

God “Transforms” or God “Accepts”?

Dilemmas of the Construction of Identity Among LGBT Evangelicals¹

Marcelo Tavares Natividade²

Leandro de Oliveira³

A recent movement of religious groups in Brazil is characterized by the preaching of the compatibility of Christianity and homosexuality, offering the faithful who adhere to gay, lesbian, transvestite and transsexual identities access to norms of conduct that do not prohibit sexual practices that differ from heterosexuality.⁴ Describing themselves as *inclusionary*, these

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2 Social Scientist, Doctor in Social Anthropology, researcher at the Center for Studies of the Subject, Interaction and Change (NuSIM/ PPGAS/ MN/ UFRJ) and of the Association for Study and Research in Anthropology (ASEPA).

3 Social Scientist, Doctoral student in Social Anthropology (PPGAS/ MN/ UFRJ), Researcher at the Center for Studies of the Subject, Interaction and Change (NuSIM/ PPGAS/ MN/ UFRJ) and of the Association for Study and Research in Anthropology.

4 The uses of the expression “sexual diversity” as a way to address the construction of dissident erotic subjectivities appears to have accompanied the diffusion of the GLS category in the Brazilian market since 1994, examined by França (2006). This diffusion of the notion appears to intertwine in complex manners with the recent fragmentation of the domain of political identities that had tended to be, until then, encompassed under the rubric of “homosexuality.” For the purposes of this article, we employ the expression “sexual diversity” as a tool to mark the plurality of sexual identities that, despite their singularities, can be targets of similar stigmatization, an effect of the tension found in the cultural matrix

groups are mostly Evangelical and often led by homosexual pastors.⁵ The living of LGBT⁶ identities does not conflict with the codes of sanctity found in their services, theology, cosmologies and *ethos*. These initiatives develop a hermeneutic that proposes alternative interpretations to religious dogma that condemns homosexuality. They also promote the erasure of stigmas against sexual diversity (Natividade, 2008), and see homosexuality in a positive light. For this reason they are very attractive to gays and lesbians who had in their trajectories adhesion to Christian religions, particularly the Evangelicals. Throughout Brazil, initiatives and groups have risen that are aligned to this religious movement, which have an affinity with the contemporary cultural scenery in which sexual rights are progressively recognized as human rights.⁷ This article concerns processes of construction of self of the members of this religious movement by focusing on distinct cultural languages, based on a reflection on the native notions of *transformation and acceptance*.⁸

The data analyzed comes from interviews and participant observation realized among members of *inclusionary* Christian groups in the cities of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, between the years 2007 and 2008.⁹ These churches appear to predominantly congregate men who define themselves as *gays*, and a minority of the participants adhere to other sexual identities.¹⁰ The field

that prescribes compulsory heterosexuality as the norm.

5 In the Brazilian context, the category “Evangelicals” encompasses different groups and doctrines of the Protestant tradition, including historic and pentecostal lines. The expression “inclusionary churches” involves reverberations of the “Gay Christian” movement in Brazil.

6 The initials LGBT (lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transvestites) came to be adopted by social movements calling for citizenship rights for sexual minorities after the first national GLBT Conference in Brazil in 2008. This marks not only the political articulations that were undertaken at the event, but also indicates the procedural character of the collective identities. In this article, the initials are used to describe identities and forms of construction of subjectivities divergent from the norm of heterosexuality.

7 In addition to countless Evangelical initiatives, we located the inclusionary group *Catholic Diversity*, which also proposes conciliation between religiosity and adhesion to LGBT identities.

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10 Those interviewed, recruited from field work among these groups, come mostly from lower

research found that these inclusionary groups had broad participation by people from Evangelical families, including the children of pastors, deacons, and those who work in other Ecclesiastic functions. “Inclusionary” churches build a cosmology that emphasizes adhesion to LGBT identities, allowing a return to congregational and Ecclesiastical life, in the case of gays and lesbians, whose trajectory includes the breaking of ties with their original churches. The passage from a religious past in a conservative church to adhesion to an inclusionary group involves reformulations of the discourse about sexuality and the *self*. The objective of this article is to analyze how dilemmas of constitution of LGBT identities experienced in religious contexts express mediations and tensions between distinct cultural idioms, polarized around the notions of *transformation* and *acceptance*. We emphasize the analysis of a contextualized biography based on ethnographic data, exploring how the subject elaborates the connections between sexual orientation and religious experience. Based on this, a reflection will be conducted about cultural idioms and processes of construction of self.

Including LGBT people in the perspective of “inclusionary” initiatives differs significantly from the discourse presented by some Evangelical segments about *sheltering homosexuals*. In the 1990’s, the study *Novo Nascimento* [New Birth] indicated the existence of similar discourses, highlighting that they should not be naively seen as an expression of “acceptance” of homosexuality, but as dynamics of pastoral care that need to be investigated (Fernandes, 1998). In this light, the notion of sheltering would conceal strategies of subjection aimed at a restructuring of the subjectivity of the subjects: the sheltering of homosexuals seeks to *transform them* (Natividade, 2008; Natividade & Oliveira, 2007: 281). The category “transformation” and related notions that circulate in the Evangelical universe (“restoration,” “liberation”) are applied to the sphere of sexuality, promoting justifications for conservative dispositions concerning sexual conduct and morals (Natividade, 2006). As Mariz emphasizes (1994), in the Pentecostal notion of the person, human *liberty* is only completely realized through submission to God: to resist impulses in

income groups. Some subjects have trajectories of relative social ascension in relation to the previous generation, particularly among the leaders. We found a significant number of people from small or medium size cities from a variety of states, which – along with the discourse of the leaders about the significant participation of immigrants in the cults – suggests that these communities can exercise particular attraction to these populations.

