

Mutedness and Marginalisation: An Analysis of the Experiences of LGBTQIA+ Christians

By Andrew Barwick

Introduction

Is it not incompatible to be both a Christian and identify as LGBTQIA+? I have encountered this question, phrased in a variety of ways, frequently throughout my time as a Christian from people of various backgrounds of faith and sexuality. This question speaks to an apparent cognitive dissonance that exists in the commonly held understandings of queer identities and Christianity. Indeed, Patrick Cheng, in their introduction to 'Queer Theology,' starts by asking: "Isn't 'queer theology' an oxymoron or an inherent contradiction in terms?" (Cheng 2011: 2). It should come as little surprise that there appears to be a disconnect between those who identify as LGBTQIA+ and the Church; one must only turn on the news to hear of groups such as the Westboro Baptist Church who openly espouse this disconnect, whose official website URL is godhatesfags.com and are known for holding up signs protesting pride parades for example one saying "Same sex marriage dooms nations" visible in photos on their website. Of more surprise to me was the lack of scholarly work that dealt with the topic. Almost all existing work on this matter, especially that which is widely circulated, deals with the 'Theology of Queerness' or the way that the Church should interact with LGBTQIA+ groups, such as Reckless Love (Cheng 2011) and Contemporary Christianity and LGBT Sexualities (Hunt 2016). These

works are mainly focused on addressing the identity rather than those who have that identity as holistic individuals; the question is very much phrased in terms of ideas and ideologies, not practical living. Anthropology is uniquely situated as a discipline that provides both a theoretical and a methodological framework for exploring the lived experiences of those who occupy the seemingly oxymoronic space of a queer Christian; through this lens, we might begin to understand how they construct identity, create community, and experience belonging.

Part way through my fieldwork, while washing the dishes with John, one of my research participants, I was talking about how my project was progressing.

"Yeah, I had a long chat with a guy the other day, he just couldn't understand what it was like being a gay Christian. I spent about ten minutes explaining things to him, but he still didn't get it."

"The amount of people who don't get it. When it comes up they're like, 'ooh interesting! So how does that work?'" John sighed.

Povinelli uses the term 'incommensurability' from the field of linguistics to describe communities that exist in a space that is 'socially inconceivable' (Povinelli 2001: 325). Within linguistics, the term incommensurability refers to two ideas that function separately but cannot be accurately translated together. This has then been taken on by Povinelli and others to refer to incommensurate worlds: the incorporation of two states of being that cannot exist together within a certain cosmology. What my conversation with John highlighted was the way that queer Christians are incommensurable to the cosmology that dominates the communities we exist within. It is clear, however, that

identifying as LGBTQIA+ and Christian are not wholly incommensurable as John and many others demonstrate. What, then, is it like to live between two identities that are believed to be incompatible and oxymoronic?

Methodology and Context

I conducted my research mostly as formal, unstructured interviews with four research participants, university students at the University of St Andrews in Scotland. I also used my own experiences, both in spending time with them in a non-formal setting and in talking about my project to others, to help form my understanding of the ways in which queer Christians are perceived and how they shape that perception through words, actions, and self-portrayal. After much discussion with my research participants, I will be using the terms LGBTQIA+ and queer interchangeably throughout to refer to people who identify as non-heterosexual, non-heteroromantic, transgender, or non-gender-conforming. These are chosen in an effort to balance convenience with inclusion. As the anonymity and safety of my research participants is highly important, all names used have been changed.

While this ethnography will not focus on the theological debate behind the question of sexuality and Christianity, it is important to provide context for the following discussion of identity and belonging. There are several passages in the Bible that condemn homosexual acts, such as 1 Corinthians 6:9: “Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? ... Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men” (NIV), which have inspired discussion and debate that has largely been resolved into two opposing viewpoints, Side A and Side B. Side A Christians are those who believe

that the Bible affirms same sex sexual activity; Side B Christians are those who believe that the Bible does not condone sexual activity with the same sex. In the area where my fieldwork was conducted, the majority of the Churches and Christian communities supported the Side B interpretation and consider homosexual sexual activity to be sinful.

