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*Palgrave Studies in Lived Religion  
and Societal Challenges*

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**BISEXUALITY  
AND THE  
WESTERN  
CHRISTIAN  
CHURCH**

THE DAMAGE OF  
SILENCE

Carol A. Shepherd

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and Societal Challenges

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Carol A. Shepherd

# Bisexuality and the Western Christian Church

The Damage of Silence

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## Foreword

I first came across Carol Shepherd at a 2015 Postgraduate Symposium at our home institution, the University of Winchester. I had no idea that another bisexual scholar was at my university. Carol, I learned, was in theology, but struggling. She was not properly supported because she was camped more from an empirical than a post-structural perspective. She impressed me with her grasp of the scholarly research into this subject. I just knew I had to work with her.

This was to mark the start of a collaboration which saw me helping Carol on the side—literally in secret so that her adviser, who was a theologian, would not find out. Carol worked with me secretly because she felt drawn to my empirical model of social sciences, but knew that her post-structural adviser would disagree. After she read my recent monograph, *The Changing Dynamics of Bisexual Men's Lives: A Social Research Perspective* (Springer, 2016), she broke ties with her former adviser and began studying with me. She was intense in her approach.

The first problem we encountered was funding. However, my friends at the American Institute of Bisexuality put faith in her and furnished her with the funds she needed. Having the money was one thing, but locating participants was another. It was difficult enough for me to

find just bisexual men to speak with, let alone those with the shared identity of also being Christian. She proved me wrong. Carol sourced a high number of bisexual Christians willing to speak. In fact, she more than doubled her initial target of 40 participants, as well as impressively managing to secure interviews with notable figures from bisexual scholarship and activism, including Beth Firestein, Lisa Diamond, and Robyn Ochs.

Within the scope of a year, Carol produced an outstanding Ph.D. thesis titled, *Bisexual Christians and Mental Health: Why the Church Needs to be More Welcoming*. It was expertly researched and analyzed. It showed a keen grasp of the issues faced by her subjects with rigorous analysis. Importantly, it drew from accessible theorizing and writing.

Bisexuality is, as many readers of this forward will already know, are all-too-often ignored, both in society and also by sex researchers. It is often referred to as ‘the silent B’ in the LGBT acronym; that or it is conflated with homosexuality. Finding participants who were also Christian was a God-send.

After finishing her Ph.D., I encouraged Carol to pursue publication with large academic publishers. This is because there is nothing else like it. Not only is she the first to address the topic, but she has done so with a binational comparative. Carol undertook an impressive 83 participants in the UK and USA for this qualitative study. She permitted the participants themselves to ‘speak their truth’ about the complexity of and intersectional identities that often go with being both bisexual and Christian. The results of her work are as disturbing as they are fascinating.

Carol uncovers high rates of depressive illness among her participants, on both sides of the Atlantic. She estimates that around 90% of her sample reported mental health issues related to the stigma and exclusion of the church toward bisexuals. Perhaps more disturbing, however, is the almost blanket refusal of church institutions to recognize and engage with bisexuality as a valid sexual orientation, despite bisexual people comprising by a considerable distance the largest sector of the global LGBT population.

Another notable finding concerns the impact of erotophobia among church cultures. This was particularly true in the USA. This denies the

embodiment of a spiritual sexual identity for bisexuals. This denial is theorized as an aspect of what McCormack and I (2016) call ‘bisexual burden,’ a litany of ways in which bisexual people face extra stigma, and increased exclusion as a result of their dual-sexed attractions. For bisexuals in the Christian world, this created a ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ environment. The silence from the church around bisexuality, as the title of this work suggests, is profoundly damaging, both to the subjects of bisexual erasure and to the institution of the church itself.

In a climate where, increasingly, more young people do not identify as monosexual, religious organizations must adapt and come to a new, more contextualised understanding of sacred texts, or face inevitable distinction. Carol’s work compliments research showing the reduced importance of religion in the lives of Anglo-Americans, particularly among millennials. Her work thus accomplishes more than just capturing the current status of the relationship between an archaic religion and an ancient sexuality, it serves as a further warning of the growing irrelevance of the church in sexual minorities’ lives. If the church wishes to remain relevant, Carol has a message for them: It is high time that the same theological scholarship which allows for contextual readings of women’s rights, slavery, and a raft of other sociological issues presented to us in Scripture, is applied to the area of human sexuality.

I was pleased to see Palgrave accept this book for publication. It nicely compliments my monograph on the subject. This acceptance, and the highly positive reviews the manuscript received, is a testament to Carol Shepherd’s academic tenacity, resourcefulness, and rigor. I am convinced that this monograph will prove a defining work in the field of social sciences and applied theology for many years to come. There is simply nothing out there to rival this courageous piece of investigative research into the much-ignored phenomenon of bisexuality, and certainly not within the context of Christianity and the church.

