

Article

SEXUALITIES

Sexualities

2014, Vol. 17(5/6) 546–564

© The Author(s) 2014

Reprints and permissions:

sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/1363460714526128

sex.sagepub.com



Re-imagining bisexuality and Christianity: The negotiation of Christianity in the lives of bisexual women and men

Alex Toft

Coventry University, UK

Abstract

Research exploring non-heterosexual sexuality and Christianity has tended to conflate 'lesbian and gay', with 'bisexual', effacing the latter. This article explores how bisexual women and men in particular understand their Christianity, where they have been denied access to institutionalised Christianity and have re-imagined their faith. I examine how bisexuality is understood by popular Christian denominations and how respondents challenge these standpoints. The respondents reshaped their faith to be more inclusive of bisexuality and re-imagined their sexuality to fit with their religious faith. I draw upon data from 80 self-completion questionnaires and 20 in-depth interviews.

Keywords

Bisexuality, Christianity, identity, life-stories, negotiation

Introduction

Research exploring sexuality and Christianity has previously tended to focus on lesbians and gay men, suggesting that the issues facing bisexual women and men are synonymous with those facing lesbians and gay men. This article argues that this is not the case. It aims to explore how bisexual women and men create their religious identity. The aim of this article is two-fold: to explore what the Christian Church says about bisexuality and then to analyse how the people in my sample challenge this. I begin with an exploration of the current research on bisexuality and Christianity, moving to an exploration of what makes bisexuality such a

Corresponding author:

Dr Alex Toft, Richard Crossman Building, Room 151, Centre for Children and Families Applied Research (CCFAR), Coventry University, Priory Street, Coventry, CV1 5FB, UK.

Email: ab7240@coventry.ac.uk

unique position in the eyes of the Church. Here the focus is upon discovering what it is about bisexuality that makes it difficult for the Church to accept and understand; this then enables understanding of what the respondents were working with/against. The article then looks at how respondents re-imagine their own Christian faith, actively re-evaluating what it means to be Christian in order to shape their own bisexual Christian identity. The article is an exploration of what the Church says about bisexuality and how my sample negotiated these standpoints, to understand their faith and sexuality against the background of official and unsupportive teachings.

Literature review

The focus of previous research on bisexuality and Christianity has been upon two main areas: the importance of the Bible and leaving organised religion. The argument raised is that the Bible and bisexuality are not incompatible but that there needs to be reinterpretation. Bisexual researchers and activists have attempted to show how translations and interpretations have been focussed around heterosexuality (Maneker, 2001; Reasons, 2001; Udis-Kessler, 1998). Other work, such as Gibson (2000) suggests that bisexual Christians have moved away from organised religion because of incompatible belief-systems. As a result, liberal or open-armed Churches (according to Dobbs 2000) such as the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) have been accessed in favour of more traditional denominations. Previous research has tended to assimilate the challenges of bisexuals with those of lesbians and gay men. However, there is an emerging body of work where bisexuals' experiences are explored alongside those of lesbians and gay men. The work of Yip (1999) and Wilcox (2003) falls into this category. Although Wilcox recognises that grouping bisexuals, lesbians, gay men and transgendered people into one group is dangerous because the 'challenges faced by members of LGBT communities differ not only because of gender identity or sexual orientation, but also because of biological sex, race, ethnicity' (Wilcox, 2003: 30), they are grouped together because they all face oppression from 'heterosexual orthodox-gendered populations that persist in conflating gender identity with sexual orientation' (Wilcox, 2003: 30). Only 7.7% of Wilcox's study self-identified as bisexual but it is clear that overall the experiences of bisexual individuals are often positioned as not distinct enough to warrant separate research/analysis.

Yip's (2003) research suggests that difficulties with the Roman Catholic Church permeate from a resistance to change. Although the congregation is changing, the Church is not willing to do so (Yip, 2003):

... the Churches continue with their 'bring them back to the fold' mission, instead of engaging with people in the circumstances in which they find themselves. This not only undermines their credibility and respectability, it also broadens the chasm between people's lived experiences and social reality, and the Church's religious strictures. (Yip, 2003: 61)

Academic research has recently begun to try to show how individuals use religious materials to ease the tension between religion and sexuality (see Gross and Yip, 2010; Phillips, 2005; Trzebiatowska, 2009), conceptualising Christianity in terms of religious individualism or faith that is constructed using sexuality as the starting point (Wilcox, 2002, 2003).

Yip has argued that Christianity has been re-evaluated and, for many, God is most likely to be 'perceived as someone who upholds love and justice, rather than someone who controls and prescribes' (Gross and Yip, 2010: 47). Belief adapts rather than follows a set of rules, as a moral code of justice and equality. From the literature exploring non-heterosexuality and Christianity the over-arching theme seems to be that personal experience takes priority over traditional organised Christianity. Authority structures such as the Church and the Bible take a back seat to personal experience, with traditions becoming guides rather than scripts (Wilcox, 2002, 2003).

Space remains for an exploration of how bisexuals 'do' their Christianity and how they respond to a religion that sends out messages of incompatibility. It is clear from my research that the experiences of bisexual Christians are distinct from lesbians and gay men and that the negotiations undertaken are distinct, due in part to the fact that the Church views bisexuality differently. The research project constitutes a sociological exploration of an under-researched area, therefore, before exploring Christian understandings of bisexuality and how my respondents challenge this, it is important to give a brief overview of the research project and the participants.

