



# Religion, Youth and Sexuality

Selected Key Findings from a Multi-faith Exploration

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## Religion, Youth and Sexuality: Selected Key Findings from a Multi-faith Exploration

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## Executive Summary

1. This report presents selected key findings from an AHRC/ESRC-funded project entitled Religion, Youth and Sexuality: A Multi-faith Exploration, undertaken between January 2009 and February 2011. The research team are committed to data dissemination within academic and non-academic user communities. This report is written primarily with non-academic users in mind. Academic outputs have been planned for the near future, including a book provisionally titled *Religious and Sexual Journeys: A Multi-faith Exploration of Young Believers* (Yip, Keenan and Page, Forthcoming). Up-to-date information about the project is available at [www.nottingham.ac.uk/sociology/rys](http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/sociology/rys).

2. The research set out to explore the lives and identities of religious young adults, aged between 18 and 25. Specifically, it studied the sexual and religious values, attitudes, experiences and identities of young adults from different religious traditions, namely Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism. The research also investigated the significant factors (for example family, social and cultural expectations, religious institution) that inform their decision-making in these areas, and the diverse ways they managed their religious faith and sexuality. In addition, the research also aimed to examine these young adults' experiences of living in British society; and how they understood and managed their gender identity in relation to their religious faith.

3. The research consisted of three stages: (i) An online questionnaire was completed by 693 participants between May 2009 and June 2010; (ii) 61 participants of diverse religious faiths and sexual orientations were interviewed individually between November 2009 and June 2010; (iii) 24 participants respectively recorded a video diary over a period of approximately seven days between February and November 2010.

4. 455 (65.7%) participants were female, 237 (34.2%) were male, and one participant was transgendered. Further, 57.1% of participants were Christian, 16.6% Muslim, 7.5% Jewish, 6.8% Hindu, 4.5% Buddhist, 3.8% Sikh and 3.7% identified with more than one religious tradition. In terms of sexuality, 74.3% were heterosexual, 10% were lesbian, gay or homosexual and 7.5% were bisexual.

5. 64.9% of participants self-identified as white, followed by those who self-defined as Indian (11.3%) and Pakistani (5.8%). 82.4% of participants were British citizens. With reference to participants' geographic location, 83.8% lived in England, 7.6% in Scotland, 3.2% in Wales and 1.7% in Northern Ireland.

6. The majority of participants (65.8%) were single; 3.3% were married and 0.3% were in a civil partnership. Further, 25.4% were in an unmarried heterosexual relationship and 4.2% were in an unregistered same-sex relationship.

72.4% of the sample were students, 20.2% were employed and 4.6% were unemployed. In terms of highest academic qualification, the majority of the sample (60.3%) had achieved A-level qualifications, 25.4% had a degree, and 6.3% had a postgraduate qualification.

7. The participants held different meanings regarding their religious faith. These meanings were not mutually exclusive. Many considered being religious as having a belief in, and a relationship with, a personal God or a divine power. To them, this belief and relationship gave strength and meaning to life. In addition, some participants considered religious faith as a form of personalised spirituality and philosophy for life that promoted self-improvement and enlightenment.

8. The participants acknowledged the significant social dimension of religious faith which not only illuminated their personal lives, but also helped foster interpersonal and community connections. Some participants also emphasised the sense of ethnic and cultural belonging that their religious identification offered. However, some participants separated personal spirituality from institutional religiosity, considering institutional religion a social control mechanism that excessively regulated gender and sexual behaviour.

9. Almost half (48.2%)<sup>1</sup> of the participants considered themselves 'liberal'/'very liberal', and a quarter of them (25.1%) considered themselves 'conservative'/'very conservative'. In terms of religious participation, the majority of the participants (65.1%) were involved in a religious community in one way or another and just over half of the participants (56.7%) attended a public religious gathering at least once a week.

10. While the majority of participants used a particular label to identify their sexual orientation, some deliberately questioned the usefulness and accuracy of such labelling. On the whole, the participants were less reflective and articulate about their sexualities compared to their religious faiths, particularly heterosexual participants.

11. Fewer than half of the participants (43.1%) were sexually active. Further, 12.9% of the participants engaged in casual sex. Just over a quarter of participants who were single (28.7%) were sexually active. Further, 36% of participants in partnered but unmarried heterosexual relationships were not sexually active, perhaps reflecting their commitment to the religious ideal of 'sex within marriage only'.

12. Most participants thought that the expression of one's sexuality was desirable, and 29.9% thought that celibacy was fulfilling. While many participants thought that consenting adults should be allowed to express their sexualities, opinions varied on the ways in which they should do so, with some participants believing that consenting adults should be able to express their sexualities however they wished, while others believed sexual expression should be limited to marriage or a committed relationship.

1. Questions in the questionnaire attracted variable numbers of responses. The percentages presented in this report were calculated using the valid responses to each question, excluding 'missing cases' and 'not applicable' responses.

13. The participants were almost equally split on the idea that sex should only occur within marriage, suggesting that some religious young adults had moved from 'sex in marriage' as the ideal to 'meaningful or committed sexual expression' as the ideal (but in diverse relational contexts). In addition, monogamy within a partnered relationship was highly valued.

14. About one-third of the participants (31.6%) believed that heterosexuality should be the only expression of human sexuality, and a bigger proportion (52.4%) thought that it should be the ideal for human sexuality. 58.1% of the participants were committed to treating heterosexuality and homosexuality on equal terms.

15. Just over half of the participants (54.8%) thought that their religions were positive towards sexuality issues. However, there was also a significant proportion who viewed fairly negatively the knowledge base of priests or religious leaders in relation to sexuality, particularly matters pertaining to youth sexuality. For lesbian, gay and bisexual participants, while some had successfully reconciled their sexuality to their religious faith, some reported the psychological and social costs of 'coming out' and managing their sexual and religious identities.

16. Religious faith was by far the most important source of information for the participants' sexual values/attitudes and sexual practices. Religious texts, parents/caregivers, friends, the internet and the media also played a role in this respect, but less significantly. Only around 1% of the participants considered religious leaders the most important source of influence.

17. Further, in terms of sexual practices in comparison to sexual values/attitudes, the significance of the role of friends and the internet/the media increased, and the role of religious faith, religious texts and parent/caregivers decreased. This is likely due to the fact that friends and the internet/media were perceived to be the safer and more supportive sources to address the specific issues of how to practise one's sexuality.

18. The participants' experiences in connecting their religious faith and sexuality were diverse. There are three primary manifestations: (i) tension and conflict due to difficulty in managing these two dimensions; (ii) compartmentalisation of these two dimensions in order to minimise tension and conflict; and (iii) accommodation and harmonious acceptance of these two dimensions.

19. The participants identified a variety of challenges for them as young religious adults in secular society. These included: stigmatisation of religion, sexualised culture, drinking culture and consumer society. However the majority (67.4%) did not believe that being religious made their everyday life more difficult.

20. The majority of participants (68.5%) believed that religious people were stigmatised in Britain. 35.3% thought that it was difficult to talk about their religious faith with non-believers. Further, some felt that references to religion in society often took the form of jokes or gross generalisations.

21. The majority of participants (76.1%) believed there was too much focus on sex in mainstream society. Particularly, they considered sexualised culture and the prevalence of sexual promiscuity significant issues for religious young adults.

22. The majority of participants (63.4%) believed that their religions upheld gender equality in principle. However, some expressed concern that this was not the case in reality, with, for example, perceived gender inequality being evidenced at places of worship.

23. A high number of participants (73.2%) agreed with women being involved in religious leadership. This was particularly important for young women who saw women in leadership as role models.

24. Religious faith was considered the main factor influencing how the participants lived their lives as women or men. Some participants acknowledged that there were discrepant expectations for women and men particularly in the context of relationships and raising children. However, 65.6% of women and 68.1% of men disagreed that women should have primary responsibility for raising children. To them, it should be a shared responsibility.

25. Religious young adults can benefit from hearing the stories of their contemporaries to understand the wide range of experiences and negotiations in their religious and sexual lives. This knowledge could offer help in integrating religious faith and sexuality more successfully. Engagement with mainstream society may also encourage understanding and respect between non-religious and religious young adults.

26. Young religious adults desire an increased openness to discussions of faith and sexuality within their religions. Religious leaders and professionals should be open to such discussions, willing to reflect on young adults' interactions with secular culture and to engage with secular youth workers and health professionals to find ways of providing support for religious young adults.

27. Training of practitioners working with young adults in secular contexts needs to recognise the role and importance of religious faith in some young adults' lives. More collaboration is also needed between religious leaders and professionals who work with young adults in secular contexts, in order to formulate policy and practice that provides consistent advice and guidance.

## Section 1: Setting Out the Context

Sex and religion are generally considered uncomfortable bedfellows. Western culture is often perceived as being increasingly secular and sexualised and religions are often perceived as sex-negative (or at least sex-constraining), with heterosexual marriage being the only appropriate context for sex. Existing research also suggests a gulf between these areas. Research on religious young adults tends to sideline sexuality, ignoring the prominent place sexual desire has in their lives. On the other hand, although social research on sexuality is growing, the role of religion is grossly under-developed.

