[FIR 1.3 (2005) 271-289] *Fieldwork in Religion* (print) ISSN 1743-0615
Fieldwork in Religion (online) ISSN 1743-0623

Andrew K.T. Yip

Religion and the Politics of Spirituality/Sexuality: Reflections on Researching British Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Christians and Muslims

Andrew Yip is Reader in Sociology at Nottingham Trent University (UK). He has published widely, among others, in the area of lesbian, gay, and bisexual Christian and Muslim identities and relationships. He is the author of *Gay Male Christian Couples: Life Stories* (Praeger, 1997), and co-author of *Lesbian and Gay Lives Over 50* (York House Publishing, 2003).

School of Social Sciences
Nottingham Trent University
Burton Street, Nottingham
NG1 4BU
UK

a.yip@ntu.ac.uk

Abstract

Drawing upon my research on British LGB Christians and Muslims, and theoretical literature on 'identity', 'identity politics', and 'sexual citizenship', I begin by discussing some advantages and disadvantages of merging the personal and the professional in research. I then argue that in order to understand why some LGB people stay in seemingly homophobic institutional religion, we need to understand the connection between spirituality and sexuality that not only offers ontological security, but also underpins the politics of spirituality/sexuality. This politics is personally and socially transformative. The merger of the counter religious discourse, that this politics underpins, with the secular discourse of human rights and sexual citizenship offers LGB believers cause for optimism. Nonetheless, I also contest the ideological and cultural specificity of contemporary religious and secular LGB identity politics. Highlighting the political, religious, social-cultural, and ethnic issues with which LGB Muslims need to engage, I argue for the broadening of current discourse of identity in general, and LGB identity in particular.

© Equinox Publishing Ltd 2006, Unit 6, The Village, 101 Amies Street, London SW11 2JW.

Introduction

Exploring the lived experiences of British lesbian, gay, and bisexual (hereinafter LGB) Christians—and more recently LGB Muslims—has occupied the bulk of my research activity in the past decade. This paper, in many ways, gives me the opportunity to take a step back and reflect upon, as a whole, the corpus of knowledge that the research has generated. To this end, I shall highlight selective themes that represent some of my reflections. The first theme concerns epistemological and methodological issues. The subsequent themes are broad conceptual and theoretical reflections drawn from different research projects on LGB Christians, with the focus on the project *National Survey of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Christians*.[1] In the last theme, I give prominence to the experiences of LGB Muslims, drawn from the project *A Minority within a Minority: British Non-Heterosexual Muslims*.[2] My reflections on such issues are broad, some of which are also tentative, and will be developed further in future work. To prioritize broad reflections, I shall not present any empirical data here, but references will be made to specific empirical publications.

1. This project was conducted in 1997–1998. It aimed to explore LGB Christians' life circumstances and lived experiences, involving 565 participants across Britain. Each participant completed an 18-page postal questionnaire. A sub-sample of 61, selected based on various criteria such as age, locality, level of church involvement, and relationship status, were subsequently interviewed for approximately two hours respectively. The sample, recruited primarily through support groups/organizations, 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 (altogether 8%). Their 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%), with most of them living in Greater London and the southeast of England (42.1%). Almost a quarter of the sample were priests/chaplains, followed by educational professionals (13.5%) and medical professionals (11.7%). I gratefully acknowledge the financial support from Nottingham Trent University, and the important contribution from all participants and user groups. In addition, I have also studied gay male Christian couples (see, e.g., Yip, 1997a); conducted membership surveys of *Quest*, the oldest and biggest support organization for British LGB Catholics (see, e.g., Yip, 1997b), and the *Centre for the Study of Christianity and Sexuality* (see Yip, 1998a).

2. This qualitative project, conducted in 2001–2002, aimed to explore LGB Muslims' life circumstances and lived experiences as members of sexual, ethnic, and religious minority. It involved 20 female and 22 male participants who were primarily of South Asian origin (approximately 88%). Each participant was interviewed for approximately two hours. In addition, two focus group interviews (one mixed, one all women) were held. The participants were recruited through similar sampling methods as the project on LGB Christians. The majority of the sample lived in Greater London and the southeast of England (71%), with almost 64% under the age of 30. They were also highly educated (52% had at least a first degree), and the majority (76%) were in full-time employment. I gratefully acknowledge the financial support from the *Economic and Social Research Council* (ESRC, Award No. R000223530), and the important contribution from all participants and user groups.

© Equinox Publishing Ltd 2006.

Researching the personal

My research into LGB lived experiences began with my postgraduate training in Britain in the early 1990s. I was living in Malaysia before that, where, given my own religious and cultural conservatism, underpinned by societal conservatism that hegemonizes heteronormativity, the thought of researching this area was non-existent. Even if the intention were there, any attempt would have been thwarted by the impossibility of obtaining research funding.[3] Thus, working in Britain had given me the opportunity to broaden my research agenda. Indeed, the British context offered me not only professional, but also much-needed personal space to explore this area. On the cusp of having to confront my own homosexual feelings for the first time,[4] the opportunity to research LGB lives became a professional pursuit to build a career, as well as a personal quest to re-examine my own identity.

Within this context, research is more than a tool to uncover the complexity of social life. It also serves as a tool for self-exploration. In retrospect, I would conclude that, over the years, the merger of the personal (particularly when it is highly politicized) and the professional has proven to be a double-edged sword. The personal drive to explore and inquire has been a much-needed propelling impetus, particularly when I encountered de-motivating obstacles on the professional level. For instance, in different professional contexts, I found myself having to justify my interest in such a 'peripheral' research topic to rather sceptical audiences. Further, most colleagues who found my research interesting were more interested in my personal stance on the debate of the morality of homosexuality, rather than the sociological aspects of LGB lives. I also used to find myself being the only scholar presenting a paper on LGB issues in Sociology of Religion conferences; and the only one discussing religion/spirituality in LGB/Queer Studies or Sexuality conferences. I am glad to say that such 'professional loneliness' has been assuaged in recent years, particularly within the North American context. Any scholar working in an acutely under-researched area (particularly that which crosses disciplinary or sub-disciplinary

3. It must be mentioned that while the Malaysian society and the Academy are still conservative by Western standards, the past decade has witnessed the emergence of research on sexual dissidence and diversity such as LGB lives (e.g., Chua, 2005) and transsexuality (e.g., Teh, 2005).

