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1 Bisexuality, religion and spirituality: Instigating a dialogue

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Introduction

The purpose of this volume is to instigate a dialogue; a much-needed dialogue. Yes, we need to talk about bisexuality; more specifically, bisexuality as a lived experience and an identity in religious and spiritual spaces. Indisputably, the last three decades have witnessed the proliferation of literature on non-normative sexualities, which is a highly encouraging development. However, bisexuality is very often an appendage in this dialogue that, in reality, privileges homosexuality. Research that examines bisexuality in its own right is a minority endeavour. This scarcity is even more evident and striking in research specifically on bisexuality in relation to religion and spirituality. For example, the 20-year-old *Journal of Bisexuality*, which has been playing a pivotal role in bisexuality scholarship, rarely publishes articles on this topic, reflecting the acute paucity of research in this area.

Against this backdrop, we decided to turn the spotlight on bisexuality, religion and spirituality by inviting an international team of scholars with expertise in different disciplines – sociology, psychology, theology, religious studies and literary studies – to offer their critical perspectives. Across ten contributions, the authors examine this topic theoretically and empirically within the context of the UK, Canada, Lebanon, Turkey, Australia and the USA. Not surprisingly, the vast majority of the research in this area – as with that pertaining to homosexuality, religion and spirituality – concentrates on Christianity. This is reflected in this volume too, but there are also contributions that bring Sufism, Buddhism, Islam, Paganism, Judaism and non-religion into the conversation.

In the remainder of this chapter, we shall discuss briefly two themes that unify the key concerns of the contributions in this volume: bisexuality and its discontents and mixing bisexuality with religion and spirituality: muddling the waters? It is not our intention to offer an exhaustive literature review on these two themes. The contributions in this volume collectively have done a remarkable job in this respect. They all offer a critical engagement with extant literature, aided ably by the lived experiences, texts and cultures they study. Our aim here is to highlight some key texts and issues. After that, we shall introduce the contributions, followed by some concluding remarks, reflecting on the research journey ahead.

Bisexuality and its discontents

As we have asserted above, research that examines bisexuality in its own right is a minority endeavour (for a comprehensive review, see e.g. Anderson and McCormack, 2016; Barker et al., 2012; Klesse, 2018; Monro, 2015; Monro, Hines and Osborne, 2017). One principal theme of this corpus of research literature is the pervasiveness of prejudice against – and, indeed, fear of (i.e. biphobia) – bisexuality and bisexual people in heterosexual as well as lesbian and gay communities. All the contributions in this volume echo this theme. This scenario is perpetuated by a deep-rooted misunderstanding of bisexuality as a distinct human sexuality, in our culture which is so fundamentally constituted by monosexism as well as gender and sexual binarism. We

have argued elsewhere (Toft and Yip, 2018) that monosexism is an interweaving and interlocking system of meanings and practices which stipulates that an individual's sexual self-identification must exclusively and consistently position on one identity, namely 'heterosexual' or 'homosexual'. This construction of human sexuality perpetuates the hegemony of the hetero/homo dichotomy, and an individual's position on either side of the binary. Consequently, bisexual people's emotional attachment and erotic attraction to both genders destabilises and disrupts the gender specificity and exclusivity that monosexism obstinately demands. That is deeply troubling and intimidating to many people, which explains the circulation and reinscription of stereotypes about bisexual people for being 'confused', 'undecided' or 'going through a phase' in terms of their sexual identity development. In terms of relationship formation, bisexual people have been routinely and suspiciously perceived as 'promiscuous', 'hypersexed', 'incapable of monogamy' and 'uncommitted to coupledness' (e.g. Klesse, 2007, 2018; Monro, 2015). Klesse rightly asserts that, 'Bisexuality has assumed a precarious position in western discourses on sexuality, continuously evoked as a core element of sexual knowledge and/or theory yet at the same time disavowed as a feature of a mature personality' (2018: 1361).

One phenomenon thrives vis-à-vis this stigmatising backdrop – bisexual erasure: the systematic invalidation of bisexuality and obliteration of the voices and visibility of bisexual people in everyday language and social relations. This erasure operates not only in heterosexual spaces, but also in lesbian and gay spaces (e.g. Gonzalez et al., 2017; Maliepaard, 2017; Van Alphen, 2019; Yoshino, 2000), eroding positive and accurate 'bisexual display' (Hartman, 2013; Hartman-Linck, 2014). Within this context, it is not surprising that research overwhelmingly reports that bisexuals, compared to their heterosexual and lesbian and gay counterparts, experience a lower level of sexual and mental health, and wellbeing (e.g. Flanders, 2016; Friedman et al., 2014). Chapters 9 to 11 of this volume speak to this theme, offering contrasting observations and findings.

