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# **Negotiating Queer and Religious Identities in Higher Education: Queering ‘Progression’ in the ‘University Experience’**

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## **Abstract**

This paper addresses the negotiation of ‘queer religious’ student identities in UK Higher Education. The ‘university experience’ has generally been characterised as a period of intense transformation and self-exploration, with complex and overlapping personal and social influences significantly shaping educational spaces, subjects and subjectivities. Engaging with ideas about progressive tolerance and becoming, often contrasted against ‘backwards’ religious-homophobia as a sentiment/space/subject ‘outside’ of education (Rasmussen, 2010), this paper follows the experiences and expectations of queer Christian students<sup>i</sup>. In asking if notions of ‘queering higher education’ (Renn, 2010; Case et al., 2012; Rumens, 2014, Taylor, 2013a) ‘fit’ with queer identifying religious youth, it explores how educational experiences are narrated and made sense of as ‘progressive’. Educational transitions allow (some) sexual-religious subjects to negotiate identities more freely, albeit with ongoing constraints. Yet perceptions of what, where and who, is deemed ‘progressive’ and ‘backwards’ with regard to sexuality and religion need to be met with caution, where the ‘university experience’ can shape and shake sexual-religious identity.

**Keywords:** Sexuality, Religion, Education, Queer Youth, Transitions, Diversity

## **Introduction: Progressing and ‘Passing Through’ Diversity?**

University is often characterised as a rite of passage and space of transformation, personally, professionally and politically, albeit within conditions of privilege and

precarity<sup>ii</sup> (Berzonsky and Kuk 2000, Evans, 2010; Inckle, 2012; Mountford 2014). Such transition has, at least for traditional students, been acknowledged as a significant period in the life course for shaping young people's identities (Berzonsky and Kuk, 2000; Evans, 2010). Traditional students are largely characterised by those entering post-compulsory education directly after or close to the time of school leaving, who have achieved conventional school qualifications, are not yet in full time employment, and do not have any dependents (Ross-Gordon, 2011). But how 'diverse' and 'non-traditional' students experience university transition remains an important concern (Terenzini, et al. 1994; Ahmed, 2012; Mountford, 2014; Rumens, 2014; Taylor, 2012, 2014), with research highlighting persistent raced, gendered and classed inequalities (Addison, 2012; Ahmed, 2012; Reay et al., 2010; Taylor, 2012).

Those researching the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) students have emphasised the role of the university experience for '...self-exploration, personal growth, and determination of the roles one will play in society' (Evans, 2001: 181). However, there has been little attention to how this process of self-exploration and transformation affects queer religious students who embody multiple differences, both at *odds with* and set up as *part of* educated 'diversity'. Contemporary manifestations of diversity politics involve and seemingly embrace metric measures and diversity branding which celebrate 'otherness' as integral to institutional difference and distinction, as represented in Stonewall's 'Gay by Degree' institutions<sup>iii</sup> (Taylor, 2013b). Often there is lack of focus on whether the effort is in publicising institutions that have a strong ethos of equality and acceptance – or ranking cities for the best LGBTQ commercial scenes. Overall, a rather consumerist measure of diversity as done-by and produced-for white-middle-class students, residing in elite universities, is celebrated. Within educational measures, increasingly codified into the 'university experience' (Addison, 2012; Mountford, 2014), it is important to consider how presumed inclusive and tolerant spaces accommodate students who identify as both queer *and* religious (Sharma and Guest, 2013). Educational transitions allow (some) sexual-religious subjects to negotiate identities more freely, albeit with ongoing constraints, with 'university experience' frequently mobilised as a progressive signifier, in opposition to regressive spaces and subjects. It is thus important to consider how notions of 'queering higher education' (Renn, 2010; Case et al., 2012; Rumens, 2014) 'fit' with queer identifying religious youth.

Hodges and Jobanputra (2012) explore aspects of the university experience that speak to 'diverse' students and their lived realities in the educational curriculum, using the examples of Black and Ethnic Minority students (BME), and social class and sexual minorities in mainstream psychology courses. Similarly, Laird (2005) connects the 'diversity course' choices of 'non-traditional' students (those who do not display the markers of white, middle-classness etc.) as more reflective and inclusive of their own experiences and identities, concluding that '... diversity experiences may work together to foster development of certain aspects of self' (Laird, 2005: 365). Here, diversity is celebrated as an aspect of curriculum provision and representation, then to be reflected back to and through the (diverse) student body.

Beyond the matter of subject choice and provision, there has recently been a growing interest in the experiences of being diverse, including how Christian students live out their religious identities while at university (Mayrl and Uecker 2011; Astin et al 2011; Sharma and Guest 2013; Carpenter et al., 2014). This research has tended to focus on the navigation of faith when there is a shift from pre-university home life to entering into the realm of higher education and its associated pedagogies and sociality, and has provided a closer assessment of student's spiritual and religious qualities (Astin et al., 2011). Sharma and Guest (2013) note that while this transitional process can often destabilize existing religious identities, for Christian students at English universities enactments of faith can enable smoother transitions. Further, familiar cultures of faith can help comfort students and forge relationships with others, also reflected in Carpenter et al. (2014) research on 'Christian higher education', whereby the global revitalization of Christian universities highlights that the principles of Christianity, religion and higher education can be deeply intertwined and intersectional.

