

Catholic and Gay - a Stigma?

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I welcome this opportunity at the Royal College of Psychiatrists to consider the situation of LGBT people¹, especially LGBT Catholics, through the lens of 'Stigma'. My presentation should not be seen as arguing for a particular theological position, but as an exploration of certain themes common to pastoral care and psychiatry suggested by this topic.

An individual may suffer in various ways from the negative behaviour of others, through bullying or abuse, for example, but when we talk about stigma, we are referring to a more generic rejection, not just of an individual, but of all persons belonging to a particular group, on the basis of their race, beliefs, sexual orientation or some other factor, a rejection which makes it hard for them to build a robust sense of personal identity and self-worth.

The question of stigma is made even more complex today by the heterogeneous nature of many Western societies. In a traditional, homogeneous society, it is obvious which groups risk being stigmatised: those who do not fit into the dominant belief system or social group; Jews and atheists, certainly, Protestants or Catholics, depending on the nature of the society, and some others. But in a society like ours, stigma may apply in a fluid way to a variety of groups, depending on who is regarded as the dominant social group: in liberal circles, for example, being LGBT is quite acceptable, whereas being Catholic, or at least a certain kind of Catholic, carries a stigma as belonging to an outdated, superstitious and harmful body. In some religious circles, on the other hand, being gay is precisely what is stigmatised.

Being an LGBT Catholic therefore subjects a person to the risk of a double stigma in which one may feel threatened in his or her identity both as a Catholic and a gay person, a tension which can be too much for some to sustain. Since being gay is not something a person chooses, but religious belief is, it is active belonging to the Catholic Church that will usually be jettisoned in such cases.

In passing, we may note one interesting context in which this tension makes itself felt: the participation in Pride Marches by some religious LGBT groups. Because of the rather uninhibited behaviour of some LGBT people during such parades, this participation is viewed unfavourably by some religious people, but actually welcomed by some quite senior clerics on the grounds that it demonstrates to the 'liberal elite' that it is indeed possible to be gay and Catholic at the same time.

For Catholics at the present time, this theme is of particular interest because of the professed agenda of Pope Francis, not only in his present position but also in his previous incarnation as archbishop of Buenos Aires, to reach out to those on what he calls the peripheries of society, not just the obvious peripheries of poverty and social deprivation, but what he calls the 'existential peripheries,' which include remarried divorcees and LGBT people. Quite how this

¹ LGBT: initialism for Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transgender

laudable agenda is to be squared with traditional Catholic teaching is currently the subject of feverish debate among many Catholics.

In order to explore this theme, and how the stigma of being gay and Catholic can be dealt with, it seems necessary to do two things: firstly to explore the possible religious origins of the stigma LGBT people suffer; and secondly to examine which pastoral approaches have been found helpful for them in overcoming this.

Religion and homosexuality

It would be difficult to find a major religion that is entirely positive about homosexuality. Buddhism has been proposed as being at least neutral on this score, but, while Buddhists do not use Judeo-Christian categories such as sin to describe homosexual orientation and behaviour, at least some Buddhists seem to regard homosexuality as a misfortune, the result of bad karma from a previous life.

As regards Islam, scholars have pointed out that among the common misperceptions of 'exotic' Middle Eastern societies among Westerners has been its supposed tolerance of homosexuality among men, while in fact the authoritative Moslem texts are explicit in forbidding such behaviour. The only somewhat positive reference is a text in which Mohammed appears to show understanding of the attraction 'beardless youths' can hold for an older man, but warning against it.

Jewish and Christian texts contain explicit condemnations of homosexual behaviour, balanced only by references which some have interpreted as erotic to the intense friendship between Jonathan and the future king David, and the particular love of Jesus for one of his disciples, traditionally identified with St. John.

The main point of issue, of course, at least in Judeo-Christian circles, is how far traditional condemnations of homosexual behaviour can be applied to what many see as a completely new situation not envisaged by Biblical authors or traditional theologians, in which certain people do not just engage in homosexual behaviour, but experience their entire orientation as towards those of the same sex, either predominantly or wholly. Catholic theologian James Alison claims that this new situation requires a complete revision of Catholic attitudes to homosexuality, arguing that if Grace builds on Nature, as Catholics assert, the discovery of homosexual orientation is a simple fact of Nature, not a deviation from God's design or from Natural Law, which moral theology must therefore take into account on its own terms.

It should be noted, however, that until recently, official Vatican documents on homosexuality have carefully eschewed references to it as a permanent orientation, no doubt for fear of opening the Church to precisely the kind of interpretation Alison gives. Instead, such documents distinguish carefully between homosexuality as a condition, which is described as objectively disordered but not sinful in itself, and homosexual behaviour, which is described as always gravely sinful.

