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RELIGIOUS INDIVIDUALISM AND HOW YOUNG RELIGIOUS LGBT+ PERSONS APPROACH PARENTHOOD IN POLAND

Indywidualizm religijny a stosunek do rodzicielstwa młodych osób wierzących LGBT+ w Polsce

Abstract: The article is based on research material consisting of ethnographic interviews with young non-normative Poles practising as religious members of the Roman Catholic Church. The author analyses their life narratives, discussing how they are struggling to integrate their religious beliefs with their non-normative gender and sexuality, gradually distancing themselves from the institutional Church and sensing that they are becoming “a minority within a minority”. In the second part of the article, the author focuses on the non-normative religious Poles’ approach to reproduction, family and life plans.

Keywords: Catholicism, LGBT+, reproduction, family

Streszczenie: Artykuł oparty jest na materiale badawczym zebranym w ramach wywiadów etnograficznych z młodymi osobami o nienormatywnej tożsamości płciowej lub seksualnej, identyfikujących się jako osoby wierzące związane z Kościołem rzymskokatolickim. Autor dokonuje

analizy dotychczasowej drogi życiowej rozmówców i rozmówczyń, omawiając ich trudności z integracją wiary z seksualnością, stopniowe odchodzenia od kościoła instytucjonalnego, poczucie stanowienia „mniejszości w mniejszości”, w drugiej części pracy skupiając się na ich stosunku do kwestii reprodukcji, tworzenia rodziny, i planowania dalszego życia.

Słowa kluczowe: katolicyzm, LGBT, rodzicielstwo, rodzina

Introduction

In this article, I wish to take a closer look at elements common to the biographical narratives of people identifying as religious LGBT+ persons, while taking care not to downplay the significance of marked differences (in place of residence, personal struggles provoked by the traditional Catholic upbringing and identity issues) stemming from the research participants' various life trajectories. My primary objective is to reveal, and thereby highlight, significant commonalities in young non-heteronormative persons' attitudes to family and the Catholic Church as well as their perspective on their lives to come, including issues related to reproduction and their plans for the future. In the first part of this article, I reconstruct their struggles as they attempt to integrate their religious faith with their sexuality and gender identity and also their troublesome status as 'a minority within a minority'. In the second part of the article, I analyse their views and stance on parenting and family issues, drawing attention to their relinquishment of the traditional family model in favour of a 'family of choice', which does not necessarily involve them having children (biological or adopted). I conclude by suggesting that it is worth considering if it is these persons' religious individualism that influences their decision to leave the institutional Church rather than compromising their non-normative gender and sexual identity by reproducing the traditional Catholic family model. Although the research participants' young age leads them to approach the issue of potential parenthood with caution and uncertainty, their biographical narratives may suggest that a significant generational

shift is taking place among Polish LGBT+ Christians, and this is most apparent in their articulation of a different vision for integrating spirituality with queer identity.

The Catholic Church's official interpretation towards persons of non-normative gender and sexuality is contained in a set of documents originating from the *Persona Humana* Declaration on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics, which was published in 1975 by the Congregations for the Doctrine of the Faith. The document distinguishes between 'homosexual tendencies' and 'homosexual acts', unequivocally condemning sexual contact of any kind between persons of the same sex. The religious argument declaring homosexual acts to be a sin is based on an interpretation of the Bible articulated in the Catechism of the Catholic Church published in 1998, in which homosexual tendencies are treated as the manifestation of an 'objective disorder' (cf. Kościańska 2012: 148–60). The Church's negative stance on homosexuals has been confirmed over the years in other official documents prepared by the Congregation (cf. Hall 2016: 54–60) and was reiterated in August 2020 in the Position of the Polish Bishops' Conference on LGBT+, which also contains provisions promoting 'reparative' therapies for homosexuals. As for the Church's stance on transgender individuals, though this has oscillated historically, it is currently articulated using the language of sin (Bieńkowska 2012; Dębińska 2020). This shaped the context of my research, especially after 2019, when the Church's official stance in the public debate started to harden, as evidenced by the outspoken homophobic statements made by certain hierarchs who not only sought to legitimize the Church's interpretation of homosexual relations as sinful, but also to integrate these teachings into the contemporary political discourse – a case in point being Metropolitan Jędraszewski's statements about the 'rainbow plague', which were also referenced by the participants in my research (cf. Bednarek et al. 2022: 31–2).

