

# Growing up Gay and Religious.

## Conflict, Dialogue, and religious Identity Strategies

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### Abstract

Homosexuality has become a divisive issue in many religious communities. Partly because of that, individuals growing up in such a community and experiencing same sex attractions need to negotiate the messages about homosexuality with their own experiences. This paper explores the identity strategies of religious communities as the background of individual identity struggles. Following a discussion of Bauman's 'grammars of identity/alterity, it describes four different discourses employed in conservative protestant and evangelical circles: holiness, subjectivity, obedience, and responsibility and four modes of negotiation: Christian lifestyle, gay lifestyle, commuting (compartmentalisation), and integration. By combining an analysis of discourses on the community level with individual strategies, this narrative research helps to better understand the interactions of (group) culture and individual coping.

**Keywords:** homosexuality; religion, identity strategies; conflict; narrative

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In the midst of the present-day conflicts about homosexuality in religious circles, one might easily forget that it is not just an abstract issue that is at stake, but the actual lives of real people. No matter how one describes the conflict, on every side of the divide we find individuals and communities that try to make sense of their lives and live with integrity toward their own values, toward the people that matter to them, and toward what is sacred in their lives. The high degree of polarization makes it difficult to achieve some kind of compromise or to allow for multiple loyalties. This state of affairs is a risk factor for mental health and associated with outcomes such as depression, anxiety, and suicide ideation (Lewis, 2009). To discover oneself to be a member of a contested, stigmatized, or even rejected group is at least potentially harmful, even when many people in this situation find ways to cope with it.

In this polarized state of affairs, many feel compelled to engage in conflict or separation rather than in dialogue. That is to say: individuals as well as communities develop their identities and employ identity strategies in such a way that they can negotiate the conflict and – in a sense the reverse process – they use the conflict to foster their sense of identity.

In this paper, we will first look at the level of communities and then at the level of individuals, precisely because we are interested in understanding the ways persons navigate these conflicting identities. We are not interested in promoting a particular view of homosexuality. Our aim is to clarify the conflict and explore the identity strategies operating in it. In doing so, we will be able to discover reasons why sometimes we prefer conflict over dialogue. In a second step, we will look into the identity strategies of young homosexual Christians – experiencing the divide within themselves – and explore how they negotiate the conflict in a ‘dialogue interieur’.

### **Method and background**

This paper is part of a research project investigating the conflicts between religion and homosexuality (Ganzevoort et al., 2010). While focusing on how individuals construe their life stories and negotiate their sexual and religious identities, we pay thorough attention to the interpretive frameworks available in their religious and cultural contexts. We conducted open narrative interviews, inviting participants to talk about their religious and sexual biography. Participants were selected through various contact persons using purposeful sampling to ensure heterogeneity (Patton, 2002). The sample consisted of 10 young adults (age 21-30, 5 male, 5 female), in equal numbers coming from evangelical/charismatic/Pentecostal churches and from conservative/orthodox protestant churches and from more urban and more rural areas. We also ensured that we would have participants making different life style choices regarding religion and homosexuality and even defining their identities in different ways. All participants are from Caucasian Dutch background, which limits the generalizability across cultural borders. Interviews lasted around two hours and were tape recorded and transcribed.

In the analysis, a narrative model was used that covers six dimensions: structure, perspective, role division, tone, relational positioning, and audience (Ganzevoort, 1998). Special attention was given to the use of metaphors to discover dominant discourses. All interview text was coded by two researchers using qualitative data analysis software. Initial analyses were offered to the participants for validation. In cross case analysis, we aimed at describing the particular conflicts and issues they experienced as well as the strategies and outcomes. More specifically, we looked at how dominant discourses in their social and religious context influenced their negotiation of identities. This analysis helps us assess the impact of failing intergroup dialogue on individuals caught in the middle.

Though not at the heart of this investigation, mental health consequences are an important reason for and aspect of this study. The rationale for the project lies in part in the mental health risk involved in marginalization and identity tensions. In

our sample we found several indicators of mental health issues. One participant, Carolyn (27), stated: "I can never be completely happy, because I am gay and I don't know how to cope with my identity. But as a child of God I can also never be perfect or never really call myself a child of God, because I cannot find my way in faith." Evert (29) says: "I despised my homosexuality" and "I have a hard time accepting myself." David (29) tells us how his choice to remain celibate sometimes pains him: "Of course I would want to have a relationship. I need someone to be with, to talk to, physical contact." Someone else (not a participant in this study) told us: "I hoped to be 'cured', but nothing happened. I did everything they told me but nothing changed. I was sad and confused and asked myself whether my faith maybe wasn't sincere or strong enough. I doubted everything: myself, my faith, God." As we will show in our analysis of the different discourses about homosexuality, there is usually a major loss involved. Some choose to abstain from the development of their sexuality and experience loss of self or alienation from their body and from significant others. Others experience alienation from their spiritual sources and well-being. Still others struggle with profound feelings of guilt and shame. We did not set out to analyse these mental health issues in detail, but try to understand the identity processes behind and in response to these issues.

