

Finding the Happy Medium:
A Practice-Oriented Framework for Navigating Faith and
Non-Heterosexuality Based on Qualitative Interviews

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Finding the Happy Medium:

A Practice-Oriented Framework Based on Qualitative Interviews

Across Faith Traditions

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- **Ali:** Conceptualisation; Data curation; Formal analysis; Investigation; Methodology; Project administration; Validation; Visualisation; Writing – original draft; Writing – review & editing
- **Ludwig:** Conceptualisation; Supervision; Visualisation; Writing – review & editing

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Abstract

Objectives: This work aimed to explore the experiences of participants identifying as both religious and non-heterosexual, with a deeper focus on how they sought support to navigate these identities. **Method:** A grounded-theory approach, using semi-structured interviews, with 16 participants from different religious backgrounds was employed. **Results:** A number of themes arose including conflict that is both internal and external (from societal norms), negotiation of identity including either affirming or rejecting their different identities, and a desire for a person-centred space that encouraged internal dialogue rather than immediate judgement. Analysis revealed three dichotomies shaping participants' identity navigation: fluidity versus fixedness in faith and sexuality (whether religion and sexuality are personally negotiable or externally determined), the distinction between personal beliefs and enacted practices, and public versus private acceptance of intersectional identities. Participants expressed a need to be seen as holistic individuals beyond their religious and sexual identities. **Conclusions:** The article presents "Finding the Happy Medium," a person-centred, conversational framework to support religious and secular service providers in creating, safe spaces for clients navigating faith-sexuality intersections. The framework offers a bridge between sexuality-affirming and faith-affirming services. These results have applications across therapeutic, coaching, and community support settings.

Keywords: intersectional identity, religious identity, sexual identity, grounded theory, identity navigation, lgbtq

Introduction

Religion and sexuality have historically often been understood as mutually exclusive (Turpin, 2019), creating significant challenges for individuals who identify as both religious and non-heterosexual. While research has begun to explore this intersection, most studies have focused on Western, predominantly Christian or Jewish contexts (Sherkat, 2002; Whitley, 2009), leaving a significant gap in our understanding of these experiences across diverse religious and cultural backgrounds. The purpose of the current study was to examine how non-heterosexual individuals navigate their religious and sexual identities across diverse faith traditions, with particular attention to their experiences with support services. This research addresses two critical gaps: the limited understanding of identity negotiation in multicultural religious contexts, and the lack of frameworks for personal identity construction in this space. Note that in this study, ‘non-heterosexual’ is used to describe the target population to encapsulate the broad range of sexual orientations that this includes (e.g., lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, demisexual), and while there may be a link to gender identification, this is a scope for future studies.

Research by Sherkat (2016) demonstrates varying levels of religious commitment according to sexual orientation, with heterosexual women showing the highest levels of commitment and bisexual individuals being less likely to have religious identification. This highlights a critical challenge: individuals who identify as non-heterosexual and belong to faith communities often face pressure to affirm only one aspect of their identity while rejecting the other (Haldeman, 2004). This tension is exacerbated by limitations in available support services. Secular services frequently lack understanding of faith contexts (Eleuteri & Farulla, 2016), while faith-based services may struggle to fully address sexual identity complexities, often accepting individuals' personhood while rejecting same-sex sexual practice (Hodge, 2005; Eleuteri & Farulla, 2016).

Research on how this population creates meaning and navigates these identities is limited but some theoretical frameworks have been proposed (e.g., Fuist, 2016; Tay et al., 2018) which provide valuable insights into the role of social contexts and cultural resources. These insights connect to broader theoretical perspectives on identity navigation, including: (i) sexuality-affirming approaches that either exclude faith considerations (Turner & Stayton, 2022) or incorporate intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1998); (ii) faith-affirming perspectives (Haldeman, 2004); and (iii) personally constructed frameworks (Davie, 2015) that allow for negotiation between beliefs and religious doctrine, sometimes incorporating hierarchical ordering of religious and sexual identities (McQueeney, 2009).

To address these gaps and complexities, this study employed grounded theory methodology (Glaser, 1992), using qualitative methods to explore lived experiences through participants' social actions, behaviours, thoughts, and meanings. Following Constructivist Grounded Theory principles (Charmaz, 2014), we rooted our analysis in participants' meaning-making processes regarding the intersection of non-heterosexuality and religion, allowing theoretical insights to emerge from the data rather than preexisting frameworks. This approach enabled us to examine how individuals across diverse religious traditions navigate these complex identities, both within and outside of supportive communities. By expanding beyond Western-centric, single-faith, and single-sexual orientation perspectives, this research aimed to develop a more comprehensive understanding of identity navigation in multicultural, religiously plural contexts, while identifying crucial elements for improving support services for this population. To this end, we were able to use our data to create a practice-oriented framework (Finding The Happy Medium) that offers scope for further research and potential application in support services, as presented in the Discussion section of this paper.

Defining Key Concepts

The terms ‘faith’, ‘religion’, and ‘spirituality’ —known as the ‘sacred triad’ by Land (2014)—have collectively been defined as a search for meaning related to the sacred (Pargament, 2001). This inclusive conceptualisation accommodates both individuals who follow organised doctrines and those who adopt more postmodern, individualistic approaches to belief and practice (Hervieu-Léger, 1990; Benson et al., 2018). However, as people may draw distinctions between the terms based on their personal meaning-making journeys, it can be important to further differentiate them for conceptual precision. Gschwandtner (2021) comprehensively reviews the literature around these overlapping terms and distinguishes the phenomenological layers. ‘Faith’ is described as the personal commitment to beliefs, ‘religion’ as relating to specific traditions including communal events or practices, and ‘spirituality’ as a basic human predisposition that allows for self-transcendental experiences, regardless of affiliation with any dogma. In this work, we will be using the term ‘faith’ as a default to ensure the focus is on the personal experiences (e.g., personal beliefs) of the participant. Further use of the term religion or spirituality is intentional and applies to their respective definition provided here.

In this article, we further adopt the definition of sexuality as "the human capacity for emotional attachment, companionship, and erotic connection" (Yip, 2010, p. 668; see also Machacek & Wilcox, 2003; Robertson, 2006). This conceptualisation intentionally extends beyond physical acts, which are often perceived negatively by faith communities (Eleuteri & Farulla, 2016), to encompass one's sexual identity in terms of partner attraction. While acknowledging the spectrum of identities within LGBTQI+ communities (Stonewall, 2025), this study focuses specifically on sexual attraction and uses the term 'non-heterosexual' to maintain clarity of scope while examining identity navigation across diverse faith contexts. Furthermore,

the terms ‘LGBTQI+’ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and other sexual and gender minorities) includes many identities that may or may not be associated with sexual attraction; it can also include gender identities which some may differentiate from sexuality while others think the two are inseparable (Stonewall, 2025). The research focusses mainly on sexual identities based on sexual attraction (Robertson, 2006) and will mostly be referred to by the term ‘non-heterosexual’.

Approaches Affirming Non-Heterosexuality

The first clarification to make is that approaches that affirm non-heterosexuality can either be intersectional with other aspects of identity, including faith, or they exclude faith considerations (Turner & Stayton, 2022).

Approaches that incorporate intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1998) often employ person-centred therapeutic models, as demonstrated in Malark's (2017) psychodynamic work with an atheist man raised in an Orthodox Jewish family, or Harvey et al.'s (2017) queer affirmative therapy with a gay man with cerebral palsy. Malark's (2017) psychodynamic approach can be questioned for its neutrality and intersectionality, as it took a directional approach by actively challenging hostilities towards religion, family observances of religion, and sexual expressions; thus it could be argued that the research—and therefore the patient's experience—was not entirely free from Malark's own values.

Emerging research has begun exploring the potential integration of spirituality and sexuality through concepts like "sacred sexuality" (Carlisle, 2018), suggesting possibilities for reconciliation, whereby sexuality is seen as a divine blessing for expressing love and creating life. However, based on the current study's interviews, these frameworks remain predominantly

heteronormative, highlighting a significant gap in understanding how non-heterosexual individuals might access similar integrative approaches.

Faith-excluding approaches, as categorized by Coley's (2019) study of LGBTQ activist groups in Christian colleges, further demonstrate the complexity of "affirming" and "excluding" as concepts. These approaches employ strategies of reframing, reconciling, or individualising, depending on their primary focus—community change or personal growth. This research offers valuable insights into organisational approaches but provides limited understanding of individual navigation processes outside supportive communities, a gap that our study specifically addresses.

Faith-Affirming Perspectives

Faith-affirming perspectives have historically positioned non-heterosexuality and religious faith as mutually exclusive, often framing non-heterosexuality as a "lifestyle choice" rather than an inherent identity (Armour, 2010). This conflict stems partly from differing conceptions of the origins of sexual attraction: while non-heterosexual individuals often embrace biological determinism, many religious traditions maintain that non-heterosexuality is sinful and therefore cannot be divinely created. This can in turn lead to increased levels of internalised homonegativity, negative emotional states, and behaviours associated with HIV/sexually transmitted infections (Wilkerson et al., 2012).

In holding such faith-affirmative perspectives at the exclusion of non-heterosexuality, some religious services have advocated for conversion therapies—organised attempts to convert rather than accept homosexual orientation (Morrow & Beckstead, 2004). Religious services may offer relief to homoerotic feelings through prayer, whilst behavioural approaches encouraged gay men to participate in sports, date women, and avoid participating in public social life at times where there is a high likelihood of attractive men being present (Haldeman, 2004). Conversion

therapies remain controversial for their negative impacts on individuals' mental health (Shidlo & Schroeder, 2002), and its exacerbation of internalised homonegativity (Meladze & Brown, 2015). When conversion therapy is voluntarily sought by non-heterosexual person of faith, it is usually sought due to societal prejudice rather than the sexual identity itself (Drescher, 2002).

However, faith-affirming perspectives need not exclude non-heterosexuality entirely. Young's (2023) research on churchgoers' perspectives reveals how non-affirming churches often maintain their positions by portraying non-heterosexuality as abstract and distant, employing generalised teachings like "we love everybody" (p. 122) while decentring the experiences of non-heterosexual individuals. This approach contrasts sharply with the lived experiences documented by Sorrell et al. (2024), who found that LGBTQ+ teens and their parents from conservative Christian backgrounds experienced microaggressions as "little knives stabbing me" (p. 223), leading to ostracisation from religious environments.

On the other hand, Dyer and Goodman (2022) found that religiously affiliated youth had fewer mental health problems than the non-affiliated, and this remained true for sexual minorities but untrue for transgender participants. Similarly, Woodell and Schwadel (2020) observed that while sexual minority status correlates with religious disaffiliation and reduced service attendance, it does not consistently affect prayer practices. This highlights important nuances in how individuals define and practice the distinction between 'religion' and 'faith,' and the fluid nature of identity exploration throughout a life course suggesting that identity navigation is more complex than simple affiliation or disaffiliation decisions.

Personally Constructed Frameworks

The limitations of both approaches (those that affirm non-heterosexuality, and faith-affirming) have led to increased interest in personally constructed frameworks that centre

individual agency in identity navigation. Haldeman (2004) points to evidence that spiritual affiliation can be a source of connection, meaning, resilience, and health for non-heterosexual people as there are strong links to family and community through religion.

