“God Save Us Nelly Queens”: Religion and Homophile Activism in the Council on Religion and the Homosexual, 1964 - 1968

In 2009, the Barna Research Group conducted an extensive phone survey to explore the religious and spiritual beliefs of gay and lesbian adults. The study, which had over 9,000 participants, provided “surprising insights” into the personal faith beliefs of gay and lesbian Americans. The introduction to the research summary notes the increasing national attention on issues of gay and lesbian rights, and asserts that, “In the wake of those controversies and the spotlight aimed at gays, Americans have developed numerous assumptions about the lives of the homosexual population.” One of these stereotypes is that homosexuals are secular or even anti-religious, as they are often in public disagreement with the political goals of religious conservatives. Surprisingly, the study reveals that these assumptions are far from reality. In fact, 60% of gay adults described faith as “very important” in their life, and 58% professed a current “personal commitment to Jesus Christ.” These results seem to defy many modern perceptions of the gay community, and challenge the prevailing image of religion and the Church as constant antagonists of gay civil rights.

1 “God Save Us Nelly Queens” was an anthem of the San Francisco gay bar community in the early 1960s sung to the tune of “God Save the Queen.” José Sarria, a famous drag performer at the Black Cat, made the tune well known within the homosexual bar crowd as a song on community empowerment.
3 The Barna Group, Ltd., 1.
4 The Barna Group, Ltd., 1.
While conducted very recently, this study has implications for the historical study of the Gay Rights Movement.\footnote{I use the term “Gay Rights Movement” to refer to the overall movement for gay and lesbian equality in the United States from the 1950s to the present. The term “Homophile Movement” refers more specifically to the tactics and rhetoric of the movement from the 1950s to early 1960s, and the “Gay Liberation Movement” refers to the post-Stonewall (1969-) forms of activism.} The historiography of the movement does not generally focus on any spiritual aspect of the gay community, and it does not discuss how religion could serve as a forum for discussing civil rights. As this modern study suggests, there has, in fact, been a history of spiritual community and religious-based social activism within the Gay Rights Movement. This history is exemplified in an organization called the Council on Religion and the Homosexual (CRH), which is one of the most important and understudied organizations of the Gay Rights Movement. The CRH provides an example of a strong relationship between religious and homosexual communities, and challenges the secular focus of current historiography.

The CRH was founded in 1964 by a group of Protestant clergy and homophile activists in San Francisco, who wanted to address the growing divide between homosexuals and the Church. Unlike other homosexual organizations at this time, the Council combined the ideals of spirituality and religious community with a passion for social activism. Although the CRH only lasted for four years (1964 to 1968), it served a crucial role in the growth of the gay movement in San Francisco. \textbf{As a coalition of clergy and homosexual activists, the CRH was in a unique position to address the multi-faceted struggles of gay individuals, because it tackled the difficult issues of spiritual and emotional isolation, lack of community, rejection from mainstream society, as well as trampled civil rights. In contrast to our modern preconceptions, the CRH illustrates that alliances between the Church and the gay community are possible, and that religion can and has played a key role in the fight for homosexual civil rights in the United States.}\footnote{I use the term “Gay Rights Movement” to refer to the overall movement for gay and lesbian equality in the United States from the 1950s to the present. The term “Homophile Movement” refers more specifically to the tactics and rhetoric of the movement from the 1950s to early 1960s, and the “Gay Liberation Movement” refers to the post-Stonewall (1969-) forms of activism.}
In order to create a comprehensive and rich understanding of the Council on Religion and the Homosexual, it is important to first explore the historical context of the organization and the harsh realities of life for gay men and women in the 1950s and 1960s. Although gay men and women faced countless social and historical barriers, many came together to form important social and activist communities, which would become crucial to the later formation of the CRH. Liberal Protestant clergy united with these homophile organizations for the first time at the White Memorial Retreat, where discussion and attitudes revealed a revolutionary new community of spiritual openness and social activism. This event, in turn, led to the permanent creation of the CRH, whose primary goals and purposes rested on the ideals of communication, education, and civil rights. These goals were ultimately put to the test in the aftermath of police harassment of their first fundraising event, the Mardi Gras Ball in 1965. The huge outcry and strong response from the clergy after the event solidified the CRH’s crucial role in the history of Gay Rights Movement.

Context: The Homosexual Experience in the 1950s and 1960s

The 1969 Stonewall Riots in New York City brought the issues of homosexual rights onto a national stage. After three days of clashes between gay people and the police, many Americans realized that they could no longer ignore the sexual minority in their midst. But the events at Stonewall, which historians generally consider the beginning of the Gay Liberation Movement, did not suddenly erupt out of nowhere – in fact, there is a long and rich history of homosexual relationship building and activism in the United States. Although this “pre-Stonewall” history is much less well known in the public sphere, professional historians have already done considerable research into the formation of gay communities and social activism in
the U.S. before 1969. The Council on Religion and the Homosexual was an important organization of the pre-Stonewall period of the Gay Rights Movement.

