

Latter-day Saint Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgendered Spirituality

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Abstract

Religions differ in the degree to which they accept diversity of belief or practice among their own adherents. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (whose followers commonly are known as Mormons) is among those denominations for whom unanimity of belief and practice is highly valued. Its central theological concepts and liturgical practices presuppose a heterosexual identity. This results in particular dilemmas for adherents whose personal identity is not heterosexual. Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered persons experience various pressures to remain closeted within the church and doctrines that are not easily reconciled with their own personal identities. This results in considerable social isolation and personal cognitive dissonance. Although some gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered members adapt to these problems and remain engaged in the LDS church, the most common outcome for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered persons is eventually either disaffiliation with the church without maintaining a personal spirituality or, less commonly, finding a new, friendlier denomination.

Introduction

The ideologies of different religious traditions differ in their acknowledgment and acceptance of diversity of practice and belief. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, whose members are widely known as Mormons, exemplifies a religion in which unanimity of belief and practice is idealized. Yet, there is diversity within every religion, including those that do not formally recognize or accept it, and the LDS religion is no exception. The fact of diversity within the LDS church is well illustrated by the existence of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered (GLBT) members within the denomination.

The LDS idealization of uniformity results in the experience of pressure on members to suppress any characteristic that sets them apart, religiously or socially, from their fellow Mormons. This pressure is particularly acute for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered members who desire to continue their participation in Mormon religious life.

Doctrinal challenges for GLBT members

Particular LDS beliefs and practices pose special challenges for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered members of the LDS religion. For instance, heterosexual marriage occupies a central place in the LDS community and its theology: "The family is ordained of God. Marriage between man and woman is essential to His eternal plan" (The First Presidency and the Council

of the Twelve, 1995). Among the most sacred LDS "ordinances" is that which is commonly referred to as "temple marriage," a marital "sealing" between a man and a woman that is believed to make the marital bond valid for eternity. The afterlife is conceptualized in terms of the relationships between such "sealed" (heterosexual) couples and their descendants through an unbroken chain of children and ancestors who have been similarly "sealed" to their spouses. Being "sealed" in a heterosexual marriage is considered to be a prerequisite to a person's attaining the "highest level of exaltation" in the next life.

Given the centrality of the heterosexual family to LDS social life, theology, and religious rites, it is unsurprising that LDS sexual values not only preclude premarital sex but that specific teachings would exist that impinge directly on gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered members. For instance, homosexual behavior is regarded as "serious sin" and even the thoughts and feelings associated with homosexual attraction "should be resisted and redirected" (Oaks, 1995:9). According to the Church Handbook of Instructions, the official policy manual provided to ecclesiastical leaders, homosexual behavior by either males or females, particularly by adults and especially by males who hold ecclesiastical office, is grounds for excommunication:

"Homosexual behavior violates the commandments of God, is contrary to the purposes of human sexuality, distorts loving relationships, and deprives people of the blessings that can be found in family life and in the saving ordinances of the gospel. Those who persist in such behavior or who influence others to do so are subject to Church discipline. Homosexual behavior can be forgiven through sincere repentance.

"If members have homosexual thoughts or feelings or engage in homosexual behavior, Church leaders should help them have a clear understanding of faith in Jesus Christ, the process of repentance, and the purpose of life on earth. Leaders also should help them accept responsibility for their thoughts and actions and apply gospel principles in their lives. In addition to the inspired assistance of Church leaders, members may need professional counseling. When appropriate, bishops [pastors of local congregations] should contact LDS Social Services to identify resources to provide such counseling in harmony with gospel principles" (Intellectual Reserve, 1998:158).

Homosexuality is of such concern to LDS leadership that the Church has actively lobbied against same-sex marriage in Hawaii and in several U.S. states in favor of so-called DOMA (i.e., "Defense of Marriage") laws that restrict the recognition of marriage to heterosexual marriages (Crapo, 1997a, 1997b).

Although transsexual surgery does not violate the LDS expectation of chastity before marriage, it is apparently perceived as an implicit challenge to the LDS belief that "gender is an essential characteristic of individual premortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose" (The First Presidency and the Council of the Twelve, 1995). Thus it is specifically listed as among those "transgressions" for which official action against an individual's church membership "may be necessary" (Intellectual Reserve, 1998, p. 95). The instructions regarding surgery are that "Church leaders counsel against elective transsexual operations. If a member is contemplating such an operation, a presiding officer should inform him of this counsel and advise him that the operation may be cause for formal Church discipline" (Intellectual Reserve, 1998, p. 95).