4. Though I have been living with a same-sex partner for over a decade, I have never been comfortable with the label 'gay', primarily because of its historical, cultural and social specificity, which prioritizes 'Western' experiences. Some elements of its 'white', middle-class, and male construction are still alien to me emotionally, culturally, and ideologically. Nevertheless, 'gay' was—and still is when I need to—the closest social label I identify with as far as my sexuality is concerned. The complexity of such identification will be explored further in this article.

© Equinox Publishing Ltd 2006.

boundary) could identify with this 'loneliness'. In this context, intense personal interest is often vital in sustaining such a research trajectory.

One of the major challenges of personalizing research is that certain encounters during the research process could have a profoundly de-stabilizing—even transformative—effect on my personal reflection on, for instance, personal morality and relational ethics and values. Narratives I documented about how gay male Christian couples managed sexual non-monogamy in their relationships (for more details see Yip, 1997c) seriously challenged my hitherto uncontested understanding of 'Christian' ethics in managing sexual relations in partnership. The line of demarcation some participants established between 'emotional fidelity' and 'sexual fidelity' (i.e., being emotionally exclusive to one's partner despite being sexually non-exclusive) was sociologically fascinating, but personally disturbing. It challenged my deeply-held and religiously-informed assumption that they are inseparable, and indeed synonymous. In other words, it deeply challenged my taken-for-granted definitions of 'fidelity' and 'faithfulness' (see also Heaphy, Donovan and Weeks, 2004). Indeed, the lived experiences of some participants which were not consistent with my personal values compelled me to re-evaluate not only my own Christian values, but also my relationship with my partner. Thus, while most of the participants and I were in the same position of accepting our sexuality, we differed sharply on behavioural and relational ethics. My own stance, informed by my evangelical background, was so out of sync with the majority of the participants that I asked myself the fundamental meaning of being 'Christian'.

Another significant challenge in my research career is the management of the discrepancy between the research agenda and the political agenda of some of the user groups/organizations that participated in the research. My research has been widely perceived by participants and gatekeepers of such groups as advocacy research that should promote a better understanding of their plight. Therefore, its political dimension is necessarily salient. In principle, I am committed to the feminist research ethos that emphasizes 'giving something back' and 'participant empowerment' (for more details see Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002; Letherby and Jackson, 2003). Nevertheless, not being a political activist of any kind, I constantly have to manage this expectation of advocacy, with varying degrees of success. Further, my commitment to documenting the diversity of the participants' experiences does not always fit well with the political agenda of some user groups that emphasizes experiences of victimization and victimhood, arguably the most politically expedient and efficacious way of highlighting the distinctiveness and markedness of their identity. This has led to some gatekeepers and participants questioning my commitment to 'the cause'. Having spent years in such a research milieu, I have come to the conclusion that the issue of mutual expectation is best settled at the outset

© Equinox Publishing Ltd 2006.

when access to the field is negotiated. That would reduce—though not eradicate—incompatible expectations between the researcher and the researched.

Intellectually, I was sustained by various aspects of feminist epistemology and methodology that emphasize, *inter alia*, research as unalienated labour that coincides with personal concerns, the importance of the researcher's subjectivity and reflexivity, the relation between the (often politicized) personal to the professional without the fear of being 'too involved'—thus losing 'objectivity' and 'detachment'—in the research process. Significantly contrary to my largely positivistic sociological training, this contributes to an epistemological shift in certain ways. Shulamit Reinhartz's *On Becoming a Social Scientist* (1985) and Susan Krieger's *Social Science and the Self* (1991)—informed by the broad intellectual pillars spelt out in Mills' *The Sociological Imagination* (1959)—were of particular importance in my reflection on the intertwined nature of the development of my professional identity alongside my personal identity.

Why stay in a homophobic institution?

Within the LGB community which is largely secular, the question 'Why do you stay in a homophobic institution?' is often posed to its members who profess to have a religious faith. While this query could be prompted by genuine curiosity, often it is underlined by hostility, informed by the view that staying in a homophobic institution indirectly colludes with the perpetuation of homophobia (O'Brien, 2005). Indeed, while legal reform and social change since 1960s signpost a society that is more tolerant of sexual difference, religious institutions seem to be immune to such progressive change, manifested in periodic controversies such as the appointment of Gene Robinson, the first openly gay bishop in the Anglican Communion (for a good analysis of this, see Bates, 2005). Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that even a cursory reading of LGB publications such as *Gay Times* would reveal that institutional religion is often represented as inherently sex-negative, homophobic, and exclusionary (e.g., Smith, 2005). Indeed, the cliché, 'It is harder to be Christian in the gay community than to be gay in the Christian community' resonates with the experiences of many LGB Christians I have studied.

In my view, anti-religious sentiments within the largely secular LGB community are shaped by the perception that religion, infested with traditions and values of yesteryears, is fundamentally incompatible with LGB identity and 'lifestyle'. In other words, the LGB identity is premised upon liberation and freedom from the shackles of religion that upholds moral absolutism and a heteronormative power structure. Secularism, therefore, is often assumed to be pivotal to a LGB identity. This view, though dominant, is simplistic. First and foremost, research shows that there is significant variation among institutional religions in terms of their teachings and

© Equinox Publishing Ltd 2006.

official stance on sexuality in general, and homosexuality in particular. Non-monotheistic religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism are far more tolerant of sexual difference compared to Christianity and Islam for a variety of reasons, such as their theological conception of human sexuality, and organization of religious authority structures (Swidler, 1993; Sweasey, 1997; Runzo and Martin, 2000).

