

Reconstructing a Fragmented Self: How LGBT Catholics Negotiate a Coherent Sense of Identity

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Abstract

This paper explores how lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) Catholics deal with the intra-personal conflict that emerges from the incongruence between their faith and their sexuality. When they start experiencing sexual desires for persons of the same sex, their inner state of being is shattered as they are engulfed with feelings of guilt, fear, anger, doubt and anxiety. They have to deal with their apparently irreconcilable sexuality and faith as they feel judged by God and by his Church.

The LGBT Catholics in my study are spiritually profound, introspective, faithful beings. Yet they are not afraid to engage with the Church's teachings to develop their own individual morality. Drawing upon the Catholic tradition itself, they seek to develop an alternative, LGBT-affirming moral hermeneutic, a process aided by therapy, reflection, prayer, priestly advice and other techniques which enable them not only to find themselves but to relocate themselves within Catholicism. Through what Foucault calls "practices of the self" such as self-reflection, self-knowledge and self-examination, individuals engage with the established and prescribed moral code in a process of "moral subjectivation". Such processes enable them to reconstruct their fragmented self and to 'reclaim' their rightful place in religious texts which was denied them through heteronormative theological interpretations.

Keywords: homosexuality, Catholic, identity reconstruction, narrative

Introduction

That most LGBT individuals who are brought up as Christians have to deal with the dilemma of their apparently irreconcilable sexuality and faith is well documented (*inter alia* Dillon, 1999; Gross & Yip, 2010; Grubbs & Exline, 2014; Lapinski & McKirnan, 2013; Levy & Edmiston, 2014; Levy & Reeves, 2011; Mahaffy, 1996; Rodriguez, 2010; Schuck & Liddle, 2001; Subhi & Geelan, 2012; Subhi et al, 2011; Thumma, 1991; Toft, 2014; Trammell, 2015; Wilcox, 2002b, 2003; Wolkomir, 2001; Yip, 1997a; Yip 1997b). While their religious identity becomes an integral part of

who they are since childhood, their sexual self is by comparison rather unfamiliar. Their same-sex desire is even more confusing because it is seen as 'bad' or 'deviant'. They think that they are the only ones having these feelings. This 'newness' is not meant only in the sense of newly discovered but also in terms of acknowledging a gay or lesbian identity which is, in itself, a relatively new concept which was not written about before the 1970s (Epstein, 1978). Their emerging self is incongruent with Catholic morality and with the heteronormative ideals which they internalised and which they learn to idealise. Internalised homophobia creates disharmony within the self, causing conflict and pain. In LGBT informants, this internal conflict is extremely profound because it concerns issues related to their sense of being. Conflict is not just about lifestyle choices and behaviour that is condemned by the Catholic Church. It is primarily about accepting themselves as non-conforming *beings*, not only as non-conforming *actors*.

Informants eventually learn to cope with their feelings and find ways of reconciling their conflicts, although they never completely resolve them. They may even perceive their homosexuality as a source of pride and their experiences as an opportunity for personal and spiritual growth. Dealing with this contradiction often presents an opportunity for the emergence of an empowered sense of self (Taylor & Snowden, 2014).

Methodology

This research is based on two years of ethnography with Drachma LGBTI (henceforth Drachma) in Malta and one week of intense participant observation with Ali d'Aquila in Palermo. Both groups are concerned with enabling LGBT believers to reconcile their spirituality with their sexuality. I also conducted nine in-depth interviews with LGBT Catholics from Drachma (eight men, including one transman, and two women), nine interviews (five men and four women) with LGBT Catholics from Ali D'Aquila and six interviews with LGB persons (two women and four men) who do not frequent either group. Most of my informants were well-educated individuals in their thirties. All the names of my informants are pseudonyms except for those of a few individuals who gave me permission to use their real name.

Reconciling faith and sexuality

This paper accompanies my LGBT informants along their 'journey' towards self-acceptance and self-affirmation. LGBT informants live the conflict as modern selves who are also spiritually profound, introspective beings who critically engage with the Church's teachings to develop their own individual morality. Drawing upon the Catholic tradition itself, they seek to develop an alternative, LGBT-affirming moral

hermeneutic, a process aided by therapy, reflection, prayer, priestly advice and other techniques that enable them not only to find themselves but to relocate themselves within Catholicism. Through what Foucault (1984, p. 29) calls “practices of the self” such as self-reflection, self-knowledge and self-examination, individuals engage with the established and prescribed moral code in a process of “moral subjectivation”. Such processes enable them to reconstruct their fragmented self and to ‘reclaim’ their rightful place in religious texts, which was denied to them through heteronormative theological interpretations (Yip, 2005).

