THE GOSPEL HOUR
Liminality, Identity, & Religion in a Gay Bar 1

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Introduction

We squeeze through a crowd thick with gay men. Some ignore us; others greet us with smiles. Everyone is animated. Bartenders race back and forth opening bottles of beer and mixing gin tonics for the hot and thirsty assembly. Dance music is playing loudly. Suddenly, the music changes incongruously to a stirring orchestral version of the "Hallelujah" chorus. This is Morticia Deville's cue. Unnoticed in the rear of the darkened room, Morticia starts to navigate her large figure through the audience slowly toward the dance floor. The crowd begins to applaud. A spotlight--after what seems a long moment--strikes her sequined gown, perfectly made-up face, and blond wig. She looks the perfect Southern Gospel singer on a televised revival hour as she takes the stage. With all eyes on her, Morticia begins to sing, "Living in the Presence of the King." The song is a popular contemporary Christian hymn. The Gospel Hour at this midtown Atlanta gay bar has begun.

Morticia is a gay man in drag in her early thirties. She sings as a member of "The Gospel Girls" with a popular Black drag queen and a straight Black woman. Each week they and their audience use Christian symbols and song to create a unique gay gospel cabaret, The Gospel Hour. It is a two hour-long gospel performance and sing-along. Performers sing or lip-sync traditional Gospel hymns and contemporary numbers. Morticia and other Gospel Girls perform in drag for a mostly white gay male audience. Many in this audience are from Evangelical backgrounds and many are Christian still.

Morticia DeVille is the founder and star of the Gospel Hour. She is also a make-believe character; an identity created by a man we call Paul.2 As Morticia, Paul combines religious sensibilities and songs learned as a child in the mountains of North Georgia with the art of high drag learned as a gay man in the bars of Atlanta. Even as a child, Paul was drawn to both drag and religion. He told us how he would sneak into his grandmother's bedroom to steal her lipstick. Afterwards he retreated to the loneliness and safety of an empty mountain hollow. Robbed in a bed sheet, he preached to the winds, pretending he was Billy Graham. Paul has exchanged bed sheets for sequined frocks and covert wearing of lipstick in rural Georgia for a public identity as a drag queen in Atlanta.

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1. An earlier version of this study, "Amazing, Grace! How Sweet the Sound! Southern Evangelical Religion and Gay Drag in Atlanta," appears in *Gay Men's Issues in Religious Studies.* Vol. 7, *A Rainbow of Religious Studies* edited by J. Michael Clark and Robert E. Goss. Dallas: Monument Press, 1996; pp. 33B53.

In addition, we thank our colleagues at Emory University for numerous discussions of some of the ideas in this study.

2. The stage names of all performers, unless otherwise noted, are accurate. Personal names and the names of the taverns and clubs have been changed.

The Gospel Hour is a fascinating institution on the Atlanta gay scene. It is also an event well suited to ethnographic study. It is open to repeated participant observation to determine regular and deep patterns. Regular participants--in addition to the principals--can be identified, approached, and interviewed. Others can be talked to more casually--or their conversation overheard. As well as being accessible to observation, the Gospel Hour is a multi-layered symbolic event. This ethnographic investigation uncovers these levels of symbolic meaning. Is it a religious event or mere spectacle? Is Paul continuing to pretend to be someone else at the Gospel Hour, presiding over a group of gay men likewise pretending to have church? Or is the Gospel Hour a ritual generative of new and not make-believe identities and models for being both gay and Christian?

Evangelical gospel music blends with drag not for parody but for purpose at the Gospel Hour. The performance challenges everyday categories of experience by absorbing these categories and transforming them. The Gospel Hour merges gospel performance models with high drag. It also blends Southern Evangelical Christian sensibilities and cultural norms with urban gay ones. Its audience of gays, straights, Blacks, and whites has multiple experiences of the Gospel Hour. Participants have differential encounters to the Gospel Hour based on individual and shared experiences. We acknowledge this as an opportunity for further study. Nonetheless, for the segment of the audience we observed--and for the performers themselves--the Gospel Hour is a ritual of identity negotiation. Southern gay men reconcile their newly achieved modern urban gay identity with their childhood and young adult Evangelical Christian formation. The Gospel Hour--a drag show--is the setting for this identity work. Its product is a model that defies dominant cultural norms and establishes new ways to organize social relations.

The Gospel Hour generates what Victor Turner (1969) has called "templates or models" that reclassify social relationships. They provide motives and guides to action. We examine how the model or template of gay drag gospel performance allows participants to reclassify ordinary, taken-for-granted social relationships and cultural categories framing Christianity and gay sexuality. Turner described modern "social life is a type of dialectical process involving successive experience of high and low, *communitas* and structure, homogeneity and differentiation, equality and inequality" (Turner 1969, p. 96). Our investigation employs Turner's insight to show how culturally marginal groups create new cultural forms and practices through ritual. His theory illumines how our informants use the ritual template generated by the Gospel Hour to negotiate their identity as Southern gay Christian men. The performance is a liminal time and space set apart from the everyday. It is betwixt and between dominant cultural and subcultural norms. Being gay and Christian, within this liminal moment, is not exceptional or odd. It is normal.

