

Interconnections between religious hegemony, socio-political processes, & the mental wellbeing of pious LGBT+ citizens

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Abstract

Religiosity is associated with better mental health outcomes including lower levels of anxiety and depression; a greater sense of emotional wellbeing; and personal fulfilment. However, whether religiosity has the same bearing on the mental health of lesbians, gay men, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT+) individuals has yet to be fully established. What is clear is the social environment in which it operates is one that routinely rejects and stigmatises non-heterosexual people. Set within a global context, religion has been acknowledged to be a key agency hostile to the introduction of legislation protecting the civil rights of the LGBT+ populace. In this article, the interconnections between religious hegemony, LGBT+ Christians, and socio-political advances for the equal rights of gay people is explored through an assessment of the scholarly literature and research. This article seeks to contribute to an understanding of the relationship between traditional religion, secular society, and the mental wellbeing of LGBT+ citizens.

Keywords

Conversion therapy / discrimination / legislation / mental wellbeing / identity / religion.

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Introduction

Despite the political and social revolution in recent decades supporting equal rights for LGBT+ citizens, religion remains one of the foremost opponents hostile to global egalitarianism for the LGBT+ population. An extensive body of literature has emerged documenting the conflict between religiosity and attitudes critical of homosexuality, same-sex marriage, and same-sex parenting (Olson et al., 2006; Rodriguez 2009; Sherkat et al., 2010; Weeks 2017; Suen and Chan 2020). A reoccurring theme that appears is heteronormativity as a continual process of negotiating relationships through structures of power and control. A socio-political strategy employed to strengthen heteronormative institutions, and marginalize the rights of non-normative sexualities (Duggan 2002). Rooted as it is in daily life makes it absolute; built into infrastructures that govern cultures, and an essential condition in perpetuating inequality (Duggan 2003; McGeorge and Stone Carlson 2011; Herz and Johansson 2015). According to Durkheim [1897] 2006, societies wield authority over the individual shaped by institutions namely schools, social groupings, and religious institutions. It is within these systems of behavior that heterosexual privilege relating to civil rights and social benefits is bestowed on heterosexuals, merely by virtue of their sexual orientation. By contrast, LGBT+ citizens are regularly alienated using an imagery and language that re-enforces normative behaviors and values—those of marriage and family (Rodriguez 2009; Weeks 2017). In this way, heteronormativity discriminates against sexual orientations believed to be abnormal or unnatural, and for some, homosexuality is seen as a risk to humanity and an offence against God (King and Cortina 2010; McIntyre and McDonald 2012; Habarth 2015; Weeks 2017). Religiosity sees demands for equal rights by the LGBT+ community portrayed as an attack on religious freedom. Threats to religious liberty are cited by leaders as a justification for discriminatory treatment towards LGBT+ citizens. Yet the claim supporting religious freedom is one that discriminates against non-heterosexuals representing an assault on their rights. It criticizes heterosexuals who themselves are supportive of the way of life of LGBT+ individuals. Furthermore, it undermines the rights of all citizens who do not share in religious beliefs (OHCHR 2006). Øistein Endsjø (2020: 1686-7) claims what is sought by religious institutions is an insistence on freedom while denying it to others. For those who want to curtail the rights of LGBT+ people in the name of religious freedom, it is principally *all* about religion.

This article reviews the literature on the experiences of LGBT+ religious people within a dialogue of heteronormativity. It involves an analytical exploration of theory and enquiry into religious affiliation, sexual orientation, gender identity, and homophobia in the context of Christianity with particular reference to Catholicism. The article collates existing data to include the narratives of LGB individuals, allowing a valuable insight into their experiences. The discourse on heteronormativity as a social construct applied to faith is presented, challenging the treatment of pious LGBT+ people by mainstream religions, where the continual pathologizing of homosexuality is judged to be an attack on identity itself (Yip 2005; Rodriguez 2009; Gross and Yip 2010). The article further evaluates links between heteronormativity, theological codes of ethics, and progressive government policies. The conclusion evaluates whether religion is a positive force, or a movement that constraints LGBT+ individuals triggering lifelong psychological damage.

