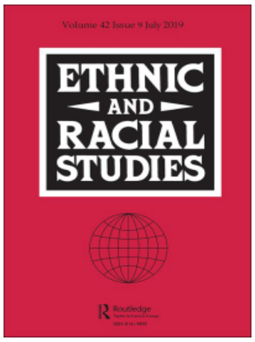

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SPECIAL ISSUE: QUEER LIBERALISMS AND MARGINAL MOBILITY

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LGBTQ+ asylum and transformative accommodations between religion, faith and sexuality in the UK

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ABSTRACT
The right to asylum on grounds of sexuality and/or gender-based persecution is frequently seen as synonymous with the right to "exit" one's oppressive religious community. This article aims to critique this assumption through a focus on LGBTQ+ asylum claimants, refugees and support providers everyday negotiations with and between faith, religion, sexuality and gender identity in the UK. Drawing on critical scholarship on religion, gender, sexuality, difference, and asylum, as well as empirical research with asylum claimants and secular and religious support organizations in the UK, this article shows how LGBTQ+ refugees and asylum claimants respond to experiences of marginalization through processes of "transformative accommodation" between faith traditions and liberal LGBTQ+ rights. Such accommodations highlight the instability of assumptions that view LGBTQ+ rights in conflict with faith and religious belief, in turn contesting the basis on which racialized, secular and gendered differences that pervade contexts of LGBTQ+ asylum are maintained.

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KEYWORDS LGBTQ+ rights; queer asylum; queer migration; religion; faith; United Kingdom

Introduction

Religion and faith are often understood to be a source of discrimination and persecution in the lives of LGBTQ+ people (LaViolete 2007). Religious teachings and faith beliefs are generally thought to be incompatible with queer subjectivities, identities, and practices – a view propagated both by conservative faith groups and implied within secular narratives of LGBTQ+ rights and liberation (see Raboin 2016; Scherer 2017; García Rodríguez 2019). These assumptions underscore the credibility of LGBTQ+ asylum claimants in

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countries like the UK too: "credible" LGBTQ+ refugees are expected to have fled from religious oppression, and to want to distance themselves from the dominant religious values or faith beliefs of their countries of origin (Giametta 2014; Dustin and Held 2021). Nevertheless, experiences of providing and receiving support for LGBTQ+ asylum claimants and refugees reveal the central and affirmative role faith and religious belief can play, something that is often obscured by overarching assumptions that religious values and LGBTQ+ identities and practices are diametrically opposed.

During my PhD research, which explores experiences of providing and receiving support for LGBTQ+ asylum claimants in the UK and Germany,[1] participants would frequently mention religion, often in the affirmative, not as something that has been struggled against, but as a source of strength in overcoming the challenges of homophobia and/or transphobia, or as a key motivation for the assistance provided to queer refugees. I was intrigued by examples of LGBTQ+ refugees and asylum claimants describing where and when they felt most "welcome" in the UK: Fatima,[2] a lesbian from Syria who identifies as a Muslim, told me that it was only in a church in Peckham that she started to feel truly safe and included, despite also being involved with several secular LGBTQ+ support groups. What do these experiences tell us about the role of religion and faith in contexts of LGBTQ+ asylum seeking in the UK? By building on the concept of "transformative accommodations" (Shachar 2001), I attempt to trouble the frequent association between religion/faith[3] and LGBTQ+ discrimination, highlighting instead the meaningful role religion and faith can play in the lives of LGBTQ+ asylum claimants, refugees and in the provision of asylum support. In doing so, this paper highlights through empirical research with LGBTQ+ asylum claimants and support providers in the UK how faith, religion, sexuality, and gendered differences become productive of new forms of solidarity, motivations and actions that challenge both secular and religious orthodoxies surrounding the compatibility of LGBTQ+ rights with religious norms and values. I also highlight how the costs of accommodation – of negotiating between supposedly confounding differences – are borne out by LGBTQ+ asylum claimants of faith, forming an important consideration in their own strategies and claims for recognition which troubles binaries of freedom/visibility and oppression/concealment.

In developing my analysis, I first discuss religion, faith and secularity in the UK asylum process and LGBTQ+ asylum support settings. Secondly, I briefly discuss my methodology. Thirdly, I outline what I mean by "transformative accommodations", before turning to a discussion of the empirical data arising from interviews with LGBTQ+ asylum claimants and support providers in the UK. Here, I focus on two key themes: (i) experiences of being LGBTQ+ and religious and (ii) curating welcoming support spaces. Ultimately, this article finds that religious belief and being welcomed into a faith community can foster a sense of dignity and provide meaning and purpose in a context of waiting, isolation, and dependency. It can motivate support for those at the margins, including LGBTQ+ people, despite secular assumptions that faith traditions are inherently conservative and sceptical of LGBTQ+ rights. By both exploring how LGBTQ+ asylum claimants meaningfully engage with faith, and how encounters with supposedly confounding sexual and religious differences lead to "transformative accommodations" in contexts of LGBTQ+ asylum, this article aims to challenge the basis on which negative assumptions about religious and sexual difference are sustained. Rather, beyond the neatly defined assumptions about sexual, gender and religious difference exist these sorts of everyday encounters and negotiations that subvert the basis on which that difference is maintained.

