

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/279764910>

Toft, A. 2009. 'Bisexual Christians: The Life-Stories of a Marginalised Community'. In: Hunt, S. (ed). Contemporary Christianity and LGBT Sexualities. Aldershot: Ashgate.

Chapter · January 2009

CITATIONS

0

READS

14

1 author:



Alex Toft

34 PUBLICATIONS 74 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:



My Liver App: A research project to develop a mobile application to support young people with liver conditions through the period of transition from paediatric to adult health services- Funded by CLDF (Children's Liver Disease Foundation) [View project](#)



Young, Disabled and LGBT+ [View project](#)

Chapter 4

Bisexual Christians: The Life-Stories of a Marginalised Community¹

Alex Toft

Bisexual Christians remain an under-researched population. The lack of research interest may stem from bisexual Christians dual minority status. Firstly within a secular 'community' which may be perceived as negative towards religious faith. And, secondly, as a minority interest in LGBT religious groups which focus primarily on 'gay' issues. Recent debate regarding sexuality and the Anglican Church concerning the elevation of gay priests to Bishops (Jeffery John in 2003 was nominated for the post of Bishop of Reading, later withdrawing) has been contextualised as focusing upon the issue of homosexuality rather than the broader implications regarding human sexuality itself. The concept of bisexuality and the life-experiences of bisexual people highlights societies continued struggle to see sexuality as anything but monosexual (exclusive attraction to members of one sex only). The negotiations and choices open to bisexual Christians differ substantially from gay and lesbian Christians, hence the need for a nuanced understanding of what it means to identify as both bisexual and Christian, as will become apparent throughout this chapter.

After presenting an overview of the context in which the research project resides, the chapter moves forward to look at how bisexual Christians understand both their sexuality and spirituality and the complex negotiations which take place in living with sexualised religiosity. The chapter concludes with an exploration of how bisexual Christians respond to the pressures of scriptural traditions and Official Church guidelines within Christianity.

The study is located within three broad sociological fields: (1) The study of human sexuality (namely bisexuality) and the self-definitions applied by respondents in order to understand their own sexuality; (2) the exploration of the lives of bisexual Christians specifically focusing on what aspects of bisexuality are problematic for the Christian Church and the negotiations which occur in order to gain access (if required) to the Church. Finally; (3) the investigation of Christianity from the perspective of 'non-heterosexuals', how religious identity is constructed

¹ The data from which this chapter is drawn is part of an ESRC funded PhD research project. I would like to thank the ESRC for their support. I would also like to thank the individual respondents without whom this research could not have taken place, and my supervisors Dr Andrew Yip, Dr Esther Bott and Dr Victoria Gosling for their support.

by individuals who have historically been denied access to institutionalised Christianity. These three areas all impact on, and inform the study therefore it is necessary to briefly consider the literature in these areas.

Locating bisexual Christians

Although once ignored in academic discourse (Rust 2000), both research and theoretical dialogue regarding the lives of bisexual individuals is steadily increasing. Fox suggests that bisexual academia is now at its highest peak throughout the history of social theory (originally stated in Fox 1996 and later confirmed in Fox 2007). Yet bisexuality is elusive and definitions are fleeting, resulting often in highly personalised understandings. Contemporary theorists present a re-alignment of definition away from the work of Kinsey (1948) and his associates towards a more practical empowering standpoint for those actively defining themselves as bisexual. The emphasis has moved from viewing bisexuality in terms of combinations of masculinity and femininity or a combination of both heterosexual and homosexual desire which it has been suggested Kinsey effectively does (Rust 2004), towards bisexuality being a positive sexual identity in its own terms.

The work of Storr (1996) highlights such a progression with the production of a four-phase history of research into bisexuality beginning with bisexuality as a gender schema as the initial phase. Here bisexuality is heavily influenced by the work of Wolfe (1989) which sees deviation from masculinity (in men) and femininity (in women) as bisexuality. Such definition has been discredited on grounds of the re-enforcement of essentialised gender stereotypes (see Weeks 1986), but should not be dismissed solely on these grounds. Following this phase bisexuality is often classified in terms of its relationship with heterosexuality and homosexuality, suggesting that it is not a distinct sexual orientation, rather a combination identity. Modern theorisation has sought to reject such standpoints, either through radical definition or more conservative suggestions. The goal of those unwilling to embrace radical possibilities has been to establish bisexuality as a valid sexual identity which has been tragically ignored by key sociologists. Eadie (1997) argues that Plummer's unwillingness to explore bisexual stories in *Telling Sexual Stories* (Plummer 1995) demonstrates society's unwillingness to engage with bisexuality. The focus of such theorisation has been upon understanding bisexuality as the potential or ability to be physically, emotionally and spiritually attracted to members of any sex. Rust (2004) argues that any stricter definition renders bisexuality exclusionist and inaccessible even to those who define themselves as bisexual.