Sociological and anthropological studies conducted since the 1990s on the experience of religious non-normative persons in the West have tended to focus on the issue of identity negotiation and the pursuit of

more open ecumenical communities (Warner 1995; Dillon 1999; Yip 2000). However, the reflections presented in this article are structured by a theoretical framework provided by a conception inhabiting the intersection point of religious studies and queer theory, notably religious individualism as a strategy for coping with exclusion from the institutional Church, an idea explored in the research of American religious scholar Melissa M. Wilcox (2009). Significantly, the perspective of religious persons of non-normative gender and sexuality (queer youth) has been extremely rarely explored to date (Taylor, Falconer and Snowdon 2014; Taylor 2016). In Polish academia, studies on the relationship between the Roman Catholic Church and LGBT+ communities have only started to be conducted over the last twenty years and these have primarily concentrated on the analysis of media discourse and the role played by the Church in the stigmatization of people of non-normative gender and sexuality (cf. Kościańska 2012; Zielińska 2015). However, it is the pioneering research of Dorota Hall that is the most important reference point for my reflections in this article, due to it being based on a reconstruction of the experiences and viewpoints of those identifying as LGBT Christians. In her book *Searching for a Place: LGBT Christians in Poland*, Hall undertook a synthesis in which she discusses the successive stages that shaped the discourse on LGBT+ persons in the Polish Catholic press, correctly pointing out that such an identity category as ‘LGBT Christians’ owed its existence to a discursive transformation that made it possible for these people to articulate a positive identity (Hall 2016: 117–88). The empirical part of her study focused on members of the informal Faith and Rainbow [Wiara i Tęcza] group, an ecumenical community of Christians acting on behalf of people of non-normative gender and sexuality. When I refer in this article to Hall’s analysis of the ‘LGBT Christians’ group, I propose that it be expanded to incorporate issues related to reproduction and family creation, though my main focus is on personal narratives that differ somewhat from the Faith and Rainbow community’s accounts of their struggles with their faith and sexuality inasmuch as they are more strongly marked by religious individualism.

Characteristics of the study sample

This article is based on research material consisting of ten in-depth ethnographic interviews conducted from October 2021 to January 2022.¹ All my male and female respondents did at some stage in their lives – or still do – identify as members of the Roman Catholic Church community, although some already preferred by the time of the interview to refer to themselves as ‘ex-Catholics’. Despite distancing themselves in this way from the institutional Church, they still described themselves as religious despite not necessarily fitting into the category of ‘LGBT Christians’ analysed by Hall. Although my interview group were small in number, the ways in which they, as individuals, define their gender and sexual identity means that they represent a cross-section of various identity categories. Such diversity was one of the premises upon which the research was founded, as I was eager to access as diverse a set of personal narratives as possible on the experiences of non-normative people raised in the Catholic faith; this article is therefore based on biographical interviews conducted with seven cisgendered men identifying as gay, a cisgendered woman identifying as lesbian, a transgender man and a non-binary person identifying as bisexual. The interviews were semi-structured and based on a grid of questions that I used flexibly, tailoring the tool to each research participant’s individual perspective. When analysing the material (transcriptions, interviews, notes), I focused on comparing the biographical narratives in terms of converging experiences, grouped together as follows: first, growing up and attempts made to reconcile two identities (also taking into account the respondents’ self-identification as a ‘minority within a minority’), second, their attitude towards relationship formation and family creation. The study participants were informed in what ways and to what end the collected material would be used when giving their

¹ The research was conducted within the framework of a research project titled ‘Katolicyzacja reprodukcji, reprodukcja katolicyzmu. Aktywizm i intymność w Polsce od 1930 r. do dziś’ (KATOREP) [The Catholicization of Reproduction, the Reproduction of Catholicism. Activism and Intimacy in Poland from 1930 to Today], which was funded by an NCN (National Science Centre) grant.

consent to take part in it.² I used the ‘snowball’ method for the research, building a network of interviewees using the internet with the support of ‘LGBT Christian’ groups. My respondents came from Warsaw, Poznań, Sosnowiec and Lublin, although some of the interviews were conducted – due to restrictions caused by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic – using an internet communication platform.³ Most of my respondents were educated young people born between 1984 and 1996 roughly representing the urban middle class, and the vast majority of them were in relationships at the time of interview (three people described themselves as single).⁴

Growing up and attempting to reconcile two identities

All my respondents grew up in traditional families strongly impacted by the Catholic faith. Being a member of the Church was never open to question if the expectations of family were to be met. In practice, this meant actively participating in the life of the parish, attending Sunday Mass, receiving the sacraments and living according to the principles set out in the Catechism of the Catholic Church. However, as the respondents’ approach puberty in their biographies, a tension arises between two

² All the interviews were anonymized. The respondents’ names have been changed or replaced by pseudonyms they chose for themselves while their interview was being conducted.

³ Despite the ongoing pandemic potentially limiting my access to people whom I could meet for an interview, conducting ethnographic interviews not only turned out to be possible at that time, but brought unanticipated benefits due to such factors as respondents having more time on their hands and the possibility of conducting interviews with people coming from various Polish cities. In this regard, my experiences accorded with the observations undertaken by the other researchers involved in the Katorep project (cf. Kościańska, Kosiorowska and Pomian 2022: 14–15).

