

A Queer kind of faith: Religion and spirituality in Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual New Zealanders

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Lavender Islands is the first strengths-based study of lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) persons in New Zealand.

In total, 2,269 LGB participants responded to questions in many domains, including spirituality and religion. Women respondents expressed more belief in a spiritual force than men, and older respondents more belief than younger. LGBs appear to be disaffiliating with Christianity at 2.37 times the rate of the general New Zealand population since 1966. Respondents who were raised as Christians in particular reported that their religious tradition was more a difficulty than a support than those with No Religion. LGBs reporting No Religion experienced more support from their families for themselves and their partners than those who were raised Christian. These quantitative findings are echoed in unprompted qualitative remarks submitted by respondents. Respondents clearly articulated their struggles with reconciling a religious affiliation with a sexual identity, and in each instance had chosen in favour of their sexual identities at the expense of the religious affiliation. Human rights issues are suggested. Despite their fraught relationship with faith communities, however, some LGBs have remained connected their religious traditions which demonstrates their resilience and their unwillingness to abandon faith traditions that have in many instances abandoned them.

Introduction

Religion remains a contended area in communities of sexual minority persons, with an extensive literature expressing the sense of alienation and isolation that LGBs feel about most organized religions. This sense of alienation is reflected in the widely held belief among faithful LGBs that 'it is easier to be religious and gay, than gay and religious'; that is, it is easier to remain with one's same-sex affiliated identity concealed or unarticulated within religious congregations (or even announced, in welcoming congregations), but the mistrust and approbation that LGBs have about traditional religions means that LGBs who remain affiliated with them are made objects of curiosity, pity or scorn. This article explores religion and spirituality from a national study of LGBs in New Zealand. In providing these data it is hoped that this article may contribute to an improved understanding of the meaning of the challenges, conflicts, expectations and, less often, supports that LGBs get from spirituality and religious faith.

In this study researchers defined spirituality as having to do with meaningfulness and the purpose of life, which may include beliefs in spiritual forces, god or gods, and religion as having to do with particular structured expressions of that meaning within existing or traditional institutions. These are inevitably fungible and overlapping concepts. The study responses show that LGB New Zealanders have found various ways of addressing the conflicts between religious traditions and personal identities, but that residual hurts and disappointments remain, particularly among respondents who identified themselves as raised as Christian.

Literature Review

The literature is well populated with stories of the struggles of LGBs of faith to reconcile their faith with their sexual identity. Much of this writing comes from an historically American perspective, (Bergin & Smith, 2002; Boyd, 2000; Glaser, 1996; Kader, 1999; Kearney, 1997; Rosser, 1992; Scanzoni & Mollenkott, 1978; Sherwood, 1987; Yip, 2005) and to a lesser extent from a British perspective (e.g., (Pittenger, 1976). There is also an Australasian literature on this contended issue (e.g. Bergin & Smith, 2002; Rosser, 1992). A number of studies of religion and homosexuality have been done in an American context where more of the population than any other developed nation professes religious affiliation (Pew Global Attitudes Project, 2002). Lee & Busto (1991), for example, in a non-peer-reviewed study of religion and spirituality in LGBs, found that 84 percent of LGBs found that religion was important, and 66 percent believed in God. In their sample they found that 42 percent said there was no such thing as an LGB spirituality, while 33 percent said there was. Their sample included 83 percent who were born Christian (36 percent Protestant, 30 percent Roman Catholic) and 11 percent Jewish; 10 percent said they were not raised in any religion. However, at the time of the survey only 34 percent claimed a Christian or Jewish religious affiliation. The dilemma that many LGBs face is that they must either reject religion in order to accept themselves, or reject themselves in order to conform to deeply held religious traditions (Buchanan, Dzelme, Harris and Hecker, (2001). Contemporary discourse holds that LGB sexuality and religion are incompatible; thus LGBs participate less in religion than do heterosexuals, and when they do participate religion can be detrimental to the psychological health of LGBs (Lease, Horne and Noffsinger-Frazier, (2005), even though there is an association between spirituality/religion and mental health (MacDonald & Holland, 2003). This has led to a process of LGBs abandoning, and being abandoned by, their religious traditions. Kirkman's (2001) study of 30 New Zealand lesbians found that many of these lesbians had essential conflicts with their religious traditions before coming out as lesbians, and identified the phenomenon of "defecting in place"; that is, maintaining the appearance of active participation in a religious organization, while failing to adhere to its beliefs. They report that after their participants came out they wanted inclusion in both lesbian and Christian communities.