Yet some points of potential intersection in inhabiting university spaces, choosing university subjects and negotiating student subjectivity, may prove more disconnecting than others (Addison, 2012; Reay et al., 2010). A vast body of research focuses on the gendered and sexual educational experiences of students in both formative and higher education and academic cultures (Renold, 2000; Epstein, 2000; Meiners and Quinn, 2012; Rasmussen, 2010; Ringrose, 2013). Such studies have included earlier depictions of gender, masculinity and homophobia in university communities (Connell 1992), as well as social and psychological perspectives on LGBT youth during their university

years (Evans 2001; McDermott 2010; Taylor, 2011). Evans concludes that higher education institutions would benefit from introducing sexual orientation awareness training and campaigning, in order to protect against homophobia and discrimination. Interestingly, while Evans does mention that religious and political affiliations are shaped by sexual orientation, she presents an overly psychological frame of sexual identity as fore-fronting other identity formations, rather than taking an intersectional approach of sexuality, religion and social politics as informing each other. More recently, Dugan and Yurman (2011) have described university transitions as significantly influential to the 'coming out' process of young LGB students, arguing that the culture fostered by university is integral to identity formation and the disclosure of sexuality. Developing this, Herdt (2013) argues that the impact of the coming out process on gay youth requires a closer analysis of educational contexts, while Rasmussen (2010)<sup>iv</sup> shifts the focus away from religion as an assumed automatic negative force and instead considers how notions of 'progressive' sex education in the USA draw and indeed re-inscribe religious/secular divides, positioning religious backwardness against supposed progressive secularism in sex education. More often than not, these important insights remain disjointed with regard to the intersections between religions and sexuality, albeit with some intersectional consideration towards classed, gendered and sexualised aspects of educational school transitions, and sex education specifically (Taylor, 2005, 2006; Hsieh, 2012, Rasmussen, 2010).

Rasmussen (2010) explores the hidden prejudices and attachments of scholars who advocate a secular stand to *sex* education, overwriting faith perspectives, and simultaneously self-confirming their own secular subjectivity as 'progressive', independent and rational. Within the field of education more generally, sentiments, spaces and subjectivities of religiosity/sexuality similarly navigate such tensions and some scholars have vividly biographically narrated intersectional slippages in 'passing through' – or having 'passed through' higher education (Tokarczyk and Fay, 1993; Wakeling, 2010). Reflecting on his experience of university, pioneering gay historian and academic John D'Emilio states that '...my undergraduate years were, at the time and in memory, the most confusing and disorientating of my life' (1992: xvii). Having lived his former years in a working-class Catholic area of the Bronx and possessing a deep faith in the Catholic Church, D'Emilio experienced a profound shift in his identity, sexual politics and religious beliefs during his time at university in the late

1960s. Shaped by his 'educational awakening', his growing sexual relationships and encounters, and his involvement with the dynamic sexual politics and radical student activism that occupied USA campuses in the 1960s and 1970s, D'Emilio discarded the Church and theology in favour of his 'new', political identity. Profoundly influenced by political activism at university, he described 'choosing' the path of intellectual sexual politics over a career in theology and subsequently rejected his 'old' catholic background as incompatible with his 'new' future political and sexual identity.

D'Emilio's 'university experience' fits with transformative accounts of intense self-exploration and becoming, against 'backwards' religious-homophobia. Yet we need to remain cautious of 'progressive' and 'backwards' turns, assumptions and schools of thoughts within the disciplinary realms of sexuality and religion (Taylor and Snowdon 2014) as well as within empirical accounts. Educational transitions allow (some) sexual-religious subjects to negotiate identities more freely, albeit with ongoing constraints, and this may not be felt as resolutely or entirely 'queering higher education' (Renn, 2010; Case et al., 2012; Rumens, 2014).

More generally, sexualities research has critiqued the neo-liberalisation of LGBT rights, mis-positioning western locations as automatically progressive and assimilation as normative. The rhetoric of 'advancement', 'moving forward' and 'progressive politics', may in fact displace and de-politicise earlier radical politics, such as those described by D'Emilio (1992) which opened up opportunities for new queer imaginaries. Others have argued that assimilation discourses reproduce heteronormative, often conservative, structure of sexual belonging, inclusion and citizenship (Bell and Binnie, 2000; Wesley et al., 2011) and thus Stonewall's diversity index of higher educational institutions may be complicit with a restrictive and celebratory, rather than radical or realistic, measure of diversity as holistically conceived.<sup>v</sup>

Binnie and Klesse (2013) critique the heteronormative framing of temporal positionings and call for this to be readdressed through queer lens, arguing that '... the politics of age, generation and temporality can often be interconnected in ways that reinforce stereotypes about the relative 'progressive' or 'backwards' nature of sexual politics' (581). With such discourses permeating into the consciousness of queer youth, it is essential to consider how intersecting religious and sexual identities manifest in the

lives of young students, and potentially (re)shape their budding social and political identities, their subject choices and their friendship networks at university.

