Homosexuality and Priesthood: Conflict in the life of a Norwegian Woman

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Abstract

The conflict between sexual orientation and religiosity in the Christian religion has been studied from different perspectives. However there is no research on female homosexuals who are interested in becoming priests. The aim of this paper is to examine the possible conflict faced by a Norwegian lesbian in her 20’s who is an applicant for priesthood. This research can be a first attempt to examine the conflict between faith and sexual identity in female homosexual priests-to-be; a population that has been neglected until today. The Interpretative Phenomenological Approach (IPA) was used to analyse the data. One semi-structured interview was conducted through Skype and lasted for approximately 40 minutes. The main themes that have emerged from the analysis of the interview are plenty and broken down into four clusters (Childhood - Schooling, Conflict, Dealing, Now) and each cluster includes subthemes. The analyses showed that conflict can lead to loneliness and a great loss of oneself, of dreams and of hopes. Specifically, trying to figure out the solution in books and theories might be helpful but it does not substitute the social network and support from people who are open-minded and it can provide solutions based on their knowledge of the subject. The limitations of this study is that the interview took place written via Skype and that is it based on one participant. Future research should focus more on the conflict between religiosity and sexuality and the coping techniques used by different individuals. Furthermore, it can assist practitioners in supporting clients facing this issue.

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Peer-review under responsibility of Academic World Education and Research Center

Keywords: religion, religiousness, homosexuality, LGBT, priesthood, female priest, Norway.

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**1. Introduction**

The conflict between sexual orientation and religiosity in the Christian religion has been studied from different perspectives; from the viewpoint of homosexual believers and church attendants (Gross, 2008) and also from the perspective of male priests both homosexuals and heterosexuals (Plante, 2007). However there is no research on female homosexuals who are interested in becoming priests. There are several reasons why this might be; to begin with many Christian doctrines do not allow women to become priests and that minimizes the available field even for research purposes. Another reason is the small number of female applicants to priesthood in comparison to males. Taking this as a fact we can assume that the number of female homosexuals priests-to-be is far more smaller when the analogy of male homosexual to heterosexual priests is higher than the analogy between the equivalent secular population (Plante, 2007). A research that took place in France has shown that homosexuals in an attempt to deal with the conflict either form their own personal religions where they find a way to keep their sexual identity and religious believes in harmony, they attend more inclusive parishes, keep their sexual identities hidden or they feel discriminated in normal parishes (Gross, 2008). Furthermore research on male homosexual priests has shown that they are as adjusted as the heterosexual male priests and their psychological profiles do not differ either (Plante, 2007).

The aim of this paper is to examine the possible conflict faced by a Norwegian lesbian in her 20’s who is an applicant to priesthood. This research is a first attempt to examine the conflict between faith and sexual identity in female homosexual priests-to-be; a population that has not yet attracted the int.

**2. Method**

**2.1 Participants**

Maria (the name has been changed to assure confidentiality) is a Norwegian girl in her late 20’s. She has accepted her sexual identity, she is a public face for the rights of the Lesbian Gay Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) community in her country and she will become a priest in the Protestant Church of Norway, once she returns home. She has came to Greece as a Master student with the Erasmus program and that is how the researcher met her and got interested to explore her story and explore this area more thoroughly.

**3. Procedure**

One semi-structured and conversational in nature interview was conducted written through Skype and lasted for approximately 40 minutes. The questions that were prepared in advance were the following: “I am trying to better understand the relationship between sexuality and religion in the lives of gay, Christians. I would like you to tell me your life story and life experience with religion and sexuality, and in doing so to be sure to describe your religious experiences as you were growing up as well as your growing sense of sexuality, and how these two areas of your life may have been related…right up to the present day” As adapted from Alexander, (2011), “Do you get the sense sometimes that your life is broken down in boxes? Now I am a Christian, now I am gay?” “Have you ever been asked to give up your sexual identity for the church or vice versa, to give up your church for your sexual identity?” based on the research of Gross (2008).