Similarly, the intent to undergo transsexual surgery can be a hindrance to joining the LDS religion: "Persons who are considering an elective transsexual operation should not be baptized. Persons who have already undergone an elective transsexual operation may be baptized if they are otherwise found worthy in an interview with the mission president or a priesthood leader he

assigns. Such persons may not receive the priesthood or a temple recommend" (Intellectual Reserve, 1998, p. 26).

The very existence of bisexual Mormons is unacknowledged in church publications or sermons by top ecclesiastical leaders. Since, like heterosexual members, they experience attraction to members of the other sex, they are simply expected to conform to the church's norms of chastity before marriage and to find a compatible spouse who is not of their own sex. Thus, bisexual members are not treated as having any particular pastoral needs. Bisexual members have similar difficulty finding a support network outside the church itself. There are, at this time, no bisexual-support organizations for bisexual Mormons, although such persons are typically welcomed by similar support groups whose members are primarily LDS gay or lesbian individuals.

In principle, the LDS doctrine does not distinguish among persons based on their personal, subjectively perceived sexual identities. For instance, rather than recognizing kinds of persons based on differences in "sexual orientation," the church regards differences in erotic or affective attraction simply as matters of the kinds of "temptations" different individuals may experience. Thus, the spontaneous experience of a "same-sex attraction" to another person is not regarded as sin any more than an unbidden heterosexual "temptation" would be. It is only behavior--acting on "homosexual feelings" that is held to be sin. In practice, the LDS world view does not allow for the existence of "gay," "lesbian," or "bisexual" persons. For instance, church leaders carefully avoid the very use of the term "sexual orientation" or terms such as "gay," "lesbian," or "bisexual" as kinds of human identities. Instead, they speak only of individuals being "troubled" by "experiencing same-sex temptations." By replacing the noun phrase, "sexual orientation," with various verb phrases, such as "being same-sex attracted," LDS theological discourse delegitimizes sexual orientation as the basis for a person's social identity within the religious setting. One may be an LDS lawyer or an LDS Democrat or Republican, but one may not, in the accepted language of Mormonism, be a "gay, lesbian, or bisexual Mormon." From the viewpoint of church leaders, persons who designate themselves by one of these terms are, by the very act of self-labeling, placing themselves outside the LDS system of thought that acknowledges only "persons who experience same-sex attraction." Thus, there is no form of pastoral counseling which is aimed at dealing with the cognitive dissonance of experiencing oneself as being both "LDS" and "gay," "lesbian," or "bisexual." Instead, such individuals are simply counseled not to act on their temptations and may be referred to LDS Family Services where therapists are expected to help such persons conform their behavior to the LDS ideal of chastity outside heterosexual marriage and to alter their self-perception as "being" gay, lesbian, or bisexual persons.

The primary document concerning homosexuality that has been issued by the church for therapists employed by LDS Family Services (LDS Social Services, 1995) discusses homosexuality and lesbianism within a gender-identity learning model in which homosexual and lesbian relationships are portrayed as by-products of inadequate identification with the same-sex parent, poor peer relations, unhealthy sexual attitudes, and early homosexual experiences or sexual abuse. It recommends a form of "reparative" therapy intended to facilitate patients' acquisition of those gender roles that the church views as appropriate for relationships between men and women. Gay, lesbian, or bisexual members report that their own acceptance of this viewpoint can be a source of tremendous inner turmoil. For instance, several male interviewees said that as adolescents they had prayed repeatedly and to no avail for God to take away their sexual attraction to other males and that, finally, they had chosen to serve as missionaries for the

church in the hope that by so demonstrating their dedication to their religion, God would surely change them so that they would no longer feel a sexual attraction to other men. When, after a year or more of missionary service, they found themselves unchanged, they were devastated to the point of becoming suicidal.

Pressure to remain closeted: loss of the usual social support network

As with many Americans, it is common for LDS members to confound any distinction between an individual's sexual or gender orientation with behavior that violates the accepted sexual norms of the church, so that simply identifying oneself as a gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered person is perceived as tantamount to challenging the legitimacy of the church. Thus, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered members are commonly counseled by their religious leaders not to discuss their sexual or gender identities with other members except on a "need to know" basis. This mandate to remain "closeted" functions to isolate gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered members from the social support network that other members take for granted as a norm of Mormon life.

A theology in which heterosexual-family ideals are as central as they are to the LDS church poses clear challenges to persons who were reared in a Mormon family and then find that their sexual identity is that of a gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered person. First, such individuals are very likely to be concerned about the potential for rejection by both their families and their ecclesiastical leaders should they "come out." The pressure not to communicate about issues of personal identity are strong. For instance, R. D. Phillips (1993) interviewed 71 homosexual Mormon males and found that most had not told their parents about their sexual orientation. Similarly, B. Benson (2001), who interviewed homosexual Mormon males about the coming-out process, found that "[t]he most common reason [for not coming out to parents] was fear of parent's reaction. Another obstacle to disclosure for these individuals was guilt about adding to parents' emotional distress or wanting to protect their parents from painful emotions" (p. 26). Benson further found that LDS homosexual males who did come out to their families did so at a later age than is typical of non-LDS gays.

