THE HOUSE OF GOD - HEAVEN AND HELL: A CANADIAN PERSPECTIVE ON THE EMPOWERMENT OF LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, AND TRANSGENDERED (LGBT) PEOPLE THROUGH RELIGION AND SUBJUGATED KNOWLEDGE

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Since sexual minority clients experience a profound sense of alienation from, and often hostility towards, organized religion or do not hold membership in majority culture churches and denominations, therapists can be misled into thinking that religious belief and spirituality are not important to them. In fact, the opposite is often true. This narrative examines how Christian religion, particularly Catholicism, can be experienced by LGBT clients as both an empowering and disempowering phenomenon. A particular focus is placed on the same-sex marriage debate.

Introduction

This narrative is written from the perspective of a woman, raised within the Catholic faith, who later went through a painful process of reconciling her homosexuality with her spiritual worldview. At a time when the same-sex marriage debate continues to generate sensationalised headlines in Canadian mainstream media, the author provides a serious examination, within the context of the debate, of how Christianity can be experienced by lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) as both an empowering[1] and disempowering phenomenon. Practitioners who work using an empowerment perspective with LGBT clients need to understand how the phylogeny of Christian theology has shaped the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) people's construction of self and sexuality. Such knowledge is required in working with the client so that negative messages about homosexuality can be confronted and intercepted and so that constructive action can be undertaken to speak out against such negative messages.

Rationale

Clark et al (as cited in Ritter & Terndrup, 2002) claims that sexual minorities have a profound sense of alienation from, and often animosity towards, organized religion. According to Garranzi, LeVay & Novas, and Scasta (as Schuck & Liddle, 2001) since most religions, and Christianity in particular, condemn homosexual behavior, and even homosexual orientation itself, many clients are affected by this factor. Religious background is also associated with greater difficulty in coming out, and internal conflicts arising from religious beliefs can inimically affect homosexual identity formation (Schuck & Liddle, 2001). Because many sexual minority clients are hostile to organized religion or do not hold membership in majority culture churches and denominations, therapists can be misled into thinking that religious belief and spirituality[2] are not important to them. Yet, Halderman (as cited in Ritter & Terndrup, 2002) suggested that the profound emotional and existential meanings associated with religious issues for many sexual minorities mandate that these issues be taken seriously. Spirituality can also be a "constructive way of facing life's difficulties and is particularly appropriate when problems cannot be fixed or solved" (Sermabeikian, 1994, p.181). This certainly applies to homosexuals living in a heterosexist world where dominant attitudes and biases cannot be simply "fixed." Thus, it

can be argued that part of a therapist's role is to help people use spirituality as yet another tool in their "coping arsenal" (Sermabeikian, 1994, p. 178). While religion and spirituality may be sources of strength, they may also be sources of conflict and ambivalence for LGBT individuals, who may struggle to reconcile with the negative message of their religious upbringing. Thus practitioners must understand the systemic context of religion and how it impacts LGBT people's lives and their human rights. These include, but are not limited to, equality before the law, the right to self-expression, the right to privacy, and the right to be treated with dignity (Ife, 2001).

Historical Bias for the Denial of Same-Sex Marriage

An underlying precept of empowerment involves helping oppressed people understand "how structural oppression in its various forms impacts individuals" and it is one way for individuals to take back some control of their lives (Pease, 2002, p. 136). In the case of same-sex marriage, a historical knowledge of the Christian underpinning of marriage is relevant to understanding the present day social and legal construct of marriage.

The Bible has long been portrayed as reflecting cosmic and divine order. The sanctification of this social order is used to justify heterosexual marriage as the norm. This has led to a denial of equality before the law in that heterosexual marriage is legally recognized while same-sex marriage is not. Christian theology, particularly Catholicism, seeks to control and repress sexuality by condemning all forms of human intercourse except the most traditional act of reproduction within the confines of a heterosexual marriage and without any form of birth control (Fortune, 1989). This view, consistent with the early Biblical interpreters' obsession with conjugal sex for procreation only (Ranke-Heinemann, 1990), reduces sexuality to a one-dimensional activity, understood solely in a context of a heterosexual relationship (i.e., one in which procreation can take place). It leaves LGBT people questioning their self-worth and potentially struggling with their sexual and gender identities because their relationships are difficult to define directly, or solely, in terms of procreative functions. By insisting on sexual activity solely to procreate within "the sanctity of marriage," the Church has not only unrealistically romanticized marriage but also denied people a sense of their own "sexual integrity and taught sexual repression" (Harrison & Heyward, 1989). This may induce feelings of guilt and shame in association with any kind of sexual activity outside the approved definition, including sex for the sake of pleasure only or homosexual sex.