### **Homosexuality as conflict**

The debate on homosexuality in the church (and other religious communities) has risen from invisibility to being one of the central conflicts in Christianity within a few decades. The worldwide Anglican community is in the midst of fierce struggles that may easily lead to a schism not only in the United States, but also on a global scale. The ordination of a gay bishop disclosed a tension between churches from the west and churches from the global south. It also made clear that the distance between liberal and evangelical groups within the church is growing to the point of possible mutual exclusion. In the Netherlands, perhaps one of the most tolerant countries in this respect, there are many discussions about the position of orthodox-protestant and Roman Catholic churches and organizations that reject homosexuality. These organizations are usually quick to assert that they do not reject homosexuals as persons, but only the homosexual lifestyle. The Roman Catholic church takes an exceptionally strict position, especially in the words of its official leaders. In liberal churches in the Netherlands, homosexuality officially is not an issue and church leaders like to speak of full acceptance. A closer look reveals that at least within the largest protestant church, a significant number of congregations and ministers reject homosexuality and in fact exclude homosexual persons from the church or from ordained ministry. A few exceptions apart, the evangelical churches are known for their rejection, influenced by evangelical and fundamentalist counterparts in the United States. They differ in the degree to which they actually excommunicate homosexual members or try to heal them through prayer, therapy, and exorcism. The same may be said for many of the migrant churches that usually belong to evangelical-charismatic Christianity, but they add to that an ethnic and cultural

background that is also more negative toward homosexuality than the Dutch society in which they live. We refrain at this point from trying to sketch the parallel movements in contemporary world religions, partly because we are not familiar enough with that, partly because the whole issue is only just emerging and in many cases still remains completely under the surface. There are some individuals and organizations working for example on dialogue within Islam and Judaism, but on the whole awareness, reflection, and dialogue on homosexuality are not yet on the agenda.

So why has homosexuality become such a major issue with some even claiming it to be the most dangerous threat to Christian life and to the gospel, part of the cosmic battle that Satan is waging against the church. The interesting thing is that it need not be so central. It is quite clear that in the Bible homosexuality does not receive a lot of attention. There are some texts that may refer to homosexuality (dependent on one's interpretation), but overall the Bible is mute. At no point the stories show that Jesus was interested in this issue at all. Whether or not this indicates acceptance or self-evident disapproval is hard to say, but it does show that it wasn't a matter of debate in those days. The fuzz today therefore cannot be only because of biblical texts. It is also not due to the number of people with homosexual attractions, behaviours, or identities. It may be true that they have become more visible in the past few decades, but it still is a rather small group, usually estimated between 3 and 10 percent of the population (dependent on definition). According to the most radical Christian opponents of homosexuality, this small minority has succeeded in dominating the public domain through some kind of aggressive emancipation. Within the American context, they refer to this as the 'gay agenda', a well organized and sponsored effort to dismantle traditional morality and therefore directly attack the Christian values that are the heart of society (Herman 1997). They claim that by now schools and society at large are inundated by homosexual propaganda, even though a closer look shows the exact opposite: homosexuality is made almost invisible and covert and overt heterosexual images and messages are paramount.

It is not difficult then to argue that homosexuality is not really an issue worth all these conflicts, but that only raises the question why it has become so important. Apparently there is something at stake that makes it a suitable topic for conflict. The nature of this 'something' differs between societies. The most important element found in evangelical Christian views in the United States seems to be the protection of traditional values and families. What is at stake then primarily is the symbolic order on which society is founded and which in turn is shaped by the Christian religion. This symbolic order has clear gender demarcations at its centre and homosexuality is seen as a threat to this symbolic foundation of society. In several other places including major parts of Africa and Latin and South America, the key element seems to be masculinity, which can imply that life according to traditional gender roles is more important than the preference for a partner of a specific gender. Even when engaging in sexual relations with persons of the same gender, one would still count as male and heterosexual as long as one takes an

active macho role in it (Long 2004). In the Netherlands, the core feature in our understanding is the authority of the Bible versus individual autonomy. Conservative believers ground their rejection of homosexuality on the Bible and claim that they cannot be more tolerant without jeopardizing the whole notion of obeying God's revelation. Whether this is the reason for their position or a justification afterwards remains to be seen, but it is clear that this is the central topic.

