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**Negotiating Sexuality and Spirituality: Lived Experiences of Bisexual Women  
and Men**

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**Abstract**

Bisexuality challenges binary conceptions of sexuality, and therefore ‘doing’ bisexuality within an organisation such as the Christian Church is often challenging. This chapter utilises data from a British mixed-methods study that explored how identities were managed in relation to being Christian and bisexual. The research found that the participants repackaged and reimagined their faith and, to a lesser extent re-imagine their sexuality. Bisexual Christians used creative agency in their intimate lives and found support from personal communities and friendships. This chapter attempts to move from exploring sexuality and faith separately, towards an intersectional approach to the experiences of the participants. Although their religious and sexual lives are considered, the chapter aims to explore how the experiences of the participants intertwine and how the identities speak to, and inform each other. As a result, the chapter takes the original research as a starting point and explores how we might see the participants as bisexual Christians rather than bisexuals who happen to be Christian (and vice-versa). The stories and the experiences of the participants suggest a bisexual Christianity rooted in Christianity morality and individualism.

## Introduction

As part of my doctoral research project I embarked on a large-scale mixed-methods study, looking to explore how bisexual Christians in the UK negotiated what, at first glance, appeared to be contradictory and conflicting identities. This was driven by an academic interest in identity and gender and a personal interest in Christianity and bisexuality. Due to the unique nature of the research and the specific focus upon bisexuality as opposed to lesbian and gay experiences, the data led to a number of publications and contributions to knowledge. The purpose of this chapter is to bring together the main findings from this research project that have been noted elsewhere but have not been articulated in relation to the project as a whole. It is hoped that this will highlight the contribution of the research to those with interests in religion, sexuality, gender and identity studies. I believe that the life-stories of bisexual Christians highlight the uniqueness of bisexuality as a sexual identity, and sheds lights on how gender, sexuality and identity are enacted. Furthermore, the chapter shows the fluidity of Christianity, in contrast to the official teaching of organised denominations.

Uniquely, this chapter will explore the participants religious and sexual identities inform and interact, taking a more reflective approach. Although the two main sections; *Negotiating bisexual in Christian lives* (foregrounding bisexuality in the analysis) and *Bisexual Christianity* (foregrounding Christianity in the analysis) centralise one identity over another, the aim is to present an analysis that is more intersectional and illuminate how bisexuality is informed by Christianity (during the first section) and how Christianity is informed by bisexuality (second section). Of course, such exploration should also explore other aspects of the participants lives such as race/ethnicity and gender identity which will also impact upon such identities, however, due to the focus of the original research, such an analysis is not possible.

The chapter begins by outlining the theoretical underpinnings of the research to do two things: First, to give an overview of my position in relation to identity, bisexuality and Christianity, when the research took place, whilst exploring new advancements in these areas, particularly in relation to the move towards considering bisexual Christianity. Second, to briefly outline how the research was conducted. Following this the chapter moves to explore what was found during the research and a re-examination of these findings; and this has been divided into discreet but interconnecting sections for clarity. The focus begins with an exploration of how bisexual Christians do (or enact) their sexual identity in *Negotiating bisexuality in Christian lives*. Here the focus is upon how the participants negotiated and understood their bisexuality and what this tells us about their Christianity. The chapter then moves to explore *Bisexual Christianity*. Throughout this section I attempt to explore the participants lived experiences in relation to the negotiation of their spirituality in light of their bisexuality.

### **Theoretical positioning**

#### *Identity*

The overarching goal of the research was to understand how identity (specifically bisexual and Christian identities) are ‘done’. I used the word ‘done’ as a shorthand to refer to the presentation of identity, the management and negotiation of our selves. Although Goffman’s theory of the presentation of the self (Goffman, 1971), has been the focus of criticism, specifically the assertion that identity is a performance in which we can change characters at will (Layder, 2009), I feel that because of the pressures of institutions (the Church) and a lack of social blueprints for bisexuals, Goffman’s work sheds light upon what is occurring. Goffman understands identity as a game in which

individuals constantly work to display or conceal their selves dependent upon the situation. In the lives of bisexual Christians, where concealment and self-censuring play an important role, this is a useful perspective. There has also been some advancement in understanding bisexual identity specifically with the exploration of ‘bisexual display’ (Hartman, 2013; Hartman-Linck, 2014). Bisexuality, as Hartman-Linck (2014) notes, is particularly difficult to signal because heterosexuality is presumed unless people either verbalise or signify that they are otherwise. Even in same-sex relationships, bisexuality remains invisible. Although this work post-dates my research it is important to recognise this attempt to explain identity in bisexual lives, where due to bisexual erasure and invisibility in certain quarters, bisexuality has to be visualised and other aspects beyond sex and gender including political motivations play an important role (Toft, forthcoming).

