Queering Religious Texts: An Exploration of British Non-heterosexual Christians' and Muslims' Strategy of Constructing Sexuality-affirming Hermeneutics

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ABSTRACT

Religious authority figures often use religious texts as the primary basis for censuring homosexuality. In recent years, however, non-heterosexual Christians and Muslims have begun to contest the discursively produced boundary of sexual morality. Drawing upon two research projects on non-heterosexual Christians and Muslims, this paper explores the three approaches embedded in this strategy. While acknowledging that homosexuality is indeed portrayed negatively in some parts of religious texts, the participants critique traditional hermeneutics by highlighting its inaccuracy and socio-cultural specificity, and arguing for a contextualized and culturally-relevant interpretation. They also critique the credibility of institutional interpretive authority, by highlighting its inadequacy and ideology; and relocating authentic interpretive authority to personal experience. Finally, they recast religious texts to construct resources for their spiritual nourishment. This strategy generally reflects contemporary western religious landscape that prioritizes the authority of the self over that of religious institution.

KEY WORDS

Christianity/Islam/ Religious Texts/Sexuality/Homosexuality

Introduction

In spite of increasing social and legal normalization of non-heterosexuality (specifically homosexuality) in western society, non-heterosexuals[1] with religious faith continue to grapple with censure of their sexuality within religious communities. Notwithstanding the gradual ascendancy of their own voices and their supporters', their progressive efforts for change continue to experience resistance from conservative quarters of the religious communities. Within the Christian community, this resistance has been demonstrated since May 2003 by the controversy surrounding the appointment of the publicly gay Jeffrey John as the Bishop of Reading, and his subsequent withdrawal as a result of the threat of disintegration of the international Anglican Communion (e.g. Yip and Keenan, 2004). Such resistance is also clearly manifested in the Vatican's latest document on human sexuality, issued in June 2003, that continues to pathologize homosexuality and same-sex relationships (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 2003); and the protestations against the election of Gene Robinson as Bishop of New Hampshire, the first openly gay Bishop in the worldwide Anglican Communion (e.g. USA Today, 2003).

Similar discourse is evident in the Muslim community in the west, though not as common and widely reported. In 2001 in the Netherlands, for instance, imam Khalil El Moumni declared on national television that homosexuality was a disease, a sin, and a threat to social fabric, sending far-reaching ripples throughout Dutch society (for more details see Hekma, 2001).

Empirical research shows that non-heterosexual Christians and Muslims develop diverse strategies to manage the lack of acceptance experienced by them in religious communities.[2] While some conceal their sexuality in religious communities for fear of stigmatization (e.g. Yip, 1997), some discard religion altogether in order to reduce or resolve the psychological dissonance generated by the seemingly unbridgeable chasm between their sexuality and religious faith (e.g. Mahaffy, 1996; Safra Project, 2002). Some also refrain from 'practising' their sexuality through, among others, spiritual assistance from the so-called 'ex-gay movement'[3] (e.g. Ponticelli, 1996; Naz Project, 2000). Others attempt to minimize stigmatization by distancing themselves from religious communities but still keeping their religious faith through privatized practices such as prayer (e.g. Yip, 2000).[4] In addition, some search for accepting religious enclaves and thrive in such an environment (e.g. Lukenbill, 1998; Rodriguez and Ouellette, 2000). Finally, some remain in religious communities despite potential stigmatization, with the hope to effect positive change from inside (e.g. Dillon, 1999; Yip, 2003a, 2003b). On the whole, these diverse strategies reflect how individuals with

dissident and counter-normative identities manage social exclusion. The dynamics of such exclusion is complex, and these strategies are inter-related, and their employment, context-specific. In general, they are employed not only to defend, but also to construct space for the reinforcement of their dissident identity.

This paper provides an in-depth analysis of a specific strategy, which relates to and informs some of the strategies outlined above. Specifically, it presents narratives that demonstrate non-heterosexual Christians and Muslims constructing sexuality-affirming hermeneutics of religious texts to legitimize their sexuality theologically and also uncover 'queer' meanings in such texts for their own consumption and spiritual nourishment. This process is part and parcel of identity construction and management, aided by printed theological resources, the Internet (e.g. on-line discussions or self-study of material) and support networks (e.g. support groups). It is important to state at the outset that individual non-heterosexual Christians and Muslims demonstrate varying degrees of competence in the employment of this strategy, depending significantly, on their theological knowledge.

