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**Shifting Silences: Changes in Living Religion and Homosexuality
in Poland between 1970s and 2010s**

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Abstract

In Poland between 1970s and 2010s, the discursive landscape involving issues of religion and homosexuality radically changed, which influenced the possibilities for combining religiosity with non-normative sexuality at a personal level. This paper draws on biographical interviews with Polish Roman Catholics who experience homoerotic desire. It shows that the shift of homosexuality from being a phenomenon surrounded by silence to becoming a ‘gay’ identity has produced new silences and new problems in integrating the religious and the sexual spheres of life. The paper is concerned with the integration at both the cognitive level and in the context of social interactions, highlighting possibilities and limitations specific for the past and the present, respectively. However, it tells a non-linear story of gay and lesbian experience that complicates a clear division between the communist past, customarily seen as totally restricting sexually non-normative individuals, and today’s democratic conditions, seen as decidedly beneficial for their self-expression.

Keywords: *religion, homosexuality, discourse, lived experience, communism, Roman Catholicism.*

This paper addresses the tension between religion and non-normative sexuality in biographies of those living both lives, that is, those adhering to Roman Catholicism and experiencing homoerotic desire. My aim is to highlight the change in the possibilities for combining Catholic religiosity with same-sex attraction that have taken place in Poland between the 1970s and recent years. We shall see that this change closely corresponds to the increased importance of homosexuality and the development of a strong dichotomy between homosexuality and religion in public discourse. The shift from being a phenomenon surrounded by silence (in Poland of the 20th century) to becoming a 'gay' identity (in the last two decades) has not brought full comfort to Catholic believers experiencing non-normative sexual desire. While opening up new possibilities, the new identity discourse has imposed on them new limitations and silences due to the emergence of a strong LGBT-religion dichotomy.

Three stipulations should be made at this point. First, I do not consider silences and discourses on homosexuality as two concepts totally separated from each other. Following Foucault (1978) and queer studies scholars (e.g. Sedgwick, 1990), I recognize that, on the one hand, silence is never entire, singular and evenly distributed throughout a discursive landscape, and on the other hand, many silences underlie and permeate discourses. Although I highlight how homosexuality was scarcely commented on in public debates between the 1970s and the new millennium in Poland, and the impact this silence had for the gay Christian experience, I also discuss the work of silence after homosexual discourses entered the public realm in the first years of the 2000s. And although I emphasize the silence over homosexuality in the 20th century, I still show the vitality of religious and therapeutic sexual discourses which governed human bodies, emotions and identities in the de-centralized way identified by Foucault (1978). The focus on silence seen as contrasting discursivity would distort the history of homosexuality in Poland under the communist regime and shortly thereafter. Meanwhile, my paper contributes to the project of recuperating the homosexual experience from the last century, in concert with other Polish scholars (see e.g. Kurpios, 2001; Szulc, 2017; Majewska, 2018; Kościańska et al., 2019).

Second, while the analysis does not challenge the academic view that the gay emancipatory discourse greatly facilitates the process of integrating sexual non-normativity with religion at the personal level (e.g. Lukenbill, 1998; Yip, 2005a), it introduces a nuance to the discussion of gay Christians' potential to harmoniously combine religious and sexual aspects of their life. On the one hand, it highlights available pathways for reconciliation before this discourse entered the public realm, and on the other hand, problems that are specific to the present moment. Again, my paper follows Foucault's (1978) observation that the past discretion over homoeroticism not only resulted in extreme severity targeting the 'sodomites', but also allowed for quite widespread tolerance. The subsequent proliferation of homosexual discourses has led to both tightened social control and development of a 'reverse' discourse that legitimizes homosexuality and yet exerts pressure on individuals, as do all discourses.

Third, the problems faced by gay Christians today are related to the fact that the gay emancipatory discourse is strongly entangled in secularist approaches, and the belief that religious commitments are detrimental to the advancement of sexual equality. Many important works have commented on the discursive structure building an opposition between homosexuality and religion, mainly by reference to the American ‘war on terrorism’ and how it has strengthened the polarization between a so-called secular and progressive ‘West’ and a religious and backward Islamic ‘East’ (Puar, 2007; Butler, 2009). Critical scholars have addressed the conjunction between nationalism and sexuality in this context, especially under the rubric of ‘homonationalism’ (Puar, 2007). The latter term is deployed to demonstrate how secular pro-gay articulations are pitted against religion, Islam in particular, and how LGBT rights and freedoms are instrumentally used to legitimate racism and xenophobia. In Poland, secular, nationalistic and homosexual emancipatory discourses form a different kind of assemblage, connected to the cultivation of an association between Polishness and Roman Catholicism and the simultaneous geopolitical location of Poland as the ‘Eastern’ and ‘new’ part of the – perceived as secular – European Union (Kulpa, 2011). The opposition between religion and homosexuality in Poland is therefore played out as the opposition between Polishness and the image of the secular EU supported by gay people.