Religion, faith, race and secularity in the UK asylum process

Being recognized as a credible LGBTQ+ asylum claimant in the UK requires conforming to gendered, raced, and secular understandings of sexual and gendered difference (Dustin and Held 2021; Giametta 2014), especially in legal contexts, such as Home Office interviews and asylum hearings. These include an institutional expectation that LGBTQ+ asylum claimants will conform to gendered stereotypes that indicate whether they are "credibly" queer; for example, that lesbians will be "butch" (Lewis 2013) and that gay men will be "effeminate" (Millbank 2009a) or "flamboyant" (Tschalaer 2019, 6). Trans claimants are often not believed if they fail to "conform" to masculine or feminine gendered stereotypes (Avgeri 2021) whilst bisexual claimants are frequently disbelieved due to biphobic stereotypes that bisexuality is a "myth" (D'Arcio 2020). Together, these stereotypes arise from narrow, racialized understandings of sexual and gendered difference that privileges normative white, gay, male, and Western ways of being queer (Tschalaer 2019). When applicants fail to "fit" into such normative expectations, they are seen as repressed, bogus-LGBTQ+ refugees, in turn racialized as victims in need of saving; as "gays who cannot properly be gay" (El-Tayeb 2012).

There is also an expectation that, during asylum interviews, LGBTQ+ asylum claimants should put distance between themselves and their cultural backgrounds and countries of origin. As a result, "credible" LGBTQ+ asylum applicants are expected to uphold the "positional superiority" (Nader 1989) of Western tolerance and respect for sexual diversity through the articulation of narratives that emphasize the "backward", patriarchal, religious, and illiberal qualities of the countries/cultures from which they have fled (following Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2016a). "Credible" testimonies are expected to articulate straight forward narratives of flight, from an oppressive religion/culture, and into the safety of a tolerant, secular, gay-friendly UK (Raboin 2016; Lopes Heimer 2020). The relationship between credible testimonies and secularity emerges through an expectation that LGBTQ+ asylum claimants will have either faced religious persecution, or that religion is something they have had to struggle against in coming to terms with an otherwise immutable, stable sexual identity (Giametta 2014; Berg and Millbank 2009). A view that LGBTQ+ identities and practices are seen as a "crime against religion" (Lopes Heimer 2020, 202) and that this can be linked to persecution, is a persistent theme in LGBTQ+ asylum cases. Whilst this may be true for many claimants, articulating a more positive relationship with faith, including that it may have offered spiritual or emotional support, or that it has been a source of strength in navigating diverse forms of homophobia and transphobia, is seen to contradict a generalized view that religion motivates homophobic persecution in the non-West (Giametta 2014). To this end, questions that LGBTQ+ asylum claimants of faith continue to face in courtrooms and asylum interviews include: "how can you be Christian and a lesbian?" (Dyck, Kobutetsi, and Ferguson 2019, 42).

The tendency for LGBTQ+ asylum claimants to be disbelieved (Millbank 2009b) should their testimonies not abide by these gendered, racialized and secular narrative conventions is notable. Firstly, coherent narratives about the discovery of one's sexuality, and of coming to terms with this, are seen to be undermined by a failure to recognize religion as a barrier to self-realization. This intersects with gendered and racialized framings of other asylum claimants, notably the male Muslim refugee, who becomes vilified in political and societal discourse as an imagined threat to liberal values of tolerance and sexual diversity (Tschalaer 2019). LGBTQ+ asylum claimants are often represented as figures in need of saving from the savage barbarism of patriarchal, religious (Muslim) men (Greatrick 2017, 6–7; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2016a), echoing earlier gendered critiques of the not-so-post-colonial instincts of contemporary Western interventions where "white men [seek to] save brown women from other brown men" (Spivak 1993, 93; Abu-Lughod 2002). Here, putting distance between one's sexual and gender identity and that of the imagined homophobic (read: Muslim) other speaks to the intersections of gender, secularity, race, and religion in constructing who is seen as a credible LGBTQ+ asylum claimant. This inevitably becomes a highly conditional and narrow category (Wilkström 2014), informed by racialized patterns of securitization and neo-colonial hierarchies between the "civilised" and sexually progressive, secular West, and the "inferior", backward non-West.

These patterns suggest that tolerance for and recognition of "credible" forms of sexual and gendered difference in European asylum contexts are conditional on the perceived threat of a racialized, securitized "other", whose presence supposedly threatens Europe's borders and values of liberal modernity. As such, a clear link can be drawn between the construction of LGBTQ+ "credibility" and the racialized politics of homonationalism (drawing on Puar 2007), which legitimizes exclusionary responses toward refugees (the "other") through the language of inclusive LGBTQ+ rights discourses. In reality, the subjectivities of LGBTQ+ asylum claimants will not easily conform to Western, male-centric and white articulations of sexual and gendered difference. Nor do the experiences of LGBTQ+ asylum claimants prove that European states are, in fact, inherently welcoming to persecuted queer people: their asylum journeys – like most refugees and asylum claimants – are often defined by hostility, suspicion, surveillance and the securitization of the asylum process.

