Contesting Queer Secularity: The Spiritual and the Sexual after Secularization

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Abstract

Queer and social science scholarship has amply demonstrated how contestations over sexual diversity in the public sphere are structured by antagonisms between heteronormative public religion and progressive politics, even as processes of secularization advance in most European societies. In this article, by contrast, I explore how the progressive decoupling of notions of national belonging from both religion and sexual identity has accompanied the proliferation of new subject positions around queer spirituality and religiosity. Engaging with theories of secularization and belonging, as well as Jasbir Puar's notion of 'queer secularity', I examine emergent entanglements between queer emancipation, religion and sexual citizenship as they are taking shape through the biographical trajectories of queer subjects in Spain. The article argues that emancipation from queer secularity and access to these subject positions of queer spirituality are mediated through situated biographical trajectories. They depend on but also expedite the unmaking of antagonisms between queer secularity and heteronormative religion.

Keywords: Sexual freedom, homosexuality, religion, secularity, sexual liberation, Spain

Introduction

On 18 June 2005, thousands of people descended on Madrid's *puerta del sol*, the ground zero and mother of all street politics in Spain (Vicherat Mattar 2010), in order to protest against the eminent legalization of same-sex marriage. The number of participants was subject to much controversy; the organizers, which included the Spanish Forum of the Family, as well as around twenty Catholic bishops, claimed 1.5 million and the local conservative PP government counted 700,000 whereas the National Police estimated 166,000 protesters.[1] The Catholic inspiration behind the protest was very evident, and representatives of several church-based initiatives, next to conservative politicians, took up much of the speaking time. Protesters declared their dissatisfaction with plans for both same-sex marriage and the adoption rights of same-sex couples. Chiefly, Catholics argued that the law promoted a vision of sexuality that was 'humanly impoverished', reduced to individual pleasure and denying the unique value of unions between husbands and wives.[2] The irony of ending the ceremony by playing Queen's 'We are the Champions' seemed to have been lost on both the organizers and most of the mainstream media reporting on the event. The band's late lead singer Freddy Mercury is perhaps the most iconic openly gay pop musician.

This mobilization against same-sex marriage was embedded in wider European contestations against the legal recognition of same-sex identities, which were often driven by Catholic actors and sentiments (Dobbelaere and Perez-Agote

[1] See https://elpais.com/sociedad/2005/06/18/actualidad/1119045601_850215.html, accessed 14 August 2020.

[2] See https://www.catholicculture.org/news/features/index.cfm?recnum=38522, accessed 17 August 2020.

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2015).[3] On the one hand, the intensity of these contestations was surprising given the rapidly declining influence of Catholicism in Spanish society, a process which secularization theorists often associate with the rise of individualism and personal autonomy, not least in matters of family and sexuality (Dobbelaere 2002: 143; Kuhar and Patternotte 2017). On the other hand, these contestations resonate with much recent scholarly writing on new forms of public religion and the emergence of post-secularity.[4] Significantly, the discourses surrounding the legal claims of queer communities were tantamount to the re-staging of the dominant narrative around sexual emancipation – supported in fact by both secularization theories and theories of post-secularity and public religion – that is based on a rigid dichotomy between religion on the one hand and queer political frames and forms of subjecthood on the other. What is left out here are forms of agency and biographical trajectories in which non-heteronormative sexualities and religion do not abide by such neat separations.

In this article, I seek to interrogate this dominant narrative by exploring the multiple crossings and mutual entanglements of queer emancipation and religiosity in a social context marked by contested cultural memories, increasing transnational migration and divergent transregional (European, Mediterranean) affiliations (Astor and Griera 2015). I do so on the basis of ten biographical interviews with Christian gays and lesbians carried out between 2013 and 2015 in the Spanish capital city, Madrid, and the Catalan metropolis of Barcelona. The analysis of biographical interviews, I suggest, allows me to unearth the affiliations, dis-affiliations and re-affiliations of queer subjects with their religious and spiritual lives (see also White and White 2004, Neitz 2000). Following Fedele and Knibbe (2020), I assume that secular contexts powerfully shape the meanings of spiritual experience.

In her book *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (2007), Jasbir K. Puar has cogently described how public debates about progressive politics and emancipation, as well as queer political frames, rely on a particular secular grounding. According to Puar (ibid.: 13):

> Queer secularity demands a certain transgression of norms, religious norms that are understood to otherwise bind that subject to an especially egregious interdictory religious frame. The queer agential subject can only ever be fathomed outside the norming constrictions of religion, conflating agency and resistance. […] Queer secularity understands observance of religious creeds, participation in religious public spaces and rituals, devotion to faith-based or spiritual practices […] as marks of subjugated and repressed sexuality void of any agency. (13)

This foundational opposition of sexual agency and religion has the paradoxical effect that queer forms of subjecthood are not so much placed at the margins of the modern social order or formulated in opposition to it but are in fact its paradigmatic expression. As sexually autonomous subjects, homosexuals 'stand for the ideal citizen of neoliberal modernity' (Mepschen et al. 2010: 970). Puar therefore suggests that 'Queer secularity is constitutive of and constituted by the queer autonomous liberal subject […]' (ibid: 15). While Puar develops her argument chiefly in relation to the place of Muslims in global queer politics, I suggest that it is also highly relevant to the trajectories of Christian queers.