⁴ Only one of the respondents (born in 1960) represented the older generation, and his narrative markedly differed from how the other research participants spoke of their experiences. In this article, I focus on outlining and analysing the main intersection points and recurring motifs in the conducted interviews – with a view to reconstructing how young non-normative Christians speak about their experience – merely signalling a need to conduct comparative research directed at the unearthing of generational differences in the Polish LGBT+ community.

‘competing’ identities – the public, national-Catholic one and a private identity bound up with their discovery and gradually emerging awareness of their non-normative gender or sexual identity. One of the respondents, Adaś, describes his ‘secret’ identity – the discovery of an erotic attraction to men – as a challenge he was forced to contend with:

I had to sort of... you know, every so often treat it as something that is not ok, something that needs to be dealt with. In a sense, a bit of a challenge. Probably, Catholics would say... or the language of the Church would say that this is a sort of challenge that one needs to bear, isn't it, something of the kind. [...] I don't know, at confession I never said what kind of porn I was viewing, yeah. Actually, I didn't regard that as necessary [...] because I recognized that a sin is a sin and it makes no difference who you're watching on the screen.

The second part of the statement shows the interviewee's methods for avoiding having to deal directly with the priest's criticism. In the intimate circumstances of the confession, the interviewee purposefully conceals the whole truth about the object of his fascination, regarding this as a suitable strategy that does not diminish the value of the sacrament of confession – after all, ‘a sin is a sin’, irrespective of whether it relates to gay or heterosexual pornography.

When evaluating their involvement in the Church from childhood and early adolescence, all the respondents draw attention to a gradually growing conviction that the social teachings of the Catholic Church are proving to be incompatible with their personal experience and viewpoints. Crucially, however, that dissonance is not related to differences over issues of faith, but rather to the perception that priests are being politicized. One of the interviewees, Kap, ironically recalls the content of the sermons delivered by her local parish priest:

Because, to all intents and purposes, he was all sweetness and light and, it being a small rural parish, he really did whatever he could to renovate this and that, so that he... He was helping the locals,

organizing collections of some kind or other, but he had one hobby horse. That hobbyhorse was sermons on how Jewry was destroying Poland. He ranted and raved at Mass; certain people were sure to appear: Jews, Freemasons, Satanists, homosexuals and ‘lebitki’⁵. ‘Lebitki’ were lesbians, only I never ever heard the priest say it correctly. And well, that jarred with me so much that even though I was taking part in the Mass, I had to shut my mind to the content of that sermon.

The ‘jarring’ described by the interviewee can be interpreted as a moment – yet to enter full consciousness – that established the foundations of a personal religiosity: gradual liberation from a priest to whose sermons it was necessary to ‘shut one’s mind’, or more broadly – from the institutional Church. Although this element of critical reflection on a power relationship along a homosexuality–religion cline is not one of the research participants’ distinguishing traits, it maintains a constant presence in their biographical narratives, reflecting a paradox pointed out by Hall, according to which the religious non-heteronormative person ‘[...] is, as it were, thrust into a position of submission with regard to the oppositional positioning of these issues and is no longer really able to separate the forms of external pressure exerted on them by particular institutions from internalized pressure’ (Hall 2016: 192).

The experience of growing up within Catholic families also influenced how hard it was for my interviewees to come out to their loved ones, and in particular to their parents. In the narratives of those identifying as homosexual, the relationship between the Church’s official interpretation of homosexuality and their parents’ lack of acceptance of their non-normative identity is made very explicit:

The whole struggle was connected practically ... well, unfortunately, it appears like I was so brainwashed, so to speak, by how the Church views, how the Church talks about [...] how the Church approaches this, and it is this that was bringing back that de facto

⁵ The term ‘lebitki’ is probably an allusion to ‘kobitki’, a pejorative term for women (‘kobiety’) in Polish.

internal struggle directly and indirectly [...] which the Church had also instilled in, for example, in my parents, that... mainly in my mother, she had the biggest problem with that. With dad, it was more ... that information washed over dad, but my mum had a problem with that, precisely because of the way she had also been raised and what the Church had implanted in her head directly and indirectly; it all stemmed from what... from this narrative created by the Church.

The stigmatizing narrative on homosexuality not only classes all gender and sexual non-normativity as sin, but also reinforces the link between Polish Catholicism (and the nation) and heterosexuality (cf. Graff 2008: 33–109). One of the respondents recalled that after coming out to his family, one of his grandmother’s first responses was to ask: “Does this mean you’re leaving the Church?” Similar accounts can be found in an anthology of memoirs written by LGBT+ people during the pandemic, in which they frequently describe in some detail their struggles with the internalized homophobia instilled in them from childhood by representatives of the Church (cf. Bednarek et al. 2022).

