Spirituality and Sexuality: An Exploration of the Religious Beliefs of Non-Heterosexual Christians in Great Britain

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Abstract
This article analyzes the religious beliefs of 565 gay, lesbian and bisexual Christians, focusing on God, Jesus Christ and the Bible. Most respondents saw no conflict between their sexualities and their Christian faith. The examination of these religious beliefs uncovers themes that appear to be influenced by their social circumstances, the core of which being their stigmatized sexualities. Their beliefs of God were consistent with the 'love and justice' theme of queer theology. Jesus Christ was perceived as a good role model committed to social justice. Although the divinity of Christ was acknowledged, they did not consider him the exclusive way to salvation. The Bible was considered still relevant to everyday life. It was, however, not regarded as the sole guide for Christian living, and it should be interpreted through the lens of shifting socio-cultural realities and personal experiences. On the whole, the data seem to suggest that the respondents' personal experiences and collective social circumstances have an impact on their religious beliefs.

Introduction
Human sexuality has been a thorny issue within the Christian community. While the social climate on grassroots level might vary, the authority structures of institutionalized Churches have demonstrated a high degree of unease in handling issues related to sex and sexuality. Among these issues, non-heterosexuality (homosexuality particularly, bisexuality is comparatively undiscovered) has proven to be the most contentious. For instance, in the decennial Lambeth Conference held in Canterbury, England during July-August 1998, there was a high degree of disagreement and contention among the bishops representing 80 million believers in the worldwide Anglican Communion. While
some quarters assiduously promoted the issue of homosexuality, others, particularly representatives from non-Western countries, strove to marginalize this issue on the agenda. Much of this has to do with other more pressing social issues (e.g. Third World debt, poverty), but more so the perceived straightforward teachings of the Bible which do not affirm homosexuality. In some extreme cases, homosexuality was included in the same category with bestiality and child abuse (for more details, see Hogg 1998).

That homosexuality is a contentious issue within the Christian community is undeniable. However, on the academic level, the discourse is dominated almost exclusively by theologians, evidenced by the burgeoning corpus of literature in this area (e.g. Seow 1996; Bradshaw 1997; Stuart [ed.] 1997, 2003; Schneider 2000). This scenario is closely related to the general assumption that the Bible serves as the most powerful and fundamental basis for the Churches’ prohibition of the ‘practice’ of homosexuality. The focus on biblical exegesis and other related issues (e.g. Church tradition) is therefore inevitable.

Sociologically, however, the interplay between sexuality and spirituality remains a relatively unexplored terrain. Within the sociology of sexuality in general, or queer studies in particular, the religious or spiritual dimension is either mentioned en passant or neglected altogether. On the other hand, empirical research within sociology of religion thus far has focused on what some call the ‘holy trinity of sociological analysis’, namely, class, gender, and race/ethnicity. Sexuality as a social variable has yet to be taken seriously in the analysis of, for instance, religious participation, experiences and beliefs (Neitz 2000).

Nevertheless, the limited amount of sociological literature currently available can be divided into two broad categories. First, literature on the management of the stigma attached to being lesbian and gay Christians. Given the generally unaffirming climate in the Christian community, research in this category primarily examines strategies that lesbian and gay Christians have developed to cope with the potentially stigmatizing environment. (For a detailed discussion of the official stances on institutionalized Churches in this area, see Brash 1995; Hartman 1996; Jordan 2000. There can be, however, discrepancy between the institution and the individual local churches in terms of acceptance level, see Yip 1998.) In addition, research also explores how, in a more advanced stage, lesbian and gay Christians incorporate harmoniously their sexuality and spirituality, as a result of the construction of a positive personal identity that challenges the validity and creditability of the stigmatizer and the stigma itself (e.g. Thumma 1991; Mahaffy 1996; Yip 1997a, 1997b, 1999; Lukenbill 1998; Rodriguez and Ouellette 2000).
Research within the second category, on the other hand, concentrates broadly on lesbian and gay Christians' views and perceptions of the institutionalized Churches (e.g. the Churches' conventional biblical exegesis on homosexuality, and their lack of experiences of dealing with the lesbian and gay community), as well as a host of issues related to human sexuality such as celibacy and sexual ethics (e.g. O'Brien 1990; Yip 1997c). Research evidence seems to suggest that the majority of lesbian and gay Christians hold views that contradict those of the institutionalized Churches, and they rise above the institutional line in the construction of their personal Christian faith (Yip 2002a).