One seemingly central implication of the hegemonic status of queer secularity within queer culture is that it describes a situation in which the only choice at hand for queer subjects is to abdicate religious creeds and institutions based on homophobia and misogyny. My argument is that this rendering ignores first, the ways in which queers create spaces of spirituality and religiosity both inside and outside dominant religious institutions, and second, the nonlinear nature of certain queer biographies themselves, characterized as they are by multiple biographical

[3] Similar protests occurred, for instance, in Paris in May 2013. See **https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-22671572**, accessed 14 August 2020.

[4] For a programmatic statement on public religion, see Casanova (1994); for a critical response, see Hjelm (2015); on post-secular society see Habermas (2008).

ruptures and reorientations. Conversing with the work of Puar, thinking studies of queer religiosity in conjunction with the scholarship on secularization and post-secularity, I suggest that attention to queer biographies helps us to consider sociological debates on secularization, belonging and citizenship in Europe in novel ways. In the following section, I situate my account in these debates, arguing that the decoupling of national belonging from religion, sexual identities and sexual citizenship, itself part of secularization processes, has facilitated the creation of new queer spiritual subject positions. The rest of the article centers on a detailed analysis of two queer biographies, both exemplifying the dynamics of lives *beyond queer secularity* mentioned above. These biographies are driven by a utopian longing and by a notion of queerness as 'a structuring and educated of mode desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present' (José Muñoz 2004: 1).

Religion and the Sexual Politics of the Present

Across Europe, issues of sexuality and gender have acquired renewed significance in debates about citizenship and national belonging. In many instances, such debates and public discourses pivot on the sexualization of migrants' identities, casting migrant women as sexually unemancipated and migrant men as sexually deprived and driven by uncontrolled sexual impulses. Circulating through classical media outlets, social media and political commentary, such public portrayals have emerged especially in the wake of rape cases in which refugee men, mostly of North African and Middle Eastern origin, were the perpetrators and which were often associated with their cultural background and Muslim religion. In the same debates and based on similar forms of ethno-religious labelling, Muslims and other ethno-religious minorities are often perceived as homophobic, and their presence therefore constituting a threat to Western sexual freedoms and emancipation. Accordingly, states and municipalities have initiated far-flung programs around sexual education, targeting immigrants and refugees in order to promote sexual tolerance among them and close the perceived cultural gap between them and Western populations.

In some societies, especially the Netherlands, sexual freedom and tolerance of sexual diversity have meanwhile acquired iconic status within the pantheon of national values as they began to be supported even by conservative political actors who had hitherto not been suspicious of such views (El-Tayeb 2012; Schuh et al. 2012). Astutely termed 'homonationalism' (Puar 2007), this folding of queer emancipation into the national political order appeared to end the long history in which trans, gay and lesbian bodies and sexual practices have been criminalized, stigmatized, viewed as deviant and cast as a moral danger. Moreover, according to Puar (ibid.) it seemed to question the time-honored notion, especially among queer circles, of nation-states' inherent heteronormativity, showing instead how queer identities could be enlisted in reactionary projects and mobilized toward the exclusion of religious minorities. Significantly, since as a matter of fact queer emancipation is closely associated with, and largely an outcome of, struggles towards both liberalization (Frank and McEneaney 1999) and secularization, secularity has again turned into a metonym of progressiveness and a source of modern subjecthood (Schuh et al. 2012) as that which enables people to embrace tolerance of sexual diversity. While the imbrications of anti-Muslim sentiment with sexual liberation served to portray Europe as the 'avatar of both freedom and modernity' (Butler 2008: 2), the politics around sexual freedom turned into a platform for rearticulating antagonisms between religion and secularism.