The negotiation of an integrated identity is a ‘journey’ filled with hurdles and disappointments. Some experiences are less painful, as informants manage to cope with their dilemmas more successfully and in a shorter amount of time than others. Others go through a great deal of stress and suffering, at times risking death (Wilcox, 2003). LGBT people of faith deal with their conflicts in different ways. They may reject either their sexual or their religious identity; they may succeed in reconciling both identities; they may compartmentalise the two aspects of their identity or they may continue to live with the conflict (Levy & Reeves, 2011, Rodriguez & Ouelette, 2000; Wilcox, 2009). They may choose their religion over their sexuality, struggling to conform to social expectations, praying that their sexual desires will go away (Wilcox, 2003). Others choose their LGBT identity and reject their offending Church while others try to find a middle ground. According to Rodriguez and Ouelette (2000), rejection of one’s homosexual identity may involve seeking reparative therapy, something which hardly featured among the participants in my study and which has since become illegal in Malta. Among my LGBT Catholic informants, the initial reaction was often to deny or to fight against their sexuality, to make it go away rather than to abandon their religion. Although a few kept away from God or from religious rituals for a time, giving up this aspect of one’s identity was not generally an option. Most informants sought ways of reconciling the two seemingly incompatible elements as they eventually recognised the importance of retaining both.

I approach identity reconstruction as a process of synthesis where individuals seek to reconcile their different identities into an integrated sense of self (Epstein, 1978) through a hermeneutic process in which they are both subjects and objects of interpretation. Based on his ethnographic fieldwork among gay Muslims in Indonesia, anthropologist Tom Boellstorff (2007, pp.141-3) describes his interlocutors as having to deal with their being “ungrammatical”. Within Islamic Indonesian society, homosexuality is not only considered false but also incommensurable, as if it does not exist. Dealing with their faith and sexual desires as Muslim gay men is like having to make sense of a phrase which reads “earth happy twelve the”. Therefore, interpretation is of utmost importance, especially in the absence of an Islamic discursive framework concerning homosexuality. Most of my informants were brought up in a social and moral environment which also did not offer them much in terms of self-understanding except the interpretation of the Roman Catholic Church.

However, nowadays contemporary society provides them with “new mechanisms” (Giddens, 1991, p.2) which enable them to take an active role in the construction of their own identity. The reconstruction of self-identity is not simply shaped by outside forces in a passive way but is acted upon by LGBT Catholics, who frequently seek the help of others such as therapists, priests, theologians and LGBT faith groups. Rather than passively accepting their stigma, LGBT Christians develop an affirmative self-identity which counters that of the Church but is simultaneously embedded within Catholicism and enables them to remain within the Catholic fold.

Means of narrativisation

A self-affirming narrative emerges out of a process of negotiation and growth through which LGBT Catholics strive to achieve some degree of balance between their incongruent sexual and religious identities. It is a continuous process, rather than a “two-dimensional or bipolar construct” (Rodriguez, 2010, p.17; Rodriguez & Ouelette, 2000). It is not a dichotomous experience of switching from one state to another or a linear, progressive sequence of events. It is a transitional process during which LGBT Catholics make use of what in the literature are referred to as strategies (Mahaffy, 1996; Pietkiewicz & Kołodziejczyk-Skrzypek, 2016; Rodriguez, 2010; Rodriguez & Ouelette, 2000; Wilcox, 2003; Wilcox, 2009; Yip, 1997a; Yip, 1997b, Yip, 2005; Yip & Page, 2013) in their efforts to understand and accept the possibility that they can be both LGBT and Catholic. This process of identity negotiation is characterised by ups and downs, by progress, satisfaction and reassurance as much as by anxiety, depression and nagging questions.

LGBT Catholic informants sought to engage with their conflicts in different ways. Especially in the beginning, some joined religious orders or sought spiritual direction, often combined with psychological help. They tried to repress their sexuality while seeking to learn more about their feelings and about the experiences of others in a similar situation. They sought help from friends, knowledge from books and websites. They may have joined faith-based groups such as Drachma and Ali d'Aquila. Such endeavours equipped them with the necessary tools and skills to be able to reconstruct a more coherent sense of self and to develop an alternative moral hermeneutic which embraces both their faith and their sexuality.

Therapy and spiritual direction

Only a minority of my informants did not consult a psychotherapist, a psychologist or even a psychiatrist, to help them come to terms with their incongruent sense of self. For some, therapy is an integral part of their life. Others seek therapy only during a temporary turbulent period in their life, while a few others keep returning to their

therapist whenever they feel the need. This is not surprising in our 'therapeutic culture' where therapy has become an institution carrying a great deal of legitimacy (Illouz, 2008). Giddens (1991, p.34) contends that therapy has become the "secular version of the confessional".