Research thus far has cast lesbian and gay Christians to an 'underdog' position in the face of stigmatization and discrimination. The research themes are constructed within a 'morality framework', focusing on two opposing quarters wrestling with the social definitional power of homosexuality. With the exception of Comstock (1996) and Sherkat (2002), research thus far has not given sufficient space to the analysis of this social group's religious worldviews, commitment and participation, in relation to their sexualities.

Against this backdrop, this article, using both quantitative and qualitative data, aims to explore the religious beliefs of 565 self-identified gay, lesbian and bisexual Christians in Great Britain. The focus is on meanings and beliefs, not practices. I will set the scene by exploring the respondents' views of their sexualities in relation to their Christian faith. This is followed by an examination of their beliefs, focusing specifically on God, Jesus Christ and the Bible. I will demonstrate that their beliefs are informed by the specificity of their own social circumstances, particularly their stigmatized sexualities.

I think it is worthwhile to mention that the study from which the data are drawn is not designed to compare the religious beliefs of heterosexuals and non-heterosexuals. Throughout my experience of conducting this project and disseminating its findings, I have encountered queries about why heterosexuals were not included in the study, for comparative purposes. There are two reasons for this. First, that is simply not the research aim of the project. As discussed, empirical research on non-heterosexual Christians is scarce. This study intends to enrich the body of literature in this area. The study, however, does undertake a certain degree of comparison within the non-heterosexual (gay, lesbian and bisexual) sample. Second, while many might assert that a comparative study would have been more 'interesting', I detect the underlying argument that such a study would render the findings more 'reliable', 'valid' and therefore more 'valuable'. There is no doubt that there are similarities and dissimilarities between heterosexual and
non-heterosexual experiences in various spheres of social life. However, I do not think that the validity of non-heterosexual experiences could only be established if they are studied in comparison to those of heterosexuals, the 'norm'. This community deserves research interest on its own right, which would help inform the diversity and complexity of contemporary religious landscape.

**The Study**

The primary aim of the study, the largest of its kind to date in Great Britain, was to construct what Richardson (1990) called the 'collective narrative' of this minority whose lived experiences are currently peripheral to mainstream sociological discourses and public consciousness. On the whole, the project aimed to collect quantitative data by reaching as widely as possible to the targeted population, as well as in-depth qualitative data by interviewing a sub-sample.

The study examined a host of issues pertaining to the sexuality and spirituality of the respondents. These issues include, among others, their religious beliefs and practices (e.g., perceptions of God and Jesus Christ; views of the institutionalized Churches, the Bible and prayer); their sexuality in relation to Christianity (e.g., views on their sexual orientation as God's creation, homophobia); their experiences with the local churches (e.g., churches' stance on sexuality; experiences of stigmatization or acceptance); their involvement in the lesbian, gay and bisexual communities; and their experiences of casual and committed relationships.

The first stage of the project, carried out between May and December 1997, involved the use of 17-page postal questionnaires, with both closed-ended and open-ended questions. Publicity leaflets were distributed through, among others, lesbian gay and bisexual Christian organizations; Christian organizations whose members might be lesbian, gay or bisexual; 'secular' lesbian, gay and bisexual organizations whose members might be Christian; snowballing; personal contact network; lesbian, gay and bisexual commercial scenes; as well as recruitment through advertisements in the popular press. These cost-effective leaflets contained details about the research project and information about my credentials and previous research experience, in order to enhance potential respondents' confidence and willingness to participate. Interested individuals then returned the bottom end of the leaflet with personal details in the prepaid envelopes provided. Subsequently, questionnaires were posted to them.