However, as the above-mentioned mass mobilizations against same-sex marriage in Spain demonstrate, homonationalism may be much less pervasive and heteronationalism much more enduring and vital than is often assumed. In fact, many of the more recent populist mobilizations in Europe – from center-right to far-right – and their affective politics thrive on discourses that

condemn the legal equality of gays and lesbians and castigate sexual diversity education as the state-sponsored 'homosexualization' of children. Subsuming projects towards sexual inclusiveness under the label of 'gender ideology' (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017), right-wing nationalist populism is a central social force behind the new waves of 'anti-genderism' (Von Redecker 2016) and 'femonationalism' (Sarris 2017), a finding that is perhaps at odds with the notion that 'we are all conditioned by [homonationalism] and through it' (Puar 2013: 336). Whereas Puar likens homonationalism to modernity, something that one simply cannot opt out of, I suggest viewing homonationalism as a concrete process with a fixed structure and set of actors. Related to that, there are increasing criticisms of how debates on homonationalism sometimes fail to address transnational collusions of heteronationalisms. As Dhawan (2013: 191) suggestively argued:

> Religious violence against sexual minorities is ignored by prioritizing violence against religious minorities. The sole focus on queer racism and homonationalism in the Global North neglects how supposedly conflicting ideologies of heteronationalism across the postcolonial divide in fact collaborate with each other.

In this article, I focus on Spain as a southern European context that is characterized by increasing levels of ethnic and religious diversity (Griera 2012; Martínez et al. 2014), but in which the dynamics around homonationalism are much less pronounced than elsewhere in the West. With the gradual expulsion of Jews and Muslims following the completion of the Catholic kings' *reconquista* in 1492, Spain became a largely mono-religious society in which church, state and notions of nationhood were intimately entwined (Casanova 1994). Antagonisms between liberal, republican and secular political forces and segments of the populace on the one hand, and conservative, traditionalist and Catholic actors on the other, have started to structure political life in Spain since the liberal revolutions of the 19th century, famously culminating in the Spanish Civil War. However, with the end of Franco's dictatorship in 1975 and ensuing democratization, the power of this political and cultural cleavage seemed to have withered. In particular, it seemed that secularization processes – visible in the decline of religious attendance, religious belief and the demand for Catholic rituals, especially Catholic marriages – had led to a weakening of Catholicism's cultural power (Pérez-Agote 2012). And yet in 2005 the 'Two Spains', as the cleavage described above is generally referred to, were back and took the center stage of public space. Significantly, it was the politics of sexuality and queer emancipation that revived this binary, and with it a particular reading of modernity. In this understanding, modernity is achieved and won over and against Catholic sexual traditionalism and is only made possible to the extent that Catholic understandings of intimate life become privatized and the public sphere secular. In this image, queer love could only be placed outside religion and was premised on the latter's demise.[5]

In an important intervention in the debate, Mepschen et al. (2010: 972) have argued that there is a need 'to get beyond the false dichotomy of defending the religious and cultural rights of minorities versus the sexual rights of women and gays'. In many ways, the individuals I interviewed for this study, their narratives, practices and political commitments, embody this 'beyond'. They are religiously *and* sexually minoritized and therefore positioned at the crossing points of multiple lines of difference. However, as the analysis demonstrates, the breaking open of the dichotomies of queer secularity and religious heteronormativity is the result of complex, sometimes fraught biographical journeys.

In order to understand these biographical journeys as outcomes of situated practices and the shaping influences of social forces, I draw on existing research on life histories in queer studies, as well anthropological and sociological traditions of biographical research (Rosen-

[5] Similar contentions in relation to religion, modernity and women took hold during the post-independence nation-building processes across the Arab world (see Abu-Lughod 1998).

thal 2004; Wohlrab-Sahr and Frank 2018). Life-history approaches in queer studies center on the insight that the recording and analyzing of queer individuals' trajectories gives voice to the lived experiences of unheard and historically oppressed communities and advances our understanding of the interactions between subjective experiences and institutional contexts (Olive 2014). Doing so, queer historians have followed feminist historians in positioning their interlocutors as historical experts, taking narratives seriously and seeking to empower them by returning to them the means to control their own social representation (for a summary, see Boyd 2008).

Going beyond these aims, sociological approaches seek to understand the specific situatedness of practices and biographical choices that steer a person's life in one direction instead of another. Based on the assumption that every practice is an engagement with practical problems, social norms, past experiences and future expectations, the question is: why do people actualize certain possibilities while leaving aside others? Within the perspective employed here, interpreters of biographical narratives gain access to queer subjects' social realities not by reconstructing the subjective meanings they attach to their practices and statements, but rather by confronting *what is said* with *what is done*, from analyzing how subjective meanings are linked to objectified expressive forms and objective problems of practice (see Wacquant and Bourdieu 1992).