Lack of a tradition of pastoral ministry

Coming out to ecclesiastical leaders is complicated by the fact that the LDS ecclesiastical organization is built on a lay ministry rather than a professional one. Thus, bishops and stake presidents have no formal theological or pastoral training. Each lay minister is given a copy of the Church Handbook of Instructions (Intellectual Reserve, 1998) which is concerned with matters of policy that are relevant to carrying out the organizational work each minister has been requested to perform, but this publication does not attempt to outline LDS theology or the skills of pastoral ministering to congregants. Thus, bishops and stake presidents must often rely simply on their personal intuitions about how to respond to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered individuals and on their personal interpretations of the limited policy material that touches on such things as church discipline for nonconformist individuals. For this reason, the response of

LDS bishops and stake presidents who are approached by gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered members can vary tremendously from one "ward" or stake to another.

Awareness that the response of their ecclesiastical leaders is highly unpredictable and often unsupportive is a frequently-mentioned concern of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered Mormons, one that they experience as pressure not to seek pastoral counseling at all because of their fear of possible loss of membership. As one interviewee, who now describes himself as a "personally spiritual but organizationally unaffiliated" gay man, described his own previous "discord" about his relationship with the church, "I was afraid about how the church would react and afraid about the loss of social structure and terribly depressed about marriage problems I was having, like my infidelity, because I was trying to follow the church's teachings by being a father and husband, but I kept getting involved with men." This individual eventually resolved his cognitive dissonance by no longer participating in either Mormon or non-Mormon worship services and leaving his heterosexual marriage relationship.

Nevertheless, remaining closeted does not eliminate the dissonance gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered Mormons experience between their religious and sexual identities. One gay man described how on one Sunday, he was sitting in the choir at the front of his ward's chapel when "this guy I had slept with the previous night came in and sat down in the congregation!" Experiences such as this, he explained, were personally embarrassing because they challenged his previous compartmentalization of his spiritual and sexual lives and forced him to deal with a sense of hypocrisy in his participation in the religious life of his congregation. The gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered Mormons I interviewed described the dissonance they have experienced as primarily internal and psychological rather than as a matter of social awkwardness. More commonly than discussing embarrassing or otherwise difficult social situations, interviewees spoke about the depression and sense of loneliness they had to cope with as closeted participants in LDS life.

Resolving the Conflicts

Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered members attempt to resolve the social and doctrinal conflicts they experience as members of the LDS church in one of two ways: by carving out niches within the fold and by disengaging from the church.

Carving out niches within the fold

Despite the powerful cognitive dissonance experienced by gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered persons whose religious identity is LDS, some individuals remain active participants in the LDS religion. The religious identification can be powerful, and one gay male whose ancestors were pioneer Mormon settlers of Utah territory told me, "I can no more choose not to be Mormon than I can choose not to be male or homosexual." A. D. Lach, a spokesman for Affirmation, a support group for LDS gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered persons, quotes one gay Mormon man as having said, "I am a Mormon, from a long line of Mormons, yet, I am also a homosexual. I have come to realize that I cannot cease being either. Thus, happiness depends upon my ability to reconcile these two facets of my nature" (Lach, 1989). In his study of

LDS gays, Phillips (1993) noted that his sample included persons who "choose to live celibate lives, attempt to change their sexual orientation, or marry heterosexually in order to maintain favor with the Mormon church" (p. vi). One gay man I spoke to viewed his future in these terms, "I am 25, LDS with a rock solid testimony and planning on a life of celibacy to honor my Temple covenants. But to be realistic being alone is very hard if not impossible, but it is worth a try, and it is what I feel Heavenly Father wants me to do" (Crapo, 1998).