### **Conflict and identity strategies**

The conflict around homosexuality may be interpreted as a confrontation between conflicting religious identities. That means that we not only look at the specific content of the conflict, but focus more on the pragmatic and performative aspects of rhetoric exchanges. The question is not what arguments are used, but how the conflict is framed and how that affects relations and identity construction. One of the interesting features then is that orthodox religious groups often reject the notion of a homosexual identity. They may be willing to accept that homosexuality exists, but they deny the right of homosexuals to claim that as part of their identity. Instead they frame it as a sin, a sickness, an aberration, a handicap, or something like that. In many cases, they also refute the conviction that homosexuality is inborn and genetically determinate, because that – it seems – would lead directly to accepting homosexuality as part of human nature. In defending this perspective, they often refer to ex-gay people, who moved from a homosexual identity to one in which they choose not to engage in homosexuality anymore.<sup>1</sup> In one interesting exchange, the religious leaders present claimed that religion was central to identity and homosexuality was a falsely chosen lifestyle. The speakers representing the gay community instead claimed that homosexuality was a nature given (or maybe God given) reality, whereas religion was an adopted lifestyle, probably as a result of indoctrination. In this exchange both groups denied the other the right to frame their perspective as a matter of identity. The reason to engage in the conflict using this line of reasoning may well be the underlying assumption in our western societies that a person's identity needs to be honoured and protected at all times. By defining one of the elements as part of identity and denying the other that status, both groups sought to bolster their own position and undermine the position of their opponent.

Part of this struggle on identities is the field of identity politics, the strategies used by marginalized groups to redefine their perspective and liberate it from oppression by the majority group (Heyes 2008). Central to identity politics is the fact that a group demand recognition for its authentic existence. They do not want to be accepted as neutral members of a society defined by the majority groups. They demand acceptance in their being different. These strategies of

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<sup>1</sup> Jones & Yarhouse (2007) conclude from a prospective and longitudinal study that change away from homosexuality is possible. Although their study is highly controversial because it seems to be devoted to furthering the aims of the ex-gay (or according to other scholars anti-gay) movement, it actually suggests that it is not sexual orientation that changes but sexual identity. Moreover, whereas participants showed a move away from homosexual identification, they did not develop a more heterosexual identification.

identity politics can be seen on both sides of the debate. Homosexuals claim acceptance as homosexuals, not just as citizens, and it is for that reason that they insist on describing homosexuality as identity. Religious groups claim the right to take positions that might otherwise be labelled as discriminatory, because their religious identity needs to be protected. As a result, they deny their opponents' identity status in order to render them powerless. Part of these identity strategies is the identification of an enemy. For evangelical Christianity, the homosexual community has become such an enemy, and this is what they mean when they speak of the 'gay agenda'. It is interesting to note that this construction emerged gradually and replaced their battle against the communists in the period after the second world war (Herman 1997). When anticommunism lost its plausibility, the 'devil discourse' of the Christian fundamentalists found a new shape in fighting homosexuality. This of course links directly to the theological structure of evangelical Christian faith, in which a cosmic battle is central. In this battle between God and Satan, the Christian experiences life as being under constant attack from the evil one. The fact that Christianity is losing its supremacy strengthens them in the conviction that they should be on the lookout for enemies. Homosexuality then is a great candidate, because it symbolizes the threat to traditional moral values. Moreover, precisely because it regards only a small minority and because still many people share a certain prejudice against and distaste for homosexuality, the Christian strategy of opposing homosexuality strengthens their religious identity and helps them gain support for their religious cause. The stance on homosexuality thus has become an identity marker for orthodox Christians, distinguishing them from more liberal believers and from the secular society at large. Such an identity marker functions to strengthen cohesion within the group by stressing differences from other constituencies. For reasons that we have outlined, homosexuality today serves as a proper identity marker and thus has become much more central than it could be expected to. In a historical perspective, this is not exceptional, because homosexuality has often been associated with the stranger. In early twentieth century France, it was referred to as the German vice, whereas in Germany it was called the French malady. In the sixteenth and seventeenth century it had been called the Italian vice, in the eighteenth French or English and in the nineteenth the 'Arab way' (Tamagne 2004). Daniel Defoe wrote that it originated in Turkey, in Israel it is attributed to Arabs, in Algeria to the French, in sub-Saharan Africa to Europe, and so on (Greenberg 1988). The missionaries called it pagan, and present-day evangelicals call it 'the gay agenda'. Homosexuality, it seems, is consistently interpreted as 'other', thereby demarcating it from the self.