Further, there are differential levels of tolerance within the same religion. For instance, Sufism within Islam, and some Christian denominations which are less hierarchical, are generally more tolerant (Crockett and Voas, 2003; Long, 2004; Thumma and Gray, 2005). Finally—and perhaps most importantly—there could be discrepancy between a homophobic official line and treatment at grassroots level, which could be tolerant. My research has come across many LGB Anglicans, for instance, who were deeply frustrated with the Church of England official stance, but who nevertheless experienced acceptance in their parish churches. This unfortunate gap, however, is often perceived by LGB Christians as evidence of the hypocrisy of religious authority structures (for more details, see Yip, 1998b). Therefore, in order to understand why some LGB people stay in institutional religion, we need a more nuanced understanding of the interplay between sexuality and spirituality, to which I now turn.

Sexuality is spiritual, spirituality is sexual

To me, one of the most fundamental insights into why LGB believers stay within institutional religion is the inextricable link they establish between sexuality and spirituality. Sexuality and spirituality are flip sides of each other—to be sexual is to be spiritual; and to be spiritual is to be sexual. They are inseparable. Spirituality entails asking fundamental questions about the self (e.g., 'Who am I?'), others/community (e.g., 'How do I love others?'), and God (e.g., 'How can I have a meaningful relationship with God?'). When LGB believers ask themselves such questions, sexuality is featured prominently. Indeed, whether they are positive or negative—or in between—about their sexuality significantly informs the search and the content of the answers to such questions. Therefore, when they explore the fundamentals of spirituality, they simultaneously explore the fundamentals of sexuality, and *vice versa*. The religious and social disapprobation of their sexuality only serves to heighten this connection. 'Coming out to oneself' characterizes this process or journey of self-analysis and self-exploration, where learning to trust one's experience and using it as one's ontological anchor is one of the most important lessons to learn. This process, I would argue, takes place simultaneously with 'coming out to God'. In order to be honest with oneself, one has to be honest with God. Collectively, they are the foundation of a positive personal identity that incorporates both sexuality

© Equinox Publishing Ltd 2006.

and spirituality. The following quote accurately expresses the interconnectedness of sexuality and spirituality:

> [S]exuality is much more of an integral and holistic part of the human experience than the activity of genital sex. It is the source of our capacity for relationship, for emotional and erotic connection, for intimacy, for passion and for transcendence. It is a holistic expression of our human experience as *body-selves*... Consequently, sexuality is 'neither incidental nor detrimental'...to spirituality, but an important and integrated dimension of it... In other words, it is through the *sensuality* of human *sexuality* (which includes but is not limited to genital sex) that individuals can experience a direct erotic connection with the God of one's understanding. In the lanaguge of Christian theology, embodiment is incarnation- the Holy is known and experienced in the flesh (Horn, *et al*., 2005: 81-82; emphasis original).

On this point, there is indisputable similarity between LGB Christians and LGB Muslims. They generally believe that their sexuality is created by God or *Allah*, deeply connected to the spiritual core of their being. Indeed, through the acknowledgement and expression of their sexuality, one strengthens one's spiritual core.[5] This 'ontogeneric argument' is well expressed by the following quotes:

> Homosexuality is one of God's most significant gifts to humanity. To be gay or lesbian is to have received a special blessing from God. All humans receive their own special graces from their creator, but God has chosen some to be gay and lesbian as a way of revealing something about God-self that heterosexuals do not (Empereur, 1998: 1).

> Being gay and lesbian is part of God's plan and a unique gift to humanity. Rather than viewing it as something to be changed or hated, properly understood with the confines of the spiritual, this orientation should be welcomed, grasped, and nurtured with the full understanding, emotional and intellectual, that is good and does participate in the Divine Plan of creation (Lazar, 1995: 5)

The above quotes illustrate 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 (Moon, 2004). 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. Therefore, 'being a wholesome human being' and 'being honest with oneself, others, and God' are sentiments that powerfully underpin a positive LGB Christian and Muslim identity. They are also the cornerstone of the truth claim which contests and competes with the institutional truth claim that fails to accept this significant connection.

5. It must be acknowledged that LGB Christians are more likely to hold this view compared to their Muslim counterparts, for a variety of reasons. One of them is the differential amount of theological capital that helps construct a positive identity, which I shall discuss later.

© Equinox Publishing Ltd 2006.

When religious institution oppresses their sexuality, it oppresses their humanity too (for more details see, e.g., Yip, 1997d; 2004a). This is the basis of the politics of spirituality/sexuality, which I shall explore in the next section.

The politics of spirituality/sexuality

The 'ontogeneric argument' offers more than an ontological anchor—a concrete sense of who they are. It is also a political strategy to resist and contest the institutional religious discourse that frames the homosexual orientation as socially constructed and mutable; and propagates the separation of homosexual orientation and 'practice' as desirable, and indeed compulsory in certain contexts (e.g., in the case of clergy, see Church of England, 2005; McMahon, 2005). To compete with this institutional truth claim on human sexuality, LGB spirituality/sexuality serves as a political tool that transgresses and disrupts heteronormative power structures that give rise to institutional homophobia. Sweasey (1997) expresses this well:

> Queer spirituality distrusts external claims to authority, if they clash with the inner truth of our experience. Having come to this understanding of where real power lies, we are more likely, not less, to challenge whatever tries to deny our hard-won sense of self (Sweasey, 1997: 199).

The politics of spirituality/sexuality, therefore, is characterized by religious individualism, a religiosity that prioritizes the authority of the self over that of the institution. This is a point that other scholars and I have emphasized in various places (e.g.. Wilcox, 2003; Yip, 2002). Further, it is also a politics of difference, underpinned by an emancipatory logic that leads to the politicization of hitherto taken-for-granted institutional values and practices. This politics of difference demands recognition of their sexuality as well as spirituality, whose connectedness offers them a unique vantage point of life.

