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LGBTQIA+: Summoned to Wholeness

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A recent headline in an Irish national newspaper caught my attention which read *Without coming out, you can't be whole*. I followed with interest the chronicle of real time testimonies of five LGBTQIA+ persons. Each in their own way spoke of a sense of acceptance, happiness (contentment), being whole etc. It seems that something happened in the lives of these persons that pushed them to cross the threshold to “tell it as it is”. These persons did so, embracing both the benefits and challenges that followed.

I am of the view that *wholeness* encompasses the impulse to find a measure of fitting connection between all different aspects of our identity and outer world. The separation of the spiritual (sacred, divine) from the body (sexual, secular) in Western tradition adds another layer of duality/split in the lives of LGBTQIA+ persons, who are forced to choose or reject one identity over the other in a sometimes-phobic heterosexist society. Such compartmentalisation works against wholeness – *God who makes everything holy and whole ... putting us together, spirit, soul and body* (1Thessalonians 5: 23).

There is an apparent trend for persons in all walks of life and across many countries to disclose an LGBTQIA+ identity. At the same time, the LGBTQIA+ spectrum seems to be expanding to include new variants e.g., pansexual, sapiosexual¹, etc. Why this development is such belongs to another forum.

I glean that a person may come to a juncture in their life journey realizing that they are seen to be *somebody else other than the self they know themselves to be*. When a LGBTQIA+ person arrives at this critical moment it may mark the culmination of a long, hidden, silent struggle to amend their sense of self integrity. Not a single, momentary, spontaneous gesture but the first step in a complex

1 Pansexual – not limited in sexual choice regarding biological sex, gender, or gender identity.

Sapiosexual – a person who finds intelligence sexually attractive or arousing.

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evolving process of ‘outing’. Might this embody the universal drive to *wholeness*, beyond the simple wish to cease living a partial pretence?

Here I explore in particular the journey a Christian LGBTQIA+ person makes towards *wholeness*. I wish to focus on the interweaving processes of *sexual identity* (as an aspect of personal identity) and *spiritual identity* as central to wholeness. Developmental research is limited in scope and representation regarding the LGBTQIA+ spectrum, but what is available provides useful insights. I draw on my experience from both therapeutic and spiritual modalities, real-time testimonies in the public domain as well as the many searching conversations with colleagues in wider disciplines. Some potential benefits are identified and prompts for pastoral/social and spiritual care offered.

CONTEXT

One’s identity is the outcome of an on-going, complex dynamic process of exploring, assessing, and integrating aspects of personality: intellect, affect, sexuality, spirituality, etc. Eventually, the constant stream of deconstructing and re-constituting of these elements coalesce to represent a persistent sameness within oneself – a continuity and flow of life that define patterns of trust, industry, beliefs, goals etc. Sufficiently so such that one can declare *this is who I am* – a unified entity, my true self.

In the *Christian* tradition, our spirit-life is founded on knowing ourselves as *offspring of God* (Acts 17:28), and God who formed the spirit within us (Zechariah 12:1). This inner/human spirit is intrinsically connected to God, yet separate. As Christians we are able to construct a sense of spiritual identity through more awakened reflection and deepening of faith experiences which enable us to continue to *feel after him and find him...* (Acts 17:27). In this way we come to understand the fullness of *who we are* within that benevolent life-force – *For in Him we live and move and have our being* (Acts 17:28).

No development is ever linear or straightforward, but thought to be fluid and flexible. Developmental scholars loosely describe a three-staged process of an *internal* coming to know oneself as LGBTQIA+, at any age; an *external* coming out to close allies, friends, and an eventual *social* identification with the LGBTQIA+ community, borne out of a fundamental social developmental need (rather than erotic).²

2 Troiden, R.R. (1989). The formation of homosexual identities. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 17, 43- 73.

Fassinger, R. E., & Miller, B.A. (1996). Validation of an inclusive model of sexual identity formation on a sample of gay men. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 32, 53 -78.

From the beginning of life we are faced with the challenge of finding and composing some order, unity and coherence in the force field of our lives. Kristeva (2009) implies that the drive to have faith and trust in some powerful and ideal sense accords meaning to our existence as human beings³. How and when we all navigate our identity milestones is unique to each individual in timing, rhythm, and pattern. For LGBTQIA+ persons in particular there are many stops and starts along the way, as evidenced by foreclosures, even back tracking; personal defences, denials, suppression of specific mannerisms etc. may serve to curb tell-tale signs. Nevertheless, a self-affirming faith evolves with a corresponding sense of self-certainty (including one's sexual identity and how, or if, it will be revealed to the world around them) providing reassurance.

No one developmental model adequately addresses the complexity of LGBTQIA+ identity evolution. However, models tend to converge on a sequential pattern of an initial adopting of multiple defence strategies to manage the first awareness of non-heterosexual feelings, in order to maintain an unspecified/unadmitted identity. Gradually, tentative self-identifying with LGBTQIA+ feelings advance into greater acceptance, exiting an assumed heterosexual status towards possible social alignment with dedicated LGBTQIA+ groups. Many LGBTQIA+ persons find coexistence within a 'discreet peer community' in/alongside the collective. Over time, intimacy ties are fostered in tandem with revealing themselves as LGBTQIA+ offspring to siblings/family.