The little research that examines the intersection of religion and sex(uality) often focuses on a single religion, and a particular sexual orientation (e.g. Kugle, 2010; Wilcox, 2003), or a specific practice (e.g. pre-marital heterosexual sex). Against this backdrop, our research aims to fill some of these gaps by taking a multi-faith approach and exploring a variety of sexual orientations.

### Research aims

The research set out to explore the lives and identities of religious young adults, aged between 18 and 25. Specifically, it studied the sexual and religious values, attitudes, experiences and identities of young adults from different religious traditions, namely Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism. The research also investigated the significant factors (for example family, social and cultural expectations, religious institution) that inform their decision-making in these areas, and the diverse ways they managed their religious faith and sexuality. In addition, the research also aimed to examine these young adults' experiences of living in British society and how they understood and managed their gender identity in relation to their religious faith.

### Research methods and participant recruitment

The research consisted of three distinct stages. All the participants took part in Stage 1. Some participants were then selected to take part in Stages 2 and 3.

1. An online questionnaire was hosted on [www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com) from May 2009 until June 2010. The questionnaire, with 38 questions, explored various aspects of the participants' lives and opinions based on the above-mentioned research aims. 693 religious young adults completed the questionnaire.

2. Sixty-one participants of diverse religious faiths and sexual orientations were interviewed between November 2009 and June 2010 in order to explore in greater depth their views and experiences, including those expressed in the questionnaire. The interviews, undertaken across the UK, lasted around an hour and a half.

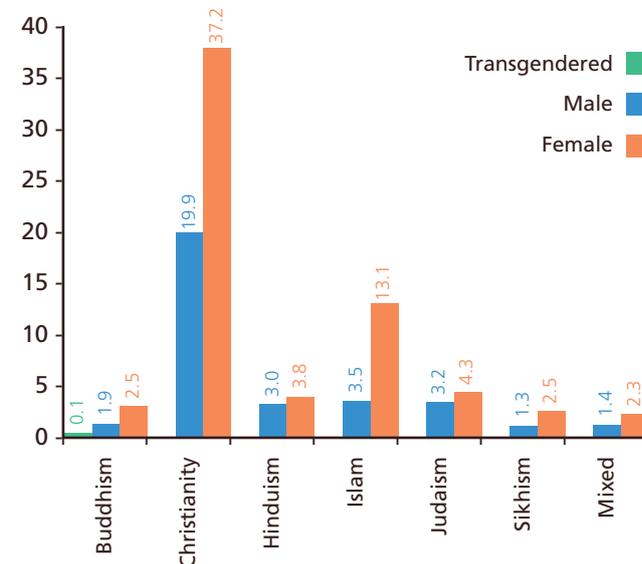
3. A further 24 participants were selected to record a video diary over a period of approximately seven days. The participants were asked to reflect on moments, events and experiences that they felt were significant in relation to their sexual and religious lives. This method, undertaken between February 2010 and November 2010, was deliberately designed to be participant-led.

The participants were recruited in diverse ways. Primarily, the research team sent publicity posters, postcards and e-mails to a wide variety of groups such as those working with religious young adults, sexual health organisations, support groups for sexual minorities, cultural associations and university religious and non-religious student groups. The team also used various personal networks and asked participants to refer others to the project. A website and a Facebook page were also established to publicise the project. Further, advertisements were placed in printed and online media.

### Introducing the participants

Out of the 693 participants who completed the questionnaire, 455 (65.7%) were women, 237 (34.2%) were men, and one participant was transgendered. Similarly, across the religions the majority of participants were female, as Figure 1 shows.

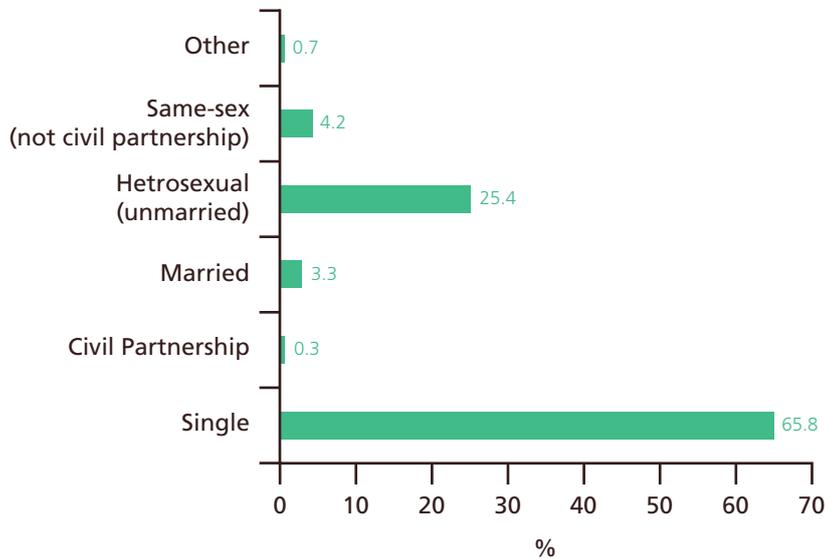
**Figure 1: Percentages of participants in terms of gender and religion**



In terms of sexual orientation, the majority of participants (74.3%) identified themselves as 'heterosexual', followed by 'lesbian'/'gay'/'homosexual' (10%) and 'bisexual' (7.5%). Further, 5.9% of participants had made a specific decision not to define their sexuality. Other identifications included 'asexual', 'queer' and 'bicurious'.

In terms of ethnicity, the majority of participants were white (64.9%), followed by Indian (11.3%), Pakistani (5.8%) and mixed (4.5%). In addition, 82.4% were British citizens. The majority of participants (65.8%) were single, while the others were in various relationship types, as can be seen in Figure 2.

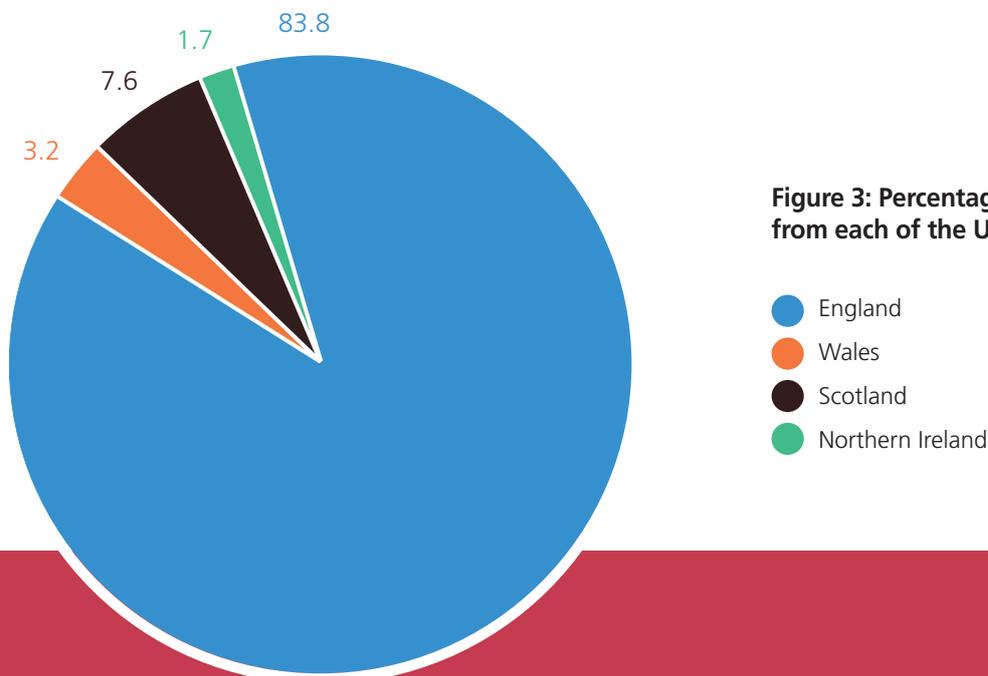
**Figure 2: Participants' relationship statuses**



In terms of their highest academic qualification, 60.3% had achieved A-levels, 25.4% had a degree, and 6.3% had a postgraduate qualification. Further, 72.4% of the sample were students, 20.2% were employed and 4.6% were unemployed.

The profiles presented in this sub-section illustrate the diverse nature of the participants who took part in the study. The report will now go on to explore in more detail how the participants live their lives as religious young adults and manage the various challenges that inform their religious and sexual lives.

Finally, 83.8% of the participants lived in England with 20.8% from the Greater London area. Figure 3 illustrates the participants' locations by nation within the UK.



**Figure 3: Percentage of participants from each of the UK nations**

- England
- Wales
- Scotland
- Northern Ireland

## Section 2: Key Findings

### Section 2.1: Understanding Religious Faith

Research has demonstrated that the religious landscape of contemporary society is becoming increasingly diverse and complex (e.g. Hunt, 2005; McGuire, 2008). Therefore, it is important that we do not make simplistic assumptions about particular religious individuals or groups. Rather, we should develop a nuanced understanding of how individuals perceive and live their religious faith under specific circumstances. With this in mind, this section explores the diverse understandings the participants held about their religious faiths and their involvement in religious communities.