The literature proposes that there is a contended and fraught relationship between LGBs and organised religion, and that the way many LGBs resolve these issues is to reconstruct the meaning of spirituality and

religion in the context of their own life experiences. This supports the notion, however, that there is a kind of subcultural yearning among LGBs for inclusion in the discourses of religion and spirituality. Some communities of faith and congregations in some religious traditions have responded to this yearning, and have made deliberate efforts to identify themselves as welcoming sexual minorities to their communities; there are LGB-oriented organisations within many religious traditions, and there are some LGB-specific denominations and congregations (Maher, 2006). The existence of these separate sexual identity-based organisations and denominations, however, serves also to demonstrate that in many ways LGBs remain marginalized by mainstream religious traditions.

With some exceptions, both religionists and LGBs themselves largely understand LGB identity and religious faith as incompatible with each other. For people who belong to both groups this antagonism has been a source of difficulty, requiring careful negotiation of individual identity and religious/spiritual beliefs. For LGBs who undertake these negotiations successfully, the outcomes appear to be positive and advantageous to their mental and emotional well-being. Many, if not most, LGBs, however, appear to have chosen not to undertake that negotiation, and have abandoned the faiths of their births. The present study seeks to explore LGB identity and spirituality in the New Zealand context where much of the population is not religiously affiliated.

Methodology

Lavender Islands: Portrait of the Whole Family (LI) is a national study of lesbian, gay and bisexual people in New Zealand. The research team and community advisory group took a deliberate decision not to include questions about HIV, safer-sex, mental health, suicidality, or alcohol and drugs, since those issues have been well-researched in other, more appropriate projects (e.g., Fergusson, Horwood and Beautrais, 1999(1999); (Saxton, Dickson, Hughes, & Paul, 2002); (Rankine, 2001); (Welch, Howden-Chapman, & Collings, 1998)). The study was developed by an interdisciplinary research team in close consultation with a community advisory group made up of LGB community leaders and members. These key informants were recruited to be as broadly representative as possible of LGB communities in New Zealand. The community advisory group identified the overall research question— ‘What do we look like?’— and then developed specific domains that they wanted to include in order to answer the question. Multidisciplinary interest areas were developed by the community advisory group, and included identity and self-definition, families of origin, families of choice, immigration and internal migration, well-being, politics, work, income and spending, careers and leisure, community connections, challenges, and religion and spirituality. A full description of the methodology, results and links to other publications from the project are available on the project website.

The final survey instrument was 133 items, and took between 18-45 minutes to complete. Funding and practical limitations meant that the instrument was available only in English, which may have excluded some recent immigrants from participating. We were also mindful that a survey methodology is not a preferred method for researching some cultural groups, and would probably result in undersampling those groups. The survey instrument was made available both by website and paper copy from April-July, 2004. In addition to distributing paper copies, an electronic link to the website URL was sent out through the community advisory group, and from them to their email lists, and so on. This last proved to be the most efficient and productive avenue of recruitment. The only significant difference between the web and paper response pathways was age; the mean age of paper respondents was about ten years older than that of website respondents. Data were examined to ensure that they met assumptions before tests of significance were carried out.

In all, 2,269 unduplicated responses were received, 83.6 percent from the website and 16.4 percent on paper (returned by Freepost). With respect to gender, 45.3 percent of the entire sample was female and 54.7 percent male. (There were five transgender and intersex responses received, and 13 respondents did not indicate a gender; these responses have been removed from gendered analyses in this article.). Respondents were very well educated: 51.3 percent held at least an undergraduate degree, compared with

approximately 11 percent of the New Zealand population overall (Ministry of Social Development, 2005). This also meant that respondents were of high income relative to the general population.

Questions about religion and spirituality included whether a respondent believed in God, gods or spiritual forces; in what religious tradition(s) they were raised and currently practice; how much their religious tradition/spiritual practice been a difficulty or support in coming to terms with their sexual identity; and how satisfied they were with an LGB identity. At the end of the survey instrument respondents were asked if they would like to say anything else about their experiences of being LGB in New Zealand. These qualitative responses were otherwise unprompted. Where relevant, for the sake of comparison with general population census data, the question and response format of these questions conformed largely to the style and structure of the New Zealand Census.