This paper draws upon findings from a larger ESRC funded project *Making Space for Queer Identifying Religious Youth*<sup>vi</sup>. One of the questions posed was whether queer youth perceive their religiosity as part of the rise of ‘progressive spirituality’, or whether some aspects of their lives were (self) positioned as regressive. Empirical studies among LGBT Christians support the notion of progressive spiritualities, whereby senses of ‘self’ function as ‘the ultimate point of reference in the individual’s life course’ (Yip, 2003). Such privatization is seen to characterize religious faith today more than external authority structures. The tensions between ‘self-cultivation’ in religious subjectivization and life-as demand, as specifically ‘queer’, are worthy of further attention in the realm of education as a space of ‘becoming’. Engaging with queer-religions student experiences (Cole, 2013) also destabilises the perception of secular heterosexuality as becoming ‘progressive’, ‘queer’ as potentially diverse, and religiosity as automatically ‘backwards’.

This paper queries what, where and who, is deemed ‘progressive’ or ‘backwards’ by considering sexuality and religion in the educational journeys of young adults. Ideas about progressive tolerance and becoming, are often contrasted with a backwards regressive religious homophobia as a sentiment, space and subject ‘outside’ of education. This paper follows the experiences and expectations of students to assess how identities and beliefs are shaped *and* shaken by education. In ‘queerying’ the temporality of educational transitions as propelling forward in linear lines and lives, this paper revisits the ‘now’ and ‘then’ of queer education<sup>vii</sup>. Arguably, the radical sexual-gender politics that defined earlier university eras has greatly transformed the realm of higher education and universities as critically diverse and ‘tolerant’ institutions (see for example, D’Emilio’s (1992) discussion of the 1970s). This paper specifically probes at the descriptions of educational spaces and subjects as generating critical and complicit thought; as offering choices and imposing constraints; and as resourced and resourcing transitions. We turn to the role of education in changes to student’s social attitudes and activism (Stake and Hoffmann, 2001; Hurtado and Stewart 2004), considering too the importance of student societies and network organisations (Menziez and Baron, 2013), to explore how queer religious youth construct collective identities with others as they embody multiple diversity as part of – and apart from – the

'university experience'. Methodological considerations are outlined in the following section 'Making Space for Queer Religious Youth: Project Methods', followed by sections 'Progressing Diversity: Can University 'Set You Free'?' and 'Stretching and Straightening: Educational Subjects, Spaces and Subjectivities' to develop understandings of the transitions, identities and overlapping educational experiences of queer religious youth.

### **Making Space for Queer Religious Youth: Project Methods**

Over the course of the fieldwork for the project (2011-2013), 38 respondents were recruited across 3 UK sites: Newcastle, Manchester, and London. The majority of respondents did not easily identify in terms of social class<sup>viii</sup> as a personal identification, but *did* use this as a classifying device to describe others, their families, backgrounds, schooling experiences, whilst often still reluctant to attach this to themselves *personally*: 'I don't like to say 'class'. I suppose other people would call me middle-class but I do not, I don't judge people by their class and I don't really approve of that' (George, 23). Despite the fact that overt identification with class, or with 'objective' middle-class status in particular, was not always decisive or desirable, a socio-economic cross-section was somewhat represented. Lucy (19) exemplifies the experience of some first generation 'non-traditional' university entrants: 'I definitely come from a working-class background. I wouldn't say that it was that important; sometimes at university, a lot of the people I know are more middle-class so I might not fit in, kind of, but I wouldn't say it was that important. I just have a stronger accent.' But while class was ambivalently articulated, and not always explicitly claimed, participants often alluded to it culturally, spatially, and emotionally (not 'fitting in') even if not in economic terms (as never the complete marker of class). From the 38 interviewees who participated in the project, 34 had direct experience of university education. At the time of the interviews, 21 participants were currently attending a university course, 12 had recently completed a university degree, and 1 was an A-level student intending to secure a place at university the following year. Six of these 34 participants were either currently studying, or had recently completed, multiple degrees, higher degrees at postgraduate level or PhD courses. In terms of sex and gender identity, 19 participants identified as female, 15 as male, 2 as gender-queer, 1 as gender-queer and transgender, and 1 as transsexual female-to-male. The sexual identity of



participants can be broadly categorised as gay (15 respondents), lesbian (13), bisexual (5), queer (4), and asexual (1).

The project adopted a mixed-method research design, consisting of individual face-to-face interviews, diaries, and a mapping exercise. In addition, each participant was invited to keep a diary for one month after the interview, to record their reflections on their everyday life, events and thoughts relating to the interview themes. Interview topics included education (compulsory education and higher/further education); employment and unemployment, family; leisure; locale; relationships and identity; religion, spirituality and faith; the future.

