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Reclaiming Sacred Space

Patrick Griffin Long

I wrote this piece for myself as a hybrid of personal discovery and academic inquiry, and I hope it can guide and empower others like myself. In this piece, I examine the intersections of queer identity with religious and spiritual identity development and discuss how practitioners can help students reclaim sacred space. Foregrounding my personal narrative and expanding with scholarship, I show why this development deserves attention from student affairs professionals. I give both programmatic and institutional considerations to review when centering religious and spiritual development for LGBTQ students.

*I believe in the sun
even when it is not shining.*

*I believe in love
even when not feeling it.*

*I believe in God
even when He is silent.*

- Inscription found on the wall of a cellar in Cologne, where Jews hid from the Nazis

Raised in a religious family in North Carolina, spirituality was an integral piece of my daily life. Through potlucks, service projects, youth groups, and bible studies, religious practices infused all elements of my life. I grew up in a community of shared believers who had a distinct responsibility to the growth of each other. Coming to terms with my sexual identity meant the loss of the security and comfort I felt in my religious practices. After coming out for the first time in college, I remember stepping into a church service and feeling distanced. Although I never experienced rejection from someone within my religious community, I was certain it would happen. During that service, I realized that any other sin could be overlooked, but the fact that I am gay would not be accepted. How could I have explained the struggle I faced with my identity to these people? How could I explain that it was not simply a matter of choice, but a need to

Patrick is a second-year student in the Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration program at the University of Vermont interested in working in career development. Special thanks to Rev. Laura Engelken and Sharon Lifschutz for their friendship, guidance, and support in the creation of this piece. Their work in supporting religious and spiritual identity development not only inspired this writing, but gave the author the space to begin reconciliation of a long time struggle.

simply exist? How could I explain that acceptance of my sexuality meant being my authentic self and any other option felt suffocating? On that day I realized the aspect of religion I held most dear, fellowship, was no longer available to me.

Feeling cut off from religion did not mean I stopped believing in something or that I stopped having bigger questions to answer. I could not find a resolution to the conflict between my two identities, so I chose to pause my religious identity development to explore my queer identity better. In my mind, one could not be explored unless the other was ignored. At different times during college, I tried to consider how to fit this new aspect of myself into my religious heritage, but never felt reconciliation. Queer spaces I navigated vehemently rejected religion for its oppressive and dismissive structures and the personal harm it causes many in the LGBTQ community, but I could not ignore the calling I felt. On the other hand, religious organizations required a performance I no longer felt authentic to complete. Certain performances were deemed appropriate, but others were not, and I did not know how my queerness fits into a performance of religion that is authentic and acceptable.

The majority of my queer identity development is ongoing. My identity is constantly changing, and there is no end point in sight. In my first year of graduate school, I challenged myself to bring identity into the classroom. Where I once hid until I trusted others fully, I centered my queer identity in class discussions. Putting my queerness in the forefront in an academic space pushed my boundaries of comfort and let academic inquiry give light to new understandings.

The Academy and the Spirit

Pulling on several scholars, Patton, Renn, Guido, and Quaye (2016) defined spirituality, religion, and faith in the following ways. Spirituality is a sense of self, belief, heritage, purpose, and a greater connection to other individuals and the world. Religion is an organized group of beliefs, rituals, and traditions shared collectively among a group of people. As our locus of understanding and meaning-making, faith cuts across both the sacred and secular (Patton et al., 2016). Some folks explore and grow their spirituality by engaging in religious traditions, while others favor individual spiritual development over organized religion. Faith drives us to seek meaning-making in several ways, organized or not.

Academic discourse trended towards secularization in the 20th century, with religion typically valued as a subject matter and not in practice on university campuses (Astin, 2011). Secularization of the academy is not progressive when it seeks complete erasure. It is complicit with the reinforcement of dominant structures, silences counternarratives, and invalidates the lived experiences of students, staff, and faculty as religious/spiritual beings. Failing to provide space

for students to integrate their spirituality fails to validate the full person and misses an important developmental opportunity. Some scholars looked to elicit this religious struggle to facilitate stronger ecumenical worldviews for students, but the current culture on college campuses lacks even rudimentary opportunities for this development (Mayhew, 2012).

With few options to process, students experience religious struggle in a vacuum, forcing adoption of dominant narratives or abandonment. For marginalized folks, who already experience religious struggle more often at a higher magnitude than other groups, the patriarchal and hegemonic nature of dominant religions may leave them with limited options for exploration (Gehrke, 2014; Mayhew, 2012). Religion and spirituality are still present on campus, but not within student development rhetoric. I am not advocating for a revival of religiosity or the proselytism of the student body, but for a shift away from stigma, so marginalized students have avenues for developmental growth.