Between October 1997 and January 1998, I interviewed a sub-sample of 61 respondents, using a semi-structured interview guide. This sub-
sample, like the main sample, represented respondents from Wales, Scotland, and every region in England.

The Respondents

The total sample of 565 respondents consisted of 389 self-identified gay men (68.8%), 131 lesbians (23.2%), 21 bisexual men and 24 bisexual women (total 8%). In terms of gender, 27.4% of the sample were women and 72.6% men. The ages of the sample distributed between 18 and 80, with just over half (52.6%) between 31 and 50. The mean age was 44.3 years. An overwhelming majority of the sample (95.4%) was white.

Almost half of the sample (271, 48.0%) was affiliated to the Church of England. Other major denominations to which the respondents were affiliated include Roman Catholic (149, 26.4%), Methodist (29, 5.1%), and Baptist (16, 2.8%). 399 (70.6%) of the sample were in some form of employment. In terms of occupations, 96 (23.9%) were clerics, followed by educational professionals (e.g. teachers and lecturers, 54, 13.5%), medical professionals (e.g. doctors and therapists, 47, 11.7%), and administrators and social/support workers (both 28, 7%).

The sample was in general highly educated, with 342 (60.5%) possessing at least a first degree. Although the sample was distributed across the United Kingdom, the majority lived in Greater London (164, 29%), the South East (74, 13.1%), and North West (64, 11.3%) of England.

A representative sample of a (partially) hidden population is unobtainable. Since the respondents constitute a non-probability (and therefore unrepresentative) sample, findings reported here should be treated with great care, and generalizations to the entire non-heterosexual Christian community should be discouraged. Nevertheless, the findings serve to inform us about certain aspects of the religious beliefs of this under-researched community.

Views of Sexuality and Christianity

This section highlights the respondents’ positive personal identities. An overwhelming majority of them perceived their sexualities to be compatible with their Christian faith, in stark contrast to the stances of the institutionalized Churches. Table 1 illustrates this point.
## Table 1. Respondents’ Views on their Sexualities in Relation to Christianity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Entire Sample (N= 565)</th>
<th>Gay Men (N= 389)</th>
<th>Lesbians (N= 131)</th>
<th>Bisexuals (N= 45)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. All sexualities are created by God and to be fully accepted</td>
<td>464 (82.1%)</td>
<td>319 (82.0%)</td>
<td>109 (83.2%)</td>
<td>36 (80.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. A person’s sexual orientation is established early in life and cannot be changed radically</td>
<td>455 (80.5%)</td>
<td>342 (87.9%)</td>
<td>92 (70.2%)</td>
<td>21 (46.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Same-sex genital acts are always incompatible with Christian principles</td>
<td>25 (4.4%)</td>
<td>20 (5.1%)</td>
<td>3 (2.3%)</td>
<td>2 (4.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. The traditional biblical exegesis on homosexuality is inaccurate</td>
<td>480 (84.9%)</td>
<td>327 (84.1%)</td>
<td>114 (87.0%)</td>
<td>39 (86.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. The Churches have not taken due account of the experiences of gay, lesbian and bisexual Christians in their examination of the issue of human sexuality</td>
<td>527 (93.3%)</td>
<td>364 (93.6%)</td>
<td>120 (91.6%)</td>
<td>43 (95.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F. The Churches have encouraged heterosexism in society</td>
<td>539 (95.4%)</td>
<td>374 (96.1%)</td>
<td>130 (99.2%)</td>
<td>35 (77.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G. The Churches have contributed to the perpetuation of homophobia in society</td>
<td>530 (92.8%)</td>
<td>368 (94.6%)</td>
<td>129 (98.5%)</td>
<td>33 (73.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H. Sexual intercourse should always be potentially procreative</td>
<td>33 (5.8%)</td>
<td>27 (6.9%)</td>
<td>4 (3.1%)</td>
<td>2 (4.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. Christian sexual ethics should be concerned much more with responsible behaviour and justice to individuals, rather than the acceptability of particular kinds of genital acts</td>
<td>524 (92.7%)</td>
<td>364 (93.6%)</td>
<td>125 (95.4%)</td>
<td>43 (95.5%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 illustrates three salient points. First, the vast majority of the respondents were confident about the acceptability of their sexualities in relation to the Christian faith (as shown by their responses to, for instance, statements A, B and C). They represented a segment of this sexual and religious minority who had by and large risen above stigmatizing social definition in the process of constructing personal identities that incorporate harmoniously their sexuality and spirituality. Second, following
from the first point, the respondents were highly critical of institutionalized Churches and Christianity (as shown in their responses to, for instance, statements D to G). This undermines the credibility of the Churches and their religious orthodoxy in the discourse of homosexuality (and to a much less extent, bisexuality).