The research project

This article draws upon a UK-based project which uses 80 self-completion questionnaires and 20 face-to-face in-depth interviews, aimed at discovering how identity is constructed and negotiated in the lives of Christian bisexuals. Because of the difficulties in reaching potential respondents – there were at the time of research no support groups specifically for bisexual Christians, which Yip (2008) has suggested as a key source of recruitment – a four-tier research sampling strategy was constructed which included: advertisement through the national and local press; approaching (LGBT and Christian) support groups; use of personal connections and networks; and snowball sampling.

Previous research by Keenan on gay clergy (2007) found that obtaining participants when investigating Christianity and sexuality was particularly difficult because respondents were often secretive about their sexuality. This is exacerbated when researching bisexual Christians because the respondents are potentially misunderstood in both sexual and religious communities, making it very difficult to recruit through these avenues. It has been argued that bisexual people are ostracised from gay communities (Eadie, 1997; Hemmings, 2002) and, like lesbians and gay men, they are often excluded from religious communities.

Once a sample was obtained, the research had two phases. First, 80 questionnaires were collected electronically and via the post. The questionnaires were constructed using the literature review, which then informed the interview schedules. This quantitative data produced a vast amount of information with regards to age, locality and so forth but also more specific data regarding sexuality and religious beliefs and practices. Questionnaires have been shown to be excellent methods of collecting data on sexuality and Christianity and as a way to make contact with respondents. They help to define the boundaries of the research project and its aims (Yip, 1999).

Second, 20 semi-structured interviews took place that were constructed using completed questionnaires and therefore the interview questions and signposts were unique to the interviewee. These interviews were similar to Wengraf's (2001) 'Biographical Narrative Interviews' in that their goal was to produce a focussed retelling of the respondent's life-story with specific focus on areas signposted by the researcher. There is a strong history of autobiography as a research tool exploring bisexuality (Kolodny, 2000; Ochs, 2009; Reba-Weise, 1992). However, like Yip (2002) I felt the semi-structured interview would be more effective in obtaining sensitive data, acting as an opportunity for the respondent to open up and talk about sensitive issues with a friendly stranger. This was combined with an appreciation of reflexivity, as I have previously discussed (Toft, 2012b), and flexibility in style. It was important to allow the respondents the space to explore their own definitions and understanding of the situation (Esterberg, 2002). This was also combined with a flexible approach to interview times and locations, leading to interviews being conducted in comfortable places for the respondent (their homes, libraries) and at a time convenient to them.

The only qualifying feature in order to take part in the research was that respondents must self-identify as bisexual and define their faith as Christian. What these identities meant to individual respondents could be explored during the questionnaire and interview stages. This produced the following sample of questionnaire respondents (80 in total): 47.5% (38) were male and 52.5% (42) female. The age range was between 18 and 72 with the average being 29 years old. Eight different denominations were represented: Anglican, Methodist, Metropolitan Community Church, Unitarian, Evangelical, Quaker, Catholic and Russian Orthodox. However, 35% (28) had no denomination, 53.8% (43) either never attended or only attended on special occasions, while 28.8% (23) attended weekly. The majority (78 or 97.5%) described their ethnicity as white British and most of the respondents (40 or 50%) were in a relationship (but not married or co-habiting).

Those who were interviewed (20 in total) were as follows: 55% (11) were male and 45% (9) were female. They were aged between 20 and 72 with the average age being approximately 31 years old. Seven different denominations were represented. Anglican, Methodist, Metropolitan Community Church, Unitarian, Evangelical and Catholic. Four were not regular Church attendees. All respondents described their ethnicity as white British and three respondents were single with the rest in

relationships (two were married). Having explored the literature review in which this research lies and the sample used, the article moves to look at how bisexuality is widely understood by the Christian Church, in order to present a picture of what the respondents have to work with (or against) in order to reconcile their Christian and bisexual identities.

Official Christian standpoints towards bisexuality

Bisexuality and the Church of England

Within the existing academic literature and official Church publications, there are obstacles that hinder bisexual Christians' Church access. Throughout this section I make use of the House of Bishops' publications, which can be seen as the official Anglican Churches standpoints of human sexuality. First, bisexuals are seen to be promiscuous: 'If bisexual sexual activity involves simultaneous sexual relations with people of both sexes then . . . this would either imply promiscuity or infidelity or both' (House of Bishops, 2003: 283).

Bisexuals are seen as being promiscuous as the term itself tends to imply multiple partners (House of Bishops, 2003: 282), as Klesse (2007) demonstrates. These generalisations are not helpful: research does show that there are married bisexuals and those in committed monogamous relationships (Toft, 2012a), even while academic literature has highlighted the potential incompatibility between marriage vows and bisexuality (see Rosefire, 2000). Rogers (1999) has argued that non-heterosexuals are often denied access to the Church because they cannot get married. In this respect they cannot become true members of a Church, as the act of marriage is seen as having one's relationship blessed by God. At the time of the research it was Church policy in the UK to marry heterosexual couples only; although the passing of the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013 should lead to same-sex marriages in the UK although the impact of the Act is currently unclear.

