa was exposed by other students for being a lesbian. As a result, she experienced several harmful confrontations. It resulted in discussions with the head of the school, who referred her to a counselor, a religious one, who would help her through praying and other religious practices. After this incident, which Efa refused to participate in, Efa went to church less often.

Efa struggles with her sexuality and still experiences stigma in her church. When Efa opens up about her religious practices and feelings, she suddenly discusses how she sometimes feels she will die. She says

that she primarily prays when she feels “something is coming our way, something bad”:<sup>246</sup>

Marlijn: “Why would you die? When do you have this idea?”

Efia: “I do not know, but I have this feeling that um. I have to change my mindset before I die, so even if I was sleeping or about to sleep, I have this feeling that when I sleep, I am not going to wake up again to see the next day or something. Yeah, sometimes I feel that way. So, I pray when I feel that way.”

Marlijn: “And what do you pray about then?”

Efia: “I pray to God, to save me and to change me. Cause I am scared. I do not know why I have that feeling. I do not know why I think about that so much. [...] I have tried to change my - how I live, everything. But it is not working. My sexuality, it is not working. I don’t know. Sometimes, I will be there, I will pray over it. God help me change it. I will follow his will and everything, but it is not working that way.”

Efia is fearful and anxious about her sexuality and her religious beliefs. For instance, in response to a statement on feeling threatened by evil forces at work in the world, Efia describes how she feels hated by some people, which is told to her by the religious leaders in her church:

Like in my room. I will just be there. And you know, the pastors, preachers also, all of them, they always say even if you are alone, if you have not done anything to anybody, there is one particular person that hates you.

After asking Efia why people would hate her, she explains that it relates to her sexuality. She says that there are people around her who do not like her. They threaten and blackmail her:

I remember, someone threatening me that, if I do not give this amount of money, he is going to tell my friends that this [being a lesbian] is what I do.

In addition to these experiences, Efia internalizes homonegative religious beliefs. She believes she might be punished if she dies because of her sexuality. Her motivation to change her sexuality is strongly supported by the idea that she would not go to heaven being a lesbian:

I have been praying a lot to change, when I feel I will die. I want to go to heaven, cause now [being a lesbian], I would not go to heaven

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<sup>246</sup> These parts follow from a discussion in Efia’s response to statement 99, ‘Takes comfort in thinking that those who do not live righteously will face suffering or punishment’, which is a distinguishing statement among persons of this prototype.

We all know it. It is in the bible, that you have to be righteous. If you are not, then you can face suffering and you go to hell.<sup>247</sup>

Efia tells me that she still lives with her parents, both Christians and who raised her as a Christian. They do not know about Efia's sexuality. Her religious community does not know about it either, but Efia thinks some might have suspicions because of how she dresses. She experiences this as well at home with her siblings.

They [church members] do not know, but because of how I put on my outfit and everything, that [being a lesbian] is what they think. They have not fully said it. More in this is what you do.

Every time I put on my clothes, why do I put on guys stuff and yes. I just tell them [siblings], that is what I want. [...] They have not fully said it [I am a lesbian], but I know they are suspecting it.

Some of her fellow church members have talked to Efia and commented about her looks, but always outside of the regular church meetings. Efia is afraid of more confrontations within the church.

They would not like it. I think they would not like to come to us like they used to. Someone would say, I won't come to you because when I come to you, you turn me [into a homosexual]. That is what I am scared of.

This fear is related to another negative view on homosexuality; that it is a contagious disease. Efia explains this belief; some people believe homosexuality is spread when a person is in close contact with someone who seems to have homosexual desires. Since Efia is suspected of being a lesbian, as she does not pass normative expectations because of her way of dressing more masculine, she is confronted with this stigmatization. This contagious discourse discriminates against non-normative individuals and isolates them from social contacts.

At home, Efia experiences stigma from her siblings. She thinks that her siblings want her to change and that they are partly motivated by the views on salvation; being more masculine and, therefore likely a lesbian, she will not achieve salvation. Once again, Efia is confronted with stigma because she does not pass normative expectations for a woman; she does not dress feminine enough.

Another stigmatizing belief that Efia experiences is the homonegative view that homosexuals do not have any success or progress in their lives. Pastors often share this as they spread the idea that evil spirits possess

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<sup>247</sup> This is said in response statement 99, 'Takes comfort in thinking that those who do not live righteously will face suffering or punishment', a distinguishing statement among persons of this prototype.



homosexuals, and thus they do not experience any progress in their life. However, not being successful or experiencing progress becomes a daily reality because of the stigma that homosexuals experience in their daily lives. They are discriminated against at work, often do not have access to higher education, and experience isolation at home to avoid further stigmatization.

I pray that God should protect me and change me. So that, I will just be righteous and follow you but also that I will be successful, cause everybody says, that I mean, you are not going to be successful. So, God should change me and protect me.

It is evident from the interview that Efia experiences isolation. She says that even though she would tell her partner about everything, she would not tell other people she is in a relationship because that would reveal her sexuality. Furthermore, in response to the question where she feels most able to express herself, Efia says she often does not feel like she can express herself: "Like now, like expressing myself. I feel like, I cannot, like how I am talking to you, I cannot talk to my dad or my siblings like that". This also comes through in the question of whether there was a time she wished to be a different kind of person. At this point, she says that she is hiding in society:

Marlijn: "Was there any time that you think I wish I was a different kind of person?"

Efia: "I talked about it before, but not, every day. You know, being an LGBT means a lot of problems. Cause it is like, it is the case, people in Ghana, they are not accepting us. So, we're like hiding. I am hiding. They are hiding, they would not like to go home. For me, I do not tell people, that [being a lesbian] is what I do, but I think others know."

## 8.2.2 Strategies and agency

Identifying strategies or recognizing empowerment is difficult when a person internalizes negatives views on their sexuality. However, even though Efia internalizes certain beliefs, such as the idea that she will not go to heaven as a lesbian, she also wishes to adapt to avoid further sexual stigma. Therefore, adapting or minimizing one's sexuality can be recognized as a strategy, even though it might not be seen as progressive than strategies that increase harmony between sexuality and religion. What should be considered with Efia is her social environment and the access she has to other possibilities. The experiences that she shared in the interview show that she does not only experience sexual stigma in her closest circles, but she is also isolated. Isolation limits opportunities and (social) resources. Despite her isolation, there are specific strategies

and ways of coping that Efia shares in the interview, namely queer readings and forms of self-empowerment.

Similar to other persons among this prototype, Efia has counter interpretations of biblical verses that are used against homosexuality that do not justify homosexuality but destabilize the opposing view. For instance, to counter the interpretation of Sodom and Gomorrah, Efia argues that “everybody is a sinner” according to the bible and “being a lesbian woman is not one of the worst”.

Efia is aware of the stigma she might be subjected to. This awareness has increased self-empowerment; for example, by pursuing her goals that others do not approve of. This comes through in several ways in the interview, when she mentions a person should follow their wishes in life independent of others’ opinions and that she wants to join the military even though her father does not approve of it<sup>248</sup>.

As an individual, you have to choose what you want to do [...] Maybe you like to do this but parents and society would say no. [...] Decide for yourself, what you want to do.

At first, my dad did not like the idea of me being in the military. So, he was saying, I should not do that. [...] If I had not told him, and I made an attempt of going, I think, I will progress, but me telling him, you rather trying to condemn the fact that I should go, so keeping everything to myself and doing everything on your own, yes, I think it is the best.

The last quote is about Efia’s wish to join the military, which her father disagrees with. It is not common for women to join the military. Despite his disapproval, Efia still wants to do this and says you should support yourself and your dreams. Her view on “doing everything on your own” is also a way of avoiding stigma. It relates to concealing your sexuality to avoid sexual stigma. Efia expresses this strategy clearly when she says that keeping her sexuality to herself is best because “when others get to know, the more they will criticize you”.

Efia’s experiences show how internalizations of sexual stigma, self-stigma, and awareness and consciousness of sexual stigma (i.e., felt stigma) can be intertwined. On the one hand, the homonegative views from family members and religious authorities impact Efia and might decrease self-esteem. On the other hand, she is highly aware of sexual stigma and tries to navigate it with strategies that conceal her sexuality and focus on avoiding stigma. An experience of self-stigma does not exclude experiences of felt stigma or a decrease of self-stigma at a

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<sup>248</sup> These parts are said by Efia in response to statement 93, ‘Sees personal self-realization as a primary spiritual goal in life’, which is a distinguishing statement among persons of this prototype.

certain point and an increase of felt stigma. Self-stigma also does not exclude that Efiia is agentic. She becomes isolated due to sexual stigma, but her withdrawal is also a choice to avoid further sexual stigma.

That [demonic possession] is what people say. But I do not think that way. Cause you know, how it [sexual desires] started and everything, I do not think an evil spirit is doing that. Cause it is for your own interest.

### 8.3 Key experiences shared by Kwami

*Kwami is a twenty-three-year-old male who identifies as bisexual. He belongs to a minority Christian community and sings in the choir. On a scale of being religious, he describes himself to be quite religious and his family as very religious. He attends religious gatherings more than once a week and practices religion privately every day. Kwami has been through a low point in his life, where he thought about ending his life, but he describes that he continued and accepted himself for who he is through his religious beliefs and support from friends from the queer community.*

Kwami's religious beliefs are central in his life. He tells me that he was raised in a very spiritual household, and therefore, religious practices were something ordinary for Kwami to do. Kwami attends church at least twice a week and goes to bible studies. He describes his relationship to the divine as a close and personal one and views the bible as a guide in his life:

We are all created individually and so we have a personal relationship with our creator, exactly. I believe that we could have a relationship with the one who protects you.<sup>249</sup>

Marlijn: Okay. Um. Thirty-two, Considers our religious scriptures to be outdated or- misguided.

Kwami: Hell no.

Marlijn: So, what do they mean to you, like the bible?

Kwami: The bible. The bible is life guidance. Okay. It guides us through life. To make our choices.<sup>250</sup>

The relationship with the divine makes Kwami "feel free to express whatever I feel to my creator and [through] prayers". Other religious

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<sup>249</sup> This is said in response to statement 53, 'Believes in a divine being with whom one can have a personal relationship', a distinguishing statement among persons of this prototype.

<sup>250</sup> This is said in response to statement 32, 'Considers all religious scriptures to be outdated or misguided', a distinguishing rejected statement among persons of this prototype.

practices are important to Kwami as well, for example, singing and listening to religious music. He describes these as ways to connect to the divine when he talks about listening to music: “I think the gospel really connects you to your creator, the secular ones, are kind of motivational.”

Kwami has recently been through a low point in his life due to stigmatizing experiences in his religious community. Despite the stigma in his religious community, Kwami has an affirmative view of his religious beliefs and the divine. He views the support he received from friends in his queer community as a gift from the divine, to give him strength during a difficult time in his life:

If it had not been for his protection, I would not be alive. Because of what I have gone through, over the years. I was a role model for members in the church. Then my service privilege was taken. I felt ‘wow’, I wanted to end my life. But he has protected me because he did not allow me to end my life.<sup>251</sup>

The stigma that Kwami experienced in his church happened close to the time of the interview. It was a difficult period for Kwami, as his religious community and the activities are an essential part of Kwami’s life. At the same time, the rumors in the church caused discussions about Kwami’s sexuality in other places, such as his close family.

### 8.3.1 Stigmatizing experiences

During the interview, Kwami describes one relatively recent experience that strongly affected him and his family. It happened in his religious community, in the church. A father of a friend, with whom he had been intimate, went to the church leaders to point out that Kwami was a homosexual man. Nothing was done, as the religious leaders decided that there was insufficient proof against Kwami. Soon after that, there were new rumors, supported with photos that were secretly taken and shared among people in his church. The photos were shown to his parents.

They do not believe that Kwami is homosexual and stand by him. However, the church leaders decided that he was not allowed to help during services anymore and should not be visiting the church. Kwami did not know what to do with himself. Despite what happened, he decided to continue to visit his church:

I was expelled from church. But I still go to church, I will still go to church. But people do not, my friends who are not like that, are not supposed to communicate with me like before. But yet again, my

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<sup>251</sup> This is said in response to statement 78, ‘Is often keenly aware of the presence of the divine’, which is a distinguishing statement among persons of this prototype.

friends who are from the LGBT family, call me and check in with me occasionally. But they are not allowed to see me with them talking.

Kwami views the support from close queer friends as a gift from the divine. They “saved” him from ending his life: “If it had not been for his protection, I would not be alive. Because of what I have gone through, over the years [the events in his church].” Although Kwami has an affirmative view in his religious beliefs, he is aware that homosexuality is not accepted and stigmatized in religious communities:

When it comes to religious communities, because it is not a norm that has been accepted, we are kind of cautious. To prevent stigma and humiliation. I think it is best to stick to our own beliefs.

One of the issues that Kwami struggles with is hypocrisy among queer people on religion and religious beliefs. He says that hypocrisy prevents people from hearing different, positive perspectives on homosexuality. Too many people preach against homosexuality, also among queer people. An example that Kwami gives is a friend who is a religious leader and a homosexual and talked in a way about homosexuality that Kwami disagreed with:

There was a little bit of hypocrisy in his opinion. I thought well, he should not have talked like that. I think, in general, people preach against what they actually do.

The difficulty is that sexual stigma is normalized, making it complicated for individuals to stand up, as they might be exposed to stigma, and thus discrimination and social exclusion, perhaps even violence, may follow. Because of his experience, Kwami is very aware of this and wants to support others in similar situations:

I am very emotional and when I see, even people who I do not like, when I see them suffering, because of who they are, it is really kind of worrying.<sup>252</sup>

Kwami has done a lot since his own experience in church. He has become more active in queer organizations and more outspoken about his sexuality and religious beliefs. In many ways, he has turned his experience into empowerment.

### 8.3.2 Strategies and agency

While Kwami faced stigma in his church, he got continuous support from friends in queer organizations and his parents. During the interview,

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<sup>252</sup> This is said in response to statement 77, ‘Is profoundly touched by the suffering of others’, which is a distinguishing statement among persons of this prototype.

Kwami describes the importance of his friends who helped him get back on his feet and get rid of his anxiety. He describes them as the reason why he did not end his life:

When I meet my friends who are homosexuals, we tend to have fruitful discussions because we are able to express ourselves. Because it is like, the whole world is against us, but when we are together, we feel, we do not even, we feel we forget about that, and we feel a sense of um, a sense of togetherness. And a sense of oneness. That helps us to you know, go back into the world and be who we are.

It is a community and a family, I was free to tell them what the actual case was and most of them sympathize. [...] I always went to friends to have their company, to laugh over stuff and at the end of the day I would so refreshed.

Kwami views close friendships as a gift from the divine. His affirmative view of the divine and his religious beliefs is another form of support in his life. Kwami has embraced his sexuality and believes the divine is the only one who can judge:

It is there for God to sort things out. God knows the heart, God knows love, it is not my fault that I was gay.

He [God] brought people in my life that encouraged me. It has made me even stronger to face future challenges.

This translates to Kwami's decision to hold on to his religious community. While many of his friends advised Kwami to go to a different church after what happened, Kwami did not feel that was the right thing to do. He is who he is, and that should not stop him from going to the church that he grew up with:

Because it [Kwami's faith] has been my education from childhood, I felt like well, that should not stop me. Even most of my friends tell me that, why I do not quite that church, there are other churches. But being gay is not a choice. It is what makes you, you.

His decision is supported by his parents as well. Even though they do not discuss Kwami's sexuality and do not believe he is a homosexual, they stood by him during the accusations in the church. Moreover, since Kwami's service privileges were taken away, he and his parents visited the church services together every week.

My parents love me so much. But they yet have to accept the fact that I am a homosexual. They are in the knowing, but they have not heard enough, as in evidence. [...] They were so supportive [after the discussions in the church], I was so surprised. They felt hurt, but they did not allow me to see it [photos that went around]. They did not

show it in my presence but they were supportive. I appreciated that so much.

Kwami argues that he has learned to accept himself for who he is because of what he went through. Self-acceptance is another form of empowerment for Kwami:

There is nothing like being accepted. There is nothing more than being accepted and having the idea that the ones sitting next to me understands me.

Because I accepted myself from the beginning and yeah, it is all part of state of acceptance. It allows you.

In addition to what Kwami translated into empowerment from what he went through, he also describes other critical moments in his life that have helped him. For example, he says that university so far has been a time where he got to know himself better:

I tend to understand, being yourself more. I thought, well okay, it is just like, what makes you happy, you like to have sex with guys. Then like, it is what I grew up and to got to know people, I got to understand, it [homosexuality] has a different angle. That it is not only about enjoying, it is who you are.

Self-acceptance and support have made Kwami more outspoken about himself. Kwami is seen as a role model among his queer friends. In secrecy, he has married his partner. He and his partner arranged a ceremony with close friends from the queer community. Kwami did not want to be promiscuous and wanted to get married:

This is a special person, that I always think about. And he felt the same way, surprising. So, we had to, what were we waiting for, so we had to come to get married.

It was important to me, yes. Religiously, because if you are married, you stick to one person. You do not have to go and fornicat- um, sleep around with anyone when you are married. Yes, so, that is the link why it is important to your religion. But the difference is that I am married to a guy, that is the only difference.

Kwami's marriage in secrecy is quite exceptional and unheard of in the queer community. It has given him a reputation: "One of our friends, says anytime he sees our pictures together, he draws encouragement from it. To have the same relationships. People see it, admire us, we have people who even want to write stories about us."

Kwami is optimistic about what the future holds. He believes the Ghanaian society will change and that there will be more freedom in

“expression and sexuality”. He wants to stay in Ghana but might leave with his partner. He says that they will “follow their dreams whatever someone else will say” to overcome obstacles.

## 8.4 Discussion

Persons of the prototype ‘Deeply-connected private believer’ self-identify as being religious in the survey. They emphasize this as well throughout the interviews. In addition to private religious practices, they are active in their religious communities, sometimes with periods of change, but they have not left their religious community. However, they do hold different views on religious beliefs and the idea of a divine, which relates to their exposure to stigma and their support. For instance, Kwami and Nana hold affirmative views to the idea of the divine, while Efia has some anxiety towards the idea of the divine.