Queerness and the Spirit

Many of us in the queer community operate in a space of liminality, not fully participating in all aspects of religious practice due to conflicting ideals, but unable to abandon our faith entirely. Operating in what Anzaldúa (1987) termed theoretical borderlands, we are not residing in either world fully and instead take up some third world in between. This liminality may be stressful, but can also be transcendent. We as student affairs practitioners should recognize how we can promote this transcendent liminality. By foregoing the assumption that religiosity, spirituality, and queer identities have distinct and divergent paths, we can encourage the creation of counternarratives (Coleman-Fountain, 2017). This counter-narrative approach disrupts views of normalcy and allows for non-dominant narratives to be included. We need to create disruption to make room for counternarratives that will increase the belonging of religious and spiritual folks that are queer-identified (Coleman-Fountain, 2017).

Following the work of Abes (2012), a merging of constructivism and intersectionality is needed to capture the multiplicity of identities at play here. Reclaiming of sacred space requires us to make meaning together and leave room for contextuality and complexity. Including intersectionality opens the discussion to power hierarchies and how this impacts our understanding of the sacred and what convergence of identity is possible. Together these frameworks drive a nuanced development of understanding across contexts while recognizing the interactions of power, privilege, and oppression (Abes, 2012). This combined intersectional constructivism built on the Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity is the theoretical basis of my writing.

Literature Review

Academic research on LGBTQ folks and their religious/spiritual development is scattered, limited in scope, and exclusive of bisexual folks, trans* individuals, and queer and trans* people of color. Research into queer spirituality broadly maintains a supposition that major religious traditions are either explicitly or implicitly homonegative and that folks must choose between these two identities (Engelken, 2002; Lease, Horne, & Noffsinger-Frazier, 2005; Reynolds and Pope, 1991). Assuming these developmental trajectories are bound in conflict pushes folks to seek reconciliation, through several different strategies, often resulting in personal harm, isolation, anxiety, and even negative mental health outcomes (Hattie and Beagan, 2013; Pietkiewicz and Kołodziejczyk-Skrzypek, 2016; Vespone, 2016). Some scholars challenge this assumption and call for a paradigmatic shift away from struggle, discord, and contrast, towards one that leaves room for affirming religious counternarratives and lifts queer folks as inherently spiritual beings (Lease et al., 2005; Rodriguez, 2010).

Recognizing the dynamic sub-interactions that arise, sometimes through conflict, within a multiplicity of identities, scholars urge us to create sites for identity integration. Focusing on empowerment, identity integration takes place at multiple junctures, including the larger faith community, queer theology, and queer affinity spaces (Rodriguez, 2010). By centering values on affirmation and positivity and creating space for affinity, religious spaces can support and empower folks towards identity integration through community building (Dunn, Glassman, Garrett, Badaszewski, Jones, Pierre, Fresk, Young, & Correll-Hughes, 2015; Rodriguez, 2010; Vespone, 2016). However, Rodriguez (2010) warned that too much focus on integration could lead to isolation and sectarianism. Along the lines of literature, successful integration results in a strong sense of belonging across multiple dimensions of religious fellowship. We as student affairs practitioners must make room for queer students on our campuses in a way that is inclusive, empowering, and affirming; with a goal of identity integration, not sectarian isolation.

Sacred Space

Isolation, rejection, and lack of representation keep queer students from nourishing their spiritual needs. Reclamation of sacred space allows students to (re)build solidarity and connection, raise consciousness, practice resiliency, heal, and find meaning. The reclamation of sacred space calls for a pluralistic or interfaith approach because older religious structures could be too rigid, lack inclusivity, or have histories of trauma for queer folks. Due to its capability to create counternarratives, pluralism through interfaith is the natural vehicle to facilitate spiritual/religious development and integration among queer student populations.

Pluralism and Interfaith

Pluralism is engaging others across difference with a goal of deeper meaning-making. Grounded in the idea that the presence of diversity alone is insufficient, engagement in discussions across difference promotes growth through challenge and vulnerability (Rockenbach, Mayhew, Morin, Crandell, & Selznick, 2015). Pluralism calls for a shift towards a relativistic level of epistemological development, wherein one can recognize the validity of different ways of knowing, hold different views against their own based on context, and grow their knowledge complexity. Interfaith is the praxis of religious pluralism by means of engaging people from diverse religious traditions, non-religious traditions such as atheism, different understandings of spirituality, and philosophical traditions (Rockenbach et al., 2015). Rooted in ideas of the contact hypothesis, through challenge and support, interfaith spaces could contribute to improved understanding across difference, moral and epistemological complexity, and give light to new methods of purpose building and meaning-making.