Fuist's (2016) research identifies three primary approaches to negotiating the intersection of religious and sexual identities: reconciling, selection, and integration, alluding to a need to centre the non-heterosexual voice in how they navigate their own identities. Furthermore, Avishai (2020) notes that a religious LGBT person's ambivalence and fluidity do not indicate an inability to arrive at any of these three approaches. In fact, much literature around this is centred around an argument that faith and sexuality are mutually exclusive and destinations at which one should arrive at in their negotiations, but this takes away the agency of people to be fluid and navigate this space as many times as needed throughout their lives. Both papers offer a transgressive lens through which to view this dichotomy as they make observations about how people 'do religion' or 'do sexuality' and provide sound conceptual frameworks. Davie's (2015) concept of "believing without belonging" offers another useful framework for understanding how individuals negotiate religious beliefs outside traditional institutional contexts. This approach allows for personal construction of faith that can accommodate non-heterosexual identities without requiring full adherence to religious doctrine. In the context of Christianity, Dale and Keller (2019) have proposed that religious individuals can question and adapt specific religious beliefs and teachings (e.g., those targeting non-heterosexuality) while simultaneously keeping their faith, thereby allowing for a successful integration of both areas of life. Similarly, McQueeney's (2009) research on inclusive churches found that members often employ hierarchical ordering of their identities, prioritising either their religious or sexual identity depending on context.

What remains critically underexplored in these personally constructed frameworks is how individuals develop and maintain these negotiated identities without institutional support, particularly across diverse religious traditions—or at least what institutional support would have been desired had their voices been centred. While existing frameworks offer valuable insights into potential outcomes, they still provide relatively limited understanding of the process through which individuals arrive at these positions, especially when navigating identities in isolation or outside Western Christian contexts.

The current study

Most literature on the relationship between religion and sexuality focusses on a single religious population, whether Abrahamic or theistic and its rejection of homosexuality (Clarke, Brown & Hochstein, 1989), or on New Religious Movements such as the International Raelian Movement (Gregg, 2014), whereby sexuality may be seen as radical and central, but much of it is heteronormative. The current study addresses these gaps by examining the experiences of non-heterosexual individuals across diverse faith traditions, focusing on how they personally construct frameworks for navigating the intersection of their religious and sexual identities. Previous research, such as Clarke et al.'s (2022) interviews with Muslim, Jewish, and Christian families, offers valuable insights into religious perspectives on sexuality more broadly, particularly regarding sexuality morality and education rather than orientation (i.e., external processes). However, our study specifically centres the voices and experiences of non-heterosexual individuals themselves (i.e., internal processes on how participants navigate this space).

Here we aimed to develop a more comprehensive understanding of identity navigation processes both within and outside supportive communities, addressing Young's (2023) call for

empathy-based approaches to discussions of sexuality within religious contexts. Furthermore, by examining participants' experiences with support services, we aimed to identify elements that are beneficial or detrimental in facilitating identity navigation. An underlying motivation was to lay the groundwork for more effective support for non-heterosexual individuals across diverse faith backgrounds. The analytic process culminated in the development of a practice-oriented framework that models identity navigation processes across contexts.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a combination of inductive and deductive thematic analysis informed by principles of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014) to address the identified gaps in understanding how non-heterosexual individuals navigate religious and sexual identities across diverse faith traditions. This approach was selected because it centres participants' experiences and meaning-making processes—essential for understanding personally constructed frameworks. Furthermore, it allows for theory development grounded in participants' lived experiences rather than imposing existing frameworks, addressing the limitation of Western-centric perspectives in current literature.

Positionality Statement

The first author who conducted the interviews, analysis, and most of the interpretation—is a South Asian, Muslim, cis-male, born and raised as an ethnic minority in the Southeast of England and has lived experience of dual cultures. The author did not disclose his religious or sexual orientations to participants at the time of the interview to keep the process as participant-centred as possible. Interviewees may have presumed a shared understanding of certain cultural nuances based on visible identity markers (e.g., skin colour or name), thereby reducing the need

for elaboration and potentially contributing to a richer dataset and more informed framework (Young, 2023). The experience of navigating dual cultural identities sensitised the author to the complex negotiations individuals undertake when navigating potentially conflicting aspects of identity. This perspective aligns with the study's focus on understanding personally constructed frameworks for identity navigation while maintaining appropriate critical distance through reflexive practices.

The second author, who provided supervisory guidance during the later stages of the research, was raised in a Catholic Christian context and later explored other spiritual paths, including Eastern traditions. She has similarly encountered and navigated complex dilemmas at the intersection of religion and sexuality.

Participant selection and recruitment

After approval from the ethics committee, participants were recruited using a purposive and snowball method (Nolas, 2011, p. 26). Participants initially indicated interest through an advert disseminated through various charitable organisations and social media. Inclusion criteria were that a person was over 18, belonged to a faith at some point, and self-identified as non-heterosexual.

Table 1. Participant Demographics.

Pseudonym, Characteristics	Sexuality	Faith
Aleena, Female, 25-34 years	Bisexual	Muslim
Iram, Female, 18-24 years	Bisexual	Muslim
Neel, Male, 25-34 years	Gay	Muslim (with Hindu influences)
Prem, Male, 25-34 years	Gay	Atheist (previously raised as Hindu)
Peter, Male, 45-54 years	Homosexual	Agnostic
Sandra, Female, 25-34 years	Bisexual/ Pansexual	Christian
Chris, Male, 35-44 years	Homosexual	Pagan
James, Male, 55-64 years	Bisexual	Christian
Adam, Male, 55-64 years	Gay	Christian (Spiritual/Buddhist influence)
Jack, Male, 65-74 years	Homosexual	Christian
Viren, Male, 45-54 years	Gay	Spiritual (Hindu background)
Michael, Male, 55-64 years	Homosexual	Christian
Darleen, Female, 55-64 years	Lesbian	Jewish
Carol, Female, 25-34 years	Lesbian	Spiritual (Christian background)
Navbir, Male, 45-54 years	Homosexual	Agnostic/Sikh
Idrees, Male, 35-44 years	Gay	Muslim

Note. Pseudonyms are close to cultural representation of the actual participant. All criteria are self-identified. All participants were cisgender.

The diversity of faith backgrounds represented in the participant sample (see Table 1) was intentional, addressing the identified gap in research beyond Western Christian contexts. The inclusion of participants with varying relationships to faith—from active practitioners to those with previous religious upbringing—further enabled exploration of the dynamic, ongoing process of identity navigation highlighted earlier.

Sixteen participants were interviewed, which was when the codes constructed from the data reached a saturation point of not providing novel information (Aldiabat & Navenec, 2018). This saturation point was reached after 12 participants, but resources allowed for an additional 4 interviews.

Data Collection Methods

A series of open-ended questions were asked via semi-structured interviews, as participants would be given the freedom to explore their experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2003, p.63). The interview agenda can be found in the Supplementary Materials (Appendix A), including different revisions as the study progressed. Interviews took place on MS Teams, lasted between 30-75 minutes, were recorded with consent, and used the automated transcription tool. The researcher used a constructivist interviewing framework, understanding that both the researcher and participant may influence each other through their interactions in the interview (Charmaz, 2014, p.95). Semi-structured interviews permit this deviation from the interview schedule to allow exploration of a particular moment. This inductive approach (Charmaz, 2014) allows the researcher to use their neutrality (Hiller & DiLuzio, 2004) to gain a deep understanding of participants' experiences by building a rapport with them (Rieger, 2019).

All participants used retrospective anecdotes as well as hypothetical scenarios when sharing their experiences. The open-ended nature of the questions deliberately avoided assumptions about conflict between religious and sexual identities, allowing participants to articulate their own frameworks for understanding this intersection. This approach directly addresses the study's aim to move beyond binary understandings of religion and sexuality as mutually exclusive, instead exploring the nuanced processes through which individuals construct meaningful identities. Such sensitivity to the data (Yardley, 2017) increases the validity.

Each interview began with re-addressing ethical considerations, reminding participants of their right to withdraw, and ended with a debrief—highlighting the support services on offer if the participant required them.

Data analysis

Data analysis and collection were carried out together, as Charmaz (2014) posited that each layer of collection and analysis builds new iterations of a potential theory. Table 2 shows the steps taken during analysis with additional details on all steps provided in the Supplementary Materials (Appendix B).

Table 2. From Data to Framework.

Analytic Stage	Key Activities	Inputs	Outputs
Step 1: Familiarisation	Reading, re-reading, initial notes	Interview transcripts	Reflective notes; interview agenda iterations
Step 2: Open Coding	Line-by-line coding	Interview transcripts	60+ initial codes
Step 3: Memo Writing	Analytic reflection	Codes, transcripts, emerging patterns	Memos
Step 4: Focused Coding	Grouping codes into categories	Initial codes	12 focused categories; four themes with associated sub-themes; dimensions of variation
Step 5: Constant Comparison	Systematic case comparison	Categories, transcripts, themes, dimensions	Further clarification of dimensions
Step 6: Literature Engagement	Reading existing theory	Categories, dimensions	Sensitising concepts
Step 7: Framework Development	Integration and synthesis	All prior outputs	Three-dimension framework
Step 8: Write-Up	Manuscript preparation and revision	Final framework	Published findings

Note. The analytic process proceeded in eight steps, largely completed by the first author. All steps are described in detail in the Supplementary Materials (Appendix A). Although described sequentially, the analytic steps were iterative and involved ongoing back-and-forth across stages.

There is much debate about the coding process and how categories and relationships should be developed. Ultimately, the constructivist approach to grounded theory requires a freedom of nuance and delineating the analysis process for it to be truly data and participant driven (Gibson & Hartman, 2013). At the time of data collection, engagement with the literature on religious identity negotiation was intentionally limited, consistent with such principles. Concepts from the literature were employed as sensitising rather than as a definitive framework in later stages of the analytic process (see Table 2; Charmaz, 2014). Initial coding remained open and inductive, and it

used incident-by-incident style coding (Charmaz, 2014). Transcript cleaning and initial coding were supported by Nvivo software. Later stages included visual mapping and clustering of codes using both digital documents and physical materials (e.g., printed excerpts and movable notes), supporting iterative comparison and framework refinement.

The use of memos, which are a reflective audit trail of the procedural aspects of a grounded theory study allowed for the reflexivity of assumptions at regular stages throughout the research to identify how they may impact on research and use them as strengths in analysing data (Birks et al., 2019). This helped to inform the focused coding stage using a manual method of theoretical coding (Charmaz, 2014). As co-creator of the data (McGrath et al., 2019), reflexivity is advised which means being conscious about the impact of the researcher's role, and this was achieved through constructivist note-taking during interviews (Charmaz, 2014) and attending supervision meetings (Howitt & Cramer, 2020). By keeping memos and discussing research with a supervisor, the interviewer demonstrated the intention to ensure that data collection was not tarnished with personal bias.

Abductive reasoning then entailed inferences being made to account for findings which helped to form imaginative hypotheses for each explanation, each of which were checked against existing data to arrive at the form of a theory (Charmaz, 2014, p. 201). The iterative process of revisiting data to apply emerging theories against (Charmaz, 2014), ensures the robust analysis of the data. The theoretical categories crystallised through iterative comparison only after all the interviews had been completed. This iterative analytic process was particularly suited to developing a theory of identity navigation that accounts for both individual agency and structural influences, addressing the gap in understanding how personally constructed frameworks develop both within and outside supportive communities.

Results

The findings revealed complex and fluid processes of identity navigation that challenge binary understandings of religion and sexuality as mutually exclusive.

More than 60 initial codes from the open coding stage were grouped into 12 categories using focused coding (see Table S1 in Supplementary Materials). Subsequently, four main themes were discovered within those 12 categories (Table S2 in the Supplementary Materials; and Table 3): (1) Conflict between religious and sexual identities; (2) Negotiation of identity through various strategies; (3) Development of identity frameworks that transcend both faith and sexuality; and (4) Desire for person-centred safe spaces to navigate identity conflicts. Table 3 also shows sub-themes associated with each of the themes alongside the number of participants contributing to the respective code. Sub-themes emerged through iterative refinement of themes, involving revisiting and re-integrating focused codes to ensure alignment between codes, themes, and the developing analytic framework. The themes collectively illustrate the dynamic processes through which participants construct personally meaningful identity frameworks both within and outside supportive communities. Through further engagement with the data and—later on—with concepts from the existing literature, three dimensions of variation of participants started to emerge (Table 3): public vs. private acceptance; beliefs vs. practice; and fixedness vs. fluidity in faith and sexuality.