#### Diverse meanings of religious faith

The meaning of religious faith was diverse among the participants, both within and across the religions our study covered. These meanings, which were not mutually exclusive, covered the personal, institutional, and social dimensions of religion. Many participants constructed a faith focused on a belief in, and a relationship with, a personal God or a divine power. This belief and relationship played a significant role in giving them both meaning and strength, as Angela, a bisexual Christian, explained, *'I think the best thing is that... God is always with me and He would always help me out with everything so I am never alone'*.

For participants of non-theistic religious faith, such as Buddhists, the concept of a personal God was less relevant. In fact, some of them felt that 'religion' was an inaccurate term to be applied to Buddhism, which they perceived as a philosophy for life. Nonetheless, they considered their belief in, and practice of, spirituality crucial because the exploration generates various theological, spiritual, and philosophical resources for self-improvement and enlightenment. Robert, a gay male Buddhist, informed us, *'The mindfulness that you develop in meditation is observing [life] as a non-judgmental watcher... and that's key to how you develop the wisdom to deal with your daily life and everything'*.

Religious faith and spirituality, however, were much more than simply a personal and internal belief and practice. Participants were quick to point out that religious faith and spirituality had a significant social dimension. Ajeet, a heterosexual Sikh man, explained how his religious faith had encouraged him to be involved in his community, *'I'd give all my importance to religion... [Some of the work I have done at the community level, charity work, I've only really looked into it because of what Sikhism teaches me'*.

Religious faith, as Ajeet pointed out, is more than a belief; it is also action-oriented, illuminating both the participants' personal lives and the connections they fostered with others.

Some participants also emphasised the ethnic and cultural dimension of their religious faith. Typically, these were participants who did not feel they had much affiliation with religious institutions, but recognised the sense of belonging that their religious identification offered culturally, as Erica, a Jewish lesbian, explained, *'For me my Judaism is being proud of who I am... Being religious for me is much more cultural and spiritual rather than religious'*.

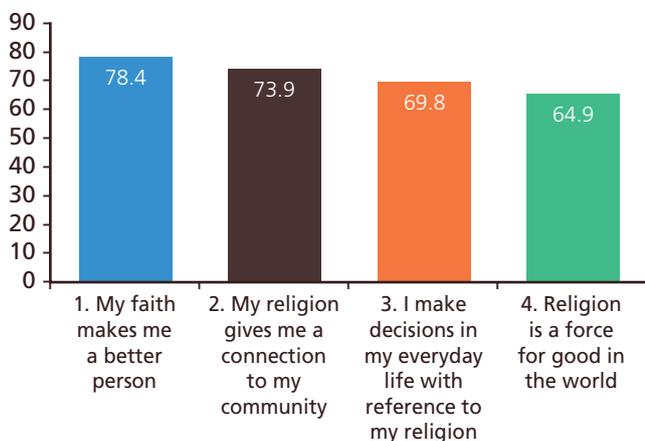
In the same vein, Rashida, a heterosexual Muslim woman who described herself as 'quite westernised' in some ways, talked about the significance of her religious and ethnic community, and their inextricable link, in various video diary entries. Below is an account of the cultural aspect.



Today I was discussing with my friend my plans on the weekend, and we were discussing how there are some South Asian melas on. That means like funfairs, and there is one on Saturday and one on Sunday. I want to take my mum along and my niece and nephew and sister. I really like Asian melas and to be honest in the area I live in, it is predominantly a white area and I don't really mix with Asians because a lot of my Asian friends live in [town]. I like going to melas particularly in a different city where you get to see other Asians. The particular thing with seeing other Asians is that I like the outfits they wear; I am someone who tends to wear Western clothes out of the house but at home I wear more Asian clothes. Going to a mela will give me the opportunity to wear some Asian clothes.

Building on the story so far, the figure below further illustrates the value of religious faith to the participants on personal, interpersonal and social levels.

**Figure 4: Percentage of participants who 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' with statements about their religious faith**



As Figure 4 clearly shows, a high proportion of the religious young adults we studied acknowledged the significance and importance of religious faith not only as a personal moral and ethical compass, but also as a social cement that fostered community belonging and cohesion. Further, they believed it was capable of making themselves and the world better.

However, some participants did not perceive their religious faith in a positive light. Although they identified with a religious label, they drew a line of demarcation between personal spirituality (which was perceived to be self-directed and reflexive) and institutional religiosity (which emphasised compliance and adherence). Going even further, some participants considered such institutional religiosity a social control mechanism that excessively regulated behaviour, particularly gender and sexual behaviour. Emily, a heterosexual Christian woman, related this view to us:

*'Religious... It sort of feels a bit of a dirty word to be honest... That's my instinct. And for me when I think about it I get a kind of bit constricted in my chest almost. Kind of lots of rules and sets of beliefs that you have to sort of sign up to... That's not being spiritual, on your own or going off on your own'.*

## Religious position and involvement in religious community

In terms of religious position on the liberal-conservative spectrum, 48.2% of the participants considered themselves 'liberal'/'very liberal'. Across religious categories, mixed-faith participants were most likely to define themselves as such (86.9% of them did so), and Muslim participants were least likely to do so (36.4%). On the other hand, a quarter of the participants (25.1%) considered themselves 'conservative'/'very conservative'.

In terms of religious participation, the majority of the participants (65.1%) were involved in a religious community in one way or another, with the highest percentages among Christians (74.5%), followed by Jews (71.2%) and Buddhists (70%). The lowest levels of involvement were found among mixed-faith participants (26.9%). In addition, over half of the participants (56.7%) attended a public religious gathering at least once a week. Below are two contrasting views about involvement in the religious community, illustrating its double-edged nature:

*'I always enjoy going to the temple; you meet people... You don't get to see everyone every day and it's [in] events when you get to see them... So definitely there is a strong community bond to it as well'.*

Ranjit, heterosexual Hindu man

*'I think that institutional religion makes everything really black and white and rigid... [But] human beings are not rigid, so trying to impose a rigid system on something that is changeable doesn't make sense to me... I don't need to go to an institutional place of faith to feel validated'.*

Rashpal, lesbian mixed-faith woman

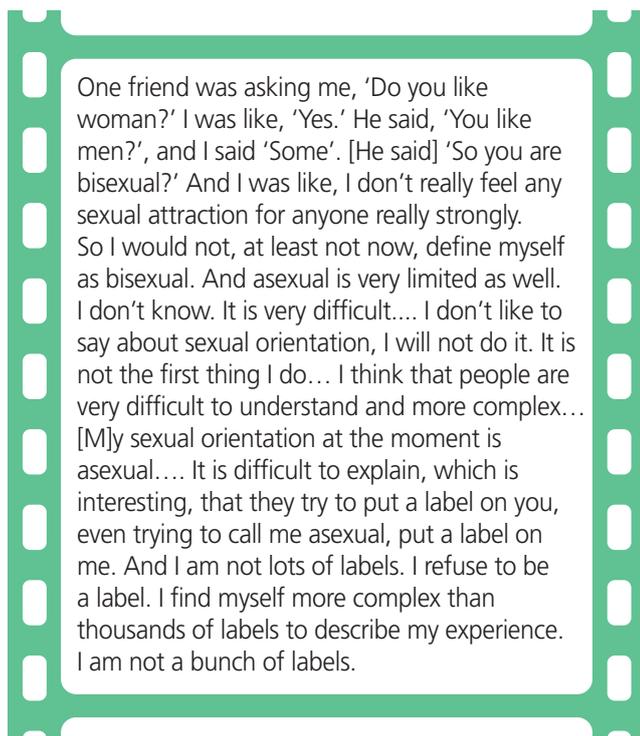


## Section 2.2: Understanding Sexuality and Relationships

It is generally assumed that young adulthood is characterised by experimentation, exploration and change, which is part and parcel of the intensive process of constructing an emerging ‘inner voice’ that helps build the foundation of an identity (e.g. Thomson, 2009). In this process, sexuality often assumes a prominent role as young adults gain deeper understandings of themselves as well as interpersonal connections. This prominence is partly due to the increasing sexualisation and prevalence of the media in contemporary culture, particularly youth culture. In this section, we shall turn the spotlight on the participants’ understandings and practices of sexuality.

### Sexual orientation

In Section 1, we have already shown the participants’ sexual identifications. It is interesting to note that, while the majority of participants used a particular label to identify their sexual orientation, some deliberately questioned the usefulness and accuracy of such labelling. Ricardo, a Buddhist man who reluctantly considered himself ‘asexual’, expressed his frustration in this respect in multiple video diary entries.



On the whole, while the participants were articulate about the diverse meanings of their religious faith, they were less reflective about what their sexuality meant to them, particularly the heterosexual participants.