There is a general societal misunderstanding regarding the term 'bisexuality', particularly the need to separate the terms monosexuality and non-monogamy (Wishik and Pierce, 1995: 125). Bisexuality is often seen as a choice by the Anglican Church (an individual can choose to be heterosexual) – it is assumed that because an individual can be sexually involved with members of either sex then they can pick and choose one. So, if a bisexual individual can choose, they should ideally choose to be 'heterosexual' and then get married:

If God's overall intention for human activity is that it should take place in the context of marriage with someone of the opposite sex, then clearly the Church needs to encourage bisexual people who are capable of entering into such a relationship to do so . . . (House of Bishops, 2003: 283)

If however, the individual chooses to be involved with a member of the same sex then the answer is abstinence: 'If the proper Christian alternative to marriage is

abstinence, then it is clearly right for the Church to advocate this for bisexuals just as much as anyone else' (House of Bishops, 2003: 283). Such an approach is monosexist and sees bisexuality as an invalid form of sexual identity. Bisexuality becomes invisible because it sits in the middle of both homosexuality and heterosexuality. The House of Bishops' publications also consider the possibility that bisexuality might be a place en route to what the Church would consider a valid sexual identity. But there is no room to explore this within the Christian Church: 'There does not seem to be any place within the traditional Christian framework for the idea that bisexual relationships should be accepted as part of a process of sexual development' (House of Bishops, 2003: 283).

If bisexuals 'choose' to be homosexual, the Church suggests that counselling is the solution, arguing that 'it may well be the case that counselling can help bisexuals to come to terms with their sexual identity' (House of Bishops, 2003: 283). Bisexuality is not seen as a valid sexual orientation, rather a combination of heterosexuality and homosexuality that needs to be guided towards heterosexuality. Such severe statements are balanced with the suggestion that perhaps bisexuality is not widespread: 'Sexual orientation is something that is very hard to define, and some of the claims that have been made for the prevalence of bisexuality seem exaggerated' (House of Bishops, 2003: 218).

There is a suggestion that because the Church does not know of many bisexual Christians it is not a significant issue and not worthy of serious consideration. Interesting here is a suggestion that if bisexuality can be shown to be 'outside' of the Christian understanding of human sexuality then they should be free to explore whatever relationships they need to, as long as they are loving (House of Bishops, 2003: 282). This could have two possible ramifications. Either that bisexuality is fundamentally un-Christian or that bisexuality could change the way the Church viewed sexuality. Taken to its logical extreme, it may be the case that bisexuality is questioning the whole of Christianity's teachings on sexuality. Here the Church reaffirms Thatcher and Stuart's (1996) summary of the situation: 'Bisexuals undermine the whole sexual system, the neat classification of people into homo and hetero, the pathologizing of homosexuality as a heterosexual disorder and so on' (Thatcher and Stuart, 1996, quoted in House of Bishops, 2003: 34). This continues: 'If accepted, this theory means that any argument advanced against homosexuality on the basis that heterosexuality is the norm, loses credibility, and it becomes much more difficult to maintain that God's intention was that people should be heterosexual' (House of Bishops, 2003: 34). Such a reworking of the understanding of sexuality asks questions which most people would rather ignore. Although the Church seems to consider the issue, it is not something that is given any sustained thought.

Conservative Christianity

The term 'conservative Christianity' refers to those denominations with more traditional Christian beliefs, placing great importance on Bible teachings. Within the

scope of the research project, conservatism refers mainly to those from the Roman Catholic and Evangelical denominations.

Research into non-heterosexuality and the Roman Catholic Church has been difficult, with reports of censorship on the part of the Church (Ritter and O'Neil, 1996). Although based in the USA, the research suggested that there is a need for the worldwide Catholic Church to change its stance of sexuality and gender. Ritter and O'Neil found that bishops had been instructed to play down the extent of same-sex sexual activity taking place within the clergy implying they had found the Church to be hypocritical in its stance towards same-sex relationships.

The Vatican's educational document *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality* calls homosexuality a trial which one must endure and, with therapy, break through (Pontifical Council for the Family, 1995: 104). Homosexuality itself is still often regarded as a psychological condition, which should only be addressed when it arises (1995: 105):

Homosexuality should not be discussed before adolescence unless a specific serious problem has arisen in a particular situation. This subject must be presented only in terms of chastity, health and the truth about human sexuality in its relationship to the family as taught by the Church. (Pontifical Council for the Family, 1995: 125. Emphasis in original)

The Catholic Church in this respect cannot move away from the fact that homosexuality does not lead to procreation, and that same-sex relationships will not be blessed by God in marriage. It is clear that in terms of the more conservative Christian denominations, the Bible is central to the belief system yet the literature suggests that through careful negotiation reconciliation is possible.

Yet Thumma's (1991) US study on Evangelical Christians shows there is space and a place within more conservative denominations for gay identities. Accordingly there are three stages in the process. First, gay Christians must be convinced that it is permissible and indeed possible to alter your belief system within the Christian framework. Second, there should be a re-evaluation of Christian doctrine and an emphasis on teaching the 'true' meaning of the Bible rather than Bible interpretation. Third, the new identity should be integrated through interaction with other Evangelicals followed by social interaction allowing the identity to take hold (Thumma, 1991: 339–341).