Before going further, it may legitimately be asked, if this is the Church's official position, how can an LGBT person not suffer from a sense of being stigmatised by the Catholic Church? Nevertheless, in one of the groups where I minister (see below for details) members quite happily accept this description of their state, and devote themselves to avoiding what they genuinely believe to be harmful behaviour by applying twelve-step processes to themselves, in a way analogous to alcoholism.

I would like to argue, however, that it is not Christianity per se that is responsible for homophobia and allied phenomena which still persist in our society. After all, alongside condemnation of homosexual behaviour, the Church offers pastoral care, spiritual direction and recourse to the sacrament of confession, all of which are intended to enable an LGBT Catholic to align themselves gradually with the Church's teaching if they wish to do so. It also offers - not always intentionally! - many examples of leading figures within the Church, clerical and lay, who clearly were or are mainly homosexual by orientation, and who to some extent can serve as role models.

Instead, I would argue that it is something else which emerged in Western society in the Middle Ages, admittedly under Christian influence but not solely attributable to it, which is responsible for the stigma attached to LGBT people, namely the ideal of courtly love between a knight and his lady, what we usually refer to as the tradition of chivalry. This ideal, immortalised in such works as the tales of King Arthur and Dante's *Divine Comedy*, transformed itself over time into the modern romantic notions of being in love, and the ideal of the nuclear family in which a man and a woman find contentment and fulfilment with each other and their children.

Of course, it was not the Western Middle Ages which invented the idea of men and women being in love. But the centrality of the ideal of chivalry and its modern equivalents may go some way to explaining a curious fact, which those who maintain Christianity as the culprit for homophobia will find hard to explain, a phenomenon noted by Gilles Herrada in his searching study of the modern homosexual soul, 'The Missing Myth'.²

Herrada points out that when Christianity began to lose its dominant position in the West during the late eighteenth century, three of the major forces which succeeded it, adopting a position of general hostility to its tenets, were all implacably hostile to homosexuality, a fact hardly consistent with blaming Christianity for homophobia. These were the philosophy of the Enlightenment, the Communist party, and the profession of psychiatry. Indeed until not so long ago homosexuality was still viewed by the psychiatric profession as a mental illness.

If this hypothesis is correct, we may have to face the uncomfortable conclusion that acceptance of LGBT people by the modern liberal establishment is only skin deep, and that it is unrealistic to expect any heterosexual person to be free of homophobia in the deepest recesses of their mind. If this is the case, the stigma attached to LGBT people can only be removed by themselves, and this can only be done by finding what Herrada calls the missing myth to shore up the identity of the modern LGBT person. The challenge for religion is whether it can help in this process out of its own treasure house of stories, rather than deepen

² Herrada, G. (2013: 181) *The Missing Myth*. Select Books: New York.

the identity crisis of LGBT people, and whether it can do that while remaining true to its own founding principles.

Pastoral approaches to LGBT Catholics

If one of the significant effects of stigma is to undermine a person's sense of identity, it follows that pastoral care of LGBT Catholics must aim to build it up. The two main ways of doing this are through establishing support groups and through one-to-one spiritual direction or equivalents.

Support groups fall into two main categories: those set up by LGBT people themselves or their family members, and those set up by Church leaders. Not long ago I met an American man whose gay son lived near my parish and who described to me how in two separate locations where he lived in the United States he had taken the initiative in setting up local support groups for LGBT people and their family members, as a direct result of his son coming out as a gay man. In both groups, he reported, participants found great comfort in simply sharing experiences of what it was like to be gay and Catholic, or to have a close family member or friend who had come out as gay. He claimed that neither group had any agenda beyond mutual support: they did not take up any 'political' position, either in defence of the Church's current teaching or attempting to change it. In both cases, he reported that the local priest and bishop - in one case even a Cardinal - had been extremely supportive.

Setting up such a group should usually be a relatively simple matter and can be of great help in overcoming the problem of stigma. Everyone knows they are welcome in such a group, whatever their situation, and whatever issues they are facing can be openly discussed. But in some cases matters are a little more complicated. In London, the bombing of a pub frequented by LGBT people, the Admiral Duncan, led to the formation of a Catholic LGBT support group which quickly began looking for priests to celebrate Mass for the group. While this may have been understandable, it soon aroused controversy, as some Catholics perceived the group to be a growing focus for open dissent from Church teaching, and queried the whole idea of a 'gay Mass.' The location of the group in Soho, and the dramatic circumstances of its birth, can only have strengthened this perception.