Of course, my epistemological perspective was not to adopt Goffman’s perspective uncritically. Importantly, I feel that there were two other aspects of identity that needed exploration, and these would have an impact upon those who identified as bisexual Christians: how identity can be constructed through reflexivity and the importance of the use of narrative in constructing identity. Both aspects are important for individuals who have to work with and against such dominant structures such as the Church and bring their identities, which are seemingly at odds with hegemonic discourse, to life through narration. Using the work of Giddens (1991) as an entry point, due to de-traditionalisation, identity is more agency driven (Bauman 2001). As Elliott (2007) argued, identity draws upon memory, desire and society but also what other people do in their own cultural and societal practices.

To be bisexual is to identify as bisexual and this is enacted through telling stories. Using the work of Plummer (1995) and Lawler (2009), I argue that identity is

produced by the stories we tell in everyday life. Although, as Layder (2004) highlights, such an approach is problematic as it opens us up to creating fictitious versions of who we are. Understanding identity in this way is useful because it allows us to explore the negotiations that take place and the decisions and process behind such negotiations.

### *Bisexual identity*

It is clear that the concept of bisexuality is somewhat imprecise and open to interpretation. Historically this has been due to the fact that bisexuality has traditionally been ignored in academia (Monro, Hines and Osborne, 2017). Definitions provided by Hemmings (2002) and Bi Academic Intervention (1997) indicate that bisexuality could be used to describe a combination of maleness and femaleness, a combination of masculinity and femininity or emotional and physical attracted to both sexes. I understood that bisexuality related those who have the capacity for emotional, sensual, sexual relations with members of the both sexes (Off Pink Collective, 1988; Robinson, 2015; Rust, 2004). The focus may be upon loving the person regardless of the gender (Clausen, 1990) and relationships may be monogamous or polyamorous (see Klesse, 2016). Bisexuality challenges the binary systems of gender and sex (Rust, 1996). It could be seen as radical and an attempt to move away from identification which relies on binary opposites (Highleyman, 1995); explored in Toft, forthcoming). Bisexuality remains ambiguous and recent work has shown that much research continues to debate its mean and place within wider debates (see Klesse, 2018). Bisexuality continues in the main to refer to behaviour, attractions, identification and history (Rust, 1996; Robinson, 2015); although there is clear space to explore more nuanced examinations of bisexuality's unique positioning

towards monogamy and compulsory monogamy (Toft and Yip, 2018; Toft, forthcoming).

### *Christian identity*

Religious individualism was the dominant and most accurate way of understanding the Christian landscape at the time the research began, and this framed the focus of the work. Religion (Christianity specifically) is filtered through the self (Wilcox, 2003) and has switched to become an active attribute, with the emphasis on religion doing something for the individual rather than what the individual can contribute (Woodhead, 2001). This idea has been framed as the ‘Turn to Life’ (Woodhead and Heelas, 2000; Heelas *et al.*, 2005).

I also tapped into work with LGB Christians, particularly the work of Wilcox (2003) and Yip (2000) as there were themes and ideas that could be consistent for other marginalised groups (such as bisexual Christians). Wilcox’s notion of the ‘Bible Buffet’ resonated strongly as it was a technique which could be used to incorporate compatible aspects of religion into life. Yip’s work is vital in understanding that official Church’s understandings and/or teachings on sexuality are often viewed as being incompatible with modern society because Christianity has not evolved at a similar pace (Yip, 2003). As Davie (2000, 2002, 2012) has noted, and will be reflected throughout this chapter, this does not necessarily represent a reduction of belief but rather a shift in how belief is enacted. Faith in this regard becomes more personalised, with less reliance upon institutional guidance, in what is referred to as believing without belonging.