Another interesting dimension of this politics is that its agenda often extends beyond securing acceptance for LGB believers only. It is a justice-seeking politics that aims to transform the religious community to be inclusive of all socially marginalized people. This entails challenging the hierarchical and patriarchal power structure within religious institutions that extends beyond the immediate concerns of LGB believers. Jesus Christ is often constructed as the inspirational champion of this endeavour. My examination of LGB Christians' perception of Christ demonstrates that, while not disregarding his divinity, they are more inclined to view Christ as a human being who came from a marginal space but utilized that marginality creatively to transgress established social order. In other words, when it comes to relating to institutional powers, Christ himself was transgressive, disruptive, and destabilizing (for more details, see Yip, 2003a; Simpson, 2005). Firmly fixing their gaze

© Equinox Publishing Ltd 2006.

on Christ, the spirituality of LGB Christians becomes 'a spirituality of justice' (Empereur, 1998: 10).

Notwithstanding the personal and social costs of occupying the marginal space, marginality offers the opportunity to 'think outside the box', and to cast a critical eye on taken-for-granted conventions and assumptions. This is the creative, productive, transgressive, and transformative power of marginality (Johnson, 2000). Through such politics, LGB Christians construct, to use Castells' (2004) formulation of identity building, a 'resistance' as well as a 'project' identity:

> *Resistance identity* [is] generated by those actors who are in positions/conditions devalued and/or stigmatised by the logic of domination, thus building trenches of resistance and survival on the basis of principles different from, or opposed to, those permeating the institution of society... *Project identity* [is] when social actors, on the basis of whatever cultural material are available to them, build a new identity that redefines their position in society and, by so doing, seek the transformation of overall social structure (Castells 2004: 8; emphasis original).

In sum, the politics of spirituality/sexuality is more than just resisting and contesting institutional stigmatization of homosexuality, it is also a project that challenges 'compulsory heterosexuality' (Rich, 1980: 632) that underpins all forms of sexual oppression, which leads to the invisibility and non-representation of various kinds of sexual dissidents. This project also builds a LGB Christian community—physical and virtual. Similar to other forms of identity politics, it is personally, socially, and politically expressive and transformative (Kenny, 2004). The following section discusses some strategies of engagement that this politics entails.

Strategies of engagement

Boisvert (2000: 14) argues that LGB spirituality contains three important elements: critical religious discourse, political analysis and engagement, and affirmation of the erotic. In reality, of course, this remains a potential that not necessarily materializes for everyone. Indeed, empirical research has shown that LGB Christians respond differently to the censure of homosexuality, due to a host of psychological and social factors, such as differential access to theological, cultural, and social capital that informs the construction of a positive personal identity and political activism (e.g., Wilcox, 2005; Yip, 2005). In this section, however, I want to focus on strategies of those who are engaged in the politics of spirituality/sexuality.

A good point of departure is to distinguish between different forms of association with institutional religion. One of the most interesting of these is characterized by a succinct phrase from a gay male participant, 'I am leaving the Church to keep my faith'. This quote denotes a kind of social distancing from religious institutions, while maintaining one's religious faith/spirituality. Here, LGB Christians draw

© Equinox Publishing Ltd 2006.

a clear line of demarcation between human religious institutions and authority structures that are homophobic; and the essence of religion such as the belief that God and Christ are loving and accepting (for more details see Yip, 2000; 2003a). Thus, the institutional practice of religion may be inhospitable to the LGB identity, but the spiritual core of religion—the most important of which is one's personal relationship with God—is not. This demarcation plays a significant role in sustaining LGB believers. It generates a tenacious spirituality that withstands the onslaught of homophobia on the social level, with a heightened reliance on the personal and private dimension of religion (Wilcox, 2003).

There are also LGB believers who choose to remain in a religious institution in order to effect positive change from within. The purpose of this engagement strategy is the claiming and the transformation of space—physical, psychological, and theological. This endeavour, since the 1970s, has been anchored by the 'queering' of religious texts, which I have discussed in great detail elsewhere. In a nutshell, this strategy deploys alternative interpretations of religious texts that seemingly censure homosexuality, by highlighting the inaccuracy and sociocultural specificity of traditional interpretations. This counter discourse provides much-needed theological capital to de-stigmatize LGB sexuality. In addition, it also undermines the credibility and moral authority of religious authority structures. Further, this strategy—supported by an increasing amount of LGB-affirming theology (e.g., Stuart, 2003; Althaus-Reid and Isherwood, 2005)—also plays a significant role in generating resources for spiritual nourishment and development (for more details, see Yip, 2005).

In recent years, this religious counter discourse increasingly merges with the secular discourse of human rights that emphasizes diversity, pluralism, and inclusivity. Moon (2004) has demonstrated that language plays a significant role in the contestation of homosexuality. Framing their rights broadly as human rights, LGB Christians broaden and strengthen their power base by aligning the language of these discourses. On an organizational level, recent collaborations between the *Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement*[6] and *Stonewall*[7] are evidence of this (for more details see Yip, 2006). One significant outcome of this is that the secular discourse of sexual/intimate citizenship is making inroads into the religious sphere, benefiting the politics of spirituality/sexuality.

6. Established in 1976 as *Gay Christian Movement* and re-named *Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement* in 1987, this is the largest British LGB Christian organization, with a membership of over 3000 (for more details, see www.lgcm.org.uk).

7. Established in 1989, this secular organization is widely recognized as the most effective British lobbying, campaigning, and research organization for LGB equality and rights (for more details, see www.stonewall.org.uk).

© Equinox Publishing Ltd 2006.

Sociological and social policy literature on sexual/intimate citizenship has proliferated in the past decade (e.g., Bell and Binnie, 2000; Plummer, 2003). In a nutshell, this body of literature challenges the heterosexualized conception of 'citizenship', as Richardson (1998) argues:

> My starting point is the argument that claims to citizenship status, at least in the West, are closely associated with the institutionalisation of heterosexual as well as male privilege (Richardson, 1998: 88).