Winchester, UK  
May 2018

Eric Anderson



# Acknowledgements

Many individuals and organizations contributed to this book.

In the UK, I would like to thank the University of Winchester, in particular the Faculty of Business, Law & Sport, and the Research & Knowledge Exchange, without which this monograph would not have been possible. I am also greatly appreciative of the Martial Rose Library for resources, both human and educational! Reverend Chris Day, the University Chaplain, has been particularly supportive and helped 'keep my eye on the prize' whenever I lost focus. And not forgetting The Scholastic Gang, whose camaraderie has proved invaluable.

I am indebted to Palgrave Macmillan for understanding the urgency of my project as an academic and sociological issue. In terms of religious and LGBT support organizations, I extend my thanks to MCC North London, MCC Northern Lights, Liberty Church Blackpool, The Lesbian & Gay Christian Movement (Now 'One Body One Faith'), Jeremy Marks and Post Courage UK, The Bisexual Resource Center (Boston), Believe Out Loud! (New York), The Religious Institute (Westport, Connecticut), Broadway United Church of Christ (New York), The Cathedral of Hope (Dallas), and Vantage Point Counselling (Dallas). The American Institute of Bisexuality also made a significant contribution through the provision of a study grant for fieldwork in the USA.

Confidentiality clauses prevent me from thanking all 83 UK and US participants who so generously gave of their time. There was laughter, there were tears, but most of all, there was a tremendous 333 senses of mutual love, respect, and shared vulnerability. My life was changed by the people I met. Of those who waived the right to anonymity, I would like to extend particular thanks to Robyn Ochs, Marie Alford-Harkey, and Beth Firestein in the USA, who were willing to speak to me at length. Their insights into the bisexuality/faith intersection proved invaluable, as did those of Professor Lisa Diamond, of the University of Utah. I would also like to express my gratitude to fellow bi-scholar Margaret Robinson in Canada, my 24/7 PDF Fairy (!), and to Eliel Cruz of Faithfully LGBT for helping source participants. Kate Estrop, Michael Monroe, and Julia Canfield of the Bisexual Resource Center in Boston made me feel particularly welcome, and Reverend Dr. Neil Cazares-Thomas and Reverend Todd Scoggins extended great hospitality at the Cathedral of Hope in Dallas. Alison Amyx and James Rowe at the Believe Out Loud offices in New York gave generously of their time and vulnerably of their selves. I would also like to thank Pastor Ron Woolsey of Narrow Way Ministries. While I do not share his theology, he was the only Christian fundamentalist willing to speak to me, which took some degree of courage. I am also grateful to Reverend Janet Edwards (PCUSA—More Light Congregation) and Reverend Layton Williams (PCUSA), who exhibited such bravery and integrity in speaking as ‘out’ bisexual clergy, while Reverend Dr. James Campbell of Broadway United Church of Christ, New York, touched me with his honesty and humility.

However, two individuals stand head and shoulders above all others, namely the two men in my life, John Shepherd, my husband of 21 years, and Eric Anderson, mentor and friend. Both these guys have, in their own *very* different ways, upheld me, encouraged me, supported me when things looked bleak, and put up with my mercurial nature. I would not be where I am today without either of them in my life.

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# 1

## A Conspiracy of Silence: Bisexuality and Christianity

My name is Carol Shepherd. I am a Research Officer at the University of Winchester, UK. I am also a cisgendered<sup>1</sup> mother of three who self-identifies as Christian and bisexual.

Since the age of seven or eight, around the time I first started getting interested in popular music and television, I began to subconsciously note that I found both male and female identified people attractive—some more than others, as one might expect. Also around this time, possibly influenced by the Bible stories and parables recounted in assembly with enthusiasm by my primary school headmaster, I began to develop a spiritual awareness. I had a sense of a presence above me and around me, which I learnt to call God and Jesus respectively. I had been brought up in a non-church attending family and this burgeoning faith was discouraged in the home. Church was therefore not an option until I was old enough to make my own way to a large Pentecostal temple in the city where I lived. It was during these early explorations of church life that I learnt to keep quiet about my same-sex attractions—they were clearly not welcome in the House of God.

My struggle to reconcile my spirituality and sexuality saw me read every book available to me on the subject of 'Spiritual Wholeness.'

All the teaching I had received in the various conservative evangelical churches I had attended thus far had led me to believe that homosexual feelings to any degree were not of God and should be repented of. To act on these feelings was unambiguously sinful and one should turn away from this lifestyle, or face eternal damnation along with murderers, adulterers, slanderers and those who covet their neighbour's ass.

