

# **8th International Conference on Gender, Sexuality and Queer Theology**

## **Debunking the Myths, Ending Conversion Practices**

11 November 2021

Hosted by the Jakarta Theological Seminary

Opening address by

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### ***“Normal is a cycle on a washing machine”***

Society and human beings in general have always had a problem with accepting difference. It doesn't matter what country you are in, there will always be those who are considered “normal”.

Whoever is the dominant race in a country will consider those not of the same ethnicity to be on the outer. Being on the outer is, by nature, inferior.

Surprisingly, the word normal is a relatively new word. It entered the English language in the mid-1840s. I'm sure this is surprising to many as we consider it a longstanding and universal truth. When normal was first used, it had nothing to do with people, or society, or human behaviour. Norm and normal were Latin words used by mathematicians.

When “normal” is established within a society's group think, it automatically creates another class, a divide if you will, and the “other” is created. Depending on what is perceived as “normal” depends on who will be on the outer. Your experience of being in or out can be determined by seen or unseen traits and abilities.

What is “normal” can also be judged by things such as the colour of your skin, hair and eyes. Height can also be judged as normal or abnormal. Intelligence another. And of course abilities. So “normal” is often judged not only by what is visible but also by what is unseen.

#### **Left handedness**

Ninety percent of the human population are right-handed and therefore often considered as normal. Throughout history, being left-handed was considered negative, or evil; even into the 20th century, left-handed children were beaten by schoolteachers for writing with their left hand. Because of the way handedness is wired in the brain, it has been shown that forcing a child to use their right can have negative impacts. These can be things such as difficulty in concentration, reading, spelling, and speech problems ranging from stammering to stuttering. Also, shyness, introversion, bed-wetting and nail-biting. These impacts all happening because predominately right-handed people attempted to make left-handed people conform, to be like themselves or what they considered “normal”.

## **Red Heads**

Less than 2% of the world's population has red hair. As this wasn't "normal" those with red hair were considered having connections with the devil and witchcraft. Some cultures still believe this. Where there have been witch trials in the past, many of those who were drowned or burnt alive at the stake were red heads. 40,000 to 60,000 in Scotland. Thousands were also put to death in Germany and also in Europe during the Spanish Inquisition.

Whilst some of the things previously mentioned may seem inconsequential or trivial, if you are now or have ever been considered "abnormal" then you know what it is like to experience stigma, shame, rejection, discrimination and even violence.

## **Diverse Genders and Sexualities**

Probably one of the most "othered" groups of people has been those of diverse genders and sexualities. It's not hard to find diverse gender and sexuality people in every country and culture. Except of course where these people face imprisonment or death where they fear for their lives and remain invisible for their survival.

## **My personal journey**

For most of my life I wasn't aware of the value of growing old. It is only of recent years I have come to appreciate my seniority. I was born in 1951. I celebrate 70 years on the planet this year. What is particularly relevant though to my presentation today is that my life mirrors the history of the gay conversion "therapy" movement.

One of my favourite memes is of a senior lady, grey hair, wired rimmed glasses and probably in her late 70s or early 80s. She is sitting in a tiered university lecture room, surrounded by young students in conversation or looking on their phones. The senior lady has her hand raised to get the attention of the lecturer. The meme says "CORRECTS HISTORY PROFESSOR. REMEMBERS BEING THERE". I often feel like that. What I share with you today doesn't come from a book or from something someone else has told me. It is my lived experience.

## **1950s -1960s**

I was born into a society that viewed homosexuality as an illness and a perversion. It wasn't "normal". Even the dictionary I used in primary school stated that a homosexual was "someone attracted to the same sex, a pervert, a deviate". The topic was never spoken of in polite company. It was too disgusting. Criminal penalties existed for those who were caught.

In the 1950s and 1960s some mental health professionals were devoting their lives to finding a cure. Initially, there were horrendous medical interventions such as lobotomies, electric shock treatments, and hormone injections. These did nothing more than damage people for life. It was essentially experimentation and eventually these barbaric practices ceased.

Soon it moved from medical interventions to working on changing people's behaviours through psychiatric and psychological means. It was during this time that aversion therapies and hypnosis were also introduced. There are several names that stand out in this era as "experts" in this field. Reading back through the literature of the time, it is clear that this was not always motivated by compassion or a desire to heal, but more by ego. Their quest was to determine what that cause was and then to work on discovering a "cure".

Names that stand out during this era are Edmund Bergler, Charles Socarides and Irving Bieber. These men were publishing regularly and considered “experts” in the field of the causes and cure for homosexuality.

