

Changing Religion, Changing Faith: Reflections on the Transformative Strategies of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Christians and Muslims

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Abstract

This paper draws upon several quantitative and qualitative projects researching the lived experiences and life circumstances of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) Christians and Muslim in the UK. The paper focuses on the transformative efforts of LGB Christians and - to a smaller extent - LGB Muslims, to challenge heterosexist religious orthodoxy and practices, and make religions more accepting of sexual difference. These efforts take various forms, the most prominent of which are: (1) 'Queering' religious texts (e.g. critiquing traditional hermeneutics by highlighting its inaccuracy and socio-cultural specificity; and relocating interpretive authority from religious authority structures to the self/personal experience); (2) Construction of 'real'/face-to-face and 'virtual' support networks, which are crucial to identity reinforcement and community building; and (3) Political mobilisation, in collaboration with secular LGB organisations (e.g. capitalising on progressive legal reform and social change in the secular spheres to press for similar change in the religious sphere). Collectively, these efforts generate significant theological, social, cultural, and political capital for their politics of difference, which is underpinned by the politics of spirituality/sexuality that emphasises the inseparability and compatibility of their sexuality and religious faith. This politics of difference is not without its challenges, however. Notwithstanding the continued resistance from certain quarters of the religious community, this politics has to grapple with other significant issues, for instance, the need to be more inclusive, recognising the diversity within its fold on the basis of religious faith, ethnicity, and differential access to the above-mentioned capital; and the incorporation of the secular discourse of LGB human rights and citizenship that often eclipses the religious dimension of LGB Christians' and Muslims' lived experiences.

Introduction

This paper draws upon my reflections on several quantitative and qualitative projects researching the lived experiences of British lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) Christians and Muslim in the past decade (for more details on methodology, see e.g. Yip, In Press); as well as broader development in LGB politics. Specifically, this paper analyses three transformative strategies of LGB Christians and Muslims, as dissident religious believers who rattle heterosexist religious orthodoxy and in the

process make religion not only LGB-friendly, but also more inclusive of sexual and social diversity in general. In the concluding section, I shall discuss the challenges facing such progressive efforts of religious and social change.

Queering Religious Texts: Constructing Theological Capital

Texts are significant to scriptural religions such as Christianity and Islam. They constitute the foundation of religious reasoning, vocabulary, ethics, and morality. It is therefore not surprising that they form a firm basis for religious censure of homosexuality and bisexuality, on both theological and popular levels. However, it is more accurate to say that it is the *interpretation* of such texts that stigmatises LGB believers. Consequently, such texts become the first target of LGB believers in their attempt to de-stigmatise their sexuality.

In the case of Christianity, the growth of LGB-affirming sexual theology in the past three decades has significantly strengthened the theological capital for LGB Christians. From the much-cited and controversial work of Boswell (1980) to more recent work (e.g. Stuart, 2003; Guest, 2005), this corpus of literature significantly challenges the interpretive monopoly of religious authority structures. It provides an alternative interpretation which critiques traditional hermeneutics by highlighting its inaccuracy and socio-cultural specificity. Further, it encourages believers to relocate interpretive authority from religious authority structures to the self – with personal experience as the basis - as such structures are considered heterosexist and homophobic. It also seeks to cast new light on these texts in order to generate spiritual and ethical guidance for LGB-affirming religious life (for a detailed discussion, see Yip, 2005).

Thus, this body of literature not only provides resources for LGB Christians to counter what Goss (2002) calls the ‘texts of terror’, but also generates theological material for their reflections on LGB Christian life. This is significant, because it is an indisputable indication that LGB Christians no longer apologise for who they are; but they actively use religion as a ‘tool box’ for the establishment of Christian life that harmoniously incorporates their sexuality. In this case, texts are read with LGB sensibilities, with sexuality offering a unique standpoint or social location.