the sphere of sexuality can be seen as a form of affirmation of personal autonomy. By presenting *homosexuality* as a morally condemnable and contingent practice, these discourses confront modern concepts of sexuality that confer legitimacy to LGBT identities. Contrasting tensions between the domains of sexuality and religion in contemporary Brazil have been heating up with the intensification of political and cultural processes that highlight the visibility and the recognition of the citizenship of gays and lesbians. In the current scenery, religious responses emerge that are aligned both to a posture of positive respect for these identities, recognizing gays and lesbians as political subjects, as well as positions of rejection and repudiation, anchored in naturalized concepts of sexuality and gender (Natividade and Oliveira, 2008; Natividade and Lopes, 2007). “Inclusionary” groups and similar initiatives offer alternatives in the religious market to subjects who adhere to identities that are dissident to the norm of heterosexuality and do not try to fit into religious cults whose models of sexuality include projects to “cure” homosexuality (Natividade, 2008).

This collective mobilization – as we will see below – is not unified, or homogenous, and has distinctions in cosmological and doctrinal emphases made by different leaderships and in the selective appropriations made by the faithful at the level of *private ethos*. Here we examine, particularly, the uses of categories of *transformation* and *acceptance*, which circulate in the inclusionary churches as part of a cultural idiom available to the faithful to speak of relations with divinity and of relations with oneself. The first section of this article analyzes the current connections between subjectivity, religion and sexual orientation based on some ethnographic situations, pointing to the relative plurality of forms by which the self can be constituted in inclusionary religious groups and underlining distinctions between the discourse of leaders and the faithful. The second section presents the trajectory of one believer who revises, during his biography, some of these negotiations, signaling the way that the religious categories of *transformation and acceptance* are triggered in the discourse about oneself. As we will see below, these categories point to quite distinct cultural idioms employed by the subjects in the expression of their religious and sexual experiences.

“Shelter,” “transform,” “accept”: subjectivity and regulation of sexuality in Evangelical religious discourse

People who adhere to inclusionary churches promote *mediations* (Velho and Kuschmir, 2001) between apparently conflicting social worlds and positions of the subject, causing the expression “gay Evangelical” to be revealed as something more than an oxymoron. However, how does this construction of subjectivity that reconciles such apparently contrasting positions take place? Or more precisely, how is this *vocation*, which reconciles the experiencing of religion and sexuality as axial connections in the processes of elaboration of identity, configured? Without the pretension of being able to answer these questions, we believe that they can serve as a guide for the analysis undertaken.

A reflection on the connections between religious and romantic-sexual experiences remembered by the subject raises questions about the processes of constitution of the self. As Taylor proposes (1997), a specific vocabulary has been constituted in Western thinking to speak about “the self” as an “interior space” in which is located the person. It is a region that contrasts with the social sphere and is found in permanent tension with it. The emergence of this notion is accompanied by the constitution of a perception of the dignity of human life, of a valorization without precedents of daily life or “ordinary life,” and of a discourse that formulates the expression of the *self* as an expression of a *nature*. The formation of this configuration of ideas and practices creates a type of paradox, given that the affirmation of the “self,” the cultivation of the self, involves a progressive erasing of broader social schemes that constitute and sustain the *self* in social life. Taylor strives to demonstrate how being/having a “self” moves in a space of moral questioning, a search for *orientation* for an idea of good, which may be concealed by an *ethics of inarticulacy*. The supposition that relations with *oneself* have greater weight than relations with others in the orientation of conduct is supported in the cultural belief that presents the self as *detached* from sociocultural webs.

Considering the *self* and *sexual orientation* in their specifically relational character is an analytical exercise that must consider the socio-cultural environment in which the selves of LGBT people are constituted. To constitute oneself as “gay,” “lesbian,” “transvestite” or “transsexual” involves a per-

ception of *self* as different, a process of *self-alienation*¹¹ around gender and or sexuality, which runs parallel to contingent social experiences that support this self-alienation. This perception of self as “different” is lived as an experience that isolates the subject, who is required to hide from social networks in which an important part of the self participate. The stigma associated to homosexuality, which can be hidden by mechanisms of control of information about oneself, is not shared with the family group of origin, as are certain stigmas associated with race and religion (Pecheny, 2004). This fact allows homosexuality to become a *foundational secret* of identities and personal relations, giving origin to particular types of interaction and conflict and solidifying ties between those who share them. This mode of constitution of identity can cause the homosexual to perceive his or her personal life, his or her “true self,” as located in this sphere of “elected” relations and ruled by silence and by secrets, in opposition to relations characterized by convention and coercion (Pollak, 1990: 29-30).

In light of this debate, the emergence of the inclusionary churches on the contemporary cultural scene appears to indicate the constitution of a specific social world, in which people socialized in Christian religions who adhere to LGBT identities can constitute elective ties that make visible and allow the sharing of this intimate dimension of life, often experienced in a relatively clandestine situation, until they enter an inclusionary community. In this way, these groups offer the people who were socialized in Christian religions – and who experience *self-alienation* linked to sexual orientation – a space for the construction of a positive self-image through interaction with subjects considered to be “similar” to themselves (Natividade, 2008).

Because the idea of self is culturally specific, we believe that attention to the contexts of its use can help identify the specificities of this notion. A first point that can be highlighted is the much affirmed untranslatability of this category. The “self” in the English language has a series of uses and related nouns that are connected in specific ways and which may not exist in other languages. To reflect on the linguistic uses of “self” can help to reveal the *moral sources* that these enunciations mobilize. An ethnographic digression about the uses of discourse in the first person in inclusionary groups

11 About the place of *self-alienation* in the history of the processes of constitution of subjectivity in modern Western culture see Trilling (1974 [1971]).

elucidates aspects of the proposed reflection.

