

Between faith and love?

***Sexual morality and
religious belief among
LGBT and cohabiting
Catholics in Malta and
Sicily***



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Between faith and love?

**Sexual morality and religious belief among
LGBT and cohabiting Catholics in Malta and
Sicily**

**A thesis presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,
University of Malta**

Angele Deguara

2018

***To the beautiful people of the LGBT community
and to those who dare be themselves***

ABSTRACT

My ethnographic study explores the role of religion in relation to intimate relationships in contemporary Maltese society and to a lesser extent in Palermo, Sicily. The study examines the intersection between faith and sexuality in a secularising society. It seeks to answer two main research questions: (i) whether and to what extent the Catholic Church and its teaching influence the lifestyles, decisions, beliefs and behaviours of individuals in intimate relationships; (ii) how Catholics who are in sexual relationships which do not conform to the moral guidelines of the Catholic Church, more specifically lesbian, gay, bisexual or trans (LGBT) and divorced or separated and cohabiting or remarried men and women experience conflict arising from the incongruence between their beliefs and their sexual desires or lifestyle choices.

My ethnographic fieldwork consisted of two years of participant observation with *Drachma LGBTI* in Malta. I also spent a short time with members of *Ali d'Aquila* in Palermo. Both organisations offer a space where LGBT individuals may reconcile their sexuality and their spirituality. Most informants from *Drachma* and *Ali d'Aquila* are male, in their mid-thirties and well-educated. I also conducted forty-five in-depth, unstructured interviews with both LGBT and non-LGBT individuals whose lifestyle or sexuality does not conform to the official teaching of the Catholic Church on sexuality.

Being brought up in a traditionally Catholic society means absorbing notions of what it means to be a 'good' Catholic such as being heterosexual, getting married in Church, not having sex outside marriage and having children. Therefore non-conformity to these expectations leads to various conflicts and struggles which may manifest themselves in a number of ways and on many levels. The official teaching of the Church on sexual morality is the main source of conflict not only with the Church itself but also with God, with significant others and with the wider moral community.

The study reveals that LGBT and non-LGBT informants experience the conflict differently. Same-sex desires tend to shatter one's inner state of being as one is engulfed with feelings of guilt, fear, disgust, anger, anxiety and disempowerment. Divorced or cohabiting Catholics may also experience guilt because of living 'in sin'. However they are more tormented by shame rather than by guilt, as they experience a sense of judgement and exclusion from the social community. In contrast, LGBT informants are more concerned with the judging eyes of God.

The past few decades have witnessed remarkable shifts in the way family life and intimacies are construed and experienced in contemporary society, not least in Malta. Contemporary believers are living their faith and their sexuality in very different social conditions than they did only a few decades ago. Secular developments have created an environment which makes it possible for individuals to challenge the dictates of prescriptive morality. As traditional sources of authority decline, individuals tend to reconstruct their faith and sexual morality. However, the study suggests that one cannot adopt the religious individualisation thesis unproblematically within the Maltese context. While informants no longer consider the Church to be their moral yardstick where their love lives are concerned, it is only a few who have relinquished their desire to be embraced by it. Their reconstructed sexual morality is still embedded within a Catholic framework even as they opt for contemporary lifestyles. Modern Catholic believers are reluctant to sever their ties completely from the Church, preferring instead to have remained within its fold.

While nobody can deny that Malta has indeed become a more secular, modern society, and that relationship choices are less guided by Church morality, Malta's modernity remains persistently Catholic. In Malta aspects of modernity converge with pre-modern elements. While the movement away from the Church may suggest a decline in religious authority, the fact that the legitimation of the sacred is still significant indicates that religion still plays an important role within contemporary Malta.

PREFACE

This thesis is being submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Anthropological Sciences at the University of Malta. The work is original except where reference or acknowledgement is made to previous research and has not been presented for any other degree or qualification to any other university. The study was conducted under the supervision of Dr Jean-Paul Baldacchino, Head of the Department of Anthropological Sciences.

My interest in studying secularisation through intimate relationships was spurred by the divorce legislation campaign in 2011 in which I was directly involved with the 'yes' movement. The role of the Roman Catholic Church in Malta had changed and I wanted to delve more into the subject. In the years preceding the research I was also active in promoting LGBT rights and I had broadened my circle of friends from the LGBT community. I hope that my work exploring the conflict arising from the incongruence between faith, love and sexuality will give a voice to the LGBT and divorced/separated persons who shared their experiences with me. I would perhaps be too optimistic to expect my work to bring about some kind of positive change in their life but I still hope it will.

I would like to thank members of *Drachma LGBTI* in Malta and *Ali d'Aquila* in Palermo for opening their door and their hearts to me as well as all those who shared their story with me or who gave me their support throughout this research process. I particularly want to thank Mario Gerada for his constant support and feedback. I am grateful to my patient husband for taking on more than his share of domestic responsibilities so that I could work on my project. I thank the members of the Department of Anthropological Sciences for introducing me to the fascinating world of anthropology and for giving me the opportunity to broaden my knowledge and understanding of the social phenomena under investigation by exploring them from this perspective. I appreciate the encouragement, interest and advice of my co-supervisor and friend, Professor Dorota Hall from the Polish

Academy of Sciences in Warsaw which she has given me from the start. Finally I thank my tutor, Dr Jean-Paul Baldacchino for the long hours he dedicated to this project. I value his friendship, his professionalism, the scholarly guidance and valuable insights he gave me especially during our long conversations which shaped this work. I owe this enjoyable learning experience mostly to him.

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*alone sulking bitterly in my solitude
drowning in my despair, for truly i felt alone
as i remembered that first time
when i got hard just by lookin' at him...*

*the horror and that revulsion ...
why me lord? why me?
what have i done wrong?
why did you forsake me?
why me?*

*so i curled up in my quiet spot
there in the shadows
where no one could see
my silent weeping
there by myself
drowning in
my despair..*

why me?

*up in the sky you smile
love so pure, soothes and calms
blessed tranquility amidst many storms an' blizzards..*

*i smile back
i shed the robes of guilt
and the rattling rotting chains
that held me down..
freely and,
with my loved one
at my side,
i fly the skies towards You
for Your love
knows no
bounds ..*

*in peace
in acceptance
not alone this time
in quiet serenity
in closeness*

to You

Written by a gay man from *Drachma LGBTI*

Chapter I: THE CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

1.1 Overview of the study

My research project consists of an ethnographic study of the role of religion in intimate relationships in contemporary Maltese society and to some extent in Palermo, in the nearby Italian island of Sicily. The study seeks to understand individuals' relationship to religion through the life choices they make. It explores the intersection between faith and sexuality in a secular society. It examines two main research questions: (i) whether and to what extent the Roman Catholic Church (henceforth the Church) and its teaching bear an influence on the lifestyles, decisions, beliefs and behaviours of individuals in relationships with intimate others and the extent to which they are guided by secular values; (ii) how Catholics who are in sexual relationships which do not conform to the moral guidelines of the Catholic Church - more specifically lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) and divorced or separated and cohabiting or remarried men and women - experience the conflict that may arise from the incongruence between their beliefs and their sexuality or lifestyle choices. The study seeks to understand how my Catholic informants live their faith as they struggle with these potential conflicts and dilemmas. As I will explain in detail in Chapter II, I explored these issues through ethnographic fieldwork with *Drachma LGBTI* (henceforth *Drachma*) in Malta between January 2014 and December 2015. I also spent a short time with *Ali d'Aquila* in Palermo and interviewed some of its members. *Ali d'Aquila* is part of *Drachma's* international network and one of its 'sister organisations'. Both are faith communities concerned with reconciling sexuality and spirituality. However, mine is not a comparative study as the main focus of my fieldwork remains *Drachma*. To supplement the participant observation, I conducted a number of in-depth interviews with LGBT and heterosexual Catholic believers whose relationships did not confirm to Catholic sexual morality. These interviews were carried out with individuals who did not necessarily form part of either *Drachma*, *Ali d'Aquila* or any other group.

In a historically Roman Catholic context such as that of Malta and Palermo, one is almost inevitably brought up as a Catholic and socialised into Catholic values and morality through the role of parents, teachers, mass media and figures of religious authority. Most of my informants were brought up in a religious environment at home and were expected to attend mass and to go to confession regularly. In addition my Maltese participants attended compulsory catechism classes after school. Some may have attended Church schools although in Maltese government schools, the religious ethos tends to be just as strong. Some were actively involved in the parish as readers or as altar boys while others sang in the church choir or played the guitar during mass. Many formed part of religious groups such as *Legion of Mary*, *Youth Fellowship*, *Charismatic Renewal Movements* and, in Palermo, the *Federazione Universitaria Cattolica Italiana* (FUCI), the *Focolare Movement* or the *Movimento Eucaristico Giovanile* (MEG). A significant number of my Maltese gay male informants joined religious orders for a time. Most of my informants came from a background characterised by both a “high family involvement” and a “high personal involvement” in traditional forms of religion (Wilcox 2009, p. 89). Only a few did not conform to this pattern, having parents who were not particularly religious but who themselves gave great importance to religion during their childhood and youth. This, together with many other Catholic symbols and rituals which colour everyday life in Malta and Southern Italy is bound to have an effect on one’s identity formation.

Being brought up as Catholic also means absorbing notions of what it means to be a ‘good’ Catholic. This would include being heterosexual, getting married in church, not having sex outside marriage and having children (Wolkomir 2001, p. 311). Mahaffy (1996, p. 393) reports that Christian lesbian women may retain a model of the family based on traditional notions of gender. Finding one’s sexuality to be at odds with such ideals often leads to complex emotions, dilemmas, questions and struggles. Faced with unforeseen circumstances such as infidelity and marital breakdown, non-LGBT individuals often feel that they have no choice but to opt for a lifestyle which does not live up to the expectations of being a

'good' Catholic. In both cases, one has to deal with the fact that, as defined by the hegemonic culture, two important aspects of one's life are incongruent.

The conflict that may arise from this incongruence is multifaceted and may manifest itself in a number of ways and on many levels. It can be internal (intrapersonal) and/or external (interpersonal). It may be direct or indirect such as when it affects one's partner and consequently the relationship (Gerada 2000, p. 38). It may involve psychological, social, cultural, moral, ethical, relational, theological and ontological dimensions. It may span over a relatively short period of time or it may involve years of unrelenting tension and despair at times even leading to suicide (Subhi & Geelan 2012, p. 1397). It should be noted that many of my LGBT informants both in Malta and Palermo grew up in a society where homosexuality was not yet part of the social and political discourse as it has recently become, a factor which made it difficult for them to make sense of their sexual desires and to identify with them. It was also a society in which the Church was still the most powerful agent in determining sexual morality, a role which it retained well into the 20th century. The more liberal attitudes characteristic of other Western cultures after World War II seeped in very slowly into Maltese society (Savona-Ventura 2001). This is not unique to Maltese culture as Inglis (2005) notes a similar process when writing about Catholic Ireland.

The study reveals that there are differences in how my LGBT and non-LGBT informants experience conflict, what they consider to be the main sources of conflict, the feelings these evoke and the impact they have on their sense of self. The issues which LGBT Catholics, the main protagonists in my study, have to contend with do not bear close resemblance to those which trouble my heterosexual informants. When those who now identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual Catholics started experiencing sexual desires for persons of the same sex, their inner state of being was shattered as they were engulfed with feelings of guilt, fear, disgust, anger, doubt, anxiety and disempowerment. This is further explored in Chapters IV and V which analyse the relationship of my informants with others and with God respectively. While non-LGBT Catholics may also experience some

guilt because of living 'in sin', their overriding moral sentiment is shame rather than guilt, as they experience a sense of judgement and exclusion from their moral community as established in Chapter IV. For LGBT Catholics shame is a secondary emotion. They are more concerned with how they are perceived by God rather than by society in contrast to my non-LGBT informants. However, as I will show in Chapter III, my informants' perceived condemnation and rejection by the Church contributes significantly to their distress even though conflict with the Church bears a different significance for the two sets of informants. For LGBT Catholics the Church represents first and foremost God's judgement although it may also lead to their estrangement from a moral community. For non-LGBT Catholics conflict with the Church is driven by their perceived loss of status in the parish community. The Church influences the morality of the social community and disturbs their previous embeddedness within a social network where they now feel stigmatised. For these latter informants their conflict with the Church is closely tied to their sense of shame ensuing from the judging eyes of the social other. In contrast, my LGBT informants' deepest conflict is internal as they struggle with their guilt; with accepting and restructuring their sinful, deviant self that they believe is condemned by God, the divine Other. As indicated, these distinct, yet connected, conflicting relationships (i) with the Church as an institution, (ii) with others and (iii) with God are explored in the three main ethnographic chapters, Chapters III, IV and V respectively. Chapter VI concerns how my LGBT informants deal with their conflicts; with how they seek to reconcile their religious and sexual identities as they try to answer their many questions. In their endeavours to assuage their feelings and dilemmas, they develop a narrative of self, especially cultivated by therapy, deep introspection and the reading of LGBT-affirming Catholic theologies. The latter is particularly fostered by *Drachma* which seeks to guide its members to recognise the relevance of the word of God in light of their own lived experience.

Many of my informants manage to find an acceptable balance. With time, they stop being the 'Orthodox Catholics' they were in the past and tend to become 'Creative Catholics' who do not stick rigidly to the rules of the Church (Inglis 2007,

pp. 10-11). They tend to distance themselves from the Church on matters related to sexuality. They also tend to explore alternative ways of living their spirituality. However their 'journey' towards some degree of resolution is filled with torment. Some LGBT Catholics even manage to emerge out of the conflict proud of their sexuality but a few continue to have doubts, to question, to seek therapy and to wish they were 'normal'.

1.2 The Church's official position on homosexuality

The Roman Catholic Church condemns homosexual acts [but not homosexual orientation] in no uncertain terms even as it calls for compassion and prudence towards homosexuals. Within a cultural context such as that of Malta and Palermo, this was bound to influence cultural values and to set the standards of sexual normativity which have only recently started to be questioned. The Church's official position about homosexuality is found in a number of documents (For a detailed review of the doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church on homosexuality see Dillon 1999, pp. 54-60). The Catechism of the Catholic Church (Catholic Church 1994, p. 625 paragraphs 2357-2359) reiterates the doctrine set out in two important documents which were published in 1975 and 1986 respectively. Mario, previous *Drachma* coordinator, describes these as "the three paragraphs that brought about so much pain". The first document was the *Declaration on certain questions concerning sexual ethics* (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 1975).¹ The declaration deals with homosexuality briefly together with other issues such as masturbation and reiterates the Church's position that sexual relations are only morally justified if they take place within a heterosexual marital context. The document describes homosexuality as "a serious depravity" and as "the sad consequence of rejecting God". Although homosexuals are not blamed for suffering from this "anomaly", homosexual acts are deemed to be "intrinsically disordered and can in no case be approved of" (Section VIII). In 1986, The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith published a *Letter to the*

¹http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19751229_person_a-humana_en.html

*Bishops of the Catholic Church on the pastoral care of homosexual persons*² making reference to the earlier document of 1975 where the homosexual “condition” or homosexual “tendencies” are confirmed as “intrinsically disordered” (paragraph 3). The document argues that same sex relationships go against the divine plan and are “essentially self-indulgent” and immoral. They are not complementary. They go against the natural law and are not open to life (paragraph 7). In line with this teaching, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (2003)³ issued a document entitled *Considerations regarding proposals to give legal recognition to unions between homosexual persons* in which the then Cardinal Ratzinger explains the Church’s objections to homosexual legal unions with the scope of protecting “the dignity of marriage, the foundation of the family, and the stability of society”. The document also gives advice to Catholic politicians on how to object to such unions. Furthermore, in 2005, the Congregation for Catholic Education published an *Instruction Concerning the Criteria for the Discernment of Vocations with regard to Persons with Homosexual Tendencies in view of their Admission to the Seminary and to Holy Orders*.⁴ In this document (Congregation for Catholic Education 2005), approved by Pope Benedict XVI, the Church declares that in light of its teaching, it “cannot admit to the seminary or to holy orders those who practise homosexuality, present deep-seated homosexual tendencies or support the so-called ‘gay culture’”. According to the document, such persons cannot relate to others “correctly”. Therefore unless their “homosexual tendencies” are “clearly overcome at least three years before ordination to the diaconate”, priesthood is out of bounds. Otherwise “negative consequences” may derive from their ordination.

²http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19861001_homosexual-persons_en.html

³http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20030731_homosexual-unions_en.html

⁴http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_20051104_istruzione_en.html

Apart from the Church's teaching, there are scattered references to homosexuality in the Old Testament which are often quoted by those who condemn homosexuality in the name of the Catholic faith (namely Leviticus 18:22, Leviticus 20:13 and Genesis 19:1-11). Therefore within Christianity, religious scripture tends to be the basis for censoring homosexuality. Such Bible stories have been called "texts of terror" by authors such as Bardella (2001, p. 122) and Goss (1993, p. 90), a queer Christian theologian. They argue that these texts have constantly been used to instill fear and to discriminate against gays.

Considering the strong language which is used to condemn homosexual acts, both in the Holy Scriptures and in the Church's Magisterium, it is not surprising that LGBT people who are practising Catholics have a problem with accepting themselves and their sexuality. They also need to figure out why the Church's teaching on homosexuality seems to be at odds with other aspects of its teaching, such as its central tenet that God's love is unconditional (Rodriguez 2010, p. 9). Pope Francis seems to be attempting to make the Church appear less homophobic in the eyes of the LGBT faith community. He has been described by a National Catholic Reporter correspondent (Reese 2017) as being more concerned with orthopraxis rather than with orthodoxy and as succeeding in truly instilling a new way of evangelising.

Increasingly there are a number of Catholic priests that are writing and actively seeking to 'build a bridge' with the LGBT community (See for example Martin 2017a). In an article written by Martin (2017b) who is a Jesuit priest, it is argued that the change in tone with regards to LGBT Catholics is due both to the approach of Pope Francis himself as well as to the lived experiences of people at grassroots level. Pope Francis' famous, often quoted observation, made during his trip back to Rome from Rio de Janeiro that "If someone is gay and he searches for the Lord and has good will, who am I to judge?" (BBC 2013) gives hope to LGBT Catholics even if it does not change the official doctrine of the Catholic Church.

Historically speaking it wasn't solely the Church that acted as the authority determining the nature of sexual behaviour. As Salazar (2006, p. 36), following Foucault, argues, sex also became subject to regulation by a medical discourse. Medicine used to view homosexuality as a form of neurosis. Homosexuals were institutionalised or even made to undergo surgical interventions in the West (Wilcox 2003, p. 44).

1.3 The Church's official position on matrimony

The Church's position on the sacrament of matrimony is laid out in Article 7 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church (Catholic Church 1994, Canons 1601-1666).⁵ In terms of Catholic teaching, both cohabitation and civil marriage are morally unacceptable even if both are on the increase in contemporary society. The teaching of the Church prohibits those who are divorced and in another sexual relationship from receiving communion⁶ (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 1994; Catholic Church 1994). In 2016 [after I conducted my fieldwork] Pope Francis's apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*⁷ revisited the ban, urging the clergy to take a more sensitive, case-by-case approach. Following the publication of the exhortation, in January 2017, the Maltese Bishops published a document (Archdiocese of Malta and Diocese of Gozo 2017) in which they set out the criteria for the application of Chapter VIII of *Amoris Laetitia*.⁸ In the document, the Bishops call on priests to accompany those who are in a cohabiting relationship or who are married only civilly. In their pastoral work with people in these circumstances, priests are advised to distinguish one situation from another. Quoting the Pope's exhortation extensively, the Maltese Bishops note that individuals in such situations should not be precluded from approaching the

⁵ http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p2s2c3a7.htm

⁶ http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_14091994_rec-holy-comm-by-divorced_en.html

⁷ https://w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia_en.pdf

⁸ <http://ms.maltadiocese.org/WEBSITE/2017/PRESS%20RELEASES/Norms%20for%20the%20Application%20of%20Chapter%20VIII%20of%20AL.pdf>

sacraments of reconciliation and communion if they are “at peace with God” (p. 7). The report was welcomed by some quarters and criticised heavily by others (Hitchens 2017). The Maltese Bishops however stood by their position and even advised Maltese seminarians to quit their formation if they were not ready to heed the advice of the Pope (Independent 2017a).

1.4 Christianity in Malta’s History

Malta has for centuries been synonymous with Christianity which it is believed to have embraced since the Shipwreck of St Paul on the island in 60 AD, possibly with an Islamic interruption during the Arab occupation. As Mitchell (2002a, pp. 22-32) notes, the narrative of St Paul not only gives the Maltese their Catholic identity but also their national and European identity.

Although little is known about the early Church in Malta, there are clear indications that after the arrival of the Knights of St John in 1530, the Church’s position was well established. Its central role in the life of Maltese people was reflected in how villages were designed with the parish church at their core. This represented the significance of religious belief, rituals, symbols, celebrations as well as piques over patron saints and between band clubs in Maltese villages (Boissevain 1993). Under British Protestant colonial rule (1800-1964), the Church’s hegemony was rarely tampered with as political pragmatism stopped the British from interfering in religious matters (Koster 1984, pp. 35-45). During the British period, the local Church was the main provider of welfare, charity, education and leisure (Abela 1991, p. 66). Boissevain’s (1993) ethnographic study in the 1960s analysing village/parish life at the time, amply depicts the role of religion and the Church in the everyday life of the villagers/parishioners within the context of Church-state relations. He points to the many ways in which the secular was so intertwined with the religious that it was difficult to disentangle parish from village. The Church’s influence was solidified by the support of the people who related to it as their main source and symbol of national identity particularly in opposition to their Protestant masters (Koster 1988). The people’s undivided

loyalty to the Church and their strong religiosity were the Church's main source of legitimation as the Maltese did not, until relatively late in history, conceive of a separation between Church and state or between the sacred and the secular in their everyday life (Boissevain 1993). In the village, the parish priest enjoyed a high social standing with his flock who consulted him not only for spiritual advice but also sought his assistance regarding secular matters as one of the few formally educated people in the village. He not only "served as lawyer, banker, business adviser and traditional dispenser of charity" (Boissevain 1993, pp. 42-43) but also as representative and defender of the people's interests with secular authorities who in turn used the priest to communicate with the people.

Therefore the Church was involved in politics at every level, from the village community to the national level. Where it had no authority, it still had considerable influence (Boissevain 1993). The privileged status of the Church is also enshrined in the Maltese Constitution. Not only is the Roman Catholic Apostolic religion declared the religion of Malta but Article 2 of the Constitution also states that the authorities of the Church have the duty and the right to teach which principles are right and which are wrong. Religious teaching of the Roman Catholic Apostolic Faith is also provided in all state schools as part of compulsory education, according to the same Constitution⁹.

The Church in Malta has therefore traditionally set the social standards of morality. As in other Western countries, it has particularly asserted its right to regulate the conditions surrounding the conjugal bond (Remond 1999, pp. 71-76). Studies from traditionally Catholic countries such as Ireland (Anderson 2010) and the Philippines (Bautista 2010) attest to this. The Church's influence on moral standards was, until a few years ago, reflected in public policies and civil legislation. Laws and social policies, particularly those relating to marriage, sexuality and relationships, tended to reflect religious mores or else were

⁹ However, now parents may opt to exempt their children from attending lessons in religious knowledge. Since 2014 an ethics education programme is gradually being introduced in state Schools in parallel with religious education.

inexistent in line with Catholic teaching. The anthropologist Mark Anthony Falzon (2007, p. 54) argued that there was a noticeable absence of a mature secular discourse and debate surrounding questions such as divorce and same-sex unions. Public debates were inevitably embedded within a discourse of Catholic morality.

For many years the Church in Malta had almost complete control over the marital bond and its role in marriage preparation, rites and dissolution is still significant. The Church is the only organisation which offers compulsory preparation courses to couples before a Church marriage through its *Cana Movement*.¹⁰ The state offers no parallel service to those opting for a civil marriage. Before the introduction of civil marriage (Marriage Act 1975), canonical marriage was the only option in Malta. For many years religious marriage remained predominant in Malta. However, civil marriages have dramatically increased since their inception to the point of surpassing religious marriages for the first time in 2016 (NSO 2017, p. 9). At the same time it does not mean that all those who opt for a church marriage necessarily make this choice on the basis of their faith (Galea 2009, p. 18). Both state and Church have the power to grant marriage annulments in Malta although for a time, the issue of annulments reflected the immense power wielded by the Church and sustained by the state. In the marriage concordat¹¹ signed between the Republic of Malta and the Holy See in 1993, the Government of the time gave the Ecclesiastical Tribunal precedence over the civil courts in annulment cases. However, in 2014 the agreement was revised (Times of Malta 2014), curtailing the power of the Church¹² [Marriage (Amendment) Act 2014]. In

¹⁰ The *Cana Movement* is a voluntary organisation within the Maltese Catholic Church which offers services to families who are facing difficulties. It organises preparation courses for marriage, support groups for separated persons and natural family planning advice among its many services. It was founded by Fr Charles Vella in 1956.

¹¹ The document can be read from:
http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/secretariat_state/archivio/documents/rc_seg-st_19930203_s-sede-malta_en.html, retrieved 25th March 2017.

¹² On the 27th January 2014, the Maltese Government and the Holy See signed The Third Additional Protocol which amends parts of the previous agreement signed in 1993 while repealing the Second Additional Protocol signed on 6 January 1995. The press release issued by the Church of Malta can be read here:
<http://ms.maltadiocese.org/WEBSITE/2014/PRESS%20RELEASES/11%20THIRD%20ADDITIONAL%20PROTOCOL%20ENG.pdf>

2014, out of a total of 77 registered annulments, 48 were religious annulments and 29 were civil cases (NSO 2016). The smaller number of annulments granted by the state is probably due to the introduction of divorce legislation in 2011. However, for people of faith such as my informants, obtaining a Church annulment remains significant since this enables them to remarry in church should they so desire after a failed marriage rather than be constrained to cohabit or to opt for a civil marriage. Indeed, failure to obtain an annulment from the Ecclesiastical Tribunal often leads to disappointment and anger.

1.5 Social Change and Secularisation

Boissevain (2006, pp. 165-185) argues that while in Malta traditional religious rituals have remained largely intact, there is also evidence that things are changing. In contemporary society, people's lives are less bound to the rhythm of church bells and religious activities. In our traditionally religious island community there are clear indications of shifts in the complex relationship between Church, state and society reflecting processes of modernisation and secularisation. These however do not necessarily imply the loss of religion as much as a transformation in the experience and expression of faith.

1.5.1. Church and State

The encroachment of the state on areas previously under Church responsibility is one way in which the social significance of religion has been transformed (Van der Veer 1995, p. 8). Bruce (1996, p. 40) claims that, "What medieval monarchs sought from God's representative on earth, democratic governments seek from the ballot box". In modern Western societies governments no longer need the blessing of Bishops or Popes. Anthropology's attempt at capturing the secular has been closely connected to politics, the state and civil society and consequently to secularism (Agrama 2010; Chatterjee 2006; Hirschkind 2006; Mahmood 2005; Tambar 2009; Van der Veer 1995, 2011). Rather than seeing secularisation as a consequence of social change and modernity, as it was generally approached within sociology, anthropology perceives secularisation as a process emerging out

of secularist state policies. Asad (2003, p. 13) views modernity as a 'project' which people in power seek to implement with the aim of establishing a number of principles such as democracy, human and civil rights, market freedom and secularism. The scope of such modernising states was not only to disentangle themselves from ecclesiastical institutions but also to implement a set of reforms aimed at reshaping both the material and moral fibre of society in terms of Enlightenment principles (Asad 1992, p. 15). This has often meant the "coercive universalization of modern morality, knowledge, law and nation-statehood" (Asad 1992, p. 16). The institutionalisation of secularity was not merely about the absence of 'religion' from public life or about instilling religious tolerance but rather about the power of the modern nation-state (Bangstad 2009, p. 191). According to Mahmood (2008, n.p), secularism is "not so much the abandonment of religion but its ongoing regulation through a variety of state and civic institutions".

As a result of such processes, religious bodies became progressively divested of their powers, property and authority in domains such as marriage and welfare (Asad 1992, p. 15). They led to a decline in the involvement of religious institutions in fields such as education, healthcare, welfare and social control. However, as the main welfare provider - long before any attempts by the state to establish its own welfare regime - the Maltese Church still retains a significant role in welfare provision (Falzon 2007, pp. 60-63). This despite the fact that successive governments have contributed to the development of a state welfare regime. The local Church was, until the early 1980s, also the main provider of natural family planning services until the government opened its own family planning clinics (Savona-Ventura 2003). Falzon's (2007) analysis of the role of the Roman Catholic Church within Malta's welfare system provides an evaluation of the dynamic relationship between Church and state. It shows how political decisions have led to a more secular welfare regime where paradoxically the Church still enjoys a high level of involvement.

However, transformations in the dynamics of Church-state relations are most evident in the legislative changes implemented by the government, particularly in the past few years. The introduction of divorce legislation (Civil Code Amendment Act 2011) following a consultative referendum was a watershed in Maltese socio-cultural history. It is a stark example of the secular shifts in Maltese society. The people voted in favour of the introduction of divorce legislation despite the reluctance of a conservative government, the Church's strong opposition during the referendum campaign (Deguara 2012) and the relatively high level of religiosity among the Maltese. Consequently, Malta became the last country in Europe to introduce divorce. The result of the referendum suggests that the Church's influence in terms of intimate relationships has diminished.

More significantly, since 2011 and the election of a new Labour Government, other pieces of legislation which do not concur with the teaching of the Church were enacted, particularly those related to LGBT rights. In 2016, the Maltese Parliament also repealed a law, in place since 1933, which criminalised the vilification of the Roman Catholic religion. The legal amendment [Criminal Code (Amendment) Act 2016] also decriminalised pornography, despite the laments of the Archbishop (Cocks 2016). Another historically and culturally significant legislation for Malta was the Civil Unions Act (2014) by means of which gay couples could enter into a civil union with all the rights enjoyed by heterosexual married couples. A year later it became legally possible for individuals to change their gender identity (Gender Identity, Gender Expression and Sex Characteristics Act 2015). Soon after, Malta became the first country in Europe to make conversion therapy, aimed at repressing or changing a person's sexual orientation, illegal (Affirmation of Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Gender Expression Act 2016). Upon its re-election in 2017, the Labour Government amended the marriage law itself, now granting marriage equality to same-sex couples [Marriage Act and other Laws (Amendment) Act 2017]. In 2018, the law regulating in-vitro fertilisation was amended to make the treatment available to lesbians and single women and to permit embryo freezing [Embryo Protection (Amendment) Act, 2018]. Such swift and unprecedented legal and social policy changes targeting the

LGBT community placed Malta at the top of the ILGA-Europe Rainbow Europe Index (ILGA-Europe 2016). Within the space of a few years Malta went from being rather conservative with regards to marriage, gender and sexuality to being one of the most 'permissive' countries in the world. Cohabitation also became legally recognised for the first time in 2017 (Cohabitation Act 2017). With these moves, the government not only met the demands of the LGBT rights movement but also helped to instigate more acceptance of alternative lifestyles within a society in which they were traditionally viewed as immoral. Simultaneously, it may have created "contradictory social contexts" where legislation is swifter than cultural acceptance in parts of Maltese society where homosexuality is still kept hidden in the "social closet" and shrouded in secrecy (Cassar & Grima Sultana 2017, p. 171).

Despite its undeniable strength therefore, the local Church did not succeed in sheltering Maltese society from the changes taking place away from Malta's shores (Fenech 2012, p. 229). Nor did it manage to protect its hegemony against the forces of the state, especially those with a secularist agenda. It is difficult to establish when Maltese society started moving away from its non-secular state of affairs. However when Malta started being ruled by Maltese politicians, the balance of power between Church and state took a different dimension as the state was now obliged to take other civil states and international law as its benchmark rather than the Church. Consequently the Church gradually began losing its hold on different aspects of Maltese society (Montebello 2009, p. 110).

The recent legislative transformations however were not the first concrete attempts at secularisation, at least on the legislative front. The politico-religious conflicts of the late 1920s between Lord Strickland and the Maltese Church and especially those of the 1960s between the Church and the Malta Labour Party (MLP, currently PL) left an indelible mark on the relationship between the local Church and the Maltese people. The Church sought to protect its threatened hegemony against the secularising forces of the state by imposing sanctions on both Strickland and his Constitutional Party and Mintoff's Labour Party. The conflict with the MLP started with Mintoff's vision of integrating Malta with Britain. The

threat of an increased presence of Protestantism, were such plans to be successful, alarmed the Church. This resulted in a series of clashes between the Church, led by Archbishop Gonzi, and Mintoff. These tensions escalated to the interdiction of the MLP and consequently to its losing the 1962 election. MLP supporters were warned that by supporting the Party, they would be committing a mortal sin. Although voters at the time heeded the Church's advice and did not vote for Mintoff, the Church's sanctions pushed certain people away from its fold as they were constrained to choose between their Church and their Party (Boissevain 1993).

Zammit (1984) considers the Labour Movement as a major secularising force in Malta. It was not only the Church's intrinsic conservatism which Mintoff's MLP saw as problematic but the fact that it could not implement its political reforms unless the Church's power was diminished (Fenech 2012, pp. 227-229). It was only in the 1970s after the long and bitter conflict of the 60s with the Church came to an end that Mintoff, as Prime Minister, began implementing a number of controversial secularist policies. These included the decriminalisation of sodomy and adultery, the legalisation of contraceptives and the introduction of civil marriage, amid a series of other measures which increasingly curtailed the power and privileges of the local Church. Mintoff's reforms took place within a backdrop of numerous other changes, both local and international, some of them instigated by the Roman Catholic Church itself especially through Vatican Council II.

The 1987 general elections brought the Nationalist Party (PN) back to power after a 16-year Socialist stretch. Despite its Christian Democratic roots and its propensity to appease the local Church, the PN still succeeded in undermining the "Church-State hegemony even as it fostered it" (Falzon 2007, p. 63). By encouraging more materialist lifestyles and pushing for EU membership, the PN changed Malta's soul. Since the early 1990s material consumption has become a central feature of Maltese culture (Tonna 1996, pp. 62-63) as the PN government liberalised the markets and ushered in a 'spoilt for choice' mentality and an unprecedented sense of material wellbeing. This contrasted with the consumption

trends during Mintoff's Labour government which were curtailed by his protectionist policies. In contemporary Maltese society, people have become more concerned with the here and now (Tonna 1997, pp. 220-221) than with the afterlife.

The increase in tourism and the proliferation of the media played an important role in these changes as the Maltese were presented with images of alternative lifestyles. They were also crucial in challenging the traditional role of women endorsed by the Church. Malta's EU membership in 2004, vehemently promoted by the PN Government, also contributed to weaken the Church's power. With EU membership, public discourse, policies and legislation concerning issues such as welfare, families and gender did not remain safely under the islands' protective wings (Falzon 2007, pp. 65-66). Yet the ambivalence of the Maltese as traditional Catholics and as modern Europeans "placed them both inside and outside European 'modernity'" (Mitchell 2002a, p. 16) as Catholicism was used both to legitimise their place within the European community as well as to resist or to keep Europe at a distance. For example, abortion, which is legal in most of the EU is still taboo in Catholic Malta. In this case, Malta generally makes it a point to remind Europe that the Maltese are a God-fearing nation.

The relationship between Church, state and society is socially constructed and can take many forms (Fox 2008, p. 350; Stepan 2011, p. 114). It depends on the legal, historical and political contexts (Lord 2008, p. 33). Despite attempts at the depoliticisation and marginalisation of religion, very few states, if any, have effectively managed to achieve a total separation between Church and state (Fox 2008, p. 359). Secularist state policies in different socio-political contexts may have witnessed the gradual decline of religion in politics but they have not generally managed to disempower religious institutions completely. On the contrary, despite the declining influence of religion on some aspects of society, religion can be both versatile and resilient, maintaining its significance "on at least some aspects of society and politics" (Fox 2008, p. 364).

1.5.2 Structural Differentiation

Within Sociology secularisation was seen as a process emanating from the social, cultural and economic transformations taking place in the West especially since the 18th century. Secularisation was traditionally associated with these wider transformations related to modernity and seen as one of its consequences. While there has been some engagement with the concepts of the secular and secularism (inter alia Calhoun, Juergensmeyer, & Vanantwerpen 2011; Casanova 2009, 2011; Graham 2012; Modood 2012), sociology's major concern was with secularisation as a process of social change and structural differentiation. As modernity replaced a religious past, the religious and the secular became separate, even opposing entities. Maltese sociologists (Abela 1991; Tabone 1987, 1994, 1995; Vassallo 1974) were also concerned with the relationship between modernity and secularisation. Modernity was largely analysed in terms of secularisation. Indeed in Malta there have hardly been any studies about modernity which were not linked to secularisation.

According to Bruce (1996, p. 25), since in 'traditional' societies religion pervaded every aspect of social life, it was difficult to separate it from other social spheres. However, social change has led to a process of structural differentiation whereby social subsystems became separate and autonomous entities free from religious influence and control or vice versa. Religion became one among many competing social spheres. Structural differentiation was identified as a direct cause of secularisation by various sociologists and was central to the secularisation debate. Parsons (1966) and Luhmann (1977) saw differentiation in terms of the division of the social system into a number of smaller, specialised functional units or subsystems. Structural differentiation led to the "dissolution of the traditional, coherent sacred cosmos" (Luckmann 1967, p. 101). The "sacred canopy" (Berger 1967) gave way to a segmented religious market where the individual is confronted with a variety of reality-defining agencies or plausibility structures to choose from, none of which demands unequivocal allegiance. As modern societies became more differentiated, social control became more bureaucratic and technical and consequently removed from the domain of religion. The power and

influence of religion in society is thereby diminished (Wilson 1966). Chaves (1994, p. 757) uses the term 'laicization' to describe this process. Anthropologist Talal Asad is critical of the view espoused by sociology that modernisation has led to a separation of the religious from the secular. He considers the concepts of 'the secular' and 'the religious' to be more closely connected than they appear to be (Asad 2003, pp. 22-26). Anthropologists studying secularisation in Malta have also argued that in Malta it is not so easy to distinguish the domain of religion from that of the secular (Boissevain 1993, 2006; Mitchell 2002a). In his analysis of the canonisation of Dun Ġorġ Preca, Malta's first saint, Baldacchino (2011) pointed at the enduring significance of miracles in a secular age. According to Casanova (2009, p. 1050) however, the structural differentiation argument is the core and soundest part of the secularisation thesis which "remains uncontested".

1.5.3 Changes within the Church

Secularisation processes may also be observed within the Church itself, what Dobbelaere (1981, 1985, 1987) calls the institutional level of secularisation. According to Abela (1991, p. 67), considering that Malta is such a "close-knit" society, secular forces may emerge from within the Church. During the course of the 20th century a number of social, political and religious movements did indeed have their roots within the Catholic Church itself such as the *Cana Movement* and the *M.U.S.E.U.M.*¹³ While such movements were not secular in nature or scope, they had a number of secularising effects on society even though they were inspired by religious values and formed part of the Maltese Catholic Church. Yet, the leaders of such movements also sought to bring reforms in "what they perceived to be a decadent socio-religious administration of the hierarchical Church" (Abela 1991, p. 67).

Chaves (1994, p. 757) argues that religious institutions undergo internal secularisation as they transform themselves in order to fit better within a secular

¹³ M.U.S.E.U.M. is the Society of Christian Doctrine founded by Dun Ġorġ Preca, a Roman Catholic Priest and Malta's first saint, in 1907 but officially approved by the Church in 1932.

world. Some of the major processes of change within the Church were driven by Vatican Council II which also gave more participatory and interpretive power to the faithful (Dillon 1999, pp. 48-52). Religious organisations themselves are increasingly resorting to secular language to get their message across (Bruce 2002, p. 19; Thompson & Sharma 1998, p. 449). In Malta, this was evident during the divorce referendum campaign, where the Church-backed 'no' movement resorted to scientific statistical data sources rather than to theological discourse to support its arguments against the introduction of divorce legislation (Deguara 2012). In his study on the making of Catholic saints and the determination of miracles, Baldacchino (2011) also shows the central role that science has come to occupy in both these related processes.

