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The Cultural and Social Effects of Religion on Queer¹ People

Introduction

Religion holds a heavy weight in our society; regardless if you are religious yourself, the underlying values of most mainstream religions permeate into our societal values. In this paper, the religions I will discuss as having negative perceptions of Queer people are Christian denominations and Orthodox Jewish denominations since it is what most of the studies looked to reach their conclusions. This is specifically problematic for those who identify as Queer (LGBT) who, under the values of these religions, are seen as going against all moral values. As said by Sherkat, “Americans are conflicted over their core values surrounding the perceived sanctity of family and marriage and their own rising individualism and efforts to tailor their life experiences to their personal choice”(2002:347). In this paper, I wish to cover three main points. First, to discuss how having a religious identity can be both potentially uplifting and cause a lot of grief for Queer people. They often struggle with their own feeling about their identities which are often times conflicting in values. Also, I will search for how the coming out process of Queer people may be more difficult for Queer people who hold more traditional religious values. Next, I will show how, in our society, religion has permeated through our culture and has potentially affected parents who are both religious and not religious; causing

¹ Queer is the main term I will be using throughout this paper to refer to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) people as it is the term most accepted by the community. Homosexual will only be used when the article reviewed uses it; it otherwise is seen as unacceptable to the Queer community since it was originally used to diagnose those with same-sex attraction as having a mental disease/disorder.

them to have trouble accepting their Queer child's identity. Finally, I would like to look at how the politics of our society are being run by religious values and affecting society's perceived identities of Queer people. In our society, Queer people have become the symbols of a culture heavily entrenched with religious values as religion has affected their identity, their self acceptance, and the acceptance or rejection from others.

Religious VS. Queer Identity

Queer people will cope differently than one another with the reality of having an identity that is often seen as conflicting. In Schnoor's article, he found that there were four main ways the Queer Jewish people he interviewed balanced their religious identity with their queer identity these are; as "Jewish Lifestylers, Gay Lifestylers, Gay Commuters, and Gay Integrators"(2006: 49). The Jewish Lifestyler suppresses their gay identity and do not see it as a crucial part of their life. The Gay Lifestylers suppress their Jewish identity because they feel that being Jewish isn't a big part of their identity, just something that they happen to be ethnically. Gay Commuters tend to switch which identity is most important to them because they find both important and find it the best way to feel accepted by both communities. The Gay Integrators find it important to show both their gay and Jewish identities because both aspects play a big role in their identity and are important to them (Schnoor 2006). These groups all signify different paths a Queer Jew or any Queer person with a religion may take. They may choose to suppress an identity as the Gay and Jewish Lifestylers do to feel more accepted in whichever identity they feel is right for them. They may also be like the Gay Commuters, who change which identity they express, so that they don't have to choose one community over the other. It is more risky in terms of acceptance in gay or religious communities to

be like the Gay Integrators, who openly express both identities. It causes many tensions between communities where mainstream religions, such as in Judaism, see homosexuality is a sin, and gay communities often see religion as an evil that has oppressed them in society.

Often times, many queer people still feel a need to have a religious identity as well which was explored in Smith and Horne's article (2007). Smith and Horne's research indicated that many Queer people who had been of Judeo-Christian religions before coming out look for religiosity and spirituality in more earth-spirited religions that don't cause the same emotional battles that continuing to self identify with Christianity may cause. They hypothesized that Judeo-Christian faith Queers have a more difficult coming out process due to their internal struggle of religion and sexuality compared to those who are Earth-spirited and that earth-spirituality LGBT members feel a high approval rating within the religions because the religions support them (Smith and Horne 2007: 239-240). Through their surveys, Smith and Horne did find that those who had formally been from a Judeo-Christian religion were more likely to struggle with a balance of their sexual identity and religious identity than those who had come out while identifying with an earth-spirited religion to begin with (2007). From this we can gather that coming out while identifying with a Judeo-Christian religion affects Queer people's ability to identify as Queer without feeling an inner conflict.

Wagner and Serafini (1994) also look at this phenomenon with their research on internalized homophobia. They wrote, "As a rule, gays and lesbians come to accept their sexual identity over a period of time, as they learn to disregard negative societal messages and recognize the validity of their feelings. This transition may be more

complicated for those who have a religious upbringing”(Wagner and Serafini 1994:93). One of the hypotheses Wagner and Serafini looked to study was if Queers with who are more traditionally religious experience higher levels of internal homophobia. They tested this by surveying gay men who seemed to be more liberally religious and those who were more conservatively religious. The study did not find that there was a significant pattern in religiosity and internalized homophobia, but it did find two things of significance. First that those who had more liberal religious beliefs had their first same-sex relationship earlier in life, and second that, “age of first ongoing gay relationships...and age when first accepted being gay...were positively correlated with greater internalized homophobia...”(Wagner and Serafini 1994: 101). This reveals that because more liberal Christian gay men were able to accept being gay earlier they had less internalized homophobia than those who were more conservative Christian gay men, who generally did not accept their sexuality until later in life. For these conservative gay men, their religion was keeping them from being comfortable with their self expression and created problems with their own self identities.