Therefore, citizenship is more than a political membership to a nation state. It also entails one's right to assume an identity and live it without fear or experience of stigmatization, discrimination, misrepresentation, and criminalization, particularly in the intimate or personal areas of life such as sexuality and personal relationships. Intimate citizenship, therefore, concerns:

> [t]he decisions people have to make over *the control (or not) over* one's body, feelings, relationships; *access (or not) to* representations, relationships, public spaces, etc.; *socially grounded choices (or not) about* identities, gender experiences, erotic experiences. It does not imply one model, one pattern or one way (Plummer, 1995: 151; emphasis original).

The increasing incorporation of 'sexual orientation' in anti-discrimination legislations and charters of human rights is clear evidence of the advancement of such debate. Underpinning sexual/intimate citizenship is the notion of 'space', that one could exercise one's citizen rights with dignity and freedom in all social spaces regardless of one's sexual orientation (Bell and Binnie, 2000: 7-8).

Sexual citizenship as a concept and political strategy has a particularly important bearing on LGB believers. It empowers their claim that their sexuality should not affect negatively their access to, and participation in, the religious sphere, and indeed all other social spheres. Notwithstanding the resistance from conservative quarters of religious institution and community, I am indeed optimistic about the future in this respect.

Broadening LGB (Christian) identity politics

Using identity as the basis of politics is useful in many ways. It offers a focus to marginalized social actors to mobilize their energy and resources in the construction of physical and psychological space. Nevertheless, as Plummer (2003: 82-83) has argued, it also essentializes LGB people, by reducing them to a common sexual label that exaggerates homogeneity and ignores internal diversity. Further, it magnifies the 'us' and 'them' sentiment that casts opponents into polarized positions, which often become mutually exclusionary; a scenario that Castells (2004: 9) calls 'the exclusion of the excluders by the excluded'. This significantly precludes the possibility of

© Equinox Publishing Ltd 2006.

dialogue and reciprocal communicability. I would also argue that this dichotomous construction of stance—'You are either with us or against us!'—silences the voices of those who move in between such positions.

Not long after the death of Pope John Paul II, I was engaged in a discussion about his legacy with a politically active and non-religious gay man. I mentioned that though his uncompromising stance on homosexuality was unpalatable, John Paul II earned my respect in other areas, for instance, his contribution to the European political landscape, his strenuous efforts to meet Catholics worldwide (particularly in impoverished nations), and his endeavour to forge interfaith dialogue. Noticeably shocked, my acquaintance snapped, 'How could you possibly see him in that way? He's the most homophobic Christian in the world!' I retorted, 'Well, perhaps I am not as gay as you are!'

My acquaintance's response underlines the anti-religious sentiment so pervasive among the secular LGB community, a point I have already mentioned. More significantly, it also illustrates the point that, for LGB people, there should be only *one* lens through which John Paul II's life is evaluated. This lens is informed by their sexuality as 'master status'. I find this kind of militant attitude disturbing because it often underlines LGB politics, making its framework rather limiting and exclusionary. Most of all, this perspective does not reflect the diverse lived experiences of LGB believers I have studied; and the interplay between sexual identity with other identities: gender, religious, class, and ethnic, for instance. The assumption that the prominence of sexual identity cuts across all other identities is inaccurate. To some, sexual identity indeed assumes a 'master status', and this informs the ways they organize their personal life and social relationships. For others, their sexual identity operates alongside other identities—professional, gender, religious, ethnic, class—and each is foreground in different contexts. In other words, none assumes a 'master status', and their manifestation is contextual.

Among the LGB Christians I have studied, there is undeniable commonality of experience; having to manage institutional censure of homosexuality being the most salient. Nevertheless, the impact of this censure on them varies. So do their management strategies, theological standpoints, relationship values and so on. All these significantly inform the meaning of being LGB, and the place and role of their sexual identity in the broader scheme of everyday life.

Brekhus' (2003) ethnographic study of gay suburbanites offers helpful insights into this. He constructs three ideal types of gay suburbanites: 'gay lifestylers' (whose sexual identity assumes a 'master status' in all social contexts); 'gay commuters' (whose sexual identity is foreground only in specific contexts); and 'gay integrators' (whose sexual identity integrates with other identities so that none takes prominence). Gay lifestylers, with their high-volume, high-intensity, and high-visibility

© Equinox Publishing Ltd 2006.

gayness, are the 'cultural vanguard of identity politics' (Brekhus, 2003: 46). Indeed, their intensity, commitment and one-dimensional focus make them torch bearers of LGB identity politics. Nevertheless, they do not represent the entire community.

On this basis, if LGB identity politics—religious or secular—wants to be truly inclusive and effective, it needs to broaden the current conceptual and political framework. Being an oppressed minority does not immune this community to oppressive and exclusionary practices within itself (e.g., on the ground of gender, ethnicity, body shape, and age). Sinfield (1998) and Simpson (1999), for instance, have critiqued the one-dimensional nature of the metropolitan gay identity and culture that privileges 'white', middle-class, educated, and urban-based gay men.

The ideological singularity and cultural limitation of LGB identity politics is particularly evident from a cross-cultural perspective. To illustrate this, I want to draw upon my research on British LGB Muslims (who are also members of various ethnic minorities, particularly South Asian), to offer insights into contemporary discourse of LGB (Christian) identity politics and identity itself. One of the remarks most commonly made to me by LGB activists and academics—secular or Christian—is 'Muslims are where Christians were 50 years ago as far as the issue of homosexuality is concerned. They will get there.' In spite of the arbitrary nature of the expressed time span, the remark is accurate about the embryonic stage of the development of theological, social, and cultural capital for LGB Muslims. Compared to their Christian counterparts, LGB Muslims indeed have conspicuously limited LGB-affirming Islamic theology (e.g., Jamal, 2001; Malik, 2003; Manji, 2004) and support network (e.g., Yip, 2003b; Nahas, 2004; Siraf, 2006).[8]

Nevertheless, I am concerned about the implicit expectation that LGB Muslim identity, politics, and community will develop following the same trajectory of their Christian counterparts. There seems to be an expectation of homogeneity and assimilation. I find this limiting and insensitive to cultural diversity within the LGB community. The assumption that there is *one* 'developmental model' for all LGB identity and politics—led by the precedent set by 'white' and Christian LGB—is unsound, since identity is socially and culturally grounded.

