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► To cite this version:

Martine Gross, Andrew K.T. Yip. Living Spirituality and Sexuality: A Comparison of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Christians in France and Britain. *Social Compass*, 2010, 57 (1), pp.40-59. hal-00994492

HAL Id: hal-00994492

<https://hal.science/hal-00994492>

Submitted on 22 May 2014

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Martine GROSS and Andrew K.T. YIP

Living Spirituality and Sexuality: A Comparison of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Christians in France and Britain

Drawing upon two conceptually and methodologically related projects in France and Britain, the authors illuminate lesbian, gay and bisexual Christians' religious orientations, beliefs and practices. The samples demonstrated striking similarities and differences. Participants generally strongly disagreed with the Church's censorious teachings on non-heterosexuality, but the British sample appeared more critical. The French sample also experienced a greater degree of psychological and social dissociation. Nevertheless, some participants across samples stayed within homophobic religious structures because of their commitment to integrating their sexuality and spirituality, and to making religious communities more inclusive. This commitment was buttressed by: (1) their conceptualization of the all-loving God and of Jesus Christ as a transgressive champion of social justice; (2) positive personal experiences; (3) the marginalization of church authority in their moral universe; and (4) increasing theological, social and political capital. Theoretically, the authors contribute to debates on contemporary religious and spiritual landscape and identity.

Key words: bisexuality · Britain · Christianity · France · homosexuality · spirituality

S'appuyant sur deux enquêtes identiques, conceptuellement et méthodologiquement parlant, menées en Grande-Bretagne et en France, les auteurs éclairent les croyances, les pratiques et les orientations religieuses de gays, lesbiennes et bisexuel/les chrétiens. Les échantillons présentent quelques différences et similitudes remarquables. Si les participants sont généralement tout à fait en désaccord avec les positions officielles des Églises sur l'homosexualité et la bisexualité, l'échantillon britannique semble plus critique. Les enquêtes français vivent un niveau plus élevé de dissociation psychologique et sociale. Quelques personnes des deux échantillons restent toutefois au sein de structures religieuses homophobes, en tentant, d'une part, d'intégrer leur sexualité et leur spiritualité et, d'autre part, de faire évoluer celles-ci de l'intérieur vers une plus grande inclusivité. Leur effort pour intégrer foi et sexualité s'étaye sur (1) l'idée d'un Dieu aimant chacune de ses créatures et de Jésus-Christ comme un champion de justice sociale; (2) un vécu personnel positif; (3) une certaine délégitimation de l'autorité de l'Église dans l'univers moral individuel; et (4) l'augmentation du capital théologique, social et politique. Les auteurs contribuent aux débats théoriques sur l'identité et le paysage religieux et spirituel contemporains.

Mots-clés: bisexualité · christianisme · France · Grande-Bretagne · homosexualité · spiritualité

Introduction

The last decade or so has witnessed, within the secular spheres of French and British society, significant progress in the legal protection of, as well as social attitudes towards, the lesbian, gay, and bisexual (hereinafter LGB) population. In France, legal recognition of same-sex couples was achieved after much debate surrounding the *Civil Pact of Solidarity* (1999), which allows two people, irrespective of their sex, to organize their life together in all respects (e.g. property, tax, health insurance) except those of child adoption and co-parenting. The government agency *Haute autorité de lutte contre les discriminations et pour l'égalité* was established in 2004 in order to address discrimination on the grounds of ethnicity, religion and sexual orientation. In the 2007 presidential election campaign, we witnessed, for the first time, both sides of the political spectrum engaging with issues relating to same-sex marriage and adoption. Finally, a recent survey has shown that the French increasingly think that gay and lesbian sexuality is as valid as heterosexuality (Bajos and Bozon, 2007).

Similarly, Britain has also seen the implementation of legislation that substantially recognizes the rights of this population. Legislation such as *Adoption and Children Act* (2002), *Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regulations* (2003), *Civil Partnership Act* (2004) and *Equality Act (Sexual Orientation) Regulations* (2007) aims to promote equality and tackle discrimination in the areas of child adoption and parenting, employment, partnership, and the provision of goods and services. A recent representative survey also reported that the vast majority of Britons were in support of the above-mentioned legal reform, and comfortable with lesbian and gay individuals in all walks of life (for more details, see Stonewall, 2007).

Nevertheless, this wind of change has not made as much headway in the religious sphere. Within the British context, the acrimony between conservative and progressive quarters generated by the appointment and subsequent removal of the gay priest Jeffery John (who was in a celibate relationship) as Bishop Designate of Reading in England in 2003 was evidence of how contentious and explosive the issue of homosexuality is within the Church of England. This issue took on an international dimension when the openly gay Gene Robinson was appointed Bishop of New Hampshire in the Episcopal Church in the United States. The event galvanized the worldwide Anglican Communion into a whirlwind of debate and mutual recrimination which many consider as the beginning of the end of this Communion of 80 million members (for more details, see Hassett, 2007). The July 2008 Lambeth Conference demonstrates that this debate is far from over.