Furthermore, what Christianity means to individuals has shifted towards teaching about love and justice rather than control. Yip notes this in relation to Jesus.

Jesus, for instance, is often constructed as being critical and subversive of unequal socio-political structures, and was unafraid to challenge them in the pursuit of justice. Thus, such reading of the texts instils pride and a sense of belonging to the family of believers. Far from being outcasts, LGBTQI people, as these texts evidence, have always been a part of religious communities. (Yip, 2010:39).

Christianity is framed as an identity which is negotiable and adapts to change and progress, although this can conflict with traditional Christianity.

### **Methodological account**

When the project began in 2007, the research with bisexual Christians was mainly autobiographical and theoretical in nature. It was therefore important to consider work in which bisexuals were included such as Yip (1997a, 1997b, 2002), Dillon (1999) and Wilcox (2002, 2003). Examination of such research showed a use of mixed methods often with a quantitative phase to act as scoping into areas which are under-researched. This approach would also allow a triangulation of methods where interview schedules are informed by the literature and the questionnaires. As a result, 80 questionnaires were collected which gave an overview of the participants sexual and religious identities but also included large open-ended questions to explore what issues were important for them. This informed 20 individually constructed interview schedules which were based upon the questionnaires. Interviews were very loosely semi-structured which would produce rich and detailed life-stories.

It is important to note here that the sample was constructed mainly through advertisement and personal networks, and was largely purposeful in nature. Although interviewees were selected to cover different locations and Christian denominations;



genders and understandings of bisexuality were not purposefully targeted. Participants were split almost evenly between women (52.5%) and men (47.5%), all were cisgendered; as noted, this was not by design but represents a limitation. The majority were in coupled relationships (66.7%), with 11.5% being in relationships with at least three people. A range of Christian denominations were represented including Anglican, Roman Catholic, Evangelical, Metropolitan Community Church, and those who no longer attended.

### **Negotiating bisexuality in Christian lives.**

The research showed that most of the respondents felt their sexuality was central to who they were as people, at times referring to this as their core identity. In everyday life it was this identity which took precedent and which acted as a filter for all other important aspects of life. However, some negotiation of what bisexuality means and how it was enacted, took place. The data suggests two main negotiations which they enacted and used in their everyday life: the flexibility of bisexuality; and/or a ‘re-imagining’ of what bisexuality means in their lives.

#### *Flexibility*

Research has worked to show that bisexuality should not be encapsulated as ‘fence-sitting’ or enabling individuals to access heterosexual privileges (Kaplan, 1995; Hemmings, 2005). However, for bisexual Christians this flexibility, particularly with regards to issues of coming out, was often useful in spaces where they would face hostility and possible exclusion. Participants left their sexuality at the door to their church, downplaying bisexuality and allowing others to assume they were straight.

Half (40) of the participants said that it was not important to be out within their religious communities as they felt it was most important to worship as human beings. Although this raises interesting points with regards to being defined as a person in relation to sexuality, in times of perceived difficulty, a number of participants preferred to not highlight their sexuality. For some this was discussed in relation to vocalising their sexuality. One respondent Jim, a 26-year-old Anglican from the Midlands, noted that bisexuality was flexible and allowed you to ‘come out when you want to’, he continued:

I am pretty much out to everyone but it was gradual and, like I said I had to be careful. Because my sexuality isn’t always clear it was probably easier to do.

Jim went on to suggest that, although he would disclose his sexuality if asked, this wasn’t often likely:

It’s not something that is mentioned at Church either, so I don’t see the reason why I would talk about it. It’s just easier and I don’t really want to argue with people, it might not be safe.

Jim was tactical in presenting himself as a bisexual Christian and did not do so when it could be potentially difficult for him. Although it could be argued that Jim was being deceptive here and allowing others to see him as straight when it suited him, it was a strategy that was employed, due to issues of personal safety.

