

Making space for young lesbians in church? Intersectional sites, scripts and sticking points

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Abstract This article is a case-study exploration of Christianity and sexuality in the lives of young lesbians in the UK. Religion matters as a personal and political force, but secularizing trends arguably obscure its influence upon the complex convergence and intersection of personal, political, familial and institutional realms (Brierley, 2006; Heelas and Woodhead, 2005). While the ‘question of homosexuality’ has been a central focus in much discussion, highlighting around the presumed discontinuity between sexual identity and Christian identity (O’Brien, 2004), there is still a gap in terms of locating first-hand narratives of self-identified young ‘queer’ Christians. Rather than assuming that these are separate and divergent paths (Wilcox, 2000), this article explores intersectional convergences and divergences, illustrating how religious participation can convey (de)legitimation within family, community and society. Such (de)legitimation is revealed in unpacking scripts of inclusion and exclusion (Taylor and Snowdon, 2014), which are (re)circulated via ‘hetero-homo normative’ ideals, and perpetuated and contested in the context of intersectional Equalities legislation (Monro and Richardson, 2010). Here, we examine the highly gendered and heteronormative ‘role models’, ‘mentors’ and (familial) mediations experienced by young lesbian Christians, as intersecting public-private domains in the production of queer religious subjectivity and dis-identification.

Introduction: Making, modelling and mimicking space

Christian stances on 'homosexuality' have been vigorously debated. Into this often highly intense social milieu, young LGBT Christians try to find a sense of belonging and it is within this context that our overall research project stands. Empirical data is taken from wider research 'Making space for queer-identifying religious youth' (2011-2013) funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) which explores youth cultures, queer community and religious groups. Overall, the intention is to offer insight into the management of excluded identity positions, building on a growing body of literature (Thumma, 1991; Yip, 2002; Wilcox, 2003, 2006; O'Brien, 2004, 2005). Young people's voices are particularly marginalised within writings on religion, often positioned as obvious absences, given the assumed dichotomy and mutual disinterest between 'youth' and 'religion'. Queer-identified youth are further negated within this sweep and, as such, their (dis)comforts and (dis)investments are mostly absent. This negation also occurs within LGBTQ 'friendly' religious organisations, practices and spaces, which are often still demonstrably of and for older adults.

The purpose here is to question, through an intersectional framing (Taylor, 2009), 'how religious identity interplays with other forms and contexts of identity', specifically those related to youth, gender and sexual identity (Stein, 2001; Yip, 2005). These 'intersections' may be located within contested, and increasingly globalised, policy reformation, which challenge and consolidate key sites, institutions and practices of heteronormativity – and religiosity (Jackson, 2011). This is apparent in same-sex marriage rights and international legislation and debates, which often posit Christian 'backlash' against more integrative calls for inclusion. For some, such policies signal an 'arrival' of more liberal politics (Weeks, 2007). But for those still firmly attached to religion values, as rooted in heteronormativity, predicated on supposed 'natural laws' and assumptions of a traditional gender division based on sexual reproductivity (as *also* reflect in are mirrored in religious/legal policy), these

changes can be unsettling. The nuclear family, combined with traditional gender roles, is still a foundational pillar of many religions, contested by participation in congregations, levels of ordination and specific sacraments (such as marriage) (see Machacek and Wilcox, 2003).

However, young people are again side-lined from such debates. These absences and contentions emerge in considering sexualised and gendered ‘role modes’ and ‘mentors’ for young lesbian Christians, mediated by intersecting public-private domains which produce *and* queer religious subjectivity and dis-identification. Alongside the passing of Equalities legislation¹, sits the arguably contradictory and uncomfortable fact of continued male-dominated presences and church hierarchies, impacting on the ‘making’ of religious and queer space, as both gendered and sexualised. Such ‘heteronormativity’ is still the pervasive context into which young lesbians (re)frame their religious participation, from the public political-policy level, to the more intimate-everyday level, where the language of familialism (dis)allows and (re)circulates heteronormativity and, in the context of same-sex rights, certain ‘homonormativities’ (Duggan, 2003; Puar, 2007).

Here we explore young people’s understanding of religion as fields which they enter, negotiate, participate in and withdraw from, at times searching for and rejecting the role models and mentors provided in ‘making space’; frequently younger (single) adults were welcomed into churches through an implicit – and sometimes explicit – *familial* framing of community, care, grouping and identity. ‘Space’ is not simply theirs, or there for the taking, rather it is created through processes, actions and policies, including those which contest the place of women in church leadership roles (exemplified in current tensions around the ordination of women bishops in the Church of England). *Gendered* exclusions operate

¹ In the UK context, this includes the raft of legislation enacted by the previous UK New Labour government, such as the Civil Partnership Act, 2004, the Gender Recognition Act, 2004 and the Equality Act, 2010. The Conservative-Liberal coalition government have introduced the Marriage (Same-Sex Couples) Act in 2013. Some of these provisions are included and extended through European Union (EU) legislation (see Monro and Richardson, 2010).