However, Efia experiences stigma from her siblings while both Kwami and Nana have some support from their family members. Persons of this prototype have experienced humiliation, gossip, public exposure, privacy violations, and discrimination, such as being banned from their church and not being allowed to communicate with fellow church members. In addition, they experience indirect discrimination, as they are not allowed to get married to their partners, which they all wish to do.

There are two views in this group on religious views. Kwami and Nana hold affirmative views of the divine and their own religious beliefs. They have positive ideas and associations with their sexuality. Efia holds some homonegative views of her sexuality. She is fearful in her beliefs of the divine with her sexuality. As previously mentioned, there is a difference of support among these three people. In the case of Efia, the lack of support and the experience of sexual stigma from family members is an underlying cause for an increase in the internalization of homonegative religious beliefs.

Persons of this prototype share a certain individualism which is sometimes caused by isolation due to stigmatization. However, in the case of Efia, withdrawal to avoid stigmatization is also a choice and can be seen as agentic. This individual characteristic also comes through in forms of self-acceptance and self-empowerment. Persons of this prototype often discuss how they will not listen to others but strive for their own goals and believe in them. This attitude is similar to the one expressed among persons of prototype two, the ‘Guilt-feeling Non-Religious Individualist’. Similarly, the individual attitude is often caused by isolation due to stigmatization among family members and religious communities. However, different from persons of prototype two, persons of this prototype hold on to their religious beliefs, but there is



an increase in private religious practices and a slight decrease of participation in religious communities. There is a tendency to have an affirmative idea towards the divine and counter homonegative religious beliefs, similar to persons of prototype one, the Open-minded Confident Believers’.

#### 8.4.1 Experiences of stigma

Persons in this prototype shared many experiences of stigma in their interviews. This is partly because some of them are ‘discredited’; they are vulnerable to stigma as they physically do not pass heteronormative norms. Discredited refers to what Goffman (1963) describes as the difference between a person “who assumes their differentness is known about already”, or is evident in interaction with others, which is the opposite of being discreditable, to “assume it is not known or immediately perceivable” (p. 4). This also leads to a high consciousness of sexual stigma, increasing felt stigma. Felt stigma is expressed several times among persons of this prototype, for instance, when Efia says that she is hiding, but even though she does not tell people she is a lesbian, she thinks people know, and when Kwami says that homosexuality is not a norm that has been accepted, so he has to be cautious to avoid stigma and humiliation.

Kwami’s exposure in his religious community led to more gossip and rumors, which led to further stigmatization outside of the religious community, an experience of being discredited. Likewise, Efia has experienced being discredited and being discreditable. During high school, she has been exposed through gossip and is now afraid that she might get exposed in her religious community.

Both Efia and Nana experience sexual stigma against their masculine way of dressing and looks. Embodiment plays an important role here, distinguishing them from the heteronormative norm. It reveals that their bodies, expressions, and preferred way of dressing are tied to the assumption shared in society that they are lesbian. This perceptibility of homosexuality becomes a threat, exposing them to sexual stigma. This increases felt stigma, as they are afraid of the possibility of sexual stigma. Felt stigma is also related to the occurrence of enacted stigma.

Efia and Nana both describe how they get criticized and threatened by people around them. Places such as their religious communities, neighborhoods, and schools exclude queer bodies and are hostile towards them. Efia expresses how these experiences make her anxious about being exposed to her religious community.

Another critical factor to being discredited, embodiment, and heteronormative norms is time. Nana explains that society expects that she will get married and bear children as a heterosexual woman. Her

experience relates to 'straight time' (Boellstorff 2007, Wilcox 2009, Page and Shipley 2020). This is tied to the embodiment, as visible embodied signs show that one is engaged, married, and of course, pregnant.

Sexual minorities who do not follow this pattern of life fall out of 'straight time' and can be treated with suspicion as non-normative (Page and Shipley 2020). This is an issue that women of this prototype experience. For queer women, this is another vulnerability of how their sexuality is perceived by others when they do not fit heteronormative expectations.

In addition to sexual stigma, persons to this prototype experience isolation, as they have several experiences of being banned from (religious) communities and try to avoid sexual stigma by staying at home. Minimizing sexual stigma by isolation is related to felt stigma. The homonegative beliefs that homosexuality is contagious isolate them even more, as fellow religious members are discouraged from being close with individuals suspected of being a homosexual because of the stigma; they do not want to become stigmatized against (see also Goffman 1963 on courtesy stigma). In addition, these beliefs lead to victimization, in which the person who experiences stigma has to attempt "to correct the 'defect'" (Goffman 1963, p. 5).

These kinds of attempts are expressed in this chapter, as people, often religious authorities, suggest persons of this prototype should have counseling, pray, fast, or do some type of cleansing. It increases the risk of self-stigma, the internalization of homonegative beliefs.

In addition to the belief that homosexuality is contagious, people of this prototype were also confronted with the idea that homosexuality is caused by the possession of evil spirits, leading to an unsuccessful and short life. During the interview with Efia, it was challenging to understand whether she believed in this idea or was aware of it but did not believe it. It might be something in between, as it can be difficult for an individual to not believe in such a thing, even though they experience the reality of it. She might experience times where she tends to internalize some of these beliefs and times where she talks about change as a strategy to avoid further sexual stigma in her life.

Not being successful or experiencing progress is often a daily reality for individuals such as Efia because of the sexual stigma they experience. Due to discrimination, they lose their jobs, are expelled from educational institutions, and often experience isolation.

Another critical factor in the experience of stigma and navigating stigma is the support of close family members or friends. Both Kwami and Nana have support from their parents and have not been confronted by their close family with homonegative religious beliefs. For Efia, this is a different experience. She is confronted with her siblings stigmatizing her. They assume that Efia is a lesbian and often tell her that she has to

change or she will not achieve salvation. The exposure to stigma in close circles, and the lack of support, relate to Efi's doubts about homonegative beliefs. It shows that isolation and stigma from close relations, such as family and friends, leads to a higher risk of, or increase in, self-stigma.

The belief that Efi needs to change and that her religious beliefs will guide her with that might be why she experiences isolation in queer communities. Efi explains that she often receives negative responses from friends in queer communities when discussing her faith or religious practices, such as praying. Her experience shows that religious beliefs are not popular in the queer community. This exclusion is not uncommon, as people who leave their religious communities or experienced stigma in their religious communities often hold opposing views towards religion or are more suspicious of other members who hold onto their religion (Taylor and Snowdon 2014b, Van Klinken 2019).

#### 8.4.2 Strategies and agency

Several strategies are employed among the persons of this prototype, which can be identified as ways of empowerment or resistance towards stigmatization. A well-known type is queer readings of biblical texts that are otherwise used against homosexuality. This is also known as the approach of queer theology (see, e.g., Van Klinken and Phiri 2015) or "constructing sexuality-affirmative hermeneutics of religious texts" (Yip 2005, p. 49), or simply 'queering texts' or 'queer readings'.

Persons of this prototype belong to different Christian communities but are all confronted with similar homonegative religious discourses. Especially the story of Sodom and Gomorrah is described to be used against homosexuality, to exemplify that homosexuality is a sin. Persons of this prototype critique this interpretation. Their approach relates to the strategy named by Yip as 'the critique of traditional interpretations of specific passages in a text' "by constructing an alternative and sexuality-affirming interpretation" (2005, p. 52). However, I would claim that persons of this prototype do not yet construct a sexuality-affirming interpretation but rather an alternative that focuses on everyone, not only homosexual people. This approach of queer reading provides persons of this prototype with alternative interpretations that destigmatize their sexuality.

As Yip (2005) points out, and what is important to persons of this prototype, is that in this approach, the sanctity of the religious text is not challenged. However, the traditional interpretation is challenged, which allows them to empower themselves beyond religious ignorance and prejudice (Ibid.).

The second approach of queer reading that, as Yip explains, often complements the first approach is also shared among persons of this prototype. Yet to a lesser degree than the first one. It is an offensive approach directed to critique the interpretive authority of religious authority structures. In this approach, people tend to discredit the assumed objectivity of religious leaders, emphasize heterosexist bias in interpretations, and personalize the interpretation of texts (Ibid.). I would not say that this is a characteristic of the persons of this prototype, as they do not all critique religious leaders and their authority. However, some do, and it often emphasizes their interpretation of religious texts. The latter is important because religious texts were seen as very important to persons of this prototype, and this might relate to this approach used by some of them.

Yip relates this strategy to the notion of 'religious individualism', in that "queering texts means personalizing and individualizing the interpretation of texts, by adopting a hermeneutic lens based on the authority of self" (2005, p. 56). This strategy and the notion of religious individualism align with how some of the persons among this prototype view their religious beliefs and their relationship to the divine as being created individually and having a personal relationship with the divine. In addition, some persons of this prototype critique religious leaders within and outside of their religious communities of being heterosexist, and several times there are references made to sexuality-affirming interpretations of Biblical texts, especially ones that emphasize love.

The emphasis on love, in general, is another strategy that I identified and labeled as the 'love discourse'. This is an affirmative approach of people of this prototype to their faith and sexuality based on the argument that sexual preference and faith should be understood as being based on love. It comes through in their experiences and the distinguishing statements of the Faith Q-Sort. For instance, cards that refer to a personal and close connection to the divine and the idea that the divine provides protection and guidance.<sup>253</sup>

As sexuality and religious beliefs are based on love, they cannot be associated with negative discourses. People of this prototype argue that because their relationships are based on love, their sexuality should be understood positively. At the same time, this approach enables young women to make their choices of marriage and starting a family based on love, rather than the pressure to be married or bear a child. This approach is further supported with biblical texts, such as the citation

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<sup>253</sup> These are the distinguishing statements 53, 'Believes in a divine being with whom one can have a personal relationship' and 78, 'Is often keenly aware of the presence of the divine'. Also, statement 74, 'Feels personally protected and guided by a spiritual being', which is sorted in as most defining among persons of this prototype, fits this argument.

that “Love is the greatest” (1 Corinthians 13 NLT) and “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:13) and religious views such as the idea that the divine knows the heart, or the goodness of the people of this prototype.

This approach cuts across affirmative interpretations of religious texts and affirmative notions of sexuality and love in daily life. It destigmatizes homosexuality on a religious level but also beyond that. However, as Van Klinken and Phiri (2015) write in their study on the image of God in grassroots African queer theology, love is not interpreted as a universal category but has “a particular Christian meaning, as it is rooted in their belief to be created in the image of God who is love” (2015, p. 48). I recognize the emphasis on love by Van Klinken’s and Phiri’s participants. For instance, how participants explain that they do not know what the divine thinks about homosexuality but that he loves them anyway.

This affirmative approach and the image of the divine as loving are also shared among persons of this prototype. Not only does it come through in their notion of the divine, but also their interpretations of religious texts. It relates as well to the first approach that Yip mentioned (2005), criticizing traditional interpretations, as the love discourse destigmatizes views of homosexuality as sinning: “Bringing to the fore the centrality of love to their sexuality, identity and relations, these participants humanize their gay selves, thereby debunking popular discourses that reduce being gay to practicing “sodomy”” (Van Klinken and Phiri 2015, p. 48).

These strategies do not have direct consequences, as identity processes are not linear and stigmatizing experiences are a daily matter for most persons of this prototype. However, it is visible among these persons that these strategies increase self-acceptance, which often leads to less isolation and finding supportive communities. For instance, Kwami describes that an early realization of his sexuality made him accept himself sooner, which helped him find his way. He translated his self-acceptance into being more active in queer communities and outspoken about his personal life, for example, his marriage with his partner. Instead of discussing self-acceptance, Nana describes how she is aware of the sexual stigma that she faces. She has a drive for activism, reads about feminist approaches, and wishes to become a “bold feminist”.

In addition to religious beliefs, the queer community plays a vital role in self-acceptance for persons of this prototype. It is a place that does not only provide support and where people can meet others with similar experiences, but it is also a space where knowledge is shared, for instance, through movies, books, and social media. This can help self-acceptance as it can be a place where positive stories are shared, and

role models are seen. These places can also be spaces where queer theology is shared, and affirmative approaches are central, which would allow religious sexual minorities to feel included and develop their religious identity in harmony with their sexuality.

Self-acceptance relates closely to the awareness of stigma and rejection of internalization of that stigma. I find it hard to recognize or analyze these instances in the interviews. In some of the interviews of people of this prototype, it is easy, as someone uses words such as realization or acceptance. However, it is difficult other times, as someone shifts from discussing homonegative beliefs that one does not believe to negative ideas about the divine and being afraid and anxious. That interviewee gave me the idea that rather than internalizing homonegativity, this person wants to adjust herself to avoid stigma in her future life.

On the one hand, her strategy could be seen as what Goffman describes as 'victimization', where a person seeks to adjust herself. On the other hand, it might be that her strategy is closer to concealing her sexuality, even though she discusses her wish to change. Her awareness of the stigmatization that she experiences and her rejection of stigmatizing religious beliefs make me think that she wishes to change to avoid further stigma. However, in contrast to approaches that are seen as affirmative towards one's identity, she pursues a strategy that might be seen more like the contrary, yet it can still be seen as a strategy chosen under the circumstances that she is living with.

## 9. Religious plurality and positivity

This chapter is based on the interviews with the persons of the prototype 'Confident Scripture-driven Believer'. From the thirty-one participants, three persons are part of this prototype. It is thus one of the smallest prototypes of the Q-pattern analysis. Another exception in this chapter is that the third person, Yilma, should hold opposite views compared to the first and second person of this prototype since she technically relates to this prototype negatively. This is thus a chapter with much diversity in shared views and values on religion and sexuality.

This chapter follows the structure of the previous chapters. Interviews are thematically divided into religiosity, stigmatizing experiences and strategies, and agency. The chapter ends with a discussion on these themes and is enriched with a comparison to the previous findings from the persons of other prototypes.

### 9.1 Key experiences shared by Silva

*Silva is a twenty-eight-year-old who identifies as a Christian lesbian. On a scale of being religious, she describes herself and her family as very religious. At least once a week, she attends religious ceremonies, and every day she practices religion privately.*

Silva describes herself as "in fear of God", a "fearing God person", which as she explains means "a strong worshipping God person". Silva holds ideas and values that are strongly represented in this prototype. For example, the bible is very important to her, and she often attends religious activities. She goes to church three times a week, including one evening for bible studies. She not only attends religious activities but also believes it is an important way to show your religious beliefs to the divine and worship him.

Every day, I call my God. When I going to bed, when I wake up. When I am moving out. [...]

Marlijn: Okay. And is the bible important to you?

Silva: Yes, it is very important. [Laughs] I read my bible every day. Every day, I have a quotation to be.

Marlijn: What do you think of the bible?

Silva: What do I think of the bible? It teaches me more to know about my creator. [...] When I am in my fasten time, I don't talk to my partner. I don't talk to her, not like we are quarrelling or something but we give ourselves space, a little space, so that I can communicate with my maker.

During the interview with Silva, she does not share any stigmatizing experiences or any relevant challenges or struggles. Gender or sexuality do not come up quickly in the interview concerning the stigma or struggles that she experienced. In response to whether there are any obstacles for her future, Silva says, "I do not have any obstacles. I always wish for good things. I do not have any bad things."

Concerning her faith, her sexuality is a non-issue. Silva believes that the divine protects her from experiencing any stigma or struggles, and she does not see any conflict with her religious beliefs and her sexuality. She also believes that there is no punishment or suffering for not living righteously. She believes that being judged by the divine depends on one's religious beliefs and faith in the divine.

To me, my sexuality is guided by my God. Cause I am a Christian. [...] I worship him and it is because of him I am still alive. If he is not guiding me, I would not be here today.

[...]

Marlijn: So, the first one [statement in minus four column] is ninety-nine, 'takes comfort in thinking that those who do not live righteously will face safe suffering or punishment'.

Silva: Oh, that is not true. It is not true. [Laughs] When you repent, you repent once and for all, yes. So, I don't, I won't say maybe I am a lesbian and there is no good, so I will be going to, no, no, no, no. Someone can be a lesbian who will not even receive a punishment. Because of how he or she worships God. As faithful. How faithful you are with your God. And if you accepted Him as a personal savior, yeah. So, the punishment side and suffering is out of my sexuality.

A factor that might play a role in Silva's attitude against stigma or challenges might be her age and her more stable life phase. She is one of the older participants in this study, twenty-eight years old, and she finished her studies and has a stable job. This gives her some financial stability. In addition to that, she describes that she has been with women a bit longer than over ten years. During the interview, it becomes clear that Silva does experience sexual stigma but does not care that much anymore and has found ways to live with it. This is reflected in her values and ideas that she discusses, for instance, her affirmative position towards her religious beliefs and supportive experiences in the queer community. She also explains that she has learned her rights in the queer community, which has helped her to avoid stigma.



### 9.1.1 Stigmatizing experiences

Even though Silva does not discuss any stigmatizing experiences directly, a few of them appear during the discussion of other subjects in the interview. Silva experiences gossip, the threat of exposure (especially among her family and religious community), and pressure from her parents to fulfill the expectation of having children. She experiences stigma in her neighborhood, in her religious community, and among her family.

Silva lives with her parents and her little brother. She does not discuss her sexuality with her family or people in the neighborhood, but she suspects that they assume that she is a lesbian because she is not often seen closely together with a guy or because of her clothing, as she never wears skirts. Mainly when her neighborhood is discussed during the interview, Silva says that “people talk a lot” and there is gossip about whether or not Silva is a lesbian. These remarks are often based on Silva’s looks, expressions, or the fact that she is not seen together with a man holding hands or being close.

People will be thinking, maybe, I don’t know what I am doing. Or maybe, I do not know, maybe I am not beautiful for guys for asking me out. But they don’t know why I am doing that [not being with a man].<sup>254</sup>

People will be saying I don’t laugh. So, I don’t do that in guys to come, but they don’t know, I laugh a lot but just that I don’t have feelings for them.