In conducting the fieldwork, there was a practiced commitment to enabling participants to record their mundane and significant reflections, prompted by routine and critical or fateful (Giddens 1991) moments and events, which would enhance their sense of control over the stories they told (e.g. Holliday 1999, 2004). Thus only minimal guidelines were provided, with participants left to tell their story in their own way. Participants were also asked to complete a mind-map: the brief was to think about spaces they inhabit on a day-to-day basis and where they felt (un)comfortable in expressing their religious and sexual identities. This information was visually mapped onto a blank piece of paper with participants choosing different, creative, and often colourful ways to express themselves (Taylor and Snowdon, 2014).

Higher education and the university experience emerged as a prominent theme in the experiences of queer identifying religious youth. As with other major themes that emerged in the project, such as the role of Facebook and social networking sites (Taylor et al., 2014) and congregational music (Taylor and Falconer, 2014), the social and educational expectations and academic subject choices of young, queer, Christian students significantly shaped identity formations and negotiations. This was the case with both formative experiences of schooling, as well as the shift to, though, and beyond post-compulsory education. This paper will specifically focus on the higher educational experiences of religious-sexual subjects, exploring how these are narrated and made sense of as ‘progressive’, arguing for a complex shaping and shaking of sexual-religious identities, rather than a mobile freedom to choose and ‘become’.

### **Progressing Diversity: Can university ‘set you free?’**

Various research problematizes the idea that attending university automatically ‘liberalises’ students, but the focus can be on the retention or displacement of religious values, as if liberalisation – or indeed traditionalisation – follows therein (Mayrl and Uecker 2011). It is important to examine the assumptions of ‘liberal’ and ‘progressive’ discourses that surround the acceptance and enactment of queer religious identities. This is especially relevant in thinking through a distorted and polarized binary of either ‘religious’ (traditional, backwards) or ‘queer’ (liberal, progressive), instead allowing for a more nuanced investigation of queer religious youth.

Higher education can offer significant opportunities for youth transformation, enabling new life chapters and identities to emerge (McDermott, 2010) and the project demonstrated the importance of university in ‘making space’ for new, often liberating, opportunities for self-exploration, experimentation and identity formation, infiltrated the expectations of young people. McDermott notes that for working-class women, the mobility afforded by higher education enabled them to come out as lesbian ‘in places and spaces away from the home or place of origin’ (2010: 203). This was also the case for queer identifying religious youth when university space was seen as a ‘move away’, geographically and symbolically, from family and home life in order to pursue queer, religious identities in new spaces of increased tolerance:

Q: Will you move away?

James (17): Yes... please! My Dad is quite keen to get me in at Manchester but I want to go further afield, I want the experience of living on my own elsewhere, the proper university experience.

There was an expectation from many of the young people that ‘the proper university experience’ had the potential to ‘set them free’ from their sometimes turbulent negotiation of both queer and religious identities. Like D’Emilio (1992), the impression of university culture as liberal and in turn liberating, was born out of the assumption that spaces of higher education are inclusive and progressive. Many of the participants felt more able to ‘come out’ as queer in the first years of their university experience. Julian (20) explains how going to university gave him the confidence and independence to be able to explore his sexual and religious identities, and Sally (20) reflects on coming back from university with her girlfriend as a way of ‘telling’ her former sixth

form friends she was in a relationship with another woman. Thomas (24), describes university as ‘a very safe place for people to be gay’, finding respite from conflicting identities in the queer student community:

Thomas: At University I met a boy who I was very much in love with... but it was all very messy and I started going along to the Lesbian and Gay Association there, which was hidden away at the top floor of the Student Union in the attic. I was 19 - and you had to phone a telephone number, then someone would meet you in the bar at the bottom of the building then lead you up to the room and the room was only, well it said ‘Gay people only’ on the door. ..I was 21 and I just came out but then got really stressed and dropped out of my final year of University, the Christmas, came back to my parents on Christmas Eve after drinking quite a few whiskies and throwing them up. but then had a break and repeated my final year as an out gay person, with lots of gay friends and sharing a house with gay people, and it was really good, a fantastic year, and I’m so glad I did repeat it and not carry on with all the problems that were going on.

Thomas’s account of university is one that allowed for the expression of his sexual identity where previous spaces had appeared restrictive. The ‘messiness’ of his self-exploration is highlighted alongside the queer networks and friendship groups that clearly provided support and a period of ‘fantastic’ respite from the stress of coming out. Tom (20) tells a similar story; on starting university at 17 he met ‘the first transgendered person I’d ever met and I realized that it wasn’t just that I was a lesbian that made me want to look male, it was actually that I was more comfortable being male’. This time in his life was subsequently seen as significant in shaping his transgendered identity. The perception of university culture as facilitating new opportunities for sexual identities, networks and reconciliations was one that was pre-empted by participants who had been struggling with their queer and religious identities throughout the earlier years of their youth. Kirsty (30) describes advice she gives to a young woman in her youth group:

Kirsty: But in the end, after a couple of months I had to say to her, ‘Well look, I’m gay, so you can be a Christian and be gay, and if this isn’t the church for you then you need to decide whether you want to go to another church, you need

to decide why you are going to church and if it's important enough to you. If it's just something you do to keep your family happy, then is that a good enough reason to keep on doing it and to be kind of worrying about how you feel?' I said, 'Or do you need to explore that side maybe when you go to uni or something? So do you need to take that space and decide whether going to church and being a Christian is important to you?' And she took that on board and she was going to start a course at the local university ...so she was out to her friends at university and stuff and they were quite a strong small group of LGBT friends, but wasn't out at all to her Grandma and the rest of the church.