Pope Francis is trying to give a more humane face to the Church. He has sought to soften the language used in terms of homosexuality and has called on priests to be more sensitive to the plight of those in irregular intimate relationships. His approach has led to shifts which until a few years ago were inconceivable. For example in May 2017, *La Repubblica* (Rodari 2017) reported that for the first time across Italy, many churches were taking part in the vigils against homophobia and transphobia which take place every year on the 17th May to commemorate the *International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia* (IDAHOT). In Palermo, members of *Ali d'Aquila* had indicated this as one of the main controversial issues which had affected their relationship with the Church authorities. In the past they had problems with obtaining permission to hold these annual vigils inside a church. Indeed, in the same report (Rodari 2017), *La Repubblica* claims that in 2011, the cardinal of Palermo had stopped the IDAHOT vigil, in line with Ratzinger's 1986 *Letter to the Bishops*, cited earlier. Now the Church has decided to open its doors to the LGBT community. The Pope's more embracing discourse has inevitably also left an impact on the Maltese Church. Certain public documents and statements consequently made by the local Church authorities and cited earlier suggest a willingness to show compassion to believers whose lifestyles are not in line with Church doctrine. This is a far cry from the much heavier, dogmatic approach taken by the Curias of Malta and Gozo during the divorce campaign

(Deguara 2012). *Drachma's* ambiguous relationship with the local Church authorities has improved over the years especially since the setting up of the *Drachma Parents' Group*.¹⁴ This has led to some instances of co-operation between the two entities including the participation of the Archbishop or his representatives in *Drachma's* IDAHOT celebrations.

1.5.4 Shifts in the construction of intimate relationships and sexual morality

In early 1981 Albert and Jane Marshall migrated to Australia with their children because of the way they were harassed by members of the public as a result of their involvement in a controversial television series called *Il-Madonna taċ-ċoqqa* [the Madonna in the monk's habit]. The series, which was aired on national television in 1979 concerned the conflict between a village peasant and the Church upon the latter's refusal to renew his lease on a piece of land that was his family's lifeline. The series, directed by Albert Marshall, gave rise to many controversies, the most serious of which concerned an intimate relationship between the peasant's daughter, Rita and a novice priest, Fra Marjanu. In one scene Rita, played by Jane Marshall, breaks the glass of the Madonna's niche and removes the Madonna's habit. In another, more controversial scene, she gives birth to Fra Marjanu's child in the church belfry. The series had such a powerful impact on Maltese society that there were those who apparently could not distinguish between fiction and reality, resulting in the persecution of Ġużè Diacono, the play's author, the director and his main actors, especially his wife. This chain of events particularly points to how Maltese society found it especially difficult to accept what it perceived to be a confrontational approach towards the Church, disrespect for the Madonna and an unacceptable combination of sexuality with religion. Almost forty years have passed since this scandalous, yet very popular drama was the talk of all the towns and villages in Malta and Gozo. When

¹⁴ The *Drachma Parent's Group* is an offshoot of *Drachma LGBTI*, set up in 2008 to help parents and relatives of LGBT individuals to deal with their children's or relatives' coming out and to help them come to terms with the sexuality of their loved ones within a Catholic context.

the Marshalls left Melbourne fifteen years later, they returned to a changed Maltese society. As this chapter shows, in a relatively short time span Maltese society changed from one characterised by a rather conservative Catholic mindset to one where liberal values have made significant headway especially in the last two decades.

The transformation of the sacred in Maltese society is not so much about religious belief as it is about the way Maltese Catholics are living their faith (Montebello 2009, p. 103) and reconstructing their sexual morality. As Abela (2001, p. 84) noted, “[f]aced with ambivalent moral dilemmas of late modernity, it is not uncommon for believers to construct their own individualized value systems at variance from orthodox and authoritative versions of Catholic faith and morals”. In his study of sexuality among young people in Malta, Abela (1998) noted a steady decline in religious identity and trust in the Church. He argued that while Malta was until a few decades earlier regarded as a “fortress-convent” due to its rigid sexual morality, it has now become a “modern Euro-Mediterranean city-island” (Abela 1998, p. 10). There was a notable shift in the values of Maltese society as “[t]he sexual activity of young people has come under the influence of global and western European culture” (Abela 1998, p. 10). According to Abela, young people were becoming more self-reliant, increasingly adopting more relativistic and individualised ethics as they turned away from traditional Church morality. Recent developments in Maltese society such as the popular vote in favour of divorce legislation and the relatively seamless way in which marriage equality was introduced seem to confirm such trends noted by Abela in the 90s. It has been suggested that guidelines about love and intimacy have been transformed into individual choices (Beck 2010, p. 16) and are much less being structured within a framework of religious morality. However, my study suggests that despite these undeniable shifts towards ‘modernity’ in Maltese society, modernity is far from immune to Catholic sensibility.

The possibility of disagreement with an institutionalised religion that exercised a moral hegemony is however itself a sign of secularisation (Tabone 1987, pp. 148-

166). While the hegemony of the Church was challenged in the past, this shift in religious attitudes and practice is a recent phenomenon. Apart from the drop in church attendance, the declining power of the Church to guide individual morality is particularly evident in the realm of intimate relationships. In an increasingly individualistic search for self-fulfilment, one's personal satisfaction has become more of a priority than the needs of partners and children even if it means the end of a relationship (Cherlin 1992). Before the introduction of divorce legislation in Malta, separation rates had been rapidly increasing (Savona-Ventura 2001). In 2010, there were 566 registered separation cases (NSO 2011) while in 2014 there were 662 (NSO 2016). In 2013, 3.9% (6160) of Maltese households comprised of single parent families with dependent children (NSO 2015). Cohabitation figures are not easily accessible partly because cohabitation only became an officially recognised civil status regulated by law in 2017. However, the 2005 census (NSO 2007) suggests that at the time there were more than 2500 cohabiting couples. The 2011 Census (NSO 2014) indicates that there were 170 same-sex couples living in Malta prior to the enactment of civil union legislation. Statistics show that of the 399 registered divorces recognised by the Maltese authorities in 2014, 323 were registered in Malta (NSO 2016). The Church's declining influence on sexual morality is also evident in the increase in the number of couples opting for civil marriage. In 2016, out of 3,034 marriages in the Maltese islands, 1,628 (53%) were civil marriages only compared to 779 in 2005 (NSO 2017). In 2009, 78 Maltese residents went to the UK to have an abortion, more than double the figure for 2008 (NSO 2011). The increase in the availability and use of different forms of contraceptives (Savona-Ventura 2003, pp. 51-58), coupled with the fact that one fourth of births are taking place outside a marriage context (NSO 2013), is also indicative of changing lifestyles and their greater acceptance.

Such trends strongly point to a weakening of traditional sources of authority such as religious and family institutions. In the not so distant past, such institutions provided the glue which maintained a strong link between the family, gender relations and sexuality, a link which has since been broken (Baldacchino 2008; Castells 1997; Weeks 2009). Socio-cultural transformations have led to an erosion

of the power of these old guardians of morality (Abela 1998; Bautista 2010; Chaves 1994; Giddens 1992; Manuel & Tollefsen 2008; Nguyen 2007; Weeks 2009). They ceased to be the central referents of personal life as individuals are more bent on discovering who they are and where they want to go, experimenting with love, romance and lifestyle options along the way. Belief in love has taken on a “quasi religious” status offering “salvation in the here and now”, giving a new significance to life before, rather than after, death (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 1995, pp. 174-176). “The old-style ‘till death us do part’ marriage, already elbowed out by the self-admittedly temporary ‘we will see how it works’ cohabitation, is replaced by a part-time, flexible-times ‘comings together’” (Bauman 2003, p. 36). As the old setters of morality retreat, love has become a personal affair governed by its own rules and the search for personal fulfilment:

“Increasingly, the individuals who want to live together are, or more precisely are becoming, the legislators of their own way of life, the judges of their own transgressions, the priests who absolve their own sins and the therapists who loosen the bonds of their own past” (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 1995, p. 5).

This unprecedented variation in form and substance of what Beck-Gernsheim (2002, p. ix) calls “post-familial families” is also reflected in a change in the language used in understandings and narratives about love and intimacy. From the traditional references to ‘family’ and ‘spouse’ we have now adopted the language of ‘relationship’ and ‘partner’, as the ‘couple relationship’ has taken centre stage (Jamieson 1998, p. 136).

Particularly in the West, these movements away from ‘traditional’¹⁵ conceptions of intimate relationships and family life, have “remade everyday life” (Weeks 2009, p. 15) not just for heterosexuals but also very significantly for those having alternative sexual identities and engaging in non-heterosexual practices (Castells

¹⁵ The term ‘traditional’ is a problematic concept which is often contrasted with, and assumed to have preceded the ‘modern’. The term ‘modern’ is often used to distinguish the present from the past which is associated with the ‘traditional’. While both concepts are often used both in academic and everyday contexts, they are not as straightforward as they appear to be. The concepts ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ have both cultural and temporal connotations (Argyrou 2002). In the literature on contemporary intimate relations, the term ‘traditional’ is generally used to denote socio-cultural practices and expectations, values and meanings tied to intimacy and passed on across generations (the cultural dimension) which were common until around the mid 20th century (the temporal dimension) (Gross 2005).

1997; Giddens 1992; Kirtsoglou 2004; Weeks 2009). Weeks (2009, p. 20) describes the period between the 1960s and the 1990s in the West as “the Great Transition” which, following the decline of the traditional model of sexual control, gave rise to:

a new moral economy – one that was less hierarchical and more democratic, more hedonistic, more individualistic, more selfish, perhaps, but also one that was vastly more tolerant, experimental and open to diversity and choice in a way that had been inconceivable just a generation earlier.

There were various theoretical interpretations of such processes (inter alia Bauman 2003; Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 1995; Castells 1997; Foucault 1976; Giddens 1992; Jamieson 1998, 1999, 2011; Weeks 2009). For Giddens (1992, p. 28) this ‘sexual revolution’ is hardly about mere sexual freedom. It is much more about the individualisation of personal life (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002) and the achievement of greater female sexual autonomy as well as the thriving of alternative sexualities (Giddens 1992, p. 28). We are witnessing “the normalization of diversity” according to Beck (2010, p. 121). What was previously considered to be perverse has now by and large come to be seen as “normal sexuality”, as “one type of life-style choice among others” (Giddens 1992, p. 179). This is partly due to the struggles of various movements fighting for more rights for women, gay couples and other disadvantaged groups and the responses of democratic states to their demands. (Giddens 1992, p. 28; Jamieson 1998, pp. 111-112). The introduction of civil unions or marriage equality in a small but growing number of countries may indeed point to a democratic process which is responding to transformations in the private sphere and taking the demands of interest groups more seriously. In certain modern liberal democracies, the state, not least in Malta, has taken it upon itself not only to defend diverse sexual identities and their free expression but also to set the tone of how society should think about sexuality (Verkaaik & Spronk 2011, p. 86). Despite the struggles that individuals engaged in non-traditional relationships may still face within family, religious or other contexts, nowadays they are freer to declare their alternative sexual identities and practices with less fear and within stronger support structures.

The reorganisation of intimate life has been portrayed both as a mover of structural, economic and political changes as well as a consequence of such changes (Jamieson 2011, p. 2). The 'detraditionalisation' thesis has however been challenged (Gross 2005; Wood 2007). While modernity has brought about a number of changes in various aspects of intimacy especially in the urban regions of Western societies, Gross argues that, at least in the US, intimate relationships are still very much tied to traditional expectations such as getting married if one would like to have children. The problem with the 'detraditionalisation of intimacy' view is, according to Gross, that it does not distinguish between 'regulative' and 'meaning-constitutive' tradition. The former refers to forms of control and regulation employed by moral communities. The latter involves "patterns of sense making passed down from one generation to the next" which still serve "as a hegemonic ideal" in intimate relationships today (Gross 2005, p. 288). Gross claims that statistical evidence shows that the former has declined but that the latter persists. Nowadays individuals are freer to deviate from the lifelong, heterosexual, male-dominated model without being ostracised by the community. Yet the nuclear family model based on heterosexual romantic love remains the cultural ideal for many. My study shows that it is an ideal which even LGBT Catholics aspire to and aim to emulate in the sense that many tend to prefer long-term, exclusive intimate relationships rather than casual sexual encounters. This is because it is also the model which is promulgated by the Church.

The decline in significance of 'traditional' guidelines has also led to dilemmas cropping up in numerous situations as individuals are increasingly faced with a number of options concerning everyday life choices (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 1995, p. 52; Beck-Gernsheim 2002, pp. 44-45). These may include whether to engage in a same-sex intimate relationship despite one's faith; whether or when to get married and to have children; whether one should live alone or with one's partner or whether to leave one's spouse to live with one's same-sex lover. This sense of being able to choose from a number of options is at once a form of 'liberation' from the constraints of 'fate' and a burden of *having* to choose (Berger

1979, pp. 108-9). This is one of the dilemmas of modernity, or as Fromm (1994) calls it, the paradox of having to “escape from freedom” as liberation becomes too exhilarating. This view of individualisation as espoused by the likes of Giddens of individuals drawing upon resources to reflect upon themselves and to choose different forms of action and identities was criticised particularly because it fails to address social, organisational and structural factors which are bound to influence such processes (for a detailed critique see Wood 2007). My research revealed that while my informants do make choices, these are hardly free from Catholic values even as they disregard Church teaching on sexual morality.

Changes in how individuals in contemporary Maltese society are living their faith and sexuality have also started to be reflected in academic research. For example, none of the fourteen gay and lesbian participants in Gerada’s (2000, p. 44) study considered stopping their relationship because of the Church’s stand on homosexuality even if some of the study participants still continued practising. A number of studies about the religiosity or spirituality of individuals in non-heterosexual relationships in other contexts such as those of Yip (1997b, 2002), Dillon (1999), Rodriguez & Ouelette (2000), and Thumma (1991) reveal that many succeed in reconciling their homosexuality with their beliefs, despite the official Church position on homosexuality. My study also indicates that individuals tend to devise their own ideas of what is permissible and what is not in very idiosyncratic ways that can make sense of their personal situations and needs. While many succeed in building a “positive self identity, constructed primarily in opposition to the Church’s teachings” (Yip 1997b, p. 165), my study also suggests that one cannot adopt the religious individualisation thesis unproblematically within the Maltese context. While informants no longer consider the Church to be their moral yardstick, it is only a few who have relinquished their desire to be embraced by it. Their reconstructed sexual morality is still embedded within a Catholic framework even as they opt for contemporary lifestyles. They are reluctant to sever their ties completely from the Church, preferring instead to have been able to remain within its fold. This suggests that while many factors point to a decline in Church influence, the desire to be part of the Church, both as an institution

representing their Catholic tradition and as a socio-religious community, is still significant. My informants may criticise the Church and challenge its teaching but, had their circumstances been different, they would rather not be at its fringes.

It is clear that while the complex nature of the phenomenon of secularisation has to be approached with caution in any social context, the situation in Malta may be even more difficult to decipher in view of the islands' strong religious identity and history as well as the paradoxes which seem to characterise the Maltese experience. In Malta we can still see a thriving sense of belonging to the Church and a high level of belief in God combined with a growing trend where individuals are inclined to choose their own lifestyle, even if their choices depart from the teaching of the Church, what Abela (2000 in Pace 2006 p. 32) calls an "individualized Catholic identity". Consequently, Abela (1991, p. 3) parts with "the European model of secularisation" and explores "the communication of tradition, rather than its erosion" as social values are transformed while being disseminated, taking on a secular character but still seeking legitimation in the sacred. Considering the Church's still significant public role in Maltese society, the persistent belief in the supernatural, the thriving saintly devotion and the still relatively strong commitment to the sacraments, Malta has been described as looking "decidedly unsecular" and as being "[a]t the very edge of a secular space" (Mitchell 2017, pp. 214-5). However, despite the paradoxical or ambivalent character of the transformation of the sacred in Malta, few would deny that some degree of secularisation, broadly understood, has taken place.

1.6 The evolution of LGBT emancipation and identities in Malta

In his book *Queer Mediterranean Memories*, published less than a decade ago, Chetcuti (2009, p. 24) laments that Malta was far behind the rest of Europe in terms of gay and lesbian rights and that "[t]he era of equality – protecting gay men and lesbian (sic) – as individuals, as couples and as families, has not yet dawned". Apart from being illegal, homosexuality was shrouded in secrecy until well into the twentieth century. It was not spoken about publicly. The condemnation of

homosexual activity by the Church certainly did not help. It was not uncommon for gay people to get married to hide their homosexuality. There were those who migrated to other countries while others entered the priesthood to avoid getting married. On one occasion a woman in her mid sixties, Pia, attended a *Drachma* meeting with her nephew, Mark who told us about his troubles with his family who was involved in the *Neocatechumenal Way*.¹⁶ He was finding it difficult to deal with his homosexuality. However, he admitted that at least he did have his aunt to whom he could turn, even if it was against his parents' wishes. He could also reach out to *Drachma* or use the internet. His aunt's experience three decades earlier was much worse. Pia recounted how she used to think that she was the only person having homoerotic desires. There was "no information, no support structures, no *Drachma*". She recalled a time when she used to frequent a gay-friendly bar in South Street, Valletta but the patrons used to be "persecuted by the police". She preferred to wear men's clothes but this was still a taboo. She used to do everything secretly and with a lot of fear. She felt compelled to leave home because she was afraid that she would harm her father who occupied "an important position". Yet, despite the stigma and the secrecy, Chetcuti (2009, pp. 47-71) describes quite a vibrant underground gay life and culture largely developed around the harbour and other towns in gay-friendly bars, clubs, cruising areas, gardens, beaches, cinemas, private parties and latrines from before the middle of the twentieth century. Yet, considering the taboo surrounding homosexuality at the time, anonymous sexual encounters particularly associated with cruising areas "fostered a sense of guilt, of sin and of self-loathing" (Chetcuti 2009, p. 64) which later started to diminish. It should also be noted that women do not seem to feature much in the gay scene described by Chetcuti.

Chetcuti (2009, pp. 23-24) also claims that there was still a great deal of ignorance among politicians and stigma within society in general about homosexuality.

¹⁶ The Neocatechumenal Way is a charism within the Catholic Church concerned with Catholic formation and ongoing education in the faith. According to the website of the Maltese Archdiocese, in 1973 HE Archbishop Michael Gonzi invited a team of catechists from Italy to start animating the Neocatechumenal Way in Malta. Since then it has spread to a number of parishes in Malta and Gozo.

During the EU membership campaign in the early 2000s, the Malta Labour Party tried to scare the electorate that EU membership may usher in same-sex marriage among other possible threats to morality while the Nationalist Party tried to reassure the people that gay rights would not be affected by EU membership (Chetcuti, pp. 211-212). On two different occasions in 2008 and 2011, Joseph Muscat, the incumbent prime minister who eventually introduced LGBT rights legislation, was reported to have declared himself against same-sex marriage on *Xarabank*, a popular discussion programme. His argument was that the concept of marriage only pertains to a union between a man and a woman (Independent 2017b). It was only *Alternattiva Demokratika*, the tiny and relatively insignificant Green Party which had included gay rights in its political agenda since the mid 1990s. Until the general election of 2008, LGBT rights were absent from the manifestos of the two main political parties. Their inclusion was inconceivable. Studies carried out by the *Malta Gay Rights Movement (MGRM 2003, 2011)* gave a rather bleak picture of the experiences of members of the LGBT community in terms of discrimination, harassment and even violence within various contexts such as work, educational, health and religious institutions, as well as within the family and residential community.

Gay rights activism in Malta only started taking shape towards the end of the 20th century. Therefore there were no local role models for LGBT individuals to look up to. 'Coming out' bore no political significance as it did in other countries such as Australia, Canada, the UK and the US (Chetcuti 2009, p. 201). There was not even a conception of 'coming out' or being 'out' as these concepts were introduced later. *The Malta Gay Support Group* was the first gay rights movement to be set up in 1987 followed by *Pride Organisation Malta* in the middle of the 1990s. 2001 saw the establishment of the *Malta Gay Civil Rights Movement*, which only lasted a few weeks as well as the foundation of the *Malta Gay Rights Movement*.¹⁷ Although some groundwork in terms of visibility and demands for LGBT rights was done, especially by the first group, it was the latter group which has managed not

¹⁷ <http://www.maltgayrights.org/>

only to survive but to persist in achieving what until only a few years earlier was inconceivable. Since its inception, the *MGRM* has worked relentlessly to achieve “full equality for LGBT people in Maltese society; a society that enables people to live openly and fully without fear of discrimination based on one’s sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression” as set out in its mission statement. Over the past years, other groups concerned with different LGBT issues emerged both in Malta and Gozo.¹⁸ Together, these provide a number of services to the LGBT community ranging from support and education to information and entertainment. In 2013, the LGBT Consultative Council, with a representation of these NGOs, was set up to advise the government on LGBT issues and to help draft LGBT rights legislation. Malta’s changing social climate reflecting broader social transformations and a government that recognised an opportune time to act on LGBT rights certainly helped to accelerate matters. What started as an uphill struggle in a hostile environment for LGBT rights movements culminated into a series of achievements and breakthroughs which rendered Malta the country to emulate and to consult on LGBT issues in the EU. Maltese society has made huge strides not only in terms of rights legislation but also in creating a more embracing social environment and providing the necessary support structures for the LGBT community to thrive. These shifts reveal the important role of state policies and legislation in the conduct of personal life (Jamieson 1998, pp. 111-112) as LGBT issues became less embedded in morality and became more concerned with the enhancement of civil liberties (Harwood 2015, p. 115). Although LGBT individuals may still face conflicts and challenges nowadays, they do so within a changed social, legal and moral environment which undoubtedly facilitates the way that these issues are dealt with. It has also enabled the development of a public debate surrounding LGBT issues evident in the social media, in the comments pages of online newspapers and in letters sent to newspaper editors by LGBT individuals who are no longer afraid to express themselves freely and openly.

¹⁸ <https://www.gaymalta.com/ngo-directory>

There were many factors which contributed to the sea change that Maltese society has witnessed in the field of LGBT rights and attitudes in the space of a few years. Undoubtedly the divorce referendum was a crucial turning point. Apparently the Maltese were more liberal than they were thought to be. The unexpected outcome may also have helped to tone down the Church's opposition to other reforms such as the introduction of civil unions and marriage equality according to Gabi Calleja, the *MGRM* coordinator. Gabi, who has become synonymous with the LGBT movement in Malta believes that Malta's EU membership was another milestone. It gave the LGBT rights movement access to European resources, funds, support systems, knowledge and best practices enabling capacity building, enhancement of skills and networking especially through the *MGRM's* collaboration with *ILGA-Europe* (the European branch of the *International Lesbian Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association*) and *IGLYO* (*The International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer & Intersex Youth and Student Organisation*). The European Union has incorporated LGBT equality in its legal structures since the Treaty of Amsterdam in the late 1990s and was pivotal in inducing policy changes on national state level (Harwood 2015, p. 114). Malta's obligations towards the EU's *acquis* in preparation for membership in 2004 led to the transposition of the EU Council's Employment Framework Directive (Directive 2000/78/EC) protecting individuals from discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation at work (Attard 2005). This was groundbreaking in terms of LGBT rights legislation since, following the decriminalisation of homosexuality in the 1970s, very little else was done.

A strategically important development which led to the sensitisation of the Labour Party to LGBT issues and consequently to its change of heart on the matter was the establishment of *LGBT Labour*, an off-shoot of the party's youth forum. *LGBT Labour* was not only successful in bringing about effective changes in the party's LGBT policies but also acted as mediator between the LGBT community and the party which itself had "to come out of the closet" (Harwood 2015, p. 126). In the meantime, the LGBT movement was also becoming more professional and more organised and started gaining more visibility and credibility with the aid of its EU

allies and sections of the Maltese media especially the popular Friday night *Xarabank*. The change has also been reflected in the annual Gay Pride Parade which over the years has grown substantially and became more colourful, more professional in organisation, more inclusive of the LGBT community and more daring.

One outcome of these developments was the emergence of more nuanced conceptual distinctions and a more politically-correct language used in relation to the LGBT community. Until this wave of change hit Malta a few years ago, the word 'gay' was generally used across the board even by members of the same community. Therefore it was gay rights, gay bars and so on. Chetcuti (2009, p. 176) predicted that

“as Malta’s gay men and lesbians become more visible and more daring, the Maltese language, our mother tongue too, will also begin to reflect both our living and our loving”.

Chetcuti’s predictions were not far off the mark, at least where formal discourse is concerned. LGBT, which stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender persons is increasingly being used by EU and inter-state institutions such as the UN. Since such terms started being used instead of the generalising term 'gay', additional letters have been added to make the acronym more representative of the wide variation of sexual orientations and gender identities. In Malta, the acronym has also entered political and mediated discourse. However, by no means is such language universally recognised, comprehended or used. An ILGA (2017, p. 18)¹⁹ report claims that in many cultures it is misunderstood, considered foreign or may even have negative connotations. My ethnographic research suggests that in Malta it is still more common for the people in the street to use the word 'gay' to refer to the whole spectrum of gender identities and sexual orientations despite increasing exposure to these terms. At the same time, the usage of the term LGBT in the media means that more people may at least recognise it and understand

¹⁹ The report may be read here:

http://ilga.org/downloads/ILGA_RIWI_Minorities_Report_2017_Attitudes_to_sexual_and_gender_minorities.pdf

what it stands for. The nuanced and more accessible terminology provides a wide spectrum of gender identities and expressions, sexual orientations and sex characteristics with which one may find affinity. Indeed nowadays, more individuals are identifying as genderfluid, non-binary or genderqueer.

The LGBT rights movement was instrumental in importing such terminology to Malta and in setting the tone and direction of the discourse surrounding LGBT issues. After failing to make any headway with the Church during its meetings with consecutive Bishops, the *MGRM* decided to develop its arguments around civil rights issues rather than in moral terms. Its first campaigns did not include trans rights which were introduced at a later stage. More recently, particularly with the introduction of civil union legislation and marriage equality, the discourse of the *MGRM* shifted once again to include families. At first it was “same-sex partners” or families, followed by “rainbow families” as parenthood slowly started being introduced in relation to adoption rights, in-vitro fertilisation and other possible avenues. The issue of same-sex parenthood, especially through adoption has been the topic of much controversy and the reason cited by the PN opposition for voting against civil union legislation in parliament. In-vitro fertilisation involving gamete donation became possible with the change in the law in 2018 but surrogacy remained illegal. Also controversial was the introduction of gender-neutral language in the process of introducing or amending legislation to make it LGBT-friendly (Micallef 2017; Sansone 2017).

Throughout the study, when referring to my informants and to the wider non-heterosexual and non-cisgender²⁰ community I use LGBT, excluding reference to Intersex (I) and Queer or Questioning (Q) which are commonly added nowadays. I do this for a number of reasons: (i) none of my informants identified as Intersex, Questioning or Queer; (ii) consequently, in order to avoid confusion I also use LGBT when referring to the whole non-cisgender, non-heterosexual community;

²⁰ The term ‘cisgender’ implies that one’s sense of personal identity and gender is congruent with the sex that one is assigned at birth.

(iii) Drachma itself added the “l” to the previously added LGBT after I started my fieldwork ; (iv) LGBTIQ is still not an exhaustive representation of all those who do not identify as heterosexual or cisgender. Indeed sometimes the term LGBT+ is used for the sake of more general inclusivity. I use different acronyms only when quoting studies focusing on specific categories of the LGBT community. Therefore if I am quoting a researcher who studied lesbians, gays and bisexuals only, I would refer to the subjects of the study as LGB accordingly.

1.7 The study of secularisation and intimate relationships

Sociological research about religion in Malta was mostly conducted by Roman Catholic priests either as independent scholars or as members of the Maltese Church’s research arm, *Discern*. The Church has been described as “Malta’s main sociologist” (Falzon 2007, p. 58) and continues to be a major promoter of social scientific research. For years, the Department of Sociology of the University of Malta was the domain of Catholic priests or former priests. Consequently, religion and secularisation were research areas of interest, particularly in relation to social change. Maltese scholars tended to link secularisation and religious morality to changes in the family and sexual behaviour (Abela 1991, 1998, 2001; Abela & Fenech 2011; Galea 2009; Tabone 1987, 1995).

Unlike this study which approaches secularisation ethnographically, most sociological studies of religion in Malta focused on the structural dimension of secularisation (Abela 1991). They were concerned with the conditions under which religious institutions have seen their social and political power diminish as a result of socio-cultural and political changes (cf. Vassallo 1974). Other studies have focused on desacralisation (Tabone 1987,1994,1995); the degree of conformity to religious norms and the level of adherence to the Church’s teaching (Tabone 1987, 1994, 1995) and participation in religious rituals such as Sunday mass attendance (Discern 2009). Studies on value orientations have also tackled the subject of the preponderance of religious values in Malta (Abela 1991; Tonna 1996). Studies on secularisation have therefore focused on the changing role of the Church within

Maltese society and with understanding how Maltese Catholics related to and perceived their Church, its doctrine and morality. Hardly any attention was given within sociology to the exploration of secularisation through the ethnographic lens. The individual dimension of secularisation was almost exclusively measured either in terms of religious behaviour such as church attendance or by trying to gauge belief, mostly through survey data. People's intimate lives such as their experiences of personal relationships have been generally ignored.

Within anthropology there has been some engagement with the ethnographic exploration of the secular through the study of festas and patron saints (Baldacchino 2014; Boissevain 1993, 2006; Mitchell 2002a) although these studies did not focus primarily on secularisation. Baldacchino's (2011) ethnographic study of the canonisation of the first and only Maltese saint, Dun Ġorġ Preca gives us a glimpse of secularisation processes through the way miracles are established by the Church in 'a secular age'. Baldacchino (2014) even extended the analysis of Maltese *fešta* rituals outside Malta's shores. He showed how the meanings, collective expression, identities and celebrations of the *San Bastjan fešta* are significantly transformed once transported from one public sphere embedded within a 'Catholic modernity' to another which likes to project itself as multicultural and secular. However, ethnographies of religion in Malta are sparse possibly because Christianity has tended to remain underexplored and undertheorised within anthropology. As the predominant religion in the Western world from where anthropologists mostly hail, its understanding might have been taken for granted (Cannell 2005, 2006, pp. 3-4).

My research analyses secularisation by exploring whether religion has an impact on the decisions individuals make about their relationships. All religions tend to have principles, if not rules, which govern sexual morality or conduct. Therefore 'religion' or 'beliefs' tend to play an important role in structuring moral attitudes towards sexuality. However, few studies actually sought to look at secularisation from this perspective (cf. Burdette et al 2009; Brewster et al 1998; Yip 2002) and

these did not approach the topic ethnographically. Despite the profound shifts in how intimate relationships are perceived and lived today, little attention was given to how people structure their relationships in terms of moral principles and whether these are embedded in religious beliefs. Most of the Anglo-American work on intimate relationships tended to look at how these were transformed by focusing on political, social and economic factors and how these impinged on intimacy. While reference is made to how 'traditional' sources of morality have weakened, not much importance is given in the literature on intimacy to religion or belief per se. In the West, transformations in intimacy have largely been seen as a consequence of 'modernity' while in the non-West, intimate relationships tended to undergo certain changes as individuals or couples wanted to become or to feel 'modern'.

In anthropology the study of sexuality was frowned upon for many years since it was considered offensive to the dominant Western morality. This discouraged research initiatives by ethnographers who feared for their reputation. Therefore sexuality was largely sidelined or else only explored in relation to family, marriage and kinship structures in non-Western societies while incest was given disproportionate attention (Donnan & Magowan 2010, pp. 5-8). Especially before the 1970s, anthropology was not much concerned with the issue of homosexuality although some notable research was carried out in sociology such as that of Humphreys (1970) on the tearoom trade.

While everywhere people engage in intimate practices, there does not seem to be a universally recognised definition of what constitutes intimate relationships especially since these are bound to vary across cultures and historical periods (Jamieson 2011, p. 1). In this study, I understand 'intimate relationships' to refer to personal relationships between two adults engaged in a sexual relationship. There are, undoubtedly, various elements which can further qualify personal, intimate relationships and which can lend themselves to making such relationships so diverse and yet also similar in their narratives, trajectories and experiences. These may include issues such as the degree of emotional attachment, disclosure, trust

and respect between the persons in the relationship; whether such relationships are socially or legally recognised; whether they are short or long-term; whether the couple lives together or apart; the degree of equality or inequality between the partners as well as whether they are virtual or 'real'.

My study provides insights into how individuals engaged in intimate relationships which do not conform to the dominant Catholic morality experience religion within this changing social context. It seeks to understand the secular "through its shadows" (Asad 2003, p. 16); how individuals experience their selfhood and their belief in a secular society (Baldacchino & Kahn 2011, p. 5; Taylor 2007, p. 38). In the next chapter, I discuss the methodology used for this ethnographic study, describing my field and reflecting on myself as a researcher. I also discuss some methodological challenges involved in the process.

Chapter II – STRUCTURING MY FIELD: STUDYING RELIGION AND SEXUALITY IN CONTEMPORARY MALTA

2.1 The idea for the study and my research questions

On the 28th May 2011, voters in Malta and Gozo went to the polls to vote on whether they wanted Malta's civil law to remain in line with Roman Catholic Church morality or whether they wanted to have the right to dissolve a failed marriage despite the teaching of the Church. Of those who voted in the referendum, 53% opted for the introduction of divorce legislation. The result surprised many, including those, who, like myself, were actively involved in lobbying in favour of the legislation. Despite some statistical indicators that those in favour of divorce in Malta had finally surpassed the 50% threshold, very few had predicted that the Church's appeal to preserve the indissolubility of marriage during the long and acrimonious referendum campaign would be disregarded by the majority of voters. In the run up to the referendum, the Church played a pivotal role and was the main driving force behind the 'no' movement. In the international media Malta was presented as the last bastion of Catholic morality in Europe, and the result of the referendum was deemed to be the sign of clear cracks in its foundations. It was this unexpected turn that made me reflect on the role of the Church as guardian of sexual morality in Malta. Before I started my doctoral research, I wrote an article about the role of the Church in the referendum campaign where I explored the discourse it used to oppose divorce legislation and to persuade the electorate to vote against it (Deguara 2012). However, I was also curious to find out the extent to which the Church's influence on ideas, decisions and practices pertaining to intimate relationships had diminished. I wanted to explore the place of religion in people's consciousness and whether people's intimate relationships are structured within a framework of religious morality despite Malta's secularising trends. I was interested in the experience of belief in a moralistically plural society, Taylor's (2007, pp. 2-4) third dimension of secularity. My research project gives an indication of how individuals in contemporary society perceive the role of the Church and its teaching in terms

of the choices they make in life particularly about love and intimate relationships. My anthropological inquiry into secularisation entailed looking at the particular; at the attitudes, meanings, beliefs, experiences, decisions and lifestyles of my informants to discover whether such elements fall under the all-pervading 'sacred canopy' (Berger 1967) or whether they undermine the moral hegemony that religion has traditionally enjoyed. This study explores whether individuals construct their intimate relationships around the teaching of the Catholic Church. The broader questions that this project addresses include: How does Malta fit within the theory of secularisation? Is Malta following the footsteps of other Western countries? Notwithstanding these clear aims, the scope of the study was not that of testing hypotheses but rather of providing a detailed exploration, or as Geertz (1973, pp. 6-10) would have it, "a thick description" of the research questions.

In order to try to answer these questions I employed two main interpretive methods, namely participant observation and in-depth personal conversations. However, I sought not to limit my sources of knowledge to these systematic means of data collection. Sometimes pertinent information came by through an unexpected encounter or conversation with someone, a chance observation, an email or a post on *Facebook*. Given the relative difficulty of conducting participant observation with couples within their personal spaces, participant observation was carried out in a different setting. Part of the study involved my immersion within *Drachma* where I carried out most of my fieldwork during 2014 and 2015. During the summer of 2015, I also spent a short but intensive time with members of *Ali d'Aquila* in Palermo since I wanted to look into aspects of *Drachma's* international network.²¹ Like *Drachma*, *Ali d'Aquila* offers a space where individuals may explore

²¹ *Drachma* is a member of a number of European or international LGBT organisations such as the European Forum of Christian LGBT Groups where, for a time, one of its members was co-president and the *European Network on Religion and Belief* (ENORB). *Drachma* members sit on the boards of the *Global Network of Rainbow Catholics* (GNRC) and the *European Network of Parents of LGBT+ persons* (ENP). *Drachma* networks with *Progetto Gionata*, the *Forum di Cristiani LGBT* and *Cammini di Speranza* in Italy and with *Westminster LGBT* in the UK, and, more loosely, with others including *New Ways Ministry* in the United States, *Homosexualität und Kirche* in Germany and *Saul et Jonathan* in France.

and deepen their spirituality as persons whose sexuality does not conform to the heteronormative model endorsed by the Church and by society. Both organisations are open to different faiths although the majority of participants are Catholic. For a few months, between November 2014 and February 2015 I also attended weekly meetings of the *Young Separated Support Group (YSSG)* within *Caritas Malta*.²² The group's aim is to offer support and guidance to men and women who experienced or are still going through a marital separation. The group operates under the auspices of the local Church.

I conducted a number of in-depth, unstructured interviews with both LGBT and non-LGBT individuals whose lifestyle does not conform to the official teaching of the Church on sexuality despite their Catholic faith. I identified the interviewees who did not form part of either *Drachma* or *Ali d'Aquila* through snowballing. Most of them were indicated to me by friends or relatives or else were distant acquaintances of mine whom I contacted myself. Overall, I conducted ten interviews with LGBT Catholics involved in *Drachma* (eight men including one transman and two women), nine interviews (five men, four women) with LGBT Catholics in Palermo, most of whom are involved in *Ali D'Aquila*, six interviews with LGB women (two) and men (four) who do not frequent *Drachma* as well as eighteen interviews (thirteen women and five men) with persons who are in a heterosexual relationship which does not conform to Catholic morality i.e. who are divorced, cohabiting or in a civil marriage. Through these interviews I sought to gain an understanding of how individuals engaged in unconventional relationships live their faith and construct their morality. The conversations were facilitated by means of very broad questions which encouraged the narrative of my interviewees to unfold freely. All the names of my informants are pseudonyms except for those of a few individuals who gave me permission to use their real name. I recorded all these conversations and transcribed them word for word.

²² Caritas Malta is a Catholic organisation which was founded in 1968. According to its official website its mission is "to alleviate poverty and promote human development and social justice, witnessing to the Christian faith and Gospel values". With the help of volunteers and professionals, it offers a number of services in fields including drug rehabilitation, prevention and education, community outreach, pastoral care, seminars, support services and social research. <http://www.caritasmalta.org/>

When I needed to clarify or follow up a point while I was transcribing the interview, I contacted the person involved for further information. The conversations were carried out in Maltese and/or English in Malta or in Italian and/or English in Palermo. Most of the direct quotes used in the text are translated into English from the original Maltese or Italian or quoted verbatim in English. The locations where the interviews were conducted included both public and private spaces chosen as much as possible by the interviewees.

Considering the sensitive nature of my research questions, I sought and obtained the official authorisation of the University Research Ethics Committee of the University of Malta to proceed with the research. I was conscious that, while sexuality is an important aspect of one's identity, getting into the bodies and minds of informants is one of the challenges faced by anthropologists engaged in this field (Donnan & Magowan 2010, p. 2). However, despite the sensitivity of the subject matter and the difficulties that one may encounter in obtaining the consent of individuals who are willing to speak about their faith and sexuality (Toft 2014, p. 548), the only stumbling block I faced was gaining the trust of the *Caritas* group as I will elaborate in due course. Otherwise, I found a great deal of co-operation, support and encouragement and the welcome and acceptance that I was offered by both *Drachma* and *Ali d'Aquila* exceeded my expectations.

2.2 Stories of Intimacy

My fieldwork produced many stories about intimacy; stories about unwanted same-sex desires and the aches and pains that ensued. Others narrated stories of infidelity and betrayal, of shattered dreams and new beginnings. I heard stories of broken selves, conflicts and stigma but also of emerging new identities and of souls much less tormented by shame and guilt than they were at the start of their ordeal. Although these stories provided a wealth of personal details and experiences that enabled me to get closer to my informants' intimate lives, they could not be assumed to be unproblematic revelations of some hidden truth (Plummer 1995, p. 12). As Plummer notes, the telling of sexual stories raises many

concerns and endless questions and is embedded in various contexts which can be situational, cultural, social, historical and religious among others and need to be analysed in all their complexities and nuances. They were narrated to me as a researcher interested in intimate relationships within the context of faith and spirituality which in itself was bound to impinge on the thrust and unfolding of the narratives. However, some stories, particularly those about intimacy, may only be known through the narratives that people tell. They may not be a reflection of 'reality'. They may be as partial as they are subjective. Stories are 'packaged' representations of the self which may at times be contradicted by actual, observed behaviour in real life (Jamieson 1998, p. 12). When Nick, one of the LGBT Catholics in my study told me that he was returning to conventual life after twenty-five years and a number of relationships, I was surprised not only because he had already experienced and abandoned that life but because of what he had told me during our conversation in relation to the Church. He had expressed his anger at the Church very passionately, declaring that it had lost all credibility in his eyes. He had also been rather disillusioned with religious life especially because he could not find the sense of spirituality he yearned for. And yet it is to the Church that he was planning to return. Such stories reflect some of the many paradoxes involved in the lives of my informants, the oscillations that characterise the way they perceive themselves, God and the Church.