To avoid gossip, Silva describes several examples of how she deals with it. For example, she conceals her sexuality from people in her neighborhood, avoids befriending or being seen with girls, and adjusts her expressions and behavior according to where she is.

Oh, people talk a lot. When you tell one person you’re a lesbian, she will go and tell another person and they will be spreading you name around. Which I don’t want to. I am what I am. I only know myself who I am.

I have a lot of guy friends, I don’t friend girls, because I know what I do. When I am very close to a girl, people will be thinking, maybe I am dating that person. So, me, I don’t friend girls, all my friends are guys. But the thing is, I don’t go into a relationship with guys

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<sup>254</sup> This is said in response to statement 92, ‘Takes for granted that particular religious claims are true’, which is a distinguishing statement among persons of this prototype. Silva interpreted this statement differently to her sexuality and people taking their ideas about homosexuality for granted.

In her religious community, Silva avoids discussing her sexuality or discussing sexuality in general. She says that she is not close to many people in the church, despite attending many activities. For the same reason, she is not close to people in her neighborhood: because of the threat of gossip. However, it also has to do with the homonegative religious discourse that homosexuality is spiritual, caused by an evil spirit, and contagious. This idea that is shared in Silva's church makes the threat of exposure or gossip worse, as many people do not want to socialize or be associated with someone contagious and possessed by an evil spirit.

Silva: If you are a lesbian in a church, you can't tell someone you are a lesbian in a church.

Marlijn: Why can't you tell it in the church?

Silva: Oh, you know people, people talk a lot. People talk a lot. Maybe you might be taking her as a very close friend, telling her all your secrets, but she will go and then reveal it to another person. Yeah, people talk a lot.

Marlijn: And what will happen then in the church?

Silva: Oh, they will be talking about you, you wouldn't even feel comfortable in the church. When people are talking about you. When they are doing something you are participating, you know, some people, when you are a lesbian, they don't, they don't even want to talk to you. They think maybe it is a spiritual something. So, they don't want to talk to you. But to me it is not a spiritual something. It is my choice.

Silva is close with her parents. She visits the church weekly together with them and goes to family gatherings. She has not discussed her sexuality with her parents but thinks they already know. For some time, when she was younger, her parents complained about not seeing any guy or boyfriend around. To stop this, Silva dated a young man.

They were thinking I was a lesbian and then they were saying it, I am a lesbian, I am a lesbian, but I proofed to them I am not a lesbian by dating a guy. But I know I am a lesbian.

Yes, actually, I do not have any feelings for guys, but I try to date a guy because of how my family people are doing. All the time, they are saying, where is your boyfriend and all that. So, I decided to be with a guy. But eh, it doesn't last.

However, Silva is not that worried about her parents' response if they would find out. She suspects her mother of knowing and believes that she would not tell anyone but discuss it with Silva only. Despite their close relationship, Silva believes that they want her to change. In response to that, she says that she will only change when she is ready to

change. Silva holds strong views on her sexuality and relates this to her religious beliefs. After discussing how her parents might react, she says: "If God knows better [than Silva], he can change me".

Later during the interview, on the issue of change, Silva says that she does not need to change, but her parents need to. She believes this will happen after she has given birth to their grandchildren.

Silva: Oh, definitely they [her parents] will change. Yeah, they will change.

Marlijn: What will happen or what needs to happen?

Silva: Oh, when I give birth to them, they will change. Yeah.

Marlijn: In what way?

Silva: They want me to give birth. Yeah, so when I give them one child, and I decide to be with my partner still, they will just take my child and then change their mind on what they have been thinking for me.

Silva ends this discussion by telling about her desire to emigrate and live in another country. This is a shared desire among many of the participants of this study. She says she wants to return to Ghana, at some point, to educate people and share her pride in her sexuality.

### 9.1.2 Strategies and agency

Silva discusses several strategies in her neighborhood and religious community to avoid stigma, such as concealing her sexuality and avoiding being seen with girlfriends. There are also several ways in which Silva empowers herself, primarily related to support and education in queer communities and among friends, such as her partner. She also mentions social media, which could be potentially threatening as there are lots of scammers active, but she finds it a way to network and gets to know other people as she can decide to hide or expose specific stories and photos.<sup>255</sup>

Silva's position on her sexuality stands out during the entire interview: she does not view her sexuality as a crucial matter to stigma as she has found her ways to avoid it, and she does not internalize any stigma. Instead, she views her sexuality as a positive matter, her choice, and freedom, and she is outspoken about this.

Everything you do is freedom. Freedom of choice, like my freedom now. It is my choice to be a lesbian. It is my freedom.

Oh, he [the pastor] has been saying it [homosexuality] is bad, it is a spiritual something. But to me it is not. It is a choice. Yeah

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<sup>255</sup> See also Taylor et al. 2014 and Duguay 2016 on the benefits of social media among queer youth and their negotiation of sexuality and religiosity.

When I tell you I am a lesbian, what will you do? You won't do anything to me. You can't change me, it is my choice. I can decide to stop the lesbian and move with a guy. That one is my choice.

Her optimistic view on her sexuality is also to her religious beliefs. She believes that the divine protects and supports her and that the divine judges people on their faithfulness, not on their sexual preference. She believes that she avoided some stigma in her past because of her faith in the divine. As an example, she describes how she had to take her phone to a store for repairs. Sometimes, people go through images or videos on the phone, and if they seem to relate to stigmatized issues, such as homosexuality, there can be many consequences for the phone owner. This did not happen to Silva, as they did not go through the database on her phone. Silva describes it as an instance where the divine protected her.

Silva interprets some of the notions shared among persons of this prototype with queer communities. For instance, the importance of reading and talking about his or her convictions is for Silva related to reading books on sexualities.<sup>256</sup> Silva says she started reading these books about ten years ago when she started dating women. To her, this is important, and it has taught her about sexualities, health, and lesbian relationships.

The support from queer communities is critical to Silva. For her, it is a matter of support and education and sharing experiences to discuss possible strategies. She discusses this with the notion 'Actively works towards making the world a better place to live', which is a strongly shared notion among persons of this prototype.<sup>257</sup>

Silva: Activities like this, it helps. Like educative talks, and all that. Sometimes these Solace people [from Solace Initiative] arrange educative things and then they invite us to come. If they don't do activities, we wouldn't know much about this LGBT thing. Yeah, so it is important.

Marlijn: Hmm. How has it influenced you?

Silva: Oh, a lot, a lot. How you have to walk like bold, when you are in public. Some people, even when they are tomboys, they walk anyhow, they can walk with their boxers, when you come to LGBT meetings. They will tell you how to handle yourself, things you must do in public and things not to do. Just so that when you are walking, people know

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<sup>256</sup> This discussion responds to statement 6, 'Spends much time reading or talking about his or her convictions', which is a distinguishing statement among persons of this prototype.

<sup>257</sup> This relates to statement 51, 'Actively works towards making the world a better place to live', which is a statement that is sorted most defining among persons of this prototype.

or insult you or beat you. No. Yeah, so with these activities, it helps us a lot.

Silva describes how strategies are shared in these meetings to avoid stigma. For example, it is better as a tomboy [a masculine queer woman] to wear a belt instead of showing boxers (underwear). Women wearing boxers are often targeted as lesbians and can experience stigma in public.

Marlijn: And why is that important to your sexuality? If you don't wear a belt? What does it say?

Silva: No, not in my sexuality. But you know some tomgirls, they don't wear a belt, and they will make everyone see what they are wearing under. They will just sack for people to see their boxers, that will tell you, this person's sexuality. She is a tom. Yes. But through that I can dress decent. If I don't tell you I am a tomguy, you wouldn't know.

Silva refers to these strategies as knowing "her rights". She says that she has not been threatened because she knows her rights. When she gives an example, it becomes clear that she is not talking about human rights, but about strategies to avoid stigmatization: about where to "act as a lesbian and where not to act"<sup>258</sup>:

Silva: Some people have been threatened by their work people. Some are being threatened with their hood people, family people and all that. But me, I have never been threatened before. Because, I know my right. I know where to act as a lesbian and where not to act as a lesbian.

Marlijn: So, what are the places you can act as a lesbian?

Silva: When I am in a LGBT meeting, I act as a lesbian. But when I am out with my family, church programs, I don't act like that. I'll ignore you.

Marlijn: So, what do you, how do you act then, what do you change in your?

Silva: What do I change? I change my language, how I speak. When I am in a LGBT meeting, I can speak anyhow, I speak with you- I am telling you what I am. I am a lesbian. But when I move with other people, I don't tell them I am a lesbian. I don't even raise topic that comes with LGBT something, no, no, no. Cause I don't want them to say something bad, that would affect me. Yeah.

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<sup>258</sup> This discussion is in response to statement 61, 'Feels threatened by evil forces at work in the world', which is a least defining statement among persons of this prototype. Silva takes this statement literally and relates it to sexual stigma, meaning she has not felt threatened at her workplace or anywhere else.

Even though Silva has to conceal her sexuality, which can be an oppressive experience, she has taught herself strategies to avoid stigma by sharing knowledge in organizations such as Solace Initiative. For instance, the awareness of heteronormative ways of dressing and the role of language (what words or topics to use or discuss and which to avoid). This makes her feel empowered. However, more importantly, she becomes aware of the sexual stigma and does not internalize it, but instead, she has embraced her sexuality and has affirmative views on it with her religious beliefs.

## 9.2 Key experiences shared by Sami

*Sami is twenty-one years old and identifies as a Christian homosexual man. On a scale of being religious, he describes himself as moderately religious and his family as more religious. Once a week, he attends religious ceremonies and practices religion privately.*

Sami lives by himself on his family property close to his mother in a poorer area of Accra. His parents are separated, and Sami sees his father regularly. His mother is Christian, and his father believes in African Indigenous Religions (AIRs). However, even though Sami visits the church every Sunday, he does not see himself as religious.

Sami: I am not really spiritual.

Marlijn: You're not really religious?

Sami: No.

Marlijn: But you go to church, right?

Sami: Yeah.

Marlijn: So, why are you not really religious, what's-

Sami: Sometimes I helped my father with his traditional things and sometimes too, I go to church at the same time. So, like, I am not committed.

He [Sami's father] once tells me that some, there are some men, in the same house, like the man came to him but like- every night a man that was sleeping, walks into his sleep. There is, fights in this spiritual world and stuff so. For me, like to me, I don't like, I don't believe in those traditional things so. Even if he [Sami's father] is telling about it.<sup>259</sup>

One of the biggest struggles in Sami's life is poverty. Sami and his mother do not have financial stability and often seek support to cover daily costs, such as school fees or health costs. The church has been

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<sup>259</sup> This is said following a discussion of statement 61, 'Feels threatened by evil forces at work in the world', sorted as least defining among persons of this prototype.

supportive and has sometimes covered Sami's school fees. At these times, Sami does describe that he believes in the divine, but at other times when he and his mother are struggling, he says that he feels distant from the divine.

Like what he [Sami's uncle] said was God, I told myself that ah, we need something very like ordinary- like immediate [money for a hospital bill] and you're telling us, it will be provided by God. What was that. So- we called a different person down to us, relatives, and that person helped us. God doesn't come to you. He passes through someone like, he uses favors through someone. He doesn't come to you.

I asked a friend, like maybe let's say a question to him and he said, you know I should pray. And like- immediately I told him that like ah, you are telling me to pray, so if I pray, would God go and write the thing [an exam] for me?

Despite his doubts about the divine, Sami believes in eternal salvation. This is one of the distinguishing statements among persons of this prototype. Sami thinks it is good for everyone to attain eternal salvation and "having a good and normal life"<sup>260</sup>. Between Christianity and AIRs, Sami is more directed towards Christianity, maybe because the church is also a community that offers support. In addition to his weekly visits to the church, Sami helps his father with religious practices at his home, such as libation and offerings (such as food) at shrines. Sami says that his father often tells stories about threats or evil spirits and that other spirits will protect them, but Sami does not believe any of this. Therefore, he does not feel protected by the beliefs of his father. In addition, he does believe that religious leaders in AIRs are often scammers, which his father has also warned him about.

No, no, no, I don't believe, that is why if my dad tells me that it helps protecting me, I don't like, I don't feel anything.

It does not mean he [AIRs priest] is going to help you, he is only going to take your money. He offers to God, the animal will die or something, and he just pours the blood. They do not do anything for you, cause I know. My dad thinks the same, he tells me that is come to a point like, you come to some places.

Concerning protection and support, Sami feels different about the church he visits compared to AIRs. Although Sami started the interview by saying that he was not committed, religious, or spiritual, he feels protection from the church as they provide him and his family

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<sup>260</sup> This is said in a discussion on statement 38, 'Feels confident of attaining eternal salvation', which is a distinguishing statement among persons of this prototype.

sometimes with financial support. When the practice of praying is discussed, Sami tells me that he often prays for his family to become rich to overcome poverty.<sup>261</sup>

The pastor told me that a God is protecting you, right now, and I know that.

Maybe when I need something and I tell them, they [the church] always provide help.

The way the poverty has been like, I did not like, I do not want any of my family members to pass through that. So, I always pray for them to get rich. I know how poverty is like and how it feels if you do not have money.

In a discussion about poverty, Sami says that he does not become more religious or spiritual in times of need. He believes that “help is in many ways”, and that whether you are Akan, Fante, or relate to any other indigenous community, it does not matter when it is about helping each other. Instead of AIRs or Christianity, Sami says he remains open to everybody and not only thinks of religion and being part of a religious community. Although he visits the church sometimes and has some religious practices, he does not see himself as committed to any religious community or ideology.

### 9.2.1 Stigmatizing experiences

Regarding his sexuality, Sami did not discuss many stigmatizing experiences. However, he is aware of the sexual stigma. For instance, besides his parents, Sami does not want anyone to know that he is homosexual because “some would be pleased, but some would, it will be like discrimination”. Therefore, he does not discuss it with people when he visits the church.

However, besides that, stigmatizing experiences against his sexuality do not seem the most relevant to him. At his church, homonegative religious discourses are shared, for instance, the belief that homosexual people are possessed, but Sami does not believe this.

They [priests] say like, they always say it [homosexuality] is an evil practice. I always think like, what [would] you do like if you feel okay that way.

Sami says that he got bullied for not having a girlfriend during junior high school. However, this kind of gossip did not lead to other

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<sup>261</sup> This is said during a discussion on statement 95, ‘Believes that human progress is possible on a worldwide scale’, which is a most defining statement among persons of this prototype.



consequences, such as a discussion with the head of the school or possible suspension or further exposure. Instead, Sami says, he fought back by going into the discussion.

They [other students] always mock me. They always mock me that I am dating a girl. [...] One day, I got bored, I gave him a beating and told him that I do not like, I hate these things [the bullying]. [...] I just told him, I just expressed myself to them. To know who I am so, that they won't go, do this stuff saying.

You see, friends are very difficult to appreciate. [...] Like even if my peers call, they like, like they always call and they would call the girl for me. But the way I have talked to the girl, I don't feel comfortable. Like, talking to my peers that are gay, even if, the way I've been talking and asking you questions, and- introducing myself like- if I meet the girl, I know like, I don't feel anything for a girl so.

Besides his friend, Sami does not experience any pressure from people. He has a close relationship with his mother, and she does not pressure him to be with a woman. During this interview, it is also clear that for Sami and his family, poverty is a more significant issue in their lives. He holds several views on progress and activism, which he relates to becoming rich to help others and decrease poverty. Sami does not share any experiences of being stigmatized for being poor, but he does struggle with it, as he and his mother often do not have enough money to cover daily costs, such as school fees and health expenses. He finds it frustrating that he does not have enough money, as his friends go out and have a drink somewhere and his friends always need to help him.

It [working towards making the world a better place] is very important to me because if you live in some place and the place is not nice, it can even be like [no one] can visit you, because the place is not nice.<sup>262</sup>

Marlijn: So, what are you working towards?

Sami: I want to be very- I want to be the richest person in the world.

Marlijn: Okay, why do you want to be the richest person?

Sami: Cause, I like helping. [...] I like helping people that are not happy, so like, I like giving to the needy and maybe someone in my area [neighborhood] does not have a family, I give out them.

Progressing is very important to avoid poverty. [...] At the time I was in junior high school, I did not have any money, my mom did not have

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<sup>262</sup> This is said in response to statement 51, 'Actively works towards making the world a better place to live', which is a most defining statement among persons of this prototype.

money to pay for my registration. So, I had to like, leave school for two weeks to go and find some part time job.<sup>263</sup>

During the interview with Sami, it became clear that poverty was a struggle in his life, and gender, sexuality, and religiosity were not significant matters to him. However, despite not being significant matters to Sami, he is pretty active in queer communities and has a very supportive environment around him.

### 9.2.2 Strategies and agency

Even though gender and sexuality were not central in this interview, Sami discussed how he has been active in queer communities and his close relationship with his mother. Being himself and discussing his sexuality openly with close friends is very important to him. In the last three years, Sami has been more active in queer communities and got some close friends with whom he can be completely open.

It is very important to me. It is very important to me, because if you don't have anyone, you don't have anyone to like- to have someone to be with, very. You feel very like if you go like, you feel very lonely and stuff so.

From early on, Sami's mother told him that he should do what makes him happy, which has been an ongoing motivation in Sami's life to embrace himself for who he is. He refers to this motto when he discusses stigma, such as priests talking negatively about homosexuality in his church. It also helped him discuss his sexuality with his mother, who said it was all right with her. As a result, he has an affirmative view of his sexuality and receives support from his close family and friends.

So, she [Sami's mother] told me like, she asked me not to lie to her and I said yeah, okay it [Sami is a homosexual] is true, she said okay. She is fine with it.

Once a time a man told me that it is supposed to be a man with a woman, but not a man and a man. As in okay, I have heard what he said but to me, that is what makes me feel okay. That is what makes me feel happy so.

My mom has inspired me. Like she is always telling me that, I should do it, what makes me happy. I should do what I feel, believe it will make me happy.

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<sup>263</sup> This is said in response to statement 95, 'Believes that human progress is possible on a world wide scale', which is a most defining statement among persons of this prototype.