The identity politics operant in the gay movement similarly find an easy target in religious groups. Terms like homophobia and bigotry are used to denunciate the others' religious position and describe them as archaic, dangerous and alien to central values in modern western society. The language of human rights is often employed to claim equality and has in fact been the legal basis for the acceptance of same-sex marriages in several countries. It is thus a similar story of struggle and oppression that urges homosexuals to engage in identity politics. But this response

not only forecloses any possibility of dialogue. It is also at odds with important tenets of the gay movement itself because it comes so close to an essentialist view of homosexuality. In defending the rights of homosexuals, they often resort to the argument that homosexuality is natural and inborn, whereas contemporary mainline theorists and queer activists more and more reject such notions of fixed sexuality and instead argue that sexuality can be construed and expressed in many fluid ways. The religious battle on homosexuality thus serves both parties in bolstering their identities. It is not just that they have a strong identity that brings them into conflict with one another; it is much more the conflict they engage in that strengthens their identity. They both use the other party as a projected enemy. This antithetical approach contradicts fundamental notions within both communities and jeopardizes any fruitful dialogue.

It may be useful to explore Baumann's (2004) theory of 'selving and othering' as a means of understanding these processes. Baumann departs from the view that claims to identity inevitably correlate with exclusions of alterity (every 'us' excludes a 'them') by describing a more complex set of three different grammars of connecting identity and alterity.<sup>2</sup> In describing them, one should note that they are built on differences between groups and fail to account for the complexities in both groups and the large overlap between the two. We use them here precisely because they help us understand the ways in which the controversy is framed. Apart from the binary grammar of only oppositions (which Baumann calls an 'anti-grammar'), the first grammar is one of orientalizing. This is in fact a binary grammar in which self and other are attributed oppositional sets of features. In the case of the homosexual-Christian divide, Christians may attribute faithfulness to themselves and unfaithfulness or promiscuity to homosexuals.<sup>3</sup> Likewise Christians may tend to think of themselves as dedicated to community and of homosexuals as inherently lonely people. Reversely, homosexuals may believe themselves to open, tolerant, and flexible, and see Christians as narrow-minded, repressive, and rigid. The orientalizing grammar however adds sophistication to the binary grammar by acknowledging that the other-group may have some admirable features that the self-group misses. For example, Christians sometimes describe homosexuals as creative and sensitive above average, and homosexuals may see Christians as more willing to sacrifice selfish desires. These positive attributions, however still serve dichotomous relationships. Therefore this grammar is usually a barrier to dialogue.

The second grammar is one of segmentation. In this grammar, society is divided in different groups that are subdivided again and again. By consequence, where

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<sup>2</sup> Baumann builds his theory on a reinterpretation of the anthropological work of Edward Saïd, E.E. Evans-Pritchard, and Louis Dumont, acknowledging that he is using their ideas creatively rather than representing them precisely. It is beyond the aims of this paper to assess the relation between Baumann's work and his inspirers.

<sup>3</sup> Many studies of homosexual behaviour give ample attention to the number of sex partners of homosexuals but fail to give corresponding numbers for heterosexuals, nor to explain a possibly high degree of promiscuity in light of the socio-cultural climate homosexuals live in or to differences between male and female homosexuality and the influence of gender differences. Without this kind of background, such studies contribute to the orientalizing grammar.

two persons may belong to the same group at a higher level in this hierarchy of segmentation, they may belong to different groups at a lower level. Different gay subcultures may be very much separated from one another (and some argue that gay men and lesbians should not be grouped together), yet join together over against a heterosexist society. The homosexual community may experience fierce conflict with other minority groups (say ethnic or religio-cultural), yet experience the same kind of alienation, and so on. Dependent on how the segmentation hierarchy is understood, Christians and homosexuals may define themselves as being in the same league (for example in critiquing or 'queering' the status quo of bourgeois society) or as fundamentally different. In fact, it seems we can witness a change in the hierarchy of religious affiliation in our times. Whereas in earlier days denominational differences were perhaps the most salient level of segmentation, it seems today the contrast between more liberal and more conservative perspectives is gaining importance to the expense of denominational frontiers as is evidenced by the bonds between liberal Catholics, Jews, Protestants, and Muslims in their fight for human rights and a similar alliance of the different conservative groups that sometimes group around notions of family values. One of the rhetorical devices in this grammar is to group the opponent with others who are described in a negative way. Thus, fundamentalist preachers may define homosexuals, pedophiles, terrorists, and thieves as posing a common threat to society's values and security. Reversely, gay activists may group Christians with Taliban, Nazis, and other oppressors. Although this segmentation grammar allows for contextual awareness and the understanding that on the highest level we all belong to the same group, it is easily employed to demonize the other and prevent any proper dialogue.

