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"There's theology and then there's the people I love. . .": Authority and Ambivalence in Seminarians' Attitudes Toward Same-Sex Relationships, Marriage, and Ordination

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Drawing from 102 in-depth interviews conducted with first-year Master of Divinity (M.Div.) students at a Mainline Protestant seminary, this paper examines how students describe and account for their positions on homosexuality, same-sex marriage, and the ordination of gay and lesbian clergy. We found that students on "both sides"—i.e., those who lean affirming and those who lean non-affirming—invoked three primary authorities in their accounts: Biblical authority, Godly authority, and the authority of lived experience, as demonstrated in the lives of gay and lesbian people. We also found that nearly one-third of the students in our sample expressed uncertainty, ambivalence, and/or contradictions in their responses. Through a close analysis of these accounts, we show that ambivalence and uncertainty are rooted in attempts to navigate and "reconcile" the pulls of these different authorities and that attitudinal certainty is often accomplished by privileging one authority over others.

Key words: homosexuality; same-sex marriage; seminary; clergy; religion; ambivalence; authority; attitudes.

Attitudes toward homosexuality and same-sex marriage in the United States have liberalized over the past several decades (Baunach 2012; Loftus 2001).

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This trend has been found both across and within generations, suggesting that the cultural shift cannot be explained by cohort replacement alone but requires intra-person attitudinal change (Andersen and Fetner 2008). Despite these broad trends, however, there remains a sizable minority of people who oppose gay rights, and issues related to homosexuality continue to be both salient and polarizing. Religious affiliation and belief have been found to be among the strongest predictors of opinions about homosexuality and same-sex marriage in the United States, with most work showing a correlation between religion and non-affirming positions (Adamczyk and Pitt 2009; Moore et al. 2021; Olson, Cadge, and Harrison 2006; Rogers 2019; Sherkat et al. 2011; Whitehead 2010).

Both public discourse and existing research tend to depict cultural attitudes toward homosexuality as dichotomous and univalent. On the one hand, debates about homosexuality are frequently depicted as a binary consisting of two clearly defined "sides." Further enhancing a sense of "culture war" (Hunter 1991), these sides are described as relying on different and contradictory logics and values to support their position, suggesting very little common ground for discourse or compromise across them. At the same time, individual attitudes are depicted as univalent: People are either in favor of or opposed to gay rights. Together, then, this research assumes that there are two possible positions available (e.g., for or against same-sex marriage) and that individual people fall neatly into one or the other camp.

More recent research, however, has begun to question these assumptions. Some researchers highlight a more varied set of possible positions and perspectives on homosexuality both within and across religious groups and political "camps" (Hart-Brinson 2014, 2016; Moon 2004, 2014). Others demonstrate the prevalence of attitudinal ambivalence and uncertainty at the individual level, suggesting that people's views are more conflicted and ambiguous than existing research and public discourse tend to assume (Cadge et al. 2012; Craig et al. 2005; Steele and Helmuth 2019; Sumerau, Grollman, and Cragun 2018). This work aligns with broader theoretical calls in cultural sociology regarding the value of attending closely to contradiction (Pugh 2013) and ambivalence (Smelser 1998) in cultural discourse and individual accounts. These scholars argue that culture itself is contradictory and incoherent and that we should, therefore, expect contradiction and ambivalence in individual accounts, especially in regard to emotionally charged and controversial social issues, where people "have multiple and sometimes conflicting loyalties, goals, and commitments" (Pugh 2013:47). Analyzing how people work through tensions and contradictions allows us to see individuals as embedded in cultural contexts that provide them with competing values and logics.

In this paper, we add further complexity to the views of religious people and to our understanding of the role of religion in shaping individual attitudes toward homosexuality. Drawing from 102 in-depth interviews conducted with first-year Master of Divinity (M.Div.) students at a Mainline Protestant seminary, we examine how students describe and account for their positions on homosexuality, same-sex marriage, and the ordination of gay and lesbian clergy. We find that

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students who lean affirming and those who lean non-affirming invoked three primary authorities in their accounts: Biblical authority, Godly authority, and the authority of lived experience, as demonstrated in the lives of gay and lesbian people. In the findings, we provide examples of how each authority was invoked and highlight both similarities and differences in their usage across more and less affirming students. Our finding that students invoke the same authorities, rather than relying on the distinct loci of authority suggested by the "culture wars" framework, offers a more nuanced look at how people holding a range of views on sexuality nevertheless attempt to justify those views in similar ways. We also found that many students in our sample expressed uncertainty, ambivalence, and/or contradiction in their responses. Through a close analysis of these accounts, we found that attitudinal ambivalence was often rooted in attempts to navigate and "reconcile" the pulls of these different authorities, implying that certainty and clarity are accomplished by privileging one authority over others. Interestingly, we find that even for students who report certainty in their views, they nevertheless describe grappling with whether and how these different authorities might make contradictory claims. In the discussion, we consider the implications of our findings for research on religion and sexuality, specifically, and on attitudinal ambivalence more broadly.

CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES ON HOMOSEXUALITY: BEYOND THE DICHOTOMY

Early writing about attitudes toward homosexuality in the United States tended to draw a clear line between those in favor of gay marriage and those against it, with issues related to homosexuality being a key battleground of the so-called "culture wars" (Hunter 1991). Scholars argued that the two sides not only held different views but thought about and framed sexuality issues in divergent ways: Those in favor (most of whom were non-religious) framed gay rights issues in terms of fairness and equality, while those against same-sex marriage (most of whom were religious) framed homosexuality in terms of morality and sin. Later research acknowledged more variability among religious people in their views on homosexuality and same-sex marriage, although this work often continued to assume binary positions, with the "two sides" described as grounding their positions in opposing cultural logics (Hunter 1991; Moore et al. 2021). Within American Christianity, Mainline Protestants (who tend to be more moderate to liberal) are more likely to describe homosexuality as "natural," leading them to support the extension of civil rights and protections to LGBTQ+ individuals (Sullivan-Blum 2006). Meanwhile, evangelical Protestants (who tend to be more conservative) are more likely to view homosexuality as a "choice" and therefore a sin, leading to lower levels of support for same-sex relationships and marriage (Thomas and Olson 2012; Whitehead 2010). Though this work highlights differences *within* the Christian tradition concerning the acceptance of homosexuality, it continues

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to assume a neat alignment between positions and discourses (Olson, Wendy, and James 2006; Reimer and Park 2001).

