Religion has been a source of both solace and suffering for many lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Americans. For while most LGBT Americans have been raised in an organized religion — and many continue to cherish their faith community — too many have been forced to leave those communities behind because of condemnation of LGBT people. Overviews on different religious organizations’ positions on LGBT people and the issues that affect them are below. Please note that this list is not comprehensive. There are LGBT people of faith in a number of religions not listed here including Sikhism, Native American religions and others. There also are many LGBT people who practice forms of spirituality found outside organized religion.

Buddhism

Sexual orientation, specifically, was not elaborated upon by Siddhartha Gautama, nor is there any reference or guidance for lay people regarding sexual orientation or same-sex behavior within the Pali Canon, the scriptural texts that hold the Buddha’s original teachings. The Vinyana, a Buddhist text for monks, forbids Buddhist monks and nuns from having sexual relationships with men, women and those of other genders, such as pandanka (interpreted as those with indeterminate sexual characteristics or people who do not conform to sexual norms, such as prostitutes). These textual references do not target LGBT people specifically, as everyone within the monastic order is expected to refrain from all forms of sexual relations. This practice is especially common within Theravada Buddhism, which focuses heavily on the monastic tradition.

Zen Buddhism does not make a distinction between same-sex and opposite-sex relationships. Instead, the expectation is not to harm, exploit or manipulate others, which would directly violate the third precept. For instance, Zen Buddhists often refer to hedonism, ascetic masochism and prostitutions as practices that violate the “Middle Way.”

Regarding Tibetan Buddhism, the Dalai Lama’s perspectives are complex and evolving. On the positive side, he has publicly condemned violence against LGBT people and has been reported to have said, “If the two people have taken no vows [of chastity] and neither is harmed why should it not be acceptable. Yet in a 1997 press conference he commented that “from a Buddhist point of view [lesbian and gay sex] is generally considered sexual misconduct.” have been mixed and somewhat influx. During a meeting with representatives of the LGBT community, the Dalai Lama reportedly showed interest in how modern scientific research might create new understanding of the Buddhist texts, acknowledging a “willingness to consider the possibility that some of the teachings may be specific to a particular cultural and historic context.”
Mormonism

As the church has rapidly grown in Africa, Latin America, and other developing parts of the world, non-traditional families are challenging the assumed supremacy of the traditional family in the church. Further, the church has begun to realize that their stridently anti-gay stance is severely splitting many families, the basic societal units the church works so hard to maintain. As a result, the church began to soften its rhetoric and treatment of its LGBT members in recent years. Church publications often counsel members to accept LGBT family members and friends with love and compassion and have repeatedly told parents to refrain from rejecting their children just for being gay or lesbian.

Episcopalian

In 1976, both the House of Deputies and House of Bishops voted for a fully inclusive Episcopal Church, stating, “homosexual persons are children of God who have a full and equal claim with all other persons upon the love, acceptance, and pastoral concern and care of the church.”

Canon law includes “gender identity or expression” in its list of persons who are assured full access to the ministry of the church. The law further specifies that administrative forms must include options for both preferred and legal names, and for gender identity and pronoun preference. In an intentional move toward diversity, it adds,

“As transgender people and their families increasingly come out within or find their way to congregations, their specific naming in our Canons . . . will encourage congregations to deepen their understanding and widen their welcome.”

In 2015, the Episcopal Church codified theological support for same-sex marriage with two resolutions. The first (A054) formally approved gender-neutral and same-sex marriage ceremonies, while the second (A036) changed the current marriage “canons” to allow clergy to officiate same-sex marriages using either a marriage rite from the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer or a “trial” liturgy. Clergy will however have the option to opt out of performing the ceremonies.

Lutheran

Of the three leading Lutheran organizations operating in the United States, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) is considered the most welcoming and inclusive of LGBT members. Formed in 1988 with the merger of three smaller Lutheran organizations, the ELCA is based in Chicago and encompasses nearly 10,000 congregations and 4 million members across the country.
Churchwide Assemblies are held every three years, with elected representatives establishing policy and addressing the concerns of the larger church body. As stated on the denomination’s web site, the Churchwide Assembly “provides a time and place for growth and change while remaining rooted in Scripture, tradition, Lutheran confessions and the rich histories of our congregations and communities.”

In 1991, the Churchwide Assembly passed a resolution stating that,

“Gay and lesbian people, as individuals created by God, are welcome to participate fully in the life of the congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.”

Today, church programs include summer camps and homeless shelters for LGBT youth, and pastor participation in the “It Gets Better” campaign. However, there are no inclusion policies specific to transgender persons.