More radical possibilities have been controversial, with Garber (2000) suggesting that bisexuality is more than just a sexual identity, that it can show everyone the full potential of human sexuality, bisexuality is the end-goal for all human sexuality. Rust (2004) has inferred that bisexuality could indeed be the missing piece of the sexuality puzzle, allowing people across genders and

sexualities the freedom to interact with each other. This is done through the rejection of gendered attraction and has been furthered recently through the work of Baumgardener (2008) who suggests because female sexuality is fluid other attributes (such as humour or intelligence) play a greater role in attraction than physicality or the persons sex.

Research exploring bisexual Christians in isolation from other sexual minorities is an emerging area, featuring the book *Blessed Bi Spirit* (Kolodny 2000) and a small but growing body of online publications from the *Whosoever Magazine*.² Focusing primarily upon personal experiences and autobiography, research has highlighted the problems in accessing religion based upon scripture but not with regards to the negotiation of sexual or religious identity in any detail. Although previous work has suggested bisexual Christians have struggled for inclusion through the use of affirming hermeneutics and re-interpretation of the Bible (Maneker 2001; Reasons 2001; Udis-Kessler 1997; 2008), it does not address how bisexual Christians have understood their sexuality and spirituality.

Such a conclusion would be an over-simplification of the literature available and it is unfair and problematic to suggest that, although including bisexuals into the LGBT milieu has not shown the distinct struggles due to the reluctance to isolate the experiences bisexual individuals, such research is a vital base for the current study. In fact, such research is of prime importance because it highlights the plight of communities who are viewed as 'others' (outside the heterosexual dynamic) by the Church. The work of Thumma (1991), Wilcox (2003) and Yip (1997b; 2000; 2005a) particularly resonate with the themes of the current study.

Thumma suggests that previous research on religious identity negotiation has overly exerted more radical solutions to identity dissonance such as leaving one's faith and/or finding another, ignoring the more subtle and complex negotiations that take place (Thumma 1991, 334). Using the symbolic interactionist perspective which stresses 'It is through the interaction of self and society that meaning systems are created and sustained' (Thumma 1991, 334), he suggests that individuals often construct 'core' identities which they use to organise and make sense of their other identities, therefore simply discarding religion is not an option. Thumma suggests that three main negotiations must take place: Firstly, convincing gay Evangelical Christians (in this instance) that it is permissible to alter your belief systems within the Christian framework. This is followed by a re-evaluation of Christian doctrine and an emphasis on teaching the 'true' meaning of the Bible. Then finally the stage integrating the new identity through interaction with other Evangelicals and general social interaction (Thumma 1991, 339-41).

The work of Yip is important in understanding how non-heterosexual Christians have viewed their sexuality and spirituality, and how they have attempted to gain access to institutionalised Christianity. Although space does not permit a review of all of Yip's vast body of research, the piece *Attacking the Attacker: Gay Christians Fight Back* (1997b) is particularly relevant to the study as it shows the techniques

2 <www.whosoever.com>.

used to justify the possession of the identity 'gay Christian' (in this instance). The documented strategies are:

1. 'Attacking the stigma' – as a scripture based religion Christianity places significance on the infallibility of the Holy Bible, therefore non-heterosexuals have to: (a) question traditional interpretations of the Bible; (b) focus upon other Christian values and teachings ahead of sexuality; and (c) challenge the context and compatibility of such passages.
2. 'Attacking the stigmatiser' – The focus here is the authority of the Church as messengers of the word of God, a general mistrust that the Church has got this issue wrong.
3. 'Positive Personal Approaches' – Questioning the Churches understanding of sexuality and denying the relevance to one's own life.
4. 'Ontogeneric argument' – Sexuality is created by God and therefore all sexualities are valid and as acceptable as each other (adapted from Yip 1997b, 117–23).

Wilcox has furthered these techniques by presenting a more flexible and fluid approach to Christianity. The notion of the 'Bible Buffet' seems pertinent here with the suggestion that non-heterosexual Christians take part in a spiritual 'pick 'n' mix' in order to take on board aspects of Christianity which fit with their sexual identity (Wilcox 2003). Here sexual identity is implied as the 'core' identity with spirituality moulded to fit. Numerous examples exist in relation to research into bisexual Christians as collected by Kolodny (2003) with contributors calling themselves: Zen Catholic Pagan, Wiccan Quaker, Budeo-Pagan, and Zen Buddhist Quaker.

Unlike previous research, the current research project links the diversity of bisexual experience with the negotiation of religious identity. Rather than a strong bias on religious negotiations the scope is twofold: an exploration of bisexuality and how it is negotiated and defined in order to fit with religious identity, this aspect highlights the unique situation in which bisexual Christians find themselves. And the techniques used to gain access to institutionalised Christianity; how do bisexual Christians understand and shape their religious identity?

The study

Drawing upon data collected from a national survey of 60 self-identified bisexual men and women, the research was designed to collect information regarding sexual and spiritual lives whilst also being exploratory in nature due to the infancy of the research area. Distinctly divided into the two separate yet entwined stages the research began with a questionnaire stage, collecting data through postal and electronic means, 60 of these were completed and returned. Stage 2 consisted of

very loosely semi-structured interviews, where respondents were given the full opportunity to tell their stories whilst I guided the 'conversation'.

