



eCOMMONS

Loyola University Chicago
Loyola eCommons

School of Education: Faculty Publications and
Other Works

Faculty Publications

2007

The Lost Sheep: Experiences of Religious Gay Men in Havana, Cuba

Michael Maher Jr

Loyola University Chicago, mmaher@luc.edu

Recommended Citation

Maher, M.J. (2007). The lost sheep: Experiences of religious gay men in Havana, Cuba. *Journal of Religion and Society*, 9, (<http://moses.creighton.edu/JRS/toc/2007.html>).

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Publications at Loyola eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in School of Education: Faculty Publications and Other Works by an authorized administrator of Loyola eCommons. For more information, please contact ecommons@luc.edu.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License](#).

Copyright © 2007 Michael Maher Jr.

The Lost Sheep

Experiences of Religious Gay Men in Havana, Cuba

Michael J. Maher, Loyola University, Chicago

Abstract

The focus of the article is interviews with ten religious gay men in Havana. Interviews were conducted in 1999 and 2000. The men were from Catholic, Santeria, Protestant, and Pentecostal backgrounds. Common perceptions were that Santeria was the most welcoming religion to gays and that Pentecostalism was the least welcoming to gays. While many non-Catholics viewed the Catholic Church as welcoming, the gay Catholics in the study did not see the Church as welcoming, but they did tend to see it as more welcoming than Pentecostalism. Almost all the men in the study had come to reconcile their sexuality and their spirituality, but they did so through private reflection and prayer rather than through a gay religious community, or through a religious community that was welcoming to gays, or through a gay community that was interested in religion. Overall, the experience of being gay and religious involved a great deal of solitary reflection for the subjects.

Introduction

[1] Since the 1960s, North America and Western Europe have seen the development of a rich dialogue on the topic of homosexuality and religion. Along with this dialogue (and possibly because of it) have come a number of gay and lesbian religious communities including gay churches, gay synagogues, and even gay organizations for religious minorities such as Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and Neo-Pagans. While the gay and lesbian community at large may view organized religion as hostile to them, communities have been created that welcome and celebrate gay identity in the context of religion.

[2] Like most Communist countries, Cuba has actively sought to repress religion. Religious persons have been seen as a type of “enemy of the state” in Cuba. While this position has lightened in Cuba in recent years, decades of repression still have an effect on the culture. Like religious persons, gay and lesbian people in Cuba have also experienced systematic

repression in Cuba for decades, also with some recent lightening of these policies. Do these two groups, which have a similar history of repression in Cuba, have enough in common to support each other in some ways? What is the experience of people who belong to both groups?

[3] The focus of this study was a preliminary look at the experiences of religious gay men in Cuba. The researcher sought to describe their experiences with particular attention to how their identities as religious interacted with their identities as gay men. All this was against a backdrop of oppression for both identities in Cuba. These subjects were clearly outside “the flock” of mainstream Cuban society.

Methods and Data Collection

[4] Data was collected through audiotaped interviews with ten religious gay men living in Havana. Half of the interviews were conducted in May of 1999, and the remaining five were conducted in May of 2000. While there was some slight variation in the interview questions, subjects were asked to describe their religious histories, their personal histories of coming to identify as gay, their views of how welcoming Cuban religious communities were to gays, and their views of gay spirituality.

[5] Subjects’ consents were obtained verbally because having their names on a form would only increase the possibility of their confidentiality being betrayed if officials ever confiscated notes and papers. Subjects were informed of the topic of the study and the intent to publish the findings. They were assured that pseudonyms would be used in any reporting. All names given in this article are pseudonyms.

[6] Initial subjects were personal acquaintances of the researcher. They then referred other subjects to the researcher. The subjects could not be called a “circle of friends,” however; most subjects only knew one or two of the other subjects. The researcher sought a range of religions to be represented; three of the subjects were Catholic, three Pentecostal, three Santero (a religion of African origin), and one was Methodist. The three Pentecostals came from families who were strong practitioners of the religion. Others came from families with a mixed history of religious practice. The terms “Protestant” and “Pentecostal” are used almost interchangeably in Cuba. In reality, there are great variations between most mainline Protestant churches and most Pentecostal churches in Havana. While many Pentecostals call themselves “Protestant,” most mainline Protestants will not call themselves “Pentecostal.” Ivan, who was Methodist, described his church very differently from those who came from Pentecostal churches. Santeria, which is based on the African religion of the Yoruba people, is a very popular religion on the island. Santeria *Orishas* (spirits) are often depicted as Catholic saints and are referred to often as “Saints” (Canizares). The subjects, their pseudonyms, and their religious traditions are listed below:

Subject Pseudonym	Religion	Year Interviewed
Alexi	Santero	1999
Diego	Catholic	2000
Ezequiel	Pentecostal	1999

Francisco	Santero	2000
Ivan	Methodist	2000
Jeremias	Pentecostal	2000
Jose	Catholic	1999
Julio	Santero	2000
Luis	Pentecostal	1999
Miguel	Catholic	1999

[7] It should be noted that the researcher in this study has made ten trips to Cuba between 1997 and 2004. He is very familiar with many religious communities of Havana and the gay culture of the city. While the data from the ten interviews is the focus of this study, interpretation of that data is informed by the researcher's general familiarity with the topic.