Indeed, my research has come across many participants who are differentially skilled in appropriating such resources to not only de-stigmatise their sexual orientation, but also to claim their space within the religious community. The quote below illustrates this:

I no longer apologise for who I am. I am who I am because God made me so. I am not an abomination, as the Church says, you know. I have read loads and debated all those issues about being gay and Christian. If people still have problem with that, I just ask them to read those books.... The problem is, they are only interested in saying that

homosexuality is wrong with their eyes closed. I wish they would look at me and realise that I am not interested in their preoccupation, because I am too busy living my life as a happy and fulfilled lesbian and Christian. (Sarah, in her 40s, living in Greater London)

Theological capital is significantly less developed in the case of LGB Muslims, although it is rapidly improving. At present, rigorous LGB-affirming Islamic sexual theology is limited. However, there is increasing printed and internet material that questions traditional interpretation of Islamic texts that hegemonies heteropatriarchy. Such material may not be theologically rigorous, but it is a significant first step. One distinctive characteristic of this material is the appropriation of the concept *ijtihad*, which literally means ‘the intellectual effort of trained Islamic scholars to arrive at legal rulings not covered in the sacred sources’ (Kurzman, 2002: 377). In such material, *ijtihad* is often used to mean ‘independent reasoning’, so that one’s understanding and practice of Islam is not uncritically based on traditional and institutional interpretation, but on personal experience and the exercise of reason and rationality, with reference to changing socio-cultural circumstances. Thus, contextualisation is core to this independent query of Islam.

This concept has been widely used by LGB-affirming scholars (e.g. Nahas, 2001; Malik, 2003; Manji, 2003) to encourage Muslims to reform Islam and return to its essential principles that uphold social justice, equity, human diversity, and dignity. In essence, *ijtihad* emphasises the democratisation of textual interpretation by wresting interpretive authority from religious authority structures (e.g. the *ulama*), and placing it firmly in the hands of the individual believer. The basis of this approach is the self and personal experience, on which rests interpretive authority. This understanding of *ijtihad* is not without its critics, of course. For example, Ramadan (1999), without referring to the debate of sexuality specifically, has cautioned that the concept has been used chaotically to justify everything consistent with the ideology of the user.

This effort to reform Islam – with emphasis on difference – draws heavily from the older and more established efforts of feminist Muslims, which critique Islam through gender lens. Works by Ahmed (1993), Ali (2006), Mernissi (1991), and Wadud (1999; 2006) are examples *par excellence*. In her seminal text *Qur’an and Woman*, Wadud argues that it is important to pay attention to ‘*what* the Qur’an says, *how* it says it, *what* is said *about* the Qur’an, and *who* is doing that saying... [and] what is left *unsaid*: the ellipses and silences’ (1999: xiii. Emphasis in original).

In the same vein, in critiquing classical Christian theology that does not give due consideration to gender and sexuality issues, Quero argues that ‘.. every theology is, in fact, ideology; ultimately there is no such thing as innocent theology. Every theology represents an ideology that permeates its paradigm and its hermeneutical circle, moulding its productions’ (2006:

82). Indeed, LGB-affirming Christian sexual theology also draws heavily from feminist theology. Collectively, the use of gender and sexual orientation as valid and distinctive standpoints to ‘do’ theology significantly de-constructs and exposes the ideological underpinnings of sexist and heterosexist classical theology that uncritically perpetuates heteropatriarchy. Of course, this does not mean that feminist theologians and LGB-affirming theologians see eye to eye at all times with regards to *what* difference is worthwhile and right to protect. Nevertheless, the similarity of agenda and the commitment to liberation is striking.

Community Building: Constructing Social Capital

Having a sense of community - especially a geographical space as an identifier of community - has always been particularly important to minority groups. Geographical identifiers – and increasingly emotional and psychological ones in our increasingly networked and globalised world - are crucial to the formation, maintenance, and growth of group identity. Indeed, they are markers of the minority’s existence, and an environment for the establishment of resources, networks, relationships, norms, meanings, and trust that enable smooth social engagements among members. These important features constitute social capital that serves as the foundation of group and individual identities. This is even more important if the minority assumes a stigmatised status, because community offers a real and emotional shield of protection.

Weeks (1995) argues that LGB communities are an invented tradition that empowers individuals, offers a repertoire of values, and enables the articulation of identity. On the other hand, Plummer (1995) labels them as ‘communities of story tellers’. Individual sexual stories need a community who is willing to listen in order that these stories could be stronger, particularly politically. In return, such a community exists only through the stories individuals tell. Thus, the relationship between the story teller and the community is symbiotic. So are individual identity and group identity. Indeed, the construction of, and communications within, these communities have been transformed by the rapid development in information and communications technology. While geographical space continues to be important, ‘virtual’ space has become an indispensable repertoire of support networks to many, particularly those who have limited or no access to the geographical space.