Since the expression of sexuality is one of fundamental biological imperatives, such attempts to proscribe it create a state of perpetual guilt and a feeling of being sinful. Sinfulness implies the need for redemption and forgiveness. Yet how does one repent when one has done nothing other than express one's natural instincts? One must first find something to repent and be forgiven for. Thus values of suffering and of the need for redemption propagated by the Church (Redmond, 1989) only exacerbate the state of perpetual guilt. Feelings of being sinful, the narrow one-dimensional definition of sex, and the Catholic Church's official position of "accept the person, condemn the behavior" (Canda & Furman, 1999, p. 110) contribute to LGBT people's sense of guilt and shame over how they choose to express their sexuality. It not only limits their right to self-expression, but the shame and guilt become internalized, causing self-regulation of expression and even self-hatred, thus denying LGBT people a sense of control over their choices and lives.

When Church values, such as sex for procreation only within the confines of marriage, permeate societal institutions, such

as the legal system, they are used as justification to discriminate. For example, a court ruling that denied gays the ability to marry was based on the belief that the principal purpose of marriage, procreation, cannot be achieved in a homosexual union ("Two Men,"1 1993). The sophistry and hypocrisy of such a ruling[3] is evident in the fact that it ignores married heterosexual couples who intend to never have children, and never annuls marriages where offspring have not been produced. Thus, only LGBT people are singled out for discrimination on the basis of non-procreation.

A Need for a Spiritually Empowering Approach

For some, spirituality serves as a bastion of strength as it provides emotional consolation, inspiration, guidance, structure, and security. Gutierrez et al (1995) state that empowerment encompasses the reduction of self-blame, assumption of personal responsibility, especially for change, increased self-efficacy, and the development of group consciousness. Spirituality can foster personal responsibility, identity, respect for ethical codes, meaningful ritual, and community building (Gotterer, 2001). Thus, spirituality is a salient consideration for an accurate assessment of any client system and particularly for LGBT people, whose view of concepts such as sin, negativity, shame, and forgiveness are often wrapped in the shroud of religious beliefs (Pellebon & Anderson, 1999).

By failing to acknowledge the prospective empowering effects of spirituality, practitioners thus miss out on the strengths that it may bring to the process. They also risk disempowering clients by reinforcing the "prevailing paradigm of pathology" (Damianakis, 2001, p.26) by failing to fully understand external factors such as the impact of religious and spiritual beliefs on their clients. By dismissing spirituality as a viable therapeutic tool, practitioners implicitly make a value judgement as to what is or is not helpful to a client. Finally, since spirituality is an integral component of belief systems of many cultures, ignoring the spiritual component of people's lives can be a failure to exercise cultural sensitivity. If the goal of empowerment is "to increase personal, interpersonal, and political power" (Gutierrez et al, 1995, p. 535), then ignoring the impact of spirituality on LGBT people is not consistent with an empowerment approach.

Empowering Interpretations of the Bible

Alternative LGBT-friendly Biblical interpretations could be viewed as empowerment through "the insurrection of subjugated knowledge" (Pease, 2002, p. 141). Saleeby (as cited in Pease, 2002) states that subjugated knowledge is described as marginalized knowledge that exists but is denied legitimacy and acknowledgement in the larger society. Alternative interpretations of the scriptures are empowering in that they produce "alternative power saturated knowledge" (Pease, 2002, p. 141). This knowledge can help challenge LGBT clients' internalized negative messages about their sexuality and religion. Alternative interpretation can be utilized to define a goal for LGBT people, assist them to believe themselves worthy of it, and help them develop a plan to reach an approximation of that destination (Simon, 1994). For example, the quote "I will put My law within them, and on their heart I will write it..." (Jeremiah 31:33) can be interpreted as God's will being in each of us. It offers an empowering view for LGBT people in that following their heart can be seen as following the law of God. They can develop a view of themselves as individuals created in the image of God. This can be an ego-supportive intervention. Jeremiah's verse could also be seen as God's willingness to relinquish control over His children and allow them to become the adults that they are