Religious Texts as the Primary Basis of Censure of Homosexuality

Christianity and Islam are scriptural religions with written texts as the lynchpin of their teachings on, *inter alia*, sexual morality (e.g. Parrinder, 1996; Ridgeon, 2003). Thus, religious texts constitute the primary, though not exclusive, basis for the censure of homosexuality. The significance of the Bible was incontrovertibly highlighted in the recent controversies mentioned above. In the debates about the appointment of Jeffrey John, both his supporters and opponents resorted to the Bible to buttress their arguments. In their open letter expressing their concern about the appointment, nine bishops base their opposition primarily 'in the light of Scripture' (The Guardian, 2003). In defending Jeffrey John, Richard Harries, the Bishop of Oxford who appointed him, asserts that he 'could see nothing in the Bible' against John's celibate same-sex relationship (The Sunday Times, 2003). In both cases, the Bible as a divine text - and therefore of higher authority to human's – underlines the discourse and reverse discourse. Indeed, the significance of religious texts is undeniable. Even opponents with scarce theological knowledge often use clichés such as 'The Bible says so' or 'The *Qur'an* says it is wrong', to justify their stance against homosexuality. Though lacking in theological sophistication, such popular discourse reflects its significant textual underpinnings.

Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that non-heterosexual Christians and Muslims engage with religious texts to construct space not only to contest for acceptance, but also to generate theological capital for their own

spiritual nourishment. Within Christianity, it is widely perceived that the Bible explicitly or implicitly censures homosexuality. The traditional - and still dominant – discourse of binary sexuality hegemonizes heterosexuality (particularly within marriage), and problematizes homosexuality. Biblical passages that are used to support this discourse are: Genesis 19 (e.g. most famously the story of Sodom and Gomorra), Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, Deuteronomy 23:18, Romans 1: 26-27, I Corinthians 6:9 and I Timothy 1: 10, 18-32. In the past two decades, however, the emergence of lesbian and gay-affirming theology has rattled religious orthodoxy and offered significant resources to non-heterosexual Christians for the individual and collective construction of a reverse discourse (e.g. Stuart, 1995; Jordan, 2000), as I shall demonstrate later.

Islam, on the other hand, has a greater repertoire of religious texts in this respect. In addition to the *Qur'an*, which most Muslims consider the literal and unabridged words of *Allah*, the *Shari'ah* ('Whole duty of Mankind' [An-Na'im, 1990: 11], a text on moral and pastoral theology; laws for public and private life), and the *Hadith* (Sayings of the Prophet Muhammad) are also significant. Similar to the Christian discourse on sexuality, the Islamic discourse also hegemonizes heterosexuality within marriage, and renders homosexuality a revolt against *Allah* and violation of nature (Bouhdiba, 1998; Green and Numrich, 2001). Jamal (2001), for instance, argues that the story of Lot, which is mentioned in 14 of the

114 *suras* [chapters] in the *Qur'an* (e.g. 6: 85-87; 38: 11-14; 54: 33-40), is commonly used as the basis for censuring homosexuality (Jamal, 2001). Unlike Christian theology of sexuality, however, there is at present limited efforts in Islamic theology which offer non-heterosexual Muslims resources to construct a reverse discourse. The works of Jamal (2001), Malik (2003), and Nahas (1998, 2001 cf. Hekma, 2002) are distinct exceptions.

It is important to acknowledge that, despite the sharing of sexual identification and similarity in certain experiences (e.g. being stigmatized), non-heterosexual Christians and Muslims in Britain – and the west in general - differ in some significant ways. As mentioned, the former has witnessed significant growth in theological resources that affirm their sexuality. Such theological capital, however, is scarce for non-heterosexual Muslims. There is also a higher degree of internal pluralism within Christianity (some argue that this is evidence of secularization), compared to Islam, which opens up more space for dissident identities and alternative religious practices. Indeed, Islam in the west, being a minority religion, also heightens expectation of adherence and conformity, as a form of cultural defence (Bruce, 2002; Roald, 2001). Further, Islam plays a significant role in ethnic identification among British Muslims, who are primarily of South Asian origin. Within the Muslim community, homosexuality is widely perceived as a 'western disease', a natural outcome of the west's secularity and cultural degeneracy (Naz Project, 1999; Yip, 2004). Non-heterosexual Christians

are generally spared of such cultural complexities that significantly inform identity construction. In addition, Muslims face much prejudice in western societies, evidenced, for instance, in debates around state aid to Islamic schools and the wearing of *hijab* in school. Some argue that such prejudice has proliferated since the unfortunate event of September 11 (e.g. Fetzer and Soper, 2003). Finally, non-heterosexual Christians also have substantially more established support networks compared to non-heterosexual Muslims.[5] This has a significant impact on the availability of religious and social capital for identity construction and management. In short, it is important to be aware of the differences in the social positions of these two groups. Nevertheless, they all face varying degrees of religious exclusion on the ground of their sexuality.