Christian Queers in Secular Spain

Any discussion of queer religiosities in contemporary Spain needs to begin by recognizing that being a believing, religiously affiliated and practicing homosexual is indeed a highly exceptional subject position, one that instantiates a threefold social exclusion: exclusion from dominant heteronormative sexuality; exclusion from the center of hegemonic post-Catholic secular culture; and exclusion from mainstream queer activism. This marginalization has been facilitated and exacerbated by the fact that Spain's Catholic church belongs to the most conservative sections of global Catholicism and the ways in which queer activists adopted radically atheist positions in response. It also became abundantly clear in interviews I did with leading members of the *Federación Estatal de Lesbianas, Gais, Trans y Bisexuales* (National Federation of Lesbians, Gays, Transsexuals and Bisexuals). Confirming dominant notions of sexual emancipation and democratization, one former president told me:

> Religion means nothing to me, and I don't know any person to whom it means something. Contrary to what many people abroad think, this is a very secularized country. It was a dictatorship until 1975, and for us the end of the dictatorship was the end of religion in our lives. Religion simply doesn't exist in our personal lives.

At the same time, in queer debates the Catholic Church is construed as the only real enemy, since, in the eyes of activists, conservative political actors are usually tactical homophobes, promoting anti-queer sentiment for electoral purposes. Homophobia is thus located outside the secular society in the realm of Catholic doctrine and hierarchies. Significantly, the secularist and partly atheist underpinnings of Spain's queer politics also powerfully structure its perceptions of religious queers. Too insignificant in numbers to become a real cause of concern, they are certainly viewed with incomprehension and subjected to ambivalent judgments. On the one hand, Christian queers are part of an institution that is a declared enemy and thus placed on the other side of the frontlines of queer politics. On the other hand, they are viewed as heroines and heroes who seek to transform this institution from the inside and end its homophobia. However, for most mainstream queer activists such efforts are either quixotries, i.e. wasted efforts in the face of immutable Catholic homophobia, or simply unnecessary, as they view the Catholic Church as an institution that is already in decline, a dying enemy. While there is some understanding for those creating their own spiritual spaces outside existing religious institutions, the domi-

nant view is that religious queers are driven by false consciousness in seeking to be or become members of a club that rejects them.

The exclusionary consequences for religious homosexuals of the antagonism between heteronormative religious institutions and mainstream queer activism was also manifested in the latter's organizational dynamics in Spain. After the Madrid-based LGBT+ collective COGAM established a discussion group of issues related to religion, religious members felt encouraged to use a hall inside the association's headquarters for meetings that included religious worship. However, as soon as COGAM's leadership became aware of this, they banned the meetings, arguing that the association was civil and non-confessional or even atheist, that religious practices were discriminatory of non-believers and that it was imperative to maintain the secular nature of their spaces.[6] Religious members in turn felt they had been treated unfairly by the association's secularist majority.

A part of them felt that the proscription of religious worship was effectively an expulsion from the association. As a result, they formed a new collective called CRISHMOM (cristianas y cristianos LGBTI+H de Madrid). Thanks to the personal ties to a parish priest and his sympathies, this group began meeting in the premises of a local church. As such meetings would not have been approved by the church, they had to occur secretly. This afforded them an atmosphere of clandestineness and privacy, which actually strongly aided the solidarity among the participants, as one informant told me. At the same time, 'meeting in the catacombs', as he put it, created severe risks for the priest, raising the stakes of loyalty inside the group. I suggest that the group's location 'in the catacombs' is highly illustrative of religious queers' exclusion from both mainstream heteronormative religion and mainstream queer culture and politics. However, the question that remains is how to account theoretically for the emergent entwinings between religion and homosexual identities in the first place?

Building on the sociological phenomenology of Alfred Schütz and Peter Berger, social theorist Silke Steets (2017) has usefully suggested the term 'cognitive minorities' to describe groups whose relevance structures and taken-for-granted understandings about the world are fundamentally different from those of the societies surrounding them. This is especially true of cases of what she calls 'pluralism of the mind'. I suggest that religious queers are a particularly paradigmatic case of 'pluralism of the mind' that juxtaposes religious and secular knowledge around sexuality, whose integration requires major cognitive efforts. Against the backdrop of experiences of cognitive dissonances, there is a need to create further plausibility. One way in which this happens has been the creation of dense networks of interaction and organization among Christian queers. Such networks create cognitive support and moral confirmation. On the individual level, I suggest that plausibility is addressed through biographical work, i.e. the ways in which trajectories of queer religiosity are shaped by particular biographical choices in particular contexts. I now turn to the analysis of these trajectories.

Desire Work and Faith Work

Against the dominant assumption inherent in the notion of the queer secularity of linear biographical trajectories towards sexual emancipation, religious queers typically embody lives marked by deep biographical ruptures, regardless of whether they are raised in pious families or not (Erzen 2006; Taylor and Snowdon 2014). As in many social contexts, subject positions of queer religiosity from which to speak and around which to form biographical choices are not easily publicly available or accessible but are ruptures articulated through shifts *between* queer and religious points of view. I wish to illustrate the ensuing biographical dynamics by exploring the life of a man I call Aurelio.

[6] On the material spaces of spiritual queers, see also Browne et al. (2016).

