Chapter 9

Religious Experiences in Life Stories of Homosexuals and Bisexuals in Russia

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ARE RELIGION AND QUEERNESS INCOMPATIBLE?

Russian religious institutions, as is well known, are hostile to LGBTQ people. In conditions of clericalization or desecularization of contemporary Russian society, governmental gender and sexual politics are formed with active support from the Orthodox and other churches. As Healey demonstrates, the federal law banning the spread of propaganda of non-traditional sexual relationships and the discourse of traditional Russian values are the results of a mixture of secular and religious homophobic ideas about homosexuality (Healey 2018). Before him, considering Russian homophobia in the context of politics and democratic values, Kon (2010) named the Russian Orthodox Church the main motivating force behind the informational campaign that demonized homosexuality in the public discourse. He claimed the church's hostile attitude to homosexuality is based not only on religious canon but also political motives. In this way, the church tries to consolidate conservative forces around itself.

According to the Russian Public Opinion Research Center, in 2019, 63 percent of the Russian population adhered to Orthodoxy (VCIOM 2019). Among persons aged over sixty, the proportion of Orthodox believers is much higher, accounting for 74 percent of the population. Given the popularity of Orthodoxy, members of Parliament enlisted the support of the Russian Orthodox Church to lobby for the law about propaganda (Healey 2018; Sozaev 2014). At the same time, less powerful churches like the Russian Union of Christians of Evangelical Faith demonstrated their solidarity with the government by gathering signatures for this law, as Sozaev (2014) has shown. Other religious groups, such as Muslims and Catholics, also have

expressed homophobic attitudes to LGBTQ people in Russia and most post-Soviet states (Mole 2019).

In such conditions, there is an assumed polarization of Russian society where LGBTQ and faithful people are at opposite poles, as Sozaev states (2017). On the one hand, he writes, "the monopoly of authoritative religious opinion makes an impression that any religion unequivocally condemns homosexuality" (Sozaev 2016, 5). Most queers don't know that some religious movements affirm LGBTQ people and their rights. On the other hand, there is a popular point of view that non-heterosexuals and non-cisgenders need to renounce religion. This perspective is based on the negative religious experiences of many queers who faced hate, emotional or even physical violence, and condemnation in the religious sphere. Most religious doctrines are assumed to harm queers' well-being as far as they urge people to overcome the sin of homosexual desire and thus cause their self-hatred. Also, in most cases, conversion therapy (a form of psychotherapy aimed at altering a patient's sexual orientation from gay to straight and recognized as unethical and inefficient) is founded on religious beliefs.

All of this led to the consideration of religion as incompatible with the successful acceptance of one's queerness. This view has a theoretical elaboration in the American context. Harris (2014) offers the concept of gaytheism. Using queer theory, he criticizes both conservative and liberal branches of Christianity for hierarchical, heterocentric assumptions. In his opinion, even liberal denominations like the Metropolitan Community Church and deinstitutionalized forms of religion are inherently heteronormative. So, as he writes, "queers should demur from religion as a reactionary framework . . . they should cease attempts to rehabilitate forms of religion and seek forms of community and ethical sustenance outside religious structures" (Harris 2014, 26). Harris mentions deinstitutionalized forms of spirituality only superficially, without any specifics, and omits the ethnography of such communities that have existed since the 1990s, like radical faeries, for instance. This gay male subculture is positioned in opposition to fundamentalist forms of Christianity, appropriating rituals from non-Christian cultures (Celtic, Greek, Egyptian, and other). Egalitarianism and non-normative gender are emphasized in their cultural practices, so this movement, as researchers demonstrate, has a subversive potential (Barrett 2017).

The complex relationships between being queer and being religious are considered by some researchers in American society (e.g., McQueeney 2009; Samerau 2012, 2013; Wilcox 2009; Wolkomir 2006). Using similar methods to this chapter, Samerau et al. (2016) write about transformations in American Gay Christians' sexual and religious experiences. The authors apply Goffman's concept of moral career and demonstrate the following turning points of Gay Christians' moral career: essentializing religious belief

(description of one's belief as inherent part of oneself), emotionalizing painful early religious experience, spiritualizing one's coming out process (mentions of God's help, e.g.) and sexualizing coming back to religious participation (linkage between one's sexual identity and religious feelings). Though I do not use the concept of moral career, in this chapter, I consider how my participants describe their religious experiences and take into account their rhetoric.