**4. Data Analysis**

The Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to analyse the data. It was found appropriate because according to Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) IPA is a qualitative research method that allows the researcher to examine the subjective experience of a specific life event of the participant and the ways the participants interpret the meaning of this experience (Passmore & Mortimer, 2011).
5. Results

Table 1. Summary Table

| Cluster/ Theme                      | Quote/Keyword                        | Page/line nr. |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------|
| Childhood- Schooling                |                                       |               |
| Doubting God                       | “I started doubting there were any God” | 1, 9, 1,31-34 |
| Bullied                            | “There I was bullied”                 | 1,37, 2,51    |
| Believing Again                    | “I started believing again”           | 2,54          |
| Relationships of a Tomboy          | “I had some boyfriends…”              | 2,79, 2,81-82 |
| Sexuality                          | “I had to figure out a lot of stuff”  | 3, 111-114    |
| Conflict                            |                                       |               |
| What is conflict                   | “it is challenging to be in conflict” | 5,196-199     |
| Loneliness                         | “I was so alone”                      | 2,91-92, 3,129|
| Unsure about the future             | “Could I be a priest?”                | 3,130-131     |
| Conflict with gays                 | “They don’t understand”               | 4,170-171     |
| Dealing                            |                                       |               |
| Personal Studies                   | “I read a lot”                        | 3,96-97, 3,100-103 |
| Social Support                     | “I needed a practical person”         | 3,120-126, 4,146-151 |
| Praying                            | “I prayed a lot”                      | 3,127-128     |
| Wrong Modeling                     | “We have a professor at my school”    | 4,155-157     |
| Dialogue                           | “Dialogue is the key”                 | 4,172-173, 5,207-208 |
| Now                                |                                       |               |
| My Vision                          | “Being a bridge builder”              | 5,201-204, 5,207-209 |
| My Girl                            | “She had feelings for me”             | 6, 225-230    |

Cluster 1, Childhood and schooling: Doubting God; Maria was brought to her religion (Christian Protestant) by her mother and she had followed her beliefs and religious practices. At the age of 11, Maia suffered a significant loss—her grandmother passed away due to cancer. These events have affected her deeply to the point that she started doubting her faith, for the first time (“At my teens I saw myself as an atheist. (…) I was debating God’s existence with the leaders in the church”). This might have been an excuse to break free from the binds of religiosity that she did not choose herself, but it was her mother’s guidance. Against her mother’s belief’s and instincts that led her to religion, she chose to “fight back” by going through the literature and tried to use the Bible against her own church and anyone else who tried to argue with her. She claimed that the God knows the future so, it is illogical if he allows bad things to happen. Here we can see a child’s first encounter with the wrongs and unfair situations of life and the conflict between the good and kind God and all the “evil” in the world.
Bulling; Maria’s suffering continued through the last classes of elementary school and junior high school through bullying. Although still not religious, she was a girl searching and standing for righteousness, so when she noticed that some boys were mistreating some girls, she notified the teacher with some personal expenses. The boys started spreading rumors and bullying her in different ways. She got stigmatized for her search of right (“I have always been a girl searching for righteousness”). The boys started spreading rumors about her and bullying her so she had to leave her old school and went to a boarding school (“So my only chance was to move”). However, the stigma came around again later in her life (“I started struggling with inner feelings because of the bullying”, “with(…) being bullied and the consequences of it”). Believing Again; the constant bullying has led her to change school, since there were no other ways to deal with it. Her new boarding school, although it was religious it was not of the same doctrine as she used to be in. She did not disclose how, but she started engaging into religious activities and she started believing in God again (“I started believing again and engaged in Christian activities”). A probably “positive” outcome of bullying. It could be the tranquility of a religious boarding school that substituted her relationship with her family and even her distancing from her mother made her search for another supporting mechanism and maybe guilt for disappointing her mother could have led her back to believing. Relationships of a tomboy; as she was growing up she was the kind of girl playing soccer and loving horses, not something that most girls did and it could be a feeling of left out or the inmost fear of not blending in that made her succumb to the peer pressure and find a boyfriend as her other friends did. These three relationships did not last more than three months (”I didn’t really care about relationships (…) I played soccer (…) I had some boyfriends”). Sexuality; As she stated love, romance and relationships were not on the top of her list about things to consider. Her “old records she had to straight” personally with her bullying and that overall experience had a toll in her later life and sexuality; they became secondary priority. Here it is possible to identify a defense mechanism that was protecting her from her feelings and attraction to girls. Another stigmatization-to-be, as it was her bullying in the past (“I had to figure out a lot of stuff before the age of 20”).