In order to develop comparison data with the 5-yearly New Zealand census, we performed some simple calculations. The mean age of respondents to the LI survey was 38.5 years (s.d.=12.86, range 12-80 years; there was no difference by gender). Since the survey was completed in 2004, we subtracted the mean age of respondents from 2004 in order to determine a mean approximate birth year. This mean birth year corresponded most closely to the New Zealand census year of 1966. Because the number of responses to the census itself grew from 2.67 million in 1966 to 3.52 million in 2001 percentages of responses were used rather than the actual number of respondents in calculations. References to changes in the general population below, therefore, use percentages to describe these changes from 1966.

This study has the usual limitations inherent to self-selected samples, including that these respondents are willing to self-identify as LGB to the extent of participating in such a study, and that they are people whose identity has coalesced to the extent that they are willing to identify with an LGB community¹. Since there is no other comparable study of LGBs in New Zealand, nor is sexual identity included as a New Zealand Census question, it is impossible to determine how representative this sample is of all people who identify themselves as LGB in New Zealand. Nevertheless, this unique sample is quite large, and is in many respects consistent with New Zealand census data and other relevant Australasian studies (e.g., (Pitts, Smith, Mitchell, & Patel, 2006).

Results

Quantitative responses

Of the 2,246 respondents to the question about belief in God, gods or spiritual forces, 59.8 percent said that they believe in such a divine power. Responses to this question differed significantly by gender ($p < .001$ by chi square). In women, 64.9 percent claimed belief, while 55.5 percent of men did so; Table 1 summarises these data. Not surprisingly, then, women rated the importance of spirituality in their lives significantly higher ($M=4.6$, $s.d.=1.98$, where 1=lowest and 7=highest) than did men ($M=3.9$, $s.d.=2.07$, $p < .001$ by ANOVA), although neither gender rated spirituality particularly high. Respondents aged forty and older also rated spirituality significantly more important in their lives ($M=4.4$, $s.d.=2.07$) than those under forty ($M=4.0$, $s.d.=2.03$, $p < .001$).

To the question about belonging to an organised religion, 72.8 percent of the participants said that they were raised Christian, and 22.5 percent were raised in 'No Religion'. All other responses were less than 1.7 percent (see Table 2). Table 2 also summarises the responses to religions currently practiced.

¹ The author acknowledges that a lesbian, gay or bisexual 'identity' is primarily an identity located in Western, Europeanised cultures and societies, that the identities themselves are contended, and are a priori for the construction of LGB communities. The use of these Westernised constructs is not meant to imply the primacy or hegemony of Western identities, or even the appropriateness of applying these constructs to individuals or to non-Westernised cultures. This contended language is used both for the sake of convenience, and because it is what most of the New Zealand LGB respondents said they called themselves. Such language obviates the larger discussion which has been well-developed elsewhere (see, for instance, Chou, 2000, or Murray, 2002). This issue has also been addressed by the author elsewhere (Henrickson, 2006a) (Henrickson, 2006b)

Only 14.8 percent of respondents currently practice Christianity, and 72.9 percent currently practice No Religion. While Buddhism and 'Other' religions appear to be increasing, overseas-born respondents contributed 38.8 and 21.1 percent respectively to these two responses, and the overall proportions remain comparatively low, both in LI responses and the general population. It is not possible to tell from the data what the different constituents of Other are, although this is clearly an area for further exploration. For these reasons the balance of the data presented will focus on the 'Christian' and 'No Religion' responses.

