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## **Sacred Sexualities: Religion in LGBTQ+ Activism & Justice Movements**

### **Essential Question**

How has religion played a role in various LGBTQ+ human rights struggles?

### **Lesson Overview**

In a world that often poses religious and LGBTQ+ identities as irreconcilable opposites, this lesson explores the complex and multiple roles that religion has played in different LGBTQ+ human rights struggles across North America. This primary source-based lesson plan presents a total of six individual “case studies” that each highlight different LGBTQ+ religious leaders. By the conclusion of this lesson, students should be able to communicate an understanding of how queer religious leaders pioneered efforts to increase social acceptance and political rights for LGBTQ+ people, both within their communities and in society at large.

Students engage one case study as a pre-class reading, which becomes the launching point for warm-up discussions on the many ways religion informs LGBTQ+ activism. Then, in small groups, students are assigned one of the remaining case studies to read and discuss together. Finally, each group reports their findings to their peers ahead of a class discussion around the Essential Question. There is a suggested reflective homework assignment.

### **Learning Objectives**

#### Students will...

- Examine how religious identity intersects with racial, sexual, and gender identities.
- Communicate an understanding of how queer religious leaders pioneered efforts to increase social acceptance and political rights for LGBTQ+ people, both within their communities and in society at large.
- Synthesize diverse perspectives and beliefs as they analyze and discuss first-hand source materials.
- Practice empathy and non-judgment as they confront diverse ideas.

### **Learning Standards**

- [Common Core State Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies \(Grades 9-12\)](#)

## Central Questions

- Essential Question: How has religion played a role in various LGBTQ+ human rights struggles?
- What is the role of religion in shaping modern society, politics, and culture?
- How have religious identities interacted or intersected with other social identities (religious, racial, gender, sexual, etc.) to inform individual religious beliefs and the formation of religious communities?
- What unique characteristics does religious identity and practice lend to activism and social justice movements?
- From these readings and personal histories, what would you speculate might be religion's place in future LGBTQ+ activism and justice movements?

## Suggested Time:

One 90-minute class period

Two 45-minute class periods

\* Note: For shorter class periods use the shorter case studies: Renee McCoy, Johnny Abush, Randy Burns

\* Disclaimer! Religion is a broad, sensitive, and sometimes personal topic about which every one of us likely has our own story. This lesson does not aim to persuade or convince you of any religious beliefs, but rather to illuminate multiple ways that religion has held meaning in LGBTQ+ human rights struggles. Remember, you have full control over your own beliefs and values. Religious texts or claims by religious people only have as much power as you grant them. No one can force you to become religious or to believe in the things that they do.

## Teacher Landing Page

### Overview

The word “homosexual” began appearing in the English language around the turn of the 20th century. However, the introduction of homosexuality into everyday vocabulary had significant yet contradictory consequences. On one hand, “homosexual” became an identity that individuals could claim and build a human rights movement around. (They used the word “homophile” instead of homosexual. Today the abbreviation LGBTQ+ is used.) On the other hand, a “homosexual” became a type of person that could be studied, diagnosed, condemned, or even cured.

In the medical, academic, political, and religious sectors of mid-1900s North America, homosexuals were labeled, among other things, sociopaths, perverts, treasonists, and sinners. This led to many small-minded and harmful assumptions about sexuality and, by association, gender, becoming popularized across the continent. The lasting effect of this widespread marginalization of homosexuality was the equally far-reaching normalization of heterosexuality between partners of “opposite” sexes— “men” on one side and “women” on the other. Similarly, the idea that marriage was legal only between one man and one woman was imposed without regard for traditional customs.

With American and Canadian development across the North American continent came violence against and subjugation of indigenous tribes and cultures. One of the many indigenous cultural characteristics to be eradicated was the existence of different “third gender” categories across tribes. Both America and Canada had Indian Boarding School Systems in the 20th century, which violently forced indigenous children into compliance with American and Christian social norms, including cutting their hair, changing their clothes, adopting the English language, and adhering to a strict male/female gender binary. The “third gender” indigenous category, then called *berdache*, was largely erased by the start of the 20th century.

The modern struggle for LGBTQ+ rights is said to have originated with the Stonewall Riots of New York City in June 1969. However, framing the Stonewall Riots as the singular birth of the gay rights struggle eclipses decades of institutionalized violence against homosexuals, as well as the organized resistance of the earliest gay and lesbian activist groups. These earliest homosexual advocacy organizations laid the foundation for the plethora of diverse LGBTQ+ activism and resistance efforts that emerged in the wake of Stonewall.

The American Homophile Movement began in the 1950s with the formation of the Mattachine Society, an initially secret organization whose primary mission was to challenge the misconceptions that had outcasted gays and lesbians from mainstream society. With the “countercultural decade” of the 1960s\*, however, new waves of LGBTQ-affirming organizations abandoned notions of conformity with heterosexual life and instead began demanding space,

recognition, and rights as uniquely LGBTQ+ persons. Where safe and welcoming spaces were not created for them, LGBTQ+ communities have strived to build their own.