The stories I was told were narrated within a fast-changing cultural and social context. In the local context, stories of failed marriages, sexual relationships out of wedlock and alternative sexualities could hardly have been conceived, let alone narrated with ease until only a relatively short time ago. Stories that were once shrouded in secrecy, lived in silence, shame and guilt have now become public stories of identity (Plummer 1995, p. 87). Personal, intimate stories, especially those of LGBT Catholics, have become political statements. The past few centuries have seen a proliferation of sexual stories as individuals were encouraged to confess their stories and later to tell their stories to therapists. Our media-saturated, expressive, therapeutic culture (Illouz 2008) further encourages the telling of sexual stories (Plummer 1995, p. 125).

2.3 Introducing my informants

Most of my informants from *Drachma* and *Ali d'Aquila* were male, in their thirties and well-educated. Most, though not all, *Drachma* members had a tertiary level of education. Quite a few of my male, LGBT informants in Malta, regardless of whether or not they were part of *Drachma*, studied theology at least at Masters level and a significant number of them spent a period of time in religious formation. In contrast, none of my female LGBT informants was involved in the study of theology, although they were also mostly professionals with a tertiary education. In Palermo, most members of *Ali d'Aquila* had middle class jobs even if not all were university graduates. Unlike my Maltese male informants, none of the male members of *Ali d'Aquila* mentioned having studied theology or experienced religious life. Although very few of my Maltese and Sicilian informants were working class, many of them hailed from an upper-working or lower-middle class family background.

My non-LGBT informants came from all walks of life and were in different forms of relationship as well as in different stages of their relationship. They also had very different life situations. They included people who were previously married and in a new relationship after divorce, separation, annulment or widowhood and who were in a civil marriage or in a cohabiting heterosexual relationship. There were also a few who were never married. Most of them were in the thirty to fifty age cohort.

The *Caritas* group of separated persons included a mix of men and women whose ages ranged from the late twenties to the fifties. Only very few were older than fifty and the majority were in their late thirties and early forties. Most of them had working class or lower middle class occupations. One man, John, was a university graduate. There was a nurse, an air traffic controller, a few civil servants, a hairdresser, a cleaner, a mini bus driver, a security guard, a seamstress and some women who did not work.

The separated or divorced individuals who accepted my invitation to tell me their story resembled the YSSG in some ways although these did not frequent any group at the time of the interview. Most of them came from a working class background but had completed post-secondary education and had lower-middle class occupations in banking, insurance, education or in the civil service. One managed her own shop. Only a handful were university graduates, one an engineer, two had a masters degree and another one had a first degree. One main difference between them and the YSSG was that the vast majority of them were in a stable relationship, a few of them in a second, non-religious marriage.

For ease of reference, I have compiled a list of my main informants indicating their age, nationality, level of education, occupation, sexual orientation/gender identity, whether they are affiliated with any group and their relationship status (see Appendix 1).

2.4 My field: *Drachma* and beyond

2.4.1 Establishing my field

To define a field as a pre-existing, clearly-defined and contained space or community where research is carried out is a rather limited way of looking at the source of our ethnographies. Although I conducted the main part of my fieldwork with *Drachma*, my investigation took me beyond *Drachma*, beyond LGBT intimacy and even beyond Malta's shores. There were instances during the course of my research when I asked myself whether my field was too broad and my informants perhaps too dispersed. However, an ethnographic field is created to a large extent by the research questions and is a product of the ethnographer's imagination in conjunction with a social or geographical space or community of individuals. It is a combination of investigative and tangible space (Madden 2010, p. 39). The field comes into existence through the ethnographer's perception of its coherent qualities and becomes visible to the readers through how it is projected by the ethnographer's writing (Landres 2002, p. 104). Different sites chosen by the ethnographer may not necessarily be connected themselves but may each have a

connection with the ethnographer as Wacquant (2004) shows in his analysis of Bourdieu's paired fieldwork in the Algerian village of Kabylia and in his childhood hometown of Béarn in France.

While in Malta I had identified two rather fluid communities which to some extent may be defined as spatially bounded fields, I obtained a good part of my knowledge from interviews with individuals who were not necessarily connected to these groups. This means that my wider field was the whole of Maltese society from where I picked informants according to whether they fit the pre-set criteria. These interviews from the wider field proved to be rather fruitful in terms of providing me with relevant material. Although somewhat dispersed and rather diverse, my informants had one common denominator which bound them together for the purpose of my research: their lifestyle and relationship choices were not in conformity with Church morality on sexuality and sexual relationships. They were all faced with a conflict between their sexuality or lifestyle and their religious beliefs. For all my informants, the Catholic faith and/or spirituality played a significant role.

Drachma became my main site of fieldwork unexpectedly. In the initial phases of my research project, my intention was to study individuals who were in an intimate relationship after a separation or divorce but for whom the Catholic faith still bore considerable significance. Although I had considered the possibility of studying LGBT Catholics, I did not want to limit the focus of my study to same-sex relationships. I decided to discuss my dilemmas with Mario who at the time was *Drachma's* coordinator. I have known Mario since he was a 16-year old student in my advanced Sociology class. It was during this time that he had acknowledged his homosexuality, something that he had chosen to share with me. Since that time, more than twenty years ago, we have kept in touch even when our paths did not cross through our social activism and common interests. As a spiritual person who had issues with the Church himself, Mario was interested in my research project even when it was still in embryonic form. With him I discussed possible ways of

exploring the role of the Church and religion in contemporary Maltese society in conjunction with intimate relationships. Needless to say, fieldwork with *Drachma* was an option that kept cropping up, considering that Mario had been its coordinator almost from its inception. However, by the time I started my fieldwork in 2014, Mario had relinquished this role that he had occupied for nine years and handed over *Drachma's* coordination to Chris. Still he remained one of my key reference points throughout the duration of the study, giving me advice and feedback whenever I sought it.

While I retained *Drachma* as a defined community from which I gained a significant part of my knowledge, the focus of my research was not *Drachma* as an organisation but *Drachma* the community of individuals who frequented it. Therefore, where *Drachma* is concerned, I shifted my focus (which was initially important) from familiarising myself with the organisation, its origins, scope, structure, philosophy, relationship with the Church and so on to getting to know the people who form part of *Drachma* and its role in their life. Therefore *Drachma* became an essential recruiting ground for interviewees as well as a component to explore during the interview conversations. This does not mean that the group was being sacrificed for the individual members but that I had to look at individuals both in terms of their personal experiences as well as in relation to their participation in *Drachma* and how it affected their personal experiences.

2.4.2 Getting into the field

On a mild winter evening in January 2014 I parked my car on the ring road of the university and headed towards the University Chapel, a few metres away. Having worked and studied at the University of Malta for most of my adult life, I was more than familiar with the surroundings. I was calm but excited at the same time at the prospect of meeting members of *Drachma* for the first time. I did not know what to expect. The ordinariness of walking along the tree-edged road full of students' cars parked on both sides and watching people walking hurriedly towards their lecture rooms gave me confidence and eased some of my concerns. I had not been

to the chapel for about ten years but going down the few steps leading to the open space in front of its main entrance I could not help but remember the time when my husband and I used to take the children to mass when they were small. However, there were other things on my mind at that moment such as whether I would be welcomed, whether I would manage to integrate with my potential informants, whether I would live up to the expectations of doing ethnography 'the anthropological way', considering my training in sociology. However my thoughts were cut short when I saw Chris, *Drachma's* coordinator, coming out from a side door near the chapel's entrance, signalling that the meeting was not going to be held inside the chapel itself but in one of the meeting rooms. I was led to a small room where about ten men were seated, forming a small rectangle. Most of them appeared to be in their thirties although there was an older, balding man who appeared to be in his fifties and who walked with a stick. On one side of the packed room, two Japanese men were setting up a stand camera. Apparently the meeting was being filmed by a Japanese journalist accompanied by a cameraman as part of a project on the LGBT community in Malta. As I sat down, I said 'hi' and Mario, who at that time was handing over the coordination of *Drachma* to Chris, introduced me to Tyrone, the founder of *Drachma*, and to all the others. Mario was the only other person I knew in the room but it helped to break the ice. With Tyrone, I seemed to make an instant connection.

Although Chris and I worked in the same institution he was only an acquaintance. Indeed I was surprised when once, during the summer of 2013, I attended an activity about intersex persons and he was present. It was there that he told me that he was gay (he actually identifies as bisexual) and that he had started attending *Drachma*. When in January 2014 I approached Chris regarding the possibility of doing fieldwork with *Drachma*, he had become its new coordinator. He invited me to attend this prayer meeting on the 17th of January. He had presented my request to *Drachma's* executive committee and it had been accepted. He told me that only *Drachma Parents*, who are represented on the committee, had some misgivings about my request considering my political involvement in the Green Party at the time. This issue was never brought up

during my fieldwork although I felt I should clarify my position during our first encounter. I explained my presence and my wish to get to know them and their stories as LGBT Catholics. I thanked them for inviting me to the meeting and reassured them that my interest in *Drachma* was purely academic and that my request to be a participant observer among them was not motivated by my political involvement.

They did not seem uneasy by my presence. Some interventions during the meeting were rather personal but there were no awkward moments. The meeting took the shape of many others which were to follow. It started with a prayer of thanks to God. Chris had chosen a theme for the evening which was: *Let your faith be bigger than your fears – One who has faith in God should be ashamed to worry about anything whatsoever*. Chris distributed a sheet of paper with an excerpt from Psalm 136 and Psalm 23 under the theme heading. The first is a thanksgiving prayer to God for his creations and for his might during the Exodus of his people from Egypt. The line *His love endures forever* recursively occurs in every alternate line. The opening line of Psalm 23 is *The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want*. It is a prayer which exudes confidence and peace of mind as one feels protected by God's love and mercy. After the reading of the psalms, anyone could reflect, comment or contribute in any way. Arthur, the middle-aged man, said that Psalm 23 meant a lot to him because it was read during the funeral services of his father, his sister and his partner. I could not help but think of the suffering that this man must have experienced as a result of all these deaths. Later I learned that his partner of twenty-three years had committed suicide. I wondered whether *Drachma* served as a support structure in such instances. Vincent, a long-time regular *Drachma* member, said that he prayed regularly to God for a relationship but that this has not happened yet. Vincent has a speech impairment together with other psychological problems which might make it more difficult for him to find love. One overriding thought I had when I saw the verses of the psalm and the chosen theme was that if one's view of God was that one could just leave everything in his hands, one would be taking a rather passive stance. When I was invited to share my thoughts, I decided to be honest about this and said that not

being concerned about anything just because one has faith in God seemed to be rather naive from where I stood. This led to other reflections and interpretations of the two psalms and in relation to their faith in God's love which turned out to be very sensible and well articulated. During this first encounter, I was not explicit about myself in terms of beliefs, personal life, sexual orientation and so on. This was not because I wanted to hide anything from them but because these started emerging later as our relationship developed. The meeting ended as it started, with a prayer which was said with eyes down or completely closed. After the meeting they invited me to join them for dinner at a local restaurant. The Japanese men also came along. Therefore, as often happened during my fieldwork with *Drachma*, I accompanied the men for some social time together to *Melita Gardens* in Balzan. It was a pleasant evening and we opted to eat outside. We sat on the sofas and ordered wine and pizza. For a while the conversation turned to James Alison, a theologian friend of *Drachma* who was soon going to visit Malta for the second time on *Drachma's* invitation. However, for the rest of the evening we chatted informally about other things. I told them more about myself, my family, my research project and why I was a vegetarian.

I felt at ease within *Drachma* from the start despite the many things that might have made my integration difficult. As a non-religious, heterosexual, middle-aged, married woman, I did not have much in common with those who frequented *Drachma*. Yet our educational background and cultural habitus united us to a large extent. We held rather similar worldviews in terms of certain political issues and shared certain commonalities in tastes and lifestyle. Despite our differences, the relationship that developed between us over the months that I frequented the community was based on mutual respect and friendship. Despite my misgivings about attending prayer meetings which I had assumed would be utterly boring, they turned out to be quite engaging, even if I would not have chosen to participate in them outside the scope of my research. This does not mean that I did not have to play a role at times and pretend that I was interested in a psalm more than I actually was or that I was engaged in prayer when I actually was not.

However, it was no great effort on my part to get into the required spirit. Nor did I find the company of *Drachma* members disagreeable even if most of my friends tend to be non-religious. On the contrary, I have maintained contact with many of them even after I stopped my participant observation. I still occasionally attend public activities or social events of *Drachma* and I also keep in touch through *Facebook*.

2.4.3 My fieldwork with *Drachma*

Between January 2014 and December 2015, I participated in most of the activities of *Drachma*. These included a series of public lectures on gender, sexuality and spirituality. In April 2015 *Drachma* invited theologian James Alison for a second visit. I attended some of the preparatory meetings for the visit as well as his public lectures and the activities specifically aimed at *Drachma* members. There was also the occasional mass at Christmas, Easter or the *International Day against Homophobia and Transphobia* (IDAHOT) as well as social events such as a dinner or a film. During my two year-period of participant observation I attended all the meetings of *Drachma*. These largely took place at the University Chapel although a few activities took place in other locations, also run by religious entities such as *Mount St Joseph* in Mosta, *Dar Osanna Pia* in Sliema, the *Carmelite Priory* in Mdina or the *Millennium Chapel*²³ in St Julian's. When meetings took place in a chapel there tended to be a stronger sense of sacred presence because of the 'sacrament' in the tabernacle and the general atmosphere of being in a chapel. Meetings always started and ended with a prayer which was said with earnest solemnity. When Henry, a gay man in his late thirties, started coming to *Drachma* meetings after the summer of 2014, he used to prepare a song with a gospel theme and we

²³ The Millennium Chapel is found in St Julian's, a town frequented by young people especially during the weekend. It forms part of the Augustinian Province of Malta. A number of professionals and volunteers, called "Welcomers" take care of the operation and day to day running of the Chapel and WoW (Wishing Others Well). It claims to be "an oasis of peace in the heart of Paceville to visitors of all creeds, colour and races". Apart from spiritual and counselling services, it provides first aid help in crisis situations to drug, alcohol abusers and those suffering from other addictions.

used to start and end the meetings listening to this song on his radio. However, the song was never utilised for reflection or analysis.

The University Chapel is dedicated to St Thomas More and run by the Jesuits. It is a sacred space, a spiritual oasis, within a quasi-secular institution in the pursuit of research and education, a most appropriately symbolic location for me to carry out my fieldwork. The chapel, which started functioning in the late 1970s, is a modern, circular building with a central space for the altar. In front of the altar there are a few rows of chairs but most of the seating consists of tiers of semi-circular stone seats, in amphitheatrical style. A set of colourful, abstract paintings representing the Way of the Cross decorate its walls. The meetings were held in the middle of the chapel, right in front of the altar where we used to form a circle with the chairs in the front rows. Meetings usually involved reflections on a chosen theme (not always by Chris) and some sharing of personal experiences which was valued by some more than others. Attendance fluctuated but was usually in the range of seven to fifteen men with a woman or two occasionally dropping in. There were those who attended infrequently but there was a core group that rarely missed a meeting. For the latter, *Drachma* was more than a monthly commitment. It also provided a source of friendship and a sense of community.

Meetings could be described as rather uneventful affairs although occasionally someone from the group would provide a few colourful, at times unwelcome, outbursts. Polly has a history of psychological and social problems including domestic abuse and lives in an institution. She identifies as transgender although at times she herself would use masculine pronouns to refer to herself, not surprisingly considering that her carers always treated her as male. The person running the institution decided that attending *Drachma* would help Polly to extend her very limited social circle and she occasionally attended with her social carer. I was going to omit Polly from my description because I do not feel that her presence had significant bearing on my research. She started attending meetings during my second year of fieldwork. However, I changed my mind upon reading

Orsi's (2005, p. 167) observation that an honest account of religious spaces should not seek to edit out the messy bits. Polly is different. She is emotionally disturbed and intellectually challenged. She was rejected and abused by her family and yearned for love and intimacy. Although she was embraced by *Drachma*, her frequent and noisy interruptions were not always appreciated, although she enjoyed every minute of it. Like everyone else, Polly had the opportunity to express herself, to comment and to share her experiences. Her interventions were not always out of place as she would refer to some episode from the Bible and link it, albeit in a simplistic manner to what was being discussed. However, at times she would just interrupt the discussion and ask Chris whether, for example, she would eventually find a boyfriend. She was also critical of priests in general. Once she became very emotional by the opening song chosen by Henry that she started crying. Chris often needed to curb her enthusiastic and emotional interventions so that the meetings could continue with some kind of composure.

2.4.4 *Drachma's Mission*

The idea that was to develop into *Drachma* was conceived by Tyrone Grima, its founder, as an entity concerned with the integration of faith and sexuality. However it took some years to materialise. *Drachma* was founded in 2004, initially with the support of the *Malta Gay Rights Movement*. Occasionally, the *MGRM* would refer someone to Tyrone because of issues related to homosexuality and faith and when he decided to set up this group he sought their assistance. There were several disappointments initially. Attendance of the group, yet without a name, would at times dwindle to the extent that Tyrone was about to give up more than once. Eventually Mario was asked to help and he managed to revive the group and to keep it going. When Chris took over from Mario, *Drachma* became more structured in its coordination and operations and was formally registered as a voluntary organisation. Although *Drachma* does not fall under the wing of the Church, individual priests have given their support to the group, especially through the provision of meeting spaces. In 2008 the *Drachma Parents' Group* was set up.

According to its *Facebook* page,

Drachma is a space open to all persons of good will who seek sexual and spiritual integration. It includes lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender and intersex persons, as well as friends of LGBTI persons who wish to meet to pray together and explore the intersections between sexuality, gender, gender identity, faith, spirituality and religion. It also includes parents, siblings, relatives and all those who wish to accompany and support LGBTI people, and other parents and relatives of LGBTI persons in their life journeys.

Drachma is a group largely inspired by the Roman Catholic tradition, values and spirituality but is open to people coming from different religious traditions or none at all. *Drachma* also explores ecumenical and inter-faith spaces.

Individuals discover *Drachma* in different ways. They may hear about it through one of its public activities or through social media. The Church's publication *Flimkien* [Together] advertises the group on a regular basis. Sometimes individuals are directed towards *Drachma* by a priest or psychologist. Some may learn about it through personal contacts. There are those who just turn up for an activity or a meeting. However, those who intend to start attending the group or would like to speak about their experience, would first get in touch with Chris who would meet them personally and guide them accordingly. Chris dedicates a lot of his time to pastoral care, especially considering his past experience as a catechist. *Drachma* is a loose group in the sense that everyone is free to come and go. There are over a hundred members who are also part of a *Google* group through which they receive communication and where they can also share anything. However, very few are actively involved. At the same time, very few opt to leave suggesting that they might be getting something from the group. Perhaps being part of an online community still gives one a sense of belonging and security. Should the need arise, they know they have a point of reference. However those who attend *Drachma* regularly tend to maintain personal and social contact beyond the meetings. They may go out together or visit each other's homes. They might visit a member of the group in hospital or at home if he is sick or offer each other support during dark moments.

2.4.5 Drachma – not just a name

A couple of weeks before the celebration of Christmas 2014, *Drachma* met at *Dar Osanna Pia*, a beautiful old townhouse in Sliema owned by the Salesians. We had met there once before in September. On that occasion the meeting was held in the tranquil atmosphere of its back garden since the weather was still warm. However, I learned that *Drachma* had been utilising this place for years. In December, the meeting was held upstairs in a tiny room transformed into a chapel for Christmas. Half the space was taken up by a big crib overseen by angels hanging from the walls. There was a strong sense of peace and serenity enhanced by the presence of the blessed sacrament. Chris appealed for *gabra* [solemnity]. Then he explained that in this same room, some years previously, the group which had been simply known as a gay Catholic group, chose *Drachma* as its name. In 2014, the name was changed again to *Drachma LGBTI* to reflect the increased awareness of sexual and gender diversity.

Chris asked Tyrone, as the founder of *Drachma* as well as the one who represented continuity with *Drachma's* past, to explain the circumstances that led to the choice. Tyrone said that in the beginning, *Drachma* had no name. Their meetings were not planned or structured. They used to meet and decide what to do spontaneously. They used to open the Bible and discuss the text which came up at random. On that day, the parable of the lost drachma coin (Luke 15: 8-10)²⁴ was chosen for reflection. It is a short story which Jesus narrated together with two other parables which also focus on the theme of redemption: that of the lost sheep (Luke 15: 3-7) and that of the prodigal son (Luke 15: 11-32). According to Luke's gospel, Jesus tells this story to his disciples after the Pharisees accuse him of eating with sinners. According to Tyrone, within the group there was a strong sense of identification with this particular parable more than with the other two, partly because the others are more well known. Someone had suggested that

²⁴ 8 "Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Doesn't she light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? 9 And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbours together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.' 10 In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

Drachma could be a suitable name for the group. Although the parable held different meanings to different people, they all liked the idea.

Tyrone further explained that the parable evoked a sense of being lost in the dark or of being unknown. The story also symbolises a closeted sense of not being in the open, of being misunderstood. Finding the coin could refer to the 'coming out' process of LGBT persons. The woman lifting the carpet represented God looking for people in the fringes of the community. Celebrating with friends upon finding the coin could be compared to finding oneself and celebrating one's sexuality. Tyrone also reminded us that at the time, homosexuality was very much kept under the carpet. People did not know much about gays and even less about *Drachma*. However, James Alison's visit in 2007, enhanced *Drachma's* public profile significantly. It was, so to speak, discovered.

To commemorate the naming of the group, Chris chose the theme *Precious in the eyes of God* to focus the discussion around the parables of the coin and of the lost sheep. It turned out that my informants also found significant symbolic meaning in these parables. Vincent argued that they symbolised the importance God gives to every single person. He noted that even though the coin was small and might not have had a lot of value in terms of currency, it was still a silver coin and it meant a lot to the woman. He recounted the story of a writer who could not understand the meaning of these parables until he was asked to compare the loss of the coin or the sheep to just one page lost from one of his books. A good part of the discussion that evening continued along these lines. What is interesting is the interpretation that my informants attached to these parables. In the gospel, the parables refer to those who have sinned or left the fold and who are found and welcomed back by God. For my informants, being lost was interpreted as trying to make sense of themselves, to understand why they were different; struggling with how God could love them even if they were sinners. Being lost meant trying to come to terms with being gay, with the fear, the rejection, the doubts that make one feel lost. Acknowledging one's sexuality and accepting oneself is being found.

However, this has always been a central role of *Drachma*: to read the word of God and to interpret it in light of the LGBT experience.

2.4.6 Beyond Drachma: Ali d'Aquila in Palermo

My brief experience with *Ali d'Aquila* enabled me to explore the paradox emerging from being LGBT and Catholic further afield. *Drachma's* relationship with groups engaged in a similar mission in other countries kindled my interest to get in touch with one of these groups. I asked Mario about the idea and he immediately put me in contact with a number of groups across Italy on *Facebook*. Just as quickly they all offered their support. Mario suggested that I choose *Ali d'Aquila* since he knew Giovanni, one of its founding members, would be very supportive and helpful. He was right because Giovanni, who became my key informant, went out of his way to ensure that my short visit to Palermo would be both pleasant and useful. During the weekend of my trip (July-August 2015) some of the members of the group were going to Reggio Calabria to take part in the Gay Pride Parade and I was invited to join them. Giovanni also made arrangements for me to stay with another member of *Ali d'Aquila*, Lucia and her partner while in Palermo, who turned out to be as welcoming and supportive as Giovanni and most of the people that I met on this short but very eventful visit.

During the long journey to Messina to catch the *traghetto* to Reggio, Giovanni told me about *Ali d'Aquila* in which he was involved from the beginning and about the relationship of the LGBT community with the Bishops in Palermo which he described as "getting worse and worse". Giovanni was active in various fields including LGBT issues, anti-mafia campaigns, the environment and interfaith dialogue. Many newly established LGBT groups in Italy were concerned with fighting homophobia. Actually, *Ali d'Aquila's* most important annual activity is the organisation of a Vigil on the occasion of the IDAHOT celebrated on the 17th of May. The Vigil is attended by people from all parts of Sicily. However, the Church authorities in Palermo have on more than one occasion refused permission for the vigil to be held inside a church.

Ali d'Aquila was created around Christmas of 2008 to offer a space where LGBT individuals would feel welcome and could pray together. According to the group's *Facebook* page, its scope is to help individuals reconcile with themselves, with God and with the Church. In the past, *Ali d'Aquila* had a strong Protestant (Waldensian Christian) representation. It still works closely with other denominations but its active members when I visited were all Catholic. *Ali d'Aquila* also works with other LGBT groups all over Italy. Some members are also active in *Comunità di Vita Cristiana* (CVX, Christian Life Community), a Jesuit religious community, and the *Associazione di amici, parenti e genitori di persone omolesuali* (AGEDO), an Italian association of friends, relatives and parents of homosexual persons with whom Malta's *Drachma Parents' Group* collaborates. Giovanni is not involved in the organisation of *Ali d'Aquila* but is very active in the church community where *Ali d'Aquila* meets. He described this church dedicated to San Francesco Saverio as a community of people rejected by the Church but welcomed and accepted by Father Cosimo Scordato, a respected theologian. According to Giovanni, the "rejects" [*respinti dalla Chiesa*] within this community include not only LGBT individuals but also others such as divorced people and ex-priests who later got married.

When we arrived in Reggio we went straight to the townhall where we attended a meeting about human rights in the Mediterranean. The following day we went to meet a man from Reggio who had contacted *Ali d'Aquila* because he had been searching for a gay Catholic group in Sicily since in Reggio Calabria no such groups existed. After the meeting we had lunch with the organisers of the Pride Parade and in the evening we all attended the Parade wearing the T-shirts they provided. It was a colourful activity where different groups could express themselves in different ways. There were political activists, cross-dressers, members of religious groups including Rastafarians all displaying or shouting their slogans or political messages including calls for marriage equality amid expletives addressed at politicians.

We arrived back in Palermo in the early hours of the morning. I accompanied Lucia to her apartment since she had generously offered me accommodation. Late in the morning I woke up to beautiful mountain views and some two cats and three dogs running all over the tastefully decorated, modern apartment. At midday Lucia and I left the apartment in the scorching August heat and went to a park with the dogs. We spoke for about two hours about her family, her experiences in South America, her relationship with her partner, Marina and her involvement in *Ali d'Aquila*. Lucia and Marina did not attend Sunday mass. Lucia told me that she only went to mass when she felt like it and that she would not attend mass unless the celebrant was respectful of the LGBT community. Around the apartment there were a few artifacts from South America and some pictures with religious messages but no traditional holy pictures and candles that I had become accustomed to see in Maltese houses.

Lucia and Giovanni helped me to meet others from the group. There were a couple of women who were sceptical at first about talking to me but they managed to persuade them. After their initial misgivings they actually turned out to be very friendly and forthcoming with their stories. Indeed, members of *Ali d'Aquila* tended to be very enthusiastic to share their stories with me. The following day I attended one of *Ali d'Aquila's* meetings which was held at Francesco's house in a very friendly and informal atmosphere and was chaired by Lucia. Unlike *Drachma*, *Ali d'Aquila* is not coordinated by one person. Individuals take turns to chair the meetings and tasks and roles are informally taken up by volunteers. Despite their similar functions and objectives, there are features which distinguish *Ali d'Aquila* from *Drachma*. *Ali d'Aquila* is less structured than *Drachma* had become under Chris' direction. It is more similar to Mario's *Drachma*. Like *Drachma*, *Ali d'Aquila* dedicates time to both praying and sharing. Their

experiences are shared using a method called *condivisione*.²⁵ The Bible is read “from a general acceptance point of view which includes homosexuality but is not specifically centred around it” according to Gianluca. Like Mario, Giovanni gives importance to political activism which goes beyond LGBT issues and this is shared by some others in *Ali d’Aquila*. The *Drachma* that I studied is not concerned with matters beyond LGBT, faith and the Church even if it forms part of the Government’s LGBT Consultative Council. Although some members of *Drachma* participate in the Pride March as individuals, *Drachma* rarely participates as an organisation. In contrast, *Ali d’Aquila* participates enthusiastically in the Pride of Palermo and its main event is the IDAHOT vigil. Although the vigil is in itself a prayer, it is also a protest against LGBT hate and discrimination. *Drachma* also celebrates the IDAHOT but gives it less importance than *Ali d’Aquila*. Although both organisations are open to people from other faiths, *Ali d’Aquila*’s collaboration with other faith groups is stronger. Waldensians were actually involved in the setting up of the group. More affinity may be observed in terms of how the two groups relate to the Church. Members of *Ali d’Aquila* are as angry at the Church as my Maltese informants and would like the Church to have taken a different approach towards LGBT issues. Like *Drachma*, *Ali d’Aquila* also seeks to build bridges with the Church despite its conflict with Church authorities and despite the lack of individual participation in church rituals outside the confines of *San Saverio*.

All in all my visit to Palermo enabled me to widen my spectrum of gay Catholic experiences as well as to enhance my knowledge of gay Catholic organisations’ operations and networking.

²⁵ Francesco told me that this method which is practised during meetings of *Ali d’Aquila* was developed by an association called Comunità Mondo e Famiglia and is based on sharing without debating. Individuals share experiences, opinions, comment on a chosen theme and others just listen. They can ask questions but they cannot get into a debate and they cannot discuss what is shared with others outside the group.

2.4.7 The Young Separated Support Group within Caritas Malta

In the beginning of summer in 2014 I had contacted Iris, the marriage counsellor who coordinates a group for separated persons within the *Cana Movement* to ask her whether it would be possible for me to start attending her group as an observer. She told me that it should not be a problem but that I should contact her again in September since the group did not meet during the summer. She told me that her group consists of men and women in their first year of separation after which they have to move on to other groups within *Cana* where women and men are not mixed. This is done “*biex ma nlaqqgħuhomx*” [not to help them meet], as the secretary of the *Cana* Director at the time told me. During that same summer, I had obtained the Director’s permission to be able to conduct my fieldwork with the group called *Grupp Terapewtiku għas-Separati fl-Ewwel Sena* [Therapeutic group for separated persons in the first year]. However, once September came I was very disappointed to learn that I would not be carrying out any fieldwork with this group after all. Iris told me that she did not think it would serve my purpose. The people in the group were in the early phases of their separation and not likely to be involved in other relationships. At the same time she did not exclude the possibility that individuals seek her group with the aim of meeting someone new. However she told me that she does not encourage them, especially at this stage, when they have just been through the traumatic experience of a marriage breakdown. Despite being a representative of a Church organisation and also considering that she is an elderly woman, I was surprised that Iris did not cite a religious reason for not encouraging the people in her group to start new relationships. When I asked her about the other sex-segregated groups within *Cana*, Iris told me that once the first year of separation ends, those in her group actually prefer to move on to ‘the *Caritas* group’ rather than go to the single-sex groups since this is also a mixed group. Therefore, I decided to try my luck with this group instead, which I later learned is called *The Young Separated Support Group*.

I knew Leonid McKay, the Director of *Caritas*, personally and we arranged to meet at his office in November 2014. There was another *Caritas* male representative present for the rather formal meeting. I told them about my study and that I was interested in doing fieldwork with the group for separated persons. They acceded to my request, suggesting that I get in touch with Anna, the person who facilitates the meetings. I met Anna a few days later. When I arrived at her office, I was surprised to find an attractive, fashionably dressed woman of about forty-five. I had imagined that I would be meeting an older, 'churchy' woman wearing old-fashioned clothes. I was even more surprised to learn that she herself had been divorced for many years since she had obtained her divorce in the UK. I could not believe that a Catholic organisation within the Church would allow a divorced woman to lead such a group. I learned that eventually she had also obtained a Church annulment and that she had been advised by the Church authorities to 'regularise' her status. Anna told me that although the YSSG is a mixed group, the men and women who attended were not encouraged to pair up, or at least to present a semblance of not being together. However, I later noticed that those who did form a new couple within the group did not make much effort to hide the fact.

I learned that the YSSG was an offshoot of another support group within *Caritas*, set up in 1997 by Matilde Balzan as *Ro-Se* [*Romol-Separati* meaning Widowed-Separated]. However, it was later felt that since widowed and separated persons had different issues to deal with, it was better to split the group in order to cater better for their specific needs. The number of separated persons had also increased substantially. Anna had coordinated the group for ten years after the split but had resumed its coordination after a period of absence due to a relationship with a non-Maltese man. She feels that it is important for the group to have a leader "because the leader gets to know the group". However, from what I could observe, she did not make much effort to get to know the participants personally, often addressing them as 'the gentleman' [*is-sinjur*] or 'the lady' [*is-sinjura*]. She also keeps her distance from all forms of social activity, not even once accompanying them to the customary pizza after every meeting. Indeed I have

often heard members of the group referring to her impersonally as “the one who leads the meeting” [*dik li tmexxi l-laqqħa*] rather than by her name.

I attended my first meeting of the YSSG on the 26th November 2014. Meetings are held every week on a Wednesday and, according to Anna, there is a strong demand for them [*ikunu jriduh*]. The meetings take place in a large hall within the *Caritas* premises which form part of the Church Curia in Floriana. There is a separate entrance at the back of the building leading to the *Caritas* block. I entered the elevator, with little enthusiasm since I was not particularly looking forward to this first meeting. Since I had started my participant observation with *Drachma*, I had focused my energies on the issues concerning LGBT Catholics and had become less interested in the non-LGBT dimension. However, I also recognised the worth of conducting participant observation to complement my conversations with heterosexual informants in alternative relationships. When I entered the room, there were about thirty men and women in a circle. Anna welcomed and introduced me. She then invited me to address the group and to explain my presence. Then, to my embarrassment, Anna asked them to give me a round of applause!

Anna introduced the theme of the evening which was going to be ‘redemption’. Just as she was about to continue, she noticed that one woman was still in the kitchenette drinking her coffee. Anna called her in and admonished her for staying behind once the meeting had started. She took the opportunity to remind those present of the importance of punctuality unless they had a valid reason to be late. She then started putting a series of questions to her audience such as why they should forgive or whom they do forgive, instigating some contributions from the participants. The discussion was at times emotional, psychological, at others practical. Anna was trying to send the message that forgiveness is a slow healing process. She also made some reference to Jesus’ suffering and forgiveness but this religious aspect was hardly taken up by those present. They seemed to be more interested in sharing their personal experiences of hurt, anger, bitterness and

pique with their former spouses. They seemed to know each other by name. Sometimes they addressed each other, giving advice pertaining to children, legal matters and court proceedings. It was a very lively discussion and one of the few in which they took an active role.

At some point, Anna asked me whether I wanted to contribute but I declined. I felt that it was not my place to intervene. I had not yet told them that I was not separated. I was afraid that they might think I was too arrogant to speak about forgiveness when I had not experienced what all of them had gone through. Yet I did not have the same reservations with intervening during *Drachma* meetings even if my circumstances were different from theirs. Within *Drachma* I never felt the sense of detachment, otherness but also insecurity and loneliness that I felt with the *separati* from beginning to end. In fact I could not bring myself to accompany them to their social get togethers. It was only in mid-January that I plucked up the courage to tag along to dinner with them, still very much an outsider. Jimmy was doing the rounds, collecting some money to give to *Caritas* as a donation and he asked me to join them for dinner. I still felt like an intruder, invading their space. I was attending meetings regularly, yet I was finding it difficult to get close to anyone in the group. I felt that I was not going anywhere or getting anything from the meetings. I started picking up a couple of names. Some would nod or smile at me every now and then but it took me weeks until I could talk to a few of them during dinner and to find the support of a handful of them.

The meetings would start with a prayer such as a Hail Mary. They usually took the form of a sermon-style talk prepared by Anna on a particular conceptual theme such as hate, anger, or love. She would then ask some questions but she hardly gave those present any time to express themselves, except on rare occasions as happened during the first meeting I attended. Although the group formed a circle, representing horizontality, sharing and collaboration, Anna often engaged in an hour-long monologue, addressing these issues in a rather top-down manner as if she were addressing a catechism class since the talk was usually tinged with

sporadic references to Jesus or God and Catholic morality such as: “Let’s not forget that Christmas is a celebration of the birth of Jesus, our saviour and we should not forget to go to mass. We have become too materialistic, forgetting this”. She also drew quite a lot from her own personal experiences to relate to the theme at hand and to empower those present. Her message was usually positive, urging the group to be hopeful, to focus on their blessings, to be grateful for what they have, to remember that God loves them. She enjoined them to use their energy in a positive way, to let go of bitterness, anger, pique and hate. She preferred to use less negative concepts and referred to their being separated as ‘our status’. Anna apparently wanted to convey the message that she owned and shared their identity as *separati* but also tried to reduce the stigma that some felt was still attached to it. Yet she also kept her distance and frequently reinforced her leadership role.

The meetings’ scope is to help those who have experienced a marital separation cope with the failure of their marriage by furnishing them with the necessary lifeskills, with practical ways in which to deal with their situation and with messages of hope. Occasionally Anna invited priests or specialised speakers to address the group. Apart from the occasional reference to Catholic values or traditions, the religious aspect of these meetings took the form of the occasional retreat, spiritual exercises during lent, and mass on special occasions such as Christmas. These activities are well attended and I have heard a few positive comments such as, “Anna made me cry when she was speaking about Christmas” or that “these meetings make a lot of sense”. However, I also heard critical comments. John, a separated man of about forty who always tried to make me feel welcome became a kind of key informant. He told me that he did not like Anna much himself but that she has some firm supporters [*hawn min jahlef biha*]. Others felt that she should give them more opportunity to speak. However, she was never challenged. People just listened and nodded. They seemed more interested in practical topics which would help them deal with their separation and its many implications. They were more concerned with getting back on their feet rather than with philosophical, social or religious themes. Despite the

apparent enthusiasm for these meetings, I somehow could not help but get the feeling that most of those who attended were primarily interested in the opportunity that the group gave them to meet others socially and perhaps to meet someone with whom to rebuild their lives. Sofia, a woman who learned of her husband's unfaithfulness and huge debts while recovering from a serious operation, told me that they mostly frequent the group for the company [*u mhux għall-kumpanija?*]. Indeed, the social activities went beyond the weekly pizza night following each meeting and extended to frequent parties, dinners and social gatherings. I was invited to join in these parties once or twice by John but, while I appreciated his efforts to help me integrate within the group, I declined. They also had a closed *Facebook* group called *Friends* on which they share these events but also post messages of support, courage and reflections on life.

The YSSG provided a source of identification, a sense of alignment with others who shared their plight. Yet despite the group's strong social function, I could sense a feeling of ambivalence, a sense of reluctant belonging, of being where one would not like to be, a sentiment which I never traced in *Drachma*, despite it being a fringe group. Although they did not speak much to me, I could sense a general feeling of resentment at being *separati* both because of the negative personal experiences (the conflicts with their former spouse) as well as the social stigma that some claimed to experience. There was a sense of disillusionment, even of disbelief that this could have happened to them especially if they had considered their marriage to have been 'normal'. From what I could gather, most of their stories concerned unfaithfulness. Jimmy's wife left him for his sister's fiancé. Marisa's husband left her for a younger woman after a long marriage and four grown-up children. Veronica's husband told her that he was leaving her for another woman out of the blue upon returning home from their weekly shopping. Apart from having to deal with such realities, these individuals also found themselves living alone or with their children. They had to start dating again, going to parties and sleeping in the early hours of the morning as if they were teenagers instead of being with their family.

Despite the friendships that were formed within the group, there was also quite a degree of intrigue and conflict, as I found out during the post-meeting dinners. There were factions or individuals that did not speak to each other. There were times when 'the couples' would go to eat on their own rather than accompany 'the singles', a point that was noted with some bitterness as well as concern by the latter who felt that the group might be splitting into 'us' and 'them'. I was soon to discover the degree of this sense of othering within the YSSG. I always joined 'the singles' when this happened since the few people with whom I managed to build some kind of relationship beyond nods and smiles were all single at the time. There was also a lot of mistrust within the group. Once I sat down for dinner near a man who had his new partner on his other side and he instantly changed places with her. I can only make suppositions about why he changed places but I cannot rule out the possibility that he did not want to sit next to me or that she did not like him sitting next to me. I can understand that having experienced some form of betrayal from a previous spouse may make it difficult for an individual to trust others but I was still taken aback by the extent of their mistrust. For example I had never before been asked by my dinner companions to hand in my restaurant receipt as evidence that I had paid my bill, a ritual which takes place every time "in order to avoid discrepancies".