The development of the largely secular LGB community in general has been well documented (e.g. Engel, 2001). In many ways, this development provides the impetus for the establishment of support networks specifically for LGB Christians and Muslims. I shall focus on collaboration between secular and religious support networks in the next section. Here, I would like to focus on support networks specifically for LGB Christians and Muslims, which offer an

environment that meets their needs as LGB *as well as* Christian/Muslim. In Europe and North America, the LGB identity is generally conceived as an identity that is free from two institutions: the heterosexual family and religion. These institutions are often implicated in the perpetuation of homophobia (for more details, see Yip, In Press). Thus, being a LGB person with religious faith - particularly a religion such as Christianity that has historical baggage; and a religion such as Islam that is often misrepresented as antithetical to democracy and individual freedom – could expose one to misunderstanding or even hostility within the broader LGB community, for ‘sleeping with the enemy’. In other words, the anti-religious sentiment – underpinned by ‘religiophobia’ - within the LGB community reflects its own historical and cultural specificities.

This heightens the importance of support networks specifically for LGB Christians and Muslims, where theological and social capital could merge to offer a concrete support base for their development as sexual as well as spiritual beings. The quote below succinctly demonstrates this:

I felt so lonely when I began to acknowledge my sexuality. I was so depressed, because wherever I turned, there was condemnation. I was so scared and I told myself that there was no way I was going to let people know. But that made it worse. I didn't know where to go for help and support..... So when I discovered on the internet about [name of a LGB Muslim group], I was over the moon. You know, it was just great to know that there were people like me out there, that I am not the odd one out... Now, as I look back, I thank *Allah* and [group's name] for the support I have received. (Jamina, a lesbian Muslim in her 20s).

Sometimes, it is easy to forget about experiences like Jamina's within the context of Western Europe and North America, where homosexuality is increasingly socially accepted and legally protected. Experiences such as hers incontrovertibly highlight the continued importance of support networks of a religious nature.

Space does not allow me to discuss LGB Christian and Muslim support networks in great detail. I shall highlight some examples and discuss briefly the issue of access. In terms of British LGB Christian support network in the form of formalised groups and organisations, mention must be made about the *Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement*, which was established in 1976 (previously named *Gay Christian Movement*, until 1987), and remains the largest British organisation of its kind, with a membership of around 3000. Besides involving in activities on the national and international front, it has affiliated local groups across Britain (for more details, see Gill, 1998; www.lgcm.org.uk). Other organisations, which have a lower political and media profile, include *Quest*, for LGB Roman Catholics, established in 1973 (www.questgaycatholic.org.uk); the

Evangelical Fellowship for Lesbian and Gay Christians, established in 1979 (www.eflgc.org.uk); and *Changing Attitude*, founded in 1995 (www.changingattitude.org.uk).

In comparison, the development of LGB Muslim support network is embryonic. Following the ground-breaking establishment of the *Al-Fatiha Foundation* in the USA in 1998 (www.al-fatiha.org), *Al-Fatiha UK*, the very first British support organisation of its kind, was established in the following year. In April 2004, this group, which has about 300 members, changed its name to *Imaan* (www.imaan.org.uk). On the other hand, *Safra Project*, established in 2001, focuses specifically on the needs of lesbian and bisexual Muslim women (www.safraproject.org).

It must be acknowledged that the ministry of such national organisations is substantially complemented and strengthened by, in the case of LGB Christians, numerous local support groups. While LGB Muslims have notably scarce support groups on grassroots level, they are receiving increasing attention from secular and Christian groups which attempt to broaden their portfolio of activity. Collectively, such networks on national, regional, and local levels offer a repertoire of social capital, significant to the development and consolidation of identity, as well as the quest for legal protection. Also, such networks offer a focal point for dialogue and debate.