**Presbyterian**

As recently as 2010, the General Assembly agreed that the Presbyterian Church (USA), “has no consensus in the interpretation of Scripture on issues of same-sex practice.” However, the church has also adopted policies that allow for the ordination of LGBT ministers and the celebration of same-sex marriages. Experiences may differ greatly across individual communities but many congregations are entirely welcoming and inclusive. Groups such as More Light Presbyterians are committed to “work for the full participation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) people in the life, ministry and witness of the Presbyterian Church (USA) and in society.” Similarly, the Covenant Network of Presbyterians is a coalition of clergy and laity who hope to “strengthen the church of Jesus Christ, with the help of God’s grace,” and are, “called to achieve this goal by furthering the inclusion of LGBTQ persons, and by working for the unity of the PC(USA).”

In 1996, Erin Swenson became the first transgender minister to serve in the Presbyterian Church (USA) when members voted to continue her ministry following her transition from male to female. While the church has no official policy regarding transgender inclusion, organizations such as More Light Presbyterians are specific in advocating for transgender congregants.

**Quakers**

Many Quaker communities are open and welcoming to LGBT people, and an increasing number take the marriages and unions of LGBT couples under their care. Others hold differing views on a wide range of LGBT issues, including nondiscrimination, civil marriage rights, support for families headed by LGBT people, and spiritual equality.
Friends have a history of fighting for social justice, and they traditionally welcome all people to their meetings. Some Friends organizations also bless unions between same-sex couples and advocate for LGBT rights in the legal and political arenas.

Many local Friends communities welcome LGBT people unequivocally. In addition, the Friends General Conference, one of three major national associations for Friends meetings and churches in the United States, issued a statement in fall 2004, “Minute on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer Friends,” emphasizing that LGBT people were welcome in their religious community:

“Our experience has been that spiritual gifts are not distributed with regard to sexual orientation or gender identity.

“Our experience has been that our Gatherings and Central Committee work have been immeasurably enriched over the years by the full participation and Spirit-guided leadership of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and queer Friends. We will never go back to silencing those voices or suppressing those gifts. Our experience confirms that we are all equal before God, as God made us, and we feel blessed to be engaged in the work of Friends General Conference together.”

Catholicism

While the Catholic Church does not consider “homosexual orientation” sinful in and of itself, it does have a very negative attitude toward it. The 1986 Letter states, “Although the particular inclination of the homosexual person is not a sin, it is a more or less strong tendency ordered toward an intrinsic moral evil; and thus the inclination itself must be seen as an objective disorder.”

The fact that Catholicism does not consider the “inclination” sinful is very different from more fundamentalist Christian churches. It is one of the reasons that the Catholic Church has not officially approved of reparative therapy. The Catechism further states that “Homosexual persons are called to chastity.” However, the doctrine also specifies that, “Such persons must be accepted with respect and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided.”

The actual experience of LGBT parishioners can vary widely across dioceses and parishes. Many Catholic communities reach out to LGBT members to offer as full of a welcome as possible within the limits of a Church policy that does not approve of same-sex relationships, even committed ones. Other parishes have denied membership to LGBT individuals and families. There have also been recent instances of LGBT employees in the United States being dismissed from Catholic schools and parishes following the celebration of a same-sex couple’s marriage.
According to the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) web site, “We not only open our doors to people of all sexual orientations and gender identities, we value diversity of sexuality and gender and see it as a spiritual gift. We create inclusive religious communities and work for LGBTQ justice and equity as a core part of who we are.”

In 2007, the General Assembly passed a resolution affirming the inclusion of transgender individuals in its commitment to “the inherent worth and dignity of every human being.” It urged “the expression of this affirmation through employment practices, educational efforts, congregational life, and public witness.” Ongoing efforts include an annual Transgender Day of Remembrance, with educational support materials, and a sexual health curriculum that gives equal weight to the transgender experience.

The church has conducted “services of union” for same-sex couples since 1984. In 1996, the General Assembly passed a resolution urging “member congregations to proclaim the worth of marriage between any two committed persons and to make this position known in their home communities.” The UUA has been at the forefront of recent struggles – and victories – for marriage equality.

The church’s Book of Discipline bans discrimination at the congregational level, and recognizes the “sacred worth” of all persons. Current policy states,

“We implore families and churches not to reject or condemn lesbian and gay members and friends. We commit ourselves to be in ministry for and with all persons.”

This policy is reflected in the church’s support of full inclusion for LGBT persons in the armed services and employment.

However, church doctrine also states that homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teachings and bans financial support of all LGBT-based groups. A call for reform on these issues is being heard from local churches and districts, and is likely to be addressed at the General Conference in 2016.