Singing gospel songs in a gay bar led by men in drag defies most norms and experiences of both urban gay culture and Evangelical Christianity. Because it is a drag show in a gay bar, the Gospel Hour is alien to the Evangelical world. Because it is a Christian Gospel music performance, it falls outside the expected parameters of gay drag. Yet the Gospel Hour is a gay drag show and a Gospel music performance. Morticia DeVille *is* a Gospel singer *and* a drag queen. Singing Gospel hymns in drag is a ritual act redefining everyday classifications of experience and creating a new model for identity. This model or template has a normative

function. It reconciles being gay and Christian. "All rituals have this exemplary, model displaying character," according to Turner. Rituals create society "in much the same way as Oscar Wilde held life to be 'an imitation of art'"" (Turner 1969, 117). A young man, a former Christian charismatic, may have said it best to us one night after the Gospel Hour.
It's hard [to get used to at first] because you grow up and you believe that these are praises to God and you see this big drag queen camping it up, and you are thinking "Oh no, something is really wrong here and we can't let this go on . . . " It clashes with all the preconceived ideas you have . . . Later on, you realize that it can be this way too. **3**

Ethnography Beyond the Local Congregation

The Gospel Hour is the longest running drag show in Atlanta. Our first exposure was in 1992, its seventh year. Sporadic but enthusiastic attendance by one of us led to this formal investigation in the spring and summer of 1994. The Gospel Hour had just moved from the bar that had been its home for more than four years. During our study, the Gospel Girls increased the frequency of new numbers, rehearsed more often, and wore the occasional coordinated costume. Our regular presence as identified researchers may have helped prod these changes. We cannot determine, however, if our observation had any direct effect. Nevertheless, the Gospel Hour remained basically unchanged during the course of our study.

Using participant observation, we collected our data over twelve evenings, or twenty-four services. We interviewed informally, chatted with, and eavesdropped on participants. These included the owner and several bartenders. We also formally interviewed Morticia DeVille and Ramona Dugger and thirteen participants, including several who were regular guest performers. The audience members volunteered to talk with us after a general announcement by Morticia. She encouraged "her flock" to help us in our research. Of those we formally interviewed, all but one was male. Seven interviewees reported that they were born and raised in the South. Two others hailed from the Northeast and Central regions of the country. Four interviewees did not provide this data. They were all white, middle class, in their twenties and thirties, and the majority had at least some college education. They gave us a less than fully representative picture. We spoke informally, however, with many African Americans and older participants. Our informants (although not a randomly selected sample), are part of an important segment of the participants----those who identify as gay and Christian. These sons of the church have creatively reappropriated cultural forms they once thought off-limits. They--like other members of modern fragmented urban society--create ritually generated forms to negotiate religious and social identity in a multiplicity of settings, many of them contested. In addition, they *choose* from among these ritually created and sustained forms.

The Gospel Hour As Ritual:
Fully Gay and Altogether Southern Evangelical

Twice each Sunday the Gospel Girls conduct what they call "services" for their "congregation." During the first half of the nearly two-hour performance, they sing solo numbers. Some of these

3. All quotations of informants comments are from our transcribed interviews, 1995, Atlanta.

are signature pieces. Special guests often sing during this time from a repertoire of classic and contemporary Gospel music. The songs differ at each service, but they are selected from a circumscribed range of a few dozen pieces. The quality of performance, nonetheless, is uniformly high week-to-week. "That's the good thing about us," Morticia told us one day in a slow drawl. “The music is so powerful. It’s so good. And Southern.”

Morticia is sweet and warm--grandmotherly in a Sunday-School-teacher sort of way. She can stir the audience with her singing. For some songs, like "Standing in the Presence of the King," she lip-syncs to another performer. Most often, however, she sings well-known hymns in her own strong and beautiful voice. Audience members place dollar bills in her hands and kiss her on the cheek.

Morticia introduces Ramona Dugger after her opening segment. Ramona is the number two Gospel Girl. She has a remarkable vocal range. When she sings "Amazing Grace"--a signature number for her--you begin to fear for the glassware in the bar. Her songs are emotional and passionate. Ramona is straight, young, and African American. She favors contemporary gospel music. Her background is Episcopalian. Many songs in the Gospel Hour repertoire, therefore, were unfamiliar. When she does sing traditional Evangelical hymns, she favors the classics like "Amazing Grace" and "How Great Thou Art." Sometimes she sings, "If You're Happy and You Know it, Clap your Hands" changing the words to, "If you're happy and gay, clap your hands!"