Outside the Flock: Cuban Repression of Religion and Homosexuality

[8] In the years since the Communist Revolution, politics has tremendously determined Cuban life. Not surprisingly, more than forty years of leadership under a single party, a single system, and a single individual has created an environment that highly values conformity and that discourages or attempts to stamp out divergence from strict norms. The dominant "flock" in Cuba is clearly defined as Communist and as macho. While Cuban society has become more tolerant in the last ten to fifteen years, the history of oppression has had an impact, and Cubans know the potential consequences of leaving "the flock."

[9] There are visible signs in Havana of groups that do not conform. The religious community and the gay community can be seen, and it is clear that they form their own "flocks." These are made visible through people who identify with spaces (churches, synagogues, the "gay area" of the seaside walkway) and people who provide symbols of their affiliation (religious statues in windows, Santeria symbols drawn on doors, wearing the all-white dress of a Santeria initiate, wearing those styles associated with being gay, and even a rare rainbow flag). These two communities have a history of repression in Cuba.

Religious Repression in Cuba

[10] Before the Communist Revolution, Christianity was not a strong force in Cuba, especially compared with many other Latin American countries (Malone 1996, 1998; Leiner). In the 1960s and 1970s, the regime was openly hostile to religion and imprisoned many clergy in forced labor camps, including the current Catholic Cardinal of Havana, Jaime Ortega (Acosta). The 1990s marked a time of change in relations between the Castro government and Christian churches. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and consequential loss of funding, the Castro government began to see religious institutions as a source of revenue for the island through international charity. Also, potential sources of funding, such as the European Union, made religious freedom a condition for receiving funds (Malone 1996, 1998; Gunn). In 1990, Fidel Castro held a televised meeting with Protestant leaders and pledged to end religious discrimination in Cuba. In 1991, religious believers were allowed to become members of the Communist Party and Cuba became a secular, rather than an atheist, state through a change in the Constitution. Churches began to

grow in Cuba in the 1990s (Malone 1996). The papal visit of January 1998 did not create any new guarantees of religious freedom, but it did gain space and profile for religion in Cuba. Catholic parishes actively evangelized their neighborhoods in preparation for the visit, and attendance at Mass increased all over the island. The Church has a higher profile in Cuba now than at any time in its history (Malone 1998).

[11] The effects of the Communist Revolution in Cuba can be seen in the histories of the subjects of this study. Ezequiel reported, "I come from a Protestant home. You could almost say that I was born in the Church . . . Today we have a government that is a bit more open minded towards religion. In my childhood and that of my brothers, it was very difficult to go to the university . . . It was almost a crime to be Christian." Julio's family demonstrated changes and quiet practice: "My mother integrated to the revolutionary process and stopped being Catholic . . . My aunt did not stop being Catholic, neither did my grandmother, because they were not people integrated politically. They continued practicing the Catholic religion, yes, but without going to church. At home, in other words, they believed in their privacy, 'from the door in.'" Alexi (Santero) came from a strong Communist family. "When I came here to Havana, I sat down with him (his father), and I told him that I was a religious person, that I was a Santero. He felt a little bit uncomfortable because he would have liked for me to follow his in his footsteps (as involved in the Communist Party). Earlier in time, it was believed that a person who was religious was not with the government and too many problems were created. So I told him that I was religious and he accepted it. My mother in her own way always understood."

Homosexual Repression in Cuba

[12] The 1960s were very difficult years for Cuban gays. Che Guevara's concept of "The New Man" was a hyper-masculinity imposed on an already macho culture (Birringer; Lumsden; Leiner). UMAP (Military Units to Aid Production) camps were established in the countryside for "re-education." These were agricultural forced labor camps for homosexuals, non-conformists, the religious, men who wore long hair, and others viewed as not fitting into the Communist ideal. It was in one of these camps that Jaime Cardinal Ortega was imprisoned as a young man. The camps were closed after a few years under international pressure. Arrests were common for gays, and gays were barred from positions of public influence (Lumsden). The Cuban government began sending effeminate young boys to special schools for children with behavioral disorders. There was concern that they would "infect" other students (Leiner).