In this specific strategy of queering religious texts, Goss (2002), with specific reference to Christian texts, argues that to 'queer' is 'to spoil or interfere with' (p. xiv). Queering religious texts, therefore, has a de-stabilizing effect, through the transgression and de-construction of naturalized and normalized hermeneutics, which reinforces heteronormativity. As I shall demonstrate, queering exposes the socio-cultural embededness and temporal specificity of the texts, as well as the ideological framework of the authority that constructs such hermeneutics. This strategy, closely informed by and intertwined with theological resources, can be divided into three approaches: (i) Critique of traditional interpretation of specific passages in the texts; (ii) Critique of

interpretative authority of religious authority structures and figures; and (iii) Re-casting religious texts. Before discussing these approaches, I shall first provide a brief account of the research.

The Research

The qualitative data presented in this paper are drawn from two separate but conceptually-related projects. The first project, conducted in 1997-1998, involves in-depth interviews with 25 women and 36 men who are self-identified Christian and lesbian/gay/bisexual. The second project, on non-heterosexual Muslims, involves in-depth interviews with 20 women and 22 men, and two focus groups, conducted in 2001-2002. Both projects aim to examine three levels of the participants' life circumstances and lived experiences. These levels are: (i) individual (e.g. how they reconcile the seemingly contradictory sexual and religious dimensions of their identity); (ii) interpersonal (e.g. how they organize social relations with potentially stigmatizing social audiences such as the religious community and family); and (iii) intergroup (e.g. how they access and manage involvement in support networks). This paper, however, focuses only on the individual level.

In view of the 'hidden population' status of the participants (particularly in the case of non-heterosexual Muslims), a variety of sampling methods were

employed to construct non-probability convenience samples. These methods are: support group networks, non-heterosexual Press, personal networks, snowballing, and publicity in non-heterosexual events/meetings.

There are similarities between the two samples, for instance, the majority of them live in Greater London and the Southeast of England (71% non-heterosexual Muslims and 80% of non-heterosexual Christians). They are highly educated (52% of non-heterosexual Muslims and 89% of non-heterosexual Christians have at least a first degree), and the majority are in full-time employment (76% of non-heterosexual Muslims and 72% of non-heterosexual Christians). Almost all of the non-heterosexual Christian sample are white (97%), but none of non-heterosexual Muslim are, with 88% of South Asian origin. Further, 64% of the non-heterosexual Muslim is under the age of 30, but only 48% on the non-heterosexual Christian sample is in this category.

Critique of Traditional Interpretation of Specific Textual Passages: A Defensive Approach

As mentioned above, a vast majority of the participants acknowledge that homosexuality is presented in a negative light in some parts of religious texts. Thus, this approach focuses on *alternative* textual interpretations with the primary objective to defend the acceptability of their sexuality, drawing upon

theological resources, of which the participants demonstrate varying degrees of knowledge. In general, there are two dimensions to this defensive approach.

(a) Engagement *within* the framework of this specific corpus of textual material, by constructing an alternative and sexuality-affirming interpretation.

Through this, the participants expose the inaccuracy of traditional interpretation, attempting to undermine its theological credibility and moral authority, and in return, enhance their own. One of the most commonly used passages in the censure of homosexuality in both Christianity and Islam is the story of Sodom and Gomorra in relation to Lot, Abraham's cousin (Genesis 19 of the Bible and *suras* 6 and 38 of the *Qur'an*). In both theological and popular discourses, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorra is often used as evidence of God's punishment for the 'sinful' same-sex sexual acts that occurred. Therefore, it is unsurprising that participants take issue with such interpretation, as demonstrated by the following narratives:

> The traditional interpretation of those passages that appear to speak against homosexuality is not accurate. I have read enough in this area to be convinced that the Church has got it wrong. They misunderstood male prostitution as homosexuality, for example [referring to Deuteronomy 23:18]. You get people who argue that 'Oh, Sodom and Gomorra is the story about God's punishment

> for gay people.' That's bullshit. There are tons of good books out there now to show that actually it is about inhospitality. (Sandra, a lesbian Christian in her 30s)

> I had assumed, like most Muslims, that Islam was very homophobic and the penalty for being gay was death. But I have since done some reading and discussed it a lot with people who know more about Islam than I do. I now know that there are various interpretations of what the *Qur'an* says… I turned to the passage most Muslims would turn to – the story of the Prophet of Lot. I read and re-read it in English and Arabic, because it didn't occur to me that it was referring to sexuality at all…. So, as I discussed it more [on-line and in a support group] and read more, I became convinced by the argument that the passage didn't refer specifically to homosexuality, but to various things like inhospitality and the [negative] treatment of guests. That was a huge sense of relief! (Jamila, a self-identified queer Muslim in her 20s)