Ramona became a Gospel Girl in 1994. She had been a regular guest performer for five years--most of the ensemble's career. When Morticia announced that Ramona would become "official," one owner of the bar objected. He said that bartenders were getting complaints about the explicitly religious nature of Ramona's on-stage comments. The barkeep's description of the usual thrust of Ramona's remarks--explicitly Christian--struck us as accurate. Soon after, the Gospel Hour moved. We asked Ramona about proselytizing during her performance. She said,

> We’re treading a fine line as it is. You know, it’s a very fine line. And I quite frankly identify with it probably most strongly more than anyone else in the show on a higher spiritual level. And because of that I probably step over that line. Tish never says “God.” She never says “Jesus.” I will. I don’t do it on a regular basis because I don’t want people to feel like I’m coming into a bar and I’m just getting preached at because I’m not preaching to anybody. But I do think there are so many people who are so hungry to know that God does love them, you know, and that they’re under so much stress and so much trouble in their lives that they need to be reminded that it’s just not all here and now. There’s more to that. You got to look up and know you are not alone in all this. . . . And try to give them some comfort. So I do, I admit I do cross that line a bit.

After her initial song--usually "Friends are Friends Forever" sung powerfully and warmly with Morticia--Ramona invites an American Sign Language interpreter to the stage. He reported to us that deaf people come regularly. As he signs, Ramona moves to the rear. Under the spotlight, his hands sing gracefully and energetically for the unhearing. The beauty and grace of the signing captures the audience.

Alicia Kelly is the most recent Gospel Girl. She is a young muscular black man. Ramona and others report she does an amazingly realistic Patti LaBelle. We believe it. She lip-syncs her numbers but everything else about her performance is authentic. She pours a fantastic amount of energy into her dancing, or "shouting." Kelly imitates a Pentecostal devotee possessed by the Holy Spirit. The congregation watches her transport herself acrobatically across the stage and they respond with loud applause. Many toss crumbled bills onto the stage, and shout "Amen, Sister!" Alicia dramatically concludes by throwing her wig into the crowd and dousing herself with a bottle of beer or mineral water grabbed from a startled member of the audience. They roar.

Alicia, Ramona told us, "is doing the style she grew up with. They're the women that she saw in church. Often she will say, "Well, this is Sister so-and-so," and she'll become Sister so-and-so." The manager of the group--echoing an assessment that could have come from anyone in the audience--said, "If [Alicia Kelly] doesn't light your fire, your wood's wet!" Her electrifying performance concludes the first half of the hour.

Immediately, Morticia introduces the "Greeting Portion" of the service, a time, she says, for the congregation to meet and greet one another. She invites strangers to introduce themselves. Morticia leads the way and begins to mingle with the crowd. Most people do not follow her example, but some do. Romances have started at the Gospel Hour, including some lasting ones. Morticia takes this portion of the service seriously.

> I really want them to meet each other. The greeting portion... I mean, it's very difficult for them to talk to each other. Nobody will go up and speak to a stranger. And at Drakes I'd make a point to go all the way around the entire room. I don't do that so much anymore. I really do try to push. . . .

Gospel music continues to play during the quarter-of-an-hour break. The service resumes with the crowd eagerly anticipating the "High Church Sing-Along--the highlight of the performance. Morticia, Ramona, Alicia, and guest singers sit on bar stools. They lead the crowd in favorite hymns like "When the Roll is Called Up Yonder," "Because He Lives, I Can Face Tomorrow," and "There is Power in the Blood of the Lamb." The volume, quality, and passion of the singing would be the envy of any church. During these hymns, participants occasionally close their eyes, some bow their heads. A few others raise their hands. "I really missed Gospel music," a tall, handsome son of a famous Pentecostal minister told us. "There is a part of me that likes to sing," Gary continued, "so now I sing Gospel music in a gay bar." Like so many at the Gospel Hour, Gary loves to sing, and he loves to sing *these* songs.

The Gospel Girls then invite individual members of the audience to sing a verse of "Amazing Grace." The ability of the audience participants covers a wide range. On Easter Sunday, 1995, a young man in a wheelchair sang. He chose the verse including the line "I once was lost but now I'm found, was blind but now I see." The bar fell silent straining to hear his weak voice. Later, Morticia DeVille confided that she wanted to cry because she found the young man's singing so sweet.

Although weeping is not *supposed* to happen in a gay bar, tears are no strangers at these services. We have seen men cry during the Gospel Hour, caught up in the music and the emotion of the evening. One Sunday, a young man began to sob after the mention of the many who have died of AIDS, sometimes abandoned by family at their deaths but often surrounded by friends. The man--who we assumed was mourning the loss of a loved one--was embraced and comforted by his circle of friends. He did not hide his tears. No one made any move to the door. The emotion was very public--like at a revival meeting.