‘Discovering themselves’ requires the research participants to enter into a conflict with the Church’s narrative, which negatively affects their relationships with their parents, who associate gender and sexual non-normativity with the rejection of the teachings of the Catholic Church. Consequently, as far as the respondents are concerned, their decision to come out equates to them finding themselves outside the Church community despite professing their commitment to the faith. However, any attempt by homosexuals to reconcile their non-normative sexual identity with the teachings of the Church can only end in a ‘life of celibacy’, which is not regarded as a viable solution by a young generation growing up in full awareness of the emancipatory LGBT+ discourse:

And at the end of the second grade, I basically got to know this guy and confided in him, so that was kind of a first coming out. [...] Well, this boy said he had similar feelings too, but that it was... we’re believers and it was cool that I’d told him and now we’d

support each other with this. Yeah, and this was in that Catholic sense, renouncing homosexuality, living in celibacy, carrying out the provisions of that letter from the archbishops [...] on the pastoral care of homosexuals. [...] I had a spiritual guide and attended a kind of Catholic therapy. But everything was all geared towards this, let's say, life of chastity.

Zack, a transgender man, points out that associating the transition process with sin – “interfering in something created by God” – also results in him being effectively excluded from the community:

Well, as for transgenderism, there's something there... Well, there's also something about, so to speak, I don't remember exactly what I read there, but for sure the mere fact that someone was transgender was sort of ok, but undergoing a transition, or kind of interfering in something created by God, was a sin. [...] even if I, for example, agree my gender legally, to the Church, I am still that other person who de facto, as it were, doesn't legally exist anymore. That means, of course, that a birth certificate is something that is still somehow linked to my person, but if, for example, I wanted to go to my church, to the parish priest to tell him what the situation is, then the baptismal certificate is in my old name and absolutely nothing has changed; to them, I am, so to speak, that old person.

The Church's narrative also influences the stance taken by parents, which may not only exacerbate parent-child conflicts, but also cause psychological crises:

You know, generally, there's a dichotomous viewpoint, [based on the assumption] that everything's definitely going to be bad, nothing's going to work out, and so on. Anyway, my mother began... she also went on some religious community's retreat and basically returned from it as a kind of convert and started actively, aggressively, saying that this depression was invented, it was caused by my sinfulness, that she was calling on me to convert. [...] That she would turn up at my place and haul me to confession, that she would not

support me, and generally that was how she rejected me at a time when I genuinely had clinical depression. Not some kind of... as people say, low mood, just... Well, she fought me for a few months. But during that period I also went back on my medication, I went for psychotherapy. At the beginning, those Catholic principles were still a topic during my psychotherapy, but I had already begun that distancing [from the Church].

Wojtek's deteriorating mental health made him decide to seek support from a priest whose sermons seemed to indicate his willingness to help. After assuring Wojtek that the only solution was to live in celibacy, the priest suggested he undergo psychotherapy at the *Odwaga* ('Courage') Centre in Lublin, which turned out to be carrying out conversion therapy employing so-called reparative procedures (cf. Kocikowski 2011). The practices of centres of this type have yet to be officially condemned by the psychological community in Poland despite them "contradicting current knowledge confirming the immutability of sexual orientation and not contributing to the patient's welfare, as demonstrated by accounts of their numerous negative effects on the psyches of persons subjected to them" (Szeroczyńska 2020: 31).

Eventually, all my interviewees mention that moment when they realized that any further attempts to reconcile their two opposing identities were doomed to fail. The choice they are faced with is whether or not it is possible to live on 'in hiding' and thereby avoid violating the moral principles instilled in them by the Church. Each of them, irrespective of their differing life trajectories, decides to distance themselves, to a greater or lesser degree, from the institutional Roman Catholic Church: they stop participating in Mass or taking the sacraments, cut themselves off from their families and in some cases state during their interviews that they are in 'the process of leaving' or basically, 'an ex-Catholic'. There are various strategies for coping with the dissonance between the realms of faith and sexuality, but my respondents seem to pursue a compartmentalization model, which involves them separating their two identities by rejecting institutional religiosity and replacing it with religious individualism

(cf. Hall 2016: 71). David openly admits that despite his faith remaining strong, he does not see himself as being part of the community anymore. Instead, he rejects the hypocrisy underlying the idea of ‘living in celibacy’, seeing what psychological harm it inflicts on other persons of non-normative identity.

Going to a club on Saturday and, pardon me, sucking someone off in the bog, because I had no other space for that. Because Catholicism had consigned, and I myself had consigned, my sexual orientation to the gutter, to something to be ashamed of, to be hidden, something that should never see the light of day. And come Sunday morning, I was capable of going to church. And that’s a very, very bad path that, in my opinion, is a real mindfuck for Catholics. It’s impossible to reconcile being an active Catholic and an active homosexual while looking after one’s mental health. It’s irreconcilable. That triad will never work out. This is a typical triad, two out of three [options can be chosen].