Mixing bisexuality, religion and spirituality: muddling the waters?

As we have argued above – and so have several of the contributions in this volume – in spite of the expansion of research on religion and non-normative sexualities, bisexuality is conspicuously under-represented. Reflecting the current state of play, this under-representation is demonstrated in several extensive volumes on sexuality and religion such as Boisvert and Daniel-Hughes (2016), Hunt (2015), Hunt and Yip (2012) and Taylor and Snowdon (2014). Indeed, research in this field that exclusively examines bisexuality, religion and spirituality is few and far between, with notable exceptions such as recent works by Levy and Harr (2018), Robinson (2015), Shepherd (2018) and Toft (2012, 2014). In many ways, this is unsurprising. In the contestations of non-normative sexualities and religion, high-profile issues that capture public and research attention are same-sex marriage and gay men in leadership positions, as evidenced in the perennial debate that has been threatening to fracture the Anglican Communion with 85 million members globally (e.g. Brittain and McKinnon, 2018; McKinnon and Brittain, 2020). Nonetheless, this signifies the prominence of homosexuality in such a discourse, and the continued erasure of bisexuality within it.

We would also contend that, especially in religious spaces, this scenario is predicated on the erroneous assumption and expectation that bisexual people, compared to their lesbian and gay counterparts, have a 'choice', i.e. choosing heterosexuality (e.g. Lingwood, 2012; Shepherd, 2018). This evinces not only the power of heteronormativity, but also that of monosexism, as we

have argued above and elsewhere (Toft and Yip, 2018). The potency of monosex-ism is strengthened by conterminous cultural ideologies such as 'compulsory coupledness' (Wilkinson, 2013) and compulsory monogamy (as a marker of commitment and faithfulness). In the popular – but erroneous – imagination, bisexuality is inherently antithetical to such cultural and religious ideals.

This is particularly axiomatic within Abrahamic religious spaces, leading to experiences of tension and conflict amongst bisexual religious actors (e.g. Levy and Harr, 2018; Shepherd, 2018). However, other religious and spiritual spaces such as Paganism and New Age seem to offer a more conducive and nurturing environment for the exploration and accommodation of ambiguity and fluidity that bisexuality imbues (e.g. Browne and Dinnie, 2010; Dinnie and Browne, 2011; Ezzy, 2014; Fielder and Ezzy, 2017; Robinson, 2003). Contributions in this volume certainly affirm this narrative. While bisexual erasure is evident within institutional Christianity, Islam and Judaism (see Chapters 2 to 7; Chapters 9 to 11), it is less so in Buddhism, Sufism, Paganism and non-religion (as a belief system), enabling bisexual individuals to accommodate their sexual and religious identities more harmoniously (see Chapters 2, 4, 5 and 8).

Overall, this underlines an important message: we must not homogenise religion, and we must recognise that the intersection between religion and (bi) sexuality generates multifarious rather than monolithic outcomes. Further-more, it is also crucial to be mindful of intrareligious differences and interreligious similarities in our exploration of this complex intersection (e.g. Page and Shipley, forthcoming; Page and Yip, 2020; Yip, 2015; Young and Shipley, 2020).

Introducing the chapters

In our effort to offer a variety of critical perspectives on bisexuality, religion and spirituality, we deliberately solicited some contributors outside of our own field of sociology. Therefore, while Chapters 2 to 6 are primarily socio-logical in nature, there are also contributions from theology (Chapter 7), literary studies (Chapter 8) and psychology (Chapters 9 to 11). Using a variety of methodologies and from a variety of academic disciplines, the ten contributions explore the two themes we have highlighted above in diverse geographical and cultural contexts.

The book begins with sociological considerations. In Chapter 2, Heather Shipley and Pamela Dickey Young examine the identity constructions and negotiations of young bisexual adults in Canada. They explore the intersections of identities in order to best understand how bisexuality is constructed in relation to the young adults' other fluid identities. Importantly, the chapter compares the bisexual respondents to the rest of the non-bisexual sample in order to understand the differences and similarities in experience. The young adults consider bisexuality a poor identifier to accurately describe their lives, and this is resisted for a variety of reasons, including bisexuality's reliance upon binary gender categories and perceived negative stereotypes about bisexuality. However, bisexuality is ultimately used as an identifier for simplicity and for the benefit of others' understanding. The chapter shows that the respondents feel that young adulthood is a period in their lives in which identities are perhaps less restricted and they feel able to challenge gender and sexual boundaries within religious traditions.