Similar controversies are not so evident in France, where the Catholic tradition dominates. The strict Catholic moral code that pathologizes homosexuality accords little leeway for dissident sexual identity within its institutional authority structures. The appointment of an openly gay priest, for instance, would be currently unthinkable. Even the comparatively liberal and progressive Lutheran Reformed Council, which federates the Lutheran Reformed Protestant churches, declares: "It appears that being homosexual is an obstacle to being a minister

in a local church. It is not appropriate to consider a blessing ceremony which would confuse homosexual and heterosexual relationships” (Conseil Permanent des Églises Luthéro-Réformées, 2004).

Given the continued pathologization of homosexuality, it is not surprising that the religious sphere is widely considered—by many religious and non-religious LGB individuals—as a space antithetical to, and unsupportive of, LGB identity (Wilcox, 2006; Yip, 2005a). Yet, for all the fervour and acrimony such events and debates generate, one important dimension is often missing: the lived experiences and voices of LGB Christians themselves. Thus, the debates often focus on theological, ethical, rhetorical and political issues but lack a sociological underpinning.

To fill this significant gap, our paper presents concrete research findings that aim to illuminate the religious orientation and practices of LGB Christians. It shows how religiosity/spirituality and sexuality mutually inform, enrich and indeed empower and constrain each other in the management of meaningful identities and lives. Sociological research on this group has been developing in the past decade or so, particularly within the American context (e.g. Comstock, 2002; Dillon, 1999; Wilcox, 2003, 2006). However, Europe significantly lags behind in this respect (with distinctive exceptions, such as works by Buisson-Fenet, 2004; Gross, 2004, 2005, 2008; Yip, 1997, 2003, 2005b). In contrast to this body of literature, which focuses on the management of stigmatized sexual identity within Christianity, this paper will focus on a theme that is less politicized yet significant: the individuals’ understandings and lived experiences of their religious faith.

We shall begin by contextualizing the research findings through a methodological discussion of the two projects. This is followed by an exploration of the significant gap between official church teachings on sexuality and the samples’ individual perceptions. Further, the paper explores the samples’ religious orientation, focusing on their perceptions of God, the Bible, and Jesus Christ. Finally, the paper discusses the participants’ religious practices at a personal and a communal level. Throughout the discussions, we shall undertake a comparative analysis in order to show cross-national differences and similarities.

1. Research projects and samples

The findings this paper presents are drawn from two conceptually and methodologically related research projects. The first was undertaken by the second author in Britain in 1998, and the second by the first author in France in 2005. They remain the biggest sociological research projects on this population in their respective countries. The success of the British project prompted the collaboration which led to the research tools being translated and adapted for the French context. The projects share similar aims, namely to explore the lived experiences of this population on three primary levels: (1) cognitive/individual (i.e. how they manage the cognitive dissonance generated by the seeming incompatibility of their sexuality and spirituality); (2) interpersonal (i.e. how they manage social relationships with potentially stigmatizing social audiences); (3) intergroup (i.e. their experiences in accessing the broader LGB community).

The British project involved 565 participants. Each participant completed an 18-page postal questionnaire. A sub-sample of 61, selected on the basis of various criteria, such as age, locality, and level of church involvement, were subsequently

interviewed for approximately two hours each. The sample, recruited primarily through support groups/organizations, the LGB press, personal contact networks and snowballing, consisted of 389 self-identified gay men (68.8%), 131 lesbians (23.2%), 24 bisexual women and 21 bisexual men (together 8%). The sample's ages ranged from 18 to 76. The majority of the sample were affiliated to the Church of England (48%) and Roman Catholic Church (26.4%). Almost all the sample were "white" (95.4%), most of them living in Greater London and the south-east of England (42.1%). Almost a quarter of the sample were priests/chaplains, followed by educational professionals (13.5%) and medical professionals (11.7%).¹

The French project involved 395 participants. Each participant completed a 20-page questionnaire, adapted from the one employed in the British project. Around 4,000 copies were sent by post throughout the country, to lesbian- and gay-affirming Christian groups such as *David et Jonathan*, *Devenir un en Christ*, *Centre du Christ Libérateur*, *Rendez-vous chrétiens*, *Gays anglicans* and the *Metropolitan Christian Church* in Montpellier and Paris²; and to Christian-friendly gay and lesbian groups and media such as the *Centre Gay et Lesbien*. Advertisements were also placed in some Christian publications, such as *La Croix* and *Témoignage chrétien* as well as on the internet. The sample comprised 290 self-identified gay men (73.4%), 77 lesbians (19.4%), 7 bisexual women, and 21 bisexual men (together 7.1%). They were almost exclusively Catholics (88.6%), with 5.6% Lutheran-Reformed, and 5.0 per cent of other denominations. A sub-sample of 20 was subsequently interviewed in depth. In general, participants' education level was high, two-thirds holding a Master's degree or a doctorate. Most of them were in employment and had quite significant economic resources. Around 14.8 per cent were monks, priests or pastors, 17.8 per cent were educational professionals, and 12.1 per cent were medical professionals.

We acknowledge that there are significant differences in terms of the history and composition of Christianity within the British and French contexts. For instance, Britain is primarily a Protestant country; France, on the other hand, is primarily a Catholic country. Such differing traditions no doubt inform the construction and management of religious orientation and practices (for more details, see Barbier-Bouvet, 2007). Nevertheless, we would argue that a comparative analysis will offer a broader view of the lived experiences of LGB Christians.