The Supplementary Materials provide additional detail on all analytic steps and results (Appendices B and C). They present an example of constant comparison across participants for one theme (analysis step 5; Table S3), detail how existing literature informed the framework in later stages (analysis step 6), and document successive iterations of the developing framework (analysis steps 7–8; Table S4 and Appendix C). These materials also include selected excerpts

and notes from supervision meetings and analytic memos in which key coding decisions were discussed. In the following, we present the results for the four identified themes in greater detail.

Table 3. Themes, Sub-Themes, and Emerging Dimensions.

Themes	Sub-Themes	Dimensions
Conflict	• between faith and sexuality (13) • due to judgements and a lack of external acceptance (14) • due to loneliness and lack of internal acceptance (10)	Public vs. Private Acceptance; Beliefs vs. Practice
Negotiation of identity	• process of affirming or rejecting religion (14) • faith and sexuality are mutually exclusive (11) • faith and sexuality overlap (12)	Beliefs vs. Practice; Fixedness vs. Fluidity in Faith and Sexuality
Identity that transcends faith and sexuality	• conflict between other aspects of identity (8) • identity that transcends religion and sexuality (10)	Fixedness vs. Fluidity in Faith and Sexuality
Desire for a person-centred safe space to navigate the identity conflict	• safety in terms of external and internal acceptance (14) • dialogical (11) • neutral space (14) • affirming my whole identity and not just religion and sexuality (11)	Encapsulates the three dimensions above as a space to explore them

Note. Numbers refer to the prevalence of participants (out of 16) contributing to the respective code. Themes and sub-themes were discovered during the focused coding stage of data analysis. Emerging dimensions refer to dimensions along which participants varied (associated with each theme) and which later formed the basis of the final framework.

Conflict

Participants unanimously experienced conflicts at least once in their lives and these varied in intensity. For example, some felt a conflict so heightened that it led to passive suicidal ideation, whilst for others, the conflict was existent but less impactful as they felt supported by friends or family. This conflict was central to the process of navigating the space between religion and sexuality and demonstrates the aptness of the verb ‘navigate’ as it illustrates a non-linear journey that the participants undertook, and in some cases, is still going. It also outlines the active nature of the discourse in that it relies on the participant to engage in a meaning-finding process.

Conflict between faith and sexuality that was sourced externally typically came from judgements (both perceived and actual) from family, friends, and religious communities which consisted of fellow worshippers, religious leaders, and religious scriptures. Perceived judgements were adopted due to vicarious experiences of actual judgement (Neel, Navbir, Darleen). For example, Viren recollects a situation where a gay man was prevented from attending his father's funeral due to the community and family not accepting his sexuality and its conflicts with religious values and rites to do with death. Some judgements were more explicit with condemnations to "*burn in hell*" (Iram/Sandra) so participants often felt like "*I've had to choose between one or the other*" (Peter) referring to either their faith, or their sexuality. Viren asks: "*How many synagogues, temples, churches, mosques, do we need to knock on for one to finally accept us?*"

On the other hand, Idrees experienced conflict in identity that also arose from judgement, but not from his mosque, rather from secular counselling that he had used to help him navigate his identity. His local imam had in fact been quite welcoming and a source of comfort when he spoke to him, but Idrees' counsellor alluded that religion should not play an important role in a person's life if it suppresses sexuality.

For most participants (particularly those of stronger faith conditioning as observed by family values and expectations to partake in religious observance and institution attendance), judgement became internalised by the participant and remained as latent homonegativity. Idrees explained that despite a personal acceptance of sexuality, there was still some internalised homonegativity due to a heteronormative socialisation. Half of the sample, including Idrees internalised this conflict and tried to live a heteronormative life by marrying or having intimate relationships with members of the opposite sex, and some even had children with them through

heteronormative means. This conflict due to lack of internal acceptance meant that participants navigated the space in isolation as they did not feel the safety to speak to people around them—particularly heightened considering the risk of damage/loss to their heteronormative lives. As Peter described it, navigating away from heteronormative beliefs was like “*a shellfish clamped to a rock. If you try and prise it off, it clings harder, so it took a lot of undoing for me.*”

Negotiation of Identity

The experience of conflict—whether externally imposed through judgment or internally manifested as homonegativity—served as a catalyst for participants' active negotiation of their identities. Table 3 outlines the instances that negotiation of identity occurred over 16 participants. In considering the three sub-themes that arose from that core theme, it is worth noting that participants could not solely be assigned to one of them. Rather, the process of negotiation meant that they fluidly navigated between them. This fluidity and change occurred in three ways: (1) negotiation of identity over time, (2) negotiation of identity across different contexts, and (3) public or private acceptance. These will now be described in more detail.

1. Negotiation of Identity Over Time

Over half the participants had experienced a change in their beliefs about their faith–sexuality relationship. Some of these participants had previously been married to members of the opposite sex and some even had children through heteronormative means. Their views had subsequently changed from faith and sexuality being mutually exclusive, to one that overlapped, or co-existed separately. Participants navigated this change by questioning religious dogma, with some participants criticising the misogyny and patriarchy within religion (Prem, Iram, Chris, Jack).

“I didn’t really like the patriarchal nature of the church, you know ideas about the father and son and so on. I preferred more Buddhist genderless norms of God.” (Adam)

“On a theological level, a big eye-opener was studying feminist theology which was very influential. It gave me a framework through which to reconcile my faith and sexuality.” (Chris)

This questioning typically arose from some form of difficulty in ‘finding their place’ within the religion. It was also specified that *“most religions are all about love”* and thus the contention is with *“people’s opinions and perceptions of what they are reading into scriptures and what they think it means”* (Chris), showing that participants engaged in a personal negotiation of their relationship with faith, God, and scriptures when navigating this fluidity over time.

2. Negotiation of Identity Across Different Contexts

Eleven participants alluded to switching their identities depending on who they were with at any given time. For example, when around people who held homophobic beliefs, participants demonstrated a self-imposed inhibition of their sexuality to safeguard themselves from judgements and worse repercussions. Some of the greatest examples of how this negotiation differed due to social contexts and time came from our older participants who had lived through decades of policy and social changes surrounding non-heterosexuality (Peter, James, Jack, Adam).

“It was almost like I was spiritually infected with some demonic desire [...] I would have to blame the social context in which I grew up in, even more than the church. The church was just spouting what society thought in those days. And I can remember [...] it was very hard to be openly gay [...] I remember somebody at work saying very loudly about the AIDS crisis, and he thought the government should lock up these disgusting people [...]

Most churches who are in any way caring would at least respond to me with concern or care, and pray for me.” (James)

However, in the company of the people they felt safe with, they were comfortable to affirm their sexual identities, and in some cases, had curated the list of people that they felt comfortable to ‘come out’ to, that is to acknowledge and affirm their sexual identity to another person (Iram, Aleena, Navbir, Neel).

3. Public or Private Acceptance

The fluidity in identity negotiation over time and across context—encompassing both religious beliefs and practices as well as sexual beliefs and practices—was rooted in a desire for acceptance from external sources (e.g., family or religious communities) that became internalised. A theme of public and private acceptance then became apparent in that participants negotiated control over their identities instead of being influenced by societal constraints. For example, a choice to ‘come out’ in public acceptance of sexuality in some spaces but not others point to an empowerment of these individuals as they navigate this with fluidity. Participants such as Sandra and Iram stated that they would feel most empowered when affirming beliefs about their sexuality both privately and publicly. However, for those like Idrees and Aleena, they found contentment in only their private acceptance to safeguard themselves from public prejudice.

“For example, in terms of my sexuality, I’ve always known that I’ve been bisexual, but because I’ve always been told that as a Muslim, it’s not okay to like anyone of the same sex, it’s never really been something I’ve discussed openly[...] So, then obviously as I became a teenager [...] I found other forums where you could be bisexual and be OK and be a Muslim at same time but they were a bit too much for me. You were quite openly

kind of accepting your sexuality, and I mean that was too far out in the spectrum and it made me uncomfortable. So for me, I kind of just settled and in the middle place where I was like; you know, I'm gonna hope that God gets it.” (Aleena)

Identity That Transcends Faith and Sexuality

While participants engaged in various strategies to negotiate the relationship between their religious and sexual identities, many ultimately developed frameworks that transcended this binary altogether. These transcendent identity frameworks emerged as participants recognized the limitations of being defined solely through either a religious or sexual lens. The lenses were perceived as socially constructed through societal judgements. Participants expressed a desire to be seen as more than their faith and/or sexuality, rather than through the overlapping lenses of solely these two identities. For example, some participants expressed that there is identity beyond this conflict and referred to gender or ethnic inequalities that they faced (Iram, Andrew, Jack). They also stated that humans can find connections in other ways, such as their culture, history, and ancestor’s stories (Viren).

*“My faith space (place of practising faith) as nature helps me to make sense of my identity. It’s **fluid**, it’s free. It doesn’t hold labels. It keeps me open minded and confident to communicate to every and any aspect of nature—whether its human or inanimate.”*

(Carol; bold added to reflect participant emphasis)

Chris and Carol placed a strong emphasis on being a part of the natural world and ecosystem, which gave them a perspective on how much more there is to the human experience than being categorised into sexuality or faith-related labels. Viren and others shared similar sentiments but used the concept of a ‘genderless soul’ to illustrate how identity transcends beyond labels:

“As I get older, I see my faith or my belief that the soul has no gender. The soul is light, the soul is energy. One of the interesting things about going to a Hindu funeral, is where they say the soul is neither both and nor does it die... Free-spirited is what I would call my sexuality, and that also describes my faith.” (Viren)

“Being gay is not my everything but it is a part of me. Islam is not my everything. I am more than my religion and I am more than my sexuality.” (Neel)

"In the (Sikh) scriptures, it talks about marriage as the union of two souls. It doesn't mention male or female, it just says the union of two souls. But it also does say that sex should only be for pro-creating, and sex should only be between a man and a wife. So it is a bit obscure. So I will say this for me, irrespective of whether the religion says its wrong or it's right or it's not; it's a part of me. God, if there is one, made me, and He loves me. And that's it.” (Navbir)

For some participants therefore, this identity was God-given, and they saw their identity as a manifestation or extension of God's love.

Desire for Person-Centred, Safe Spaces to Navigate Identity Conflict

Participants' development of transcendent identity frameworks highlighted the importance of environments that could accommodate such complex understandings. This recognition manifested in their expressed desire for person-centred, safe spaces where they could explore and navigate identity conflicts without judgment or predetermined outcomes.

As religion was often integral to the family and community system, it was frequently the origin of where participants would (either internally or externally) seek representation, understanding, and/or acceptance of their sexuality. Participants would have liked a religious space that was open to such conversations but often language and social restrictions, as well as

perceptions of prejudice from vicarious circumstances and sermons would prevent them from seeking out such a space.

This sentiment was also shared when participants spoke about accessing secular mental health services. For example, Sandra said: *“I never went to therapy or counselling, nor LGBT counselling—I don’t think they would have understood for a minute how religious I am.”* Other services such as school counsellors, or mental health services were sought after some time of living with the identity conflicts. When offering recommendations to services who deal with the faith–sexuality space, almost all participants expressed that holding a neutral, non-directive space was crucial.