In Chapter 3, Alex Toft and Anita Franklin focus upon the lives of young people, with an exploration into the intersection of youth, bisexuality, disability and Christianity in the life of one young person. The chapter represents a unique exploration of a number of contested identities, and sheds light on how such identities are negotiated. Using the life-story of Abigail, the chapter

shows how she worked to fit her faith with her sexual identity, practising an individualism amongst a culture of discrimination bound up with misconceptions about her disability and her sexuality. Although her experiences of religious life have been largely negative, Abigail highlights the important role Christianity plays in her life. Abigail's story uncovers the prevailing ableism and heteronormativity which have denied her access to support, but most importantly the validation of her identity.

Andrew Kam-Tuck Yip and Sarah-Jane Page explore, in Chapter 4, how, as a minority within and minority, young bisexual adults experience bisexual erasure within some religious traditions (primarily Abrahamic) but much less so in others, such as Buddhism. The chapter examines the negotiations young people undertake in relation to their sexual, religious and social lives. It shows how sexual and religious identifications should not be understood in a monolithic fashion. The chapter maps stories of 'conflict and tension' and 'accommodation and adaptation' in order to capture the complexity of the young bisexual people's lives.

In Chapter 5, Douglas Ezzy and Bronwyn Fielder introduce Paganism into the dialogue, by examining the reasons why Christianity struggles to embrace bisexuality, compared to Paganism. Through the analytic lens of liminality, they argue that as Paganism focuses upon rituals, involving erotic, bisexual and hermaphroditic deities, it is able to embrace the ambiguity and complexity that encapsulates bisexuality. Christianity, however, with its emphasis on belief and sincerity, struggles to develop a constructive understanding of bisexuality. The chapter demonstrates that different religions and spiritualities create varied nature of the rituals and structure of liminality, and that significantly informs their responses to bisexuality.

Alex Toft, in Chapter 6, presents findings from a British mixed-method study exploring identity in the lives of bisexual Christians. The chapter attempts to bring together the key themes and findings in relation to the spiritual and sexual lives of the research participants, and suggests that it is most fruitful to explore the findings in terms of an intersectional approach in order to understand bisexual Christianity more fully. Toft suggests that the participants strenuously re-shape their religious lives, reflecting an individualisation of faith. He further argues that separating religious and sexual lives for analysis is over-simplification, as spirituality and bisexuality inform and interact with each other. The chapter ultimately encourages work which is mindful of this and embraces bisexual Christianity with its complexities and ambiguities.

Chris Greenough, in Chapter 7, presents the story of Sam, a Christian, gender-fluid bisexual person. The chapter uses sexual storytelling to explore bisexuality and how identity can be understood. Greenough asserts that queer theology can help us understand that sexuality and religious faith are not fixed. By embracing 'identification', recognising the processual, mutable, therefore unfinished nature of identity, we can understand that sexuality and faith are ongoing processes. Queer theology, he argues, is a way to pull plural identifications together whilst accepting such ambiguities. Using the theoretical and theological framework of Althaus-Reid in the analysis of Sam's story, Greenough shows how sexuality and faith are not fixed and rigid constructs.

In Chapter 8, Cheryl Stobie presents a queer feminist reading of Elif Shafak's celebrated novel *The Forty Rules of Love* (2010) in order to explore bisexuality and Sufism. Stobie contends that the novel – which interlaces the thirteenth-century narrative of Sufi companions Rumi and Shams (both married men) with a contemporary heterosexual love story – creates a productive platform to position the theoretical lens of bisexuality. The chapter posits that bisexuality and Sufism can be

conceptualised as unorthodox, fluid and anti-binarist. The chapter argues that the novel successfully visualises a queer-friendly, mystical and emancipatory version of Islam that embraces for the socially marginalised.

Chapter 9 leads the volume to the consideration of psychological perspectives in the study of bisexuality, religion and spirituality. In this chapter, Ismaël Maatouk and Rusi Jaspal apply social representations theory and identity process theory to examine identity construction and wellbeing in the lives of bisexual Lebanese men. Although empirical work specifically on Lebanese bisexual men is currently non-existent, Maatouk and Jaspal have offered some invaluable hypotheses and insights on how dominant religious and cultural norms in Lebanon are bisexual-unfriendly, and there is a need to offer social support for bisexual men who often remain hidden because of fear.