Currently, there is no systematic study about the religious experiences of LGBTQ people in Russia. This chapter is the first attempt to describe diverse scenarios of Russian queers' religious experience, from religious oppression to empowerment from belonging to LGBTQ religious communities. Using the biographical method, I reveal the role of religion in life stories of Russian homosexuals and bisexuals. I consider the narratives about religion in relation to social and cultural contexts that have been changing in the past thirty years. Besides, the social situation varies significantly in different regions of Russia. The chapter does not purport to give an exhaustive description of the religious life of Russian queers. Rather, based on particular cases, I explore in what systems of social relations Russian non-heterosexual believers are incorporated and how they verbalize their experiences. The body of the chapter is divided into two parts, the first of which is devoted to negative impressions of religion, and the second reports positive experiences of the coexistence of queerness and faith in the Russian context.

The chapter is a part of a broader research project devoted to constructing biographical narratives of non-heterosexuals in Russia. My main methodological framework is a biographical and narrative analysis. From these perspectives, I consider the strategies that Russian non-heterosexuals use in talking about their sexuality and life paths. The source material for this study consists of forty-seven interviews and thirty-seven written life stories collected from gays, lesbians, and bisexuals aged from eighteen to sixty-four. For the study on religious experiences, the cases where the relevant topics were discussed were selected from the whole corpus of materials. All names of the participants are withheld.

As I have observed, within Russian communities of queers and LGBTQ activists, religiosity in general is sometimes perceived of as a sign of ignorance or "backwardness." LGBTQ believers particularly face misunderstandings. For example, on the Russian social networking site "VKontakte," in an LGBTQ group, under a post about a public coming out of a Russian clergyman, is the following comment: "Why would these people, who are perverts and sodomists from the religious perspective, confess a religion or even become a priest?" For the author of the comment, any religion and especially priesthood are irreconcilable with homosexuality, although it was the clergyman of the True or Genuine Orthodox Church, a movement within Orthodox Christianity that separated from the mainstream Eastern Orthodox

Church and is regarded as more tolerant. Nonetheless, the position of the gay priest is unclear for many Russian queer people. He is seen almost like a traitor who took the side of the enemy, the church, which, as they assume, hates homosexuals.

Another case from my fieldwork was a workshop on Christianity, homosexuality, and LGBTQ activism in Russia organized by Timothy Sozaev, gay activist, researcher, and founder of LGBT ministry *Nuntiare et Recreare* in Saint Petersburg. He talked about his Orthodox experience in childhood and youth, the creation of his project *Nuntiare et Recreare*, queer theology, and the foreign churches that affirm homosexuality. At the end of the workshop, during the final discussion, it became clear that the most pressing issue for the audience was what kinds of arguments can be used in disputes with religious fundamentalists. Most attendees appeared to be atheist or agnostic who were seeking out any information to use as a weapon in the struggle against religious homophobia.

These cases are not precisely about the hatred of religion; rather, they demonstrate that faithful and especially Orthodox communities are perceived of as "other" and "dangerous" by most Russian queers. At the same time, this contributes to stereotypes of a homogeneous and egalitarian LGBTQ community in which there are no believers. Within this process in Russian society, there are traces of homonationalism, Puar's term. It is an interconnection between LGBTQ rights and a nationalist ideology (Puar 2007). Homonationalism is closely related to prejudices about the "non-Western" world as homophobic and dangerous and the "West" as egalitarian. From this perspective, a homosexual true Orthodox believer seems as improbable as a queer Sikh, the example Puar uses. Homosexual identity is supposed to be modernized and westernized, while a fundamentalist religion like Orthodoxy is considered non-Western and backward. Of course, Orthodoxy is a mainstream religion in Russia, so the term homonationalism that initially conceptualized instrumentalization of LGBT rights by politicians must be used carefully. Nevertheless, this concept may be helpful as a critique of the homogeneous image of the Russian LGBTQ community where LGBTQ believers are a minority within a minority.