In the decades before Stonewall, the gay population in the United States was psychologically stigmatized, socially isolated, and legally oppressed, even in the famously liberal city of San Francisco. As lesbian activist Phyllis Lyon remembers, “It was just a very scary time. People were deeply in the closet.” Although we think of the 1960s as a time of “sexual revolution,” there were still many reasons for homosexuals to be afraid of exposure and remain hidden from mainstream society in the 1950s and 1960s. A vast majority of mental health professionals believed that homosexuality was a form of mental illness, rather than a healthy expression of human sexuality. In fact, at this time homosexuality was still classified by the American Psychological Association as a curable mental illness, and techniques to correct homosexual behavior remained in the official Diagnostic and Statistical Manual until 1973. Branded as deviants with psychological issues, homosexuals were often isolated from mainstream society, and exposure as a homosexual almost certainly led to ostracism by one’s family and peers. Although homosexuality was viewed as an illness, paradoxically this “illness” was illegal in most states with strict laws against sodomy and other vague sexual laws. In addition, police across the country found many additional ways to arrest sexually active homosexuals with charges like vagrancy or lewd and lascivious conduct. The social stigma of

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6 John D’Emilio’s book *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970*, was the first major historical work to look at the history of the homosexuals before Stonewall. Since his book was released in 1983, many more historians have looked into similar topics, but with a more narrow, often geographic, focus. Other notable works include: *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of Gay Male World, 1890 – 1940*, by George Chauncey; *Gay L.A.: A History of Sexual Outlaws, Power Politics, and Lipstick Lesbians*, by Lillian Faderman and Stuart Timmons; *Wide Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965*, by Nan Alamilla Boyd; and *Gay Seattle: Stories of Exile and Belonging*, by Gary Atkins.


homosexuality, isolation from mainstream society, and the threat of arrest were all real and present dangers for homosexuals living in San Francisco at the time the Council on Religion and the Homosexual was founded.

When the first homosexual activists began to organize in the fifties and sixties, mainstream psychology identified homosexuality as a form of mental illness or deviance. In June 1964, *Life* magazine published an extensive exposé on homosexuality in America, and one of the articles addressed the many psychological theories about the cause of homosexuality. Most of the psychologists interviewed agreed on the fact that homosexuality was indeed a mental illness, and one psychoanalyst, Dr. Irving Bieber, asserted that “homosexuals are psychologically sick: the emotionally disturbed offspring of emotionally disturbed parents.” ⁹ Although not all psychologists shared this view, most agreed, “that homosexuality represents a form of arrested development.” ¹⁰ Early gay activists, including those in the CRH, had to face the societal prejudices, stereotypes, and isolation that grew out of the idea that gay people were somehow mentally ill.

In addition to the stigma of mental illness created by psychologists, gay men and lesbians in this time period often faced prejudice based on the moral and religious judgments of mainstream society. John D’Emilio, one of the most prominent historians of the Gay Rights Movement, observes that well into the twentieth century, “religious teachings still shaped [Americans’] views of sexuality and sexual behavior to a large degree.” ¹¹ D’Emilio traces religious condemnation of homosexuality back to the intensely Puritanical beliefs of the first American colonies, where ministers set the precedent for Christians to quote Old Testament

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¹⁰ Havemann, 77.
verses identifying homosexuality as a “sin.” D’Emilio writes, “Men who lay with men, the book of Leviticus warned, committed an ‘abomination; they shall surely be put to death; their blood shall be upon them.’ Paul considered lustful behavior between men and between women ‘vile passions… against nature.’”

Many of these ideas continued to inform general understandings of homosexuality well into the 20th century. In a 1966 book called *An Introduction to Christianity*, the authors contended that sex belonged solely within the institution of marriage “for procreation and rearing of children.” The authors continued by offering a corollary to their traditional view of sexuality: “Masturbation, sodomy, and homosexuality are immediately condemned as sinful or reflections of mental difficulties, since they pervert the normal end of sex.” This narrow conception of human sexuality informed the personal beliefs of many Americans well into the 20th century, and created many barriers of understanding between the Church and gay people.

Religious and moral condemnation of homosexuality added yet another layer to the social stigma of homosexuality in America, and created a culture in which, “Exposure promised punishment and ostracism.” Individuals who were exposed, or who made the decision to live openly as a homosexual, faced social and emotional isolation from their family and friends. Lesbian activist Billie Talmajj remembered one young woman who came out as a lesbian to her Southern family and faced particularly awful results: “They set up a gravestone with her name on it. They declared her dead and announced her death in the newspaper in an obituary. She lived with that for the rest of her life.” This element of moral judgment, often cloaked in religious rhetoric, created an atmosphere of social ostracism and misunderstanding that the activists of the

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14 Anderson and Fischer, *An Introduction to Christianity*, 207.
CRH had to confront in the work of their organization. To combat the prevalent moral condemnation of homosexuals, clergy in the CRH would turn the accepted theological doctrines upside down and offer new readings of the Bible to support homosexuality as a moral way of life.

Homosexuals in the 1950s and 60s were seen as either mentally ill, morally corrupt, or some combination of the two; therefore, gay men and lesbians living in San Francisco faced many obstacles in creating a community of their own. Since they could not develop a community within the constructs of mainstream institutions, they first achieved social acceptance and comradery within the clandestine world of gay bars. In 1964, *Life* magazine noted that, “In the city of San Francisco, which rates as the ‘gay capital,’ there are more than 30 bars that cater exclusively to homosexual clientele.”17 In the early 1960s, the most well known gay bars were the Black Cat, the Beige Room, Mona’s, the Paper Doll, and the Jumping Frog. These bars, which traced their collective history back to the racy days of the California Gold Rush, each had a special atmosphere and client base. Many other gay bars didn’t last more than eighteen months because of heavy policing and legal oppression, but the open-minded and theatrical way of life in San Francisco assured the gay bars a continuing place in the city’s culture. Historian Nan Alamilla Boyd argues that these gay bars “also functioned as community centers where gay, lesbian, and transgendered people could make friends, find lovers, get information, or plan activities.”18 The gay bar scene was the initial spark of social awareness for the homosexual community in San Francisco, and the strong ties formed in these public spaces would eventually lead to the formation of many homophile organizations, including the Council on Religion and the Homosexual.