In Chapter 10, Carol A. Shepherd examines depression and suicidality in bisexual Christians in the UK and the USA. Shepherd asserts that bisexual people experience a large degree of social stigma, resulting in both identity erasure and identity degradation, which is significantly detrimental to their health and wellbeing. This is evident in the sweeping erasure of bisexuality within pastoral practices and liturgical resources in Christian institutions. She cautions that the current situation is likely to continue on both sides of the Atlantic, where bisexuality is largely overshadowed by gay, lesbian and, increasingly, transgender issues.

Margaret Robinson and Shayan Asadi, in Chapter 11, draw upon data from a large-scale project in Ontario, Canada. The authors examine the impact of being religious and bisexual in relation to anxiety, depression and social support. Religiosity was not found to be a risk factor for the participants, as it did not impact upon mental health. This appears to disconfirm research which has highlighted the lack of support for religious bisexual people, and this negatively impacts upon their wellbeing. However, Robinson and Asadi suggest that such a finding is possibly a result of secularity or individualised faith which distances bisexual Christians from potentially anxiety-inducing situations.

Concluding remarks

In their extensive historiographical and textual study on the representation of bisexuality in sexuality studies in the UK and USA between 1970 and 2015, Monroe, Hines and Osborne (2017) convincingly demonstrate the existence of bisexual erasure in social sciences. Their analysis reveals that, during the 45-year period, sexualities scholarship consistently overlooked and marginalised bisexuality. The contributing factors to this scenario includes 'the heterosexist nature of the literature, the impact of gay and lesbian-focused identity politics, and queer deconstructionism' (2017: 663). Appropriately, they call for the mainstreaming of bisexuality into this scholarship. We join their call, and that of other scholars (e.g. Monroe, 2015, 2018; Page and Shipley, forthcoming) for research that investigates the voices and lived experiences of bisexuals in their own right. The specific focus we place on bisexuality, religion and spirituality in this volume is one step towards that goal. As the contributions collectively attest, such research engenders insights that enrich our understanding of how dominant discourses such as monosexism, 'compulsory coupledness' and compulsory monogamy – often religiously legitimised – consolidate and perpetuate the misunderstanding, stigmatisation and erasure of bisexuality. This could generate tension and conflict which undermine the spiritual, sexual and mental health of religious and spiritual bisexual people. Nonetheless, as this volume has also

demonstrated, religious and spiritual bisexual people, as sexual and religious actors, also creatively carve out bisexual-friendly meanings, theologies, practices and spaces that empower them to integrate their sexual and religious identities.

To go even further in this journey, we call for more research to interrogate, in a more nuanced way, the intersection between bisexuality and different types of belief systems. We would include in this non-religion and unbelief (e. g. Lee, 2015), not as an unproblematised 'Other' of religion, but as a belief system in its own right which is meaning-generating and influential of individuals' worldview and social positioning, including the management of their sexuality. In this endeavour, we also need to bring into the conversation more non-Christian perspectives and voices, including those that emanate from non-institutional spaces. Although many of their pieces do not aim to be academic in nature, *Blessed Bi Spirit* (Kolodny, 2000) and *Sexuality, Religion and the Sacred* (Hutchins and Williams, 2012) are much-needed anthologies that have performed this task outstandingly.

Equally, we should also pay attention to voices and identities that signify an amalgamation of diverse religious, spiritual and even secular sources, rather than discrete and exclusive labels and categories (e.g. Ursic, 2014). Young people, in their construction of ethical framework and navigation of everyday life, are particularly inclined to this formulation of hyphenated identities (e.g. Christian-Buddhist-Pagan, humanist-Muslim), as they place emphasis on the utility and functionality of such diverse sources rather than their theological essence and 'purity' (e.g. Madge, Hemming and Stenson, 2014; Page and Yip, 2017; Yip and Page, 2013; Young and Shipley, 2020). Yes, it is complex. But it is precisely in this complexity and 'messiness' that richness resides, waiting for perceptive scholars to induce its unfolding. Several of the contributions in this volume have addressed these issues. We need more.

As Udis-Kessler fittingly reminds us, experiences of bisexual people offer 'a model for life outside the boundaries of destructive hierarchical dualisms' (2000: 15). Dualisms or binaries of different kinds – for example, white/black, men/women, heterosexual/homosexual – assume the superiority of the former, and the inferiority of the latter. They force us to embrace an 'either-or' existence. They are, in essence, calamitous and insidious, limiting our consciousness and experience of the complexity, intricacy and multiplicity of humanity. We believe that, bisexuality – with its queering spirit of liminality and fluidity – can serve as a catalyst to liberate us from the shackles of sexual and gender binarism, and help us envision a world beyond binary that celebrates the kaleidoscope of humanity. It sounds like a dream. But who says we can't dare to dream?

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