Of course, balancing various functions is a demanding and delicate act. While some groups excel in both political activism and support provision, some with fewer resources end up specialising in one of these functions. I shall elaborate this point in the next section. I would like to end this section by considering the issue of access. While the growth of such social capital is a cause for celebration, it is often forgotten that access to it is inequitable. This community, like the population in general, is classed, gendered, and racialised, despite its shared sexual identification. As scholars such as Bauman (2001) has cautioned, access to societal resources is inequitable. As I have mentioned, LGB Muslims have significantly less amount of social capital in this respect, compared to their Christian counterparts. Further, socio-cultural complications (e.g. close-knit family and kin network, marriage) also make it more difficult for them to access geographical spaces, as the psychological and social costs are high (for more details, see e.g. Yip, 2004). Under these circumstances, the access to 'virtual' community becomes even more indispensable. Thus, the issue of opening up and democratising access is an important one that the LGB community must address.

Collaboration with Secular LGB Organisations: Constructing Political Capital

As I have mentioned, the journey of the development of LGB politics has largely been a secular one, in which religion is relegated to the sideline, or even perceived as a perennial obstruction to social progress and democracy. Until very recently, religion is hardly featured in the agenda of well-

established organisations such as the *International Lesbian and Gay Association* (www.ilga.org), established in 1978, and now representing 400 member groups from 90 countries across the world. Within the British context, the same could be said about *Stonewall* (www.stonewall.org.uk). Established in 1989, it is widely considered the most effective and respected lobbying, campaigning and research organisation on LGB equality and rights. It has made significant contribution to legal reform pertaining to LGB rights, in areas such as criminal justice, partnership, education, and employment.

Secular organisations such as the above have achieved much in incorporating the needs of the LGB population into mainstream policy and legal debate on ‘human rights’ and ‘citizenship’. Indeed, the increasing incorporation of ‘sexual orientation’ into anti-discrimination legislations and social policies is indisputable evidence of progress the LGB population has made in demanding the recognition of their citizenship (for a good critique of this concept’s heterosexist underpinnings, see e.g. Richardson, 2000).

Such significant debate of sexual citizenship, however, has been until recently non-existent within the religious sphere. This is primarily because within the religious sphere, the debate is still very much about the acceptability of homosexuality, while in many secular spheres, it has moved on to the protection of LGB rights. Yet, as far as social change is concerned, the boundary between such spheres is often porous. In recent years, LGB religious organisations such as the *Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement* have demonstrated increasing aptitude and professionalism in collaborating with secular LGB organisations such as *Stonewall*.

The construction of political capital in this case cannot be over-emphasised. Underlining this is the convergence of the secular discourse (which emphasises individual freedom and human rights in, for instance, the maintenance and expression of identity and lifestyle) and alternative religious discourse (which emphasises primacy of personal experience and the ‘god-giveness’ of sexuality). This is where the western socio-cultural context is crucial. Processes such as individualisation and de-traditionalisation have significantly changed the relationship between society and individual, characterised by the empowerment or freeing of agency, as the following quote illustrates:

Of course I am still a Muslim, even though I don’t follow everything the religious leaders have to say. My Muslim faith is personal. It’s how I relate to *Allah*, and *Allah* to me, that really matters. It took me a long time, but I did eventually learn to be OK about listening to my heart and *Allah*, rather than those so-called religious leaders who condemn gayness.... *Allah* gave me life, so he also gave me rights as a human being. As long as my relationship is OK with him, and I am happy, then I am OK if others disagree with me. (Samia, a lesbian Muslim in her 30s)

Interestingly, the collaboration between religious and secular LGB organisations is now complemented by collaboration across religious groups (e.g. Muslim and Christian). The convergence of these forces of social change has led to the broadening of agenda, perhaps an evitable outcome of building a common ground to enhance the cohesiveness and effectiveness of strategy. This has led to the quest for social justice and equality for not only the LGB populations, but also other marginalised groups. In other words, they increasingly address social justice in the broader sense, recognising that the eradication of heterosexism and homophobia must be pursued within a broader framework of human rights that eradicate all social injustices.