Here, I leave this issue aside, as I have discussed similar issues elsewhere (Hall, 2015). What I take from the ‘Western’ scholarship is the concept of gay religious individuals ‘who cannot properly be gay’ (El-Tayeb, 2012), a phrase originally referring to gay Muslims in Amsterdam caught up in the homonationalist imagery, but still relevant to Polish gay people who do not subscribe to the dominant secular emancipatory gay discourse. By situating the discussion of Polish nonheterosexual Roman Catholics in the context of wider discursive structures, the paper engages with sociological scholarship on homosexuality and Christianity concerned with the issue of combining conflicting religious and sexual identities at the individual level, but that scarcely comments on the entanglement of this process in discourses governing individual experience.

My discussion draws on biographical interviews with Roman Catholics in Poland of various ages, who define themselves as gay, lesbian or bisexual. After referring to Anglophone scholarly publications on Christianity and homosexuality and situating my analytical perspective in relation to this body of literature, I devote one section to the Vatican’s standpoint on homosexuality and a specific trajectory of its reception in Poland. I also show how the Polish context influences my paper at the conceptual level. In the subsequent section, I briefly present evolving discourses on homosexuality in Poland, followed by a methodological account. Finally, drawing on the interviews, I discuss (im)possibilities for combining Catholic religiosity with same-sex attraction, closely related to the discursive changes outlined in section 3. I then summarize my findings by way of concluding remarks.

1. Theoretical background

Many social studies discussing the intersection of religious and sexually non-normative engagement focus on ‘cognitive dissonance’ and its resolution (e.g. Mahaffy, 1996; Gross, 2008; Meek, 2014), that is, the individually experienced tension between religion and homosexuality and how that tension might be resolved. Thumma’s (1991) publication on a gay Christian organization called Good News, followed by Mahaffy’s (1996) study of lesbian Christians, and Rodriguez and Ouelette’s (2000) discussion of the experience of members of the Metropolitan Community Church, consolidated a typology for managing the tension: rejecting the religious identity, rejecting the homosexual identity, compartmentalization, identity integration.

Social studies drawing on personal accounts have also highlighted various strategies by nonheterosexual Christians to harmoniously combine the conflicting identities. For instance, they have pointed to the reinterpretation of the Bible and the questioning of church officials’ authority (Thumma, 1991; Yip, 1997; 2005b), as well as the reliance on positive personal experience of the sacred (Mahaffy, 1996; Yip, 1997), which usually goes hand-in-hand with the retreat from the image of a punitive God in favor of the image of a loving and unconditionally accepting deity (Gross and Yip, 2010; Deguara, 2018). The studies have also accentuated the spiritual-seeking Christian communities that best respond to the need for reconciling the religious and sexual spheres of life, arguing that participation in such communities facilitates the process of identity integration at the cognitive level (Rodriguez and Ouelette, 2000; Wilcox, 2003; Levy and Reeves, 2011).

Whether the research focus has been on the experience of nonheterosexual Christians affiliated with various Protestant traditions (the majority of studies referred to above), or the Roman Catholic Church (e.g. García et al., 2008; Deguara, 2018), the common feature is that the studies assume two pre-established, conflicting identities: the religious and the homosexual (or, more broadly, nonheterosexual), as if both were essential attributes of the individual. If they introduce a dynamism at all, this is either to acknowledge the psychological process of identity formation (e.g. Levy and Reeves, 2011), or to show that the religious engagement and the tendency to act upon one’s nonheterosexuality may change throughout the life trajectory (e.g. García et al., 2008; Meek, 2014).

Thus, scholarly publications on Christianity and non-normative sexuality rarely take account of the observation made by Foucault (1978) and queer studies scholars (Butler, 1990; Sedgwick, 1990) that the ‘homosexual’ or ‘gay’ identity is historically and culturally contingent. This is probably owing to the fact that the above-mentioned publications, rapidly proliferating since the 1990s, report on those who have had a chance to identify themselves with the ‘gay’ subject position already well rooted in the North American and Western European context. My research conducted in Poland between 2011 and 2014, with the gay emancipatory discourse at work for not more than some 10 years, called for taking into account the non-obvious nature of gay identity and for perceiving individual experience and identity formation as shaped by discourses and silences available in the public

realm at a given historical moment (Foucault, 1978). Accordingly, while still concerned with the religion–homosexuality dichotomy, I do not take homosexual identity as a starting point for discussion, and I do not isolate the issue of living religion and homosexuality from the broader discursive setting.