Aurelio was born in 1975 and told me that he always knew he was gay. When he was fifteen his parents found out about his gayness because they opened some letters of his, chiefly because his mother had already become suspicious of his sexual orientation. Although reading the love letters from his male friends left her shocked, his father found it easier to accept his homosexuality because he knew homosexuals from his wider circle of acquaintances. Significantly, after recounting this brief opening story, Aurelio offers a second beginning that operates as a mirror image of the first one: 'But I was always also spiritual', he told me, 'and from early on I was deeply involved in what is called *New Age*. I went to retreats where I did alternative therapies and took drama lessons and like, culturally speaking, these meetings were cutting edge.'

In this context, he also became interested in theories of personal growth and participated in a course dedicated to that topic. The teacher was an evangelical pastor, and the course was made up of several levels in each of which participants had to contribute greater amounts of money. In this course, he also got to know a girl he liked and began to date: 'I had never dated a girl before, but I liked her, so I thought why not?' and it seems that together with her he grew into the world of *New Age* as they engaged in practices of psychic healing and out-of-body experiences. But they also started to have doubts about the economic side of this world, the weekly payments they were expected to make. This criticism of *New Age* had two consequences for him. On the one hand, it involved him more strongly in evangelical social networks because much of that criticism was levelled by these groups. On the other hand, however, this involvement made the dilemmas and conundrums linked to his sexual orientation more explicit.

His girlfriend took him to an evangelical church, where they read the Bible in more intense ways. Aurelio was impressed by the spiritual personality of the pastor, who, in an act of charismatic initiation, handed Aurelio a copy of the Bible, telling him: 'This book will change your life'. Overall Aurelio felt welcome and enjoyed the specific warmness of his fellow congregants. However, at some point he disclosed to his girlfriend that he was gay. She responded by telling him that this was against God's will and that he had to change. She painted a very dark picture of homosexuality as something that was only practised by prisoners or men in faraway countries such as the Netherlands and that they all ended up killing themselves. Subsequently, they hastily abandoned their relationship and Aurelio sought to find a new life, in London and thus away from home, at the age of 26.

This episode is remarkable in several ways. It is clear that Aurelio's understanding of his engagement with his girlfriend differed strongly from hers. Whereas his girlfriend assumed this to be a romantic relationship based on an assumed heterosexual background consensus, Aurelio refused to address the apparent disjuncture between his sexual orientation and his relationship, or else he saw no contradiction in it. There are two possible interpretations here. First, his heterosexual engagement speaks to how his internalization of the shame associated with homosexuality in Christian life-worlds produced the desire to become straight. Second, his heterosexual engagement can also be seen as illustrating sexual fluidity, pointing to the absence of a coherent and enduring coupling of sexual orientation as an inner, mental substrate and romantic practice. The fact that, even twenty years after this episode, he would seek to generate plausibility with the rhetorical question 'I liked her, so why shouldn't I go out with her?' seems to corroborate this idea. However, since he does not describe himself as bisexual or polysexual, it rather appears that these encounters remain unresolved.

After his arrival in London, his spiritual journey continued in an intensified fashion. He began to read many books written by Indian spiritual masters, but he also returned to the Bible, and especially the story of Jesus Christ. Again, he got in touch with evangelical groups and also actively engaged with evangelical literature on homo-

sexuality. The result was, as he told me: 'Well, if God doesn't think it's right, then I leave the sexuality on the side'. For almost three years, he continued being a member of what he described as 'fundamentalist, literalist churches'. He said: 'So I did what many gays did after having an experience of faith – you try to change your sexuality and ask God to change you. So you do that, but time passes and it doesn't yield any results.' He recalled how he participated in charismatic church healings in which pastors used techniques of hypnosis and other practices that he felt were manipulative.

Aurelio's efforts to become straight powerfully illustrate the dynamics of what anthropologist Melissa Hackman (2017) has called 'desire work'. According to Hackman there is a fundamental paradox at the heart of desire work: one must learn to feel heterosexual desire that supposedly comes naturally. In fact, while heterosexual gender models are construed as natural in the world of evangelical Christianity, for these gays seeking to straighten themselves it takes work on the self to achieve them. As Hackman cogently demonstrates, in this context, agency manifests itself as a technology of the self à la Foucault, whereby individuals seek to construe themselves as particular kinds of subjects through the application of specific procedures. Aurelio spends years reading theological texts about heterosexual desire and makes efforts to date women and develop and cultivate a life as part of a heterosexual couple, thus seeking to gain control over his sexual desires. But agency also emerges as that fragile and paradoxical construction of radical autonomy – the self that allows the Holy Spirit to act in his or her life – and radical heteronomy whereby agency is fully dependent on this external power (Mahmood 2011).