Several of the respondents found this flexibility a useful tool to explain how they enacted their sexuality. Richard, a 45-year-old man from Surrey talked about bisexuality giving him access to feminine and masculine personas. Richard subsumed sexuality with gender, arguing that he was bisexual because of his more even blend of masculinity and femininity in his personality. For Richard, this bisexuality helped him in his religious work:

But I'm not a church leader, and I wasn't that good a missionary when I did that. But I'm good as a carer because I am using my bisexuality, my female persona at times as a God-given gift and then at times I will use my male side. This flexibility of gender was a part of what he felt made him bisexual. As Stoller (1972) notes, such conceptualisations of bisexuality appear to originate from the work of Freud, who understood bisexuality as an unformed sexuality. For Freud, the link between gender and sexuality was tangible, and in the case of bisexuality, the failure to move towards either femininity or masculinity results in bisexuality. Viewing bisexuality as a failure to develop into a gender ideal (e.g. femininity in females) remains a point for discussion within psychoanalytic development theory (Elise, 1997). However, such theories and the work of social constructionists have shown such approaches to sexuality as not being aligned to real life experiences (Anderson, 2008).

Other respondents talked about having 'sides' to their personalities which reflected their sexuality. Adam, a 63-year-old Anglican man explained that although historically he had been in relationships with women, he was currently only interested romantically in men, arguing that he was pursuing his 'gay side'.

I wander around both [heterosexuality and homosexuality]. I'd say nowadays in practical terms I might as well be gay. But I also know from my side of it, my sex life when I was married was fine. I know guys who have been married and would say they are gay and I'd say you must have had a reasonable sex-life and they'd say 'No I used to hate it', and that just wasn't me, so that's why I think bi suits me.

The bisexuality that the participants presented is not often represented in modern exploration of bisexual identities. As previously noted, the conflation of gender with

sexuality is no longer understood to be an accurate representation of lives (Weeks, 2002). However, the bisexuality that Adam and Richard refer to appeared to be informed by their understanding of Christian values and morality in relation to gender, which the participants saw as reflecting their bisexuality. The focus upon the separation of masculinity and femininity or, in Richard's example, the combination of the two appears to be in part informed by their understanding of what it is to be a good Christian, in a rather traditional sense. As Richard notes, his bisexuality allowed him to move between the two, emphasising a binary view of gender. As an ex-missionary and carer, he argued that this helped him to engage with people on a personal level and spread the word of God. Of course, this is a clear example of his religious and sexual identities informing and influencing each other. A number of classic articles have highlighted the gender divide within conservative/traditional Christianity, particularly in terms of gender roles and responsibilities (e.g. Bartkowski, 1999; Sherkat, 2000; Wilcox and Jelen, 1991). This is very much still present in Richard's understanding of Christianity. However, Richard suggested that there is a unique bisexual take here, and explained that, he was able to take this Christian view of gender and enact this through his sexuality.

### *Re-imagining*

The stories above all explore bisexuality in terms of its flexibility and malleability, particularly in relation to the conflation of gender and sexuality. However, this does not effectively capture what all the respondents were doing. I suggest that in their everyday lives they were in fact re-imagining bisexuality. This is in many ways similar to the flexible approach outlined above but suggests more permanency and also a focus upon sexuality beyond sexual activity. Re-imagining refers to

understanding bisexuality not solely upon sexual behaviour but as being able to relate to partners as close friends. It also should be reiterated that this re-examination of bisexuality was not common. As previously noted, participants usually adapted their faith to match their sexuality.

The focus upon non-sexual aspects of bisexuality meant that some participants were able to reconcile their sexuality and faith with little impact upon their religious lives. One respondent, Phillip, suggested that for him having some same-sex time through close friendships was enough for him to maintain his bisexual identity:

I'd rather have friends than have sex... because friends are there for me and sex can actually sour it. So gradually I've become more coherent about who I am and where I am [prompt regarding the relationship between bisexuality and friendship], it's a blurred line but at this time in my life I want close friendships with people and I'm bisexual.

This focus upon emotional attachment over sexual attraction is present previous research. As Diamond and Savin-Williams (2000) have noted, attraction based upon emotion has been one key way that sexual-minority women have disrupted typical narratives of coming out. Furthermore, strong emotional attachments with one individual are common traits of non-heterosexual stories. As Phillip's story suggests, for him, this emotional aspect of attraction is very much part of his sexual life.