The third grammar is described as encompassment. This grammar acknowledges the difference of the other, but then defines a higher level in which the other is similar to the self. This similarity however is not defined as a higher order as in the segmentation grammar, but it is defined by the characteristics of the self that are projected on the other. By consequence, this grammar is often used primarily by dominant groups who incorporate (or colonize) the minority groups by allowing them to feel different and reinterpreting them as being intrinsically the same, thus resisting the challenge to the dominant group's self-understanding inherent to the encounter with the other. One example is the (declining) tendency to accept homosexual relationships but expecting them to be similar to heterosexual relationships in the sense that one partner should be the 'male' and the other the 'female'. This grammar is at work for example in research that tries to explain the origins of homosexuality without asking the same question about heterosexuality (presuming that to be the normal case that does not require explanation). In accepting homosexuality, it is still pathologized. Tellingly, this kind of research is often supported by faith based groups and treated as suspect by gay activists, precisely because the underlying assumptions are not challenged. Minority groups functioning in a society that fosters encompassment grammars usually learn to live accordingly and even define themselves in the terms of the hegemonic group. It is a major effort in identity politics to demand not being

accepted for being essentially similar, but for being different. In the emancipation of homosexuals, controversial high-visibility events like Gay pride parades have served to challenge the kind of encompassment grammar, precisely by being non-conforming, although one can ask whether the form really differs from comparable heterosexual displays in carnivals and other events.

### **Discourses**

Moving from this macro level of cultural clashes to the mesolevel of religious communities, it is useful to look into the different religious discourses that are being employed. In the narrative research project that informs this paper, we could identify four different discourses among our participants, all of whom grew up in a conservative protestant or evangelical context. The first two seemed more prominent in the evangelical narratives, the latter two more in the conservative protestant ones, but we will not conclude too much from that. Our aim is to describe some structural features rather than generalize from this material to the more complex features of religious traditions as such.

The first discourse centres around holiness and victory. Human life is understood as a constant struggle with sin and temptation, which means that personal conversion, a born-again experience, and sanctification will define the Christian life. Guided and empowered by the Holy Spirit, believers should and can be victorious in this struggle. They should be critical toward their own affections because that is precisely an area of temptation. Says evangelical raised Helen (25): “I regard this secret homosexual relationship I had as a mistake I made and as something that just doesn’t fit me. And that just, that just won’t happen again.” Instead they should focus on their relation with God and live life accordingly. Almost without exception, homosexuality is seen as part of the world of sin and temptation, and participants who were raised and still live in this discourse tend to say that they have had homosexual struggles rather than develop a gay identity. David (29, Baptist) says: “I struggle with homosexuality but I have the freedom now to make a choice in what I want in my life. And that is the freedom God offers.” “I was made a man, so I am called to be with a woman. That is what the Bible tells me. So if I would be with a man, I would miss my vocation.” This relates to the belief that nothing is beyond God’s possibility to change it, including homosexual orientation. Overall, this discourse allows for personal experiences, even stresses their importance, but only insofar as they are modelled after and controlled by the dominant discourse.

The second discourse agrees with the focus on a personal relationship with God, but gives more credit to personal experiences of God. That is why we have labelled it a subjectivity-discourse. Personal authentic living with God is put to the foreground, which at times may imply divergence from the traditional teachings of the community. Andreas (23, evangelical) connects this to particular experiences: “And the moment my father and I had finished praying about how I would have to cope with my homosexuality, actually, there was a large rainbow in the sky. And that was like: yes, God approves of it as well. I thought like: yeah, no

matter what, God loves you anyway and he will not destroy you. For the sign of the rainbow is of course, God's endless love and, towards human being. And also of course it is the sign of the gay community and the diversity of human beings." Usually this discourse does not allow for a real break with central issues, among which the communities of the participants counted homosexuality because of the reasons described earlier. Nevertheless, religious subjectivity is stressed more than in the discourse of holiness and victory, because they believe and expect God to communicate directly with individual believers and to direct them in individual ways. There is still heteronomy, but the religious community plays a less central role in that.

The third discourse is one of obedience to God's law, and it operates more in conservative protestant circles. Life stories and faith stories count as legitimate stories only when they are in full agreement with biblical revelation as understood in these communities, usually stressing biblical inerrancy and absolute authority. Evert (29, orthodox-protestant) heard his pastor respond to his homosexuality: "homosexuality is a sin and it is not according to God's purpose". Pietist reformed Carolyn (27) tells us: "I increasingly felt imperfect and started to ask myself: if you are a lesbian, are you going to make the choice to get involved in sin? As a human being, I can never be completely happy, because I am gay and I don't know how to cope with my identity. But as a child of God I can also never be perfect or never really call myself a child of God, because I cannot find my way in faith. But I would want to ask God to bless me and support me." The biblical references are stronger than in the discourse of holiness, as is the conviction that victory over sin and temptation is not within reach. Sin remains a constant element of human life, only adding to guilt and dependence on God for forgiveness. Human experience is important only in the sense that it may tell us to what degree we are truly reached by God's undeserved grace. It is not a source of insight into what God expects from us, because that is revealed in the bible only.