Bisexual Christians are a minority within a minority in that the space that they occupy within the religious sphere is almost completely invisible; they can occupy both conventionally heterosexual Church communities and also religious communities which are seen as gay and lesbian, without being forcibly 'outed' as being bisexual. In the example of the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) the congregation is often non-heterosexual but any further investigation may lead to 'outing' bisexuals against their wishes. Therefore a representative sample of this 'hidden' population is unobtainable (e.g. Heaphy et al. 2004), emphasising the need for constructive sampling (examples being snowballing or respondents actively advertising or passing on my details to potential respondents) and an advertising campaign had to be developed. As no specific 'official' bisexual Christian groups exist, advertisement through non-heterosexual magazines, internet news-sites, mailing-lists, support groups/network, MCC (Young) Lesbian Gay Christian Movement ((Y)LGCM) and other 'open-armed' Churches took place. Some religious support groups were used but also several groups rejected my advert as 'un-Christian', particularly Evangelical organisations that saw the term 'bisexual Christian' as a contradiction.

In addition to such substantial advertising personal contact networks were used and snowballing was very effective through Stage 1 respondents. The questionnaires that were sent out were accompanied by an ethical statement which respondents had to read and sign, at this point they could opt to take part in stage 2. The ethical statement/consent forms were returned in separate envelopes for security reasons. Although the research sample for the questionnaire stage was recruited evenly across the differing groups the majority (27) were recruited through non-heterosexual groups/organisations where the members happened to be Christian, although the members were not necessarily exclusively Christian. This is followed by MCC Church members (10). With such a seemingly small population it was not possible to be overly selective with choosing which respondents to interview, all those who indicated an interest in taking part in Stage 2 were taken up on their offer.

The gender divide of the sample was evenly split with 29 men taking part and 31 women. The age-range was from 18 to 64 with the majority in the 18–30 category (32–53 per cent). Seven official denominations were represented: Anglican (14: 23 per cent), Methodist (6: 10.0 per cent), MCC (10: 16.7 per cent), Unitarian (1: 1.7 per cent), Evangelical (2: 3.3 per cent), Quaker (1: 1.7 per cent), Catholic (5: 8.3 per cent) and Russian Orthodox (1: 1.7 per cent), along with those respondents who were not affiliated with any denomination (20: 33.3 per cent). It is important to note that of those with no official denomination 19 (95 per cent) never attended Church or did so only on special occasions. The sample was located throughout the UK with the majority located in London (14: 23 per cent), this was followed by Yorkshire (6: 10 per cent), with the rest of the UK providing a few respondents in each locality. It could be stated that the overwhelming amount of the sample

would define themselves as white, privileged and middle-class. Forty-four per cent of the sample had degrees and 91 per cent were either students, retired or in full-time employment, none of the respondents were unemployed, and a massive majority (98 per cent) described their ethnicity as white British.

Of this 60 a further sub-sample of 10 were selected to take part in the interview. Due to the limited amount of respondents it was not possible to be selective and respondents were interviewed because of their willingness to be interviewed. Six men and four women of ages ranging from 19–63 took part. The respondents were varied in their Church attendance with some regularly attending; others were struggling to find a religious space in which to locate themselves and two in particular completely rejecting the need for participation. From this it is important to note that the sample can never be truly representative and generalisations are unrealistic, although the data and analysis presented here highlight the need for a specific bisexual understanding of Christianity.

Negotiating bisexuality

The aims of this section are two-fold: To explore how bisexual Christians define their sexuality – self-definitions of bisexuality, and to understand how respondents settled upon such definitions in order to identify as bisexual and Christian – adapting bisexuality.

Self-definitions of bisexuality

What bisexuality is remains unclear, and its definition varies from person to person. (George 1993, 103)

Bisexuality by its very nature and conceptualisation is full of uncertainty, flexibility and multifaceted meaning, and is both heralded and criticised for this. Hemmings, for example, states that bisexuality is too diverse to define (Hemmings 2002, 124). This has resulted in rather personalised/individualised constructs of bisexuality. The following table gives an indication of how respondents view their own sexuality.

Table 4.1 suggests that bisexual men and women are not unanimous in defining their sexuality and there cannot be a one size fits-all type definition, although for many respondents simply understanding bisexuality as a sexual and emotional attraction is often sufficient. This is a common definition that appears within the literature:

People who experience the desire of emotional, sensual and/or sexual relations with people of both sexes, though not necessarily at the same time. (Off Pink Collective 1988, 90)

Table 4.1 Number and percentage of respondents who answered 'true' to the following statements

Statement	Entire Sample (n = 60)	Male (29)	Female (31)
(A) I am more physically attracted to members of the same sex	18 (30%)	10 (16%)	8 (26%)
(B) I am more physically attracted to members of the opposite sex	11 (18%)	5 (17%)	6 (19%)
(C) I prefer to have sex with members of the opposite sex	10 (17%)	5 (17%)	5 (16%)
(D) I prefer to have sex with members of the same sex	15 (25%)	7 (24%)	8 (26%)
(E) I feel more emotionally attached to members of the opposite sex	8 (13%)	5 (17%)	3 (10%)
(F) I feel more emotionally attached to members of the same sex	13 (22%)	4 (14%)	9 (29%)
(G) None of the above apply to me	27 (45%)	14 (23%)	13 (22%)

From the research there are four main ways that the respondents preferred to see their sexuality: (1) In terms of a rejection of gendered attraction (2) as a combination of heterosexual and homosexual desire (3) as a way of dissolving binary thinking with regards to gender and sexuality or (4) a more practical approach which uses the term 'capacity' (or ability – derived from the work of Rust (2004)) to illuminate the issue.