Such processes also arise through a general association between LGBTQ+ rights and secularity in the West. Rather than developing a more complex view of queer subjectivities within the broad spectrum of LGBTQ+ identities, mainstream narratives of queer liberation have led to the construction of LGBTQ+ identities as largely existing outside of, or of being required to exit from, the violent homophobia of religious belief (Ewing 2011). For Diego García Rodríguez, drawing on Bee Scherer's notion of "homosecularism" (Scherer 2017), this translates into a normalizing expectation that to be queer is to reject one's spirituality and religion, or to be in need of saving from one's oppressive religious culture (García Rodríguez 2019, 2–3). By contrast, religious belief, just like sexual and gendered identities, will not be homogenous, and as Moira Dustin and Nina Held show in their study of LGBTQ+ asylum claimant religiosity in the UK, Germany and Italy, individual religious belief will be explained in a "variety of ways, with some people rejecting organised religion while continuing to believe in God" (Dustin and Held 2021, 198). It is important to appreciate how LGBTQ+ asylum claimants find comfort in the meanings they make "regarding their multiply marginalized [sexual and religious] identities" (Alessi et al. 2019, 7), without assuming that these meanings will be defined by inevitable conflict or a need to "choose" one identity over another.

Encountering faith through the research process

I carried out fieldwork in the UK between March 2020 and June 2021. In total, the accounts of 11 LGBTQ+ refugees and asylum claimants and eight support workers/volunteers are drawn on here, given that their accounts and interviews in some way addressed religion, faith and sexuality. All participants gave informed consent and have been anonymized throughout. The majority of the research took place in the South West of England and London, and involved some participant observation as a result of my volunteering with LGBTQ+ asylum support organizations since September 2020.[4] During these interviews, I explored people's motivations for helping LGBTQ+ asylum claimants, as well as the decisions made by asylum claimants relating to the support they sought out and how it shaped their experiences of welcome, belonging and inclusion.

The complex dynamics that appeared when and how participants talked about their faith and sexuality, how it animated diverse forms of support, care and solidarity, highlighted the numerous negotiations and accommodations that are made between different identities, subject positions and beliefs in contexts of LGBTQ+ asylum support. The complexity of the intersections I was witnessing through the research highlighted a disconnect between underlying assumptions in policy, practice and asylum adjudication which often constructs such differences (religious, sexual, and gendered) as fixed and oppositional. Instead, I was witnessing the production and configuration of understandings and articulations about the relationship between religious, sexual and gender identities that were often highly relational, driven by situational encounters, in turn challenging a fixed view of difference or the idea that such negotiations and accommodations with difference can be thought of in linear or coherent ways. Rather, the encounters I had during the research process encouraged me to appreciate both the transformative ways in which difference itself was negotiated in contexts of LGBTQ+ asylum support, but also how these negotiations were themselves mundane, where the fact of difference (sexual, gendered, racial, religious) was less important than the desire to include, offer welcome, be included and be welcomed. In expanding on this, I will first outline my approach to "transformative accommodations" before discussing how assumed differences between religion, faith and sexuality are transformed and accommodated in light of the different motivations, identities and experiences of "welcome" and "belonging" that emerge in LGBTQ+ asylum support contexts.

Transformative accommodations: negotiating difference in contexts of diversity

"Transformative accommodations" is a concept that aims to recognize how the tensions and negotiations that emerge in contexts of multicultural difference do not result in inevitable conflict (Shachar 2001). This echoes theoretical perspectives that view multiculturalism as transformative rather than tokenistic, leading different groups to develop new practices, identifications, concepts, and discourses that reflect the need to expand rather than narrow-down who is or is not "included" within specific cultural, social and religious communities (Kymlicka 2010). Building on "transformative accommodations" highlights how prevailing assumptions about cultural tension and difference create a false dichotomy around where "rights" and "culture" lie. In the context of the UK, this can be seen in the way that asylum decisions tend to essentialize LGBTQ+ asylum as being a choice between exiting one's backward religious culture, thereby securing your rights as a free LGBTQ+ person, or of being stuck in one's culture, either as a bogus asylum claimant or as a victim of shame and internalized homophobia (Giametta 2014, 592).

Nevertheless, there are limits to such "transformations" in contexts of LGBTQ+ asylum. Processes of securitization and bordering hardens racial, gendered, and sexual difference into monolithic archetypes that shape who is and who is not seen as worthy (Mole 2020), deserving (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2016a) and "credible" in the eyes of asylum adjudicators, the state and different support providers. The need to "fit" into certain gendered, secular, and racialized expectations about LGBTQ+ identities and vulnerabilities inevitably closes opportunities for transformative articulations of difference. Asylum policies correlate with the unequal politics of citizenship, preventing many who are going through the system of being or feeling "included" in any meaningful sense (Kymlicka 2010). In the UK, the rights and recognition of certain individuals and communities becomes animated in opposition to an imagined and excluded other, the bogus refugee, the illegal immigrant, the terrorist, in turn framing both how difference is understood and managed politically, but also the scope for diverse articulations that subvert the basis on which such hierarchies and inequalities are sustained. Moreover, at a personal level, many LGBTQ+ asylum claimants may feel reluctant to engage with or encounter religious belief, communities and ideas, given past experiences of oppression, homophobia and transphobia (Karimi 2018, 11). For others, continuing to practice their faith in the UK may require them to conceal their sexuality from diaspora or religious communities in countries because, in the face of poverty and destitution, material support from such communities remains an important part of their survival strategies (Goba 2021). In this sense, we must also recognize how LGBTQ+ asylum claimants are required to bear the costs of accommodation, whereby continued participation in religious communities may itself be predicated on the need to conceal one's sexual identity, despite the existence of LGBTQ+ rights protections on the part of the UK state.