De-constructing religious hegemony through socio-political processes

There is little doubt during the past two decades human sexuality as a discursive and contested issue has become embedded in the socio-political fabric of societies (Yip 2018). The discourse on human sexuality has provided an essential academic and partisan space for the growth in ideological transformations directed towards non-normative sexualities (Gross and Yip 2010; Yip 2018). Against this backdrop, a series of radical law reforms have been produced seeking to protect the civil rights of LGBT+ citizens, and have come about at a time of social change in attitudes towards non-heterosexuals. When surveyed, the majority of Britons were in favor of legal reforms recognizing the rights of LGBT+ people while additionally declaring support for them, regardless (Stonewall 2007; 2012). Among religious institutions acceptance of non-normative sexualities is utmost evident with younger people of faith. Young religious adults are less concerned with a fundamental reading of doctrine and ritual, and instead are ‘pragmatic and pluralist in the construction of religious identities, emphasizing the functionality and usefulness of religious belief’ (Yip 2018: 1293). A generally more open attitude has guaranteed steady changes to UK government policy particularly the introduction of civil partnerships in 2004, followed by same-sex marriage under the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013. Other statutory changes have ranged from the Adoption and Children Act (2002), giving the right to same-sex couples to adopt, to the Equality Act (Sexual Orientation) Regulations (2007), intended to outlaw discrimination in a range of areas, including employment and the provision of goods and services. However, the UK is not alone in its steadfastness to radically roll back inequality for LGBT+ citizens. In 2015, Ireland became the first country in the world to introduce same-sex marriage by popular vote. A proposed amendment to the Irish Constitution was made to integrate the provision of same-sex marriage (Stewart 2015; McKearney 2020). This is in marked contrast to the original draft in 1937, when the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Ireland had a considerable say in its formation. Such was his level of autocracy that he sent recommendations for new laws governing religion, social welfare and education to the Vatican to be sanctioned (Stewart 2015). This preoccupation by the Catholic establishment to direct government policy, and control civil society on sex and sexualities is a persistent and global feature. For instance, the origins of the present-day narrative pathologizing homosexuality (Yip 2005; Gross and Yip 2010), and contravening statutory protections for the LGBT+ populace, can be traced back to a series of letters by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, later Pope Benedict XVI. Unrelenting in his determination to enforce doctrine and the theological ethics of the church, (Bennett 2009), Ratzinger warned about ‘*deceitful propaganda*’ by homosexual groups, describing homosexuality as fundamentally a ‘*moral evil*.’ He wrote:

Although the particular inclination of homosexual person is not a sin, *it is a more or less strong tendency ordered towards an intrinsic moral evil*; and thus *the inclination itself must be seen as an objective disorder* ... It has been argued that the homosexual orientation in certain cases is not the result of deliberate choice [but] as in every *conversation from evil*, the abandonment of homosexual activity will require a profound collaboration of the individual with God’s liberating grace (*Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith*. October 1, 1986; emphasis added).

Throughout a number of paragraphs scripture is used to justify discrimination. Almost two decades later, the Vatican adopted the same autocratic tone when calling upon governments not to equate same-sex unions with heterosexual marriage. It argued:

... homosexual acts go against the natural moral law [and] under no circumstances can they be approved. [Governments must] avoid exposing young people to erroneous ideas about sexuality and marriage that would deprive them of their necessary defences and contribute to the spread of the phenomenon ... *the approval or legislation of evil is something far different from the toleration of evil* (Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith. June 3, 2003; emphasis added).

By propagating these decrees the Catholic Church maintains itself as a system that dominates, controls and excludes; a hegemonic institution constructing heterosexuality as the natural, superior and only expression of sexuality, whilst policing non-normative sexualities. For the church, the expression of sexuality is singular, monogamous, married and above all a reproductive union (Duggan 2002; Robinson 2016). Those who can integrate into the heteronormative structure of the church and conform, obtain the rights and privileges given to the rest of the group. Nonetheless, in recent times there has been an erosion of the Catholic Church's hegemony due to high profile and distressing revelations about the physical and sexual abuse of children (Formicola 2011; Pilgrim 2011; Garrett 2013). This has resulted in what Pace (2007) sees as a church incapable of controlling its structures of belief and practice, and ability to influence civil societies. For many, it has meant a move away from organized religion and towards embracing values of personal responsibility, human rights, diversity and freedom (Gross and Yip 2010). The decline in the church's moral authority has been greeted by LGBT+ people with optimism for a more liberal and accepting future. A gay man living in rural Ireland agrees, highlighting how fear played a major part in manipulating people's thinking.