It is clear from Kirsty's narrative that the time and space afforded by the experience of university is more than for educational gain, but to allow for exploration of sexual identities that may not otherwise be attended to (McDermott, 2010). Again, there is an underlying expectation here that university space will be one of tolerance and inclusivity for emerging queer sexualities, but Kirsty's account further indicates that this space may override religious identities, as 'taking that space' may indeed challenge religious beliefs and encourage her friend to decide whether or not 'being Christian was important' to her.

It was indeed the case that some participants became distanced from church as pursuits at university 'led them astray' from previous Christian beliefs and practices. Andrea (24) claims 'my personal experience is that when people come to university, on the whole they've stopped going to a church'. On asked whether he stills attends a catholic church, John (21) replies:

John: Up until 18 I went quite religiously, every week, and then when it came to uni I didn't go at all and my Dad didn't like that because he felt like I needed some sort of, well, having church in my life means God is in your life and He provides you with a guidance or what have you...My view on young people and religion is hugely skewed because school, everyone I knew was Catholic so I just thought everyone said their prayers and stuff and then as soon as I came to university I was like, it's such a tiny... Just people that are willing to speak about it. Like, at school there were no qualms about mentioning it because we knew it so well, the whole thing, everyone had gone through the same thing, we

could relate entirely on that level and you could mention something about God, any comment, whereas at uni, if you are a Christian and you are fully fledged and you believe then it's quite a bold statement.

John's narrative begins to resonate with the earlier reported binaries of 'choosing' either sexuality or religion in particular spaces (D'Emilio 1992, Buchanan et al. 2001). Whereas with regard to acceptance of queer sexuality, university provides an inclusive space for young people, it appears that religious *and* Christian identities can simultaneously become marginalised. University and higher education represents a shift from earlier suppression of queer identities to discomforts surrounding 'mention(ing) something about God'. John continues to describe the university experience as one that encourages an occupation of embodied alternatives to religious beliefs, through social networking, intense periods of transition and critical thought, 'because while you are at uni you can sort of make other things your religion'.

However, despite expectations of universities as inclusive, the lived realities of those who inhabit multiple diversities do not always fit into place within academic spaces (Taylor 2012, Ahmed 2012). For John, who expected that 'when I came to uni I considered it to be a really liberal and open ... because I thought coming from X, a small town, and in Y I'd meet so many people that I'd get on with, the 'perfect person' sort of thing, and it's entirely not like that'. John refers to his expectation of liberal and queer spaces at university, yet his experience never lived up to these expectations. Nicola (21) also expressed a feeling of something being 'not quite right' despite initial desperation for university space to 'set her free':

Nicola If you'd asked me kind of within the first three months before I went to University 'How long have you got until you go to university?' I could tell you the exact number of days..... I just *had* to get to university. Then as soon as I waved my parents off.., and I was like, 'argh' and all these emotions sort of just came out and it was interesting. So yes, and then as soon as I got to university, I'd go to church and because I didn't feel like I fitted in because there was something not quite right, it was the sort of 'gay' trying to get out and I just didn't feel like I fitted in.

John had a similar experience, describing his time at university was ‘bittersweet’:

**John:** I thought uni was just going to be three years of fun *and being happy all the time* [my emphasis], and it completely wasn’t, and so I had to readjust my mentality of what uni is and have to just say that it was a learning curve because it’s the only way I can deal with the times that weren’t that good, because I’d be too sad... I think I was thinking about a lot of things and I had identity crisis, to an extent, and I was just working out who I was and what I thought and what my views were and it was quite a struggle to plough through that. There were times that I was just so drained by the whole thing that it was like an emotional breakdown ...

Despite expectations of university culture as being an escape from the emotional turmoil associated with conflicting identities in their earlier youth, for many queer religious students these conflicts continued to play out during their period of higher education, compounding feelings of insecurity and exclusion. To feel let down by the ‘promise of happiness’ (Ahmed 2010) presented by access to ‘liberal’ or ‘diverse’ cultures (‘...and being happy all the time...’) can be deeply disappointing and a point of crisis rather, struggled against, while still articulated as part of the ‘learning curve’ of educational becoming. Unlike Thomas’ fairly affirming experience of the LGBT society (albeit in the secret room) Claire, for example, found the student Christian union ‘really conservative’ and excluding of her queer identity. These experiences impact on the identities of young queer religious students, as they negotiate whether multiple identities are possible and whether, like D’Emilio, they too have to ‘choose’, stretch, or shake-off certain spaces and subjectivities.