Participants have reacted emotionally since Morticia began to sing gospel songs in the gay bars of Atlanta. She recalled how her first audience responded in 1984.

> I did a show at Doug's. And it was just me and this piano player. And it just went so well. All those leather men like, had tears, they were all singing, they were crying. It was, it was really moving. . . .

Each Gospel Hour concludes in the same fashion. Perched on a row of bar stools, the Gospel Girls lip-sync a rousing version of "Looking for a City." Members of the audience grab cocktail napkins to wave them as hankies back-and-forth, to-and-fro, round and round, in time with the music. The Gospel Girls mirror back the movements of the enthusiastic crowd. "See You in the Rapture," a contemporary song, follows immediately and is the grand finale. A dozen or more men take the stage with no prompting to form a chorus line. Among them are some who join every week. New people also join making the line several deep. The dancing--like the napkin routine--is campy. The theology behind the lyrics of "See You in the Rapture" and "Looking for a City" is explicitly eschatological. The heavenly city is a place where residents will never die, where they "will be with Jesus and their loved ones too. Where the Holy Spirit all [their] hopes renew." Both songs promise an imminent new order marked by what Turner called "communitas" (Turner 169, pp. 94-129). The eternal home "Looking for a City" envisions and the bliss "See You in the Rapture" eagerly awaits--like Turner's communitas--stand against all human works and ways. The songs describe an eternity of acceptance. Despite "all we have been through," participants await the day they will see Jesus and each other--including those taken by age, accident, and disease--in the air some sweet day." Contrary to current social structure, these hymns anticipate a time and space based on spontaneous relations among equal human beings.

We do not know the choreographic origins or theological referents of the hankie waving during "Looking for a City" or the line dancing during "See You in the Rapture." Neither was planned by the performers. When asked about them, Morticia admitted,

> I don't understand the napkins. The napkins were way before our time. They were other queens who did "Looking for a City" [in their drag shows] and they always waved napkins. I don't know where that came from.

She shed no more light on the line dancing but did volunteer that she was "just a little offended by the dance." Recalling the enthusiastic participation of the audience that previous Sunday, however, she began to soften. "But it is OK." Then, coming further around, admitted to perhaps a guilty pleasure in the enthusiastic participation of her audience. "I mean . . . Sunday, there was just an incredible amount of people up there!" Morticia and the Gospel Girls are not the only creators of the rituals of the Gospel Hour.

Morticia and Ramona explicitly address the crowd as they might in a church service. One often hears, "Say Amen, congregation!" and "Hang around for the next service." Morticia carries on a relaxed banter with insider references. She jokes about where she has eaten that day or how hard it is to find clothes. (She is a large woman.) They tell an ongoing joke about their old Gospel Bus. Sadly, it was lost in a fire. They plan a fund-raiser in order to replace it. One of the original Gospel Girls started the unfortunate blaze while she was frying chicken in the rear of the bus during a tour.

The bus never existed. Yet some "churchly" accouterments do. These have included faux stained glass windows, choir robes, bulletins, and guest choirs. The Gospel Girls regularly recognize ministers in the crowd. Some Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) pastors are regulars. The choir of a local MCC church sings once each month. They "pass the plate" to collect for their church building fund. On Palm Sunday the bar was decorated with fronds. Finally, of course, there are the hymns. The Gospel Girls go right up to the line of creating an explicitly religious environment. On occasion they call the bar a "cathedral." "If I had my way," Morticia told us, "when we moved to Prism from Drake's we would have had furniture, you know, church furniture. I thought I could make it myself. Spray paint it white."

The Gospel Girls and participants behave themselves during the hour. They sometimes openly enforce a standard of conduct on the audience. Morticia once chastised some rowdy participants with the rebuke, "s my Mamma used to say to me, 'Girl, you can give one hour a week back (to God)!'" They avoid the kind of bawdy sexual remarks typical of drag performances. Morticia, however, can be sexually suggestive but subtly. The hour never seems so sexually charged as when Alicia Kelly dances her ecstatic Black Pentecostal shouts. Yet none of this sexuality is overt. Like church, there may be undertones of sexuality, but the worship service is not the place to act on these feelings. One Sunday, a male stripper danced between services. The bar scene before, between, and after each performance is indistinguishable from any other drag show. In that regard, a male stripper was not out of place. Morticia said that while there is nothing wrong with strippers, they are inappropriate as part of the Gospel Hour or in proximity with it. She explained this to the crowd. The stripper never returned.