The above narratives are clearly informed by lesbian and gay-affirming theology. This body of theology – which often examines original languages of the texts - has argued that the destruction of the cities was actually due to inhospitality to strangers and sexual violence (e.g. Goss, 2002; Jamal, 2001; Nahas, 1998). In the same vein, Nahas (1998, 2001) argues that although the *Shar'iah* is generally negative towards homosexuality, it also mentions that same-sex sexual acts are only punishable if they are observed by four witnesses. This problematizes the

Islamic position on homosexual acts in private, particularly within the context of a loving and committed relationship.

Evidently, the participants engage with such alternative theological material to undermine the basis of the traditional interpretation that stigmatizes homosexuality. Significantly, they do not challenge the content of the religious texts, thus respecting their sanctity. However, they contest the accuracy and therefore the hegemony of the traditional interpretation of such texts. Through this, they construct themselves as victims (and indeed survivors) of religious ignorance and prejudice.

(b) Contextualizing the textual material by highlighting its historic and cultural specificity, thus its inapplicability to contemporary socio-cultural context.

Here, the participants highlight the cultural and historical specificity of traditional interpretation of homosexuality, which might appear negative, but are nevertheless inapplicable to contemporary society with its modern understanding of the diversity of human sexuality. In other words, they challenge the inerrancy and the literal usage of such texts, on the basis that texts are discursively produced, therefore historical, temporal, and cultural specificity must be emphasized. Ian, a gay priest in his 50s, asserts the importance of such contextualization.

> So what if the Bible says some negative things about homosexuality? It was written ages ago, when people did not have the scientific knowledge we now have about human sexuality. The culture was so rigid then when it comes to sex. How could you apply the standards and norms then to our life now? We have moved on. We should move on from that…. I think that's the problem. The Church thinks that our understanding of sexuality doesn't change, or shouldn't change. But we do change, as individuals and a society.

Ian's argument is consistent with that of Shazia, a lesbian Muslim in her 30s:

> I always question the *Hadith*, because the earliest *Hadith* was written 300 to 400 years after the death of the prophet Muhammad. So how true can that be? And at that time there was a lot of political people in Islam and Islamic tribes, so a lot of *Hadith* were written in a time of political upheaval, [with the] pressures to contain [a] society that needs order, rules, regulations… The *Shari'ah* has come from the *Hadith* and also the *Qur'an*. But the *Shari'ah* has a lot to do with men specifically, and people controlling the masses. The *Shari'ah* has gone a long way to continue the bigotry and prejudice that lies in our Islamic cultures today, on homosexuality and many other subjects such as women.

These narratives resonate with the postmodernist approach that 'queer' theologians favour, that knowledge is discursively produced, and should not be

universalized and generalized across time and space. For instance, lesbian and gay-affirming Christian theologians (e.g. Stuart, 2003) have argued that Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 do not condemn sex between men. Rather, they censure 'a man lying with a man as a woman' (taking on the female role), which reflects socio-cultural significance and rigid symbolism of gender-specific sex roles within a particular historical context. Similarly, they assert that homosexual acts that the Apostle Paul censures (e.g. Romans 1: 26-27; I Corinthians 6:9) actually refer to cult prostitution, which should have no bearing on contemporary same-sex relationships.

Within Islam, An-Na'im (1990) – with specific reference to civil liberties, human rights and international laws - asserts that the *Shari'ah* was developed based on Muslims' experience and understanding in Medina in 7th century. Far from being divine and immutable, the *Shari'ah* is constructed, based on human interpretation of other Islamic sources within a specific cultural and historical context. Therefore, the interpretation and practice of it needs to be contextualized, as long as it is consistent with fundamental sources of Islam. Although An-Na'im makes no reference to sexuality in his arguments, works such as his contributes indirectly to non-heterosexual Muslims' consideration of Islamic written sources.

In sum, this defensive approach aims to defend the participants' sexuality by engaging with the same textual material, but offering an alternative de-

stigmatizing light. Further, temporal and socio-cultural relevance is greatly emphasized. On the whole, it is a form of defensive apologetics. This is complemented by an offensive approach, to which I now turn.