Nevertheless, "transformative accommodations" are evident in the everyday negotiations and decisions made by LGBTQ+ asylum claimants, which this article will go on to address. As a concept, "transformative accommodations" does not imply that tensions between religious, gender and sexual difference will be "overcome" but rather that these tensions should not be viewed as inherently confrontational or oppositional. Such accommodations co-exist with and respond to the limits of recognition that arise through a narrow conceptualization of sexual and gendered difference. As such, "transformative accommodations" highlights the limits of liberal tolerance for difference and how these emerge at precisely the points at which it encounters, building on Elizabeth Povinelli (Povinelli 2002) and Tom Boellstroff, "forms of incommensurability that refuse the sameness on which that difference depends" (Boellstroff 2005, 37). In this way, LGBTQ+ asylum claimants are expected to conform to the expectations of what it means to be gay, lesbian, bisexual and so on, if they are to be granted asylum, drawing on highly gendered, racialized and Western-centric stereotypes of difference that help put distance between them and the undesirable homophobic (read religious, Islamic, conservative) "other". Failing to do this, including by articulating a continuing affinity to a religion, comes into conflict with the conditionality of liberal emancipation and its expectation that LGBTQ+ asylum claimants will articulate a "correct" account of their identity as secular.

By contrast, "transformative accommodations" argues for a view of difference as constructed (and contested) through mutable rather than inherently conflictual interactions and encounters (Shachar 2001). This challenges a framing of sexual and religious difference as being defined by unbridgeable conflict. Rather, out of supposedly competing moral and ethical norms can new forms of accommodation emerge. Rather than directly apply Shachar's theoretical framing – which is more focused on matters of political theory and discussions on multicultural accommodations – I borrow (and transpose) "transformative accommodations" to emphasize how sexual, gendered and religious differences are negotiated in the lives of LGBTQ+ asylum claimants *beyond* a framing of inevitable conflict and tension, or an expectation that one must choose a "primary affiliation" (Shachar 2001, 120). Examples from my empirical research show how these negotiations, from a pastor motivated by faith teachings to fight homophobia and transphobia, to the sharing of religious and spiritual support by LGBTQ+ asylum claimants in secular support spaces, upend the idea that religious and sexual difference must always be at odds with one another. My framing of "transformative accommodations" also seeks to challenge the logics of LGBTQ+ asylum "credibility" discussed earlier, which makes incomprehensible precisely these sorts of everyday negotiations between religious, sexual and gendered difference. By contrast, this article aims to recognize the productiveness of these sorts of accommodations, and how they subvert oppressive norms within both secular and religious orthodoxies, as well as facilitate new solidarities and accommodations in the face of racialized subjectivations and state violence.

Accounting for such "transformative accommodations" recognizes how LGBTQ+ asylum claimants, and those that support them, can and do deal with sexual and gendered differences in a way that resists a fixed or narrow view of such differences. This includes a recognition on the part of some to celebrate religious diversity within LGBTQ+ communities, or to proudly articulate how their faith has helped them to deal with the uncertainties of the UK asylum system. Likewise, LGBTQ+ members of religiously "conservative" communities find ways of resisting and/or accommodating different attitudes, revealing patterns of action that trouble assumptions of homophobia as an inherent outcome of queer encounters with such communities (Yip 2012). Indeed, motivations to participate in religious communities, and to welcome LGBTQ+ people into these communities, draw on theological and ethical positions that seek to offer sanctuary and inclusion as an act of faith, creating the basis for solidarity and reciprocity that should not be overlooked. Ultimately, whilst explaining shifting religious attitudes toward sexual difference is a complex endeavour (Page and Shipley 2020), recognizing such negotiations and accommodations is important in accounting for the transformations that emerge in diverse contexts of asylum seeking. Here, various forms of subjectivation, liberation and meaning making emerge through the negotiations that LGBTQ+ asylum claimants make between their multiple faith, sexual and gender identities.

Making sense of sexual and faith identities in contexts of LGBTQ+ asylum

Sociological literature shows how LGBTQ+ people of faith accommodate and navigate the intersection of their religious belief and sexual and/or gender identity in complex and specific ways (Brintnall 2013), including strategies of "identity compartmentalisation" (Yip 2005) and through the articulation of affirmative readings of religious texts (Alpert 1998). Here, we see a link between sociological studies relating to faith and sexuality, and the work of liberation theologists who have developed theological arguments to support historically marginalized identities (Althaus-Reid 2003) often in relation to histories of LGBTQ+ liberation in the West (Schneider and Roncolato 2012). Whilst such work has mostly focused on the relationship between Christianity and homosexuality (see Yip 1999), several recent studies on Islam have emerged (García Rodríguez 2019; Peumans 2017; Alessi et al. 2019), all of which help to contest a view that LGBTQ+ subjecthood is formed in opposition to or outside of "the norming constrictions of religion" (Puar 2007 cited by García Rodríguez 2019, 2). Such studies are useful in addressing how sexuality and religious identity intersect beyond a purely confrontational framework.

However, there is an assumption within much of the literature that such negotiations will be highly fraught in the lives of queer people of faith, reflecting a wider expectation that faith and sexual identities form confrontational aspects of one's identity to be "resolved". By contrast, as Diego García-Rodríguez's study of queer Muslim communities in Java, Indonesia, highlights, modalities of agency that arise in the building of queer faith spaces challenge the frequent dichotomy of secular emancipation versus religious intolerance present in many Western-oriented studies of sexuality and faith (2019). García-Rodríguez's research demonstrates the value of exploring such questions through the prism of everyday lives and lived experiences, as a means of challenging wider epistemological assumptions that such negotiations will be prompted or defined by a need to "resolve" conflictual differences between religious belief and sexual or gender identity.