destined to be. It could be argued that to not follow one's heart (i.e., to be true to one's self) is to defy God's will. This interpretation can be an empowering intervention that allows LGBT individuals to release feelings of guilt and shame and accept their sexuality and to believe that their life has meaning as ordained by God. Knowing that God's unconditional love allows all people to follow their hearts and that there may be a deeper spiritual meaning to life may facilitate a sense of peacefulness and provide a coping ability (Hodge, 2001). This is consistent with an empowerment principle, quoted by Saair (as cited in Simon, 1994 p. 2-3), to aid "clients in finding meaning in and making sense of their situation, relationships, and problems." For LGBT individuals, the meaning may be an understanding of how their religion and their sexuality intersect.

Alternative Biblical interpretations may provide a sense of personal power by replacing counterproductive beliefs with productive ones that draw on the client's spiritual worldview, and by shifting the focus from present obstacles to the spiritual lessons that clients desire to learn (Hodge, 2001). Within this process, the practitioner helps the clients analyze their narratives, externalize the problems, assess their strengths and limitations, and reframe the narratives in a productive and meaningful way (Northcut, 2000). The practitioner must be respectful in the presentation of alternative knowledge as some ideas may be contrary to the clients' beliefs and the practitioner's actions may be perceived as a challenge to the fundamental self or personal ontology (Hodge, 2002). Practitioners walk a very fine line between challenging dominant discourse and imposing a definition of the problem in a way that is disempowering (i.e., paternalistic). In addition, in presenting alternative knowledge, practitioners have an obligation not to lose focus on their role of identifying client's strengths and marshalling resources to address

the client's difficulties, or else the practitioner risks becoming a spiritual director (Hodge, 2001; Northcut, 2000). The practitioners are also obligated to recognize when it is appropriate to refer an individual to an external resource. For example, if a LGBT client feels a sense of spiritual isolation, a practitioner may suggest joining an LGBT-supportive spiritual community such as the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC). A more enlightened view of LGBT people and their rights can also be found in some other Christian denominations, United Church being but one example. Even within the Catholic Church, particularly in North America, a spectrum of views broader than the Vatican orthodoxy exists. However, practitioners should be aware of, and address, the guilt that some LGBT people who grew up in one faith may feel in leaving that faith to explore other religious denominations or spiritual venues.

Subjugated knowledge represented by the alternative Biblical interpretations can be construed as resistance as it represents a localized effort "to attack mechanisms of power" (Pease, 2002, p. 141). However, resistance to dominant discourse does not necessarily lead to empowerment (Pease, 2002). For example, in my opinion the alternative Biblical interpretations are not particularly empowering, as the "absurd singling out of Biblical verses" (Pittenger, 1977, p. 87) amounts to a linguistic interpretation war, with each side selectively choosing passages or interpretations that support their position. The Bible dictates that slaves are to obey their masters (1 Peter 2:18), people are exhorted not to pray in public (Matthew 6:5-6), women are not to cut their hair, and so forth (Sweat, 2003). Yet, such prohibitions are now conveniently overlooked, begging the question of who decides which passages of the Bible are to be interpreted literally as the word of God,

and which are reflective of the Bible's time and social mores. Christians use the Bible to maintain a particular social order "where straight, white men are in charge," argues Biblical scholar Professor Lloyd Lewis (Sweat, 2003, p. 22). For them, alternative interpretations can be seen as a threat to this power structure as they challenge the social order of heterosexism and patriarchy. The Bible also tends to be viewed as a "handbook of ethics" (Mulrooney, 1998, p.137), whereas it may simply be a mythological story (Campbell, 1988), so tortured through multiple translations that its original meanings have been long lost (Fox, 1992).