We also acknowledge that since the projects employed non-probability purposive—and therefore unrepresentative—samples, the findings reported here should be treated with great care, and generalizations should be discouraged. Nevertheless, the findings are significant in throwing light on the religious orientation and practices of this acutely under-researched minority.

2. Mind the gap: Church teachings and individual perceptions

The Anglican Church's official teachings on human sexuality stress the sanctity of sex within the framework of heterosexual marriage. Nevertheless, in the past few decades it has become increasingly explicit in demarcating homosexual "orientation" (which should not be the basis for discrimination) and homosexual "practice", namely, same-sex genital acts, which are deemed unacceptable, particularly in the case of priests. To many, the tension between the liberal and conservative wings within the Church of England and the worldwide Anglican

Communion is reaching a breaking point as a result of the above-mentioned developments. There is an increasingly pervasive view that the tension over this contentious issue will significantly transform the composition of the Communion and Anglicanism itself (e.g. Radner and Turner, 2007).

The Roman Catholic Church's official teachings in this respect are even more stringent. Homosexual acts are labelled "intrinsically disordered", and homosexual orientation "objectively disordered". In addition to citing scriptural justification, the Church censures homosexual acts because they are outside of the framework of heterosexual marriage and have no potential for the transmission of new life (Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, 1986: paragraphs 3 and 7). In response to the expansion of legal recognition for same-sex couples, the Vatican also issued, in June 2003, a document that calls upon governments not to put same-sex unions on par with heterosexual marriage (Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, 2003).

How did the participants themselves view such issues? Table 1 offers some interesting observations.

TABLE 1
Participants' views on their sexuality in relation to Christianity

Statement	Number and Percentage of Participants Who "Agree" or "Strongly Agree"	
	British Sample (N=565)	French Sample (N=395)
A. All sexualities are created by God and to be fully accepted	464 (82.1%)	257 (65.0%)
B. A person's sexual orientation is established early in life and cannot be changed	455 (80.5%)	318 (80.5%)
C. Sexual intercourse should always be potentially procreative	33 (5.8%)	31 (7.84%)
D. Same-sex genital acts are always incompatible with Christian principles	25 (4.4%)	50 (12.7%)
E. The traditional biblical exegesis on homosexuality is inaccurate	480 (84.9%)	254 (64.3%)
F. The Churches have not taken due account of the experiences of LGB Christians in their examination of the issue of human sexuality	527 (93.3%)	346 (87.6%)
G. The Churches have encouraged heterosexism in society	539 (95.4%)	351 (88.9%)
H. The Churches have contributed to the perpetuation of homophobia in society	530 (93.8%)	304 (77.0%)

On the whole, Table 1 shows a significant gap between the participants' personal views and the institutional Churches' teachings and rhetoric. Three observations could be made that demonstrate the consistency between the two samples. First, a vast majority of the participants believed that their sexual orientation, far from being a choice, was established early in life; and more importantly, that it was part of God's creation plan (i.e. statements A, B, and C). This perception is significant because it not only de-stigmatizes their sexual orientation, but also offers a theological and ontological anchor to their sense of being, which places them in a unique position to withstand and indeed challenge heteronormativity, constantly being reinforced by institutional authority structures. Second, the participants demonstrated a high level of disagreement with the institutional line of homosexuality justified specifically by the Bible and well established principles such as the (heterosexist) natural law (i.e. statements D and E). Third, the vast majority of participants were highly critical of the institutional Churches for not respecting their lived experiences and directly perpetuating heterosexism and homophobia in society at large (i.e. statements F, G, and H).

Overall, the British sample appears more critical and more out of step with the institutional line compared with its French counterpart (e.g. see statistical differences in responses to statements A, D, E and H). We suggest that this is primarily due to the more stringent and dissent-averse Catholic culture that underlines the religious framework within which the French participants live. The Catholic Church is not only a gathering of believers; its complex institutional authority structures—crystallized in the Pope's perceived infallibility and authority—also generate a strict religious culture that imposes conformity and stifles dissent. This heteronormative culture has far-reaching implications for LGBT Catholics—for instance, in terms of their church participation pattern, as we shall discuss later (see also Gross, 2008).

Qualitative data generally supports the above quantitative analysis. The vast majority of the participants seemed accepting of their sexuality, demonstrated in the following typical quote:

I discovered my sexuality, or rather, my homosexuality. It was a shock to me. I prayed that God would suppress my "bad" desires. I thus completely repressed my feelings. I suffered a lot. I wanted to commit suicide to end it all because there was no way out. I felt very bad. I fought my homosexual desires for eight years ... [But] on the internet I found Christian texts discussing homosexuality in a totally new way! It was no longer about condemnation, but rather about love. God loves us as we are with an infinite love ... This is how I managed to reconcile homosexuality and Christian faith. I distanced myself from the official discourse of traditional churches that condemns homosexuality. (Theophile, Protestant, gay, French, aged 22)

The journey that participants have travelled in the exploration of their spirituality and sexuality plays a significant role in the construction of a positive identity which harmoniously incorporates these two aspects on the fundamental level of individual conviction and relationship with the divine. The more progress they make in this respect, the less influential institutional authority structures become, not only in the specific area of sexuality, but also in their Christian life more broadly. Tables 2 and 3 illustrate this.