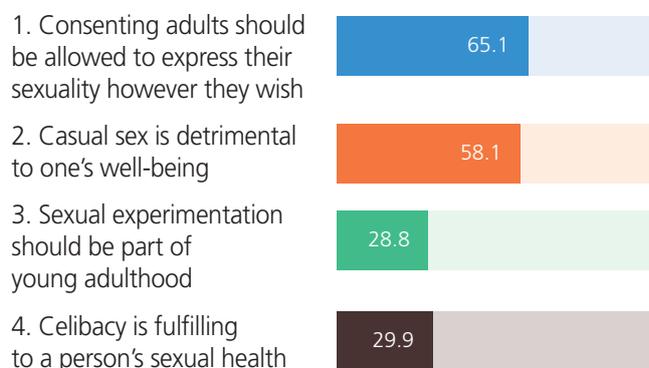
This could be partly explained by the relatively unproblematic nature of heterosexuality within an affirming religious space, unlike homosexuality which has generated, and continues to generate, much debate and contention (see Browne et al., 2010, for an exploration of homosexuality within diverse religious/spiritual traditions). However, despite their less contentious sexual orientation, heterosexual young adults also needed to grapple with various challenges in connecting their sexuality to their religious faith, as we shall discuss in Section 2.3.

### Sexual behaviour and attitudes

In terms of sexual behaviour, fewer than half of the participants (43.1%) were sexually active, with Buddhists being the most likely to be active (76.7%) and Muslims the least likely (19.8%). Further, 12.9% of the participants engaged in casual sex.

Among participants who were single, 28.7% of them were sexually active and 13.4% engaged in casual sex. On the other hand, 36% of participants in partnered but unmarried heterosexual relationships were not sexually active, perhaps reflecting their commitment to the religious ideal of ‘sex within marriage only’. The figure below further illustrates the participants’ sexual attitudes and values.

**Figure 5: Percentages of participants who ‘strongly agreed’ or ‘agreed’ with statements about celibacy, sexual experimentation and consent**



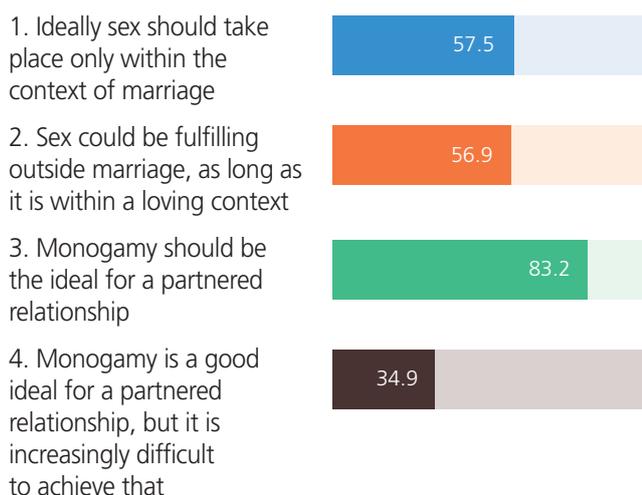
The figure above demonstrates a general picture. As only 29.9% of the participants strongly agreed or agreed that celibacy was fulfilling, we can conclude that celibacy was seen to be a choice for those with a specific calling or commitment. Contrary to the popular view that sexual experimentation is a crucial part of young adulthood, only 28.8% of the participants agreed with this perception. Further, just over half of the participants thought that casual sex was detrimental to their well-being. Responses to statement 1 also suggest that consenting adults ought to have the freedom to express their sexuality in their chosen ways.

For many participants, mutual consent ought to be complemented with the intimacy which came with a relationship, rather than a brief encounter. Lindsay, a Christian-Buddhist believer who preferred not to define her sexual orientation, argued this point, *'I don't think it [casual sex] is desirable because... I think sex is something intimate and should be with a person that you really love... It should just be in a loving, consensual relationship because that is the most healthy way'*.

Lindsay's emphasis on sex within the context of love and intimacy is reiterated by Marcus, a heterosexual man who described himself as Christian-Muslim, *'Me and my fiancée we are not married... We live together, and obviously we do have sexual relations... [W]e think that even though the religion says that you shouldn't [have sex] before marriage, we are more than married, and so as long as we are happy with each other and we are not forcing on each other'*.

### Marriage and monogamy

**Figure 6: Percentages of participants who 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' with statements about marriage and monogamy**



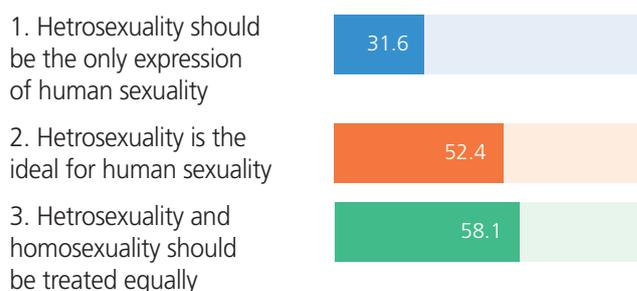
The responses to the first two statements in Figure 6 show the participants views on the issue of the 'sex within marriage only' norm that many institutional religions teach. While 57.5% argued that sex should ideally take place only in the context of marriage, 56.9% also acknowledged that sex could be fulfilling outside of marriage as long as it was within a loving context, suggesting that some of these religious young adults have moved from 'sex in marriage' to 'meaningful or committed sexual expression' (in diverse relational contexts) as the ideal.

Responses to statements 3 and 4 show that monogamy within a partnered relationship was highly valued, notwithstanding the challenges in contemporary culture that militated against it. The importance of monogamy was well illustrated by Jai, a heterosexual Hindu man: *'Marriage is an ultimate form of commitment you know, like if you're going to take that step towards marriage you should be loyal to your partner in every way'*.

### Sexual diversity and difference

Academic research and public opinion surveys generally show that the level of acceptance of sexual diversity and difference are informed by various significant factors such as gender, religion, and age. In general, women, non-religious people and the younger generation demonstrate a higher level of acceptance compared to men, religious people and the older generation. (e.g. Balkin et al., 2009; Gerhards, 2010). Figure 7 shows the overall view of our participants.

**Figure 7: Percentages of participants who 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' with statements about diversity and difference**



Only 31.6% of the participants agreed that heterosexuality should be the only expression of human sexuality. However, a bigger proportion (52.4%) thought that it should be the ideal for human sexuality. The commitment to equality accorded to heterosexuality and homosexuality, fairly well-established in British law, was shared by just over half of the participants (58.1%).

A similar picture can be constructed among heterosexual participants specifically; 39.2% agreed with statement 1, 61.8% agreed with statement 2, and 51.3% agreed with statement 3. Thus, there is a general perception across the overall sample and specifically the heterosexual participants – that while the majority acknowledged the existence of other sexualities other than heterosexuality, heterosexuality largely remained the ideal. In addition, although the majority supported equality between heterosexuality and homosexuality, the proportion was not overwhelming.

This lukewarm support for sexual equality is typified by the view expressed by Fahima, a heterosexual Muslim woman:

*'I have nothing against people who are gay or lesbians, I feel they've made a wrong choice, but I don't have anything against them, because even in Islam we acknowledge that people can be gay or lesbian, but we say it's haram [forbidden]... A lot of people who are gay and bisexual usually end up growing out of it... In Islam it's something that you should reject'.*

Some heterosexual participants, however, did not share the views expressed by Fahima. While they acknowledged the official line generally taken by the authority structures of their religions, they chose to disagree, not only in perception, but also in action, as Dharam, a heterosexual Sikh man explained, *'[B]eing gay it's something that is not really discussed in the Sikh faith... But then [homosexuality] does exist and why would it not be right?... Mainstream wise I think there is a lot of work that needs to be done around the Sikh faith, around that kind of topic and I'm involved in the LGBT Sikhs organisation and I know the guy that runs it and made a few posters just to kind of raise the awareness'.*

Similarly, some heterosexual participants respected the democratic right of personal choice, with the principle that 'one shouldn't judge', as Jai, a heterosexual Hindu man explained, *'I don't know if it's right or wrong actually, but it's an individual's prerogative as to what they decide, and as long as they are happy with what they're doing and they don't bother me'.*



## Section 2.3: Connecting Faith and Sexuality

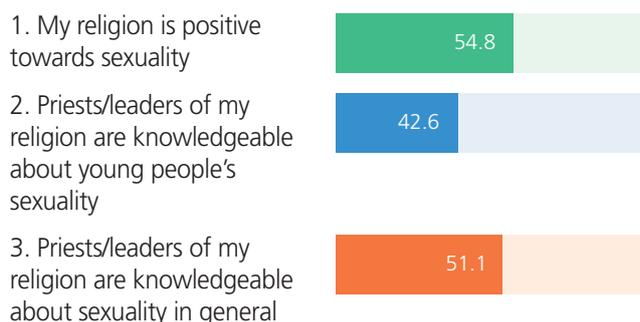
Having explored the participants' diverse understandings and experiences of their religious faith and sexuality, we now turn to their various experiences in the attempts to connect their religious and sexual identities. Research has consistently shown that the outcome of this attempt can significantly affect one's psychological, spiritual and social well-being, regardless of sexual orientation (e.g. Freitas, 2008; Gross and Yip, 2010). This section will illuminate the participants' perceptions and experiences in navigating this challenging terrain.

### Perceptions of the sexuality-faith connection and priests/religious leaders

Much research has demonstrated that sexuality is indeed a contentious and often inadequately addressed issue within particularly Abrahamic religious communities (e.g. Browne et al., 2010; Regnerus, 2007). Yet, in an increasingly sexualised contemporary culture, particularly among young people, sexuality is a dominant issue that they need to address in their attempts to construct their identities, trying to establish a firm footing in a fast-paced and increasingly media-dominated society (e.g. Johansson, 2007).