Undeniably, there is similarity between LGB Christians and Muslims in managing spirituality and sexuality *vis-à-vis* social and religious censure. Nevertheless, there are also significant differences, apart from the differential levels of theological and social capital discussed above. For instance, it is interesting to note that LGB Muslims

8. Within the North American context, the *Al-Fatiha Foundation*, established as recently as 1998, is the largest support organization in this respect (http://www.al-fatiha.org). In the UK, the two organizations with the highest profile are *Imaan* (previously *Al-Fatiha UK*, established in 1999; http://www.imaan.org.uk); and the *Safra Project*, established in 2001 (http://www.safraproject.org); see also Safra Project, 2002.

© Equinox Publishing Ltd 2006.

are more likely than their Christian counterparts to acknowledge that religion is more than a belief system. Islam, to them, is a pervasive meaning system that informs all aspects of their lives. Significantly, 'Muslim' is also more than a religious label. It is also a crucial political marker of difference in a religiously and ethnically different society. In this respect, since they are more likely to be discriminated in the society at large because of their religious faith and ethnicity rather than their sexuality (which could be hidden), Islamophobia and racism are often more salient issues than homophobia in their daily life. Further, as Islam is a minority religion in the West, embraced primarily by 'non-whites', this heightens not only expectation of religious adherence and conformity as a form of cultural defence, but also the interplay between religious and ethnic identification (e.g., Roald, 2001). Significantly, fuelled by the increasing politicization of Islam in the West, coupled with increasing Islamophobia (e.g., Fetzer and Soper, 2003), religion and ethnicity are extremely salient to LGB Muslims as political issues.

In addition, unlike their Christian counterparts, LGB Muslims have to negotiate a host of significant religious and sociocultural complications such as the pressure to get married, close-knit familial and kinship network and emphasis on family honour (*izzat*) (for more details see Yip, 2004b); and the pervasive perception that homosexuality is a 'Western disease' (for more details see Yip, 2004a).

Thus, for LGB Muslims, the interplay between religion, ethnicity, sexuality, and culture in an increasingly politicized context is indeed salient. I would contend that, religion and ethnicity are often as prominent, if not more prominent than, sexuality in their everyday life. In other words, sexuality does not generally take on a 'master status' as far as their personal identities are concerned.

This is indeed a significant issue. Academic and non-academic discourse of contemporary identity—including LGB identity—has been underpinned by the often taken-for-granted individualization thesis, which prioritizes agency (i.e., the freeing of the self with radicalized and habitual reflexivity) in the fashioning of life, enabled by the decline of structures (e.g., traditions) in a de-traditionalizing society. Identity, according to this thesis, has become liquid and fluid, an outcome of the individual's reflexive strategic life planning that seemingly takes place over and above social structures. Identity therefore becomes a do-it-yourself biographical narrative. Underpinning this thesis is the postmodernist/poststructuralist perspective (e.g., Bauman, 2001; 2004; 2005) and reflexive modernist perspective (e.g., Giddens, 1991; 1999; Beck, 1992) that dominate sociological discourse of identity. Nevertheless, this thesis has recently been subjected to critique for, among others, its ideological underpinnings and cultural specificity (e.g., Heelas, Lash and Morris, 1996; Walliss, 2002; Adams, 2003; Sweetman, 2003; Smart and Shipman, 2004; Brannen and Nilsen, 2005). In this respect, I find helpful Woodward's (2002) formulation of identity as

© Equinox Publishing Ltd 2006.

'route' and 'root'. Woodward argues that identity is more than a trajectory carved out by a reflexive individual, despite decreasing structural constraints along the way (as the individualization thesis argues). It is also about where the individual comes from and the cultural baggage (e.g., collective memory) that she/he takes with her/him on the journey—in other words, her/his material roots. Indeed, the social dimension of identity is just as important as the personal, as Hetherington (1998) remarks:

> Identity is more than about self-reflection, understanding and the development of a life project based on the idea of a calling. It is fundamentally about issues of belonging, expression, performance, identification and communication with others (Hetherington, 1998: 62-63).

My research on LGB Muslims also shows the cultural specificity and limitation of the individualization thesis. This is particularly evident in the areas of negotiating religious and sociocultural roles and obligations. Here, expressive individualism is often balanced with a strong sense of social obligation and responsibility. The fact that they are not as 'free' as their Christian or 'white' counterparts does not necessarily mean their LGB identity is less developed or authentic. Given the complexity of familial and kin relations, LGB Muslims often consider if coming out in this context has to be a necessary stage in identity development. To many of them, not coming out need not be a sign of internalized homophobia. Rather, it could be a well-reasoned decision based on emotional and cultural factors (e.g., respect for parents, maintaining family honour; see Yip, 2004a; 2004b). Thus, coming out as a 'natural' stage of LGB identity development in current political and academic discourses demonstrates the ideological underpinning of expressive individualism that constructs being-closeted-to-being-out as a one-dimensional trajectory applicable to all, with 'outness' as a reflection of a positive identity.

Given the religious and cultural sensitivities and sensibilities surrounding the LGB Muslim identity, LGB (Christian) politics that is unquestioningly premised upon the experiences of the 'white' and Christian population faces new challenges. Already we have witnessed tension between well-meaning but culturally-insensitive 'white' LGB activists and their Muslim counterparts. The former's critique of homophobic practices within the Muslim communities was at times construed by the latter as attacks on Islam and the Muslim community itself. I would caution that it is unwise to steamroll LGB politics across ethnic and cultural lines in the name of 'universal' human rights. Each human indeed has rights. But how such rights are conceived, established, and protected is much more than a rhetorical or personal issue. It is inextricably related to culture. In other words, the language of rights is discursively produced (Calhoun, 1994).

© Equinox Publishing Ltd 2006.

