

Religion, Culture and Gender Guides



The purpose of the Guides is to showcase the work of Manchester students on the theme of Religion, Culture and Gender in Britain, and provide creative, informative and critically informed resources on this theme.

An exploration of religious attitudes towards homosexuality, with specific reference to the concept of a gay 'cure' encouraged and administered by some religious groups and parts of the medical community operating within the United Kingdom.

Peter Burns

Glossary:

- Homosexual/Gay: A person who is sexually attracted to people of their own sex.
- Heterosexual: A person who is sexually attracted to people of the same sex.
- Reparative therapy: Reparative/Conversion therapy is a range of pseudo-scientific treatments that aim to change sexual orientation from homosexual to heterosexual.
- Evangelical Alliance: The World Evangelical Alliance is a Christian global ministry working with local churches around the world.
- Psychotherapy/ Psychotherapeutic: The treatment of a mental disorder by psychological rather than medical means
- Sociological: The study of the development, structure, and functioning of human society
- Shock Therapy: The treatment of chronic mental conditions by electroconvulsive therapy or by inducing physiological shock.
- 'App'(Mobile Application): A self-contained program or piece of software designed to fulfil a particular purpose
- Patriarchal: Relating to or denoting a system of society or government controlled by men
- Stereotypes: A person or thing that conforms to a widely held but oversimplified image of the class or type to which they belong
- Pariah: An outcast

Case study:

Earlier last year (2013) the Telegraph newspaper reported on a controversial issue regarding an advert publicised on London buses that implied homosexuality could be "repaired" through therapy and corrective counselling approaches. The advert was the brain child of the Core Issues Trust, an international Christian ministry group that spearheaded the campaign in response to the famous Stonewall adverts currently still in place globally that promote the iconic gay slogan "SOME PEOPLE ARE GAY. GET OVER IT!". The trust itself, part of the Evangelical Alliance and widely active in the UK, sees the issue as paramount in the development of equal rights not only for homosexuals themselves but also for those who want to move *'quietly, honourably and respectfully out of homosexual practice.'*(Core Issues Trust [Online]) The trust took as their own slogan, "NOT GAY! EX-GAY, POST GAY AND PROUD. GET OVER IT!", which in turn sparked mass controversy on the opposing side by those who see such reparative practices as a remnant of archaic cultural beliefs supported only by religious institutions reluctant to change.

The extent to which this issue has major implications for the areas of religion, culture and gender will be addressed in January this year (2014), as parliament moves to change the laws relating to the practising of reparative therapy and psychotherapeutic approaches aimed at reversing the nature of homosexuality in men and women; a bill strongly opposed by some religious institutions with offer and promote such services. The backlash of such a law passing through parliament would only further divide opinions as to whether such practices have any place in British society, or if the controversy is simply a response to the further limitations of church practice and its traditional foothold in the UK; reinforced strongly by the current popularity of homosexuality in areas such as media, arts and music.

Main body

Both cultural and religious attitudes surrounding homosexuality have transformed dramatically over the past fifty years since homosexuality itself was decriminalised in the UK in 1967. Since this time 'gay culture' has both evolved and transgressed cultural stigmas and age old barriers that segregated the gay community from the rest of society, with recent reforms in same-sex marriage laws and the presence of homosexual men and women in the clergy thrusting new ideas and debates into the religious and cultural sphere. These ideas call for both an acknowledgment of equal rights and clarification on the nature of what it is to be gay and what that means for religious faith and practice. Swidler emphasises the extent of this progress in saying that '*After centuries of disparagement, Roman Catholic homosexuals recently have found reason to hope that their tradition might be on the verge of reassessing its pastoral towards gay people*' (Swidler 1993). With this in mind, and with the revaluation of such tradition, some religious circles have opted for a more traditional approach in line with their own interpretation of scripture and with the intention of opposing the homosexual lifestyle choice altogether.

In the plethora of resources available on the study of homosexuality in its sociological context, one of the first texts to emerge from the controversial mid-20th century debate; that both engaged and sought to address cultural perceptions and scientific evaluation, was the 1955 D.J. West publication that aimed at dissecting the roots and paranoia surrounding homosexual practice and origins. The text uses many religious figures and references that acted as authority on the matter, such as Dr. Fisher, Archbishop of Canterbury in 1953 who argued that '*Let it be understood that homosexual indulgence is a shameful vice and a grievous sin from which deliverance is to be sought by every means*' (West 1955), which helps to encapsulate the popular and official position of society and the religious community at the time. Now however, using over fifty years of historical hindsight the book is a testament to the early attitudes and ideas that materialised at the same time gay women and men were liberated in the legal eyes of society; as well as providing material for sociological research and cultural debates in a modern context. In many ways, the book itself symbolises a strong and prejudicial misunderstanding of what it meant to be gay, founded on cultural and social opinions that lacked true understanding on the direction society was taking. Like society however, religion is not what it once was, and it too has evolved and assimilated new tolerances and ideologies that puts it ahead of its previous prejudices against homosexuals. Despite this progression, many people still misinterpret religion as a whole throughout history as abhorring and penalising homosexuals, whilst inadvertently forgetting that the society in which we once idealised created and nurtured such prejudices to the extent in which it criminalised, persecuted and medically alienated homosexual men and women.