The difference between the 72.8 percent who were raised Christian and the 14.8 percent who are currently Christians is a 79.9 percent decline. Likewise, the difference between the 22.4 percent who were raised in No Religion and the 72.9 percent who currently claim No Religion is a 225.4 percent increase. Without further exploring these differences, which is not possible within the structure of the LI survey instrument, we cannot attribute reasons to them. However, we can put them in the context of the larger New Zealand population. In the 1966 New Zealand Census, approximately 90.1 percent of the New Zealand population of 2.67 million reported that they were Christian, and 1.6 percent reported No Religion. (An average of seven percent of the population do not respond to this question in each census). All other religious groups were less than 0.5 percent each of the population in 1966. The Christian responses gradually declined each census year until they were 59.8 percent of the 3.52 million general population responses in 2001. The No Religion responses gradually increased until in 2001 they were 29.2 percent of all responses. All other responses in 2001 were less than 1.5 percent each. Census respondents identifying themselves as Christian dropped from 90.1 percent to 59.8 percent, or a decline of 33.6 percent in 35 years. Census 'No Religion' responses increased from 1.6 to 29.2, or an increase of over 1700 percent. It appears, then that LGB respondents are disaffiliating with Christianity at a rate 2.37 times the general population, but affiliating with No Religion at a rate somewhat less than the general population. (This apparent change, however, may be rendered less meaningful because of the relatively low proportion of the general population that claimed No Religion in 1966).

Finally we found that current Christian respondents were significantly older ($M=41.4$, $s.d.=15.06$, $n=327$) than current No Religion respondents ($M=37.9$ years, $s.d.=12.23$, $n=1612$, $p<.001$), which suggests a generational effect, possibly related to belief in God, noted above.

We asked to what extent participants had found their religious tradition a difficulty (at the 1 end of the scale) or a support (at the 7 end of the scale). Men ($M=3.5$, $s.d.=1.45$, $p<.001$) were significantly more likely than women ($M=3.9$, $s.d.=1.45$) to find religion a difficulty rather than a support, although both men and women scored the item below a neutral 4.0, indicating that their religious tradition had been a difficulty for respondents. However, current Christians found religion significantly more a difficulty ($M=3.2$, $s.d.=1.76$, $n=325$, $p<.001$) than No Religion respondents ($M=3.6$, $s.d.=1.30$, $n=1,577$). This difference was even more apparent in respondents who were raised Christian. Respondents who were raised Christian were significantly more likely to report that their religion was a difficulty ($M=3.5$, $s.d.=1.50$, $n=1,598$, $p<.001$) than those who were raised with no religion ($M=4.2$, $s.d.=1.06$, $n=479$).

There was a significant difference between the two groups on the extent to which the respondent felt support from their families of origin: current No Religion respondents experienced significantly more support from their families ($M=5.1$, $s.d.=1.81$, where 1=lowest support and 7=greatest possible support) than current Christians ($M=4.9$, $s.d.=1.81$, $p=.033$). Likewise, although there was no significant difference between the two groups on the extent to which families of origin included the respondent in major family gatherings, there was a difference in whether families of origin included the respondent's same-sex partner: the significantly higher mean in the current No Religion ($M=5.4$, $s.d.=2.04$), compared with current Christians ($M=5.1$, $s.d.=2.15$, $p=.016$) indicates that respondents with No Religion felt that their families are more likely to include their same sex partners than are current Christians.

Qualitative responses

The unprompted qualitative data on religion, spirituality and sexual identity echo, and in some ways explicate, the quantitative data, and some are cited here at some length. In most cases the responses relate a history of difficulty with organised religion, and usually specifically Christianity. The experiences of respondents with religion almost universally expressed difficulties, hurt, disappointment, alienation from families and social networks, and a lack of support from religious faiths. No respondents expressed an unreservedly positive view of religion. (Comments have been excerpted in some instances, or edited for length or relevance; edits are indicated by [...])

- The hardest thing that I have found about becoming a lesbian was acceptance by my family & friends who were very religious. We were given a very hard time - excommunicated from the church and from a lot of the family for a long time. They have slowly come to accept it but still don't like it. We feel we are 'tolerated'.
- I think that NZ is a great place for gay/lesbian and transgender people to live. [...] Everyday things like banks, car companies, flats etc.[...] are very accommodating, referring to my relationship as partners and it works well [...] It would be great though if religion played a lesser part in all this. I have found that Christians force their beliefs upon our community, basically judging us before getting to know us [...] How many more lives need to be messed up by religion[?] [T]hat's why I don't practice religion at all. [...]
- [...] I left the church in which I was brought up because the leaders did not support homosexuality. I left the church when I was 16/17 years old [...]
- As a [lesbian] daughter of a Samoan father I have found it extremely difficult to come to terms with what I believe to be commonly held prejudice and discrimination against gay and lesbian people in the Samoan Christian community. There is a belief that gay people have demons inside them and need to be saved by Christianity; which is largely accepted and even promoted within my Polynesian family. Because of such beliefs I will probably never tell my father that I love a woman, even if I commit to my partner for life. This makes me very sad [...]
- [...] I have had nothing but a positive coming out experience, supported by all family members (immediate and extended), friends and workmates. Until I came out I was a practising Christian, and while my faith in God remains, I cannot continue to attend regular worship because the church and the congregation would not blindly accept me as a full member of the church, rather they would 'tolerate' me.
- [Religion] is the only area in my life [...] where I have exp[erience]d significant difficulty and distress; i.e., in my previous role as a minister I was vilified, received hate mail/ phone calls etc and lost my job