I attended the weekly meetings of the YSSG for four months until the end of February. I never managed to integrate with its members. I joined the group and left it as an outsider. I could not identify with them not because they were *separati* and I was not but because I could not get over the barriers which they put down and the bridges that separated our parallel worlds. Perhaps I did not try hard enough. Maybe it was because my presence was imposed on them. Perhaps they wanted their participation in this group to remain private. Apparently for them, the fact that I was married, therefore not one of them, was very significant. This points to the complex and dynamic nature of sameness/difference identification processes in ethnographic fieldwork (Elliston 2005, p. 36). I would have assumed that I shared more commonalities with the *separati* than with LGBT Catholics but I was wrong. As numerous identities may unfold during ethnographic fieldwork in

terms of gender, race, occupation, social class, nationality and even marital status, there is no clearcut manner in which the 'I' and the 'them' could be defined (Neitz 2002, p. 35). The insider/outsider status of the ethnographer is less fixed and obvious than one may think. It is a social construction and prone to fluidity (Ganiel & Mitchell 2006, p 4). The lives, worldviews, educational background and perspectives on different issues of those of the *separati* and myself were too divergent. My alienation was intensified by my silent judgement of their racist comments during a discussion about multiculturalism, their clique mentality and piques within the group. Therefore it was with relief that I acquiesced to their wishes when I was asked to discontinue my participant observation with the group. When Anna asked to speak to me after the last meeting that I attended, I partly anticipated what was coming. She told me that some of the participants were not comfortable with my presence. I immediately told her that I understood and that I would refrain from attending any more meetings and to thank the group on my behalf. Leonid, the *Caritas* Director also felt he should thank me for being so understanding when I met him shortly after this incident.

Apparently what happened was that someone noted that I had been added to their closed *Facebook* group and that I was not a *separata* and demanded that I be removed with an explanation that this group was only meant for *separati*. Jimmy, who had offered to add me explained why I was in the group but promised to remove me. I saw this correspondence myself since at that point I was still a member of the *Facebook* group. A few days later, in March 2015, I received an email from John who told me how this same person, Miriam, alerted the group about the issues and risks involved in being studied like 'guinea pigs' by a stranger who also had the audacity to go and eat with them. Following Miriam's outburst, there were others who, according to John, also expressed their concerns:

I don't trust her... What if she is someone from the tax department and gets to know that I work illegally? What if she is sent by my ex-husband to see whether I am going out with someone else?

Despite this disagreeable episode during my fieldwork, I did not abandon the idea of including non-LGBT individuals in the study. However, most of the insights I

obtained about the experiences of separated and divorced individuals emerged from the personal interviews.

2.5 Reflecting on myself as researcher

I did not approach this research project as a ‘disinterested’ researcher. Ethnography is as much the ethnographer’s story as it is the story of those being studied. Ethnography is “actively situated *between* powerful systems of meaning” (Clifford 1986, p. 2, italics in original). Therefore researcher reflexivity is critical not only to the production of ethnographic knowledge but also to understanding how that knowledge was produced (Pillow 2003, p. 176). It is important to acknowledge that as a researcher carrying beliefs, experiences, attitudes and knowledge, I was bound to look at the social realities under investigation in a particular way. I could only construct “partial truths” (Clifford 1986, p. 1) as my world undoubtedly left its mark on how I viewed and interpreted that of my informants. Ethnographic data are, as Geertz (1973, p. 9) points out, the anthropologist’s construction of the constructions of others. However they are also very personal accounts of the experiences of others as I witnessed them (Scheper-Hughes 1995, p. 419). Therefore, reflecting on my subjectivities and disclosing them will give a clearer picture of how I sought to make sense of the ethnographic material emerging from my fieldwork. Reflexivity puts both the researcher and the whole research process under scrutiny and addresses the fine line between objectivity and subjectivity, between an insider’s and an outsider’s story. As I turn the microscope on myself, the reader is better placed to comprehend what informed my position in this research project.

2.5.1 My Catholic upbringing and questioning the faith

Like most people in Malta, I was brought up as a practising Catholic and an active member of the parish community. I used to look at the Church as my ‘natural’ home. It was an important part of my life for most of my childhood and youth. Until I reached young adulthood I hardly questioned its teaching and its role in society. I was brought up in a lower-middle class family where religious practice

was of utmost importance, especially for my mother. At home we used to say the rosary every day. My parents were regular church-goers although they frequented different churches in Paola, where I grew up. My mother was (and still is) actively involved in the smaller parish which is known as *ta' Lourdes* and consequently I too became involved. My mother was a primary school teacher and her contribution to the church community ranged from teaching catechism classes, to reading and singing during mass and animating youth meetings. She also helped with the cleaning of the church and with sewing church curtains and other items for the parish and its annual *fiesta*. Therefore my upbringing was inevitably part and parcel of the church community of *ta' Lourdes* since my sister and I used to accompany my mother to church on most days. After mass we used to hang around to play and later to chat with friends in and around the church precinct. I occasionally read during mass and for a time I was part of the church choir. When I was politely asked to leave due to my inability to sing, I was heart broken. I continued attending catechism classes even after I had my Confirmation. I was also active in adolescent groups in the parish. My involvement in the parish community during my teenage years meant much more to me than the development of a religious formation which was also strengthened by my attending a secondary Church school. The church had a strong social significance and, at times, a romantic pull. It was the place where I formed some of my first meaningful social networks, where I had my first crush on a boy and where I received my first kiss. Since my parents' idea of entertainment when I was growing up was limited to watching television and to boring Sunday afternoon drives, I used to look forward to any outings or social activities organised by the parish priest or *tal-mużew* [catechists] with great anticipation. My parents were very strict, limiting my horizons and controlling my every urge to explore what was beyond my small world. The home environment was not conducive to questioning or discussion, much like my school environment dominated by Catholic nuns and strict lay teachers. Therefore I could identify very closely with the upbringing of many of my informants. However, unlike my LGBT informants, I was a 'habitual Catholic'. My beliefs were based on unquestioned persuasion rather than on firmly held convictions.

By the time I was around twenty, the sense of meaninglessness attached to my continued participation in Sunday mass started to bother me. I started questioning my faith and reflecting on myself as a Catholic for the first time. My issues were not yet as political as they were doubts about what I was brought up to believe in. I was not so concerned with the Church as an institution. Yet I still continued participating regularly in Sunday mass although I started distancing myself from confession and communion. I did not discuss this with anyone, not even with a priest. Since at the time, all my family and friends used to go to church on Sundays, the social pull was still strong. In my immediate family, questioning the faith and challenging religious norms were not an option. Even though I was an adult, I still found it difficult to take a stand which I knew would result in a great deal of family conflict, especially with my mother. Indeed my 'belonging without believing' continued for a number of years. I could deal with a 45-minute mass every week but I could not yet deal with my mother's persistent nagging and praying for me (and my sister) to get back to the fold. That came later (and continues to the present) when I finally confronted her with my decision.

Partly for the same reason and partly for the sake of tradition, I still chose to get married in church. Although my husband and I were not practising Catholics, we still decided to baptise the children. Once again there were different reasons behind the decisions, my family's inevitably strong disapproval included. However, there were other reasons which had nothing to do with faith and family conflicts. I did not want my children to feel excluded at school at a time when schools were not as multicultural as they have become today. In a still predominantly Catholic country, I preferred to expose them to the faith and then let them decide whether they wanted to embrace it or not. I also did not want to exclude their possibility of attending a Church school. In line with this decision, we once again started attending mass to accompany the children. Every Saturday evening we used to attend mass at the University Chapel because we preferred the slightly alternative format, the participatory atmosphere and the sensible homilies.

Indeed both my sons eventually did attend a Church school, not because I was keen to give them a Catholic formation but because I considered Church schools to provide a better secondary education than the state school alternative at the time. When my elder son firmly declared that he was an atheist at fourteen, I was proud of him for taking a stand (regardless of the position taken) at such a young age, something which I was hardly able to do as an adult. His brother soon followed although less forcefully.

Despite my lack of faith, I prefer to describe myself as agnostic rather than atheist. I never wanted to make any strong statements concerning my non-belief although I have no qualms about anyone knowing that I am not actively religious. Nor would I define myself as anti-clerical even though I do not agree with the Church's position on a number of issues and have on occasions made my views public. My political issues with the Church incidentally had their roots at home because my mother's fervour for the Church and for God is as passionate as her support for the Labour Party. Therefore, when I was growing up, Church-state issues often cropped up either in the form of past narratives involving Mintoff and Archbishop Gonzi or in terms of political developments that were happening at the time such as the Labour Party's conflict with the Church over its schools in the 1980s. Debates at home could at times get heated considering that my parents held opposing partisan sympathies. However both my non-Catholic beliefs and my views regarding the Church continued to develop once I started studying at University. At university I started forming part of new social circles. I became exposed to new ideas which continued to challenge the values that I was brought up with and which no longer made sense. I continued to distance myself from my past and to reconstruct an alternative value system inspired by leftist, liberal and feminist ideologies. I do not 'hate' the Church although at times it angers me and I respect people of faith even if I don't share their beliefs. Nowadays I look at the Church as an institution which still has a very important role in society both as a spiritual and social force, although in dire need of some serious soul searching. I do not believe that in our contemporary, diverse and pluralistic society social policy and civil law should be designed according to the dictates of Canon law or

the laws of any other religious creed. Despite the rich Catholic tradition of the Maltese Islands, the Church for me is one voice among many. What I did not know was how strong and persuasive that voice is for my Catholic informants.

Before I started my research I had a slight fear that by immersing myself in the religious domain I would once again be drawn into the religious world of my youth. I was probably more afraid of myself than of being seduced by my informants. It was not a thought I dwelled upon but it somehow crossed my mind that I might let my senses (the smell of incense, the music, the rituals which I was so familiar with) pull me back to my old religious ways. This did not happen. I entered and left the field as a non-believing participant observer. Neither was my non-belief ever judged or questioned by any of my informants. I was never challenged regarding whether as a non-believer I could be in a position to even start to understand the world of my informants as Orsi (2005, p. 148) was by one of the devotees of St Jude that he was interviewing in Chicago. Like Orsi, I had also assumed that my religious upbringing may enhance my affinity with my informants. However, considering my estrangement from the religious world, I could not ignore the bridge that existed between me and my informants even if I was never challenged to cross it. The fact that many *Drachma* members were familiar with academic research may have helped them to understand *me* since they knew the pitfalls of doing research.

There are those who do not see what Berger (1969, p. 180) called “methodological atheism” as problematic. On the contrary there are those who argue (cf Oustinova-Stjepanovic 2015, p. 117) that agnosticism is more conducive to objective anthropological understandings of the beliefs of others and prevents one from ‘going native’. However, Oustinova-Stjepanovic (2015, pp. 119-120) herself is not convinced by the objectivity argument and sees the anthropologist’s personal beliefs as a methodological issue involving possible differences in perspective. After all being a believer oneself does not necessarily give anthropologists of religion unobstructed access to the cultures and worldviews of their informants.

No believer can make assumptions about informants on the basis of one's own experiences. Agnostic anthropologists should seek as much as possible not to judge the believers they are studying. I have to say that as a non-believer it does not make sense to me that many LGBT Catholics continue to hope for the Church to embrace their love. Therefore I tried as much as possible to understand their position with an 'open mind'. However this 'bracketing' approach is not without its problems (Oustinova-Stjepanovic 2015, pp. 119-120). The religious predisposition of the researcher is only one of a list of elements that may impinge on the research particularly in the study of religion. One cannot but see religious spaces "as inevitably and profoundly intersected by things brought into them from outside, things that bear their own histories, complexities, meanings different from those offered within the religious space" (Orsi 2005, p. 167).

During one of the meetings Chris asked us to draw something that for us symbolised God and to share it with the others. When my turn came, I said that I had drawn a question mark both because God was not so much part of my life and also because I doubted his existence. I was always honest about my non-belief and my contribution was received like any other, with interest and without any sign of disapproval. Our informants may engage with us on different levels emotionally, socially, morally, intellectually and not necessarily on the basis of a shared faith. I never felt that my lack of belief tarnished my relationship with my *Drachma* informants. They did not seem to perceive me as "a lost soul on the brink of salvation" as Harding was (1987, p. 171) in her study of born-again Christians or as a prospective "convert" as the Marmara Muslims saw Clough (2006, pp. 265-266). I did not get the impression that my *Drachma* informants saw me as a "Jesus-rejecting" other or as an "odd man out" (Peshkin 1984, pp. 256-257). When James Alison was in Malta in April 2015, *Drachma* organised a Sunday morning event for the theologian to meet members and parents which started with a mass. Before the consecration ritual, the priest invited us to form a circle round the altar. Those present, mostly men, appeared composed and contemplative during the consecration and while we said the prayer of Our Lord. The peace-giving ritual was also done differently as we moved around the altar giving peace to each other and

shaking hands. Most of those present participated in communion which for the occasion also included dipping the host in wine. I refrained from taking communion, leading Tyrone to ask me why. I told him that I did not want them to think that I was disrespectful by taking communion without believing in the sacrament. He told me that I should have participated anyway. His tone indicated that he considered the ritual to be an inclusive celebration. I appreciated the suggestion. I did not feel pressed or judged and I could not interpret it as an attempt at trying to pull me back into the Catholic fold.

2.5.2 ‘Gayer than gay’: My LGBT socialisation and activism

My choice of the research question was partly instigated by my role as a civil rights activist. During the divorce referendum campaign, I was a member of the executive committee of *Alternattiva Demokratika*, the Green Party, which campaigned in favour of divorce legislation. Between 2010 and 2013 I was spokesperson for social policy within the same party at a time when rights for same-sex couples were still non-existent in Malta. In the run-up to the 2013 general election, the Green Party made LGBT rights one of its major electoral platforms. We spoke in favour of equality and social justice for the LGBT community including equal access to civil marriage, adoption and in-vitro fertilisation treatment for lesbian couples. After the 2013 election I did not seek re-election on the party’s executive committee. However, until 2015, a year into my fieldwork with *Drachma*, I still represented *Alternattiva Demokratika* on the Government’s LGBT Consultative Council where *Drachma* also had its representatives.

However my interest in LGBT issues and my involvement in the LGBT community started long before my brief political career. The first time that I came face to face with the realisation that one of my closest friends at university, Sasha, was a lesbian I was shocked. We were sitting together on the grass in the shade of a tree on campus between lectures when she told me. I had known that Sasha shared her home with another woman and with her daughter from a previous marriage

but I was too naive to even suspect that she might be a lesbian. I was shocked not because I disapproved but because I was not expecting the declaration. More pertinently, it shattered the stereotypical views on homosexuality that I was brought up with. My first stupid reaction to her revelation was, “Ok, I’m fine with it, just don’t try anything with me because I’m not interested in women”. When I was growing up, the word ‘gay’ was hardly ever used. Gay men to my mind were *pufti*, sissy, effeminate but also hardly visible. Lesbians were even less conspicuous. I did not know anyone who was openly gay before I met Sasha. It was only recently that I got to know through *Facebook* that two of my childhood friends who had left the country decades ago are now married to same-sex partners but still live abroad. One had left the island “to become a priest” and the other had joined the *International Focolare Movement*. At that time, these matters were hardly talked about and if they were, it was only in the form of gossip or jokes. I remember a woman in our village who was known as Biçe *tal-ħobż* [lit. Beatrice of the bread] but she later transformed herself into a ‘man’, changing her name to Joe and wearing men’s clothes even if at the time, none of this was legally recognised or understood in any way. However, Biçe’s daring transformation also implies that despite the taboos and the lack of legal or support structures, transgenderism was a possibility even if being the village baker put Joe more critically in the public eye. The word quickly spread that Biçe/Joe was a *mara/raġel* [woman/man].

It was through Sasha that I slowly started being introduced to the peripheries of the gay world, almost thirty years ago. Through her I experienced ‘the normalisation of homosexuality’ long before homosexuality was on the social and political agenda in Malta. I gradually became acquainted with other gay individuals and couples. I used to go to the Pride march with her when it was still a rather lacklustre event involving a small number of people and I never stopped attending since then. My friendship with Sasha therefore introduced me both to the personal and to the political aspect of alternative sexualities. However my political interest in LGBT issues intensified recently when I became more politically focused on civil rights and, more specifically on LGBT issues. This was further reinforced by

the fact that LGBT issues became policy priorities for the Labour administration since 2013. After 2015 I did not remain involved in any political organisation. However, I still give public support to LGBT issues and participate enthusiastically in LGBT events. The combination of my activism and my fieldwork with LGBT Catholics has helped to broaden my knowledge about LGBT issues and to widen my circle of friends who do not identify as heterosexual or cisgender as well as to make me feel more integrated within the LGBT community. I feel honoured to be invited to LGBT spaces and events as if I were 'one of them'. I know that members of the LGBT community see me as an ally. However I was quite amused when on a couple of occasions I was described as 'the gayest among straights' or as 'gayer than gay'. When I joined *Drachma* for my participant observation, being in the company of gay men was a pleasure rather than a challenge. Although, the scope of my fieldwork with the LGBT community was primarily academic, I still harbour a secret hope that my writing will manage to improve the lives of LGBT Catholics. I prefer to see my work as being "politically committed and morally engaged" (Scheper-Hughes 1995, p. 410) rather than simply an academic exercise. If my account of the predicament of those who consider themselves to be at the fringes of the Church (including my heterosexual informants) would have the slightest impact on the Church's teaching in their regard, I would consider that to be as important as my academic achievement.

2.5.3 The impact of my research on informants

There are different ways in which a researcher may leave an impact on the research although I must admit that I did not expect my study to affect the lives of some of my informants in the way that it did. When my informants kindly accepted to share their stories with me, I was grateful and appreciative of their co-operation. However, it turned out that what I had thought was something they did for *me*, for the purpose of my research, was at times interpreted as something I did for *them*.

My Sicilian informants tended to give particular importance to the narrative that emerged from our conversations to the extent that I was asked by a few of them to give them the recording of their interview because they wanted to listen to it and to keep it. Francesco sent me this message after he read the recording of our conversation: “Angele, I've listened to our interview entirely. I want to say again thank you. It has been an important moment of my life”. When I was staying at Lucia’s house during my stay in Palermo, Laura, one of the few active women in *Ali d’Aquila*, came to Lucia’s house along with some other friends. She was sceptical to speak to me at first, concerned about whether I will use her real name. She finally relaxed and started talking about how she lost her mother when she was still a child and that she has not told her father about her sexuality since she is a very private person who described herself as “anonymous”. At the end of our conversation, she told me that she was glad that she spoke to me, even happy that she did since she saw it as a positive step in her struggle to speak about herself especially to strangers. When I casually asked Lucia whether I would be able to participate in an LGBT Catholic conference that she was organising in Rome, she told me that this would be possible if I would be willing to share the stories of my informants during this conference. She also asked me whether she could have a copy of our recorded interview which I offered to copy on her computer. This also suggests that individuals have increasingly come to see their own life as “storied” and as an “*ontological condition of social life*” (Somers 1994 pp. 613-4, italics in original).

However, it was Nick who made me realise just how powerful the impact of narrating one’s story to a researcher can be on the narrator. When two years after I finished my fieldwork, he came to speak to me “in confidence” about going back to religious life, what fascinated me most about Nick’s revelation was that his decision was instigated by his interview with me. He told me, “The interview made me realise just how much I missed religious life. I could not stop thinking about it”.

According to Giddens (1991, pp. 52-54) telling one’s story is not only crucial for identity construction; it is what defines the self of late modernity. Narrative is

important because it emerges from experience and at the same time, it enables the narrator to give a sense of order to that same experience by linking otherwise disconnected events, creating a sense of continuity between the past and the present, making the narrative and the self inseparable (Ochs & Capps 1996, pp. 20-21). Identity narratives are also very much embedded within their cultural and historical context and it is within such contexts that they are both narrated and understood or interpreted (Loseke 2007, p. 663). They are also, however, ontological and epistemological and not mere representations in the sense that it is through narrative that we come to understand who we are and to understand the world around us. It is through narrative that “we come to be who we are (however ephemeral, multiple and changing) by being located or locating ourselves (usually unconsciously) in social narratives *rarely of our own making*” (Somers 1994, p. 606, emphasis in original).

2.5.4 Exploring gender and sexuality

As a heterosexual woman studying men with a different sexual orientation, I cannot dismiss my gender and sexuality outright as being unproblematic. Although in the wider society, my sexuality is seen as ‘normal’, within *Drachma*, my sexuality became “queered” (Elliston 2005, pp. 43-44) in the sense that it was ‘not normal’ within that specific setting. Like me, my informants could have been conscious of our difference in sexual orientation. However, I never detected any sense of discomfort or awkwardness because I am not a lesbian. On the contrary, both during meetings as well as during private conversations they did not seem to be restrained by my presence when talking about their faith, their intimacy and their conflicts. Despite our difference in gender and sexual orientation, our common attraction to men might have made my sexuality appear less ‘unnatural’ to them. After the meetings, my husband often joined us for dinner. Therefore my different sexual orientation would become more emphasised. We would be the only opposite-sex couple and I would remain the only woman. Some *Drachma* members might have seen me as a mother figure or as a friend, depending on their age but they never gave me the impression that they saw me as a woman invading their ‘male’ space.

The fact that, like other LGBT faith communities in other parts of the world, *Drachma* tends to be male-dominated, did not seem to bother the majority of my informants as much as it did the Feminist in me. I did not miss the actual presence of women. I just wanted to understand their absence. I was curious to know why *Drachma* had never managed to attract women except sporadically. I asked this question to Debbie with whom I spent a day in the town which she has made her home since she left Malta. According to Debbie, who used to be very active in *Drachma*, women were always absent despite Mario's and Tyrone's efforts. She thinks it is women themselves who kept away but could not pinpoint the reason behind the phenomenon. Theresa, who used to attend *Drachma* for a time, does not share Debbie's view, claiming that women prefer their own space, "For me those are *Drachma* boys and where there are boys, they take over. Women have the tendency to stay back".

Different studies have found a prevalence of men in LGBT faith congregations (Shokeid 1995, 2001; Wilcox 2003, 2005, 2009), communities or support groups (Dillon 1999; Primiano 1993; Wolkomir 2001). While Debbie integrated well with the "*Drachma* boys", she does not underestimate the importance of women. She was instrumental in inviting one of the two women theologians who visited *Drachma*, Jeannine Gramick, a Roman Catholic nun and co-founder of *New Ways Ministry*, a US-based LGBT-affirmative organisation. When Gramick came to Malta and gave a public lecture, she attracted many parents of LGBT children, some of whom eventually set up *Drachma Parents* upon her suggestion. Women's participation may be appreciated in *Drachma*. Yet the overrepresentation of men may lead to women being excluded through lack of positive action rather than conscious discrimination. When *Drachma* organised the *Gender, Sexuality and Spirituality Series*, out of ten lectures, only two were delivered by women. One of these was stereotypically *A Parent's perspective* delivered by the co-ordinator of *Drachma Parents*. The presentations about the spirituality of the only two female theologians in the series were made by two priests.

In what is perhaps the earliest study addressing the issue of gender in LGBT faith communities, Primiano (1993, pp. 89-99) points to both the male-oriented culture as well as to the male-dominated composition of such groups which may keep women away. Another issue raised in the literature (Wilcox 2009, p. 7; Dillon 1999, p. 156) echoes Theresa's sentiments of a male-dominated *Drachma* reflecting a patriarchal Church. Women keep away from these LGBT faith groups because they feel that such organisations only question the Church on the issue of homosexuality, neglecting issues which pertain exclusively to women such as the exclusion of women from the priesthood. *Drachma* has never actually taken any official position on issues such as divorce or women's prohibition from the priesthood. The predominance of males at the helm of religious organisations is another possible reason behind women's distance from LGBT faith communities where this trend is also evident (Dillon 1999, pp. 156-157; Shokeid 1995, p. 174; 2001, p. 5; Wilcox 2003, pp. 107-110; Wilcox 2005, pp. 204-205). *Drachma* has always been managed by a man and this could be reflected in its lack of success to attract women. In many LGBT Catholic groups all over Italy the situation is more or less the same. Lately *Ali d'Aquila* has been "paying more attention" to the issue of gender parity according to Giovanni and apparently their proactive efforts at addressing the gender imbalance have led to positive results.

2.6 Anthropology at home

Conducting anthropological research 'at home' is a relatively recent but growing phenomenon (Amit 2000; Baldacchino 2011; Jackson 1987; Lithman 2004; Luhrmann 1989; Madden 2010; Peirano 1998) which for many years was deemed paradoxical. Classical anthropological endeavours were characterised by their exotic subject matter and by the geographic and cultural distance between the anthropologist and those being investigated (Peirano 1998, p. 105). Consequently Christianity in the West tended to be overlooked by anthropologists partly because Western anthropologists have preferred to focus their energies on the exploration of different religious manifestations and rituals in non-Western settings. During the twentieth century, however, the idea of exclusively studying

cultural elements of 'exotic others' in distant geographic locations and the premise that that which is closer to home is ethnographically unproblematic has come under critical scrutiny (Amit 2000, p. 2). It has been argued that the exotic could be found in one's own hometown and that one's fellow countrymen and women have as much to offer the anthropologist as any exotic community (Jackson 1987, p. 8). Anthropologists have attempted to apply the analytical tools previously reserved for the 'exotic' field in order to investigate social and cultural narratives closer to home (Amit 2000; Jackson 1987; Lithman 2004; Madden 2010; Peirano 1998). Consequently, the anthropology of Christianity is a growing field (Cannell 2006; Norget, Napolitano & Mayblin 2017; Robbins 2010). Baldacchino's (2011) ethnographic analysis of the canonisation of Dun Ġorġ Preca is one local exemplar.

In his preface to a study about peasant life in China, Malinowski (1939, pp. xix-xxvi) himself argued that doing anthropology with one's own people is at once the most difficult yet most worthy endeavour of any researcher. Ethnography of one's own culture may provide particular perspectives and depth of comprehension even as "accounts are empowered and restricted in unique ways" (Clifford 1986, p. 9). "Anthropologizing one's own world" as Wacquant (2004, p. 398) calls it, was for Bourdieu a way of putting into practice his belief that 'objectivation' is at once a process of 'desubjectivation' as

one knows the world better and better as one knows oneself better, that scientific knowledge and knowledge of oneself and of one's own social unconscious advance hand in hand (Bourdieu 2003, p. 289 in Wacquant 2004 p. 398).

Through his early studies of his childhood town, Bourdieu challenged the commonly held view that for participant observation to be valid, the anthropologist had to be "socially distant and culturally different" from the subjects of his investigations (Wacquant 2004, p. 395).

Conducting anthropology at home may be less complicated than studying some far away community particularly where practical issues are concerned although it does present its challenges. I was literally very close to home during my participation in *Drachma* activities. I also had very quick access to my informants

through social media, emails and telephones in contrast to being in some far away location without efficient communication channels (Caputo 2000, pp. 26-27). One implication of this is that I was never completely immersed in my field, in the sense of being able to detach myself from my personal life. Remaining at home, I did not have to disrupt any of my everyday routines. Nor did I actually leave the field when my two years of fieldwork were over (Caputo 2000, p. 28).

Doing fieldwork at home has been associated with the familiar, with what a fieldworker might feel comfortable with in contrast to the strangeness and that sense of the unknown associated with distant communities (Dyck 2000, pp. 43-48). Conducting fieldwork at home meant that I did not face the problems associated with having to communicate in an unfamiliar language or struggle to make sense of a strange culture. Even in Palermo, my knowledge of Italian and some of my informants' knowledge of English facilitated communication. One cannot live in Malta and not experience Catholicism in at least some of its many forms and manifestations. I started my fieldwork thinking that I 'knew' Catholicism, not least because I myself was brought up firmly within the faith. This might have enabled me to contextualise ethnographic evidence more effectively. One could say that I was studying 'us' rather than 'them' on more than one level. Many of my LGBT informants were professionals like me, some even employees of the same University apart from being Maltese. Neither was the LGBT world totally alien to me. That sense of otherness that traditionally characterised anthropological fieldwork is much weaker when fieldwork is done on home soil. There might not be much need for cultural translation as the 'native' becomes an ethnographer (Wilcox 2002a, p. 49). However, fieldwork experience has shown that those we study are both other and not other. They are us yet very different from us as Olive (2014, pp. 4-5) soon discovered from his research with members of the LGBT community. He had thought that being gay himself, he would not have to struggle much with the emic/etic dichotomy. However, regardless of how close (culturally, morally, socially, intellectually) the ethnographer is to her or his informants, one is never totally an insider (Madden 2010, pp. 19-20). This blurred distinction between 'us' and 'them' has been described as a potentially paralysing paradox

(Orsi 2005, p. 162). I must say that I was intrigued by some of my informants' experiences of the Catholic faith. For instance I had never imagined that the experience of holy communion could be so intense to a person; that its perceived denial could be so heart-wrenchingly dramatic. I was similarly surprised by the torrent of emotions that praying could unleash in a believer, experiences that I could not identify with. I was fascinated by certain anecdotes emerging from my fieldwork such as when Tyrone told me that he had bought Chris a crucifix for his birthday to add to his collection of more than four hundred crosses. Despite my Catholic upbringing, some profound experiences of faith lived by my informants such as their call for religious life were as foreign to me as were their struggles with their sexuality. Therefore the familiar may be an illusion that one eventually needs to put in perspective. As this chapter has shown, what I had expected to be rather familiar rendered me an outsider. In contrast, with *Drachma* with whom I had assumed that I shared less in common, I felt much more 'at home'. Regardless of where the fieldwork takes place, in the end it is about how both anthropologist and informants are touched and changed by the process of ethnography. Both are affected by each other's ways of seeing and categorising the world and in the process both end up having to rethink aspects of their own self, identity and culture. Rabinow (1977, p. 39) calls this "the dialectical process of fieldwork" in the sense that neither researcher nor informants remain the same after the experience.

Chapter III: THE COMPLEX RELATIONSHIP WITH THE CHURCH

Introduction

Until very recently very few people dared question the Catholic Church in Malta where one tends to become imbued with a Catholic identity or habitus from birth. Being Catholic is almost taken as 'natural', as automatic (Day 2011, p. 55) as the vast majority of children are baptised into the Catholic Church only a few weeks after birth. Inglis (2007), García, Gray-Stanley & Ramirez-Valles (2008) and Hall (2015) describe similar situations in Catholic Ireland, among Latino GBT raised as Catholics in the US and among Catholics in Poland respectively. Noah, a *Drachma* member who is rather critical of the Church but who still holds on to his Catholic values, told me, "In Malta you don't choose to be a Catholic. Catholicism is part of your shadow. It made me what I am today". Yet Catholicism for many of my informants carries much more than a cultural, symbolic or national significance. Especially for my LGBT informants, it is much more than an ascribed nominalism as may be the case with an increasing number of Christians (Day 2011, pp. 72-73). For Tyrone Catholicism was always important, first as a religion, and, as time went by, as spirituality. He told me that, "If I had to find five adjectives which define me in a *profound* way, being Catholic would be one of them".

At the same time, my informants are living in a social climate where individuals are freer to choose the type of relationship they want to have with the Church. Our 'secular age' provides individuals with a set of conditions which makes it possible for them to make choices regarding their religious organisations, their faith and their private life (Taylor 2007, p. 41). They are living their faith within a cultural and legal context which was not conceivable even in the recent past. Taylor's view is that in the past individuals lived in an enchanted world as "porous" beings (Taylor 2007, pp. 37-42). Although Taylor acknowledges that modernity has witnessed a process of disenchantment, he is not convinced that this enchanted world was simply left behind, as individuals let go of the false beliefs which characterised it. If anything, we are living in a *less* enchanted world. This process

of disenchantment in modernity involves a change in sensibility as individuals started experiencing the world as “buffered” selves. As buffered selves, spirits and supernatural forces can no longer shape our life since we are now capable of distancing ourselves, of “disengaging from everything outside the mind”. People have changed and so have the conditions in which they experience belief or unbelief (Taylor 2011b, pp. 38-41).

It is within such a context that my informants make decisions and choices about faith, love and relationships. The context of religious belief in a ‘secular age’ also makes it possible for them to distinguish between God, whose nature is divine, and the Church, which is perceived as an institution made up of erring human beings and which is not necessarily perceived as representing the divine. Consequently they have no qualms about openly taking a critical stance towards any of its practices or positions with which they are at odds. Many of my mostly middle-class, well-educated informants could articulate their ideas about the Church and the feelings it conjures up in them. Michael, who is separated and in a long-term heterosexual relationship, articulated this general feeling as follows:

Between the message and the messenger, between the message of God and the messenger which is the Church that is supposed to be delivering this message, there is an enormous discrepancy and the Church needs to take a serious look at itself before it starts promoting itself as the messenger of God.

While informants tended to refer to the Maltese Archdiocese when they spoke about the Church [*il-knisja*], there were some references to the Catholic Church as a global institution and particularly to Pope Benedict and Pope Francis during our conversations.

This chapter explores my informants’ ambivalent relationship with the Church as their main source of conflict. It describes the experiences of my informants who were previously active in their local parish community or even part of religious orders but who now feel marginalised by the Church. It describes how the Church alienates them but how they are still reluctant to disassociate themselves from it entirely. It explains how my informants distinguish between the Church as a

hierarchical organisation and its agents with whom they interact at grassroots level. It also attempts to explain the difference in the way my LGBT and non-LGBT informants relate to the Church and the different significance they attach to belonging within it.

3.1 *Drachma's relationship with the Maltese Church*

Since *Drachma* was set up in 2004, it has always operated outside the confines of the Church although its relationship with the Church authorities has changed over the years. This has depended on a number of factors such as the direction of its co-ordinator, the incumbent Archbishop's willingness to engage with the group, the group's initial insecurities, its growing public profile and the country's changing social and political climate in terms of LGBT issues.

In its first years, *Drachma* was relatively unknown. Its priority was to offer a space for gay persons seeking to reconcile their sexuality with their spirituality, filling a lacuna which, according to some informants, the Church had failed to address. In the beginning, there was a lot of insecurity and fear within *Drachma* in relation to the Church and there was hardly any contact with Church authorities. When in 2007 *Drachma* was discussing the possibility of a visit by James Alison, an openly gay theologian and ex-Dominican monk, there were many doubts regarding whether this was too daring, whether it was the right moment, whether it will anger the Church. In its first cautious attempt at building a bridge between the Church and the gay Catholic community, *Drachma* approached someone from within the Curia and asked whether the Church would be interested in collaborating. However, at the time, Alison's visit may actually have been a cause of fear and insecurity for the Church as well. The Church initially collaborated with *Drachma* in the organisation of Alison's visit but then pulled out. None of the Church authorities even attempted to meet the prominent theologian. *Drachma* was 'advised' by certain members of the Church hierarchy not to proceed with the visit although this did not stop *Drachma*, especially Mario, its determined co-ordinator, from going ahead. The Maltese Church was apparently not yet prepared

to discuss homosexuality publicly. Alison's visit was a turning point for *Drachma* because the theologian received a lot of media publicity and public interest and consequently *Drachma* started gaining recognition and respect. *Drachma's* involvement with Alison and with other established gay-affirming theologians, Bible scholars and activists such as Jeannine Gramick, Margaret Farley and Peterson Toscano may have also raised the status of *Drachma* in the eyes of the Church. It also enabled *Drachma* to extend the debate to the public sphere, thus breaking the taboo surrounding any discussion on the topic of homosexuality and Christianity.

Drachma never received any form of support or recognition by the Church as an institution. Since its inception however it has used spaces offered by supportive individual priests or religious orders for its activities. These religious entities have maintained their relationship with *Drachma* even if officially they may tow the line of the Church in matters pertaining to homosexuality. They have supported *Drachma* and offered their premises for prayer meetings, masses, public lectures and other activities. In 2014, the *Carmelite Priory* even offered to host James Alison on his second visit to Malta.²⁶

Drachma has generally sought to maintain a non-antagonistic, yet critical approach towards the Church. It never wanted to make the Church its enemy even if it was felt that the Church was rather hostile towards gays in its approach and in the language used. *Drachma's* aim was, and still is, to build bridges rather than to demonise the Church. As Mario explained:

We go against the principle that someone will be created as the enemy. Just as in the past it was bad that gays were perceived as the enemy, it is just as bad for an Archbishop to take that role. We wanted to deconstruct that... The Church and the gay community were always polarised and perceived to be against each other. We came in the middle. I think we did bridge the gap. Those who were angry with the Church and did not want to have anything to do with it remained the same, but those who wished to get closer, managed to do so. And it linked us in a

²⁶ This second visit of James Alison which was eventually postponed from 2014 to 2015 took place in a completely changed scenario both in societal and ecclesiastical terms. He was received and welcomed not only by the Church authorities in both Malta and Gozo but also by the President of the Republic.

healthy way because if you see the letters which [Archbishop] Mercieca used to write on the gay issue, they were horrific [*tal-waħx*].

Under Mario's coordination *Drachma's* profile became more theological and academic in nature. On a pastoral level, *Drachma's* scope was that of enhancing the faith of its members, to help them grow spiritually, to enable them to look at the scriptures from a different perspective. On a theological level, *Drachma* started to question the Church's teaching on homosexuality while embracing the same Catholic theology. It challenged the Church publicly through the media by drawing upon the writings of Catholic theologians and even of Pope Ratzinger himself to question the Church's reading of the scriptures. This was a conscious process which sought to put *Drachma* and gay Catholics in dialogue, rather than in opposition to, the Catholic Church. *Drachma* did not seek to back its arguments with a fringe theology such as Liberation theology because Mario felt it would not have given them any credibility under Pope Benedict's papacy. It also wanted to show that one can be gay and Catholic. Being gay does not necessarily mean dismissing the Church as irrelevant. Chris, who became *Drachma's* coordinator just before I started my fieldwork told me:

Our interpretation is wider rather than different. In the sense that if the Church says that marriage is between a man and a woman, I use the same Church theology to prove that in fact it is Catholic theology that opens marriage to people who are gay. What we want is to revisit the same theology and the roots of that theology. Don't forget that the Church's theology on sexuality is dated. Even the language has a context.

Eventually, both *Drachma* and *Drachma Parents* established a healthy dialogue with the Church. They feel that the Bishops have consequently become more sensitive to the concerns of the LGBT community.²⁷ Meeting members of the LGBT community in person may have meant that they started seeing them as individuals

²⁷ This was evident in the speech of Bishop Mario Grech who represented Malta in the Bishops' Synod in Rome in October 2014. Bishop Grech, who was the President of the Maltese Episcopal Conference consulted *Drachma Parents* and maintained contact with them both before and during the synod proceedings. On another occasion, the then Auxiliary Bishop Charles Scicluna accepted an invitation from *Drachma* to celebrate mass on the occasion of the 2014 *International Day against Homophobia and Transphobia* (IDAHOT) and also asked himself for a meeting with *Drachma*.

rather than as a category. Yet, while *Drachma* has always sought to maintain a cordial relationship with the Church, it never wanted to be its voice, as Chris explained: “It can be the Bishop, the Pope, the parish priest, the provincial, the catechist, I don’t want anyone impinging on my freedom. I want to have that safe space...”. Despite this dialogue, *Drachma* members still feel that they are misunderstood by the Church. Bishop Charles Scicluna, gave them the impression that the Church believes that *Drachma* is in complete affinity with its doctrine about homosexuality, that *Drachma* is against gay civil unions, that it does not agree with adoption by gay couples and that it promotes non-sexual relationships. According to Tyrone,

This is certainly not the case. For us even the civil union bill, it’s obvious there is the sexual element. I was really taken aback. Maybe I was naive. It’s the avoidance of opening up a Pandora’s box.

Chris was speaking to me about *Drachma*’s role on the Government’s LGBT Consultative Council and how the Archbishop seemed to have misunderstood their stand on issues which are not endorsed by the Church:

I think he thought that because we are on the LGBT Consultative Council we would be his voice there but I’m sorry I have my own voice. I agree with civil union as I agree with gay adoption and I am not going to take the Bishop’s position because I don’t agree with it. I represent *Drachma* not the Church. I am Catholic yes and I have a Christian voice but I’m not going to be the voice of the Bishop. And I made this clear.