Restrained sexual expression is just one of the several informal rules at the Gospel Hour. The Gospel Girls never charge a cover. They never make fun of religious personalities. When the audience chooses to, however, they do not object. One recording popular with the audience captures Jimmy Swaggert giving a warm welcome to some unidentified religious group. He encourages them to hug, embrace, and show how they love each other. Participants enjoy the irony (or perhaps the ambiguity) of the liminal setting. Although they perform almost exclusively in bars, the Gospel Girls are careful not to drink in public. Seeing anyone drunk during the performance, for that matter, is rare although the bar does a brisk business. Almost no one cruises overtly. Audience members, however, get picked-up on occasion.

The two other bars in the immediate area attract their own crowds. One fills when the Gospel Hour ends. Many participants go there afterwards rather than stay at Prism after singing "See You in the Rapture." The transition from its concluding notes to dance music is abrupt but most people seem to prefer to go elsewhere to dance. They maintain the distinction between sacred

time and secular entertainment. One comment summarized the attitude of many participants. “I don’t normally do here what I do in a bar. I just feel funny about doing it . . . I don’t chase men when I come to the Gospel Girls. That’s not the purpose of coming here.” Participants separate from the straight world by coming to the gay bar. They actively set themselves apart from norms of the gay world too. They do this by making the choice to listen to and sing Gospel music.

The "ritual subject," according to Turner (Turner 1969, 95) has an "ambiguous" social role as he negotiates a new identity. We found no one with a more ambiguous identity than Morticia DeVille, the presider at the Gospel Hour. Our interview was the first time we had seen Morticia/Paul away from the Gospel Hour, out of role, as a man. It was a startling sight. It was only dimly, however, that we could see him. One small kitchen light illumined our way through Paul’s darkened home. We talked out on the enclosed porch. We sat on the floor among potted plants, exercise equipment, and shadows. Gone were the sequined gowns, blond wigs and makeup, faux stained glass windows, and stage lights. During our interview, Morticia/Paul described Paul as a bitch, Morticia as sweet and grandmotherly. Paul--not in drag, away from the bright lights of the stage--struck us as shy, almost withdrawn. Where, we wondered, was the bitchy queen? Part of our confusion may have stemmed from Morticia Deville’s sexual ambiguity and Paul’s ambivalence about the religious nature of the event. (We discuss this below.) This ambiguity shapes the liminal nature of the entire Gospel Hour.

In addition to multiple and ambiguous meanings, the phases of liminal ritual at the Gospel Hour leading to identity negotiation are more generalized than in Turner’s model. Plenty of nonreligious activity goes on. People come and go constantly. Many participants are out with their friends, having a good time. The performance dominates, but it does not monopolize. Participants and the singers alike combine behaviors learned in church and in bars. They have created a new model or template of identity mixing Evangelical and gay forms seamlessly.

The Participants: Identity Negotiation in a Modern Fragmented World

The first time visitor to the Gospel Hour immediately notices the predominantly young white crowd. A second glance, however, uncovers the approximate ten percent who are African Americans, along with a few Hispanics and Asians. On any given night ten to fifteen women attend. Perhaps twenty percent are more than fifty-five years of age. Several of those interviewed attested to this unique diversity. One person claimed that Gospel Hour participants were “not your normal S and M gays . . . you know ‘Stand and Model” gays.” One fourth of our informants insisted they were not “bar people.” Not only was this an older and more mature group, most did not have gym-perfected bodies. Many, in fact, were overweight, short, bald, or unattractive. The youngest, most handsome participants whom you might see in any popular gay bar often gather in small groups hugging the railing around the large stage. Directly in front, a group of regulars, many of them members of the MCC, enthusiastically sing along. Most of the audience crams into the space behind these clusters. A middle age mother of a gay man or a sympathetic minister may sit at the few small tables to one side of the bar. Morticia is careful to greet and introduce them and other special guests each week. When she does, the audience receives the newcomers warmly.

Many in the crowd are regulars. Some come, we suspect, because they want to be in a bar full of gay men. Some are visitors from out-of-town. (Variety in participants" familiarity, interest, and motives, of course, is common to most groups.) More unusual are those attracted by the beehive of activity who enter and become confused. A few of the uninitiated are further drawn in by the spectacle and stay. Others remain because of the familiarity of the music or fascination at the setting. Some participate to reconcile Christian belief and practice with modern urban gay identity in the safety of the gay bar, (a sort of cultural womb of the urban gay community).

Donald, a former Southern Baptist and middle-aged man with no current church affiliation, reported that "at the Gospel Hour we can feel safe, like we won't be condemned." Regular participation allows him and others to identify more openly as Christian to gay friends. "We can say, 'Come go to the Gospel Hour.'" We could never say 'Come go to church,'" he explained, "The Gospel Hour is fine because it's in a bar." "Going here I now can realize that I can be gay and still be with God," Mark, another regular participant, said. "God can reach out and say, 'I love you!'" For him, a man in is twenties from South Carolina, this was a significant realization. Mark was raised like many we spoke with as a Southern Baptist. He grew up knowing that he couldn't be both gay and Christian at the same time. By the time he came out he was an ordained minister for five years. Since then, Mark has left institutional religion. "I was very fearful of incorporating the two concepts together," he confided. "I was told by most organized religion that I was wrong and damned to Hell."