Between July 11-13, 2009, we participated in a leadership training seminar of the Igreja da Comunidade Metropolitana [Metropolitan Community Church], in the municipality of Sabará in Minas Gerais State. MCC was created in the United States, in the 1970s, and since then has established “cells” and “missions” in various countries.¹² Since 2002, religious discourses produced by MCC international have been consumed in Brazil, supporting the emergence of cells and groups dedicated to the implantation and consolidation of this church in the country. The leadership training seminar, conducted with the presence of representatives of MCC international, focused on the articulation of these initiatives and a presentation of the institutional proposal of the church. At the closing of the event, a religious service was held in the state capital of Belo Horizonte, promoted by the local group. The service was attended by representatives of MCC international and those from various Brazilian states. A specific moment of the celebration involved the singing of hymns by the congregation, whose words were projected above the pulpit. Many of those present sang the songs from memory, without turning their eyes to read the text. Looking through the space it was possible to see how familiar those present were with the songs. The surrounding environment was very similar to that of Evangelical churches of the broader religious universe, despite it being an “inclusionary church.” Some canticles inspired more highly spirited corporal performances that included “speaking in tongues,” typical of the Pentecostal religious cosmologies.

A bit later, on the same night, we went to dinner with some members of the MCC, including the pastor of the São Paulo church. He noted that one of the challenges of the MCC in Brazil was to discover “affirmative hymns.” He explained that in most hymns the individual is a passive object in relation to God: the faithful asks God to *restore*, *liberate* or *use* him or her. From the pastor’s perspective, it is important for the subject to *liberate and restore him or herself*, instead of *being used*: the adoption of this language reinforces the *self-acceptance* of the individuals and the construction of a positive sense of self. In many gospel songs, the lyric-I would delegate to God the role of a *transformation* whose responsibility would be assumed by the faithful.

12 “Cells” and “missions” are native categories that include the embryonic state of the formation and structuring of a church.

One well known hymn, written by the Evangelical singer Aline Barros, expresses this type of discursive construction very well, and is found in a large number of songs consumed in these religious networks:

Examine me, Lord, and know me, break down my heart
Transform me according to your word
And fill me until all there is in me is you
Then, use me, Lord, use me
Like a lighthouse that shines at night
Like a bridge over the waters
Like a shelter in the desert
Like an arrow that hits the mark
I want to be used, to please you
At any time and any place, take my life
Use me, Lord, use me
Examine me, break me down
Transform me, fill me, use me, Lord.

Although the construction is conducted in the first person singular, the preference for the oblique atonic pronoun (more than for oblique tonic pronouns) does not appear to be completely insignificant. The pronoun “me” indicates, at least in this case, a relational “I,” because it always refers to the influence of another – in this case, God – who exercises an action on the first person. The metaphors of the lighthouse, bridge, shelter and arrow represent objects, or, tools, which serve the will of God. This short text synthesizes a type of constitution of subjectivity that can make considerable sense to some faithful of inclusionary groups. While the leadership of the MCC in São Paulo appears to value technologies of production of a *self* that is unattached and autonomous, from the perspective of many believers, the supplication *transform-me, break me down* can be an important formula for the constitution of a valid *self*. The request presented in an imperative tense, in which the faithful demands that God makes him His tool, indicates the paradox of this identity that is not contained in the *self*.

While some leaders profess a discourse that emphasizes the importance of *self-esteem*, and the cultivation of human dignity, an alternative perspective (which has greater affinity with hegemonic Evangelical discourses) subordi-

nates the dignity of the human person to the condition of subjection to God.¹³ A particularly expressive example of this dissension emerges around norms of sexual conduct.

At the same seminar, the position of the international leaders of the MCC about sexual conduct determined that *sin* is only the establishment of asymmetric relations: basically, non-consensual sex, “pedophilia” and situations of sexual harassment. The establishment of a romantic relationship between a pastor and a member of the community was considered particularly questionable, precisely because of its potential to be asymmetrical. One of the recommendations offered to the aspirants to the position of clergy or lay pastors was precisely that it would be preferable that the leaders have romantic relationships with people outside the congregation. This prescription for conduct appeared to have caused a certain perplexity among those present who questioned if the partner of a leader could not be a religious person. One member of the audience observed, in what sounded to us like an interpretation that attempted to better qualify this behavioral recommendation, that a loving relationship sanctifies the *spouse* or *partner* of the holy man, through the “love” involved in the relationship. In this way, it is not *necessary* for the partner of a pastor to be a member of the community, because he or she would be linked to this higher spiritual condition by the bonds of love. Nevertheless, from the perspective of many believers – it should be noted that many of those present at the event aspired to be leaders who work in local communities – it appeared paradoxical to not include *promiscuity* and *infidelity* on the list of sexual sins. Another comment that emerged from the audience indicated that when two people *unite* in a relationship they become *one in spirit* and *one in flesh*, so that any sexual interaction that takes place outside of the conjugal dyad could have *bad influences* on the relationship. From an analytical perspective, it is possible to suggest that the norms prescribed by the international leaders focus less on the *relationality* and more on the *dignity* of the human being, which should be protected from all subjection. Among the audience, however, the perception appeared of sin that revealed the more clearly relational character of the subjectivity and corporality of

13 This discourse with emphasis on subjection to God and on the cosmology of the spiritual battle is reinforced in the inclusionary denominations that are perceived as “Pentecostal” such as the Comunidade Cristã Nova Esperança (São Paulo) and the Igreja Cristã Contemporânea (Rio de Janeiro), although it is not necessarily absent in groups of a “historic” profile such as those linked to the MCC church.

the believers. This ethnographic digression evokes the form that the vector of *subjectivism* (Duarte, 2005) takes in this inclusionary religious context. The cultural attention to the dimension of interiority, characteristic of modernity, is refracted by the local emphasis on idioms of relationality.