In Table 2, participants were asked to rank several items in order of importance as the basis of their Christian faith. Both samples produce the same ranking,

TABLE 2
Participants’ opinions of what should constitute the basis of
Christian faith

Statement	Number and Percentage of Participants Who Gave the Item a Top Two Ranking	
	British Sample (N=565)	French Sample (N=395)
Personal experience	463 (81.9%)	360 (91.1%)
The Bible	333 (58.9%)	336 (85.1%)
Human reason	303 (3.6%)	308 (78.0%)
Church authority	95 (16.8%)	113 (28.6%)

with “personal experience” being the most important, followed by “the Bible”, then “human reason”, and finally “Church authority”. Over 80 per cent of both samples placed “personal experience” at the top, and 16.8 per cent of the British sample put “church authority” at the bottom, but significantly more of their French counterparts did so (28.6%). As mentioned, this difference could be due to the more deferential and compliant religious culture propagated by the Catholic Church. One point is certain: the respondents use their positive experiences as LGB Christians to cumulatively establish a positive personal identity, buttressed by an increasing amount of theological capital that de-stigmatizes and indeed celebrates homosexuality (for more details on the development of sexual theology that affirms homosexuality, see, e.g., Yip, 2005b; Loughlin, 2007). In turn, this empowers them to become more confident, and critical—even disparaging—of the Churches’ recalcitrant attitudes in the area of sexual diversity. It is therefore not surprising that a narrative such as the following is pervasive among the participants:

I did have a lot of problems with my sexuality. I thought it was wrong. You know, just as the Church says over and over again. I was quite depressed, thinking that God wouldn’t want me any more. But that was a while ago. Now, I just think that the Church is silly on such matters. It’s high time they looked around and saw the number of happy lesbian and gay Christians around. We are all God’s children. (Janice, Anglican, bisexual, British, aged 38)

Table 3 further illustrates the power of personal experience in the fashioning of the participants’ Christian life, and the relative insignificance of institutional authority structures in this process. In terms of the basis of sexual ethics, the British sample once again considered “personal experience” the most important, followed by “human reason”, “the Bible”, “the LGB communities”, and “Church authority”. A similar order was produced by the French sample, with a minor

TABLE 3
Participants' opinions of what should constitute the basis for LGB
Christian sexual ethics

Statement	Number and Percentage of Participants Who Gave the Item a Top Two Ranking	
	British Sample (N=565)	French Sample (N=395)
Personal experience	442 (78.2%)	356 (90.1%)
Human reason	326 (57.7%)	326 (82.5%)
The Bible	255 (45.1%)	242 (61.3%)
The LGB communities	129 (22.8%)	243 (61.5%)
Church authority	51 (9.7%)	82 (20.8%)

difference, involving the swapping of position between “the LGB communities” and “the Bible”. The following narrative is typical:

What does the church know about the mystery of human sexuality, you tell me? In fact, what does it really know about the mystery of Christian faith? It seems to want to limit people rather than celebrate human diversity, all created by God. Therefore, I much prefer to rely on my own experience, using my own reasoning, and my own understanding of the Bible to guide me to live not only as a gay man, but also as a Christian. I don't think the church has been good at doing that. That's why it is at the bottom [of the ranking]. (John, Anglican, gay, British, aged 45)

Once again, we observe a higher percentage of the French sample (20.8% compared with 9.7% of the British) who placed great importance on Church authority in this area. This further supports our proposition that generally the Catholic culture, compared with that of the Anglican, fosters a greater degree of compliance to institutional teachings. Further, around 75 per cent of the French sample “agreed” or “strongly agreed” with the statement that “The institutionalized Church seems irrelevant to your everyday life”. Interestingly, the percentage for the British sample is significantly lower (33.3%). We suggest that this is primarily due to the severely censorious Catholic culture, which generates a high degree of psychological dissociation, complementing a high degree of social dissociation (i.e. not attending church). This is compounded by the lack of choice within the French religious market. In this respect, we would assert that the inter-relationship between an LGB Christian's perception of the institutionalized Church, her/his sense of belonging to the symbolic spiritual community and her/his church participation pattern is nuanced and multi-layered, a point that we shall elaborate in the concluding section.

3. Religious orientation: God, Jesus Christ and the Bible

This section presents data about the participants' beliefs in God, Jesus Christ and the Bible. These are areas that are often drowned by the clamour surrounding the controversies about homosexuality, which are located within the framework of morality, namely the right and wrong about being Christian as well as LGB. Our aim is to go beyond this, relevant though it still is, and explore what the participants actually believe in.

Table 4 presents some interesting data about the participants' understanding of the character and characteristics of God. Consistently across the samples, God was perceived much less as an authority figure who controls and dictates one's life (i.e. statements H and I) than as highly approachable and close, a God with whom one could be intimate (i.e. particularly statements C, D, and E). More interestingly, an overwhelming majority of the samples "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that "God is love" (i.e. statement A). This is highly significant. Conceiving God as love denotes her/his accepting and inclusive character, features that are particularly emphasized by the participants because of their problematic relationship with the institutional authority structures.