In principle, religious community could be a 'moral community' that provides advice, guidance and support to young adults as they attempt to find a firm footing and clear direction in their journeys of sexuality and spirituality. Therefore, religious leaders and professionals could have a potentially significant role to play in this process. However, our findings generally do not show a promising picture in this respect, as Figure 8 demonstrates.

**Figure 8: Percentages of participants who 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' with statements about sexuality in relation to religious faith and religious leaders**



On the whole, just over half of the participants thought that their religions were positive towards sexuality issues (statement 1). Across religions, Buddhists were most likely to express this sentiment, with 75.9% of them strongly agreeing or agreeing with this statement. On the other hand, Hindus (45.9%) and Sikhs (21.7%) were least likely to do so. While a small majority of the participants considered their priests or religious leaders knowledgeable about sexuality in general, fewer than half thought that was the case in relation to young people's sexuality specifically.

The perceived general lack of knowledge about sexuality is also reflected in the area of sexual diversity and difference. Only 38.9% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that 'My religion understands the issues lesbian, gay and bisexual people face,' and 56.3% thought that their religion was against any form of sexuality other than heterosexuality. While some lesbian, gay and bisexual participants had successfully reconciled their sexuality to their religious faith, familiar narratives about the social costs of 'coming out', such as the following, were also highly evident:

*'So I guess telling my parents maybe I will feel very relieved, but if it did get out into the community it will just hurt my parents, and I know it will be hard for me to face the community again, maybe I'll be thrown from the mosque... [I]t is quite scary'.*

Jamil, bisexual Muslim man

*'I don't feel that people need to know [about her sexual orientation].... I think I have got to a place where I am quite comfortable in my parish in [her hometown] and I don't really want to rock the boat too much there, because occasionally it can be quite hostile towards people because there was [woman's name] and she had got divorced and she actually had to stop [church activity] for a while'.*

Saira, queer Christian woman

## Sources of sexual knowledge

Table 1 illustrates the sources from which participants drew influence regarding their sexual values/attitudes and practices.

**Table 1: Sources of influence for participants' sexual values/attitudes and sexual practices**

| Participants who ranked the following sources 'most important' | Sexual Values/ Attitudes | Sexual Practices |
|--|--------------------------|------------------|
|  | %                        | %                |
| Religious faith  | 46.0                     | 43.1             |
| Religious texts  | 11.5                     | 10.4             |
| Parents/caregivers   | 15.8                     | 9.4              |
| Friends  | 14.0                     | 16.0             |
| Internet/printed and electronic media                          | 4.3                      | 10.2             |
| Religious leaders  | 1.1                      | 1.0              |

As the above table clearly shows, religious faith - denoting one's moral and ethical compass derived from one's religious beliefs - is by far the most important source of information for the participants. Indeed 69.9% of the participants agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that 'My religious faith is significant in shaping my attitude towards sex and sexuality', and 63.3% for the statement 'My religious faith is significant in shaping my sexual practices'.

Besides religious faith, religious texts, parents/caregivers, friends, internet and the media also play a role in this respect, but less significantly. Only around 1% of the participants considered religious leaders the most important source of influence. It is also noteworthy that, in terms of sexual practices in comparison to sexual values/attitudes, the significance of the role of friends and the internet/the media increases, and the role of religious faith, religious texts and parent/caregivers decreases. This is likely due to the fact that friends and the internet/media were perceived to be the safer and more supportive sources to address the specific issues of how to practise one's sexuality.

## Managing sexuality and religious faith

Our research has shown that religious young adults' experiences in connecting their religious faith and sexuality are diverse. Here, we shall highlight three manifestations: (i) tension and conflict; (ii) compartmentalisation; and (iii) accommodation.

The first manifestation is represented by tension and conflict, where the participants were painfully aware of the gap between the dominant sexual norms perpetuated in

their religious communities and the choices they made in this respect. This is clearly demonstrated in the life of Jodie, an Orthodox Jewish bisexual woman. She tried strenuously to reduce the tension experienced between her religious faith and her bisexuality. She spoke about this at length in the interview. She also talked about this struggle in multiple video diary entries. These entries, recorded over a week, have been organised as follows to enhance continuity and illustrate the prominence of such struggle in her life.

I am bisexual, and my decision [is] that I want to actively try to limit myself to dating only men because I can't see myself living a long-term relationship with a woman because of my community and my religion..... I started having a relationship with a girl, and then at some point during the relationship I admitted to myself that I was gay. [But] I didn't feel comfortable being Orthodox Jewish and gay, in that I don't want to live in a fringe community. So my choices were: leave Orthodoxy and embrace myself as gay, and in that relationship in which I was very happy; or break off the relationship and embrace my Orthodoxy..... I couldn't leave Orthodox Judaism. That was my home, my people, where I feel comfortable. I was willing to give up a good relationship [for that]..... [Referring to her current heterosexual relationship where the partner self-identified as Jewish and gay] I am more attracted to girls and he is more attracted to boys, so how do we really know that we are interested in each other? It is a difficult call so we decided to be physical in our relationship and it sort of opened the floodgates..... [Initially] I had clear limits. I would go so far as kissing and perhaps some feeling, exploration, but I draw the line at mutual masturbation and any sort of penetrative, oral or anal sex because I have a religious objection to unnecessary ejaculation; ejaculation that won't lead to pregnancy..... [But] in the past week there has definitely been some oral sex and ejaculation and that is a bit confusing to me and I presume it is confusing him in the same way... Emotionally I feel great about that because it means that I can keep doing what comes naturally without having to feel stressed about it. But mentally I am a bit worried about that. One of the things I have really held on to is that my inner morals match a Jewish ethic; that I can rely on my inner compass. Clearly that is not working out for me.

The second manifestation is characterised by the deliberate separation of sexuality and religious faith at least in some contexts of life, with the primary aim to reduce the potential of tension and conflict. In this regards, Isma, a heterosexual Muslim woman, said, *'Everyone has desires. I don't particularly listen to mine... sex before marriage or engaging in sexual activity before marriage is completely unlawful so you have to try and avoid that... you avoid people who you like, people who you have lust with or crushes, or whatever you like'*.

Similarly, Stephen, a gay male Christian argued, *'When I go back home to [country] I sometimes try to play it straight, just try to pass myself off. I don't do a good job, but yeah, my friends never asked any questions [about his sexual orientation]. I don't really think they want to know... I suppose in some ways [I'm] also frightened... It made me feel like I didn't quite fit, which I'd been feeling for quite a while within that congregation'*.

The final manifestation is accommodation, where the participants, often after much struggle, had arrived at a stage where their religious faith and sexuality existed harmoniously, and were mutually-enriching. This kind of harmonious co-existence could also be facilitated by the participants' perception of their religion as sexuality-affirming and sex-positive at the onset. The narrative below illustrates the importance of this achievement.

*Yeah, I mean obviously I couldn't be part of a religion that didn't accept me; me being I suppose in a sexual sense bisexual. So I suppose the two are kind of interlinked in a way... Yeah, it's so safe that I haven't even thought about it, it hasn't even crossed my mind that that's not acceptable in Buddhism, until you kind of asked that question, and that's a really good thing actually. So I suppose they're very interlinked, otherwise I just wouldn't be a Buddhist'*.

Tamara, bisexual Buddhist woman

## Section 2.4: Negotiating Religious Faith in Mainstream Society

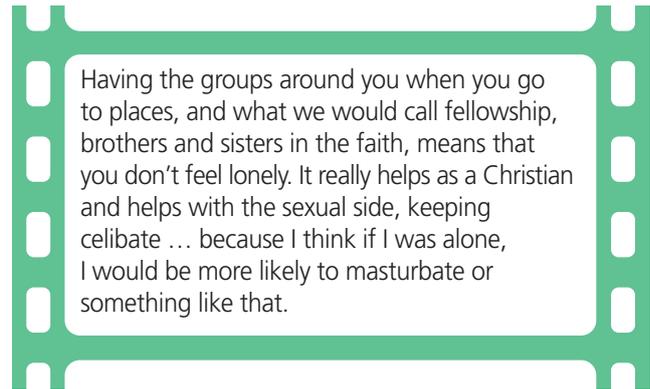
Research has shown that for many religious young people, being religious was an aspect of themselves which they felt separated them from other young people in mainstream society (mainstream society often being seen as secular), particularly as young people are seen to be less likely to engage with institutional religion than other age groups (Collins-Mayo and Dandelion, 2010; Smith and Snell, 2009). Religious values are therefore seen to be increasingly distinct from mainstream youth culture.

This section engages with the participants' views of, and interactions with, mainstream society. It begins by presenting the variety of challenges they experienced as young religious adults, and looks at how they managed this in their social lives. The section then takes a closer look at two of the major challenges, namely the stigmatisation of religion and the sexualisation of culture. Although participants did discuss positive engagements with secular music, literature and film, the majority of reflection on mainstream society centred around difference, and therefore this is the focus of this section also.

### Challenges experienced in interactions with mainstream society

Figure 9 illustrates – in the participants' own words – some of the various challenges they identified in their interactions with mainstream society. These challenges include: stigmatisation of religion, sexualised culture, sexual promiscuity in society, the absence of religion in areas of society, drinking culture, drug culture, declining moral standards, greed, materialism and practical difficulties in fulfilling religious requirements (e.g. suitable food).