The relevance of this literature to studies of LGBTQ+ asylum seeking is significant but infrequently applied to research in this context. This is despite the presence of a small but not insignificant number of faith-based groups who work to support LGBTQ+ people and asylum claimants in the UK, such as Imaan, Metropolitan Community Churches, Quest, Keshet UK and many locally based initiatives.[5] As such, literature on sexuality, gender and faith offers insights into not only how LGBTQ+ asylum claimants make accommodations between various aspects of their religious, sexual and gender identities, but also how faith motivates diverse forms of support for LGBTQ+ people seeking protection from persecution. Such literature is also helpful in moving beyond a view that emphasizes the inherent "conflict" between faith and sexual difference. For example, several interviewees spoke of how they found sanctuary in spaces that may otherwise be disinterested in affirming the rights of LGBTQ+ people, such as mosques and church spaces, but that this did not necessarily result in a "struggle" for them. Instead, as is the case with Sarah,[6] a lesbian asylum claimant from Uganda living in the South West of England who I interviewed and spoke to regularly from autumn 2020, attending a church allowed her to feel connected to her family and son who she had not seen in years. She reflected on how this helped her to deal with her PTSD and a profound sense of loss that she felt was not fully addressed through the psychological support she was receiving. During her first visit to the church, children from the community led the congregation, which Sarah reflected had the following affects:

> I went there to lift that grief [of losing family] and when I went there, they gave me [a sense of] how important I am. Everything they said it was like my son talking to me. You know, sometimes you feel very sick, but we understand … we are also there for you, you know.

This example highlights how LGBTQ+ asylum claimant accommodations between religious belief and their gender and/or sexual identity are framed by a nuanced understanding of their own needs, including spiritual needs. In this sense, Sarah's experience of familial separation was addressed through the spiritual solace she found in the church, reflecting the importance of family and faith practices in maintaining a link to loved ones. This can often be overlooked through an assumption that LGBTQ+ asylum claimants will have been shunned by their family, or that they would rather build new relations with their "chosen family" of fellow LGBTQ+ people instead (Kim and Feyissa 2021). By contrast, participating in the church helped Sarah to address the material realities of waiting, separation and loneliness that arise in securitized contexts of asylum and, crucially, offered her a sense of self-worth that she had struggled to find through other support groups: "If I didn't go to that church, I wouldn't be alive today because I was scared of picking myself up."

Moreover, whilst Sarah felt she had to conceal her lesbian identity in the church, she did not see such concealment as the "price" of practicing her faith. Far from viewing her religious and sexual identity as something to "resolve", Sarah instead talked about how the church helped her to build a sense of dignity and self-worth as "a human". In response to my question about how she handled the possible tensions that exist between her sexuality and her faith, Sarah was initially baffled. The idea that there could be a "conflict" was anathema to her; her Christian faith had always been an important part of her identity and whilst she recognized that homophobia did exist in the churches she had participated in, including in the UK, the idea that this made her any less Christian, or that her faith made her any less of a lesbian, was strongly rebutted:

> to me, as a Christian, I believe in God. If he says every person, he doesn't mean every straight person. Every person includes me. Every human being, that includes me. So, I cut out whatever any other Christian is saying, that I am not human enough. […] If it says in the Bible that I am his child, who is anybody to tell me I'm not.

The way in which Sarah talked about her sexuality and faith challenges a view that such identities are fixed and oppositional. Accounting for the situated and particular knowledges LGBTQ+ asylum claimants, such as Sarah, have about their own sexuality and faith alert us to the limits of existing secular paradigms that frame sexuality and faith as oppositional forms of difference. By contrast, and building on García-Rodríguez's discussion of the modalities of agency within queer Muslim communities in Indonesia (2019), it is possible to see how supposedly confounding differences are "transformed" through the practices and actions of those who inhabit marginal subject positions at various points of encounter.

Such accommodations often involved LGBTQ+ asylum claimants distinguishing between "official" or "institutional" religious belief, and personal or individual belief. For example, for Fatima,[7] a lesbian refugee from Syria living in London who I interviewed by phone in October 2020, her belief as a Muslim is sustained through a rejection of organized religion on the one hand, which she describes as restrictive, and through a more personal relationship with God on the other:

> At the end of the day, my personal feeling is that "religion" is restriction. However, *I* am religious. When *I* think about religion I think about God, about not being alone, about how shitty everybody is, and God is wonderful. (My emphasis added)

As with Sarah, Fatima's faith belief plays an important role in building a sense of support and belonging, and of dealing with experiences of isolation and discrimination that arise through the UK's asylum system, despite a recognition that formal or institutionalized religion can be and has been a source of gendered and sexual restriction in her own life. The co-existence of such positions highlights how Fatima understands her own sexuality and religious belief as something personal to her, and not as something she needs to "explain" or resolve. For Fatima, her faith plays a crucial role in building a sense of dignity and community that is not foreclosed by processes of inclusion and exclusion implied by a normative view of communities and identities as being formed around "primary affiliations" (Shachar 2001, 120): in this instance that because she is a lesbian, she only *belongs* in an LGBTQ + community, and not a Muslim community, and vice versa.