alongside and intersect with *sexualised* exclusions and thus the purpose of this article is to unpack scripts of inclusion and exclusion in relation to young lesbians in church (O'Brien, 2014). The aim is to adopt an intersectional lens, both theoretically and methodologically, also uncovering the salience of multiple social divisions and identities in young lesbian lives. Using such a model is relevant, where this largely theoretical position is often not fully embedded within empirical study. Beyond the recognisable material 'spaces' of religion (e.g. in the sacralisation of space and the construction of places of worship, see Gorman-Murray and Nash, 2014), religion infiltrates everyday, intimate and political spaces of family, community and identity. This article firstly considers the literature on sexuality, religion and youth, making a case for the potential (and perhaps failure) of 'intersectionality', as an *effort* in bringing connecting social divisions to the forefront through specific empirical examples. Using key studies, we consider the place of heteronormativity in shaping religious subjectivity and dis-identification before outlining the projects methodology. Subsequent sections pursue connected themes of "'Diversity role models": Finding the (lesbian) women in leadership' and 'Locating young lesbian lives in church/through family', leading to a concluding section.

Intersectional absences: Reviewing sexuality, religion and youth

*Intersectional Anxieties and Enduring Capacities*²

Much sociological and feminist literature applies a conceptual lens of 'intersectionality' in exploring, theorising and debating social divisions of sexuality, gender, race and class (Anthias, 2001; Taylor et al., 2010). Rather than portraying intersectionality as a list to be constructed and completed, whereby inequalities are rated and ranked, others have pointed instead to on-going complexity and multiplicity, so that inequalities cannot simply be marked

² Brown, M. (2011) 'Gender and sexuality I: Intersectional anxieties' *Progress in Human Geography* 1-10

onto each other mechanically (Valentine, 2007). While ‘intersection’ is now a common trope in discussions of social dynamics and identities, there is still immense worth and salience in this concept. When empirically embedded ‘intersectionality’ can arguably be retrieved it from any ‘buzzword’ catch-all framing (Davis, 2008). Arguably, ‘understanding complexities posed by intersections of different axes of differentiation is as pressing today as it has always been’ (Brah and Phoenix, 2004: 75). Yet, as with Brown’s (2011) ‘anxious’ commentary on the potentiality of ‘intersectionality, painful feelings of being failed by the neglect of particular intersections, specifically those of sexuality and class, can be experienced (Taylor, 2007, 2009). LGBT/class often constitutes a dividing, rather than contour, line between projects, traditions and trajectories. Class and sexuality seems a particularly awkward disconnection (Taylor et al., 2010; Taylor, 2012) and ‘intersectional anxieties’ may re-emerge when theorising sexuality and religion.

While the ‘enduring capacities of intersectionality’ have been acknowledged, Puar also insists that it remains limited by its failure, arguing that ‘no matter how intersectional our models of subjectivity, no matter how attuned to locational politics of space, place, and scale, these formulations may still limit us if they presume the automatic primacy and singularity of the disciplinary subject and its identitarian interpellation’ (2007: 206). Puar thus advocates a ‘move from intersectionality to assemblage’, a move ‘more attuned to interwoven forces that merge and dissipate time, space, and body against linearity, coherency, and permanency’ (ibid). Intersectionality may demand the ‘knowing and naming’ of identity and there needs to be attentiveness to who can be named and known, by interrogating claims making, entitlements and ‘rights’ of sexual citizens. Such interrogation seeks to work with and through ‘enduring capacities’, even as these are troubled. Additive models of theorising identities and inequalities are problematised in empirically investigating the

interconnectedness and spatially situated salience of queer youth religiosity, negotiated too via gendered dynamics. Complex interactional personal identities also re-cast ‘group’ positions and explain ‘... how individuals with divergent values, interests and beliefs can *in practice* live with difference despite competing groups rights claims in the public sphere’ (Valentine and Waite, 2012: 490, original italics). While having outlined the enduring capacity and anxiety around ‘intersectionality’, few studies have explored the ways that Christian religious identities shape and are shaped by their intersections and interactions with other social identities (although see Yip, 2005 on Muslim identities). Yet ‘intersectionality’ allows for exploration of the relations between various *social* categories and experiences; between the everyday, ordinary – even contradictory – spaces of (sexual/religious) citizenship (Skelton and Valentine, 2005; Yip, 2005). Inclusions do not necessarily result in resolutions, as ‘intersectionality’ cannot be simply seen as concluded, instead involving enduring efforts and even failures, in the attempt to ‘keep trying’ (Haschemi Yekani et al., 2010; Taylor et al., 2010).³

Heteronomativities? Institutionalised scripts and individualised inclusion

Intersectionality as a social frame avoids the pit-falls of more psychologised frames that speak of ‘cognitive dissonance’ or resolving ‘double stigma’, where the site of examination is often the individual rather than the social context. As O’Brien (2004) demonstrates, her investigation into the strategies used by LGBTQ Christians to ‘integrate’ conflicting identities was quickly dismissed in foregrounding the multiple identities held in ‘workable tension’ (Thumma, 1991). Several studies have shown how queer identified members of Christian churches have developed strategies of adaptation and resistance, re-working scripts

³ To ‘queer’ often signals a challenging to dualistic frameworks that limit and methodologically marginalize; there are tensions between the naming of identity but there are also links between queer theory and anticategorical approaches to the intersectionality (Haschemi Yekani et al., 2010).

of inclusion and exclusion, ‘coming out’ (or not) and stretching heteronormative theologies of sexuality (O’Brien 2004, 2005, 2014; Wilcox, 2006).