Their power has gone. And with that, the fear has gone, and people aren't afraid to stand up to the church now when they preach about homosexuality being a sin. People now make up their own minds about what is moral and immoral (McKearney 2014: 8).

Despite such optimism, in some parts of Ireland the church continues to hold sway over political and social matters. In his study of gay men living in the west and northwest of Ireland, McKearney (2020) draws attention to the heteronormative culture that persists in these locales, which necessitates an endless negotiation of masculinity, sexuality and identity by gay men. These are spaces where hegemonic and normative concepts of masculinity continue to prevail. In other words gay men need to *be* masculine to survive. During the referendum campaign for same-sex marriage this grip became evident, when churchgoers across a range of denominations particularly the Church of Ireland, Presbyterian, Methodist and Catholic were urged to vote against the proposed change to the law (Stewart 2015; McKearney 2020). Arguably this had some success when County Roscommon returned a 'No' vote. Nevertheless, the outcome in favor of same-sex marriage legislation, confirmed the state as a modern

inclusive democracy, ready to discard the constraints of its Catholic history to shape a more secular and egalitarian future (Stewart 2015; McKearney 2020). The Minister for Health, Leo Varadkar, who himself came out as gay during the campaign, said the Yes vote made Ireland a, ‘beacon of light for the rest of the world in terms of liberty and equality. It’s a historical day for Ireland ... a social revolution’ (*Irish Times*, May 23, 2015). James Reilly, Minister for Children and Youth Affairs added, ‘while the same-sex marriage referendum Yes vote is strong in Dublin, it is also strong around the country. A lot of voters have been thinking about their grandchildren, and giving them the same opportunities in life, should they be gay’ (*Irish Times*, May 23, 2015). In contrast, the Archbishop of Dublin harkened back to the strict moral protocol that dismisses egalitarianism for LGBT+ citizens, admitting, ‘I have a strong belief—there is a strong belief in the church—about the nature of marriage and the family. I would like to have seen that the rights of gay and lesbian men and women have been respected, without changing the definition of marriage’ (*Irish Times*, May 23, 2015). Regardless, Ireland endorsed a dramatic departure from its historic rigid obedience to strict Catholic moral teaching, which had been pursued vigorously by church leaders, politicians and citizens alike (Fahey 2014).

Navigating dogma, survival strategies and emotional wellbeing

Weeks (2017) describes a lack of being able to engage with gay people as demonstrating a failure to recognise that human sexuality is fundamental to a sense of self. The core of his argument is sexuality affords identity—it is what makes a person male or female, homosexual or heterosexual. In spite of this, the comments by the Archbishop of Dublin after the same-sex marriage referendum, echo a church that ascribes a literal reading to the Bible, strengthening the alienation of LGBT+ worshippers by emphasizing their ‘unnatural’ and ‘perverse’ lifestyle (Rodriguez 2009; Yip 2018). This literal interpretation sanctions a heteronormative approach whereby religious LGB people are compelled to live a celibate life refraining from ‘practicing’ unnatural sinful acts (Rodriguez 2009). Empirical research has persistently determined that LGB people believe their orientation to have been set at a young age, and it is not something over which they had a choice. They also regard it as an important part of God’s plan (Gross and Yip 2010). This awareness has enabled them to withstand the heteronormative narrative adopted by traditional Christianity, empowering them to challenge homophobia propagated through Biblical quotes to support claims on natural law, marriage, and the family (Rodriguez 2009). As part of a survival strategy, LGB churchgoers described their need to distance themselves from the church’s teachings on homosexuality. Gross and Yip (2010: 45) illustrate this with the example of a Protestant gay man, who explains his struggle to unite his Christian faith and sexuality. He recalled:

I prayed that God would suppress my “bad” desires ... I suffered a lot. I wanted to commit suicide to end it all because there was no way out. I fought my homosexual desires for eight years ... I managed to reconcile homosexuality and Christian faith [by] distancing myself from the official discourse of traditional churches that condemns homosexuality.