Facilitators should avoid guiding a conversation with personal views (Michael) or *“pushing a particular agenda”* (Adam). The neutrality should create a space that allows the participant to question, negotiate, and explore their conflicts or *‘curiosity’* as Carol explains that some religious experiences hinder this curiosity. Themes of safety and judgement recur here as participants may want to ask questions of their religious communities, but when these are so connected to family and friends, it can deter a person from “taking the risk” (Idrees) and talking about their experiences.

Dialogue was important in that a person may have questions, and the facilitator should do their best to answer those from their respective area of expertise (whether religious or secular), but without judgement so that the person asking the question can guide their own journey. Navbir summarises this hypothetical space by recommending that services should *“go to a humanistic base first. Yes this is a relationship with God, but what’s paramount is working on the relationship with yourself first.”* Similar recommendations were made for both faith-based and sexuality-based services in that faith services needed to be more affirming of the person as a

whole and beyond their sexuality, whilst sexuality-based services must only take on participants if they can be sensitive to culture or intersectionality. For example, Jack uses the example of a ‘woke or cancel culture’ to illustrate how judgements come from all areas of society now. He argues that just as the older generation could be dismissive of gay people, the younger generation can be equally dismissive of anybody who was “*just trying to understand the process and work things out, so if you don’t get it right, you can get judged for your views.*” He points to the importance of dialogical conversation as “*the prejudice of society is just going full circle.*”

Discussion

This study sought to deepen understanding of how individuals navigate the space between their faith and non-heterosexual identities. The findings—grounded in empirical data and further refined through engagement with the existing literature—coalesced into a set of interrelated themes and a novel practice-oriented framework with potential relevance for support contexts. Our findings reveal the complex, fluid, and deeply personal nature of navigating the intersection between religious and sexual identities. Far from representing a fixed or linear process, participants' experiences demonstrate ongoing negotiation across different contexts and throughout their life course. Our analytic process itself mirrored this complexity. Early iterations of the framework relied on more dichotomous language and categorical representations that did not fully capture the fluidity of participants' experiences. For example, initial diagrams resembled Venn models or coaching-style frameworks, implicitly suggesting movement from one position to another. Through iterative discussion, memoing, and supervision, we recognized that such representations risked implying change as a goal. However, participants did not primarily seek identity transformation; rather, they sought safety, validation, and space to hold

complexity. This realisation prompted us to refine the framework to be descriptive and dynamic rather than process-driven or typological.

Importantly, these findings challenge binary understandings of religion and sexuality as mutually exclusive, highlighting instead the agency participants exercise in crafting nuanced relationships with both aspects of their identity. Later framework iterations therefore reflected continua and multiplicity rather than simple categories. The diversity of experiences across faith traditions in our participants further demonstrates the need for approaches that move beyond Western Christian contexts to understand identity navigation in increasingly pluralistic societies. Most critically, participants' expressed desire for person-centred, non-judgmental spaces that affirm their whole personhood has significant implications for how support services might better facilitate this complex navigation process.

The results demonstrate an external and internal conflict that the participants experienced, and a desire to be seen as a holistic person that is more than their religious and sexual identity. The conflict they experienced varied from *“wanting to end my life on two different occasions”* (Navbir), to *“I don’t have a problem with it at all”* (Matthew). Adam stated: *“You’re either clamped on to it or you’re not. There’s no ‘in between’ of those two positions. At some point you have to reassess what **you** really believe and what **you** think is right.”* (Adam; bold added to reflect participant emphasis)

Participants affirmed this intentional negotiation of beliefs in a variety of pragmatic ways as part of their broader desire to create an ethical framework for life (Tedesco, 2017). As participants navigated the space between the two lenses, they engaged in a reflexive adaptation of their beliefs and subsequently manifested these in their practice of religion and/or sexuality.

Our findings of deep conflict in non-heterosexual individuals across diverse faith traditions illustrate the need for a theoretical framework that can help people navigate this complexity. Such a framework could be used as a conversational, therapeutic, or educational tool, although it would require further research and testing in such contexts. In Figure 1, we propose a framework that highlights the nuances of navigating the intersection between faith and sexuality, based on the current research results. This framework involves three dynamic dichotomies: (i) fixedness vs. flexibility in faith and sexuality, (ii) beliefs vs. practice, and (iii) public vs. private acceptance. The framework, titled *Finding the Happy Medium*, aims to explain how individuals navigate the intersection of non-heterosexual and religious identities. While the three dimensions may resemble constructs in existing literature, they largely emerged inductively from our data and operate dynamically in ways not previously theorised. After describing the framework in detail below, we offer several additional considerations regarding the use of identity labels and the provision of safe spaces. We then discuss the practical use of the framework, limitations, and future directions for this work.

Dichotomies of the Proposed Framework

Fixedness vs. Fluidity in Faith and Sexuality

Fluidity vs. fixedness was seen in the belief that variability or changeability in a person's identity or expressions beyond typical norms are acceptable. This dichotomy came from the identified theme of negotiating identity and identity that transcends faith or sexuality (Table 3). It can apply either to faith or sexuality, depicted by the two orthogonal axes in Figure 1. Typically, a participant whose faith is considered fluid may engage in personal negotiation about their beliefs and practices and follow a personal spirituality (Davie, 2015) rather than an orthodox method

which derives key aspects of value systems from an external, higher authority (Hunter, 1992). A person who holds fluid beliefs around sexuality considers it “normal” and acceptable for people to be different from the societal norm of heterosexual, monogamous marriage. For many but not all people, such fluidity in sexuality can also express itself in changes in sexual identity over time and/or in different contexts. For example, someone might have initially self-identified as heterosexual (whether as an act of denial, or genuine exploration) during one period and then navigated to homosexuality (Kuorikoski, 2007; Jack, Michael), or someone might be openly accepting of their non-heterosexuality amongst contexts that they deem safe, but hide it in others (Aleena, Idrees, Iram).

Fixedness regarding *both* faith and sexuality is therefore the absence of fluidity and was expressed with a view that faith and sexuality are mutually exclusive. A fixed view presents as holding traditional views of what religiosity and sexuality look like. All participants moved between fixedness and fluidity at some point in their lives, with some participants negotiating the use of the flexibility according to the contexts that it served them.

Beliefs vs. Practice

The second dichotomy relates to beliefs vs. practice; in other words, to internal beliefs vs. outward behaviours. This dichotomy was seen prominently in the themes of conflict and negotiation of identity (Table 3). Figure 1 shows how the two concepts apply in the context of the four quadrants formed by low vs. high fluidity in faith vs. sexuality respectively. For example, in the current study, when participants still wanted strong faith connections and had fixed beliefs about sexuality (“sexuality *has* to be heterosexual”) combined with fluid beliefs about faith (“faith is personal and there are different ways to practise faith”), they reconciled the intersection with their non-heterosexuality by adopting an acceptance or belief that it was a ‘test

from God'. This narrative of the 'tragic homosexual' was seen in Andersson et al's (2011) study of Episcopalian churches (New York) which explored how heterosexual clergy perceive their encounters with the city's LGBT population. For the participants in the current study (particularly, the Muslim population), accepting this position in their faith–sexuality space was a controlled negotiation of the secular society's demand to accept their sexuality, but without abandoning their faith. In terms of practice or outward behaviour, these individuals may choose to inhibit their sexuality both privately and publicly, highlighting how this dimension affords varying degrees of fixedness and fluidity in relation to faith and sexuality. The following section illustrates how this unfolds in participants' lives.

Public vs. Private Acceptance

The third dichotomy refers to the acceptance by external communities (public) and resolution of internal conflicts (private). This dichotomy arose mostly from the themes of conflict and desire for a person-centred safe space to navigate the identity conflict (Table 3). Figure 1 shows how the four quadrants of flexibility vs. fluidity in faith and sexuality map onto these two aspects. A person could be internally at peace with their sexuality while hiding it from their communities and/or feeling judged or excluded (upper left quadrant of the framework; i.e., high fluidity in sexuality combined with high fixedness in faith). Vice versa, a person could be accepted by their surroundings but still feel inner conflict (lower right quadrant of the framework; i.e., high fluidity in faith combined with high fixedness in sexuality). An interesting example is Iram who identifies as bisexual and chose to marry a man (resulting in higher public acceptance). This empowered her to advocate for LGBTQI+ rights in faith communities because she had enough leverage across both communities to allow herself to be in control of her identity rather than have communities restrict her into a particular category. Iram is one many examples

that illustrate how the three dichotomies can manifest as empowerment in the ways participants negotiate their identities for themselves and for others.

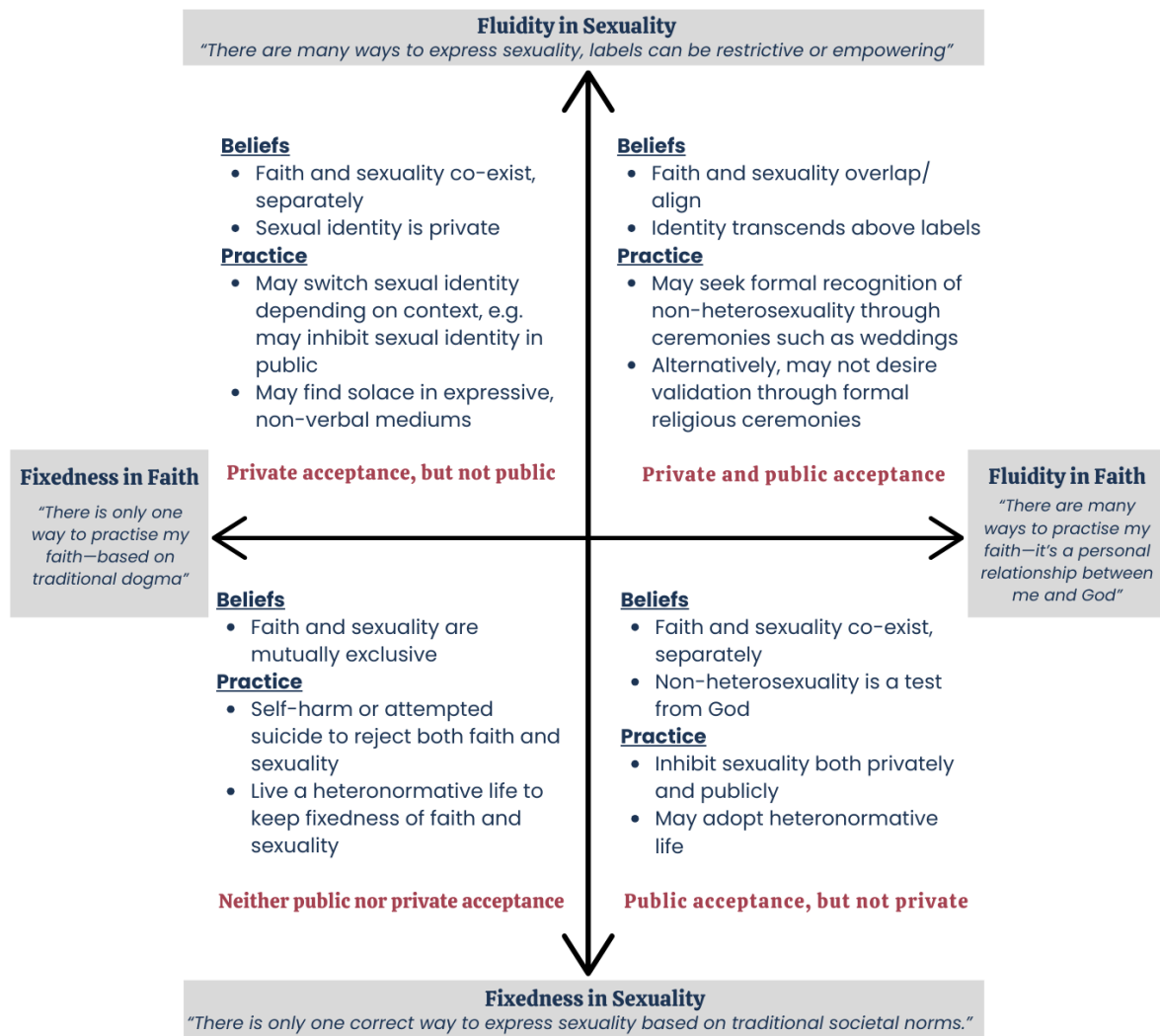


Figure 1. Finding The Happy Medium: A dynamic framework that explains the variety of identity intersections in terms of beliefs and practice for non-heterosexual individuals of faith.