Heelas and Woodhead’s subjectivization thesis posits a decrease of participation in and adherence to ‘life-as’ religions – understood as subordinating to and conforming of individual life to divine life – and an increased interest in holistic ‘subjective-life’ spiritualities. The latter involves living in tune with *individual* subjectivities as a legitimate form of spiritual living. Current empirical studies among LGB Christians support the latter position, with Yip (2003) suggesting that non-heterosexual Christians utilizing aspects of de-traditionalization and individualism, whereby senses of ‘self’ functions as ‘...the ultimate point of reference in the individual’s life course’ (135). Such privatization is seen to characterize religious faith today more than external authority structures. There are, however, enduring tensions between ‘self-cultivation’ in religious subjectivization and life-as demand where gendered and sexualized scripts recirculate certain sources of authority. ‘Queer religion’ occurs within intersections of personal, familial, organizational and cultural domains, informing enduring exclusions and questionable inclusions.

‘Heteronormativity’ is central here, understood as a set of institutional practices that systematically legitimise and establish heterosexuality as the norm for sexual, and broader, *social* relations. Heterosexuality becomes the everywhere and nowhere ‘organising principle of social life’ (Hockey et al. 2007) and the assumption that structures social relations (Weeks et al. 2001) and moral boundaries (Ahmed, 2006b). Jackson (2011) argue that heteronormativity is often an invisible and silent, yet pervasive and entrenched structure, as an ‘the assemblage of regulatory practices, which produces intelligible genders within a heterosexual matrix that insists upon the coherence of sex/gender/desire’ (Chambers, 2007:

667). Highly gendered and heteronormative ‘role models’, ‘mentors’ and (familial) mediations are experienced by young lesbian Christians. These intersect public-private domains in the production of queer religious subjectivity and dis-identification. In bringing such domains to light, Macke (2014) offers ‘que(e)rying’ as a distinct model of research that integrates ethnographic methods with queer theory and praxis. Such ‘que(e)rying’ becomes a methodological strategy oriented toward the dialectical relationship between sex, gender, sexualities, and religious practices, organizations, and cultures.

Methods

This article is based on sub-set of data, involving 16⁴ young lesbian women who identify as Christian from Manchester, Newcastle and London. Participants were recruited through our website⁵ and closed Facebook group (Queer Religious Youth), and also through inclusive churches, university LGBT societies, LGBT youth groups, support services, and publications. Snowballing was used with limited success, whilst espoused by researchers of difficult-to-access and marginalized groups (Fish, 2000) most respondents did not have an extensive network of young lesbian Christians that researchers could access. As one participant exclaimed in her interview: ‘Yeah I would be surprised if I met a gay Christian; I would definitely want to talk to them’ (Susan, 19, Newcastle).

A mixed-method research design was adopted, consisting of individual semi-structured face-to-face interviews, diaries, and a social mapping exercise. The latter two were employed as participant-led methodologies, generating both textual and visual data to complement the oral stories. Using diaries, participants were invited to keep them for a month after the interview to record their reflections on their everyday lives, events and thoughts relating to the

⁴ This number increases to 21 if bisexual (4) and asexual (1) participants were to be included.

⁵ <http://queerreligiousyouth.wordpress.com/>

interview themes. Using mind-maps, participants were asked to think about the spaces they inhabit on a day-to-day basis and where they felt (un)comfortable to express their religious and sexual identities. This information was visually mapped onto a blank piece of paper with participants choosing different, creative, and often colourful ways to express themselves and ‘display’ their identities, including keywords in the centre of the page with ideas, concepts, and pictures radiating from them; graphs; Venn diagrams; lists; and Mandalas. The purpose was to offer insight into identities in a format alternative to the interviews and to represent different intersecting components of lived lives.

Most of the participants from our sample of 16 young lesbians considered themselves to be white British, with only one identifying as white Other (Welsh). Two participants have disabilities (one uses an electronic wheelchair and one claims Disability Living Allowance because of her specific disabilities). Some participants identified with the denomination of their church: Church of England (2 participants), and Methodist (1). One participant identified as Unitarian but with Pagan and Buddhist leanings. Where churches were non-denominational, like the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) (9 participants), some participants also identified with the denomination within which they had been brought up (Church of England, 2 participants; and Catholic, 1). Three other participants did not attend a church, or attended a non-denominational church (other than MCC).

In the overall research project, young people were broadly defined as under-35 years, with the youngest respondent in our sub-sample of lesbians, discussed in this article, being 19 and the oldest being 30 (the mean age of respondents was 25 years old). In line with comparable youth studies, our first call for LGBT Christians to participate in the project defined ‘young’ adults as 16 to 24 years of age. However, ‘youth’ is a contested term. It can signify a very wide age range, and the experiences and meanings associated with it are socially constituted,

varying both cross-culturally and historically. In an age of austerity, it is common for young adults to have a protracted period of dependency on their parent(s) with record numbers not leaving the parental home until their early thirties (Kubicek, 2009; Yip et al, 2011; The Guardian, 1 June 2012). Thus by increasing the upper age range of our participants to under 35 we acknowledged this complexity in defining ‘youth’ and the significance of this (expanding) point in the life-course.