[13] Homosexuality was identified as "anti-revolutionary" by the Cuban government. This was similar to the position of the Soviet Union, which saw homosexuality as an illness caused by Capitalism and Fascism (Tuller; Essig). Equating homosexuality with Capitalism was common throughout the 1960s and 1970s, leading the government to include gays in the class of people known as "*escoria*" ("trash") who were allowed to leave Cuba in the 1980 Mariel immigration (Lumsden; Quiroga). Bejel has argued that the connection of heterosexist repression under Communism with Cuban nationalism has pre-revolutionary roots in Cuba dating back to Jose Marti; fear of effeminacy in males and a connected antipathy toward the Catholic priesthood was a strong undercurrent since the late nineteenth

century. Others have observed, however, that Cuba was more tolerant of homosexuality before the Communist Revolution (Conner and Sparks).

[14] The 1980s did see limited legal and social changes for Cuban gays. While the 1979 Cuban penal code no longer included homosexuality as a crime, homosexual behavior in public (including social behavior and sexual behavior that *might* be seen by others) was punishable with three to nine months imprisonment. Throughout the 1980s, while homosexuality was officially decriminalized, it could still be seen as “improper conduct” under Cuban law, and there were some street-sweeps of gays before larger public events (Lumsden; Leiner; Quiroga). Attitudes began to change in the 1980s in the education and health fields, shifting to a more tolerant culture there (Leiner). The 1980s also marked, however, the period of forced quarantine to “camps” for people with AIDS (Lumsden; Leiner). By the 1990s, homosexuality was a topic that could be discussed in a positive way in the Cuban press and on Cuban television, and the Cuban government blamed its past homophobic policies on Stalinism and influences of the Catholic Church (Acosta; Morris 1996). A 2006 Cuban soap opera that included a bisexual character, *The Dark Side of the Moon*, spurred intense public discussion of the topic of homosexuality in Cuba (Marx; Ravensberg).

[15] All of the subjects described Cuban culture as prejudiced against gays. Some said that homosexuality was associated with prostitution and other criminal activity. Many saw this related to the macho norms of the culture. Some saw prejudice against gays coming, at least in part, from ideals of the Communist Party. Alexi (Santero) shared, “Everything was hidden from my mother and my father. I was afraid of scandal, mainly because my father was already in the government . . . I used to suffer a lot because it was a sad life, beautiful, but sad, especially in this system that makes it harder for homosexuals.” Most of the subjects stated that the Cuban government repressed gays in Cuba, although less in current times than in earlier periods. Julio (Santero) stated, “I defend the fact that I am gay in a country where officially homosexuality is repressed, but in contrast there is a great number of homosexuals . . . What bothers me here is that I cannot live my life as I would like. Not so much if there is a gay disco, a gay store, or a gay business who only wants its employees to be gay. Why not a place where everyone can be what feels good to them, with no discrimination? There is much discrimination here.”

[16] An important side note for this study is the issue of defining who is a gay man in the view of Cuban culture. In most of Latin America, the understanding of what it means to be gay is different from the North American and Western European view. Not all Cuban men who have sex with men would consider themselves to be gay (Carrier; Cantu; Lumsden; Murray 1995a, 1995b; Murray and Arboleda; Robaina; Schifter). “It should not be forgotten that in Latin America the majority of those who engage in same-sex sex (whether sporadic or habitual) do not necessarily identify themselves as homosexuals, let alone want to build their social lives around gay institutions. It is the members of the emerging gay community, composed of homosexuals who define their identities primarily in terms of sexual orientation, who feel most oppressed in Cuba” (Lumsden: 190).

Belonging to Two Flocks: Being Both Gay and Religious

[17] A surface look at gay life in Cuba sometimes indicates religion as a “safe space” for gay men. Gay travel books printed in North America list Catholic holy days as the popular gay

Cuban holidays (Cordova). The 1993 gay Cuban film, “Strawberries and Chocolate,” has as its main character a gay sculptor who incorporates religious themes into his works (Quiroga; Birringer). The reality seems to be that while connections do exist between religiosity and male homosexuality in Cuba, those connections do not go much deeper than the surface.

Connections Between Homosexuality and Religiosity

[18] Lumsden notes:

Indeed, rather than being perceived as a bastion of homophobia, as in Mexico and Costa Rica, the (Catholic) Church (in Cuba) has a certain popularity among gays because of its opposition to the Regime . . . Gays also gather at events such as the Christmas Eve Mass, which seems to be a gay ‘happening’ in the Cathedral and adjoining square as much as a formal religious service . . . Few are practicing Catholics, but still they are there, partly because – unlike the North American Church – the Cuban Church, and particularly the archbishop of Havana, Cardinal Jaime Ortega, are seen as sympathetic to homosexuals. This impression has been made through the Church’s defense of human rights in Cuba. Most gays have little knowledge of the homophobic edicts issued by Pope John Paul II (138).