Natividade (2008) observes that the junction of the notion of the Pentecoastal person with the idea of the subject dignified by human rights as propagated in the inclusionary churches can result in a complex form of production of homosexuality in this context. A constant *devir* among the values of change and permanence leads to distinct perceptions of what can (and should) be changed in terms of sexual conduct and of what is not susceptible to *transformation/restructuring* through the *power of God*. One clear example is the relative doctrinal consensus around the idea of sexual orientation, signified in the inclusionary churches from an essentializing perspective (homosexuality is a *creation of God, a divine blessing*). Nevertheless, there is no established norm concerning the limits of sin, and this category is established through constant attempts to define its domains. The definition of “sin” in these churches is found in the intersection between doctrines, cosmologies, positions of the leaders and perceptions of the believers, through disputes and negotiations that can be especially tense.

In any case, while different actors linked to the inclusionary groups employ efforts to formulate a model of sanctified homosexuality (Christian, not promiscuous, monogamous, and discrete), others perceive its action to be more committed to a political discourse that has the potential to destabilize hegemonic norms of regulation of sexuality. These more effectively question the exclusion of LGBTs from the Christian tradition, confronting a supposed religious homophobia that has a millenary base. It involves – like the Protestant and Catholic feminism studied by Rohden (1997) – constructing a type of discourse and hermeneutic that restitutes the place of minorities in this religious tradition.

This internal plurality signals differences in the forms of action in relation to sexual diversity: on one hand, there is a focus on sexual conduct and on greater control capable of making this sexual orientation compatible to the exercise of religious life; on the other, there is an emphasis on political and theological discourses capable of transforming gays and lesbians into protagonists of a struggle against religious homophobia through new Biblical readings and in the struggle against fundamentalist postures that

reinforce the paradigm of sin. In this sense, the empowerment and legitimacy of these subjects is placed in focus.

In the interviews and informal conversations conducted during the field work, some leaders and a certain number of faithful of the inclusionary churches expressed a criticism of “promiscuity” similar to that presented by the *neotraditionalist* Evangelicals (Natividade, 2008).¹⁴ This inclusionary “neotraditionalism” is characterized, however, by a selective cultivation of values from the hegemonic field, deconstructing the norm that presents homosexuality as a “sin.” The reiteration, within some inclusionary groups, of apparently “conservative” values favors the work of mediation that they conduct, allowing LGBT believers a sense of continuity with previously learned beliefs and norms, in parallel to a neutralization of the stigmas concerning sexual identity. By recurrently presenting a Pentecostal emphasis, these communities appear to be particularly attractive to the faithful socialized in conservative congregations.

In groups with a historic profile, except for the Pentecostals, there is an emphasis on the theological debate about the reconceptualized interpretation of the Biblical texts commonly triggered to disqualify homosexuality. There is also a tendency to discuss themes related to sexual ethics and morality, in which the regulation of conduct emphasizes the maintenance of health. One MCC leader interviewed expressed support for the use of condoms in all sexual relations, noting that unprotected sex can be a form of “self-punishment” mobilized by the internalization of “fundamentalist” religious precepts. In his discourse, “promiscuity” appears as a lesser problem in relation to the importance of prevention:

14 The category *neotraditionalism* is formulated by Natividade (2008) to circumscribe the enactment of *performance of traditionality* (Rios, 2002) which arises as a reaction to broad social changes that create tension with performances by subjects who perceive themselves and act as champions of “modern” values. The merit of this conceptual reflection is to indicate that the labels “tradition” and “modernity” do not correspond to substantive entities, but to a *relationship* negotiated in the flow of social practices. The opposition between social contexts classifiable as “traditional” and “modern,” despite its potential as a heuristic tool in comparative studies, must be made with a certain caution. In fact, there are distinct and contrastable norms operating in the networks about which the sociological imagination usually applies these labels. Nevertheless, expressive differences between them can only emerge as a *judgment* (issued by a subject positioned in some point of the social web, in terms of his sociological insertion and incorporated experiences) about the *relationship* between them, and not as substantive *attributes* of each one of these webs (Goldman & Lima, 1999: 88-89). Oliveira (2006) presents a similar argument about the relationship between cultural models of the relationship between gender and sexual orientation which can be referred to as “hierarchical-traditional” and “modern-egalitarian.”

Leader: An individual who is born in a fundamentalist religious environment, internalizes all that thinking that God does not accept him, that God does not love him because of his sexuality and that his prayers are not heard by God. It is much easier for this person to revolt than to fight against his sexuality, so many of them revolt, leave the church, give up the faith, and live a life of self-punishment. Why? Because they are not loved, are not accepted and then at times there are situations that we, unfortunately, we see this often: sex without protection. Unconsciously, these people realize this as self-punishment (30, homosexual, MCC-SP)

In groups of Pentecostal emphasis, the debate about prevention of STDs is not supported in the same way – which does not mean that they are resistant to such discourse, but indicates a subordination of this issue to other dimensions of the religious experience. The strategies of regulation of sexuality that emerge in these communities appear to emphasize more the importance of conjugality, reappropriating the Evangelical notion of the body as a *temple of the Holy Spirit* (Natividade, 2008; 2003). Gays and lesbians leaving conservative congregations discover in the inclusionary groups a chance to produce religious justifications for the exercise of their sexual orientation. Believers, who in hegemonic churches experience subjective and or interpersonal conflicts linked to the constitution of their sexual identities, find in the inclusionary churches support from social networks that allow the construction of a positive self-image without giving up a way to exercise their sexuality that transgresses behavioral models accepted in the broader religious universe. These subjects select and signify the events of their career based on normative discourses that are available in these social networks and that offer a range of positions for intelligible subjects, prescribing conduct considered to be more or less compatible with these positions.