EXPERIENCING RELIGIOUS OPPRESSION

The average age of my participants was 33.6, and most of them grew up in the 1990s. At that time, Russia was experiencing a period of so-called "religious revival" after the removal of restrictions on religious activities at the end of the 1980s (Krindatch 2004). While atheism was an important part of official Soviet ideology for nearly seventy years, in the 1990s in Russia, the number

of religious organizations and religious diversity in general increased. Not only did the Orthodox Church become more popular, but various Protestant denominations and churches which were not present in Soviet times, many of which were the product of foreign missionary initiatives, also appeared. As Krindatch reports, between 1990 and 2003 the total number of religious communities in Russia raised from 6,600 to 21,000, which covered places of regular worship, monasteries, religious missions, administrative centers of religious organizations, religious brotherhoods, and theological educational institutions. These processes are reflected in the life stories of my participants.

Many participants first learned about homosexuality just as something negative, wrong, and pathological. The "sinful" nature of homosexuality was frequently included in this perspective. For example, one of my participants read about the existence of homosexual relationships in Orthodox books, where it was said that sodomites did not inherit the kingdom of God. He didn't know then that this related to him but kept in mind. He recognized his homosexual desire over time and after this had believed that he was a sinner who would never be saved. This led him to suicidal thoughts.

In some cases, any sexuality appeared to be linked with sinfulness or dirtiness. It is worth noting, as the participant emphasizes in the following quote, that his feeling of guilt was caused by sex in general, but not his homosexual experience in particular.

> It was my first gay sex, we both were fourteen. I remember that, after the first pleasant and sweet feeling, I felt guilt and shame. It seemed to me there was some dirt, sin or something like this on me. I even wanted to tell someone from my family and repent. However, the problem was not that I did "it" with a boy. The problem was exactly that I did "it." My family was puritan: talking about sex was not accepted at all, and this silence caused the assumption that sex is dirty. (gay male, thirty-three)

Feeling guilty for their "sin," the participants turned to God in their prayers for help in getting rid of their homosexuality. This practice is often mentioned by those who grew up in religious families and were deeply concerned about their "purity" and morality in the sense that their religion offered them. My research shows that these themes are common in the biographical narratives of faithful or ex-faithful queers. In these prayers, as participants described, homosexuality was considered to be a "sin," "disease," or "temptation," in other words, something apart from the subject of homosexual desire. Participants were afraid of their own desires, and they were asking God to deliver from all of this. As one participant, a twenty-six-year-old gay man, described, "Well, I yelled out of the window in my childhood, asked God: 'I wish I weren't like that!'" Another said,

> And every time, after masturbating and viewing gay porn, I prayed and asked God to help me get rid of this "disease" and to forgive me for doing sinful things. (gay man, nineteen)

In some cases, these prayers are mentioned alongside various self-destructive things like suicidal thoughts or self-harm. Guilt about the sinfulness of homosexuality because of religious assumptions is described as what induces people to search for ways to escape from wrong thoughts and feelings. In the following quote, a gay man who grew up in the Muslim tradition of the Chechen Republic writes about the Christian websites where he read stories about curing homosexuality. This case stands out among my materials, and I will elaborate on it later. It is remarkable that his seeking solutions to the problem had a super-ecumenist character as he turned to the expertise of another religion to meet the demands of his faith. Perhaps it was due to the fact that most practices of conversion therapy are based on Christian customs, although there are similar activities among Islamic specialists (Jahangir and Abdul-Latif 2015).

> In my arsenal there were prayers, self-destruction (usually I beat my head against the wall because I wanted to deprive myself of memory), abstinence from sleep, viewing lesbian porn, reading Christian sites about people who were wonderfully cured of homosexuality, Internet search for medications, and so on. (gay man, twenty-five)

Growing up and living in a religious atmosphere does not always mean belonging to a religious community and regular church attendance, but several stories contain such experiences. Given that the adolescence of many participants coincided with the appearance of various Protestant churches, in three biographical narratives, the beginning of one's sexual recognition and acceptance was interrupted by attending church. All of these stories begin with unproblematic homosexual or near-homosexual experiences. For example, one lesbian described how she and her sisters wore boyish clothes, fell in love with girls, and discussed their feelings among themselves: "It was natural for us to tell each other about our sympathies. And since an early age, these were always girls. . . . We looked like boys: short hair, boyish or unisex style. In Soviet times!" (lesbian, forty).