Terrified of the fate that surely befell me, I presented myself for healing prayer and spoke to numerous pastors and youth leaders about the same-sex attracted side of me. I did not have the financial wherewithal to sign up for aversion therapy of any kind, so reading 'Christian' self-help books of this genre was a cheap alternative. The key works of 'homosexual healing' in the late 80s/early 90s were Andrew Comiskey (2001), Briar Whitehead (2003), Leanne Payne (1995), and Mary Pytches (1991). The titles of these books—full of references to healing and brokenness—reflect the *zeitgeist* of that era, shaped by the fallout from Section 28,<sup>2</sup> the HIV/AIDS crisis and the ill-fated Lambeth Conference in 1988, which saw scuffles break out when Bishop Emmanuel Chukwuma of Nigeria attempt to exorcise demons of homosexuality from the Reverend Richard Kirker, erstwhile President of the Lesbian & Gay Christian Movement.<sup>3</sup>

On several occasions, members of 'prayer ministry teams' at Christian conferences also laid hands on me to 'heal' me of my homosexuality, or attempted to exorcise the 'devil of homosexuality' out of me, much like the character played by Charlotte Coleman in the BBC adaptation of Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*.<sup>4</sup> This was all to no avail. I remained sexually and emotionally attracted to both men and women—and spiritually drawn to Jesus Christ.

This was a psychosexual conundrum that was to define my life and continues to do so until this day. Like many other people I have met, I am emotionally and sexually drawn to both men and women. However, unlike most of these people, including the vast majority of academics at my own seat of learning, I am also fascinated by the historical and spiritual figure of Jesus Christ. I retain my faith in a loving creator God who sent his perfect Son to set us free; yet I need the love of the created and fallen to feel truly liberated.

Church dominated a quarter of a century of my life, until it became apparent that one could not live with any degree of authenticity between the binaries and find a place within the mainstream Christian faith community. Church made me profoundly depressed. There is no liturgical framework, no theology, no Christian ethic on how to live holistically as a bisexual or bi-intimate follower of Jesus Christ, whether sexually active or not. (For just some examples of works of gay theology/sexual ethics with little or no reference to bisexuality, see Barton, 2012; Boswell, 1980; Comstock, 1993; Farley, 2006; Helminiak, 1994; Rogers, 2009; Sharpe, 2011.) Meyer's concept of Minority Stress Theory (Meyer, 2003) discusses the damaging effects of stigmatisation on sexual minorities. I would argue that such stress is amplified within church communities, where moral purity carries extra currency and the pressure to conform to heteronormative<sup>5</sup> monogamous relationships within marriage all the greater.

My aim in the research that formed the basis of this book was to find a Christian framework that potentially enabled bisexual people of faith specifically to live with honesty and integrity, either inside or outside of the Church. An ambitious goal, some would say; others might say foolhardy (e.g. Dallas, 2007; DeYoung, 2015; Gagnon, 2002). But that is the story and the motivation behind this project. Essentially, I am posing the question: is it possible to be bisexual and Christian and live holistically?

This is a book for academics interested in this complex intersectional identity, yet also a resource for pastors and educators. As such, some chapters will be of more interest to academics, and others of more interest to clergy and support workers. Broadly speaking, those chapters which report directly on interviews with participants are written in a more everyday style. Those interested solely in the immediate presenting issues brought to the table by bisexual Christians may wish to proceed immediately to Chapter 4, which focuses on arguably the most pressing issue—mental health. Those with a keen interest in churchmanship and pastoral provision may wish to start at Chapter 3.



## Intersectional Identities: The Bisexual Christian Problematic

In his pioneering 1978 study of bisexuality, US sexologist Fritz Klein described bisexuals as ‘sociologically non-existent,’ invisible in church, society and science (1978: 17). Nearly forty years later, it seems bisexuals are still invisible in the church and theological literature, at least in the UK, despite progress made elsewhere (e.g. Kolodny, 2000).

Whilst bisexuality has gradually acquired its place in the ever-diverse list of sexual minorities, assisted by the efforts of Klein, it remains the case that the B in LGBT is largely silent. Bisexuality remains for the most part unacknowledged, unexplored and misunderstood within faith circles. One of the most comprehensive recent accounts published about the lives of bisexual men, for example, does not look at how bisexuals operate within organised religions (I refer here to Anderson & McCormack, 2016). Bisexual people are rarely mentioned and precious little pastoral support, if any, is afforded them. Indeed, it seems that the majority of highly educated and (arguably) philanthropic clergy seem both unable and unwilling to get their heads around bisexuality. When the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, speaks of the divisions in the Anglican Communion, these are over ‘homosexuality’ and ‘same sex marriage’ but no reference is made to bisexuality (e.g. press conference of 11 January 2016 prefacing the run up to the Primates Meeting at Canterbury<sup>6</sup>). This cultural erasure adds to, and may arguably be at the root of, the anxiety and pain felt by many bisexual people of faith.

This silence is a damaging combination of many factors. The role of binary thought as the operating system of patriarchal hierarchies, both in society and within the realms of gender politics and religion, has had an enormous effect on the acknowledgement and visibility of bisexual people, as has the pathologisation of non-heteronormative orientations from the mid nineteenth century to relatively recent times (e.g. Comiskey, 2001; Freud, 1991; Payne, 1995; von Krafft-Ebing, 2013). Towards the latter part of the twentieth century, bisexuals were made scapegoats for the HIV/AIDS epidemic, whilst the current clamour for gay equality in all walks of life, including marriage, has further marginalized the specific issues associated with dual plus attracted individuals.