As observed above, the categories “acceptance” and “transformation” appear to indicate discursive marks that are particularly dense in these inclusionary groups. They circumscribe focuses of tension and mediation with hegemonic religious discourses that disqualify sexualities that transgress heterosexuality. The analysis conducted of narratives formulated by LGBT faithful about their biographic trajectories focuses on the elaboration of subjectivity that takes place at the intersection between religious experience and the

experience of homosexuality. Below, we will examine how the tension between these categories appears in the biography of one believer – emphasizing the procedural character of the production of religious justifications that are in keeping with the horizon of contemporary values in which the free exercise of sexual orientation has been progressively constructed as a human right.

The Dilemmas of *Acceptance*

The concept of *acceptance* appears to occupy a relatively important position in the discourses that offer respect for sexual orientations that are in dissonance with the heterosexual norm in the Brazilian context. The concept is subject to a variety of uses, but provides support for a cultural idiom that circumscribes *relations with the family network and relations with oneself* (Oliveira, 2008). The recurrence of the use of this term by homosexuals in the discourse about themselves has been recognized by Natividade (2008), among Evangelical gay men, in terms of how they perceive their relationship with God.¹⁵ In the trajectories analyzed by Natividade, the recurrence of the phrase “God accepts me as I am,” expressed by those interviewed, indicates the crucial importance of the dimension of the relationship with the divinity in processes of construction of self. God either “abominates” homosexual practices or – in the hermeneutic proposed in the inclusionary groups – accepts, regardless of sexual orientation. Discourses that focus on supporting self-image also express the idea of *accepting oneself* as a crucial step in the construction of sexual identity. The same rhetoric emerges in representations about the relationship of LGBT people with their families of origin, emphasizing acceptance in the sphere of family relations.

To reflect on the importance of the category of *acceptance*, based on the contexts in which it is used, can provide an interpretive key to understanding how religious and sexual trajectories are articulated in the preparation of subjectivity. The category *acceptance* serves, in a particularly productive manner, as an element of support to investigate the connections between forms

¹⁵ Natividade, (2008) based on field work and in-depth interviews in three *inclusionary* congregations in the cities of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, discusses the place of these religious offerings in the construction of self for men who adhere to homosexual identities. He analyzes the social learning experienced by the faithful in the passage from conservative and inclusionary denominations. He highlights the role of leaders and the place of pastoral care in the construction of a positive self-image.

of constitution of *relationality* and of *subjectivity*. The subject who “is” or who “wants to be” *accepted* also has to *accept himself*: the construction of acceptance in the interpersonal sphere is articulated with the processes of elaboration of perception and presentation of self. The subject who wants to be *accepted*, wants to be accepted *how, by whom, where?* What does it mean to *be accepted* for subjects who live or want to live the experience of *acceptance*? We do not intend to answer all of these questions, but we believe that they can serve as a guide to the analysis that we will undertake, based on the *life history* of a young gay man.

Isaías lives in the city of São Paulo, he is 20 years old and was raised in an intensely Evangelical home. His genitors, in addition to being religious, were leaders in their respective churches. His mother converted to the Assembly of God after migrating from Minas Gerais to São Paulo, having been *anointed as a pastor* in this denomination;¹⁶ his father, once a pastor of a Baptist church, later joined the Assembly of God church. His domestic group today is composed of the mother, two brothers, a sister-in-law and two nephews – Isaías’ father died when he was seven years old. He is the youngest of six brothers, of whom only three (two men and a woman) are “heterosexual”: the other two boys also adhere to a gay identity. The mother receives a pension left by the father, who was employed as a mid-level technician. She is dedicated full time to religious activities and holds no job.

Our informant frequented the Assembly of God during his childhood and youth, to which he was taken by his mother and brothers. He reported intense participation in the activities of congregational life. Although all his brothers had been socialized in a religious environment, Isaías maintains that they had positive reactions when his sexual orientation became visible in the family network – except for one, who later also adhered to a gay identity, but at the time *still did not accept it*. The youth’s mother, on the other hand, repudiated the conduct and paths taken by her son in the sphere of

16 The term “anoint” has multiple meanings in the Evangelical religious field and its meaning depends on the contexts in which it is used. In the native idiom in question, the notion of anointment is close to that of the idea of being elected by God. In Pentecostal cosmologies, the individual is submitted to a set of ritual procedures through which they see their “choice” by God confirmed. The category “anoint” is not isolated from the broader idea of “apartamento” [being set apart] which suggests a form of construction of the person which emphasizes the idea of belief as an individual set apart from the world, a subject who is touched, “sealed,” and separated by God. The analysis of the concept of anoint includes a dimension of ritual purification.

sexuality. Isaías believes that she has recently begun to *accept*, after his participation in the MCC-SP, revealing a way of speaking about himself that appears in the explanation about how his family members reacted when they “found out” about his sexual orientation, compared to the experience of his gay brothers:¹⁷

Well, Marcos [one of Isaías’ gay brothers] was a bit disturbed. A bit upset. Because he took the same option. (...) He was like me at first, we *did not accept*. I *did it*, practiced, but I *didn’t accept*. I began to accept myself, in reality...Began to accept myself now. Because of this stuff of religion. About what God thought, everything. And now that I began to go to the Christian Community Church, I began to accept myself. But, Marcos had misgivings, was upset. César [one of his heterosexual brothers] didn’t mind. For him, it’s normal. My sister and my brothers also helped.