However, when she was fourteen, her family was engaged in the Protestant community where homosexuality wasn't acceptable. During the ten years she belonged to the Protestant church, she rejected her homosexual desire. Then, as she said, she was tired of the church where the priests repeated the same words. The participant was twenty-five before she first attended a gay party and met her girlfriend; in other words, she returned to the acceptance of her sexuality and began her lesbian life.

Another participant, a gay man, had sexual experiences with a young man in his adolescence, which were described as happy and pleasurable experiments. Then, when he was seventeen, his mother involved him in the Baptist church, and after this, his sexuality is appeared to become problematized: "One of the Christian doctrines said that God is against homosexuality. So my slow struggle with myself began" (gay man, thirty-three).

After a few years of life surrounded by Baptists, he was sure that he had gotten rid of homosexual thoughts and planned to get married, but later he fell in love with his neighbor who was a parishioner of his church. Their relationships were not successful because my participant's partner repented of their sexual activities in front of their older brothers in faith. This led to the participant's expulsion from the church since he refused to repent and redeem himself. His homosexual desire and identity were emancipated, and he left the church and renounced the religion which oppressed his sexuality.

A third story is very similar, with the main difference being that the participant wasn't concerned about the religious ban of homosexual relations, but his partner was, resulting in their separation and disenchantment with religion. In all these stories, coming to church hindered the understanding of one's sexual desires, delayed self-acceptance, and caused traumatic experiences of exclusion, shaming, or loss.

In some cases, the participants faced the oppression of their faithful relatives who wanted to cure homosexuality with religion. The older members of their families were trying to convince my participants that same-sex relationships are sinful and to insist on their church fellowship. My data demonstrate that the agents of such "care" were my participants' mothers, although it is not a representative sample. However, some researchers state that Russian women are far more religious than men (Greeley 1994; Krindatch 2004). This even led to the novel situation of gender authority within the patriarchal Orthodox churches when women began to be religious professionals and participate in religious education as teachers (Ladykowska and Tocheva 2013; Kizenko 2013). Under such circumstances, it is not surprising that it is women who try to fix their children's sexuality by religious rites or conversations with priests. Also, it may be related to the fact that any care is women's responsibility (Kittay 1999). Since faithful relatives see their tactics as a way to "save" their children and as manifestations of love and care, such religious oppression is initiated by women.

It is noteworthy in the following quote, the mother turned to religion after she sent her daughter to a psychologist. The psychologist did not reach the mother's goal insofar as she didn't try to correct my participant's sexuality and held therapeutic sessions instead. When psychotherapy didn't meet her expectations, the mother's next step was using religious arguments. It may

mean that in this case religion appeared to be just an instrument for the disposal of homosexuality, among other things, like psychotherapy or medicine. In addition, this case illustrates how religious oppression intersects with emotional violence and subordination in interactions between homosexuals and their parents.

> Then she brought the "heavy metal"—the church—into play, namely taking me to monasteries and priests. And I had no force or even wish to resist, so I consented silently to this violence on myself. Now I understand that all she did was a cruel violation of my personal boundaries and was the result of her own psychological trauma. But I was so scared that she would abandon me, and I used to believe in her claims that my life is a sin, I would never be happy, I should have fought who I am, all lesbians are only people who were imprisoned, and so on. (lesbian, thirty-one)

The next case demonstrates the usage of near-religious or spiritual practices in attempts to normalize sexuality, although it is not the personal experience of the participant. She described the situation in Buryatia in the 1990s. As she wrote, the mothers of her friends turned to both Orthodox churches and midwives or Shamans to cure their children's homosexuality. Such practices correlate with the religious landscape of this Russian region where Orthodox believers, Buddhists, and Shamanists coexist and alternative medicine is very popular (Darieva 2008).