In order to strengthen his efforts to overcome his own homosexual drives, Aurelio even began campaigning for heterosexual 'desire work' among his gay friends asking them to give up their gay lives. Yet the upshot of these efforts was that they began avoiding him. At the same time, in the charismatic church he attended he became friends with the couple running the church. When he realized that his work to develop exclusively heterosexual desires had failed, he took the decision to disclose to them that he was gay. Their answer was that apparently he was not a real Christian, that he hadn't undergone a process of conversion in Christ, and he began spreading this view among his friends in the church as well. Here too, as a result people in the church stopped talking to him. Torn between different subject positions, Aurelio thus faces multiple exclusions. These exclusions highlight the tensions that result from his inability to inhabit the position of a religious queer.

'A reality of which I had no idea'

After four years Aurelio returned to Madrid, where he made a last effort to remain in a straight evangelical church. He got in touch again with the pastor who had given him the Bible that had drawn him into evangelical Christianity seven years earlier. He went to visit the congregation, but experienced the same kind of fundamentalist views on family and sexuality as in London, and realized that he would never be able to show up there with a homosexual spouse. At this point, he finally decided to give up. Instead, he became a member of an Anglican church community that was gay-friendly and sexually inclusive. Via internet research, he found an LGBT church where members produced materials in which they deconstructed religious condemnations of homosexuality and which he later introduced to his Anglican congregation. Getting in touch with these groups changed his life: 'Suddenly, I found this whole world out there. There was a reality out there of which I had no idea.' Immersing himself in this reality, Aurelio became one of the leaders of Christian gay and lesbian networks in Spain.

The analysis suggests three central conclusions. *First*, there are two distinct temporalities of narrating, one built around linear time that underwrites efforts towards biographical continuity and coherence and is epitomized in the sentence

'I always knew I was gay'. The other temporality is organized through disruptions, in particular Aurelio's failed desire work and repeated religious and sexual reorientations. *Second*, desire work takes place alongside forms of religious seeking, or 'faith work', which are manifest in numerous reaffiliations and changes of church communities. Desire work and faith work are linked to one another. But importantly, for Aurelio the value of developing and cultivating his spiritual self is never eclipsed by his frustrating experiences of sexual disclosure. Even after having multiple experiences of rejection and marginalization in both religious and queer contexts, he maintains his spiritual search.

Third, it was only upon his entering into the social world of religious queers that Aurelio was able to inhabit the subject position of a Christian homosexual and that his change of social framework produced plausibility for it. The 'reality' that Aurelio discovered is in the first place the *social reality* constructed through the work of religious queer activists. Aurelio comes to inhabit this reality by 'cruising utopia', as José Muñoz (2004) beautifully put it, and by understanding queerness as 'essentially a rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality and concrete possibility for another world' (ibid.: 1).

His entry into the world of religious queers more or less coincided with the legal recognition of same-sex marriages. Realizing that this was the remarkable result of many years of hard work and continued struggle on the part of LGBTQ+ activists, Aurelio decided to become an activist himself and began taking over offices in queer religious associations. He became involved in the founding of a federation of religious gays and lesbians which also engaged in networking with Jewish, Hindu and Muslim groups. In fact, in 2012 the first gay Muslim association called *Asociacion de Musulmanes Homosexuales* (Association of Muslim Homosexuals) was formed, led by the Argentinian-Syrian Abdel Jhalil Zam-Zam, a man who was a non-practising Catholic until he was 37 and then converted to Islam to become Spain's first Muslim queer activist. As shown by my subsequent analysis of the life of Joan, a gay man at the age of 55 at the time of the interview, trajectories into networks of religious gay and lesbian activism may differ starkly.

Coming Out of the Monastery

The openings of biographical interviews are typically characterized by the way in which subjects mark a particular beginning. Aurelio told me 'I always knew I was gay'. Joan, by contrast, opened by explicitly marking his speaker position, which is worth quoting at length:

> So, I am telling you, first, I was strongly involved in the development of the city's inclusivity policies here in Barcelona, which involved religious and sexual diversity. It was the first of its kind in Spain and has been a hugely important experience for so many groups in the city. Then second, I am the counsellor of the Asociación Cristiana de Gays y Lesbianas de Barcelona [Christian Association of Gays and Lesbians of Barcelona]. This is also a social movement that seeks to reach out to Christian communities. and thirdly, I belong to an inclusive church […] So that you know, when I am speaking, I am speaking from these three perspectives.

Choosing this opening, Joan portrays himself as a person with a political agenda, which, although differentiated here into diverse offices, pivots on one pillar, and thus bridging divides.