Mark was not the only one to believe and fear the message of non-acceptance and condemnation from American religious institutions. Nearly three-quarters of the respondents to the 1984 General Social Survey considered same-sex relations to be always or almost always wrong (Roof & McKinney, 1987, 213). Likewise, most Gospel Hour participants know all too well the historic incompatibility of Christianity and homosexuality. Their childhood and adult experiences of the church, its ministers, and indirectly of the Christian God are ample proof. What takes place at the Gospel Hour is not important for participants alone. Nonetheless, the Gospel Hour provides a model for the place of gay people in the church contrary to dominant Christian practices and beliefs.

For gays and lesbians of Evangelical Christian heritage, religious support and advocacy have been nearly nonexistent. A few tolerant churches and support groups exit. For the most part, however, gay Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians face hard choices. They must remain closeted in their conservative churches, switch into a liberal denomination, or leave organized Christianity all together (Thumma 1987, 125). With the two latter options, the gay Evangelical Southern man must leave the symbols, rituals, hymns, and religious culture in which he was raised behind. The Gospel Hour is another option. It offers a setting in which participants can be both gay and Christian openly. High drag (an art form to which urban gay men become acculturated) combines with the familiar and cherished worship style of participants" early religious formation.

Our informants report considerable early religious formation as Evangelical Christians. Six were raised as Southern Baptists, two Methodist, three Pentecostal or charismatic, one Presbyterian (one person did not answer). Evangelical churches and institutions educated and employed these men. Three attended Christian colleges, three seminaries or Bible Schools. Four spoke of being

“called” to the ministry. One person sang at Jerry Farwell’s Liberty University. Gary sang at Church of God congregations throughout the South. One person was currently a minister. Mark and another man were former clergy; a third was a former Southern Baptist missionary. The remainder reported their earliest religious formation in moderate and liberal Protestant Christian churches. We encountered few who were Catholics, Jews, non-Christians, or not religiously identified at all.

The MCC dominated informants” current church affiliation. The Universal Fellowship of the Metropolitan Community Churches is an independent denomination of approximately 290 churches and 30,000 members. Gay Christians created the denomination to fill a religious void for gay (and heterosexual) believers. MCC's founder, Troy Perry, was raised and served as a minister in a conservative Pentecostal church. The MCC as a whole reflects some of Perry’s theological heritage and early religious formation. Of the three MCC congregations in Atlanta, one borrows predominantly from Baptist worship, one from Methodist, and the eclectic third congregation from high Episcopal to low Methodist (Cotton 1996, 295). Unfamiliar or high church rituals or even the overt gay emphasis of MCC worship can deter gays from Evangelical backgrounds from participation and membership (Perry 1972, Warner 1994, Bauer 1976).

Six of those interviewed claimed the MCC to be “their church” (including an MCC associate pastor). Three others had attended an MCC congregation but no longer. Two of these said they “didn't connect” with the church, and one complained that it was “too ritualistic.” Two other informants attended Presbyterian and Episcopal churches where they were organists. (One of these persons pointed out that many gay church organists and choir directors attend the Gospel Hour regularly.) Except the six active MCC members, all informants reported little current involvement in churches.

Almost every person spoke of nonacceptance of gays and lesbians by religious groups. Many said they had experienced animosity from religious persons. Hostility is the normal, everyday posture of Christianity toward gays and lesbians. Our informants believe that gays have been, as one said, “shut off from Christianity.” “If you are gay, you are going to hell!” said another summarizing the prevailing message of the church of his youth. This older message sharply contrasts with what gay men see, hear, and do at the Gospel Hour.

> "I realized that the God that the Baptists preached hated me," Shannon--the former missionary--said one Sunday between services. "I was told for so long that [as a gay man] I was hated by God." Many told us of their personal negative experiences. “I always thought that God completely hated me. I was told, ‘You are gay and you are going to hell.” Another informant told of his church friends” reactions after he shared his sexual orientation with them. "My best friends in the world turned their backs on me," he remembered. In the face of overt rejection by the Christian community, many gays decide to have nothing further to do with religion. Gary described his response plainly but with some of the cadence of an Evangelical preacher. “I jumped out of the closet and slammed the door right behind me. I left in the closet my family, my religion, and my God.”