> No one was fine: from eighteen to forty-five years old, all of them had problems. The mothers used to take the young women to churches to cure them, namely exorcize demons. There must be *tema* [lesbians] among Buryats, but I don't know whether they were taken to Buddhist datsans. Both Russians and Buryats crossed paths at the home of Natasha, the midwife who healed alcohol addiction of both nations by *zagovory* [verbal folk magic]. I have never met a recovering lesbian, but there were about five persons in "treatment" as I remember. (lesbian, about forty)

As I mentioned before, in my materials there is a story of a gay man from the Chechen Republic which stands out among other biographical narratives. Chechnya is characterized by a high level of militarization and prevalence of dogmatic Islam, and in 2017, unofficial prisons for men deemed to be homosexual where the victims were tortured were discovered (Kondakov 2018). Such a difficult and volatile situation is reflected in my participant's autobiography. He described himself as a totally closeted gay man who told nobody about his homosexuality except in some cases through Internet communication on gay dating sites. Religion is a very important context of his

life because his surroundings suppose that he is Muslim and he needs to meet their expectations and thoroughly hide his homosexuality.

> I am an agnostic. And I am grateful to all heaven's forces that I don't accuse myself of all sorts of evils as some faithful gay men do. Judge for yourself! A man believes that God created him the way he is, but he is afraid of God's wrath because he was born gay. There is no logic here at all. Therefore, freedom from religious bonds gives me a little chance to breathe more freely. Sure, it is difficult when you live in the Islamic republic where everyone asks you whether you pray. In those moments I avert my eyes. I can't answer: "My friend, I stopped believing in these oriental tales since I was 17." Although there were times when I begged God to rid me of this punishment and make me a normal guy the same as my friends who sat for a long time and chatted with their girls, whom, however, they forgot after a couple of months. But it was not what I wanted. My homosexuality made me more independent from the behavior of the crowd. Although I wish I didn't want to spend the evening hugging my friend. Because it is so low to be friends with the man who sees me as a friend and brother and want to have romantic relationships with him. However, religion surrounds me everywhere so I try to pay no attention to it and say in time: "Everything is in the Hands of the Lord." In any case, it is a part of my nation's culture so I don't see anything wrong in my participation in religious rites, though there is no faith in my soul. (gay man, twenty-five)

Unlike most of the participants who experienced religious oppression, he can't renounce their religion openly without leaving his homeland. He has to follow Islamic rites and pretend to be a believer to secure himself in Chechen society. Remarkably, he describes this necessity as an almost unproblematic routine thing. In so doing, he emphasizes that his inner freedom of religious conscious absolves him from feelings of guilt and shame. This case illustrates that strategies of resistance to religious oppression are deeply contextualized and depend on social conditions.

Many Russian non-heterosexuals need to feign that they are heterosexual. Most participants hide their relationships from their parents and colleagues, and some of them tell a lie about their non-existent heterosexual relationships or even introduce their friends of the opposite gender as their boyfriends or girlfriends in order to establish an alibi. One participant told me that he and his partner could not live together and need to rent different apartments in one building and pretend to be merely neighbors. In this perspective, pretending to be a believer turns out to be just one way of masking one's true identity for safety. Yet nobody else reported similar cases to me. It is difficult to say whether it means that such dissembling is limited

to Islam. Rather, it depends on how far religion is influential in the family, community, or region.

EXPERIENCING RELIGIOUS EMPOWERMENT

As far as my research has shown, there are at least two queer religious groups in Russia: the LGBT ministry *Nuntiare et Recreare* (in Latin: herald and strengthen) in Saint Petersburg and the Christian community *Svet Mira* (Light of the World) in Moscow. While the Moscow community is designed for members of all Christian denominations, the Saint Petersburg ministry unites LGBT believers of different religious and confessional affiliations (not only Christian) and also people who are not affiliated with any organized forms of religion. Both of them arrange meetings of faithful people for communication and collective worship, hold seminars and other educational events, and publish educational literature. Moreover, *Nuntiare et Recreare* uses some of the spiritual practices of the afore-mentioned Radical Fairies, like the heart circle. This is a speech event with organized turns at speaking which other participants keep silent and listen carefully; in these circles, participants exchange their emotional and spiritual experience (Barrett 2017, 65). Hence, *Nuntiare et Recreare* extends beyond the usual religious denominations, turning to the experiences of the combined non-Christian spiritual movement.