I am not arguing that LGB Christians and LGB Muslims occupy two polarized cultural spheres with impassable boundary, and that there are no inter-group commonalities and intra-group differences. Indeed, boundary is often porous; but that does not mean that there is no boundary at all, or there is no specificity within the boundary, however broad it is. If we accept that LGB identity—like other identities—is grounded in culture, then we need to take seriously cultural diversity in the shaping of one's construction and expression of LGB identity. Thus, as Sinfield (1998: 199) argues, 'the task is not to imagine an exclusive group of like-minded people, but to build on the diverse strengths of our constituency, to encourage it, and to politicize it'.

Concluding remarks

In this article, I have drawn upon my research on British LGB Christians and Muslims in the past decade, and theoretical literature on 'identity', 'identity politics', and 'sexual citizenship' to highlight some epistemological/methodological and conceptual/theoretical themes. I began by discussing some advantages and disadvantages of merging the personal and the professional in my research career. I then argued that in order to understand why some LGB people stay in seemingly homophobic institutional religions, contrary to the expectation of the LGB community itself, we need to appreciate first of all that spirituality and sexuality are in essence flip sides of the same coin. This deep connection offers not only ontological security; it also serves as the basis of the politics of spirituality/sexuality that strives to establish the authenticity of difference. This politics is personally transformative. But it also has the higher goal of socially transforming hierarchical and patriarchal power structures and exclusionary practices within institutional religion. One of the primary strategies in this politics is the queering of religious texts.

The merger of the counter religious discourse that this politics underpins, with the secular discourse of human rights and sexual citizenship, offers LGB believers cause for optimism. Nonetheless, I also contest the ideological and cultural specificity of contemporary LGB identity politics in the West—religious and secular. Highlighting the significant political, religious, social-cultural, and ethnic issues with which LGB Muslims need to engage, I argue that there is a strong basis for the broadening of current academic and non-academic discourse of identity in general, and LGB identity in particular.

© Equinox Publishing Ltd 2006.

References

Adams, M., 2003, 'The Reflexive Self and Culture: A Critique'. *British Journal of Sociology* 54(2): 221-38.

Althaus-Reid, M., and L. Isherwood, 2005, *The Sexual Theologian: A Primer in Radical and Sex Queer Theology*. London: Continuum.

Bates, S., 2005, *A Church at War: Anglicans and Homosexuality*. London: I.B. Tauris.

Bauman, Z., 2001, *The Individualised Society*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

—2004, *Identity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

—2005, *Liquid Life*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Beck, U., 1992, *Risk Society*. London: Sage.

Bell, D., and J. Binnie, 2000, *The Sexual Citizen: Queer Politics and Beyond*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Boisvert, D., 2000, *Out on Holy Ground: Meditations on Gay Men's Spirituality*. Cleveland: Pilgrim Press.

Brannen, J., and A. Nilsen, 2005, 'Individualisation, Choice and Structure: A Discussion of Current Trends in Sociological Analysis'. *Sociological Review* 53(3): 412-28.

Brekhus, W., 2003, *Peacocks, Chameleons, Centaurs: Gay Suburbia and the Grammar of Social Identity*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Calhoun, C., 1994, *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Castells, M., 2004, *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*. II. *The Power of Identities*. 2nd edn; Oxford: Blackwell.

Chua, H.K., 2005, *Gay Malaysia in Retrospect*. Paper presented at the 1st Asian Queer Studies International Conference, Bangkok 7–9 July.

Church of England, 2005, *Civil Partnerships: A Pastoral Statement from the House of Bishops of the Church of England*. London: Church House Publishing.

Crockett, A., and D. Voas, 2003, 'A Divergence of Views: Attitude Change and the Religious Crisis over Homosexuality'. *Sociological Research Online* 8(4). http://www.socresonline.org.uk/8/4/crockett.html (accessed 20 June, 2005)

Empereur, J.L., 1998, *Spiritual Dimension and the Gay Person*. London: Geoffrey Chapman.

Fetzer, J., and J.C. Soper, 2003, 'The Roots of Public Attitudes toward State Accommodation of European Muslims' Religious Practices before and after September 11'. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 42(2): 247-58.

Giddens, A., 1991, *Modernity and Self-identity.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

—1999, *Runaway World: How Globalisation Is Shaping our Lives*. London: Profile Books.

Heaphy, B., C. Donovan and J. Weeks, 2004, 'A Different Affair? Openness and Non-monogamy in Same-sex Relationships'. In J. Duncombe, K. Harrison, G. Allen and D. Marsden (eds.), *The State of Affairs: Explorations in Infidelity and Commitment*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, pp. 143-61.

Heelas, P., S. Lash and P. Morris, 1996, *Detraditionalisation: Critical Reflections on Authority and Identity*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Hetherington, K., 1998, *Expressions of Identity: Space, Performance, Politics*. London: Sage.

Horn, M. J., R.L. Piedmont, G.M. Fialkowski, R.J. Wicks and M.E. Hunt, 2005, 'Sexuality and Spirituality: The Embodied Spirituality Scale'. *Theology and Sexuality* 12(1): 81-102.

Jamal, A., 2001, 'The Story of Lot and the *Qur'an*'s Perception of the Morality of Same-sex Sexuality'. *Journal of Homosexuality* 41(1): 1-88.

Johnson, T., 2000, *Gay Spirituality: The Role of Gay Identity in the Transformation of Human Consciousness.* Los Angeles: Alyson Books.

Kenny, M., 2004, *The Politics of Identity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

© Equinox Publishing Ltd 2006.