This did sometimes result in celibacy as a tool for reconciliation between faith and sexuality, but this approach was exceptional. During the interviews I met Jessica, a 38-year-old woman from London, who had been living with a female partner for over five years and had a civil partnership; however, they were both celibate. Jessica suggested that she was attracted to her partner on a spiritual level, and it was this deep

connection that kept their relationship strong. The partnership was not based upon sexual activity:

We relate because of our beliefs and the community that we are a part of...we don't have a sexual side to our relationship but we've been together for a while and all is good.

Such stories have obvious and strong resonance to notions of sexual celibacy as an important factor in religiosity. Also, as I will suggest, bisexuality is uniquely placed with regard to this celibacy. The work of Isherwood (2006) here is of importance. Isherwood's focus of celibacy is in relation to sex's reinforcement of gender norms and the way that celibacy can disrupt heteropatriarchy:

...the world of sexuality is not an exchange of equality and mutuality in the pursuit of erotic pleasure but rather a highly stylized pornographic dance of domination. (Isherwood, 2006:3-4)

Isherwood then poses the question that in order to respond to this difficulty, should the 'twenty-first century, post-feminist movement women adopt celibacy as the counter to the worst excesses of heteropatriarchy?' (Isherwood, 2006: 4). Isherwood suggests a queering of Christ enables a bypassing of binary categorisation, and actually challenges the way we act and engage with others. The focus upon a queer understanding of Jesus and an erotic Christ has resonance with Jessica's story. In Jessica's relationship bisexuality is informed by the fact that the gender of a person is not the focus of attraction, she is bisexual because the gender of her partners is of no importance, challenging or queering this system. Therefore, celibacy for Jessica was also a necessary part of building a stronger bond with Christ, whereas sexual activity held no importance in her life. But, additionally celibacy here resonates strongly with

the disruptive nature of bisexuality with regards to binary gender and sexuality categorisation.

### **Bisexual Christianity**

The majority of the participants had to adjust their understanding of Christianity. This often led to practising a Christianity different from that which is often presented through official teaching or Church life. It could be argued that the respondents were less willing to dilute themselves as sexual beings and felt that Christianity, if properly understood and then negotiated, was entirely compatible with their sexuality.

However, their Christianity was influenced by their sexuality and this was reflected in how they understood and enacted their faith. Here I will explore how the participants negotiated their faith and how this relates to their sexuality.

The research suggested that bisexual Christians used a number of strategies or negotiations in order to fit their sexual selves with their religious selves. There were two main findings which were revealed strongly in the data which will be the focus here:

1. To understand Christianity in terms of its moral values and teachings, moving away from more rigid and literal interpretations of Christianity: Refocussing Christianity;
2. To leave organised religion and construct a more individualised and personal form of Christianity: Individualised Christianity.

#### *Refocussing Christianity*

Refocussing Christianity refers to focussing upon aspects of Christianity which are compatible with everyday lives and working to silence aspects of Christian teaching

which are no longer useful. Specifically, Christianity is forged in relation to sexuality and their intersection is viewed as inseparable. This refocussing however is different from selecting aspects scripture which fit, as with the Bible Buffet (Wilcox, 2003); which in essence is concerned with taking what works for you from the Bible whilst not using others. Here the focus is upon Christianity as a moral guide, moving away from teaching and worship. Refocussing then disrupts conventional understandings of doing Christianity (e.g. worship) in favour of being a Christian and living in a Christian fashion. Of course, cues are taken from established Christian norms and morality, but the focus shifts belief in God towards Christianity as a lifestyle and ideology.

For many this refocussing may be a step too far from traditional understandings of what Christianity is, and it could be argued that the participants were in fact no longer be recognisable a Christian. Yet participants argued that Christianity's strength lies in its ability to speak to them personally and to help them gain understanding of their life. In everyday life, the participants in my research suggest that this has been presented in two ways: as an internalisation of God, where Christianity is about inner-peace and finding meaning through personal reflection and meditation; or as focussing upon Christianity as a force for love and equality. Such refocussing has been noted in previous research in relation to religious texts. Yip (2010), in his research with LGB Christians noted a shift from more traditional interpretation of texts that are not accepting towards LGB lives, towards a more flexible approach. Yip (2010: 37-41) highlights three strategies: 'defensive apologetics', a re-contextualisation of texts, 'cruising texts', uncovering same-sex lives within texts, and 'turning theology upside down', where religion is refocussed with the self at its centre.