The majority of respondents did not easily identify in terms of social class as a personal identification, but *did* use this as a classifying device to describe others, their families, backgrounds, schooling experiences, whilst often still reluctant to attach this to themselves *personally*: ‘I don’t really like the term because I think it’s laden with all sorts of cultural assumptions about your values and other things’ (Kelly, 26, London). Despite the fact overt identification with class was not always decisive or desirable, a socio-economic cross-section was somewhat represented. Where class was not claimed, participants often alluded to it culturally, spatially, and emotionally (not ‘fitting in’) even if not in economic terms (never the complete marker of class, see Taylor, 2012).

Access to university did make space for young people to come forward, to ‘come out’ and to claim space as theirs, however precariously (McDermott, 2010; Taylor, 2004). A high proportion of this sample was university educated (14 of the 16 participants discussed here, with the remaining two having attended college courses and completed a Diploma). However, some of the interviewees benefitted from widening participation programmes in *entering* university and were amongst the first members of their families to do so. Others experienced insecure journeys in and beyond higher education, meaning that a university education is not in itself the automatic middle-class marker it once was (Taylor, 2007). Respondents’ ‘troubled’ experiences with post-compulsory education meant a straightforward

‘capitalisation’ upon this field was not always easy. Due to worsening disabilities, Tracey (26, Manchester) had to give-up her college course (Social Skills and English Literature) and Estelle (25, Manchester) had to leave her Nursing degree. Stephanie (29, Newcastle) was misdiagnosed at university with depression and anxiety (actually suffering from bipolar disorder) and claims this had a ‘big impact on my ability to study’, graduating with a 2:2 degree and now working part-time as an office co-ordinator at a church. Thus, educated status did provide – and make – some space for the articulation of sexual and religious identity and practice (McDermott, 2011), but these trajectories and spaces could also be rendered insecure, ambivalent and precarious.

Leaving home and starting university were cited as reasons why young people raised in the church discontinued *and* continued their attendance; for young people who were raised in secular households, deciding to access church space later on was made difficult by age and attitudes: ‘I don’t know many people who when they’ve got to be a teenager, have gone, ‘Right, I’m going to start going to church.’ It’s kind of not the done thing’ (Evelyn, 26, Manchester). Churches could be seen as spaces dominated by ‘older people’: ‘we don’t want to go to church because it’s just full of old people and that’s not cool’ (Nicola, 21, Newcastle); ‘I think young people never really see it as a cool thing’ (Lucy, 19, Newcastle). Claire (24, Newcastle) called for a mix of the traditional and modern in churches to make them more relevant and engaging to young people, ‘to just think outside the box a little bit’ to communicate ‘that God isn’t boring’. But whilst our participants looked to the church to ‘mix it up’ and attract a new generation of congregants, many feared that the heteronormative leadership structure of the church had already made it an irrelevant space in young peoples’ lives.

Finding the (lesbian) women in leadership: ‘Diversity Role Models’

Women bishops and the 'elders' wife'

On the 21 November 2012 the Church of England's governing body, the General Synod, voted against allowing women to become bishops (The Guardian, 21 November 2012). The young women participating in our project were incensed. What re-emerged in these public controversies was a revisitation and recirculation of traditional gender and religious roles (and 'role models'), whereby leadership and public presences was legitimised, in official votes at least, as specifically male. This questions the 'coming forward' of young lesbian Christians in making queer religious space, a constraint which sat alongside continued gendered, familial and heteronormative roles/spaces more generally. Andrea (24, Newcastle) was writing in her project diary when news of the vote was broadcast live, she interrupted her entry with the following:

*Wait – I've just been watching the BBC News live news feed from the CofE general synod and just heard that they have rejected the introduction of women bishops. I cannot believe it. What makes even less sense is that the house of laity⁶ voted against it whilst the Bishops and the Clergy were overwhelmingly in favour. I've just looked at the stats apparently a 2/3 majority is needed and the laity voted 132 for and 74 against if another 6 had voted the other way we'd be looking at a world with women bishops in the CofE! I can't quite believe it. I'm worried now the CofE will look even more irrelevant and I think it will really struggle to justify it's [sic] union with the State now. If we can't even have women bishops what's the hope for same-sex marriage? (Andrea, 24, Newcastle)

Andrea was in the process of reconciling both her sexual and religious identity but felt this ruling undermined the progress she had made and would alienate friends who might see her

⁶ House of Laity. No changes were made to the punctuation or grammar of diary entries.

Christian faith as archaic and irrelevant, further reflecting in her diary: ‘it is entirely possible to be young queer and Christian. Sometimes it is easier than others (eg it will be embarrassing to be a Christian within my social groups following the rejection of women bishops – hopefully this will ease).’

Evelyn (26, Manchester) returned her diary with thoughts of leaving the church in protest against the General Synod’s announcement: ‘I don’t know how many House of Bishops statements that would take’. She recounted a conversation she had with a work colleague about Diversity Role Models, a charity aimed at helping schools eradicate homophobic bullying: ‘they send normal people into schools to go “I’m gay, I’m normal, feel free to ask your questions” (as a side note which just occurred whilst working on this – maybe the House of Bishops need to meet a Diversity Role Model).’ Here, Evelyn was voicing frustration at a lack not only of women but non-heterosexual role models in the Church.