Other researchers have found that some gay Latino populations found comfort and safety in the Catholic Church (Rodriguez and Ouellette; Cantu). Studies also indicate Afro-Brazilian religious groups similar to Santeria have attracted gay men and afforded them special roles (Conner and Sparks; Fry 1986, 1995; Hale; Landes; Roscoe; Wafer).

[19] Some of the subjects did see a relationship between religion and tolerance of homosexuality. Almost all the subjects stated that there were many gays in their religious groups, despite some oppression of gays within some of those groups. Ezequiel (Pentecostal) shared, “Because the government is against the Church and against homosexuals, some gays are attracted to the Catholic Church. Also, most Catholic priests and seminarians are gay. Some gays like Santeria because it is flamboyant and the fashion. Most gays are secular, though, just like most of the Cuban people.” Diego (Catholic) stated, “A large number of the people who emigrated in the 80s, to be able to leave the country, many said that they were lesbian or gay even though it wasn’t true. Or they said they were Catholics, or they said they had some religion, whether Catholic or protestant.” Jose (Catholic) shared, “Outside of the church, that is the belief, that the Catholics are all gay.” Miguel (Catholic) believed that attraction of gays to religion had to do with the nature of gays. “In general terms, I think that the gay personality has it difficult and is extremely chaotic. In the midst of all, there exists a great call for worship. If it is not a religious worship, then it is a spiritual one. Generally, if a gay person does not practice a religion, then they are lovers of art. For me, art is spiritual.” Diego (Catholic) believed that the presence of many gay priests attracted gays to the Catholic Church.

[20] Although the Santeros tended to see Catholicism as more tolerant of gays than Pentecostalism, they nevertheless saw some drawbacks. The Pentecostals, in contrast, saw Catholicism as totally accepting of gays. Ezequiel stated, “The Catholic Church accepts them totally, while Santeria in Cuba does the same, in contrast to the Protestants who do not.

They do not want them . . . They (Catholics) believe that if a person is gay then God created him that way and He is aware of it. The (Catholic) Church tends to help, while the Pentecostal people do not.”

[21] All of the subjects saw Santeria as the religion in Cuba that was totally accepting of gay people. Some believed that many gays were attracted to Santeria because of its tolerance. Miguel (Catholic) shared, “I believe that if the (Catholic) Church were to open its doors to the homosexual population, they would not turn to Santeria so much.” Some expressed that it was a common stereotype that many Santero men were gay. The Santeros were adamant, however, that they were not attracted to Santeria because of its tolerance of gay people. Alexi stated, “There are many, but not because the religion calls for them or anything like that. Years back there were only a few.” Francisco shared, “In Santeria gatherings, there’s always a sympathy among the gays, but it’s not that, that I would go to those places to look to get together with other gays. I go to practice Santeria.” Conner and Sparks noted that some gays in Haiti were attracted to Vodou because they felt rejected by Catholicism. They also found that some HIV-positive gays in Cuba had been attracted to Santeria because of its association with miraculous healing. Mason found that many Santeria priests were gay and drew a connection between gay identity and spirit possession.

[22] Many of the subjects indicated that they believed that spirituality and sexuality were totally separate issues. Alexi (Santero) shared, “But in reality one thing has nothing to do with another. The religion has nothing to do with being homosexual or anything like that . . . Religion has nothing to do with homosexuality, nothing at all. The Saints do not recognize it; they see you as a normal person.” Conner and Sparks found this response very common in Cuban Santeria; gay practitioners typically saw no connection between their spirituality and their sexuality.

Discomfort with Religion

[23] Despite the evidence above of gay tolerance within Cuban religion, there is evidence that this is not a complete picture. Lumsden describes Santeria as tolerant despite the fact that women and gays cannot be *babalaos* (priests). Robaina notes that some Santeros have become critical of the increase in the number of gay followers. Schifter and Madrigal (2000) found in Costa Rica that Fundamentalist Christian movements were more conservative than the local Catholic Church, were more vocal on issues of sexuality than the Catholic Church, and tended to tie together misogyny, homophobia, and AIDS. The Pentecostal churches in Cuba seem to present a similar position.

[24] While the non-Catholic subjects tended to view the Catholic Church as relatively accepting of gays, the Catholic subjects saw the Catholic tolerance as more ambiguous. Diego stated, “It’s like ‘I accept you, but I don’t accept you.’” Jose stated, “When we studied morality, they told us especially that homosexuality was not a sin; that a sin was when it was lived in an inhumane way. So where is it found in practicality? When you are confronted with a priest who looks at you funny, and he does not accept you? . . . You are always being told that this is a sin, this is a sin, a sin, etc., in the Catholic Church and in the other churches, more so in the others . . . The problem is that in the Catholic Church they cannot say to you not to come in any more . . . If a person commits to a religion, the same difficulty would be found in the Catholic religion as that found in a Protestant religion, even if the

person belongs and receives Communion. It is the same thing. With the difference I believe that there is more respect in the Catholic religion than in the Protestant religion.” Diego stated that homosexuality was seen in the Catholic Church as a modern problem tied with other modern social problems. “Pope John Paul has called to assume that homosexuality is one more occurrence of modern society . . . I’ve heard, for example, that the Cardinal of Havana, a bishop in Havana, asks the gays not to be so devoted to certain artists, and has attacked Madonna, saying that she is a contemporary evil who must be endured, that she is a person who has done damage.”