The effects of such marginalization and ostracism can be seen in the lack of vigorous debate on life issues affecting bisexual people, beyond sexual health and titillating news magazine stories with titles such as ‘Rise of the flexi-sexual female’<sup>7</sup> and ‘Seventeen things you should know before dating a bisexual woman.’<sup>8</sup>

This is worrying, when medical reports are increasingly reporting elevated levels of suicide among bisexual people.<sup>9</sup> A medical report in Canada from 2010 (Brennan et al., 2010) showed that bisexual people were six times more likely to commit suicide than their straight counterparts, while a study by Colledge, Hickson, Reid, and Weatherburn (2015) demonstrated bisexual women in the UK to be far more susceptible to mental health issues than lesbians. How do we account for such silence on the subject of bisexuality, when research repeatedly shows adverse mental health outcomes for this cohort?

Is it simply that bisexuals are not coming forward to tell their stories, as Pew suggests (2013)?<sup>10</sup> Or is it that hierarchical systems and identity politics require the existence of simplistic dichotomies (male/female, straight/gay, good/evil) to maintain power bases, effectively gagging bisexual ‘insurgents’? (Thatcher speaks of the ‘over-used and over-tidy categories of heterosexual and homosexual’, 1993: 155). And is there a connection between the two? How do gender and race further impact on the willingness of bisexual people to ‘come out’—especially within a faith context? And how do understandings of gender and biological sex in the light of queer theory (e.g. Butler, 2004; Jagose, 1996) further impact bi-tangibility<sup>11</sup> (author’s own terminology) through deconstructing the very foundations of what we mean by sex, gender and sexual identity?

To be bisexual is inadvertently to be political, whether one lays public claim to the identity or not (Eisner, 2013). This is because bisexuality challenges what Anderson and McCormack (2016) call ‘monosexist’ structures relating to gender, sexuality and morality. The politics of bisexuality are more seriously heightened within the Christian Church, where traditional monogamous marriage between a man and a woman is still generally accepted as the Creator’s exclusive will for human sexual expression (Church of England, 1991). But while monogamous same sex marriage is making some inroads into the sexual hegemony, there

remains a clear dialogical gap in the ongoing debate on how best to encompass other sexual minorities within the Church and its administrative and social structures.<sup>12</sup> What of those who do not fit very easily into the monosexual partner for life paradigm?<sup>13</sup> In particular, it seems that nobody wants to talk about bisexuality—it is simply too complicated to countenance. What chance then, in such a climate, of a holistic or embodied identity for bisexual people of faith?

## Conceptual Issues Surrounding Bisexuality as They Impact on Bi-visibility

But before we even begin to consider dual attraction, we become submerged within a conceptual quagmire surrounding the bisexual condition. Halperin (2009: 453) speaks of no fewer than thirteen potential definitions of bisexuality, from those who have never had sexual relations with the same sex, yet identify emotionally as bisexual, to those who have sex with both genders, yet identify as heterosexual—and all this before we factor in transgender and intersex couplings. Others claim there are significantly more identities and behaviours that could count as bisexual (Rullo 2010, cited in Rullo, Strassberg, & Miner, 2015, lists thirty-four).

As society becomes more accepting of non-heteronormative sexual expression, the very word bisexual is deemed limiting and passé, with gender fluid, pansexual, omnisexual and the catch-all ‘gender queer’ deemed more appropriate to describe romantic or sexual attraction to all genders and gender identities. Such fragmentation of sexual identities, however, does not offer much in the way of a cohesive group identity for cissexual<sup>14</sup> individuals who find themselves attracted to both male and female identified people, and who long for understanding, acceptance and community in the very place which purports to champion it—the Church.

Whether a sexual identity requires sexual expression to validate it, is another subject for debate. The Oxford Dictionary defines a bisexual as ‘*a person who is sexually attracted to both men and women*’

with or without sexual activity. This view is shared by the Religious Institute in the USA, which defines bisexuality as ‘*an enduring romantic, emotional and/or sexual attraction towards people of more than one sex or gender*’ (Alford-Harkey & Haffner, 2014: 2). At a conceptual level, therefore, sexual orientation need not involve genital sexual expression.

Same-sex dalliance and sexual experimentation, argues Stephen Lingwood, does not constitute a bisexual identity. Bisexual identity is an embodied and long-term sense of attraction to both genders, where to label oneself either gay or straight would seem disingenuous.