### **Stretching and Straightening: Educational Subjects, Spaces and Subjectivities**

Returning to the question of ‘progressive’ politics, student activism and LGBT politics in the academy, this paper now explores whether the expectations of transitions into university life and the embodiment of diverse identities, are able to connect with political activism and academic knowledge in educational spaces. There are accounts of student activism reacting to and operating alongside LGBT rights and, as discussed

earlier, identity politics intersect with shifting identity formation, as particularly pertinent for young people moving through higher education. Claire (24), for example, discusses how she was the only person of her age group at university to have a civil partnership<sup>ix</sup> with her partner, whereas her friends at home had ‘stayed and got married and stuff and didn’t go to university’. Here, Claire’s decision to marry young is in itself seen as symptomatic of a parochial ‘small town mentality, where perceptions of the more cultured, progressive space of the university is one where sexual relationships outside marriage are deemed normative, even encouraged. These forms of distinction carry with them degrees of cultural capital afforded by education, yet they take on an additional meaning when the sexual diversity of queer politics is contrasted and aligned with the apparent conservatism of religion. Lesley (21) describes the ‘torture’ experienced by trans students who were described as being forced to wear bowties and formal attire to sit their exams at the traditional elite University. Not accounting for diverse gender non-conformity, Lesley states of his institution: ‘There is that old joke, and it’s told all kinds of places, ‘How many dons does it take to change a light bulb?’ ... ‘Change?!’ so they don’t like change, they don’t like queer people’.

Identity conflicts continued to play out where LGBT political campaigns clashed with spaces of spirituality, during what is often a very passionately political time for young students. Andrea describes such a case:

Andrea. The [X] group was quite concerned that at [Z] University they were allowing one of the local churches, which has a reputation for trying to encourage gay people to straighten out, that they were allowing them to host their services there on a Sunday, so I was away that weekend but they had a bit of a protest there.....I think they are actually very backwards in terms of, they don’t like women priests. How can any student, any female student go to that and think it’s okay? I don’t know, I can’t see any argument for not having women priests at all, I find that really difficult, the idea that there’s a church that’s a really popular student church and it has views like that.

For Andrea, who identifies as both queer and religious, a binary of conflicting identities is reaffirmed through student activism campaigning for LGBT rights. However, what is especially pertinent in her narrative is the concept that no educated person (‘any

student') could possibly be part of a church organization that is understood as 'backwards' in such a forward thinking institution. This resonates with earlier discussions about the 'progressive' nature of LGBT and queer politics potentially excluding certain groups who do not fit with particular social and political agendas. It would seem therefore, that those who identify as religious, despite also embodying queerness, are at risk of becoming the backwards, uneducated 'queer unwanted' (Browne, 2011). This has wider implications for the political queer agenda, framing certain religious beliefs as 'backwards' and marginalizing religious subjects who embody diverse sexualities and gender non-conformity (Rasmussen, 2010). For students like Andrea, who wonder which side of the protest they should be fighting on during student events and activism, these conflicts can run deep.

Further, the process of identity formation is often intertwined with the academic structures itself, especially with regard to certain disciplinary subject choices. Educational theorists have long argued that scholarship and learning enables students to gain the conceptual tools of critical reflection and analysis. When applied to their own identity formation, especially within certain social sciences, philosophy and humanities, this can result in a 'through the looking glass' effect. For example, this can be seen in the implications of studying whiteness or the role of critical race studies and women's studies for engineering political activism in student's wider lives and changing social attitudes (Hurtado and Stewart 2004; Stake and Hoffmann 2001).

The subject choices of queer identifying religious youth varied, yet some experiential narratives were undoubtedly influenced by their university courses, and in turn their choice of education was determined by their emerging identities as part of their wider journeys. Tom directly attributes being able to discuss and debate queer sexuality and theology with academic culture:

Tom: All of the people [at university], even the ones who can be more judgmental, are still friendly and open and willing to sort of discuss things and debate things, there's no one there that says 'this is what I believe and that's the end of that'. There's a lot of debate there, which I think is partly due to it being quite academic.



Lesley uses his course in physiological science to make sense of gender and sexuality, ('... looking at how stress affects the mind and body and I'm very interested in the gender identity of intersex people ... Especially if it's me that's being affected directly so...'), while Andrea highlights the polarized choices she has to bridge between medical science and Christianity:

**Andrea:** To be fair, it's probably my own assumptions of other people's beliefs sort of within...I tried going to a Christian medical group at the University, 'Oh this is brilliant, they're Christians and they're medics' because obviously Christianity and Science is another place where people are 'Oh they must be sort of, they're a dichotomy. You can't have them both' so I thought that'd be interesting, but I still found them to be far too black and white for my liking, and I was like, 'Well from what I'm getting out of this they wouldn't be particularly happy if I was to start bringing up sexuality and faith and medicine' so whilst it wasn't a direct discrimination it was somewhere I would have felt uncomfortable I think.