Remaining in the Christian faith and attending church, for a few, presented feelings of psychological wellbeing and offered a sense of belonging (Yip 2018). They also saw it as a chance to influence positive change from within. Yet the bigotry towards LGBT+ individuals who were ‘out’ about their sexuality in their Christian community, more often resulted in negative feelings causing them mental distress (Rodriguez 2009). To avoid stigmatization and prejudice from fellow parishioners, concealment of sexuality is a regular tactic employed (Browne et al., 2016; Deguara 2018; Suen and Chan 2020). In a related example Gross and Yip (2010: 53) offer the narrative of a French man who recalled the treatment he received in his country from his local Catholic priest. The man’s account gives an indication as to why so many choose to remain silent about their sexual orientation.

The priest of my parish [*sic*] has refused to baptise me after a year and a half of studying and preparing for the baptism because of the “sexual compulsion of homosexuals.” I left that parish and went to another one in order to receive baptism. There, I hide the fact that I am gay.

Other LGBT+ individuals unwilling to hide their sexual orientation or gender identity, felt marginalized and concluded they had no option but to leave the church. Their experience of hostility, intolerance and condemnation had caused significant psychological and emotional damage leading to increased moods of depression, anxiety, internalized homophobia, and a fear of perdition (García et al., 2008; Rodriguez 2009; Barton 2010; Super and Jackson 2011; Beagan and Hattie 2013). Less data is available probing the experiences of transgender people, but the limited findings indicate that an excessive amount change their congregations, denominations, or leave religion entirely. It is suggested this is due to a strict code of ethics around gender roles causing transgender parishioners to be left unsupported, owing to the church’s ambiguity on gender variants (Kidd and Witten 2008; Levy and Lo 2013). For some LGBT+ people, leaving turned out to be a cathartic move as distancing themselves allowed a deeper awareness of their personal spiritual journey (Yip 2000; 2018). They were able to concentrate on the core values of their religion rather than the dogmas and practices. Values such as compassion, caring, respect and love, using yoga, meditation, self-reflection, and the natural elements (Barton; 2010; Beagan and Hattie 2013). In addition, creating a personal connection removed the oppressive authority of organized religion. A lesbian shares her thoughts on finding her spiritual space from within.

Spirituality to me is ... a part of what builds your foundation ... It is something inside of you, that you conjure up yourself ... For me it’s nature ... the beauty and power of nature is just so intense (Beagan and Hattie 2013: 108).

Several individuals who left, reported barriers such as not being able to ‘come out’ were too limiting, and staying would mean consenting to the perpetuation of Christian homophobia (Gross and Yip 2010). Church dogma and the hypocrisy witnessed caused many to feel their spiritual development was hindered. For others, a conflict of emotions arose between liberation and the security religion provided. A lesbian talks about the freedom she sensed on leaving her Catholic faith, yet even so, the woman felt a sense of loss at no longer being part of a

community. ‘There’s a lot of comfort in the familiar, and ritual around a very dogmatic approach to religion, can be very comforting and very anchoring in times of uncertainty’ (p.102). Having left Catholicism she rediscovered her spirituality, and describes experiencing:

... a far more articulated and self-aware construct of spirituality, than I did when I was going through the motions ... My own spirituality, while deeply framed by that ritual and by that practice, only surfaced once I was about to look at it from outside (p.106).