On the other hand, many LGBT individuals do find strength in Biblical scripture. Thus subjugated knowledge can be the means through which individuals find their personal sense of power or resistance. LGBT individuals often struggle with self-hatred and self-doubt, similar to other members of disempowered minority groups who assume that wisdom lies outside themselves, generally within the dominant group (Simon, 1994). Alternative forms of knowledge and views of the Bible can assist in the critical task of helping LGBT examine the "mythical and degraded self-portraits that they have internalized unconsciously as members of a stigmatized group" (Simon, 1994, p. 13). They can also facilitate LGBT individuals' desires to coalesce as a community with likeminded people who share common needs and issues.

The Catholic Church and Public Discourse

In examining the effect of religion on individuals there must be recognition that spirituality has an "equal potential for harm," such as promoting hatred (Sermabeikian, 1994, p181). Religious values shape societal norms of right and wrong. In particular, the Catholic Church's condemnation of homosexuality promotes and condones violence against LGBT people, thus denying LGBT people a basic (i.e., first generation) right to public safety and freedom from harassment, intimation, and torture (Ife, 2001).

Pope Benedict XVI, former Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, wrote in his "Letter on Homosexual Persons" that:

> When civil legislation is introduced to protect behavior to which no one has any conceivable right, neither the Church nor society at large should be surprised when other distorted notions and practices gain ground, and irrational and violent reactions increase…(Fortune, 1989, p. 93).

More recent pronouncements that dominate the public discourse have Church leaders making statements such as "a homosexual person…is not suitable to receive the sacrament of holy orders" (Sweat, 2003, p.20). Then there are reports that the Vatican is preparing a document to ban gays from entering seminaries, ostensibly to rid the Church of pedophiles. This is happening even though the American Psychological Association, National Association of Social Workers and American Academy of Child Psychiatrists all clearly state that there is no correlation between homosexuality and child abuse (Sweat, 2003). The propagation of stereotypical myths (gays as pedophiles) and the condemnation of homosexuality target LGBT people for violence and make them feel unwelcome in the Catholic Church. Their spiritual life can become ignored, repressed, and a source of shame and guilt. According to Miller (as cited in Simon, 1994) LGBT people's feelings of shame, guilt, and self-hatred are consistent with historically disadvantaged population's tendency to believe the worst about themselves.

From an empowerment perspective, the public discourse within Christian Churches is

a microcosm of the debate happening in society on same-sex marriage. It can be viewed as the struggle between different interpretations (i.e. knowledge), as well as the differing applications of such knowledge. Some Churches' interpretations and application of scripture create a welcoming environment for LGBT people. Specifically, the United Church and the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) have contested dominant discourses and practices. These alternative interpretations and practices form the basis of resistance. For example, in 2001, the Toronto chapter of the MCC used an old Christian tradition of publishing "banns" in a unique twist to have same-sex marriages recognized by the government of Ontario. The tradition of "banns" is a public notice of people's intent to marry. Following it, a valid marriage license, registered by the province of Ontario, is issued. MCC attempted to use the "banns" as a loophole for same-sex couples to enter into legal matrimony and continued "marrying" same-sex couples using this tradition. It forced the government of Ontario to take an official stand on the issue, pronouncing that the marriages would not be registered because they did not meet federal guidelines ("Banns," 2001). As a result of a legal challenge by MCC in defense of the reading of "banns," the issue of gay and lesbian human rights as exemplified by the right to marry has now been brought onto a national forum. Canada's current position of recognizing same-sex marriage has also led to a debate within the United States, with many states recognizing the same-sex marriage and other states embroiled in a debate over the issue.

Actions undertaken by faith congregations, spurred by the recent gay-bashing of a Hamilton café owner, provide another example of spiritually-based resistance against the dominant discourse. Parishioners of First Unitarian and Centenary United Churches marched from their places of worship to the café as a show of support for the owner and to demonstrate against hate crimes (Gulliver, 2004).