Liberal Christianity

In recent years the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) has emerged as a real choice for liberal Christians within the UK, with a policy of inclusion for all sexualities. Whereas other denominations locally may turn a blind eye to non-heterosexuality, or do not discuss it, the MCC teaches complete acceptance rather than tolerance (Dobbs, 2000). There is no reparative work done by the

Church as they are not concerned with ‘healing’ non-heterosexuals, preferring to show that sexuality is God-given:

We embody and proclaim Christian salvation and liberation, Christian inclusivity and community, and Christian social action and justice. We serve among those seeking and celebrating the integration of their sexuality and spirituality. (MCC, 1997 Mission Statement quoted in Wilcox, 2003: 175)

Wilcox’s (2003) research on LGBT individuals within the MCC Church draws on findings from 72 interviews with people positioned throughout the hierarchical structure of the Church (members, pastors, attendees and affiliates). Wilcox’s themes directly resonate as she explores how the participants integrate their religious and sexual or transgender identities, with the rise of the MCC positioned as hand-in-hand with religious individualism where the focus shifts from ‘spirituality of dwelling’ to ‘spirituality of seeking’ (Wuthnow, 1998). One is no longer born into a religion, or belongs to a religion; people are now free to choose whether or not to participate in religion, as a lived experience rather than assigned at birth. Roof (1999) has argued that lived religion involves ‘scripts, practices and human agency’, which are equally important to tradition.

Wilcox (2003) found that the majority of respondents engaged in what she called the ‘Bible Buffet’ or what Dufour (2000) has called ‘sifting’, a process which involves individuals taking what they like from a religious text rather than having to reinterpret or recontextualize. MCC members, it is argued, have connected with God as non-heterosexual individuals and God is with them when they come out, offering support and guidance (Wilcox, 2002: 507). God is represented as love and immanence and therefore everyone is welcome:

God is not only ever present but is actually present in each person...and if every person is made in the image of God, then God could be understood, at least in part, to be lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender. (Wilcox, 2002: 507)

The approach of the MCC Church is different from the strong focus upon the Bible and tradition that is present in the Roman Catholic and Evangelical Church. Perhaps unsurprisingly, thanks to its mission statement, the focus of its leaders and members is upon living as *both* a sexual and spiritual person.

Re-imagining Christianity

Of course, individuals may not have extensive knowledge of the official stand-points put forward by the Church, but it is possible to explore their life-stories to understand how these standpoints relate to the real lives of the bisexual Christians. Having focussed upon the existing literature on how bisexuality is understood by the Church, the findings from my research are used to show how my respondents actually understood their faith. How they negotiated,

constructed and enacted their faith against a backdrop of a denomination that may (or may not) be supportive towards their sexuality. The aim here is to present a picture of what Christianity does for the respondents and what it does in their lives. What does it mean to self-identify as Christian bisexual women and men? These ideas will be developed in two sections starting with an exploration of how the denomination of my respondents impacted upon their faith. This will then be pushed further to explore how the respondents reconceptualised their sexuality to fit with their faith. Interviewees actively challenged the standpoints put forward in the previous section by redefining what it actually means to be bisexual and the impact of such redefinitions upon their faith.

Denominational variation

Christianity is diverse and the sample shows that bisexual Christians are no more likely to be associated with any one particular denomination than any other. The most frequently represented denomination was Anglicanism (23%), although 35% stated that they belonged to no official denomination, therefore refusing to categorise their beliefs in this manner. Cornelius, a 45-year-old man from the South-West¹ was almost ashamed to call himself Roman Catholic because of the negative connotations that arise from such identification. Cornelius himself listed the recent scandals regarding disgraced priests and the Church's outdated views of human sexuality as reasons for being wary of calling oneself Catholic. The tendency to not identify with a particular denomination has been seen by some to suggest a weakening of the Christian church. Bruce (2002) suggests that the West (particularly the UK) is becoming less religious (or 'less Christian') and also highlights the failure of the New Age to replace this decline. In fact new types of Christianity or 'Unitarian-Universalism' are seen as not true religions at all. Bruce argues that types or forms of Christianity which are not rooted in institutional Christianity and promote ideas of self-worship and pluralism do not qualify as religions. However, both Yip (2003) and Hunt (2002) suggest that this turn to more individualised faith, or faith constructed around the self simply represents a different type of Christianity, or merely different worship methods. Therefore the decline in denominational Christianity (as shown in my data) does not represent a decline in Christianity, rather a shift in the type of Christianity practised.

Hope was a 29-year-old woman who had been struggling with her denominational affiliation after rather traumatic and harrowing experiences of sexual abuse at the hands of both Evangelical and Methodist ministers. Hope argued for trust in oneself as the originator of religiosity whilst also stressing the need for flexibility within denominations, therefore downplaying the suggestion that a move away from fixed authority structures means that one is less religious. However, Hope called for a need for the Church to recognise that divergent belief systems were being ostracised from organised worship. The rigidity of

the Church experience has the potential to cause alienation for those who do not fit in. Particular denominations produced a version of Christianity that was too narrow and rigid:

I couldn't bear what they were being taught, and I moved to this house when I was 23, and I did start going to church, I went to quite a few different ones, I just didn't find the God I knew inside myself there, and I felt wrong in them. So the last Church I went to regularly was some sort of Methodist Church but one of the splits, I'm not quite sure which one, and it had guest preachers, there was like a preacher but he did pastoral stuff not preaching. So there was a guest every week. One came out with the evils of the world and said we all know what the problem is, we all know the root of this, it's homosexuality, and to a man everyone in the congregation went 'Hallelujah Amen'. (Hope, 29, North West England)

Flexibility within Christian belief structures is evident, particularly in the case of those involved in the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC). The church seemingly embodies acceptance of difference and a flexible attitude regarding morality and behaviour. And as such the Church seems to represent the sample's call for a move away from rigid denominations. To be linked spirituality with one's denomination changes meaning. Rather than becoming a part of one's identity it reflects the flexible nature of faith and the elasticity of Christianity.