However, despite her own subjective understandings of sexual and religious identity, Fatima found that her identity as a Muslim woman often determined how she was interpellated and supported in secular spaces and contexts. She recounts with frustration how asylum support workers in London often assumed that she must be straight because she was a Muslim woman from Syria. As a result, she was often referred to womens' support groups, meaning she had to share space with people she felt uncomfortable to be around: "There are assumptions that if you are Muslim, if you are a refugee, that means you are straight, that nobody attacks you for being, you know, gay." In Fatima's experience, her "primary affiliation" (Shachar 2001, 120) was often interpellated in support spaces as one of being a straight Muslim woman, making it more difficult for her to move beyond this categorization, or to seek support relating to other aspects of her identity, including her sexuality. It was also in this context that Fatima felt tied down by an expectation that, as a Muslim woman, she will be suffering, echoing how gender often contributes to a racialized view of Islam as patriarchal, promoting interventions that aim to "save" Muslim women from the oppression of other Muslim men (Abu-Lughod 2002).

Similar to depictions of Muslim men as "dangerous" and "threatening" figures in contexts of asylum, Fatima's experience highlights how the categories of woman, refugee and Muslim intersect in Western imaginations to constitute the figure of the "pure" victim (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2016b). Defined by the suffering they have experienced, such gendered assumptions sustain modes of support and intervention that prevent Muslim women refugees from articulating their own subjectivations (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2014): in this case, being a lesbian Muslim woman looking for friends, love and a community who understands her. This was extremely irritating for Fatima, who hoped that life in the UK might afford her greater freedom as a lesbian; instead, the conditionality of support offered to her ensured she was not understood as anything more than a "Muslim woman", leading her to criticize secular support groups for reproducing the same forms of intelligibility and "restrictions" (Fatima) that had framed her past experiences of being persecuted as someone whose sexuality set her outside the norms of her family and community in Syria. In responding to these frustrations, LGBTQ+

asylum claimants find ways to practice their faith and articulate their sexual or gender identities on their own terms. For Fatima, this meant volunteering at an LGBTQ+ homeless shelter, and finding a community of support there that did not see her purely as a "Muslim woman refugee".

Curating "welcoming" support spaces? Transformative accommodations in practice

The presence of LGBTQ+ asylum claimants and refugees in faith spaces also changes how faith communities think about sexual subjectivities and religious belief, highlighting how practices and understandings about difference are "transformed" through various points of encounter. One key theme that emerged related to the changing practices of some support groups, and how these reflected changing understandings of sexual and religious difference in contexts of support. For one church in the South West that has been offering social support, food and clothing to refugees and asylum claimants since 2011, the arrival of increasing numbers of LGBTQ+ asylum claimants has prompted the church to thoroughly consider how they can welcome LGBTQ+ people in inclusive and supportive ways. Prior to this, there existed an organizational assumption that the support they offered would not be particularly welcoming to LGBTQ+ people, in part because the support is based in a church and is faith motivated. A support worker explained why this was the case, based on his own Christian background:

> Coming from a Christian background, I often see how it [being LGBTQ+] can be this real driver away from a personal spiritual practice or a personal faith and that was really interesting to see the opposite being true.

Whilst the work of this church stems from a radical and liberatory theological position, of acting out a Christian calling "to be the hands and feet of Jesus, or to be a neighbour to all people" (support worker), the anticipation that tensions between religious belief and sexual and gendered difference will in some way prevent LGBTQ+ asylum claimants from feeling "welcomed" by the church was interpreted as an inherent limit to the support they could provide. However, encountering LGBTQ+ people of multiple faith traditions through the support the church offered prompted the service coordinators to reassess the validity of such assumptions.

> the moment that kind of clicked for me was when some of these Bangladeshi men, who were all gay, had been to mosque and they were all wearing their finest national dress for prayers or whatever, and came to see us after they prayed, and I guess just clocking that, okay, continuing to participate in Islam and in the religious life of their communities is obviously really, really important to these guys.

Through such encounters, we see how prevailing assumptions about who might or might not feel "welcomed" or included within certain faith spaces are contested through the everyday interactions that take place in contexts of asylum support. Following such encounters, the church sought to adopt new practices, including flying the LGBTQ+ rainbow flag, to demarcate the consecrated Catholic church as simultaneously welcoming to and inclusive of diverse LGBTQ+ people. Similarly, the support that the church offers has adopted an extensive equality monitoring system and diversity training to all support workers, as a way of welcoming and of "advocating for the rights of our queer members" (support worker). Such accommodations also have the effect of producing new articulations of what it means to be Christian. From the perspective of the support worker, "[we] take great pleasure in the fact that there's a pride flag hanging in a Roman Catholic church, and there are Muslims praying here and breaking their fast here during Ramadan". In this example, there is less of an imperative to clearly define who the support or the space is for, but rather a comfort in dealing with a more universal approach to multiplicity than is evident in Fatima's experience of being helped only as a "Muslim woman refugee" by secular asylum support groups. In this specific example, the ethical and theological motivations underscoring the church's response to asylum claimants and refugees reflects a process of adaptation and accommodation which both challenges who the "church" is for, and what it means to practice faith.