Critique of Interpretive Authority of Religious Authority Structures: An Offensive Approach

Given the perceived divine authority of religious texts, it is unsurprising that religious authority structures employ them to buttress the absolutism of their own moral authority. Against this backdrop, the participants launch an offensive against religious authority structures and figures, so as to discredit their credibility and moral authority, and in turn weaken their discourse. Underpinning this approach is the argument that the engagement with texts cannot be separated from the power behind the interpretation and propagation. There are two dimensions to this approach, raised by participants, which again appear to be informed by lesbian and gay-affirming theology.

(a) Deconstructing and challenging the hegemonic discourse of religious authority structures.

This dimension emphasizes the heterosexist bias embedded in the interpretation of religious texts and institutional pronouncements that censure homosexuality, as illustrated in the following narrative:

> I feel sometimes, all these people who issue these hard-line statements against homosexuality are repressed homosexuals themselves. To them homophobia is the biggest shield for their own [homo]sexuality. I mean, if you go to any little town in any Muslim country, the religious leaders are always involved with homosexuality. *Imams* have bad reputation in Pakistan in certain districts…. for having sex with men. (Omar, a gay Muslim in his late 20s)

Omar might have exaggerated his observation. However, the thrust of his argument discredits the assumed intellectual and moral objectivity of religious authority figures. Empirical research has shown that younger Muslims in the west do challenge imams from their countries of origin (who are often not fluent in western languages) who attempt to re-enact the traditional version of Islam, which in their view, may not be totally appropriate for their western social environment (e.g. Smith, 2002). The employment of this offensive is also evident among non-heterosexual Christians, such as Margaret, a bisexual Christian in her 40s:

> I think the Church generally does not know how to deal with issues about sexuality, or anything to do with the body really. I think the Church is doing more damage than good, both to itself and the people it's supposed to be caring for. I often ask myself why I don't just walk away.

Besides undermining the moral credibility and intellectual objectivity of religious authority structures, the participants are also highly critical of their 'selective fundamentalism', namely their focus on homosexuality, and neglect of other 'abominations' mentioned in religious texts (e.g. wearing a mixed fibre jacket and eating shellfish).

This method is consistent with that widely used by feminist Christians and Muslims to challenge andocentric and patriarchal hermeneutics of religious texts and the construction of sexist theology (e.g. Mernissi, 1991; Jobling, 2002). By expressing doubt over religious authority structures and their discourse, the participants argue for the reliance on their own reasoning as the definitive interpretive authority of religious texts, to which I now turn.

(b) Relocating interpretive authority from institution to the self.

Having discredited the interpretive authority of religious authority structures, the participants relocate this authority to their self, using their personal experience as non-heterosexual believers as the interpretive lens. In this case,

queering texts means personalizing and individualizing the interpretation of texts, by adopting a hermeneutic lens based on the authority of self. The following narratives demonstrate this:

> Anyone who goes to the *Qur'an* as a text is reading it… through their understanding of that reading. It's how you perceive the text. So between ten people who read the same sentence, we can perceive it in ten different ways… So [the *Shari'ah*] are man made laws and they have come through male reasoning and interpretation. Do I wish to live my life according to that? Certainly not… For me it's much more a personal thing. (Hasima, a lesbian Muslim in her early 20s)

> I think at the end of the day, my experience as a lesbian Christian will determine how I live. Okay, I listen to what the Church or Christian traditions have to say about sexuality and other things. I also read the Bible. But at the end of the day, it's our conscience that counts, isn't it? Who is the Church to tell me that my life is a mistake? Yes, I did screw things up. But now I am happy as I am. The relationship with [her partner] has a lot to do with it…. So yes, my reference point is my own experience. (Sally, in her 40s)

These narratives illustrate clearly the participants' attempt to bring their self into the reading of texts. Such religious individualism, for non-heterosexuals with religious faith, is often a dissident identity management strategy (Wilcox, 2002,

2003; Yip, 2002, 2003a). Reading religious texts, therefore, becomes an exercise to seek guidance rather than approval, as they learn to trust their personal experiences as the 'spirit of truth' (Stuart, 1997a: 20; See also Stuart, 2003). It is important to acknowledge that the participants – in line with lesbian and gay theology – generally do not discount the value, relevance and indeed sanctity of the texts. However, they wrestle the authentic interpretive authority from religious authority structures and relocate it to their self – their own reflection, evaluation, and experience. This is consistent with Koch's (2001) encouragement to non-heterosexual Christians to 'cruise' the texts, with their personal experience in the driving seat in the journey of textual exploration. The practice of this is elaborated in the next approach.

Re-casting Religious Texts: A Creative Approach

Compared to the first two, this approach is the least commonly used and sophisticated, primarily because the theological capital that underpins it is the most recently developed. Significantly, this approach moves beyond the framework of the moral debate about homosexuality, in which the first two approaches are embedded. Here, the participants focus on using the texts for spiritual growth. This approach, however, is significantly uncommon among non-heterosexual Muslims at present. This, as mentioned, is a reflection of the

significant discrepancy in theological and cultural resources between them and their Christian counterparts. There are two dimensions to this approach.