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Early Homophile Activism and Origins of the CRH

As social awareness increased, some homosexuals sought to move their community beyond the doors of the bar. In the 1950s and early 1960s, like-minded gay men and lesbians formed homophile organizations. Life magazine’s exposé referred to the growing movement and discussed some of the specific organizations – most of which operated out of the country’s “gay capital,” San Francisco. The article attempted to introduce these organizations to mainstream American society, saying, “A recent phenomenon in American society, the homophile groups actively conduct programs to increase public understanding of homosexuality in the hope of getting more sympathetic treatment, particularly from law enforcement agencies.”19 The organizational purposes expressed here are accurate, but some of these homophile organizations, notably the Mattachine Society and Daughters of Bilitis (DOB), had existed since the early 1950s (more than ten years before the article was written). These organizations and others sought to “promote the acceptance of homosexuality by society”20 and to help people within their community to deal with problems unique to the homosexual experience. By 1964, San Francisco was home to not only to Mattachine and the DOB, but also to the Society for Individual Rights (SIR), League for Civil Education (LCE), and the Tavern Guild. The homosexual activists who joined liberal clergy to form the CRH were all from these organizations, and they therefore came to the discussion with the specific mindset of homophile activists. Within the context of the CRH, they pursued the homophile agenda of mainstream education and acceptance, as well as personal and emotional growth of individual homosexuals in a hostile society.

The CRH did not begin as a formal or permanent organization. It grew out of a three-day retreat of socially conscious clergy and homophile activists at the White Memorial Retreat House

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20 Welch, 71.
in Mill Valley, California. The consultation was conceived by Reverend Ted McIlvenna, a young pastor at Glide Memorial Church in San Francisco and director of the Glide Young Adult Project. In his work with young San Franciscans, “Ted met persons for whom homosexuality created problems… [and] learned that many homosexuals sensed a sharp division between themselves and the church.”21 The thriving bar culture and the subsequent creation of socially conscious homophile organizations gave McIlvenna a concrete place to look for homosexual allies. McIlvenna and Glide Foundation director Lewis Durham approached local homophile organizations with the idea for the retreat, and then worked alongside representatives of the DOB, Mattachine Society, LCE, and Tavern Guild to organize and plan the full consultation.22 The retreat, which lasted from May 31 to June 2, 1964, combined formal presentations on homosexuality, theology, law reform, and personal experience with small group discussions about pressing issues. In all, twenty-nine people attended the retreat – sixteen members of the clergy and thirteen representatives of the homophile community. The clergy came from a wide spectrum of Protestant denominations, including Lutheran, Methodist, Episcopal, United Church of Christ, and Quaker. Homophile activists included both men and women – mostly representatives of the four San Francisco homophile organizations (DOB, Mattachine, Tavern Guild, LCE).23 The participants in the diverse group sought to learn about each other and discuss issues pertinent to the broken relationship between gay people and the church.

The White Memorial Retreat took place in a time when it was unpopular and dangerous to come out as a homosexual, and it was incredibly rare to see a public alliance between the

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Church and gay activists. However rare this coalition may seem in historical context, both clergymen and homophile supporters had many reasons to attend the White Memorial Retreat. The focus on religion, community, and social problems spoke to the specific tactics and philosophy of the growing San Francisco homophile movement. Guy Strait, the founder of the League for Civil Education, explained that in 1964 the movement was “devoted to the improvement and status of the homosexual.”24 The retreat offered a possible alliance with one of the biggest institutions in mainstream culture – the Protestant Church. But the possibility of developing a publicly beneficial relationship with the Church was not the only draw for homophile activists. The specific nature of the discussion addressed many of the personal and social problems for gay people in that time period. The clergy wanted to focus on the profound issues of spiritual isolation, community building, and civil rights, and all of these themes strongly appealed to the homophile activists.

In her presentation to the group, DOB activist Billie Talmajj conceded, “The homosexual may be more than a little defensive. We are also more than a little prejudiced.”25 Talmajj was not placing full blame on the homosexual community or saying its members were prejudiced without reason, but rather acknowledging the animosity of many gays towards the church. These feelings were a direct result of the Church calling the homosexual “‘unnatural’ for eons,”26 and the subsequent exclusion of gay people from the accepted community of the Church. Despite the prevalent religious-based prejudice against gay men and women during this time, Talmajj found that “Many of our people said they missed going to church… They said they still believed in

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God, but the church no longer provided a community for them.”

Not only did they feel excluded from the actual institution of the church, but many homosexuals also “felt a real spiritual aridity, a real blankness.”

Participation in the White Memorial Retreat offered the homophile community an opportunity to establish a positive relationship with local churches and clergy. Some activists, including Talmajj, hoped these relationships could help spiritual homosexuals find acceptance into church communities and provide an important outlet for the missing religious aspect of their lives.

Many homophile activists also viewed the retreat as an important opportunity to establish lines of communication and to build a strong community – a goal that grew directly out of the profound isolation of homosexual individuals and groups in society. In the early 1960s, disparate homophile organizations slowly came to recognize the need for communication and community within the movement. Phyllis Lyon, one of the founders of the DOB, acknowledged, “I don’t think the idea of a community ever occurred to any of us in the ‘40s and ‘50s.”

Her partner and DOB co-founder Del Martin also added that the community they ultimately envisioned was not just a loose social affiliation, but instead a connected, aware, and communicative group of people. She reiterated, “My sense of community is much broader.”

The entire basis of the conference was to establish meaningful communication and substantive relationships in order to create a rich, understanding community. The theme for discussion on the first day was focused on the idea: “How we view each other – and how we hope the relationships might be.”

The emphasis on community, communication, and creation of meaningful relationships were key elements of the retreat that appealed to the homophile activists.