Another problem with the main current of the sociological scholarship reporting on non-heterosexual Christians' lived experience is that it usually points to religion as the main producer of the tension between the two conflicting identities. This even applies to quite nuanced studies that introduce a historical perspective (e.g. Meek, 2014). To be sure, some scholars mention the mainstream emancipatory discourse as the other side of the coin, pointing to secular gay/lesbian circles' exclusionary approach to religious individuals. For instance, both Wilcox (2003) and Yip (2005a) notice that revealing one's religious commitment in these circles bears traits typical of 'coming out' and is rarely met with approval. But by focusing on inner struggles for harmonious integration of one's sexual and religious identity, and sometimes also on the experience of gay Christians in mainstream religious, gay religious or secular gay activist communities, the studies typically leave aside the issue of living religion and homosexuality in everyday life, especially at home and the workplace. Nor do they discuss the fact that these social settings are also governed by dominant religious and homosexual discourses which translate into the increase or decrease in gay Christians' well-being. My presentation below is informed by such a broader perspective.

2. Roman Catholicism in context

Since more than 90 per cent of Poles declare their affiliation to the Roman Catholic Church (CBOS, 2017), those experiencing homoerotic desire live in social environments (family, other institutions) where religion plays a significant role, and if they define themselves as religious, they typically adhere to Roman Catholicism.

In many countries of the 'Western' part of the world, reforms of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) with their emphasis on *aggiornamento*, that is, the adjustment of the church's message to contemporary cultural conditions, and greater subjectivity given to lay people, awoke high hopes for the liberalization of the Roman Catholic Church's standpoint on sexuality. In the 1960s and 1970s, the emergence of gay Catholic groups and ministries, e.g. *Dignity* in the US, *Quest* in the UK, reflected such an optimistic attitude. However, these hopes soon appeared groundless. From *Persona humana* (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1975), through the *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons* (Congregation..., 1986), to statements opposing anti-discrimination legislation (e.g. Congregation..., 1992) and the call for parliamentarians to vote against any acts regulating same-sex partnership (Congregation..., 2003), the Vatican tightened up its view on homosexuality. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1993: paras. 2357–2359) put it, 'homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered', 'homosexual inclination [...] is objectively disordered',

and homosexual persons are 'called to chastity', which in practice means sexual abstinence.

In his auto-ethnographic account, Dominic Wetzel (2014) shows how this conservative shift influenced his experience of a male adolescent discovering homoerotic desire within a traditionalist Catholic family in the US. His article diverges from the main current of the scholarship on gay Roman Catholics by destabilizing the issue of identity, and it brilliantly documents the correspondence between the dominant religious discourse on homosexuality and personal experience. It also tells an alternative story of living religion by 'queers raised conservative Catholics' – by pointing to the potential of neglecting the tension between religion and sexuality in specific homosocial spaces within the church, such as a parish choir for boys. My approach follows the analytical path taken by Wetzel, that is, it employs the Foucauldian logic of teasing out how discourses permeate personal experience and self-understanding (Foucault, 1978). It is concerned not only with limitations imposed by discourses on individuals but also with possibilities for minimizing the tension between religion and non-normative sexuality. At the same time, it diverges from Wetzel's account in two important ways, both resulting from the embeddedness of my discussion in the Polish context.

First, the story about the Roman Catholic Church going conservative after the Second Vatican Council, and especially under the papacy of John Paul II (1978–2005), may hold true from a 'Western' perspective. However, this narrative does not resonate in the Polish context. In the 1970s and 1980s, the local church was preoccupied with state-level politics; it supported the democratic opposition and served as mediator between dissident circles and the communist government (Grzymała-Busse, 2015). Poles perceived John Paul II not as a figure toughening moral standards, but rather as a powerful leader capable of inciting a wide-scale anti-communist drive in society; his contribution to the fall of communism is undeniable. The reception of the Second Vatican Council in Poland was quite selective and superficial. While the reforms changed the way in which the mass is celebrated, they did not spark any debates on the issue of sexuality, and they have not led to a wide-scale promotion of lay people's independent judgment of their moral performance (Grabska, 1996). Similarly, there were no debates on the first comprehensive Vatican document on homosexuality (Congregation..., 1986), which restricted the development of gay ministries in many 'Western' countries. The church has shown its conservative face regarding homosexuality, but only after the fall of communism, when church officials rushed to capitalize on their 'moral authority' developed under the previous regime (Grzymała-Busse, 2015), particularly after the LGBT emancipatory discourse entered the public scene in the first years of the 2000s. Before that, the church in Poland rarely took a stance on the issue, and this silence corresponded with a widespread silence over homosexuality in the public space. Personal stories by Polish believers experiencing homoerotic desire are therefore entangled in a discursive trajectory fundamentally different from what Wetzel (2014) describes in a US context, and as I will elaborate on below, their personal accounts reflect these different conditions.