Baumgardener (2008) understands the idea of rejecting gendered attraction as attraction/intimacy/love with an individual(s) without concern of specific physical or learned characteristics such as the sex of the individual. The sex of the individual is not as important in entering into relations (of any kind) as other factors such as intelligence and sense of humour. Bisexuality threatens to disrupt 'maleness' and 'femaleness' because it has been argued that this seemingly goes against the understanding of Christian sexuality in terms of official doctrine and scriptural evidence. Therefore a more fluid viewing of human sexuality would force a re-evaluation of Church policy. This was a common occurrence with my respondents in both the questionnaire and interview stages:

I try to live as genderless as possible (this is not to say that my partners are androgynous because they are not), in that I don't go out looking for a man or a woman, if it happens then it happens. (Penny, a 32 year old female Methodist from the London area)

Yeah there were certain things about either sex that I'd find attractive by looking at people, and they were specifically aimed at a certain sex. So this developed towards the end of my High school time, but I guess that's why I'm monogamous, I don't need to have both sexes because I'm just attracted to the person, how I relate and interact with them. (Jim, a 26 year old male from the Midlands, with no official denomination)

The second finding links to the third phase of Storr's plan as discussed in the literature review, as respondents struggled in defining their sexuality without using heterosexuality and homosexuality as reference points. Respondents considered themselves to be made up of varying degrees of homosexuality and heterosexuality; it was their way of dealing with an identity which finds itself either in-between or outside of what is socially recognisable. Some of these respondents used this to divide their lives into stages with times that they were gay and others when they were straight to result in a bisexual life.

These bisexual life-paths were in the minority, and those who spoke of themselves in relation to homosexuality and heterosexuality did so in order to distance themselves, arguing that bisexuality is in fact distinct and potentially more radical than this:

It's much more than that. Bisexuality is about breaking down the boundaries between sexualities and what it means to be a man and woman. It's not being a mix of those though. (Nicola, 20 year old female with no official denomination)

I struggle with this but, a person's sexuality should have no bearing, there should be no categories. (Phillip)

A fourth finding is directly informed by the work of Rust, who tentatively understands bisexuals as being 'able' to have romantic relationships with members of either sex. Rust argues that in reality most bisexuals view their sexuality as the 'capacity' to be attracted to members of both sexes (Rust 2004, 216). This therefore does not rely on experiences or personal sexual history which would possibly exclude some identifying as bisexual. Further to this 'sexual attraction to, or romantic feelings toward, another person does not necessarily imply that one would enjoy having sex with that person ...' (Rust 2004, 217). Therefore such a definition would have to encapsulate the fact that a sexual relationship could occur. Definitions often fail to recognise the radical logical end-point to the work of Rust, who it seems is suggesting that bisexuality itself is the end-point of human sexuality and it is the position which people should attain to reach, therefore truly fulfilling their potential as human sexual beings.

Although some people would say I am predominantly straight I have been involved with men in the past and continue to have thoughts about men (just as I do with women). (Alf, a 52 year old man from Manchester)

I don't believe that attraction should be limited to members of the opposite sex, doing so is denying ones fully potential. (Jo, 39 year old from Derbyshire)

Adapting bisexuality

Having presented the trends and commonalities from the research in regards to how respondents understood their sexuality, this chapter progresses to look at how these definitions are used in order for a positive identity of 'bisexual Christian' to be created. Respondents suggested three clear ways in which their sexualities helped them to access institutionalised religion and allow them to integrate their identities. I will deal with them individually for the sake of clarity:

1. By seeing bisexuality as a combination of heterosexuality and homosexuality respondents managed coming out strategies and used closeted identity techniques, effectively separating their spiritual and sexual lives.

The mental processes which bisexuals have to contemplate in relation to their sexuality and belonging to a Church are often very complex and the management of these processes can often have extreme consequences. For example, there are practical negotiations and assessments that must take place before the individual is able to come out as bisexual. If then it is not possible for the individual to 'come out' and be accepted within their denomination then how do bisexuals reconcile their sexuality with a Church that does not accept them? Adam sees his sexuality as a divided self; his 'self' is literally split into two halves, one heterosexual and one homosexual:

... to take my point from earlier on. I am choosing ... in relationship terms ...
I am choosing to go in the gay direction, so I am choosing to leave behind the straight relationship possibility ...