Third, having rejected the moral authority and credibility of the Churches in the area of sexuality, the respondents argued for Christian sexual ethics that do not demarcate sexual orientation and sexual practice, which is often the case with the Churches’ official stances (see responses to statements H and I). Such progressive sexual ethics do not reduce the complexity of sexuality to mere genital acts, ignoring relationality, mutuality and emotionality. This stance resonates with the ‘theology of relationships’ rather than ‘theology of sexual acts’ that a growing number of gay- and lesbian-affirming theologians espouse (see, for instance, Nelson 1992; Stuart 1995; Hayes, Porter and Tombs 1998; Rogers 1999). This call is echoed in sociological literature too. Weeks (1995: 54), for instance, asserted that postmodern morality (particularly sexual) needs to be conceptualized as ‘an ethics of relationships, and choice of relationships, which is intent on listening to how to engage with one another, and respond to one another’s needs as fellow human beings’ instead of ‘a morality of acts, which locates truth and rightness or wrongdoing in particular practices, and the expression of creation desires’ (see also Yip 2002b). These points are illustrated in the following narratives:

I have come a long way. But my sexuality now fits very well with my Christian faith. If a particular church found out that I was a lesbian and they didn’t like it, that wouldn’t really worry me. I would just move on from that situation. I no longer have any respect for the Church of England, which is a shame really. The Church is a human institution. It is supposed to be inspired by God. But I think it loses sight of God very often. In fact, I think a lot of things have gone wrong in the Church. (Barbara, lesbian, carer in her late 40s, living in Yorkshire)

Yes, I was very confused by my sexual orientation when I was 15 or 16. I think I grew up with an awareness of being different, but couldn’t identify what it was. I felt quite ashamed of myself. Luckily I survived that. I started to read and explore. Then that led to coming out to my family and friends. Well, most people still wanted to be around despite that, which was for me like a breath of fresh air... But 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. (Margaret, bisexual woman, teacher in her late 30s, living in Wales)
Both the quantitative and qualitative data above lend credence data from the previous research that I have reviewed in the preceding section.

**Beliefs about God**

Having discussed the respondents' views of their sexualities in relation to Christianity, I now explore further their religious beliefs and the impact of their sexualities on their content. Table 2 shows the respondents' beliefs about God.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2. Respondents' Beliefs about God</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number and Percentage of Respondents Who 'Agreed' or 'Strongly Agreed'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. God is genderless</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. God is love</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. God is socially concerned, for instance, with justice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. God is a life force within you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. God is within and among us rather than above us</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F. God is close to you and approachable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G. We can interact intimately with God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H. God hears prayers and answers them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. God is like a father who cares for his children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J. God determines your destiny and fate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K. God's will is final and there is no questioning of his will</td>
</tr>
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</table>

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Statements A to C aimed to explore the attributes of God. The responses to statement A show a feminist slant. At least 80 per cent of the respondents across sexualities perceived God to be genderless instead of the traditional male gender. This is particularly telling, though not surprising, among lesbian Christians, who, as women, are more likely than men to perceive institutionalized Christianity as patriarchal and sexist (Sherkat 2002). This point is strengthened by the comparatively low percentage of lesbian Christians who agreed or strongly agreed with the image of God as a father (statement I).