The common theme amongst these “experts” was that homosexuality began in the home and was caused by the mother getting too close or smothering the son and the father being distant emotionally or physically.

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*“The ‘classical’ homosexual triangular pattern is one where the mother is CBI [close-binding-intimate] with the son and is dominant and minimizing toward a husband who is a detached father, particularly a hostile-detached one. From our statistical analysis, the chances appear to be high that any son exposed to this parental combination will become homosexual or develop severe homosexual problems.” (Irving Bieber, Homosexuality: A Psychoanalytical Study, 1962)*

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For two decades, these theories continued to go unchallenged. But who were their patients? Gay men and women (mostly men) who lived in fear, shame, and self-loathing. Many had been arrested. Some were in institutions. These were the homosexuals they were treating, researching and writing about. Obviously this was not a good sample to draw conclusions about, but the experts were convinced that their patients were typical of all homosexuals. Imagine what your perception of heterosexuals would be if the only ones you researched were those who were deeply troubled, in prison, institutions or therapy?

The media always made sure the topic was covered sensationally and usually involved scandal. Parents to keep a close eye on their sons lest they be seduced and converted.

I remember clearly about the age of four and I was playing with my two older sisters downstairs from our flat. We pretended we were having a dinner party. They brought their dolls, and I brought my teddy bear. We sat them at our little table and chairs and began serving them pretend cups of tea. Dad appeared, scolded me, and sent me back upstairs. “Boys don’t play those games”, I was told. Dad was making sure I would never become “one of those”.

In my High School years, at puberty, like everyone else, I was becoming sexually aware. My interest was in boys, not girls though. I was scared. I knew what I was feeling was not “normal”. It meant I could go to gaol, for being a pervert and deviate. Two things I knew though, was that I could not tell a soul, and I had to do everything I could to stop it. After a couple of years of battling and struggling, I became more and more depressed. I felt life was unfair and my future looked terrible. I thought often about ending my life and after an attempt, I was sent to a psychiatrist in 1968. I’d hope for an answer, a release. The psychiatrist suggested I reject the friend I’d had sexual contact with and try harder to get close to my father. “I think it’s just a phase,” he said. Nothing changed.

In 1973, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) removed homosexuality from their diagnostic manual.

## **The Christian Years**

It didn't take me long to realise that time with the psychiatrist was not only a waste of time but also of my parents' money. Nothing had changed. I still had the same feelings, no matter how much I tried to deny, ignore, and suppress them.

During the summer of 1969 I went to an evangelical camp. These people talked about God as though he was real and that he could fix any problem. Jesus was the only one who could turn my life around. I prayed and gave my life to Jesus. Now, with my past forgiven and God's strength to overcome sin, I could put that terrible part of my life behind me. I soon found out that my conversion was not the magic wand I'd expected.

This put my life in cycles of falling, repenting, promising God it will never happen again, cruising along for a while feeling like I had control, only to find myself in the same cycle again and again. By this stage, I'd come into the Charismatic/Pentecostal experience. I didn't talk with anyone about my three-way battle between God, the devil, and my same-sex desires. I was too ashamed. I had a breakdown. I was told the reason the homosexuality never goes away is that a demon of homosexuality had control over my life. I went through several exorcisms and was convinced at last I had beaten the curse. Wrong again.

In 1972, after another breakdown, I confessed to my pastor. He referred me to a residential rehabilitation program that worked with drug addicts, prostitutes, and homosexuals. During my 6 months there, I had to get rid of clothing they believed was "gay". I had to do manly tasks outside the home, act straight and have no contact with anyone except Christians from that group. It was an abusive environment, so I left. They said it would take one to two years to become straight, but I wasn't hanging around any longer. Was I straight? No.

I moved to the country the next year and in a small country Pentecostal church I met Helen. As we were essentially the only two young people in the church, everyone thought we should get married. I liked Helen. We got along well together. We spent so much time together it seemed right to ask her to marry me. I say this to my shame today. I believe I was more in love with the idea of being a husband and a father, being normal, than I was in love with Helen. Of course I loved her. But not in a male to female romantic way. I didn't know what that was.

We married and soon had two beautiful daughters. I became increasingly well known as a preacher and within a few years, I'd founded a national evangelistic ministry and was preaching in all the largest megachurches in Australia, like Hillsong. It would appear that all my dreams had come true. But in reality, I was constantly tormented internally by my thoughts and desires.

Just before my 40<sup>th</sup> birthday that all changed.