Second, Wetzel's (2014) story begins after the 'gay' subject position has been soundly articulated within the US discursive landscape and, at least outside of the Roman Catholic Church, has become an obvious point of reference for individuals experiencing homoerotic desire. When Wetzel mentions silence over homosexuality, he refers mainly to techniques of silencing structurally inscribed in the church institution (cf. Jordan, 2000). Stories that I encountered begin when the silence dominated not only the church, but also the broader public space. Hence, my focus is on a dynamism involving not only discourse produced by the church, but also other discourses on homosexuality. Over the last couple of decades, religious, therapeutic and emancipatory discourses have converged in complex ways in Poland, and the interplay between them has produced different possibilities and imposed different limitations on individuals' efforts to integrate their religiosity with non-normative sexuality. The following analysis identifies spaces of silence pertaining to the impossibility of articulating a religious gay identity, showing how silence relates to shifting positions within a mutable discursive structure over time.

3. Discursive transformations in Poland

In Poland under the communist regime, homosexuality was surrounded by considerable silence, both within the Roman Catholic Church and in the broader public space. Sexologists, in line with prevalent medical recommendations at the time, offered techniques to 'treat' homosexuality, but they did not advertise them widely, and they never set up a significant therapeutic industry targeting homosexual people. In the last two decades of communism, they rather recommended that homosexuality should be depathologized, underlining the need to increase societal acceptance of people of homosexual orientation (Kościańska, 2014). Since the communist state never penalized homosexual acts, it gave weak impulses for counteracting its sexual policy, and authorities took advantage from keeping homosexuality in the scarcely commented and minimally opposed sphere of shame. This allowed them to approach the phenomenon instrumentally and strategically, for instance, to blackmail people with homoerotic interests into cooperation with the secret services (Kurpios, 2001; Szulc, 2017; Majewska, 2018).

Careful reading of the press of that time reveals traces of discursive pathologization and criminalization of homosexuality, accompanied by efforts made by some columnists of socio-cultural magazines of the 1980s to prove that 'homosexuals', although different in their sexual behaviors, are not different to other people in society (Fiedotow, 2012). If at all, it was male homosexuality that was problematized; lesbians were virtually absent from the public discourse during communism. Nevertheless, state control of the media, followed by a restrictive law on associations, did not allow the variety of standpoints on homosexuality to fully manifest themselves in public and interact with each other.

In the first decade after the fall of communism, gay and lesbian activists, whose self-organization (though not recognized by the wider public) could be traced back to the 1980s (Kurpios, 2001; Szulc, 2017), gained freedom to register

their associations. Still, they operated in niches, and focused on community actions rather than on political campaigning. In the public discourse, homosexuality was overshadowed by multiple issues of prominent importance in times of political and economic transformation. If the mainstream media referred to gay organizations newly emerging in Poland, this was usually to point out the diversity of society under democratic rule. The issue did not spark significant controversies, although one could hear the voice of church officials opposing any form of gay activism (Hall, 2015).

The beginning of the 2000s saw wider references to homosexuality in the public realm in two specific contexts. First, in 2000, homosexuality became a topic in connection with the international gay pride in Rome, which overlapped in time with the Great National Pilgrimage of Poles to Rome for celebrations of the Great Jubilee of 2000 Years of Christianity. Contributing to an atmosphere of scandal around this coincidence, the media established the opposition between promiscuous 'homosexuals' from abroad and Christian values protected by Poles (Hall, 2015). Second, in 2002, the press revealed that Juliusz Paetz, Archbishop of Poznań, had sexually harassed subordinated seminarians, and Catholic media of various political affiliations (with no significant opposition from the mainstream liberal media) began to promote religiously motivated ex-gay reparative programs, considering them the proper way to deal with homosexuality among both the clergy and lay people (Hall, 2017).

The gay emancipatory discourse dynamically entered public space in 2003 as a result of the first large-scale, and widely contested, anti-homophobic project: the billboard campaign *Let Them See Us*, which displayed gay and lesbian couples holding hands (Mizielińska, 2011). In their public statements, campaign leaders opposed the exoticization of homosexuality, the church's views on the issue, and the reparative programs (Hall, 2015; 2017). In subsequent years, the discursive dichotomy between religion and homosexuality was further entrenched. On the eve of Poland's accession to the European Union in 2004, right-wing political parties and conservative columnists reinforced the image of the homosexual as the 'other' threatening Poland's sovereignty and national values, closely linked to the Catholic religion (Hall, 2015). The conflict reached the streets in connection with gay pride initiatives in Poland, their ban, and counter-manifestations, mainly in 2004 and 2005 (Graff, 2006). Issues related to homosexuality and sexual minorities' rights, popularly referred to by the 'LGBT' acronym, had by then entered the headline news. In 2011, the leader of the organization that had implemented the *Let Them See Us* campaign in 2003, as well as a transsexual activist, joined the Palikot Movement, a party employing anti-clerical rhetoric and winning parliamentary elections. Their electoral success, followed by subsequent initiatives of the party they represented, such as an effort to remove a cross from parliamentary premises, preserved the discursive polarization between LGBT issues and religion (Hall, 2015).