I identify as bisexual because identifying as either gay or straight would feel dishonest; it would be denying part of myself that I judge to be significant and would feel like being in the closet. If a person identifies as bisexual it means that his or her homosexuality and heterosexuality are significant enough for that person to consider himself or herself bisexual. A bisexual person does not need to act on those sexual feelings for both sexes to be happy (or to be bisexual). (2010: 33)

Yet for others, bisexuality is simply too abstract to be of practical use. Feminist liberation theologian Carter Heyward, whilst acknowledging bisexual aspects to her own sexual make-up, publicly eschewed bisexuality as a political identity in favour of the conceptual clarity of lesbianism:

I have been aware that there is a box, another box, a less constrictive box, for people with this experience: bisexual. As boxes go, bisexuality is not bad. It may be (if unknowable truths were known) the most nearly adequate box for *all* persons. The problem with bisexuality in my life (and I can speak only for myself) is that it has been grounded too much in my utopian fantasy of the way things ought to be and too little in the more modest recognition of myself as a participant in *this* society at *this* time in *this* world, in which I have both a concrete desire for personal intimacy with someone else and a responsibility to participate in, and witness to, the destruction of unjust social structures – specifically, the heterosexual box. (1984: 80)

Heyward continues:

It has been my experience that to live now as bisexual is to live somewhat abstractly in anticipation of a future that has not arrived. That is why, for several years, I have been coming out of bisexuality, coming out of utopian vision in order to focus my sight on the urgency and immediacy of the concrete present. (1984: 80)

While this decision must be taken in the context of the gay rights struggles of the 1970s and 1980s, it did not help the bisexual cause. In a robust riposte to Heyward, Lingwood asserts:

...bisexuality is about concrete desire for personal intimacy; it is a name given to the concrete realities of people's lives: their relationships, sexualities, thoughts and feelings. There is nothing abstract about this. And there is nothing utopian about bisexuals demanding freedom from oppression in the here and now. Why should bisexuals wait until some eschatological future to live out the truth of their lives? (2010: 37)

The emerging Queer movement of the late 1980s/1990s (Jagose, 1996) made great strides in deconstructing the patriarchal systems that had suppressed women and sexual minorities for so long, by challenging essentialist positions on sex and gender. Yet whilst the Queer Movement succeeded in challenging binary thought and male hegemony (Butler, 2004), the 'queer' rainbow alliance of sexual minorities did little to promote the fledgling bisexual identity emerging from the work of Klein and others in the late '70s. As April Callis notes:

The seminal works of this theoretical school, written by authors such as Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, Diana Fuss and Eve Sedgwick, all bypassed bisexuality as a topic of inquiry even while writing against binary, biological models of gender and sexuality. (2009: 213)

Callis continues:

... queer theory has ignored, and continues to ignore, questions of bisexuality and bisexual identity. It seems a curious gap, keeping in mind the aim of most queer theorists: the destabilisation of gender and sexual

binaries. Bisexuality, which cannot help but be placed uniquely inside/outside of the binary of heterosexuality/ homosexuality, seems to be an ideal starting place for deconstruction. (2009: 219)

It is my own view that Foucault, in his unmasking of socially constructed power-based identities, did indeed write much of relevance to the bisexual question, even if it is not explicitly communicated as bi-affirming philosophy. However, it is arguably true that in the deconstruction process, queer theory contributed little towards achieving a political identity for bisexual people—though, admittedly, this was never a bespoke aim of the movement. Indeed, one of the underlying principles of Queer philosophy is auto-ethnographic; in common with insider-outsider theory (McCutcheon, 1999), no-one should purport to speak on behalf of other minorities. It is up to the particular group to find its voice, for it to be deemed authentic (Butler, 2004).

Queer theology, which emerged from the Queer Movement, suffered from the same (indirect) bi-myopic tendencies. In a paper tellingly titled *Reinforcing Binaries, Downgrading Passions: Bisexual Invisibility in Mainstream Queer Christian Theology*, Bernhardt-House describes many works of queer theology as ‘inherently biased’ against bisexuals (2010: 55). Such bias reveals the dilemma faced by queer theologians. Do they remain loyal to the social constructionist discourses of their poststructuralist forebears, or adopt a more essentialist view of human sexuality, which is a far better fit for the dualistic moral absolutes of the Christian faith<sup>15</sup> in terms of arguing the case for LGBT inclusion? If the latter is the case, then this is good news for monosexual identities, but less so for sexually fluid ones.