[25] One important theme that was stated by all the Catholics was the idea that many (or most, or all) Catholic clergy were gay. Miguel shared, “That is why I think the theme of homosexuality within the Church is kind of a taboo. It is not talked about. It is not touched on. It is there, and everyone knows it . . . I think that a priest who is not a homosexual has more of a tendency to be compassionate towards a person who is a homosexual. A gay priest who cannot accept himself for being gay cannot, in fact, accept others who may be gay.”

[26] While Santeria was seen as the most accepting religion for gays in Cuba, even the Santeros had some concerns about this. Julio stated, “Here is where I myself have a doubt, because there are so many gays, and I wonder if they have reached for it because it is a fad or because they are convinced that the Yoruba religion is their religion. But I also think that since they are not discriminated against within the Yoruba religion, they turn more to Santeria because they can be themselves, and nobody can tell them, ‘you cannot be that.’ Nobody tells them in Santeria that they cannot be what they want to be. Everyone is the way they want to be, and the Yoruba Saints do not care. They do not worry about that.” None of the Santeros saw the restriction of gays from the role of *babalao* (priest) as discrimination. They said there were legends within Santeria that dictated this rule, and that was simply enough of an explanation. Gays could fulfill a number of leadership and ritual roles within the religion.

[27] The subjects clearly viewed the Pentecostal churches as the least accepting of gays. Jose (Catholic) observed, “When we refer to other religions, such as the Protestants, they are more intransigent or in other words, they demand too much. They corner you, and they close the door to you.” Ezequiel (Pentecostal) shared, “It is like a sin to be gay, a delinquency, or like prostitution, or better yet, like a prostitute . . . If they (Pentecostals) know someone is gay, they say, ‘No!’ They reject them. God should only impose His judgment.” Jeremias (Pentecostal) shared, “It is rejected. It’s like the plague. It is almost like the illness of the plague. That topic is not discussed . . . It is preached that it is not right.”

[28] A major concern that many of these men expressed was the need to “behave” in their religious communities. This seemed to be an important method of adjustment to being gay. Ezequiel (Pentecostal) shared, “I made my own decision to be gay, to be gay in a form in which it will not make my family ashamed. I did not want people to talk about me in the form that is often used in Cuba, ‘the pastor’s son is a . . .’” Jeremias stated that other people in his Pentecostal church knew he was gay. When asked what helped him to remain part of the church, he responded, “Maintaining a normal conduct, and acting socially correctly among those around me. In other words, behaving normally.” Julio (Santero) shared, “In my religion, there are many, many gays. That does not bother me at all. What bothers me is that

within the gay population there are some who are very ostentatious or effeminate. In Cuba it is called 'those with many feathers.' Within the religion, I believe there should be a standard at the time of practicing the religion." Even though Ivan (Methodist) described his church as welcoming to gay people and stated that he had never heard preaching against homosexuality in the church, he still stated, "It is a bit liberal, but it is liberal in the sense that I know who is gay . . . They allow it, but as I said earlier, as long as one behaves accordingly."

Discomfort with the Gay Community

[29] While the gay community is visible in Havana, the picture is not necessarily positive. The most visible aspects of the community are dominated by prostitution and consumerism. Tourism has encouraged an increased market for prostitution in Havana, including in the gay world. Stable relationships are not publicly celebrated, and those in relationships tend to be invisible to the larger community. Many of the subjects stated that most gay men in Cuba were married to women and had children. Most have hidden relationships with other men. With most gays in the closet, forming community was also seen as very difficult. Several of the subjects said that materialism and tourist culture was destroying gay culture in Havana. Researchers have pointed to the lack of privacy (Lumsden) and closeted nature of the gay community (Arguelles and Rich) as barriers to forming relationships in Cuba. Elison reported that prostitution and black marketeering were eroding Socialist values by focusing on materialism and individualism in the youth of Cuba. Leiner noted that prostitution went on the rise in Cuba due to a desire for consumer goods only available through dollars and tourists. Similarly, Conner and Sparks found that materialism and tourism was eroding Santeria in Cuba because of the initiation fees within the religion. Alexi shared, "Lately, with the country's problems, the religion has been degraded a lot. Many have made the saint as a way of making money and then they will make the saint on foreigners and people who live well."