It is not unusual for negative identity feelings and ambivalence to return, for example after ending a first relationship. Accepting and integrating of LGBTQIA+ identity as a positive, as opposed to negative aspect of self remains a work in progress through life.

SEXUAL IDENTITY AND SPIRITUAL IDENTITY

I weigh in on Fowler's (1981)⁴ proposed sequential developmental stages as an aid to attempt to unravel the pattern of the interweaving of the sexual and 'spiritual me' as it manifests in Christian LGBTQIA+ persons.

Many LGBTQIA+ persons speak of an *identity confusion*, awareness of one's LGBTQIA+ thoughts and feelings that awaken particularly at puberty, but also at any age – perhaps many times through a lifespan. The resulting emotions may interact with sensed benevolence (love, acceptance, trust, courage, hope etc.), or

3 Julia Kristeva and Beverly Bie Brachic. (Trans.). *The Incredible Need to Believe*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009). p. 63 – 70.

4 Fowler, J. W. (1981). *Stages of Faith: The psychology of human development and the quest for meaning*. New York: Harper & Row.

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hostility (threats of rejection, abandonment, inconsistency, etc.), as experienced in the surrounding lived environment. These feelings may, in turn, impact on founding sentience of God.

Not necessarily time-bound to adolescence – rudimentary intuitions of what the world is really like are tested; how they are regarded and whether they can be ‘at home’ here – qualities which may also be ascribed to God.

Their interpersonal sense of others/God/ spiritual – the centre of meaning, value and power takes its cue from the surrounding social culture. Confusion, ambivalence naturally evokes the need for *exploration*, often constrained by familial, religious and cultural norms. When family/Church/social environment infer unacceptable sentiments towards LGBTQIA+ persons on the basis of religious, moral, or social standards, such non-acceptance/ formulations may be transferred to one’s imaging of God and the shaping of spiritual identity.

As LGBTQIA+ persons make their way through *comparing*, *tolerating* and *accepting* their identity they may interface with a censoring faith culture characterised by interpretations and practices of rules, symbols, beliefs, scripture etc. These are sometimes one-dimensional, literally interpreted in meaning as pivotal to upholding a more orderly, linear, and dependable world/ faith community. Further, faith is expressed within the context of the community of believers which places a strong emphasis on those creeds, doctrines, and traditions that are the expected norms for membership in that particular group. Nascent feelings of guilt, shame and self-censorship may influence compliance, or agitate inner conflict.

Literalism inevitably is challenged with growing maturation. Intense struggle, doubt, scrutiny, even charged emotions for LGBTQIA+ persons drive them to garner their own thinking to resolve faith dilemmas and possible contradictions within the prevailing faith culture. Thus, a re-examination of previously held beliefs and values to revise meaning-making follows. As such, there is a longing for safe, appropriate spaces of inquiry to engage in uncensored, unfiltered exploratory discussions about faith practices, theologies, belief systems and values in order to revise, refine and consolidate core values around spiritual identity.

Over time, LGBTQIA+ persons continue to embody their identity as more wholesome beings, anchored on a sense of a God they call their own. With incremental integration and a more holistic sense of self, it becomes possible to take their rightful place in the wider Christian community, somewhat separate but connected.

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BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES

What are the benefits? Many LGBTQIA+ persons who have made the journey of ‘coming out’ speak of a sense of wholeness and happiness; relieved from no longer needing to hide or keep secrets. Real-time testimonies intimate that *acceptance is everything*, a new chapter begins as one takes control, rather than being controlled by the secret. Internal fears and anxieties of being ‘outed’ reportedly diminish, making for a better, more whole, all rounded person as self-esteem and confidence improve, relationships strengthened. Also reported is greater tolerance as negative energy is less likely to be misdirected.

Understandably, there can be a downside, risks to self-disclosure. Targeting of LGBTQIA+ individuals/community with harassment, discrimination, or in extreme cases hate crimes, is an ongoing worry. Existing relationships can be strained or breakdown, significant emotional supports withdrawn. Hyper-sensitivity around what people are saying can undermine confidence and trust. However, there are wider supports available, one need never feel alone/isolated.

Summoned to wholeness presupposes a sufficient ease with who we are. LGBTQIA+ persons tend to begin with small steps, *the ground you know, the pale ground beneath your feet, your own way to begin....* (Whyte, 2012)⁵ Writing a script, or several of them, may ease the process of disclosure; choosing carefully the first person to whom one opens out, as well as subsequent appropriate support; staying calm in face of setbacks; allowing people time in coming to terms with shared information... possible mixed emotions – all help to soften the *rite of passage*. Avoid berating oneself if decided to defer or postpone. Take heart from how far one has come - there will always be a ‘right’ time and it can never be too late.