- Coming out was the hardest decision I have ever had to make in my life to date. Due to my religious upbringing it meant losing contact with much of my family and friends. Yet it was the best decision I could have made, now I live a life true to myself, and in the process my family has grown to be a little more accepting.
- Raised in a strong Catholic family, my coming out was traumatic and frightening. 10 years on my father spoke to me for the first time just two weeks ago. This made me hesitant to be honest with people for a very long time. I am now completely comfortable with my sexuality and don't care what others think [...]
- I thought I was straight until about 4 years ago at the age of 54 [...] I attend a Presbyterian Church which used to have a lesbian minister [...] The parish is supposedly gay- friendly but I have outed myself to only 1 person, whose daughter is gay. There is an anti-gay undercurrent which I hear as they don't know I am one too [...]
- [...] My partner is an example where culture and religion deeply [a]ffects families' abilities to cope with a gay son, hence he is not out, and there is a part of his life where I am not allowed and in fact invisible, I don't exist. This has been a new experience for me, and having lived all my life openly and honestly, I do not understand how individuals can live their life in the shadows. This hurts me to the core and makes me angry with the discrimination and hurt that is still out there in our society.
- My same-sex journey arose out of meeting my best friend at the age of 47, after spending 30 years in a marriage and farming partnership and raising four wonderful children. My friend/now partner and I came together out of a deep emotional, spiritual and empathetic need - we just 'clicked'. We are deeply in love but the journey has been a huge roller coaster of finding out just who we are. There has been unspeakable joy and wrenching pain. Our relationship with our God is an integral part of our lives and this has enabled us to cope with (sometimes) extraordinary judgementalism from within the established Church, though we have also found there deep, accepting love and compassion. We are a very 'new' couple and so are still finding out a lot about ourselves and society's reaction to us. Some people who have always been gay or lesbian have no doubt experienced difficulties and persecution from an early age - we have not necessarily. Our main concerns are for our 8 wonderful children, with whom we strive, daily, to pick up the threads of a new, mature relationship - quite different from that which we had with them as youngsters.
- Although I do identify as a Christian, I go to a Gay church and as a Maori, I want to make the point that there is a difference between spirituality and religion [...]
- I am an ordained minister in a mainstream Christian denomination. I was working as such when I came out to myself and my family and formed a relationship with my partner. Some people and the structure of the church have made this an incredibly costly journey. I have never doubted the rightness of my choice to be lesbian. I have struggled with having to defend this right in my chosen career which I am now moving away from.

- I have experienced difficulty at times and others times it has been okay. It has been a most difficult time when some of the Christian community of AOG, etc have tried to exorcise my 'demons' and that was a very painful experience indeed. I have lost jobs and places where I lived because I am both Jewish and Lesbian. I have been abused and hurt deeply, but I have survived to live and fight another day. In fact I might even say it has made me stronger than before.
- I have been in a lesbian relationship for over 4 years. I can honestly say that my partner and I connect on so many levels. Yes I was brought up with strong Catholic values in the beginning I did think I was going against everything I was taught and what I believed in. I've never been more happy and secure with one person. [...]

In every case where a respondent was forced to make a choice between their religious tradition and their sexual identity the respondent chose sexual identity. Some respondents chose to maintain a negotiated, but ambiguous relationship with a religious tradition based on concealment or misdirection. It is also apparent that a number of respondents do not view 'tolerance' as a positive or sufficient attitude. In many instances, however, a respondent made it clear that they were able to separate their relationship with God from their relationship with their religious tradition. This negotiated faith has become a cornerstone in the spiritual constructs of respondents.