[30] Most of the subjects expressed hostility to the Cuban gay community. Luis (Pentecostal) stated, "The gay life in this country is a piece of shit. It is very sad and more so today because all gays are gigolos. All gays want money . . . It is very difficult when two gays love each other. I don't know about the United States, but here it is very difficult." Miguel (Catholic) shared, "There is a tendency here in Cuba in today's world for gays to be very superficial, and they only evaluate their body, clothing, money, and not the inner self."

[31] Ezequiel (Pentecostal) took the position that Cuba had no gay culture. "In Cuba, there is no gay culture, no. There are places that are so-called 'gay,' but those places are illegal, and the government does not recognize them as actually being gay places. Another thing is that we are not associated with anyone or any one thing, in order to be better organized. There is no Gay Pride Day here. It does not exist. If there are meetings, some might say that they are nothing. And to speak of Cuba as having a gay culture is not right, because there isn't one here . . . I also think that it would be difficult for us to unite ourselves. They only think about the money. They say that they are really gay but . . . if we were to form some type of coalition, they would not be interested in it."

[32] Julio (Santero) was adamant that while he did not like everything about gay life in Havana, he did not want a gay culture in Havana that was similar to gay life in the United States with separate gay restaurants and businesses. "Many times we lock ourselves in a

‘ghetto,’ and we ourselves auto-separate from the rest of the people . . . Gays in Cuba are socially more united than in other parts of the world, united not among themselves, but united with the rest of the society . . . For example, nobody is let go from their work because they are gay . . . I know that this happens in other parts of the world, but here it does not happen. There is a contradiction here; the gay person is repressed but at the same time he is freer . . . What I am saying, you have seen it; a place such as the Café Fiat (a gay club). It is not logical for it to exist in Cuba, due to the repression that exists; nevertheless, it exists, and everyone knows it is there. This is a great success for the gay people. No, I am not trying to say that we have succeeded, and have our place. Tomorrow, the police can come close the place down and take everyone out from there. But this is a success.” In fact, the police did close the Café Fiat about six months after this interview.

Alone in the Wilderness: Reconciling Homosexuality and Religion

[33] One of the most striking findings from this study was the fact that the subjects came to their ideas and ways of understanding themselves as gay and religious *by themselves* for the most part. In a country of Afro-Latino culture that prides itself on its communitarian aspects, in a country with a Communist government that prides itself on its collectivity, these men were largely alone. They did not discuss the experiences of being gay within their religious communities, and they did not discuss their ideas of being religious within their gay communities. While this is not necessarily different from the experiences of many gay men in North America and Western Europe, in North America and Western Europe, an extensive dialogue exists within gay religious organizations and through written texts on the subject. These men did not indicate that they had accessed any such resources, and they indicated that gay religious men had not formed communities, even casual ones, in Havana. While many knew that other men in their religious communities were gay, they had no relationships with those other men.

[34] There may be some cultural history to this perspective. Lumsden asserted that Cubans have historically been more individual rather than communal in their Catholicism and have not been very likely to practice many tenants of the Church’s moral teaching. Schifter noted that in Latin culture, it is common to profess the Catholic faith and not question the Church’s authority while at the same time not follow its moral teachings in practice.

[35] A few of the subjects expressed that while they may still be in the closet as gay in some ways, they saw themselves as liberated. Miguel (Catholic) shared, “Above all else I still feel very liberated. I maintain that part of my problem hidden; however, I do not feel bad about it.” Schifter noted, “For a Latin ‘gay,’ being out of the closet is more a question of inwardly accepting his own sexuality, rather than expressing it to the rest of the world. In other words, it is an end to the mental repression of his own homosexuality” (22).

[36] Some of the subjects saw their homosexuality as something with which they were born. Luis (Pentecostal) stated, “I used to cry every night because I used to think, ‘How can it be possible? That I am against it (God’s will) if I was born like this? I was born like this!’ . . . I did suffer a lot.” Jeremias (Pentecostal) shared, “But I think that God created us like this. I did not choose to be gay. I felt it.”

[37] Julio (Santero) saw gay people as possessing certain special qualities. “I believe we have a power to understand, to help others with their problems, and to provide advice when someone needs it, a power that heterosexuals do not have because we have a sensitivity perhaps due to the union, if you want to call it that, of the feminine spirituality and the masculine spirituality, and we summarize it. I believe that society, instead of discriminating against us, should have a place of prestige and of more importance for us due to our spirituality. As you can see, I am very proud of being gay.”