Perhaps part of the challenge for LGBT people in feeling that spirituality is empowering is that such expressions of resistance appear small and isolated. In terms of sheer numbers, Catholicism has great power within Christian religions; hence it appears as though the religious discourse on homosexuality is dominated by the Catholic Church. In addition, despite the dissident voices found among North American Catholics, Canadian media coverage of the same-sex marriage debate tends to focus on the viewpoint espoused by the Vatican. There has been much coverage of the late Pope John Paul II and other top Vatican officials speaking out against legalizing the same-sex marriage ("Pope," 2004). The late Pope referred to it as "degrading," and there is no indication that Pope Benedict XVI will affect any changes in the Church's stance. In fact, his previous statements, already mentioned in this paper, are worrisome at best, and at worst can be interpreted as condoning violence against homosexuals. The challenge for those operating from an empowerment perspective is that in having the debate on same-sex marriage dominated by the orthodoxy of the Catholic Church, dialogue is difficult, if not impossible. Pease (2002) argued that "dialogical forms of communication challenge the knowledge/power connection of dominant discourse." Unfortunately, Catholic doctrine holds that the Pope is infallible—his interpretations are beyond reproach. It is this dogma that reifies knowledge in dichotomous absolutes and prevents any dialogue on the issue. Simon (1994) warns against such dualistic thinking that is embedded in institutions and impedes collaborative relationships. Any challenge within the Catholic Church to official interpretation is met with swift retribution. For example, a Canadian Catholic priest who publicly supported same-

sex marriages and argued that "imposing separate but equal qualifications on the rights of minorities is inconsistent with our Charter of Rights" was suspended by the Archdiocese of Toronto (Ryan, 2004).

It is certainly discouraging for LGBT people that the Vatican feels the necessity to launch a global campaign against same-sex marriages in an attempt to "stem the tide of widening legal recognition for same-sex unions in Europe, North America and elsewhere" ("Pope," 2004). However, the Vatican's campaign can also be viewed as evidence that the same-sex marriage debate has gathered enough support to be a perceived a threat. Given Simon's (1994) urging to be patient because empowerment takes time and continuity of effort, it is impressive to know that the actions of one small Toronto church (MCC) three years ago have changed the legal, and perhaps social, landscape for LGBT people in Canada and perhaps internationally.

Personal Reflection

For me, a lesbian who was raised Catholic, the decision to write this paper evolved from a personal struggle with religion. I have been extremely disenchanted with organized religion, and I ascribe to Marx's notion that religion is the opiate of the people. Thus I saw the need to critically challenge my assumptions and values in regards to religion. It is also an acknowledgement that I risk over-identifying with clients' spiritual struggles due to my negative feelings toward religion. Since such feelings are a primary source of counter-transference biases, I feel a responsibility to be reflective and to strive to ensure that any therapeutic relationship I am engaged in does not become tainted by my personal experiences. Arguably the hardest challenge for me has been one of personal values and of self-awareness. Not surprisingly, practitioners may be inclined to avoid spiritual work rather than confront their ambivalence and reflect on their own spirituality (Cornett,

1992). It is a highly value-laden area for both the practitioner and the client. Thus practitioners' own spiritual biases may be "a more complicated area than sex or politics!" (Northcut, 1999, p. 219).

Another challenge for me has been the requirement to relinquish control over the therapeutic process and its outcomes and to temporarily abdicate the role of an expert (Damianakis, 2001). Since spirituality may be unexplainable, my own comfort level with it dictates how much I hear and understand of this aspect of clients' lives. To truly hear someone it is necessary to take the stance of "not knowing" without losing sight of the goal of the therapeutic relationship (Gotterer, 2001). How do I handle my passionate feelings on LGBT human rights in a way that will allow me to take the position of not knowing? Can I let go of my notions of right and wrong, just and unjust? I realize that viewing religion only as a disempowering force denies the reality of alternative views. Without such alternative knowledge there can be no dialectic communication and no stance of not knowing or seeking to understand the other's perspective. Even when a client might share my own biases, if I am to honour the clients' right to make their own informed choices, I have a responsibility to present alternative possibilities. This is easier said than done when one is passionate about an issue that is often cloaked in the dichotomies of just vs. unjust, moral vs. immoral, and sanctified vs. condemned.