The paradox at the heart of the queer identity is reflected in the title of the 2013 publication, *Queering Christianity: Finding a Place at the Table for LGBTQI Christians* (Shore-Goss, Bohache, Cheng, & West, 2013). ‘Queer’ cannot involve the ‘erasing or deconstruction of boundaries’ (Cheng, 2011: 8) and at the same time serve as a collective term for the (fixed) subsets L,G,B,T,Q and I (2011: 9). In many works of Queer Theology (Cheng, 2011; Shore-Goss et al., 2013; Stuart, 1997; Wilson, 1995), the terms gay, lesbian and transgender are all common-place within the text, yet bisexuality rarely occurs. For example, the Moderator of

the Metropolitan Community Churches, Reverend Nancy Wilson, speaks of a 'queer millennial vision' where 'gay men and lesbian in all churches will be welcomed with outstretched arms' (1995: 156). This is a vision that allows lesbians and gay men to stand both under and outside of the queer umbrella, while bisexual people must remain underneath it, their identity subsumed within the catch-all queer and thereby erased. In this way, the queer moniker would appear to be utilised in a rather haphazard or arbitrary fashion, while the gay/lesbian essentialist discourses of twentieth century Gay and Lesbian Studies (e.g. Ablove, 2012; Ablove et al., 1993) retain their monopoly.

What lies behind this desire to retain an essentialist monosexist discourse? Is it simply habit or is it agenda-driven? One explanation for this is that the retention of 'gay' and 'lesbian' alongside 'queer' enables a gay-affirming case to be made for homosexuality in Scripture. It can be effectively argued that the Apostle Paul does not castigate homosexuals in his pastoral letters to the churches in Rome and Corinth in the New Testament, if we believe homosexuality is fixed and therefore natural for that person.<sup>16</sup> Rather, according to this line of argument, Paul is drawing attention to those who act against their natural sexual nature, i.e. sexuality tourists, seeking sexual pleasure by engaging in physical acts outside of their usual sphere of contact. He is not pulling up those who are in committed homosexual relationships, or performing in line with their natural sexual instinct, but those who are transgressing the boundaries of their own innate sexuality.

Social constructionism and sexual fluidity are far more threatening approaches to the conundrum of human sexuality, for both majority and minority stake-holders in sexual politics, as relativism and queer sexualities cannot be contained within the prison walls of doctrinal absolutes or innate orientations. If theories of innate sexuality are surrendered to social constructionist arguments, which dictate that sexuality and gender are fluid and forever subject to prevailing cultural norms and power structures, then it is hard to argue a case for a progressive theology for LGBT Christians. There is no 'natural' state of affairs, no sense of moral order, only a state of flux and fluidity which can be manipulated by those in positions of power to the detriment of

the sexually weak and disenfranchised—whoever those people may be at any given point in time. It is no small wonder then that the Church has failed to address the bisexual conundrum, when affirming theologians themselves are unwilling to tackle dual plus attraction within their same-sex affirming agendas, for fear of diluting arguments in favour of an essentialist position.

Speaking as a queer theologian, Lingwood (2010: 33) asserts that more ‘us’ theology is required (bisexual theology written by bisexual people) rather than ‘them’ theology (theology written about bisexual people by both straight and gay theologians). The view of the insider is sacred, given the widespread ignorance of the issues faced by bisexuals—not only amongst clergy, but amongst psychotherapists, educators, even gay-affirming theological scholars and intellectuals. It is this desire to present the voice of the insider that has led me away from a purely theological approach and towards an applied theological social scientific approach to the bisexuality/faith intersection.

As Anderson and McCormack note in their own approach to qualitative research on bisexuality, it is important to work from the outside in and not the reverse (2016). My concern here is not what makes a person bisexual—if, indeed, it is possible to discern this—but how bisexual people negotiate life as a dual-attracted Christian, either inside or outside of faith communities, the decisions they make and the impact of prevailing cultures on these choices. Lived experience is key in the formulation of a sexual ethic, though accorded less credence the further right the denominational direction of travel. This is significant as we compare the fundamentalist ideological position on sexuality with a progressive theology that allows for individual diversity. According to a conservative Christian ethic (e.g. Gagnon, 2002), the bar for a believer not called to celibacy is permanently set at heterosexual monogamous marriage, irrespective of whether that feels achievable or not. Personal realities or lived experience do not come into the equation. Within a more progressive theology (e.g. Heyward, 1989), the moral compass points to justice and mutuality in relationships, irrespective of the gender or sexuality of one’s life partner(s).



## Bisexual Activity: The Great Unmentionable

If bisexuals are the phantom subjects of LGBT theory and pastoral practice, their very existence called into question, then sexual activity is the elephant in the room, the great unmentionable. It is debatable whether it is either helpful or authentic to postulate a theory for bisexual inclusion without at least making some attempt to cover the issue of duogamy<sup>17</sup> or polyamory—or, to be blunt, what one is supposed to do with a set of feelings, the expression of which is not always compatible with emotional and/or sexual fidelity. In seeking to avoid stereotyping bisexuals as sexually voracious philanderers, it seems that the gritty realities of what one does about physical/emotional longing have been deemed too sensitive for faith-based inclusivity studies. Yet if online chat forums are anything to go by, this is a burning issue for many bisexual people of faith.<sup>18</sup>

However, from existing research material, it seems that few are interested in discussing sexual activity in LGBT-affirming faith literature. The Religious Institute, based in Westport, Connecticut, recently published a ninety-five page bi-friendly pastoral resource for churches, with no reference to sexual practice beyond a coy admonishment of congregants who ask personal questions of their bisexual pastors (2014: 64). (Though I understand from a personal conversation with a pastor involved in its publication that even this was deemed daring within the prevailing environment; therefore this omission should be seen within the context of a highly restrictive discursive forum.)