4. Methodological account

In the remaining part of this paper, I draw on my sociological research on religion and non-heteronormativity in Poland, conducted in 2011–2014.¹ The project involved interviews with 52 cis-gendered women (24) and men (28) who adhere to Christianity, the vast majority to Roman Catholicism, while staying in same-sex romantic relationships and/or declaring themselves as gay, lesbian, or bisexual. These were thematic biographical interviews focusing on issues related to religion and sexuality.

Starting from my personal network, I used snowball sampling to contact one-fourth of the interviewees. I reached the rest through *Faith and Rainbow* (*Wiara i Tęcza*), the first and only nationwide community targeting Polish LGBT Christians, established in 2010. The community's mission is to work for the revision of religious – mainly Roman Catholic – leaders' views on LGBT issues, and to support those who wish to harmoniously combine their religiosity with non-normative sexuality.²

My interviewees were aged between 19 and 77; mainly people in their twenties and thirties. All had university degrees or were studying. The vast majority were raised in religiously engaged families in various towns and cities across Poland. At the time of my study, almost all lived in big cities.

5. Personal experience and changes over time

5.1 Limitations in the past

The silence that surrounded homosexuality up until the early 2000s translated into individuals' difficulties in defining their non-normative sexual desire. As a rule, it did not allow my interviewees to develop a gay/lesbian identity. This applies in particular to women whose sexual non-normativity remained socially unrecognized. As Ewa³ (b. 1976) told me, 'I didn't call it being a lesbian, or homosexuality, but, well, I knew I had this tendency'. Male same-sex attraction was more exposed to naming: 'it was commented in the context of a joke, maliciousness or very negative judgement' (Adam, b. 1983). Still, memories of many male interviewees do not significantly differ from those presented by female respondents:

I didn't know and I didn't have any tools to investigate it. Does the fact that I'm attracted to men mean I'm gay? Or is it a developmental stage, for

¹ The research received funding from my project *The Institutional and Individual Dimension of LGBT People's Religiosity in Poland* financed by the National Science Centre in Poland, based on decision DEC-2011/01/D/HS6/03877.

² *Faith and Rainbow*: <http://www.wiaraiteczka.pl/>

³ I use pseudonyms throughout the paper.

instance? Nothing at all was said about it. It's only now that I can even call it by its name. (Tadeusz, b. 1975)

Faced with difficulties in capturing their homoerotic desire in existing idioms, my respondents tended to situate it within the religious perspective, especially since they were strongly socialized into religious engagement. However, in the 20th century, Polish church officials were far from providing a clear guidance on how to conceptualize non-normative desire and handle it. Moreover, priests to whom my interviewees turned to with their concerns did not know how to respond:

They had no knowledge of the issue, neither positive nor negative. They didn't know whether you can or you cannot treat it. They tended to suggest this is transitory, they ignored the problem. (Jacek, male, b. 1977)

I didn't face a strong condemnation from priests. It was rather a kind of approach like towards a disabled person, an approach with a wink: 'Relax, you're so young... What are you saying? Is there something a man did to you? Eehh, you'll probably be alright'. No constructive conversation. And in fact, for many years I tried to handle it on my own. (Marta, female, b. 1978)

Obviously, this ignorance imposed a huge burden on people. While specific discourses on homosexuality, even those recommending the 'treatment' of the 'problem', were practically absent from the religious realm, other disciplining discourses hugely affected my respondents. In lack of explicit statements on homosexuality, and hence lack of any 'reverse' discourses (cf. Foucault, 1978), people relied on general Catholic advice on sexual matters, reinforcing the silence and peoples' experience of marginalization within the church. Situating homoerotic desire within the religious sphere 'on their own' often resulted in self-condemnation. Such a reaction was supported by the limited reception of the Second Vatican Council: the Polish church of the 20th century did little to break with the pre-Council image of a punitive God. Church representatives cultivated this image and spread it over everything that went beyond traditional moral standards, including in the realm of sexuality. As Jacek (b. 1977) commented, 'I had a very neurotic approach to all these issues'.

Karol's (b. 1935) account shows a detrimental work of silence at the level of social interactions. In the 1970s, he experienced marginalization as a member of the Club of Catholic Intelligentsia (CCI):

In one of the first conversations with me, she [a person from the CCI management] said... It wasn't directly to me, she said it like into the air: ladies in CCI warn me about you. They say, 'he is kind of... kind of, kind of, kind of...' I'm sorry I'm saying it like this, but she was just repeating it like a scratched record, and she could not go beyond and say, kind of what. He is kind of, kind of, kind of... and so on.