The realization that there are factions within Christianity that are providing resistance to the dominant ideology has been personally empowering for me. Sometimes engaging in social activism can feel like a Sisyphean task, so it is important to identify and celebrate the small victories. It is equally vital to recognize pockets of resistance and to nurture them.

More importantly, if I apply standpoint theory to my own views, I realize that as a lesbian, raised Catholic, I have always felt that

heterosexuals are not aware of, or interested in, fighting against what I perceived as discrimination legitimized by Christianity. Yet, if I take the often quoted estimate that gays and lesbians account for 10% of the population, I am forced to recognize that the progress made on the issue of same-sex marriage has been largely due to the support of heterosexuals. Heterosexuals do "get it," i.e., understand that the issue of same-sex marriage is a human rights issue and *are* supportive of the rights of LGBT people. This realization has challenged my personal paranoia as well as my "split." To explain, Turner (1991, p. 118) discusses how another minority, African-Americans, develop a "healthy paranoia" designed to help navigate the "splits" within themselves, as it relates to their alliances with various groups within society. A minority identity is linked to vigilance in interactions with others (expectations of rejection), concealment of identity for fear of harm, or internalization of stigma. In writing this paper I was forced to examine how this phenomenon operates within my self.

I still struggle with the question of whose fight it is. I wonder if it is empowerment or deference to paternalism to expect heterosexuals to lead the fight. Will they bother to take up the challenge within their own congregations? However, I realize that, as LGBT people who have left Christian religions, we are not able to lead the fight ourselves for change within those religious institutions.

I still harbor strong emotions with regards to many organized religions, as I perceive them to be less than accepting, if not downright hostile, to us as homosexuals and to our rights, including the right to existence. Thus I continue to struggle with many religions' stance on homosexuality, particularly that of the Catholic Church. The central dilemma for me is how to challenge, without my becoming oppressive, the discrimination and the denial of human rights when they are shrouded in the cloak of religion and religious freedom. How do I maintain my passion for gay and lesbian rights, yet remain close to people's experiences when they share views that differ from mine? This is critical when it comes to religion. Issues that have a religious context (e.g. homosexuality, abortion, birth control, etc.) are ruled by the fallacy of bifurcation (e.g., good vs. bad, moral vs. immoral). I have seen people become so impassioned by such issues that they appear to lose sight of any opinions contrary to theirs, as well as the ability to carry on a civil discourse and to not revert to demagoguery. I think that in writing this paper, I was constantly forced to keep in mind that the issue of seeking empowerment through spirituality has, like many others, no simple black and white answers. Rather, it has every shade of gray and has no single objective truth or answer associated with it. Thus, this paper has been one of the many steps in my journey of self-exploration, where I seek to deconstruct my own ambiguous feelings on the issue.

Conclusion

This narrative was the author's attempt to challenge her personal perspective that Christian religion is disempowering, through the denial of human rights, to LGBT people. The paper looked at alternative interpretations of the Bible as subjugated knowledge that can be used to challenge the dominant discourse on the micro level, in therapy or through self-reflection. The paper also explored encouraging examples, within some Christian denominations, of spiritually empowering actions that can be viewed as public acknowledgement and support of LGBT people's human rights.

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(Footnotes)

[1] Empowerment is defined as "gaining control over one's life" and "gaining control over the factors which are critical in accounting for one's state of oppression or disempowerment" (Breton 1994, p.24).

[2] In this paper spirituality is defined as "the general human experience of developing a sense of meaning, purpose, and morality" (Canda, 1989, as cited in Pellebon, & Anderson, 1999, p. 230), and encompasses religion, which is "an institutional set of beliefs and practices" (Canda, 1997, as cited in Hodge, 2000, p. 3).

[3] The Ontario court ruling (June 2003) allowing gay marriages and the subsequent Federal Government's decision not to appeal it gives some hope that this hypocrisy is finally acknowledged. However, concerns still remain, given the Alberta government's announcement of the intention to invoke the notwithstanding clause. As well, the federal government made it very clear that even if Bill C-38 is passed, legalising same-sex marriage in Canada, religious authorities will be free to grant or deny their blessings as they see fit. This ruling allows religious organizations to continue to discriminate against homosexuals.

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