In this way, the bisexual person of faith may suffer holistic or embodied frustration, affecting the mind and body alike. So alongside considerations of how to ‘be’ bisexual within a Christian ethical framework, we need to be asking how we ‘do’ bisexuality. It is one thing for Christian theologians to call for the release of Eros (Farley, 2006: 178), quite another to release Eros in a manner congruent with (broadly accepted) Christian ideals of monogamy and emotional fidelity. It seems that a great deal of LGBT affirming theology is afflicted by the self-same head/body dualism that it seeks to oppose, offering much in the way of theoretical inclusivity, yet offering precious little in the way of practical

guidelines on how to live as an embodied individual within that ethical framework.

## The Omission of LGBT Voices in Christian Sexual Ethics

Christian Sexual Ethics have typically built their foundations on the so-called Methodist or Wesleyan Quadrilateral, the four pillars of theology, tradition, secular knowledge and contemporary experience (Cheng, 2011; Farley, 2006). Yet all too often, the actual lived experiences of LGBT Christians have been ignored. Engaging with ‘contemporary experience’ all too often involves little more than inaccurate, and frankly somewhat offensive, assumptions about the lives of minority sexualities, as prescribed by heterosexual clergy in various doctrinal positions on human sexuality (Lingwood, 2010). The most notorious example of this would be the report of the House of Bishops, *Issues in Human Sexuality* (Church House Publishing, 1991).

While this book touches on the views of theologians, historians and social scientists, at its very heart is the lived experience of bisexual people of faith and those who pastor them. I empirically investigate the lived experiences of bisexual Christians today via discussions with pastoral organizations and individuals engaged in bi-affirming ministry. This is what sets this book apart from others works on the LGBT/Christianity intersection. As I write, there are no works at all in the UK or further afield which document the more specific bisexual/Christian intersection through the eyes of those who live out this identity on a daily basis.

Current attitudes within the Christian Church (Western and otherwise) towards non-heteronormative identities are considered, specifically as they impact on bisexual people. The treatment of bisexuality within the LGBT faith community is also covered. Silence as symptomatic of a general malaise within society/Christian communities with non-binary thought and experience will be discussed, as this relates to hierarchical power structures (Heyward, 1999; Robinson, 2008). The effect of

this malaise on forging a positive identity for bisexual people of faith is assessed, including the specific circumstances of bisexual men and women.

In short, I aim to fill the void in Christian sexual ethics concerning the bisexual question: namely, what might a holistic or embodied bisexual identity look like within a Christian ethical framework? Can the bisexual individual achieve a positive sexual identity and psychosexual wholeness within the context of their faith (with or without physical sexual expression)?

## Giving Voice to Bisexual Christians

In an attempt to find some answers to such questions, the lived experience of bisexual people of Christian faith and those who pastor them were investigated via qualitative research. This qualitative research confirms to the contemporary experience pillar of the aforementioned Methodist Quadrilateral, the aspect which is traditionally ignored within ‘them theologies’ put forward by non-bi-identified Christian sexual ethicists (Lingwood, 2010).

A four-cell social science model was utilised, involving interviews in the UK and US with organisations that support/claim to support bisexual people of faith, as well as the recipients of this pastoral support. (A full list of participants from all four research cells can be found in Appendix A.) The aim of the live research component was both to build up a contemporary picture of life as a bisexual Christian, but perhaps more importantly, to deduce from these interviews some fledgling concept of what a positive bisexual Christian identity might look like, based on existing relationship models and pastoral practices. I shine a light on the actual lived reality of bisexual people of faith, posing the challenge, ‘can you follow Jesus Christ and still achieve psycho-sexual/psycho-spiritual wholeness?’ To put a rather blunt slant on the issue at hand, I address the question: are bisexual Christians doomed to a life of sexual frustration and mental illness?

I chose interview-based research for multiple reasons. Firstly, I am uniquely positioned, as a bisexual person of faith, to earn the trust of

both secular and Christian LGBT individuals. I also speak the language of faith organisations, accrued from 15 years in church ministry. I also believe that interviews are, on the whole, preferable to the closed format of email communication, in terms of building rapport, and generate infinitely more material for further discussion and reflection.

In addition, many people are reluctant to put sensitive information ‘in writing’ that can be held on file, or permanently linked to a personal email account, whereas interviews can be carried out under a pseudonym with the option of being recorded for temporary transcription purposes only, to be deleted at a later date.