These diverse statements from the questionnaires illustrate the sense of difference experienced by the participants. However, despite this, the majority of the participants (67.4%) disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement 'My religion makes everyday life more difficult'. This suggests that these challenges, though related to their religious faith, were at an acceptable level of difficulty. Indeed, for some, involvement in religious communities helped them to deal with these challenges. For example Kyle, a bisexual Christian man, discussed in his video diary how religious involvement helped him to deal with the temptations and difficulties raised by non-religious culture.



This importance of religious community has been seen in previous literature (e.g. Regnerus, 2007) which has emphasised how strong involvement within a religious community can extend into many parts of a believer's social life, making following religious values more plausible or possible for the individual. There was some evidence of participants surrounding themselves with other religious people, but there was also evidence of refusal to take this approach to social life.

**Figure 9: Examples of challenges that the participants experienced in mainstream society**



54.7% of the participants reported that the majority of their friends were religious (25.4% felt the majority of their friends shared the same faith as them and 29.3% felt the majority of their friends were of a variety of faith backgrounds), while 45.3% reported that the majority of their friends were not religious. In interview Rosie, a heterosexual Buddhist woman, reflected on why having religious friends was important. She said *'Even if you have a conversation about the weather, the connection there is deeper because you feel like you're being understood'*.

Religion therefore acts as a connection, linking people as well as being a source of meaning for individuals and interactions (Henderson et al., 2007), providing support and encouragement in everyday life, and as Rosie expressed a sense of being 'understood'. Interestingly, when the focus was moved from friendship to social life more broadly, 71.6% disagreed or strongly disagreed that the majority of their social lives were within religious groups and meetings. So although the positives of involvement within a religious community were seen by participants in the research, this was not required or exclusive.

The research also explored whether self-censorship was a way that young religious adults dealt with the pressures of non-religious aspects of culture. Around a quarter of participants (25.7%) limited their consumption of TV and film due to their faith; and 19.4% of them limited their consumption of music. Iqbal, a heterosexual Muslim man, was one of the participants who limited his media consumption, he explained his reasons for this: *'God says always keep a balance. You can watch a movie... Have fun but keep it balanced, that is the main thing in life. I may watch a few programmes but I try and make up for it by watching some Islamic talking. It evens it out'*. So for Iqbal controlling media consumption was a way of living as a believer in everyday life, and of balancing his interactions with secular media.

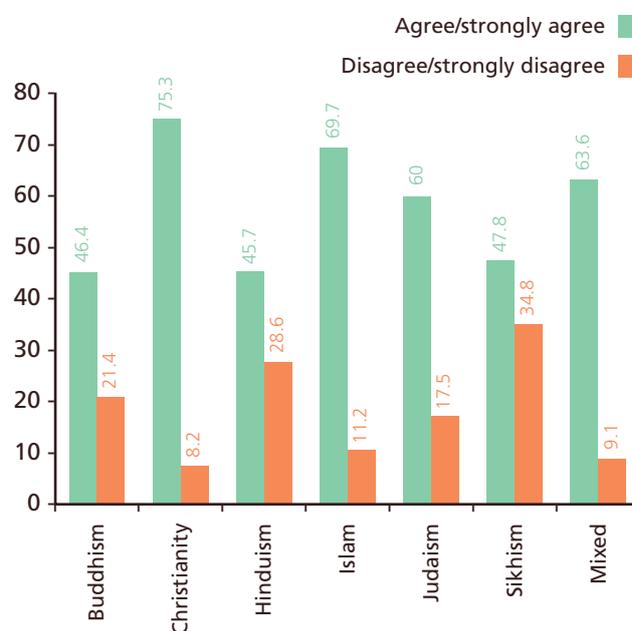
For participants whose stories focused on avoidance of sexually explicit or religiously negative material, controlling media consumption was one way of enabling continued living as a religious young adult, and avoiding 'temptation' in what they saw to be an increasingly secular society. For others, secular media was an important source of entertainment and identity. For example, Uma, a Sikh heterosexual woman, said, *'When we moved here there was like a local Indian cinema... I just loved going to that cinema, and it's actually one thing that bonded me and my mum, like the one thing we had in common that she liked watching like Indian films as well'*. Therefore, though generally the participants emphasised negatives, positive understandings of secular media were also present.

## Stigmatised religion

The sense of difference many participants felt from non-religious peers and mainstream society was further underlined by the belief held by a number of participants that religion was stigmatised. This is illustrated by the responses to two statements in the questionnaire. In response to 'My religion is negatively portrayed in the media', 69.1% of participants either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. Similarly, in response to 'Religious people are stigmatised in Britain', 68.5% of participants either agreed or strongly agreed.

Across the religions it was consistently the case that those who felt religious people were stigmatised outnumbered those who did not, as can be seen in Figure 10.

**Figure 10: Participants' responses to the statement 'Religious people are stigmatised in Britain' by religion.**



Indeed, some participants reflected on their experiences of lack of understanding closer to home. Zakia, a heterosexual woman who had converted to Islam, discussed in her video diary the attitudes to religion in her family.

Been having problems with my family as well. They are getting better, they have told me I can go live with them for a little while, but it is not enough. They want a daughter who is half naked and is drinking constantly to come home, not their Muslim daughter. I have been having problems with that... But it was very awkward and I mean I can't even pray at the house at the moment and that was one of the problems when we came back and needed to pray. Ended up praying in the garden. Religion in my family is no freer for anybody unless you want to say you are an atheist or a Christian, but you would get bullied for that as well.

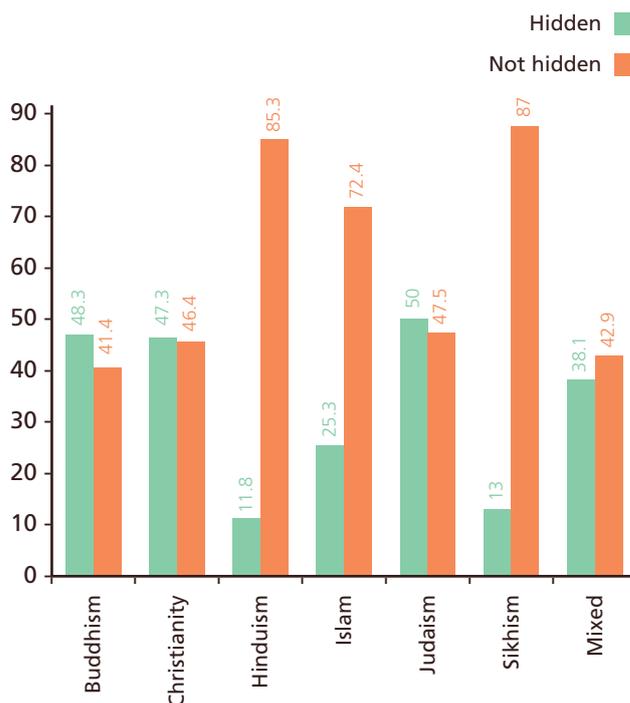
There were specific consequences of such perceived stigmatisation for some participants. For example, a sizable minority of participants (35.3%) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement 'It is difficult to talk about faith with non-believers'. Lindsay, who saw her faith as a combination of Christianity and Buddhism and did not define her sexuality, reflected on this issue in interview saying, *'Nobody really talks about religion or God unless they are making fun of it. Otherwise, no one really talks, no one is really spiritual'*.

Tariq, a heterosexual Muslim man, also emphasised that misunderstanding and generalisation were often central, when religion was discussed. He said, *'People hear Islam and they think Osama bin Laden, Iraq, Afghanistan, the war on terror'*. Tariq's quote also illustrates Islamophobia and points to a specific Muslim experience. However, in doing so it further underlines the pervasive misunderstandings and generalisations which were perceived by participants from all religious traditions.

As well as finding it difficult to speak about faith, some participants found it difficult to be open about their faith on occasion. A sizable minority (40.2%) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement 'I have hidden my religious identity from others', suggesting that openness about being religious was difficult in certain secular contexts.

When exploring those who had previously concealed their religious identity publicly, participants from Buddhism, Christianity and Judaism were split quite evenly between those who definitely had and definitely had not hidden their faiths. Within Hinduism, Islam and Sikhism, far higher percentages of participants had not hidden their religious faith, as Figure 11 shows.

**Figure 11: Percentages of participants who had hidden and not hidden their religious faith in public**



Such evidence illustrates that although there is variation across the religions, consequences of perceived stigmatisation can be seen. As mentioned above, this can lead to a feeling of difference. One particular area in which participants specifically discussed feeling different was in terms of engagement with sex and representations of sex, and it is to this we now turn.

### Sexualisation of society

Many participants discussed feeling that sex and representations of sex were becoming increasingly central in mainstream society, reflecting wider discussions of sexualisation (Attwood, 2009). They felt this was a negative development. This strength of feeling can be seen in the response to the statement 'There is too much focus on sex in the media', to which 76.1% of the participants agreed or strongly agreed. Concerns were further illustrated in the aspects of British society the participants found challenging as young religious adults, as illustrated in Figure 9 (p.15). Two themes within questionnaire responses were 'The Sexualisation of Culture' and 'Sexual Promiscuity', as shown in Figure 12.