Responses to statements B and C reflect the ‘queer’ dimension of the respondents’ beliefs about God. Queer theologians have argued that, for those who are on the margins of the church, the God of justice who is read about in the scriptures is more important than the God of metaphysical speculation or even the liberal God who treats the oppressor and the oppressed equally. In point of fact, talk about god must soon turn again into talk about justice and love if it is not to be distracting speculation. (Edwards 1997: 72; for a general discussion see Stuart (ed.) 1997; Goss 1999; Bardella 2001)

This ‘love and justice’ theme constitutes an important attribute in the respondents’ beliefs about God. This is indicative of the relationship between their social circumstances and their belief that God is loving and accepting of people of all sexualities. Further, God is concerned with the social injustice inflicted upon them, despite their being God’s creation.

In response to statements D to G that examined their beliefs about God in relation to their own lives, the majority of respondents rejected the traditional view of a God high above, but one who is close, approachable, interactive, communicative, and within themselves. Their responses to statements H to K regarding the power or functions of God show that they rejected God as being all determining in the course of their lives (see specifically statements J and K). This is consistent with their perception that God is love. If God is love, God will not impose her or his will and plans onto the lives of individuals. The following narratives encapsulate the respondents’ beliefs about God in general:

God is love. He loves everybody... And I think being a lesbian, when I became a Christian, God said to me, ‘Right, you are one of my children now’. Because I am a lesbian I am no different, I’m still one of God’s children... God is around us. God is in our hearts. God is in our spirit. God is in our lives. He has to be in the whole of you. You can’t have God put in a little box and taken out on a Sunday... He is someone I can communicate with on an intimate level. I could tell him anything I want. I can get angry with him, if I’m angry. (Jane, lesbian, mid-60s, student, Metropolitan Community Church, East Midlands)
I believe in a God that is loving, not judgmental, a God that cares for all of creation, and not any part of it... I don’t believe in God being up above, up in the clouds. God communicates with us in lots of different ways, not just through the Bible, but also individual experience. God is every being of life, communicated through creation theology. (Michael, gay man, late 20s, teacher, Church of England, Yorkshire)

I see God as being very personal, very close. But at the same time, I see God as being inside me but also without. So he is able to know me intimately and also to view from afar and keep that distance and be able to guide me... So there is a personal and then a sort of parental role almost, you know, of keeping a watchful eye on his child. I do see God as very personal. (Keith, bisexual man, mid-30s, teacher, Metropolitan Community Church, North West of England)

On the whole, the respondents were inclined to believe God in personal and experiential terms. Their beliefs in God were more pantheistic (God is around us, involving in all things) rather than theistic (God reigns over all creation, looks after us, and responds to our needs). Their social circumstances also seemed to inform their beliefs about God.