For Adam, seeing himself as split in two in, this way is a coping strategy in a society that cannot grasp those with attraction to members of both sexes at the same time. Adam understands his bisexuality as almost two distinct forms of sexuality combined and did not mind describing himself as either gay or straight throughout the interview. This ties in with the Anglican Church's official standpoint on bisexuality which notes that in order for bisexuals to be accepted into the Church they must choose to be heterosexual because that is the nature of bisexuality (Church of England 2003, 283). This of course is not made a Church issue by Adam as he is not actively 'out' within his religious community but it is an internal struggle for which he has developed his own coping strategy. There is further evidence to suggest that bisexual Christians can use closeted identity techniques in order to survive within institutional Christianity. Cornelius, a 44 year old Roman Catholic states the following:

I think most people in the congregation would probably be ok with it. But I think the clergy would definitely not be ok with it. I don't think, the current pastor, he would say anything, unless I made an issue of it.

Although in principal the Roman Catholic Church would oppose his sexuality, in allowing people to believe that he is in fact heterosexual, Cornelius avoids the difficult issue of being 'out' within his religious community by allowing the pastor to believe that he is heterosexual by not overtly promoting his same-sex attractions. This is a common trend, with respondents feeling that being open and honest about ones sexuality would often be ideal but in practical terms it was too difficult:

I don't think that many people are aware. Certainly not forced me to come out at all. I think though if I did I would need to walk away, I think, I'm fairly sure.
(Adam, a 63 year old Anglican from the Hampshire area)

In this instance the act of actively being out was not an option for Adam if he hoped to stay at his chosen Church. There is a personal choice here to separate his sexual and spiritual identity in order for him to continue with his religious journey.

Table 4.2 shows that respondents were very wary to discuss their sexuality within a religious context and most of them were not 'out' in that their priest or the congregation had not been actively told about their sexuality. Apart from the fact that bisexuals potentially face discrimination or exclusion because of their sexuality, respondents also argued that it was not a matter open for discussion, partly because their sexuality was a private matter but also because they did not feel that they were defined by their sexuality. A common statement was that respondents were Christians who happened to be bisexual, indicating that they felt their core identity to be their religious selves.

Table 4.2 To whom are you out as 'bisexual'?

	Entire Sample (n = 59)	Male (29)	Female (30)
Everyone	10 (17%)	3 (10%)	7 (23%)
Everyone apart from my religious community	9 (15%)	4 (14%)	5 (17%)
Just partner	26 (44%)	14 (48%)	12 (40%)
Just friends	9 (15%)	5 (17%)	4 (13%)
Just family	2 (3%)	2 (7%)	0
No-one	3 (5%)	1 (3%)	2 (7%)
Not out in their religious community	49 (83%)	26 (90%)	23 (77%)

2. By suggesting that because bisexuality does not rely on an individual's sex to form relations (of any kind) it is therefore outside of the Church's understanding of sexuality in general.

To elaborate, the respondents and the life-stories they gave seem to imply that the very idea of bisexuality highlights a flaw in the understanding of how people relate to each other as highlighted by Thatcher and Stuart:

... bisexuals undermine the whole sexual system, the neat classification of people into homo and hetero, the pathologizing of homosexuality as a heterosexual disorder and so on. (Thatcher and Stuart quoted in Church of England 2004, 34)

The existence and frequency of bisexuality in society suggests that the understanding that heterosexuality is the norm with homosexuality being a tolerated error where sexual desire is inverted. The very concept of bisexuality rejects all pre-conceptions about sexuality, of which the Anglican Church seem to be fully aware. I quote at length to fully appreciate the magnitude of the issue being discussed:

Instead it is bisexuality that is the norm. Most people have both heterosexual and homosexual tendencies and it is only social pressure that stops more people from accepting or expressing their homosexual ones ... If accepted, this theory means that any argument advanced against homosexuality on the basis that heterosexuality is the norm, loses credibility, and it becomes much more difficult to maintain that God's intention was that people should be heterosexual. (Church of England 2003, 34)

Although still refusing to see bisexuality as a distinct sexual identity and aligning the argument with rather out-dated research conducted by Freud where bisexuality is the stage before a sexuality is formed (successfully in the case of heterosexuality or incorrectly for homosexuality), such deliberation shows that the Anglican Church is aware of such an argument but clearly does not pay it any serious credence.

3. Bisexuality represents the ideal way to live and relate to people. Taking the life of Jesus Christ as the ideal template for human existence, respondents argued that the relationships and the ethos expressed in Jesus' teachings was bisexual.

Although contentious such an argument has been put forward previously by with the idea of 'outing texts' (Yip 2005a, 57), where respondents suggested that the Bible had been heterosexualised, quashing the possibility of same-sex relationships in the Bible. Although the relationships between David and Jonathan or Ruth and Naomi were seen as affirming of non-heterosexuality, bisexual Christians were more interested in the characteristics of Jesus and his relationship with people throughout the Gospels which respondents saw as being bisexual in nature, and sexual confirmation of this is not required. Richard, a 46 year old man from the London area saw his bisexuality as a gift from God which had given

him the ability to move between gender and sexuality. He saw his bisexuality as allowing him to interact more closely with women and men without a sexual context. Although this infers that bisexuality is an androgynous state respondents found this useful in aligning themselves with the Christian faith and the teachings of the Gospels in particular.