A more recent wave of research adds further nuance to our understanding of how religious people talk and think about homosexuality and gay rights. This work highlights within-group variation, between-group similarities, and the presence of positions and discourses that do not fall neatly on either "side" of the debate. Dawne Moon's (2014) work is particularly informative. Synthesizing previous studies, Moon identified six distinct religious perspectives on homosexuality present among American Christians and Jews. In doing so, she argues for the value of de-coupling attitudinal positions from beliefs about the fixity or fluidity of sexuality (i.e., the "sinful choice" vs. "born gay" binary). Moon convincingly demonstrates that some religious people believe homosexuality is both innate and sinful, while others believe that homosexuality is in some ways chosen while also believing it is morally neutral (or even good). While the six ideal typical positions outlined by Moon can be arranged on a spectrum from hostile to celebratory, her analysis shows that core themes such as innateness and choice, fixity and fluidity, and righteousness and sin cut across these positions rather than neatly cohering into opposing sides. Others have also shown that similar logics and rhetorics, such as "naturalness," are deployed by people on "both sides" of the debate (McQueeney 2009; Sullivan-Blum 2006).

Looking more broadly at cultural perspectives on homosexuality among both religious and secular Americans, Hart-Brinson (2014) also found that, "contrary to the 'culture war' imagery . . . patterns of talk failed to polarize into two irreconcilable discourses" (231). Instead, Hart-Brinson identified a variety of "middle-ground" discourses between unambiguous support and unambiguous opposition. For example, he finds that a substantial minority of Americans report being in favor of gay rights, including same-sex marriage, while also holding a more generally negative attitude toward homosexuality. Together, Moon and Hart-Brinson's work suggests that there is a wider range of available positions and perspectives on homosexuality than is being captured in much of the existing public opinion research. Moreover, while public discourse (and in some cases, denominational positions) may be more neatly dichotomous, religious people across traditions and positions can and often do mix and match logics and discourses—morality, equality, fairness, choice, and sin—in complex ways.

INDIVIDUAL ATTITUDES TOWARD HOMOSEXUALITY: BEYOND UNIVALENT VIEWS

In addition to assuming "two sides," research on attitudes toward homosexuality and gay rights often assumes that people hold clear, unambiguous, and univalent views. Reflecting this, survey researchers will usually lump those who slightly, somewhat, and/or strongly agree that gay marriage should be legal into a "pro-marriage" camp and likewise for those who are "anti" same-sex marriage

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(Bramlett 2012). In many cases, this work simply drops or ignores respondents who report being unsure or "neither for or against." A growing body of research, however, has begun to document the prevalence of attitudinal *ambivalence* on same-sex marriage and gay rights, defined as "the expression of simultaneously conflicting viewpoints, or a mixture of positive and negative reactions toward a single attitudinal object" (Steele and Helmuth 2019:423). In practice, ambivalence has been measured in several ways including: (1) simultaneously holding both positive and negative affective orientations toward gay rights issues (Craig et al. 2005); (2) holding seemingly contradictory positions across different issues related to gay rights—for example, maintaining moral opposition to homosexuality while expressing support for certain legal rights (Bean and Martinez 2014; Jackman 2020; Moore et al. 2021); and/or (3) expressing uncertain, ambiguous, or unpredictable views on gay rights issues (Garner 2013; Steele and Helmuth 2019). These studies all demonstrate that many people's attitudes are characterized by ambivalence, contraction, and/or uncertainty.

Additionally, these studies have sought to identify the factors associated with individual ambivalence. One prominent theory, drawing on the work of Robert Merton (Merton 1976), focuses on what scholars call *socially-structured ambivalence* (Bean and Martinez 2014; Steele and Helmuth 2019). This concept draws attention to the fact that people have multiple, intersecting identities, roles, and group memberships and that these different affiliations may exert contradictory pulls on their beliefs about homosexuality and gay rights. In most of this work, religion is assumed to be a conservative influence that may be in tension with the pulls of other, liberal-leaning identities or group memberships (Hart-Brinson 2014; Steele and Helmuth 2019). Take the case of a highly educated person who is also religious. Higher levels of education are, on average, associated with a more liberal view of homosexuality. Religiosity is, on average, associated with a more conservative view. From this perspective, then, it is assumed that the person's socioeconomic and religious identities will act as countervailing forces, increasing the likelihood of individual ambivalence. Similar arguments have been made about the cross-pressures created by religion (as a conservative force) and personal contact with gay and lesbian people (as a liberalizing force) (Baker and Brauner-Otto 2015; Garner 2013; Jackman 2020). It is assumed that these conflicts have a cumulative effect: the more varied one's affiliations, the more likely one will express ambivalence (Steele and Helmuth 2019). While adding necessary complexity to our understanding of individual attitudes, this line of work tends to assume that religion acts as a conservative influence, exerting uniform pressure toward a non-affirming position on homosexuality.

Religious groups themselves, however, may offer contradictory discourses, logics, and scripts related to homosexuality and gay rights. Using national survey data, Bean and Martinez (2014) found a diversity of attitudes among Evangelical Protestants, with 35% reporting consistently progressive attitudes toward homosexuality, 41% reporting consistently conservative attitudes, and 24% reporting ambivalent positions. The latter group, whom the authors refer to as "Ambivalent

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Evangelicals," supports gay civil unions even as they remain morally opposed to homosexuality (similar to the positions described by Hart-Brinson 2014; Moon 2014). The authors attribute this growing ambivalence to the presence of "competing scripts and expectations about how to 'do' religion with regard to gays and lesbians" (397) *within* the Evangelical subculture. These different scripts contain inconsistent normative expectations regarding ideology and behavior, which can generate ambivalence.

Others have documented a relatively high degree of uncertainty in religious people's attitudes toward homosexuality and gay rights, even among religious leaders (Cadge et al. 2012; Djupe and Neiheisel 2008; Garner 2013). Cadge et al. (2012), for example, found that roughly half of the clergy in their sample were uncertain about their personal opinions on homosexuality and gay rights. Many voiced this uncertainty explicitly (e.g., "I'm conflicted about this") or described the issue as "terribly complicated" (377). The authors also found that clergy's attitudinal uncertainty was linked to uncertainty about whether homosexuality was innate or chosen and/or to feelings of tension between their moral opposition to homosexuality and positive personal experiences with gay people. This work reveals that "clergy across the theological spectrum wrestle with how to approach challenging socio-moral issues" (378). As religious leaders, clergy uncertainty has the potential to trickle down into the views of laypeople, contributing to uncertainty and/or ambivalence among congregants. Altogether, this research suggests that people's attitudes (including religious people's attitudes) are less certain and less univalent than previously reported. It also suggests that religious groups themselves may offer conflicting logics and values which can generate individual uncertainty.