This incongruence between the Church’s teaching and the philosophy of *Drachma* was also evident during the IDAHOT mass which was celebrated by the then Auxiliary Bishop Charles Scicluna at the Carmelite Church in Mdina in 2014. This mass was also a celebration of *Drachma*’s tenth anniversary. During the mass, Tyrone shared some personal experiences as a gay Catholic who is in an intimate relationship. Yet this was completely ignored by the celebrant who repeatedly referred to gay relationships as ‘friendships’ not only during the same mass but also publicly on more than one occasion. Both Tyrone and his partner, Chris, however, are not perturbed by this. They may see the Church as rather unfriendly towards gays, as unrealistic and irrational in its demands for gay celibacy, but they can understand the challenges of trying to change such an old and well ingrained

tradition. They feel that having Bishop Scicluna celebrate the IDAHOT mass with them was a big step forward considering the Church's stand on homosexual relationships.

The relationship between *Drachma* and the Maltese Church has always been somewhat ambiguous although the setting up of *Drachma Parents* somewhat improved the relationship. Most of the parents come from a middle class background and are active within the Church. They are also in a better position than *Drachma* itself to liaise with the Church since they are more likely to be seen as 'victims' than the actively gay *Drachma* members. Yet, while the latter accept their limitations in terms of their power to change official Church doctrine or policies, they feel that they have brought about a change in the Church's "institutional conversations" and in challenging accepted assumptions about what it means to be a Catholic (Dillon 1999, p. 30). However, within *Drachma* not everyone shares such optimism. There are those who are rather pessimistic that any significant changes will ever take place within the Church. Similarly, building a relationship with the Church's hierarchy is not everyone's priority within *Drachma*. There are those who have even left *Drachma* as a result of its various efforts to reach out to the Church especially since Chris took over. However for others this is of utmost significance.

3.2 The Church as the main source of conflict

All my informants have issues with the Church especially with its official teaching about sexuality. This teaching is the underlying cause of conflict not only with the Church itself but more intimately with God, significant others and the social community more broadly as I will show in the ensuing chapters. For my LGBT informants the Church's judgement represents God's judgement, often leading to strong feelings of guilt and internal conflict. The *separati's* perception of being judged by the social community is also linked to the Church's official position on intimate relationships. The Church is seen as an indirect source of shame as it sets the standards upon which the social community builds its moral code. It is only

when individuals succeed in conceiving of God and the institutional Church as two separate entities, that they start to reconcile some of their conflicts.

When I asked LGBT informants to identify the sources of their hardships, they mentioned various issues, the teaching of the Church being among their primary concerns. Judgement came “from everywhere” according to Joseph and Debbie. Debbie mentioned the fact that she was Catholic; her scrupulous father as well as her Church school, “Everything helped”. Joseph has a scientific background where he is used to seeing everything as either black or white. Shades of grey are tolerated but a straight line is always best, “Let’s call [the way I perceived my sexual desires] negative; bad not in the sense of the devil; bad as in deviant”. The message LGBT Catholics tend to get from their faith community is that one cannot be gay and Catholic at the same time. Their religious identity and their place within their faith community is considered to be incompatible. LGBT identities are considered to be heterosexual perversions within mainstream Christian communities (Wilcox 2002b, p. 503). Gay and lesbian Christians are often pushed into making a difficult and possibly dangerous choice between their faith and their sexuality (Lapinski & McKirnan 2013, p. 868).

The following passage which was taken from an anonymous open letter by a gay man on the *Drachma* website²⁸ gives an idea of how Catholic LGBT individuals may develop a negative identity and suffer because of the messages that come across, not least from the Church:

For a long time when listening intently to sermons by local preachers (and not all necessarily priests) I heard talk of man’s fallen nature, man succumbing to sin and from it, the direct or indirect deduction that homosexuality is part of the result of man succumbing to evil. God ordained a natural order of things and sin distorted this natural plan and that is why such ‘objective disorders’ such as homosexuality exist. I’ve heard this kind of explanation a hundred times and I also believed it for a long time. Others claimed that homosexuality is a reversible disease or a form of psychosis with gay sexual orientation only being something superficial.

²⁸ <http://drachmalgbt.blogspot.com/2013/04/to-all-men-and-women-of-good-will-open.html>

The homonegativity felt within social and religious institutions is found to have an intense effect on the self-concept and well-being of lesbians and gays, eroding their very core (Lapinski & McKirnan 2013, pp. 856-857; Marcellino 1997, p. 54). This is aggravated by other circumstances such as the level of religiosity of one's parents (Subhi et al 2011, p. 1386) and social taboos and stigmas surrounding sexual practices deemed unacceptable or perverse. The effects of the stigma are worse if the person is brought up in a close-knit, conservative family environment with strict rules about religion as this instils a greater fear of losing one's family, community and beliefs (Subhi & Geelan 2012, p. 1386). Taking an auto-ethnographic approach, Wetzel (2014, p. 66) relates how he was brought up in a strict Catholic environment within a large, Irish-German, working-class family in America where he and his siblings were constantly warned against temptation and urged to become saints by their extremely religious mother. He writes about the pain, the stigma, the shame and the trauma, the "spiritual woundedness" that he and other queer Catholics experienced "as their humanity is precluded by the Church".

From his own small-scale study, Mario found that when they came to acknowledge their sexual orientation, ten out of the fourteen gays and lesbians he interviewed claimed to have experienced various struggles and dilemmas due to their non-conformity with Catholic morality (Gerada 2000, p. 34). Catholicism has been found to exacerbate the trauma of 'coming out'. Dominant social and religious notions of sexuality have a strong, negative impact on one's self-identity (Dillon 1999, pp. 128-130). From her ethnographic research, Dillon found that feelings of guilt and sin left her participants disempowered. Churches play a significant role in instilling homophobia in society (Yip 2002, p. 204), contributing to the internalisation of homophobia among LGBT believers (Kubicek et al 2009, p. 7; Marcellino 1997, p. 58; Yip 1998, p. 42). Research by Kralovec et al (2014, p. 416) found a strong link between religious affiliation and a sense of belonging to a religious community and high levels of internalised homophobia. This was also associated with low self-esteem, depression and suicidal thoughts (McLaren 2016, pp. 164-165). Schuck & Liddle (2001, pp. 69-70) claim that religious teaching,

passages from the scriptures and the prejudices of their religious congregations were cited as sources of conflict by their study participants. Being perceived as bad or as sinners often led to alienation, depression and shame. Pietkiewicz & Kołodziejczyk-Skrzypek (2016, p. 1573) argue that internalising the teaching of the Church about homosexuality led to internal conflict especially when one starts acknowledging the possibility of being gay. Kubicek et al (2009, p. 6) however report that the young gay Catholic men in their study were brought up to consider sex in general as being a sin. They did not feel that the Catholic Church's messages targeted homosexuality in particular.

Schuck & Liddle (2001, p. 70) argue that one of the worst experiences that religious LGBT go through is the feeling of being rejected by their religious community and by God as a result of the Church's doctrine. Michelle, one of my lesbian informants who is not a *Drachma* member, felt rejected by her parents with whom she had always had a close relationship. While she was telling me her story as we sat outside her office, I could feel the pain in her voice as she remembered her wedding day. When she went to England to marry her girlfriend, she was broken-hearted because her parents refused to go to her wedding. They had asked the opinion of a local priest who told them that, "The Church does not accept this and if you go, you would be considered to have accepted their sin".

My non-LGBT informants also feel that the Church's teaching contributes significantly to their distress particularly because of the negative image it gives them in the eyes of the church community as I will show in the next chapter. The Church labels them as 'sinners' and bans them from taking communion. Consequently they feel excluded from the religious community. Joanna stopped going to church even though she "believes a lot in God". She lives with her partner and her two sons after leaving her abusive husband. Because of her lifestyle she feels "cut off from the Church" because she does not feel accepted. When her elder son was preparing for his First Holy Communion, the priest had asked her whether she was having a relationship and told her "because in that case you cannot take communion yourself". She used to attend church with her parents and

sorely misses that experience. She is sorry that she cannot join her neighbours when she sees them leaving for mass, hinting at feelings of isolation from the community.

The Church's ban on communion for those who disregard its teaching can have serious repercussions on a person's psychological wellbeing as Sylvia's story suggests. Sylvia is a fervent believer who speaks very emotionally, almost mystically, about her desire to partake in communion. In her essay *Women Mystics and Eucharistic Devotion in the Thirteenth Century*, Walker-Bynum (1991) associates this fervent desire for the eucharist predominantly with women. Among my informants it was Sylvia who expressed her desire in such a way. However as I show in other sections of this study, there are others, all women, who would love to be able to take communion. Sylvia's devotion to the Catholic faith was evident even before I entered her home. Apart from the statues of the Madonna and of Pope Benedict which adorned her kitchen, another carved image of the Madonna guarded her front door. She told me that as a Catholic, "This thing of the mass really bothers me and it bothers me a lot". Sometimes she goes to church and asks Jesus why she deserved all the things that she had to experience. After ten years of marriage, she had discovered that her husband was having an affair with another woman with whom he also had a child. Sylvia feels that not being able to receive communion puts her in a difficult situation not only because of the social stigma but also because she is denied the opportunity to be one with Christ. This is how Sylvia expressed her pain:

I go to mass here a few steps away and the people all know me. They know that I'm not married, and during communion I say a short prayer and I tell God, 'You know my circumstances and that I cannot receive communion. You know that I do not deserve you but I still want you inside me'. With tears in my eyes, I feel really moved and I wear my sunglasses. And I am angry too and I say how unfair the world is. Because if I had taken someone else's husband or if I had broken my family or if I don't care about this person... and I make the sign of the cross and I take it as if I really did receive communion.

Such individual anecdotes are symptomatic of the prevailing sentiments towards the ecclesiastical institution. All my informants feel at odds with the Church for some reason or other. Yet some are more forceful in their criticism. The following

discussion examines the relationship of both LGBT and heterosexual informants with the Church. However I also seek to demonstrate how my informants relate to the Church in different ways depending on their level of disaffection or disgruntlement.

3.3 The love-hate relationship with the Church

In a society where the Church has such an important spiritual, social and cultural role, it is to be expected that most of my informants developed a strong attachment to the Church from early childhood. As indicated in Chapter I, my informants' upbringing was characterised by a high level of religious involvement and influence. My LGBT informants in particular had a rather active role within the church community. Some were engaged in pastoral work, Chris was a catechist and a significant number of my Maltese LGBT informants felt called to religious life. The latter were drawn to religious orders and not to the regular priesthood, possibly because of their communal character. There were others who had contemplated religious life but never actually experienced it. This calling may have been linked to their strong sense of belief, spirituality or religiosity and seen as a way of deepening their bond with God and with his Church.

Some were drawn to conventual experience through a close relationship with a member of a particular religious order who would be their spiritual director or with whom they would have interacted closely within a pastoral environment. As an altar boy Henry had been attracted to religious life but now, looking back, he feels that he never truly had a vocation. He had joined the monks for the safety and protection that the convent offered him against the outside world where he felt insecure for most of his troubled life. It was just another desperate attempt at trying to cope with his homosexuality.

Some others only dabbled with the idea or with the experience. Tyrone's calling for religious life "always remained a question mark". He admits that he just "wanted to try it just to tick it off the list so that later I wouldn't say I didn't do

anything about it... Anyway after the second year I decided to stop Franciscan life". Daniel, one of the youngest members of *Drachma*, had been certain that he wanted to become a priest but later realised that religious life was not what he wanted. For most of his childhood and adolescence he was a fervent Catholic, "obsessed with religion and with the Church". For a time he had joined the *Missionaries of Charity* of Mother Theresa and participated in a number of experiences abroad.

Joseph had postponed dealing with his homosexuality for many years, repressing it and living in denial. He considers his spiritual and religious formation of six years to have given him the freedom to confront his homosexuality. However, while indirectly it was the Church which enabled him to accept himself as gay by instilling in him a more profound spirituality, it was the same Church which later drove him away from it because it did not embrace him for loving another man. Internal judgement was replaced with one that was external. When he was one with the Church he was not himself. When he eventually accepted himself and could live his homosexuality freely, he could no longer be one with the Church, something which still pains and angers him.

My separated informants also have a strong affinity with the Church. The Church not only represents the faith they were brought up in but also has traditional, social and communal significance. When they were still married, they felt a sense of belonging within their local church community. They also valued the sacramental aspect of the Church and the traditional rituals attached to it. They had all been married in church, had baptised their children and prepared them for their First Holy Communion and Confirmation. They themselves used to approach the sacraments of confession and communion regularly. Therefore it is not surprising that, especially from where my informants stand, the Church evokes a multitude of feelings, emotions and reactions. It is perceived by many informants as being judgemental, hypocritical, inconsistent and arrogant.

This attitude goes beyond the Church's condemnation of their intimate lives. While they do not share the Church's views on a number of issues such as divorce, contraceptive use and LGBT issues many also feel that the Church fails miserably in being Christ's representative since it does not bear witness to his philosophy of love, poverty and humility. Anger at the Church largely emanates from the way individuals feel labelled as sinners, for being denied access to the rituals of the Church such as communion and religious marriage and for being prohibited from acting as godparents. Many informants argued that while Jesus used to embrace sinners, the Church judges them without seeking to understand their situation. As Joanna told me, it is as if "for God it's alright but for the Church it's not". Considering that most of my informants feel they are not to blame for their predicament, they feel unfairly judged by the Church. The *separati* feel that they are victims of circumstances. It was not their fault that their marriage failed but that of their ex-spouse. They did not choose to end the marriage. Neither did they break their new partner's marriage as in most cases they would have had already left their spouse when they met. Like my LGBT informants, they frequently cite the passage in the Bible (John 8: 1-11) where Jesus does not judge the adulterous woman to make their point. Therefore, on the one hand, they identify with being sinners and acknowledge that they are breaking Church rules; on the other hand, they feel that the Church's doctrine is too harsh. My LGBT informants also feel that being perceived as sinners is unjust since after all they were created by God even if God may initially be blamed for not creating them heterosexual (Grubbs & Exline 2014, p. 316).

Yet many of my informants also long for full acceptance and participation in the Church. Adriana, a lawyer who frequents *Ali d'Aquila* in Palermo told me about her difficulties with accepting her homosexuality due to her faith. She spoke about how she feels rejected by the Church, "in the margin". Once she even wrote to the Pope in her desperation:

I told him that even I have a right to go to Church, to be loved equally by God. It is not a choice, I tried to be normal. I did everything that the Church wanted me to do. I married a virgin. I have a son. I cannot say I don't care. I need the Church to accept me. I wish for it to understand that it is not a choice and that I am a better

person for expressing my affectivity. I had to take medicine because I did not feel well. I need the Church to understand this. This is a *need* for me [repeated 3 times]. I can't say I couldn't care less.

The same longing to be included within the Church was expressed by Henry in a letter he published on social media in April 2016 addressed to 'a Catholic priest':

Dear priest,

As a gay person, my heart aches when I hear you speaking about Jesus and the family, and in no way including the experiences of people like me, who have their own strong, personal realities, both as single persons and as people living the realities of a relationship with its ups and downs. We too have an experience of Jesus. We also need and long to feel part of this Church we love so much. We are gay, lesbian and trans people who love Jesus and long for love. We love the priest. That is why we would so much like to hear you speaking more about us and to include us with so much love, as Jesus does.

Thank you Father. Bless me.

3.3.1 Double standards

The Church's demonisation of any form of sexual activity which does not take place within a religious marriage between a man and a woman angers many of my informants. A few years after her first husband died, Anna met her second husband who at the time was separated from his wife. She was very angry when during the annual house blessings, her mother was waiting outside the door and the priest crossed over and asked her, "Do you know that your daughter is with a married man?" without taking into consideration that she might not have known about the relationship. The Church is viewed as being too concerned with the issue of extra-marital sex while not condemning enough issues such as racism or, worse still, paedophilia by Catholic priests which is seen as a graver sin. The concern with the sexual behaviour of believers heightens the anger felt towards what they perceive as a hypocritical Church. The *separati* complain that while the Church expects married couples to honour their marriage vows to their death, priests are not obliged to honour their own vows. They may leave the priesthood, get married and receive communion while they are not given absolution if they go to confession while being in a relationship. Echoing the general sentiment, Bianca, who lives with her partner and her son from her previous marriage argues that she

is a victim. Her husband cheated on her and broke their marriage. When her son's Confirmation was approaching she was concerned because she knew from past experience that unless she lied about her relationship it was futile seeking absolution:

How can you judge me? Only God can judge me. When so many obscenities are taking place by priests on children and the Church tries to hide them? So the Church only judges selectively [*Mela lil min trid hi tigjudika l-Knisja!*] and that's why I feel so angry. That is the word –anger [*rabja*]. I am already worrying about the Confirmation because probably there's going to be a repeat and I don't feel comfortable to just go and receive communion but at the same time I feel really angry because with all due respect.. I understand that this priest has to follow the rules but just because I am separated and have a relationship? Are these priests who abuse children about whom we are hearing so many stories given absolution? And can they receive communion? Because that is a much bigger sin than mine.

The seemingly double standards used by the Church also hurt and anger my LGBT informants. Godwin who does not frequent *Drachma* is in a long-term living-apart-together same-sex relationship. He believes that certain priests are hypocrites, preaching from the pulpit and then,

doing things in the dark, in hiding, under cover. I know because I have been through such experiences [referring to priests in cruising areas who do not present themselves as priests] while giving a false 'saintly' impression to people in order to be in a comfortable place.

Nick, also not a *Drachma* member and formerly a Brother with a religious order had just ended a long-term gay relationship when he told me his story. He describes the Church as,

fixated with sex, and then you have a Church full of paedophiles. Open your eyes, see what's happening around you. I know many priests who are actively gay and I have no problem with that but then don't go on the altar and condemn that young man who may end up killing himself.

3.3.2 Homilies

The homilies of certain priests are among the factors that exasperate my informants. Especially for those with a tertiary education, homilies are deemed irrelevant and intellectually unstimulating. However, the biggest difficulty with homilies is that many consider them to be hurtful and judgemental of those who

do not conform to Church morality. Joseph, who spent years in religious formation and is now married to Simon, told me, “What I have with my husband is not wrong. When I hear certain homilies telling me that I am sinning continually... when I know that what I have with Simon is so profound”. Similarly, in Palermo Francesco told me, “When I hear a priest saying stupid things during homilies, I just leave. I cannot accept these things any more”. In a study of four Maltese couples who had a gay son, Cassar & Grima Sultana (2016, p. 995) showed that homilies may be just as hurtful to the parents of LGBT persons. Parents in the study were critical of the Church’s approach towards homosexuality with a few even choosing a different church to avoid the homophobic comments of certain priests.

Homilies do not alienate everyone in the same way. Godwin chooses to ignore them during mass as he seeks to understand the scriptures without the priest’s explanation. Others stopped going to mass, or at least not as frequently. Michelle “could not bear to go to another mass and listen to another homily which hurts so much”. Paula, who married her second husband in a civil ceremony, stopped attending mass regularly and no longer goes to confession,

because we had certain parish priests who used to stifle me [*jaqtgħulek nifsek*], out of touch with life’s realities. Yes they have hurt me. During a homily they give the impression that one has to be like Saint Rita. Even if he beats you, you have to stay with him. Just because I was married in Church I was supposed to stay in a relationship no matter what.

She also remembers that once during a parents’ meeting before her son’s Confirmation, the parish priest told them, “And let me warn you, don’t bring me separated persons to act as godparents”. This for her was an insensitive insult considering her attempts at saving her first marriage despite her husband’s betrayals: “If the godfather had to take care of the child instead of me and he was not suitable because he was separated, so what about me? How can you speak in such a way?”.

3.3.3 Living 'in sin': Long-term relationships and Church annulments

For many of my LGBT informants, having a long-term relationship is their ultimate goal. Contrary to Church teaching, they argue that expressing one's sexuality in a relationship based on love and commitment gives significance to their union in front of God. Although my Maltese LGBT informants in particular are rather sceptical of casual relationships, they legitimise the expression of sexual intimacy within a committed, long-term, sexual relationship on the basis that it is not much different from a monogamous heterosexual relationship within a Christian marriage. This underscores the importance they give to Catholic ethics despite their failure to abide by Church rules on sexual intimacy as well as the approval that many still seek from the Church despite its reluctance to acknowledge their intimate relationships. They would still like the Church to bless their love. Like Joseph, Chris cannot accept that his relationship with his partner is wrong. He cannot understand how the Church tells him that he cannot love his partner and that God is love at the same time. He feels that sex within a loving and committed relationship leads a couple towards God. Daniel, a young regular *Drachma* member who, like Chris is in a relationship with another *Drachma* member, is also convinced that the way that the Church demonises sex cannot reflect God's will. He also perceives intimacy as a means of experiencing God.

Yet while the Church's official message encourages long-term commitment in relationships [between men and women], the message tends to be different for LGBT persons. A few were advised that if they engaged in casual sexual relationships, they might resort to confession and their 'occasional' sins would be forgiven. However, should they enter into a long-term committed relationship, they are not likely to be given absolution by the priest since then it would be perceived as 'living in sin' (Meek 2014, pp. 104-106; Yip 1997a, p. 115). In Palermo, Giuseppe could only act as a minister of the eucharist because at the time he was not in a relationship. He could receive communion as well "and if I had sex I used to confess and be given absolution and I could continue administering the eucharist. If I had a long-term companion I would not have been able to do it. It is rather hypocritical". This problem was also encountered by Steve who does not

attend *Drachma* and who for a time was a member of a religious order. When he started frequenting gay clubs and having casual sexual relationships, he could go to confession and receive absolution. He also used to take communion. However, when he spoke to a monk about his dream of having a long-term relationship, he was shocked by the advice he was given: “He told me, ‘It’s better to stay as you are because that’s something that can be forgiven’ because I would have given in to temptation but if I have a relationship it would be a lifestyle choice. I took it really badly. I was very emotional”.

Church annulments²⁹ and the sacrament of reconciliation may not have much in common. However, annulments are at times perceived as being encouraged by members of the clergy in order to ensure that separated or divorced individuals who are in another relationship will regularise their situation and thereby be able to remarry in Church rather than ‘live in sin’. Therefore both in their own way provide an alternative to ‘living in sin’. However, such advice is not always welcomed especially if one feels that priests would only be using it as a way of channelling the faithful towards a lifestyle that is acceptable to the Church, rather than as advice based on principles. For some, such advice was indeed perceived to be a form of abuse by the clergy. Sylvia had been happily married for ten years when she discovered that her husband was cheating on her. She did not consider her case as meriting an annulment and was rather surprised when a priest advised her to apply for annulment. She perceives marriage as a sacrament which she thought would last for life. She was also discouraged by the amount of money she would have to pay to obtain it. Therefore, one may say that Sylvia had her own agenda for not applying for an annulment. Nevertheless, adultery is not one of the grounds for nullity of marriage according to the Church and therefore Sylvia felt that the priest should not have brought up the issue of annulment.

²⁹ In Malta annulments are granted by both Church and State. A declaration of nullity is made by the Catholic Church when a marriage is not deemed to have been valid as stipulated in Chapter IV of the Code of Canon Law: http://www.holyrosaryprovince.org/2011/media/essencial/code_of_canon_law_1983.pdf

The issue of annulments emerged quite often in my conversations with the *separati*. It is a factor which contributes significantly to the anger directed at the Church. There is a general feeling that the decisions of the Ecclesiastical Tribunal are not always fair. Annulments take years to be decided, causing frustration and disappointment especially if false hopes are raised and if it is perceived that others were granted an annulment while their request was unfairly denied. Annulments are also seen as a lucrative source of income for the Church. Cash payments are often perceived as a prerequisite for obtaining an annulment. Anton, the only person who shared his story with me from the *Cana* support group for separated persons, had tried to obtain a Church annulment and his spiritual director was of the opinion that he did have a case. Therefore he had high hopes,

The Tribunal's negative decision was a bigger shock than the separation itself. It was a big let-down because you hear of cases where couples get an annulment because they're not mature. There are people who got an annulment three times. You almost start believing that you really have to pay for it.

3.4 Assimilators, Deserters and Affiliators: A Typology

My informants generally prefer to have remained part of the Catholic fold in spite of their sentiments towards the Church. Feelings of community belonging may be higher among heterosexuals, partly because religious communities are largely heteronormative spaces. However, my LGBT informants also attach great significance to belonging to a moral community. Yip and Page (2013, p. 27) found that there are many benefits of belonging to religious communities such as the provision of moral guidance and the accumulation of social and cultural capital. However, this sense of belonging often hinges on the members' conformity to the shared group morality. Failure to do so often leads to implicit or explicit exclusion as many of my informants claim to have experienced. However, there are those for whom leaving is the only sensible option. Some LGBT Christians on the other hand feel that for them to be welcomed into the church community, they would need to deny or repress their sexuality (Marcellino 1997, p. 46).

I see my informants as fitting more or less into three overlapping categories according to the level of alienation they feel from the institution. Firstly there are

those who feel at peace or comfortable within the Church even if they feel hurt or disappointed for some reason or other. They participate in church rituals even though they may not agree with its stand on a number of issues. They are critical of the Church without being antagonistic. There is an element of loyalty towards the Church despite the disillusionment as well as a sense of belonging within the wider Church community. I call these 'Assimilators'. A second group decided to leave the Church which they consider to have rejected them. Within this category of 'Deserters' there are a few who are very clear in their denunciation of the Church which, they claim, is not the Church which Christ wanted and rarely participate in its rituals. According to them, the Church is more concerned with doctrine and with maintaining its power than with disseminating Christ's message of love. It has lost its credibility because it does not practise what it preaches. Yet most informants who fall within this category have deserted the Church rather reluctantly. They tend to project a sense of loss, of having been driven away from an institution they would otherwise prefer to have continued embracing had the circumstances been different or had the Church accepted them. They have not severed their emotional ties with the Church and may drift in and out of it in terms of participation and feelings of belonging. Thirdly there are those who I call 'Affiliators' who join faith-based groups such as *Drachma*, *Ali d'Aquila* or the *Young Separated Support Group* either as an alternative to forming part of the wider Church or as a supplement. LGBT faith groups may provide informants with the sense of belonging to a religious community which they could not find in the Church, despite their being outside the confines of the Church itself. This is especially so if they felt rejected not only by the Church but also by other faith groups to which they previously belonged. Groups which operate under the auspices of the Church such as the *YSSG* may enable informants to maintain a link with the Church even if they no longer participate in its rituals.

3.4.1 The Assimilators

For those who fall in the first category, being part of the Church is very important although belonging bears different significance for my two sets of informants. For

LGBT Catholics, the Church is first and foremost a spiritual community which affords access to the supernatural. For those who were involved in parish life the Church also offered a sense of community belonging. Chris was actively involved in youth pastoral work in a local parish after a long career in the *MUSEUM*, the *Society of Christian Doctrine*, but when he went public about his homosexuality, he was asked to leave. This hurt him because he feels that pastoral work is his vocation. He felt excluded and rejected by the Church he loves but at the same time he accepted its decision “with tranquility” because he understands that, like him, the Church has to struggle to change. It was difficult for him too to accept his homosexuality and the fact that he has to live at the fringes of the Church while he “would like to be in her bosom”. While he cannot live according to the Church’s teaching about intimacy which he considers to be antiquated and unrealistic, it does not mean that he never has moral dilemmas that he might be wrong. He feels like being “in uncharted waters”, not knowing where they will lead him. He does not have the safety net of the Church which would have given him a better guarantee for his salvation. Despite his disagreement with the Church on issues of sexuality, Chris has maintained his faith in the Church, something he shares with his partner, Tyrone. He told me:

I could easily have gone in that direction. I want to be clear, I am tempted to say I couldn’t care less about the Church but I said, “No I love the Church”. I didn’t want to move away from the Church even if it treats me badly. I pray to God to give me the grace to remain...

Mario also feels a strong sense of attachment to the Church. Despite its limitations, the Church is still Christ’s Church. It epitomises the faith and provides access to the sacraments and to the sacred. His closeness to the Church stems largely from his immersion within Carmelite spirituality. Unlike Chris, it is the mystical dimension of Catholicism which primarily draws Mario to the Church: “What I don’t find in the institution I find in the mystics”. He regularly visits a Franciscan convent in Assisi where he experiences profound spirituality. He also draws inspiration from Liberation and Queer theologies. Mario still participates in Church liturgical rituals even if for a time he had distanced himself from the Church. There was a time when Mario also contemplated religious life.

Steve, a gay Maltese man who does not frequent *Drachma*, does not agree with those who stopped going to Church because they believe the Church does not accept them:

If you do not go, it is you who are not believing in it. Nobody is going to stop you. Nobody will deny you communion. I always go with my partner and we both receive communion. That which the Church does not give me, I take myself. I feel ok because it's ok. I've always had this philosophy. If I accept myself as I am, I do not have a problem if others do not accept me. I could have been the only one in the Church. Why shouldn't I have a place as who I am within the Church? If St Francis did not put on his rags, he wouldn't have founded his order. If St Dominic hadn't decided to start studying, and to fight the heresy of his time and going all over Europe... It is people who were different who made a difference.

Initially he used to hear mass in different churches and to seek different confessors. With time he learnt "not to take everything the Church says as scripture". Like Chris however, Steve does not feel that he is exactly where he would like to be. Despite his continued participation in Church rituals, he too feels a certain void. What he misses most is the involvement in the parish that was such an important part of his life before he started religious life. When he came out, after leaving the convent, he knew that he had to give up that special part of his life, "Suddenly because of this, I had to lose it. If I had a girlfriend and got married I would have been able to continue doing it. I feel a sense of bereavement. It's a loss".

Godwin is more critical of the Church than most of those who chose to remain within it. He has been in a gay relationship for many years and he claims not to be bothered by the Church's position on homosexuality: "If the Church does not accept me it's her problem not mine and it never affected my relationship. I have accepted myself and I'm happy with what I am." He compares the Church to the mafia and describes its authority as "deformed". When it "imposes certain things which are not in line [jistunaw] with today's society, you are telling the people, "Move as far away from me as possible". Yet while he claims to have long lost credibility in the Church and particularly in the clergy, he still participates in all the traditional rituals of the Church. He goes to mass regularly and receives

communion. While he claims not to perceive his relationship with his partner as sinful, he still confesses repeatedly that he breaks the 6th commandment and seeks absolution. This suggests that Godwin may still need the Church's blessing. He explains this apparent incongruence by saying that this is all about his relationship with God. He calls his confessions conversations with his spiritual director, who is also gay. He emphasises the distinction between God with whom he has a very close relationship, and the Church in which he has lost faith. Yet it is still through the Church that he partially seeks access to God.

Among my non-LGBT informants, there were also those who continued being part of the Church although these tend to attach a different meaning to it. For my heterosexual informants the Church is a religious community which represents their Catholic tradition and has strong social significance. The cultural element is stronger within this group than it is for my LGBT informants. Lisa, who is in a second marriage after she divorced her first husband, describes herself as "a staunch Catholic". She lives in an old townhouse which she claims she chose specifically for its position in front of a church. It had always been her wish to live close to a church, to hear the church bells chiming "as if they were in the living room" which incidentally boasts of a number of statues and holy pictures next to pictures of her family and those of the Prime Minister. Lisa is not only a regular church-goer herself but she also encourages others to go, "If someone tells me, 'I don't go to mass', I always try to see what I can do to get them closer. I tell them, 'Ignore the priest, whatever he says. It is with God that you are concerned [*Int m'Alla għandek x'taqsam*]'". Lisa is also a strong critic of the Church and, as a strong Labour Party supporter, she has had issues with it on political matters. She is also angry at how the Church handled her application for annulment and with how certain Church authorities flaunt the Church's wealth instead of embracing Christ's poverty. At the same she distinguishes between "the Church as an institution with a capital K [for *Knisja* in Maltese] and the few who manage it", the Church "as the people", as well as many individual 'good' priests whom she greatly respects.

Michael, who lives with his girlfriend after separating from his wife, is also rather angry at the Church even though he, like Lisa, continues to be actively involved. When he was still married he used to coordinate marriage preparation courses for the Church's *Cana Movement*. Now he is irked with the Church's disapproval of his lifestyle:

The message of the Church is clear: we are here to move people towards marriage and our marriage is the only good marriage. Everything else is wrong. It's rubbish. You cannot tell me that the relationship I have with my partner is wrong. That is goes against your regulations, maybe. That it goes against God, neither because you are not God's representative.

Despite his denunciation of the Church, Michael would still fall into the category of *Assimilators*. He still goes to mass and receives communion. He is also a member of a men's Christian group and a close friend of one of Malta's leading theologians. Unlike Michael and Lisa who are quite proud of their defiant streak, Sylvia is a conformist at heart. Despite her anguish and sorrow at not being able to take communion because of her cohabiting relationship, she tries to understand the Church's rules although she keeps hoping they will change: "I say this is the religion I practise. I pray to God to forgive me because I am Catholic and I try to follow his rules but I couldn't do otherwise. I was still young when my husband left me".

Therefore the *Assimilators* are a rather diverse category. Despite their differences, most continue being part of the Church because it is their link to God. While there are those who are able to find God outside the Church, *Assimilators* feel closer to God when participating in traditional rituals especially communion. Furthermore, one cannot exclude the importance of tradition particularly in a culture historically dominated by the Church. Particularly for the *separati*, the traditional significance attached to attending mass as a family, going to midnight mass at Christmas, getting married in church still has meaning and tends to be missed by those who have relinquished church practice. *Assimilators* may wish to continue being part of the Church because they want to feel part of their community, to share in the collective memory (Dillon 1999, p. 123; Gross & Yip 2010, p. 55). They may be motivated by the need to feel 'normal' rather than deviant. They may want to

minimise the effect of having to live outside the moral boundaries of their religious community. Their assimilation within the Church may suggest that for my informants, being Catholic is just as important as their sexuality and are not willing to abandon either aspect of their identity (Gross & Yip 2010, pp. 54-55).

3.4.2 The Deserters

Recently out of a long-term gay relationship, Nick is disillusioned by a Church which has hurt him in a lot of ways and which he considers to have become irrelevant on a personal, social and political level. Nick does not frequent *Drachma* and not being part of the Church is not much of an issue nowadays. Although he attends the occasional mass, he has more affinity with the *Deserters*. The seven years he spent in religious formation enabled him to grow spiritually, to be closer to Jesus, to realise that God loves him. Yet despite being immersed in a sacred world, Nick had still felt a spiritual void. He felt that religious life was all about religion rather than spirituality which he considers to be more important. His overall experience and evaluation of the Church pushed him away from it but closer to God. Nick feels that the Church judges him as a category, without knowing him as a person with values and beliefs. He is also very angry at the way the Church treated him when he wanted to leave religious life.

Nowadays I'm out of it. I have a lot of friends who are priests but I tell them I'm sorry but I'm not convinced. I find it irrelevant, it doesn't have much to say. For me it's more about the internal journey.

Theresa was the only woman I spoke to from the LGBT community who raised feminist issues as one of the reasons behind her rejection of the ecclesiastical institution. Theresa used to frequent *Drachma* for a time but left when Chris took over its coordination. She feels that as a separated, feminist woman and mother who only recently identified as lesbian and is in an intimate relationship with a woman, she belongs to a social category of people who has long been denigrated by both Church and society. Theresa's concerns suggest that women may have their specific issues which contribute to their anger and frustration with the Church and which may impact on the choices they make in their paths towards

God (Wilcox 2005, p. 205; Wilcox 2009, p. 198). Theresa came across as a reserved, gentle yet very principled woman when she spoke to me about her views on the Church:

I see it as an institution which tries to hold itself up rather than trying to help people live their experiences. The Church is an organisation which seeks to preserve its power and promote that which it believes in to the point that it dictates to you. Now it doesn't mean that all that the Church says is wrong but I have a big resistance because it has not given me the space to be free to find my way. The last time I went to church the priest was talking disrespectfully about gay people and I did not go again.

Those who have managed to reach a secure enough point outside the comfort zone of the Church claim that they do not need the Church's approval or blessing, especially as they grew spiritually and strengthened their bond with God. Karl was active in *Drachma* in the past. He sees the Church as an institution which very often hinders spirituality. He feels that people give too much importance to the institution. "You don't need approval from people like a child. I don't need the institution to tell me I'm a good boy. What do I care about the institution?" People like Karl are not personally perturbed by the Church's stand on homosexuality although, as Giovanni told me in Palermo, he would like the Church to change for the sake of those who are still suffering. Noah, from *Drachma*, is similarly unperturbed by the Church's position on homosexuality:

I take the institution with a pinch of salt, like a child that has not yet realised certain things. You say that maybe with time they will come round. I don't expect them to change overnight but I'm not concerned with whether they will change or not. I live my life according to my values which are based on a good Catholic ethic. It's up to them whether they want to change or not.

Despite leaving the Church however, there are those among the *Deserters* whose decision to leave was done very reluctantly. For some it was even a traumatic experience. Perhaps nobody epitomises this painful experience better than Joseph. Although Joseph is one of the few informants whose parents were not practising Catholics, he was always a person of faith. He used to go to church with his brothers and sisters. From the time he was an altar boy he felt drawn towards religious life. He eventually spent six years in religious formation. He is now married to Simon. They got married abroad since at the time, same-sex marriage

was not possible in Malta. His narrative reflects the mixed feelings of sadness, anger, disappointment, hurt, indifference, love and hate conjured up by the need for the Church's embrace, "They rejected me and at some point I had to survive, to remain sane. I had to reject the Church". He never stopped loving the Church but has stopped participating in traditional rituals except on sporadic occasions. While his religious formation gave him the strength both to grow spiritually and to finally confront his homosexuality and accept it, he still cannot accept being rejected by the Church, not being able to integrate fully within the Catholic community and having his homosexual marriage blessed. He doesn't feel that an organisation like *Drachma* is an appropriate place for him either, "For me that is a ghetto. I want the Church to fully endorse me". During the celebration of his marriage,

I told them that my only regret was that I could not get married in church in front of God but I believe with all my strength that where there are people gathered in his name he will be there too. I asked them to say a short prayer and to bless our union because the Church will never do it for us. I needed the blessing of the community and I received it in some way but I still felt cheated because after all I grew up in a culture where people get married in church. I also understand this within a spiritual context. I am not interested in the building of the Church but that there is someone who administers officially... although actually it is Simon and I who are the ministers but that there is someone who joins us together. I felt that and I will continue feeling it and that's why I am angry and will continue to be angry for many years to come, and hurt. Because I was deprived of that.

The decision to stop participating in Church rituals and being part of the wider church community affects individuals in different ways. There are those who are rational and matter-of-fact when referring to the Church, while others, like Joseph are still emotionally attached even as they critically dismiss the Church. Particularly among the *separati*, not being able to participate in communion is one of the issues which drives them away from religious participation, albeit reluctantly. Those for whom spirituality carries great significance tend to find solace in their intimacy with God even if they seek him outside the Church. Indeed, the *Deserters* shared in common a clear distinction between the Church as an institution and their faith and spirituality. Having their own direct relationship with God gives them strength when the Church fails them. While this distinction is crucial for the *Deserters*, it is often a significant turning point in the experience of most informants regardless of whether they continue practising or not. Many

informants increasingly eliminate the Church as a link between them and the supernatural preferring to relate directly to God. As Luigi from *Ali d'Aquila* told me, "I need to relate to God and not so much to a denomination. The personal relationship with God is more important. I do not seek anymore a mediator between me and God".

3.4.3 The Affiliators

I call *Affiliators* those who are engaged in a faith group such as *Drachma* and *Ali d'Aquila*. *Affiliators* may seek faith groups for different reasons. As shown in Chapters II and VI, their functions are various and may be social, spiritual, psychological and practical. LGBT faith groups like *Drachma* and *Ali d'Aquila* may fill a void left by a Church unresponsive to the needs of LGBT Catholics. *Affiliators* may frequent such groups in addition to participating in the mainstream church community. For people like Chris, Mario and Tyrone, these groups serve to deepen their spirituality while learning to embrace their sexuality within a community of 'equals' who are undergoing similar experiences. For others such groups provide an alternative to the church community and a more accepting environment. They provide that which one may not find in the Church such as access to LGBT-affirmative theologies and a sense of acceptance and belonging especially if they felt rejected by the Church or by other faith groups.