Interestingly, unlike the LGBT+ Christians interviewed by Hall, with the exception of one person, none of the participants in my research had sought help from the Faith and Rainbow group, nor had they considered joining another Church.⁶ Given the modest size of the sample involved in this study, it is difficult to definitively state whether this reluctance is a sign that there is a gradual shift taking place in Poland’s LGBT+ community or whether it

⁶ In comparison with the people with links to the Faith and Rainbow foundation who were interviewed by Hall, my respondents almost unanimously declared their lack of interest in following the debate on the situation of LGBT+ people being conducted on the pages of Catholic magazines. They unanimously stated that they do not read the Catholic press – whether of a progressive bent (*Tygodnik powszechny*) or with conservative tendencies – explaining that this was down to a conviction that the disputes had become sterile and a general decline in the importance of the press in comparison to new media: “I know what will be in these discussions. In the sense that there is little room for manoeuvre there, so why should I waste my time on reading Christian or Catholic magazines?”. This puzzling indifference to the public debate may well be the outcome of Church circles (including the hierarchs) intensifying their smear campaign against the LGBT community from 2019 to 2020. An impressive wave of new marches and equality parades organized – often for the first time – in many Polish towns and cities met with blanket criticism from leading Catholic magazines such as *Gość Niedzielny* or *Niedziela* (Leśniczak 2020).

simply highlights the specific nature of that particular group, which almost exclusively consisted of people professing to currently hold liberal-leftist views. Adaś claims that this aversion to joining another community – even one that is open to the experiences of LGBT+ Christians – can be explained by their preference for focusing on religious individualism:

You know, I think I heard about that [Faith and Rainbow] at the point when the option was already almost fully formed in my head that my faith is very individual, that I don't need another community, only this time oriented towards something else. Because for me it is crucial that... I mean crucial, if I say that for me it is crucial that I'm a believer, it sounds as if I'm experiencing that every day.

A minority within a minority

Having decided to withdraw from the life of the Church community, my interviewees focus on building romantic relations and friendships with people from the LGBT+ community. At the same time, many of them draw attention to the sense of alienation they experience in their new, progressive company. Criticism of the Roman Catholic Church potentially turns them – people of faith attempting to reconcile their spirituality with their non-normative sexuality – into targets. One female interviewee characterizes her uncomfortable position as being “invisible”:

It's also a bit like, within the LGBT community itself, I think believers are a little discriminated against, but it's often assumed that when someone is an LGBT person, then they're definitely not a believer and there are various jokes about believers. [...] What bothers me most is the fact that it's not taken into account that it's also possible to be... that within the LGBT community, there may also be believers, only some assume that there can't possibly be any believers in that community. And that's why I sometimes feel like that... as if I were actually invisible. And within this community of LGBT believers, we're united by an even greater common experience, because of this faith and this orientation.

According to the interviewees, one of the ways in which LGBT believers may respond to this situation is to allow their individual religiosity to retreat further into the private sphere – that is, “not parading one’s Catholic faith” – though they perceive this as a paradoxical reversal of the recommendations they previously heard from the Church.

Some people, even if they hear that someone’s a believer, are not really capable of understanding that, I don’t know, one can be LGBT, one can be a believer. And it’s a bit like they kind of apply a zero-one logic. But I also try to avoid such conversations because I think I don’t feel a need to make any attempt to share my experiences, or I also don’t feel any need to socialize with people who have the same approach to this matter. Because I somehow treat this more like faith is something of my own, and I don’t have to somehow share it with the outside world.

The sense of belonging to a ‘minority within a minority’ is a constant presence in my interviewees’ daily struggles. This is not a uniquely Polish phenomenon, as discrimination against LGBT+ believers is also a conspicuous problem in progressive movements in the West (cf. O’Brien 2007). Again, what unites their differing narratives is the attempt they make to articulate the experience of being doubly excluded: first, from the religious community – which is actually their decision – and then, from the actual LGBT+ community, which marginalizes their experiences and beliefs. Both these social spaces therefore continue to be places of silence and the unspeakable (Hall 2016: 221–24). Although religious non-normative individuals speak of this situation with sorrow, they seem, at the same time, to accept the current situation, making no attempt whatsoever to seek out people with similar experiences; on the contrary, they declare that they have no interest in building any social network with other believers and, by extension, are not interested in ‘breaking the silence’ about their dual identity. This “schizophrenic situation”, as another interviewee calls it, seems to thrust LGBT believers all the more forcefully in the direction of religious individualism – of a kind that need not be comprehensible either to other members of the universal Church or to people from the LGBT+ community.