RELIGIOUS AUTHORITIES AND ATTITUDES TOWARD HOMOSEXUALITY

How and why does religion shape public opinion on homosexuality and gay marriage? Previous work has tended to focus on the discourses and/or values that circulate in religious communities as drivers of individual attitudes (Hunter 1991). Another important line of argument explores the role of religion itself as an epistemic authority, especially vis-à-vis other prominent authorities, such as science. Researchers have argued, for example, that Evangelicals' tendency to reject a view of homosexuality as innate or "inborn" reflects the fact that they privilege the epistemic authority of the Bible over that of science (Hunter 1991; Stephens and Giberson 2011; Whitehead and Baker 2012). On the other hand, affirming religious people have been found to dismiss scriptural authority while invoking scientific arguments like biology and/or nature (Djupe and Neiheisel 2008; Sullivan-Blum 2006).

However, research also suggests that many religious people express uncertainty and/or ambivalence in articulating their views on the epistemic authority of science vis-à-vis religion and generally feel accountable to both (Chan and

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Ecklund 2016). Moreover, affirming religious people do not only defer to science but also rely on religious authorities—such as the authority of God—to justify their positions in favor of homosexuality and gay rights (Moon 2014; Thumma 1991). Religious communities also contain multiple sources of authority which themselves may be in conflict over socio-moral issues. Individual clergy and congregations do not always agree with the positions of their denominations and may follow the authority of Scripture and/or congregational consensus rather than the theological or organizational authority of their employers in deciding whether to accept and how to treat gay and lesbian members in their community (Gardner and Martí 2022; Krull and Gilliland 2023). Likewise, many religious traditions draw from multiple sources of authority to articulate theological positions on social issues such as same-sex marriage. For example, the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, which is upheld by denominations like the United Methodist Church and Church of the Nazarene, encourages adherents to seek balance between Scripture, reason, tradition, and experience in answering difficult theological questions, and one study finds that all four sources of authority have been used by adherents to defend both affirming and non-affirming positions (Simpson 2011). In this paper, we show that the presence of different (and potentially contradictory) authorities *within* religious communities can be an important driver of uncertainty and ambivalence.

DATA AND METHODS

Data for this paper come from the Seminary-to-Early Ministry (SEM) study: a mixed-methods, longitudinal cohort study of students at one mainline seminary associated with the United Methodist Church, which we call Mainline Divinity School (MDS) (see Eagle, Gaghan, and Johnston 2023). While a significant portion of students at MDS are United Methodist (30–40% per cohort across all degree programs), the school also attracts students from a range of other (mostly Protestant) religious traditions. For this analysis, we analyzed 102 in-depth interviews conducted with first-year Master of Divinity (M.Div.) students.

The M.Div. program, which is focused on training students for careers in Christian ministry, enrolls approximately 120 students each year. All students beginning seminary in 2019, 2020, and 2021 were invited to participate in a series of three baseline surveys. Response rates for these surveys ranged from 75% to 83% of each M.Div. class. We then used stratified random sampling to select a representative subset of M.Div. students from the pool of survey respondents and invited them via email to participate in an in-depth interview about their experiences. Each prospective participant was contacted up to three times during recruitment. In total, we invited 128 students to participate in these interviews—80% consented to be interviewed. Table 1 shows the participant demographics of the sample. Of the 102 students we interviewed, 74% were White, 51% were women,

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TABLE 1 Participant Demographics

Demographics (n = 102)	Percent
Cohort entering year	
2019	35
2020	30
2021	35
Age	
20–29	74
30–39	14
40+	12
Gender identity	
Man	46
Woman	51
Transgender or non-binary	3
Sexual orientation	
Heterosexual	87
Gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual	13
Combined sexual orientation and gender identity	
Straight, Cisgender	86
LGBTQ+	14
Race	
White	74
Black or African American	19
Other	8
Religious tradition	
Mainline	67
Evangelical	23
Black Protestant	10
Other	1

Source: Seminary to Early Ministry Study, 2019–2021.

and 67% identified as Mainline Protestant. These numbers are representative of the larger M.Div. classes in the study cohorts.

Interviews were conducted in person, by phone, or via Zoom between October and January of the students' first year of seminary. The semi-structured interview guide covered several domains including students' religious upbringing, decision to attend divinity school, career plans, theological views, academic experiences, and physical health practices. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interviews ranged in length from 45 minutes to 2 hours, with an average of 75 minutes. All study procedures were approved by the Duke University's Institutional Review Board Institutional Review Board.

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Transcripts were coded in NVivo 12 using applied thematic coding techniques (Guest, MacQueen, and Namey 2011) and following the two-stage "flexible coding" approach outlined by Deterding and Waters (2021). First, a structural codebook was deductively developed based on the interview guide to "index" the transcripts according to broad themes—such as "religious upbringing" and "theological views"—and within each theme, narrower topics that reflected specific interview questions—such as "the Bible" or "LGBTQ+ issues" in the section on theological views. For each cohort, analysts met to establish inter-coder reliability before applying structural codes to the remaining transcripts independently. Codebook definitions and codes were revised on an as-needed basis by mutual agreement.

This paper is based on further "analytic" coding of all segments of the interview transcripts identified as relevant to the topic of "LGBTQ+" during indexing (Deterding and Waters 2021). This includes responses to direct questions about same-sex relationships, gay marriage, and the ordination of LGBTQ+ individuals as well as any discussions relevant to issues of gender or sexuality that arose in other parts of the interview.[1] To begin, the three authors read through a subset of transcripts, wrote memos, and met to discuss emergent themes. Based on these discussions, the authors developed a preliminary thematic codebook that included codes both for students' stated positions on each issue and their justifications for those positions, including the "authorities" they invoked. The initial codebook included six authorities: Biblical, Godly, experiential, scientific, academic, and denominational. All three authors coded the same six transcripts to establish inter-coder reliability in the application of thematic codes. After this, the transcripts were divided among the three authors and coded independently. The authors met weekly to discuss any issues that arose during coding. Difficult transcripts or sections were checked by a second coder for accuracy.

After an initial round of coding, we identified Biblical, Godly, and experiential authority as the most commonly invoked by students in our sample. Building on memos and collaborative discussion, the authors developed a second thematic codebook that sought to gain clarity on how these three authorities were invoked. For this round of coding, each author focused on a single type of authority—Biblical, Godly, or experiential—across all transcripts to ensure consistency in code applications. A code for "conflict and contradiction" was also added to the codebook at this time to capture moments when the three authorities were invoked side-by-side. Finally, key demographic codes—including participant gender, race, sexuality, and denomination—were added to the codebook and used to assess variations in positions and justifications across students. We did not find

[1]The majority of the data coded at "LGBTQ+" reflected respondents' views on same-sex relationships and issues relating to gay and lesbian individuals. A minority of the data was related to respondents' views on gender identity or transgender individuals. The amount of data related to gender was not sufficient for analysis. Therefore, for the purposes of this analysis, we focus solely on the material coded "LGBTQ+" that concerned same-sex relationships.