Krieger, S., 1991, *Social Science and the Self*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
Lazar, J., 1995, *Outpouring of the Spirit*. New York: Carlton Press.
Letherby, G., and S. Jackson, 2003, *Feminist Research in Theory and Practice*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
Long, R., 2004, *Men, Homosexuality and the Gods*. New York: Haworth Press.
McMahon, B., 2005, 'Vatican to Toughen Rules on Homosexuals with Ban on Gay Men Joining Priesthood'. *The Guardian*, 23 September.
Malik, F., 2003, *Queer Sexuality and Identity in the Qur'an and Hadith*. http://www.well.com/user/aquarius/Qurannotes.htm (accessed 23 June, 2005).
Manji, I., 2004, *The Trouble with Islam: A Wake-Up Call for Honesty and Change*. London: Mainstream Publishing.
Mills, C.W., 1959, *The Sociological Imagination*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Moon, D., 2004, *God, Sex and Politics: Homosexuality and Everyday Theologies*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
Nahas, O., 2004, 'Yoesuf: An Islamic Idea with Dutch Quality'. *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Social Services* 16(1): 53-64.
O'Brien, J., 2004, 'Wrestling the Angel of Contradiction: Queer Christian Identities'. *Culture and Religion* 5(2): 179-202.
Ramazanoglu, C., and J. Holland, 2002, *Feminist Methodology: Challenges and Choices*. London: Sage.
Reinhartz, S., 1985, *On Becoming a Social Scientist*. Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
Plummer, K., 1995, *Telling Sexual Stories*. London: Routledge.
—2003, *Intimate Citizenship: Private Decisions and Public Dialogues*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
Rich, A., 1980, 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence'. *Signs* 5(4): 631-60.
Richardson, D., 1998, 'Sexuality and Citizenship'. *Sociology* 32(1): 83-100.
Roald, A., 2001, *Women in Islam*. London: Routledge.
Runzo, J., and N. Martin, 2000, *Love, Sex and Gender in World Religions*. Oxford: Oneworld.
Safra Project, 2002, *Identifying the Difficulties Experienced by Muslim Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Women in Accessing Social and Legal Services*. London: Safra Project.
Simpson, M., 1999, *Anti-Gay*. London: Continuum.
Simpson, R.H., 2005, 'How to Be Fashionably Queer: Reminding the Church of the Importance of Sexual Stories'. *Theology and Sexuality* 11(2): 97-108
Sinfield, A., 1998, *Gay and After*. London: Serpent's Tail.
Siraf, A., 2006, 'On Being Homosexual and Muslim: Conflicts and Challenges'. In L. Ouzgane (ed.) *Islamic Masculinities*, London: Zed Books.
Smart, C., and B. Shipman, 2004, 'Visions in Monochrome: Families, Marriage and the Individualisation Thesis'. *British Journal of Sociology* 55(4): 491-509.
Smith, R., 2005, 'Wrong, Said Fred'. *Gay Times* September: 31.
Stuart, E., 2003, *Gay and Lesbian Theologies*. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate.
Sweasey, P., 1997, *From Queer to Eternity: Spirituality in the Lives of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual People*. London: Cassell.
Sweetman, P., 2003, 'Twenty-first Century Dis-ease? Habitual Reflexivity or the Reflexive Habitus'. *Sociological Review* 51(4): 528-49.
Swidler, A., 1993, *Homosexuality and World Religions*. Valley Forge, PA: Trinity.
Teh, Y.K., 2005, *The Mak Nyahs: Male to Female Transsexuals in Malaysia*. Singapore: Eastern Universities Press.

© Equinox Publishing Ltd 2006.

Thumma, S., and E. Gray, 2005, *Gay Religion*. Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press.
Walliss, J., 2002, *The Brahma Kumaris as a Reflexive Tradition: Responding to Late Modernity*. Oxon: Ashgate.
Wilcox, M., 2003, *Coming Out in Christianity: Religion, Identity, and Community*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
— 2005, 'A Religion of One's Own: Gender and LGBT Religiosity'. In S. Thumma and E. Gray (eds.), *Gay Religion*, Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press: 203-20.
Woodward, K., 2002, *Questioning Identity*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
Yip, A.K.T., 1997a, *Gay Male Christian Couples: Life Stories*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
—1997b, 'Dare to Differ: Lesbian and Gay Catholics' Assessment of Official Catholic Positions on Sexuality'. *Sociology of Religion* 58: 165-80.
—1997c, 'Gay Male Christian Couples and Sexual Exclusivity'. *Sociology* 31(2): 289-306.
—1997d, 'Attacking the Attacker: Gay Christians Talk Back'. *British Journal of Sociology* 48(1): 113-27.
—1998a, 'Education as CSCS' Primary Function: A Membership Survey Report'. *Centre for the Study of Christianity and Sexuality News* 16: 7-11.
—1998b, 'Gay Christians and their Perceptions of the Christian Community in Relation to their Sexuality'. *Theology and Sexuality* 8: 240-51.
—2000, 'Leaving the Church to Keep my Faith: The Lived Experiences of Non-heterosexual Christians'. In L.J. Francis and Y.J. Katz (eds.) *Joining and Leaving Religion*, Leominster: Gracewing: 129-45.
—2002, 'The Persistence of Faith among Nonheterosexual Christians: Evidence for the Neo-secularisation Thesis of Religious Transformation'. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 41(2): 199-212.
—2003a, 'Spirituality and Sexuality: An Exploration of the Religious Beliefs of Non-heterosexual Christians in Great Britain'. *Theology and Sexuality* 9(2): 137-54.
—2003b, *A Minority within a Minority: British Non-heterosexual Muslims*. London: Economic and Social Research Council. http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk (accessed 24 June 2005).
—2004a, 'Embracing Allah and Sexuality?: South Asian Non-heterosexual Muslims in Britain'. In P. Kumar and K. Jacobsen (eds.), *South Asians in the Diaspora*. Leiden: E.J. Brill: 294-310.
—2004b, 'Negotiating Space with Family and Kin in Identity Construction: The Narratives of British Non-heterosexual Muslims'. *Sociological Review* 52(3): 336-49.
—2005, 'Queering Religious Texts: An Exploration of British Non-heterosexual Christians' and Muslims' Strategy of Constructing Sexuality-affirming Hermeneutics'. *Sociology* 39(1): 47-65.
—2006, 'Sexual Orientation Discrimination in Religious Communities'. In J. Frank and L. Badgett (eds.), *Sexual Orientation Discrimination*. Forthcoming; London: Routledge.

© Equinox Publishing Ltd 2006.