Surveys of Christians from every denomination, from the most liberal to the most conservative, confirm these recollections of intolerance and hurt. One denominational study found that 81

percent of the lay members and 68 percent of clergy thought the "homosexual lifestyle" was always or almost always wrong (Edion 1993, 174). George Gallup Jr. and Jim Castelli found only 19 percent of Evangelicals and 42 percent of mainline Protestants favor legalization of homosexual acts (Gallup and Castelli 1989, 190). Likewise, Roof and McKinney reported that an average of 64 percent of those surveyed from liberal denominations, 77 percent of those from moderate denominations, 79 percent from historically African American denominations, and 89 percent from conservative denominations thought homosexuality was always or almost always wrong. Sixty-nine percent of the Catholics surveyed agreed (Roof & McKinney 1989, 211?212). In a 1990 study of Southern Baptists, only two percent of respondents thought homosexuality was a "viable" Christian lifestyle (Ammerman 1990, 109). It is not surprising that nearly every study of gays and lesbians shows very low levels of participation in organized religion. In one study more than 50 percent responded that they were not religious in the conventional sense at all (Bell and Weinberg 1978). Various studies, on the other hand, report powerful childhood religious influences and a desire for spiritual meaning among gays and lesbians (Thumma 1987, 1991; Greenberg 1988, Boswell 1980; McNeill 1976).

In spite of almost always negative, frequently hostile, and occasionally violent responses to homosexuality in and outside the church, many at the Gospel Hour are still Christian--when construed in broad, cultural terms--although not active church members. For many Southern gay men, Evangelical churches provided important models of identity. Many at the Gospel Hour are still the choirboys, testifying and witnessing lay members, and even clerical leaders that they were in the Evangelical churches of their youth and young adult lives. As children and youths, these churches taught them their religious identity and helped prepare them to be (white) Christian men in the South. In the more diverse and tolerant cultural spaces of the city where they have learned to be gay, they are mastering how to be Christian again too--on their own terms.

Some Gospel Hour participants attended for the first time hostile, ambiguous, or conflicted about Christianity. Others still respect the church or cherish a childhood memory of it. For six of the thirteen interviewed, the Gospel Girls" performance initially seemed wrong, even disgusting. Ben, a former fundamentalist Southern Baptist who attended Jerry Farwell's University, recalled his first impression. "I thought it was hypocritical and blasphemous." Guy, deeply involved in the charismatic movement, left after his initial visit and did not return for six years. "The first time I came, I was just totally disgusted. "I thought, 'How could they be doing this in a gay place--singing gospel music and trying to be religious?'" Gregory recalled for us his first visceral reaction. "At first I was appalled. I just knew the ground was going to open up and we'd be sucked straight into hell . . . *but* after a while I began to notice the look of joy on people's faces."

These participants no longer find the Gospel Hour appalling or hypocritical. To the contrary, they spoke of feeling the presence of God. "I do, many times, sense the presence of the Spirit," one said. Another commented, "I never feel like I leave here without getting something out of this." The Gospel Hour stands in stark contrast to the message that gay life and Christianity are irreconcilable. The Gospel Hour does more than send a countervailing message. It enacts in a specific time and space a new model of gay Christian identity and a new template for cultural and social relations between Evangelicalism and gay life.

Half of those we interviewed attended the drag show regularly for several years. One person missed only four times in three years. We think our informants reflect the audience on any given Sunday. We estimate almost half are very committed, constituting the core participants. Another twenty to thirty percent attend occasionally, about once each month. In addition, a fifth to a third are marginal. This group attends infrequently, only once, or to cruise the crowd. A marginal group, these men likely view the Gospel Hour as pure entertainment, an oddity, or even disturbing. One of us overheard the conversation of three first-timers who walked in during the middle of the performance unknowingly. After looking confused and uncomfortable, one fellow turned to his friends and implored them, "Let's get out of here!"

For our informants, the drag show is a moving spiritual experience. "Everybody gets something out of (the Gospel Hour)," Gregory said in his subtle Southern accent, "even if it is just that God doesn't hate them. It is a good and positive outlet." "It is a form of ministry," another maintained. Paul, however, is reluctant to talk about his work as Morticia DeVille as anything approximating a religious calling. In fact, he explicitly denies it. Paul, who earns his living as Morticia, speaks of her as a different person, someone apart and different from himself. Morticia is "jovial and funny and loving and trying to be grandmotherish" in Paul's description. He acknowledges that the *character* of Morticia DeVille might be ministerial, but not the person we call Paul. Other Gospel Girls and regular participants, however, are not hesitant to claim that Paul is following his calling. One Sunday, Morticia read a card from a MCC minister, a regular at the services. "You wear makeup and a wig," he wrote to her. "I wear a robe. But we both serve the same person."

That Morticia does wear a dress, however, is essential to the ritual. Drag is an ambiguous art. The drag performer embodies a picture of the gay man--as the feminine--rejected by many gays. Drag erases symbolically in a particular sub-cultural setting the gender lines created and maintained symbolically and socially in the dominant culture. Urban gay men must rehearse these daily in some segments of their lives. They are increasingly free in the American urban milieu, however, to ignore dominant gender lines in others.