The number of women in leadership roles, regardless of denomination, was a common concern amongst participants. At one end of this extreme, Kelly (26, London) complained in her interview that there were too many women in leadership at her MCC church:

There are more men in the congregation, always has been, but our leadership team is almost entirely women, which is just as bad. Actually it’s almost worse because if there were more men in the congregation there should be more men in leadership to reflect the congregation. (Kelly, 26, London)

Similarly, Claire (24, Newcastle) acknowledged that there were also more women ‘in charge’ in her local MCC, arguing that this was important to disrupt *traditional heteronormative* leadership structures, which still arguably persist beyond a numerical ‘diversity count’ (Ahmed, 2012):

... people are used to seeing 70% men and 30% women standing at the front of a church, when it's the other way round, they perceive it as a huge problem. Even if it's 50:50, they think because it's more women than they're used to seeing, they think of it as a problem. We had one person complain that there weren't enough men in leadership and I just felt like saying, "If it was the other way round and there were more men than women, you wouldn't even notice because that's normal." (Claire, 24, Newcastle)

Participants also spoke of witnessing negative reactions from congregants towards authority figures because of their gender. Debbie (30, London) had attended a Pentecostal church when she was younger where a woman was discouraged from becoming a priest: 'there was a female person in charge who was involved in the church and it was before female priests and she was so hated because she wanted to be a priest! I thought that was awful. She has become a priest now but she's still getting negative connotations for being there'. Claire (24, Newcastle) had attended an Anglican service near to her university and commended the female curate: 'she has a PhD in Theology and she preached really, really well and she preached about women in leadership. And she obviously had a positive view on that being a female curate standing up there.' However, Claire noted a hostile reaction to the curate for positioning herself outside of traditional biblical gender norms: 'afterwards, she had a queue of 18 year old undergraduates, men mostly, going up to her telling her how she was wrong because the bible says women should stay quiet. And I just thought, 'How dare you?!'

Within Helen's (20, Newcastle) Charismatic church, an overt message of equality between the sexes was preached: 'men and women are equal, they just have their different strengths'. Helen agrees with this in principal: 'of course only women can have babies, yes, that's obvious'. However, she has begun to rally against this dictate as she realised the restrictions it

placed on women and the hypocrisy of the leadership structure:

... the restrictions tended to apply more to women than to men, even though, you know, these perceptions that women can do the kids' stuff but men can also do that if they want, however the elders of the church are men and, 'No, women can't do that', and just this dichotomy and sort of inequality which most people are saying, 'No, no! What are you talking about? Men and women are equal' but then you look at the structure there and think, 'No, that's not true at all'. (Helen, 20, Newcastle)

As these accounts show, there are persistent gendered and heteronormative scripts which share the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, evident in public debates and congregational conversations (and challenges); thus the (lesbian) leader can be limited in the, often bracketed and cordoned off, space that she can take up.

'Nudge, nudge, wink, wink': Leading lesbians?

Where men dominated, some participants, like Helen, spoke of the informal leadership roles women could take, particularly as wives to (male) authority figures, with women's access to authority formulated through heterosexual marriage: 'They have the authority role as elder's wife, which is like elder but it is not elder because they are the elder's wives, if you know what I mean. I think they have as much influence in the church as the actual elders, but the official authority is that of the elders; that's how it works' (Helen, 20, Newcastle).

Female leaders, however, represented a more inclusive, liberal church to participants. Estelle (25, Manchester) described her local Anglican church in these terms:

... it's quite diverse and it's a woman vicar, which I've found to mean that they are more liberal and do actually dare to talk about things like gay stuff and race and stuff. So that's cool... the vicar there, she openly talked about LGBT stuff and women's

stuff in sermons, and that's made me want to go back. (Estelle, 25, Manchester)

At least 4 participants had aspirations, were in the process, or were already acting as lay or ordained ministers of their churches. Claire (24 years old) would consider ordination and has made tentative plans with her wife to 'plant' a new church in Wales. Kelly (26, London) is training on a non-stipendiary basis for ordination with MCC and is considering a chaplaincy career for the future. Andrea (24 years old) has acted as a lay minister in the past and Kirsty (30, Manchester) qualified as a youth minister. Kirsty's story, however, highlights that women's aspirations and trajectories within the church are not always straightforward, particularly amongst those that identify as lesbian.