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clear differences in the authorities used across these groups. This may reflect the nature and/or size of our sample. In the discussion, we suggest lines for future research focused on demographic variation.

FINDINGS

We first categorized every student into one of three categories: more affirming of same-sex relationships, marriage, and ordination (66% of interviewees); less affirming of same-sex relationships, marriage, and ordination (26% of interviewees); or so unsure or unclear that they could not be readily categorized (8% of interviewees). It is important to highlight that these categories include significant variation in terms of students' certainty. In addition to classifying seminarians as more affirming, less affirming, or uncertain, we also classified them according to the level of confidence in their views on homosexuality. We found that about two-thirds (69%) of the sample were currently confident in their views as affirming or not affirming, while the last third (31%) expressed some degree of uncertainty, ambivalence, and/or contradiction in their views. Affirming and non-affirming students were proportionally equally likely to be certain about their views. To most clearly present our findings, we opted to combine students who were confidently affirming (or not) with those who were leaning affirming (or not) throughout.

We also found that sexuality, especially as it pertains to same-sex relationships and gay marriage, was a salient theological issue for many students.[2] More than half of the students we spoke with (58%) brought up issues related to homosexuality spontaneously (i.e., before interviewers asked about this issue explicitly). Most often, this topic was raised in response to questions about what theological ideas or issues, if any, the individual (1) had struggled with in the past and/or (2) was struggling with in the present. Nearly half (46%) of students mentioned homosexuality and/or gay rights in response to one of these questions. Some students who expressed certainty regarding their position on these issues in the present described a period of wrestling with competing authorities before settling on their current views.

In the remainder of this paper, we focus on the three authorities most commonly invoked by students when describing and accounting for their positions on issues related to same-sex relationships, same-sex marriage, and the ordination of LGBTQ+ clergy: Godly authority, Biblical authority, and the authority of lived experience. All three of the authorities were mentioned at least once by more than half of the students in our sample, with lived experience being the least

[2]The salience of this issue may reflect MDS's affiliation with the United Methodist Church, which was in the midst of a split regarding the issue of same-sex marriage and the ordination of clergy in same-sex relationships during the study period.

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commonly mentioned (55%) and Biblical authority (72%) the most commonly invoked. We found differences in the authorities mentioned by affirming and non-affirming students. Godly and Biblical authority were invoked more by non-affirming students than affirming students, while lived experience was referenced more frequently among affirming students. In the sections below, we provide a more nuanced look at how more and less affirming students invoked each type of authority, highlighting similarities and differences in their accounts. In the final section, we explore how students who expressed uncertain, ambivalent, or contradictory positions navigate these three authorities, with some perceiving these authorities to be in conflict and others resolving the tension between them.

Godly Authority

Two-thirds of the seminary students in our sample appealed to Godly authority to describe and justify their beliefs about sexuality. We classified a respondent as invoking Godly authority if they explained their views concerning sexuality by characterizing them as in line with the character and/or will of God, as defined by the respondent. Students invoked Godly authority in three interrelated but analytically distinct ways: by appealing to what the respondent understood to be God's nature, by pointing to God's role as the creator and designer of humans, and/or by deferring to God's sovereignty to "call" people to ministry and/or to judge human actions. All three approaches were used to justify both affirming and non-affirming positions.

First, we saw students invoke Godly authority by appealing to God's nature, or their understanding of who God is, to support their positions. Jamie[3] told us they took issue with many conservative theological positions, including those against homosexuality and gay rights. Jamie reflected on what they referred to as "patriarchal, homophobic, teetotaling" theology,

> *It's like all this shit that feels so restrictive and so absolutely . . . I think antithetical maybe is the word I'm looking for, but it's completely against the nature of the God that I understand. It's like all the [non-affirming] theology that feels like it's running up against the character of Jesus that I understand and feel connected to. That's the stuff I have issues with.*

Jamie argued that non-affirming positions are "antithetical" to their understanding of who God is, manifested most clearly in the person of Jesus. Later in the interview, Jamie described their "genuine faith and belief in this totally radical Jesus." It is this understanding of Jesus as "unapologetically for . . . the most decrepit and tossed-aside people of our nation" that served as a primary foundation for Jamie's affirming views on homosexuality.

Students who held non-affirming positions also appealed to Godly authority vis-à-vis God's nature in supporting their position. Michael, for example, reported that his views on homosexuality fell on "the conservative side." However,

[3]All names attributed to respondents are pseudonyms to preserve respondent confidentiality.

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Michael also took issue with those who treated gay and lesbian people poorly. He continued,

> *To me, that's not how Jesus went about his ministry. The story of him with the woman at the well . . . he crossed some pretty serious boundaries, be them social, cultural, or even religious, to approach this woman. Which was this profound display of love. And so, I see this need to create spaces of belonging for people [. . .] And I guess the question is: How would God have us go about loving people well?*

Jesus, he continued, sat down with the woman at the well and listened to her story, but Jesus also had "the conversation of whether she was sinning or not." Like Jamie, Michael used the character of God—as evident in Jesus's ministry—to justify his position. In this case, however, Michael ultimately viewed homosexuality as immoral and believed that people should be confronted with their sins. Michael saw both listening and confronting as part of God's vision, modeled through Jesus, for "loving people well."

Second, both affirming and non-affirming students invoked Godly authority by emphasizing God's role as an intentional creator of human life, including human sexuality. On the one hand, non-affirming students tended to emphasize God's intention that human sexuality be linked to procreation. For example, James told us, "I really believe that God created male and female, and that we would reproduce in his likeness. If we're created in the Imago Dei and what we're to do is to reproduce, then I'm challenged to understand how that works from a same-sex perspective." Another student, Jacob, made a similar argument supporting his position against the ordination of gay clergy: "I think if homosexual marriage is against God's design, then someone who's actively living in a life of homosexual sin . . . is living contrary to what God has called them to do." For these non-affirming students, engaging in same-sex relationships violated God's creation and intentional design for humanity.

Echoing language used by non-affirming students regarding the creation of humans in God's own image, affirming students also emphasized that human sexuality was a feature of God's intention. However, in this case, all forms of sexuality, not just heterosexuality, were a part of God's design. For example, Charlie told us, "I consider folks, hetero- or homosexual, to be fearfully and wonderfully made in God's image." Similarly, Valerie argued, "God has created us to love each other. If that love is with another woman or it's with another man, I can't see God condemning people to hell because they love somebody and this is who they want to be with. And if God has created them to be who they are, how is that wrong?" For these students, homosexuality was not a barrier to human flourishing as intended by God, but rather a God-created way to achieve that flourishing (see also Moon 2014; Thumma 1991).