Dynamic Interactions Between the Three Dichotomies

Rather than just operating in parallel or loosely connected, the dichotomies interact dynamically and influence each other. For example, the dimension of fixedness versus fluidity

shapes the belief–practice distinction, as individuals’ ways of holding beliefs and enacting faith and sexuality can vary across contexts. For example, where Aleena, Idrees, and Iram engage in contextual code-switching (i.e., adapting their outward expression of identity across social contexts), they demonstrate fluid beliefs about God’s acceptance of their non-heterosexuality, while outwardly choosing not to reflect their non-heterosexuality. This outward non-disclosure does not reflect a rejection of their sexual identity, but rather a way of practising this aspect of the self in a manner that prioritises safety.

These dimensions can also interact in cascading sequences. For Sandra, Darleen, and Viren, initial movement toward fluidity in understanding their sexual identity (e.g., questioning whether same-sex attraction is inherently sinful) prompted experimentation with religious practices (e.g., attending different places of worship, exploring affirming theology), which gradually shifted the belief–practice alignment. This internal work then created conditions for selective public disclosure—first to trusted friends both in and outside of the religious institution his church, and then also more broadly. However, negative responses to this disclosure pushed Michael back toward more fixed positioning and renewed compartmentalisation between public religious spaces and private queer community. This example illustrates that movement along these dimensions is not unidirectional. Moreover, movement exists in dynamic tension, with shifts in one domain creating ripple effects that can either expand or constrain positioning on others, depending on contextual responses and available resources.

Additional Insights Resulting from the Present Study

Labels

Participants alluded to a difficulty in labelling one’s sexual orientation/identity, demonstrating the importance that language can have in placing pressure on people to

essentialise themselves into socially constructed norms. We saw this in the results with a great desire to be seen as more than these two aspects of their identity. Ewing (2011) found that Pakistani Muslims in her study were less concerned by sex and desire than the modern practice of naming sexualities as the foundation for secular public identities. Many sexual activities were disconnected to sexual identities, and this was an unspoken norm across her sample population. On the contrary, adding language to typically taboo topics can also help LGBTI+ identification to alleviate feelings of isolation and the inability to name their own experiences, and a sense of confusion around identity (Vulakh et al, 2023).

Creating a Person-Centred Safe Space, using Neutral Conversational Tools

The participants in the current study teach us that language limitations do exist in many communities with regards to how people process and understand sexuality. The rich diversity of faith backgrounds that our participants offered helped us to understand this further in the concepts of genderless souls, or nature as places of worship, challenging traditional dogmatic views. Armour (2010, p. 111) studies the use of Confession as a therapeutic way to explore this ‘pathological non-heterosexuality.’ Confession as a faith-based act, allows the person seeking penance to seek forgiveness of God, by speaking through a mesh divider to a clergy member. Only one participant (Idrees) in the current study had a positive experience with ‘confession’ to an imam whilst others sought support primarily in secular services or more neutral spaces before turning to their religious institutions.

This study thus found the need for a safe space for clients to explore their identities in the context of religion and sexuality as opposite to the reductionist views of only the sex acts., Participants cited prayer and dialogue as a key feature of the safe space they desired and some even found that a personal conversation with God was akin to a conversation with a desired

therapist in that there was no judgemental voice returning to them and it was a neutral space (Rajski, 2003; Michael). Dale (2021, p. 478) observes a similar distinction between ‘religious beliefs’ and ‘faith experiences’ in that beliefs are head-based, while “*the faith experience is more intuitive, and centred in the heart.*”

The results therefore demonstrate a significant paradigm shift in the way that participants see the nature of religion in social life today; in the past, identity would have been shaped around religion, while now, people are seeking a religion that explains and fits around their ‘intuitive and heart-centred’ identity. This negotiation was referred to by some participants as a “*born again*” affirmation of their religion, and sometimes this was the same religion in which they were born into but involved in a personally navigated journey into that acceptance (Benson et al., 2018). Mediums to facilitate this negotiation included conversations with a range of people, art, meditation, being in nature, and alludes to a personal ‘spiritual shopping’ experience suggested by Hervieu-Léger (1990). This allowed them to consider the context of both aspects of their identity.

Beckstead and Morrow (2004, p. 651) refer to the polarised ‘choices’ as either “*out-gay*” or “*ex-gay*” which leaves very little room for an affirmation of religious choice. In the context of this study, participants more frequently used language such as ‘*space*’ and ‘*spectrum*’ than terms implying categorical or boxed understandings. Participants acknowledged a desire to have control over the space, as this was the way in which they could ensure their own safety. There appeared to be a sense of an internal dialogue, and participants may have benefitted from being able to share this discussion with an external person who simply listened in a non-judgemental manner (Tosey et al., 2014). All participants then cited the benefits of the current study’s interview as a form of such dialogue:

“First time I've had it (this discussion), so helpful. Really appreciative [...] Even filling in the form today was so interesting. I'm so used to completing heterosexual because it's easier and you don't know who's going to look at it... But being able to openly select the bisexual option was really different and good.” (Aleena)

An important feature of the safe space is the facilitator's ability to create the conditions for personal negotiation and safe questioning—something that participants felt was not easily achievable given the socialisation they received, whereby questioning faith rendered them weak in their beliefs. Four participants felt disconnected with faith because of other (but not disconnected) gender-based issues such as patriarchal systems, a lack of female priests or queer representation in religion (Yip, 2005), or misogynistic interpretation of religion. It is interesting to note that these participants cited malestream religious deliverance as an issue of conflict with sexuality rather than the religion itself (Beecheno, 2021). Subsequently, they had interpreted religious scriptures personally and in a way that was accepting of them as a whole person (Yip & Page, 2014). Any contention of acceptance came from community and patriarchal, man-made traditions rather than a direct issue with God (Avishai et al., 2024). Nearly all participants criticised mainstream interpretations, with some criticism directed at editions of the Bible and prominent religious figures, while references to criticism of God were minimal.

Practical Application of the Framework, Limitations, and Future Research

The person-centred approach that Haldeman (2004) advocates for involves a three-stage process to reconciling the religion–sexuality conflict: assessment, intervention, and integration. It could be argued that the interviews from this study can support the assessment phase. Moreover, to contribute to the intervention phase, our framework could help professionals in both the religious and secular spaces to facilitate neutral conversations. In adopting such a framework, the

autonomy remains centred with the client, while the service provider maintains a safe space in which the individual can feel part of their community without feeling that they must compromise—for example, their core religious convictions.

The framework can be used as a timeline tool that facilitators can draw upon to explore retrospective experiences (Dale, 2021), and it could be applied in psychotherapy or coaching contexts. Language and active listening skills are key components to facilitating a safe space for people to navigate the intersections of their identity. As soon as themes of ‘redemption’ or ‘forgiveness’ enter the space, or when a judgemental tone or poor listening is sensed (Machin, 2010), the space may begin to feel unsafe, and the individual may refrain from continuing the navigation.

Once safety is established, the fixedness and fluidity that one may have about one’s faith and sexuality can be explored and, if needed, operationalised in the context of one’s beliefs, and practices. Fixedness and fluidity in this framework should not be misunderstood as self-conversion therapy; rather we are referring to flexibility of identity expression across both axes.

This sliding scale may still appear restrictive if one were to place oneself, for example, as two separate “x’s” across the perpendicular axes. To move beyond this, the entirety of the quadrant space can be considered, allowing the two scales to be integrated and represented by a single “x,” should a client wish to do so. To operationalise these spaces, we examine how a participant’s acceptance is manifested in their beliefs and practices.

Overall, religion and spirituality can hold personal meaning for non-heterosexual people, as they can “turn inwards for lack of external support” (Haldeman, 2004, p. 694). In doing so, they may create a rich internal framework that alleviates the issues of dissonance with homonegative norms. Engagement with positive psychology and coaching psychology

(Seligman, 2007)—although sexuality remains relatively underexplored within these fields (Ludwig et al., 2026)—may help further develop and apply the framework as a practical tool for supporting individuals in navigating their internal identity processes. In line with this, practitioners could also draw upon a person's religiosity as a potential strength rather than shame (Clarke et al., 2022). The framework could be used in group interventions (Yarhouse & Beckstead, 2011) or on an individual level.

Some participants from the current study negotiated the distinction in beliefs and practices using various mediums such as art, writing, or dance, to help them reach a sense of private acceptance of their identity conflicts. The framework offers language to non-verbal experiences that many religions have been unable to provide outside of the narrative of shame and taboo (Vulakh et al., 2023).

Religious officials—who may be concerned that neutrality is not serving their job role as a directive preacher of religious laws—could note that in adopting neutral conversational tools with this framework, they hold the ability to still use religious discernment whilst being sexuality-affirming. Study participants desired an informative, safe space with religion, which therefore points to a need for transparency rather than neutrality: Neutrality may sometimes cause harm by not challenging internalised stigma or oppressive norms. Gelso and Kanninen (2017) explore five different meanings of effective neutrality in a therapeutic space and ultimately propose that we should maintain the practice as long as it is carried out in the context of empathy, and care. Dale (2021) poses that a client can understand both traditional (Christian) religious frameworks and entertain an alternative spiritual discernment framework with multiple sources of spiritual authority. For example, if a client wishes to affirm their sexual identity publicly, a religious facilitator may feel that this part of the journey carries a conflict of interest.

Hence, referring them to a professional who does not hold that conflict may be more appropriate, whilst still maintaining the safe space through the empathic neutrality posed by Gelso and Kanninen (2017). Pienaar (2016) offers that the transition to non-directivity seeks to foster cooperation instead of autocracy and that religious officials or LGBTQI+ supporters could position themselves in a horizontal structure with the client instead of vertical. This can be achieved through effective training, contracting, and supervision. Overall, it is crucial to question what ‘neutrality’ truly looks like and how it can be achieved in a safe manner for all parties. In some cases, transparency about values or reflexive positioning might be valuable for the process.

Finally, the implications of this framework are extensive and open to further research. This paper has used principles and data from a substantive grounded approach to explain the process of how participants navigated the contentious space between non-heterosexuality and faith, the factors that influence this, and how there are dynamic changes across time and contexts. This enabled us to develop a framework that both describes and explains the process as it unfolds in real time for individuals navigating these experiences. As such, it can account for variation in outcomes, rather than functioning as a discrete typology that categorises individuals at a fixed point in time. This navigation process may, in turn, be facilitated through application of the framework across various contexts, although its potential as a clinical or practice-oriented framework remains to be explored. The benefits of holding a neutral safe space for religious/sexuality matters regardless of your background is cited extensively (Dale, 2021; Vulakh et.al 2023; Clarke et al.2022; Benson et al.2018). The framework should be used in conjunction with training to hold a safe space and is not intended to be directive for the space-holder; rather it is for the person to place themselves on the spectra. The framework offers a

language that is shared by others to give them a place to start their journey (if they wish to do so).