Parenting

Undertaking a reconstruction of the research participants' life paths to date – both during the interview and in this article – seemed to me to be crucial to understanding their attitude towards the issues of reproduction, parenting and family, or more broadly, how they see their future in Poland. The group of people I included in my study were young people in their twenties and thirties who had taken the decision to distance themselves from the Catholic Church community, while still describing themselves as deeply religious. I was interested in attempting to understand how they saw their future, both when they were growing up and today, as adults.

When one interviewee was asked how his traditional Catholic upbringing influenced his perception of family, he spoke of the overwhelming sense of loneliness to which one is condemned when attempting to integrate one's homosexual identity with the teachings of the Church:

As a gay man, I no longer imagine a future where a vision of loneliness awaits me, because that was the vision I stored up for myself at high school. I suppose I want to fall in love one day. And just live with a guy. Well, there was a point at which I stopped, for example, attending Communion. Because I found that it's ok, it's kind of good that I can be gay there, but actually the very assumption that I will start a family one day with a guy kind of... not 'discriminates', that's the wrong word, it kind of excludes me from the Church community and from taking Communion. So that's how it was. That's how I dealt with it. That sense of guilt has never left me. [...] One fact that also made me want to get cured of being gay was my sudden awareness that I would never have children. And that happened back at high school. And that was hard for me to live with. At that time, I really wanted to have children and in fact fulfil those heteronorms.

Another interviewee evokes similar childhood memories when reconstructing a way of thinking according to which the impossibility of him having children would condemn him, as a gay Catholic, to “extra suffering”:

But one of the other reasons for the extra suffering caused by my discovery of my homosexuality was... that difficulty accepting I wouldn't have a family. In the sense that at the beginning I thought I would be completely excluded from society, rejected by my family and friends, and will never be in a relationship and that basically, you know, my life would be barren, infertile, I wouldn't leave any children behind.

The conviction that people struggling with their different sexuality hold about the 'barrenness' of the non-normative life model shows how deeply the Church's social teachings on homosexuality can be internalized. Being excluded from procreation, as Catholic ethics dictate, becomes another burden to bear – for my interviewees, it was impossible to imagine any form of Christianity other than the heteronormative version in which the life goal of individuals is to 'leave children behind'. Naturally, for some, having their own children is not a priority. For Kap, a non-binary person, starting a family is not a short-term objective: "I'm not sure if I'll start a family. As for children, I'd sooner adopt some. I'd say it's not a priority for me, but one of those issues I think about. I know that it'll be difficult for me in my situation". For young LGBT+ persons living in Poland, the decision to have offspring is bound up with a radical life change – in their narratives, this topic is invariably linked with reflections on potentially emigrating. In Karolina's case, the possibility of starting a traditional family is perceived as an unimaginable decision in Poland, where a single woman wishing to adopt a child would be required to conceal the truth about her non-normative sexual identity.

I'm not sure about that yet. I'm still thinking about it, because, on the one hand, I'd probably like to, but on the other, I know that [such a decision] would probably entail me moving abroad and... For if I was ready, I... I'm thinking about adoption, not about that sort... not about getting pregnant using a donor. So I know that it would entail... a big change in my life, and I don't know if I'd want it that much...

Research from 2014 on people creating same-sex families shows that 61% of offspring being raised by such couples came from previous heterosexual relationships (Mizielińska, Abramowicz, Stasińska 2014: 126). As the lifepath discussed in the first part of this article shows, even though my interviewees were raised in traditional families, their coming out happened at a relatively early stage of their lives, so they had not entered into any serious heterosexual relationships (let alone marriage). They are aware of the limited horizon of possibilities for LGBT+ persons to have offspring in Poland, which particularly applies to homosexual men wishing to raise a child together.⁷ The obstacles presented by the state, and the Church as well in the case of some of my respondents, clash with their own ideas of both family and religiosity. Adaś, a thirty-year-old gay man who describes himself as deeply religious, views the issue of parenthood through the prism of his spirituality. In his account of the matter, his desire to have offspring is directly linked to a need to create a common spiritual relationship symbolized by his dream of attending church services together:

You know, maybe if I had children, I would think, you know, that it'd be cool [...] for them to take part in such things as the Advent Mass, for us to have some common memories... I mean, generally it's cool to have shared memories with one's children... that's a truism of course. However, if there were some substance to those memories, maybe then I'd think about it, I'd go with them. But at this particular moment, when I'm not even thinking about getting

⁷ The study participants indicated three options that were theoretically available to them: adoption, surrogacy, artificial insemination (in a clinic or at home). The provisions of Polish law theoretically make it possible for a single person to adopt a child, but in practice, adoption centres put many obstacles in the way of unmarried persons wishing to do so (for example, demanding that applicants produce a church marriage certificate). The law also does not allow the adoption of a male or female partner's child within a same-sex relationship. An act passed on 25 June 2015 addressing fertility treatment does not exclude any category of woman from in vitro artificial insemination procedures. However, the institution of surrogacy is unregulated under Polish legislation, and therefore continues to be illegal, taking place underground (commercial surrogacy), thereby presenting a challenge to Polish law.

married, and definitely not thinking about children, for wherever would I get children from?

