

Queer Faces in Holy Spaces

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Abstract

This study is the result of a series of informal, unstructured interviews with five individuals who identify as LGBTQ+ and Christian by a researcher who shares these same intersectional identities. These interviews and their thematic interpretation provide an insight into the experiences of members of a subgroup that exists as a marginalised part of two vocal and all-encompassing subcultural identities. Through frank and honest discussion in the tradition of a qualitative, feminist approach, this study- and the report below- aim to be a means through which the voices of both these five individuals and those they represent who cannot speak may be heard. This study does not claim to provide an in-depth or even fully representative insight into the lives of queer Christians, it is merely to be seen as a foundation for future study and discussion, and of five people, at least in some way, receiving an opportunity to “speak truth to power.” (Scheper-Hughes, 1992, p.28)

Introduction

The existence of a group of people on the intersection between two traditionally opposed groups is not a new phenomenon; sociologists have concerned themselves with the existence of such intersectional existences for decades (a key example of this is the work of Palvaldis and Fullagar (2013) on the existence of women within the sport of roller derby.) However, the subject of this paper is the controversial and difficult intersection that exists between religion and sexuality. The individuals who find themselves identifying both as LGBTQ+ (queer used henceforth) and Christian exist in a world where the morals and ideas proposed by both groups find themselves in (sometimes violent) conflict and thus, as one researcher puts it, queer Christians may often find themselves “wrestling the angel of contradiction” that this existence demands (O’Brien 2004, p.179.) When deciding to undertake this project, I had to come to terms with my own reality as a member of the group I am seeking study. I was raised as a practising Catholic and during my late teens balanced my growing sexuality and gender identity with a feeling of attraction to priesthood that has never really gone away, and thus I take inspiration from the work of Burke (2011, p.47) and view the study that is reported here as a piece of *critical autoethnography*- that is, I see the stories of struggle and subversion that are reported here as a reflection of my own journey and whilst searching for participants to interview and stories to tell, I am “learning how to tell my own story as well.” (ibid, p.49.)

But what is that story?

More than one researcher has commented on the particular struggle that faces queer Christians in a world where the all too common reality is that they must come to terms with what O’Brien (2004, p.181) describes as the “double-stigma” of facing rejection from either community based on membership of the other. The need to choose between either identity has been reported upon by Wagner et al (1994) who found that over 69% of their homosexual male participants had willingly chosen sexual identity over faith. However, for those who remain within both communities and thus attempt to forge “paths to self-acceptance and spiritual wholeness” (Wilcox 2000, p.135) there must be the undertaking of a deeply personal journey towards adapting and (in some cases) overcoming the issues that

the “gay predicament” (Fortunato, 1982) that queer religiosity causes. It is to these journeys, and my attempt to understand them, that we now turn.

Methodology

The methodology of this project has been immensely influenced by my position as a member of the group I am studying. The existence of queer Christians as members of a faith community that traditionally has fought against the existence of LGBTQ+ rights (See Johnson and Vanderbeck 2014, for an explanation of religious influence on anti-LGBTQ+ laws) and in at least some cases still sees homosexuality as “intrinsically disordered” (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1994, 566) means that the social circles of queer Christians are necessarily imbued with a certain level of secrecy that would be hard to overcome if I wasn’t a member of those circles myself. Thus, in order to garner participants, I found it necessary to approach individuals who I know be involved with queer Christian activism and fellowship: these individuals acted as *gatekeepers* who selected individuals who they felt would be open to participation and in at least one case refused to share my project with their peers as they felt that the risk of “outing” participants was too great. Although I did gain two participants through contact with gatekeepers, I reflected on the work of Darling (2014, p. 205) who said that in order for fieldwork of vulnerable groups to work, one must “develop friendships, trust and relationships of mutual respect” with those who one wishes to interview, and thus I interviewed the gatekeepers with whom I had built up those relationships during months of discussion and also called upon a number of people who I knew personally as members of the community and who had discussed and in many ways inspired the beginning of this project. Thus, I can say that my methods of sampling relied on both a form of snowball sampling, and a selective method of choosing specific people to take part.