For some of the participants Christianity had become a very personal and reflective process. Participants explored how their Christianity relation to a quest for inner-peace most concerned with self-healing and learning to be comfortable in your own skin. The life-stories of Kimberley and Florence are most relevant here as they both explored how Christianity is not related to belief in an external supernatural God but as a process of finding yourself as a whole being, including of course, sexuality. Kimberley spoke about how God was metaphoric and referred to a journey or process of getting to know yourself and your purpose:

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.

The choice that Kimberley is referring to here is between her faith and her sexuality, in relation to her local Church's insistence that she must choose in order to be accepted within the congregation. However, Kimberley argued that this did not fit with her understanding of God or God's purpose for her. Believing in God was about believing in a 'force which gives me peace and lets me understand that we are all connected' (Kimberley's words). Florence explored this rather more explicitly during the interview and was able to articulate that her faith was consistent and compatible with her sexuality due to re-focussing Christianity towards an internal process of self-acceptance and peace.

Finding God is finding myself. So, religion is like a quest to find who I am and where I am.

Here Florence is exploring how for her God represents a something to work towards and to aspire to and through self-reflection and Christian values she gets close to this. From the stories of the participants it does appear that this approach is perhaps the most radical proposed, in terms of re-focussing religion. However, a number of participants were a lot more prescriptive about using these Christian values to underline their belief; placing this at the centre of the belief system. This was reflected in understanding Christianity in terms of acceptance of others, being fair, and working to equality. Here the focus is upon living a good Christian life guided by love above selfish drives. Michael, a 27-year-old man who had not attended church since he was 18, explained this in relation to his worship style. This does relate to the ideas put forward by Kimberley and Florence but with a greater emphasis on Christian values:

I basically put aside an hour a day for meaningful time... it's like a relaxation time where I sit.... perhaps with candles and so forth.... sometimes I will have music.... the candles aren't important either really none of it is really.... I just need a space to be alone with me and God and to think about the correct thing to do.... the Christian thing to do.

This refers to Michael's desire to be quiet and reflect inwards upon his life. However, Michael places his Christian values with an emphasis upon doing what he sees as the Christian thing. Through meditation and relaxation Michael felt able to reflect on the best way to be a Christian whilst being guided by his faith. Throughout the interview Michael referred to this refocussing as a centralising of his Christian values rather than being restricted by Christian teaching and doctrine. He stated that his beliefs were 'guided by being a good person, a Christian person who values all people...and does this through love'. Love was a recurrent word throughout the interview and

represented a need for fairness and acceptance. For Michael enacting these values was what made him a Christian and as a result he felt free from any exclusionary practices that the Church may partake in.

### *Individualised Christianity*

Whereas ‘refocussing’ refers to shifting the focus of Christianity towards other, more salient aspects of life, ‘individualising’ refers to revising or editing what aspects of traditional Christianity speak to bisexual Christians. In relation to religious texts, Wilcox’s (2001) Bible Buffet is a good example of how this is enacted in religious life, as passages which affirm sexuality are embraced, whereas others that conflict are rejected. However, individualisation relates to all aspects of Christian life (e.g. attendance, community, support and scripture).

A good proportion (25%) of the participants in the research no longer attended church on a regular basis and this was often the first step in constructing a more individual form of Christianity. However, it is important to note that of those who still attended regularly (around 40%), they all practised some negotiation of their Christianity. Unlike their sexuality, religion was seen as being open to interpretation and malleable in terms of its meaning. A more individualised Christianity often is less reliant on official doctrine or teaching and is more selective of what aspects are adopted. For those who leave the Church, there appeared to be two main reasons for doing this. Firstly, the participants felt that there were too many conflicts between official teaching and their lives, perceiving the church as unwelcoming towards bisexuals. Secondly, that church practices were not compatible with bisexual life particularly in terms of the emphasis on coupled relationships.