Karol had no discursive resources to rely on and oppose the marginalization: 'I tucked my tail, well, what could I do? After all, I can't deny or confirm it, so everyone knows'. In the atmosphere of understatement and hazy suggestions still giving him the feeling that 'everyone knows', he was not able to freely develop his activity: 'They rather kept me away from everything. [...] I really felt that I was just a nobody in CCI'.

Karol's recollection might be better understood if we take into account the Polish political context of the 1970s and 1980s and the fact that the CCI was a very specific milieu: with scarce support from the Polish Episcopate, it worked for the dissemination of the message from the Second Vatican Council, especially in the realm of inter-religious dialogue. Additionally, CCI relied on the Council's vision of human dignity to promote human rights against the communist regime. Karol pointed exactly to the dissident aspect of CCI's activity when explaining his experience: 'it was difficult to trust a person like me in conspiracy-related issues, such a person could easily give in to the pressure from the secret services'. Thus, although silence over homosexuality did not allow for naming things (as apparent in the conversation between Karol and the lady from CCI's management), it created room for discourses like the one about gay people's cooperation with the secret services. It created a platform for both Karol's exclusion and making this exclusion legible to the excluded party.

5.2 Possibilities in the past

Ewa (b. 1976), who was engaged in the Charismatic Renewal during her university studies under democratic conditions of the 1990s, had a different story. In her case, the silence still surrounding homosexuality in the church and the public realm proved beneficial; it allowed her to personally deal with the relationship between religion and homoerotic desire, achieving a comfort in everyday life. At that time, Ewa shared a household with two female members of her religious community, of which one was her girlfriend. The second woman was therefore a witness to their sexual intimacy: 'Our friend knew about it. She did know, but we never spoke about it.' Whether or not the friend accepted the partnership, she apparently lacked the language to comment on what was going on. Other members of the religious community also tacitly approved of their partnership, which resonates with Foucault's (1978) comments on spaces of relative tolerance in times characterized by the discretion over homoeroticism.

Aleksander's (b. 1979) story points to the work of silence at the cognitive level, suggesting that the lack of explicit condemnation of homosexuality might have diminished inner struggles involving homoerotic desire. Aleksander told me that in his teenage years, it was not homosexuality but masturbation that was his largest concern: '[Sexuality] was not an issue until... When, you know, I discovered what masturbation is, and when a catechist told me that this is a mortal sin'. While falling victim to the work of long-standing 'war against onanism' inside and outside of the church, he was able to put aside his inner struggles related to the

erotic interest in boys, which again speaks to Foucault's (1978) perspective on possible beneficial results of discretion over homoeroticism.

Meanwhile, Stanisław's (b. 1944) account shows that the church's silence over homosexuality could – in the long run – lead to quite smooth integration of religiosity with sexuality. The man told me about a confession when young; he confessed his homoerotic desire, but the confessor did not give him any special guidance, except for staying away from people with similar interests. After having faced the confessor's relative indifference, Stanisław kept searching for an answer to the nagging question about his non-normative desire. He came across sexologist publications which in the 1970s were the only source of comprehensive information regarding homosexuality. Inspired by these publications, he travelled across Poland in search of effective treatment, trying out a range of therapeutic techniques, including hypnosis. His main battlefield was hence in the realm of medicine rather than religion, which was far less explicit on the subject matter. It took him 15 years of inner struggle before deciding to get involved in same-sex relationships, and stop considering them as incompatible with the Roman Catholic tradition:

Can anyone be celibate? [...] Several doctors told me: get married. I mean, specifically the urologist, he told me to have a regular intercourse. [He told me] that if I didn't, then things will get rotten, or something like that. [...] I had inflammations, and the urologist gave me antibiotics. He finally got upset, he went like 'take a wife, a woman, have sex, and you'll be fine'. So that's why I ask, can anyone go celibate? I mean, not if they [actually] can. Rather, without endangering their health. The saints are saints because they professed faith, risking their health, life. But should every believer be required to do that?

In the case of Stanisław, it was – somehow paradoxically – the strong medicalization of his problems that led him to finally accepting his active homosexuality. It could be argued that Stanisław's experience is a result of the work of discourses under the dominant silence; his account shows how the beneficial aspects of discretion over homoeroticism might have come to the fore (Foucault, 1978). As long as homosexuality was scarcely commented on outside of the sexologist context, other medical discourses could come into play and create a certain space for non-normative desires. Similarly, the disciplining effects of church discourses on sex, not yet fixated on the issue of homosexuality, would be eased or counterbalanced by other religious discourses, such as a religious imagery that separates the devotion of saints from the experience of regular believers.

5.3 Possibilities in the present

After the LGBT emancipatory discourse – that is, the 'reverse' discourse (Foucault, 1978) to formerly disciplining sexual discourses – entered the stage in the first

decade of 2000s, the situation for my interviewees changed dramatically. They could now draw on new discursive resources and develop a positive gay identity.