TABLE 4
Participants' beliefs about God

Statement	Number and Percentage of Respondents Who "Agree" or "Strongly Agree"	
	British Sample (N=565)	French Sample (N=395)
A. God is love	545 (96.5%)	370 (93.6%)
B. God is a life force within you	430 (76.1%)	349 (88.3%)
C. God is within and among us rather than above us	470 (83.2%)	341 (86.3%)
D. God is close to you and approachable	488 (86.4%)	294 (74.4%)
E. We can interact intimately with God	456 (80.7%)	309 (78.2%)
F. God hears prayers and answers them	398 (70.4%)	249 (63.0%)
G. God is like a father who cares for his children	381 (67.4%)	279 (70.6%)
H. God determines your destiny and fate	185 (32.7%)	115 (29.1%)
I. God's will is final and there is no questioning of his will	213 (37.7%)	99 (25.0%)

This conception of God is the foundation of the faith structure of many LGB Christians. The more unshakeable this foundation built on divine approval and acceptance, the more they are able to withstand the onslaught of stigmatization and censure in human relationships. The following narratives illustrate the power of this:

To me, the first and foremost thing about God is that he is love and compassion. It doesn't make sense that he created us all and then found some of us unacceptable. People might do that, but not God. Well, not the God I know anyway. (Adam, Baptist, gay, British, aged 40)

I did not choose [to be gay] and I am sure that God is looking at me as he looks at any of his children. The real difficulty is not with God but with the Church (Robert, Catholic, gay, French, aged 33)

This "love" theme is extended to the participants' perception of Jesus Christ. Christ in general was perceived as someone who, like God, was accepting and inclusive. While not neglecting Christ's divinity (as the Son of God), the participants across the samples were more likely to emphasize his humanity. This humanizing of Christ is important for two reasons. First, it aligns Christ to their lived experiences of oppression. Christ, as a human, had experienced oppression and was thus empathetic of their plight. Second, Christ, as a human, was also unafraid of transgressing established social orders and practices that he deemed unjust. Thus, he was a champion of social justice and a social reformer. These two characteristics not only empower the participants in the face of oppression, but also induce in them a responsibility to engage in socio-political change to make the religious community and society at large more inclusive. The following quotes clearly illustrate this:

Well, Jesus is my saviour. By that I mean I have found salvation in him, not just about going to heaven and stuff like that, [but] on a day-to-day basis. I know he sustains and helps me through life. I also think he knows me, a lesbian, and others like me, as oppressed people. And I genuinely believe that he doesn't like that because he was so against injustice. He would change things for us. (Amanda, Roman Catholic, lesbian, British, aged 52)

Being gay forced me to look for the true meaning in Jesus's message. I could not adopt a superficial attitude towards religion as a lot of Catholic Christians do. I had to look for coherence in the Gospels and when I found it, I was transformed into a Christian with conviction [for social justice]. (Baptiste, Catholic, gay, French, aged 33)

The participants' lived experiences as LGB also informs their perception of the Bible. The British sample, primarily coming from a Protestant background, was more likely than its French Catholic counterpart to value the role of the Bible in daily life. For instance, while 89.9 per cent of the British sample considered the Bible relevant to everyday life, only 58.8 per cent of the French sample thought so. This could be due to the greater emphasis placed on the Bible in the Protestant tradition than in the Catholic tradition.

Nevertheless, striking consistency was found between the samples in terms of Biblical literalness. Some 94.9 per cent and 91.3 per cent of the British and French samples, respectively, "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that "The Bible cannot always be taken literally". Here we see once again a view that is clearly informed by their experience as lesbian, gay or bisexual. To many LGB Christians,

the literal interpretation of the Bible that underpins the traditional discourse of human sexuality legitimizes heteronormativity and constructs other sexualities as “deviant”, from which one should repent, or which one should at least refrain from “practising”. The following narratives illustrate the importance of not treating the Bible as a rule book but as a guide to be understood through one’s lived experiences:

The Bible has much wealth in it. I read it to find comfort and guidance. But that is not to say that I let it dictate my life. It was written a long time ago by people. So I don’t see it as God’s word, which doesn’t change at all. I think the principles are good, but you have to adapt them to our life [circumstances] now, don’t you? Otherwise, you are using it like a rule book that doesn’t change. But we change, as a society. (James, Anglican, gay, British, aged 33)

The Biblical writers translated what they had been told, and what they understood. There is, therefore, a margin of error that must not be overlooked. In my opinion, that gives me the right not to agree with every part of the Bible and makes me more confident in my own experiences in relation to the Scriptures. (Xavier, Catholic, gay, French, aged 40)

4. Reaching in and reaching out: religious practices and experiences

In this section, we turn our attention to the participants’ private and social religious practices and subsequent experiences. Table 5 demonstrates the participants’ private Bible reading and praying patterns.

Table 5 shows that a substantial number of participants are involved in private religious activities. Some 85.4 per cent of the British sample and 68.6 per cent of the French sample prayed at least once a week. Across the samples, participants were less likely to read the Bible privately at least once a week, though the British sample was more likely to do so than their French counterparts (56.8% and 34.4% respectively). Consistent with our previous argument, we assert that this is probably due to the greater emphasis placed on the Bible among Protestants than among Catholics, not only as a theological resource, but also as an object of engagement for their spiritual nourishment and growth, reinforced throughout the process of religious socialization. In any case, qualitative data reveals that such private activities play an important role in sustaining spiritual growth, as the narratives below show:

The reason I pray and read the Bible is because I need them for my own growth as a Christian. They deepen my faith, I suppose. They help me focus on God and my own spiritual well-being. This is important, you know, particularly if you are in a church that says it’s not OK to be gay or bisexual – you know, only heterosexuals can inherit the kingdom of God, that kind of stuff. So I find comfort and strength in such activities. (Mike, Anglican, bisexual, British, aged 58)

I read the Bible when I feel the need to find a clear sense of direction in some moments of my life, such as when I am thinking about meaning of my life, or when I doubt and I feel alienated from my beliefs because I am not going to church any more. (Serge, Catholic, gay, French, aged 38)

The spiritual and psychological benefits of private Bible reading and praying cannot be denied. These are often complemented by participation in the local church. Among the British sample, 80.3 per cent attended a local church at least

TABLE 5
Participants' private Bible reading and praying patterns

	Private Bible Reading		Private Praying	
	British Sample (N=565)	French Sample (N=395)	British Sample (N=565)	French Sample (N=395)
Daily	120 (21.2%)	56 (14.2%)	318 (56.2%)	172 (43.5%)
Several times a week	134 (23.7%)	49 (12.4%)	130 (23.0%)	75 (19.0%)
Once a week	67 (11.9%)	31 (7.8%)	35 (6.2%)	24 (6.1%)
Once a month	35 (6.2%)	28 (7.1%)	5 (1.2%)	8 (2.0%)
Occasionally	205 (36.3%)	171 (43.3%)	77 (3.4%)	86 (21.8%)
Never	4 (0.7%)	55 (13.9%)	0 (0%)	25 (6.3%)

weekly. The percentage for the French sample is lower, but significant (55.9%). The activities they participated in ranged from Sunday service/Mass to prayer meetings, Bible study and church council meetings. The lower level of church participation among the French participants could be explained, at least partly, by their responses to the statement "One can be a good Christian without attending church". Some 69 per cent of the sample—compared with 55.4 per cent of the British sample—"agreed" or "strongly agreed" with the statement.

Myriad reasons were reported for non-participation in the local church community. This ranged from general disillusionment with institutional authority structures to more specific disappointment with the lack of progress in the area of affirming LGB people within the community. Interestingly, these non-participants still maintained the Christian identity, not only as a cultural marker but also as a religious identity that could be nurtured despite their disassociation from the Church. In other words, leaving the institutional Church does not equate to losing one's spirituality. In fact, some argued that distance from the Church contributes positively to personal spiritual growth, as encapsulated in the elegant phrase from a British participant: "I am leaving the Church to keep my faith" (for more details, see Yip, 2000).

Here, we would like to focus on those LGBs who choose to remain within the Church community, behaviour that puzzles many LGB people who do not have religious faith and argue that by remaining within a homophobic institution, LGB Christians are giving consent to, and indeed indirectly contributing to, the perpetuation of "Christian homophobia". This is where the intersection between spirituality and sexuality becomes fascinating. The assumption underpinning the criticism prioritizes the LGB dimension of the participants' identity, so that their

lack of acceptance within the Church should serve as a deterrent to participation. In reality, however, the participants have another, equally significant, aspect to their identity—being Christian. This is reflected in the narrative below.

I think attending church is important to your Christian faith. Being Christian is not about having a personal faith only. It is also, to me, about communion and community. You know, we need each other ... to grow together. That's why I take part in quite a lot of activities. I contribute but I also get something back. I like that social way of being Christian. (Norman, Roman Catholic, gay, British, aged 47)

Another important reason for staying in a seemingly homophobic institution is the commitment to effect positive change from within. This is particularly relevant to participants who have developed a positive personal identity, and who often use Christ as the role model to bring about change that makes the institution more inclusive and accepting of God-created sexual—and indeed human—diversity. The following narratives illustrate this commitment powerfully.

I am Christian as I am gay—deeply. I don't choose to be more Christian than gay. Being gay is only one aspect of my personality. I hope the Church will evolve. I am working at this at my own level by going to church. I was born in the Church; it gave me my religious culture, my spirituality. (Simon, Roman Catholic, gay, French, aged 44)

I stay because my faith is more than Church teachings. I dream to keep belonging to a community of believers and participating in their rites. Religious community [which could be LGB-accepting] is different from religious institution [which is homophobic]. (Cédric, Roman Catholic, gay, French, aged 48)

As the last respondent points out, there can be a gap between the local church attitude (which could be partly or entirely positive) and the highly negative statements that seem to dominate the official national discourse on homosexuality and Christianity.

One significant issue that church-attending LGB Christians have to face is deciding how to manage information about their sexuality, and the responses they receive if they decide to reveal such information. Of the 454 church-going British participants and their 221 French counterparts, 71.3 per cent and 52.5 per cent, respectively, were “completely out” or “partially out”. The significantly higher level of “outness” among the British sample is much influenced by two factors: that the issues of homosexuality and bisexuality are more likely to have been addressed in the local churches in Britain than in France; and the fact that more British participants generally perceived their church members to be “sympathetic” or “more sympathetic” towards such issues. This is demonstrated in the table below.

As the above table shows, homosexuality as an issue has been addressed by more local churches than bisexuality. This is a reflection of the fact that, despite often being linked in religious, political and popular discourses as an “Other” to heterosexuality, homosexuality (particularly male homosexuality) generates more attention and is more established in public awareness than bisexuality. Similarly, both samples reported a higher level of understanding and tolerance among church members of homosexuality than of bisexuality. The differential structural positions of these two types of non-heterosexuality deserve deeper analysis, which goes beyond the remit of the research projects reported here (for information on the limited research specifically on bisexual Christians, see, for instance, Toft 2007).