(a) 'Outing' the texts

Goss (2002) defines 'outing' religious texts as the attempt to discover queer voices in them, and use them to inform non-heterosexual Christian living. In other words, accounts of same-sex intimacy and love are embedded within religious texts, but have been silenced. Such 'subjugated knowledge' ought to be used not only to justify same-sex intimacy and love, but also offer insights into dynamics of same-sex intimacy. Biblical accounts of the relationships of Naomi and Ruth (the book of Ruth), Jonathan and David (1 and 2 Samuel), and Jesus and his disciples (the Gospel of John) are commonly used (e.g. Stuart, 2003). John, a gay Christian in his 50s, demonstrates his employment of such 'subjugated knowledge':

> I draw so much comfort and confidence from the intimacy between David and Jonathan, or Ruth and Naomi. Their stories show us that same-sex love is possible [and] there is no need to be ashamed of it…. Jesus himself was so close to his disciples. I have read that there are probably homosexual feelings between them. I think he opened the door for us. No need to be ashamed,

> really. I think we should focus on learning from these examples and enrich our own relationships.

(b) 'Befriending' the texts

In this related dimension, the participants attempt to uncover implicit non-heterosexual subjectivity within the texts. A good example of this is their attempt to 'queer' Christ by focusing on his humanity, emphasizing his role as a champion of victims of social injustice and a radical political activist who transgressed traditional social order and power structure. Through this, the solidarity between Christ and non-heterosexual as the oppressed is established. Thus, Christ's suffering, as Goss (2002) argues, encompasses non-heterosexuals' suffering; and gay bashing becomes Christ bashing. The following narrative illustrates this central point:

> I see Jesus as a champion for marginalized people, like poor people, black people, and gay people. I really believe in it. He wasn't afraid of authority and really spoke his mind to defend social justice. I know deep inside that he understands me and knows the pains I go through [she is not open about her sexuality in the church for fear of rejection]. Hopefully, one day I feel strong enough to stand up and be counted in the church. I really hope so. (Maria, a lesbian Christian in her late 30s)

This view of Christ is prevalent among non-heterosexual Christians (e.g. Yip, 2003b). Another less common identification with Christ centers on his sexuality, as James, a gay Christian in his early 60s, asserts:

> Yes, Jesus is the Son of God. But he was also human. He felt pain when he was crucified. He had desires and urges like you and me. I think he must have had sexual feelings too. Otherwise, how could he be totally human like you and me? You see? I think he must have felt sexually attracted to people around him, maybe his own disciples too.

James' argument is consistent with theological efforts to construct Christ as a sexual being, which challenges the traditional conception of him as asexual or celibate (e.g. in emphasizing Christ's supposedly homoerotic relationship with Mark and Lazarus. See, for example, Bohache, 2003; Goss, 2002). This explicit allusion to Christ's sexuality accentuates his humanity, since being sexual is part and parcel of being human.

Another central Biblical figure who has been subjected to such 'queering', albeit to a much lesser extent, is the Apostle Paul. This is not surprising as some of his epistles are commonly used to justify the censure of homosexuality. Joy, a lesbian Christian who is clearly informed by Spong's (1991) controversial claim that Paul was 'gay', argues:

> I have read books which claim that Paul was gay himself. But he couldn't express it, you know, at the time. [It] must be tough for gay people then…. So we can understand why he is so negative about homosexuality in the Bible. I think he hated himself for being gay.

By constructing the texts 'gay-friendly' through the reading of them from a queer social location, the texts are transformed into not only narratives of resistance (against censure), but also narratives of spiritual nourishment. This process promotes truth-claims that affirm their identity as well as nourishing their spirituality. Koch (2001), for instance, argues that non-heterosexual Christians should move away from the hermeneutical paradigm to defend themselves against traditional interpretation of religious texts. Instead, they should use a 'homoerotic approach' that stems from internal knowledge – the self – which '"cruises" the Bible for pleasure and moments of delightful encounter with those characters and stories which offer moments of identification, point of connection and the possibility of transformation' (p. 10).

Injecting 'queer' meanings to texts, therefore, becomes an important component of this process. For instance, there are efforts to inject homoeroticism into *Song of Songs*, the treatise to love in the Old Testament (e.g. King, 2000; Moore, 2001). The keyword in this effort is 'reclaiming', which signifies their

intention to reclaim space that has been eradicated through traditional heterosexist hermeneutics.