**Beliefs about Jesus Christ**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
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<th>Bisexuals (N= 45)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Jesus Christ was a prophetic leader</td>
<td>487 (86.2%)</td>
<td>333 (85.6%)</td>
<td>116 (88.5%)</td>
<td>38 (84.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Jesus Christ is the Son of God</td>
<td>485 (85.8%)</td>
<td>345 (88.7%)</td>
<td>107 (81.7%)</td>
<td>33 (73.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Jesus Christ was a moral teacher</td>
<td>475 (84.1%)</td>
<td>330 (84.8%)</td>
<td>110 (84.0%)</td>
<td>35 (77.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. Jesus Christ is God made man</td>
<td>457 (80.9%)</td>
<td>327 (84.1%)</td>
<td>101 (77.1%)</td>
<td>29 (64.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. Jesus Christ is your personal Saviour and Lord</td>
<td>406 (71.9%)</td>
<td>302 (77.6%)</td>
<td>78 (59.5%)</td>
<td>26 (57.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F. Jesus Christ is the only hope for salvation</td>
<td>269 (47.6%)</td>
<td>209 (53.7%)</td>
<td>49 (37.4%)</td>
<td>11 (24.4%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Responses to statements A to E indicate that the majority of respondents acknowledged both the divine and human nature of Christ. Nevertheless, traditional beliefs associated with the divinity of Christ—his being the only hope of salvation (statement F) and his second coming to 'rapture' the saved (statement G)—were supported by less than 50 per cent of the respondents, across all sexuality categories. This shows that, although accepting Christ's divinity, the majority of respondents rejected some fundamental Christian claims about the exclusiveness of Christ as the Saviour for all humankind. Nevertheless, the analysis of qualitative data reveals that the divine nature constitutes a significant part of the respondents' perceptions of Christ, as encapsulated in the following narrative:

I believe Jesus is Son of God and Son of Man. I mean I believe in reincarnation. I believe that Jesus is humanity, and that is as important as his divinity. I am a fairly orthodox Christian I suppose. I believe that Jesus comes into the world, died for our sins, and was raised again. I think that his teaching about God’s kingdom is absolutely fundamental to Christianity, and has often unfortunately been obscured by the church. At least in the sense of its radicalism being lost sight of, or even denied. (Nick, bisexual man, late 40s, editor, Church of England, Yorkshire)

Most respondents, however, placed greater emphasis on Christ’s humanity. He was perceived as a good role model or example in human terms, particularly in the area of social justice, as illustrated by the following narrative:

I find Jesus a very attractive person in his teaching and his way of life. So I feel he is a good person to follow and emulate... I try to live a simple lifestyle and don’t spend loads of money on clothes. I also try to work for justice, for other people, people who are marginalized. A lot of the things I do are concerned with my church’s action poverty group. I feel that’s the sort of thing Jesus would be doing. Well, he said that love shows itself in action. He himself set the example. I suppose that’s why I work [voluntarily] at the school a couple of days a week and work on the [lesbian and gay] phone helpline because I am trying to help. (Patricia, lesbian, late 60s, retired, Church of England, West Midlands)

Considering the respondents' beliefs about God and Jesus Christ together, it is interesting to note the primacy accorded to the 'love and justice' theme. They believed primarily that God is loving in very personal ways, and sensitive to their needs and circumstances. Constituting
significantly to such circumstances is their negative experience within the church because of their sexualities (some have ceased attending church as a result of this—for more details see Yip 2000). Jesus Christ, therefore, is primarily believed to be an enabler who identified with marginalized people. He gave a voice to people who are otherwise silenced by religious authority structures. Such beliefs are significantly linked to the respondents’ social position as ‘religious marginals’; evidence that their social circumstances do inform and shape their religious beliefs in this connection.

Beliefs about the Bible

The respondents’ beliefs about the Bible is arguably the most obvious area to assess the impact of their lived experiences as a stigmatized community on their religious beliefs. The Bible constitutes the most fundamental and primary, though not exclusive, basis for the Churches’ unfavourable attitudes towards homosexuality. (It is worthwhile to reiterate that bisexuality has hardly entered into the Churches’ consciousness to warrant any meaningful consideration. Nevertheless, any sexualities other than hegemonic heterosexuality are problematic to the Churches at this point, albeit to varying degrees.) The conventional interpretation of biblical texts that prohibits the practice of homosexuality characterizes the Churches’ dominant discourse. It is therefore not surprising that lesbian, gay and bisexual Christians’ reverse discourse seeks to challenge the validity and credibility of this discourse (for more details, see Yip 1997a, 1998, 1999). Their general beliefs about the Bible illustrate this point, as demonstrated in Table 4.