Júlio [another gay brother], at that time, he had already come out. So he also thought it was fine. (...) In reality, my brothers did not criticize me, they didn’t judge, no. The only person who raised a fuss was my mother, saying that I would go to hell. Always saying that we were, as that pastor says [leader of MCC-SP], the fuel of hell. But my mother, really, was the only person who *didn’t accept*. It was my mother.

The attitude of Isaías’ mother, evoking the religious image of *hell* in her judgment of her son’s sexual orientation, could perhaps be classified as “homophobic,” intolerant or conservative, if seen from the outside, from the perspective of respect for sexual diversity. Isaías’ assumption of homosexuality did not lead to a break, but would cause his mother to exercise intense control over the life of her son. She sought to prevent him from having contact with male company with whom he could establish a romantic or sexual relationship. This concerned and controlling attitude is referred to by Isaías – perhaps in a tone of relative condescension – as “a mother’s thing”:

My mother cried, made a scene. She said that I would go to hell. That that was not life. It was very heavy. Then she wouldn’t let me anymore. She was *afraid* of me going out. She was *afraid* that I would have relations with other people. But the more she locked me up, the more I had relationships, but I had that kinda

17 Those interviewed, and other people they mention, were given fictitious names to protect their identity.

thing. She tried to keep me in, but couldn't. (...) She didn't want to let me go out, she didn't want to let me have more contact. If I took [home] a friend or colleague, (and for this reason, I didn't have any more male friends), she would think (...) "So, you are bringing him home then he's a boyfriend or is someone you are going out with. I don't want to know about it." I would bring home just women friends. If she saw me speaking with any man she thought that I was trying to have a relationship with him. Then that thing began, that *mother's thing*, you know. She didn't let me go out. If I had to go out, I had to go with someone she trusted.

This relation of tension and regulation of conduct in the family network is perceived by the subject as a form of *care*, justified by *fear* experienced by the mother when she perceived the sexual orientation of her child. This form of relationship, in which a visceral relation of repudiation to sexual diversity is qualified as a form of care for the person who experiences these expressions of sexuality, can be interpreted through a dialog with the reflection by Fernandes (2008) about the phenomenon of *cordial homophobia*. It does not involve a "discriminatory attitude" that *segregates* individuals marked as different and inferior, but *approximates* those who exercise a position of moral superiority in a relationship of subjugation. This asymmetric relationship can involve emotional engagement of the subjects involved, favoring the perpetration of very subtle forms of symbolic subjection and violence. Nevertheless, the conservative Evangelical perspective of "taking in" homosexuals – a phenomenon that can be qualified as a form of *pastoral homophobia* – transcends the effects of cordial homophobia, to the degree in which it not only incorporates subjects marked as inferior, but intends to eliminate this "mark" by means of liberation, cure or therapy. These *technologies of the self* seek to incorporate these people in order to obstruct the constitution of LGBT identities, and are thus a particularly insidious strategy for repudiation of sexual diversity. As we will see below, the religious perspective of the liberation of homosexuality emerges from the report analyzed as a factor that strongly stirs the dilemmas experienced in the process of constitution of the informant's sexual identity.

Isaías, like other LGBT people socialized in conservative Christian contexts, retrospectively identifies a phase of his life in which "he did not accept," which coincides with a period of more intense adhesion to the Evangelical religious networks and to the beliefs professed by it.

Interviewer: And at this time, you said that you did not accept yourself... What was this like, how did you feel?

Isaías: It was very complicated. I *did not accept myself*, because...since I was from the Assembly, then, they have a very closed mind to this. For them the homosexual practice is an abomination to God. This is what they try to prove in the Bible, but if we really pay attention, [to the Biblical discourse] it is not really what they say. So I *did not accept myself*, they said that it was a sin, that I would go to hell, that I would, who knows. And I was in that struggle, right. Against the precepts, the desire and reality. There was a time that, for this reason, even because of the feelings that I had for this guy [a member of the church], I even [tried] to take my life, for this reason. Because to me it was absurd, I couldn't live like that. And I tried to change. I tried the *cure*, which really doesn't exist. I tried the *cure* and saw that I couldn't. And when I was not able, I began to get desperate, I got depressed over this. I even tried suicide, a number of times. I really saw that God, he *accepted me*, and I didn't know this, but God accepted me and freed me from this. Once I tried to throw myself in front of a truck coming at full speed. I stopped in front of it. I felt a hand touch me. And another time I tried to do it again and I felt a hand pulling me. I tried a number of times, except God truly wouldn't let me. Then I understood. At times I asked myself: "why, if it is something abominable, why don't you want me to die?" And now I understand, because it really isn't abominable for God. It's something that God understands. He understands our feelings and for him this is not abominable.

This re-reading of prior experience indicates the intense pressure that is placed in these networks on people who go through processes of constitution of LGBT identities, which influence the elaboration of subjectivity. The *non-acceptance* in the sphere of social relations and of relations with God is accompanied by a repudiation of the idea that a homosexual orientation can constitute a dimension of the self. The allusion to the state of *desperation* is an emotional discourse that indicates difficulties in the management of this negative perception of self based on a cultural idiom that qualifies deeply rooted erotic dispositions as *abomination*.¹⁸

When he was 16, Isaías tried to undergo a *cure for homosexuality*. At this

¹⁸ Similar statements were given by other informants in the study, involving suicidal intentions and thoughts experienced at the time of adhesion to conservative religious beliefs.

time, he was *fighting with himself*, similar to the experience of some of the informants in a study conducted by Natividade (2007; 2008) involving the abandonment of homosexual practices and attempts to have romantic relationships with women. Even after breaking with the church, and returning to erotic contact with people of the same sex, he continued for some time to believe that God could one day *free-him* of homosexuality. Isaías resignified this past experience as a “mistake.” At that time, *I would say that I was hetero* and believed I could *return to being hetero*, but in reality I was always homosexual.