In this exploration of religious and cultural attitudes, some religious institutions, with aid from parts of the medical community have offered a radical variety of different methods in which gay men and women can reverse the psychological desire and attraction to the same sex; some techniques through faith alone and other more practical approaches such as shock therapy and reparative psychoanalysis. Because homosexuality remained a mental illness in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* until 1973, medical approaches such as these were popularly exercised with little or no medical research or evidence. Since the revision of homosexuality within the manual, the American Association for Psychiatry issued the statement that, '*Although much research has examined the possible genetic, hormonal, developmental, social, and cultural influences on sexual orientation, no findings have emerged that permit scientists to conclude that sexual orientation is determined by any particular factor or factors*' (Vandenbos 2009). With this in mind, we must question the reasoning as to why such exercises have since been adopted and promoted by some religious groups. It could be argued those biblical passages such as *Leviticus 18:22*, *Genesis 19* and *Corinthians 6:9-10* (NSV) have been used to support and legitimise these programmes with institutions such as the Core Issues Trust, as well as others such as Courage and Life group either encouraging or administering such programmes as part of their religious portfolio; whilst gradually introducing such ideas into British society through platforms like the internet, social media devices, live sermons and community encouragement.

In a very modern case, a mobile based application similar to those that help young people access Facebook and Twitter has been made available for those using Apple and Android software by the

American Christian ministry group 'Setting Captives Free'. The application itself, entitled "'Door of Hope'" is a 60-day interactive course aimed at showing people '*how to enjoy a newfound relationship with the Lord and how to find freedom from homosexuality*' (Setting Captives Free Organisation [Online]). Although the organisation that created the application is an American based ministry, its availability spans throughout the United Kingdom; whilst its developer defends its distribution by claiming that '*despite what you may have heard elsewhere, you do not have a 'homosexual gene,' nor were you born this way with no hope of freedom*' (Cleveland 2013 [Online]). Organisations such as these borrow from biblical discourses that repeatedly coin the term 'sodomy' alongside negative connotations to sin and indulgence, such as Jude 1:7:

'Just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which likewise indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural desire, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire'(NSV)

The legal battle that the Core Issues Trust faces in their publication on the London bus system however is a metaphor for the wider problems faced by such a claim that being gay can be cured, whilst in an address to the organisation for security and co-operation in Europe, founder of the trust Dr Michael Davidson tries to illustrate that '*Freedom of speech to articulate alternative, non-affirming responses to homosexuality is an important right to be protected*' (Davidson 2012). This in turn tries to highlight that in restricting such religious institutions from offering these kind of programmes the government faces the possibility of pleasing the gay-activist community whilst further segregating those who actively want to change their sexuality; being themselves a minority stuck between being gay and being dissatisfied with life.

Freudian psychoanalysis has provided a great deal of inspiration for psychotherapeutic approaches to curing homosexuality, despite Freud himself stating that '*In a certain number of cases we succeed in developing the blighted germs of heterosexual tendencies which are present in every homosexual, in the majority it is no more possible*'(Freud 1935), to which Freud goes on to imply that the aim of psychotherapy should be to '*help the homosexual towards self-acceptance and better social adjustment*'(West 1955). Such therapies are more widely available in the United States due to more relaxed regulations as well as the more active and extremist ideas of independent religious institutions. Individual accounts however give us evidence that these practices are becoming more available in the United Kingdom, which poses concern from some parts of our wider community due to the nature of such unregulated and unapproved treatments.

These therapies seem to be appearing within British society through religious vehicles such as churches that actively implant the concept of a gay cure into the minds of its religious gay community. The Frontline Church in Liverpool is one such establishment which has recently come under fire for publishing an informational 'fact-sheet' which aims at providing its staff with the tools to identify and encourage homosexuals into a heterosexual lifestyle; a lifestyle more in accordance with official and popular church practice. David Morgan would possibly argue that the nature of upholding such traditional values stems from the nature of the church being an inherently patriarchal system of gender constructs and stereotypes (Morgan 1992). Such rigid constructs allow only for the predetermined roles of men and women, which in turn seems to alienate those that do not conform to such parameters. These kind of cultural stereotypes give weight to the claim that religion and homosexuality are naturally incompatible, whereas other theories suggest otherwise.

Goss argues that '*the obvious references to homosexuality in these passages are not in fact obvious at all but constructed*' (Goss 1993). He calls for gay Christians to reinterpret the bible in accordance with their own truths, and envisages that this kind of truth will serve to promote equality and a just society for everyone via the exploration of ideals that promote positive integration between the religious community and homosexuals. Goss contrasts similarities with the homosexual community and other social outliers that have been marginalised throughout history:

'through a hermeneutics of solidarity, queer Christians can stand with the band of fugitive Israelite slaves that escaped Egyptian oppression, with the heroes and heroines of Hebrew scriptures, the hopes of liberation of the conquered Jewish people' (Goss 1993)

Through this depiction Goss almost points towards the homosexual community as being a kind of pariah people (Arendt 1970) that are emerging in various ways into the wider religious community, in some ways successfully and in other ways not, whilst the concept of a gay cure could be interpreted by some as a backwards move in this integration process.