It depends on who you are and the person you are. The MCC is almost like Christian pluralism, because there are so many people who come from different backgrounds, there are Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Catholics and Anglicans, United Reforms, Methodist, when you get them people together they have a lot of wisdom and their own traditions. To some if it's in the Bible it's just true but for others you need to put it into the modern-day context. Like when it says father, it should be balanced with mother. (Christella, 24, South-East England)

The foregoing statement from Christella, a member of her local MCC, is very much aligned with the literature produced by the MCC (see, for example the *Statement of Faith*, MCC, 2012). For members of the MCC it is more difficult to talk about faith in terms of denominational variation or specificities that make certain systems unique, as the range of beliefs is so diverse. It is important however that the MCC is not shown as a religious space without issue. One respondent Jessica, who had no official denomination, highlighted a concern that bisexual Christians were not well catered for with the Church:

I recently attended MCC (Metropolitan Community Church) – a gay led congregation. They were totally geared to lesbians and gay men only, and they were also very family orientated. If you had one of the opposite sex, you were pretty much ignored and dismissed. (Jessica, 38, London)

The issue of flexibility and personal reflection is key to this argument: Christianity does not necessarily mean what the Church officially says it means. The process of understanding someone's faith is not one-way as the priest or Church leader does not act as the giver of information. The congregation is not a passive receptacle of knowledge. The religious individual is an equal interpretative force as the preacher and this was evident throughout the data and in particular stories told. However, not all denominations appreciate this fact, expecting their teaching to be accepted without question. Traditionally, the Anglican Church has been viewed as diverse in terms of its practices and theology (see Wingate et al., 1998 concerning Anglican diversity). However, such is not the case across the spectrum of denominations, specifically with regards to the Evangelical Church. Evangelical Christianity in general promotes absolute truth of the Bible where the Bible is infallible and to be taken literally. Delilah was a respondent whose family were heavily involved in their local Evangelical Church, which in turn meant that she felt a duty to attend. Although this allowed her a place to worship with others, the rigidity of the belief system and the teaching of the Church were constricting:

You see, it's not just that they take a more literal view of the Bible, but it's their little view of the Bible. I mean it's not that I got automatically thrown out, because I came out at the end of the summer term, and got given the summer holidays to think and pray about it all [her sexuality and her faith]. So I did. And I spoke to people who knew in-depth the Bible from both sides and neither side convinced me, and I was like, well doesn't that say something. Doesn't it say that if it was clear cut then clearly it would be clear cut, but it didn't? So I went back to them and said, look the Bible could be interpreted as saying both things, and they were like no (laughs) we believe the one interpretation. (Delilah, 21, North-West England)

Throughout their stories the respondents argued for a relaxing of the boundaries imposed by having different Christian denominations. However, such arguments do not necessarily have to come from bisexual Christians, although it is clear that because bisexual individuals often have to leave Church this argument is somewhat acerbated. Therefore I argue that bisexual Christians have to challenge what it means to be bisexual and the preconceptions formulated in official Church documentation. Furthermore, they challenged how the Church suggests Christians should enact or 'do' their faith. This is the focus of the next section.

Reconceptualising bisexuality

Respondents challenged the official standpoints put forward by the various denominations represented in the first section in two ways. Firstly by challenging what they understand bisexuality to be and secondly, by challenging how Christianity is 'done'. I have argued that the Anglican Church for example saw bisexuality as tied up with sexual activity (often concurrently) with members of either sex. However, bisexuality was often reconceptualised as a sexuality that was non-sexual, or in less

radical instances the sexual part of bisexuality was diluted. This was often done in relation to friendship and a general challenge of what it meant to be sexual. Respondents often began a process of desexualisation in which their own sexuality and sexual behaviours took a back seat to their faith. The pressure from their religious beliefs meant sexuality had to be readjusted. This was often done by blurring the lines between friendship and sexuality and having 'close' friends. By doing this, respondents addressed several issues that were problematic for their faith. These close relationships gave them the same-sex time that they wanted whilst not being in a relationship nor having sex. Phillip discussed the problems which sex introduces into the relationships and the need for more untainted and open relationships. But it also became clear throughout the interview that for Phillip sexual activity was not part of his sexual identity and this was due in part to his previous commitments to his church:

I met a person who is now my best friend, and he is married and made it clear that he is not gay, but I think the jury is still out on that because let's just say we've had some interesting conversations, for me to realise that it is something he had to work through. I'm not entirely clear that what he is saying is the real story – he's – I just think he is the loveliest guy in the universe... he's wonderful we've known each other for years and years and I don't think I'd want anything to happen, if there developed a sexual side to our friendship. (Phillip, 55, South-East of England)

For several respondents celibacy resolved the dissonance between their faith and their sexuality and in turn took power away from the official Church standpoints. By not actually having sex, one is not being 'bisexual'. Samantha argued that the Church focussed too much upon the fact that bisexual individuals can have sex with members of either sex. She argued that this was focussed too closely to sexual behaviour:

I'm not having sex with my boyfriend, we might but this isn't what makes me bisexual... that I want to have sex, or am having sex with boys and girls. That isn't what it [bisexuality] is for me. (Samantha, 19, North-West of England)

Her solution to this was to focus upon other aspects of bisexuality and to reconceptualise bisexuality as being compatible with Christianity: 'I'm open with members of both sexes yes but I'm attracted to them for who they are, you know what makes them that way'.