On the property where he lives with his mother, Sami has a small building where he meets his friends. This gives him more privacy and the ability to have small meetings with his close friends. He emphasizes that it is important to him to have friends who are also homosexual so that they can share and discuss things. Furthermore, having these close friends has made him feel more positive in life, as he describes himself.

Sami: I feel very like, I feel very positive, like very close to those who share the same- like my friends, some of my friends, they know what I am in, and they are also in the same-

Marlijn: Like they're gay you mean?

Sami: Yeah. They are also in the same thing so. Always talked about ourselves, how to be LGBT and discuss like we share the same issue.

Sami: Like, last days, last three years.

Marlijn: And did it change you in any way?

Sami: Change. Not like- for nowadays, cause now, I feel okay, I feel very up and yeah.

Marlijn: So, you started to feel more happy?

Sami: Yeah.

Marlijn: And why?

Sami: Cause, they always like, they always call me. We talk, we go out-yeah we always have fun.

[Sami on the question if there was a time when he got to know more people like himself]

These brief parts in the interview show that sexuality is important to Sami, and he gives much attention to it, as he organizes small meetings at his own home. He thinks it is also important to have friends who share similar experiences, to discuss these issues and help each other. The support from his mother, who is beside his father, his only close family relative, is very significant. Her affirmative response and motto that Sami should do what makes him happy reflects Sami's affirmative views on sexuality and embracing his own identity.

### 9.3 Key experiences shared by Yilma

*Yilma is twenty-one years old and identifies as a Christian lesbian. In the survey, she describes herself to be part of an Islamic community, but on a scale of being religious, she describes herself as not religious at all. During the interview, she explains that her mother is a Christian and her father is a Muslim and belongs to an indigenous community. In the interview, Yilma identifies as a Christian and explains that she goes to church. On a scale of being religious, she describes her family as very religious. Once a week, she attends religious activities at her church, and privately she practices religion less often.*

Yilma is an exceptional person of this prototype, as she technically negatively relates to this prototype. This means that she holds opposite views and values compared to the other persons of this prototype, Sami and Silva. This is not entirely evident in her views, but she does stand out because of her experiences of sexual stigma and the internalization of homonegative religious beliefs that the other two persons of this prototype do not have. Whereas other persons of this prototype share fewer experiences of sexual stigma, Yilma expresses that she is confronted with sexual stigma.

In addition to experiences of sexual stigma, Yilma had a tough childhood since her father left her family and her mother, and she lived through uncertain financial times. Nevertheless, Yilma feels grateful to the divine. She is grateful for waking up in the morning every day and "for how far he has got me, where I was and where he got me to". However, at the same time, she feels guilty as she believes that the divine does not approve of her sexuality.

I decided to go to church myself. Cause I had the chance, I realized I had the chance to choose any religion I wanted.

There were some kind of difficulties in life for us but I feel by the grace of God, I got out of it.

I feel guilty, cause I feel it [her sexuality] is not something He really likes.

Her feelings of guilt also come through in her attendance at church. Yilma starts the interview by telling me that she attends the church with her mother, maybe twice a week. However, quite quickly, she says that she does not always attend services because she does not feel like it.

Yilma: Hmm, somehow. I feel like I have freedom, but sometimes I feel that I don't have freedom. Sometimes I don't feel like going to church.

Marlijn: Okay, when is that?

Yilma: Oh, anytime we go for- like, anytime I don't want to go, I don't go. If I thought I would go to church, I will go.

Yilma does not explain herself further until we discuss the issue that she does not feel close to the divine. She says that she cannot get close to the divine anymore because of what she has "gotten into". Yilma has internalized homonegative views concerning her religious beliefs and sexuality and most likely is exposed to stigmas in close circles, such as among her family and her religious community.

### 9.3.1 Stigmatizing experiences

During the interview with Yilma, it is clear that religion and her religious beliefs are central to her life. She has been through a difficult time with her mother, and her religious beliefs were a way of supporting her. She is active in the church and used to take part in some activity groups. Early in the interview, it becomes clear that Yilma is not going to services that often anymore, and she is not part of any activity group. She has withdrawn herself as she is afraid to be exposed in the church. Yilma experiences sexual stigma in her church community, among her close family, and has internalized some of the homonegative views shared in her church. These experiences have significant consequences, increasing anxiety, fear, and self-stigma.

During the interview, on a discussion about reincarnation, Yilma expresses the wish that she would like to be given another chance by being born as a man.

Sometimes with my gender and all, I want to be- it makes me feel- sometimes I wish I am a guy. But, I am not so I just have to manage.

Yilma: I would like to come in a different way, to get a chance, you get it.

Marlijn: So, you would like to start again?

Yilma: Yeah.

Marlijn Why would you like to start again?

Yilma: Cause I want to change my gender or something.

Yilma explains that her feelings have nothing to do with her sexuality but how she feels inside. She says her wish to be reborn has nothing to do with her religious beliefs, as she does not believe in reincarnation, but the idea of it speaks to her as she does not feel she is who she should be.

At the same time, Yilma experiences stigma against her sexuality in her church community, as the preachers actively preach against homosexuality, and Yilma sees herself as a lesbian. The preacher preaches about the end of the world concerning same-sex marriage, and they use interpretations of bible verses in a homonegative way. Yilma says that sometimes, she does not believe their interpretations, but sometimes she does.

For some time, I don't believe it cause there are things in the bible that have changed. And it is not um, getting to know, they have changed things in the bible. But they don't write it.

I think it is those things they preach about in church. Or they like, would make me change my mind or something [on her sexuality], so I would like to stay home.

Anytime I go [to church], it makes me have, I don't know something to change, the attitude to change, but me, a person I am, not ready to change.

Yilma explains that she often went to church more than twice a week but that this has changed over time as she heard homonegative religious discourses and felt uncomfortable. At the interview, she claims that she "just got back into it", attending church services. She says that she feels pressure that she should change when she attends church, but she does not want to change herself. Therefore, Yilma decided to stay home more often to avoid this pressure and the preaching.

Yilma internalizes some homonegative views, especially ones supported by religious beliefs. She does not feel comfortable with her sexuality and does not hold an affirmative view regarding the divine and her sexuality. Yilma says that she feels more distance from the divine when she goes to church, and religious leaders preach about homosexuality in the church. It makes her feel guilty. She has internalized the idea that she is sinning by being a lesbian and that she might go to hell.

Yilma: Yes, when I go to church, I feel because of what I gotten into [being a lesbian], I cannot get close at him anymore.

Marlijn: Because you are a lesbian?

Yilma: Yes, I cannot- I feel guilty. Or I feel bad getting with that to Him.

Marlijn: Why do you feel guilty?

Yilma: Cause I feel, it is not something He really likes.

I feel what I am doing is a sin. That is how I feel. And every sin there is a punishment, to every sin. And people say that there is heaven and there is hell. And we believe, I also believe in that so. So, when we maybe, I am sinning, and I will face the consequences of what I am doing, for whatever you do, you face the consequences. There are consequences to what you do.

No. Cause I feel when I die, right now, I will get to face the consequences of it. Of my actions that I am in. Cause I feel I didn't do God right.

Yilma is also afraid of exposure in her church. Yilma believes that religious leaders have visions, and perhaps they might be able to know about her sexuality. Yilma can be pointed out in public during a service, which makes her afraid and is another reason to avoid church services. She is not afraid of the advice she would be given, but she would be exposed to more stigma from other church members.

At times, you know some pastors see what you do. You have prophets, they see things. And when I go to church, I feel, they might pick and point me out and "this is what you are doing, stop it".<sup>264</sup>

Yilma does not receive any support from home either, as her mother shares similar negative ideas about homosexuality as her church community. Her mother does not know about her sexuality, and Yilma does not want to share it with her. It is the same situation with Yilma's siblings, who do not know about it either, and Yilma does not want to discuss her private life with them, even though she wants to be close to them. Regarding her father, whom she is still in touch with, she is afraid of his response. Her father belongs to an indigenous community<sup>265</sup>, and Yilma believes that these communities can be violent if they know someone who is homosexual. She refers to an assault that happened a few weeks before 2018 when the police arrested a group of young men who planned to attack a young lesbian couple in their home in Kumasi (MyNewsGH 2018, February 18).

She [Yilma's mother] would be disappointed in me because, anytime she speaks ill about these people [homosexual people], so even sometimes I feel like talking to her, but the way she talks about it, it does not encourage me to tell her.

Yilma: Some of them [members of indigenous communities] when you announce you are doing that, they can kill you.

Marlijn: They can kill you?

Yilma: Yeah. Or they will beat you. I have seen news on the internet saying that they beat lesbian girls in Kumasi. They saw them kissing.

Because of her anxiety and fear, Yilma is careful with visiting activities organized by queer communities or going to the local queer bar. Yilma tells me that she is sometimes afraid or anxious when she thinks of those places because she is afraid the divine might destroy them. For instance, Yilma suggests that a well-known gay bar in Accra could be destroyed since the divine would not agree with how people act and dress in the bar. When she visited it herself, she described that she felt sick.

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<sup>264</sup> This is said in response to statement 39, 'Feels uncomfortable turning to the divine'. In contrary to the other persons of this prototype, for Yilma this is a statement sorted as most defining.

<sup>265</sup> Indigenous community refers to native communities in Ghana, such as the Akan, with their languages and religious beliefs. However, I use the term indigenous community to distinguish between someone who holds African Indigenous Religious beliefs and someone who ethnically identifies as Akan but does not hold AIRs beliefs. This is further discussed in the section 1.3.3 African Indigenous Religions in Ghana.

That place, the first time I went there, I felt sick. [...] Cause, I felt as I don't know, I don't know how to explain it. [...] That place could be destroyed anytime, any moment.

I did not feel good, because of everything that was going on there. Cause it was like, the reflection of what, I don't know. [...] Cause, it is surprising and amazing to see a lot of people engaging in these things. And all of those people, you can go down the road, and the day I went there, the place was choked [crowded]. There was no car passing through. And even you, if you would go there too, you won't feel okay, like you won't have enough space to walk through.

Yilma says that she did not feel uncomfortable there but was afraid the visit might expose her because many people were around the bar. Yilma is afraid that if she goes there and is seated outside of the bar, someone will see her and think she is a lesbian. At the same time, some of Yilma's friends have told her that the place is not "classy". Yilma describes that it is like the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, a place that could expose you and the divine could destroy if he wants to. This is an example of a homonegative religious discourse that has been shared in her church, and she directs at other situations in her life, which creates further anxiety.

Yilma describes that she is in constant conflict with her religious beliefs, as she asks for forgiveness when she goes to church. However, sometimes as she says, she feels like giving up. She does not feel like she can change, but she also does not know how to continue with the church if she does not change. At the time of the interview, she seems to be at a time where she feels she is forced to choose between her sexuality or religion, as she has no surroundings that allow her to embrace both in the way she wants to.

Yilma: Yes. I, yes, most at times, I go to church. But other times, I am like, I've given up.

Marlijn: What, giving up on what?

Yilma: Like giving up with everything I am doing.

### 9.3.2 Strategies and agency

Yilma experiences sexual stigma among her closest circles, such as her family, and does not have much support. Because of this, she has more individual-focused strategies to manage the stigma. Yilma is aware of the stigma she experiences, as she mentions several times during the interview how she has to "manage" the stigma for being a more masculine woman. Despite her anxiety regarding ideas such as going to hell when she dies or being exposed in her church community, she



strives to have inner peace. Her strategies are subtler as they are very individual, but they help her manage stigma.

To manage the stigma in her religious community, Yilma conceals her sexuality and has started to avoid church services. Yilma also tells me that she does not have any friends in the church or knows of any other queer people in her church and that she keeps those things "separated" from each other. However, Yilma is still confronted with homonegative religious discourses through her mother, who shares these with their religious community. This might increase the internalization of specific negative ideas around homosexuality for Yilma.

During the interview, Yilma goes back and forth about the idea of forgiveness and salvation. On the one hand, she says that she believes homosexuality is a sin and that as a lesbian, she will go to hell. She also believes she has to live righteously and that she has to attend church and pray. However, on the other hand, she says that the divine loves her and believes that she will be forgiven for all these things. To strengthen her belief, she uses stories from the bible, for instance, how Jesus forgives the two thieves along with him at his crucifixion (Luke: 23 32-43).

Like, I believe in salvation. Yes. And I believe that God loves me. No matter who I am.<sup>266</sup>

We came to service [church service] so I feel anytime I want to go through Him, I ask for forgiveness, He forgives me.

Marlijn: So, you do think that you might be judged and not go to heaven?

Yilma: Yes.

Marlijn: But do you believe in forgiveness or?

Yilma: Yeah, I do believe in forgiveness. I do believe in forgiveness, even in the last days, when he [Jesus] was crucified, he was crucified with two criminals and he was able to forgive the other one at the point of time when he was dying. So, I believe in forgiveness.

Marlijn: Hmm. So, you think- do you think that you can be forgiven yourself?

Yilma: Yes, I think I can be forgiven.

Concerning forgiveness, Yilma argues that it is essential for her to have some inner peace. She does not explain how she achieves this but says she strives to be happy and feel a sense of inner peace. Later during the interview, she talks about playing musical instruments, listening to

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<sup>266</sup> This is said in response to statement 92, 'Takes for granted that particular religious claims are true', contrary to persons of this prototype, Yilma sorted as least defining.

music, and playing games to take her "away from my situation". She emphasizes that it is important to her sometimes to be alone.

I am a happy person and I want everyone around me to be happy. That is me. And no matter how but I might be going through, I might be going through life challenges and I wouldn't want to afflict it upon me, so I have to be happy. And have that inner peace. Yeah, cause that inner peace brings some kind of joy.

Another view that she holds onto and wants to discuss during the interview is the significance of having a purpose in life. She describes that she has a purpose in life, a dream of what she wants to do. She wants to pursue a career in security services, start her own company, and dreams about helping others, especially orphan children. Despite the challenges in her life, she does not see any obstacles in the future from achieving what she wants.

## 9.4 Discussion

Persons of the 'Confident Scripture-driven Believer' demonstrate the plurality of the religious landscape in Ghana. They do not share similar religious beliefs, but they share similar values and views on religion and its relevance. This results from their different backgrounds, interfaith marriages of their parents, exposure to different religious communities, and their different phases in life. Yilma, who is part of this prototype holding opposite views, highlights some of the characteristics of the prototype that she is opposed to.

One of the most critical characteristics among persons of this prototype is the confidence and relevance of attaining eternal salvation. Even though Silva and Sami do not identify similarly as religious, they both agree on the relevance of eternal salvation. Similarly, although in different ways, religion is viewed as having a positive impact on their lives. Silva identifies as very religious and feels protected and close to the divine. Sami does not feel committed to any religion but feels close to his mother's religious community as they support them with financial struggles. He finds comfort in praying for support and discussing struggles in life with religious leaders. Both Silva and Sami do not internalize any homonegative religious beliefs and do not experience any conflict with their sexuality.

For Yilma, religion is experienced as having a negative impact on life. She is anxious and fearful towards the divine and internalizes some of the homonegative religious beliefs, such as the idea that she goes to hell for being a lesbian. In opposition to the persons of this prototype, she feels guilty for not living up to her ideals, feels uncomfortable or fearful in turning to the divine, feels distant from God or the divine, and does

not feel that a religious or spiritual outlook strongly guides her sexuality. She believes she has to change and expresses the wish that she was born as a man instead of being a lesbian.

Another finding in this chapter, which became noticeable also due to the small number of persons of this prototype, were other characteristics relevant to managing sexual stigma and experiences of sexual stigma. In the first Q-pattern analysis, sexuality and gender were not relevant matters. That turned out to be different in the analysis of the interviews, as it was an often discussed theme. However, sexuality was not experienced as an issue by Silva. She did not experience any conflict with her religious beliefs and sexuality. She did experience sexual stigma, but it did not impact her or her religious beliefs. Her age and the knowledge she acquired make a difference. She stands out as she has financial security, a support network, and feels confident in managing sexual stigma. In the case of Sami, class is a characteristic that makes a difference. He and his mother struggle with poverty, which is currently the most challenging issue in his life. He does experience sexual stigma, but it does not impact him individually, such as internalization, as he has a supportive community (including his mother). This chapter illustrates how characteristics such as age, sexuality, religion, and class matter regarding sexual stigma and strategies to manage it.

Compared to the other prototypes, where there is often a more homogenous view on sexual stigma, homonegative religious discourses, and strategies to manage it, this prototype includes different experiences of sexual stigma and strategies to manage it. This relates to these different characteristics of the persons' lives and Yilma, who holds oppositional views.

#### 9.4.1 Experiences of stigma

Among persons of this prototype, there did not seem to be many experiences of enacted stigma. However, Yilma shared experiences of enacted stigma, including experiences in her close circles such as family and friends. Felt stigma was shared more often among persons of this prototype. Felt stigma often leads to an increase in stigma consciousness and stereotype threat. This is common among persons of this prototype who were very aware of the sexual stigma. It also results in several ways to manage sexual stigma, such as avoiding it by attempting to pass as a heterosexual or concealing one's sexuality differently. In addition to these experiences, Yilma experiences self-stigma. This is most likely a result of enacted stigma in her close circles.

What is noticeable in the differences of stigmatizing experiences among persons of this prototype is the impact of the kind of stigmatizing beliefs shared and by whom it is shared. For instance, Sami was familiar

with the idea that evil spirits cause homosexuality. However, this idea was not shared by anyone close to him or had any authority. Therefore, he dismissed this idea and did not believe in evil spirits. On the other hand, Yilma, who internalized religious homonegative views, is exposed to these views by the authority in her religious community, her preacher. In addition, Yilma is exposed to her mother sharing these views and speaking negatively about homosexuality and queer people. This example between Sami and Yilma shows how authority and the type of beliefs matter to the extent that sexual stigma can influence one's values and views.