Negotiating Christianity

The focus now shifts towards an exploration of what it means to identify as Christian in the life situation of bisexual Christians, focusing upon religious orientations, beliefs and practices. The main resistance from the Christian Church with regards to bisexuality is that bisexuals are seen to have the choice to be heterosexual. This is contentious in that it assumes bisexuals are made up of both homosexual and heterosexual identities, yet denies the existence of a specific bisexual identity.

Religious identity

Adam, as discussed in the previous section, is an example of a separation of sexual and spiritual identities, knowing that, reconciliation within his religious communities is not possible. Yet for other respondents such a division of identities was not plausible. Hope, a 29 year old Anglican woman, had recently become disillusioned with her Church:

... all of the last year I was a regular Church-goer but I was going out with a woman. And I found that quite difficult because I was going to an Evangelical church, and just before Christmas I came to the conclusion that if I couldn't be out happily at Church with the people there then I shouldn't be going.

Yet for Hope this presents a distinct problem for her religious identity which she sees as being constructed within her religious community, striving for the closeness and the support of the Church in her spiritual journey. This raises an issue that bisexual Christians have to address; can sexual and spiritual identities/lives be separated? As previously mentioned in the examples of Adam it has been necessary to force this separation, whereas Hope's life-story shows that this separation is most definitely a struggle. It is a common trend in sociological thought to believe that identities can be selected and then discarded. As Bauman states 'identities are light cloaks ready to be taken at any time' (Bauman 2005, 30). We are further warned that we need to 'keep all doors open, all of the time' (Bauman 2005, 29), yet even Bauman agrees that in the case of communities we strive for safety and security. He uses the idea of the resurgence of fundamentalism to make the point that it leads of a 'warm family-like alternative' which 'leads to pleasure' (Bauman 2005). Further to this I would argue that here Hope is demonstrating the fact that her identity is formed using society; in this case her religious community. The

work of Layder is most interesting here, with the suggestion that although we have more choices to make and we have to use individual insight to make such choices, such a situation may not be entirely healthy. But in his discussion of loneliness Layder argues that spending adverse time on your own actually destabilises self-identity rather than preserving it:

In this respect social contact is necessary to generate a sense of membership, belonging and inclusion. Other people provide us with a confirmatory sense of identity that we may not be able to provide for ourselves. (Layder 2004, 107)

Embracing this line of argument, Hope is using her religious community to gauge herself and to stabilise her identity. Conversely the questionnaire stage of the research shows that bisexual Christians have to privatise their spirituality because of the uncomfortable sitting position of their faith with their sexuality, although this does not necessarily mean that they have been expelled from the Church or walked away from the Church. They have adjusted what Christianity means to them and re-located their beliefs into a self-constructed belief system, using Christianity as an over-arching structure with certain morals and values that are useful and still salient in society.

Christian beliefs and practices

The overriding theme which comes from the research is that bisexual Christians believe Christianity is about the promotion of good moral values and following the teachings of Jesus and the Gospels, rather than the Bible in general. Therefore the respondents viewed their religion as something very personal, for them Christianity was a matter of personal reflection and meditation. Of the entire sample 75 per cent felt that being Christian meant having their own time to privately contemplate their religion. In this respect Christianity is seen as rather more agnostic for the bisexual respondents with internal contemplation plays a defining role. This was supported by the qualitative data:

I do believe we can ... communicate with God, that's shorthand. God is not removed from this world. So if prayer means anything that's what it's about ... a conversation that happens in the unconscious. There are times when I just stop and try to listen ... to work something out. (Phillip, a Methodist from Oxfordshire)

I use prayer as a silent time to be with myself and to be closer to God. I feel more comfortable when I do that. For me it's a way of talking to God, it's a big part ... You find God by spending time with yourself like that ... (Michael, a 27 year old man, who has not attended Church since he was 18)

God as a supernatural entity was played down by the respondents and there are numerous ways of expressing this:

I think my spirituality will always be linked to the natural world and the world at large, I love people watching. I go into town and look at people, at their faces, look at what's going on. You walk down the street and there is God. I don't find that in the programme of the Church. I read the Bible and the gospels, and that seems to be what Jesus was about, just wandering around, outside the structure of religion. Actually talking to people about the world ... (Phillip)

Although raised in a nominally Christian family Phillip trained to be a priest and considers himself a very spiritual person, yet he has become increasingly frustrated with the Churches preoccupation with sexuality and division of people categories. Phillip did not stop regular Church attendance because of the Methodist Church's understanding of sexuality (although this contributed) but because the loss of focus within the Church. Here the Church and Philip's understanding of the way Christianity is taught does not reflect his own personal experience with God.