Finally, we found that students invoked Godly authority by appealing to God's sovereignty. This approach came up most frequently when discussing the ordination of lesbian and gay people to religious leadership. For example, Amy, who leaned affirming, was asked about her opinion concerning the morality of

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someone in a homosexual relationship holding church leadership, and said: "I think moral. I think for us to say, 'Because you love someone who's the same gender as you, God can't use you,' that's limiting God. That's harmful to the individual, and we shouldn't be doing that. I think God can do what God wants." Sadie, who we categorized as uncertain in her views on homosexuality, reflected, "For me, personally, who am I to say who God has called [to ministry] or hasn't called? . . . I don't think I have the right to do that." Finally, Isabella, who was non-affirming of same-sex marriage and described homosexuality as a sin, responded, "I guess what I would say about that is, I have God working through me. I'm a firm believer that God can work through anybody, so I personally don't have a problem with that." In each case, students invoked God's authority to call whomever God wants and referenced the limits of their own (human) authority to question God's call.

Biblical Authority

We found that 72% of students across the ideological spectrum invoked Biblical authority when talking about sexuality. Additionally—and in contrast to our findings regarding our sample's use of Godly authority—we found that affirming and non-affirming students engaged with the Bible in different ways. Many non-affirming interviewees, when asked about same-sex marriage or when discussing their views on homosexuality more broadly, offered a straightforward assertion that the Bible is clear in teaching that same-sex relationships are a sin. For example, one student, Ben, turned to the story of creation in the book of Genesis: "I believe that there was a reason why it start[ed] off with Adam and Eve. And so as a result, I believe that marriage and relationships should be between one man and one woman." In a similar vein, another student (Edison) pointed to a New Testament passage commonly referenced by our participants,

> *I believe [same-sex relationships] are sinful based off of what the Bible tells us, based off of how the Bible talks about them. In Romans chapter one, it literally says that the men and the women were so sinful that He [God] actually let them sin even more and go into their own pits and go deeper into their own rabbit holes.*

For students using the Bible in this way, the question of gay and lesbian inclusion (particularly when it comes to same-sex marriage) was settled, because they viewed the Bible as the ultimate source of authority: They believed that it offered a definitive position on same-sex relationships. This "plain text" reading of the Bible was the most common approach that non-affirming students brought to the question of homosexuality.

While less common, more than half of affirming students also mentioned Biblical authority when discussing their views on same-sex relationships and did so in two distinct ways. First, some affirming students, like non-affirming students, referenced one (or more) of the widely cited Biblical passages believed to offer the clearest anti-homosexuality perspective. However, unlike the non-affirming students who argued that these passages conveyed a clear and unambiguous

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message that required little interpretation, affirming students referenced these passages to contextualize, reinterpret, or dismiss them, often advocating for a more "interpretive" approach to scripture. Anthony, for example, told us, "Given my interpretive lens, it's okay that scripture can say that [homosexuality is wrong]. And I can say, 'Yes, those are words that are in the Bible. Let's consider them in context. Let's consider the literary genre. Let's consider situation and the fact that this was written 2000 years ago.'" This comment exemplifies how more affirming students took issue with how others use the Bible, suggesting that common lines of justification among non-affirming people were perceived as problematic. Their affirming position on sexuality then was justified, at least in part, through an interpretive approach to scripture.

Second, we found that some affirming students went beyond taking issue with specific passages or advocating for a contextual, interpretive approach. Instead, they argued that the Bible has a broader, more salient (and more authoritative) message about love and inclusion, especially for those who are marginalized by society, that should take precedent. As Thomas argued,

> *I think that the broader messages of the Bible that are most clear overwhelm these little cherry-picked things . . . You find one or two [passages]. You look at Leviticus and the one verse that Paul says that we interpret as being problematic about homosexuality. And we draw those out into huge Biblical messages when the much more overriding message is love of neighbor. The folks on the outs are at the center of God's kingdom.*

Carrie similarly acknowledged that "there are parts in the Bible that are tough to deal with while having this [affirming] belief." Like Thomas, however, Carrie finds support for her affirming views in the overarching message of scripture. She told us, "I think there are way more scriptures in the Bible that affirm people and tell us to love people than there are against groups of people." While acknowledging that they have struggled to reconcile their affirming position with certain passages in the Bible, both respondents ultimately deferred to Biblical authority as a foundation for their affirming perspective—rooted in the Bible's commandment to love and affirm others. Thus, we found that both affirming and non-affirming students highly valued and turned to the Bible as an authority in articulating their views on homosexuality.

The Authority of Lived Experience

More than half (55%) of students in our sample mentioned someone who was gay or lesbian as having shaped their views, although this was more common among students who leaned affirming (62%) than those who leaned non-affirming (37%). When gay and lesbian individuals were mentioned, however, the impact was often described in similar ways: Students explained how relationships with LGBTQ+ individuals were an impetus for change.

More affirming students often narrated the experience of witnessing gay or lesbian individuals conduct themselves in seemingly "normal" (or even idealized) ways as authoritative evidence that same-sex relationships were

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appropriate. For example, Carla talked about a former employer who was in a same-sex marriage: "It's like, 'Oh, you're a person. You're normal. You're like me. You're sensitive. You care about others too. You probably feel things even more because of how you've been ostracized.' That has impacted me." Another student, Anthony, told us, "One of my closest friends happens to be gay and also happens to be called to ministry. I have a really hard time seeing how someone could look at his relationship with his partner, which is literally the closest model of covenant faithfulness in a relationship I've ever seen, and affirm that that is immoral." For many students, how individuals in same-sex relationships lived out their Christian faith within the context of their romantic relationship was evidence that same-sex relationships should be affirmed.

Although less common, roughly one-third of non-affirming students also mentioned relationships with gay and lesbian people in their responses and described these relationships as prompting attitudinal change. In this case, however, the change most commonly involved a movement away from explicit condemnation and toward acceptance, but not affirmation. These students argued that homosexual individuals should be loved, respected, and welcomed into religious communities, not condemned or persecuted. At the same time, these students retained the belief that homosexuality was sinful and often opposed same-sex marriage and the ordination of LGBTQ+ clergy, a position referred to as "accepting but not affirming."