The fourth discourse is one of responsibility. This discourse stresses the importance of obedience and of God's rule, but it leaves more room for personal responsibility in that it downplays the dependence on the church teachings to decide what God is asking from an individual and instead stresses that our own choices play a central role. Thus Gerwin (29, reformed): "And from that moment on, I have actually tried very consciously to create one world for me to live in, because this is who I am, this is the way I am." This is not to say that all options are open, because the responsibility is precisely to discover the will of God. The locus of authority in this discourse however shifts to become at least partially internal. Irene (30, mixed denominational background) is most radical in this respect: "I have to learn to know myself and remove the barriers so that I can become me more and more, to find that unique me that connects to the great light and to God who, well, expects me to be, or hopes me to be. That is my vocation, to be me."

These four discourses can be found among our participants. As expected, they have a different effect on the ways individuals can construe their life and faith

narrative and develop a religious and/or sexual identity as we will elaborate in the next paragraph. At this point we want to highlight the structural dimensions of these four discourses. The holiness and obedience discourse share a predominantly external locus of authority and therefore strong heteronomy. The subjectivity and responsibility have an internal locus of authority and a weaker heteronomy. We would hesitate to speak of autonomy too soon, or imply that autonomy is absent in the other discourses, but it is at least a difference in the degree of external authority. The difference between the holiness and subjectivity discourses on the one hand and the obedience and responsibility discourses on the other has to do not only with the different groups of more evangelical versus more protestant participants and the theologies involved in these backgrounds. Implied in that is also a distinction between a stronger focus on affect in the first two and a stronger focus on rational dimensions in the latter two.

### **The dialogue within: gay Christians?**

How do these discourses and the construction of conflict between Christian faith and homosexuality affect gay Christians? This is what we have been investigating in this project, collecting autobiographical interviews from a group of young people from evangelical or orthodox reformed backgrounds. In our analyses, we focus on identity strategies they use to cope with their conflicting identity elements. For that purpose, we distinguish between social and personal identity. This again regards the pragmatic and rhetoric aspects of identity and not only the referential or essential aspects. It is not just 'who I am', but also 'whom I want to belong to'. Whereas personal identity primarily focuses on the question how one can create a meaningful and somewhat consistent life story, social identity focuses on the question how one can combine different group memberships. As long as these group memberships don't exclude one another, we usually don't even notice. We authors of this paper are hardly aware, for example, that we are male as well as Dutch, because these two are not mutually exclusive. More than that, they both identify us as being part of the hegemonic groups in the Netherlands. The fact that we are part of the academic forum as well as connected to religious groups, carries already much more tensions, because what we say and do in either of these groups is not necessarily acceptable in the other. When the different groups are in a more conflictual relationship, we start to speak of hybridity, and dual group membership is sometimes described in terms of hyphenated identity. When someone finds him- or herself to be both evangelical Christian and homosexual, this tension can sometimes become unbearable, given the ways in which the discourses are built and performed.

According to social identity theory, we have the option to define our features to be part of our social identity and foreground it in our performance or to keep it private and see it as a personal characteristic that has little to do with our group membership (Tajfel, 1981). We can organize our social life around such a feature, or we can decide to render it more or less invisible. That does not necessarily mean we deny or suppress it, but only that we claim it to be irrelevant to our social identity. If we discover within ourselves certain features that are connected

to the hegemonic groups, positive self-evaluation ensues and we integrate such features without much consideration. That is to say, we accept those elements as part of our personal and social identity and we find pride in them. In an evangelical religious group, experiencing a divine miracle is such an element that is easily integrated. If on the other hand we discover something that connects us to marginalized or repressed groups, we end up with a negative self-evaluation. One way of solving that is to see the unwanted identity as a personal issue. By leaving it outside our social identity, we can avoid becoming identified with a marginalized group. This is what happens when homosexual Christians say for example that they are not homosexual but only have homosexual problems. Taking that position, their religious group will often accept them as one of their own, because their homosexuality is not accepted but defined as something to struggle with. Likewise, in parts of gay subculture a negative stance toward religion may result in homosexuals downplaying their religious desires, experiences, and beliefs.