Table 4. Respondents’ Beliefs about the Bible

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
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<th>Lesbians (N= 131)</th>
<th>Bisexuals (N= 45)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. The Bible seems irrelevant to your everyday life</td>
<td>57 (10.1%)</td>
<td>44 (11.3%)</td>
<td>10 (7.6%)</td>
<td>3 (6.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. The Bible cannot always be taken literally</td>
<td>536 (94.9%)</td>
<td>369 (94.9%)</td>
<td>126 (96.2%)</td>
<td>41 (91.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. The Bible is a sufficient guide for everyday living</td>
<td>155 (27.4%)</td>
<td>114 (29.3%)</td>
<td>31 (23.7%)</td>
<td>10 (22.2%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Statement A shows that a vast majority of respondents thought that the Bible was still relevant to their everyday lives. The typical narrative below supports this:

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We can learn from the Bible. I don’t think you can ever find it not fresh. However well you may know a particular passage, every time you read it there’s something else to be gained from it, particularly the Psalms. And an awful lot of it you can apply to your own situation. It’s not something remote or some history. It’s there and it does have relevance to what is happening in your own life. (Samantha, lesbian, early 50s, teacher, Roman Catholic, Yorkshire)

That the Bible, despite its age, is still relevant to everyday life and therefore revered, is undeniably the pervasive belief among the respondents. However, they were also quick in pointing out that the Bible should not be the sole basis for their Christian faith. Other factors, particularly personal lived experiences, need to be taken into account, for instance, in the interpretation of scriptures. The following narratives demonstrate this argument:

The Bible is divinely inspired. It has value and meaning. But I don’t think you can really use it as a sort of rulebook. That implies you are going against what is in it, which isn’t necessarily the case. I think if you are going to use the Bible, you’ve also got to use your conscience, your common sense, your experiences. The Bible is a factor in how you operate in your life. I wouldn’t say I would use it as the main rulebook. (James, gay man, early 30s, administrator, Church of England, East Midlands)

I think I would certainly consider the Bible as in some way important in our lives. But I think that we make a big mistake if we take it as the great rulebook of life, because it is the inspired word of God. I don’t doubt that God had a hand in it. But I think if you have had some training in theology you’d understand why the Bible was written and when it was written and the culture that formed it. And you’d understand that there were very good reasons why the writers said what they did. I think it is very naive of the present generation to say that the scriptures are the very words of God... You could get into trouble if you start to apply scriptures to every aspect of life when you are looking for guidance. I think God speaks to us through our various experiences of things. (John, gay man, late 30s, support worker, Church of England, East Midlands)

The narratives above highlight the ‘situatedness’ and ‘constructedness’ of the Bible and conventional biblical exegesis. Thus, on the contentious issue of homosexuality (or human sexuality, for that matter), the historical and the socio-cultural contexts that shaped the biblical discourse must be subject to ‘deconstruction’. This underlies the critique of lesbian, gay and bisexual Christians of the Churches and their biblical exegesis, which assumed the Bible’s inerrancy and literalness. This exegesis not only is blind to shifting socio-cultural realities, it also excludes the lived experiences of lesbian, gay and bisexual Christians (see the responses to statements D and E in Table 1). Not surprisingly, the respondents
strongly argued for the inclusion of lived experiences in the light of understanding the Bible, eloquently demonstrated in the following narrative:

Well, I believe everyone has to be true to their own experience and their own understanding of themselves. I think that if church authorities say things that go against authentic experience, then there is something wrong. Then they need to be challenged. I think church authority frequently is wrong and frequently does fail to take account of the variety of experience. And of course, the issue of sexuality is an example of that. (Nick, bisexual man, late 40s, editor, Church of England, Yorkshire)

Concluding Remarks

The majority of respondents appeared to have developed positive self-identities that harmoniously incorporated their stigmatized sexualities and their Christian faith. They were highly critical of the institutionalized Churches for the lack of progress in adopting an inclusive attitude towards sexualities, which, to the respondents, are all God-created and therefore deserve equal treatment.