Marked as it was by parallel efforts at desire work and faith work, Aurelio's biographical trajectory contrasts strongly with that of Joan. What they have in common, though, is that both grew up in secular, only nominally Catholic families and developed their religious quests in their own ways. Joan was born in 1960 in the small town of Vilanova near Barcelona. He thus belongs to the first generation to experience fully the cultural and political freedoms that emerged with the end of Franco's dictatorship. His interest in religious life began early, and already as a teenager he participated in numerous Catholic parish activities and other Catholic groups. His sense of a calling developed quickly, and at the age of seventeen he decided to become a monk in the order of Saint Benedict and asked to be admitted to the Monastery of Montserrat in the

mountains near Barcelona.[7] Entering at the age of nineteen, he spent four years in monastic life. At least since he was fourteen years he accepted that he was gay and was very open about it with friends and even parish priests, although he did conceal this part of his life from his superiors at Montserrat. When he realized his difficulties in remaining celibate, he went to disclose his sexual life to the abbot, who told him that his sexual orientation was not an issue for him but that celibacy was non-negotiable. Joan stayed on for two years, realizing that his yearning for sexual activity was too strong to hide and suppress. He left the monastery, and within less than a year he had become an activist in the *Front D'Alliberament Gai de Catalunya* [Gay Liberation Front of Catalonia], a gay organization with very leftist leanings. Because of their political views, the organization was widely ridiculed in public debates, a fact that reinforced Joan's commitment to the group's activism. At the same time, he began to feel a growing sense of detachment from his religious life. He began to lose touch with his Catholic friends and stopped going to church. 'and for twenty years, things remained like that', he explained.

Becoming a monk in a Catholic monastery at the age of nineteen and initiating a life in what Goffman (1961) called a 'total institution', with its encompassing regulation of behaviour and identities, is surely a radical and exceptional choice in that it creates a maximum distance between the individual and society. During the period of his adolescence and the insecurities around sexual identity that characterized it, this distance allowed Joan not to be permanently confronted with his sexuality in peer contexts in which the contradictions between being Catholic and gay would have become more obvious. I suggest that for Joan, the monastery operated as something akin to a safe space, a space in which his religious commitments were not questioned, but in which he would develop his own resolution. Eventually, this implied leaving his religious life behind. Fully benefitting from the legal changes mentioned above, Joan got married, and he and his male partner adopted and raised three children. With a stable income and integration into local social life, one can say that they became something of a model queer family.

Later on, he worked as a head of division in the municipality, a time which he perceived as incredibly hard and challenging, upon which he decided to change his mind:

> One day I went to the church, actually for something completely unrelated. It was still the same church, in the same neighbourhood, [and] people knew me. and they already knew about my life, now being married to another man and with three adopted children. And I realized they weren't bad people, much less than their parents. So, I realized that the community was still there, and they opened their arms to me and welcomed me. and And I rediscovered the spiritual side of my life and that Christ was still there, even though I hadn't visited him for some twenty years. And I returned to live my life with faith.

Two things stand out in this narrative. The *first*, is the unexpected way in which he is able to reconnect with his Catholic past, something he feels was not possible twenty years ago and which enables him to connect and weave together the central threads of his biography. *Second*, there is the position from which he rediscovers his religious needs. Joan is a fully socially established and esteemed member of the neighbourhood community, and it is this position of autonomy from which he begins to develop his second religious life, as it were.

Later on, however, Joan realized that, although the majority of parishioners accepted him unconditionally, the local media continued to raise concerns about his sexual identity, which annoyed and frustrated him. As one father of the only openly gay family father in a small-town parish he had become something of a local celebrity, which was not what he had hoped for. As a result, he eventually decided to reach out to other gay Catholics across Spain, and they founded a gay church which did not discriminate against any-

[7] For lucid recent study of monastic life at Montserrat, see Clot-Garrell (2016)

one and which accepted, as he called it, 'la doble militancia' or dual activism, both gay and Catholic. This was the *Comunidad Apostólica Fronteras Abiertas* [Apostolic Community Open Borders]. Eventually, he became the bishop of that church.

Queer Emancipation and Postmodern Religion

What enabled this trajectory, in Joan's view, has been a 'postmodern shift' (his words) in Spain's culture. While being openly gay, a priest and leading a religious grouping would have made him subject to much ridicule 25 years ago, things were different now. He felt that postmodernity had brought a shift away from this 'pure and hard materialism' of the 1970s and 1980s and a new opening for spiritual life and holistic visions of existence (see also Clot-Garrell and Griera 2019). 'My sister, who is four years younger than me', he said, 'is a complete atheist. Today she is practicing reiki and meditation, believes in healing and energies and what not. So, the question is: Is this religion and spirituality?' According to Joan, it is.

I suggest that underlying his narrative of his life and Spanish culture is a particular vision of time, a temporal modality in which cultural change provides new openings and social pathways that have different moral values. This is illustrated in the way he describes the lives of his contemporaries in terms of mental movements and mobility: being stuck vs. evolving.