Those who remain sexually inactive and who approach their bishops are usually counseled to remain quiet about their sexual orientation, sharing it on a "need to know" basis only. This perpetuates the social isolation of such members within their religious community. According to Phillips (1993), the result ". . . for most celibate gay Mormons is that they live solitary, lonely lives with few social outings" (p. 94). According to at least half of my own interviewees, this isolation exacerbates the problems of depression, fear of rejection, and even suicidal concerns

Most LDS gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered persons who remain active in the church elect to remain closeted. Some few may speak to their bishops, but doing so can be problematic, since the personal attitude of individual bishops may result in harsher treatment than is actually justified by the standard policy guidelines that are issued to each local leader. For instance, one transgendered woman reported that her bishop insisted on holding a "Disciplinary Council" because she had undergone surgery for her condition. He insisted that this was mandatory, but when she showed him that the relevant policy statement of the church was merely that church discipline "may" be required in such cases, his response was simply, "It doesn't matter. I decide." The eventual outcome was excommunication. A transsexual man explained that his bishop required him to undergo karyotype testing and took the position that he would support him only if there was evidence of chromosomal abnormality to support his choice to transition from female to male, even though the church's policy manual mentions nothing about chromosomes being determinative of one's true sex. Nevertheless, even should this prove to be the case, current church policy precludes his being ordained to the LDS lay "Priesthood" which is required for full participation in various church activities, including marriage and which is an otherwise universal expectation for male members.

Finding support outside the church

The most common resolution to the conflict between the religious and sexual identities of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered Mormons appears to be varying degrees of eventual disengagement from the church. Sometimes their disengagement has been the result of their having been either "disfellowshipped" or excommunicated by their ecclesiastical leaders. (Disfellowshipped persons retain their membership in the church but are restricted in terms of the level of their participation in the religious practices of the church.)

Others have voluntarily disengaged in ways that vary from retaining their membership but no longer attending services regularly to severing their ties with the church by requesting that their names be removed from its roles. As one gay man explained, the lack of anyone to turn to within the church for support led him to depression and the contemplation of suicide, but he "opted to survive" and found a support network in the gay community and a spiritual home in the local Metropolitan Community Church instead of continuing a closeted life among other Mormons. A lesbian interviewee who now participates in the Episcopal church explained her

own feelings of lacking a support network in a Mormon setting this way: "The LDS church is extremely patriarchal, and our mission in life is to get married, have babies, and give up having a career, but we're not just brainless baby machines."

The transition out of Mormonism is not an easy one, since many experience their LDS background not simply in denominational terms but as a matter of cultural identity. As one disaffiliated gay male put it, "It's more than a church, it's a culture." Another, who is currently unaffiliated with any denomination, put it this way: "You can take me out of the church, but you can't take the culture out of me." Disaffiliation is sometimes associated with unresolved anger. One disaffiliated gay male, a young man of about twenty-five years of age, told me, "I am . . . angry at and deeply disturbed by the Church for the untold suffering and destruction it has precipitated in the lives of so many of my gay brothers and sisters. I don't apologize for those feelings. I believe in my heart that the Church is deeply mistaken concerning its attitude and policies toward homosexuality. I still have a testimony of the gospel and resent having to attempt to find another outlet for my spiritual feelings" (Crapo, 1998).

The modal pattern among those gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered persons who have fully disaffiliated themselves from the LDS religion appears to be one of shifting towards agnosticism or atheism rather than of seeking out another denomination with a GLBT-friendly theology. Those gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered persons with whom I have spoken in the course of my research on various gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered issues are more likely to describe their current religious status to be agnostic or atheist rather than even "personally spiritual but not organizationally religious." Nevertheless, some do maintain a private spirituality or migrate to other denominations. For instance, among gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered student members of Pride Alliance, a student organization at my own university, several of the lesbian members have become affiliated with the local Episcopal church, which they perceive as both accepting of gay and lesbian members and of their own feminist values. Several of the gay male membership has found a community of spiritual support in the local Metropolitan Community Church, and a few currently participate in meetings of the Unitarian Universalists.

A number of support organizations exist that welcome gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered Mormons or their families as members. These include some that are gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered affirmative in their views and others that have the goal of helping gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered Mormons who wish to adhere to the strict sexual norms of their church. There are currently six primary organizations: Affirmation, Q-Saints, Family Fellowship, Gamophites, Evergreen International, and Disciples2.

Conclusion

The centrality of doctrines and practices concerning heterosexual marriage and families makes it unlikely that the LDS church will undergo significant theological changes in respect to its expectation that gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered persons must conform their behavior to the gender and sexual norms of the church. Although the possibility exists that the church might reassess its understanding of sexual identity in ways that would be more accepting of transgendered person's self perception without directly challenging doctrines or practices concerning the eternal nature of the heterosexual family, the existence of transgendered persons appears to be even less acknowledged or addressed in LDS literature than are homosexual and

lesbian members. The church remains similarly silent on issues concerning bisexual members. However according to the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered persons I have interviewed, church policy and practice regarding gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered members does appear to be undergoing some change currently, as church leaders become increasingly aware of the existence of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered members whose pastoral needs have not been previously addressed.

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