This social innovation in the service of community needs can be clearly witnessed in the plethora of diverse LGBTQ+ faith-based communities that emerged in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Throughout the continent, religious institutions across traditions were forced to contend with the question of whether to accept LGBTQ+ members, and to what degree. In some major religious traditions, LGBTQ+ people formed their own support organizations, such as “Dignity” (Catholic), “Integrity” (Episcopalian), Chutzpah (Jewish), and Al-Fatiha (Muslim), intended to advocate for acceptance in their traditions.

Many LGBTQ+ individuals who did not find acceptance and belonging in their original religious communities, however, sought to form new, LGBTQ-affirming ones. Some of these congregations, like Congregation Beit Simchat Torah, an LGBTQ+ synagogue in New York City, grew into major and surviving religious institutions. Others, such as the Metropolitan Community Churches, an international network of primarily LGBTQ+ congregations, have come to be considered denominations in themselves. These queer-centered faith communities championed ideas of love— unconditional divine love, universal love for others, and self-love as one was perfectly created.

In some cases, queer religious and spiritual innovation extended beyond traditional forms of religious organization, spirituality, and practice. Queer indigenous communities, for example, formed inter-tribal organizations like the Gay American Indians (GAI) with the goal of restoring and reclaiming the lost cultural and spiritual roles of queer Native elders. In the 1990s, a coalition of queer Natives coined the umbrella term “two spirit” to denote categories of gender diversity in indigenous tribal cultures. Whereas traditional “two spirit” peoples were entrusted with sacred duties like teaching, healing, prediction, childcare, and artistry, LGBTQ+ indigenous activists across the late 20th century worked tirelessly to heal their sick from AIDS when hospitals failed them, to educate the public on the virus and other issues they faced, and even providing mental health counseling.

Despite the diversity of these communities, their missions, and their approaches, these groups each help us answer the complex question: In a world that often poses religious and LGBTQ+ identities as irreconcilable opposites, which roles has religion played in various LGBTQ+ human rights struggles?

**\* See Context Timelines Handout for more insight into the many relevant movements unfolding simultaneously at this time.**

## Procedure

### Assign Pre-Reading Prior to Class

- [Carl Bean Oral History Excerpt & Analysis Questions](#)

### Warm-Up Activity

- Warm-Up Activity, Essential Question, and Class Discussion Slideshow based on the Carl Bean pre-reading: [Religion and Justice Movements Google Slideshow](#)
- OR -
- **5-Minute Free-Write & Discussion**
  - Answer one or more of the following questions, drawing on prior knowledge, personal experience, your reading of Carl Bean’s Oral History Interview, etc.
    - What does it mean for a person, community, or institution to be “religious?” What did religion mean to Carl Bean (in his heart, his identity, sense of community, etc)?
    - What is one assumption or bias that you had about the relationship between religion and the LGBTQ+ community before reading Carl Bean’s story?
      - How did reading Reverend Bean’s story re-enforce or change your perspective?
  - \* Bonus Question: What new questions has this learning brought up for you?

### Teaching Introductory Concepts

- Optional Handout: [Religious Literacy & Primary Sources Handout](#)
- Handout: [Context Timelines: Religion and Justice Movements](#)

### Class Activities & Discussions

- Breakout: Group Work
  - Students divide into 3-5 groups, with each group given a different case study. Case Studies highlight individuals and leaders in North American LGBTQ+ religious organizations. Students are given 15-20 minutes to closely read, analyze, and discuss the primary sources in each case study, using the accompanying guiding questions.
  - Case Studies
    - [Renee McCoy](#) (Christian ; *Full Truth Fellowship of Christ Church*)
    - [Pat Conover](#) (Christian ; *United Church of Christ*)

- [Johnny Abush](#) (Jewish ; *Congregation Keshet Shalom*)
- [Imam Daayiee Abdullah](#) (Muslim ; *Al-Fatihah*)
- [Randy Burns](#) (Indigenous Spiritual ; *Gay American Indians*)

### Class Discussion

- Once the groups have concluded their discussions, the class will come back together to report on their findings. Going around the room, each group will first spend about 1-2 minutes summarizing their case study for their peers.
  - name of leader,
  - leader's religious tradition,
  - ethnic or racial identity,
  - sexual or gender identity,
  - goals of any secular/non-profit aid organizations they worked with,
  - and their role in the main religious congregations they started or belonged to.
- Once the class has been introduced to each LGBTQ+ religious leader, they should begin a discussion in pursuit of the Essential Question, **“How has religion played a role in various LGBTQ+ human rights struggles?”**
  - Students should begin approaching this question by referring to their small group reflection questions and pulling specific evidence from their case studies. Students may also draw connections between their case studies and the Carl Bean Oral History excerpts.
  - As students continue to add new perspectives, examples, and contexts to their learning, they should start to identify connections and contradictions between the diverse case studies, or even pose new questions for their peers.

### Written Reflection Homework Assignment

- Following the discussion, students should be given access to all of the case studies used in class. They will need to engage at least one additional case study independently.
- For homework, students should compose a short written reflection that forms an argument in response to the Essential Question, **“How has religion played a role in various LGBTQ+ human rights struggles?”** Drawing on their discussions, students should refer to specific evidence from multiple case studies in their responses.
  - In each reflection, students should compare and contrast their assigned case study with at least one other case study presented. While students are welcome to draw on Carl Bean in their responses, they should also select an additional case study that they have not yet engaged.