Such alignment is not without its difficulty, of course. Sometimes, the excessive focus on common ground neglects significant differences, leading to strategies that may be political efficacious and expedient, but culturally unaware, or even insensitive. Further, the salience of the political agenda could also undermine resources for social support and spiritual growth. In other words, the primacy of political capital often negates social and theological capital, which does not serve the needs of many LGB Christians and Muslims, as the following quote demonstrates:

I liked it [the Christian support group she used to attend] when the focus was on the people there, you know, the fellowship and support. But then it became rather political. That's when the 'Christian' bit was gradually dropped. I could no longer tell the difference between the group and a non-religious group. What is the point then? Yes I want legal protection, but that can be done elsewhere. In that group, I wanted to nourish the Christian part of me. But I found it wanting, so I gradually lost interest.

(Jane, a bisexual Christian in her 50s)

Diversification of agenda is perhaps an unavoidable outcome of development for social movements. We could see this within the development of LGB Christian groups and organisations, which have a longer history compared to their Muslim counterparts.

Challenges Ahead

Jackson Preece rightly argues that, 'Minorities are political outsiders who challenge the prevailing principle of legitimacy' (2005: vii). Thus, the identity of a minority group is always politicised. This also applies to LGB Christians and Muslims who, as a sexual minority, challenge sexual legitimacy within their respective religious communities, as well as in the society in general. There is no doubt that there are LGB Christians and Muslims who lead a life lacking in spiritual, sexual, and social fulfilment due to continued homophobia and biphobia in religious communities. Nevertheless, increasingly we see LGB Christians and Muslims who rise above such constraints. They contest

prevailing religious and cultural legitimacy, as well as community membership.

This contestation of sexuality leads to the changing of religion and religious faith. In other words, by ‘queering’ sexuality, LGB Christians and Muslims are also ‘queering’ religion and spirituality. These inextricably linked processes change not only institutional religion and the religious authority structures, but also individual spirituality in terms of personal spiritual journey and the basis of religious faith (i.e. prioritising personal experience and voice against institutional authority. For a fuller discussion of this, see e.g. Yip, 2003). Such contestation is based on the inseparability of sexuality and spirituality. To LGB Christians and Muslims, their sexual self and their spiritual self are part and parcel of their being – their divinely created humanness. Horn and his colleagues argue this link well:

[S]exuality is much more of an integral and holistic part of the human experience than the activity of genital sex. It is the source of our capacity for relationship, for emotional and erotic connection, for intimacy, for passion and for transcendence. It is a holistic expression of our human experience as *body-selves*.....Consequently, sexuality is ‘neither incidental nor detrimental’.....to spirituality, but an important and integrated dimension of it.....In other words, it is through the *sensuality* of human *sexuality* (which includes but is not limited to genital sex) that individuals can experience a direct erotic connection with the God of one’s understanding. In the language of Christian theology, embodiment is incarnation- the Holy is known and experienced in the flesh. (Horn, Piedmont, Fialkowski, Wicks and Hunt, 2005: 81-82; emphasis original).

Collectively, the transformative strategies of LGB Christians and Muslims generate significant theological, social, and political capital which represents a repertoire of ‘tools’ not only as ammunition to defend and counter-attack, but also as resources for spiritual growth, enriched by LGB sensibilities. These strategies not only transform personal faith, but also compel institutional religions to be more inclusive and respectful of divinely-inspired difference and diversity. Thus, this quest is extremely important, as it is personally, institutionally, and socially transformative.

Their quest, not surprisingly, could lead to collision of values that could have significant impact on religious organisations. A good example of this is the Anglican Communion. The ripple effects of well-publicised events in 2003 such as the appointment of Gene Robinson as Bishop of New Hampshire, making him the first ever openly gay bishop, are still being felt across the Communion. Even the Archbishop of Canterbury has in a recent statement acknowledged the possibility that the Communion may be split into ‘constituent churches’ and ‘churches of association’ as a result of seemingly unbridgeable chasm between opposing camps on the issue of homosexuality (Williams, 2006).

Looking ahead, such transformative strategies face two challenges: First, the need to be more inclusive by recognising the diversity within the LGB community on the ground of, say, class, religious faith, and ethnicity. My research has uncovered that, in spite of their striking similarities on the basis of shared sexual identification, LGB Christians and Muslims also grapple with qualitatively different challenges, which reflect their structural position within the British society. LGB Muslims, who are also members of religious and ethnic minorities, often find themselves having to juggle significant issues such as racism and Islamophobia, alongside homophobia. The politicisation and misrepresentation of Islam as a primitive religion prone to violence and terrorism, intensified by various events in recent years, have had significant impact on the lives of Muslims, regardless of sexual orientation. Further, LGB Muslims also have to grapple with cultural issues that inform the way they live their lives as LGB. Issues such as 'honour', close familial and kin relationships, and pressure to get married as a crucial rite of passage that involves not only the couple, but also the extended family, cannot be ignored (for more details, see e.g. Yip, 2004; Whitaker, 2006).