Henry has been tormented by his homosexuality for most of his young and adult life, suffering from depression and struggling to accept himself. He has always needed to belong to a community, partly because he did not have a supportive environment at home. After a year of conventual life, he spent years in the *Neocatechumenal Way* and in the *Charismatic Movement*. However, these groups only increased his trauma with their continuous judgement and guilt-inducing words in relation to his homosexuality. Henry claims to have only recently managed to "liberate" himself from the *Neocatechumenal Way*. A year later he joined *Drachma* which he describes as his "church" and where he "truly started knowing God and finding myself". However, despite his claims, Henry has neither

'liberated' himself from the Church nor from the faith groups he frequented previously. His guilt feelings are so deeply ingrained that he remains tormented by conflicts and doubts especially since he moved in with his partner who is much less concerned with Church teaching. There was a time when he and his partner discontinued their participation in church rituals and only attended those organised by *Drachma*. However they later resumed their mass attendance. Henry is apparently still unconvinced of *Drachma's* philosophy that one can be gay and Catholic and returning to the *Neocatechumenal Way* is a lingering thought.

Despite their discontinued participation in liturgical rituals, there were those who would participate enthusiastically in a mass organised by *Drachma*. It is not the first time that members of *Drachma* have expressed their desire for more '*Drachma masses*' where the celebrant would be a 'friend' of *Drachma* and where participants are invited to take an active role in the celebration, to make their offerings, to reflect on the liturgy, to receive communion without being judged or relegated to the margins. The occasional mass enables the gay community to take an active role in "collectively creating 'the body of Christ' from which they are officially excluded" (Dillon 1999 p. 133). These occasional masses where the theme of homosexuality is bound to be interwoven with the liturgy gives LGBT Catholics a sense of legitimacy which they cannot find within mainstream congregations and which is achieved "by innovatively working with and around the traditional Mass liturgy" (Dillon 1999 p. 133). In this way, a religious space is being 'queered' while LGBT believers and their relationships are being sacralised. A religious space is used to challenge official religious doctrine, practices and policies which stigmatise and relegate the same LGBT people to the margins of the Church (Hopkins 2014, p. 173). At the same time, these masses are only celebrated on special occasions. While they are not kept secret in any way, one of these priests once indicated that he might have issues with the Curia were he to celebrate them on a regular basis. This demonstrates both the possibilities and the complexities of a truly open, liberating and inclusive Catholic community.

Daniel and his partner Noah are among those who only attend such celebrations, having stopped participating in Church rituals. Daniel would have liked to have remained part of the Church, but since “it is not the Church I would like it to be”, he prefers “to identify as a Christian or better still as spiritual and not to align myself with any religion”. He does not want to be “part of a Church whose views are so anachronistic as to deny women access to the priesthood”. Kurt and Jamie, who were more active in *Drachma* when Mario was coordinator, have also stopped going to mass celebrations except on special occasions such as Christmas and Easter and have maintained their contact with *Drachma*. However, I would describe the affinity of both couples with *Drachma* as rather loose.

The purpose of Debbie’s continued affiliation to *Drachma* is political. She was very active in *Drachma* before she left Malta. Yet, living in a country where many Catholic churches have closed down made her decision to stop practising her faith easier although she has not given up on the Church completely. Through her advocacy work as a *Drachma* representative in international Church committees, her dream is to help enact a positive change from within, “Someone once asked me, ‘Why don’t you leave the Church? Why do you tolerate this violence, this hate?’ But if I let myself out then I won’t be an instrument of change”.

I have explained in Chapter II how the YSSG helps the *separati* cope better with the stress caused by their marriage breakdown, with their ex-spouse, with caring for and dealing with children and with how to get back on their feet apart from being a source of identification and a means of social interaction. From what I could gather from those attending the YSSG, some had stopped going to church but then would attend the religious activities organised by *Caritas* specifically for them such as spiritual exercises during lent, the seven churches visitations on Maundy Thursday, weekend spiritual retreats and the occasional mass.

Therefore *Affiliators* may attach different meanings to their group affiliation. Since I conducted a good part of my fieldwork with faith-based groups, their significance was expected. Regardless of whether one is an *Assimilator* or a *Deserter*, these

groups suggest that many of my informants continue to value their Catholic tradition and their belonging to a faith community. They did not join a secular group which may have still satisfied their psychological, social and practical needs. Their belonging to faith groups enable informants to relocate themselves within Catholicism and to re-engage or remain connected with the Church.

3.5 The role of individual priests

While informants are generally familiar with the official position of the Church regarding their lifestyle choices, this does not stop them from turning to priests for advice. In Malta, priests may not have remained the prominent figures they were in the past within the village community. However, they still maintain contact with the church-going community or with parishioners through the traditional annual house blessings after Easter and are generally accessible to those who seek them. Despite the anti-Church sentiments that the behaviour of certain priests may evoke, many of my informants have maintained their respect towards the priesthood. Some informants were involved in the church community and some still are. Priests may be part of their social circles. The educational capital enjoyed by most of my informants makes it easier for them to engage in conversations with priests who may equip them with some of the essential tools to deal with their conflict. Malta's tiny size also makes it possible for individuals to have access to priests who they know would be more likely to support them and to consult such priests rather than others who would be stricter in their adherence to the official Church position.

Priests are approached by individuals for different reasons. During the initial phase of their conflict, when there is still a lot of confusion and pain, individuals may want to share their concerns, to have someone who listens to them, seeking answers to their many questions. There are those who could not understand why their marriage failed, why their wife or husband left them or why they desire partners of the same sex. Some informants approach priests for psychological support, seeking guidance either because the priests are also psychologists or

because informants would prefer to discuss matters with a priest or theologian than with a psychologist. Priests are consulted about complex issues such as doubting God's love or existence, to vent their anger towards the Church or to clarify whether they may receive communion.

Informants make a distinction between the institution and its individual agents. While there are priests or high Church officials who may turn people away from the Church, informants do not put everyone in the same boat. They acknowledge that there are 'bad' priests who drive believers away from the Church through their homilies, their sexual exploits, their aggressively judgemental attitude towards people's personal confessions or lifestyles and the Church as a whole. In contrast, 'good' priests are admired and respected for being understanding, supportive, open-minded, practical, non-judgemental, humane or ready to engage in critical or even theological dialogue with informants. Such priests are exonerated from criticism to a significant degree. Individual priests are therefore either condemned or commended on a micro level and set against the bigger institution of which they form part but which they are not necessarily seen to represent. Such priests represent those blurred or 'grey areas' within the otherwise rigorousness of the Church which may partly account for its endurance (Norget, Napolitano & Mayblin 2017, p. 17). They represent tolerance as opposed to the perceived harshness of Church rules and have a very important role even for those who have conflict with the Church. As indicated earlier, *Drachma*, as an organisation, was supported by such priests or religious orders along the years.

In Palermo, Father Cosimo Scordato has been instrumental not only in drawing a number of individuals back into the Church's fold but also in creating an exceptional community at his church of *San Francesco Saverio* by openly embracing LGBT and divorced persons. It is within this community that *Ali d'Aquila* meet and participate in religious rituals. All members of *Ali d'Aquila* spoke very positively of *San Saverio* which they did not perceive as representing the Church as a whole. Luigi, a co-founder of *Ali d'Aquila*, told me that although his experience of the Church as a homosexual man has led him away from the sacraments, at *San*

Saverio he feels drawn to the sacrament of communion as a result of the community spirit that exists, “because communion is already there in the community”.

Therefore while the official position of the Catholic Church may appear too harsh and uncompromising regarding any form of sexual intimacy outside the sacrament of marriage, at grassroots level, many informants found compassion, support and understanding. *Indri*, who is in a cohabiting heterosexual relationship, claims to be “very anti-clerical” since many priests do not “live like Christ”. Even for *Indri* however, “There are some [priests] who are decent like *Patri Gwann*. He will not condemn you because of your lifestyle. He tries to live Christ’s faith as one should live it”.

When once I asked *Tyrone* whether he feels relegated to the periphery of the Church, he told me that he feels very much part of the Church since he only managed to come to terms with his many conflicts with the help of individual priests. He told me, “I found myself within the Church”. *Kurt*, an early member of *Drachma*, told me that although he could deal with his conflict “through prayer and self-reflection, my spiritual director also helped me to accept myself. I would have been devastated had he not supported me. I would not have arrived where I am now”. Recently *Kurt* and his partner *Jamie* decided to have a baby using a surrogate. When they returned from the United States with their newborn son, *Father Robert*, a *Drachma* supporter, accepted to christen him. *Tyrone* and *Chris*, who started living together after I finished my fieldwork with *Drachma*, told me that they met the parish priest for the first time when he visited their new home during the house blessings and he was quite welcoming upon realising that they were gay. He even invited them to read during mass “but not on a regular basis”. *Lucia*, one of my informants from *Ali d’Aquila* considers the Church to be divided in two:

The church of rules and the church of men, the formal and the informal. The informal church, including some priests, was telling me that I was not wrong. This gave me the strength not to abandon the Church because it was a question of dialogue, interpretation, communication. It was a question of doctrine.

This sense of “flexibility”, characterised by “exceptions, shortcuts and leniency” combined with “a history of rigor and discipline” has led some scholars to describe Catholicism as a “‘both/and’ rather than ‘either/or’ sort of religion” (Norget, Napolitano & Mayblin 2017, pp. 16-17).

Sometimes, an unexpected encounter with a priest can change the life of an individual. Margherita, an informant from Palermo had been away from the Church for many years because of its condemnation of LGBT persons. However one day she saw a flier in front of a church which read, ‘God loves you as you are’. She decided to enter this church where she met “this marvellous priest” who helped her to make peace with the Church,

I confessed to this priest. It was a journey. This priest has restored in me faith in the Church. Meeting this priest was fundamental for me. I also had my Confirmation at forty because I did not want to do it when I was fifteen. I was already angry at the Church. I remember his words. When I told him that I felt I was alone, he told me, “You were never alone because God has suffered with you. He was always there with you”.

A similar transformation was experienced by Pia, a middle-aged lesbian who once attended a *Drachma* meeting. She had stopped approaching the sacraments, partly because she had doubts about the Church’s interpretation of the scriptures. It was a chance encounter with a priest who “opened the doors” that she always felt had been closed for her. She confessed after thirty years and claims to have found inner peace. Joseph, who eventually confronted his homosexuality while he was still in religious formation, became friends with an Irish priest during an international meeting. He was the first person he ever told that he was gay. The priest was openly gay and had the courage to speak about it. Joseph chose him as his spiritual director during a retreat, only a few weeks after he had acknowledged that he was gay himself, “And these were the best eight days of my life. I experienced a lot of love, emotively, spiritually but particularly in the spirit of Jesus. I accepted myself with love and at the time I confirmed that I wanted to remain in the order”.

A 'blessing' from a priest may serve to relieve a person's guilt. Sonia, who is single and lives with her boyfriend feels that speaking to an "open-minded priest" has relieved much of her guilt: "Since I spoke to Fr Marco with the Church I feel less that I'm doing something wrong. Like I had someone's blessing that it's alright". She had been deliberating about whether to take communion for a long time. She decided to take the opportunity after she heard the priest speaking during a homily about the importance of not judging others. The priest reassured her that she was doing nothing wrong, that she was not hurting others: "He told me, 'These are all silly things [*cućati*]' and to tell you the truth the fact that he told me this himself has really calmed me because I used to feel guilty, of two minds [*maqsuma*]" . Lisa was even advised regarding how to secure an absolution:

I have a young priest who is a friend.. he's really sweet.. and he told me what I have to do. He told me, "Go to confession and skip the part that you are not married in Church because the life of the Christian is a journey. He will not give you absolution anyway".

However, encounters with priests who are flexible in their interpretation of the Church's official doctrine remain arbitrary. There are those who were ignored, dismissed or outrightly condemned by priests during confession or consultation. When Luigi spoke to a priest about his homosexuality after quitting his role as catechist in Palermo, he was told that it was a passing phase. Similarly, when Giovanni was sixteen and had his first sexual experiences, he tried to speak to his confessor but was completely ignored, "I told him about it but he didn't reply. I thought I did not have a problem. I also told him of other experiences in quite a dirty place and nothing, no reaction".

In Syliva's case, one confession drove her away from the sacraments, a matter of grave concern which causes her a lot of anxiety:

Oh my gosh [*Illallu*] how he shouted at me, and that "He [her partner] is going to squeeze you like a lemon" and "You don't have a future with him". I was crying in front of him. I never went to confession again. I think it's been ten years now. Even at my mother's funeral, I did not take communion. For me that is really grave, of course I could not. I'm afraid to approach somebody. Since that confession all doors were closed. And I don't like to speak to my partner because then he would tell me, "You see I tell you, aren't they all the same?" And I say, "No they're not".

It is evident that although not all priests deviate from the official Church teaching, there is a divergence between official doctrine and pastoral practice at grassroots level (Gross & Yip 2010, p. 54). The softer and more tolerant side of the Church comes across through individual priests who happen to be more flexible in their interpretation of the Church's official doctrine. These priests often help to keep individuals close to the Church, to ease any guilt feelings and to help individuals reconcile their possible conflicts (Hall 2015, p. 220). Wetzel (2014, p. 69) argues that while in the past those who questioned the Church suffered the consequences, the guidance of Pope Francis' more humble approach and his focus on social justice is changing this. Yet, at times, the incongruence between the formal teaching of the Church and the different interpretations given by different priests in their informal interaction with believers may lead to confusion and may serve to further widen the "credibility gap" in the authority structures of the Church (Gross & Yip 2010, p. 54).

3.6 Reconfiguring the map: redrawing the moral boundaries in a secular society

We live in a society where the Church clearly does not have the last word on sexual morality. Most of my informants consider the Church's teaching about sexuality, intimate relationships, marriage and reproduction as irrelevant to today's realities. In Malta it is only abortion which is still generally considered to be morally wrong. The authority structures of the Church are undermined at least when it comes to decisions regarding sexuality. These are increasingly being based on personal experience, reason and biblical knowledge (Dillon 1999, pp. 14-15; Yip 2002, p. 206). It has been argued that it is the self rather than traditional authority which guides individuals in their endeavours to reconcile their sexuality and their spirituality (Beck & Beck Gernsheim 1995, pp. 1-10; Yip 2002, p. 210); that there has been a shift in interpretive authority (Heelas 1996, p. 2) as contemporary Catholics seek to reclaim what they consider to be "the authenticity of their Catholicism" (Dillon 1999, p. 76). Such trends have been interpreted as evidence of

an individualisation process (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 1995, pp. 1-10; 2002; Wilcox 2002b, pp. 511-512; Wilcox 2003, p. 157) and detraditionalisation (Heelas 1996, p. 2). Despite their dominance in the literature, Hall (2015, p. 213) considers such individualistic explanations as limited even if she does not dismiss them as irrelevant. Indeed they have been the target of much criticism (Wood 2007).

Within the Maltese context, the individualisation thesis needs to be applied with caution. My Catholic informants may disregard Church teaching on sexual morality but even as they redraw the boundaries of their faith, it is the same Catholic tradition that informs them. It is with regards to sexuality that they challenge the Church's teaching. They do not question any of the tenets of the faith. They would like the Church to embrace them as Jesus welcomed the outsiders of his society. Informants may not necessarily choose themselves to take an individualistic approach to religion. They may be constrained to do so as they feel excluded from religious institutions (Wilcox 2003, p. 77). Writing about gay men, and himself a gay anthropologist who was brought up within the Catholic tradition of southern Italy, Savastano claims that by virtue of being "forced into exile" from the Catholic Church, he had to find "an alternative religious home" (Savastano 2007, p. 11). The "spiritual 'Diaspora'" (Savastano 2007, p. 9) in which many queer men find themselves, drives them to become "'virtuosi of the holy art of bricolage' to meet their spiritual needs" (Savastano 2007, p. 11). Their circumstances force them to find creative ways in which to practise their spirituality, "to forge a diverse array of spiritual practices, re-interpret or invent alternative sacred myths, produce their own mystical writings, and form diverse intentional spiritual communities" (Savastano 2007, p. 9) and to form "Gods of their own" (Beck 2010, p. 27). Among my LGBT informants, Godwin insists that he has his "own interpretation" of the scriptures while Steve claims that he had to recreate his "value system from scratch" after three years of conventual life since homoerotic sex was hardly congruent with his Catholic formation. My research shows that it is not only queer men who seek alternative moralities and ways of expressing one's spirituality as individuals find themselves at odds with the moral prescriptions of their faith. However, there are differences in how my two sets of informants do this.

My LGBT informants tend to reconstruct their concept of sin on the basis of their personal experience and in terms of what they consider to be right in God's eyes according to the principle of the 'primacy of conscience' (Hall 2015, p. 219; Meek 2014, p. 104). Theresa, who was previously married with two grown children, is now separated and in a lesbian relationship. For a time she was involved in *Drachma*. She does not feel guilty for being in a lesbian relationship because, in her own words,

I try not to do harm, I don't kill, I don't steal. I try my best. It doesn't mean I don't reflect. I think and I try to discern, interpret. I try to see what I am doing. Maybe I am being presumptuous [*Naħseb li jjen xiħaġa*, lit. I think I am something] but somehow I have a certain peace within me. I never doubted that if I separate, if I divorce, if I'm gay, God will see me differently from who I am. For me the Church is also a church which is searching for God. The Church can tell me, "This is what I think". Fine. I do not have to do exactly what you [the Church authorities] are saying. I reflect but I am no longer that little girl who used to go to catechism classes and who had to do what the Sister said. God is much bigger than the Roman Catholic Church or any other religion.

For LGBT Catholics, celibacy is the only option provided by Church doctrine. As Mario explained, this is perceived to be a rather difficult and unjust requirement which constrained gay Catholics to turn inside themselves,

To be creative in the sense that we did not have any model on which to base our morality. We could not draw from Church theology. We could only turn to alternative theologies. We had to challenge the Church on the premise of injustice. We consider the Church's stand on homosexual intimacy as unjust, unrealistic and violent.

My LGBT informants both in Malta and Palermo challenge the Church in a number of ways both to reaffirm their Catholic identity and their rightful place within the faith as well as to justify their lifestyle. As I will further elaborate in Chapter VI, one way they do this is through the reinterpretation of the holy scriptures from an LGBT-affirmative perspective. This not only enables my LGBT Catholics to question the Church's condemnation of their lifestyle but to challenge its claim of having sole authority over doctrinal interpretation. Intellectual endeavours of this kind may be more characteristic of Christian, non-Catholic contexts as Catholicism tends to attach more importance to community belonging and to ritual

participation than to individualistic initiatives (Greeley 2000, pp. 123-125). This suggests that in this respect my LGBT Catholic informants may be closer to Northern European Christians than they are to other members of their local Catholic community. Indeed this hermeneutical redefinition of the word of God as reflects the LGBT experience has no parallel among my heterosexual informants. Participation in *Drachma* and *Ali d'Aquila* may introduce them to an alternative hermeneutics and guide them through it. Yet, LGBT Catholics still convey a strong affinity with the Catholic imagination traditionally characterised by saintly devotion, the observance of liturgical festivals and celebrations, the value of sacraments and sacred symbols such as the crucifix and the equation of intimate love with the divine (Greeley 2000, pp. 5-9).

Despite the ease with which my LGBT informants seem to redraw their morality, this is not an easy process. For some it is an agonising process of negotiation and compromise. As noted by Steve,

I had to make compromises. After a time, the issue of sin declined as well. Whether you have sex in a relationship or not, after all I always believed before that sex only takes place in marriage. So first I had to challenge this and then I had to challenge that you can have sex outside a relationship as well. I went through this process alone. I used to feel split in two.

Similarly, Chris initially found it difficult to actually engage in sexual intimacy even if on a conceptual level he had thought that he had overcome his reservations,

There was a time when even though I had accepted the possibility of sexual intimacy, I realised that I still had issues with it because *tra il dire e il fare c'è in mezzo il mare* [It's easier said than done].

He explained to me at great length how he had to negotiate an acceptable solution to his dilemmas with the support of his experienced partner who was understanding and who was willing to wait until Chris was ready. Theologically he reached the conclusion that,

The boundary line between a relationship that is holy [*relazzjoni qaddisa*] and a harmful relationship [*relazzjoni dannuża*], in the sense that it harms yourself and the other person and distances you from God, is promiscuity. If I am in a relationship with one person and the priority is the relationship there is a process. Sex is not the objective. If there is love, commitment, intention to give oneself to that person, it's part of a process that is also leading us to God.

My heterosexual informants also tend to devise their own sense of right and wrong since they too consider the Church's teaching as too harsh and its expectations as unrealistic. Like my LGBT Catholics, they tend to draw from personal experience to question the Church's teaching on sexual morality. Rather than a template to be followed blindly, Church teaching is only applied as necessary and disregarded when not applicable to one's circumstances. Stefania, whose husband left her for another woman when she was five months pregnant, claims that although she seeks to instil in her son the Catholic values that she herself was brought up with, in the end, one has to make personal choices, "That is my religion; it's what I say. I make my own choices as long as I am fine with my fellow human beings [*mal-proxxmu*"]". Lisa does "not always follow the teaching of the Church" despite considering herself to be a fervent Catholic: "I follow my conscience. I use my reason". She is convinced that God is on her side too, "Do you think that God did not want this [referring to divorce legislation enabling her to remarry to have her children protected by law]? Religion is very illogical. The God I believe in is a God that wants us to be happy". Sonia, who lives with her non-Maltese, atheist boyfriend, described Catholicism as "the most flexible religion" since "it can be easily twisted". Like Lisa, she feels justified to "pick and choose" because besides the Church's teaching, there are other sources of information which may overrule the arguments of the Church. She mentioned the example of using contraceptives where the Church's teaching competes with what she deems to be more sensible health advice. As Wetzel (2014, p. 61) points out it is a question of "who gets to decide what is and isn't Catholic".

Many of my *separati* tend to justify their lifestyle decisions by drawing upon wider Christian principles for moral guidance particularly that of doing no harm to fellow human beings. This "social code morality" (Day 2011, p. 131-133) is based on the premise that as long as one does not harm others, they can live their life as they please. Paula, who is civilly remarried after her first marriage was annulled, is convinced that God is not angry at her "because I did not do anything against my fellow human beings [*kontra l-proxxmu*]. For me sin is harming others. My

conscience is clear... If I can put my head on my pillow and say that I have not done any harm to others, then I am happy with myself and fine with God”.

The importance of being ‘fine with God’ is also manifest in the way that the sacrament of confession is neglected by many informants who prefer to seek God’s forgiveness directly. There are different reasons for this just as there are different patterns in which the sacrament of confession is combined with the sacrament of the eucharist. There are those who do not confess but take communion, others who stay away from both sacraments while others both confess and take communion. During confession they may not disclose anything about their intimate relationship or are vague about it. This is either because they do not consider it to be wrong or because they know that they will not be absolved. Claudette, who has had a series of relationships since she separated from her husband, told me, “When I’m single I take communion. I say the act of contrition. I don’t go to confession because the sacraments were made by the Church not by Jesus and that’s where I draw the line”.

Among the reasons given by my informants for not approaching the sacrament of reconciliation was their fear of being judged or scolded by the priest and absolution. These fears and inhibitions tend to be more pronounced among my *separati* rather than among my LGBT informants. Bianca stopped going to confession since the priest refused to give her absolution until she was forced to lie about her relationship. She felt that, “It did not make sense to confess something which I was going to continue doing”. Anna used to go to confession, “But how many times are you going to say the same story? I already know the answer: ‘Don’t do that, don’t do this’... I used to need to confess this thing”. She was never directly encouraged by any priest to receive communion, “So I told my husband, ‘This is on my conscience’. I feel that I’m not doing anything wrong so I still take communion. And now we read, we take the offerings. I feel very comfortable”. Lisa, who was advised by a priest not to divulge the fact that she was not married in church during confession, also takes communion because she feels that, “As far as I know we live as a proper family should”. Michael, who is a

very self-reflective person with a mind of his own, does not believe that the Church has a right to tell him that his relationship is wrong, just because it does not fit its definition of a 'good' relationship. He prefers to ask God's forgiveness directly when he feels that he has sinned. However, he still consults his theologian friends when in doubt, "Yes I take communion.. but when I feel that I need input from someone I go and find a priest who is a friend and I seek advice. We do it in the form of confession but it would be more like a discussion".

Those who refrain from communion mostly do so "because the Church says so". Some fear being denied communion although none of my informants has ever had this experience. Although they are hurt by the Church's ban on communion, they still feel they should respect the rule. Joanna feels that, "If I take communion, I will be committing a grave sin. I feel that I am sinning against God. Since the Church says I cannot, I cannot. Priests do not agree among themselves". Despite the reluctance, compliance may be due to a Catholic culture where the Church is not perceived just as a community of the faithful but as a complex hierarchical institution with an infallible Pope at its helm (Gross & Yip 2010, p. 45). However, my *separati* are more likely to abide by the rules, not least because their moral sentiments are more closely tied to their concerns with meeting the expectations of the social community and not causing 'a scandal' as I will show in the next chapter. Indeed, shame and the fear of being judged by the faith community also keep informants from taking communion.

The Church's prohibition of cohabitees and divorcees from acting as godparents tends to elicit two main responses. Some tend to defy the Church, refusing to reveal their lifestyle even when asked about it while others are angry at the ban but have no choice but to comply. When Sonia was asked to act as godmother to her nephew and the priest asked her whether she goes to mass she responded in the affirmative, "Because for them Christian teaching is about attending Sunday mass and other traditions. For me Christian teaching is about not being disloyal [*li ma tiggakbinax*], about respect, tolerance, being open-minded and non-

judgemental". Antonella, who is in a same-sex relationship, is similarly not bothered about the ban:

I don't think there is a valid reason why I cannot be a godmother to my nephews and nieces. I know the Church's reasoning behind it but since I don't feel I'm doing anything wrong in the eyes of God... and if I tell the priest he will not let me. I believe that God wants me to do it because otherwise he would not have presented me with the opportunity. I have seen people coming out of the parish office crying because they were not allowed.

Indeed Indri took it very badly when he was denied permission to act as godfather since the Church considers him to be 'living in sin'. His idea of what it means to be a 'good' Catholic is very different from that of the Church. He finds it offensive that he is assumed to be unsuitable to guide his nephew in the Christian way just because he is separated and lives with another woman,

Because I'm not doing any harm and I try to help others without reservations. But they believe that to guide him well you have to take him to church and you have to preach to him like a parrot. But to teach him well he has to learn to be compassionate, to help people in need, not to make fun of persons with disability, that's where you would be giving him such values.

Writing about Ireland and following Harvieu-Léger, Inglis (2007, p. 3) sees Catholicism nowadays as being less about conformity to institutional doctrine and more about feeling part of a cultural tradition and a collective memory. Most of my informants continue to see themselves as Catholic, to bring up their children as Catholic and would prefer to have continued to participate in Catholic rituals and sacraments. They still seek to maintain some form of continuity within the wider Catholic community of believers (Dillon 1999, p. 24). Yet, they are not so rigid when it comes to Church teaching on sexuality and they are critical of the Church hierarchy. In terms of Inglis' (2007, p. 10) typological categories, all my informants could be described as "creative Catholics" in its overused meaning of living religion *à la carte*. All my informants chose to disregard the Church's teaching about sexuality. My LGBT informants however are more 'creative' in their search for alternative ways of living their faith in order to be able to justify their rightful place within Catholicism. They do not see their religion as a menu from which they can casually pick and choose as they please. While they challenge the Church in ways which are more possible in today's more secular and individualistic society, they

still love the Church. They also constantly seek to find ways of enhancing their theological understanding, to grow spiritually and morally, to experience transcendence and to find themselves in the process.

Conclusion

My informants are no longer 'traditional' in their outlook towards their faith. While they continue to hold dear the main tenets of Christianity, they have learnt to question the infallibility of holy texts as well as the authority of the Church to use these texts as the basis for the condemnation of their sexuality. They attach new meanings to Catholic symbols, rituals and scriptures without letting go of the traditions of Catholicism with which they have a close spiritual and/or cultural affinity. This binds them to the past but also presents them with new possibilities for the future (Dillon 1999, p. 163).

On a conceptual level many of my informants may idealise or romanticise the morality of the Church and wish they could have been in a position to respect it; on a practical level however, the expectations of the Church may be too high or too difficult for individuals to live up to in their everyday life situations. Therefore on the one hand, they manage to neutralise their lifestyle decisions but on the other hand, like Chris, they would have preferred to be living 'within the bosom of the Church' rather than in its periphery. Lisa who participates enthusiastically in religious celebrations with her second husband and their children still misses the fact that she could not marry her second husband in church:

Do you think I wouldn't like to be with my husband as I was with my first husband, the one of the sacrament, with two or four children in the front rows of the Church? Wouldn't that be nice [*mhux hekk sabiħ*]?

As I explain in Chapter V, my informants' conviction that they have God's blessing helps them deal with the Church's perceived judgement and hostility. However, the sense of security and acceptance they manage to elicit from their relationship with God does not fully compensate for the Church's refusal to accept their relationships. I have earlier recounted how Joseph tried to fill the void he felt

during his marriage celebration by asking those present to bless his union with Simon instead of the Church. The Church's blessing is so important to some of my informants that they are "reclaiming it" as Mario explained during a seminar organised by *Drachma*. Mario had been asked to 'facilitate the blessing' of a child fostered by a lesbian couple who wanted to celebrate the new life since the child's biological mother had chosen not to christen her. For Mario however, this was not the first 'blessing' that he facilitated since he had also 'blessed' Kurt and Jamie's civil union. During this ceremony, Mario dwelled on the meaning of 'blessing' since, he said, this seems to have been lost by the Catholic Church which blesses houses, animals and other objects but not homosexual unions:

I am not saying this with arrogance [*b'suppervja*] because I feel blessed myself but the Church is wrong because a blessing means that where there is love there is the presence of God.

Therefore, while certain social trends may suggest that the influence of the Church has weakened, the fact that its blessing is still so significant indicates that its role within Maltese society is still important.

The following chapter deals with the relationship of my informants with others; with how the teaching of the Church affects these relationships as the moral structures which have traditionally been shaped by the Church inevitably inform the moral prescriptions of the other. Informants experience sentiments of shame, fear of social exclusion and rejection by significant others instigated by a sense of being judged or misunderstood by family members and their moral community while my LGBT informants are more concerned with the eye of the Divine Other.

Chapter IV: THE EYE OF THE OTHER AND OTHER DILEMMAS

Introduction

This chapter is about the impact of a Catholic-informed, culturally shared sexual morality on my informants' relationship with others. It shows how the imagined reactions of others are often a cause of shame or embarrassment to individuals who find it difficult to make their sexual orientation or their relationship known to their family members, friends and other social communities such as parish groups, neighbours or colleagues. It describes the experiences of having to reveal one's 'secret' to others especially family members, the tactics used to minimise the conflict and how individuals seek to negotiate the approval and blessing of their significant others. It explores the conflict that may arise in relationships with others, particularly significant others and the wider social and religious communities.

Considering the role that the Church has played in the construction of sexual morality in the social communities under investigation, all my informants tend to see a link between Church doctrine or discourse and their sense of being condemned by the other. However there are notable differences between LGBT and non-LGBT informants with regards to the experience of conflict with the other. While for LGBT Catholics, Church morality is internalised as "God", for my heterosexual informants, it is internalised as "Group" (Creighton 1990, p. 297). As indicated, LGBT informants may feel ostracised by their Church community. However, a sense of being disgraced by the Eye of the wider moral or social community was generally expressed by the *separati*, especially women. Although neither emotion is exclusive to one group, my LGBT informants tend to be tormented by guilt rather than by shame. They are more likely to feel guilty for having transgressed the moral boundaries in terms of "doing bad things" in God's eyes rather than to be concerned with how they are seen by social others (Fung 1999, p. 182).

4.1 Dilemmas prior to disclosure

Especially for LGBT informants, disclosing one's sexual orientation or incongruent gender identity to others is often an ordeal which they would rather avoid. Telling others about one's sexuality is not done in a vacuum but is embedded in everyday experiences of how homosexuality is constructed and related to in one's social context (Plummer 1995, p. 28). Therefore individuals may delay revealing their 'secret' for years, suffering in silence, praying that they will change and dreading the consequences if they do not. The dilemmas start presenting themselves even before the point of disclosure with informants experiencing a great deal of anxiety not only about when to find the right moment to speak to their significant others but also how to tell them, whom to tell first and more importantly, that they do not manage to hear about it before from someone else. According to a qualitative study with four sets of Maltese parents with gay sons (Cassar & Grima Sultana 2017, p. 175), the parents noted that prior to their 'coming out', their sons showed signs of anxiety, unease and nervousness. For an LGBT Catholic it is the point where one is likely to acknowledge the conflict inherent in expressing and practising one's sexuality while continuing to embrace one's faith (Rodriguez 2010, p. 18). 'Coming out' is a tough decision that LGBT individuals have to make as they struggle with their faith and their sexuality and with the knowledge that once they are 'out' to others, they may be subjected to ridicule, discrimination or rejection.

Informants are generally more cautious when it comes to family. Jadwin-Cakmak et al (2015, pp. 274-275) quote research which reports that the parents of gay and bisexual young men can be both a source of stress as well as a source of support for their sons and that the predicted reactions of parents generally lead to emotional adjustment. Steve's problems were never with accepting himself. However, when he left religious life after three years, his mother was very disappointed. It had been her dream to see him ordained. Therefore his main concern with 'coming out' as gay was that he will disappoint his family for the second time. He himself had to get used to living a completely different life. Having to tell his family further complicated matters. The first time he went to a gay bar he went with someone who knew the scene since he was still "testing the

water". He was "literally starting to walk". At the bar he stayed behind the door "just in case someone saw me and went to tell my mother". When Giovanni from *Ali d'Aquila* was studying away from home, he used to live in a community managed by the Jesuits. Since his parents were also involved in a Jesuit community in Palermo, one of his fears was that the director of the community would tell his parents if he found out about his sexual escapades. He went through "a long period of suffering", worrying about how his parents would react if they knew. Although at that time he did not yet identify as gay, he had been having sexual experiences with men since he was sixteen but he could not yet speak to anyone about his sexuality.

This apprehension is far from exclusive to my LGBT informants. Breaking the news of a separation or of an 'illicit' relationship following a separation especially to parents who still hold rather 'traditional' definitions of marriage and relationships is not easy. When five years after her husband died Anna met a separated man, she admitted that telling her parents was the hardest part even though she was forty years old. When Paula separated from her husband in the late 1980s, leaving one's husband was still considered a scandal even though Paula had strong reasons for leaving her husband. She herself was shocked with the realisation that, "If I separated I was going against my creed and that of my family". Even though she was sure she could not save the marriage, she still had dilemmas. She was the first to separate in the family and she was concerned about the reactions of her family:

How will my parents tell my *nanna*? My *nanna* came from a strong church background. She used to go to church twice a day. At the time, the social stigma was much stronger. All my friends were married, my cousins were all married..

4.2 Reactions to 'coming out' and other stories

'Coming out' as LGBT, leaving a marriage or being in a relationship which does not conform to social or moral expectations inevitably tends to elicit different shades of disapproval from others. The social and legal changes occurring in the recent past will certainly leave their mark on my informants. The existence of policies and

legislation which grant and safeguard the rights of the LGBT community as well as democratic processes where the state and LGBT organisations have a good working relationship were found to have a positive effect on public attitudes towards homosexuality (Adamczyk 2017, p. 6). They also have an impact on the decisions of LGBT individuals regarding whether and to what extent to 'come out' to family and others (Adamczyk 2017, pp. 5-7). However my informants grew up in a social milieu where such changes were only in their embryonic stages. Challenging the heterosexual imaginary (Ingraham 1994, p. 203) and disregarding the morality structures of the Church evidently still had their consequences.

It is arguably harder to keep one's sexuality or lifestyle away from the public eye in close-knit communities, let alone from family and friends. Eventually one has to pluck up the courage and reveal the 'secret'. There is evidence that nowadays more young people are likely to 'come out' to their parents and they are more likely to be younger when they do (Jadwin-Cakmak et al 2015, p. 276). However, both LGBT and non-LGBT informants may experience conflict with those closest to them especially in the early stages of 'coming out' or when divulging their 'illicit' relationship. Telling 'sexual stories' is often accompanied by strong emotions such as shame, anger or fear (Plummer 1995, p. 28). Friends and siblings are more likely to be accepting of LGBT persons than parents when they 'come out' to them (Brown & Trevethan 2010, p. 271). It is even more difficult for individuals whose parents are quite religious (Subhi et al 2011, pp. 198-201) which is the case for most of my informants. While religious people tend to have more negative attitudes towards homosexuality, it also depends on religious affiliation. Islam, followed by Catholicism and other Christian denominations tends to be more homophobic than Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism (Jäckle & Wenzelburger 2015, pp. 212-213). However, Catholic-majority countries, especially those in Europe with strong democracies and a high level of economic well-being tend to be characterised by high levels of acceptance of alternative sexualities. Acceptance however tends to be higher if one is single, young, female, not so religious and well educated (Adamczyk 2017, pp. 34-40).

In their study of gay male adolescents in America, Newman & Muzzonigro (1993, p. 221) report that young people whose parents held strong traditional family values predicted that they would be less accepting of their same-sex attractions. Consequently, individuals may resort to selective disclosure or controlled information as a risk management tactic (Kaufman & Johnson 2004, p. 821-822). They may not 'come out' to everyone in the family taking into consideration the circumstances and the risks involved. Kaufman & Johnson (2004, p. 822) borrow the 'revolving door' concept to explain how individuals choose when, where, to whom and to what degree they should disclose their sexuality or their relationship depending on the context. Some of my LGBT informants did not even tell immediate family members about their sexuality. Furthermore, once the parents 'know', they may decide not to disclose 'the secret' to members of the extended family for fear that their children will be the subject of gossip or ridicule (Cassar & Grima Sultana 2017, p. 180). Therefore the news will remain contained within the immediate family. Selective disclosure may be about practicality rather than because of identity issues (Kaufman & Johnson 2004, p. 822). Theresa chose not to tell her elderly mother that after separating from her husband she was in a relationship with a woman because she did not want to worry her. However, she was also selective with her colleagues: "At work not with everyone, only to those I feel I can. No not everyone knows or I think that not everyone knows. I never introduced her to my colleagues. Not even to my family but I would go to a wedding with her yes and I would not have difficulty presenting her as my partner". Therefore there are degrees of 'outness' to different people in different contexts (Yip 1997b, p. 177).

Individuals may choose not to reveal their sexuality within religious communities or to employers for fear of being pushed out or discriminated against such as when Gabriella said nothing about her lesbian relationship during her involvement in a parish committee. At the time she was only 'out' to a few people and she was not yet ready to give up her role in the parish as she inevitably had to do. I have indicated in other chapters that 'coming out' to a religious community is a very

tough decision because of the homophobia that tends to characterise such communities. There were those who revealed their homosexuality and had to bear the consequences. Some had to relinquish their previous role in the community as happened to Chris and to Steve. Others were shunned or made to deny or repress their homosexuality. For some years before joining a religious order Nick became part of the *Charismatic Renewal Movement*. Although Nick had been 'out' since he was sixteen, joining the *Charismatics* still meant that he had to hide his homosexuality, "because for them being gay is evil. I was not denying I'm gay. I didn't act upon it physically".

Some may decide to leave religious communities acknowledging that since they cannot be open about their sexuality or their relationships they no longer belong. Adriana and Francesco both went through this experience after years in the *Focolare Movement* in Italy. Worse still, a gay person may be 'outed' within a religious community, a far from pleasant experience. When Mario was still a sixth-form student in the mid 1990s he was involved in the Christian community of the school where I also used to teach at the time. He was still confused about his sexuality and was not yet ready to speak about it openly although he had confided in me. However, when a fellow student broke the news to the others that Mario was gay, the news spread quickly and everything changed. Mario now describes his experience back then as "very very very scary, a blow and a betrayal". They did not ask him to leave but "attitudes changed" and he was faced with "hostility from the leaders" who were teachers. For example he was never asked to share his experiences as was the norm in such groups for fear that he would say something about his sexuality which they preferred to leave "under the carpet". Eventually he left the group.

When one is mulling over how to tell others about one's sexuality, being in a relationship complicates matters. Relationships reinforce one's identity as LGBT or '*poġġut/a*' [lit. sitting but meaning to live with one's partner without being married] in the case of my non-LGBT informants. It also makes one's moral transgressions more visible and more likely to be the target of social judgement. In

turn one's stigmatised status is also reinforced because although informants know that they are challenging stereotypes, the reality hits them harder when they come face to face with the reactions of others (Kaufman & Johnson 2004, p. 825). When Steve told his mother that he was gay, she did not take the news as badly as he had thought she would, "But she did take the fact that I was in a relationship badly especially because of what the people would say". When Giovanni's parents learned about his homosexuality they wanted him to return to Palermo because at that time he was studying away from home. They offered to pay for his psychoanalysis:

At first my mother was very concerned about me not finding love and not being able to have a stable relationship. Everything will be more difficult and so on. Maybe it was a genuine concern but for me it felt like a curse [*una maledizione*]. Everytime I had a relationship, they became crazy.