As a result the group itself became stigmatised and a very public polarisation emerged between supporters and opponents, which soon came to the attention of the Vatican itself and led to pressure on the local bishop to regularise the situation. Clearly such polarisation was not helpful in resolving the problem of stigma: in fact in one way it only increased it. After considerable discussion, a solution was found in relocating the group to the Jesuit parish in Farm Street, Mayfair, discontinuing the 'gay Masses,' and instead making the group publicly welcome at one of the regular Masses of the parish, where they hold a social event afterwards and continue with their other activities, including participation in London's Pride March (see above.) The bishop is supportive of the group and appointed me as his liaison and chaplain to them over two years ago.

An example of the second type of group, those set up by bishops or priests themselves, is Courage, set up by Fr. John Harvey in the USA with the support of bishops there, and now

present in several countries including England. The Vatican has made it clear that bishops and priests can only set up such groups themselves if the groups are explicit in their adherence to Church teaching about the objective disorder of homosexuality and the sinfulness of homosexual acts.

Members of Courage and similar groups describe themselves not as gay but as 'experiencing same-sex attraction,' and aim at lifelong sexual abstinence - but not at changing their sexual orientation. A typical meeting has some similarities to a meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous, with members reminding each other of the goals of the group and sharing recent experiences in a non-judgmental atmosphere in which they explore the connection between their sexuality and other aspects of their lives, so as to find greater freedom from compulsive aspects of their behaviour.

The other main instrument of pastoral care is through one to one conversations between an LGBT person and a priest or other spiritual guide, involving perhaps ongoing spiritual direction or occasional meetings which may include the sacrament of confession. In such meetings, the minister will seek to communicate the unconditional love of Christ and his Church, and to accompany the person on his or her journey towards holiness. With LGBT people this ministry frequently encounters powerful feelings of pain and anger.

LGBT people often feel hurt by the Catholic Church, either because of the way its teaching comes across, or through concrete experiences of rejection, or both; those from non-Western cultures are sometimes even in danger of their lives; while some other Catholics seem threatened by the very existence of gay people, and react angrily towards attempts to accommodate them within the Church.

Anyone who ministers to LGBT Catholics soon realises that there is an extremely wide range of attitudes, experiences and behaviours among them. Some long for a permanent relationship, while others admit that relationships are not important for them, and they simply want sex. With the availability of gay websites and apps, and of well-known pick-up spots, most gay people in our society can easily have sex whenever they want.

We sometimes meet men who had a lot of casual sex but came to realise it did not make them happy. They may then seek help in leading a chaste life. Others are looking for a long-term relationship, but may go through several sexual partners in the search, sometimes remaining good friends with them after the sexual relationship has ended.

But one thing is common to virtually all LGBT Catholics today: they will not take the Church's teaching on trust, but must learn from experience. Even those who hold a very traditional attitude have likely arrived at it through many experiences.

This being so, ministers to gay Catholics need two main resources: a moral theology that can face the critical scrutiny of life experience; and a well-grounded spirituality of discernment. These can help homosexual persons look honestly at their behaviour, see where it is leading them, and discover alternatives where indicated.

The moral theology I have found most helpful in this ministry is that of the Belgian Dominican, Servais Pinckaers,³ who shows that from Biblical times to St. Thomas Aquinas, Catholic moral theology was essentially based on the search for true happiness, on earth and in heaven, and on the cultivation of virtues leading to it; a happiness deeper than mere pleasure, and consisting above all in communion with God and his holy people.

A theology based on observing rules was a later distortion, and led by reaction in the 1960s to an equally unhelpful liberalism. In Pinckaers' perspective, moral theology does not just define what one is allowed to do, or the minimum one must do, but joins hands with spirituality in promoting the search for holiness through loving God and neighbour to the uttermost.

The obvious spiritual partner for such a theology is the guidance given by St. Ignatius of Loyola on the discernment of spirits. As is well-known, these Rules for Discernment arose from Ignatius' own experience, while recovering from a wound, of reading two types of literature: romantic tales which aroused him while he read them but left him dissatisfied when he put them down, and lives of the saints which he picked up with some reluctance but gave him an excitement which endured and led him to fantasise about imitating the saints concerned - which, of course, he eventually put into practice.

What is of interest to the practice of spiritually-informed psychiatry is that here we have a classic example of the intersection between the psychological - the awareness of feelings - and the spiritual - the discernment of their origin and meaning.

From a Catholic perspective, the most important gift the pastoral minister can offer LGBT people, after unconditional love and welcome, is encouragement to a deep spiritual life of friendship with Christ, based on the traditional practices of Mass, confession, Rosary, Scripture reading, etc. Without this, discernment loses itself in subjective states of mind whereas with it we begin to see which path leads to heaven and which to hell, and to marry personal experience with the age-old wisdom of the Church.

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³ Pinckaers, S. (2005) *The Pinckaers Reader: Renewing Thomistic Moral Theology*. The Catholic University of America Press.