I was looking at wanting to see changes in people's lives, changes in people living more liberated lives in the love of God. I found the Church to be more like a prison with me as a prison warder. More that kind of issue, and I had to conform to that sort of institution. (Phillip)

Phillip wants to belong to a Church which is more concerned with 'bigger' issues. He recently began to attend Quaker meetings to address this as he feels that British Quakers are more focused with the issues that are of more importance to him. There is an aim here to de-centre sexual categorisation and the importance of sexuality in general in the Church's teachings, although bisexual Christians do this in a different way to gay and lesbian Christians because of the unique position of their sexuality there are definite parallels here with the 'Attacking the Stigma' technique as highlighted by Yip (1997b):

And I am just unhappy with the way people are pigeon-holed and pushed into boxes by society. Because if you look around there is a fluidity of other behaviour ... and an understanding of behaviour which is based on who they are. (Phillip)

Christianity for the respondents therefore is about being in tune with oneself rather than being God-fearing or rigid about one's faith, exemplified by a wariness towards priests and pastors and the role that they play within Christianity. Numerous respondents rebelled against the traditional understanding and role of the priesthood as bringers of God's message. Kimberley, a currently non-practising Methodist spoke passionately about this:

The God I feel is more real and I must admit I'm going on feelings way more than the Bible. Or everything I've ever been preached, or maybe it's the sum total of everything I've ever been preached. I just don't know. But I just know he feels real and loving and not condemning and I just can't imagine him making me choose. I mean choosing between 2 people ... If it is wrong then let God deal with it. They don't go on a Sunday morning and go through every single sin that you could possibly commit. If it was wrong, and I can't believe anything would get me to believe it was ... no, can't, let God sort it out. Don't be so obsessed, let it go!

Within specific denominations the individual has to either re-assess the teachings of the Church or practice what Wilcox has labelled the 'Bible Buffet' (Wilcox 2003), where individuals take what they need from the religion and re-interpret the meaning. The case with Evangelical Christians is particularly valid here who traditionally rely upon scriptural authority as a central tenant of their belief system. This happens within individual religions such as Christianity, appearing regularly in the questionnaires although in less radical form. In a section where respondents were asked to elaborate on their reasons for practising on their own one respondent stated:

I am Christian and believe in God but I have never felt the need to attend Church (after leaving school). I know what I believe and believe what I want to believe. There is a lot of good in the word of God and I take what I want from this. (Jim, a 27 year old, non-Church goer, from the Staffordshire region)

In distancing themselves from organised Christianity the respondents were able to worship privately and construct what felt 'Christian' to them. Kimberly, a 29 year-old Methodist woman, spoke that the God she found within organised religion was not the same God that she 'felt'. Although Kimberly felt that she should be part of a religious community she had become disillusioned about the image of God that her Church was portraying and felt hypocritical for attending. This strong emphasis on personal reflection/meditation over Church attendance shows that bisexual Christians have placed greater emphasis on individual 'spirituality', questioning the Christian tradition of Church attendance as an integral part of one's faith, although this finding is not exclusive to bisexual Christians as Yip (2000) shows. What is distinguishing is that gay and lesbian Christians continue to attend Church weekly (80.3 per cent) (Yip 2000), whereas bisexual Christians are far more staunch in their rejection of authoritative structure with only 31 per cent attending weekly. This figure is also skewed because of the MCC respondents who almost exclusively attended Church weekly. Further to this there is the suggestion that MCC members do not attend simply for traditional Christian worship but for the support network perspective of the MCC. One respondent noted that she left the MCC Church because it felt like a support network for gay men and lesbians:

I recently attended MCC (Metropolitan Community Church) – a gay led congregation. They were totally geared to lesbians and gay men only, and they were also very family orientated. If you had one [a partner] of the opposite sex, you were pretty much ignored and dismissed. (Jessica, a 28 year old female with no official denomination)

It would seem that a number of respondents did not see the MCC as traditional ‘Church’, and that attending MCC services was not a true religious experience, due to the ‘happy-clappy’ congregational practice and the diluted nature of the religious worship. Almost all of the interview respondents understood the importance of the MCC as a temporary Church. Delilah a 21 year old Evangelical summarised her experiences with the denomination:

... the MCC Church is not a settling down Church, it’s more of a passing through Church, a Church to come to when you feel you can’t go back to you own. To build up faith and then go back, its not like as he said a place to settle.

Responses to official texts and scripture

With regards to spirituality the respondents often aligned themselves with arguments put forward by gay and lesbian Christians, primarily because they could potentially be in same-sex relationships although they identified as bisexual. They also felt the need to do this because of the invisibility and powerlessness they felt as bisexual men and women, in standing alongside the gay responses to the Bible there in a sense of resistance against the interpretation of the Bible which condemns any relationship that does not result in monogamous heterosexual marriage and cohabitation, or indeed any deviation from the ‘norm’. In this respect they viewed sexuality in terms of sexual behaviour (specifically the act of male on male anal penetration) as the Bible appears to, as they had the possibility of being sexually active with members of the same-sex. The interview respondents were all well-versed in the passages of the Bible which are seemingly less than positive about homosexual acts/relations. One respondent in particular, John, spent a good deal of time dealing with each passage specifically and arguing how it had been both misinterpreted and taken out of cultural context. As discussed previously this is a strong field within the literature and respondents felt as bisexuals they needed to have a standpoint on the passages within the Bible.

Table 4.3 below shows the broad responses from the questionnaire-stage with regards to the Bible.