However, Layla,[8] a lesbian refugee from Syria who is not religious, and who received support from this same church in the South West, still felt that she had to regularly hide who she was in the space. Despite the church taking clear and visible efforts to promote LGBTQ+ inclusion, including by flying the pride flag, Layla continued to "feel out of place because being there with other refugees, and some of them maybe from the same cultural background, I found that I still can't be open". This highlights how efforts on the part of church to make LGBTQ+ people feel welcome did not necessarily translate into a genuine feeling of inclusion for all. Layla remained mindful of the fact that such markers of inclusion would not necessarily mean that others with whom she shared the space (including support staff) would accept her as a lesbian. In response to this, Layla decided to "just stop going there". In expanding on this point, she said that:

> I know they will not hurt me. I know they cannot send me out, but there is no point […] I am not here to teach them to be open minded [laughs]. Seriously! That's why I stopped going. That's the reason.

In this example, we see how attempts to promote feelings of inclusion and welcome for LGBTQ+ refugees and asylum claimants by faith groups will sometimes fail. Despite a church group recognizing and responding to the importance of LGBTQ+-inclusion in their support services, Leyla continued to perceive faith spaces as containers for homophobic attitudes. Whilst she said she had not experienced homophobia whilst receiving material support from the church, she still felt unable to "be herself" or to make more meaningful connections with others in the group, for fear of being rejected.

Layla's case is an important reminder that many LGBTQ+ people will not be religious and will not want to make accommodations with religion because it has been a real source of conflict and tension in their lives. However, encounters with faith in new contexts such as the UK, as well as with other people of faith, can still be *transformative* rather than inherently conflictual, even when accommodations become impossible or undesirable. For example, Layla began volunteering at a Salvation Army charity shop, unaware of the charity's Christian origins. Had she known this beforehand, she says she would not have taken up an opportunity there for fear that she would face some form of homophobia. However, it was in the charity shop that Layla made her "first friend" in the UK, a Christian woman who was also a volunteer:

> it was funny because the first person I became a friend with worked in the charity. I was open to her [about my sexuality] and then she told me it was a Christian charity [laughs]. No, we were laughing because, for me, it's still … I was still new, and I didn't know if it's really accepted everywhere?

Through such encounters with faith groups (both more positive and negative) Layla was able to assert what was important to her, including by removing herself from the support space of the church (by choosing *not* to accommodate herself to spaces where she felt unsafe), whilst also being surprised to find herself feeling comfortable to be open about her sexuality with new friends who also happened to be religious. That Layla found herself able to be comfortable in her friendship with the Christian volunteer encouraged her to speculate: "Can I really be accepted everywhere?". This question highlights the transformative *potential* of encounters with difference, whereby previous assumptions that religion would remain a source of conflict in her life were challenged through the new contexts and relationships Layla made in the UK. In this way, Layla was able to detach herself from religious spaces that made her feel unsafe, whilst finding new forms of acceptance that challenged her previous assumption that religion would remain a source of conflict in her life. Seen through the paradigm of "transformative accommodations", Layla's experience as a non-religious refugee highlights the important role encounters with religion can still play in finding self-acceptance and safety in new contexts. This was transformative in the sense that it encouraged Layla to think more hopefully about her future, and what it means to be genuinely accepted and welcomed:

> You are accepted now. You are safe. You are protected here now. I am safe here. I want to live this to the maximum. I want to meet other gay … women, hopefully [laughs].

Overall, Sarah, Fatima and Layla's experiences highlight how "safe spaces", "inclusive spaces" and "welcoming spaces" are ambiguously negotiated, making it possible for an LGBTQ+ asylum claimant to feel safe, included and welcomed whilst also feeling uncomfortable or unwilling to talk openly about their sexuality or gender identity at different moments of time or in specific places. This can often lead to outcomes that challenge a view that certain communities will be more welcoming of certain forms of difference or identities, following what Shachar terms the "primary affiliations" (2001, 120) that shape how difference and community can often be narrowly defined. Sarah found the spiritual support she needed to cope with family separation in a church, and Layla made her first meaningful friend volunteering for the Salvation Army. Fatima, in response to a question about where she felt most welcomed and supported as an LGBTQ+ asylum claimant, responded:

> oh boy, the community has helped me a lot. I am Muslim, but I joined a local church. I was invited for a local coffee grouping. Strange [laughs]. They said just come for coffee, drink, we speak about the bible and stuff, OK. I said but I am Muslim … I didn't say I am gay but, we drink coffee, make cakes …

Despite also receiving support from an LGBTQ+-specific homelessness group, it was in this church setting that Fatima felt able to escape the label of the suffering Muslim woman refugee which she had been interpellated and boxed into by other secular support services. Fatima felt that she was too gay for the Muslim women's groups that she was frequently referred too, and too Muslim for the LGBTQ+ groups she encountered. By contrast, despite being a Muslim and a lesbian, a Christian church in Peckham approached her in a spirit of welcome:

> They gave me a cuddle. Oh my god. I loved that. You take a cuddle. I am so, so … I think that what happened when you are born, the very first thing you get on planet Earth, it is a cuddle. You see arms around you, and you get a hug. That's the very first thing people have done for you. It's a cuddle. (Fatima)