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27 Billie Talmajj, interviewed in Making History, 78.
28 Talmajj in Making History…, 78.
29 Boyd, Wide Open Town, 148
30 Boyd, 149.
It seems even more improbable that members of the Protestant clergy would participate in the retreat, let alone be its primary organizers. But since many of the ministers lived in the heart of San Francisco, a city commonly referred to as a “gay Mecca,” they were in constant contact with homosexuals and became increasingly aware of the issues gay people faced in their daily lives. Historian John D’Emilio astutely notes, “In San Francisco, where homosexuality had achieved a greater visibility than elsewhere, it was perhaps natural that a portion of this social concern would be spent on behalf of the gay rights cause.”32 In his work with the youth of San Francisco, Rev. Ted McIlvenna found a shocking amount of homosexual runaways who had been “driven to street hustling by the hostility and ostracism of their parents and peers.”33 Throughout the dialogue in Mill Valley, one of the clergymen’s primary goals was to gain a better understanding of the homosexual experience so they could better minister to the needs of the entire San Francisco population. Clergymen felt that there was a large community of homosexuals who needed, even wanted, the support of the Church, but they felt ignorant of the central issues facing gay individuals.

Although the homophile activists and clergy came to the conference with different needs and expectations, they did share one common goal. Both groups wanted to reach a better understanding of the civil rights violations experienced by San Francisco’s gay population and to find some sort of solution for the problem. Reverend Robert Cromey, an Episcopal minister, was deeply involved in the struggle for African-American civil rights34 and saw an obvious connection to the issue of homosexual civil rights. In an interview with the author, Rev. Cromey recalled, “I became involved in homosexual activism as a direct result of the civil rights

33 D’Emilio, 192.
34 Cromey marched with Martin Luther King, Jr. in Selma, AL (1964) and also served on the San Francisco Board of the NAACP.
movement… The step was seeing the civil rights issue for gays and lesbians was all part of the same movement for justice.”

Not everyone came to the White Memorial Retreat with this background in Civil Rights protest, but all of the attendees were interested in finding solutions for the problems faced by the gay community. Guy Strait, founder of the League for Civil Education, gave a formal presentation on the oppression of homosexuals under California law. He also paralleled the gay experience to the African-American struggle, and pushed for a heightened awareness of gay civil rights issues, as well as collaboration with heterosexual activists. Strait asserted, “Why should the heterosexual be concerned? Because this legislation isolates one group of people who can no more change their nature than a Negro can change the color of his skin.”

Both groups joined the conference because of their focus on the immediate, and nationally relevant, issues of homosexual civil rights and the search for a course of action to fight isolation and oppression.

Throughout the discussion of civil rights and the comparison of the African-American and the homosexual movements, there was an implicit acknowledgement of the naturalness of homosexuality. Strait’s comparison of homosexuality to skin color was a clear assertion that homosexuality is not a choice, but is an innate, natural expression of human sexuality. Many of the Protestant clergy also came to the retreat with this understanding of homosexuality, or developed this understanding after working directly with homosexuals. Founding CRH member Rev. Robert Cromey devoted an entire chapter of his book, *In God’s Image*, to the discussion of the naturalness of homosexuality. He explains, “Homosexuality is not something about which people make a choice. They just *are* that way. Homosexuality is not a sin, sickness, perversion,

35 Robert Cromey, email to the author, March 8, 2011.
or abnormality. It is just the way people are created.”37 This idea of naturalness had important ramifications for the retreat members’ discussion of civil rights, and it signaled the development of revolutionary theological teachings that emerged with the official foundation of the organization. The discussants at the retreat asserted the foundational idea of homosexuality as natural and healthy, and this underlying recognition influenced the themes and topics of discussion at the White Memorial Retreat.

Themes of Discussion at the White Memorial Retreat

The overarching purposes for both homophile activists and Protestant clergy to attend the consultation defined the themes of discussion throughout the White Memorial Retreat.

Communication was focused primarily on education and acceptance. Participants explored the perceptions and failures of the Church, legitimacy of homosexuality as a natural and spiritual lifestyle, the Bible and theological doctrines, and civil rights issues for homosexuals. Ted McIlvenna began his presentation with a call to leave behind the social prejudices of the outside world and truly work towards constructive understanding of one another as human beings. He challenged his audience of homosexuals and clergy alike: “Forget who you represent. We represent the human race. Let’s start there.”38 On this note, twenty-nine men and women dove into conversations that sought to break apart preconceptions about sexuality, religion, and society and tried to reach a new understanding of these complex relationships.

One of the major topics of discussion at the White Memorial Retreat centered on the existing divide between homosexuals and the Church, and more specifically on homosexuals’ negative perceptions of the Church. In his address to the group, Don Lucas was the first to suggest that by ignoring homosexuals, the Church was not living up to its true purpose. He said

38 Ted McIlvenna in “Official Report” by Kuhn, 1.
unequivocally, “By failing to recognize the homosexual and serve him, the church is failing to serve the community.” ³⁹ Lucas chose not to attack the Church itself, but rather identified what he saw as an element of hypocrisy in their mission. He suggested that there was true potential for the Church to become a constructive place of community and acceptance for homosexuals, but that this potential was far from being fully realized. Surprisingly, similar rhetoric also emerged from some clergy members. In his book, In God’s Image, Rev. Robert Cromey reflected on the role of the Church in society, and strongly asserted, “The Church can only fully be the Church when it is totally inclusive, when it is loving, when it is doing everything possible to include all people into its membership.” ⁴⁰ In his mind, the Church was supposed to represent the full spectrum of humanity, and therefore “all people” had to include homosexuals and other minority groups. The idea that the Church was somehow not living up to its potential was a big part of the discussion, but some people also challenged actual theological doctrines. Don Lucas asserted, “Church doctrine is out-dated and should be brought up to date in the light of modern science⁴¹ and knowledge.” ⁴² Over the course of the retreat, participants devoted much of their discussion to the failings of the Church in terms of addressing homosexuality. In admitting the failure of organized Christianity to address the problems of homosexuals, the clergy and homophile activists sought to redefine the community of the Church and to utilize religion as a platform for civil rights discussion.