The examination of the respondents’ religious beliefs about God, Jesus Christ and the Bible uncovers themes that appear to be at least influenced, if not shaped, by their social circumstances, the core of which being their stigmatized sexualities. Their beliefs about God were consistent with the ‘love and justice’ theme of the burgeoning queer theology, which aims to deconstruct the ‘top-down’ approach to religion that favours authority structures. The ‘top-down’ approach often leads to the silencing of individual believers whose lived experiences or identities are partially or totally inconsistent with institutional definition of normality and acceptability.

On the specific issue of sexuality, queer theology problematizes, disrupts and trangresses the binary hetero/homosexual categories that form the cornerstone of heteronormativity. In this respect, queer theology, like feminist, post-colonial and ‘black’ theologies, seems to draw upon the more established liberation theology. All these theologies give primacy to the social circumstances of the people at the core of their theologies, and the inclusion of their voices in social discourses. Similarly, all of them highlight the theme of liberation from social injustices, which impede the disadvantaged from full participation in various dimensions of social life. The emphasis in on linking ‘religious truths’ to ‘social justice’ (Conn 1988; Goss 1999; Nadeau 2002).

Relating to the above point, the respondents believed in Jesus Christ in both divine and human terms. Humanly, Jesus Christ was perceived as a good role model to emulate, particularly for his compassion for the
socially disadvantaged. This arguably is also a reflection of the respondents' social circumstances shaping the way they perceived Christ. Although the respondents acknowledged the divine nature of Christ (e.g. as their Saviour, Son of God), the majority did not agree with the exclusionary claim that Christ is the only way to salvation. This could be a reflection of the respondents' emphasis on personal lived experiences as the crucial basis for their religious faith. The reaching out to the sacred need not take a unilateral route (through Christ). There could be other spiritual routes, validated by positive personal experiences.

The emphasis on lived experiences as the basis of religious faith is illustrated more clearly in the respondents' beliefs about the Bible. Although the Bible was considered still relevant to everyday life, it is nevertheless considered an insufficient guide for Christian living. They acknowledged the 'situatedness' and 'constructedness' of the Bible, thus the need to interpret it through the lens of shifting socio-cultural realities and personal experiences. They also argued that the Churches' ignorance of this crucial point often forms the basis for their generally erroneous official positions on human sexualities, and homosexuality in particular.

On the whole, the data seem to suggest that the respondents' personal experiences and collective social circumstances appear to have a significant impact on their religious beliefs. This seems to be consistent with Giddens' (1991) argument that the construction and management of personal identities in a de-traditionalized world are increasingly becoming internally referential rather than externally based. It follows that the stigmatized nature of the respondents' sexualities heightens their reflexivity and reliance on the positiveness of their personal experiences in the construction of their religious beliefs and faith. The 'voice of authority' that guides the construction of such beliefs and faith is located primarily (though not exclusively) within the self, rather than external structures. Such 'person-based spirituality', as Cox (1995: 305) calls it, is

a radically personal style piety in which, as it were, each person is constantly compiling his or her own collage of symbols and practices in the light of what coheres with their own changing experiences in the tortuous passage through life in a world where the old, allegedly comprehensive charts no longer command confidence.

This argument is consistent with Roof's (1996: 149) assertion that current religious mood and landscape are 'shifting from the cognitive and fixed beliefs toward the experiential and expressive'. Thus, as Luckmann (1967) has argued, individuals construct systems of ultimate significance based on a process of subjective reflection and choice shaped by their own social biographies. Viewed from this angle, this article seems to
point to the same direction with regards to the contemporary religious landscape, as documented by a burgeoning body of empirical work in the area of individual religiosity/spirituality (e.g. McNamara 1992; Roof 1999; Hoge et al. 2001).

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