[38] Despite the difficulties their religions presented to them, several of the subjects expressed that they were attracted to the beliefs of their religions and wished to remain in their religions. Jose expressed, “I was told that being Catholic was universal, and that a Catholic needed to be open to everything, and to all the problems of the world. I was told that God loves me and God will guide me. This is the religion that I knew and the one I started to live with. I could not live without it, and I would not go to another church even if I were separated from it.” Some expressed that their faith was a central part of their identities. Ezequiel stated, “I think that if I were to change to the Catholic religion, or go into Santeria, to me it would not have meaning. I think that I will always be a Pentecostal.”

[39] Some of the subjects had not been able to reconcile religious and gay identity. In two cases, both Pentecostals, the subjects expressed that they could not completely resolve being gay and being religious. Jeremias expressed, “I have resolved part of it. Up to a certain point I have accomplished for my family to accept me, but only up to a certain point. But the Church does not accept me.” Luis was particularly troubled. “For me, it (his religion) is the essence. Wherever I may be, whether it is in a club with gay men, in whatever place, I think of Christ. If they invite me to go somewhere, to do something not so good, I still think about Christ . . . I am never going to be able to reconcile (being gay and Pentecostal) . . . Because in the Bible it says it is a sin, but it is different in the world.”

[40] When asked how they reconciled being gay and religious, the most common answer was along the theme of reconciling with God (or the Saints) directly rather than through a faith community. Diego (Catholic) shared, “I do feel that I communicate with God, and that He knows what I am and has to accept me that way because that’s how I was born, and I am His son the same as a heterosexual is.” Alexi gave a Santeria perspective on this: “The saints are like a mother or a father, and they understand who you are.” Miguel (Catholic) stated, “God is the only person that I cared about. It did not bother me what other men would say about me. As a matter of fact, when I pray, I talk to Him about my problems, my conflicts with my boyfriend. I am convinced that He understands and accepts me completely.” Ezequiel (Pentecostal) shared, “I told myself that God had made us all different, each with his own defects and/or virtues, and He knows all of this . . . There are times that I believe I am a sinner and that God will send me to hell. Yet, before I go to bed, I take out my Bible, and ask for forgiveness, and I reconcile with God. I always have two things as if they were weights, one being the fact that I am gay, the other being that I am a sinner. However, I know that God accepts me, so I think and still I ask for forgiveness.”

Conclusion

[41] In the Parable of the Lost Sheep (Luke 15 and Matthew 18), the shepherd leaves the large flock to find the sheep that has wandered off alone in the wilderness. The sheep is reconciled with the shepherd not through the flock, but alone and individually.

[42] This study took place in the context of a country that has only recently lightened decades-long repression of religion and of homosexuality. The experience of these men was greatly one of solitude. While most had found religious communities that were to a degree welcoming to them, the job of reconciling their sexuality and spirituality was done in solitude without the benefit of community. A few saw gays as having a distinct identity and spirituality, but they came to these conclusions without the benefit or influence of the extensive dialogue on this topic which exists elsewhere in the world. In general, these men did not feel comfortable in Havana's gay community, and none saw the gay community as a resource for spiritual reconciliation. Almost all the men in the study had come to reconcile their sexuality and their spirituality, but they did so through private reflection and prayer rather than through a gay religious community, or a religious community that was welcoming to gays, or a gay community that was interested in religion.

[43] Like virtually all cultures, homosexual identity sets an individual outside the mainstream in Cuban culture. Cuban culture under Communism has had the distinction of particular hostility to divergence, resulting even in imprisonment for those who do not fit into its ideals. Humans tend to seek community, and when forced out of the larger community, they often seek safety by forming alternative communities. Religious persons and gay persons in Cuba have shared this common experience, making religion a safer environment *for a few* gays. Unfortunately, religion in Cuba has not been a safe enough environment to allow religious gays to explore and grow as persons through communities that nurture and care for these individuals in the totality of their identities. Is it enough for an environment to be comfortable? Do religious communities have a special responsibility to welcome the marginalized in a way that recognizes them for who they are? If so, is this responsibility greater in more repressive societies?

Bibliography

Acosta, D.

- 1998 "Rights – Cuba: TV opens debate on taboo subject – homosexuality." *Inter Press Service* April 7, <http://www.ipsnews.net> (accessed on 7 September 2004; also available at <http://lists.econ.utah.edu/pipermail/marxism/2004-April/006867.html>).

Arguelles, L., and B. R. Rich

- 1984 "Homosexuality, Homophobia, and Revolution: Notes Toward an Understanding of the Cuban Lesbian and Gay Experience, Part 1." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 9, 4: 686-87.

Bejel, J.