Rose illustrates this perspective well. When asked what has informed her views on same-sex relationships, Rose responded,

> *There are people who God has brought into my life over and over and over since my teenage years who are a part of the queer community. I think it was His way of letting me know, "Hey, these are my children. I love them. You need to love them. You need to learn how they relate to me and be a part of the whole process of salvation."*

Rose reflected that if we had asked her a year earlier for her views, she would have said, "They can't be saved. They're not saved." But now, she said, she has "come to a place where that makes no sense." She mentioned forming "a really good friendship" with a man who "came out this past year," noting that "it has not been easy for him." Through conversations with her friend, Rose observed that "This guy loves Jesus" and that, in turn, he is "saved." She continued, "I may not like your sexual orientation or who you love," but she no longer feels that it is place "to condemn him." Another student, Isabella, described a similar position. She explained: "I grew up believing that same-sex relationships were wrong . . . But I also grew up being taught that love covers a multitude of sins, and that we put too much weight on various sins. My best friend is gay, and she knows how I feel about certain things. But that has not stopped one ounce of the love that I have for her." In all three cases, students described their awareness of the lived experiences of someone who is gay as shaping their attitudes toward homosexuality.

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Authorities in Conflict: Expressing and Resolving Ambivalence

Broadly, we found that students who leaned affirming and those who leaned non-affirming invoked similar authorities to support their positions. We also found that the three authorities described above were not mutually exclusive. In fact, most students invoked more than one authority in accounting for their position, even when they were highly confident in their views. In some cases, students invoked an authority only to dismiss its importance or explain why the arguments of others were incorrect, as in affirming students' arguments against scriptural passages commonly used to justify non-affirming views (see also Djupe and Neiheisel 2008). But in many cases, the use of multiple authorities was clearly associated with attitudinal ambivalence and/or uncertainty. Many, like Charlie, told us that they were "still trying to make heads and tails of it [the question of homosexuality]." These students often used the interview as a space to talk through their feelings and thoughts (see also Hart-Brinson 2014). We found that ambivalence and/or uncertainty were most evident in students' attempts to "reconcile" the pulls of these different authorities. Our data also suggest that students achieved greater attitudinal certainty by privileging one authority over others. In this section, we highlight places where we saw evidence of ambivalence, uncertainty, and/or contradiction in students' accounts.

First, the contradiction between these three authorities was clearly evident among some conservative students who believed homosexuality was a sin (based largely on Biblical authority), but who were unsure where to stand on the ordination of LGBTQ+ individuals. This uncertainty was rooted in their belief that Godly authority was foundational in questions related to vocational calling and the resulting tension between the perceived demands of Biblical and Godly authority. One respondent, Henry, who leaned non-affirming, illustrates this tension clearly. When asked what theological ideas, if any, he was struggling with, Henry said he was unsure how to handle same-sex relationships in his congregation. He reflected,

> *One of [the things I've struggled with] is same-sex marriage. Because, I mean, in the Bible, it's very clear what God wants. Man-woman, woman-man. [. . .] However, [people in same-sex marriages] are still people, you can't neglect them. That's a challenge. How do you confront that in a church? How do you confront a couple who wants to get married and they're of the same sex? Do you show them love but also break God's command? Or do you reject them, and risk them being hurt and mad at you, but you're upholding the views of the Bible?*

When asked directly, Henry said that he would have to "politely decline" an invitation to perform a same-sex marriage because, as a pastor-in-training, his primary imperative was to "uphold the Bible." His "struggle" over same-sex marriage was not about what to think, but rather, concern regarding how to enact his views and values in the context of pastoral leadership.

Later, however, when asked about his views on the ordination of gay and lesbian individuals to congregational leadership, Henry expressed ambivalence. He responded,

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> *Man, you put me in a pickle now . . . As a pastor, as a preacher, one thing you have to do is you have to tread the dangerous ground of upholding the views of the Bible, but also not limiting people in how they feel that God has called them to serve. I can't tell you that God hasn't told you to serve in ministry just because you're gay. I mean, I can't do that. . . . but being a pastor, I'm responsible for upholding the views of the Bible. If I'm going to successfully uphold the views of the Bible, I would be unable to have somebody who's involved in a same-sex marriage or relationship to serve in a leadership position at the church.*

At first, Henry seems to lean heavily on Godly authority, saying that he cannot question God's call to others to lead. However, he then moves back to Biblical authority as foundationally important, suggesting that his call to "uphold the Bible" as a pastor would require him to deny gay and lesbian people the opportunity to serve in leadership at his church. When asked directly, however, Henry again expressed uncertainty, responding: "I guess you can say that's something I haven't resolved yet . . . I've got to uphold the Bible, but I can't limit you in how God has called you to serve. I'm exploring." Henry's uncertainty is rooted in the push and pull of these two authorities: Biblical authority, which he perceives to be against homosexuality and which he feels called to uphold, and Godly authority, which he feels unable to question or limit. These perceived contradictions generate ambivalence regarding the ordination of LGBTQ+ individuals.

Second, some students expressed uncertainty and/or described themselves as "of two minds" on questions of homosexuality and gay rights, more generally. In nearly all cases, the "two minds" described by students were linked to authorities which they perceived to be pulling them in different directions. Lucia leaned non-affirming but expressed considerable ambivalence. When asked about her views on the morality of same-sex relationships, she responded: "I do find [same-sex relationships] to be a sin, but I'm also finding it very problematic. I'm finding that stance problematic with how I understand God and what I'm continuing to learn about Him. So, I'm just in a really complicated space." Later, when asked about ordination, Lucia responded, "Hmm. I don't know. The indoctrinated side of me says that it [ordination] should not be [allowed], but again, what's developing in my understanding of God is not in line with that thought, but I don't really know. I can't say that I'm on either side of that right now." Here, Lucia described herself as containing two different sides: "the indoctrinated side" and the "developing" side. These sides, rooted in her upbringing and her more recent learning, respectively, pulled her in contradictory directions on questions of gay rights. Earlier in the interview, Lucia described her upbringing as one which emphasized "a more literal perspective on the Bible," but noted that her understanding of scripture was changing as a result of her short time in seminary. She reflected, "I still understand it [scripture] as the authoritative word of God, but the ways that it is authoritative are different than when I first started." Lucia's shifting understanding of the Bible's authority is bound up with her growing ambivalence regarding the morality of same-sex relationships and the ordination of LGBTQ+ clergy.

Another student, Ava, who leaned affirming, similarly constructed herself as struggling "between two poles" in relation to gay rights and invoked

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multiple authorities in her response. When asked about her views on same-sex relationships, Ava reflected on her experience searching for resources that might inform her views on homosexuality,

> *I grabbed one book, and it was like, "What does the Bible really say about homosexuality?" And I read that . . . I think it helped me think through it, because sometimes I feel like I'm trying to reconcile these things that, in my gut, feel either right or wrong. And then what the Bible says about it. . . because I am someone that thinks that the Bible has at least some authority on my life [. . .] Struggling between those two poles, I do feel this gut sense that . . . I don't see a problem with [homosexuality], [. . .] especially when I know people who are in ministry who are in the LGBTQ community, who obviously feel a strong connection with the Lord and a calling into ministry. Who am I to say that's wrong?*

Here, we see strong evidence that Ava's ambivalence was linked to her commitment to multiple authorities (Biblical, experiential and, to a lesser extent, Godly) that seem to pull her in different directions. Her case also demonstrates that looking to the Bible as a foundational authority is an important part of some people's religious identity. This identity remained important to her, but Ava also felt that it was wrong to be non-affirming, invoking lived experience and Godly authority. As a result, Ava was working to reconcile "what the Bible says" with her "gut sense."