As a result of the medicalisation of social life, what was once considered a moral issue has now become a disease which needs to be healed; moreover, the individual who goes to therapy is a "diseased self" whose self-development was, according to Illouz (2008, p.173), obstructed or hindered in some way. However, it is moral dilemmas which often push my informants towards therapy. In fact, while some manage to deal with their fears and doubts through therapy alone, others feel the need to combine their therapy with guidance from a spiritual director, sometimes by consulting a therapist who would himself be a priest or a theologian. Adriana, a Sicilian lawyer who was brought up within the Focolare Movement, claimed that psychology helped her deal with her guilt and to reluctantly learn to accept her homosexuality. However, it could only help her "accept things from a human point of view" because "regardless of what the psychologist said, I could not reconcile the human dimension with what God wanted from me". She only started to address these aspects of her conflict through Ali d'Aquila, although she still continued visiting her therapist.

Illouz (2008, p.173) refers to the "therapeutic narrative" of the self which is embedded in a sense of victimhood and suffering. It enables individuals to speak about themselves and to understand themselves through their own narrative using therapeutic language. This is helped by the diffusion of psychological knowledge and its broader accessibility.

This fusion between therapy and spiritual direction was experienced most strongly by some of those who were in religious formation. While hardly any of my informants considered the issue of their homosexuality to have featured as a motive to join a religious order, in some cases, conventual life might have unconsciously served as a safe alternative to having to deal with their homosexuality or as a means of proving that they are not 'bad' persons. Yet for some, it was the experience of religious life itself which enabled them to effectively reconcile their spirituality with their homosexuality.

It was through therapy that Joseph could finally face his homosexuality which he had denied and repressed for many years. During his religious formation of six years, he had been seeing a psychologist priest:

I woke up and went in front of the mirror in my room. I looked into my eyes and said, "Joseph, you are gay and there's nothing wrong with that". And that's where I liberated myself. I cried a lot. There was a big lump in my throat, and a huge burden. I arrived there because of the therapy I was doing with that Father.

Reflective deliberation

It is common for LGBT informants to engage in self-reflection, another means of narrative development. This is usually a rational, introspective process of deep pondering in which informants reflect upon themselves and their life as they try to make sense of who they are and where they are heading.

The combination of educational capital which my informants possess, together with the acquired therapeutic discourse, serves to enrich this contemplative self-analytic process and to equip my informants with the required explanatory vocabulary. It enables them to develop their personal narrative, which serves as a way of bringing together the pieces of their life in a more coherent manner, not in a chronological sense but as a discerning interpretation of their story in terms of analytical categories and processes, “as parts of a plot” (Polkinghorne, 1991, p.136).

Bauman (2004) argues that since identity has become more fluid, transient and elusive in contemporary society, individuals are increasingly disassociating themselves from traditional roles, structures and norms and engaging in “reflexive life projects with the self in the driver’s seat” (Gross & Yip, 2010, p.56). With the onset of late, advanced or reflexive modernity, the concept of individualism has, according to Beck (1992), become part and parcel of the Western imagination and individuals are increasingly looking inside themselves as agents and sources of meaning rather than towards traditional systems and structures. However, my informants are reluctant to let go completely of traditional systems of meaning as they draw upon the resources provided by Catholicism. Indeed, such views, also expounded by Heelas (1996), were criticised for assuming the existence of a self-reflexive self while ignoring the social, structural and cultural formations which are bound to have an impact on the formation of the self (Wood, 2007).

Contemplative thinking could at times take different forms of expression as well as become interactive. Chris described an intense period of reflection during his early encounters with Drachma, when he was still trying to decipher himself, after having quit his role of Catechist within the Society of Christian Doctrine (MUSEUM). He used to express his deep thoughts in writing, engaging in dialogue with Drachma’s coordinator and putting these thoughts on the Drachma website. His reflections were also a way of pouring out his soul to God:

I wrote about 40,000 words in that period. It was also an intense spiritual experience. It was not just an expression of my thoughts; it was almost a dialogue with God. Internally I was literally addressing the big issues and arguing with them.

Although for my Maltese Catholic informants, a Catholic identity is almost a ‘given’, this is still negotiated, questioned and explored just as much as sexuality in

this process of introspective self-understanding where the self is “routinely created and sustained in the reflective activities of the individual” (Giddens, 1991, p.52). This “relationship with the self” is not just about becoming conscious of the self and getting to know the self but also about becoming “ethical subjects”. Individuals establish their moral goals and transform themselves into “subjects of moral conduct” (Foucault, 1984, pp.28-29). Salazar (2006, pp.115-6) sees a shift from a sexual morality which was based on disciplining the body, especially women’s bodies, to a sexual morality which disciplines the self “as a knowledgeable and responsible subject”. Individuals cannot become ethical subjects unless they become knowledgeable. Consequently, Salazar (2006) sees what he terms “obedience-sexuality”, where sexual morality is based on the obedience of the dictates of the Church, being replaced by “knowledge sexuality”. Foucault (1984), however, contends that every morality, broadly speaking, encompasses both of these elements, that is, established moral codes and forms of subjectivation. They can never be completely set apart, although they can develop independently from each other.