**Figure 12: Examples of aspects of British society specifically related to sex and sexuality perceived to make life as a religious young adult harder**

| Sexualisation of Culture                 |  | Sexual Promiscuity           |   |
|--|--|------------------------------|---|
| Sexualised media                         | Easy access to pornography                       | Pressure to have sex         | Promiscuity at universities                     |
| Sex or sexual behaviour being everywhere | Acceptability of wearing short/revealing clothes | Promiscuity being celebrated | So liberal about sex, it has no meaning anymore |

In interview, a number of participants developed on these themes. For example Rosamund, a bisexual Buddhist woman expressed her dislike for sexualised mainstream popular music, and emphasised the need for depth and meaning in intimacy, saying, *'These songs are never about caring about each other... they are about I need, I need, I want, I want'*.

With reference to promiscuity and the central place sex was seen to have in many people's lives and identities, Ryan, a homosexual male Christian, said, *'Yeah, I guess the whole idea to be fulfilled, you need to be having sex; there is that idea isn't there, which comes through in lots of things. When I tell people of my aims to live as a Christian in a relationship where I am not having sex... People see it as impossible and I guess that is because they are seeing things in a more worldly way, like I think with the strength that God can give it is a possibility'*.

Ryan's view emphasises that for him sex was not a requirement. Sexual desire was controllable, and there were alternative life relationship possibilities; and Rosamund's view emphasises when sex did occur, it should centre on connection and meaning. Such discussions of sex, whether centring on celibacy or commitment, serve as a counter-narrative to what many participants saw as the negatively excessive presence of sex in mainstream culture. Underlining the feeling of difference young religious people may experience in interactions with wider secular aspects of society. For others, secular developments with regard to sex were not all seen as bad. For example James, a male heterosexual Buddhist, said, *'Whereas in kind of secular life, the opening up of kind of the idea that you can talk about sex and it's ok to experiment with things, that's all kind of fantastic, but the culture that's come with that of more casual sex and sex as losing any deeper meaning, is obviously its negative side'*. James' narrative illustrates the attempts many participants were making to reconcile secular and religious influence. Although experiencing difference, at times this difference went hand in hand with the influence of and engagement with mainstream culture.



## Section 2.5: Managing Gender, Sexuality and Religious Faith

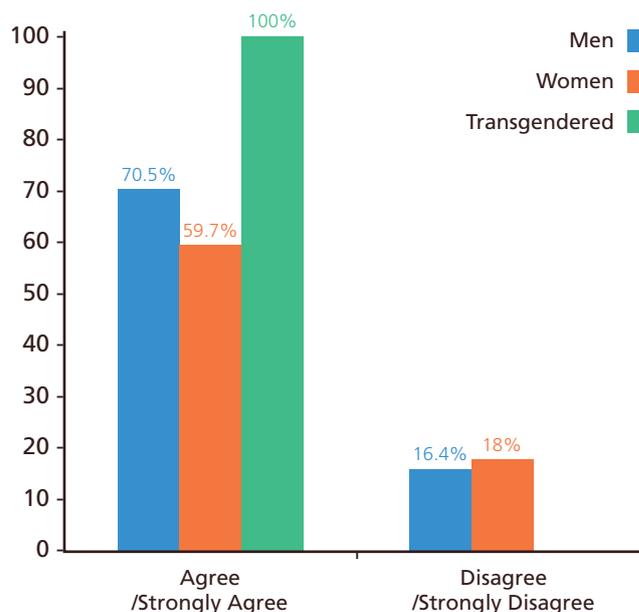
Young adults growing up in Britain have experienced enormous change regarding gender equality and inequality (Baumgardner and Richards, 2000). With regard to religion, many young adults from Protestant Christianity, Reform Judaism and Buddhism will be familiar with women as authority figures within their religious traditions, acting as rabbis and priests (Redfern and Aune, 2010). At the same time, gender inequality remains an issue in many religious traditions, both at the level of religious leadership and religious practice (Woodhead, 2007). Religion is also often a source of meaning in terms of how one lives one's everyday life as a woman or a man. Against this backdrop, this section addresses three main issues: (i) participants' perspectives on gender equality within religious traditions; (ii) their attitudes toward women's involvement in religious leadership and (iii) roles and responsibilities for women and men in relationships.

### Perspectives on gender equality in religion

A number of participants reported having experienced gender equality in their lives. As Clare, a heterosexual Christian woman expressed: *'We haven't been brought up as feminist by any means but we have been brought up as equalists. My brother can't even intellectually understand how [and] why women are treated differently'*.

This was often augmented by religious gender equality, for example, Surjit, a heterosexual Sikh woman, argued that her religion inspired equality between the sexes: *'It's one of the first religions, especially of a South Asian origin, which is putting women on an equal... level playing field, and that was the whole principle and the reason why Guru Nanak formed Sikhi [Sikhism] itself'*.

Figure 13: Participants' responses to the statement 'My religious tradition emphasises equality of the sexes'.



63.4% of the participants agreed or strongly agreed with the idea that their religious tradition emphasised equality of the sexes. Interestingly, compared to women, men were slightly more likely to state that their religion upheld sexual equality, as Figure 13 demonstrates. This was the case for all religions except Judaism. For example, 83.3% of Buddhist men thought that their religion emphasised gender equality compared to 73.3% of Buddhist women. 87.5% of Muslim men thought that their religion emphasised gender equality compared to 77.1% of women. Further, 80% of Hindu men thought that their religion was gender equal compared to only 20.8% of Hindu women.

One reason for this difference is that in some cases, men had not given the issue much prior thought. For example, Ranjit, a heterosexual Hindu man, on being asked why prayers at the temple were conducted only by men said: *'I think I've asked the question before why that's the case but I can't remember what the answer was – it was many, many years ago. But I don't see why women shouldn't be involved as much'*.

Some men, however, were more reflective, with this Sikh heterosexual man, Ajeet, arguing that although his religion is equality-conscious, this is contradicted by the lived reality: *'What my religion teaches me is equality. That is one of the biggest fundamentals of Sikhism... I'll be honest with you, at the temple in the committees, it's mainly men'*.

Indeed, this was a common theme among the participants of all religions, in that although one's religion could be seen as emphasising gender equality, this was often compromised by unequal cultural practice. As Sabrina, a Muslim heterosexual woman, argued: *'Women are treated much better in Islam than in other religions... What tends to happen I think is that the culture will take over and men will say "I'm the man, I rule the house. You just do your work" and there's no discussion; religion isn't really followed'*.

Many participants reflected on whether their religious tradition's stance on equality corresponded with lived experience. When it did not, a critical perspective was taken. Gender unequal practices were overwhelmingly interpreted as against one's religion and religion itself was very rarely seen to perpetuate unequal treatment. Rather, culture was seen as the problematic factor, indicating that religion can be a resource in challenging inequality (Bradby, 2006).

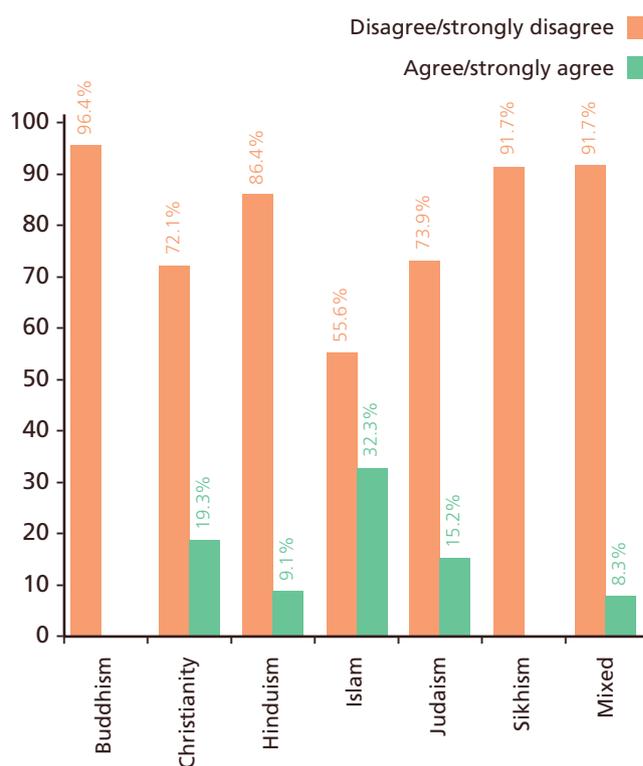
Those who did reflect on the complex links between gender and religion were often influenced either by other individuals or by literature. For example, Amelia, a liberal heterosexual Christian woman, in her video diary pondered whether the language used within religion impacted upon women's equal status, questioning whether seeing the sacred as male negatively impacts on women. This reflection was prompted when she engaged in conversation with a woman training to become a priest:

Last night I was out with two friends, one is a woman... two years into training to be a vicar... she is very pro women and I was asking her about it... She said that before she went into training she was a lot more open about inclusive language and that sort of thing, and I was saying that I didn't have a problem with that, mankind, or manning something rather than staffing something. And she said she was the same as me before she went into training, but now she gets really het up about it, and sees that inclusive language as really part of making, empowering women and that it makes a big difference... So I guess it is making me think where I am in all of that... am I being too open-minded about that, the fact that the pronoun 'he' and 'him' is so automatically used about God as well about priests... I guess I am beginning to think, does that make a difference? What happens when we challenge them and do I need to challenge more and be assertive? I don't know.