People born in the late 1980s and 1990s were immediately able to recognize their homosexual desire, without experiencing the silence that former generations were faced with: 'I looked through some websites about the issue. It was raised there, I simply began to browse, to read that it is not a disease, that it is normal' (Wiktor, b. 1985). This new perspective made it easier to align their sexuality with religiosity. High self-esteem enhanced by the emancipatory discourse, combined with their own relationship with the sacred and their own interpretation of the Bible, gave many of them pride and courage to assert that the problem of interpretation lies with traditional commentators of the Scripture:

Sixteen, seventeen years – you search the Internet, you follow biology, all these theories, psychoanalysis and the like, right? And you read carefully. You are better educated than those little priests. I was thinking 'well, if we were to live according to the old theories, we wouldn't go to the doctor, we would have our wounds burnt, our leg removed'... But the whole of our life is subject to more and more scientific discoveries which we accept because they are good [for us]. And if we perceive the most beautiful sphere of life, sharing ourselves, our sexuality, our love with another person, from the point of view of rapists, conquerors from three thousand years ago or more, then sorry, but I don't play that game. Well, I think it is YOU who are wrong. (Jan, b. 1982)

The quote above illustrates a viewpoint shared by many Polish LGBT Christians. The activist group *Faith and Rainbow* draws on the LGBT emancipatory discourse, confronting the negative approach to homosexuality articulated by dominant church representatives. Since 2010, the community has supported people wishing to integrate religion and sexuality at the personal level, and my interviews confirm findings from other social studies suggesting that participation in an LGBT Christian community greatly facilitates this process (Rodriguez and Ouelette, 2000; Wilcox, 2003; Levy and Reeves, 2011).

5.4 Limitations in the present

In parallel with LGBT organizations entering the public space, the Polish church started to voice their concerns over homosexuality, thus breaking the silence. As a result, it is no longer possible to neglect the lack of approval of homosexuality in religious contexts; the contentious issue can no longer be ignored, neither by those who themselves experience homoerotic desire, nor by their social environment.

Since 2002, Catholic activists and commentators have promoted a reparative approach to homosexuality, considering it a developmental disorder that can and should be treated. However, the reparative approach was never officially approved by the Vatican or the Polish Episcopate, and it lost momentum after a few years (Hall, 2017). Elements of this discourse have nevertheless continued to saturate

Catholic communities and individual believers. Some of my interviewees reported on participation in ex-gay programs, especially in the first decade of 2000s, and many were met with expectations from family members and members of their religious communities to enroll in these programs. Sometimes religious groups excluded members who did not follow the instructions or expectations.⁴

While affiliation with *Faith and Rainbow* can ease the difficult tension between belief and sexual desire for some people, the community cannot break the strong public polarization between religion and LGBT issues, which clearly diminishes the possibilities for believers to articulate their experience and viewpoint. It is obviously difficult for gay/lesbian Christians to criticize or fully diverge from the views of religious institutions to which they adhere, and it is equally difficult to voice critique of the secular LGBT community from a religious point of view. It is like being stuck between a rock and a hard place, leading to a particular kind of silence: the impossibility of articulating a position that is not caught up in the binary. Many respondents criticized the gay and lesbian community during the interviews, mainly for lacking religious sensitivity (cf. Wilcox, 2003; Yip, 2005). However, aware of the political importance of secular LGBT communities, my interviewees did not want to be too loud in their opposition; they did not want to use their critique in the fight for recognition of the gay Christian perspective. For instance, Dominik (b. 1986) recalled a situation when his partner had managed to protect a cross from profanation by several activists of a well-known Polish LGBT organization. At this point in the interview, he repeated several times: 'I am not going to tell any unfriendly people about it'.

Additionally, Dominik talked about a general lack of comfort as a gay Christian due to the lack of recognition in everyday life, especially among his co-workers:

I often find it painful, y'know. Even at work when I tell people about it. Because I boldly say: 'I went to church with my partner' or something. The reaction is immediate: 'How come? To church? – But I'm a believer! – But you're gay!'

These reactions indicate that the 'gay' persona, discursively created in antagonistic struggles between supporters of LGBT people's emancipation and their opponents, is recognized by mainstream society. This is a figure endowed with specific attributes, notably a secular self-identification. A religious gay identity becomes incomprehensible within this scheme, and thus cannot be recognized as 'proper' (cf. El-Tayeb, 2012). While Dominic in his professional life dares to confront the mainstream view, his heroic attitude does not seem widespread among gay Roman Catholics.