In response to criticisms raised by those that oppose the concept of a gay cure, the Core Issues Trust draws attention to individuals that actively seek out to change their sexuality, whilst emphasising the importance that the issue at hand should not aim to stereotype gay people as history often has. The trust argues that through limiting approaches that reverse homosexuality they would be penalising the people that are unhappy with their sexuality. This kind of stereotyping is highlighted in the works of Peter Berger who argues that '*the more we keep persons socially removed from us, the easier it is to think of them not as individuals but as anonymous abstractions*' (Berger 1967). The point here is that even though society may strive for equality, we sometimes begin to think in terms of general characteristics which we apply to whole categories of people. In this, Scanzoni argues that the uniqueness of the individual is swallowed up in the impersonal and distorted stereotype (Scanzoni 1994). In a way, the Core Issues Trust is recognising that throughout history Christianity has been accused of such stereotyping and is now offering an alternative approach based on an individual understanding of homosexual desires. The extent to which this individual approach is monitored and regulated however is something many organisations fail to address, being itself the main cause and controversy behind such reparative approaches. This kind of failure resulted in the 2011 closure of the Exodus International group which followed similar reparative techniques that many other groups still follow today. Its former leader, Alan chambers issued an apology last year detailing that "*It is strange to be someone who has both been hurt by the Church's treatment of the LGBTQ community, and also to be someone who must apologise for being part of the very system of ignorance that perpetuated that hurt and today it is as if I've just woken up to a greater sense of how painful it is to be a sinner in the hands of an angry church.*" (Chambers 2013)

Bibliography

- Arlene Swidler, (1993). *Homosexuality and World Religions*. Trinity Press International, Valley Forge.
 - Arlene Swidler explores and illuminates the relationship between the nature of homosexuality and lesbianism in the variety of different texts and religious cultures around the world, focusing on seven of the world's most popular and influential religions. The book incorporates the historical and sociological factors in which the nature of religion and homosexuality/lesbianism have come to co-exist whilst outlining in great detail the factors which have brought about these processes. The book is a useful referencing source for religious, educational and sociological observers, providing a mainly unbiased and informative account of the development of attitudes towards homosexuality throughout the world.

- D.J West, (1955). *Homosexuality*, Gerald Duckworth publications, Middlesex.
 - Although published before homosexuality was legalised, this is a useful tool for tracing and comparing attitudes towards homosexuality in a completely different social climate than our modern one. Present in the book are cultural, medical and religious positions that formulated popular opinions towards homosexuals at the time, whilst making reference to several official members of society to help justify different views. Its modern audience would look at the book from a historical sociological view whereas at the time of its publication it was most likely seen as the official authority on what was

known about homosexuality. This factor is incredibly useful for contrast and comparative purposes.

- Letha Dawson Scanzoni, (1994). *Is the Homosexual My Neighbour?* Revised and Updated: Positive Christian Response. New York.
 - Written by Evangelical Christians themselves, this resource offers a positive look at the ways in which homosexuality and religion have come together, using the experience of its writers to highlight this positivity. The book claims to utilise the backgrounds of the authors in literature, sociology, psychology and religious studies whilst detailing a sympathetic and accessible case that contributes greatly to the debate in question. The aim here is to emphasise biblical scripture in a positive light, whilst breaking up the book to illustrate the challenges and victories of biblical doctrine in its acceptance of homosexuals.
- Peter L. Berger, (1967). *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, penguin Press, London.
 - The book claims itself to be concerned with everything that passes itself as knowledge, with particular reference in our case to everyday issues of sociological interaction between different groups of people. The book is especially useful in the context of exploring human behaviour and the factors that influence and justify human stereotyping and prejudice. These are explored in the various institutions, laws and constructs of society such as Churches and religious stereotyping. Combined with the presence of homosexuality the book offers a clinical and rational exploration of the ways in which religious people react to that which they do not necessarily understand.
- Sigmund Freud, (1935). 'Letter to an American Mother', Published in the American Journal of Psychiatry 1951.
- Robert Goss, (1993). *Jesus acted up: A gay and lesbian manifesto*. San Francisco.
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- Mike Cleveland, (2013) – *Door of Hope* – [Online Article] Available at: <http://www.settingcaptivesfree.com/courses/door-of-hope/day1/>
- Dr. Michael Davidson, (2012) – *Letter to the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe* - [Online Article] Available at: <http://www.osce.org/odihr/94519>

Additional Sources:

- <http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2012/apr/20/i-tried-to-cure-gay-people>
- Core Issues Trust Ministry 2014 – Resources Available at – <http://www.core-issues.org/>
- Setting Captives Free Ministry 2014 – resources Available at - www.settingcaptivesfree.com/