I also interviewed a range of age groups and ethnicities, sourcing interviewees from a number of key faith organisations in both the UK and US, as well as LGBT church satellite groups and personal contacts accrued from twenty-five years of church service in the UK. I contacted key bisexual organisations, such as the Boston Bisexual Resource Center and BiNet USA, as well as ‘tweeting’ widely and using other forms of social media to recruit participants.

It was eminently clear from the outset that a dual-nation cross-comparison had merit since the US offers a range of affirming churches and pastoral practices which are, for the most part, unavailable in the UK. This was the rationale behind extending this research beyond the UK—to optimize the discovery of potential solutions to the ethical conundrum posed by being bisexual and Christian. A comparative study of bisexual experience also serves as a useful indicator of the socio-cultural influences at work in issues surrounding bivisibility, as there proved to be a great deal of overlap between UK and US participants.

A study of the rhetoric of fundamentalist churches also encompasses the work of ex-gay ministries. Whilst this might appear to be a conflation of sexual identities—it is ex-gay, not ex-bi—it is felt that such organisations inevitably encounter bisexual people within the course of their work and indeed frequently subsume bisexuality within homosexual discourses in any case. Before beginning the research, I was personally aware of at least one bisexual person of faith who had subjected themselves to aversion therapy of one sort or another, and numerous lesbian and gay Christian acquaintances who had done likewise.

However, it became clear at the very early stages of gathering information and sourcing potential participants, that fundamentalist organisations were not willing to speak to me. This is perhaps in reaction to the US administration's recent clampdown on the activities of ex-gay therapies in 2015,<sup>19</sup> mirrored in the UK by the victory of Transport for London over Core Issues Trust concerning the advertising of gay-aversion therapy on London buses.<sup>20</sup> Whatever the exact cause, it became apparent that approaching ex-gay ministries was a dead avenue. The little contact I did make with such outfits is documented within Chapters 4, 7, and 8, which feature contributions from bi-affirming pastors and educators in the UK and USA.

Whilst it was initially my intention to interview secular bisexual groups and individuals as part of the live research component, I decided that this was beyond the scope of this specific faith-based project. That said, there is some need to understand the key presenting issues brought by bisexual people in general to pastoral and activist-based organisations, as there is almost certainly some overlap in non bi-affirming experiences of those with or without a Christian faith. So, for background purposes, I contacted key bisexual support groups both in the UK and US, as a means of both uncovering positive pastoral practice and of assessing attitudes and relationship models which might prove influential in formulating a bisexual ethic for bisexual Christians. These background interviews are covered in Chapters 7 and 8, which document bi-affirming practices in the UK and USA.

## **The Remaining Three Pillars: Theology, Tradition and Secular Knowledge**

It is my view that much has already been written on the remaining three pillars of the Wesleyan quadrilateral, namely theology, tradition and secular knowledge. I have no desire to tread well-farrowed ground and besides, the whole point of this book is to give voice to the hitherto silent—namely, bisexual Christians and their supporters. That said, for those who wish to come to a historical understanding of

bisexuality and the Western Christian Church's stance on non-heteronormative behaviours, I refer you to the following works. These are by no means exhaustive; rather these are the resources that I found particularly helpful in researching the bisexuality/Christian intersection.

For an extensive account of bisexuality in antiquity, I refer you to Cantarella (2002). Heyward (1989) also traces how heteronormativity and monogamy entered Christian theocracies and ecclesiastical life from Constantine to present day, and how this has led to a conspiracy of silence on bisexual issues in the Western Christian Church. Heyward (1989) also charts the advent of erotophobia in the Christian Church from the early fourth century.

For a good survey of the Napoleonic and Victorian sexologists, including Havelock Ellis, Richard von Krafft-Ebing, Magnus Hirschfeld and Sigmund Freud, amongst others, I refer you to Wolff (1979) and Weeks (1986). These etymologies of bisexuality are significant in that they show how concepts of bisexuality were initially subsumed and conflated within discourses of homosexuality, something which still, sadly, happens today in the Christian Church.

To chart the development of bisexuality as a sexual identity and phenomena in the post-war years, I refer you to the works of leading names in the emerging science of sexology: Charlotte Wolff (1979), Fritz Klein (1978), Kinsey, Pomeroy, and Martin (1948), and Weinberg, Williams, and Pryor (1994). Storr (2013) provides a fantastic overview of bisexuality in post-war critical discourse. For a more recent social science study of bisexuality, Anderson and McCormack (2016) have documented the experiences of male bisexual individuals in urban centres, while Toft (2011), Toft and Hunt (2009), and Margaret Robinson (Thatcher, 2014) are the lone voices in examining bisexual Christian intersection, though from a largely theoretical standpoint.

For a background to queer theory and its spiritual offshoot, queer theology, I refer you to the writings of poststructuralists such as Foucault (1984) and later Butler (2004, 2006). Among those who successfully deconstruct normative statements on human sexuality, I recommend feminist theologian, Carter Heyward (1984, 1989) and queer theorist, David Halperin (1997, 2009). In terms of queer theology,