The Marginalised Individual

When looking at the experiences of LGBTQIA+ Christians, identity was the central framing of the debate. Both queer communities and Christianity locate identity as a key tool for categorisation, whether in talking about sexual identity or “identity in Christ.” Both faith and sexuality are often treated as core ‘propositions that a person believes of him or herself’ (Warnke 2008: 1). These propositions, used to ground oneself, are integral in self-understanding; however, at times these propositions can be seen as contradictory either by oneself or by one’s community, as is the case with queer identity and Christian identity. Heavy emphasis is placed on community in both Christian and queer groups and, as a result, sub-cultures arise. It is often the case that people feel caught in between these two conflicting identities and sub-cultures and in these cases, they can be seen to be ‘marginal’ (Stonequist 1935: 10). While individual experiences and understandings of identities differ, Stonequist suggests that there is a ‘life-cycle’ amongst those who are marginal and the way they negotiate and understand their complex identity (Stonequist 1935: 10). In my own research, the experiences of my research participants shared some common elements and broadly fitted into the pattern of Stonequist’s life cycle of the marginal man. The experience of one of my participants, Lydia, most clearly maps this.

The first stage of this cycle takes place 'when the individual is being introduced into the two cultures and learns more about the aspects of their identity (Stonequist 1935: 10). In the case of my research participants, this happened in different orders and ways. For Lydia, her understanding of her sexual identity predates her Christian identity. She spent time understanding her sexuality and made friends with other LGBTQIA+ people, learning about queer culture in the process. At this point her sexuality was a key part of her identity. Later she joined a Christian community through some of her friends and became a Christian. She was broadly aware of the differences in culture between the two groups but did not have any trouble joining the Christian community. For others they joined a Christian community before they understood their sexual identity. For all of them, they experienced a period of time in which they had a Christian identity and a queer identity simultaneously.

The second stage is when the individual 'becomes aware of the cultural conflict' and of their status as a marginal person (Stonequist 1935: 10). This is a sort of rupture in the continuity of identity wherein it is made clear that the two cultures and two identities are not perfectly in line. As one of my participants, Luke put it: "[He] definitely realised [he] was gay before he realised that the church didn't like gay people." Luke then reached a point of apparent conflict and it prompted him to re-examine his understanding of both aspects of his identity. Often this crisis is caused by external factors, as for the individual it appears normal to hold both identities. This was the case for John, who contended, "I don't feel like I made a big deal about it, it was already picked out for me." He had the experience of being pulled in to an already existing debate.

For Lydia the crisis was highlighted by the reactions of some of her Queer friends to her becoming a Christian, as they felt betrayed by her or assumed that she would now be hostile towards them. These crisis points caused reflection and reconsideration of personal status and identity.

The third stage in negotiating one's marginal identity is the resolution and the 'more enduring responses of the individual to the situation' (Stonequist 1935: 11). All the responses in this stage were different and all showed the ways that the incommensurability could be dealt with. For Luke, his method of continuing to engage with the question and resisting being categorised as a marginal individual, was by advocating for the middle ground of queer Christian, both in person and on social media, and challenging the dismissal of one or both aspects of his identity. For Lydia, her response was to renegotiate the importance of the two aspects of her identity. When she first came out, it was important to her to identify as queer, but since becoming a Christian, this need has lessened. For her, Christian identity plays a role in everyday life, whereas sexual identity does not. Now her Christian identity has importance over all else and her sexual identity is less dominant. The communities that she spends most time with now do not create a culture clash, and so for much of the time her sexual identity is not a secret, but also not something that comes to the fore in everyday discussion or experience. She also thinks that it is unhealthy for everyone to focus too much on sexual identity as this leads to the exclusion of others, and finds the process of labelling to be a dangerous one.

By looking at the experiences of queer Christians through the life cycle of the marginalised individual, similarities can be seen, demonstrating that there is a

unifying experience amongst those who identify as queer Christians and the way they negotiate their complex identity. Far from being an incommensurate identity, LGBTQIA+ Christianity is a nuanced and complex identity in which every individual's experience is different and different weights can be placed upon dual aspects of identity.

The Muted Group

For John, understanding his sexual orientation had provided him with a different perspective on Christianity and was the catalyst for critical reflection. As we discussed what this new perspective meant for him and what he felt it had changed, our conversation was punctuated by long pauses as John would consider a question I had asked or reflect on a statement he had just made. We were discussing how he felt among his church and in Christian communities when, after one such pause, John said, "It feels like I'm part of a group but not the one being talked to," and then after another pause, "I now understand what a woman must feel like." Unbeknownst to him, John had just clearly described the experience of being part of a muted group and clarified the direction of my fieldwork. The concept of a muted group was originally proposed by Edwin Ardener in 1968 and was then built upon by his wife, Shelly Ardener, in her 1977 book *Perceiving Women*.