At the same time, Adaś firmly dismisses the idea of using such methods as adoption or surrogacy:

In a sense, I don't think about children, I'm not even considering that option, not thinking about surrogates, not thinking about my friends, not thinking about anything of the sort. I used to think about it a lot and it seemed to me... I mean, surrogacy appeared to be an option that was quite... I found it kind of repellent, it's even hard for me, you know, to say why. In a sense because... maybe, this is silly, you know, linking a subject that is 'sacred' in inverted commas [...] with a subject that is profane, I mean, money.

Adaś draws attention to an ethical question – from his perspective, surrogacy links reproduction to financial issues, making it a transaction rather than something that is “sacred in inverted commas”. His position illustrates the impasse that many LGBT+ Christians reach, when they wish to follow the traditional model of the heteronormative family, in accordance with the ethics of the Catholic Church.

A family of choice

When it comes to how the interviewees define their attitude towards relationships, it is puzzling that they dismiss the notion of people of the same sex getting married. This could well be an outcome of the research participants being so young that only some of them had experienced being in a long-term romantic relationship. Aside from the obvious legal and religious context preventing anyone entering into relationships of this type in Poland, the research participants allude, directly and indirectly, to the notion of a ‘family of choice’, constituting “a countervailing model to straight kinship and a critique of the privilege accorded to a biogenetically grounded mode of determining which relationships count as kin”

(Levine 2008: 379). Despite receiving a traditional Catholic upbringing, my interviewees also seem to accept an alternative relationship model that does not adhere to the assimilationist homonormative emancipatory policy pursued by some of the LGBT+ community in Poland. In their personal narratives, ‘family’ is defined as a ‘family of choice’, ‘a friendship group’ or ‘two people and an animal’ and explicitly counterposed against the notion of ‘blood ties’:

But yes, as I get older, I also see that a family can also be different, in the sense that there need not be blood ties of some kind; it could be people you happen to meet in life and recognize that it is they who are your family, that they are equivalent to or sometimes even closer than a family sharing blood. [...] And if we’re defining family that way, I think I’d certainly like to create one. Though this could also just be two people and an animal, that’s also a family to me.

For some years now, I’ve had a very universal category of family, which may correspond equally well to a sort of definition of a friendship group, or some group of people who treat each other kindly, with respect, are supportive and attentive towards each other. Something like that. Personally, I’m more... I’m ... how to? ... wait, how to put it?... There’s an English text, I probably heard this in English; I mean, maybe there’s a Polish translation as well, but anyway: ‘Friends are the family you choose’, something of the kind. And I’m more drawn to that than to a flesh and blood family, than to the mere fact that I share someone’s DNA, no... that fact, that fact alone doesn’t create any intimacy, any closeness. So I take umbrage when it’s suggested that a family also needs to work on becoming close. It’s not the case that it’s a given, simply how it’s supposed to be, that it’s not important how much of a prick you are towards someone in your family, as you’re still family.. That’s not the way it works. That’s not the way it should work.

The next interviewee responds to a question about his future as a potential parent by directly linking his fate to the current state of the law in Poland. He is resigned to the fact that he will be staying in his homeland rather than moving abroad because he is convinced that is the natural choice to make at this point in his life:

We live... for the time being we're living here, for the time being getting married abroad wouldn't make the slightest difference [to our situation] in the place where we live now, so if we don't move away from here and nothing changes here, we'll basically just be stuck as fiancées. If something changes in Poland, we'll get married. Even if weddings carried out abroad began to be respected here, that would also be a reason for marrying abroad, even if those weddings were not conducted here. As for starting a family, he... actually both of us now ... a long time ago, or at least before we met, had abandoned such thoughts... or rather had reconciled ourselves to the fact that this would not be possible, on that basis. So we're not thinking about it at the present time. Basically, we have dogs and cats and these are our children.

Conclusion

The reconstruction presented in this article of the research participants' viewpoints and opinions on reproduction and family creation highlights the key role played by religious individualism in the lives of LGBT+ persons who are religious yet have distanced themselves from the Institutional Church. In the interviewees' narratives, rather than 'family' being perceived from the perspective of traditional 'blood ties' or the Sacrament of Marriage, it is seen as an alternative institution constructed on the basis of values such as friendship, closeness and choice. Similarly, the question of potential parenthood is not a priority at this stage of their lives. In this respect, I agree with Dorota Hall, who observed, while discussing how focused Christian LGBT+ scholars in the West are on religious individualism, that "the supposed individualism or reflexivity of gay and lesbian persons only applies to specific milieus (formed from a big-city, ethnically privileged middle class)" (Hall 2016: 76). At the same time, although my interviewees struggle to articulate their visions of reproduction and family creation, they seem aware how privileged they were to be able to start a family by adopting or emigrating to another country. For the time being, they are not looking for an opportunity to pursue such plans in Poland, and certainly not within the Catholic Church community.