Limitations

The current research used a sample that is reflective of a Western, multicultural society (although majority were cis-male). Future research could investigate whether the research applies in a society where homonegativity is publicly expressed and practiced by law. The research could be criticised for not diving deeper into issues related to trans people (Benson et al. 2018), patriarchy issues (Dale, 2021), or neurodiversity (Arora, 2025) and further research could assess the impact of the framework on these areas too. Furthermore, participants were educated beyond college level and held professional jobs.

A strength of this research is that there is a range of different religions in the sample. However, this also means that different traditions (Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Sikhism, Paganism, Buddhism) have sometimes been grouped into a single narrative. This risks oversimplifying doctrinal, ritual, and institutional differences, as well as overgeneralising findings that may be specific to certain contexts. We acknowledge that there are not enough participants from each religion to make claims for comparisons and/or unique features of each of them. This gives scope for future research to develop insight into these crucial differences.

Conclusion

This research has explored how participants construct frameworks for navigating their intersectional identities across faith and sexuality, as well as their experiences with support services. Our grounded theory approach helped us to keep participants' voices at the centre of the discourse. The findings emphasized the importance of a nuanced approach that allows for a balance between religion and sexuality where previously this may not have been the case. Based

on the research, a framework was proposed to facilitate further conversation: Finding the Happy Medium is a practical framework with the potential to empower professionals and clients in cultivating holistic well-being.

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Appendix A - Interview Agenda Revisions

General Procedure

First, participants were guided through the participant information sheet again. They were reminded to speak comfortably and in detail, to remain open to clarification and paraphrasing, and of their right to withdraw at any time. Participants were also informed that notes might be taken to support accurate data analysis. The session was then recorded, and verbal consent was obtained prior to recording.

Below are guidelines of the conversation content used for the semi-structured interviews. They do not include the formalities and only contain questions, themes and topics that were explored in the interviews.

Revision 1

1. Describe the relationship between your faith and your sexuality?
 - a. How do you practise your religion?
 - b. What conflicts have you had?
 - c. What aligns between your faith and sexuality?
 - d. Where are you not aligned?
 - e. Is there anything missing?
2. How has this space between non-heterosexuality and practise of your faith left you feeling?
3. What resources exist to help with this intersection of faith and sexuality? – (Refer to internal/external conflicts if appropriate for the participant. Do not assume a conflict though- some participants may not experience conflict.)
 - a. What support systems do you know about?
 - b. What would you be happy to access?
 - c. Who would you turn to?
 - d. Who would you like to turn to but can't?
 - e. Tell me how effective you felt that the support was.
 - f. What did you like about it?
 - g. What would you change about it?
4. Tell me your thoughts and feelings about having **this** open discussion?
 - a. What has this discussion done for you?
5. If there was anything you could say to either religious or secular services when supporting people in a similar situation to you; what would it be?
6. Is there anything else you wish to share about this process?

Revision 2

1. On a general level, how would you describe the relationship between faith and sexuality?
 - a. Mutually exclusive? Intersectional? Spectrum?
2. Describe the relationship between your faith and your sexuality?
 - a. How do you practise your religion?
 - b. What conflicts have you had?
 - c. What aligns between your faith and sexuality?
 - d. Where are you not aligned?
 - e. Is there anything missing?
3. How has this space between non-heterosexuality and practise of your faith left you feeling?

4. What resources exist to help with this intersection of faith and sexuality? – (Refer to internal/external conflicts if appropriate for the participant. Do not assume a conflict though- some participants may not experience conflict.)
 - a. What support systems do you know about?
 - b. What mediums did you use to make sense of this internalization?
 - c. What would you be happy to access?
 - d. Who would you turn to?
 - e. Who would you like to turn to but can't?
 - f. Tell me how effective you felt that the support was.
 - g. What did you like about it?
 - h. What would you change about it?
5. Tell me your thoughts and feelings about having **this** open discussion?
 - a. What has this discussion done for you?
6. If there was anything you could say to either religious or secular services when supporting people in a similar situation to you; what would it be?
7. Is there anything else you wish to share about this process?

Revision 3

1. Describe your faith and how you practise it
2. Describe the relationship between your faith and your sexuality – mutually exclusive, intersectional, co-exists separately?
 - a. What conflicts are there?
 - b. What aligns?
 - c. Is anything missing?
3. How has this space between non-heterosexuality and your faith left you feeling?
4. Tell me about any resources that exist to help explore this space between faith and sexuality?
5. If you were talking to either faith based or sexuality based support services- what advice would you want to give them?
6. What has the format and style of this discussion done for you today?
7. Final comments

Appendix B - Analytic Process Documentation

Overview

The analytic process proceeded in eight steps (Table 3 in main manuscript), largely completed by the first author. All steps are described in detail below. Although described sequentially, the analytic steps were iterative and involved ongoing back-and-forth across stages.

Step 1: Data Familiarisation and Preparation

What was done:

- Conducted 16 semi-structured interviews with participants
- Interviews ranged from 30-75 minutes
- All interviews were audio-recorded and auto-transcribed using MS Teams
- The first author read all transcripts multiple times to gain familiarity with the data
- Timeline: March 2022 – August 2022
- Outputs at this stage:
 - Evolving interview transcripts: Please see *Appendix B* for revisions of the Interview Agenda
 - Initial reflective notes on emerging patterns or surprises
- Example reflective note: *"There's an internal-external conflict but finding it difficult to place NB and IJ because they both play different roles depending on their social environment. E.g. NB - it's not safe for him to externally accept both, so for him, internal acceptance suffices. For IJ – she doesn't want to pick fights and war between people without reason, so she is also happy with an internal acceptance."*

Step 2: Initial Open Coding

What was done:

- Coded transcripts line-by-line or segment-by-segment using Nvivo
- Stayed close to participants' language and meanings
- Generated codes inductively without applying pre-existing theoretical frameworks
- Each transcript was coded independently before supervision discussion with Julia Papworth
- Timeline: March 2022–July 2022
- Number of initial codes generated: Approximately 60 codes
- The coding approach used for this step was *open coding*. This included descriptive codes (i.e., “what’s happening here”), in-vivo codes (i.e., using participants’ own words when particularly insightful), and process codes that capture actions (i.e., when participants negotiate, hide, reframe, argue, accept etc.)
- Example coding from one transcript segment:

Transcript excerpt:

"It's, you know, to have that sense of belonging where we can still understand each other's faith and spirituality because there's similarities, but they also will see. There's also no difference. But we are also connected through our sexuality, but we are also connected through our South Asian-ness, our history, our ancestors' stories."

Initial codes applied:

identity that transcends faith and sexuality; belonging; acceptance; alignment; faith and sexuality overlap; faith and sexuality co-exist

Step 3: Memo Writing

What was done:

- Wrote memos and reflective supervision journals throughout coding to capture emerging thoughts, questions, and connections
- Memos ranged from brief notes to extended reflections
- Used memos to question our assumptions and consider alternative interpretations
- Timeline: Ongoing throughout Steps 2–5
- Example for an early memo:

- Memo Date: 3rd March 2022
- Topic: 1st few interviews complete, supervision discussion
- Content: *With NB - you found that he used art to become okay internally before they spoke out loud about it. There was a process of using mediums (whether google, or art) to experience/overcome this internalisation process. You then formulate this into a question to ask other participants. For example – ‘what did you use to make sense of this internalisation process? Were there any mediums you turned to try and understand this internalisation?’*
- *Another theme that was found was a sense of social loneliness. That is, not lonely within themselves, but rejected by social crowd. All participants looked for like-minded people on the internet, which was grounded in a perceived lack of acceptance from others in real life. For XY, regardless of finding other people on the internet, conflict had always remained with faith and sexuality because for her they had internalised as mutually exclusive. For the three participants so far, they weren’t mutually exclusive, they could co-exist; their conflict was between the social interpretation of religion and their sexuality.”*
- Questions raised:
 - Is there a difference in the internalised and externalised processes then?
 - How do we draw the line between them?
 - Do the following codes emerge:
 - *Internalised acceptance of faith but not sexuality*
 - *Internal non-acceptance of faith related to sexuality (PM)*
 - *Internally acceptance of both but not external (AK/IJ)*
 - *External non-acceptance of faith related to sexuality (AM)*

Step 4: Focused Coding and Categorisation

What was done:

- The coding approach was *focussed coding* with the aim of forming categories.
- Initial codes from Step 2 were sought in subsequent interviews and compared across cases. Their frequencies were also noted, as codes that occurred more often were considered potentially more relevant for identifying common themes.
- Similar initial codes were grouped into broader categories (Table S1)
- In addition, themes and sub-themes evident across multiple categories were identified and noted, alongside initial reflections on possible dimensions of the emerging framework (Table S2)
- Supervision meetings with Julia Papworth to discuss emerging categories and reach consensus
- Some initial codes were merged, renamed, or discarded as less significant
- Timeline: May 2022–July 2022
- Process:
 - Handwrote all codes on small post-it notes and organised them physically into groups
 - Named each group based on what unified the codes within it
 - Tested categories by returning to raw data to ensure fit

Table S1. From Open Coding to Focused Coding

Initial Codes	Focussed Codes/ Categories	Rationale
Avoiding places of worship; selective disclosure; compartmentalising; conflict between other aspects of identity; conflict between sexuality and religion	Managing visibility in religious spaces; safety	These codes relate to how participants manage who knows what about their identity in different contexts.
Judgement from queer communities; judgement from religious communities; self-exclusion from queer communities; self-exclusion from religious communities; loneliness; lack of internal acceptance	Exclusion	These codes relate to how participants feel regarding proximity to other members of their identity communities.
Acceptance and empathy from external places; acceptance and empathy with regard to internal conflicts	Safety	These codes relate to how participants regard their risk levels in relation to their identity.
Perceived feeling of non-acceptance; supportive	Role of community—specifically friends and family	These codes relate to how participants' family and friends experience the participants' identity and contribute to their understanding of it.
Perceived feeling of exclusion from others; internal conflict of seeking social support	Loneliness	These codes relate to how participants feel emotionally on the basis of being perceived to be excluded and thus not knowing who they can talk to and where they can go for support.
Beliefs; misogyny; practices; process of affirming or rejecting religion; separation of beliefs and practice; spiritual rather than dogmatic beliefs	Relationship with faith	These codes relate to how participants experience 'beliefs.'
Personal interpretations of God; personal interpretation of scriptural understanding; secular/academic understanding; personal relationship with God	Relationship with God	These codes relate to how participants experience their understanding of God.
Faith encourages sexuality; separation of being non-heterosexual and the practice of non-heterosexuality	Relationship with sexuality	These codes relate to how participants experience their sexual identity.
Academia (feminist lenses); art; writing; dance; books; community; online forums or internet; personal questions; personal stories from other people; prayer; religious scriptures	Sources of support, mediums to help explore, navigate	These codes relate to how participants sought support to help them navigate any conflict or hardships with their faith and sexuality identity.
Insecure identity; self-loathing identity; conflict between other aspects of identity; identity that transcends faith and sexuality	Dynamic identity	These codes relate to how participants felt they could negotiate and adapt their identities.
(Absence of) queer representation in religion; co-exist separately; fluid and depends on context (code-switching); mutually exclusive; overlapped, process of alignment; self-imposed inhibition of faith; self-imposed inhibition of sexuality; spectrum	Faith–sexuality relationship is dynamic	These codes relate to how participants varied in their understandings of the relationship between faith and sexuality, both through personal beliefs and practices.
Absence of resources or knowledge of them; better knowledge and training for leaders; group or community based; creates further questions; dialogical; empathy stemming from service providers' own personal experiences; faith-affirming; individual-based (affirming	(Lack of) skills in current service providers—both faith-based and secular (sexuality-based)	These codes relate to how participants experienced support from service providers when they wanted a place to explore the relationship between their faith and sexual identity.

person as a whole identity); neutral; prayer; therapeutic or trauma/informed; sexuality-affirming

Table S2. From Focused Codes to Emerging Dimensions

Focused Codes/ Categories	Themes	Emerging Dimensions
Managing visibility in religious spaces; safety	Conflict	Public vs. private Acceptance; Beliefs vs. Practice
Exclusion		
Safety		
Role of community – specifically friends and family		
Loneliness	Negotiation of identity	Beliefs vs Practice; Fixedness vs. Fluidity in Faith and Sexuality
Relationship with faith		
Relationship with God		
Relationship with sexuality	Negotiation of identity; Identity that transcends faith and sexuality (<i>two themes</i>)	Beliefs vs. Practice; Fixedness vs. Fluidity in Faith and Sexuality
Sources of support, mediums to help explore, navigate		
Dynamic identity	Identity that transcends faith and sexuality	Fixedness vs. Fluidity in Faith and Sexuality
Faith–sexuality relationship is dynamic		
(Lack of) skills in current service providers--both faith-based and secular (sexuality-based)	Desire for a person-centred safe space to navigate the identity conflict	Encapsulates the 3 dimensions above as a space to explore them

Note. The focused codes/categories presented in this supplementary table reflect an earlier analytic stage than the sub-themes reported in the main manuscript (Table 3). Although there is conceptual overlap, sub-themes emerged through subsequent iterative refinement of themes, involving revisiting and re-integrating focused codes to ensure alignment between codes, themes, and the developing analytic framework.