I then attempted the *cure*. I began to *say that I was no longer homosexual*, that I was hetero. I gave up smoking. I said: “now it’s my life.” I tried to go out with a girl. One week later she left me. Only after I left the church. I, in reality, came to a moment that I couldn’t take it any more, I saw a man and I felt physical attraction. And I couldn’t resist. It was in late 2004 that I had contact with a boy. We had a brief relationship, something very limited. There was all the bureaucracy of the church. They tried to place me under *indiscipline*, so I could no longer participate in the services, I could no longer be part of the Lord’s Supper. And so I was *on the bench*. They began to reject me, began to disdain me, I began to feel excluded from the church. That is when I left the church. I left the church, I stopped going and became an active homosexual. Even when I was active, and declared that I was gay, at that time, *I did not accept myself*. I said that one day God would enter my life and free me and I would go back to being hetero. That is, I would **go back to being** something that I **never was**.

To establish an *acceptance of self*, this acceptance must be intensely reinforced despite the doubts that can pass through the conscience of the believer. The *acceptance* of sexual orientation, in this sense, can be dealt with as a reinforcement of performative acts, in a sense similar to that worked with by Butler (1993) about the processes of constitution of the body: the “materiality” or “reality” of the identities is a contingent effect among the power relations. In a previous period of his life, Isaías had declared that he was gay but believed that the *power of God* would *free him* from *homosexuality*, “restoring” his “heterosexuality.” The impact of the religious power thus impeded the constitution of a positive identity with homosexual orientation. This religious discourse is now interpreted by the interviewee, as a critical distancing, and the previous adhesion to these beliefs as a *non-acceptance* of himself.

Isaías' statements reveal this procedural character of acceptance, alluding to a moment in which his doubts about his own sexual orientation had dissipated. The interviewee mentions as an important turning point the moment in which he began to attend the inclusionary church, a few weeks before the interview, evoking a conversation he had a few days earlier with the pastor of this religious community:

Before I spoke with the pastor [the leader of the inclusionary church] I had doubts. I had some doubts because of what was written in the Bible. But after having spoken with him, I am now absolutely sure that God accepts me as a homosexual and that I will live in heaven with him as a homosexual. I don't need to wear masks, because God does not want us to use masks. He does not want us be what we are not. One thing that I really am not is a heterosexual, I cannot see myself married to a women, I do not have physical attractions to women. (...) Now, I truly accept myself. Now I say: "I accept myself as I am, and I know that God also accepts me as I am"

This statement suggests that the participation in this network of sociability and the access to discourses that reconcile homosexuality and Christian religion are empowering, and provide support for the processes of constitution of a positive self-image, to the degree to which they reconcile two important dimensions of his life. In various parts of the interview, Isaías refers to religious understanding of homosexuality as "sin" as mistakes and errors of interpretation. Upon discussing the rituals of cure to which he was submit, he said that there is no "cure" for homosexuality: the failures are no longer seen as temporary and he now sees the "cure" as something that "does not exist." In the process of production of religious justifications for the difference associated to sexual orientation, it is necessary to clarify these errors and reinterpret the religious discourses to which he was previously exposed under a new perspective. Meanwhile, even greater importance is placed on the personal experience with God - which presents, as a "revelation," the blessed nature of homosexuality. Isaías needs the confirmation that *God accepts*: given that it is through the production of this certainty that he will be able to repudiate the discourse that sees *homosexuality* as a sin, and integrate homosexuality as part of his self. For some of those who attend inclusionary churches, the *acceptance of oneself* appears to involve the allocation of a positive value to an attribute considered stigmatizing by

conservative religious segments, but that the subject recognizes retrospectively as part of *oneself*. In the Evangelical context in which Isaías was socialized, the idea that homosexual practices can serve as legitimate support for the constitution of an “identity” is itself questioned. It involves a cultural idiom that intensely emphasizes a person’s relationality, which presents homosexual “practices” and “desires” as an effect of the *outside influences*. The condition resulting from these *influences* can be *transformed and liberated* by the power of God.¹⁹ The existence of sexual orientation as a dimension of self that can be the object of acceptance requires acts of materialization that are much more flagrant: to be *accepted*, certainly requires that “something” exists to be accepted.

Isaías restructured and resignified the perceptions learned in the conservative context in which he was raised, but did not try to “serve only himself,” but to submit himself to a higher will.

So I experienced conflicts, my life was disturbed. For this reason I cried, got depressed, wanted, many times...I preferred death to being a homosexual. And now I understand that God *accepts me how I am*, and I know that *He wants me to be that which I truly am*. So now I love God, I can love God in “spirit and truth” according to the word, before I did not. Now I understand the verse that says: “the true worshipers worship God in spirit and in truth.” Before I did not understand, I did not know, now I know what this word means. This for me is a very profound experience, because it is *an experience that I had with God*. I don’t treat this as if it was something crazy on my part, but *was an experience that God gave me*. Because now I know what it is to love God in “spirit and truth.” I truly love him in *spirit and in truth*.” I am not concerned with what someone else thinks of me. What the next door neighbor thinks of me does not bother me anymore. What concerns me is what *God thinks of me*, and how he accepts me, which is the only thing that is important. What the others say, for me is not important. What I think, what I have to believe, is what God thinks of me. And

19 Isaías explicitly mentioned, the perception of the leaders of the Assembly of God with whom he interacted, that the life of homosexuality is an effect of *demonic possession* caused by *pombagiras* and other entities of the Afro-Brazilian pantheon. A very heterogeneous set of Evangelical discourses converge around this notion of homosexuality as an effect of *outside influences* that can include “factors” such as family trauma, sexual abuse and cultural influences stemming from the growing acceptance of homosexuality in contemporary society. These discourses are aligned to the notion that homosexuality can be *cured/liberated* by the Power of God, eventually with the help of rituals of liberation of Christian “psychological therapies” (Natividade, 2006a; 2006b).