Following the 2012 General Conference, many LGBT persons and allies continued their efforts for legislative change. Some also adopted practices of ecclesial disobedience—coined “Biblical Obedience” by ally Bishop Melvin Talbert. The practice urges people to “be the church now” and to ignore discriminatory and unjust laws. This effort has seen a dramatic increase in clergy and
laity who defy church doctrine in an effort to reclaim the Bible’s call for justice and inclusion as it applies to marriage and ordination. Some of these efforts have led to public church trials.

Transgender ministers have served United Methodist Churches. There is no policy excluding them from ordination. An attempt to deny ordination to transgender persons failed at the General Conference in 2008.

**Hinduism**

Because there is no central Hindu authority, attitudes to LGBT issues vary at different temples and ashrams. The Hindu American Foundation, in its policy brief on Hindus and Homosexuality, notes that “Hinduism does not provide a fundamental spiritual reason to reject or ostracize homosexuals,” and that, “Given their inherent spiritual equality, Hindus should not socially ostracize homosexuals, but should accept them as fellow sojourners on the path to moksha.”

The Vedas refer to a ‘third sex,’ roughly defined as people for whom sex is not procreative, either through impotence or a lack of desire for the opposite sex. Members of the third sex are not ostracized, however, and are sometimes recognized for having divine powers or insights. The Kama Sutra, a Hindu text detailing the pleasures of sexuality, states that same-sex experience is ‘to be engaged in and enjoyed for its own sake as one of the arts.’

Nevertheless, some Hindu communities continue to be unwelcoming of LGBT people, often reflecting attitudes imported from conquering nations, such as the British Empire in India.

The Gay & Lesbian Vaishnava Association (GALVA) highlights, in its report Homosexuality, Hinduism and the Third Gender, the gender fluidity of Hindu deities, and notes that “everything in this world is a reflection of the original subtle and spiritual reality.” The epic Mahabharata features the transgender character Sikhandin, and depicts the warrior Arjuna cross-dressing to become Brihannala, teacher of fine arts. GALVA further notes, “Vedic culture allowed transgender people of the third sex, known as hijras, to live openly according to their gender identity.” As stated above, contemporary attitudes will vary across different Hindu organizations and society.

**Islam**

It is rare that an openly LGBT Muslim feels fully welcome at a mainstream mosque in the United States. Cultural norms and traditional readings of sacred texts often uphold a heteronormative binary of gender identification and sexual orientation that don't allow for the range of identities present in today’s society. However, there are growing opportunities for alternative and meaningful worship and community. Muslims for Progressive Values (MPV) has founded Unity
Mosques in Atlanta, GA; Columbus, OH; and Los Angeles, CA. The Muslim Alliance for Sexual and Gender Diversity hosts an annual retreat for LGBT Muslims in Pennsylvania each May. MECCA Institute, an online school for the study of an inclusive theology of Islam will open in fall 2015. (For further resources, see below.)

Transgender men and women are recognized and accepted in many Islamic cultures around the world. In fact, the idea of a man or woman identifying as a member of the opposite gender is more likely to be accepted than that of a man or woman expressing sexual desire for someone of their own gender.

As early as 1988, gender reassignment surgery was declared acceptable under Islamic law by scholars at Egypt’s Al-Azhar, the world’s oldest Islamic university. In Iran, in 1987, Ayatollah Khomeini declared transgender surgical operations allowable. The basis for this attitude of acceptance is the belief that a person is born transgender but chooses to be homosexual, making homosexuality a sin.

**Orthodox Judaism**

Orthodoxy in the United States encompasses a wide range of attitudes toward LGBT people and the issues they face. The recognition that sexual orientation and gender identity are generally not chosen has softened attitudes. In the most traditional sectors of Orthodoxy empathy has grown only in a very limited way, but in the center and left of the movement there is a slow but steady shift toward more understanding and inclusive attitudes and policies.

While the public stance of a synagogue or rabbi may adhere strictly to religious law, individual congregants and the rabbi himself may often be personally welcoming of LGBT members. In 2010, more than 150 Orthodox rabbis and educators signed a declaration calling for the welcoming of LGBT Jews in the Orthodox community.

> “Every Jew is obligated to fulfill the entire range of mitzvot between person and person in relation to persons who are homosexual or have feelings of same sex attraction. Embarrassing, harassing or demeaning someone with a homosexual orientation or same-sex attraction is a violation of Torah prohibitions that embody the deepest values of Judaism.”

Organizations such as Eshel are dedicated to the work of supporting those efforts, and of serving Orthodox LGBT individuals in their desire to live fully in their religious and cultural traditions. For guidance on finding welcoming synagogues and rabbis, contacting Eshel is a good first step. The organization maintains contacts with congregations across the country and offers its own community of Orthodox LGBT Jews, both online and at regular gatherings.