Both Saint Petersburg's and Moscow's communities promote queer or affirmative theology, which reinterprets the Bible and other religious texts positively and constructively from the perspective of queer theory (Cheng 2011). In the view of such theology, homosexuality, as well as other forms of sexuality and gender beyond heteronormativity, is not a sin but an important part of a human, God's creation. This approach reclaims the place of homosexuality in religious thoughts and cultures (Loughlin 2009). There are many controversies in queer theology, one of which is between those who focus on identity groups and essentialist categories and those who try to overcome essentialism and identity politics. These debates are essential to the broader context of LGBT theology and have been discussed in greater detail elsewhere (e.g., Cornwall 2011; Schneider and Roncolato 2012 for reviews).

In my data, two life stories described engagement in communities of faithful LGBTQ people. Both stories start with the oppressive religious experiences mentioned before. In both cases, fellowship in homophobic churches predates discovering affirmative religious communities. The first case is the story of a woman who left the Protestant church at twenty-five and accepted her homosexuality. Ten years later she found the community of LGBT

Christians, and this helped her to solve the conflict between religion and homosexuality and finally find balance. The affirmative approach to religion gave her a way to be a lesbian and a believer at the same time. She named her entry in the community of LGBT Christians one of the most important events of her life.

> I had an internal conflict. On the one hand, I understood that it is a sin, but, on the other hand, I didn't. I couldn't understand. And I found the community of LGBT Christians. . . . It struck me when, over time, they said that it's not written anywhere that being an LGBT person is a sin. . . . And they talked about how you could see yourself and your life in general. (lesbian, forty-two)

The second case is about a man who came to the Protestant church with his partner and lost him due to the religious ban on homosexual relations. He described his first time attending an LGBT Christian event as a very dramatic moment because he found information that could have saved his previous relationships and prevent his painful loss.

> Once I met a man who helped me to solve my main problem later. Just then I understood what LGBT community and LGBT Christians are. I first learned there were churches that interpreted the Bible not literally but from different perspectives. God appeared to love all people equally and not condemn homosexuality. When I arrived at the LGBT Christian forum, I attended a lecture about how God accepts us the way we are and does not condemn us, homosexuals. After this, I was crying for an hour for the first time in my life. Why didn't this happen in due time? Why not before? This could change a lot! (gay man, forty-two)

Both stories demonstrate that leaving the church the participants did not resolve the conflict between their religious feelings and sexuality. Internal contradictions and doubts, as my participants described, stayed with them. Queer theology and communities of LGBTQ believers supported them and contributed to their empowerment and emancipation. All of this helped them to finally get rid of the religious oppression that they experienced before. Belonging to queer faithful communities also led these participants to civil activities and to struggle for their rights. Beginning to be a member of LGBTQ faithful communities, they engaged in the organization of different events, discussion of social exclusion and inequality, and the development of the LGBTQ movement.

In addition to the previous cases, it is worth noting the usage of queer theological rhetoric in biographical narratives. The following quotes are fragments of written autobiographies. Their authors didn't concretize

what role religion played in their life. They didn't mention any churches, denominations, religious communities, spiritual experiences and feelings, or anything of that nature in the rest of the text. However, these participants turned to theological arguments when they claimed their identity and right to be who they are. They explained their sexuality as a result of God's will. In other words, as they said, they were created homosexual or bisexual. This kind of rhetoric partly tends to be close to essentialism (or belief that sexual orientation is an inborn characteristic of people) because it conceals the possibility of choice. One young bisexual woman stated, "God created me this way and said that I have a right to be, but humans think that something is wrong with me." As another put it, "Faith in God gave me strength. Knowing that God loves me the way he created me" (gay man, age unknown).

An essentialist view on homosexuality or bisexuality is very popular among my participants. Many of them tend to think that they were "born this way." Essentialism can be useful as a way to accept oneself and explain it to people, especially in religious circumstances. In this case, biological determinism intermingles with religious naturalism: the rhetoric of "born this way" mixes with the "God created me this way" argument. Walters (2014) writes about this phenomenon in the American context. She estimates such argumentation is a trap because it leads to a denial of choices. From this point of view, only these whose sexuality is immutable and inborn deserve a tolerant attitude. Furthermore, essentialist and determinist approaches to homosexuality entail serious risks for queers.

