Religious Faith and Heterosexuality: A Multi-Faith Exploration of Young Adults

Andrew Kam-Tuck Yip and Sarah-Jane Page*

Abstract

This paper examines the understandings and practices of 515 heterosexual religious young adults living in the United Kingdom in terms of their religious faith and sexuality. It presents qualitative and quantitative data drawn from questionnaires, interviews, and video diaries. Four themes are explored. First, participants generally understood sexuality in relation to sacred discourses. Second, regardless of gender and religious identification, the participants drew from religious (e.g. religious community) and social (i.e. friends) influences to construct their sexual values and attitudes. Third, the religious and familial spaces within which the participants inhabited were structured by heteronormative assumptions. Thus, the participants must negotiate dominant norms, particularly those pertaining to marriage and sex within it. Finally, the paper focuses on married participants, offering insights into their motivations for, and experiences of, marriage. Overall, the paper demonstrates that, like their lesbian and gay counterparts, heterosexual religious young adults also had to manage various competing and mutually-reinforcing sexual and religious norms in constructing a meaningful life.

* Authors Note: Andrew Kam-Tuck Yip, School of Sociology and Social Policy, University of Nottingham; Sarah-Jane Page, School of Languages and Social Sciences, Aston University.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Andrew Kam-Tuck Yip, School of Sociology and Social Policy, University of Nottingham, University Park, Nottingham, NG7 2RD, United Kingdom. E-mail: andrew.yip@nottingham.ac.uk
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The proliferating research interest in the intersection of religion and sexuality is an indisputable fact. Indeed, the burgeoning corpus of research literature consistently demonstrates that the outcomes of this intersection are diverse and challenges the dominant discourse that religion is inherently restrictive, and oppressive of, sexuality. In particular, research on sexual and gender Others (e.g. women; lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans people) demonstrates that while experiences of stigmatization, discrimination, and rejection in religious spaces are still a real everyday experience, many members of such minorities are transforming such spaces, theologically and institutionally, often empowered by legislative and social progress (e.g. Browne, Munt, & Yip, 2010; Hamzić, 2012; Hunt & Yip, 2012; Shannahan, 2012; Wilcox, 2012a, 2012b; Yip & Nynäs, 2012).

This paper focuses on the views and experiences of 515 self-defined heterosexual religious young adults living in the United Kingdom, in order to offer an in-depth analysis of the intersection between heterosexuality and religious faith. We choose to focus on heterosexuality exclusively rather than the more commonly examined and contentious topic of non-heterosexuality (particularly homosexuality, and to a lesser extent, bisexuality) in order to problematize the hegemonic and naturalized status of heterosexuality. By doing so, we want to de-focus the often disproportionate attention on the issue of homosexuality, and put under scrutiny heterosexuality as an unchallenged norm. This paper will demonstrate that, despite its normative status, heterosexuality is understood and lived out by young adults in a contested and negotiated fashion, often characterized by ambivalence and contingency.

In spite of the increasing social visibility, media representation, and political voice of the lesbian and gay population, research continues to suggest that society in general is still firmly characterized by heteronormativity. This means that, at the micro, meso, and macro levels of social life, heterosexuality is institutionalized, through explicit propagation and implicit assumption in social and policy values and praxis, as the standard template for legitimate, normal, and productive social, and especially sexual and gender relations (Chambers, 2007; Ingraham, 2005). The normative status of heterosexuality, leading to the establishment, circulation, and perpetuation