The Gospel Hour functions differently for each person, and sometimes on multiple levels. For core participants it was their church. One said, "I always call it "coming to church" . . . my friends and I call it "coming to services."" Another participant stated, "It is just an extension of church." Some participants have attended the Gospel Hour regularly for years, but have not stepped foot in a church.

For others the Gospel Hour gave them an opportunity for spiritual reconnection and restoration. Shannon (the former missionary) said, "Many (gays) are scared to go back to church because [it] turned them away. This is their one touch with God." James, a Presbyterian from New Jersey who is an Episcopal church organist, stated, "Gay anger against God is dealt with here." Hurt too. A gay man visiting from Minnesota broke down during the singing. Regaining some composure, he confessed, "I can still identify with God, there is hope for me, a backslidden Christian. . . . I really want to get involved in church again," he tearily told Ramona. The comments of other participants echoed this sentiment.

> The Gospel Hour has helped me find an outlet to develop my spirituality.

> It showed me a void. A need in my life . . . it created a hunger for (church) again. The Gospel Hour made me aware of the longing I had for a relationship with God that I had turned away from.

For these and other informants the Gospel Hour offers fellowship and a sense of community. James, the organist, stated plainly, "It's a time of fellowship, that is what it is all about." Ben, the former fundamentalist, added, "I look forward to this as much as I do Sunday morning. . . . This is the fellowship portion." Finally, Mark, the former Southern Baptist preacher, found intimacy and an acceptance of his spirituality. "I could talk to others about what I feel and it was at the deepest, most intimate spiritual level." At the Gospel Hour new norms and new classifications of social relations take hold.

The Gospel Hour is most overtly a structured time for singing the old Gospel songs. The act of singing these hymns has its own power, fulfilling a deep need created during early years of church life for our informants (Clark 1993, 105-6). One reported that part of him likes to sing, another attested that "music communicates in a way that words cannot." Some missed Gospel music because singing it reminded them of home and family. Singing Gospel music, Shannon said, is "my way of showing my religion, my relationship to God." Singing these songs, he continued, "is when I feel closest to God." Guy, the former charismatic, told us that "the music makes you feel real good about yourself."

Above all, almost every informant found the combination of gay and Christian cultural templates the most compelling feature of the Gospel Hour. It is a time and space they can be fully gay and altogether evangelical--on their own terms. Informants saw it as "our own place," a place of security and divine acceptance. Mark exclaimed, "I am able to be myself . . . I can do both [be gay and Christian] and be happy!" Shannon, his friend, explained,

> Here were people who knew 'the songs" . . . knew what I had been raised with. I could identify all of a sudden. I was in a bar and it was not a sexual thing, not a social thing, it was a spiritual thing. . . . I could talk to others about what I feel and it was at the deepest and most intimate spiritual level.

Conclusion: Gay Liminality & Christian Identity

This ethnography has described how an urban gay bar becomes each week a religious space. The Gospel Hour transforms the bar into a liminal setting. High drag blends with Southern Evangelical Christian music and song to create a new model or template for the relationship between being Christian and gay. Some embrace the exemplary template enacted ritually at this gay drag gospel cabaret to negotiate their identity as Christian and gay.

The strength of ethnographic work is not to discover the single answer to a research question. It is to uncover the multiple levels of meaning in an event. Ethnography provides a thick enough description of a phenomenon to make it available for others and their interpretations. There are different experiences being had and multiple levels of meaning engaged at the Gospel Hour. That is what makes the event so compelling. The reality of multiple experiences makes the ethnographic method ideal for the Gospel Hour.

The Gospel Hour provides a model of identity and a template for social relations. But the liminal space it creates is not a simple egalitarian communitas. It is a structured social setting, an institution with its own norms. Its ritual enactments of liminal identities and social roles are contingent on a wider social and institutional surround. In modern cities like Atlanta residents have the opportunity to create and sustain liminal rituals--and to choose from among them. Liminality may comprise an entire ritual event. It may involve an entire segment of an audience. The models and templates created may be more durable than fleeting communitas. Such durability makes ritual a richer source for normative, exemplary behaviors and practices. It also demonstrates that liminality, although ritually generated, is institutionally sustained in wider settings. The Gospel Hour ritually creates a "make believe" picture of gay and Christian social relations and turns the make believe into reality by replacing dominant norms with its own and institutionalizing them.

The Gospel Hour provides a safe haven for gays coming from Evangelical and other Christian traditions. The songs remind them of the comfort they once found in their faith. The drag performance marks the space and time as uniquely gay. Our informants used cultural models extant in gay and Evangelical sub-cultures as tools to negotiate a new identity and a new set of relationships with Christianity, gay culture, and even God. The Gospel Hour fuses both gay and Evangelical realities. It is gay and Christian, cabaret and revival.

At the Gospel Hour life imitates art.

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