PASTORAL AND SOCIAL CARE

Can we imagine an undivided, *whole* Church where all belong? Christian LGBTQIA+ persons say that ‘exiled’ is where they find themselves; a bereft place to be. To understand what it is like to inhabit the skin of LGBTQIA+ persons, perhaps attitudes in Church and society have yet more progress to make. That we just not settle for the mere ‘tolerable-manageable’ comfortable acceptance of LGBTQIA+ community but lift the bar by providing information and/or forums for inquiry.

5 Whyte, David. ‘Start Close In’. *River Flow: New and Selected Poems Revised*. WA, USA: Many Rivers Press, 2012.

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What supports might foster realistic and hopeful aspirations of the LGBTQIA + community?⁶ Providing sensitive pastoral spaces for *listening* to understand the struggles of LGBTQIA+ persons as a minority group; capacity building skills can help to cope with experienced hostility, hate crimes, alienation etc. and improve quality of life. Drawing on appropriate role models, information resources, community support systems etc. as aids towards identity integration is desirable. In addition, updating sex and relationship education in school, improve policing for safer streets, sexual health services and fair and just practices in the allocation of housing, employment etc.

Many LGBTQIA+ persons regard the Pride movement (though complex and controversial) as a social and political force for change.

SPIRITUAL CARE

Belief, lived spirituality, tends to evolve from a vague sense of the numinous to a more profound recognition of the mystical, glimpsing God in all things. For Christian LGBTQIA+ persons, this spontaneous pattern may be distorted, sensibilities blunted or stymied by environmental and cultural factors. What follows can help to restore and nurture their desire to *feel after* God and find Him.

- *Availability* of people, pastors, faith-friends, educators, spiritual mentors, prayer guides etc., who are vigilant and patient regarding existential dilemmas and questioning.
- *Competent* spiritual mentoring includes a comfortable familiarity with the interweaving developmental processes of both sexual and spiritual identities and the unique faith challenges faced by LGBTQIA+ persons. With no ideal stage to be reached and no direct route, it remains a work in progress through out a life span.
- *Practices* that notice and reaffirm spiritual identity and guide towards awakening opportunities of spiritual experiences through less instructive/didactic modes. For example, inspirational readings of spiritual tradition can help to dispel needless burdens and myths in favour of a culture countenancing God's boundless compassion and acceptance.
- *Wholeness* - noticing personal desires relative to God's Desire; recording prayer memories, journals, fasting, contemplative

6 At the time of writing, I note that the Bishop of Elphin convened a meeting with a group of LGBTQIA+ persons. The outcome is recorded on the <https://acireland.ie/directory-of-synodality-syntheses-in-ireland/>

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practices, good works, rituals, etc. are useful practices to deepen spiritual experience.

- *Spiritual Guidance* to increase trust in the invaluable mediation that such guidance can provide.

STORYTELLING AND WHOLENESS

I assert a view that the developmental processes of sexual identity and spiritual identity interact to accord meaning to our existence. The *spiritual me – the core and sanctuary of our life*, encompasses one's inner thinking and feeling self, self-stories that include symbols, schemas, scripts that are also embedded in cultural mores and tradition.⁷ We also know that 'Stories have the capacity to illuminate and instruct by inviting the searcher to enter imaginatively into another's story This then draws out the searcher's own story through the recognition of parallels and resemblances ... resonances, joyful or painful.'⁸ It follows that opportunity for LGBTQIA+ persons to tell their self-stories in sabbath spaces can be a further step (beyond initial 'outing') towards fostering rapport (communion) with the wider faith community.

Through spiritual storytelling we can experience God revealing God-self to us, as we reveal self to God. Little by little we come to recognise that no part of God's creation is alien or strange to us, that we ourselves are made whole – *separated yet connected* to God. My hoped-for desire is that Christian LGBTQIA+ persons reach a measure of intrinsic harmony and wholeness, despite stops and starts along their lived journey. Pope Francis intimates that the current synodal process is an opportunity to 'rediscover a symphonic Church, in which each person is able to sing with his or her own voice, welcoming the voices of others as a gift to manifest the harmony of the whole that the Holy Spirit composes'.⁹ In the quest for wholeness as people and *Church*, how might we hasten without stumbling to co-create hospitable spaces for LGBTQIA+ persons, listening to their stories/voices with the 'ear of the heart'?

7 James, W. (1968). The self. In C. Gordon & K.J. Gergen (Eds), *The self in social interaction* (Vol. 1, pp. 43- 46). New York: Wiley & Sons. (Original work published in 1910). See also Poll., & Smith, T.B. (2003). The spiritual self: Toward a conceptualisation of spiritual identity development. *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 31, 129- 142.

8 Brian O'Leary, SJ, "The Mysticism of St Ignatius of Loyola' in *To Love and to Serve: Exploring the Ignatian Tradition*. Selected Essays. Dublin: Messenger Publications (2020), 205.

9 Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for the 56th World Day of Social Communications: *Listening with the ear of the heart*. Rome, 24 January 2022.