Among my informants, the development of the ‘ethical self’ is embedded in Christian principles which are however revisited and re-evaluated in the process of engaging with the self. My informants tend to consider their experience as a way of testing and developing their faith. They had to ask questions which they would not have asked had they not been faced with the challenges of their sexuality, often strengthening their faith as a result, even if, for a period of time, they may have distanced themselves from God or from the Church.

LGBT-affirming religious communities

Despite their desire to be accepted by the Church and their endeavours to justify their rightful place within the wider religious community, LGBT Catholics may be pushed towards “subaltern communities of faith” (Thumma & Gray, 2005, p.xiii). Rodriguez (2010) considers joining an organisation which promotes both homosexuality and religion as an important means of identity integration for LGBT Catholics. Yip (1997c) found that participation in such faith groups served many functions. Participants could give and receive moral and emotional support. They could interact socially without needing to hide their sexuality. Especially for those who feel alienated from the Church, these religious groups offer a safe space where one could meet others in the same situation; where individuals can be themselves (Kaufman & Johnson, 2004). In these spaces, individuals could learn to affirm their sexual and spiritual selves by engaging with Christian theologies of sexuality and at the same time strive for change within the Church.

Narratives of a reconstructed self

The various sources of support, learning, understanding and spiritual growth furnish LGBT Catholics with the necessary techniques and skills which facilitate the process of identity reconstruction. They provide them with “the rhetoric of conversion” (Harding, 1987, p.167), a blend of practices, symbols and vocabulary enabling them to shift “from one worldview, or mind-set, to another”. They enable them to revisit their cultural assumptions and re-evaluate their self-concept equipped with these newly acquired methods of organising and interpreting their experiences (Harding, 1987, p.168).

My LGBT informants refer to this process of self-transformation as a ‘journey’ of growth, exploration, self-reflection and discovery. Journey and travel metaphors are common in the literature pertaining to identity negotiation among LGBT people of faith (*inter alia* Browne, Munt & Yip, 2010; Gross & Yip, 2010; Rodrigue, 2010; Rosser, 1992; Schnoor, 2006; Shallenberger, 1996; Subhi et al, 2011; Taylor & Barnes, 2015; Thumma, 1991; White & White Jr., 2004; Wilcox, 2003, Wilcox, 2009; Yip, 1997a, Yip, 1997b, Yip, 2002; Yip & Page, 2013) and are often used by both my Maltese and Sicilian informants. Seeing one’s self-transformation in terms of a journey is a metaphor which is derived from contemporary Western spiritual discourse and which is not exclusive to LGBT people of faith. It implies that there is some destination which, for LGBT informants, could be a goal such as self-acceptance or achieving a coherent sense of identity. However, there is also the notion of a path or a road that one traverses as one seeks to enhance one’s theological understanding and spiritual growth and to ‘find’ oneself in the process. The ‘journey’ that my informants embark on is rather fluid, characterised by many hurdles and an uncertain destination. As Catholic believers, my informants also “journeyed with God” (Wilcox, 2003, p.50).

LGBT informants view their ‘journey’ of self-reconstruction as an experience of change from an ‘old’ to a ‘new’ self, reminiscent of the ‘born again’ spiritual experiences found in some Christian denominations. However, for Drachma members, the ‘old’ self is not that of someone who had homosexual desires and who controlled such desires in order to live according to Catholic teachings. On the contrary, the ‘old’ self was described as “not being who I really am”, denying one’s homosexuality while the ‘new’ self means accepting oneself, acknowledging and accepting God’s love. It is a shift from a past self riddled with doubt and guilt towards a more integrated and confident sense of self. It is a conception of self which emerges from an evolving narrative of sexual and spiritual integration.

An integrated self develops in conjunction with the emergence of a personal narrative which is capable of perceiving the spiritual/divine and the religious/institutional as separate spheres. It is a narrative which employs a vocabulary of neutralisation, inspired by alternative interpretations of religious texts. It is embedded in the rhetoric acquired through therapy, spiritual direction, reading and reflection.

Conclusion

One may construe the transformation experienced by LGBT Catholics as a process of 'conversion'. From non-conforming sinners, wanting to hide from the knowing, judging eyes of God, they come to view themselves as loved creatures of God. Their 'journey' takes them from a dark place filled with guilt and shame to a point where they may even feel pride in being who they are. They come to embrace their new self even as their identity remains in a state of construction.

While LGBT informants are critical of the Church's teachings on homosexuality and keep hoping that one day the Church would revise these teachings, their hermeneutical 'journey' empowers them in their endeavour to engage critically and dialogically with the Church until they are able to reclaim their rightful place within the Catholic faith.

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Bio-note

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