Beyond the physical institution of the Church, much of the conversation at the retreat addressed the spirituality of homosexuals and the legitimacy of their lifestyle in the eyes of God.

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⁴⁰ Cromey, In God’s Image, 45.
⁴¹ Lucas is most likely referring to the work of Dr. Alfred Kinsey and Dr. Evelyn Hooker, whose groundbreaking studies of homosexuals and human sexuality challenged the mainstream scientific belief that homosexuality was a form of mental illness.
No one pushed for a total rejection of Christianity, and some homosexual activists actually emphasized their fundamental connection to religion. As Don Lucas closed his address, he said, “The homosexual is a human being. He has a soul and Christ Consciousness just as do all human beings.”\textsuperscript{43} In this statement, Lucas emphasized the equality of humanity before God, and rested on an underlying assumption that a person can be a homosexual and a Christian. During the opening session, Rev. McIlvenna set the tone of the discussion by fully acknowledging the spiritual equality of heterosexuals and homosexuals. In his opening comments he expressed the belief: “Neither the heterosexuals nor the homosexuals because of their sex identification were acknowledged to have special access to truth or righteousness.”\textsuperscript{44} He openly acknowledged the spiritual legitimacy of gay men and lesbians, and tried to create an environment where homosexual activists and clergy could address one another as spiritual equals. Although the mainstream Church had often used theological doctrines to dismiss or condemn homosexuality, the participants at the retreat chose not to reject Christian ideology, but rather used the open forum at the White Mountain Retreat to assert the spiritual awareness and legitimacy of homosexuals.

Many clergy were also interested in learning about the everyday problems of homosexuals in San Francisco so they could better minister to them as a group. The educational aspect of the retreat came into play as Guy Strait, of the League for Civil Education, enumerated the various aspects of homosexual legal oppression. During his informal presentation, Strait explained the logistics of discriminatory enforcement and antiquated laws against various sex acts. He first explained the California state law against “wandering,” and how it was used to

\textsuperscript{43} Don Lucas in “Official Report” by Kuhn, 11.
\textsuperscript{44} Ted McIlvenna in “Official Report” by Kuhn, 15.
“keep suspected homosexuals off the streets.”

But even more terrifying for homosexuals was the threat of actually being arrested for a sex crime, which had the potential to force them out of the closet and subsequently ruin their reputation. California’s sex laws were extensive, and Strait explained that sodomy, oral sex, and masturbation were all technically illegal in the state. He concluded his discussion of these laws, saying, “If everyone who violated one of California’s sex laws was arrested, there would not be anyone left to guard the jails.”

Although Strait’s presentation only scratched the surface of the legal oppression of gay people in San Francisco, it was clearly aimed at the clergy in attendance who had limited knowledge of the legal and civil rights issues at stake. The discussion of practical and legal issues highlights the educational aspect of the retreat, and shows the homophile effort to further the social justice side of the gay movement.

The open dialogue and communication during the White Memorial Retreat revealed many of the pressing issues that homosexuals faced, as well as the major causes of friction between the gay community and the Church. Billie Talmajj recalled that on the first night “it was impossible to go up the stairs to your room because people were on the stairs just talking together… The communication was tremendous.” Episcopal minister Robert Cromey remembered that during the discussions, “Everyone got to speak. We all shared our stories, fears, and hopes.” The retreat activists certainly accomplished the goal of communication, but, in the wake of such passionate discussion, they came to realize there was a need for further action to remedy the host of problems they had discussed. At the end of the three days, all participants agreed that they had established important relationships and reached a new level of

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47 Talmajj in Making History, 79.
48 Robert Cromey, email to the author, March 8, 2011.
understanding, but still had a long way to go in reaching social acceptance. In the final conversation of the retreat, “All groups agreed that they had found a meeting ground in their common search for meaning and requested continuing conversation.”\(^{49}\) The avenues of communication had been opened, but many discussions had only ended in more questions.

**Official Founding: The Birth of the Council on Religion and the Homosexual**

The communication would continue, but discussion was soon to take place during the monthly meetings of an established organization. At the end of the White Memorial Retreat, the core group of local San Franciscans made the decision to start a permanent organization in order to continue the discussions and address the pressing issues of the homosexual community in San Francisco. The first official meeting of the new organization took place on July 7, 1964, and the first important order of business was to choose a name for the group. According the minutes of that first meeting, “It was felt that the group should have a permanent name… The name which was finally chosen, after many various suggestions, was ‘COUNCIL ON RELIGION AND THE HOMOSEXUAL.’”\(^{50}\) This name turned out to be revolutionary in itself, as “The creation of the CRH marks the first time in American history that an organization used the word ‘homosexual’ in its title.”\(^{51}\) Homophile groups had traditionally chosen names that publicly concealed the homosexual element of their organizations, such as the Mattachine Society and Daughters of Bilitis. But, as historian Christopher Agee notes, “by this point the gay and lesbian organizers felt comfortable with their own professional image and protected by the legitimizing presence of clergymen.”\(^{52}\) The founding members, most of whom had attended the White Memorial Retreat,

\(^{52}\) Agee, “Gayola,” 485.
acknowledged the power of this new alliance between clergy and homosexuals and pronounced
the exact purposes of their organization in its very name.