The conditions that give rise to muted groups are those in which a dominant group defines the acceptable 'structural position' as one that fits their own 'dominant model' of understanding or being in the world (Ardener 1977: xii). The sub-dominant groups 'for whom the "fit" might be very imperfect' then face two choices: either entirely lose their voice or conform to the models of expression of the dominant group (Ardener 1977: xii). For these sub-

dominant groups, the only way to gain a proper hearing is to express themselves in a way that is in keeping with the dominant idiom of the larger community. John's comment of understanding the experience of a woman is key, because the idea of muted groups was originally raised to redress a male dominance, and led to the creation of feminist anthropology. John's comment co-identified with another muted group, showing that the experience of being muted is similar for him, despite different circumstances and power relations. John felt a part of a group that is caught between two dominant models; he does not fit into either of them. Among the Christian communities that he was a part of, the two models are the side B Christian, who conforms to the dominant ideas of the Church, or the liberal queer activist, who harbours some hurt or ill will for the church. John felt that he had, due to being side B, become a "poster boy" for some church communities, having to conform to the model of what that means and becoming unable to express his own doubts or offer criticism of the model. Another of my research participants, Peter, encountered the other dominant model. Despite not having experienced any persecution or "bad experiences really," whenever he talked to representatives of Church communities, it was assumed that he was "apologising for everything the church has done." These representatives had pigeonholed him into one of their dominant models of queer Christianity. Peter acknowledged that they had done so with every intent of love, but they were still talking to their model and not to the person sitting in front of them.

Similarly, among the LGBTQIA+ communities that John had interacted with, he felt there existed a dominant "taxonomy" that he had to fit into and a system of "identity politics" that he had to play a role in. He said that it seemed

strange that, in a movement built upon freedom and self-expression, there was still such a requirement to conform to models and fit stereotypes. My other research participants also expressed this notion. One told me of the problems that he had in joining church communities due to the way that he did not fit with their dominant model; another of the difficulty talking about faith at an LGBT+ event. These experiences clearly speak of the way that LGBTQIA+ Christians are a group who are muted or overlooked by the dominant models present both in Christian and LGBTQIA+ in St. Andrews.

The effect of mutedness upon the LGBTQIA+ Christians in St. Andrews quickly became clear. Three of my research participants created a group for queer Christians to meet, regardless of what aspects of Christianity or queer identity they identified with. They describe the group as a safe space, one where people who have a common experience can meet and work out how to navigate the overlap in their two identities. For them, the group was a space of safety, non-judgementalism, and community. Community was one of the main themes that repeatedly came up in all my interviews. “It can be an isolating experience” and “I want more inclusion in communities” were just two of the oft repeated ideas. In the face of being muted and overlooked, what rose to the fore was the need to be around other people who also shared the same experiences, the need not to be alone. All of my research participants had used online forums and social media to connect with others who shared their experience, but all of them also saw a face-to-face, “real” connection as one of the most valuable things. The phenomenon of muted peoples creating community is one that is well documented and is in no way exceptional (Ardenner 1977) and should be seen as further clarification of the mutedness of queer

Christians. The act of forming a group is an act against being muted. Some of the members have described the group as “proving that we are here” and as a way to promote visibility. The formation of the group is seen as the first step in breaking out of the muted space and in showing that queer Christianity is not as incommensurable as it is often perceived to be.

Conclusion

The theories of muted groups and of marginalisation highlight the ways that LGBTQIA+ Christians navigate and live in a space that is believed by many to be an impossible one, either due to theological issues, cultural issues, or issues of community. In opposition to the idea that all queer Christians have the exact same experience, my research has shown that they do have similar experiences and that problems arise as a result of their status within community. I have also shown how these experiences help to create a shared space where a new community can be formed. This community can then act as proof, beyond individual voices, that queer Christians do exist and, as a community they can create a voice for themselves and challenge the discourse that largely leaves them muted. Above all, rather than focusing entirely on structures, ideologies, and communities in the abstract, looking at individuals who exist within spaces that are outside of the dominant voice allows for greater nuance and understanding. By occupying two different spaces, the queer Christians I spoke to were able to offer insight into aspects of identity, the Church, and queer culture that were only accessible through their unique lens.

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