I am absolutely sure that *he loves me the way that I am* and he will *accept me* the way that I am, he will not ask for a *transformation*, because it is not necessary.

The statement above reveals how participation in an inclusionary church provides support to a re-elaboration of the perception of the relationship with other social networks: *to be accepted* by family, neighbors and others is less important than *to be accepted* by God. In parallel to this rereading of interpersonal relationships, which appear to be subordinated to the spiritual experience, there is a change in language when speaking of oneself. Greater weight is attributed to the vocabulary of *acceptance* than to the discourse about *transformation*: by living a personal experience with God, Isaías comes to perceive sexual orientation as a dimension of himself, and not as an outside *influence*. The truth of sexuality, a foundation of identity, comes to be perceived as conducive with the *word of God*.

Final Considerations

The Evangelical religious notion of *transformation*, evoked in the initial portion of this study, conflicts on some levels with the meanings assumed by the notion of *acceptance* in the inclusionary Evangelical context. A significant example of this antithetical relationship is the discourse that emphasizes that *God accepts* the sexual orientation of the subject, thus repudiating *transformation* as a violation of his nature.²⁰ These tensions are revealed at the level of the discourse about the self, in which the believer reconstructs himself, re-elaborating his perceptions about his relationship with the divine, translated in terms of “intimacy” or “separation” from God, and of his capacity to follow or not the divine determinations. In the biographical narrative analyzed, He is endowed with agency and is the source of agency. The subject finds his orientation in a space of moral questioning through the

20 This relationship of tension does not mean that the category of *transformation* is abandoned or suppressed in the inclusionary religious contexts. Ethnographic indicators suggest the possibility that a discourse about transformation can, eventually, be applied to bisexuality, whose status in these congregations deserves further study. The statement of one leader, for example, qualified the “bisexuality” of an Evangelical man who had conjugal relations with a woman as *non-acceptance* of his own sexuality, a condition from which he is still not *liberated*. Another statement, from a transvestite undergoing a recent process of adhesion to the transsexual identity, presents the eminence of *transgenitalization* surgery as a *Grace* offered by the action of God. It should be emphasized that other dimensions of life, beyond sexual identity, can serve as a target for the exercise of the vocabulary of transformation among the faithful in inclusionary groups.

certainty of complying with the determinations of God – as appears, in various moments, in Isaías’ statement: “He wants me to be that which I truly am. (...) What others say, is not important to me. What I think, *what I have to think, is what God thinks of me.*”

This statement reveals an updating of the tension between very distinct cultural norms based on a singular trajectory. The *neotraditionalism* of the hegemonic Evangelical segments constitutes a social medium adverse to homosexuality, promoting, paradoxically, a prescription of cultural attention to these desires and practices. It is important to note that this attention supports a *self-alienation* in the sphere of sexuality, later leading to possible identifications with homosexuality. The sustentation of a *religious justification* for adhesion to a gay identity demands continuous work about oneself – which in the case of Isaías, is perceived as part of a *relationship with God*. This process certainly depends on support from social networks that reiterate this discourse about oneself that the subject enunciates – the participation in an inclusionary religious group is referred to by Isaías as crucial to understanding that God does not demand of him a *transformation* in the sphere of sexuality. The “dual vocation” for religion and sexuality is experienced in an intensely relational form, but emphasizes less the importance of *attributed* social relations (such as those established with the family of origin) than the *elected* relations that the subject establishes with God and the congregation.

This re-elaboration of the self, from an analytical perspective, can be interpreted as a submission to the *pedagogy of acceptance* exercised in inclusionary groups (Natividade, 2008), which act on a level of pastoral care, creating religious justifications for the constitution of sexual identities. In some conservative Evangelical contexts, “to accept” is a verb broadly used in performative discursive constructions, prescribing a mode of relationship with God: the faithful must *accept Jesus in their hearts*. Lay discourses about sexual orientation, on the other hand, focus on interiority and not on an external agency, emphasizing the importance of “accepting oneself” for the constitution of a positive self image. The *pedagogy of inclusionary acceptance* facilitates the mediation between these discourses, extending the acceptance of God to LGBT identities, which are not perceived as an *abomination* or *sin* and come to be recognized as legitimate forms of experiencing sexuality. In this way, it promotes a neutralization of the stigma that falls on these manifestations of sexual diversity, allowing the faithful contingent solutions for their

dilemmas of constitution of identity.

The discourse of the subjects about the interior conflicts experienced in the period of adhesion to conservative religiosity should not be considered only as a translation of intra-psychic tensions. To the contrary, it is possible to see them as an indicator of the mechanisms of subjection to which the person is submitted to during their life trajectory, which can be associated directly and indirectly to the Evangelical uses of the notion of *transformation* applied to sexualities that transgress heterosexuality. These impacts tend, in general, to be felt in a more vivid form by the subjects who relate adhesion to conservative Christian religions, especially Evangelical churches. The inclusionary religious initiatives, which offer a reading of the Evangelical that considers the exercise of LGBT sexualities to be legitimate, co-opt subjects who experience these dilemmas and provide support so that they can establish their sexual orientation. In this sense, they appear to collaborate to the reduction of the vulnerability of this segment of the population.

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