> Sure, some have become stuck on the way, stuck in the eighties, stuck in materialism [anquilosados, enganchados]. When you talk to them about religion, they still tell you that Christianity is the punishment of the body, but the others who have evolved see that there is more than the body, there is a spirituality in relationships to others, which unites all of us and the universe and the creation. This sounds very New Age but it's not! It goes beyond New Age!

The terms he uses for this idea of being held back in history are worth exploring in more detail. *Anquilosado* refers to people suffering from *anquilosis*, which is a kind of stiffness or numbness in the joints and which disables one from walking and moving. *Enganchado* literally means being held back by a hook and is often used to describe strong attachments, both positive and negative. For Joan, those who in his eyes remained closed towards the possibilities of spiritual fulfilment and flourishing were mentally stuck in a dualistic, uncompromising moral formation in which progressive political outlooks were closely coupled with antireligious stances and pitted against conservative Catholicism and which had already vanished.

Our conversation ended with the following story:

> Something very strange happened to me when they proposed to me the idea of getting ordained as the bishop of our gay church here. For four months I was sick without knowing what I was suffering from. The physicians examined every corner of my body, and in the end they told me that I was perfectly fine. Well, at the bottom of my heart I knew that getting ordained here meant that I would be excommunicated in the official Catholic church. I didn't believe in these things. and although there was nothing, no open battle, not even a debate or a public comment, I knew I would be cutting the ropes with the Church, and it produced this pain.

This story, I argue, provides an intriguing twist and complicates Joan's notion of stuckedness. The physical pain produced through his anticipation of cutting the cords that tied him to his Catholic home suggest there is no simple distinction between moving forward into an imagined queer future and remaining in the here and now as being stuck. In fact, the story powerfully resonates with Halberstam's (2011) suggestion that we transcend the binary of 'cynical resignation' and 'naïve optimism' that is often thought to structure queer engagements with heteronormative institutions, and to imagine alternative activisms beyond these boundaries.

Conclusions

My analysis of the biographical trajectories presented above offers at least three suggestive lessons for anthropological, critical sociological and queer studies debates about secularization, sexuality and belonging in contemporary Europe. *First*, secularization is often understood to entail the waning of religious authority in political life,

public institutions and legal frameworks (Chaves 1994) and as thus enabling legal reforms around sexual citizenship such as same-sex marriage. However, it also entails an increasing decoupling, or differentiation, of religious belonging and moral and political orientations, e.g. around sexuality. Being Christian no longer implies by default adherence to the closely-knit set of ideas around heteronormativity and family values. I argue that this decoupling of religion and sexual identities opens up a space for new connections between queer subjectivities and religion and contested re-affiliations of queers with diverse spiritual lineages, and that it is itself a part of secularization processes. Secularization thus not only produced queer secularity in the sense of Puar (2007), but allowed for the fashioning of new subject positions that pivot on queer spiritualities and religiosities (see also Burchardt 2013).

This decoupling and re-affiliating of religion and sexual subjectivities also opens up new spaces for thinking about marginalization. In his analysis of the debates surrounding the visibilities and claims of queer and Muslim subjects in Canadian educational institutions, David K. Seitz (2014) describes how conservative media discourses invariably viewed Catholic school administrators who sought to marginalize queer visibility in Catholic schools and Muslim spokespersons who mobilized to demand spaces for prayer for Muslim students as the *injuring party* (ibid.: 92). In contrast, he suggests queers and Muslims be viewed as two relatively disempowered student groups that are contesting their marginalization. Such emerging spaces of the contestation of marginalization are similarly articulated in the way Spanish religious queers revolt against their multiple exclusions, wrought, as they are, by the triple strictures of the persistence of Catholicism's institutional power, secularism's insistence on the privatization of religion, and queer insistence on the transgression of religious norms, or queer secularity.

Second, these subject positions are not readily and equally available to actors who are differently positioned in hierarchically ordered social spaces. Instead, as the analysis has shown, access to these subject positions and the ways in which individuals inhabit them are mediated through situated biographical trajectories. I argue that the stronger the antagonism between queer secularity and heteronormative religion and its bearing on the social contexts in which biographical trajectories unfold, the more difficult it is for individuals to develop radically autonomous queer spiritualities. Finally, I suggest that radical queer autonomy, the value on which queerness is generally seen to pivot, also enables such forms of emancipation from queer secularity. Two findings are central for understanding what enabled this emancipation: the creation of interstitial social spaces outside established religious and queer-secular spaces, and the fact that queer biographical trajectories are non-linear. As we saw, biographical ruptures of temporal frames of openness engender episodes of radical reorientation, which in turn enable people to move *beyond* queer secularity.

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