During the interviews themselves, I began with the question “What does it mean to you to be a Queer Christian?” and then simply allowing conversations to develop naturally and for the participant to steer the course of this unstructured interview. Although this method finds its inspiration in the life-history approach to interviewing advocated by sociologists such as Duneier (1999) and required a giving up of my own “power” as researcher to control the interview, I felt it was important to follow this method in order for these interviews to be a means of “giving voice to those who have been silenced and forgotten” (Mizen and Ofusu-Kusi 2010, p.256.) This was also a way of safeguarding against the possibility of the biases and opinions I hold as a member of the group overshadowing the experiences of my participants. Following the example of Duneier (1999, p.14) I invited my participants to act as “collaborators” who decide and direct the story that they wish to share with the world. I recorded these interviews and then transcribed them and looked for reoccurring *themes* that took the forms of concepts and ideas that were repeated and questions that I had found myself asking every participant, and through the exploration of these ideas, I seek to gain a greater understanding of what it means to be a *Queer Face in a Holy Space*.

Results

The interviews I had with five queer Christians provided five very interesting stories to analyse. The answer to the first question of “What does it mean to you to be a queer Christian?” produced different answers and thus led to different conversations: for one participant, it meant being “part of a congregation”, for another, they felt that their relationship to God was at its best when they were “furthest away from the Church.” However, the unifying aspect among all the participants was that they felt little conflict between the two identities and their relationship with God, and as one participant put it, it didn’t matter because “God is love.” For all but one of my participants, their Christian faith is lived out as part of a Church community, although attendance at services varied based on family adherence and background (for example, the participant who reported greatest regularity of Church attendance came from a practising Irish Catholic background, whereas one participant who had converted from a Muslim background- and thus had no family expectation of attendance- had stopped regular attendance at services. One aspect that unified all the participants was an agreement that Bible verses that appear to suggest that homosexuality was in some way sinful had to be reinterpreted and possibly dismissed as irrelevant, and as one evangelical Protestant participant put it, if one took all Biblical commands seriously, “we would spend our lives beating ourselves up for being imperfect.” An interesting fact about this was that three of five participants had attended Churches where Bible study is a regular occurrence and one had a masters degree in theology, thus it cannot be said that this wish to reinterpret is a result of not knowing what it is that the Bible says, but rather comes as a result of the intense theological soul-searching that at least one author argues is a key part of coming to terms with being a queer Christian (see Kelly, 2018).

This willingness to revisit and reinterpret traditional Christian views is a common feature in all the interviews undertaken, and two participants shared a view of God that rejected the traditional gendered language of He and Him and both shared the specific idea of God as being not quite gender-less but rather *beyond* all human conceptions of gender. One of these participants saw this argument as being, not a rejection of traditionalist Biblical interpretation, but as a valid view that finds its basis in the existence of passages that refer to aspects of God in language that at least suggests femininity. In many ways, these two views are examples of a wider push by queer theologians to “facilitate the coming out of the closet of God” (Althaus-Reid 2003, p.2.)

One point that united every participant was the inability to refute their Christian faith for their queer identity, with two stating that they “are not separate in my life.” However, two participants hinted that they would find it much easier to be a straight Christian than a queer atheist, thereby suggesting that they viewed their Christian faith as in some ways more vital to their sense of self than their sexuality, although conclusions such as this cannot be drawn and defended based on this argument alone and thus would benefit greatly from further research.

Conclusion

This study provides a fascinating insight into the views and experiences of a group of people who share a similar story to me. I found myself surprised by the wide variety of backgrounds that were incidentally captured in this small study of just five individuals: none of them

shared the same denominational background two of the five identified as non-binary and all came from differing socio-economic backgrounds. However, what I found was a shared faith that formed the very core of who they were and a desire to revisit the tenets of that faith in order to enhance their relationship and understanding of a God that all five continuously affirmed as a “loving” God who had made them and loved them as they were. The very conception of God seemed, at least for some, to hint towards the creative ability of queer Christians to take their struggle and the discomfort that the “gay predicament” mentioned above causes and use it to rebuild a relationship with God and in many ways add to the growing sense of a “queer spirituality as an alternative to the restrictions of organised religion.” (Comstock 1997, p.11.) Thus, through these interviews and through the thematic analysis of the qualitative data produced by them, I have found my own story reflected and thus can argue for this piece as having been inspired by the principles of *critical autoethnography*. However, much more than that, I have built a bond of trust with these individuals whose story is my own and hopefully achieved one of the aims of Oakley (1981, p.48.) who argued that the sociologist is most successful when those they interview can regard them as more than “an instrument of data collection.” My only true regret is that I did not have the time or resources to interview more people.

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