Kirsty (30, Manchester) studied at university for a degree in Youth Work and Ministry. She got married to a man when she was 19. At 22, whilst on university placement as a youth worker at her church (where her husband was a worship leader), she developed feelings for a close female friend. When she realised her feelings were reciprocated, Kirsty left her husband despite pressure from their mutual friends from church to stay together:

So a 'friend' of ours came round with him (her estranged husband) and said to me, and I was always quite close to her, she was a little bit older than me and had a family and stuff and said how disappointed she was and how sinful it was and how bad I was behaving and didn't know what I was doing and really upset me. (Kirsty, 30, Manchester)

Suspecting that her church leaders, and placement mentors, would not support her new relationship, initially she kept it from them. However, when she came under increasing pressure from her church colleagues to apply for her placement position, as a youth worker and minister, to become permanent, she felt compelled to disclose her non-heterosexuality in the interests of honesty:

‘Nudge, nudge, wink, wink, you’ll get it if you apply, you really should apply...’ and I tried to fob them off with, ‘No, I think it’s time to move on and look at new things’ but in the end I just had to say, ‘Look, I’m gay’ and the Minister backtracked a heck of a lot, suddenly it wasn’t so certain I would get it and he’d have to speak to the Bishop and get some advice and they didn’t think he could support me and a lot of families would leave the church if I were to be there, and all of this business. (Kirsty, 30, Manchester)

Kirsty’s placement subsequently broke down as the church grappled with her sexuality. She felt she had no choice but to leave university, qualifying with a Diploma rather than graduating with a Degree: ‘he [the priest and placement mentor] said, “Well I don’t think I could support your way of life if you were to stay here with the youth Minister and I think it’s incompatible with what the Bible says.”’ As a result, Kirsty aspires to work in leadership and ministry but has accepted that ‘it’s not really likely... There aren’t a lot of churches that are accepting of gay people really, or if they are accepting then you’ve got to stay celibate and you can’t be in a relationship, and I think that’s absolute rubbish.’

Kirsty now worships at a Fresh Expressions church, which works with a broad range of denominations and traditions (Anglicanism in Kirsty’s case) to encourage them to form new congregations alongside more traditional churches, primarily for the benefit of people who are not yet members of any church or have left in the past. Thus, they differ markedly from mainstream churches, often worshipping in unconventional space and creating unique approaches to service. Here, Kirsty, alongside her girlfriend, is able to lead worship as congregants take it in turns following a more democratised system. Of the congregation, she says: ‘the church I go to has got a lot of gay people... It’s not a very big church and I think,

statistically, it's one in ten people are gay then our church should have about 300 people in it. (Laughter)'.

On the whole, participants were often supportive and sometimes pro-active in making space for (lesbian) women in church, but they did so within a policy context which reinforced an institutional glass-ceiling for women, creating disillusionment and dismay amongst respondents who feared for the church's future and sometimes their own role within it. Such fears and frustrations persisted in negotiating place in church as 'God's family'.

'Scary church parents': Locating young lesbian lives in church/through 'family'

One of many: Fitting into God's (family) home

Participants often spoke of 'familial' links: it was important to '[feel] home somewhere, feel comfortable' (Claire, 24, Newcastle); 'I get to spend time with my extended family, getting to see people, getting encouraged and spending time with God in a space that's God's space' (Nicola, 21, Newcastle); 'It's an abode, a home' (Sandra, 24, Newcastle). Whilst Claire and Nicola had been excommunicated from earlier churches because of their sexuality, Sandra had left her Catholic church (along with her mother) because of their views on homosexuality. Thus, all three young women sought out a spiritual home after being, or feeling, rejected by the churches they had grown-up in. Sandra found this in the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC), an inclusive church founded in and for the LGBT community, it was a space that shielded her from the vitriol she had experienced in Catholicism: 'MCC to me is security and warmth and a shelter from the storm'.

Strong adherence to religious ethos can shape the degree of acceptability exhibited toward non-conforming gender and sexual expressions, and while Sandra experiences 'shelter',

Sally is troubled by her 'scary church parents': 'Go visit the scary church parents tonight and my whole beautiful gay Christian world could be turned on its head...' (Sally, 20, Newcastle). In her diary, Sally judged this visit to be a success as she 'didn't come back angry or wanting to cry'. Her 'scary church parents' are a married couple who 'adopted' her from an Anglican Evangelical church she had previously attended. There, married couples were encouraged to forge these links with young people in the congregation, to provide personal moral and religious guidance and support. Sally left the church (and joined the Methodists) when she realized that she fundamentally disagreed with their views, including those on abortion, 'fornication' and sexuality. LGBT religious participation is tolerated (even encouraged through this familial framing) as long as the 'sinner' (child) remembers her place:

... I have sat in a sermon from that church and they have said, everybody here has sinned, there is probably at least one girl here who has had an abortion, there are people here who have slept with people before marriage, there is a girl who is looking at another girl in the wrong way and it's like, 'What are you saying?' I just find it a bit creepy. (Sally, 20, Newcastle)

The queering of religion insists upon a shift away from 'sin' and 'abomination' in the religious script of homosexuality but here we find evidence of their persistent scripting (Wilcox 2006), alongside the questioning/queering of religiosity.