Step 5: Constant Comparison Across Cases

What was done:

- Used constant comparison method: comparing codes within and across transcripts
- Systematically compared how different participants experienced each category
- Looked for variation, similarities, and negative cases
- This further informed the emerging dimensions
- Asked: "Why does Participant A navigate this differently from Participant B?"
- Identified initial dimensions along which participants varied (e.g., public–private navigation)
- Timeline: March 2022–August 2022

Example comparisons between participants are shown in Table S3. Insight from this comparison: "People aren't just 'out' or 'closeted'—they're making different choices about disclosure in different relationships. This suggests a continuum rather than a binary. Also noticed that disclosure decisions about sexuality don't necessarily mirror disclosure about faith. These might be separate dimensions."

Table S3. Example Comparisons for the Theme ‘Negotiation of Identities’

Questions Explored	Participant AK	Participant IS	Participant IT
Who knows about sexuality	Only close friends	Only friends and family that participant is comfortable sharing with—mostly outside of synagogue	Family and select friends; local imam also knows
Who knows about faith	Everyone (often assumed due to visible marker—hijab)	Everyone	Everyone
Strategy described	Separation of two identities	Full integration on a private level; safety is key in order to extend this to a public level integration	Selective integration
Resulting outcome	Lack of public acceptance which is satisfactory because private acceptance is more important to the participant. AK believes themselves to be more than these labels.	“I don’t think for a second, they (LGBTQ charities) realise how much religion means to me”—full alignment on a private level meaning they have accepted both parts of their identity and their relationship to one another.	Fear of judgment from both sides, but most important people know. Public acceptance but some private contention.

Step 6: Engagement with Existing Literature

What was done:

- After initial codes, categories and initial dimensions were identified, a more systematic engagement with the existing literature took place. The coding approach used for this step was *theoretical coding*, with the aim of clarifying and refining emerging dimensions of the framework. Themes were analysed and cross-referenced using the findings in literature, interview notes, and memos to find relationships between them.
- Searched for scholarship on: religious identity negotiation, LGBTQ+ identity development, minority stress, identity compartmentalisation
- Used literature as "sensitizing concepts" to refine our understanding
 - Some examples (full reference list provided in main manuscript): Andersson et al. 2011; Armour, 2010; Avishai, 2020; Beecheno, 2021; Clarke et al.1989; Crenshaw, 1998; Fuist, 2016; Haldeman, 2004
- Noted where our data confirmed, extended, or contradicted existing frameworks
- Timeline: May 2022–August 2022

What we found:

- Existing literature discusses public vs. private identity management BUT primarily in contexts of stigma management, not/much less as an active negotiation strategy
- Literature on belief vs. practice distinction exists in sociology of religion BUT does not seem to have been applied to sexual minority populations navigating religious contexts
- Identity fluidity vs. fixedness appears in queer theory BUT not integrated with religious identity literature

How this influenced our analysis:

- Validated that we were seeing patterns others had identified
- Helped us articulate our dimensions more clearly
- Revealed that the *combination* and *interaction* of these dimensions was novel
- Allowed us to position our contribution as synthesis and extension

Step 7: Theoretical Integration and Framework Development

What was done:

- Identified that three key dimensions captured the variation in our data (further clarified from the initial dimensions identified in Step 5)
- Drew diagrams and visual frameworks to represent how dimensions related to each other
- Tested the framework by returning to transcripts: Could we locate each participant on these dimensions?
- Refined the framework through supervision meetings with Julia Papworth
- Table S4 shows notes on all framework iterations.
- Timeline: July–August 2022
- Analytic questions that were asked:
 - What are the core dimensions along which participants vary?
 - Are these dimensions independent or related?
 - Can we map all participants onto this framework?
 - What does this framework help us understand or predict?

Step 8: Final Write-Up and Presentation

What was done:

- Selected exemplar quotes that best illustrated each dimension
- Organised findings around the three-dimension framework, in collaboration with co-author Vera U. Ludwig
- Acknowledged the abductive nature of our analysis (moving between data and theory), in response to reviewer comments
- Positioned the contribution as integrating inductive and deductive analysis informed by grounded theory principles. Developed a novel practice-oriented framework grounded in the data and refined through engagement with existing literature. The resulting framework remains to be empirically tested in support contexts.
- Timeline: August 2022–February 2026

Table S4. Framework Iterations.

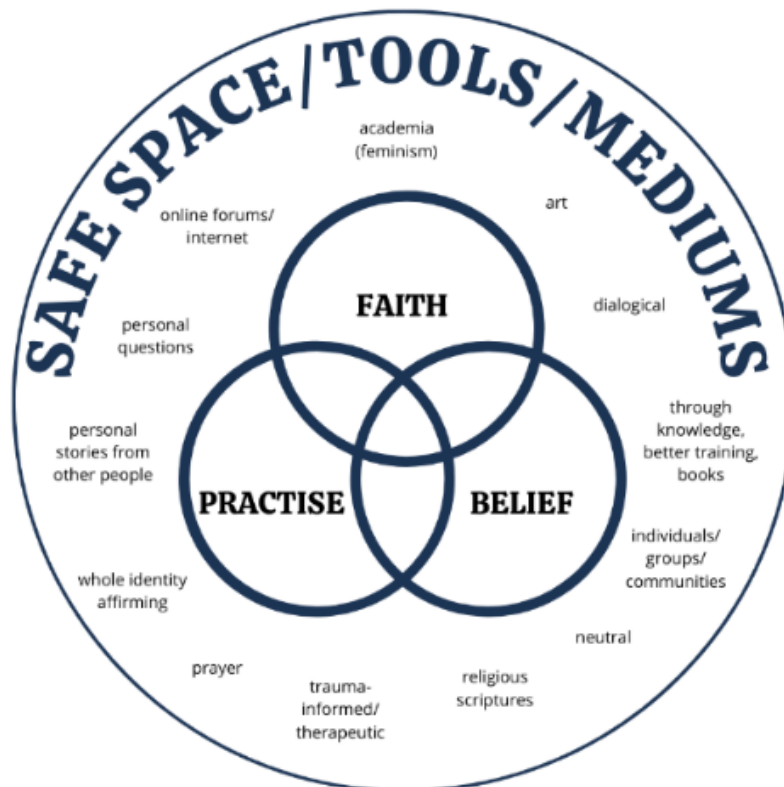
Iteration #	Notes and Details
1	Initially conceived as a Venn diagram looking at the intersection of faith, beliefs, and practice—in the hope that how sexuality is regarded and practised would fall into one of the intersections for the participant. The problem is that this centres religion as the foundation into which sexuality must fit. This does not suit all participants. Can the integration in the middle be named? Is alignment desirable for everyone? What if a person does not want to sacrifice their faith and holds strong beliefs that non-heterosexuality is wrong despite the acceptance of their own identity internally? That is, they may accept that they are gay but choose not to act on it because they see it as a test from God (participant IS). Therefore, is the middle intersection a <u>personal</u> alignment as opposed to a public one? The issue is: Is ‘alignment’ even desirable? Who is defining ‘alignment’? (see Appendix E)
2	Slight amendments to iteration 1 by adding an additional circle outside this framework to represent the need for safety to even start discussing these dimensions. The phrases around the Venn intersections were the different mediums used to navigate the space. In the initial theory development phase, the focus was more on what the participants did, rather than the core themes that underpinned this—This manifested as the dichotomies later.
	Iterations 1 and 2 were initially conceived as more of a typology with discrete categories that people had to fit into. This was rejected because participants did not fit neatly into types, and it ignored important nuances about how they practised faith and sexuality. It also did not account for how people moved between positions.
3	Started to shift form as we needed to illustrate a paradigm shift away from religion-centred discourse to a person-centred framework. The first dichotomies/continua to illustrate the participant experiences started to take form. These were external and internal conflict; personal interpretation of faith, scriptures, and God; identity that transcends faith and sexuality; knowledge and training of community leaders.
4, 5, 6, 7	Further memos and framework developments looked at the language used. The theme of ‘conflict’ was broken down, and there was uncertainty on whether that word was suitable—not all participants related to this concept. Identity that transcends faith and sexuality seemed to be an important theme for many participants. The word ‘negotiation’ was established to replace ‘interpretations,’ as it is more dynamic and ‘person-centred,’ and it is a closer reflection of what participants did. This eventually took us to iteration 7, whereby identity is seen on a spectrum of how rigid or fluid someone is (see Appendix E).
8, 9	Developed into spectra with descriptive quadrants to ensure there is space for important nuances regarding beliefs and practices of both sexuality and faith. It was decided that these should not be omitted.
10	The penultimate framework was conceptualized with three continuous dimensions along which individuals position themselves dynamically: • Public–Private Acceptance (relating to disclosure and visibility) • Belief–Practice Alignment (internal conviction vs. external participation) • Identity Fluidity–Fixedness (understanding of self as stable vs. evolving; acceptance that various forms of sexuality exist and are acceptable) The name ‘Finding The Happy Medium:’ Participant AK used the phrase “finding the happy medium” when describing how they balance being bisexual with being Muslim. When reviewing other transcripts, we realised that many participants were describing this same search for balance or middle ground; neither a full integration nor a full separation, but something in between that keeps their sense of agency. ‘Finding the Happy Medium’ is not about choosing one identity over another; it’s about negotiating livable positions on multiple dimensions simultaneously. This ‘happy medium’ isn’t a fixed point but an ongoing process.
Final adopted version	The ideas were further discussed and refined in collaboration with co-author Vera U. Ludwig. There was a return to the language of ‘rigidity’ and ‘fluidity’ to see if it applied to all participants’ beliefs about faith and sexuality. As the structure of the paper took form, the logic of the framework crystallized in the final version into three dichotomies (as described in the manuscript):

-
- Fixedness vs. Fluidity in Faith and Sexuality
 - Beliefs vs. Practice
 - Public vs Private Acceptance
-