With the official founding of the CRH, the homophile and clergy activists began to create
a more articulate and cohesive vision for the future goals of their organization. The Council
released a set of nine goals and functions, all under the primary objective: “To promote a
continuing dialogue between the religious community and homosexuals.”53 The following nine
points all related to the overarching theme of open communication, and using this
communication as a means of achieving positive social awareness and legal justice for
homosexuals. According to a pamphlet released by the Council in 1968, “The CRH has
addressed itself to two major problems confronting homosexuals as a group and society as a
whole; the first, isolation; and the second, education.”54 The CRH saw communication as its
strongest weapon in confronting the isolation of individual homosexuals, as well as the isolation
of the entire homosexual community from mainstream society. In this way, they envisioned a
grassroots movement that would address the underlying problems of ignorance and fear that
propagated the problems of the homosexuals. In his book Contacts Desired, historian and
sociologist Martin Meeker analyzes the need of homosexuals in the twentieth century to make
contact with one another and society at large. He suggests that, “the most stubborn problem
faced by homosexual over the course of the twentieth century has been one of communication.”55
Although Meeker does not directly address the CRH, he reflects the identical problem that the
organization sought to overcome. The growing Council on Religion and the Homosexual sought

53 “Goals and Purposes,” Online Exhibit: Council on Religion and the Homosexual. Part of the Lesbian, Gay,
2011).
55 Martin Meeker, Contacts Desired: Gay and Lesbian Communications and Community, 1940s – 1970s (Chicago:
new avenues of communication at the individual, local, and national level as a means of achieving social justice for homosexuals.

At the fundamental level, the CRH was a group of clergymen and homophile activists who strove to communicate openly with one another and create awareness in the local community of San Francisco. The first three goals of the CRH directly addressed the relationship between “religious communities” and homosexuals, and they primarily promoted informed communication to “bring about new and deeper understandings of sexuality, morality, ethical behavior, and the life of religious faith.” Essentially, members of the CRH sought to extend the environment and discussions of the White Memorial Retreat to new groups in their local area. Rev. Robert Cromey, one of retreat attendees and founding members of the CRH, explained that “The specific reason for forming the Council was the naïve hope we could get invited to local churches and talk to traditional congregations and raise their consciousness about gay rights and homosexuality.” Activists hoped that communication between local religious communities and homosexuals would be first step in breaking down social prejudices and misunderstandings of homosexuality.

The members of the CRH viewed local communication as the immediate purpose of their organization, but the ultimate end was national awareness of the issues facing the homosexual community. They believed that increased communication and education would force American society to acknowledge homosexuals as a minority group and address the civil rights violations they faced on a daily basis. The stated objectives of the Council also reflected these broader, national goals, including support of research into human sexuality and education through

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56 “Goals and Purposes”
57 “Goals and Purposes”
58 Robert Cromey, email with the author, March 8, 2011.
national media outlets. The final goal on the list was: “To instigate the formation of similar councils on religion and the homosexual in other areas of the nation and the world.” Clearly, the CRH was looking beyond local issues to promote justice for gay men and lesbians on a national, or even global, level. One of the pamphlets released by the CRH stated, “As social isolation recedes and education progresses, all groups in society will have to direct attention to the correction of present official discriminatory policies and practices directed against homosexuals wholly because of their sexual orientation.” The purpose of communication at local and national levels was to catch the attention of the American public, and ultimately force society to end the oppression of homosexuals.

The CRH was different from other homophile organizations of the early 1960s because it added a more complex layer to the gay movement with its focus on Christian community, spirituality, and the Bible. The CRH clergy recognized homosexuality as a natural and loving expression of human sexuality, and they often had to deal with the prevailing Biblical and theological beliefs held by other, more conservative, leaders of the Protestant Church. In 1966, the CRH sponsored the publication and circulation of a pamphlet by Rev. Dr. Robert L. Treese entitled “Homosexuality: A Contemporary View of the Biblical Perspective.” The essay is part of a larger, conscious effort by the CRH to deconstruct the interpretation of the Bible as anti-homosexual and to incorporate homosexuals into the body of the Church. Treese asserted that the Church must be in touch with the world around it, and argued, “The Church, the community of those who call Him ‘Lord,’ far from being in retreat from the world is rather thrown into the

59 “Goals and Purposes”
60 “Goals and Purposes”
world to participate in God’s continuing reclaiming, restoring, dignifying, humanizing action.”

The CRH wanted to encourage the Church to become more in touch with homosexuals and to reach out to them as human beings worthy of God’s love. Treese also argued against a literalist interpretation of the Bible and analyzed what he understood to be mistranslations and misinterpretations of the scriptures that address homosexuality. In the final pages of the pamphlet, he looked to the teachings of Jesus: “He taught us that love of God and neighbor liberates man into the fullness of life – liberates us from the bondage of estrangement, of anxiety, of hostility.” The CRH sought to establish a more inclusive theological argument based on Biblical analysis, and hoped that these arguments would persuade other Church leaders to accept homosexuals into their congregations.

Although the CRH addressed the controversial issues of Biblical theology and homosexual spirituality, their primary purpose was not to create a separate worship environment within their organization. Their theological arguments were aimed at outside religious groups, and the CRH “saw as one of its primary purposes to bring about full acceptance of homosexuals in mainstream churches.” The CRH recognized the spiritual isolation of gay individuals as a direct result of their exclusion from mainstream churches. This issue had been addressed as early as the White Mountain Retreat, when Billie Talmajj had revealed that many homosexuals had professed a wish to be a part of a spiritual community, but did not feel welcome in most churches because of the Church’s general hostility to homosexuality. Therefore, the primary role of the theological and Biblical discussion in the CRH was to push other religious leaders across the country to accept homosexuals into their communities of worship.

63 Treese, “Homosexuality,” 33.
In addition to their unique approach to homosexual spirituality, the Council on Religion and the Homosexual provided a forum for the growing community of homophile activists in San Francisco. Although the primary function of the organization was to facilitate communication between religious and homosexual communities, it also created the first unified forum for homophile activists from disparate organizations. In one of their pamphlets, the CRH openly admitted the fact that, before the founding of their organization, homophile organizations in San Francisco were “essentially isolated from each other and the rest of the community as well, and somewhat competitive in their interpersonal relationships.”65 The purpose of the diverse Council was to address the problems of the entire homosexual population, which led the original organizers to seek the different perspectives of all the different homophile organizations. Historian Nan Alamilla Boyd also notes this revolutionary aspect of the CRH, observing that, “In effect, the Council on Religion and the Homosexual functioned as a forum for gay and lesbian leadership in San Francisco. It was an issue-based organization that held the attention and cooperation of the range of activists and organizations.”66 The CRH’s focus on ending isolation, finding acceptance, and achieving civil rights united the various homophile organizations of San Francisco for the first time.