Faith can have a positive effect upon sexuality and it would be incorrect and naive to suggest that all the respondents changed their sexuality in a way that they found restrictive, such as celibacy or desexualisation. Some respondents argued that in fact the true message of the Christian Church is best espoused through bisexuality, whereby people are attracted to aspects other than solely the sex of an individual. Heterosexual people may of course place importance on such other

attributes but this cannot be expressed with such variation because of sexual attraction to members of the opposite sex.

Respondents used the life of Jesus Christ as an example and attempted to construct their sexuality along the lines of Christian morals and practice but also as an example of Christianity being open to bisexuality. Michael discussed some of these values: '... just simple things like kindness, loving individuals for who they are, not being judgemental, looking inside' (Michael, 27, East Midlands). Although Michael himself didn't link this to his own life or his sexuality, several respondents did make this link. Rose discussed the importance of Jesus in her life and the way that she wanted to interact with others:

I do [want to follow the example of Jesus] because that is the ideal way to be isn't it. That's the point of the New Testament... that's what I want for my relationships. [I] want my life to be open to the idea of being attracted to everyone and having the potential to be with anyone [interviewer prompt for clarification]... of course if I click with that person. (Rose, 29, North-West of England)

Faith in this respect is seen as entirely compatible with bisexuality because of its focus upon inclusion and social justice, and sexuality does not have to change in any notable way. There was a feeling that this was more prevalent for bisexual Christians because they have the potential to be involved with members of either sex. Although this may seem like a rather radical statement Rose elaborated further when asked to explain how Jesus and bisexuality fit together:

It is based on his works, what he did for people, not just sex... being open with people and not seeing people as just a man or a woman. Just seeing people as people I guess. He would have been bisexual because of how he related to people. (Rose, 29, North-West of England)

Some respondents had more complex ideas about how their faith was not judgemental towards their sexuality. During the questionnaire phase one respondent, Thompson continually refused to label his sexuality and argued:

I can't answer this question as it presumes my sexuality is a certain way [referring to whether he can understand his sexuality in terms of attraction]. You cannot separate me from my sexuality and therefore neither will God. My sexuality is personal to me and I can see nowhere where my sexuality is recognised by the church because it would be impossible to tie down. (Thompson, 30, London)

Although complex, the point that Thompson seems to be trying to make is that his sexuality is personal and it is not possible to talk of the Church being negative towards his sexuality because it cannot grasp what his sexuality means. In this scenario the Church would have to draw up individual action plans for everyone's sexuality. This is a difficult idea but it would seem that for some bisexual

Christians, bisexuality is something more than being attracted (on different levels) to members of any sex.

Respondents tended to not adjust their sexuality, with attempts at reconstructing their beliefs in line with their sexuality being more common. It was commonly felt that sexuality was less important than faith. Michael, summed up this situation, describing his sexuality as something that is part of him but just a small part of his life influencing only his partners and lifestyle to a small degree. Yet his spirituality is much more set in stone in terms of guidance and moral codes. Christianity acts as a guide or set of values, which create purpose and structure to one's life. The aspects of Christianity can be modified and altered and indeed Michael does this with his worship style. Although his Christian morals are traditional, Michael shows how he mimics traditional worship but does it on his own terms:

I do have an altar in my spare room, but things like that aren't important really ... the candles aren't important either really none of it is really ... I just need a space to be alone with me and God and to think about the correct thing to do ... the Christian thing to do ... it's a reflection on the day and on the things that are going on in my life ... I think it's just a chance to take the outside world away ... to take my life outside of itself ... to look at something more important and clear ... I just need to put aside society and look within me to find God and to talk to him without any sort of outside influence ... any noise ... any sort of disruptions or anything like that.
(Michael, 27, East Midlands)

Michael's Christianity is an ideology that forces sexuality into the background. This is in contrast to some of the other stories, as bisexuality in this instance is rather weak and less radical or challenging to the concept of human sexuality and how it works.

The second most popular response was to continue attending church but keep sexuality secret. This is entirely possible for bisexual individuals who decide to conceal their sexuality because of the unique gender position they occupy and the inherent heterosexism that exists within society. For example it is possible for respondents to pass as either heterosexual or homosexual if the situation decreed it:

The data in Table 1 does not conclusively show that all the respondents agreed with such a statement. However, it suggests that some respondents understood that bisexuality has the unique position of sitting between the two binary poles. Furthermore, respondents did not simply fit into communities because of the changing nature of their sexual attraction. The fitting in was done in order to not cause a disruption, as it was easier to disguise their sexuality rather than label themselves as bisexual. Several life-story accounts support this argument. Ruth was an interviewee from London who had recently converted, along with her male partner, to Roman Catholicism. She attended regularly and enjoyed the communal aspect of religious life. However, she allowed the community to

Table 1. Indicators of the flexibility of bisexuality (N = 80).