Carrying out reproductive plans is seen as a fundamentally individual endeavour. Rather than waiting for the social change that must take place in Poland or adapting their lives to the norms of a homophobic society, they take individual action that may be as simple as declaring their readiness to leave the country in the not-too-distant future.

In other words, their ‘relegation’ of any reproductive plans to an unspecified point in the future, or abandonment of the traditional Catholic path – the heteronormative family – can be interpreted as a consequence of the uncoupling of two opposing identities. My interviewees, who have been left to ‘fend for themselves’ after being stigmatized by the Catholic Church and choose not to seek support from other LGBT+ Christians, are attempting to somehow ‘reconcile’ their visions of family with the restrictions imposed on them by power structures represented by the state and Church. As a consequence, they reconcile themselves to the impossibility of having children, declaring instead a preference for other family models: a ‘family of choice’ or a friendship group. Their stance on this issue seems to confirm the dynamic character of discursive models described by Hall that enable an individual in a given historical moment both to self-determine and – as I was attempting to show in this article – articulate the restrictions arising from the current state of the law and the Roman Catholic Church’s official interpretation.

Particularly significant, for me, are the reasons why the research participants are not planning to become parents in the near future. In the *Rodzina z wyboru w Polsce* [The Family of Choice in Poland] study, as many as 30% of the non-heteronormative research participants cited biological determinism or social discrimination as a reason for not having offspring, which the researchers interpreted as an effect of the conservative discourse (Mizielińska, Abramowicz, Stasińska 2014: 117). My respondents represent a generation of LGBT+ people who are completely immersed in the emancipatory discourse, which translates – as I discussed in the first part of the article – into them struggling to integrate their faith with their non-normative sexuality at a relatively early stage of their lives. This is a generation (and this particularly applies to cisgendered women) who have no experience of starting a heteronormative family in the

past, so definitely do not have any children from a previous relationship. However, their biological narratives are focused on “living a contradiction that defines who I am” (O’Brien 2007: 181) arising from their attempt to integrate their two identities – this process, which can last many years, is a basic reference point in the interviews, irrespective of whether the respondents are referring to the past or present. Maybe this is the source of the caution with which they refer to their potential parenthood despite the fact that, for many of them, that “extra suffering” arising from the impossibility of them following the traditional family model (i.e., having offspring) is part and parcel of their daily struggle to reconcile themselves with two competing identities.

At the same time, it is clear from their personal narratives that their traditional Catholic upbringing has left its stamp, even if its only effect has been to compound the difficulties they sometimes have articulating their desires in relation to reproduction:

On the contrary, I never told any of my boyfriends, and there were, amazingly, as many as two of them, that I wanted to create a family with them. It had never ever even crossed my mind to tell them that I wanted to create a family with them, create a home. To live together, you know, just like that.

The interviewee admits that a vision of creating a traditional family with his partner ‘never crossed his mind’. On the one hand, this shows the hegemonic position held by the Catholic discourse on family and reproduction can even manifest itself in the appropriation of linguistic categories – to such an extent that for a religious gay man, the mere thought of creating a ‘home’ with his partner seems to aberrant. On the other hand, the respondents’ young age certainly exerts such a marked influence on their current perspective on relationship formation and reproductive plans that their fear of sharing their dreams with a partner may be a result of them being in a relatively new relationship rather than a direct consequence of their burdensome Catholic upbringing. At the same time, however, their difficulty articulating their life plans may be

interpreted, on the one hand, as a sign of their aversion to following an assimilationist, homonormative LGBT+ identity policy and on the other, as a renunciation of any vision of a linear life biography aligning with the expectations of traditional Catholic morality. In the case of the interviewed sample, their struggle to integrate their faith with their non-normative gender and sexuality has led to them abandoning the institutional Church and fulfilling their spiritual needs by aspiring to a model of religious individualism, while parenting issues have been relegated to the background – their priority continues to be the possibility of articulating their non-normative identity outside a religious community promoting the traditional family. The research participants still appear to be at the stage of seeking out their own models as well as possible reproductive practices that, for the time being, fall outside the scope of available models or procedures, but quite possibly hint at the existence of an alternative path more attuned to their way of experiencing spirituality and their queer identity, yet ultimately expressive of the growing religious individualism of young LGBT+ Christians in Poland.

thum. Philip Palmer

Acknowledgements

This article is a result of the research project “Catholicising Reproduction, Reproducing Catholicism: Activist Practices and Intimate Negotiations in Poland, 1930–Present” (principal investigator Agnieszka Kościańska), funded by the National Science Center, Poland (Opus 17 scheme, grant number 2019/33/B/HS3/01068)

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