Some of my LGBT informants found websites, chat rooms and other forms of social media such as *Facebook* a helpful tool in their 'coming out' process. O'Riordan & White (2010, pp. 219-220) analysed the use of digital media by LGBTQI individuals in their search for guidance about 'coming out', transitioning or for building social and spiritual connections. They report that the anonymous virtual world of the internet often led to significant changes in their offline social experiences. Noah 'came out' when he was twenty. During the two years prior to 'coming out' he used to engage in debate with online friends. It was one of these friends, a Scottish elderly gay man, who encouraged him to 'come out' earlier than he had planned. His idea was to 'come out' after graduation but he decided to heed the Scotsman's advice "not to waste one year of my life waiting".

Henry, whose life has been an ongoing struggle with reconciling his faith and his homosexuality, found the courage to 'come out' on *Facebook* one fine day when he was almost 40 years old. Henry had been 'out' within his religious community and he had also been 'out' within the secular gay scene before. However through *Facebook* he 'came out' publicly. He eventually also met his current boyfriend through social media. This is his online confession:

Dear friends and relatives, today I feel the need to share with you something very intimate. I know I will bear the consequences, but it's fighting hard to come out,

finally - I am gay, and I have lots of wonderful gay friends. Please accept me or reject me.

Michelle feels that being 'out' on *Facebook* has increased her security and has on more than one occasion helped to avoid embarrassing situations where she would have to explain to others that she is a lesbian or where people would feel uncomfortable and regret that they had asked a question:

Not that I'm not proud of it but it's uncomfortable having to say I am married to a woman. For example they ask Mona whether Jones is her husband's surname and she will tell them that it's hers. Sometimes she stops there. We use both our surnames actually. But sometimes she tells them that she is married to a woman and you see the reaction...

4.2.1 Reactions then and now

When I was a child in the 1970s I remember a relative of my mother coming to our house to speak to my parents. I was not allowed into the sitting room as they whispered, sighed and sobbed for hours. It turned out that the relative's daughter, my second cousin, had 'eloped' with her boyfriend to Australia. I later also learned that after only a few years of marriage, she left her husband for a woman but since her lesbian adventure happened in Australia it could be concealed more effectively from non-family members [*il-barranin*]. Therefore when I was growing up my second cousin was the black sheep of our family. She was portrayed as a slut and a *sfrattata* [a woman out of control] and as a disrespectful daughter. Looking back on this incident today, I realise that her 'crime' which back then caused so much scandal and shame in my extended family was that she left home to live with her boyfriend for a time before getting married. As discussed in Chapter I, Maltese society has changed significantly since then. Nowadays individuals are less likely to be confronted with so much drama when they break relationship conventions although by no means are such relationships welcomed with open arms.

Although there are parents or other family members who may be more accepting than others (Cramer & Roach 1988, p. 79), initial reactions to 'coming out' are generally more negative than positive (Brown & Trevathan 2010, p. 271). My

heterosexual informants also had issues with close family members accepting the realities they were being presented with. Most of my informants experienced this conflict within a context where LGBT issues, separation and cohabitation were not only a taboo but also relatively unknown or contained.

Nick 'came out' to his parents in 1986 when "there was still a lot of ignorance". Nick's father was not Maltese so he thought he would be more accepting of the news of his homosexuality but initially it was still a shock. He was threatened with being thrown out of his parents' home if he continued seeing his gay friends. He was "under house arrest for about a month" since "at the time there was hardly any awareness about gay issues". His father had told him, "You either don't go out or you're out of the house". I did not encounter any cases of individuals being thrown out of the home except for the long-term partner of Godwin, one of my Maltese gay informants, who had experienced one year of forced homelessness. Lucia from *Ali d'Aquila* had decided to leave home herself because of the negative reactions that she had from her parents when her sister told them that she [Lucia] was having a relationship with another woman. Neither were any of my LGBT informants forced to undergo conversion therapy which has since become illegal in Malta although some did consult priests or psychologists on the instigation of their parents. Yet my informants still feel judged, misunderstood, rejected or traumatised by those closest to them. Chris told me that when he started meeting people who were interested in joining *Drachma* he realised "the hard reality that people live, the fragility, people who are avoided, people who are oppressed by their family, people who are depressed...". It is not uncommon for individuals to hear homophobic comments or gossip and disparaging comments about people who are divorced or cohabiting by family members, making it more difficult for them to approach them. Some family members may even resort to praying for LGBT people to become 'normal' (Kubicek et al 2009, p. 7) or for separated individuals to make up with their previous spouse [*jirrangaw*].

There are also those who found no support from siblings as Lucia found out when her sister 'outed' her to their parents. Steve also had some problems with one of his sisters:

For my younger liberal sister it was fine but with my older, more conservative sister my homosexuality was taboo. So I had to work more with her, to explain to her, to clarify what she didn't understand, to try to understand what bothers her. There are still many limitations in her understanding even after all these years.

The cultural and religious context is bound to leave an impact on the relationship between parents and the children when they 'come out' to them. Nowadays, as a result of the legislative and cultural changes that are happening in Maltese society, people, including family members may find it easier to learn about LGBT issues and may consequently be more accepting. There are those who have had positive experiences as a result of such changes. When Chris started going out with Tyrone after leaving *MUSEUM*, his mother asked him whether he had "a girlfriend or a boyfriend". When he took Tyrone home for the first time all his family members were casual about his being in a relationship with a man including his three elderly aunts who were catechists themselves. During the *Drachma* seminar which I attended in October 2017 at the University Chapel, Stella and Sue shared their story as a lesbian couple with two daughters, one fostered and one from Stella's previous marriage. I did not know them since they never attended *Drachma* meetings during my fieldwork. Stella recounted how her nine-year old daughter had lost some school friends since she started having 'two mummies' and someone from school even told her that this was disgusting. However her teacher told her that she was lucky to have two while she [the teacher] had only one. Stella's father was confused following the breakup of her marriage and the different messages that he was hearing through the media and from the Church. However her brother had told her, "Listen, I'm ok with it" when she denied that Sue was her partner. In contrast, Sue was single and her sisters were also lesbians. Her parents had been reluctant to accept their partners in the past. They were never invited over at Christmas or Easter. However, now they have a different attitude which Sue especially attributes to Malta's changing social climate. Once she even heard her father telling Stella's father, "I accepted three and you are

finding it difficult to accept one?” During the seminar their parents actually came to give them moral support and since during the Pride weekend they had been in Comino with their parents, they decided to hold their “own family Pride celebration” on the island.

The day after Henry ‘came out’ on *Facebook* he reacted to the unexpectedly positive response he received:

Dear ones, I am so happy and surprised by such an overwhelming response of love and affection on your part. Thank you for your support. To tell the truth, now I feel more vulnerable, but at least I'm being true to myself.

4.2.2 Mothers and fathers

There seems to be no general pattern regarding whether it is mothers or fathers who are more accepting or more difficult to ‘persuade’. A number of studies have explored the relationship between the degree of parental acceptance and the ‘coming out’ process (Beaty 1999; Cramer & Roach 1988; Jadwin-Cakmak et al 2015, Newman & Muzzonigro 1993). The micro study carried out by Cassar & Grima Sultana (2017, pp. 176-178) with eight parents of gay sons found that mothers were more accepting of their son’s homosexuality even in the way they spoke about it and conceptualised same-sex relationships. However acceptance is a multi-layered process involving considerable emotional, psychological and moral adjustment for both parents as well as for the LGBT individuals themselves. The majority of gay men in Cramer & Roach’s (1988, pp. 79-92) study claimed to have a better relationship with their mother than with their father both before as well as after they ‘came out’. Brown & Trevathan (2010, p. 271) also report higher acceptance among mothers than among fathers. In their study of nineteen young gay and bisexual men’s narratives about ‘coming out’ to their fathers, Jadwin-Cakmak et al (2015, p. 280) found that the father’s reaction was generally different from what the son expected. The influence of hegemonic masculinity was evident in many of the young men’s narratives. Fathers’ initial reactions varied and in some cases changed with time (Jadwin-Cakmak et al 2015, p. 278).

My ethnographic research suggests that upon hearing the news both parents can be difficult while in a few cases, both can be very accepting. However, overall, mothers are generally more understanding and supportive. Gianluca from *Ali d'Aquila* told me that his parents were completely accepting of his homosexuality as they had been of his brother before him and this helped him in no uncertain terms to accept himself. When Steve 'came out' he told all his family except his father. His mother kept the secret of her son's homosexuality from his father for eight years because "she wanted to protect him". She was worried that if someone saw him they would tell his father and she did not want him to know:

She said she would pray for me so I will not remain gay. So I faced her and told her, "I will bring you a girl and we will go from there as long as you're happy". And she was shocked because my mother is not like that. She carried it by herself for years. My father is a bit macho and at first it was difficult. She still continued praying but because I had a good relationship with the mother of my boyfriend she felt she was losing and she made more effort.

Godwin's mother was "very understanding and open-minded" even if she was also "very religious". His father had already died when he introduced his boyfriend for the first time but before introducing him, "I put my cards on the table regarding my sexuality. Some were surprised, others were not. But they accepted it without problems". Although his mother did not find any objection, she always used to tell him that had his father been alive it would have been different.

Some of my heterosexual informants also experienced some difficulties with persuading either parent to accept their relationship. Anna, a widow who lived with a separated man for twenty years before they could get married, had always been close to her parents who, like her, were very religious and involved in the parish. She thought that her father, who is English and less religious than her mother, would take the news of her relationship with a separated man better but he took it even worse than her mother even if they eventually both came to accept him.

Yet, there are those whose biggest issues were with their mother. Martin, a transman had more problems with his mother than with his father. Whenever he

had doubts or when he was angry at God his father supported him and tried to convince him that God loved him. His mother found it more difficult to get used to the idea that she did not have a daughter any more, “We had many tantrums [*xenati*]. She used to tell me that this is a phase”. Paula’s mother irritates her because of her judgemental attitude towards her for leaving her husband and remarrying a separated man, especially when she herself was also separated at the time [their first marriages were eventually annulled by the Church and the state respectively]. She told me that people like her mother “think they are holier than thou and try to act as your conscience”. They judge without knowing what one would have gone through.

Adriana, from *Ali d’Aquila* in Palermo, also sees her mother as her judge. Her mother “is very Catholic, very rigid, orthodox. She loves me I know but she sends me articles and she shows me where I am wrong. She tells me that the Church does not approve”. Adriana only sees her mother in summer when she goes to Lampedusa. Therefore the distance gives her some breathing space. They have grown apart due to the conflict:

My mother is my judge. I have conflict with my mother more than I have with God and with the Church. In fact every time I go to Lampedusa I go five steps back because I become a child again with feelings of sin, of guilt. When I go home, my mother and the Church become one.

4.2.3 Compromises

Some of my informants had to make compromises to mitigate the conflict with their parents. For some parents, especially on a small island where everyone knows everybody else, one of the biggest headaches is gossip. Therefore there is an element of shame and stigma experienced by family members as well. When Nick’s mother started getting used to her son’s homosexuality, she told him, “Nick, don’t do things with which people can hurt me”. Steve’s mother was very concerned about the neighbours “because of the image”. People had already been asking her why he had left the order and she did not have an answer and then she had to contend with the revelation of his homosexuality without the support of his father who was kept in the dark. Michelle, whose parents refused to go to her

wedding on the advice of a priest, still has unresolved issues with her parents especially for the way they are so concerned about what people would say. This affects her relationship with her wife since the latter does not have the same problem with her own family. Michelle feels she had to give up on a lot of things out of respect for her parents such as refraining from holding her wife's hand in public or hugging her in front of the family as her brother is free to do:

If we are walking on the Sliema front she would want to hold my hand and sometimes I let go of her hand and I tell her, "Be patient because if someone sees me and tells my parents it will upset them [*intihom kedda*] and now they are getting old".

Michelle had to make a number of compromises to placate her parents. She had to remove a wedding photograph from the sitting room and put it in the bedroom in order not to offend her family. Her wife was very upset, "She could not understand that if *nanna* or my aunts come, it's better like this than the hassle I would have with my parents".

Stefania, whose husband left her when she was pregnant with their first child and who now lives with her foreign partner and her son, refrains from taking communion in order to respect the wishes of her very religious parents. She does this even though she is not convinced that she will be committing a sin, "It's not that you're doing something really wrong. I don't understand why I cannot receive communion while criminals can". Yet she still feels she should submit to her parents' expectations:

Since I'm not married... I feel that I should not do it even if they [her parents] don't know. And sometimes I say one day I might talk to a priest but I never did. And sometimes I really feel the urge to receive communion when I'm hearing mass. I say, "How I would love to [*aħħ kemm nixtieq*]". Once daddy told me, "You know you cannot receive communion" at my son's first holy communion. I went up with him but I did not receive communion.

4.2.4 A transitory conflict?

Despite the anxiety, the tension, the drama and the heartache that may be involved in family relations when individuals reveal their stories, this form of conflict tends to be less intense and long-lasting than other kinds of conflict

experienced by my informants. It is often more a question of family members getting used to the initial shock. Parents eventually tend to become more accepting (Cassar & Grima Sultana 2017, p. 179; Cramer & Roach 1988, p. 79). Parents tend to be primarily concerned about their children's well-being. However their children's disclosure of their sexual orientation may also bring with it dilemmas, conflict and anxieties. They worry that their children will suffer psychologically due to being stigmatised and disadvantaged (Cassar & Grima Sultana 2017, p. 177). Similar concern is shown by the parents of those who meet someone else after a failed marriage or are living with someone who was also probably previously married. Julia's father did not speak to her for a time when she told her parents that she was dating a separated man with two children, "In the beginning I had problems, yes but when he got to know him, he did not judge him. I told my father, 'Had it been my brother, would you have told him to go back to his wife because she is his wife? Or would you pray for him to find someone he deserves?' And he came to his senses". After the initial shock where he was banned by his father from going out, Nick's mother had suggested that they go to speak to a monk, "And I still don't know what he told them but he was a positive influence and he never condemned me".

Stefania's parents are involved in the *Neocatechumenal Way*. When she started living with her partner, her father told her that the members of the Community were putting pressure on him not to accept her partner at his home. Stefania's first husband had left her for another woman when she was still pregnant and she had been raising her son alone for five years. She felt it was unfair for these people to judge her and she was shocked that they were threatening her father with not moving forward in the *Neocatechumenal Way*. She told her father that she was not willing to give up her relationship because of the Community and her father never brought up the subject again. Cassar & Grima Sultana (2016, p. 995) report that parents consider it unfair for the Church to expect them to choose between their faith and their children when both are so significant in their life. Stefania's sister, Sonia, also decided to live with her boyfriend. Both their partners are foreigners and 'non-religious' but Sonia and her partner are both single. Her

parents eventually “calmed down” although still morally unconvinced. Once her mother told her, “Because I worry, I think about you. I don’t agree with these things”. Her father had told her, “Listen, it’s your life. You are a grown woman now. I don’t agree but I will continue to respect you because you are my daughter”. Sonia feels that, “It is a conflict that we will never resolve” although she would have liked to have her parents’ blessing considering that they are such a close-knit family. The last time I met Sonia she told me that she was pregnant and that her parents had received the news with less enthusiasm than usual. Sonia comes from a large family and additions to the family are always a cause for celebration. Her mother loves children and she often helps Sonia’s siblings with childcare. However, her mother’s first reaction this time was, “What were you thinking [*x’fettilek*]?”

4.3 A note on the relationship between Catholic and secular gays

Despite *Drachma*’s efforts to maintain its autonomy from the Church, its members may not be viewed positively by ‘secular’ gays (Rodriguez 2010, p. 25). They may be misunderstood and even seen as Church lackeys. It is not uncommon for non-LGBT Christians as well as for non-religious gays to consider being gay and Catholic as untithetical. LGBT believers may be perceived as being sexually repressed or as dogmatic about sexuality by their non-religious counterparts. Once I was talking to a non-religious gay activist who was under the mistaken impression that *Drachma* members do not engage in sexual relationships. Although it may not be a central issue for the gay Catholics who frequent *Drachma*, it was still pointed out to me that being LGBT and Catholic makes them appear two-faced [*facçoli*] in the eyes of the wider LGBT community. They are judged by other gays for wanting to remain within a homophobic Church. Kurt told me,

The gay community is very much divided on this issue. We are bullied in a way. They say we are hypocrites, that we are gay and Christian. And I believe there is a lot of personal hurt. I went through this myself as a teenager. I used to think that I either accept the Church or myself.

4.4 Shame and the eye of the social other

My *separati* feel a strong sense of judgement by a social other (moral community) in contrast to my LGBT informants who are mostly tormented by their perception of how they are seen and judged by a divine Other. The Church's assessment of their non-conformist lifestyle is considered to tarnish their reputation in the eyes of the religious and the wider social community, threatening the social bond (Scheff 2000, p. 84) and giving rise to feelings of shame and the fear of separation or expulsion from the social group (Creighton 1990, p. 295). Feelings of shame may be stronger than feelings of guilt among heterosexual informants also because they have a weaker sense of self-blame than LGBT informants.

The perception of being seen and judged by others leads to a great deal of anxiety. This is caused by "the real or anticipated loss of status, affection or self-regard that results from knowing that one is vulnerable to the disapproving gaze or negative judgment of others" (Shweder 2003, p. 1115). It is the imagined or real experience of loss of face within a social or moral community. Shame is triggered by an awareness of not being able to live up to the social expectations and the shared morality of the social group. Shame involves an element of self-consciousness, of seeing oneself through the eyes of the other (Crozier 1998, p. 277). Shame forms part of a family of social emotions that may include embarrassment, humiliation and shyness arising from feelings of failure, rejection, incompetence or inadequacy. What connects them together is the perception that the social bond is at risk or may be under threat (Scheff 2000, p. 84). They have also been described as "emotions of self-assessment" (Taylor 1985, p. 1). Shame involves "a negative evaluation of the self" or the potential of such an evaluation by others. The self is both evaluator and evaluated (Crozier 1998, pp. 274-275). Therefore guilt and shame are both closely linked to the self as well as concerned with an o/Other. In both there is a concern about how others might see the self or a sense that the self might be punished (Lebra 1983, p. 193) such as going to hell or being socially excluded. Shame tends to invoke notions of an audience, a sense of being judged by others due to failure to meet social expectations in terms of a shared morality.

However, the question of the audience is problematic and quite complex in itself (Taylor 1985, p. 64).

4.4.1 Shame in the anthropology of the Mediterranean

In anthropology the concept of 'shame' has been given considerable attention as part of an honour-shame syndrome. Honour refers to a person's social standing and reputation within a social community while shame ensues from one's failure to behave according to shared social codes and involves public disgrace (Stewart 2015, p. 181). Peristiany (1965) linked the concepts of honour and shame exclusively and rather uniformly to Mediterranean societies. Writing about different social contexts, the authors of this collection (Peristiany 1965, p. 9) assumed that honour and shame were predominant among the values shared by the peoples of the Mediterranean and particularly prevailed in communities characterised by personal, face to face interaction. The Mediterranean was portrayed as being both culturally homogeneous and culturally distinct from other parts of the world (Gilmore 1987; Herzfeld 1980, 1984; Pina-Cabral 1989). Peristiany (1965) and his collaborators also argued that the roots of honour and shame in the Mediterranean are essentially sexual and gendered. In the classic model, men are expected to defend their honour and women to steer clear of sexual behaviour which could bring shame on them and on their family, particularly their husbands (Blok 1981; Cassar 2005; Gilmore 1987; Mitchell 2002a). Men's honour is primarily earned and maintained through the chastity of 'their' women. It is men's responsibility to ensure that women do not act shamefully and damage their husband's reputation in the eyes of other men. Therefore women's chastity is jealously guarded as cuckolded men are disgraced. The assumption of a shared code of honour based on this gendered dichotomy led Blok (1981, p. 428) to explain the symbolic connection of a dishonoured husband specifically with the horned billy-goat. This has its roots in a pastoral code of honour where the ram is associated with virility and strength and the billy-goat with shame. This is because unlike billy-goats, rams do not share their females with other males while billy-goats do so passively. He argues that in

Mediterranean thought, the billy-goat is associated with loss of face, shame and dishonour in complementary opposition to the ram which is “the symbol of strength, honour, manliness and power” (Blok 1981, p. 429). Hence the use of the term ‘*cornuto*’ in Italian or ‘*cornudo*’ in Spanish. In Maltese the terms ‘*kurnut*’ and ‘*muqran*’ carry the same meaning while *barri* [bull] is used to a lesser extent. In the literature, the concept of honour has also been linked to wealth and socio-economic status or rank (Davis 1977, pp. 81-89). Women’s bodies, particularly their virginity have been seen as commodities, as scarce resources and a source of wealth to their families (Schneider 1971, p. 21). Although the concepts of honour and shame may be a useful tool in the study of gender and sexuality (Stewart 2015, p. 181), within anthropology they have hardly been utilised to explore issues related to alternative sexualities.

The view of the Mediterranean as an undifferentiated “culture area” where honour and shame are given utmost priority has been revisited (Gilmore 1987). It was questioned and challenged for being based on speculative ethnography and stereotypical generalisations (Herzfeld 1984, pp. 439-441; Pina-Cabral 1989, pp. 399-400) which were taken for granted for too long. While some cultural convergence is inevitable in Mediterranean communities, honour and shame may take different forms and carry different significance in different regions (Stewart 2015, p. 182). Furthermore, one cannot say that certain characteristics attributed by ethnographers to the Mediterranean are necessarily exclusive to the region (Pina-Cabral 1989, p. 402). The assumption that the roles of women and men in the Mediterranean follow a standard gendered code which distinguishes them from women and men in other regions has also been questioned. It was criticised for being “ethnographically misleading” (Herzfeld 1984, p. 446), for ignoring that there are various ways in which gender is conceived and played out in the Mediterranean and that gender ideologies and expectations may be resisted and subject to change (Mitchell 2002a, pp. 69-70). Nowadays the idea that women need men to protect them makes much less sense than it did in the past (Blok 1981, p. 435). Notions of gender and sexuality have changed and gender as it is lived and socially constructed may not necessarily fit these earlier structural

models. Queer, Feminist and Postmodern theory has also challenged the rigid models of gender and sexuality based on such binaries as masculine and feminine, heterosexual and homosexual and have pointed to their fluid and diverse nature.

4.4.2 The shame of the *separati*

The concept of honour [*unur*] did not feature at all in the vocabulary of my informants. In contrast, the concept of shame [*mistħija*] was brought up by a number of Maltese women in my study, mostly heterosexual. In contemporary Malta *unur* may be used to mean privilege, as in having the honour to do something worthy. One may feel honoured [*onorat*] to do such a thing. Someone may also be bestowed with an *unur*, such as when someone is given some form of prestigious recognition. *Unur* as in personal or family honour may have been significant historically but nowadays it hardly appears in everyday parlance. It is rarely used to denote social standing as the Maltese are more likely to use the notion of respect or respectability [*rispett*] in this regard. Respectability, like shame or disgrace, is not inherent in the person but is achieved or ascribed by others. It depends on the approval or disapproval of the social community and may be challenged or reproduced on the basis of social attributes or performance (Mitchell 2002a, pp. 96-97). Among my informants, shame and respectability also tend to be somewhat gendered terms in that it was only women who claimed to experience shame while it was only Chris who spoke of his fear of losing respectability in the eyes of the community because his homosexuality will be publicly known. Yet both concepts were used in the sense of losing face and being publicly disgraced. In my conversations with the *separati* the issue of infidelity only came up in relation to their previous marriage but even then, this was not associated with shame or dishonour but with anger, betrayal and a sense of victimhood. However, living with another man, probably separated himself, makes one a *poġġuta*, a sexually immoral woman who is in a sexual relationship with someone who is not her husband. Shame was not expressed in relation to the ex-husband's loss of face. The previous husbands of my *separati* may themselves have found new partners. Shame was not tied to family honour or more

specifically to men's honour by the women who spoke to me. However, as indicated earlier, a sense of shame may extend to family members who may feel that the family's reputation is at stake because of the lifestyle, sexual orientation or gender identity of their daughter or son.

Since shame is not inherent in our nature, it may be triggered by a range of factors depending on the social context (Heller 2003, p. 1018). Among my *separati*, feelings of shame tend to present themselves most strongly within the context of a church congregation and to a much lesser extent in other social contexts. Although a few of my heterosexual informants chose voluntarily to live with their partner, the majority felt that they were constrained to do so partly due to the fact that divorce only became legally available in Malta in 2011. Until then, the only other option for those whose marriage broke down and wanted to remarry was to try to obtain an annulment of their previous marriage. However, for a couple to be able to get married in Church, both the man and the woman would need to have had their previous marriage annulled by the Church tribunal unless one is single or a widow/er. As indicated in the previous chapter, obtaining a Church annulment may prove to be an elusive goal. This together with the fact that many of my informants consider themselves to be victims of circumstances, the perception of social judgement tends to be even more difficult to bear. Being *separat/a* is an unwanted status for many of my heterosexual informants especially women. They only reluctantly identify with being so because they consider themselves to have been brought into this unwanted situation often by their previous spouse. Being *pogġuti* is even worse. They are ashamed of what they have become even if they feel that they did not have much choice. They are conscious of having digressed from the social and moral code attached to family and relationships which they would have preferred to continue respecting. Shame is an emotion which is experienced more intensely if individuals share the perception of the judging others (Creighton 1990, p. 287). There may be different relationships between self-assessment and assessment by others but when the judgement is similar, it is more likely to cause shame (Crozier 1998, p. 278). Individuals may experience shame without necessarily feeling guilty of any

wrongdoing (Heller 1982, p. 221). My informants experienced shame not because they believe they are to blame for the failure of their marriage but because, despite their lifestyle, many still uphold an ideal of marriage as a life-long union blessed by God and the Church. When they got married, they did so for love and the thought that their marriage would not last forever never crossed their mind. They gave a word to their spouse and to God that only death will do them part. Lisa never thought that she would have to face the stark reality that her marriage had fallen apart, “Because until you are in it yourself.. before I used to think, ‘What?! You separate from your husband? You leave your husband’? I think I used to see it as something that could be avoided”.

In their everyday life interaction within their social communities, my informants are much less burdened with shame even if they are still challenging the gender and family cultural codes which Maltese people hold so dearly. This is due to the recent social transformations witnessed in Maltese society which rendered alternative lifestyles less scandalous than they previously were. However within their religious communities informants tend to become more conscious of their moral transgressions. Here, their ‘sin’ is underscored. In church they are in a sacred context where their lifestyle is considered sinful and more significantly where they are banned from receiving communion. This prohibition is not taken lightly by the *separati* as indicated in the previous chapter and may cause individuals to withdraw from church rituals altogether because of the shame. Joanna feels a strong sense of shame [*mistħija*] within the church community. She “cannot stand the fact that during communion I am sitting down and everyone is receiving communion”. If people who know her in the congregation see her receiving communion she would think, “They might ask, ‘Why is she receiving communion?’ I feel that I’m doing something wrong. I feel ashamed [*nistħi*], as if people are telling on me, as if they know why I am not receiving communion”. She would feel ashamed to take communion even in a parish where people don’t know her, so ingrained is her sense of shame. It is not uncommon for the judging Eye of the community to be internalised by those who feel judged so that they may experience shame even when they are on their own (Heller 2003, p. 1022).

Therefore members of the community may feel the effects or the anticipation of shame even when the audience is not physically present (Benedict 2005, pp. 223-224). A “*sense of shame*” (Scheff 2000, p. 97, emphasis in original) suggests that the anticipation of shame is constantly present even if one does not feel shame all the time. Joanna does not feel judged outside the church. As she showed me around her tiny, colourful apartment which she shares with her two sons, she told me that this was the same apartment where she used to live with her husband and which she regularly shares with her partner. When they met at a group for separated persons she was concerned about what people might say. She was worried about her mother who told her, “Look what happened to us! [*Ara xi ġralna!*]”. However, she feels that there was more stigma in the past about these things. Her brother and sister are also separated. Her neighbours know what she had to endure after separating from her abusive husband and they were supportive. She feels “alright” with them. However when confronted by a church congregation, it is different, “Even when the children had their Communion and Confirmation, I felt like a fish out of water. I was the only one who was alone. I felt... literally... I bowed my head”. Together with the casting down of one’s eyes and blushing, bowing one’s head has been found to be one of the universal manifestations of shame in a social context (Heller 2003, p. 1015). As Strathern (1975, p. 347) notes, shame shows on the skin. Joanna also feels embarrassed when she has to deal with official entities such as when applying for welfare. She does not work as she needs to take care of her elderly parents and disabled sister:

You go to fill in a form, they ask you your status and you feel insecure. They know because they have it on their computer. When they ask me whether I’m married I feel uncomfortable. It’s as if you are to blame. I tried many times to save the marriage but you cannot keep taking it. I gave him a lot of chances.

Sylvia also refrains from receiving communion because of the congregation. She does not want to cause a scandal among people who know that she is ‘*poġġuta*’. Her use of this derogatory word seems to suggest that Sylvia has internalised the negative social and moral judgement and that she shares the moral sentiment of the community. At the same time, however, Sylvia has no qualms about receiving communion when she feels that she will not be judged by an unfamiliar audience,

indicating that her self-assessment in the eyes of God does not necessarily resonate with how she thinks she is perceived by the religious community:

I was with my sister at *Ta' Pinu* in Gozo and I told her, "There's nobody here who knows me so I will not cause a scandal" and I went to take communion. Because I don't want to set a bad example since according to my religion I am not allowed to take communion.

Therefore unlike Joanna, Sylvia does not seem to carry her shame with her in the absence of her actual moral community. Her concern is being seen not that she is doing something wrong. However like Joanna, she does not feel stigmatised by her neighbours in her everyday social interaction even though she still lives in the house which was previously her matrimonial home. For Sylvia and other *separati*, this perceived sense of social judgement is therefore much stronger than any feelings of guilt which the Church may instil in the faithful through the dissemination of its sexual morality.

Anna claims to have "never felt any guilt" because she was living with another man even though she was brought up in a very religious environment. Anna lost her husband when she was thirty-six and has one daughter. Her second husband did not manage to get a Church annulment of his first marriage. They were therefore 'constrained' to live together for twenty years until he could divorce his wife and they could get married. In the beginning she used to speak to her late husband about her new relationship and "I felt peace in my heart, that I had his blessing. Not in the sense of sin no". However, she found it hard to cope with the social stigma, which according to her, started even before she met her second husband because of her widowhood. People used to refer to her as "the woman whose husband died [*dik li mitilha r-raġel*]", not by her name. Things became worse when she started going out with a separated man. Her worst nightmare was her sister-in-law who used to accuse her of committing a sin and of setting a bad example for her daughter. However, what hurt her most was that her mother, who used to go to church every day could not continue going because she could not stand the stigma:

Because the neighbours, especially those who had been friends with my late husband, were not very kind with their words. They used to tell her, "Mar, do you

know that your daughter is with a married man?" I knew that people would talk and I used to tell my mother to ignore them. And the more I heard, the more determined I became. I am surprised at how much courage I had. But I said, "It can't go on like this [*ma jistax ikun*, lit. it cannot be]". You learn to become tough [*trabbi qoxra*, lit. you develop a shell]. You learn to ignore them.

Today, after all this time, she feels that people's eyes are still on her. In the street where she used to live with her husband there are those who still look at her "as if I took their husbands". After all these years, "I still feel it. As if I did something really wrong". She and her husband still participate in the sacraments although they try to avoid congregations where they are known "in order to avoid causing a scandal", as one priest friend had advised them. They prefer to go to the *Millennium Chapel* where they always feel welcomed.

These shame issues of the *separati* may explain the demonstrations of suspicion and mistrust I experienced during my brief participant observation with the YSSG. Their reluctance to accept a researcher among them may be related to their perceived judgement by others. People may feel the impact, real or imagined, of social judgement not only as individuals but as members of a community. Shame may be triggered by feelings of being judged as a group and may be felt even when there is no actual moral disapproval (Heller 2003, p. 1020). They may feel that being part of a support group for *separati* will further reinforce their sense of shame, the sense of being different and officially labelled as a "*separat/a*". Therefore they may prefer to keep their group participation private. Alternatively, there are those who may choose to stay away from such groups in order to avoid re-enforcing a negative self-identity.

It is not only separated people who experience shame. Nina feels that there is also a lot of social stigma attached to teenage parents. When she was pregnant she used to feel "embarrassed to go to church" and now she does not like going to the village with her small daughter because of the stigma. She lives in a small village and people talk,

When I go to mass I feel people judging me. It's not in my head. You feel their eyes on you. You see them. The way they look at you. It's really hypocritical. When you are pregnant everybody gives you that look [*kulhadd iħarislek bl-ikraħ*]

and then they all come to see the baby. I don't go to the village with my daughter. Once my mother went into a shop and the people stopped talking.

She thinks that the stigma is more due to her age rather than because she is not married. Once she was in hospital without her daughter and two women who were sitting next to her were speaking in a very judgemental manner about the increase in the rate of unmarried mothers and teenage parents, "And you feel like you are trying your best to bring them up well and you hear people talking. So I say if I tell people that I have a child they will immediately label me". Heller (1982, p. 220) speaks of "the transindividuality of shame" to refer to an intersubjective interpretation of shame, similar to that projected by the *separati*. Also like the *separati*, Nina does not necessarily share the belief that she she has done something terribly wrong. She does not feel guilty in the eyes of God who she believes still loves her despite having a baby. After all she did not abort her child and she is doing her best to bring her up in terms of religious values.

Nina does not always receive communion if she is with her daughter, "Because I'm afraid the priest would refuse to give me communion". She feels "everywhere in the periphery not only in Church". She also feels that women like her may feel more stigmatised because "in the case of separated people it may not be their fault". Therefore Nina seems to acknowledge a sense of blame or responsibility for getting pregnant unlike the *separati*. Her reflection may also imply that she is conscious that this is the perception of the moral community who may exonerate separated persons to some extent but not people like her who should have known better.

Sonia does not think that their neighbours know that she and her boyfriend are not married. They are still young and both new to the area. They look like any other newly married couple. Unlike the *separati*, Sonia did not have to deal with the judgement of the local moral community and with a failed marriage. However she pointed out that at work she is irritated when she hears others gossiping about cohabitees, "I feel like telling them, 'Listen I am also *pogguta*'". Apart from

having to deal with her very religious parents' disapproval when she left home to live with her boyfriend, Sonia also had to confront her friends who knew her when she was still part of the *Neocatechumenal Way* with her parents. Sometimes, within this circle of friends she feels out of place, conscious that they know about her lifestyle. She was telling me about one of these friends from the religious community:

He is still very involved in the community and is very narrow-minded like my father and I feel that in his eyes, I am not approved. But at the same time he never said anything. It could be my perception. When he needed baby sitting he still asked me to do it.

Shame is a sentiment that does not easily go away especially since an aspect of one's identity is stigmatised. Shame does not emerge from a one-off situation or action. Unlike guilt which may go away following confession, reassurance by a priest or some kind of redress, feelings of shame tend to linger among informants despite a relaxation in social morals in recent years. This is partly because for most of my study participants who live with shame, no outlet seems to be available (Heller 1982, pp. 219-220).

4.4.3 Shame as a secondary emotion

Although LGBT informants tend to be affected more by internal processes of conflict and guilt, they are not completely immune to the perceived judgement of their social or religious community. Chris found it difficult to 'come out' to the social community while Michelle does not feel comfortable facing a congregation. However, for LGBT informants, the experience of shame tends to be secondary and not as traumatic as the inner turmoils they have to endure when they are afflicted by pangs of guilt over their sexual desires and their fear of eternal condemnation. Shame is an emotion which seems to be experienced only by a few LGBT informants. It is also short-lived and less intense. LGBT informants may anticipate shame and disgrace before 'coming out' but eventually tend to give less importance to the Eye of the social other as they are more concerned with being accepted by God. They may have felt shame because their alternative sexualities

have only recently gained some social acceptance. They may experience shame because their sexual orientation or gender identity may be seen as a threat to hegemonic notions of femininity and masculinity. In his discussion about gender, shame and honour among the St Paul's parishioners of Valletta, Mitchell (2002a, p. 80) argues that "homosexual and trans-sexual were discrete categories, against which masculinity could be judged". Being a man means above all being heterosexual. The Maltese derogatory term *pufta* not only refers to a homosexual man but is also used in situations where men are deemed to have violated the codes of acceptable masculine behaviour. Lesbian women also fail to reproduce themselves as gendered beings (Mitchell 2002a, p. 70) who are expected to care for their husband and children and to maintain a good home. In this sense LGBT men and women have a common denominator – they have transgressed the moral and social codes of sexual attraction, reproduction and family.

Theresa knows what it feels like to move away from the norm. She was previously in a heterosexual marriage with two children and is now in a lesbian relationship. This makes her feel "a certain sense of shame" especially when she hears people talking in a tone "which is not very gay-friendly". For her, dealing with shame is more of a struggle than accepting that she fell in love with a woman for the first time, "My struggle is not with me but with my world, with being able to show myself as I am and not giving a damn about what others think, that's a struggle". When one occupies a respectable position, one is bound to fear public disgrace. When Chris was a catechist he felt safe and respected. His greatest fear of 'coming out' was losing respectability in the eyes of the people. He spent years hiding his homosexuality, pretending to be straight. He was afraid that people would gossip, "That people would respect me less if they knew that I was gay or think I was a criminal, or even worse, a paedophile". As *Drachma* coordinator he occasionally spoke on the media about his homosexuality and about the organisation. However, although this led to his being barred from continuing his pastoral work in a local parish, most of those around him accepted him. In fact he feels that his pressure to conform was more internal, driven by his fear of losing social respect than coming from outside. In this case, the threat of public condemnation was

imagined rather than real. It emerged from how he feared others would perceive his failure to live up to the ideal of being 'normal', that is heterosexual. Having spent twenty years within *MUSEUM*, Chris' ideals were bound to have been influenced by such a context which considers the expression of homosexuality as a sin and LGBT identities as defective heterosexualities (Wilcox 2002b, p. 503).

Although abandoning the Church may be a common path taken by many queer Christians, very often it is "one travelled largely in silence, shame and a sense of loss" (Wetzel 2014, p. 65). I have indicated in the previous chapter that some of my informants such as Joseph and Steve were traumatised by the fact that they could not remain part of their respective religious communities. However, while both of them, like Chris, experienced a sense of loss, unlike Chris, neither Joseph nor Steve expressed their anguish in terms of public disgrace. Since, like most LGBT informants they are less perturbed by social disapproval, they may be immune to shame.

Michelle claims to experience shame in a rather similar way to my heterosexual informants although among LGBT informants she is almost a lone voice. She has overcome most of her internal dilemmas and she feels "tranquil and at peace with God". When she 'came out', "It was like lifting a heavy weight off my stomach. You feel relieved. However you realise that people still gossip". Michelle lives with her wife in a traditional Maltese village. She is not worried any more about how God sees her. She believes that in church she should enter with her head up but only when the church is empty. Otherwise, she becomes self-conscious about her lifestyle, "Because I cannot imagine what people would be saying about me". She does not receive communion, "Because I feel that everyone is looking at me. We live in Malta and I am open on *Facebook* and if I had to take communion, I would start hearing people saying, 'Shouldn't she be ashamed of taking communion?'" . Therefore although Michelle claims to be at peace with God and not so guilty about being married to a woman, she seems to share the social morality of the church community and to accept her failure to live up to the standards of this

shared code. Henry too claims that he has now overcome most of his worst nightmares. However, as he wrote in one correspondence to *Drachma*:

Although at times I really don't care what people say when I go to receive the Holy Eucharist, and inside my heart I feel Jesus calling me His beloved, there are times when I am very vulnerable and prone to inner conflict regarding whether I should receive him or not. I still feel people judging me as I am about to receive the Holy Eucharist.

4.5 Church morality and the eye of the divine Other

Most LGBT informants experienced feelings of guilt because of the dissonance developed through the internalisation of Catholic morality while becoming conscious of an emerging homosexual identity. These sentiments and concerns can have devastating effects on LGBT informants and may haunt them for many years. In the beginning there is a lot of internal questioning regarding how they may live as gay Catholics; how they may express their love physically and whether they are viewed as bad persons in the eyes of God because of their desires. After all, for LGBT Catholics who are committed to their faith, there are only two accepted alternatives when it comes to sexual relationships: living 'in sin' or celibacy (Meek 2014, p. 104).