Statement:	Strongly agree/agree	Strongly disagree/disagree	Unsure
Bisexuality allows you to fit into both heterosexual and homosexual communities	32 (40%)	26 (32%)	22 (28%)
My sexual attraction constantly changes	10 (13%)	59 (74%)	11 (13%)

assume that she was heterosexual and had never publicly 'outed' herself within a religious context. The presence of her male partner on Sunday mornings meant her sexuality was presumed. Another respondent, Cornelius, occasionally attended his local Roman Catholic Church with his male partner, although the congregation knew he was married. Cornelius allowed the congregation to assume that his partner was a friend, as they knew about his wife. If the congregation ever confronted him, Cornelius emphasised that he would have to leave, although he stated that such a thing seems very unlikely:

I can't imagine the Catholic Church getting so involved. If it wasn't an issue, no one would say a thing. If I forced it to become an issue by taking my partner to Church... and again it's something I would do on occasion if he wanted to come, just to be with me at Christmas and Easter. And quite a few people do bring partners who are non-Christians to such festivals. But I doubt there would be any intervention like that, any intended intervention. (Cornelius, 45, South-West of England)

The respondents who actively played down their sexual selves often celebrated the flexibility (other words such as fluidity were interchangeably used) of bisexuality both in terms of gender and the fact that bisexuals have the potential to fit into both the heterosexual and homosexual social spheres. This seems to confirm some of the fears from lesbian feminists who claim bisexuals still have heterosexual privilege and can appear heterosexual in situations that may prove difficult when identifying as bisexual. On the other hand bisexuals are seen as people unwilling to be fully homosexual and therefore can move into homosexual spheres and identities, particularly in terms of socialising and access to the 'gay scene'. Twenty respondents felt that they enjoyed the flexibility of bisexuality and the fact that they could choose which community to be part of. Although most respondents enjoyed the potential flexibility, it appears that only a few actually acted upon it. Within the 80 questionnaires however, the percentage of those presenting these types of definitions was slightly higher and more common in female respondents, potentially echoing Diamond (2008) who argues that it is easier for women to do bisexuality or flexible sexuality, which nonetheless becomes complicated by the intersection of religion.

Conclusions

According to official Church documentation Christianity and bisexuality are incompatible. However, the picture the Church presents of bisexuality does not match respondents' experiences or understandings of their sexuality and faith. The stories shared repeatedly called for less emphasis upon Christian denomination and tradition. Denomination was seen as being synonymous with archaic tradition, which has no place for any sexuality other than heterosexuality. The respondents challenged a divided and segregated Christian Church arguing that Christianity should be seen as being more flexible. By taking a more individualised approach and accepting the aspects of Christianity that spoke most clearly to them, they show that it is possible to be both bisexual and Christian. Furthermore, several respondents proposed new methods of worship alongside a revision of what Christianity entails, taking power away from institutionalised Christianity while practising religious identity on their own terms.

Rejection of denominational belief is not a unique position held only by bisexual Christians but certain strategies and negotiations may be unique to bisexual Christians in regards to how sexuality is re-imagined. Respondents argued that official Church representations are often not a true representation of bisexuality and that more accurate and 'true' representations are entirely compatible with Christianity. Through a complex process of desexualisation and the emphasis upon friendship, celibacy, a flexible attitude to revealing sexuality and a re-evaluation of what bisexuality actually is, the respondents were able to shape their sexuality to fit with their faith.

Funding

The original research was funded and supported by the ESRC. The ESRC Award No for the project is: PTA-030-2006-00245.

Note

1. NUTS1 codes have been used for respondent locations. See Office for National Statistics (2014) for further information.

References

- Bruce S (2002) *God is Dead: Secularization in the West*. Oxford: Blackwell Press.
- Diamond L (2008) *Sexual Fluidity: Understanding Women's Love and Desire*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Dobbs L (2000) Look at this day. In: Kolodny D (ed.) *Blessed Bi Spirit: Bisexual People of Faith*. London: Continuum, pp. 53–64.
- Dufour LR (2000) Sifting through tradition: The creation of Jewish feminist identities. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 39(1): 90–106.
- Eadie J (1997) Living in the past: Savage nights, bisexual times. *Journal of Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Identity* 2(1): 7–26.
- Esterberg KG (2002) *Qualitative Methods in Social Research*. Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill.