These different experiences of stigma relate as well to different religious beliefs. For instance, Silva, a Christian, feels protected by the divine. She is not exposed to any stigma in her religious community and has an affirmative view of the divine and religious beliefs. Yilma, who holds opposite views, is exposed to enacted stigma and felt stigma in her religious community and close family. She has a fearful relationship with the divine. She identifies as Christian and believes she will go to hell for being a lesbian.

The experiences of Yilma, and the lack of support, lead to an internalization of the views and values shared among her family and her religious community. She experiences self-stigma. Her internalization is most visible in her description of the queer bar as a place that will be destroyed, the idea that she will go to hell if she dies as a lesbian, the idea she has to change, and her guilty feelings because she believes the divine does not approve of her. This is an example of how Herek (2007) describes self-stigma: her acceptance of sexual stigma as part of her value system and beliefs.

Felt stigma, which was most shared among persons of this prototype, is described differently. An example is the story of Silva, who changes her phone and feels protected by the divine because nobody checked her photos and made assumptions that she is a lesbian. Simultaneously, Silva is conscious of the consequences if the phone fixer has checked her photos. Silva and Sami share these experiences, describing the fear of gossip in their neighborhoods, religious communities, and school. They both do not pass heterosexual norms, as they are never seen with a partner of the opposite sex.

For Silva, these heterosexual norms are also related to straight time (Page and Shipley 2020), as her parents expect her to give birth to grandchildren. Silva is aware of this and describes her way of managing it by giving them a grandchild and then living her life the way she wants to. In contrast to Yilma, who talks about changing, Silva discusses how her parents need to change. This is a clear example of the opposite of self-stigma. Silva points out the sexual prejudice that she has to live up to but does not accept or internalize them as her values.

#### 9.4.2 Strategies and agency

Among persons of this prototype, there were different strategies to manage stigma. This primarily resulted from the extent of the sexual stigma they were exposed to and the access to support and resources. One of the findings in this chapter is that the person who lacked resources and support has a more individual focus on strategies to manage stigma. This came through in her strategies to manage stigma and her views on life, for example, on the importance of staying focused on achieving her career, which could lead to financial independence.

Strategies to manage sexual stigma become limited when someone is without any support or resources. For Yilma, this is undoubtedly the case. Besides staying focused on her own goals in life, she tried to minimize being exposed to stigma. For instance, she conceals her sexuality from her family and religious community and focuses on private religious practices. She keeps her friend circles from her church community and queer community separated. Even though Yilma internalizes homonegative views from her church, such as sinning and the idea of going to hell, she found some relief in the notion of forgiveness. Although forgiveness comes after the event of 'sinning', which is a negative idea, forgiveness gives Yilma some relief from her anxiety about going to hell. In addition to her focus on a career and minimizing stigma by avoiding it, she focuses on keeping "inner peace" related to this understanding of individual strategies. She would distract herself, her mind from stigmatizing experiences by playing games and music. She aimed to be happy and have time alone without any stigma. Even though Yilma internalizes homonegative views and does not have access to a supportive community, the subtle ways she manages stigma can be identified as individual strategies to minimize stigma.

For the other two people of this prototype, who hold opposite views and values to Yilma, support played an important role in their strategies to manage stigma. Both of them relied on a supportive queer community, which led to several strategies such as affirmative religious views and minimizing stigmatization by passing as heterosexual in public spaces. Both of them were also closer to their parents.

Sami's mother told Sami that he should do whatever makes him happy, which gives him the motivation to be himself despite stigmatizing experiences around him. In addition, it enables him to invite friends of him with whom he can share experiences. He describes how important this is for him to share the same issues and support each other when he says how he felt happier the last three years. During this time, he became closer with some of his friends, having them over for meetings and since then calling each other to check up on each other.

Silva emphasizes how important the queer community is for her through the activities they organize. It has taught her how to minimize sexual stigma in public places by adjusting her ways of dressing. It has taught her as well about health and sexual education. Most importantly, she says the community has taught her to trust people and know her rights. Silva relies on individual strategies such as minimization but shows how important a queer community is in sharing this knowledge.

For both Sami and Silva, a supportive community and people around them who accept them for who they are, have also increased being consciousness of sexual stigma. This consciousness decreases the chance to internalize any homonegative religious discourses. Silva's descriptions of her religious beliefs and the divine exemplify how this kind of knowledge can result in affirmative religious beliefs and a positive relationship to the divine.

## 10. Conclusion

In this thesis, I have demonstrated the different ways religion and sexuality are lived among sexual minorities in Ghana. I have analyzed what kind of impact sexual stigma has, especially homonegative religious discourses, on sexual minorities who are part of or raised in a religious community. This study has contributed to the study of religion in the following ways. First, this study has contributed with illuminating and thoroughly analyzed narratives from the Global South to the existing scholarship on sexuality and religion. The narratives demonstrate persuasively the cultural and religious discourses that underpin the sexual stigma the participants must negotiate. The narratives further illustrate the diverse ways the participants enact agency to manage such challenges in different spaces, as well as the multiple outcomes this engenders. I have discussed the narratives in great detail at the end of every chapter with support from relevant literature, summarizing the key features of each of the five prototypes and their inter-relationships.

Secondly, in contribution to researchers who work with Q methodology or are interested to do so, the five prototypes can be a helpful analytical tool for future research. Thirdly, this study has also proven the usefulness and versatility of a mixed-methodology. For example, the individual interviews and sorts combined with the prototypes in this study demonstrate the complexity and time dimensionality of lived religion. The narratives of individuals demonstrate the temporality as they may crisscross different prototypes in their lives managing sexual stigma and navigating sexuality and religiosity. Simultaneously, the data support a nuanced analysis of the complex relationships between sexuality and religion among sexual minorities. I was able to foreground strategies and agency and explore how religion can be a positive resource of affirmation and empowerment to sexual minorities. Consequently, this study destabilized the sex-negative dichotomy. The mixed-methodology also enabled me to focus on the detailed narrative accounts which highlight the relevance of the study, concerning the current attempts at legislating against sexual minorities in Ghana in particular, and ongoing political developments against sexual minorities globally.

At the same time, I have disrupted the dominant dichotomy of religious-secular by showing how religion can be lived out in different ways, for instance, by someone who is not part of a religious community anymore but practices religion individually or by someone who expresses that they are not religious but do believe in a divine being. Furthermore, I hope that the nuanced analysis and rich narrative accounts on stigma, religiosity and sexuality, has increased the reader's

awareness of stigmatization experienced by sexual minorities in Ghana and the challenges they face in their everyday life. To conclude this thesis, each sub-question is answered and reflected upon with a summary of the results below. This is followed by a reflection on the methodology, focusing on some of the advantages and limitations of this study. Finally, the conclusion ends with suggestions for future research for anyone who wishes to proceed with similar themes in this area of study.

## 10.1 Summary

This study has explored how young adults in Ghana identifying as sexual minorities understand and negotiate their religious and sexual identities. Four sub-questions guided this exploration: 1) on the religious positions, 2) the religious views on sexuality and gender, and 3) the negotiation of religious and sexual identities with sexual stigma among young adults in Ghana identifying as sexual minorities. The fourth question discusses how religious institutions or authorities underpin sexual stigma or provide individual support. The answers and results regarding the four sub-questions are summarized below.

### 10.1.1 Religious positions among young adults identifying as sexual minorities

The religious positions among young adults in Ghana identifying as sexual minorities were answered through the Q-pattern analysis and further explored through the interview material. The Faith Q-Sort was developed to explore shared religious positions, values, and views. In this study, the Q-pattern analysis of the FQS resulted in five unique religious positions among the study participants. This result destabilizes the dichotomy of religious-secular and the religious, secular, and spiritual categories, as it shows the many varieties of religiosity.

The Q-pattern analysis resulted in five prototypes: 1) the Open-minded Confident Believer, 2) the Guilty-feeling Non-religious Individualist, 3) the Religiously Active Doubting Believer, 4) the Deeply-connected Private Believer, and 5) the Confident Scripture-driven Believer. These labels were based on the most distinguishing statements of the prototypes. In the analysis of the interview material, these religious positions were further explored.

The persons of the 'Open-minded Confident Believers' are the most religious compared to the persons of the other prototypes. They are active in their religious communities, value religious scriptures, and rely on their religious beliefs for individual support and on religious activities for social relationships. Determination is essential among



persons of this prototype; they expressed the importance of worship and showing your determination at religious services and ceremonies. Individually, religious beliefs were viewed as a form of support. The divine was seen as a valuable and trustworthy source, who is the only one who may judge about issues such as sexualities and sinning.

The persons of the second prototype, the Guilty-feeling Non-religious Individualist, are the most outspoken non-religious persons compared to persons of the other prototypes. Although secular was not a concept that emerged during the interviews with the participants, persons of this prototype are in light of several indicators the least religious. They did not contribute to any religious community, and they did not center their lives on a religious or spiritual quest. Compared to persons of other prototypes, they were the ones who felt most strongly about hypocrisy among religious authorities and institutions. From the interviews, it became clear that persons of this prototype experienced sexual stigma in their religious communities and often from relatives and close friends. The exposure to sexual stigma impacted the religious beliefs of persons of this prototype. They stopped going to religious gatherings and ceremonies. As a result, there was an increase in private religious practices. However, even private religious practices stopped for some people of this prototype, as they could no longer believe in a divine being while they experienced so much negativity.

Persons of the third prototype, the Religiously Active Doubting Believer, did not distance themselves from religiosity as persons of the second prototype did. However, as the prototype's title described, some of them started to doubt the religious convictions of their religious communities and authorities, especially religious views and values used against homosexuality. For some, this meant that they participated less in religious gatherings. Persons of the third prototype did not share the same confidence as persons from the first prototype. They participate in religious activities for social relationships and view being religious as central to who they are. However, they are more doubtful towards affirmative religious beliefs with sexuality than persons of the first prototype. Heteronormative ideals supported by religious communities are pursued by persons of this prototype, such as the ideal of a heterosexual marriage and a nuclear family, and their wish to be either a masculine man or a feminine woman. Simultaneously, these ideals impact the persons of this prototype, as some of them do not fit in with these heteronormative ideals. The interviews showed that persons of this prototype relied on religious authorities, scriptures, and religious communities in general. They were less critical of religious authorities and institutions than persons of prototypes one and two.

Persons of prototype four, the Deeply-connected Private Believer, described a deep connection with the divine. They feel protected and

guided by the divine and often feel aware of the presence of the divine. They are less interested in religious gatherings and more focused on private religious activities. In contrast to prototypes three and two, persons of this prototype express more positive attitudes towards religious beliefs and the divine. Persons of this prototype are active in their religious communities, but with periods of change, sometimes they withdraw, and at other times they visit religious gatherings more often.

Persons of prototype five, the Confident Scripture-driven Believer, feel strongly about the idea of eternal salvation. They do not all feel committed to a religious community, but they do value religious ideas and practices, such as the idea of eternal salvation. They have a religious plural background which impacts their attitudes on religion, as they are more positive towards different religious communities and AIRs. Religious scriptures and discussions on religion are seen as important.

As these results show, after the second prototype, which includes the least religious persons, it becomes more difficult to specify a 'religious position'. It becomes more about the religious practices and what kind of values or religious beliefs are seen as important. Attitudes and beliefs about the divine become noticeable, which differs between these prototypes. These differences in religiosity among persons of this study relate to the exposure of sexual stigma, support (or lack thereof), and other elements such as poverty, age, and health issues (such as HIV).

	<b>Prototype 1</b>	<b>Prototype 2</b>	<b>Prototype 3</b>	<b>Prototype 4</b>	<b>Prototype 5</b>
<b>Prototype 1</b>	X				
<b>Prototype 2</b>	24.23%	X			
<b>Prototype 3</b>	25.84%	16.13%	X		
<b>Prototype 4</b>	48.08%	26.80%	32.06%	X	
<b>Prototype 5</b>	16.72%	9.66%	6.07%	-0.68%	X

Table 5. Correlation table five prototypes

A correlation table resulted from the Q-pattern analysis, which is shown above. This shows how the prototypes correlate based on their defining list of statements (excluding interview material and thus interpretations). This table shows that prototype one shares the most similarities with prototype four. The least similar prototypes are prototypes four and five. However, as the Ken-Q Analysis Reference Guide (2018) claims, only similarity percentages above fifty percent are worth exploring. This means that these five prototypes differ, each with its unique religious position.

### 10.1.2 Religious views on sexuality and gender among young adults identifying as sexual minorities

There were diverse religious views and attitudes on sexuality and gender among the study participants. There was some coherency among persons of a particular prototype. However, there were also similar views and attitudes among persons across prototypes. In other words, belonging to a prototype did not always relate to having a specific religious view on sexuality or gender. This is not the same compared to experiences of sexual stigma. Persons of a prototype often shared similar experiences of sexual stigma related to their religious positions. However, their shared experiences did not always result in shared views on sexuality and gender.

A reason for this variety of religious views on sexuality and gender is the influence of stigmatizing experiences and the circumstances in which persons of a prototype are. For example, one day, they would feel a certain way, and another day after a stigmatizing experience, they would feel differently. Religious views and attitudes related to sexuality and gender were therefore very fluid, as they are discussed often in different ways in the lives of these participants. This resulted in more diversity among persons of a specific prototype and more coherency among persons across prototypes. I discuss these views per prototype in the following paragraphs, including different views.

Persons of prototype one, Open-minded Confident Believers, shared affirmative religious views on sexuality and gender. Their religious beliefs supported their sexuality, and the divine being was understood as the only being who could judge sexuality. Heteronormativity was viewed as an ideal; for example, the wish to have a nuclear heterosexual family or the aim to live in celibacy to pass as a heterosexual person. Sometimes, persons expressed guilt or the idea that the divine would punish them for not being heteronormative. However, persons of prototype one mostly shared affirmative religious views on sexuality and gender. They would look up affirmative religious leaders on the internet and affirmative, inclusive, religious communities organized outside of religious communities. Persons of this prototype shared these views although they belonged to different religious communities, Christian and Islamic. There were also influences of AIRs visible, especially to the idea of gender. One person, Ata, explained how they see themselves as a man with a woman's spirit, a ju-ju man, or, as Ata also said, with a diva inside them.

Persons of prototype two, the Guilty-feeling Non-religious Individualist, shared negative religious views on sexuality and gender. Persons of this prototype shared their religious background as they grew up in Christian families. As they are the least religious, they felt most

distanced from the divine than persons from other prototypes. They felt that religious authorities and institutions were hypocritical on issues of homosexuality and gender. Religious supported sexual stigma, such as the belief that a demon possesses a homosexual person, was a shared experience among persons of this prototype. Their families and their religious communities rejected some of them. This resulted in a separation between religion and sexuality, as persons of this prototype lost their religious beliefs or belief in a divine being. Sexuality and religion were discussed as separate issues. The concept of faith among persons of this prototype was understood as having faith in yourself instead of faith in a divine being. Persons of this prototype did not hide their sexuality; they talked publicly about it and dressed and expressed their sexuality in their preferred ways. They wanted to support other young adults and be role models for them.

Persons of prototype three, the Religiously Active Doubting Believer, are somewhat more similar to persons of prototype one, as they try to balance their religiosity with their sexualities. Persons of this prototype tend to hold more positive views on their sexuality and are aware of sexual stigma. However, at the same time, they express ways in which they want to affirm heteronormative views and values, such as heterosexual marriage. They are part of their religious communities and try to find allies in their religious communities regarding homosexuality. Similar to persons of prototype two, they grew up in Christian families, and other religious traditions such as Islam or AIRs are not discussed. They are very active in their religious communities, which is a challenge with experiences of sexual stigma. The stigmatizing belief that homosexual people are cursed and cannot be successful is a challenge among persons of this prototype. Due to fewer resources or health issues, some of them find it difficult to break from this dominant belief in homosexuality. It can become a daily reality for them. Persons of this prototype would therefore express different religious attitudes to homosexuality, mostly affirmative, but sometimes doubting whether homosexuality is 'righteous'.

There was more diversity among the participants in the last two prototypes since both prototypes were relatively small (three persons), and the fifth prototype included a person who held opposite views. Persons were brought up in interfaith families with AIRs practices. They sometimes expressed themselves as less religiously committed than persons of the first and third prototype but have comprehensive knowledge about different religious traditions. In the fourth, the Deeply-connected Private Believer, and the fifth prototype, the Confident Scripture-driven Believer, most persons had affirmative religious ideas on sexuality and gender. The divine is seen positively; as the only being that can judge on issues such as sexuality. One female participant

expressed that she felt that women were more closely connected to the divine, an empowering feminine religious view. Among the two persons of the fifth prototype, the Confident Scripture-driven Believer, religious plurality resulted in less religious outspoken views on sexuality and gender. None of them held strong religious views on sexuality and gender, and religiously supported sexual stigma was not seen as relevant in their lives. In both the fourth and the fifth prototype, a person held more negative religious beliefs on sexuality and gender. Feelings of anxiety and fear were expressed as well as the idea that they had to change. These persons were women, and heteronormative ideals, such as heterosexual marriage and becoming a mother, were discussed as future goals.

Across the persons of the prototypes, female participants expressed more pressure from their families than male participants. They more often expressed the wish to 'change' to fulfill heteronormative expectations, such as marriage, or the idea of having children to keep their family happy without marrying a man. Religiously, they often expressed feelings of guilt, fear, or anxiety towards a divine being because of their homosexual desires or masculine looks.

### 10.1.3 Experiences of sexual stigma and the negotiation of religion and sexuality

This study confirms the high stigma against homosexuality in Ghana presented in earlier research (Gyasi-Gyamrah and Akotia 2016, Owusu et al. 2013). Although there are many differences in experiences of stigma among participants of this study, there were no participants who expressed that they never experienced any stigmatization. Stigmatization against homosexuality was often experienced at high school, in religious communities, and sometimes among family members. There were noticeable differences between experiences of enacted, felt, and self-stigma among participants of this study. Being religious was not an element that necessarily increased or decreased experiences of stigma, as there are participants in this study who identify as very religious but, for example, do not self-stigmatize. Even though people experience stigma in their religious communities, they could have an affirmative view on their idea of the divine, or they might hold onto their faith and beliefs despite stigmatizing discourses in their religious communities. In general, religiosity is thus not a characteristic that creates an identity conflict or cannot be combined with non-heterosexuality.