**CRH’s Public Debut: The Mardi Gras Ball**

The unity of these homophile organizations and the strength of their newfound alliance with San Francisco clergymen became apparent during the CRH’s Mardi Gras Ball in 1965. As a young organization, the Council needed to raise money in order to begin the educational programs and publicity they envisioned, so they began to plan a Mardi Gras costume ball for New Years Day, 1965. As members planned the ball, they experienced massive resistance from

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66 Boyd, 232.
the surrounding community. Two separate venues cancelled the CRH’s reservation for the event “after they discovered that the organization sponsoring the affair did not discriminate against individuals attending the party because of their sexuality, and in fact the party would be attended by a high percentage of homosexuals.”67 Once they secured California Hall as their venue, organizers of the event were also highly aware of the possibility of police harassment, so they decided to be proactive and discuss the event with police beforehand. Rev. Ted McIlvenna and his Glide colleague Rev. Cecil Williams were the first to meet with members of the San Francisco Police Department, where they encountered immediate resistance, prejudice, and even the promise of harassment during the ball. McIlvenna and Williams were “literally put on the rack by the entire vice squad present at the Hall of Justice at the time for ‘getting mixed up with a bunch of queers.”68 The members of the Council even considered cancelling the ball, but instead scheduled another meeting with the police – this time with CRH lawyers close at hand.

During this second meeting, they made it clear to the police that “the members of the Council would not stand still for such a violation of these citizens’ rights solely because they, the arrestees, happened to be different.”69 They also assured the police officers that the CRH was a legitimate organization, and that the event was being carefully planned by activists, clergymen, and their wives. CRH activists notably chose to emphasize the role of heterosexual organizers of the event, like the clergy and their wives, to gain the approval and understanding of the police. Some combination of this tactic and the presence of CRH lawyers led to negotiations ending more favorably the second time around. After lengthy discussion, the two groups came to a mutual understanding that there would be no arbitrary arrests or other forms of police harassment

68 Donaldson and Smith, “Affidavit,” 2
69 Donaldson and Smith, 4.
at the Mardi Gras Ball. According to the CRH lawyers, “The police eventually agreed that there would be no harassment of any kind, and at the close of this meeting seemed to have realized how carefully the ball was being organized.”70 The event’s organizers believed they would be able to have an exciting fundraiser, with no threat to the civil rights of homosexuals in attendance.

This private fundraising event, however, did not stay private for very long. Police arrived at the beginning of the ball and began taking pictures of the guests as they entered California Hall. Of the 1500 people who had purchased tickets for the event in advance, only 600 were brave enough to walk past the police and their cameras and make it inside.71 After the event commenced with its shortened guest list, plainclothes and uniformed police officers began to enter the premises without permission and without a warrant. CRH lawyers Evander Smith and Herb Donaldson intervened at this point, and they approached the group of officers to demand legal justification for their presence at the private event. The official affidavit recounted, “Both lawyers then went over to the doors and were insisting that these individuals either leave or give us a reason for their presence. No answer.”72 After this interaction, more policemen arrived and arrested four people: lawyers Donaldson and Smith, another lawyer who had attempted to intervene, and ticket-taker Nancy May. They were all told by police, “You are under arrest for obstructing our inspection of these premises for fire regulation violations.”73 Two men inside were later arrested for “lewd conduct,” bringing the arrest total to six.74 The arrests were both humiliating and legally questionable, and could have gone unnoticed as many had before them.

70 Donaldson and Smith, 5.
71 Boyd, 234.
72 Donaldson and Smith, 7.
73 Donaldson and Smith, 9.
74 Herbert Donaldson interviewed in Making History by Marcus, 157.
But the next day, CRH clergy held a press conference at Glide Memorial in which they exposed the blatant police harassment and solidified their alliance with the homosexual community.

The Clergy’s Public Reaction

The police could never have anticipated the huge outcry after the events at the Mardi Gras Ball, as they had spent decades arresting homosexuals on similarly outlandish charges without consequences. Historian John D’Emilio notes, “Accustomed as they were to a free hand in dealing with homosexuals, the police could not have foreseen the consequences of their action.” 75 The day after the ball, CRH clergy lambasted the actions of the police in a press conference. Seven members of the clergy unashamedly announced that they, and their homosexual allies, “were treated to the most lavish display of police harassment known in recent times,” 76 and accused police officers of “intimidation, broken promises, and obvious hostility.” 77 A picture of the clergy, looking disappointed yet firm (see Figure 1), appeared on the front page of the San Francisco Chronicle the following day above the headline: “Angry Ministers Rip Police.” 78 The ministers now had first-hand experience with the civil rights violations of homosexuals, and they did not shy away from publicly exposing the abuse of the law and announcing their increased support for the homosexual community. In their response, clergy in the CRH proved their willingness to publicly stand behind their homosexual allies and used the opportunity to increase public awareness of the problems facing homosexuals in San Francisco.

In the statement released to the press on January 2, 1965, the CRH emphasized their growing commitment to the struggle for homosexual civil rights. Although the organization was

75 D’Emilio, 194.
78 Bess, “Angry Ministers.”
concerned about these issues from its inception, the experience of the police harassment and general prejudice during the Mardi Gras Ball inspired a more decisive call to action. The CRH said, in no uncertain terms, “This is a beginning and not the end of this determination to achieve full citizenship for homosexuals and all minorities, without discrimination and intimidation.” And although they did not spend much time addressing it publicly, the continuing commitment to civil rights was also based in a spiritual understanding of social justice. As Rev. Robert Cromey explained, “I believe the concern for peace, love, and justice is one of the highest spiritual values.” The clergy and homophile activists of the CRH were thinking in terms of citizenship and civil rights for homosexuals as a spiritual duty.