TABLE 6
Participants' experiences of local churches in relation to
their sexuality

<i>Statement</i>	Number and Percentage of Participants Who Answered "Yes"	
	British Sample N=454	French Sample N=221
Local church has addressed the issue of homosexuality in some way	251 (55.3%)	64 (29.0%)
Local church has addressed the issue of bisexuality in some way	77 (16.9%)	19 (8.6%)
Local church in general is "very sympathetic" or "sympathetic" to the issue of homosexuality	219 (48.2%)	68 (30.8%)
Local church in general is "very sympathetic" or "sympathetic" to the issue of bisexuality	92 (20.3%)	29 (13.1%)

Comparatively, 55.3 per cent and 16.9 per cent of the British sample reported that homosexuality and bisexuality, respectively, had been addressed by their local churches, compared with only 29.0 per cent and 8.6 per cent of the French sample. Further, 48.2 per cent and 20.3 per cent of the British sample thought that their local churches were "sympathetic" or "very sympathetic" to the issues homosexuality and bisexuality respectively, compared with 30.8 per cent and 13.1 per cent of the French sample. These data demonstrate that not only is there greater awareness among British churches of the prevalence of sexual diversity and the need to address it, but also a higher level of tolerance. Linking these two findings, we would like to argue that the more such issues are addressed, the more understanding, and therefore tolerance, are likely to be generated.

There is no denying the importance of a tolerant church culture to the level of integration of LGB Christians, which indeed affects their personal integrity and spiritual and psychological health. Often, "coming out" exacts high costs, which explains why some chose not to do so, as the narratives below demonstrate.

The priest of my parish has refused to baptize me after a year and a half studying and preparing for the baptism because of the "sexual compulsion of homosexuals". I left that parish and went to another one in order to receive baptism. There, I hide the fact that I am gay. (François, Catholic, gay, French, aged 52)

I keep my sexuality separated from my church involvement. It's not worth it, I think. People don't understand, and I don't have confidence in the priest either. This is a small place [a village], you know, and people aren't that sophisticated. I think many of them would die of a heart attack if I told them that I am bisexual. That's "worse" than gay, I suppose. I honestly don't think their heads could get round it. So I keep quiet, and if necessary, lie about it. (John, Roman Catholic, bisexual, British, aged 31)

Interestingly, such negative experiences are counter-balanced by positive ones, as the following narratives show.

I have been lucky I suppose. People who know about me and [her partner] seem to be OK. So far there have been no negative experiences, and we have been here for, what, seven or eight years? I think people respect me for what I do and who I am. I contribute a lot to the church, you know. But I also think the fact that [the priest] knows and is supportive of us helps a great deal. It just gives us much confidence. (Angela, Anglican, lesbian, British, aged 40)

The priest of our parish decided to celebrate our union. We prepared the event with him. [During the service], we had a time for exchanging vows and a time to share our story and love. We had with us 80 people—friends and family ... The priest wore his white robe during the celebratory service. (Manuel, Catholic, gay, French, aged 33)

The above narratives demonstrate that despite the highly uncompromising and censorious stance of the institutionalized Church, particularly in the case of the Catholic Church, some participants encountered tolerance and support at grassroots level, from both parishioners and clergy. This is incontrovertible evidence that there could be a discrepancy between the institutional stance and treatment at grassroots level; or to put it differently, between doctrinal prescriptions and pastoral practice. This discrepancy was at times perceived by participants as a “credibility gap”, which further undermined their trust in, and respect for, religious authority structures (Alison, 2007; Buisson-Fenet, 2004; Gross, 2004).

Conclusion

In this paper, we have undertaken a comparison in religious orientation, beliefs and practices of French and British LGB Christians. Across the two samples, we have identified striking similarities but also significant differences, which we argue are a reflection of the different religious cultures they inhabit. In general, the samples demonstrated a high level of disagreement with the Churches’ censorious teachings and statements on homosexuality and bisexuality, which were widely perceived as heteronormative, and indeed heterosexist. In this respect, the British sample appeared more critical, articulate and defiant than the French. We argue that this is because of greater structural space for dissent within Anglicanism than within Catholicism, as well as the greater amount of mobilizable theological and social capital that the British sample possessed, in terms of LGB-affirming theology and support networks.

This structural difference has far-reaching repercussions on the participants in general. We found that the French sample, who were more compliant with Church teachings, experienced a greater degree of psychological dissociation from the institutional religion, as well as social dissociation in the form of non-participation in church communities. We would argue that this is a reflection of a dissonance reduction strategy.

Nevertheless, some participants across both samples expressed a strong desire to stay within seemingly homophobic religious structures because of their commitment to the alignment and integration of their sexuality and spirituality, which to them were inseparable. This interconnectedness illustrates “the essentialist conception of LGB sexuality, inseparable from their spirituality—sexuality is a ‘gift’, and flawlessly made in the image of God. This conception buttresses the authenticity and validity of their humanity, which includes their immutable sexuality ... Sexuality, therefore, should not

be isolated from other aspects of one's being (e.g. one's spirituality, emotions, body). It is an issue of identity integration as well as personal integrity" (Yip, 2005a: 277).