Kajetan (b. 1981) talked about a similar, if not bigger, tension at his workplace, which shows that the very same discursive mechanism that allows people to name and make legitimate their non-normative desire pushes them back

⁴ For more developed discussion about ex-gay programs' participants in Poland see Mikulak (2020).

into the closet, as it were, as soon as their religious belief comes to the fore. Kajetan is hiding his homosexuality from his co-workers, not in fear of their hostility to sexual non-normativity but because of his theological education, which he thinks will lead to wrong associations among colleagues; he is afraid they would automatically assume that his monastery life and his homosexuality are mutually exclusive. He is also afraid of being called a hypocrite:

I can't come out as gay. Why? Because most people would assume that I left the seminary because I'm gay. However, the fact that I left the seminary wasn't so much related to my [sexual] orientation. [...] Nobody would understand it, it would be a very straightforward association. Or probably, I would be accused of duplicity, of hypocrisy: 'such a saintly person, so pious, a cleric, a former seminarian, such a theologian, and – alas! – a fag with a double life'. And in fact, they push me even more into the double life. At least, this is how I feel.

Dominik's and Kajetan's stories suggest that the gay emancipatory discourse, inherently linked to anti-clericalism, coupled with the anti-gay mobilization within the church, make it difficult for gay Catholic believers to gain recognition on their own terms. Both Dominik and Kajetan pointed to practices of self-censorship and to problems with articulating their gay Catholic perspective in front of members of their everyday community, hence pointing to the new kind of silence that issues from this irresolvable conflict. This silence is different from the silence over sexuality that seemed to dominate the social imagery in the past, but in fact, as Foucault (1978) showed, was underpinned by a multitude of sexual discourses. Today's silence corresponds better to Foucault's remarks on the permeation of discourses by various forms of silence. One of the disciplining effects of gay emancipatory discourse is that it establishes a secular gay identity to which all people experiencing homosexual desire are expected to conform. Those who do not or cannot be recognized as 'proper gays' (El-Tayeb, 2012) are inevitably silenced.

6. Concluding remarks

Drawing on accounts by Polish Roman Catholics who reflected on their living religion and homoerotic desire between the 1970s and the 2010s, this paper departs from the dominant current of studies on gay Christians, starting with Thumma (1991) and others, which present homosexuality and religiosity in essentialist identity terms, that is, as essential personal characteristics in tension with each other. Instead, I draw on Foucault's (1978) perspective that individual experience and identity are shaped by discourses and silences available in the public realm in a given historical moment. This perspective allows for more nuanced comments on the relationship between religion and non-normative sexuality in personal biographies, beyond the prevalent focus on religion as the source of tension. The above discussion has highlighted the complex discursive structure forming the

basis for individual experiences and identity formations. I draw my conclusions from the analytical assumption that discourses and silences permeate the awareness of all social actors, situating the issue of combining religiosity with non-normative sexuality at both the cognitive and the social level of interaction.

Over time, the discursive structure has produced different possibilities and imposed different limitations on individuals' reconciliation of religiosity and non-normative sexuality. The silence over homosexuality in 20th-century Polish public space did not allow individuals to develop a positive gay/lesbian identity, or a language for criticizing exclusionary practices by members of the closest religious community. It kept homoerotic desire in the sphere of private shame, which often resulted in self-condemnation among homosexual believers. Yet, silence did not completely prevent the integration of sexual and religious spheres of life. At the cognitive level, the impulse triggering such integration could come, for instance, from the field of medicine, which recommended having regular sexual intercourse. At the level of social relationships, including religious communities, silence could translate into a tacit approval of homoerotic activity.

Today's possibility for developing a positive gay/lesbian identity hinges on the LGBT emancipatory discourse which has been widely promoted in Poland since 2003. The new discursive resources arguably enhance non-heterosexual people's self-esteem and provide them with tools to resist the church's anti-gay stance. The emancipatory discourse has also prompted LGBT Christians' activism in an attempt to reconcile religion and nonheterosexuality at the cognitive level. However, breaking the old silence surrounding homosexuality has also resulted in anti-gay politics, manifested in right-wing, nationalist discourses in the public, as well as in intra-church pressure on religious gay people to partake in ex-gay programs. Perhaps most importantly for our purposes, breaking the silence has led to a new kind of silence pertaining to unintelligibility: the impossibility of articulating a perspective and an experience beyond the LGBT-religion opposition. The gay/lesbian emancipatory discourse draws its strength from this dichotomy which informs public debates and permeates the awareness of all social actors. I have argued that this severely restricts the self-expression and ability for gay/lesbian religious individuals to be recognized as 'proper' in their gayness (El-Tayeb, 2012) and live a livable homosexual-Christian life (that is, a life recognizable as such) (Butler, 2004).

My discussion also follows Foucault (1978) in his critique of the progressive vision of sexual history that relegates discipline to the past and celebrates today's freedom of sexual expression. In line with recent scholarship on homosexuality in Central and Eastern Europe (Szulc, 2017; Kościańska et al., 2019), it problematizes the binary structure between the communist past and the democratic present, showing that the religious-sexual history cannot be told according to a strongly linear scheme moving from the impossibility of accepting non-normative sexuality in the context of religion in the past to greater possibilities for being accepted in the present.

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