Discussion

The data suggest that LGBs struggle deeply with religion and spirituality. Women are more likely to believe in a spiritual force than men, and older respondents more than younger ones. In general, participants found religion to be more a difficulty than a support, although men found it even more a difficulty than did women. Many lesbian, gay and bisexual Christians (in particular) of a variety of ethnicities are struggling with their religious traditions. LGBs appear to be disaffiliating with Christianity at 2.37 times the rate of the general New Zealand population. LGBs with no religious tradition experienced more support from their families for themselves and their partners than those who were raised Christian. In a very general and unspecified way, necessitated by the very broad level of the questions in such a large study, Christians seem to be struggling more with reconciling their religious beliefs and their sexual identities. This struggle is consistent with the literature.

Christian (and other) religions by and large have apparently done an excellent job in communicating that belonging to a Christian faith and a homosexual identity are incompatible, or at least very difficult to reconcile. A large number of raised Christians appear have resolved the dissonance between their identities and their religion by leaving their religion. Some continue to struggle to reconcile the two. Faith traditions can also influence the way families and faith communities do or do not include or welcome the LGB person and their partners. LI data suggest that many LGBs do not feel welcomed into those communities. If Christian religious traditions want to keep LGBs out of their communities, then what they are doing is working; if through negative messages they want LGBs to change their identities or "lifestyles", that is not happening, because most LGBs appear more likely to abandon their religious traditions than their identities. There remains a core number of LGBs, however, who are apparently committed to living the tension between identity and religious tradition creatively and reconciling their individual experience of identity with their faith. While substantive conclusions cannot be drawn from the LI data on how this reconciliation happens, this is clearly an area that will be useful to continue to explore further.

Human rights groups and agencies are generally reluctant to step into the religious arena, possibly because there is a belief that the views and teachings of religious organisations are essentially private matters that

are beyond the public's legislative scope, and in part because religious organisations are assumed to be voluntary, and that members can leave at any time. International human rights organisations express shock that two men in their twenties who have allegedly engaged in same sex sexual activity can be hanged by under Sharia law in Iran (Human Rights Watch, 2005), yet the continuing, perhaps more subtle, persecution of LGBs by some religious groups in Western countries remains either below regular monitoring, or has been accepted as a social norm. Yet the literature has demonstrated an association between religion/spirituality and mental health; what LI data suggest is that the influence of religious organisations on LGB individuals is profound, and in some cases creates a lifelong struggle to achieve an integrated identity. Belonging to a particular religious organisation is not a public 'right' to be sure, but the ability to live freely in a fair and just society is a right. Access to good mental health, and freedom from forces that negatively impact mental health, including religious bullying, is a right in New Zealand. While LI respondents seem to suggest that mere tolerance is not enough, intolerance is entirely unacceptable. Where religious organisations teach intolerance in the public arena and make pronouncements that affect the dignity, equality and security of LGBs is the place where they have placed themselves in the public arena, and may therefore be within the scope of human rights interests. Despite their fraught relationship with faith communities, however, some LGBs have remained faithful to their religious traditions and their God. That this can happen is a testimony to their resilience and their unwillingness to abandon faith traditions that have in many instances abandoned them.

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Table 1: Belief in spiritual force, god or gods by gender and age

	Men (n=1229)	Women (n=1017)	<40 years (n=1177)	40 and older (n=1044)	*p<.001 **p<.001
Yes	55.5*	64.9*	56.8**	63.3**	1
No	41.4	32.7	41.2	33.1	
Not sure	3.1	2.4	2.0	3.5	
	100	100	100	100	

Table 2:
Raised

and current religious membership, all respondents

	Raised (%) n=2245	Current (%) n=2237
No Religion	506 (22.5)	1636 (73.1)
Christian (any)	1635 (72.8)	330 (14.8)
Hindu	5 (0.2)	8 (0.4)
Islam	6 (0.3)	2 (0.1)
Buddhist	25 (1.1)	49 (2.2)
Jewish	16 (0.7)	9 (0.4)
Other	39 (1.7)	175 (7.8)
Decline to answer	13 (0.6)	28 (1.3)
Total	2245 (100)	2256 (100)