- Gibson B (2000) A bisexual feminist spirituality. In: Kolodny D (ed.) *Blessed Bi Spirit: Bisexual People of Faith*. London: Continuum, pp. 184–191.
- Gross M and Yip AKT (2010) Living spirituality and sexuality: A comparison of lesbian, gay and bisexual Christians in France and Britain. *Social Compass* 57(1): 1–17.
- Hemmings C (2002) *Bisexual Spaces: A Geography of Sexuality and Gender*. London: Routledge.
- House of Bishops (2003) *Some Issues in Human Sexuality: A Guide to the Debate*. London: Church House Publishing.
- Hunt SJ (2002) *Religion in Western Society*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Keenan M (2007) *An exploration of gay male clerics' negotiation of their sexual, spiritual, and professional lives*. Unpublished PhD thesis. Nottingham Trent University, UK.
- Klesse C (2007) *The Spectre of Promiscuity. Gay Male and Bisexual Non-Monogamies and Polyamories*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Kolodny D (2000) *Blessed Bi Spirit: Bisexual People of Faith*. London: Continuum.
- Maneker J (2001) Idolatry is the source of much fear. *Whosoever Online Magazine* 5(4). Available at: <http://www.whosoever.org/v5i4/fearjer.html> (accessed 7 September 2012).
- MCC (2012) *UFMCC's Statement of Faith*. Available at: <http://www.wolmcc.org/about-us/our-church/#> (accessed 12 August 2013).
- Ochs R (2009) *Getting Bi: Voices of Bisexuals Around the World*. Boston, MA: Bisexual Resources Center.
- Office for National Statistics (2014) Nomenclature of units for territorial statistics (NUTS). Available at: <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/geography/beginner-s-guide/eurostat/index.html> (accessed 20 March 2014).
- Phillips R (2005) *Conservative Christians' Identity and Same-Sex Orientation: The Case of Gay Mormons*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Pontifical Council for the Family (1995) *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality*. Available at: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/family/documents/rc_pc_family_doc_08121995_human-sexuality_en.html (accessed 12 October 2006).
- Reasons D (2001) The truth about Sodom and Gomorrah. *Whosoever Online Magazine* 2(1). Available at: <http://www.whosoever.org/v2i3/sodom.html> (accessed 7 September 2012).
- Reba-Weise E (1992) *Closer to Home: Bisexuality and Feminism*. New York: Seal Press.
- Ritter KY and O'Neill CW (1996) *Righteous Religion: Unmasking the Illusions of Fundamentalism and Authoritarian Catholicism*. London: Haworth Press.
- Rosefire (2000) Is it too much to ask? In: Kolodny D (ed.) *Blessed Bi Spirit: Bisexual People of Faith* London: Continuum, pp. 56–80.
- Rogers EF (1999) *Sexuality and the Christian Body*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Roof WC (1999) *Spiritual Market Place*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Thatcher A and Stuart E (eds) (1996) *Christian Perspectives on Sexuality and Gender*. Leominster: Fowler Wright.
- Thumma S (1991) Negotiating a religious identity: The case of the gay evangelical. *Sociological Analysis* 52(4): 333–347.
- Toft A (2012a) Bisexuality and Christianity: Negotiating disparate identities. In: Hunt S and Yip AKT (eds) *The Ashgate Research Companion to Sexuality and Religion*. Aldershot: Ashgate, pp. 189–210.

- Toft A (2012b) Researching bisexuality and Christianity: Locating a hidden population and the implementation of research methods. In: Phellas CN (ed.) *Researching Non-heterosexual Sexualities*. Aldershot: Ashgate, pp. 41–56.
- Trzebiatowska M (2009) Common pathways, different lives: The ‘coming out’ narratives of Catholic nuns and lesbians in Poland. In: Hunt SJ (ed.) *Contemporary Christianity and LGBT Sexualities*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Udis-Kessler A (1998) Whose Bible is it anyway: Scripture and spiritual self defense. *Whosoever Online Magazine*. January/February 2(4). Available at: <http://whosoever.org/v2i4/amanda.html> (accessed 7 September 2012).
- Wengraf T (2001) *Qualitative Research Interviewing: Biographic Narrative and Semi-Structured Methods*. London: SAGE.
- Wilcox MM (2002) When Sheila’s a lesbian: Religious individualism among lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Christians. *Sociology of Religion* 63(4): 497–513.
- Wilcox MM (2003) *Coming Out in Christianity: Religion, Identity and Community*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Wingate A, Ward K, et al. (eds) (1998) *Anglicanism: A Global Communion*. London: Mowbray.
- Wishik H and Pierce C (1995) *Sexual Identity and Orientation: Heterosexual, Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Journeys*. Laconia, NH: New Dynamics Publications.
- Wuthnow R (1998) *After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Yip AKT (1999) Leaving the Church to keep my faith: The lived experiences of non-heterosexual Christians. In: Francis LJ and Katz YJ (eds) *Joining and Leaving Religion: Research Perspectives*. Leominster: Gracewing, pp. 129–145.
- Yip AKT (2002) The persistence of faith among non-heterosexual Christians: Evidence for the neosecularisation thesis of religious transformation. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 41(2): 199–212.
- Yip AKT (2003) The self as the basis of religious faith: Spirituality of gay, lesbian, and bisexual Christians. In: Davie G, Woodhead L and Heelas P (eds) *Predicting Religion: Mainstream and Margins in the West*. Aldershot: Ashgate, pp. 135–146.
- Yip AKT (2008) Researching lesbian, gay, and bisexual Christians and Muslims: Some thematic reflections. *Sociological Research Online* 13(1). Available at: <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/13/1/5.html> (accessed 23 March 2014).

Alex Toft is a research assistant at the Centre for Children and Families Applied Research (CCFAR) at Coventry University. He graduated from the University of Nottingham where he completed his PhD in 2010. Using quantitative and qualitative methods, his PhD thesis explored the negotiation of identity in the lives of bisexual Christians. He is the author of numerous publications with chapters in edited books including *Contemporary Christianity and LGBT Sexualities* (Ashgate, 2009, edited by Stephen Hunt), *Researching Non-Heterosexual Sexualities* (Ashgate 2012 edited by Constantinos Phellas) amongst others. He was also a teaching assistant on undergraduate modules such as *Sociology of Culture; Belief, Spirituality and Religion*; and *Introduction to Social Structure*. Since 2011 he has worked as a consultant on numerous research projects including the University of Nottingham Young Adult Carers Research and the Faculty of Engineering Grand

Challenge Research Project. Most recently Alex has worked on projects for the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA). In early 2012, he was the Lead Social Expert on the FRA social fieldwork project 'Surveying LGBT People and Authorities'. During this period he also provided assistance on the Children with Disabilities project. During 2013 he was the Lead Researcher for the FRA social fieldwork project on 'Severe Forms of Labour Exploitation'.