John takes this one step further, reflecting on his own educational and academic interests and how they shift according to his sexual identities. John reflects on his shifting gendered and sexual identity as he transfers his academic interests 'all of a sudden' from maths and physics to music and French, and Andrea delights in this learning opportunity, claiming her theology class is positively utopian, albeit framed within a (manageable) debt-credit materiality:

**Andrea:** The government is giving me an unconditional loan to pretty much just take three years of my life out, dedicated purely to development of my mind and explore life, the very meaning of life and that's just amazing! This place is a utopia and I'm never going to get a utopia like this again, and my vocation is learning for the sake of learning.

The subject choices and academic experiences of young, queer religious students

produce complex findings, and are arguably worthy of further investigation. Like other identity markers, such as gender, race and class, the process of critical thought afforded by higher education can help make sense of lived experiences and realities of sexuality and religion and provide a lifeline to those who struggle with oppression, exclusion and societal conflict. Scholars of social sciences have a long history of reflecting on their own social worlds and identities in connection with academic theory. Sociology professor and Black feminist, Heidi Safia Mirza, has claimed that academia can work as therapy for those making sense of their lives<sup>x</sup>, and that we are looking for something in writing that is on ourselves: Sociology is your life and my life: we all have stories to tell. We must tell them... our voices must be heard'. To situate lived experiences of embodying queer and religious identities within wider intellectual frameworks can provide respite for young students, and may even be positioned as a 'utopian' freedom. For Andrea, the study of theology can – at least in part – speak to multiple identities, as materialized in Higher Education; these transitions may be understood as part of a 'queering' of education, yet the subject, spaces and subjectivities in and outside of education can be framed and distinguished through imagined utopian and dystopian contexts.

## **Conclusion**

University experiences are crucial to making space for, and shaping, identities as both religious and queer. This is particularly the case as this time is often described and felt as a rite of passage and space of transformation for young students, academically, politically and socially (D'emilio, 1992; McDermott, 2010; Sharma and Guest, 2013). Whilst the students in this study encountered complex hierarchies, conflicts and exclusions as they embodied multiple diversities in spaces of Higher Education, many also welcomed the culture of university where opportunities for understanding themselves – and others – could emerge, often described as cumulative and as part of a personalised journey or 'becoming' (Addison, 2012; D'Emilio, 1992; Mountford, 2014). Scholarship and learning plays a crucial role as a resource in facilitating these opportunities, as students became intellectually stimulated; indeed this educational 'utopia' is extremely welcome at such a pivotal time of transition in their lives. This does, however, remobilise distinctions in allowing some to 'become' (Reay et al., 2010; Mountford, 2014). It leads us to consider how those queer identifying religious youths

who do not have access to higher education make sense of their identities differently, and what resources they might deploy. The rites of passage afforded by higher education allow sexual-religious subjects to negotiate these identities more freely, albeit with ongoing constraints. What is increasingly clear, from the 'Making Space' project data, is that cultural perceptions of what is deemed 'progressive' and 'backwards' with regard to sexuality and religion respectively needs to be met with caution (Binnie and Klesse, 2013; Rasmussen, 2010). The queering of the 'university experience' would need to shake easy narratives of progression, being mindful that queer religious youth can be (self)positioned as at *odds with* and *part of* educated 'diversity'. Whether to choose queer *or* religious academic and personal identities may no longer need to be such a turbulent dilemma (D'Emilio, 1992), but we urge caution here, as certain spaces, sentiments and subjectivities are brought forward in negotiating the 'university experience', while others are pushed back as 'outside' educational becoming.

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i The definition of 'Christian' and indeed 'religious' is contested – and often especially so for youth people generally and queer youth in particular (Yip and Page, 2011; Taylor and Snowdon, 2014a). Various Christian denominations have articulated different perspectives that are enormously complicated and contrary (Gross and Yip 2010). The diversity within Christian organisations and practices as well as between Christian individuals is acknowledged, while this paper focuses on commonalities amongst the sample. Most participants identified with the denomination of their church: Church of England (6 participants), Methodist (3), Catholic (2), Quaker (2), Charismatic (1), Ecumenical (1), and Evangelical (1). Two participants identified as Unitarian but with Pagan and Buddhist leanings. Where churches were non-denominational, like the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) (15 participants), some participants also identified with the denomination within which they had been brought up (Church of England, 3 participants; Catholic, 2; Greek Orthodox, 1; and Methodist, 1). A substantial body of work on the LGBT population entirely disregards any religious aspect of LGBT lives or refers to such (dis)associations as negative, harmful or superficial (Jordan, 2011; Gross and Yip, 2010; Kubicek et al., 2009; Yip, 1997). Whilst non-heterosexuality is still often associated with secularism, this study works against this dominant discourse by exploring the experiences of young LGBT people's connections with Christianity. Rather than assume that sexuality and religion – in this case Christianity – are separate and divergent paths, the ESRC 'Making Space for Queer Religious Youth' project explores how they might mutually and complexly construct one another (Taylor and Snowdon, 2014a, 2014b). There is considerable variety within the category of 'Christianity' and it is the 'queer' stretching, fitting ('sounding' and 'feeling') which the broader research project highlights, also questioning the binary of (non)traditional approaches and backwards versus progressive stances towards religion and sexuality.