Cluster 2, Conflict: What is conflict; at the age of 20 Maria came to realize that she had feelings and was attracted to other girls. Right after she had rebuilt her connections with her lost beliefs and spirituality, a new situation came to disrupt her organized beliefs. She started being in conflict with herself- that was the hardest part and the way she defined conflict; on the one side she had her beliefs and feelings and on the other hand the “logical” part that was saying that this was wrong (”it is challenging to be in conflict with yourself about something you strongly feel”). Once again she was faced with an “unfair” situation where she was the victim this time, and not her grandmother or other girls. If there was not the feeling of righteousness maybe the conflict would have been smaller. Loneliness; A consequence of the conflict was for Maria to feel lonely and probably left out (“And I felt I was alone”), something that she was afraid of when she attended the boarding school. It was difficult for her to talk to anyone around her because most people related with the church and are deeply religious, tend to be more conservative on subjects of homosexuality (Gross, 2008). Denial of future; A secondary consequence of the conflict was the denial of the future she had created in her mind; becoming a priest. In her mind she could either not become priest and be a lesbian, or become a priest but stay alone as a way to avoid the temptation (“Couldn’t I be a priest after all? Or could I be a priest, but living alone (…)”). Conflict with gays; Later on, when she had made up her mind and chose the way she wanted to live, the conflict continued, both from the conservative party, which was understandable, but also from the gay party. They could not understand why she chose to be in the church, they despised her and as a result she “despised” them back. It is interesting to see those who are in general mostly the victims of prejudice, bullying and racism can also be the prosecutors of racism and bullying towards what they do not understand ( “There are a lot of gay people in Norway that despise Christianity and the church. And they don’t understand why…”).

Cluster 3, Dealing; Personal Studies; Again Maria was facing an unfair situation where she felt alone and uncertain about her future. Once again a significant loss was at the gates; the loss of her dreams and plans for her future and potentially the loss of herself. So, in order to deal with this she used an older strategy lying in her availability; she turned to books and theories again, trying to prove that she was not doing anything wrong and she found the answers that she was looking for- as she did the previous time (“And after my little personal studies I ended up with believing that this was not wrong”). It is an interesting turning point that the books she used the last time, mostly the Bible, to prove that God was illogical and therefore does not exist, this time were used in order to prove the openness of God to personal differences. Social Support; However this time she was not alone as the last
time. She turned to a liberal professor who helped her and supported her views by telling her she was not doing anything wrong and she was still living the way she wanted—following God’s will (“I needed a practical person who would look at it from the outside”). Wrong Modeling; At the same time at her school there was a gay professor who in order to avoid his feelings and sexuality chose to live alone— an option that Maria was so afraid, and some people suggested her to live with (“We have a professor who is gay(...) but chooses to live alone”). Dialogue; After an inner dialogue and more intellectual one with books and theories, Maria came to the conclusion that the dialogue is the key to everything, as she stated, and to every problem no matter what its source is; whether you are liberal or conservative (“The dialogue is the key to everything. And to both sides”).

Cluster 4, Now; My Vision; the dialogue as a form of solving conflicts has led Maria to take on the role of bridge builder between conservatives and homosexuals. She is trying to bring this two sides closer and to a better understandings so other people do not have to feel like she did and thus go through the same stressful experience (“and I have to admit that my vision about being a bridge builder between conservatives and liberals in the church is being more harder than ever”). My Girl; Although this is a hard endeavor, this time she is not alone. On her side she has the support of her fiancée— also a Christian who revealed her sexual identity to others, just before she got into a relationship with Maria, who has no problem at all with Maria’s choice of joining priesthood (“She came out of the closet 8 months ago after telling me she had feelings for me”).

6. Discussion

This interview was conducted in order to explore the personal experiences of Maria, a lesbian girl from Norway who is about to become a priest at the Protestant Church of Norway, with focus on her conflict between her sexual identity and her religious beliefs. Her ways of dealing with the conflict, looking for well established answers in books and theories and the support of her professor allowed Maria to be free after only 2 years of conflict and worries and help her become the person that she is now; feeling that she is both a homosexual and a believer at the same time with no compartmentalization of any kind; as she stated “I am both. Full”. That is concise with the results of Plante (2007) about the psychological profile and adjustment of male homosexual priests. Maria is currently working on building bridges, as she stated, between conservatives and liberals in order to minimize the conflict for other people like her.

The overall conclusion resulting from Maria’s personal experience is that conflict can lead to loneliness and to a great loss of oneself, dreams and hopes. Trying to figure out the solution in books and theories might be helpful, but it does not substitute the social network and support from people who are open-minded and can provide solutions based on their knowledge of the subject. In Maria’s case it was a professor, for another person might be a counselor or a mental health professional that can help them overcome their conflict and live a more functioning and liberated life. There might also be strategies that turned out to be patterns and model of dealing, and for Maria this proved successful.

The limitation of the current study is that the interview took place written via Skype. There was no way to include into analysis Maria’s non verbal signs, such as tone and initial reactions to the questions and the expression of her emotions as she was telling her story. Future research on the topic may focus on the ways Maria dealt with conflict. Focusing on the coping strategies that Maria used, might help other individuals in similar situations.

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