However, there is an apparent relationship between experiences of stigma and how religiosity is lived socially. For example, participants in this study shared that they are confronted with enacted stigma in

religious communities and by religious leaders. This confirms earlier research, such as the report by the Human Rights Watch (2018), that religious communities and leaders have a significant impact on the spread of stigmatization against homosexuality and the advocacy of heteronormativity.

For participants in this study who relied on their religious communities or trusted their religious authorities, experiences of stigmatization against homosexuality increased, and managing stigma was challenging. This shows a need for more affirmative religious communities with affirmative religious leaders for sexual minorities, especially for young adults in whose lives religion is important.

Other noticeable differences in experiences of stigma among the participants of this study have been highlighted due to the awareness of intersectionality. The intersectional perspective in this study has demonstrated that it is significant to include other identity factors to understand sexual stigma and strategies and agency. The role of religiosity, or religious authorities and communities, does not explain all aspects of sexual stigma. Differences such as gender, age, and poverty were critical to understanding sexual stigma and contextualizing certain stigmatizing beliefs against homosexuality.

For instance, there were different experiences of sexual stigma between male and female participants and between persons who did not pass as heteronormative and those who did. Female participants expressed more stories of pressure from family to get married and become a mother, the pressure to pass 'straight time' (Page and Shipley 2020). If female participants were older, above twenty-five years, they became suspicious of not being married or having any children. This is another visible vulnerability that increased the threat of stigma and often increased felt stigma among them. Feminine men and masculine women shared that they experienced more enacted stigmatization and often more severe stigma, such as violence or sexual abuse, compared to masculine men and feminine women who can pass as heterosexual.

Age was another important characteristic. Younger participants shared more stories of struggling with family, parents, and being dependent on them for, for example, school fees. Older participants, mostly above twenty-five, expressed that they had found more stability. Some of them had stable jobs, and they often had a supportive community around them, supportive friends, family, or were part of a queer organization. They expressed fewer experiences of self-stigma in comparison to younger participants. Age, in this case, relates to independence, and by younger participants, becoming independent was an often expressed wish, as it is perceived as a way to avoid sexual stigma (for example, by family members). For the participants in this study, being dependent on other people often implied having to accept

stigmatizing structures and rely on strategies to decrease or avoid sexual stigma, such as adjusting as much as possible to heteronormative norms.

Poverty was one of the most important characteristics concerning stigmatization and being religious. Those who experienced poverty and were part of a religious community often expressed self-stigma and experiences of enacted stigma. The religious belief that homosexuality is a curse, or caused by the possession of a demon, was more often internalized by these individuals. This is related to the belief that homosexuals cannot be successful. Persons who experience poverty have more difficulty distancing themselves from these beliefs as they experience that they are not successful and are poor. Sometimes they rely on their religious communities for financial support and trust the religious authorities. This makes it difficult to distance themselves from a community and reject homonegative religious beliefs if the religious community shares these. In these cases, agency or empowerment is often shown through strategies such as concealing one's sexuality or compartmentalizing one's life. The implications for persons in this situation are often that they express more felt stigma and have an increased risk for self-stigma, which can increase psychological distress.

<b>Prototype</b>	<b>Religious characteristics</b>	<b>Experiences of stigma</b>	<b>Strategies and agency</b>
1. Open-minded Confident Believers	Active member of religious community, strong relationship with the divine, affirmative religious beliefs	Enacted stigma inside religious communities. Periods of self-stigma. Fear of exposure and rejection; increase of felt stigma, especially for those whose physical appearance makes them vulnerable to stigmatization. Psychological well-being is impacted; issues with trust and anxiety especially at night (nightmares, bedwetting and feeling unsafe).	The divine being is felt and viewed as a support in life. Social support from being active in religious communities despite stigmatization, for example in choirs or worship groups. Concealing one's sexuality. Religious individualism: increase of private religious practices. Support from family. Queer world making: possibilities imagined beyond the boundaries of stigmatization.
2. Guilty-feeling Non-Religious Individualist	Non-religious, religious individualism, complete distance from any religious community	Enacted stigma due to physical visibility; feminine men or masculine women. Stigmatization at a young age, suspended from schools, rejected by families. Periods of religious conversion therapy that increases self-stigma.	Individual focus: isolation and minimizing behavior to avoid enacted stigma. Expressions of self-affirmation which can lead to de-victimization (a rejection of homonegative beliefs).
3. Religiously Active Doubting Believer	Active member of religious community, being religious is central to whom he or she is, reliance on religious	Felt stigma; high awareness of stigma against homosexuality in religious communities. Self-stigma is visible in rationalization of sexuality.	Concealing sexuality Compartmentalize lives Conversion and/or support from religious communities/institutions



	authorities and scriptures	Homosexuality is not seen as natural. Poverty contributes to the belief that homosexual persons cannot be successful and are cursed. Conversion therapies are seen as a 'solution'.	Minimize or adjust behavior Reaching out to allies within religious communities
4. Deeply-connected Private Believer	Religious individualism, strong and positive relationship with the divine	Enacted stigma partly due to physical appearance; feminine men and masculine women. This increases felt stigma and thus anxiety for exposure. Female participants feel pressured with 'straight time'. Experiences of courtesy stigma which increases self-stigma which excludes persons from queer communities.	Queer readings; constructing affirmative sexuality interpretations (Yip 2005). Emphasis on love in religious beliefs; affirmative interpretations of religious texts related to the affirmative notions of sexuality and love in daily life. The divine is seen as a source of love.
5. Confident Scripture-driven Believer	Religious plurality, importance of eternal salvation, positive views on religious traditions including African Indigenous Religions	Felt stigma, persons were highly aware of stigmatization against homosexuality. Self-stigma was experienced by a person who was confronted with stigma by close family members	Individualism for person who lacked support Supportive queer communities; affirmative religious views and ideas shared to minimize stigma by passing as heterosexual Close relationships with family members.

Table 6. Summary of results per prototype

The table above summarizes the experiences of stigma, strategies, and religious characteristics per prototype. As previously highlighted, certain experiences cut across prototypes. For example, in general, persons whose physical appearance could not pass as heterosexual

experienced more enacted stigma than those who could. This is experienced by feminine men and masculine women in this study. Among women, there was also the pressure to get married and become a mother at a certain age, which would increase felt stigma and sometimes enacted stigma.

Some of the details mentioned among persons of a specific prototype do not mean that persons of another prototype never experience these, but they have not expressed them. What also has to be considered when reading this table is that many participants expressed different feelings during an interview. For example, among persons of prototype one, some persons mentioned self-stigma, while rejecting certain homonegative beliefs later on. Self-stigma does not need to be a constant state. A person can experience self-stigma during a certain period, or even only to one particular homonegative belief, which the person might go back and forth on. The findings demonstrate that self-stigma is closely related to exposure to enacted stigma by either family members or religious leaders who are trusted and relied upon. This explains, for instance, why some of the participants in this study express that they feel more pessimistic about their sexuality after visiting a religious gathering.

At the same time, it has to be considered that individuals in these prototypes are not static. Some individuals may have crisscrossed different prototypes in their navigation of their sexuality and religiosity and managing sexual stigma. Their experiences are temporal and their journeys show the processual dimension within the prototypes. It demonstrates how religiosity and in this case sexuality is lived: it changes and fluctuates. For example, Abla from prototype two, 'Guilty-feeling Non-religious Individualist', discusses a phase in her life where she tried to follow her religious authorities and the heterosexual norms in her religious community. She experienced sexual stigma from close relationships such as her mother, which she started to internalize. Her narrative of this period relates to experiences of other individuals who are part of prototype three, the 'Religiously Active Doubting Believer'. This does not mean that all individuals from prototype three might at some point end with values and views close to prototype two, as it depends on their experiences. However, it does show the temporality and processual dimension; the complexity of lived experiences. It also contributes to the study of religion, as it approaches religiosity as a dynamic lived experience that is intertwined with other aspects such as gender, sexuality and class.

Although this study did not focus on social relationships, the support of family, friends, and persons in religious communities is noticeably essential concerning strategies to manage and fight stigmatization against homosexuality. Persons who grew up in a very religious family,

who would hold homonegative beliefs, had some of the worst experiences of enacted stigma and signs of self-stigma. They manage stigma with more individual strategies, isolation, and minimizing behavior. Persons who were close with their family and either had a silent agreement on sexuality or affirmative discussions shared more confidence to manage and fight stigmatization in other places, such as during secondary or tertiary education. Often, they also felt more confident reaching out to queer communities.

Earlier findings on stigma reduction strategies were further confirmed in this study (Parker et al. 2020). As written previously<sup>267</sup>, Parker et al. suggested that the need to know and understand the other was one of the stigma reduction strategies. This is also expressed by persons in this study, especially with family members. An example is Kwesi, of prototype two, who uses the film *Prayers for Bobby* (Mulcahy 2009) to have his family members understand his experience of stigmatization and the need to stop it. Another example is one of the strategies among persons of prototype three, who try to have one-to-one discussions with other members of their religious communities on homosexuality to make them understand. This latter example relates to the education strategy mentioned by Parker et al. (2020) as the need to be true to one's moral values.

This can work especially with religious moral values upheld in religious communities and relate to love and being kind to one another. There are several examples of these strategies by persons in this study, for example, in queer readings (affirmative sexuality religious readings) and in emphasizing the love of the divine for every living being. Persons who experience isolation or lack support often rely on more individual strategies, whereas persons who can access more resources or have more support often have many strategies in collaboration with other allies. To enable these strategies, queer communities such as Solace Initiative are necessary. They are places where persons of this study feel at home, safe, and can make friends. In addition to legal support, they offer much more, as they are also places where knowledge is shared about how to manage and avoid stigmatization.

#### 10.1.4 Religious authorities and institutions: providing stigmatization or empowerment

The analysis of the interview material shows that homonegative religious beliefs are the most shared stigmatized experiences among the participants of this study. These homonegative religious beliefs are shared by religious leaders and often supported by members of religious

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<sup>267</sup> See 2.1.1 Sexual stigma, negotiation and identity strategies

communities, including family members. They are also spread by teachers at educational institutions, especially during secondary education (high school).

Since some of the homonegative beliefs are widespread, such as the idea that homosexuality is a curse and a sin against the divine, it is almost impossible to distinguish between religious traditions with different views on homosexuality. When someone visits a Catholic church that might not preach similarly on homosexuality as a pentecostal one, they might still hear these widespread homonegative beliefs on the streets through street preachers or during their years at high school that might be part of another Christian tradition. This results in participants having the idea that there are no differences in views on homosexuality amongst different religious traditions.

Several participants of this study were asked whether they experienced differences between views on homosexuality from African Indigenous Religions or Christianity or Islam. None of the participants agreed that there were differences. They all viewed that these religious traditions held negative attitudes towards homosexuality. There was a difference between participants who did not belong to a certain religious tradition and relied on portrayals from the media on these issues. For example, participants who had only heard or read about views on homosexuality within African Indigenous Religions would be very negative. They relied on news articles about violence against sexual minorities in rural communities outside of Accra, which would point to AIRs.

However, participants with family members who followed these traditions would be more neutral. This was the same for participants who identified as Christian and did not know much about Islam; sometimes, they would be very pessimistic about views on homosexuality from the 'other' religious tradition. Minority religious communities, such as Islam and AIRs, were thus not viewed as having affirmative views on sexual minorities.

These findings resemble young adults in Accra since Christians are the majority there, and other religious traditions such as Islam and AIRs are in the minority. Only a few participants had experience with AIRs through their parents or an indigenous religious priest. There were also only a few participants who identified as Muslim. Stigmatizing experiences of Muslim participants were similar to those who belonged to Christian communities. However, several participants drew on affirmative views on gender and sexuality from AIRs, for example, on the idea that one could be a man with a female spirit. As Banks (2013) exemplifies in his dissertation, the narrative of spirit-possession is in AIRs often viewed in an affirmative way and does not need to relate to an identity conflict. This is different in many Christian traditions in

Accra, as beliefs of AIRs are often portrayed as a “less advanced kind of religion” (Meyer 2011, p. 154).

The consequence of the major Christian traditions’ authority is that homonegative beliefs are widespread in Ghana, especially Accra. There was a visible difference between participants who relied on and trusted religious leaders and those who critiqued them; the former group would share views of self-stigma while the latter group was more resilient to internalizations of sexual stigma. In addition to queer organizations such as Solace Initiative, there is a need for more affirmative religious groups with affirmative religious leaders for those who feel uncomfortable in their religious community. Groups such as these were seldom mentioned, and affirmative religious leaders were often looked up to and followed through the internet. Persons who were part of affirmative religious groups or followed affirmative religious leaders would often manage stigma with several strategies such as queer readings and critiquing religious authority. They became more knowledgeable about different views on homosexuality in different religious traditions, such as African Indigenous Religions. This knowledge also intervenes and supports participants in important social relationships with their families by creating more understanding and empathy.

## 10.2 Reflection on the methodology

The mixed-method approach of this study involved three instruments that I have used to gather and analyze the data; a survey, the Faith Q-Sort, and semi-structured interviews. The data gathered through the survey were used to provide demographic information about the participants and to reflect on their religiosity and views, and convictions on same-sex couples in chapter four. The Faith Q-Sort (FQS) was used in my study as a point of departure. It contributes to my thesis with the Q-pattern analysis and as a way to open up the themes of religion and sexuality with the participants. The FQS was followed by a follow-up interview on the interpretations of the statement from the participants, and a semi-structured interview with questions about sexuality, religion, coping, and change. The collection of the data took place in three months in the center of Accra, in an office of Solace Initiative. Through thorough preparation, pilot interviews, building relationships with people who worked for Solace Initiative and comments from the first interviewees, I was able to adjust the methodology, build a strong relationship with gatekeepers of the community and become more knowledgeable of the circumstances that many participants had to deal with daily. This process is in detail described in 1.3 The Collaboration with Solace Initiative, 3.1 Gathering participants and the data collection

process and 3.2 Ethical considerations. Throughout the entire study, from the first preparations to finalizing the thesis, I have been reflective on the process, for example, the collection and the final presentation. In addition, I have thoroughly studied and written out a critical account of sexuality and specifically the colonial legacy of the concept of homosexuality in West Africa (see e.g. 1.5.1. African sexualities: understanding sexuality and 1.5.2. Colonial legacies: the need for a broader understanding of sexuality in the study of religion in Africa). Coming from an outsider's position to Solace Initiative and reaching out to participants, I felt that, among other considerations, a participant-led method was crucial in this study to allow for a deeper understanding of religiosity, sexuality, gender and sexual stigma based on the participants' narratives. I believe that the collection of rich narratives of this study are a result of these reflexive and thorough preparations and show my abilities and skills as a researcher in this area. However, I am also very thankful to the YARG project, and the mixed-methodology which was already thoroughly tested and has enabled me to collect such rich data. In the following part, I reflect on the methods separately and how they have worked together, as a mixed-method approach.

### 10.2.1 Survey

The survey provided material that was useful for background information in this study. In chapter four, data gathered during the data collection in 2016, as a part of the YARG project, contributed to providing information on religiosity among university students in Ghana. The survey data that I gathered gave more information about the participants of this study and their views and convictions. The material from the survey was interesting as it gives an idea about how complex it is to measure religiosity. Often answers provided in the survey on questions of religiosity were different compared to answers provided during the interviews. This demonstrates how difficult it is to measure religiosity and how people interpret broad concepts of religion, being religious and religious belonging. One observation is that religious hybridity complicates measuring religiosity through a survey, as often participants would describe their religious affiliation or practices differently during an interview than in the survey. For studies that deal with religious hybridity, this finding might be useful when considering methods.

### 10.2.2 Faith Q-Sort

Despite the focus on religious values and views, the FQS was highly relevant in this study concerning sexual stigma. This was due to the religious discourses on sexuality and especially against homosexuality.

Stigma was a theme that was anticipated during my study, but it emerged through the interpretations and experiences shared by the participants in the use of the FQS. For most of the participants, many of the statements that touched upon religious practices or communities would remind them of experiences of sexual stigma or their negotiation of sexuality and their religious beliefs. At the same time, the FQS enabled participants to share affirmative notions of sexuality and religion as there was no suggestion of any conflict. Below are some short excerpts from participants' responses to shared statements to give an impression of this:

*Four responses on statement ninety-nine of the FQS: 'Takes comfort in thinking that those who do not live righteously will face suffering or punishment':*

"Being a lesbian, I would not go to heaven."

"God should know what I have heard is right or wrong."

"It questions me."

"Everybody is a sinner."

*Three responses on statement five, 'Feel guilty for not living up to his or her ideals', and statement sixty-nine, 'Feels a sense of guilty and inadequacy', of the FQS:*

"I do feel guilty, I think maybe God is not blessing me."

"I am not getting everything I want because I am gay. "

"They make me feel guilty. Someone like my mommy, coming out crying about."

I intended to specifically not mention sexual stigma but to see what themes would emerge from the follow-up interviews where the participants share their interpretations and experiences. Sexual stigma was a theme that emerged from the first round of follow-up interviews. This is a characteristic of Q-methodology. Even though the researcher provided statements on cards, themes emerge through the participants' interpretations. The FQS worked well in this case, as most statements touch upon religious views and values, and many of the participants related it to sexuality, gender, and sexual stigma.

The results of the Q-pattern analysis were another benefit of the FQS. It provided me with different levels for analyzing shared beliefs, values, and attitudes among the participants. For example, in the analysis of the FQS, I looked at 1) the prototypes, 2) a view from 'above', at the individual sorts of persons of a prototype, and 3) at individual sorts from persons across prototypes. This enabled me to provide a complex and intersectional analysis of sexuality, stigma, and religion among the participants. In contrast to interviews that only provide an individual

perspective, the FQS gave me an analysis of what views and values are shared among the participants.