Such 'befriending' of religious texts is relatively absent in Islamic theology and among non-heterosexual Muslims. The social position of homosexuality within the Muslim community and Islamic theological discourses means that non-heterosexual Muslims have only recently begun the defensive – and to a much lesser extent, the offensive – approaches discussed above.

Beyond central religious texts, lesbian and gay-affirming Christian theology has also developed texts to affirm same-sex rituals, drawing upon the Bible and other sources (e.g. Stuart, 1992; Kittredge and Sherwood, 1995). A small minority of participants report that they have used such texts to celebrate their relationships.

Conclusions

Christian and Islamic religious texts have played a primary role in the censure of homosexuality. Not surprisingly, radical lesbian and gay theologians have called them 'texts of terror' that commit 'textual violence' to non-heterosexual believers, making them victims of 'biblical terrorism' (e.g. Goss, 1993; 2002). While participants of these research projects were less radical and forceful in their articulation of this issue, they nevertheless engage with such texts to construct

sexuality-affirming hermeneutics, involving not just the texts, but also the interpretative authority of such texts. By no means do I claim that such endeavour is peculiar to contemporary society. What is significant is that, in contemporary society, social processes such as de-traditionalization and individualization *increasingly* empower the self over the institution as the basis of such self-directed hermeneutics which constitutes identity construction, a theme that I shall elaborate later.

In this respect, this paper has highlighted three multi-dimensional approaches - defensive, offensive and creative. Significantly, the engagement with such texts highlights the participants' view about their continued relevance to contemporary society. Nevertheless, such texts are no longer treated as an infallible prescriptive moral template, but as a set of moral guidelines with, at best, an advisory role. The reflection and evaluation of such texts, and the practice of principles gained from them, is no longer the preserve of religious authority structures, but their own. This process humanizes the texts, emphasizing the believer's moral right to choose and select from a repertoire, rather than being constrained by it (Dufour, 2000; Wilcox, 2002, 2003). Thus, the empirical 'what is' (based on personal experience) is prioritized over the theological 'what ought to be' (i.e. institutional perspective) (McFadyen, 2000).

In doing so, the participants bring the texts in line with their lived experiences by bringing the self into the reading (Stuart, 1997b; Stone, 2001a).

This is reflective of recent development in biblical hermeneutics (less so in *Qur'anic* hermeneutics) in which 'readers also bring a particular "self" to the text which is shaped by a variety of factors such as race, ethnicity, gender, class, religious affiliations, socioeconomic standing, education, and we would add, sexual orientation' (Goss and West, 2000: 4). In the same vein, Lozada (2000) has argued that biblical interpretation is not independent of one's identity, and the identity of the interpreter is interconnected with the production of meaning.

On the whole, this strategy highlights the discursiveness, situatedness and fluidity of religious texts – their meanings and teachings. By transgressing traditional discourse, such attempts are rebellious, liberative, as well as personally and socially transformative. In many ways, the fundamental operational principle of this strategy is not new. Feminist, black, post-colonial and liberation theologies, to name a few, have all attempted to contest boundary legitimized by patriarchal, sexist, Eurocentric, and middle-class hermeneutics (e.g. Roald, 1997; Beaman, 1999; Gutierrez, 2001; Althaus-Reid, 2003). Indeed, as Bardella (2001: 117) argues, this is a kind of liberation theology that aims to 'theologically recontexualize the metaphysical dimension of homosexuality, to construct a spiritual discourse that includes lesbians and gays'. In this, we can see the intersection of the secular, the political, the theological, and the personal. Like other socially disadvantaged social groups whose voices are marginalized in religious communities, non-heterosexual Christians and Muslims, in the

words of Johnson (2003: 166), attempt to insert their pictures into their 'faith family photo album, not as apologia, but a gift to the tradition.'

This strategy is not without its critics. For instance, the third – creative – approach to 'out' and 'befriend' texts has been criticized for imposing the contemporary template of sexuality and identity on the Apostle Paul and Christ, thus making the same mistake of cultural blindness which they critique. Stone (2001b) also argues that there is not, and should not be, a single 'queer method', which assumes uniformity among people who share the same label or social location. Religious, material, and cultural diversity within the non-heterosexual community makes such a strategy rather limited. Further, the current 'queering the text' strategy has been criticized for being excessively individualistic and personalistic – even narcissistic – and devoid of political and historical context and meaning.