We cannot know whether these participants are aware of queer theology and communities of LGBTQ believers. It is possible that they didn't read or hear about these, and their appeal to religion is motivated by their self-image and amateur rethinking about religious doctrines. In any case, such affirmative rhetoric in the narratives attests to the positive religious experience of Russian queer persons. The participants mentioned their faith and, within these life stories, it does not contradict their sexuality.

CONCLUSIONS

In contemporary Russia, faithful and queer people are opposed to each other discursively. This is underscored by the homophobic rhetoric of fundamentalist churches and the assumptions of queer people about religion doing harm to their well-being. Such polarization of Russian society leads to a homonationalist view on the LGBTQ community which is understood to be homogeneous. Any religion is seen as hostile, and LGBTQ believers appear to be misunderstood and excluded. My materials demonstrate the diversity

of religious experiences among Russian lesbians and gay men where religion is not only an oppressive institution, but where some forms of religious consciousness and communities can also support queer believers and help them to see themselves without contradiction with their religion.

Nevertheless, most of the participants who shared their religious experiences faced many forms of oppression. Assumptions about the sinfulness of homosexuality are deeply rooted in Russian culture, and my participants discovered the existence of homosexual relationships and guilt because of it simultaneously. Religious perspectives aggravate feelings of shame shared by many queers because faithful young LGBTQ people thought that they would never be in harmony with their God. Most of the stories about feelings of guilt and shame that were caused specifically by religious oppression are from men. Although the volume of data is too small to extrapolate findings for all Russian society, this pattern may be rooted in the fact that male homosexuality is mentioned in the Bible more frequently and has served discursively as a bigger sin. It is worth noting here that gay men and lesbians were treated differently throughout Russian history and especially during Soviet times. Male homosexuality was criminalized and considered as a crime while female homosexuality was understood as disease and subject of psychiatry (Healey 2001, 2018; Stella 2015), although Clech (2019) demonstrates that it could be difficult to draw a line between them because some homosexual men were subjected to compulsory treatment and some lesbians were imprisoned. Nevertheless, different images of gay men and lesbians in public discourses could influence the perception of them in the religious sphere.

Since most of my participants grew up in the 1990s when the so-called religious revival began, they were involved in religious communities that condemn homosexuality. This exacerbated the already complicated process of understanding and acceptance of their sexuality. All of them left these communities but it was not always a solution to the internal conflict between their faith and self-consciousness.

In some cases, religious oppression came from relatives who tried to "fix" the participants' sexuality through religious or spiritual practices. In all cases I have collected, the agents of such oppressive care were women, as they are usually caregivers and responsible for childrearing. The objects of this oppressive care were also women in most stories. Without claiming representativeness of my findings, one could suppose that this may reflect the more dependent position of young women in Russian families, unlike young men.

The wide religious landscape of life determines strategies of interaction with religious communities. The high level of fundamentalist religiosity in the region forces queer people to pretend to be believers without sincere faith to secure themselves. Such strategies of hiding combine with a silenced rethinking of religious doctrines.

Empowering religious experience relates to belonging to communities of LGBTQ believers. In Russia, there are such communities in Saint Petersburg and Moscow, and they also have websites that promote information about affirmative or queer theology. Access to such information and social networks within LGBTQ communities contributes to successfully resolving an internal conflict between religious demands and one's sexuality. Affirmative religious communities support queer believers who are misunderstood by members of other churches and atheist queer people. Also, the religious queer communities often involve their members in LGBTQ activism.

In some stories, some traces of affirmative rhetoric can be observed, although their authors didn't describe their participation in religious communities or just faith as an important part of their life path. However, they appealed to divine creation when they explain their identity and life course to potential readers. These data may testify there are positive experiences of coexisting religious conscious and LGBTQ identities beyond communities of queer believers.

In Russia, LGBTQ individuals face religious oppression on different levels. There is internalized religious oppression, exclusion from religious institutions or communities, relatives' abuse, and wide cultural suppression in the regions where fundamentalist religions determine most social relations, like the Chechen Republic. In spite of this, there are believers in Russian LGBTQ communities, as well as the cases of the successful coexistence of non-heteronormativity with faith.

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