I met a man and fell in love. The cloak of denial I wrapped myself in was gone and I was forced to face the reality that over 20 years of struggle, fighting, and suppression had actually changed nothing. I was still as gay as I had always been. I realised my same sex orientation was not just about sex, it was something far deeper. It was about love, affection, intimacy.

In 1991, I resigned from the ministry and came out. The trauma of what happened after that stayed with me for years. I had never heard that a person could be gay and Christian. I knew I couldn't be straight, so that meant I could be a Christian. In 1999, I began studying deeper than I had ever done before and realised that verses I'd previously believed condemned me were not about me at all. They were about rape, idolatry, prostitution. I'd always read an English translation and never looked at the historical and cultural contexts or the original languages. It's amazing the difference that makes.

Wanting to support others who'd been through similar experiences, I founded a yahoo group in 2000 for male and female survivors of ex-gay organisations like Exodus and Living Waters. It grew to 400 people. I was horrified to hear the stories of trauma and harm. Most had told no one about this before, but now they had a safe space. And more importantly, people who could understand.

In 2004, my autobiography, *A Life of Unlearning*, was published. It became an Australian bestseller. Immediately, a steady stream of emails began appearing in my inbox of people telling me their stories. Once again, many for the first time were detailing the harm they had experienced. Many had also been through formal programs to try and change their sexual orientation. The others had been in churches which were anti-LGBTQ, and been involved in informal prayer with church leaders or ministries always attempting to "pray the gay away". No matter whether these people had been in formal or informal settings, the non-affirming environments had the same devastating outcomes. Anxiety, depression, mental health issues, thoughts of suicide, and some had attempted more than once.

I have tried to estimate how many survivors of LGBTQ conversion programs I've worked with. A very cautious estimate would be over 4,000. The amount of people I've connected with who have been impacted by an exclusively Christian heterosexual view of sexuality and a binary approach to gender is completely immeasurable over the last 20 years.

One of the highlights of my life was to attend the final Exodus Conference in 2013 and hear Alan Chambers make the historic announcement that they were closing down. Just days before, he had issued an apology to the LGBTQ community for the harm the organisation had caused during its nearly four decades of existence. It remains a pivotal moment in the LGBTQ conversion "therapy" story.

In 2016, the World Psychiatric Association found that "no sound scientific evidence that innate sexual orientation can be changed"

In 2020 Victor Madrigal-Borloz, the U.N. independent expert on sexual orientation and gender identity urged global governments to ban the "degrading" practise known as conversion therapy, which aims to change a person's sexual orientation or gender identity.

The call came as new United Nations research said the widely discredited treatment was used in at least 100 countries, despite no scientific evidence that sexual orientation can be altered.

"The practises of conversion therapy are cruel, inhumane and degrading treatment ... (in some cases) they constitute torture," "I am calling for a global ban on conversion therapy," he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

So what have the last 70 years taught me.

1. A non-heterosexual sexual identity is not caused by family relationships or improper development. Many gender and sexually diverse people have good relationships with parents. Some heterosexual people have terrible relationships with their parents but don't turn out gay. Two decades of that false premise were dumped five decades ago.
2. The belief that homosexuality is an illness that needed treatment was also dumped five decades ago.
3. After nearly four decades Exodus, admitted that no one really changed from gay to straight, including the president Alan Chambers.

4. The damaged lives and those we've lost because of ignorance and misinformation about sexual orientation and gender identity are immeasurable.
5. The healthy place for sexual and gender diverse individuals to thrive is in environments that are affirming. Places where diversity is accepted and celebrated.
6. The church can be and should be the safest place for gender and sexually diverse people, where they can experience acceptance, equality, and unconditional love.

I'd like to finish my presentation this afternoon with one of my favourite quotes which should be an encouragement to all those who've ever been marginalised or considered abnormal.

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***'People who exist at the margins of society are very much like Alice in Wonderland. They are not required to make the tough decision to risk their lives by embarking on an adventure of self-discovery. They have already been thrust beyond the city's walls that keep ordinary people at a safe distance from the unknown. For at least some outsiders, "alienation" has destroyed traditional presumptions of identity and opened up the mythic hero's path to the possibility of discovery. What outsiders discover in their adventures on the other side of the looking glass is the courage to repudiate self-contempt and recognise their "alienation" as a precious gift of freedom from arbitrary norms that they did not make and did not sanction. At the moment a person questions the validity of the rules, the victim is no longer a victim.'***

*'The Mythology of Transgression – Homosexuality as a Metaphor'  
by Jamake Highwater*

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For free chapters, reviews, readers' comments and endorsements of Anthony's autobiography, A Life of Unlearning, go to [www.alifeofunlearning.com](http://www.alifeofunlearning.com)