Table 4.3 Number and percentage of respondents who answered ‘true’ to the following statements

Statement	Number and percentage of respondents who ‘agreed’ or ‘strongly agreed’		
	Entire Sample	Male	Female
(A) The Bible is often misinterpreted with regards to sexuality	52 (87%)	25 (86%)	27 (87%)
(B) The Bible is negative towards non-heterosexual relationships	34 (57%)	18 (62%)	16 (52%)
(C) The Bible is incompatible with modern life	7 (12%)	4 (14%)	3 (10%)
(D) Christianity is intolerant of bisexuals	38 (63%)	17 (59%)	21 (68%)
(E) Christianity persecutes bisexuals	36 (60%)	18 (62%)	18 (58%)
(F) The Church does not understand bisexuality	53 (88%)	24 (83%)	29 (94%)

Bisexual Christians believe that the Bible is still of use for them, with only 12 per cent of the entire sample agreeing with the statement that the ‘Bible is incompatible with modern life’. However, there appears to be a contradiction here as 57 per cent of respondents argued that the Bible was indeed negative to people who were not heterosexual. This statistic is more accurate when combined with statement (A) of Table 4.3, in that the respondents felt the Bible was misinterpreted and furthermore the Church does not understand what bisexuality is. The interview stage was used extensively to elucidate upon this seemingly hypocritical situation. Respondents felt that whilst the Bible appeared negative on the surface it was due to incorrect interpretation on the part of authority figures and preachers, stating that the message of the Bible had been corrupted. This fits with the protestation that Church structure and authority is inflexible when it comes to scripture. Delilah spoke of how she was concerned that her Church would not accept any other reading of the Bible:

I spoke to people who knew in-depth the Bible from both sides and neither side convinced me, and I was like, well doesn’t that say something. Doesn’t it say that if it was clear cut then clearly it would be clear cut, but it didn’t. So I went back to them and said, look the Bible could be interpreted as saying both things, and they were like no (laughs) we believe the one interpretation.

Another response to the Bible is to embrace the teaching of Jesus rather than the Bible as a whole. Cornelius argued this:

... but the New Testament supersedes the Old Testament. I think. Because if we are going to take all those things from the Old Testament, as valid today, oughtn't we keep all the others? Oughtn't we not be eating meat and milk on certain days. We ought just be eating Kosher food. And keeping all those laws. Whereas, the new Testament fulfils the Old Testament, doesn't it ...

For numerous respondents the Old Testament was too full of contradictions and behaviours that were not even practised by the strictest Christians, exaggerated further by the fact that human sexuality had been given so much prominence. Numerous respondents spoke passionately on the subject:

It makes me so bloody angry that the Church is hypocritical, and they will use this excuse of 'well the Bible says', and it's cherry-picking. A comparable thing is slavery; the Bible probably says more about slavery and supports the idea of slavery, than it does about gay sex. But the Church these days conveniently forgets about those bits in the Bible, but hangs onto these few scraps about gay sex. (Adam)

The official standpoints of the Church denominations to which the respondents belonged were not particularly well-known in that the local-level of religious experiences was given most importance. Although several respondents stated that they noted that the structure of the Church to which they belonged would not be accepting, it was a matter to be dealt with in Church. Adam's story here is particularly fascinating as his wife upon hearing his 'story' forced him to discuss the issue with their local priest. The priest recommended counselling, but after counselling Adam went back to the Church and the issue was never discussed openly again.

Concluding thoughts

This chapter has shown two main things. Firstly, that bisexual Christians have been forced to re-evaluate what it means to identify as bisexual and has highlighted the negotiations that have to take place in order to identify as bisexual and Christian simultaneously Secondly, that respondents conversely had to re-assess what Christianity meant to them often against the traditional viewpoints of their individual Churches and denominations.

Being both Christian and bisexual situates the individual in a precarious theoretical quandary enclosed within the binary understanding of human sexuality with no space for negotiation. Homosexuality is therefore justified as God-given just as is heterosexuality, leaving bisexuality as being seen to actively deny the

choice to be heterosexual. Individuals are understood to be in a state of confusion, or to use Freudian language, in a state of arrested development, where they have failed to healthily progress into heterosexuality. Such a predicament has led to several outcomes. By separating their sexual and spiritual lives bisexual Christians have been able to 'act' heterosexually within religious spheres. Although such a statement is highly contentious and not exclusively true for all respondents for many within strict denominations it was the only way to continue a religious life as a bisexual man or woman. Such a separation was not ideal and created great inner conflict which I uncovered particularly in the interview stage of the research. Respondents often wished for a religious community in which to form their religious self in harmony with their sexual self.

Although being bisexual and Christian can lead to a privatisation of faith it is not the case that the respondents championed the idea of total relativism or individual agency. Bisexual Christians who chose not to attend Church, while expressing the postmodern ethic of de-traditionalisation and less reliance on over-arching structures (such as organised religion), did still rely on Christian teachings, usually in the form of the Bible. Access and participation is acquired through careful negotiation of what it means to be both sexual and spiritual, which involves reassessing what the Christian faith and bisexuality as a concept actually mean for bisexual Christians.