Sally maintained a relationship with the couple, meeting for regular dinners, despite them labeling her a 'sinner' when she told them she had a girlfriend and giving her a book for Christmas which 'suggested I was just going through a phase'. She reflected in her diary that '#comingout [sic] to people who 'adopted' you is harder than coming out to your mother'. But Sally is fond of the couple, she believes they are 'both brainwashed' and hopes she can

help reshape their views through example. When talking about her Methodist discussion group at university, Sally told the couple that their talking point had been ‘why does God hate gay people?’:

When telling the scary-church parents this (her ‘mother’) automatically answered “but he doesn’t!” Which whatever your view on gay people and God is true because God loves everyone but considering they view me having a girlfriend as sinning (which inherently isn’t bad, because they view everyone as a sinner)... it was quite nice to jump on it. (Sally, 20, Newcastle)

Here, Sally disrupts the traditional parental authority they assume over her as a young person by gently trying to expose the flaws in their own arguments. However, a more successful example of this ‘parental’ relationship is represented by Helen (20, Newcastle) and her ‘mentor’. Within their Charismatic church, older people are encouraged to mentor students in the congregation:

... I am sort of mentored by an older woman at church who is married and had a family and we have a coffee every now and again and I found I was able to sort of discuss my feelings on sexuality and sort of where I felt I sat and my perspective on what the church was doing and how I related to that. So that, I think, was very valuable to me that I could, there was someone that I could discuss that with, someone who was a Christian and in the church who got that and so I found that very helpful. (Helen, 20, Manchester)

Therefore, whilst Sally sought a new denomination (Methodism) because there was *no space* for her as a lesbian in her original church, a troubled relationship with her ‘church parents’ is maintained in the hope of ‘saving’ one and other. Helen, on the other hand, has a more equitable relationship with her church ‘mentor’, and whilst she also disagrees with her

church's views on sexuality (she continues to conceal her own from the congregation at large), her continued membership of their Charismatic church is forged by this outlet where she can discuss and debate freely her views in a one-to-one environment with someone she respects.

Confessing and 'coming out' (or not)

Not all participants, however, felt this 'anchoring' and belonging within their churches. Evelyn (26, Manchester) has been attending an Anglican church for four years but continues to feel isolated: 'it's a very big congregation and there are a few people I kind of smile to and say hello but I sit on my own'. In her diary, Evelyn wonders if this is because the heteronormative, family-orientated church does not know how to embrace a single lesbian:

... at the 'all talk to your neighbour while the kids head off to their Sunday school groups' bit I spoke to no-one – partly me being shy I guess. I'm not convinced its [sic] actually anything about LGBT, I think they'd struggle with a straight, single young person who isn't that outgoing too. But I wonder sometimes. (Evelyn, 26, Manchester)

During the service at Evelyn's church, they have a 'This Time Tomorrow' slot where a congregant talks about who they are, what they do during the week, the good parts and challenges, and what they would like the congregation to pray for. Perhaps sensing Evelyn's isolation, the curate asked her to speak in this slot at a forthcoming service but Evelyn declined:

I think I'd struggle to be honest, I haven't yet heard anyone stand up and say 'I live by myself' and to be honest I'd probably want prayer for a welcoming church space for

LGBT Christians – but I can't imagine standing at the front of 300 Christians who barely know me and saying that. (Evelyn, 26, Manchester)

Intimidated by her 'minority' status, Evelyn felt unable to raise the issue of LGBT Christians and welcoming inclusive spaces, despite the fact she was 'out' to the curate and vicar but not to the wider congregation ('I've never had that conversation, why would I?'). Evelyn does sometimes supplement her regular church worship with an additional LGBT service once a month and a bi-monthly Lesbian and Gay Christian Meeting (LGCM). However, she questions the efficacy of carving out that sort of specific space: 'I'd prefer just to know that I'm accepted in any church'.

Some participants did not know their church's stance on LGBT issues but continued to attend regularly despite the potential for prejudice and antigay sentiments (Yip, 2002). Andrea (24, Newcastle) is not 'out' to her parents' church: 'because everybody would gossip about it, and probably there'd be a few people who'd definitely raise their eyebrows, but I really don't know in terms of theologically what their stance would be'. Similarly, Lucy (19, Newcastle) has not disclosed her non-heterosexuality to her congregation but has surmised that they 'seem' accepting, if not overtly inclusive: 'I know there's definitely two lesbians there. They are more out than I am and the church always seems to be quite accepting to them, so I would say it is quite inclusive.' Others, like Helen, know their church is not inclusive but it fulfils their spiritual needs first and foremost:

... I have often thought about thinking, 'Well what would it be like if I attended a church that was completely inclusive?' and I think I would really enjoy it and I think it would be a load off my mind, but at the same time, because I'm quite attached to my own church as it is and I have friends, a lot of support there, I find it really... It

meets my needs in terms of sort of prayer and worship, so I'd much rather feel that, as part of that community... (Helen, 20, Newcastle)

Scripts of inclusion are stretched, queried and desired, evident in public-private debate on same-sex marriage, as a lead into – or step away – from the 'straight and narrow' hetero-homonormative family (Taylor, 2009).

'Doing it in the eyes of God': Leading into 'family'

Often participants did not want to explicitly test the institutional, and grassroots, (in)tolerance of their churches. Susan (19, Newcastle), for example, left her Evangelical church not because of their views against non-heterosexuality, but because she disagreed with God's perspective and did not believe she could continue to worship him under any denomination:

... I say 'I believe in God but I don't worship him', that's a kind of simple way of putting it. And whether you want to call that a Christian or not I don't know. I would probably say I'm not a Christian because I don't think I'm going to Heaven. That sounds a bit odd, I think I'm probably going to Hell because I'm not a Christian. Basically, God gave me the choice: he says 'you can either stay with your girlfriend... and sort of outwardly gay and act like that or you can kind of push that part of you out and take me in, make space for me and in that case you would be very Christian'. And I said 'no, I love my girlfriend and I want to be with her and if that means I'm not going to do what you think's right so be it'. I don't think it's wrong but I understand that he thinks it's wrong. Basically, I disagree with God which is a very weird thing. (Susan, 19, Newcastle)