ii Respondents were overwhelmingly from middle-class backgrounds; yet prohibitive educational conditions of increased competition and tuition fees arguably render once expected or 'entitled' middle-class educational journeys, somewhat precarious. Respondents' compulsory educational journeys were often described rather ambivalently, also being spaces of homophobia, bullying and silences, which included the formal learning environment as well as informal spaces. Higher education was described by this mostly middle-class cohort as offering a different kind of, individually chosen, space. Much research has shown how working-class youth are excluded from educational possibilities and often very early on. The precarity of different types of middle-class youth was somewhat represented in the sample as Jacob (30yrs) describes: "For me? I would say I'm a traveller. I'm ready to pack and go, if the situation doesn't go well for me. So I would say I am low class, for the moment. Low class. I would say I am a traveller. I've got everything ... always in boxes. With the cuts, with the situation, with my own personal vulnerability, in one month or two, you know, maybe I need to go. Survival, traveller, it's not medium class, no. I am more 'pack and go'".

iii Stonewall collates and publicizes the (LGB) friendliness and attractiveness of Universities, based on a 10 point 'diversity' measure, see: <http://www.gaybydegree.org.uk> For a critique of such measures see 'Degrees of Diversity in 'Gay by Degree' Index: Please Count us Present – If not 'Correct''': <http://weekscentreforsocialandpolicyresearch.wordpress.com/2012/08/17/degrees-of-diversity-in-gay-by-degree-index-please-count-us-present-if-not-correct/> [accessed 5<sup>th</sup> Jan. 2015]

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iv Mary Lou Rasmussen has written widely on secularism, religion and sexualities with her 2010 article unpicking secularisms claims to provide 'progressive' sex education, as against a 'backward' or regressive religiously orientated sex education. While sex education in itself is not the focus of our article, this argument is nonetheless useful in similarly seeking to interrogate secularism as the proper part and place of a liberal state, now seeking to protect and support 'queer youth' as 'new' or modern sexual-citizens. Like Rasmussen (2010) we argue that 'religious' perspectives are themselves diverse and that, for example, Christian and queer religious perspectives can be intermingled.

v Duggan (2002) untangles the 'new homonormativity' paradigm and sexual politics of neoliberalism by analyzing the symbols of 'progressive', 'old', 'extreme' or radical politics of gay rights. A 'third way' rhetoric is now widespread in Western politics: 'It invokes a political mainstream described as reasonable, centrist and pragmatic ...[t]he 'new' centre is contrasted with unacceptable poles of 'extremism' or 'old' politics on the Left and Right' (2002:176). Those who do not fit with the progressive arguments for gay acceptance become the 'queer unwanted' (Browne, 2011), incapable of 'moving forwards' or becoming mobile, choosing subjects able to shape themselves as fitting into space.

vi Thanks are given to the ESRC for financing this research RES-062-23-2489. Prof. Yvette Taylor is PI for the project; Dr. Ria Snowdon was Research Associate (2011-2013) and Dr. Emily Falconer was Research Assistant (2013-2014).

vii While somewhat beyond the scope of this article it is important to recognise that empirically research subjects are located in particular neo-liberal educational times when Universities self-market themselves has able to deliver on *the* 'student experience', combining and claiming particular lifestyles, benefits, positions and orientations for current and future students (see Mountford, 2014). Clearly, certain universities and more adept and more resourced at this self-aligning promotion, while others risk being positioned as 'stuck', with the post-1992 description being a vivid temporal distinction of 'new times'. Empirically, most of the interviewees for this research project did indeed attend traditional pre-1992 universities and, as we hint towards in the conclusion, attention needs to be given to further classed-based distinctions in queer-religious youths' (non)attendance, including at different types of universities.

viii McDermott (2010) remains cautious of class differences for those who are more at ease with their sexuality, and asks who gets to (self-) situate as 'progressive', 'choosing' and 'mobile' in and through university, education and global travel (see also Taylor, 2007; 2009). This paper assesses how the opportunities, freedoms and constraints afforded by the university experience effect what 'types' of identities emerge for queer, religious students.

ix Civil Partnership Act 2004 allowed same-sex couples to obtain essentially the same rights and responsibilities as civil marriage in the U.K

x Conference on Feminist Writing, Centre for Feminist Research, Goldsmiths University 6<sup>th</sup> June 2014.  
<http://www.gold.ac.uk/centre-for-feminist-research/events-activities/> and <http://www.gold.ac.uk/gold-stories/heidi-safia-mirza.php> See also Kay Inckle (2012)