The participants did not feel that adapting their faith or disengaging with the church completely, made them any less of a Christian than those who attended regularly. The experiences of Elanor are most striking here, as she explored her Christianity in terms of a selection process:

Christianity has so much to teach us and I take what I need, but I don't labour on what I don't need, and it's that choice for me to make.

Later in the interview, we explored this idea in relation to a conversation she had had with a friend:

She was talking about the word of God and all that, saying I can't challenge those ideas, ways of being...but I'm here, living now. Things can only make sense if they are in relation to how I am living now.

It is clear that for Elanor this is no less Christian than adopting a literal interpretation of religion. Elanor's point is that the majority of the Church's teaching refers to societies that are entirely incompatible with our own. Although there are certain universal truths within Christianity, it is inevitable that such a religion will have aspects that do not fit with life today. For Elanor this referred to aspects of teaching on same-sex marriage, sexuality, gender and things that she perceived the Church to still hold archaic views on. A number of the participants justified this selective or individualised approach to their faith in relation to contradictions or problematic passages in the Bible. One participant, Joseph, explored how Leviticus was written to prevent incestuous sexual activities, which for him were irrelevant today. As sections like this exist, Joseph argued that it is only right to be selective in what parts of the Bible are accepted. Another participant, Cornelius, explained how the Old Testament prohibits the eating of meat on certain days, questioning why Christians would follow teaching on sexuality but not about eating meats.

The individualisation strategies practiced by the participants were done out of perceived necessity, rather than being as a result of sexual identity. Such strategies would not be distinct from other Christians although of course, individual motivations and experiences would be unique. Individualised Christianity in this regard then is rooted in traditional understandings of Christian beliefs and worship, but the participants highlight how this was done in relation to contemporary life. Participants discussed ignoring aspects that they felt were incompatible with life today and focussing upon teaching they viewed as being useful.

### **Concluding remarks**

This chapter has done two main things: Firstly, it has explored how the participants understood and then negotiated their sexuality in light of their Christianity.

Importantly, and in contrast to some of my previous work (Toft 2009, 2012, 2014) it has attempted to do this in an intersectional manner in order to explore what it is about Christianity that has led to such negotiation. The stories of the participants suggest that sexuality was not usually the main focus in terms of negotiating or adapting identities to reconcile any potential conflicts. Bisexuality was often seen as something which was vital to understanding their 'selves' and an aspect of their character that was not up for negotiation. However, some participants explored how bisexuality could be seen as flexible and at times of potential risk to personal safety, sexuality could remain hidden. The participants recounted ideas around the connection between gender and sexuality, suggesting this helped them as Christians. Bisexuality was also 're-imagined' in reference to faith, where sexual activity and behaviour is downplayed, although such an approach was rare. Here the influence of Christian belief on gender had a direct impact upon how participants saw their

sexuality. Traditional gender roles were adapted into some of the participants lives and clearly influenced how they enacted their sexuality. Additionally, celibacy was explored as a lifestyle choice which reflected spiritual closeness in relationships but also in regard to its potential to disrupt binary categorisation, a key feature in bisexuality.

Second, the chapter has shown that in general the participants all engaged in some kind of adjustment of their religion, which was seen as the main reason for any conflicts they felt. Such negotiations were often seen as unavoidable due to what they perceived as rigidity in official Church teaching.

Through a re-focussing or individualising of what Christianity means, participants were able to conceptualise their faith as supporting their sexuality. A number of participants focussed on a Christianity which centralises messages of love and acceptance. Although, many of the tenets of Christianity may not be present in the lives of the respondents who did this, they argued that the central messages of Christianity remained clear for them. Importantly, they identified as Christian and felt that their morals and approach to life represented what could be called a Christian ethic. Others, again through necessity, aligned themselves with strategies used by lesbian and gay Christians, individualising and restricting what aspects of Christianity to use in their lives.

The overall aim of the chapter has been to re-evaluate and add to my previous work, which has tended to explore Christianity or bisexuality in isolation. This chapter has attempted to present such identities intersectionally and to acknowledge that in everyday lives, such identities will inform and impact upon each other. In simple terms, Christianity for a bisexual person will be understood and negotiated

differently to a gay person. It is important to explore such strategies as this can teach us much about religion and sexuality.

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