The FQS was a helpful tool to open up the interviews about these sensitive themes. The participants would lead with their interpretations, and there was no pressure to start talking about certain subjects due to leading interview questions. To evaluate the method and to be reflective throughout the study, I included several questions during the FQS process and after the interview to have the participants share their reflections. Most participants were very optimistic about the FQS. Some described that it was difficult to sort the statements and think of specific memories. However, this was often followed by describing how it also made them realize that they moved on and found ways to manage or give certain issues a place in their lives. Below are some of the participants' responses after sorting all the statements and asking how they felt about the method.

I think it is quite nice. It's very productive because I took a lesson from this one. I learned how to know to express myself, I have to be myself.

It's actually okay. It's really helps you know more about yourself. Cause, there was some things, I saw here, that I have not even thought of. But seeing them today with me, with you, yeah. So, it really helped me add more meaning to my life.

It made me think about my life. Especially spiritually. How I am, I don't know how to say, how much I have fallen back, but it makes me realize that there are things that mattered to me a few years ago that don't matter to me now. And with some, I don't want them to matter that much to me.

During my fieldwork and the analysis, I experienced some limitations working with the FQS. Some were concerning my study, and other limitations that I experienced were more general, such as the time-consuming aspect of Q-methodology. Especially with the FQS, the time-consuming aspect was often discussed in our project group.

Partly this had to do with the inclusion of 101 statements in the Faith Q-Set. This is a relatively large number of statements compared to other Q-methodologies since the average is around forty (see, e.g., Lundberg et al. 2020). This does not lead to any analytical difficulties as the same process is followed as any other Q-set (see 3.4.2. The Q-Pattern Analysis). But it does mean that depending on the participant, it can take a while before they have sorted the statements and placed them out on the layout. On average, this process would take an hour during my fieldwork—afterward, the follow-up interview starts, adding another hour to an hour-and-a-half.



Another difficulty with the FQS is the possible misunderstanding of a statement. Even though Q methodology is based on the idea that it allows the participant to interpret a statement, it becomes problematic when there might be language barriers. This could result in prototypes that seem coherent but are not when statements among the participants are interpreted differently. Q-methodology is based on the idea that the Q-set statements do not provide the context, but that a “Q methodological gets filled out as the study proceeds with the subjective viewpoints of the participant group being central” (Watts and Stenner 2005, p. 76). However, during my fieldwork, I noticed that some participants would sort statements that they did not understand in the least descriptive column instead of the neutral column. In these cases, a language barrier has to be considered. This does not mean that the Q-pattern analysis is faulty, as a follow-up interview will show how the person interpreted that statement. However, it could result in differences among participants of the prototype, which I noticed in the smaller prototypes (the fourth and the fifth).

Marlijn: Okay. Well, let's go to the minus fours and minus threes. So, ninety-four, 'Views symmetry, harmony and balance as reflections of ultimate truth'.

Participant: Ninety-four.

Marlijn: Yeah, it is that one.

Participant: Oh, okay. Yeah that one, I didn't understand it very well.

There was a language barrier in my study since some of the participants did not have access to higher education and their reading comprehension skills in English were not always that strong. I tried to resolve these issues by having two pilot interviews during my first visit to Accra in the fall of 2017, but there were no language issues during those two pilot interviews. However, since the participants have different educational backgrounds, language issues became visible during the fieldwork in the spring of 2018. As I wrote previously, it has not resulted in faulty prototypes, but it has made the initial analysis of the prototypes more complicated for me with much back-and-forth reading (see for a more in-depth discussion section 3.4 The Faith-Q Sort and 3.6 Limitations). An advantage of the mixed-method approach is that most statements that were not understood during the sorting would be clarified during the interview, a time where participants could explain their understanding or whether they did not understand a statement at all.

### 10.2.3 Interviews

After the sorting process, the follow-up and semi-structured interview created the space for the participants to explain their interpretations and experiences. There is time to reflect on specific memories or feelings during this phase.

During my fieldwork, I would always start with the most and least descriptive statements, often related to some of the most significant experiences in their lives. If the participant did not feel comfortable, we would continue with other statements by asking which they would like to start with. Sometimes, later in the semi-structured interview, participants would return to the statement, feeling more comfortable and knowing that they could share their experience to the extent they wanted to. There was no pressure with interview questions to discuss sensitive or painful experiences. The interviewee was allowed to raise certain subjects and let others rest. This was very helpful in using the FQS in combination with the interviews. On the one hand, the FQS opened up the interview and often made the participant and me comfortable discussing issues further in the interview.

On the other hand, the semi-structured interviews contributed to the FQS, also when there were certain limitations (as discussed above due to language barriers). When a participant struggled with the FQS, I would focus more on the semi-structured interview and experiences they shared. The semi-structured interviews also gave more meaning to the interpretations given in the follow-up interview, as they provided more context, which enriched my analysis of sexual stigma, religion, and sexuality. It emphasized an intersectional perspective, as many other factors such as age, poverty, and gender were highlighted during an interview. For instance, how some participants suffered from poverty and related to stigmatizing beliefs against homosexuality. These findings would have been lost without the semi-structured interviews.

However, collecting the semi-structured interviews after doing the FQS and the follow-up interview was sometimes exhausting for the participant and for me. It is a time-consuming methodology, especially to do these three methods simultaneously. Furthermore, at the end of my fieldwork, I would not notice any new themes in the semi-structured interviews, making it more challenging to stay focused and gather my data.

### 10.2.4 Mixed-method approach

The mixed-method approach enabled diverse views to emerge and gave space to resilience in addition to stigmatizing experiences. So often, research on issues such as sexual stigma tends to foreground negative aspects. However, there was also space for counter-narratives and

stories of agency and empowerment in my research. I believe that this mixed-method approach was, in this case, instrumental. Many of the participants were happy that they could discuss issues of sexual stigma, their feelings and experiences, and how they manage it. Research methodologies such as these that include sharing experiences or retelling stories can also be felt as positive and therapeutic for the participants (see also Cutcliffe and Ramcharan 2002).

This data disrupts the sex-negative association to religion as it shows other alternatives, which is one of the contributions of this study. Below are three shortened examples of resilience from different participants during their interpretations of the statements that were sorted as very descriptive by them.

Because it [his faith] has been my education from childhood, I felt like well, that [stigmatizing experience in church] should not stop me. Even most of my friends tell me that, why I do not quit that church, there are other churches. But being gay is not a choice. It is what makes you, you.

*Participant (23), who identifies as a Christian homosexual man responding to statement 97, 'Is an active contributing member of a religious or spiritual community'.*

You should ask me the reason why I am doing it [being a lesbian]. I mean I have my personal reasons. So, do not just, out of the comfort of your home, or because you own a phone, you can just put anything online. You need to think about others. Even if you do not agree with the person, think about the person's feelings, the person's emotions. These things are not something we do just with the hands or our legs, the heart is also involved.

*Participant (22), who identifies as a Christian lesbian responding to statement 48, 'Values his or her own purity and strives to safeguard it'.*

Sometimes, going through some spiritual, I will go to the church and the pastor or priest will tell me someone wants to destroy you, someone is going to put you through shame or disgrace. Then personally, I believe, because I have faith in God, I believe He is protecting me. So those things [spirits] will not be able to do [anything].

*Participant (22), who identifies as a Christian lesbian responding to statement 74, 'Feels personally protected and guided by a spiritual being'.*

These experiences of resilience and disrupting the sex-negativity with being religious are significant as it avoids portraying participants as victims, as people who carry a stigma rather than individuals stigmatized by societal structures and discourses. This mixed-method

approach has enabled me to overcome certain limitations that I would have encountered if I depended on one of the methods rather than combining them. They have also contributed to being able to provide a safe method for the participants to engage: I was able to provide anonymity, it could be done in one safe space (familiar to at least half the participants) and I was able to reach out to individuals who did not want to disclose or discuss issues related to religiosity and sexuality publicly (not even to other participants). For the purpose of this study and the necessary safety considerations under the increasing heterosexist political climate against sexual minorities in Ghana, I believe this mixed-methodology has been very successful.

### 10.3 Suggestions for future research

This thesis has engaged with issues that are rapidly evolving and changing globally. Young adults' religious traditions and beliefs are changing, especially with global networks and the influence of social media (see, e.g., Moberg and Sjö 2020). Simultaneously, in Ghana, but similarly in many other countries worldwide, the human rights of sexual minorities are under attack. As this thesis has demonstrated, which aligns with earlier research (HRW 2018), religious authorities and communities highly impact the spread of stigmatization against sexual minorities in Ghana. They increase the risk of self-stigma among sexual minorities, and they also spread the acceptance of violence and hatred against sexual minorities in public places.

When I started my thesis in 2016, members of Solace Initiative were optimistic about the future, and throughout Ghana, there was a growth of Ghanaian organizations that supported the rights of sexual minorities. However, while I am writing this in 2021, someone who was closest to me and collaborated with me during my fieldwork is waiting to hear from court because she was arrested for engaging in an LGBTQ+ rights training workshop. Meanwhile, anti-gay legislation has been drafted to be proposed to Ghana's parliament (Akinwotu 2021).

This thesis has highlighted the importance of religious beliefs among young adults and the impact it can have when homonegative religious beliefs are internalized instead of countered. In addition, it has shown how important it is for the participants of this study to be independent and have access to resources. Future studies that engage with these issues could further research the significance of social relations and sexual stigma, the role of support from family, and affirmative religious beliefs.

At the same time, to break down homonegative religious beliefs, more studies on the role of authoritative religious groups in Ghanaian

politics and intercontinental religious networks would be helpful. As Marc Epprecht (2008) writes in *Sexuality and Social Justice in Africa*:

The fact is that coverage of homophobia and related stories in Africa often is neither fair nor sensitive to the many factors that are contributing to the apparent upsurge in homophobic speech and violence. Some of those factors are specific to distinct African cultures and local political economies. But others are directly linked to decisions made in the West. (p. 8-9)

The study of religion can contribute to these issues by looking into those intercontinental religious communities that continue to support and spread homophobia in different countries worldwide. Furthermore, ethnographic studies on affirmative religious communities in Accra and other places where there is a need for these and the accessibility for sexual minorities would be useful and empowering (see, e.g., Van Klinken 2019). The field of religious studies can contribute with these kinds of studies on local or national affirmative religious communities that support sexual minorities, which was an often described desire by the participants of this study:

I think church could be fun; it would be more fun to go to church every day if you can, if you can relate with the people on various levels. And not just the church level. On just a religious level. But I can relate with you on a sexuality level and it builds more intimacy. So, there are there is a lot that we can talk about. And there is a lot that we can do together.

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# Appendix

## 1. Interview agreement

### Interview agreement

The Young adults and religion in a global perspective -project (YARG)  
Åbo Akademi University, Finland

Thank you for volunteering for this interview that follows after the survey that you already participated in. The purpose of this research project is to gather more knowledge about worldviews and values among young people globally today. All the interviews will be recorded and transcribed for the purpose of our analyses. The results will be published in academic articles and books and they will enhance our understanding of young adults today, your values and views, but also the culture you are part of.

### Voluntariness and confidentiality

This document is an agreement that is formed between you and the research project. The purpose of the agreement is to ensure that you have been properly informed about the project as a whole, your own participation in it, and that every step will be taken to ensure your confidentiality and anonymity.

Before you sign the agreement, it is important that you know and are informed about the following:

- You can refuse to answer any question during the interview.
- You can decide to stop the interview any time you want.
- The recordings and transcripts will become the property of the project.
- The material from the interview is only to be used for research purposes.
- The transcripts and recordings will be filed securely and separately from this agreement where your name occurs.
- You are guaranteed full anonymity:
  - Only researchers affiliated with the project will be allowed to read the material and only after signing a contract that guarantees your anonymity.
  - Your name and identity will never occur in any transcripts or in any recordings.
  - Your identity will not be communicated to any of the researchers in the project, or to any other person.
  - No publications or other reports from this project will include your name or any other information identifying you as a person.

If you cannot obtain satisfactory answers to your questions or have comments or complaints about your treatment in this study, please contact the principal investigator:

Prof. PETER NYNÄS

Åbo Akademi University, Fabriksgatan 2, FIN-20500 ÅBO, FINLAND

peter.nynas@abo.fi

+358 (0)40 587 3187

Information about participant (with print letters):

Family name and given name:

Date of birth and country of birth:

Phone number or e-mail address:

NOTE! This information will NOT be filed with the recording or the transcribed interviews.

Informed consent statement

I hereby certify that:

1. I have been informed about the research project “Young adults and religion in a global perspective” and that the results of this international project may be published in academic reports, journals and books.

2. I understand and confirm that my participation in this interview is voluntary. I understand that the discussion may be both interesting and thought-provoking. If, however, I feel uncomfortable in any way during the interview session, I have the right to decline to answer any question or to end the interview. I may withdraw and discontinue participation at any time without prejudice or penalty, and no one on my campus or at my college or university will be told.

3. I understand that my confidentiality as a participant in this study will remain secure. Subsequent uses of recordings and data will fully protect my anonymity. Researchers will not identify me by name in any reports or publications using information obtained from this interview. Faculty and administrators from my campus, college or university will neither be present at the interview nor have access to recordings or transcripts. This precaution will prevent my individual comments from having any negative repercussions.

I have been given satisfactory information and answers to my questions concerning the project procedures and other matters. I agree that any information obtained from this may be used in any way thought best for this research project. I hereby agree to participate in this electronically recorded interview.

Place and date of interview

Signature of interviewee

I hereby agree to follow all that here has been stated regarding confidentiality, anonymity and handling of the material for the project:

Signature of interviewer

Name of interviewer: Marlijn Meijer

Phone number/e-mail address: marlijn.meijer@abo.fi

Project reference no (interviewer fills in): YARG, YGHMM

Archive reference no (filled in by ÅAU staff):

## 2. Example of the survey

Young adults and religion in a global perspective (YARG)

Welcome to the YARG survey and thank you for participating!

Our purpose with this research project is to gather more knowledge about worldviews and values among young people globally today. Several thousand people worldwide will take part in this study. Individual results will not be shared with anyone outside the research group. The results will be published in academic articles and books. All participants will remain totally anonymous.

We think that you will enjoy answering the questions in this survey. They might challenge you to think and they provide an opportunity to reflect on things you might perhaps not talk about every day. The results of this study will enhance our understanding of young adults today, but also of the culture you are part of. After you have answered the questions there is an option to volunteer for participating in an interview. Those who participate in the interview will be given a gift as a compensation for their time and effort.

More information about the project can be found on our website at: [abo.fi/yarg](http://abo.fi/yarg). If you have any questions that have not been answered, or comments or complaints about your treatment in this study, please contact the principal investigator:

Prof. PETER NYNÄS

Åbo Akademi University, Fabriksgatan 2, FIN-20500 ÅBO, FINLAND

[peter.nynas@abo.fi](mailto:peter.nynas@abo.fi)

+358 (0)40 587 3187

By filling in and returning the survey form, starting on the following page, you consent to participate in the survey and agree with the following statements:

1. I have been informed about the research project "Young adults and religion in a global perspective". I understand that the survey may be both interesting and thought provoking and that the results of this survey may

be used in any way thought best for this study and published in academic reports, journals and books.

2. I understand and confirm that my participation in this survey is voluntary and that I may choose not to participate at any point without prejudice or penalty.

3. I understand that my confidentiality as a participant in this study will remain secure. My anonymity will be fully protected in relation to all parts of the research project. Researchers will not identify me by name in any reports or publications or by using information obtained from this survey.

4. Teachers, administrators or anyone else on my campus, at my college or my university will not be informed about my participation or if I choose not to participate. They will not have access to any information or answers I have provided here. This precaution will prevent my individual comments from having any negative repercussions on me whatsoever.

### Young adults and religion in a global perspective

The purpose of this research project is to gather more knowledge about worldviews and values among young people around the world today. Please, answer the following questions as accurately as you can, to the best of your knowledge. Remember that your answers will remain completely anonymous.

Professor Peter Nynäs  
Project Leader, YARG  
Åbo Akademi University, Finland

#### A. Your current life situation

A1. How would you characterise your current relationship status?

Single

Married or registered heterosexual partnership

Heterosexual cohabitant or heterosexual common-law marriage

Same-sex romantic relationship

Widow/widower

Divorced

Separated

Other, please state.....

A2. Do you have children (either own or adopted) or close relatives you are responsible for?

Yes

No

A3. At the age of 15, did you live in a city or in the countryside?

In a city

In the countryside

I don't know

A4. Would you describe yourself as being a member of a group that is discriminated against in the country you live in now? Please, select all that apply.

No, I don't feel discriminated against

Colour or race

Nationality

Religion

Political orientation

Language

Ethnic group

Age

Gender

Sexuality

Disability

Other, please, describe:

A5. In considering your family's monthly income relative to the average in your country, is it?

Much lower than the average

Somewhat lower than the average

About the average

Somewhat higher than the average

Much higher than the average

I don't know

A6. Are you studying full-time?

Yes

No

A7. Are you currently employed?

Yes

No

A8. Are you receiving a scholarship for your current studies?

Yes

No

A9. Where do you currently live?

In a shared, student accommodation, or a sub-let room

With parents or other relatives

In a privately rented apartment

In an apartment owned by your parents, other relatives, or yourself

B. Your social life

B1. How often do you meet socially with friends or relatives?

Every day

More than once a week

Once a week

- At least once a month
- Only on special days or celebrations
- Less often
- Never
- I don't know

B2. Do you have anyone with whom you can discuss intimate and personal matters?

- Yes
- No
- I don't know

B3. Compared to other people of your age, how often would you say you take part in social activities?

- Much less than most
- Less often
- About the same
- More than most
- Much more than most
- I don't know

B4. Do you find doing things with other people difficult, even if you share interests and goals with them?

- 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

B5. Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?

- 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

1. Do you consider yourself as belonging to one or more religious groups, communities, or traditions?

- No
- Yes, which?

2. Whether or not you belong to any, are there religious, spiritual, or philosophical communities, traditions, or practices you feel close to or that reflect your views?

- No
- Yes, please, describe

3. Regardless of whether you consider yourself as belonging or close to a particular religious group, community, or tradition, how religious would you say you are?