In our research, we find different strategies of negotiating the conflicting identity elements of religion and homosexuality. To describe these strategies, we distinguish four basic modes (Rodriguez and Ouellette 2000, Schnoor 2006). The first one is the choice for a religious lifestyle. This implies adherence to religious groups and downplaying homosexual identity elements. Some go as far as rejecting their homosexuality altogether in the form of denial or a search for healing as in the ex-gay movement (Erzen 2006). Others admit to having homosexual attractions, but these are framed as weaknesses to struggle with rather than parts of their identity. "Is my sexuality my identity? No, that is not my primary identity. Well, eh, like I describe it now: I am a child of God: that is my primary identity. From a sexual perspective I am confused, that's the way I experience it, eh, but I have been created as a man. And from the Bible and how it is put together, I can see only one thing: that a man has been created for a woman. So, there are two options: either that will happen or you stay alone in life" (David). When they engage in homosexual activities, this is interpreted as lapse into sin, a mistake that should not be given too much significance. "I am not homosexual myself, but I had a relationship with a girl" (Helen). For others such behaviour is more or less part of their lives, but simply not something to talk about, let alone something to claim as their identity.

The second mode is the exact opposite, a choice for a gay lifestyle. In this case one relinquishes his or her religious affiliation in favour of a clearly homosexual identity. Gerwin felt it would be hypocrisy to "engage in a Christian environment without being convinced of the Christian faith." For many, this choice follows from disappointment in their faith, God, their church, or their fellow believers. They may have tried hard to overcome their homosexuality, only to find that this condition will not go away. They may be disappointed by negative attitudes of pastors or church members and respond to the rejection they experience with a kind of counter-rejection (Yip 1999). Sebastian (reformed, late twenties) describes how he learned that "God would punish everyone who would somehow get off

the track". He started to ask himself "what do I want for myself and no longer what do others want me to do or what does God want me to do. At a certain moment it was just like: with what do I feel comfortable and what do I want? And what is going to make me happy? So at this moment I have let go of my faith. I don't go to church anymore, I don't believe in God anymore. And if he does exist, then I have extremely bad luck, but I just don't believe it." Within the gay movement, this negative stance toward Christianity is widespread, and usually it is built upon individual experiences of rejection. For some there is a lingering spiritual desire that cannot be accommodated in any form of religious affiliation because of their negative experiences, leaving them no option but to develop some idiosyncratic and almost secretive spiritual life. It is not – in this mode – connected to a religious group or identity.

In the third mode, these extremes are combined in what can be called a commuter approach to identities. Here people move from one identity to the other, belonging to both mutually exclusive groups in what can be seen as parallel worlds. Even as she was in a relationship with another woman, Carolyn said: "But I will never really have the courage to come out with that nor really have the courage to choose such a life because I, eh, expect that my family won't be able to manage that". Regularly these different worlds are located in different areas, but at least they consist of different groups, individuals, and values. A telling example involves a student who was very active in the church in his home-town during the weekends. On weekdays however, living in Amsterdam, he associated with other gay persons and even started working in a gay bar. He felt connected to both worlds in a sincere way, but he had no way of combining these two worlds. In many cases this mode is used to develop a new gay identity when one is not ready or willing to give up an old religious identity. So Evert tells he was "going to this Christian gay organization and enjoying those activities, and at the same time not telling my friends. So for the rest not integrating it in your life. Not wanting to take those steps." Often, however, one can only live in a commuter mode for a limited time, because it is increasingly difficult to prevent the two groups one lives in from meeting one another.

The fourth mode then is a seamless integration of both identity elements. In this mode one does not see these elements as mutually exclusive anymore, even though the groups one belongs to may still be antagonistic toward each other. The integrator overcomes this antagonism and instead develops an identity that includes both the religious and the homosexual elements. Says Floor (23, evangelical): "If you state: God loves you the way you are. Then, this also has to be the case if you, if you are this way, that is unavoidable. I have taken that step at a certain moment and I was like: well, yeah, then I have to trust Him in that, then I have to trust God in that this is okay." Quite often integrators find that in their religious group there is more acceptance of their homosexuality than they had anticipated, sometimes on the condition that they will not enter a homosexual relation. In other cases integrators move to another religious group that is more

accepting. In both cases, however, the person finds a way of combining the identity elements into an integrated story.