Nevertheless, Bowler's (1991, cf. Ford, 1999:136) powerful words succinctly underline the participants' need to undermine the presumed infallibility of religious authority structures and their interpretative objectivity:

> The consequences of treating the scripture as though history and personality made no difference to the words and content of scripture have been, in Christian history, horrendous. By lifting a text from its content and treating it as a timeless truth, Christians claimed scriptural warrant for their murder of Jews (Matthew 27:25); by lifting a text, Christians found warrant for burning women whom they

> regarded as witches (Exodus 22:18); by lifting a text, Christians justified slavery and apartheid (Genesis 9: 25); by lifting a text, Christians found justification for executing homosexuals (Leviticus 20:13); by lifting a text (Genesis 3:16), Christians found warrant for the subordination of women to men, so that they came to be regarded as 'a sort of infant', incapable of taking charge of their own bodies, finances or lives.

The data presented in this paper lend credence to the neosecularization thesis which argues that secularization does not mean the decline or even disappearance of religion. Rather, it signifies the declining significance and influence of religious authority structures in contemporary western society. This occurs in tandem with the ascendancy of self in the fashioning and construction of individual and social life (Yamane, 1997; Yip, 2002). Internal and external pluralism within the religious landscape in contemporary western society has led to increasing diversity in religious expressions, practices and identities. Indeed, religious orientation, identity and practices have become increasingly internally-referential and reflexively-organized, prioritizing human subjectivity. There is a perceptible relocation of interpretive authority to the self, buttressed by broad humanistic – often anti-authoritarian - values such as social justice, human rights, personal responsibility, liberty and diversity (e.g. Repstad, 2003). This is particularly true among religious people with dissident identities (Wilcox, 2002, 2003; Yip 2002; 2003c).

This development in the religious landscape is of course reflective of the contemporary western society as a whole. Processes such as de-traditionalization and individualization have significantly undermined the basis of traditional authority, leading to the empowerment of the self. Life, therefore, has become increasingly a strategic trajectory in the construction of social biography (e.g. Giddens and Pierson, 1998; Bauman, 2001).

Indeed, in the case of non-heterosexual Christians and Muslims, queering religious texts becomes one of the strategies to construct 'do-it-yourself' social biographies to achieve identity coherence and continuity. Nevertheless, I must reiterate the importance of appreciating the different levels of efforts between these two religious groups due to the discrepancy in theological and social capital. I envisage that younger generations of non-heterosexual Muslims would lead the way for such progress. This is because empirical research on younger generations of British Muslims have shown that their identities, compared to those of the older generations, are more contested and reflexive, as a result of a broader cultural repertoire that selectively incorporates their cultures of origin and western values of personal freedom and liberty (e.g. Samad, 1998; Husain and O'Brien, 2001; Manji, 2003).

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Notes

1 'Non-heterosexual' is a contentious term. Some consider it pejorative because it labels people against the perceived norm of heterosexuality, thus reinforcing heteronormativity. They prefer 'lesbian, gay, and bisexual'. This phrase itself is unsatisfactory, as others insist on prolonging it, in the name of inclusivity, by adding 'transgendered', 'queer', and more recently, 'intersex'. I decided to use 'non-heterosexual' throughout the text (except where there is a need to specify) primarily because it embraces all the labels used by participants – 'gay', 'lesbian', 'bisexual', 'homosexual' and 'queer' - to represent their dissident identity, in contrast to 'heterosexual'.

2 In the past decade, there has been a burgeoning corpus of sociological and psychological research on non-heterosexual Christians. However, this is not the case for non-heterosexual Muslims. The data on non-heterosexual Muslims presented in this paper are drawn from the very first piece of sociological research on this sexual minority, although there have been several publications by support groups, based on anecdotal evidence and personal testimonies (all cited in this paper).

3 There is diversity in the ideological framework of the 'ex-gay movement'. Some are tolerant of 'homosexual orientation' but not 'homosexual practice', thus abstinence is imposed. Others adopt a more stringent approach and attempt to 'heal' with their 'stepping out of homosexuality' programme. In general, all groups emphasize the importance of spiritual intervention and discipline. Examples of such groups are: *True Freedom Trust* (in the UK), *Exodus International* and *Living Water* (both in the USA).

4. Hower (2003) reports that while 60% of the lesbian and gay population in the USA are affiliated to a religion, only 38% practise their faith publicly (e.g. participating in church activities).

5 For instance, the *Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement* has a membership of more than 3000, with local groups across the UK. There are also many other non-heterosexual Christian groups organized by profession, gender, and denomination. In comparison, support groups for non-heterosexual

Muslims are a recent occurrence, the *Al-Fatiha Foundation* (in the USA) and *Al-Fatiha UK* were established in 1998 and 1999 respectively (*Al-Fatiha UK* changed its name to *Imaan* in April 2004).

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