Another significant reason for these participants to stay within religious structures is their commitment to make the religious communities inclusive of human diversity. This quasi-political commitment and strategy is buttressed by various factors. On a cognitive and affective level, their conceptualization of God primarily within the context of all-embracing love, and of Jesus Christ as a transgressive champion of social justice and inclusivity, significantly empower their resolve. On an experiential level, the emphasis they placed on positive personal experience and the marginalization of church authority in their moral universe embolden this strategy. Stuart, Braunston, McMahon and Morrison (1997) have argued that learning to trust personal experiences—as opposed to conforming to Church teachings—is the cornerstone of a positive LGB Christian identity, which in turn underpins further political and religious change.

In addition, the burgeoning corpus of LGB-friendly Christian theology, LGB Christian support networks, positive experiences at grassroots level and anti-discrimination legislation, have provided significant theological, social and political capital for this process (e.g. Guest, Goss, West, and Bohache, 2006; Yip, 2007). Looking ahead, we can envisage that despite the increasingly sophisticated strategies of Christian fundamentalists, LGB Christians have a brighter future. However, resources for positive change are unevenly distributed. In this respect, our projects have shown that British LGB Christians are in a stronger position than their French counterparts.

Returning to an earlier point, we would argue that the participants' varied responses towards the institutional stance reflect the typology that Hirschman (1970) used to encapsulate individuals' responses to economic and political choices, namely "exit", "voice" and "loyalty". Our research projects have come across LGB Christians who indeed have "exited" the physical religious community, expressed in non-participation in the local church. Nevertheless, some of them still expressed "loyalty" to the symbolic spiritual space, underpinned by an affective affinity amongst believers that brings them together as, say, children of God, with its shared lexicon, symbols, rituals and spiritual kinship. This nuanced response challenges the simplistic and dualistic understanding of individuals' choices in this respect—"exit" or "loyalty" (i.e. "stay"). The data shows that these two responses are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, exit from institutionalized Church does not necessarily mean exit from the symbolic spiritual space—a community of collective memory. This is consistent with Dillon's conclusion based on her study of pro-change Catholics (including lesbian and gay Catholics), that "For them, emancipatory ideals are advanced not by severing links with the institution whose official teaching marginalizes them, but by reinterpreting the tradition in ways that validate a more inclusive Catholicism" (1999: 244).

On the other hand, there were participants who refused to "exit" in the broadest sense of the word, because of their "loyalty" to the above-mentioned symbolic spiritual space, as well as their sense of belonging to the physical religious community. Instead of accepting the censorious stance and culture,

however, they “voiced” their opposition and desire for a more inclusive religious community.

Theoretically, we assert that the exploration of LGB Christians’ religious orientations, beliefs and practices contributes to our understanding of the nuanced nature of their inter-connections, and consequently to our understanding of the contemporary religious and spiritual landscape. One significant issue in this respect is the primacy of personal experience in structuring an individual’s religious orientation. There is no denying that in contemporary society, social processes such as de-traditionalization and individualization increasingly empower the self over the institution as the basis of identity construction. Identity, therefore, has become more contested, reflexive and fluid (e.g. Bauman, 2001; De Singly, 2003; Hervieu-Léger, 2004). Indeed, individuals in contemporary society are disembedded from traditional roles, allegiances, commitments and norms; and re-embedded in reflexive life projects with the self in the driver’s seat, constructing do-it-yourself biographical narratives (Beck, 1992; Plummer, 1995). There is a perceptible relocation of interpretative authority to the self, buttressed by broad humanistic—often anti-authoritarian—values such as social justice, human rights, personal responsibility, liberty and diversity. Indeed, as Geyer and Baumeister argue, “Now people must find a way to reconcile historical conceptions of morality with the recent formulation of the self as a source of value with an inherent authority claim” (2005: 419).

The evidence of the privatization and individualization of faith is undeniable, consistent with current sociological analysis of the religious landscape (e.g. Heelas and Woodhead, 2005; Hervieu-Léger, 2003; Lambert, 2003; Lyon, 2000). For instance, focusing on European Catholicism, Pace argues that the Catholic Church is “no longer capable of patrolling the symbolic boundaries of its system of belief and practice ... A relativistic attitude ... is widespread [among Catholics]” (2007: 39). Nevertheless, this does not simply mean the total rejection of institutional authority. Our findings have shown that LGB Christians continue to contextualize religious vocabulary, symbols and texts to make sense of their sexual as well as spiritual identities and lives. There is no doubt that some find the persistent censure of their sexuality within religious communities an excruciating burden, but many continue to place importance on religious community and shared experiences, and display the commitment to make the religious space more inclusive, while appreciating religion as a collective memory. Indeed, their strenuous attempts to construct and live meaningful lives as Christians as well as LGBs—thus integrating their spirituality and sexuality—demonstrate the intricate and nuanced relationships between social agency and social structure in the production, negotiation and maintenance of social life.

NOTES

¹ The second author gratefully acknowledges the financial support of Nottingham Trent University, and the contribution of all participants and LGB groups.

² The first author gratefully acknowledges the assistance of the group David et Jonathan and of Nicolas Brémont d’Ars, associate researcher at the CEIFR.

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