In their response to the harassment at the Mardi Gras Ball, the CRH also placed the homosexual struggle within a larger context of social justice for minority groups. The blossoming movement for African-American civil rights in the late 1950s and early 1960s inspired other oppressed groups to claim their rightful place as American citizens. The final words of the press release put the specific movement for homosexual civil rights in the context of American values, and challenged the audience to join: “You and every other citizen have a stake in this important undertaking which will help guarantee to all that our Constitution means exactly what it says.” This focus on American values and civil rights also challenged the mainstream Church to a large degree. Many churches had seen the blatant discrimination against African-Americans and become involved in that movement, but very few were willing to address or even acknowledge the discrimination against homosexuals. Activists in the CRH “saw that churches needed to become involved in the rights movement for homosexuals as it had in the black civil

79 “Statement Released at Press Conference”
80 Robert Cromey, email to the author, March 8, 2011.
81 “Statement Released at Press Conference”
The CRH understood the influence of the Church in American society, and knew the potential power that lay in gaining the support of other religious leaders in the fight for homosexual civil rights.

The Mardi Gras Ball and the proceeding response of the Council on Religion and the Homosexual had a lasting effect on the homosexual community of San Francisco. In her book, *Wide Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965*, historian Nan Alamilla Boyd describes the ball as a critical turning point in the movement for homosexual civil rights. She especially focuses on how the publicity of the event helped to mobilize many homosexuals who frequented gay bars, but who were not involved in the homophile movement. Boyd argues,

> Because the ball was a cooperative event that brought together homophile activists and bargoing queers, and because it produced such a compelling cohort of spokespersons, the event hastened the politicization of the bar-based populations who were fed up with the harassment and mistreatment that had relegated them to second-class citizenship.\(^83\)

The ball served to unify a disparate group of people under the cause of homosexual civil rights, and the strong public response of the CRH helped to further mobilize homosexuals in San Francisco.

The publicity surrounding the event also had larger implications for the future of the Gay Rights Movement. For the first time, homosexual complaints against police harassment carried serious weight in court. John D’Emilio observed that the support of the clergy in the CRH added a new level of legitimacy to the voice of the homosexual community. He argued, “The ministers provided a legitimacy to the charges of police harassment that the word of a homosexual lacked. For once, the press had to take the side of homosexuals or else dispute the words of a group of clergy.”\(^84\)

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82 Robert Cromey, email to the author, March 8, 2011.
83 Boyd, 236.
84 D’Emilio, 194.
therefore their word was taken more seriously than homosexuals. The religious aspect of the CRH made the fight for homosexual civil rights more accessible to the average American, and challenged many people to rethink their prejudices against homosexuals.

Conclusion

In the smoky, bohemian atmosphere of the Black Cat bar, drag performer José Sarria always asked his audience at the end of each performance to stand and join him in a boisterous chorus of “God Save Us Nelly Queens”. But the song was about more than mere audience participation; it carried an implicit reclamation of history and a joyous realization of a homosexual community in San Francisco. A frequent patron of the Black Cat explained, “If you lived at that time and had the oppression coming down from the police department and society… to be able to stand up and sing, ‘God Save Us Nelly Queens’ – we were really not saying ‘God Save Us Nelly Queens.’ We were saying, ‘We have our rights too.’”

Bars like the Black Cat facilitated this central community building and homosexual empowerment in the city of San Francisco. Even as gay men and women faced constant fear of exposure, arrest, and ostracism, many reached out to one another to form these small communities of acceptance. In a time when homosexuals were considered mentally ill or morally corrupt, this crucial community awareness led to a more concentrated effort to enact social change through the homophile movement, and eventually through the Council on Religion and the Homosexual.

From the first discussions at the White Memorial Retreat to the press conference after the Mardi Gras Ball, the CRH was a driving force in the San Francisco homophile movement. This organization brought together members of the clergy and homosexual activists, and challenged them to reckon with serious issues of humanity, sexuality, and spirituality. The activists of the

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Council on Religion and the Homosexual were revolutionary in their message – not only because they pursued homosexual civil rights in the era before Stonewall, but because they also sought to address homosexuals as valued individuals in need of love and spiritual fulfillment. After Stonewall, many homosexual organizations lost the individualistic, spiritual, and local approach to civil rights. With the nationalization of the Gay Rights Movement, organizations like the CRH lost their influence, and the new wave of activists began to consider the homophile tactics conciliatory and outdated. The truly revolutionary nature of these early activists’ message and the many ways in which they challenged society’s view of homosexuals has long been absent from the historiography of the Gay Rights Movement.

Many historians have also chosen not to address the religious aspect of the CRH, but religion figures just as prominently as homosexuality in the rhetoric and goals of the organization. The strong alliance between religious leaders and homophile leaders required the dedication of both groups, and the combined perspectives of religion, spirituality, and civil rights activism created an organization that could address the daily struggles of gay individuals. Although it served the important purpose of uniting the homophile community of San Francisco, the CRH also paved the way for gay men and lesbians to embrace religion and use it as a tool in the fight for civil rights. J. Todd Ormsbee, author of *The Meaning of Gay*, noted that, “the CRH set the groundwork for other gay men and women to consider their communities in religious terms.” During its short four-year existence, the Council on Religion and the Homosexual challenged the deep-seated prejudices and moral judgments of its contemporary culture. And, perhaps more importantly, the example of the CRH challenges our own, modern notions of the relationship between homosexuals, religion, and the ongoing fight for equal rights.

86 Ormsbee, 131.