These four modes are expressions and temporary or permanent outcomes of the negotiation between conflicting identity elements. Many individuals shift from one mode to another until they find a mode they feel at ease with. Some keep on shifting because neither mode really allows them to connect their conflicting allegiances. Whether or not they succeed in finding alternative stories that help them connect their religious and their sexual identity depends in part on how much space the hegemonic religious discourse allows. Here the two discourses with a strong external authority (holiness and obedience) are more problematic than the two discourses with weaker external authority (subjectivity and responsibility). In fact, we found that participants from an obedience discourse background had the least space to explore alternatives, precisely because every effort to do so already qualified as disobedience or rebellion. Some of the stories show how individuals can learn to transcend that discourse and reframe it in the direction of a responsibility discourse, which will allow them more options. In a sense, this is possible because the responsibility discourse is by necessity a subtext to the obedience discourse and the other way around. Likewise, individuals coming from a holiness discourse background may start to explore their options only if they learn to reframe the discourse in the direction of the subjectivity discourse. Those who do not find the space for this kind of reframing, are left with no choice than to succumb completely to the dominant discourse or leave it, thereby abandoning their entire religious identity.

What these individual identity strategies reflect, is in the end the need for dialogue between the conflicting groups they are a part of. It is precisely because these groups do not enter into dialogue, that individuals are caught in the middle and forced to solve this tension on their own. They may find companions on the road and develop new communities that help them bridge the conflicting groups they belong to. But the fact remains that their identity struggles result from the identity strategies of these conflicting worlds.

### **Clinical implications**

The main clinical implication of this nuanced analysis is that every individual situation has its specific issues and options. Sometimes radical coming out strategies are advocated as the only viable option. This implies accepting one's sexual attractions as a defining feature of identity, building one's life around that, and positioning oneself toward others as gay, lesbian, or bisexual. This may result, however, in a radical loss of one's social context and being abandoned by significant others. Although the gay community has for many been an alternative context or a 'family of choice', the price paid for this strategy is still for many estrangement from one's family of origin. As our research shows, there is sometimes also a spiritual price to be paid. When someone has learned that God cannot accept homosexuality, than accepting one's own sexuality may come at the

price of abandoning God. Apostasy then may not be a choice, but an unavoidable conclusion.

Exploring alternative strategies, many of our participants try to preserve the social and religious bonds in their lives. The Christian lifestyle strategy has much to offer in strengthening the religious identity, but it comes at the price of downplaying the sexual identity. Moreover, this strategy is rooted in the understanding that one should mistrust one's own most fundamental feelings to the point of seeing them as sinful or pathological. This need not be harmful for all, but it is certainly a psychological risk factor that may lead to depression or unceasing scrutinizing of one's feelings to make sure they are still within limits.

The commuter strategy allows the person to develop multiple identities and participate in different and even conflicting social groups. This may be especially important when a person is exploring different aspects of self and different lifestyle options. It allows for developing new identity elements without discarding the old identity organization immediately. The price for this strategy is disintegration. In some cases, this is but a small price compared to the price paid in other strategies. Especially in certain ethno-cultural and religious minorities, a homosexual identity is inconceivable. A commuter strategy can serve to remain fully part of one's community and still create some leeway for one's homosexual desires. Many however cannot live such a 'double life' for a very long time without suffering from the disintegration.

The integrator strategy can in many ways be seen as an ideal outcome. It allows to combine sexual and religious identity elements into one hybrid identity. For many however, this implies changing religious affiliation because the group one belonged to in the first place cannot accommodate members accepting their homosexuality. As a result, their religious perspective and convictions usually change to a smaller or larger degree, which may seem threatening at the start. In the long run this strategy seems preferable, but it usually first entails quite dramatic changes and not everyone is up to that. Moreover, the present polarization between Christian and gay subcultures makes this strategy implausible for many, especially when they are part of a religious group with a negative stance toward homosexuality.

For the pastoral or psychological counselor, the task is to help the client explore the different options, their potential, and the price to be paid. Instead of taking one trajectory (classic coming out) as the standard for all, the counselor should see all strategies as coping efforts with positive and negative outcomes. Changing from one strategy to another is hard work, especially when it involves critiquing the main religious discourse. Counselors should not aim at a radical change of discourse (say from obedience to autonomy) but support the client to create more living space within the discourse. Small steps are needed to help the client negotiate the demands and possibilities of his or her religious context and the sexual desires and meanings that seem out of place.

## Conclusion

It will take further research to explore how these identity strategies on the group level and on the individual level interact precisely and how they interfere with theological perspectives. Another step in research will be to develop models of dialogue that are suited for specific religious groups in dealing with homosexuality. What we have tried to make clear in this contribution is the fact that religious and sexual groups may reap benefits from antagonism and use the controversy in their own identity politics. When this is true, the willingness to engage in dialogue will be minimal. Secondly, we have explored how individuals that belong to both groups have a hard time in negotiating their double affiliation. Understanding their inner dialogue may help us understand the intricacies of the whole conflict and attend to the need of those who may easily become the casualties of our culture wars.

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