As I have mentioned, the LGB community is by and large a secular, ando-centric, and middle class construction. While it has undoubtedly achieved much, it has not been as successful in addressing difference *within* its community. With its ageism, racism, Islamophobia, religiophobia, monosexism, and other exclusionary mechanisms, it is guilty of replicating oppressive practices amongst its own members, which make it doubly hurtful and ethically unpalatable.

Maduro (2006: 27) argues that, 'Every subaltern, subordinated, oppressed group – even in its rebelliousness and resistance to oppression – tends to partly repeat and imitate the vision of the oppressor.' I am inclined to believe that this is not about repeating or imitating the oppressor. Rather, the potential to discriminate and oppress is part and parcel of the human condition, to which nobody is immune. In other words, one could be exclusionary in the pursuit of inclusivity, if one is unreflective and does not exercise self criticism constantly. The fact that the LGB population, as a sexual minority, rightly strives for the eradication of oppression on the ground of sexual orientation, does not immunise it from oppressive practices within its own community and in the society at large. Thus, the celebration of achievements so far, and the continued effort to improve, must be matched by increasing awareness and willingness to exorcise the demon of oppression within. We must be vigilant, so that we are not so absorbed in the victimology rhetoric that we do not see the victimisation amongst our midst. Indeed, the roles of oppressor and the oppressed are fluid and contextualised, not binary and fixed. Oppression is a function of social power, not distinctive features of certain individuals and social groups.

The second challenge facing LGB Christians and Muslims is how to incorporate spirituality

into the predominantly secular LGB politics and community, and enrich them in the process. My observation is that at present there is a tendency to downplay, even ignore, the religious dimension in dominant discourse of LGB human rights and citizenship. This marginalisation of religion in LGB politics and community needs to be addressed. Thus, the important question here is how LGB Christians and Muslims could use the limitless richness of spirituality to inform practices within the LGB community. Let's take gay male Christians as an example. My observation is that at present their understanding of the place and role of religion in their gay life is significantly shaped by dominant cultural traits of the gay male culture. The reverse is much less evident. This is consistent with theological reflections on gay Christian life. For instance, Rudy (1996) controversially encourages us to use the gay community as the model of Christian sexual ethics (but why not the other way round?). She argues that non-monogamous sexual relations could promote a sense of community and unity. As sexual encounters are an opportunity of giving oneself to others, the sharing of multiple sexual partners could facilitate communal relationality, which is a shared goal of Christian life. In the same vein, various contributors in the edited volume *Gay Religion* (Thumma and Gray, 2005) also encourage us to find spirituality in established practices within the gay male culture (but why not assess the compatibility of such practices to Christian life?). To them, spirituality is already there to be discovered and explored. Thus, cruising, drag queen shows, casual sex in leather bar, to name a few, are practices through which one could experience the transcendent and the spiritual.

Creative and challenging though these attempts are in spiritualising or theologising such practices that transgress heteronormativity, one question remains - how does spirituality or religious faith itself influence the practices of LGB life? For LGB people with religious faith, should their religion or spirituality be the model or referential framework of their involvement and practices within the secular LGB community? If so, how? Thus, should one be 'Christian'/'Muslim', or 'LGB' first? The creative theological suggestions above, to my mind, place the emphasis on the latter, using it as the basis of the understanding of the former. I would contend that this need not be the case. How about using the transformative and enriching potential of religion and spirituality to alleviate alienation and oppression within the LGB community? For instance, how about seeing all people as equal spiritual beings who are much more than just a physical body? Would this alleviate the body-obsession and hyper-masculinity so characteristic of the gay male culture? Further, how about rejecting certain practices within the gay male culture (e.g. alarmingly high drug and alcohol consumption level, unsafe sex) on the basis of one's religious faith? Underlying this debate is the question: How does one live one's life as LGB *with* religious faith?

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