- 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

4. How religious would you say the family you grew up in was?



0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

5. Apart from special occasions such as weddings and funerals, about how often do you take part in religious ceremonies or services these days?

- Every day
- More than once a week
- Once a week
- At least once a month
- Only on special days or celebrations
- Less often
- Never
- I don't know

6. Apart from when you are at religious ceremonies or services, how often do you engage in private religious or spiritual practices, such as worship, prayer, or meditation?

- Every day
- More than once a week
- Once a week
- At least once a month
- Only on special days or celebrations
- Less often
- Never
- I don't know

C. Your sources for news and information

C1. In the past month, how frequently did you use the following media?

Every day Almost daily Every week Occasionally Never

Newspapers/magazines

Radio

Television

The Internet

C2. If you ever use the Internet, for which of the following activities do you use it?

Every day Almost daily Every week Occasionally Never

Communication

Developing social networks

Finding information

Entertainment

Buying things or services

Selling things or services

Uploading self-created content

Health or wellbeing related services  
Religious or spiritual services and issues  
Political issues

C3. From where do you get information about news or current affairs?

Please, select all that apply.

Newspapers/magazines

Radio

Television

Social media

Online news sources

Friends or other people

Other sources, which:

C4. Which of the following do you rely on for guidance as you live your life and make decisions? Please, select all that apply.

Family

Trusted friends

God or 'higher power'

Past masters, saints, or teachers of my tradition

Deceased loved ones

Own intuition or feelings

Own reason and judgement

The teachings of my religion

The religious or spiritual group to which I belong

Local religious leaders

National religious leaders

The leader or leaders of my religious tradition

Social media

Science

Great literature and art, past and present

School or university teachers

Government authorities

Political party or politicians

None

Some other, which:

D. Your views and convictions

D1. To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

Strongly disagree    Strongly agree

1 2 3 4 5

Same-sex marriage should be treated the same as marriage between a man and a woman.

Same-sex couples should have the same rights for adoption as heterosexual couples.

If a woman became pregnant as a result of rape she should be able to obtain a legal abortion.

When a woman's own health is seriously endangered by a pregnancy she should be able to obtain a legal abortion.

A pregnant woman should be able to obtain a legal abortion if the woman wants it for any reason.

D2. Consider a situation where a person is living in severe pain because of a disease that cannot be cured and the person wants to die.

To what extent do you agree with the following statements? Strongly disagree Strongly agree

1 2 3 4 5

Doctors should be allowed to end the patient's life if the patient requests it.

Doctors should be allowed to assist the patient to commit suicide if the patient requests it.

E. Your wellbeing and happiness

E1. All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole nowadays?

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

E2. Taking all things together, how happy would you say you are?

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

E3. How satisfied are you with your present standard of living?

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

E4. How much do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?

1 2 3 4 5

I'm always optimistic about my future.

In general I feel very positive about myself.

At times I feel as if I am a failure.

On the whole my life is close to how I would like it to be.

E5. How much of the time during the past week ... Not at all All the time

1 2 3 4 5

You felt depressed?

You felt that everything you did was an effort?

Your sleep was restless?

You were happy?

You felt lonely?

You enjoyed life?  
You felt sad?  
You could not get going?  
You had a lot of energy?  
You felt anxious?  
You felt tired?  
You were absorbed in what you were doing?  
You felt calm and peaceful?  
You felt bored?  
You felt really rested when you woke up in the morning?

F. Your personal details

F1. In which country were you born?

F2. What citizenship do you hold?

F3. When were you born?

Month:

Year:

F4. What is your gender?

Male

Female

Other

F5. How would you define your sexuality

Lesbian

Gay

Homosexual

Heterosexual

Bisexual

Queer

Asexual

I do not define my sexuality

Other, please state.....

How much like you is this person?

1 2 3 4 5 6

1. It is important to me to form my views independently.
2. It is important to me that my country is secure and stable.
3. It is important to me to have a good time.
4. It is important to me to avoid upsetting other people.
5. It is important to me that the weak and vulnerable in society be protected.
6. It is important to me that people do whatever I say they should.

7. It is important to me never to think I deserve more than other people.
8. It is important to me to care for nature.
9. It is important to me that no one should ever shame me.
10. It is important to me to always look for different things to do.
11. It is important to me to take care of people I am close to.
12. It is important to me to have the power that money can bring.
13. It is very important to me to avoid disease and protect my health.
14. It is important to me to be tolerant toward all kinds of people and groups.
15. It is important to me never to violate rules or regulations.
16. It is important to me to make my own decisions about my life.
17. It is important to me to have ambitions in life.
18. It is important to me to maintain traditional values and ways of thinking.
19. It is important to me that people I know have full confidence in me.
  
20. It is important to me to be wealthy.
21. It is important to me to take part in activities to defend nature.
22. It is important to me to never annoy anyone.
23. It is important to me to develop my own opinions.
24. It is important to me to protect my public image.
25. It is very important to me to help the people dear to me.
26. It is important to me to be personally safe and secure.
27. It is important to me to be a dependable and trustworthy friend.
28. It is important to me to take risks that make life exciting.
29. It is important to me to have the power to make people do what I want.
  
30. It is important to me to plan my activities independently.
31. It is important to me to follow rules even when no-one is watching.
32. It is important to me to be very successful.
33. It is important to me to follow my family's customs or the customs of a religion.
34. It is important to me to listen to and understand people who are different from me.
35. It is important to me that the state is strong and can defend its citizens.
  
36. It is important to me to enjoy life's pleasures.
37. It is important to me that every person in the world have equal opportunities in life.
38. It is important to me to be humble.
39. It is important to me to figure things out myself.
40. It is important to me to honor the traditional practices of my culture.

41. It is important to me to be the one who tells others what to do.
42. It is important to me to obey all the laws.
43. It is important to me to have all sorts of new experiences.
44. It is important to me to own expensive things that show my wealth.
45. It is important to me to protect the natural environment from destruction or pollution.
46. It is important to me to take advantage of every opportunity to have fun.
47. It is important to me to concern myself with every need of my dear ones.
48. It is important to me that people recognize what I achieve.
49. It is important to me never to be humiliated.
50. It is important to me that my country protect itself against all threats.
51. It is important to me never to make other people angry.
52. It is important to me that everyone be treated justly, even people I don't know.
53. It is important to me to avoid anything dangerous.
54. It is important to me to be satisfied with what I have and not ask for more.
55. It is important to me that all my friends and family can rely on me completely.
56. It is important to me to be free to choose by myself what I do.
57. It is important to me to accept people even when I disagree with them.

Here we briefly describe different people. Please read each description and think about how much that person is or is not like you. Put an X in the box to the right that shows how much the person described is like you.

Thank you for completing this survey!

Our research project will benefit from your answers and enhance our understanding of young adults today, your views and values.

### 3. Faith Q-Sort Statements

FQS-b 2015

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1. Gives substantial amounts of time or money to some religious organization or worthy cause.
2. Has frequent doubts about long-held religious convictions.
3. Views religion as a central means for becoming a better and more moral person.
4. Thinks that the world's religious traditions point to a common truth.
5. Feels guilty for not living up to his or her ideals.

6. Spends much time reading or talking about his or her convictions.
7. Participates in religious practices chiefly to meet others' wishes or expectations.
8. Longs for a deeper, more confident faith.
9. Thinks about the ultimate as a life force or creative energy rather than a supernatural being.
10. Has experienced moments of intense divine, mysterious, or supernatural presence.
11. Has a strong sense of a spiritual or higher order of reality in the midst of nature.
12. Participates in religious activities chiefly on special occasions.
13. Views religious faith as a never-ending quest.
14. Is moved by the atmosphere of sacred or venerated places.
15. Considers the meaning of religious texts and teachings to be clear and true.
16. Being religious or spiritual is central to whom he or she is.
17. Becomes more religious or spiritual at times of crisis or need.
18. Considers religious scriptures to be of human authorship—inspired, perhaps, but not infallible.
19. Understands and relates to the divine as feminine.
20. Relies on religious authorities for understanding and direction.
21. Takes part in religious activities to form or maintain social relationships.
22. Thinks that certain specific beliefs are crucial for salvation.
23. Engages regularly in religious or spiritual practices in private.
24. Takes no interest in religious or spiritual matters.
25. Feels contempt for all religious institutions, ideas and practices.
26. Regrets the personal loss of religious faith or a sense of divine presence.
27. Expresses his or her religion primarily in charitable acts or social action.
28. Believes in some way, but does not view him or herself as religious.
29. Is inclined to embrace elements from various religious and spiritual traditions.
30. Considers regular attendance at places of worship to be an essential expression of faith.
31. Is critical of the religious tradition of his or her people.
32. Considers all religious scriptures to be outdated or misguided.
33. Feels spiritually moved and deeply sustained by music, art, or poetry.
34. Sees this world as a place of suffering and sorrow.
35. Feels adrift, without direction, purpose, or goal.
36. Has dedicated his or her life to serving the divine.

37. Has experienced a profound change in religious or spiritual understanding or commitment.
38. Feels confident of attaining eternal salvation.
39. Feels uncomfortable or fearful in turning to the divine.
40. Expresses his or her convictions by following certain dietary practices.
41. Thinks of the divine as a sheltering and nurturing parent.
42. Has a thorough knowledge of religious scriptures or texts.
43. Is consumed by day-to-day responsibilities, leaving little or no time for spiritual matters.
44. Senses a divine or universal luminous element within him- or herself.
45. Feels distant from God or the divine.
46. Feels that one should remain loyal to the religion of one's nation.
47. Feels closest to those who share the same faith or outlook.
48. Values his or her own purity and strives to safeguard it.
49. Seeks to intensify his or her experience of the divine or some otherworldly reality.
50. Has used methods of attaining altered states of consciousness.
51. Actively works towards making the world a better place to live.
52. Lives his or her earthly life in conscious anticipation of a life hereafter.
53. Believes in a divine being with whom one can have a personal relationship.
54. Thinks that men and women are by nature intended for different roles.
55. Personally finds the idea of divinity empty of significance or meaning.
56. Embraces an outlook that actively seeks to change societal structures and values.
57. Seldom if ever doubts his or her deeply held convictions.
58. Feels that it is important to maintain continuity of the religious traditions of family and ancestors.
59. His or her sexuality is strongly guided by a religious or spiritual outlook.
60. Views religion as the illusory creation of human fears and desires.
61. Feels threatened by evil forces at work in the world.
62. Prays chiefly for solace and personal protection.
63. Battles with inner impulses that are experienced as dark or even evil.
64. Centers his or her life on a religious or spiritual quest.
65. Furnishes his or her living space with objects for religious or spiritual use or inspiration
66. Deeply identifies with some holy figure, either human or divine.



67. Observes with great care prescribed religious practices and laws.
68. Has sensed the presence or influence of specific spirits, demons or patron saints.
69. Feels a sense of guilt and personal inadequacy.
70. Rejects religious ideas that conflict with scientific and rational principles.
71. Believes that religion should play the central role in the ruling of the nation.
72. Has moved from one group to another in search of a spiritual or ideological home.
73. Thinks that ritual or practice is more important than particular beliefs or mystical or spiritual experiences.
74. Feels personally protected and guided by a spiritual being.
75. Feels a sense of peace even in the face of life's difficulties.
76. Mainly associates with persons of the same religious tradition or outlook.
77. Is profoundly touched by the suffering of others.
78. Is often keenly aware of the presence of the divine.
79. Views all events in this world within a religious or spiritual framework.
80. Faces the prospect of death with courage and calmness.
81. Is positively engaged by or interested in other peoples' religious traditions.
82. Is reluctant to reveal his or her core convictions to others.
83. Believes that one can be deeply moral without being religious.
84. Has a vague and shifting religious outlook.
85. Finds it difficult to believe in a benevolent divine being in the face of evil.
86. Is committed to following a spiritual path that is in harmony with the environment.
87. Views religious content as metaphoric, rather than literally true.
88. Views the divine or a higher reality as a deep mystery that can be pointed to but never fully understood.
89. Has experienced moments of profound illumination.
90. Affirms the idea of reincarnation, the cycle of birth and rebirth.
91. Takes delight in paradox and mystery.
92. Takes for granted that particular religious claims are true.
93. Sees personal self-realization as a primary spiritual goal in life.
94. Views symmetry, harmony, and balance as reflections of ultimate truth.
95. Believes that human progress is possible on a worldwide scale.
96. Can see no higher purpose or ultimate destiny for the human species.

- 97. Is an active, contributing member of a religious or a spiritual community.
- 98. Willingly gives up worldly or bodily pleasures for religious or spiritual reasons.
- 99. Takes comfort in thinking that those who do not live righteously will face suffering or punishment.
- 100. Supports individual freedom of choice in matters of faith and morality.
- 101. Considers hypocrisy—not practicing what one preaches—to be common in religious circles.

#### 4. Interview guide

Interview guide - Accra interviews Marlijn 13-02-2018

Interview agreement  
Can be verbal

Survey and PVQ  
There is no wrong answer

FQS cards  
Most descriptive/least descriptive - describe you the most or least  
When we go through the cards, please mention the number  
One card at a time  
Statements

- How does it relate to you?
- In what kind of ways do you do that?
- What does it mean to you?
- How do you understand this statement?
- How does it refer to your background?
- How does it relate to your everyday life?
- What kind of moments were they?
- When does it happen?
- How does it relate to the other statement, card xx?
- How does it relate to your sexuality?

After FQS  
Can you comment on statement 54, or 59 (if not mentioned already)  
Any card in the neutral columns you would like to comment on?  
Any other card you would still like to comment on or that stood out?  
How did sorting the cards feel?  
Was there any statement missing for you?  
Would you change anything or is the sorting okay the way it is?

### Follow-up questions

What happened then

What do you mean by that

Who do you mean by xxxx/they

Would you use that positively or negatively?

Could you explain / could you elaborate

It sounds like you have experienced a lot of violence / .. , what do you think of that yourself? How do you look back on those times?

What was important to you during those periods? How did you deal? Who were important to you in those situations?

You say that you feel xxxx. In what way, do you feel xxxx? I mean, what is it there, that makes you feel xxxx?

What is the reason for this?

Can you give an example from your own experience?

How do you feel about that?

### Topics

Start of interview

Can you tell me a bit about yourself and your background, your family?

Where do you live? Do you live with your family?

How do you think you have become the person you are today with the views you hold?

What does sexuality mean to you in the person you have become?

When did you realize you were attracted to the same-sex? What happened (then)

What concept do you use for your sexual identity? Are there any other concepts you use? What do they mean to you? What do your family or friends think about your sexuality?

How did they respond when they got to know about your sexuality? How did that make you feel? What do you think about that? What was your reaction?

What does religion mean to you?

Religious background

What role does religion play in your life?

How do you practice your religion?

What are your religious views? (via FQS, only if not mentioned)

What does being religious / spiritual mean to you?

If we go back to your thoughts and religious views, do you think that there was a specific event or person that might have shaped them?

Have you felt any religious requirements or expectations due to your gender or sexuality? What kind of?

Are spirituality and religion the same for you or different? In what way?

Possession / demonic spirit (if mentioned)

How did you get to know about demonic spirits / belief in possession?

How do you feel about this? / What are your views or thoughts on this?

How does it play a role in your religious community?

What do people think about it in your religious community?

How is it practiced? What is the practice on the belief of being possessed?

Wellbeing / coping with a crisis

In which situations do you feel that you are most able to express yourself?

In which situations have you felt the opposite?

How does that relate to places where you go in your daily life?

Do you think you cannot express yourself in certain places, or, do you think that you cannot express yourself in general?

When are the times when you feel like expressing yourself?

You mention that you coped with this situation by xxxxxx. How else, or how did you overcome?

Or, what kind of efforts have you put in to overcome it?

How did religion play into this?

How did this incident/change/crisis that you experienced influence your world views or your religious view?

What do you do when you feel troubled or down?

Communities

What kind of communities are important to you?

In which ways?

What do they mean to you?

In which ones are you involved?

Who are important people in your life?

How have they influenced you or your worldviews?

Social media / spaces

Do you use social media for religious purposes in some way? What kind of ways? Facebook, WhatsApp, the internet?

What about when it comes to your sexuality?

Can you talk to your friends face to face about your sexuality? How do you feel about that?

How did you get in touch with your friends on social media?

When you talk to them, do you use your own identity? (social media) Or else... ?

Ghanaian culture / politics - context

How do your views on sexuality and religion relate to the discussions on sexuality and religion in Ghana?

What do you think of Ghanaian culture in relation to your worldviews?

How does your sexuality / religion relate to Ghanaian culture?  
What do you think of recent debates on sexuality / religion in Ghanaian media?

Change / also in relation to university context

Have your views on sexuality and religion changed over time? How?

How does/did your time at university influence your views?

Are there any specific events, experiences, romantic relationships, people or other things that have played an important role in making you the person you are today and the things you hold important?

Can you relate this change to any particular person or incident?

What makes you you today; would you relate that to any particular person, any community?

Have you ever thought of making a change in yourself?

Have you ever thought of changing yourself?

Is there any time when you thought like "I wish I was a different kind of person."?

Future

Where do you see yourself in ten years?

What are the things that could stand as obstacles in your future path?

Do you attempt to change in some way, or would you like to be a different person in some respect in the future?

End of interview

Is there anything you would like to tell or share, thinking such as "Oh, well, I would have expected a question on this, too." "This, I have to share!" Anything like that?

Is there anything else you would like to add?

Is there any topic that we talked about that you would like to expand on?

Clara Marlijn Meijer

## **Sexuality, stigma and religion**

The negotiation of sexuality and religion among sexual minorities in Ghana

In the last years, there has been a strong politicization of sexual diversity and religion in Ghana. There are attempts at legislating against individuals who identify as sexual minorities. This study investigates how sexual stigma impacts sexual minorities and how young adults identifying as sexual minorities negotiate their religious and sexual identities in Accra. It breaks with the idea that religion does not go hand in hand with non-heteronormative sexualities. Most importantly, it increases the awareness of the sexual stigma experienced by sexual minorities in Ghana.