Whilst Susan has a deep belief in God, she does not attend a church or identify as a Christian, highlighting the ruptures that were felt by some participants between the intersecting

identities of religion and sexuality. Some participants reconciled incompatible scripts between sexuality/religion by invoking what O'Brien (2005) calls a 'bigger God' who, stretches out supposed 'natural law' through equal love. Same-sex marriage was a significant setting upon which participants tried and tested ideas of a 'bigger God'. Susan was unique in opposing same-sex marriage and civil partnerships:

I can see why gay people are fighting for it to be marriage because they want equality... Really I think it's not marriage because marriage is a Christian thing. A unity not just between you and your partner but a unity between you and your partner and God. God isn't going to unite in a gay relationship so it shouldn't be a marriage really. I'm not going to march against gay people and civil partnerships but I'd probably - if I met someone who was really passionate about gay marriage, I would question them, I would challenge them. (Susan, 19, Newcastle)

More common was the view that even if interviewees themselves disagreed with the institution of marriage, they preferred to have the option and equal access:

I think there should be marriage equality for those people that want it; I think it should just be 'marriage'. Civil Partnerships annoy me, it's like a second-class marriage, I think it's just horrible and I'd never have one. I'd never get married either but I'd rather that was the option rather than Civil Partnership. (Estelle, 25, Manchester)

Some participants identified contradiction between church leadership and grassroots' views on same-sex marriage, again revealing the links between official lines (as articulated by religious leaders) and congregational lives:

Like when the Anglican Church said gay marriage is wrong and homosexuality is a sin and didn't consult anybody, any of their members about what they thought? That's

completely rubbish. The leadership pretty much said that and didn't consult anyone.
(Kirsty, 30, Manchester)

Evelyn (26, Manchester) even identified contradiction in what the vicar of her parents' church said in a private and public context. In personal conversations, he had supported equal marriage but in a service she recently attended he led prayers on 'supporting marriage and the [heterosexual] family', which Evelyn saw as a direct attack on proposed legislative changes around same-sex marriage:

... they prayed for those 'supporting marriage and the family' this is taken from the Mother's Union prayer. The MU are anti-equal marriage. I don't really want to pray for people who are saying that I shouldn't be allowed to get married, and that my relationship wouldn't be worthy of that. Then they were praying for particular relationships, parent to child and husband to wife. Because obviously husband to wife is the only acceptable option. (Evelyn, 26, Manchester)

Evelyn was concerned for those who might have attended the church for the first time and would not realise that it was actually an 'ok space' for lesbian (and GBT) Christians. Participants were mostly in favour of religious same-sex marriage and two of our participants were in Civil Partnerships (Claire, 24 and Stephanie, 29, both of Newcastle) and both received a blessing at their MCC church. But as a site of 'coming forward' as-now-included, many championed seemingly homonormative ideals as a good 'fit': 'I want to get married, I want to get married in a church, I want to get married in my church' (Sally, 20, Newcastle); 'I want to get married and have a family' (Lola, 25, London); 'the really important bit [is] getting everyone together and doing it in the eyes of God' (Claire, 24, Newcastle). When 'getting everyone together', certain gendered and heteronormative scripts re-emerge which

stretch, query and sometimes reinforce the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion in attempting to ‘make’ space, as a retention, rejection or religious affirmation.

Conclusion

The young lesbian respondents in this project participated in ‘queering religion’ at a crucial time when the intersecting tensions between the ordination of female bishops and religious same-sex marriage debates were at the forefront of the UK public imagination. Our participants spoke about the discrimination and marginalisation they felt as a result of their age, sexuality and gender within heteronormative church space. Importantly, in exploring young lesbian connections with Christianity, we have been able to disrupt an *automatic* association of non-heterosexuality with secularism and an assumed disinterest between ‘youth’ and ‘religion’ (Jordan, 2011; Gross and Yip, 2010; Kubicek et al, 2009; Yip, 1997). We have attempted a fuller, ‘intersectional’ understanding of contemporary dynamics in the queering of religion. Religion matters for our ‘queer religious youth’ as a site of significant self-identification, situated within a changing landscape and political climate.

These public-private intersections are also bases for determining inclusion and exclusion across families, communities, networks, and organizations. Heteronormativity, based on ‘natural law’ and traditional gender-binary role, can expand to include homonormativity as a certain ‘fit’ into religious-sexual space; this form of inclusivity often reaffirms certain cultural values even as it stretches the terms and conditions (as made, ‘modelled’ and/or ‘mimicked’). Religious participation conveys (de)legitimation within family, community and society, as apparent in scripts of inclusion and exclusion (O’Brien, 2014). Highly gendered and heteronormative ‘role models’, ‘mentors’ and (familial) mediations experienced by young lesbian Christians show that queer religious subjectivity is complexly negotiated via intersectional experiences, combining institutional ‘official lines’ with everyday intimate

realities and dis-identifications. Intersectional sites, scripts and sticking points converge as young lesbian ‘make space’ in conversation, contrast and convergence with institutionalised scripts.

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