Some students whose views we characterized as more certain also indicated they were struggling with how to "reconcile" their views, either with scripture (for affirming students) or with the authority of lived experience (for non-affirming students). When asked about her views on same-sex marriage, Madelyn was clear: "If they [people in same-sex relationships] love each other, they should be able to do just the same [as heterosexual couples]." Later in the interview, however, Madelyn reflected, "I feel like 'love is love,' but it's a little more complicated with scripture." Another student, Michael, clearly leaned non-affirming. When asked about his views on homosexuality, he responded, "Simply put, I think I would say that it's a sin." However, Michael also felt that the issue of homosexuality was "a tough one." He continued,

> *I also want to admit that I haven't interacted with a lot of same-sex couples who are faithfully serving God in a lot of ways. So, I don't know that I'm the expert on this topic . . . it seems to me that Scripture does call same-sex relationships sinful. In fact, I think because of that . . . and because I view Scripture as authoritative, there something has to be said for that. And I've heard stories of a few friends of mine who would identify as [gay]. . . again, the hurt, the pain, the wounds that they've faced from the churches they've been a part of. And so, I really do wrestle with how you approach this whole question and this whole topic.*

Thus, though Michael and Madelyn ultimately fall on different sides regarding their assessment of the morality of same-sex relationships, we saw that both wrestled with ambivalence regarding the primacy of scripture versus the lived experience of gay and lesbian people, authorities which they perceived to be in conflict.

While ambivalence and uncertainty were salient in many students' accounts, there were also students who expressed more certainty. We found that these students

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often achieved certainty and/or resolved ambivalence by prioritizing one authority over the others. Eleanor, for example, was clear that she places the lived experiences of gay and lesbian people (and to a lesser extent, Godly authority) over and above Biblical authority. She told us, "My parents' best friends are lesbian couple. They're like my second moms. I mean, there's theology, and then there's the people that I love, right? And the people that I love are kind of always going to win out for better or for worse." She later added, "I can't fully make a Biblical argument for gay people being married. However, I do know that God has told me to love everyone very sacrificially. . . so I'm just going to love and affirm people." While Eleanor felt unable to justify her affirming position with scripture, she deferred to Godly authority instead: she believed that loving others is more important to God than following the "letter of the law" (of scripture). Here, we see evidence that attitudinal certainty was achieved by privileging some authorities (in this case, experiential and Godly) over others (Biblical). However, we also see that even among those who achieved greater certainty by downplaying Biblical authority, there was still a strong "pull" to account for their position using scripture.

Together, our findings suggest that contradictions and tensions in students' accounts were evidence of real uncertainty and/or ambivalence on homosexuality and gay rights. Many of the students we spoke with who were or leaned affirming reported struggling with how to reconcile their views with scripture (to find a "Biblical warrant" for their views). On the other hand, many of the students we spoke with who were or leaned non-affirming were struggling to reconcile their non-affirming views with God's authority to call anyone to ministry, with their shifting understandings of God's nature, and/or with the lived experiences of gay or lesbian people in their lives. Even students who privileged one source of authority over the others and expressed more certainty as a result often also acknowledged the potential challenges presented by the others. The three authorities are important to many religious people, regardless of their position.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this paper, we examined the accounts of first-year seminary students regarding their views on same-sex relationships, marriage, and ordination. Our data reveal that students with very different attitudes invoked similar authorities—Biblical, Godly, and lived experience—to account for their position. Moreover, we found a high level of ambivalence, uncertainty, and contradiction in students' accounts. Some students explicitly reported being unsure of what was right or simply stated that they "don't know" where they stand. Others talked about feeling pulled in opposing directions or being "of two minds" on homosexuality and/or gay rights. In examining these accounts closely, our data suggest that attitudinal ambivalence (and certainty) is tied to students' attempts to navigate and "reconcile" these different authorities. These findings contribute to a growing body of research emphasizing the complex and ambivalent perspectives of many

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Americans, including religious Americans, on homosexuality and gay rights issues.

Our paper makes several important contributions. First, it contributes to existing work that seeks to move beyond binary perspectives and univalent views on homosexuality and gay rights. We find, for example, that the three authorities highlighted here were invoked by students on "both sides," suggesting areas of common ground for discourse and dialogues within and across religious communities. While not the primary focus of this paper, our data suggest that students *wanted* to talk with people who disagreed with them and that such conversations may be particularly effective and impactful when occurring among people who share a salient identity (in this case, Christian). Many of the students who expressed uncertainty and ambivalence told us that they came to seminary hoping to gain knowledge that could help them decide and/or account for a clear position on these issues. Accordingly, we theorize that conversations that start by acknowledging common ground (including shared authorities) can reduce stereotypes about those on the other "side" and make these conversations more fruitful, as long as students remain open to considering alternative positions.

Second, our data support recent efforts to highlight the prevalence of ambivalence and uncertainty in people's attitudes toward homosexuality and gay rights (Bean and Martinez 2014; Craig et al. 2005; Garner 2013; Jackman 2020; Moore et al. 2021; Steele and Helmuth 2019). Moreover, this research adds nuance to our understanding of the mechanisms underlying attitudinal ambivalence on issues of homosexuality and gay rights. First and foremost, it shows that religion does not always or necessarily exert a pull toward non-affirming positions on homosexuality. Like Bean and Martinez (2014), we find that religious communities can offer multiple, sometimes conflicting, values and logics which religious people must actively navigate and work to reconcile. More specifically, we draw from rich qualitative data to identify one mechanism generating ambivalence among religious people: the presence of different and sometimes seemingly contradictory authorities. Furthermore, the use of similar authorities across a range of positions suggests that students felt compelled to account for their views in ways that resonate in their religious communities. Some students reported actively looking for justifications that would "allow" them to change positions and become more affirming, while some who had changed attitudinal positions were still working to bring their feelings into alignment with their new position. By focusing only on survey responses, previous research has missed the diverse ways that ambivalence manifests and is negotiated (see also Smelser 1998).