In contradiction with Wagner and Serafini’s research, Tan’s research found that for almost all Queer people, both religious and non-religious, they: did not have internalized homophobia, had a good self-esteem, and didn’t feel they were being left out (Tan 2005 141-142). In general emotional well being was a “good predictor” of these, but religious well being seemed to have little to do with them (Tan 2005 135-144). Although there was no finding of any negative personal side affect within the gay and lesbian community whether religious or not, it seems that the study does show that there are many gays and lesbians who have religion and are, in fact, in a good place with God. It

shows that even gays and lesbians who are religious can find self harmony. My criticism of this study though, is that it surveyed those who already belonged to gay and lesbian groups. This could affect the results because those who are already in gay and lesbian groups may already be at a point where they are self accepting. I think it would be a better study if they had also surveyed those not affiliated with a gay and lesbian group who are both religious and not religious because those who are religious and not affiliated with a gay and lesbian group may not be at such a self accepting place. Overall from this research, it does appear that those who are queer and in a more conservative religious group have a bigger self acceptance struggle than those with either a more liberal religious background. Also, though, it shows that there are Queers out there, who are able to happily balance religion into their life as well as their queer identity. This section could be seen as part of the conflict theory; the idea that there are groups of people who have power in society and those who do not. Queer people have little power in society, so it is easy for religious groups that hold a lot of power in our society to use their power to further marginalize Queer people. At the same time, many Queer people have internalized homophobia and cause themselves further marginalization by trying to blend into our hetero-normative society.

Parental Reactions to Queer Children

Parents can play a huge role in the self acceptance of children's sexuality depending on how they react to a child's coming out. From a time a child is born, parents, religious or not, imagine how a child's life will turn out. However, because of our hetero-normative society, the image is often a daughter marrying a nice man, or a son marrying a nice woman. Parents buy their sons footballs and buy their daughters dresses and assume

they will fit the role they are suppose to fit in a heterosexist society. Freedman did a study called *Accepting the Unacceptable: Religious Parents and Adult Gay and Lesbian Children* where she hypothesized that religiously oriented parents would be less accepting of their gay or lesbian child and gay life style in general than those parents who are not religiously oriented. Also, depending upon religiosity, different parents will have different coping methods (Freedman 2008). She found through interviews with parents that both parents who are religiously oriented and not religiously oriented parents tend to be similar in accepting or not accepting of their gay and lesbian children. However, those who are not religiously oriented tend to be more willing to go to groups such as PFLAG than church support groups for gay and lesbian parents. Church support groups for gay and lesbian parents also tend to be more likely to tell parents it is ok to not be perfectly accepting of their child's sexuality (Freedman 2008).

I believe these studies show how much religion has truly permeated our society with their values. For a parent who is not considered religious, what reason would they have to believe that homosexuality is wrong? Society tells them that it is wrong, and specifically, religion has been institutionalized to create our societies values. For children who have religious parents, it may be more noticeable to see that because of their religious beliefs they believe homosexuality is wrong, but for children whose parents do not identify as religious, they are still feeling the pressures from a society which has values based on a religion affecting their Queer identity. Still, even with these results, it does prove more relief for a Queer child who has parents who are not religious because they are more likely to seek help from someone who is going to help them accept their

child. A Queer child with religious parents is more likely to have a parent going to a group where they tell the parent it is acceptable to not accept their Queer child's identity.

Often times, children will keep their sexuality hidden depending on how severe they believe their parents reaction will be. In D'Augelli, Grossman, and Starks (2005) study, they interviewed different LGB youth to find out what type of parent relationships it would take to have a LGB youth out to their parents. The study found there to be no particular living situation in which a child who was out to their parents differentiated from a child who was not out to their parents. What was found in this study that is significant to the research and hypothesis is that seven years passed from when a child recognized they had a same-sex attraction to when they actually identified as LGB (D'Augelli, Grossman, and Starks 2005). This number was regardless of whether the parent knew or did not know they were Queer. This study shows how even with a positive parent-child relationship, it is difficult for LGB children to overcome internalized homophobia. Also, the study found that children who did not disclose their sexuality to their parents did not because they were afraid of breaking relationships with either parent (2005). The study itself did not discuss religion, which may have been interesting to look at from the perspective of the LGB youth, but it is significant to note that it was a general consensus of all the children taking religion out of the picture that they were afraid of telling their parents. They may not recognize it as something that religion imposed upon them. It is the religious values in our society that have imbedded in many people that homosexuality is not acceptable. Parental acceptance is extremely important to a child's self acceptance. Through these studies evidence is provided that part of the cause for negative parent reactions may be tied with societies underlying

values, including those that are often seen as religious. This relates well to the Structural Functionalist theory of sociology where religions function in our society is to provide values for our society to follow.