Pluralism through interfaith is crucial in its ability to support folks in the LGBT community on college campuses. Queer students are more likely to engage in interfaith and pluralistic spaces for their own ecumenical development (Mayhew, 2012). Mayhew (2012) understood this as a product of the patriarchal and hegemonic oppressive nature of most dominant religious traditions. Rockenbach, Riggers-Piehl, Garvey, Lo, and Mayhew, (2016) also found a positive relationship between LGB identity and pluralistic orientation. Furthermore, Rockenbach, Morin, and Mayhew (2017) found despite negative perceptions of campus religious climate, LGBTQ students were more likely to engage in interfaith spaces. Interfaith could be a better space for the exploration of intersections of religion/spirituality and queerness than identity centers because in these spaces no identity is assumed or intersections cued (Rockenbach et al., 2017). If done correctly pluralism through interfaith suspends assumptions and creates an open space where queer students can co-construct meaning with their peers and have challenge and support in understanding the intersectionality of their identities as spiritual beings. A developmental approach of this nature requires attention to both physical and programmatic space.

Creating Physical and Programmatic Interfaith Spaces

To center interfaith, students need to have physical spaces to promote pluralistic and interactions among faith traditions. A prominent example in recent years is Stanford University's CIRCLE (Center for Inter-Religious Community, Learning and Experiences). Located in the Old Union to Buddhist, Baha'i, Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and Hindu students, CIRCLE offers office space for each of the six communities, as well as a library, seminar room, common room, and multi-faith sanctuary (Karlin-Neumann and Sanders, 2013). CIRCLE is a place for

spiritual learning, unity, and companionship within faith traditions that promote the crossover of groups through events, meals, or study sessions in the library. Stanford is a good example of the reclamation of spiritual narrative with a focus on pluralism and centering non-dominant religions. However, the presence of diversity is inadequate in promoting religious pluralism without intentional dialogue and structured programming.

As seen in the research of Mayhew (2012), structured curricular and co-curricular opportunities can help unpack the taboo surrounding the discussion of religion and faith and let students challenge, problematize, and develop their ecumenical worldview which refers to an understanding of other religions, and how one's own religious beliefs intersect with that of others. By following the first tenant of pluralism through interfaith, intentional programming gives space for engagement across difference, making room for organic and relational encounters and empowering students to take ownership of their experience to construct meaning together (Abes, 2012; Rockenbach et al., 2015). Centering queer identities requires we take interfaith one step further and ensure LGBTQ students are given the agency to show up authentically and in community with each other. Queer counternarratives must be represented in the larger interfaith dialogue and in specialized affinity spaces and programs (Abes, 2012). Abes recommended the use of the Learning Partnership Model (Magolda, 2004) as a foundation for developing this type of programming. Utilizing a dual programming approach empowers queer students to co-construct meaning around the intersections of their identities in affiliative fellowship spaces and navigate how this translates into the organizational fellowship of their respective communities.

Recommendations

The literature surrounding religious pluralism through interfaith has conflicting ideas of whether these programs and initiatives should be curricular or co-curricular. Rockenbach and colleagues (2016) promoted the importance of mentoring relationships with faculty, but Rockenbach and others (2015) found curricular efforts were less effective due to power dynamics between faculty and students. Furthermore, curricular approaches might put additional pressure on students (e.g., students answering with grades in mind), counteracting the organic and relational aspects that are crucial for co-constructive meaning-making. A curricular approach might also perpetuate dominant narratives, pushing out marginalized, and specifically, queer students.

I recommend practitioners consider how they can focus on co-curricular programming, but also include faculty voices into the discussion. Bringing faculty into the discussion could foster this faculty mentoring relationship discussed in Rockenbach et al. (2016), but mitigate power dynamics. While staff

should support and empower programming and faculty could be included in the discussions, students need to be the primary facilitators. I believe peer-led co-curricular programming will ensure they follow an intersection co-constructivist approach, by more naturally breaking down power dynamics.

Discussion

The developmental crossroad presented by religion and spirituality is complicated among many queer students. A common narrative in religious and queer communities says these identities are naturally in conflict and cannot work together. Queer identities and religious/spiritual identities are not mutually exclusive. By disrupting normalcy and allowing spiritual counternarratives to gain a foothold, we can move towards identity integration and increased belonging for queer people in religious and spiritual spaces.

Student affairs practitioners are uniquely placed to intervene at key developmental transition points for students. Practitioners interact directly and often with students, working towards their developmental success and fulfillment. Through intentional programming and planning of pluralism through interfaith, educators can create space for queer students to explore the intersections of their queer identities with their religious or spiritual identities. Whether through physical space, or programmatic space, campuses can use interfaith to promote positive engagement across difference. Creating space for queer students to explore spiritual and religious development is a step towards holistic development and reclamation.

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