Considering the role of competing authorities, specifically, in forming attitudes and generating ambivalence can be useful in explaining recent findings regarding the limited impact of personal contact on the attitudes of Evangelical Christians. While much research suggests the power of personal contact to generate attitude change (Bramlett 2012; Garner 2013; Hart-Brinson 2014), one recent study (Baker and Brauner-Otto 2015) found that social contact with gay and lesbian people had less impact on the attitudes of Evangelical Christians

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than on non-Evangelicals. Our findings suggest that individuals who lean non-affirming, most of whom in our sample belonged to Evangelical or Black Protestant traditions, may be influenced by personal contact but may ultimately privilege a plain-text reading of scripture as the ultimate authority. For our respondents who leaned non-affirming, the authority of the Bible clearly outweighed the authority of the lived experience of gay and lesbian individuals whom the respondents had relationships with. However, our research also reveals that, in many cases, personal contact did generate ambivalence and uncertainly on the part of individuals leaning non-affirming, even if self-reported attitudes on discrete survey measures remained stable.

Third, our data call into question one common way of defining and measuring "ambivalence" on homosexuality and gay rights. Bean and Martinez (2014), for example, use the term "Ambivalent Evangelicals" to refer to individuals who are in favor of gay rights (such as same-sex marriage) but maintain a view that same-sex sexual behaviors are sinful. This specific combination of attitudes has been labeled "ambivalent" in other studies as well (Jackman 2020; Moore et al. 2021). However, our data suggest that people can hold this combination of positions with relative certainty and clarity. Some of the non-affirming students in our sample, for example, were able to defend and account for these seemingly contradictory (from the researcher's perspective) positions in ways that felt personally satisfying. In other words, these individuals did not express uncertainty or indicate a felt sense of tension or contradiction regarding their views. This introduces a question about whether and when ambivalence, as an aspect or feature of attitudes, should be defined from the researcher's (etic) or the respondent's (emic) point of view. In this paper, we described respondents as "ambivalent" when they self-reported being "of two minds" on an issue or set of issues (Craig et al. 2005). Future work should continue to develop this concept, potentially articulating the differences, theoretically and empirically, between ambivalence, contradiction, and uncertainty in people's accounts.

This study is not without limitations. Our sample is drawn from a single divinity school associated with a Mainline Protestant denomination—United Methodist Church—in the middle of a denominational debate concerning homosexuality (Krull and Gilliland 2023). This context likely made issues related to homosexuality and gay rights more salient in students' minds and increased the likelihood of exposure to different perspectives on these issues. Additionally, the seminary's affiliation with a Mainline Protestant domination, in conjunction with the history of racial segregation among religious organizations in the United States, means we could not separate out the influences of race and denomination on students' views and/or accounts. In our sample, race and denominational affiliation are strongly correlated. Most White students in our sample are Mainline Protestant, a religious tradition with fairly high rates of acceptance of homosexuality. In contrast, most Black students in our sample are members of historically Black Protestant denominations or holiness or Pentecostal traditions, groups with very low rates of acceptance of homosexuality (Chaves et al. 2021). Thus,

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race and position on sexuality are also correlated (see also Ellison, Acevedo, and Ramos-Wada 2011; Lewis 2003). Roughly 20% of the students in our sample are Black (n = 19). Of these students, 11 were classified as non-affirming (58%), 2 unsure (11%), and 6 affirming (32%). Additional research is needed to disentangle the role of race and denomination on how religious people think and talk about homosexuality.

Additionally, the fact that our sample is composed of students at an ecumenical seminary, the majority of whom aspire to enter religious ministry, likely made LGBTQ+ issues more salient. For one, the ecumenical context may make justifications for individual attitudes more salient, as students in this context are more likely to be called to account for their views (including in the interview context itself) and to be navigating competing logics. At the same time, as aspiring religious leaders who will be called on to counsel, teach, and guide other people on questions of sexuality (Cadge et al. 2012; Djupe and Neiheisel 2008; Krull and Gilliland 2023), seminary students also likely feel more compelled to clarify their personal positions and to be able to provide convincing justifications for their position relative to laypeople. Additional qualitative research on seminary students, religious leaders, and laypeople would help disentangle the prevalence and causes of ambivalence among and across religious people.

Finally, two empirical findings of note stick out as particularly important for future avenues of inquiry into this topic. First, we found it especially interesting that a sample of seminarians—highly religious individuals who are immersed in the academic study of Biblical and theological texts—often placed personal experiences with gay and lesbian individuals as having the same, and sometimes greater, authoritative weight as Biblical authority or Godly authority. Though the theological importance of personal experience is not a new phenomenon for many religious traditions (e.g., the Wesleyan quadrilateral), and some scholars have noted the importance of personal experience in forming opinions on homosexuality (see Simpson 2011), the fact that the majority of our sample referenced personal experience as an authority in shaping their views is certainly noteworthy and suggests the need for further research to understand how and when this kind of personal experience is authoritative. Second, an important discovery of this study was the fact that many students held seemingly contradictory views on same-sex marriage and the ordination of individuals in same-sex relationships. Past research has found that religious individuals sometimes support LGBTQ+ civil rights but not full religious inclusion (Cadge 2002). Among our respondents, we found the opposite: that many students who leaned non-affirming opposed same-sex relationships and marriage did not oppose the ordination of homosexual individuals to the pastorate, citing God's authority over ministerial calling. More focused research is needed to disentangle how members and leaders of Christian congregations think about homosexuality inside and outside of religious settings in our current social climate.

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Additional areas for future research include how sexual and gender minority students in seminary express their views regarding sexuality and how they conceptualize their own sexuality. In our sample, 14 students (14%) identified as LGBTQ+ at matriculation. We did not remove these students from the analysis for this paper nor did we separate them out, but we do think that future research should consider the unique perspectives, accounts, and experiences of LGBTQ+ students (Fuist 2016; O'Brien 2004). Despite the increased representation of LGBTQ+ clergy in recent years, there is relatively little research on their views and/or experiences. Another area for future research is whether and how seminary students' views on sexuality change over the course of their time in the program. The present analysis is based on interviews conducted during students' first semester of seminary; however, many students were already thinking through their views on homosexuality in light of what they had learned and the relationships they had developed in seminary. These revelations during the early months of their seminary education did not uniformly move students in an affirming or nonaffirming direction. Whether and how theological education in this specific environment impacts individual attitudes is thus an open question and a matter for future research.

This paper suggests that tension and contradiction in students' accounts are evidence of real ambivalence and uncertainty regarding homosexuality and gay rights. We have argued that these contradictions and tensions are rooted in the competing "pulls" of different socially salient and personally meaningful authorities. We saw evidence throughout our interviews of significant personal struggle as students worked to reconcile these different authorities and reduce gaps between their childhood socialization, felt intuitions, and a range of external cross-pressures. Ultimately, these students sought to justify and account for their views in ways that aligned with the authorities, logics, and values of the communities in which they were situated and that felt true given their personal identities and values. These efforts, then, are evidence of "serious work" (Pugh 2013), especially for people who aspire to positions of religious leadership.

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