As Fatima's reflection highlights, the value of this "emotional labour" (following James 1989) breaks down the hierarchies and conditionalities that she faced in other parts of the asylum system or in other support contexts. Hugs and cuddles made Fatima feel welcomed despite not feeling comfortable to "say I am gay". Fatima, who was frustrated by an inability to be recognized as anything other than a suffering Muslim woman, also felt unable to tap into her own spiritual and faith needs in secular LGBTQ+-specific spaces. This highlights a need to think critically about the conditionality of "welcoming" spaces for LGBTQ+ people, and how they may rely on normative assumptions about who is or is not included, and what is implied by visibility (as freedom) and concealment (as oppression). As such, a focus on "transformative accommodations" becomes invaluable in addressing how we think of spaces as welcoming to, or not welcoming to, different types of difference. In the vignettes discussed above, everyday encounters that emerge in contexts of LGBTQ+ asylum support reshape expectations, motivations and normative practices of what it means to welcome and be welcomed in ways that are not fixed or dependent on "primary affiliations" as outlined by Shachar (2001, 120). We see in this example how Fatima sought to find ways of moving beyond her subjectivation as a mere suffering Muslim woman, finding a community of support in a space that (quite literally) embraced her and made her feel comfortable. This contrasts strongly with the more conditional logics of LGBTQ+ asylum seeker "credibility" in the UK, where recognition precludes any possibility of "welcome" and rights.

Conclusion

This article has addressed the role of religion and faith in contexts of LGBTQ+ asylum seeking in the UK. By building on the concept of "transformative accommodations" (Shachar 2001), I have sought to move away from a framing of religion and faith as being in direct tension or opposition with the articulation of LGBTQ+ identities. Rather, as is demonstrated in the discussion of empirical evidence, accommodations between such differences become productive, revealing new forms of solidarity, motivations and actions that challenge both secular and religious orthodoxies surrounding the compatibility of LGBTQ+ rights with religious norms and values. This is not to idealize such processes, wherein the costs of accommodation on LGBTQ+ asylum claimants often also require them to adopt strategies of concealment as the price of maintaining links with some faith communities. Nevertheless, the rationale that LGBTQ+ asylum claimants give to such accommodations challenge the idea that such processes are inherently oppressive. By contrast, they reveal how LGBTQ+ asylum claimants make such negotiations as a means of addressing their own spiritual and material needs, which may otherwise go unaddressed because of dominant assumptions about what LGBTQ+ people need and what safety means for them.

There is a need to move beyond framings that treat sexual, religious, gender and racial identities as somehow antithetical to one another, or as forms of difference that must be "resolved". Faith practices play an important part in the strategies of LGBTQ+ asylum claimants in dealing with the challenges of the asylum system. Faith becomes a site of resistance and of spiritual support, where feelings of belonging emerge in contrast to the conditionality and hostility of other forms of response. Lesbian Muslim asylum claimants finding refuge in a church group upend expectations of where it is or is not safe or welcoming for LGBTQ+ people to reside, in turn challenging the assumptions underpinning narrow and conditional conceptualizations of "welcome" that pervade secular, gendered and racialized narratives of LGBTQ+ safety.

Likewise, scholars and practitioners should be critical of the legal assumptions that exist around LGBTQ+ rights and "credibility" in the UK, which often create a false dichotomy of choices, between being free to live out your "primary affiliation" (Shachar 2001, 120) as a liberated LGBTQ+ person, or of having to remain closeted or scared in "backward facing" religious communities. As a lens, "transformative accommodations" is helpful in promoting a view of difference that does not require that difference to be comprehensible to the standards and expectations of either secular or religious norms. Rather, it encourages us to consider "the intersections of multiple affiliations among individuals" (Shachar 2001, 121) and how these become productive of new forms of recognition, from churches making efforts to include LGBTQ+ persons in their work, to re-evaluations on the part of LGBTQ+ asylum claimants about different religious ideas. By grasping at the situational context in which accommodations and negotiations with difference take place in the lives of LGBTQ+ asylum claimants can we attempt to recognize the interplay of specific kinds of social relations and how these both defy neat categorizations and also become productive of new meanings and identities.

This has policy and practice implications too. Religious affiliation, values or practices, or instances where LGBTQ+ asylum claimants have found support from specific faith spaces, should not imply that they are "faking it". Questions asked to this effect by asylum officials and adjudicators should be challenged, drawing on official guidance that strongly discourages such questions (see UK Home Office 2016) but which is poorly implemented in practice. Likewise, support providers (both secular and faith-based) should develop literacy around faith and sexuality that recognizes (i) the numerous ways in which such identities are complimentary, drawing on liberation theology and sociological studies into religion and sexuality, and (ii) the "modalities of agency" that emerge in the daily lives of refugees (following García Rodríguez 2019) which means identities and subject positions will not be fixed. Anticipating this will help support providers put into place practices that are more "welcoming" and "inclusive".

Notes

1. There is not the scope in this article to fully consider the differences between Germany and the UK vis-à-vis sexuality, gender, and religion in contexts of LGBTQ+ asylum. This will be explored more fully in the thesis, of which this article will form part of a chapter.

2. Not her real name.
3. I use faith and religion interchangeably in the discussion of empirical data, echoing their usage by participants. However, religion can broadly relate to "traditional" and/or "institutionalised" belief and practice, whereas faith can be described as more subjective – a personal relationship with God, for example (Paul Victor and Treschuk 2020).
4. For reasons of anonymity, I do not name these organisations.
5. For more information, see Rainbow Migration's database on "LGBTQI+ friendly faith-based organisations": https://www.rainbowmigration.org.uk/en/other-organisations-who-can-help-lgbtqi-people-seeking-asylum (accessed 12 January 2022).
6. Not her real name.
7. Not her real name.
8. Not her real name.

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