Heteronormative codes of kinship and conversion therapy

For a significant number of LGBT+ adolescence and young adults brought up in their faith tradition, walking away is not an easy option. Even though potent anti-gay rhetoric is used by influential religious figures to denounce a same-sex lifestyle, as in the example of Ratzinger, LGBT+ people continue to seek an affiliation with Christian ministries. Beagan and Hattie (2013) claim adolescence in particular long for acceptance—to be seen as good, respectable and moral—in order to obtain approval. Previous studies revealed that many of these young people grow up in church-going households that are orientated around a community based on religious kinship (Beckstead and Morrow 2004; Bartoli and Gillem 2008). This is a key reason why LGBT+ youth continued to find participation in religion as an essential part of their life. Although anti-gay rhetoric is common place in Christian churches, those raised in religious households rely on their church group for much of their social contact. The benefits associated with heterosexuality, for some, including remaining part of the church community and pressure from family and peers, were significant factors influencing lesbian, gay and bisexual worshippers to seek a change in their sexual orientation (Beckstead and Morrow 2004). It has been noted that religious LGB individuals who were involved in fundamentalist organizations and had less doubts about their faith, were significantly more likely to attempt to change their sexual orientation (Tozer and Hayes 2004; Barton 2010; Ganzevoort, van der Lann and Olsman 2011). By way of ‘curing’ themselves of their sexual desires many turn to conversion therapy also known as sexual reorientation therapy, ex-gay therapy, or reparative therapy. Conversion therapy (CT) is a practice characterized as an attempt to change, or at least reduce feelings and behaviors of same-sex attraction—despite a lack of reliable evidence of success (Ryan et al., 2020). It can entail the use of extreme physical correction measures such as electric shock, aversion therapy or “corrective rape” (*Guardian*, August 8, 2018) and continues to be used around the world irrespective of pledges to ban it, or even to protect bans already in place. In the US, an analysis of *Conversion Therapy and LGBT Youth*, found 698,000 LGBT adults had received CT, and a further 16,000 LGBT youth are expected to receive it before they reach the age of 18 in the 32 states where it remains a legal practice (Williams Institute, June 2019). In Brazil in 2017, a federal judge overturned a ban on conversion therapy imposed by the government in 1999, in response to pressure from the country’s growing evangelical Christian population. The Federal Council of Psychology argued the decision, ‘opens the dangerous possibility of the use of sexual reversion therapies’ (*Guardian*, September 19, 2017). The Council’s President Rogério Giannini, a psychologist based in São Paulo added, ‘There is no way to cure what is not a disease. It is not a serious academic debate, it is a debate connected

to religious or conservative positions' (*Guardian*, September 19, 2017). Critics of CT maintain it is based on an assumption that homosexuality is a pathological condition. Moreover it promotes intolerance, and for those who engage with the practice, it has the potential to cause serious lifelong harm (Maccio 2010). For example, according to Douglas Haldeman (2001: 122-124) some of the psychological damage seen by clinicians involving gay men after disastrous attempts with CT included; intimacy problems, withdrawal, low-self esteem, anxiety, depression, suicidality and sexual dysfunction. Endeavoring to change an adolescent or young adult's sexual identity has been found to contribute to self-destructive behavior. Results from related data revealed suicide attempts among LGB youth, who had tried to change their sexual orientation, more than doubled to a rate of forty-eight per cent (Ryan et al., 2020) in comparison to LGB youth who had not come into contact with CT, which was under half at twenty-two per cent. The majority of families associated with CT had a highly religious background and families with a low socioeconomic status, were liable to use home-based conversion treatments in addition to employing external methods. Ryan et al., (2020: 161) contends, 'rejecting behaviors ... are based on a belief that homosexuality is a mental illness or developmental disorder [with] social stigma and minority stress contribut[ing] to negative health outcomes and self hate.' Other indicators of poor health affecting adolescence who were subject to CT are; self-care, unemployment, drugs and alcohol abuse. A young lesbian growing up in the UK who joined a charismatic evangelical youth group in her 20s, tells of putting herself through years of suffering while also wasting thousands of pounds on conversion therapy. She explains:

I was an Oxbridge graduate ... You might think I should have known better, but the world I was in believed it with me. [I received] prayer ministry, healing ministry, deliverance ministry. I didn't want people to know I was struggling with this, so I went to Germany ... I've tried every conversion therapy ... It drove me to hospital twice because I just couldn't cope with the stress. I had huge undiagnosed pain, which was eventually put down to extreme levels of stress. I then had a mental breakdown (*Guardian*, August 8, 2018).

After suffering a second physical and mental breakdown, she made the decision to accept her sexuality at the age of 40.

It's amazing what love does ... The transformation was incredible. Many of my friends disowned me overnight and my family found it difficult, but the brave few who saw me couldn't call it bad or evil. There are people right now being put through this ... If you're a part of a community teaching it's sinful to be gay, you will do anything to try to change.