Societal Influence on the Queer Identity

Even beyond the parent-child relationship in regard to a Queer child, society and politics even further pushes negativity onto homosexuality and the Queer identity. Politicians will often use an argument of morals and values to marginalize those who are Queer identified. In Campbell and Monson's article, *The Race Card*, they discuss how the 2004 election was actually swayed towards Bush because of his opposition to gay marriage (Campbell and Monson 2008). They found that the republicans' strategy for the election was to get religious voters out and it was the perfect opportunity since many states were having a vote on whether their state constitutions should ban gay marriage (2008). The hypothesis they used was that by using an anti-gay marriage stance, George W. Bush was able to get more religious people voting and they found their results to be true that because of the gay marriage ban vote in a few swing states and Bush's firm stance against gay marriage, more evangelical protestants voted. Also, according to the exit polls, many people who voted for Bush voted for him because they believed he held the same "moral values" as they did (2008: 414). The study did show, though, that there were a fair amount of secularists who did not vote because they disagreed with Bush's opposition to gay marriage (2008). In this way, it does show some potential movement in our society away from always sticking with religious values as a reason to marginalize Queer people, but the number of religious people who did vote because of the ban, was more significant than that of those who didn't because of it. These findings are showing

of how religious values, especially those against Queer people, have shown further institutionalized homophobia, in a country that claims to separate church and state.

In the research done by Brumbaugh et al. (2008), I am specifically looking at the hypothesis that, “religiosity has a negative independent effect on attitudes toward gay marriage. Past research demonstrates that the more religious, particularly the more extrinsically religious and of more fundamentalist backgrounds, are more opposed to gay marriage” (2008: 349). The results they found backed up the hypothesis exactly that those who were more religious and more politically conservative were more likely to be opposed to gay marriage (Brumbaugh et al. 2008: 356). As is now current in society, only five states allow gay marriage, as of May 10, 2009, all other states and the federal government do not. From this and the research data provided, we can indicate that those that practice more conservative religions have a value system that is dominating our society. As it is, religions that do not agree with the idea of same sex marriage defend their stance of same sex marriage with politicians who say that they think it would be against our values to change the definition of marriage to be anything other than a union between a man and a woman. This not only shows how society views Queers as unable to have the same rights as them, but it puts a stigma on their relationships as immoral and unworthy of the same protection as a heterosexual relationship.

In Yip’s 1998 study *Gay Male Christians’ Perceptions of the Christian Community in Relation to their Sexuality*, Yip interviewed gay male Christians about their opinions on where they think Christianity is going in terms of acceptance of homosexuality. On a larger scale, with the institution of the church, there is a lot of intolerance; but on a smaller scale, with individual people at these same churches, there is

much less (Yip 1998 40-51). The interview also found several gay men who have left or considered leaving their church for a more welcoming church that openly accepts gays. Yip also found a split in how interviewees see the Christian religion moving forward, or not, with homosexuality. Some believe that the church will be able to move forward and become more accepting to the LGBT community while others believe that the institution will not change. I think this article is important to note because it demonstrates that many are starting to become less hostile towards the idea of homosexuality. Although it seems that the church itself has not become more lenient on the idea, members are starting to become more open. Much of this section can be looked at through the symbolic-interactionist theory and the value of words. When religions label things as immoral, many are automatically opposed to it because of the negative connotation. Just as when suggesting changing the definition of marriage to pertain to same-sex partners as well, people automatically assume immorality with changing the institution of marriage.

Conclusion

This paper has covered the many ways in which religion has been able to permeate society's values and affect the identity of Queer people. It has shown how having a queer identity in society can make it difficult to come out and be self accepting while at the same time making it also difficult to hold a religious identity. It provides evidence about how religion affects both those Queers who have religious parents and those who don't and their relationships as their parents struggle with accepting something that has a negative demeanor in our society. Also, we have seen how society has been affected so much by religion that within political institutions homophobia exists and those with Queer identities even lack rights that are guaranteed to their straight

counterparts. The issues of religion and “homosexuality” go beyond just those two groups and move to be a huge element in our society. The Queer identified have to constantly fight the negative connotations that have been created by religious institution since those values are the ones that most people in America are born and raised with, regardless of religious identity. Some future research on this topic should be specifically regarding transgender people and how religion affects them as well as how society views them in regard to their religion. Other future research should look more into child-parent relationships, beyond the research I found, there wasn't much more I could find on it and also there wasn't much on the Queer child's reaction to unsupportive parents and what steps they generally take following a parent's rejection.

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