- 2001 *Gay Cuban Nation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- Birringer, J.
1995 "Homosexuality and the Revolution: An Interview with Jorge Perugorria." *Cineaste* 21, 1-2: 21-21.
- Canizares, R.
1993 *Walking with the Night: The Afro-Cuban World of Santeria*. Rochester: Destiny.
- Cantu, L.
2000 "Entre Hombres/Between Men: Latino Masculinities and Homosexualities." Pp. 224-46 in *Gay Masculinities*. Edited by P. Nardi. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Carrier, J.
1995 *De Los Otros: Intimacy and Homosexuality among Mexican Men*. New York City: Columbia University Press.
- Conner, R. P., and D. H. Sparks
2004 *Queering Creole Spiritual Traditions: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Participation in African-Inspired Traditions of the Americas*. Binghamton: Haworth.
- Cordova, S.
1996 *A Man's Guide to Mexico and Central America 96/97*. Beverly Hills: Centurion.
- Elinson, H.
1993 *Cuba's Jineteros: Youth Culture and Revolutionary Ideology*. Washington, DC: The Caribbean Project, Center for Latin American Studies, Georgetown University (No. 20).
- Essig, L.
1999 *Queer in Russia: A Story of Sex, Self, and the Other*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Fry, P.
1986 "Male Homosexuality and Spirit Possession in Brazil." Pp. 137-53 in *The Many Faces of Homosexuality*. Edited by E. Blackwood. New York: Harrington Park.
1995 "Male Homosexuality and Afro-Brazilian Possession Cults." PP. 193-220 in *Latin American Male Homosexuality*. Edited by S. O. Murray. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.
- Gunn, G.
1995 *Cuba's NGO's: Government Puppets or Seeds of Civil Society?* Washington, DC: The Caribbean Project, Center for Latin American Studies, Georgetown University (No. 7).

- Hale, L.
2001 "Mama Oxum: Reflections on Gender and Sexuality in Brazilian Umbanda." Pp. 213-29 in *Osun Across the Waters: A Yoruba Goddess in Africa and the Americas*. Edited by J. M. Murphy and M. Sanford. Bloomington: University of Indiana Press.
- Landes, R.
1940 "A Cult Matriarchate and Male Homosexuality." *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 35: 386-97.
- Leiner, M.
1994 *Sexual Politics in Cuba: Machismo, Homosexuality, and AIDS*. Boulder: Westview.
- Lumsden, I.
1996 *Machos, Maricones, and Gays: Cuba and Homosexuality*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Malone, S. T.
1996 *Conflict, Coexistence, and Cooperation: Church-State Relations in Cuba*. Washington, DC: The Caribbean Project, Center for Latin American Studies, Georgetown University (No. 10).
1998 Testimony to U.S. House of Representative Committee on International Relations, Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere (March 4).
- Marx, G.
2006 "Helping Cubans Realize 'What It Means to be Gay.'" *Chicago Tribune* May 28, Sect. 1: 14.
- Mason, M. A.
2002 *Living Santeria: Rituals and Experiences in an Afro-Cuban Religion*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution.
- Morris, G.
1996 "Gay Cuba: Beating the Bully." *Bright Lights Film Journal* 17, http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/17/08a_gaycuba.html (accessed 7 September 2004).
- Murray, S. O.
1995a "Homosexual Categorization in Cross-Cultural Perspective." Pp. 3-32 in *Latin American Male Homosexuality*. Edited by S. O. Murray. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.
1995b "Machismo, Male Homosexuality, and Latino Culture." Pp. 49-70 in *Latin American Male Homosexuality*. Edited by S. O. Murray. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.

- Murray, S. O., and M. G. Arboleda
1995 "Stigma Transformation and Relexification: Gay in Latin America." Pp. 138-44 in *Latin American Male Homosexuality*. Edited by S. O. Murray. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.
- Quiroga, J.
2000) *Tropics of Desire: Interventions from Queer Latino America*. New York: New York University Press.
- Ravsberg, F.
2006 "Controversial Soap Opera Grips Cuba. *BBC News* May 3, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/4962540.stm> (accessed on 1 June 2006).
- Robaina, T. F.
1996 "Cuban Sexual Values and African Religious Beliefs." Pp. 205-7 in *Machos, Maricones, and Gays: Cuba and Homosexuality*. Edited by I. Lumsden. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Rodriguez, E. M., and S. C. Ouellette
2000 "Religion and Masculinities in Latino Gay Lives." Pp. 101-29 in *Gay Masculinities*. Edited by P. Nardi. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Schifter, J.
2000 *Public Sex in a Latin Society*. Binghamton: Haworth.
- Schifter, J., and J. Madrigal
2000 *The Sexual Construction of Latino Youth: Implications for the Spread of HIV/AIDS*. Binghamton: Haworth.
- Tuller, D.
1996 *Cracks in the Iron Closet: Travels in Gay and Lesbian Russia*. Boston: Faber and Faber.
- Wafer, J.
1991 *The Taste of Blood: Spirit Possession in Brazilian Candomble*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.