Appendix C - Framework Iteration Examples

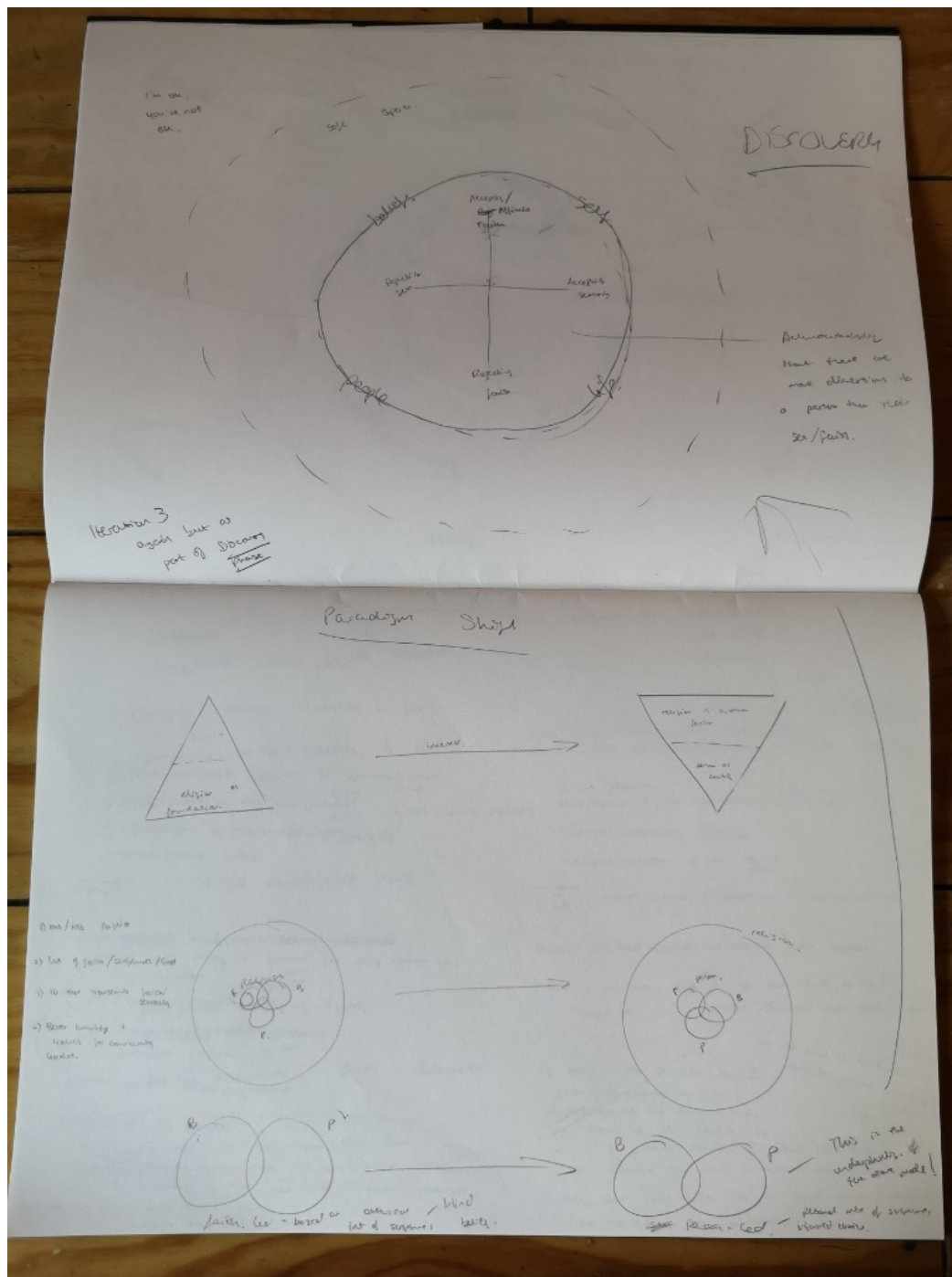
The following presents examples (computer-drawn or hand-drawn) of framework iterations created by the first author throughout the analytic process, prior to the emergence of the final framework (see Table S5 for additional notes on the different iterations).

Iteration 1



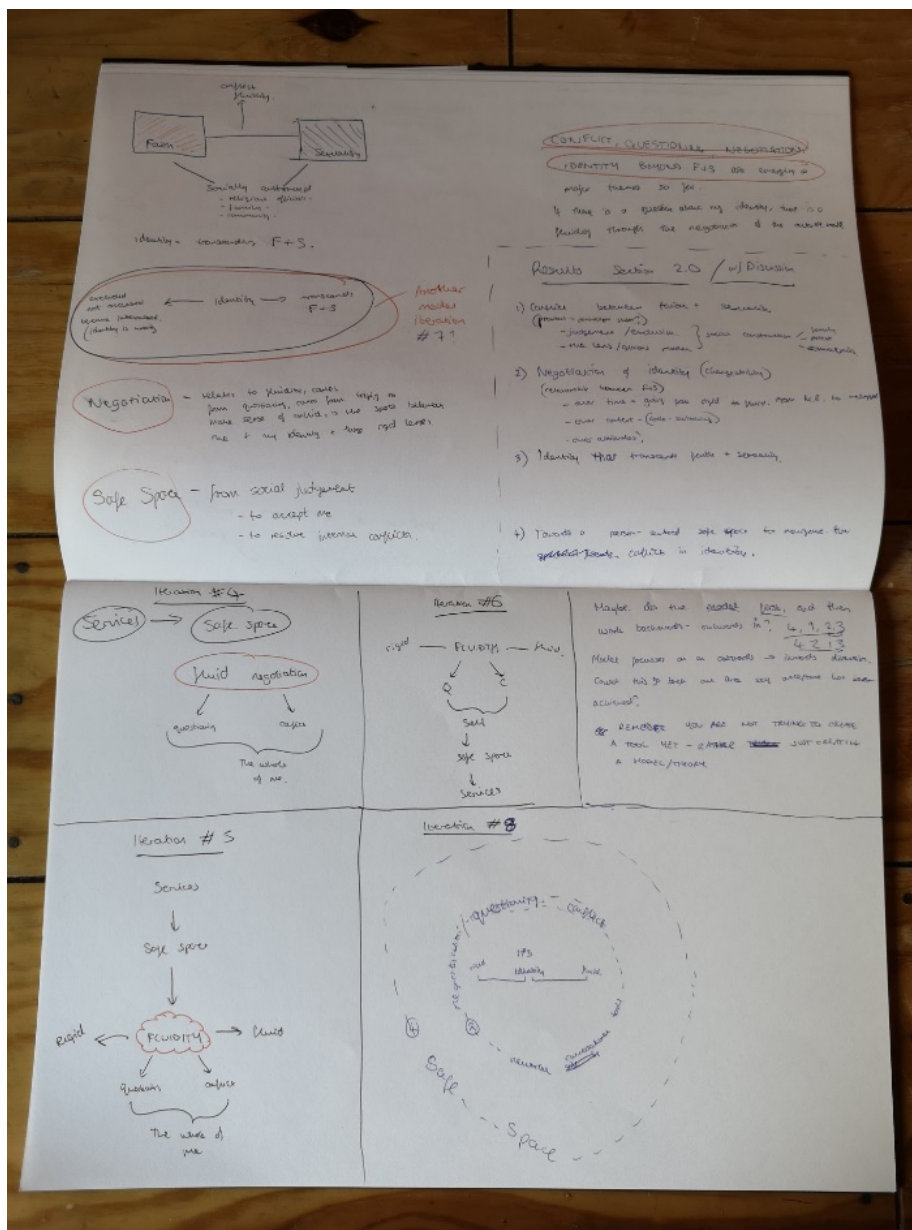
Note. Venn diagram to explore how the faith is held, belief is understood, and sexuality is practised against the context of non-heterosexuality. This however, centers religion over sexuality and was rejected.

Iteration 3



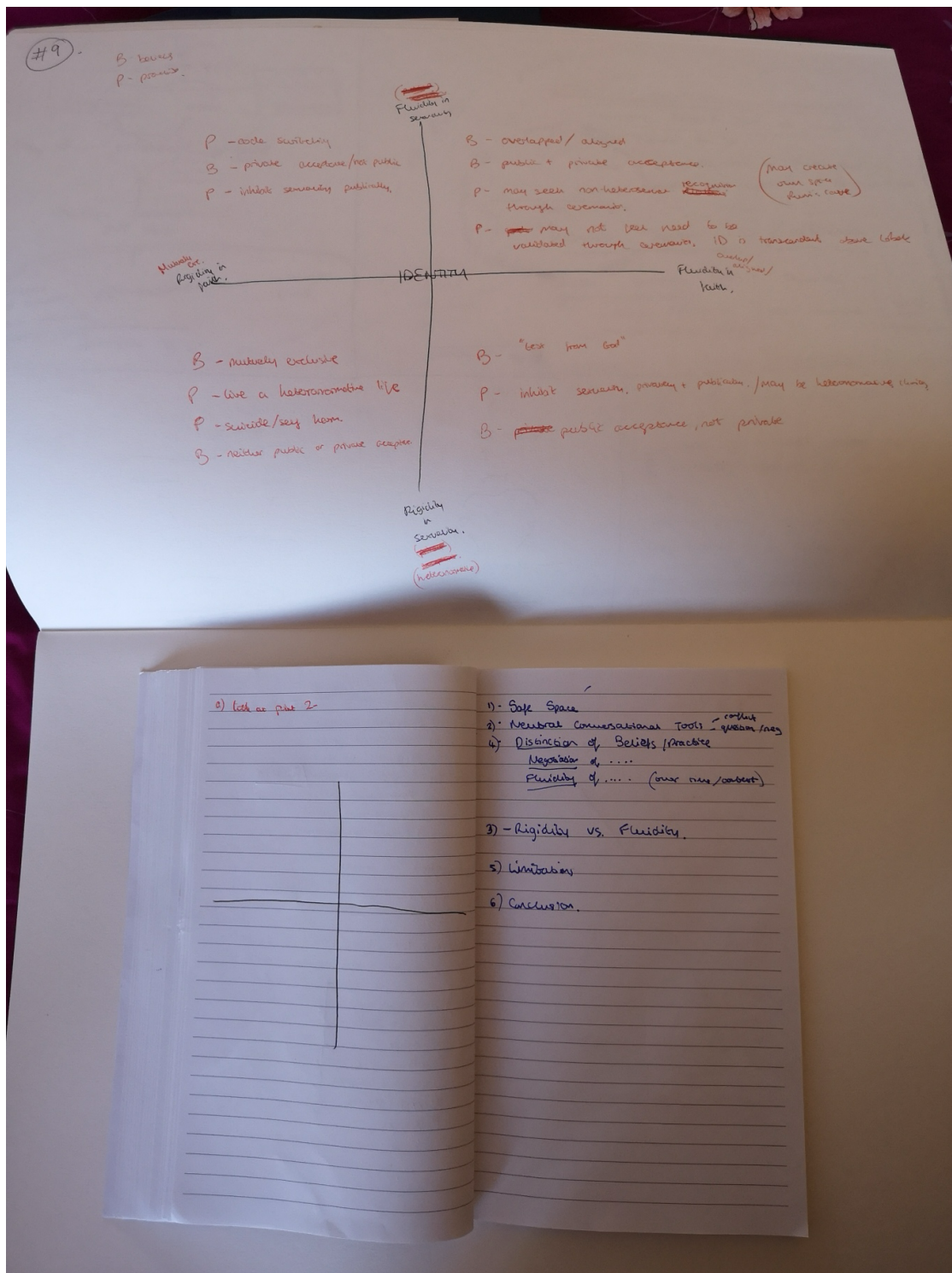
Note. To understand this shift in foundation from religion to the whole person, we identified the participants' key experiences. This process began to give shape to our initial dichotomies as coding approached the end of the focused stage.

Iterations 4, 5, 6, and 7



Note. Here we revised continua and spectra at the word level to determine what fit most appropriately.

Iteration 9



Note. Spectra with descriptive quadrants which allowed us to make space for important nuances about beliefs and practices.