Conclusion

Achieving equality in many areas of civil society for LGBT+ citizens has been celebrated as both liberating and historic (McKearney 2020). Older members of the community have lived through a revolutionary period, from being viewed as social pariahs where their way of life was criminalized, to the legal condoning of prejudice against them (Phelan 2001; Cossman 2007). There is a growing recognition that sexual orientation is congenital and natural, contrary to ideas of it being depraved and sinful (McKearney 2020). LGBT+ citizens are demanding equitable inclusion in the cultural, social and religious rudiments of society. The consequence of this revolution has seen a shift in attitudes towards the LGBT+ population to the point of accepting same-sex marriage as equal to that of heterosexual. As well as this, a change in the adoption laws has come about with a broadening of the definition of family to allow lesbians and gay men to adopt children. The discourse on equality and social inclusion for the LGBT+ populace is a global topic, yet for Christian institutions it remains a highly polarizing one. The conclusion drawn in this article, achieves cohesion with the work of other scholars who believe heteronormativity directs all social actions, where the perpetuation of heteronormativity relies on the marginalization of sexualities, pushing homosexuality to the limits of society (Jackson 2006; Ward 2009; Habarth 2015; Herz 2015; Weeks, 2017; Javaid 2018). Within religious traditions, heterosexuality continues to be the primary sexuality against which other sexualities are measured. For heteronormativity to function it needs subordinate sexualities to reinforce and affirm its superior position (Weeks 2017; Javaid 2018). This study has sought to critically assess religiosity, focusing attention on the contexts in which it is at odds with the social and political transformations that have taken place in many western countries for non-heterosexuals. It acknowledges that rejection and discrimination are an everyday reality, causing feelings of low self-esteem, isolation, and suicidal ideation. Surrounded by this world of oppression and discrimination, LGBT+ citizens are compelled to navigate their lives (Gross and Yip 2010). Nonetheless, the socio-political changes demonstrated within legislative and policy reforms, have far-reaching implications for non-heterosexual people, as well as religious movements. During the course of this research, a high level of homophobia has been identified in religiosity with sacred texts quoted to justify bigotry. Catholicism has shown itself to be an institution where there is no dissent from the church's interpretation of scripture (Gross and Yip 2010). Some gay people choose to stay in their churches believing they can champion social inclusion for LGBT+ worshippers, to be 'out' without fear of stigmatization. Yet evidence exists to support the hypothesis that the struggle between sexuality and religious belief can cause substantial and lifelong damage to the health and mental wellbeing of non-heterosexual people (Rodriguez 2009; Barton 2010; Bowers, Minichiello, and Plummer 2010; Ganzevoort, van der Laan and Olsman 2011; Beagan and Hattie 2013). It is through stigma, shame, guilt, alienation and marginalization that religion uses its power to abuse LGBT+ individuals by instilling a litany of destructive feelings (García et al., 2008; Barton 2010; Super and Jackson 2011). For many, leaving their churches was the only means of protecting their mental health and wellbeing, while those who remained, creating survival strategies such as separating religious teachings from individual spirituality proved vital.

This article contributes to the literature on the experiences of the LGBT+ population who align themselves with Christianity. It generates an insight into the interconnections

between religious hegemony, LGBT+ Christians, and socio-political advances for the equal rights of gay people. Throughout the dominant traditional religions of the west, negative treatment of non-normative sexualities is common place. The present investigation confirms the importance of challenging the propagation of heteronormativity and anti-gay rhetoric in religious spaces. It calls for an end to silence, and the advancement of the right of LGBT+ individuals to be open about their sexual orientation, while interacting with religious institutions. Despite shifts in social, political and cultural thinking allowing the increase in secularization among western societies, the emotional distress experienced by countless LGBT+ individuals engaged with organized religion continues. This study calls for proper education programs to be facilitated to families, religious leaders and congregations, providing candid information on expressions of sexual orientation and gender identity, as well as demonstrating the harmful consequences rejection behaviors such as conversion therapy can have. This article suggests that invested in the hands of young people of faith is the opportunity to transform Christianity, from an establishment founded on rigid doctrines and practices, to one that embraces the diversity of all human sexuality.

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