## Gender and faith leadership

73.2% of the participants disagreed or strongly disagreed with the idea that only men should be in religious authority positions. When this was broken down by religion, this rose to 96.4% for Buddhists, 91.7% for Sikhs, and 86.4% for Hindus. Further, 73.9% of Jews, 72.1% of Christians and 55.6% of Muslims also disagreed or strongly disagreed with the idea that religious authority figures should only be men, as Figure 14 demonstrates.

**Figure 14: Participants' views on the statement, 'Religious authority figures should be male'**



Erica, a Jewish lesbian, endorsed women's faith leadership when she said, *'I am proud that they have adapted and seen that it is not wrong to [have] woman rabbis and to make things more egalitarian'*. On the other hand, some religious young adults felt that women's leadership was not theologically permitted. As Louise, a Christian heterosexual woman argued, she could not condone women's leadership:

*'Because it doesn't say it in the Bible... it says the priests are men, preachers, teachers and different people like that are men.'*

Thus the participants had a variety of views, with Erica supporting change, fostering her continued faith engagement, while Louise found comfort and security in her interpretation of religious texts, giving her a set of foundational beliefs by which she could live.

The benefits of having women in authority positions were underscored by women who felt that they could not approach men regarding personal issues, particularly sexual matters. Fahima, a heterosexual Muslim woman, in discussing hypothetically approaching her imam, said, *'I'm pretty sure he'd be more embarrassed if I went up to him and asked him something'*. Instead, she said that she would approach the imam's wife, highlighting the dependency some young women have on women in unofficial faith roles.

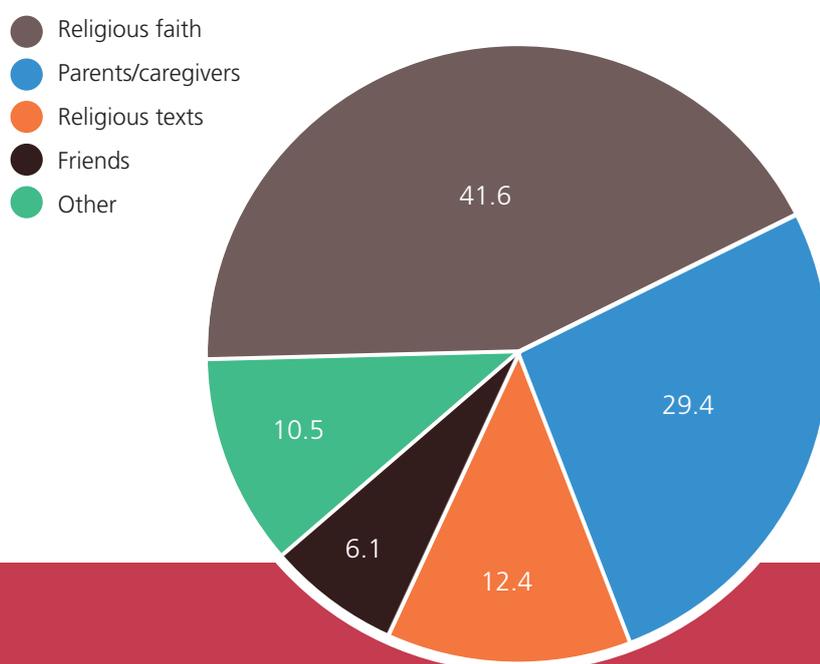
Heather, a heterosexual Christian woman pointed out the advantages of having women in leadership as role models, especially in terms of having someone to approach for advice: *'Whilst there are women in my Church [who] do leadership and things, the majority of them are still male... I think it would be good to hear from females as well... there isn't anyone to look up to'*.

Indeed, women believers may feel at a disadvantage vis-à-vis men in those traditions where women's leadership is not officially sanctioned. Fahima discussed that at her mosque the imam had to *'deal with a lot of the men and their problems, and they're like an agony aunt for men'*, while women created their own forms of informal support. This may have impacted on how successful the support networks were for young women and men, for Fahima emphasised that her mosque facilitated *'a very good... brotherhood'*, not matched by a strong sisterhood.

### Roles and responsibilities in relationships

Another pertinent issue related to the roles and responsibilities of a religious tradition. When asked what most influenced how they lived their life as women or men, the main source of influence cited was religious faith (41.6%), followed by parents/caregivers (29.4%), as Figure 15 shows.

**Figure 15: Main factors influencing participants' living as a woman or a man**



Therefore, religious understandings of how one should live life as a woman or a man had deep resonance for many participants. The survey asked participants whether they felt any specific religious requirements and expectations due to being a woman or a man. A number of participants felt that gender differences were particularly salient in relationships, with, for example, a man financially supporting his family, as well as protecting his wife and children, while a woman has primary responsibility for raising children. In this respect, 38.2% agreed or strongly agreed that men should financially provide for the family.

Faye, a Christian heterosexual woman asserted: *'The only requirements I feel as a woman are that I submit to my husband and treat him with respect. I feel that men and woman are treated equally and my faith is very much focused on each individual's relationship with God'*.

Thus gender differences were seen as endorsing equal respect for women and men. Similarly, Kulvinder, a gay male Sikh, outlined the felt expectations as a man in supporting a family, saying it was important to *'[Be a] strong family leader - having a family'*.

This view was contested, however. For example, Holly, a Christian bisexual woman asserted: *'I do feel there are certain types of behaviour expected of me because I am a woman in Christianity, but I also feel sometimes it is our duty to challenge what feels comfortable, so do not often heed these'*.

Judy, a Jewish lesbian, on saying she did feel that there were gender expectations, argued, *'I rebel against them'*. Indeed, on asking participants whether women should have primary responsibility for bringing up children, 65.6% of women and 68.1% of men disagreed, indicating that the participants were reconfiguring traditional norms and expectations, with many being willing to adopt non-traditional gender roles.

## Section 3: Reflections

We have demonstrated in this report that religious faith and sexuality assumed different meanings for the participants. Further, the report has also shown the challenges they encountered in their attempt to meaningfully live out their religious faith and sexuality in connection to each other within the context of religious community and mainstream society. Below we offer some reflections for different user groups, which we hope will contribute to ongoing debates and conversations.

### ..... for religious young adults

1. The stories presented in this report illustrate the diverse issues young religious adults face, and the different ways they manage and negotiate the challenges. Feeling confused and 'being pulled in opposite directions' are not unusual. However, we encourage them to tap into support systems available in various contexts, taking courage and learning lessons from others' experiences.
2. Religious young adults themselves have much to offer one another in terms of debating and formulating inclusive understandings of religious faith and sexuality. We encourage them to utilise existing support networks such as religious and non-religious friendships, and request for further resources to be made available to construct a forum for such a dialogue.
3. Having a lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgendered identity could be challenging for religious young adults. However, as the report has shown, harmonious accommodation of these two dimensions is a possibility. Religious young adults should explore resources and spaces that facilitate this process.
4. Interacting with mainstream society can sometimes be difficult, but also can derive benefits. Friendships may be forged with those of another faith, or with no faith at all, and religious young adults can show their non-religious counterparts the importance of religious faith in shaping one's own identity. This may also foster understanding and respect between non-religious and religious young adults, as well as promoting inter-faith dialogue.

### ..... for religious leaders and professionals

1. Young religious adults desire greater discussion and openness to discussion of religious faith and sexuality within their places of worship and religious communities. We would encourage religious leaders and professionals to heed this request and provide a safe environment for this.
2. Religious leaders and professionals should embrace the reality that many young religious adults do engage with 'secular' culture in their attempt to understand their religious faith and sexuality. This should not be viewed as a threat. Rather, open and honest dialogue where young adults' voices are respected ought to be had.
3. Religious leaders and professionals should work more closely with professionals and practitioners in the areas of sex and relationship education and sexual health to find common ground and ways to meet the needs of young people in their communities.
4. Religious institutions need to find a way to offer non-judgemental advice and counselling as well as religious direction in dealing with the contentious issue of sexuality.
5. Notwithstanding its sensitivity, we encourage religious professionals to engage in dialogue about sexuality and religious faith within an inter-faith context in order to not only promote better mutual understanding, but also share good practice.

### ..... for secular practitioners (e.g. sexual health professionals, youth workers, counsellors)

1. Practitioners need to develop a greater awareness of the role of religious faith in some young adults' lives in general, and sexual lives in particular.
2. Practitioners need to respect that sexual attitudes and decisions informed by religious faith are rational and valid for some young adults.
3. Training of practitioners should include knowledge about religious and cultural sensitivity and sensibility in relation to sexuality, instead of formulating one-size-fits-all advice on sexual health.
4. More collaboration is needed between religious leaders and professionals who work with young adults in secular contexts, in order to formulate policy and practice that provides consistent advice and guidance for religious young adults.

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# Religion, Youth and Sexuality

Selected Key Findings from a Multi-faith Exploration

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