Guilt is triggered when one is conscious of doing something that is forbidden by some authority, of this world or beyond it (Taylor 1985, p. 85). This is unlike shame which is more concerned with one's standing in the community and with feelings of being watched. A great deal of guilt is linked with the Church morality that my LGBT informants grew up with and which comes to manifest itself as the internalised voice of God. It is that internal voice inside one's head which may be called the conscience or the superego and which makes one conscious of doing something which is not right in God's eyes. Guilt is caused both by one's sense of transgressing the moral regulations of the faith as well as because one is conscious of God's knowing gaze. This may make distinguishing guilt from shame somewhat problematic. My LGBT informants often use the notion of guilt to refer to how the teaching of the Church developed in them a strong sense of sin in terms of their

sexual desires or behaviour. However some LGBT informants also claimed to have felt a sense of shame, conscious that God knew about their same-sex desires and could see their every move. In Maltese the word for guilty is *ħati* or *ħatja* (masculine/feminine). These concepts may be used in the same way that 'guilty' is used in English. They may imply feelings of guilt [*inħossni ħati/ħatja*] but they may also mean that a person is found guilty of some transgression or that a person acknowledges blame. However in Maltese there is no word for guilt as a moral sentiment or feeling. The noun *ħtija* which is derived from the adjectives *ħati/ħatja* only means blame. All the three terms are seldom used in Maltese common parlance as people tend to use the English terms 'guilt' or 'guilty'. Unlike the *separati* who used the word *nistħi* or *mistħija* in Maltese, LGBT informants also used the English word 'shame' to describe the feeling instigated by being watched by God perhaps because the Maltese word did not adequately describe their feeling which felt closer to guilt but for which they had no vocabulary.

Guilt can have a devastating effect on LGBT Catholics struggling with their faith and their unwelcome desires. For some the experience may be even more severe. For example, while there were those who might have felt guilty about masturbating, Henry could not even masturbate because of his guilt. With guilt, there tends to be an element of self-blame or responsibility for one's thoughts, actions and desires (Taylor 1985, p. 90). When they were growing up, my informants used to go to confession regularly and for some this used to be traumatic especially if they had to confess sins related to sexuality such as masturbation. The absence of a clear sense of spiritual direction as to how LGBT Catholics should live their faith as sexual beings, further exacerbated the confusion (Meek 2014, p. 104). Guilt tends to abate with time and with the necessary support. Indeed very few informants continued to feel guilty over the years although occasionally doubts may return.

Guilt may cause self-deprecation, depression, trauma and other forms of psychological maladjustment (Creighton 1990, p. 292). Individuals may suffer from depression and may even contemplate suicide (Subhi et al 2011, p. 201). Kurt used

to write to God in his diary about his “shame”. His daily prayer used to end with, “God, take me [*Mulej ħudni*]” and suicidal thoughts often crossed his mind. Debbie struggled for twenty years, “fighting with myself, in denial because of my faith”. Once she met a German woman and, “There was something so strong between us I couldn’t deny it. One day she asked me to go to her hotel and I felt a strong attraction to her and all we did was hug and I went home and I tried to wash it out of me, to scrub it out of me”. In church she could not look at the crucifix, “Because of the shame. I wasn’t obeying God, I wasn’t obeying his commandments, I wasn’t obeying the Church. I couldn’t handle the weight any more. It was like carrying a haversack full of stones”.

Feelings of guilt could be so strong that one may end up transferring the evil attached to one’s thoughts or actions onto oneself. Joseph lived in complete denial of his homosexuality for years:

Being gay was not a possibility. Not even a split second of a thought. When there was a thought, it used to find huge barriers. I did not talk about it with anyone, absolutely because there was a strong element of taboo. I did not feel it on a social level but more on an *internal and spiritual* [my emphasis] level.

At the same time he was aware of his sexual attractions. Buried inside him for many years was the nagging feeling that he was not a ‘good’ person. Once during his religious formation in Italy, he was in front of a psychologist who used a free flowing method of letting the person talk about himself without interrupting. The aim was for the person to eventually recognise the central conflicting issues in his life and to deal with them. Joseph could not even bring himself to say that his central issue was his homosexuality, “He told me, ‘What would you like to tell me today?’ and I started crying and told him, ‘*Che sono buono*. I’m a good person’, and I kept crying and crying. I believed so much that this was a bad thing and I used to believe that I was bad, intrinsically bad [*ħażin minn ġewwa*, lit. bad from inside]”. It is worth noting that although in Joseph’s youth, homosexuality carried much more social stigma than it does today, Joseph was much less concerned with the social dimension and completely devastated with feelings of guilt and lack of self-worth. The fact that he did not divulge his secret to anyone might also have

led to his dismissal of social judgement. However, it is clear that his main concern was his being an intrinsically bad person in the eyes of an omniscient God. This is also evident in Debbie's attempt at "washing" and "scrubbing" away her feelings of being dirty after her bodily contact with the German woman in the hotel room. It is perhaps because, as Douglas (2002, p. xi) suggests, their sexual desires could not be classified according to the traditional classificatory boundaries, and therefore felt dirty, polluting or taboo. Considering that initially LGBT informants tend to hold a rather harsh view of God, any attempt at reconciling one's beliefs with one's sexuality is even more difficult (Lapinski & McKirnan 2013, p. 866).

When I was in Palermo, Lucia and Giovanni made some appointments for me to speak with members of *Ali d'Aquila*. Lucia told me that Adriana, who had initially accepted to speak to me, had been having second thoughts but she still came, albeit rather reluctantly. Giovanni and I met her in front of the apartment. He introduced us but could not stay. She seemed uncomfortable and begged Giovanni to stay but soon settled down with me in the kitchen. Despite her initial reservations, she turned out to be very friendly and willing to tell me her story. Indeed she even offered to give me a lift the following day to Francesco's house for the meeting of *Ali d'Aquila*. Adriana is forty and works as a lawyer. She grew up in a small religious community and for many years was involved in the *Focolare Movement*. She told me about her guilt [*sensò di colpa*], her turbulent relationship with her very religious mother, her difficulties with opening up to same-sex love and her continued desire to have Church affirmation.

Trying to conform rigidly to the religious values she grew up with and held dearly, Adriana married her only boyfriend whom she had met within the *Focolare Movement*. She could not understand why having sex with her husband was such a traumatic experience until she started seeing a psychologist. After a legal separation from her husband, with whom she continued to share her home, she started a three-year relationship with a woman but this was also very traumatic and eventually also fell apart. Before, her distress was due to her inability to be in a heterosexual relationship despite her efforts to conform with Catholic teaching.

When she became involved with this woman her suffering was caused by the contradiction between Church teaching and her feelings for this woman. What the Church considered 'natural' was unnatural for her. What was natural for her was "an abomination for the Church". She was engulfed with guilt,

It was devastating. I felt so guilty. It was a harrowing experience. Every night I used to dream that I was confessing, every night, a hundred times. Even in reality I used to confess. It was a huge burden. The guilt destroyed my relationship with this woman. It was a nightmare. I did not do anything but cry. The psychologist helped me to accept things from a human point of view. But I still had religious problems.

Listening to Adriana's narrative, I could not help but think of Henry's story and the many things which strongly bind them such as their involvement in religious movements and the dramatic events that characterised both their lives. Henry was involved in the *Neocatechumenal Way* for thirteen years before joining *Drachma*. Like Adriana he grew up in a very strict religious environment. For his mother sexuality was taboo to the extent that whenever he tried to speak to her about his body even as a small child, she used to send him to confession. He was not allowed to look at his body in the mirror and his five older sisters had to bathe themselves with their underwear on. Unlike Adriana, Henry knew that he was gay when he was around twenty but although he did not get married like Adriana, he still conformed strictly to Church teaching. He could not even masturbate before he was well into his thirties. Ironically, he tried to find solace in religion, the very source of his conflict, first by joining a religious order "without really having a vocation" and then by making "the worst mistake" of his life, by joining the *Neocatechumenal Way*. He used to pray to God to heal him, "I was broken; I had no identity. I just wanted to hide". Within the Movement, the repression of his sexuality worsened. He was forced to deny his homosexuality. He was encouraged to date women, making him feel even guiltier because he felt he was being untruthful not only to himself but also to them. They made him stop seeing the psychologist who had tried to help him deal with his homosexuality. They used to tell him that his sexuality was "a cross to bear". When he could not take it any longer, he went to the other extreme. He started watching gay porn, drinking and having casual sex with men he met in gay bars. However this too did not make him

feel good and he became depressed. Once again he turned to one of the catechists of the Movement. He was chided for his evil behaviour and told that he did not know how to love, that he had been manipulated by men for sex. He was asked to cut all contact with every gay person he knew. He also had no access to the *Neocatechumenal Way* for a whole year because he “needed to convert” first. Henry is one of the few informants who is still tormented by guilt.

Guilt is generated when the moral authority of the Church and its teaching are respected and accepted as good and morally binding (Taylor 1985, p. 85) and as long as the Church is seen as representing God. Daniel, a young bisexual *Drachma* member, describes himself in the past as being “ultra religious, very conservative and a fan of Ratzinger”. He used to wonder whether he was doing the right thing and how God might have seen him, a common sentiment among informants. Although he was “still somewhat critical” of the Church, in the end he “used to submit” to its authority. Although religion was the principal instigator of his guilt, it was in religion that he used to “find a lot of comfort”. He used to listen to *Radju Marija*, a religious radio station:

Today I hate it because it used to make me feel a lot of guilt. Everything you do is a sin, you have to go to confession all the time, if you masturbate.. It broke me. The huge guilt complex I had, that today I don't have any more. I used to go and confess that I masturbated. At that time I used to suppress my feelings for men. I used to masturbate for men but I did not feel normal. I used to feel guilty so I wanted to find a woman.

Guilt essentially entails a sense of culpability, of doing something wrong, of transgressing the laws of God, that one will suffer the consequences of one's actions. A sense of self-blame engenders not only a fear of punishment (Fung 1999, p. 182) but also a feeling that one deserves to be punished because one is 'bad'. One may also be afraid of losing the love of a parent (Creighton 1990, p. 286) or of God in the case of my informants, even of being cursed by him. When Chris came to the point of actually having to engage in intimate relations he had many dilemmas because he used to wonder, “If I am in a relationship, how will God see me? Am I a curse [*sahta*] in the eyes of God?”

Michelle's guilt also derived from the values she had learnt and which at the time she accepted without question. She was certain that succumbing to temptation would land her in hell. She felt she would be defying the norms which she herself embraced:

I was brought up with the idea that you have to marry and have children and that is what I believed in. Basically it's normal that you feel that you are breaking a law. I had a guilt feeling that I will go to hell and I was obsessed with it. Because I had all that teaching and you think that this is the apple and if you bite it you will not go to heaven because of it.

In Palermo, Giovanni's youth was riddled with guilt because of the ethical and moral values he received from his mother and having to deal with his same-sex desires. He remembers a time when he was unable to receive communion because of his guilt. He had started having sex with men since he was sixteen even if at the time he did not identify as being gay. He could only take communion right after confession. However, while he felt the need to confess, he had a problem with finding the right priest. He thought that going to a priest who had spoken publicly against the mafia in Palermo would make it easier. He thought that he would be more progressive but instead he received the worst scolding of his life:

He started shouting in front of the others, "This is a sin, this is a sin" ... So every time I had to change my confessor. I went from church to church to look for another confessor. In my mind I thought that the priest will not know me and he would not know how long I had been committing the same sin. So many churches...

Bisexual and trans informants experience guilt differently. Bisexual informants' dilemmas about their faith and sexuality are compounded due to the prejudiced way in which they are still perceived in both the heterosexual and LGBT worlds. Considered to have the luxury of 'choice', they are either seen as promiscuous or as capable of having heterosexual relationships by both gays and heterosexuals. In other words they have to deal with both heteronormativity and homonormativity and the biphobia they tend to generate (Browne 2010, p. 235). Tyrone prefers to have been "completely gay" because then, "I wouldn't have had a choice and there would be no moral debate, because that would have been the only possibility". Tyrone's "big crisis" in terms of his sexuality and his faith revolved

around this belief in having a choice. It started when he actually had his first relationship with a man after having had a few relationships with women. Since then he has struggled with reconciling his preference to be with men when he could also be with women. His conflict resulted in years of psychotherapy until he could come to terms with the guilt surrounding his bisexuality.

For trans people, negotiating a religious, transgender identity is even more difficult (Wilcox 2009, p. 203). As a Catholic transman, Martin went through “experiences and emotions which very few people could really understand”. He hated being different. He felt he was a mistake and unloved by God because he had made him this way. His guilt was mostly about rejecting the body that God gave him, a common sentiment among trans Christians which has a profound impact on how they live their spirituality (Browne 2010, p. 235). Martin’s guilt manifests itself both when it comes to having surgical interventions done to his body such as when he had his double mastectomy and when he is intimate with his girlfriend and he uses a dildo. He feels that he is defying God who did not give him a penis.

There were a few LGBT informants who claimed not to have experienced any guilt in connection with their homosexuality. Godwin, who has been in a homosexual relationship for many years, claims that he absolutely never had any guilt feelings about his homosexuality. He was more concerned about going to hell when he disobeyed his mother or swore than when he had sex with men. This is because he has known that he liked men since childhood. Unlike his friends who were “always talking about what they would like to do to girls”, he was only interested in “doing things to men”. Godwin explains his absence of guilt by linking his homosexuality to his biological makeup, a rather uncommon assertion:

And this was a confirmation that this was something in my nature. I did not have any conflict, not with the Church and not within myself. Because for me it was normal. I have always known that I cannot be anyone else. Do I feel comfortable? To a certain extent yes, because in me there are the chromosomes that I’ve had since I came out of my mother’s womb.

Yet, as I explained in Chapter III, Godwin still feels the need to go to confession which he claims to find “therapeutic” and which gives him the opportunity to

speaking about his homosexuality openly, something he cannot do in many other contexts.

In Palermo Margherita, who had a very strong Catholic formation both at school and at home also claims to be one of those few persons who “never felt any internal conflict”. She has always felt attracted to women in a “natural way” and this never brought her any feelings of shame or guilt, “Because I rely on my intelligence and listen to my conscience. If I steal I would be ashamed, if I treat people badly, if I abandon my parents that would be a sin for me yes and I would walk with my head down”. She feels that God knows this is not a choice she made consciously, “It is something which I felt inside me since I was a child. It’s part of my personality. It’s my way of being [*il mio modo di essere*]. God made me this way in the same way that he gave me brown eyes”.

Conclusion

Maltese society appears to have been changing its attitudes towards those who challenge sexual, gender and family norms although it was the divorce referendum that served to highlight this fact. However, when most of my informants ‘came out’ or got involved in intimate relationships ‘outside marriage’, they had to contend with the still lingering power of compulsory heterosexuality and of the traditional nuclear family. Although families may nowadays have become more accepting of alternative lifestyles, when things are closer to home, emotional and moral conflicts are bound to emerge. At the same time, such conflicts are rather contained, reaching a plateau once the drama subsides and emotional attachments are generally restored.

Most of my informants suffer because of how they think they are perceived by the eye of the other, be it the judging eye of family members, of the moral community or that of God. Informants do not necessarily experience feelings of shame and guilt concomitantly although they may temporarily such as in the ‘coming out’ experiences of LGBT informants who are often still struggling to come to terms

with their guilt and internal conflicts and at the same time feel ashamed to tell others. Among all informants, guilt and/or shame are caused by circumstances which they feel are partially beyond their control. The *separati* feel ashamed to appear in front of a religious congregation for having transgressed the sexual morality codes of the faith community even if they were 'constrained' to do so. They are ashamed at least in terms of the visibility of their 'sin' within a religious context. Shame may be less visible nowadays, as Scheff (2014, p. 129) suggested, but it is very real in the life of those who live with the stigma. Within the social sphere, shame is confined to the religious context of local congregations, rarely spilling over to the wider social milieu, enabling individuals to achieve a degree of balance in terms of their sense of belonging within the community.

My LGBT Catholics initially experience guilt and shame as a result of believing that God is watching them and perceives them as 'sinners' even if they were created by him and are not entirely to blame for their desires. Guilt tends to be a temporary but intense emotion among LGBT Catholics although it may occasionally resurface. Among the *separati* shame within a religious context on the contrary tends to persist. This might be because they try to avoid the situation by going to a different parish where they are not known or stop participating in church rituals altogether rather than deal with the problem per se. In contrast, LGBT informants tend to seek professional and spiritual guidance to help them deal with their internal conflicts and eventually manage to control their guilt.

It is inevitable that moral communities will defend their value system. The relationship between the demonised other and the demoniser is a power struggle which depends on the degree of power involved and how and to what extent the demoniser uses that power (Farris 2013, p. 291). It also depends on the relationship that my informants have with God which is the topic of the next chapter. The next chapter explores my informants' relationship with God within a context where they feel judged by the Church and by others because of their non-conformity with Catholic morality. My *separati* tend to contrast the judgement of the Church with God's forgiving nature while LGBT informants tend to change

their perception of God as their perception of themselves changes. When the latter believed they were 'bad', God was a judge. Once they learn to accept their sexuality, their view of God becomes more positive as does their relationship with him. The less God is seen as an authority figure who is watching them from above and the more my informants associate the divine Other with love and acceptance rather than with judgement, the better they can deal with the stigma of the Church and of significant or social others.

CHAPTER V – GOD: FROM JUDGE ABOVE TO INFINITE AND UNCONDITIONAL LOVE

Introduction

That God has a special place in the hearts and minds of Maltese people is hardly questioned even now that Catholic Malta has evidently become more secular where religious practice and attitudes towards sexuality are concerned. Studies by the European Commission (2010, p. 204, 2005, p. 9) confirm this, putting Malta at the top of the European list in terms of belief in God. At 95% in 2005, and 94% in 2010, the Maltese are paralleled only by the Turks in their belief in God. The corresponding figure for Italy was 74% both in 2005 and in 2010. Considering that the above studies reveal that only about half the EU population believes in a deity, this phenomenon, which unites all my informants as believers, also distinguishes them from many other Europeans.

This chapter concerns my informants' relationship with God. The Church influences the way informants view God and think that he³⁰ perceives them. It is my LGBT informants that have the most turbulent relationship with God as they internalise Church morality and come to perceive themselves as 'bad' or 'evil'. This conjures up multiple emotions such as fear and anger at God (Grubbs & Exline 2014, p. 316) who initially is perceived as a judge. As they strive to reconcile their many conflicts however, their relationship with God changes and God becomes the embodiment and source of love (Gross & Yip 2010, pp. 48-49). LGBT informants often compare their relationship with God to a journey which may start at a very dark place full of self-loathing, guilt, shame, fear and desperation but which may lead to a state of self-acceptance and integration (Yip & Page 2013, p. 124). They may pray to God to change them and to take away their sexual desires but eventually they take a more positive stance as they explore ways of

³⁰ Because most of my participants refer to God in the masculine; because of grammatical practice in Maltese, English and Italian, I will be referring to God using the masculine pronoun.

dealing with their conflicts. As they learn to separate God from his Church informants construct a less stigmatised sense of identity and a positive view of God. They come to believe that, unlike the Church, God does not judge them or label them as sinners because of their sexuality. Their sexuality, which is initially a huge burden, gradually comes to be accepted as a gift from God. Among my *separati* sentiments of guilt are weaker and often transient. Their issues are about their lifestyle. It is about *what they do* not about *who they are*. They are less likely to project God as a judge as they find it easier than LGBT informants to neutralise any sense of wrongdoing. They speak to God and negotiate with him. It is the Church which is their judge. Consequently among the *separati*, one's relationship with God tends to generate a feeling of reassurance and a sense of comfort which compensates for the Church's judgement.

5.1 How LGBT informants imagine God

Despite their unity in belief, my informants hold diverse perceptions of God. There are some who see God as a father, as a creator, as someone they have to answer to after they die. Yet, as expected, many have moved away from the image of God that is often projected in religious art, books or in catechism classes of a bearded old man and father of creation. They associate God with love and forgiveness and profess to have a personal relationship with him, speak to him and feel his presence.

Reference in the literature to how LGBT Christians imagine or relate to God within sociology or anthropology is mostly made in relation to the process of dealing with the issues arising from being an LGBT believer (Gross & Yip 2010; Grubbs & Exline 2014; Marcellino 1997; Rodriguez 2010; Subhi & Geelan 2012; Wilcox 2002b, 2003, 2009; Wolkomir 2001; Yip 1997a) although scholars from other disciplines such as psychology and theology have engaged with God imagery in human perception or experience within other contexts (inter alia Aldredge-Clanton 1991; Christ 2007; Daly 1973; Hammersla, Andrews-Qualls & Frease 1986; Lawrence 1997; McDargh 1983; Rizzuto 1979; Spilka, Armatas & Nussbaum 1964; Slee 2014;

Stroope, Draper & Whitehead 2013). Here I discuss how my LGBT informants, brought up in strong Catholic communities, perceive God and relate to him as they struggle to reconstruct a coherent sense of who they are. I discuss how heterosexual informants imagine and relate to God separately since these have a less conflicting rapport with God than LGBT informants.

5.1.1 Earlier Images of God

The images of God held by my LGBT informants are dynamic and complex. Mental representations of God are closely linked to self-image. They tend to change as self-image changes. Although love is frequently linked with conceptions of God (Gross & Yip 2010, p. 48; Wilcox 2003, p. 72), this is a characteristic which my informants attribute to God at a later stage, once they have somewhat come to terms with their identity conflict. Research suggests that images of God tend to be influenced by religious socialisation at home or in church (Roberts 1989, p. 375). During their childhood and adolescence, informants' perceptions of God were mostly influenced by their mother or other family members such as aunts or grandparents as well as by what they learnt during catechism classes. Therefore, either directly or indirectly, their sense of right and wrong was derived from Church teaching.

Among the childhood images of God that stuck in the minds of my informants were: God as a mystery; as a magician who makes prayers come true; God as creator of Adam and Eve; God as the setter of morality; God as someone who watches over people from above and God as someone who takes account of what people do and who they have to answer to on judgement day. The divine images that are received during socialisation may influence conceptions of self especially during adolescence and youth. Nick, who spent six years within a religious order, claims that his earlier image of God was influenced by his abusive grandfather. He used to see himself as evil but also as a victim because he was created the way he was, as God's mistake. These earlier images of God were bound to have an impact on how my LGBT informants related to God. Some feared God's wrath. "[F]ear of

divine retribution” (Rodriguez 2010, p. 11) is common among informants who used to perceive God as a powerful being watching them and judging them because of their sexual desires. They were not sure regarding God’s perception of them especially if they considered themselves as sinners because of their sexual orientation. When Chris was young, he used to fear God and thought he would go to hell. He used to be afraid of being struck by lightning as he perceived his homosexuality as a punishment from God, as a curse. He was afraid of God because he believed that what he was feeling was wrong and that God only loved him on condition that he obeyed the rules of the Church. However his greatest fear was that he would lose his soul,

I love God and would have loved to live normally, but how could I if what I felt was wrong? I believed that one cannot be gay and Catholic at the same time. Who knows how many times I asked God, “But why, why did you make me gay? Why did you give me this punishment [*kastig*]? Why did you give me this curse [*sahta*]?”

One of the obstacles to arriving at a view of a loving and merciful God is a perception of God as an almighty being responsible for certain events, circumstances, personality traits and moral transgressions (Grubbs & Exline 2014, pp. 316-317). When, despite their prayers, their desires persist, LGBT informants may become angry at God. Whitehead (2014, p. 482) contends that an “angry” view of God suggests a judgemental and controlling perception of God. Construing God as responsible for negative experiences in life and for stigmatised personal attributes is linked to the belief that God creates people as they are and that he has the power to prevent, permit or influence their life situations and circumstances. Those who have an “active” view of God believe that God is not only engaged with what happens across the world but more specifically with what happens in their lives (Whitehead 2014, p. 482). They believe that God has the power not only to save lives and prevent deaths and illnesses but also to secure a place in a Church school for their children. According to Gray & Wegner (2010, p. 11), blaming God is a rather common human trait especially when it is difficult for individuals to blame someone else.

Anger at God has many dimensions. LGBT Catholics may blame God for burdening them with something they did not bargain for; for the homophobia in his Church and for the judgement of their moral community. They also blame God for their moral transgressions for which they partly blame themselves. Acknowledging and practising their homosexuality may lead to the formation of a negative identity. They may see themselves as sinners or deviants while believing to be victims of divine creation. Consequently, they also have to bear the brunt of the social stigma attached to a morality which condemns the way they were created by God (Grubbs & Exline 2014, p. 317). Therefore they may feel guilty or dirty for being with someone of the same sex but at the same time they blame God for making them want to be with him or her. Martin, a transman, was angry at God for giving him the wrong body. He used to kneel in front of God and tell him, “What the fuck do you mean by this situation?” Nick, who would eventually come to terms with his homosexuality during his formation within a religious order, was also extremely angry at God when he was young. He blamed God for making the mistake of creating him gay and then making him suffer the consequences. Once he smashed a statue of the Redeemer they had in the kitchen because he could never understand, “Why me? Your mistake and I have to pay for it myself”. This perception of an omnipotent God is often accompanied by a sense of victimhood and self-pity.

During one *Drachma* meeting dedicated to the theme of anger, someone said that mini-tantrums in front of God were common enough in his life. Daniel, like Martin, tends to swear at God when angry [*noffendih, nibagħtu jieħdu*, lit. I offend him, I tell him to take it] but that he also tends to “offer the anger to God”. This element of combining anger with other emotions or feelings towards God was expressed by other members of *Drachma*, often reflecting their turbulent relationship with God. For example, Miguel feels that when he is angry at God, he would at the same time feel that God is accompanying him on his journey even when he feels dirty and disgusting [*maħmuġ u moqżież*]. This suggests that although God angers them, they remain open to him.

While anger at God is common among LGBT Catholics especially during the early stages of their conflict, there are also those who did not feel angry at God because of their sexuality. Godwin and Margherita were never angry at God since they accepted their homosexuality as part of their nature even if they believe that they were created by God. They never doubted God's love for them. Others directed their anger at the Church rather than at God for judging them for how they were created by God himself. Another reason could be that other feelings such as guilt would be felt more strongly. There were a few individuals who considered their homosexuality to be insignificant compared to other grudges they had against God who is blamed for what are perceived to be more tragic events or situations. Laura, one of my Sicilian informants, had vented her anger at God for taking her mother away when she was only twelve despite her many prayers. When years later she realised that she was a lesbian, she was not angry. She had come to terms with her anger at God. Her homosexuality was a trivial matter compared to her mother's death. Noah also claims to have had more issues with God when he discovered he had multiple sclerosis than when he acknowledged that he was gay. He described his illness as a slap in the face: "My anger was more subconscious with my homosexuality. With MS I was really angry".

LGBT informants tend to experience anger at God temporarily. They eventually get over it as they mature spiritually and as they learn to accept themselves. Most of my informants spoke of being angry at God in the past. Nowadays Laura prefers to thank God for the little time that she had with her mother with her rather than be angry at him for taking her away. Martin used to ask "Why me?" when he was angry at God. Nowadays he asks, "Why not me?". For others anger is an intermittent feature of their relationship with God. Giuseppe from *Ali d'Aquila* claims to have a very conflicting relationship with God which is also quite volatile:

At times I detest him. At others I defend him with [my partner] because he blames God for every little thing. My relationship with God has matured. You have to decide for yourself what is good and what is bad.

5.1.2 Destroying false images of God: God reconstructed

My informants' perception of God changed as their perception of self changed. As they struggled with their conflicts, they let go of certain images of God and replaced them with others, generally more positive ones. Giovanni, from *Ali d'Aquila* compares his faith in God to opening an onion, "With every layer one peels off, one destroys false images of God. That God could judge you or not forgive you it's always changing", he told me. Their image of God changes continuously. It may even change with one's state of mind during the same day. However, in the long run, among LGBT informants both within and outside *Drachma* and *Ali d'Aquila*, one's conception of God tends to evolve as one comes to accept oneself as a loved creature of God. Their image of God changes from that of an accounting, judgemental, law-giving, vengeful God to that of a loving, embracing God. Nowadays Daniel from *Drachma* sees God as being near him rather than above him, watching him. He told me, "Lately I have not been talking to him but I make it a point that before I sleep I thank him for the day and ask him to help me and to guide me".

As I will show in the next chapter, this process of transformation often takes place with professional help, although individuals may work out on their own that God loves them as they are. This may be aided by the reading of gay-affirming theologies considering that quite a few *Drachma* members have an academic background in theology. However, it is not uncommon for members of the LGBT community to seek psychological help or the support of gay-friendly priests or communities (Dillon 1999; Hall 2015; Thumma 1991; Wilcox 2003; Wolkomir 2001; Yip 1997b) to help them acknowledge God's love. Sometimes a chance encounter with someone or with something such as a flier reading: 'God loves you as you are' is the turning point that leads them towards seeing themselves in a more positive light and eventually acknowledging that God does too. Nick started setting himself "free to discover God as love" only through counselling while he was in religious formation. Then he came to understand that, "If God is love and if God is perfect he cannot make mistakes. So I started accepting and loving my homosexuality".

Conceptions of God in terms of two distinct dimensions, particularly in terms of a disciplining or a nurturing God, were found to be common among different populations (Roberts 1989, p. 376). The fact that these two dimensions seem to be related to the informants' conception of self may reflect the centuries-old observation that people tend to create God in their own image, perhaps, as suggested by Voltaire, to return the compliment (Bowker 2002, p. 15). According to Bowker, (2002, p. 15), Charles de Montesquieu once wrote that, "If triangles had a God, God would have three sides". There is some evidence of such a correlation between self-image and images of the divine (Benson & Spilka 1973, p. 298; Marcellino 1997, pp. 49-59; Stroope, Draper & Whitehead 2013, p. 27) although the projection approach provides only a partial picture of divine images (Roberts 1989, pp. 382-383). While there may be other factors which influence the way an LGBT person imagines God, my research suggests that there is a close link between self-perception and images of the divine. Self-perception here refers to how my LGBT informants assessed themselves in terms of being 'good' or 'bad'. When my informants perceived themselves as sinners, they believed that God will punish them for their sins and that they deserved this. The internalisation of homonegativity from the surrounding environment may interact in complex ways with how they imagine God (Marcellino 1997, p. 43). Being brought up in a strong Catholic environment, my informants' earlier, negative perception of themselves was influenced by learned notions of what it meant to be a 'good' Catholic under the watchful eyes of God (Wolkomir 2001, p. 311). Once their self-image started to change, however, so did their image of God. God is seen as benevolent and loving as they came to view themselves as worthy of his love. Similarly, a shift in their perception of God as being more loving than judgemental may lead to a more positive self-image. It is not clear which comes first as LGBT Catholics tend to engage with dilemmas pertaining to both their faith and their sexuality simultaneously in order to find ways in which to harmonise the two.

In a sense, the transformation may be seen as a process of conversion (Buckser & Glazier 2003, p. 2) from being a sinner to being a good person, at least on a perceptual level. Conversion is a passage that entails a process of re-

identification, reordering and reorientation, “a passage to some place rather than no place” (Austin-Broos 2003, p. 2). In the context of my study conversion is a renegotiation of one’s identity. The identity of my LGBT informants is reconstructed to incorporate aspects of their sexual identity into their conception of who they are as whole persons (Thumma 1991, pp. 342-343). This is particularly relevant in a Catholic context where gay Catholics often have issues with the Church’s teaching on homosexuality as well as with a culture which perceives being gay and Catholic as a contradiction.

The reconstructed images of God held by my LGBT informants at the time of the study were more abstract than figurative. Abstract impressions of God included conceiving him as a white light, as fog, as a spirit or energy. Divine personifications included seeing God as a father (or to a lesser extent as a mother), as a brother or as a companion. Those who projected a personified God tended to have a closer and less formal relationship with him while those who held abstract notions of God viewed the divine as more distant, even if benevolent. A few even claimed to have no image of God. They just speak to him as if they are speaking to a dead relative, to a soul. Theresa, who separated from her husband and is in a lesbian relationship, has a rather complex image of God. Coming from a background of Jungian psychology, she sought to reconcile Jung’s ideas with those of Christianity in developing her conception of God. She believes that God is everywhere and permits everything. She does not believe that God is all goodness, while evil signifies the devil, as portrayed in Christianity. Neither does she see God as a father. There were times when she saw God as a mother. Nowadays she does not personify God, “God is God, I see God more as abstract, as a force, as an organised entity, a mystery, a lot of aspects”. Chris however finds it difficult to relate to what he describes as an abstract, inanimate form. He told me, “I love a person. I cannot love a force or believe that a force loves me”.

Some tend to have an immanent view of God seeing him in the simple things around them, reflecting a “culture of embodiment, of *presence* in bodies and

things” (Orsi 2005, p.55 emphasis in original). Daniel claims to believe in one of the Jesuit mottos of finding God in all things and in every circumstance. God is in sex and even in food. Like God, “Food has a certain strength. It is very social; it brings people together”. Among the many aspects of God that Lucia mentioned during our conversation under the scorching sun of Palermo was that for her, “God is in every divine creature, in how our body works to perfection. Nick sees God in his students, “God is my job. God is in nature”. There are moments of spirituality such as watching the sunset in silence which brings Nick close to God.

It’s a moment. It’s being present. It’s being aware of the Godhead. No words can contain, you know, the soul. Language is inadequate .. so for me it’s sitting down and just being. With the dogs. I see God so much in them, it’s true. You might think I’m crazy but God speaks to me through them.

According to Greeley (2000, p. 5), immanence is very much part of the Catholic imagination in contrast to Protestants who tend to have a more transcendental image of God. For Catholics who define themselves as more spiritual than religious, as many of my informants do, transcendental images and experiences of God need not necessarily be too distant from the mundane.

5.1.3 God, gender and sexuality

God does not have a gender according to many of my LGBT informants. Yet they still refer to him in the masculine. In many white churches and synagogues in different parts of the world, even in those administered by women, “God continues to be invoked as male, as Father, Lord and King” (Christ 2007, p. 161) largely because, according to Christ, female imagery would upset the existing male-dominated social order which still thrives both in religious organisations and their social context. Among my informants there are those who see God as a father or brother and still insist that he has no gender. They largely attributed this to the way they were brought up to refer to God. This cultural mind-set may be found in different contexts, not only in Mediterranean cultures (see Wilcox 2009, p. 117). Giovanni from *Ali d’Aquila* told me, “I don’t know how long I will keep a male image of God because of tradition since childhood. I think he might be more female than male but I keep referring to him as male”. Another reason is

grammatical (Armstrong 1999, p. 8). In many languages, including Maltese and Italian, God is given the masculine pronoun and referring to God in the feminine may seem 'unnatural' during speech. Lucia told me, "My first image of God is Jesus, a man. It's not that he has a gender but this comes from my culture and from language. Jesus is a man; God is a man".

Apart from Giovanni, there were others such as Nick and Steve who told me that if God had a gender, she was probably female even though only Steve actually told me that he sees "God as a supernatural being but someone I know and who knows me [using the feminine in Maltese]. God has no sex. I think it's wrong that we give God so many human attributes". Nick feels that if God were to have a gender, it would be feminine because the qualities that are often attributed to God such as love, care, understanding, acceptance and forgiveness are also traditionally attributed to women in our culture. It is interesting that among my informants it is only a few men who brought up the possibility of a female deity. Conceptions of God as female could serve to assert both one's femininity and feminist values while love for a female divinity could represent love between women (Wilcox 2009, p. 176). That none of the women in my study professed to view the divine in terms of a Goddess could be indicative of a lingering sense of patriarchy despite the changes in the role of women that both Malta and Italy witnessed over the past few decades.

God may be seen as androgynous even if still referred to in the masculine. Gabriella, a Maltese bisexual woman who is not a member of *Drachma*, is one of a couple of informants (together with Giuseppe from Palermo) who identify God with a painting by Rembrandt "where you have that figure holding a child and there is a male hand and female hand. What Rembrandt wanted to portray was this higher power which can be God, that can take the form of both a mother and a father". Similarly Lucia, one of my Sicilian informants, refers to God as male but her conception of God is much more complex and multi-faceted. When she was living in South America, she continued to enrich her idea of God through the image of *tata Dios* which in Latino culture, according to Lucia, contains a maternal

element and has feminine connotations even if *tata* literally means father. She has “always felt this sense of maternity in God, this sense of welcome”.

5.1.4 Jesus Imagery

It is not uncommon for my informants to see God in the figure of Jesus. Lucia’s first image of God is that of Jesus even if she also acknowledges the feminine side of God. He is the son of God just as she is the daughter of God. She sees Jesus as both possessing divine qualities as well as being her equal in his humanity. This is a commonly shared conception of God among all my informants considering that it reflects one of the central mysteries of Christianity, that of God being both divine and human. It is the human side of Jesus, his humble upbringing, his acceptance of sinners, his critique of the establishment, his suffering that inevitably brings him closer to the minds of my informants. Godwin claims to find it much easier to relate to Jesus who had defects and temptations like he does. It is to Jesus that he prays both alone and with his partner. Jesus represents human suffering and understands it better. Jesus was also not afraid to criticise the establishment and to defy social norms which he considered unjust. However, my informants do not identify so much with Christ the reformer or with the oppressed Christ but mostly with Christ who embraced sinners such as the adulteress. While in this episode from the Bible (John 8: 1-11), which many informants regardless of sexual orientation like to quote, Jesus still goes against the norms of his time, it is his compassion and love which is emphasised by informants rather than his non-conformist streak.

Jesus’ often attractive pictorial images may provoke thoughts of him as a sexual being, at least in the mind of gay men. While not a common declaration, at least three of my Maltese gay informants, two of them from *Drachma*, claimed to have harboured sexual thoughts about Jesus albeit in different ways. Daniel does not make a distinction between God and Jesus but he sees God as a man. He never managed to see him as a woman, “And I see nothing wrong if I had to see Jesus as gay. If you see his relationship with John, the beloved disciple, there might be

indications that he was gay". Jesus' sexuality hardly features in the holy scriptures since he tends to be portrayed as an asexual being without any erotic or emotional desires (Bardella 2001, pp. 124-125; Goss 1993, p. 69). Yet in our modern, secular society, traditionally disadvantaged minorities have challenged, questioned and reread the Bible from their own world-views (Bardella 2001, p. 121; Jennings 2013, p. 5) as *Drachma* does. The possibility of a homoerotic relationship between Jesus and "the man he loved" was explored by Jennings (2013) in his gay-affirmative reading of the Bible. In his analysis of the 'queerness' of Jesus, Goss (1993, 2002) presents Christ as a person who did not want to stay in the closet and deny the erotic. He sees Jesus as a man who identified with the oppressed and who transgressed sexual boundaries.

During one *Drachma* meeting Henry shyly claimed that he often feels physically attracted to Jesus and has erotic sentiments for him. However, it was Joseph's experience that suggests the strongest erotic sensations, even reminiscent of the transcendental experiences of mystics such as St Theresa of Avila (1515-1582) and St John of the Cross (1542-1591). In such experiences, desire for the divine is intertwined with sexual desire as the spiritual, the erotic and the psychological become blurred (Miller 1999, pp. 25-26). Joseph also does not distinguish between God and Jesus. He claimed to see God as a man, since "my heart loves a man". He told me, "I loved Jesus with all my physicality. I am not ashamed to say that during prayer I used to have an erection. It was my way of bringing my body and my physicality into the spirituality". While only Joseph mentioned having a spiritual experience incorporating elements of erotic mysticism, these two 16th century Spanish mystics in particular have a special place in the hearts of *Drachma* informants. Both St Theresa and St John of the Cross use erotic language and symbolism to describe their relationship with Christ. However in Christianity, writings employing erotic language and symbolism, exploring the relationship between God and the human soul, expressing a longing and a quest for God, imagining Christ as lover or bridegroom, weaving together sexual desire, agony and love with intimate prayer or contemplation are quite expansive and varied

(Drage Hale 2010; Godbeer 1995; Hessel-Robinson 2009; Miller 1999; Slee 2014; Walker-Bynum 1991).

Despite Jesus' centrality in divine representation, among LGBT informants there is also a significant appreciation of the Holy Spirit, the Holy Trinity being a central tenet of Christian doctrine. Many feel the presence of the Holy Spirit in their life. Both within *Drachma* and *Ali d'Aquila*, it is believed that it is the Holy Spirit that has kept both organisations going against all the odds. Steve told me that although he may associate Jesus more with the sacrament of the Eucharist, he is aware of there being a trinity. Gabriella claims to see God "in three personalities, God, the spirit, and the complexity of the trinity". Lucia from *Ali d'Aquila* explained to me how she differentiates among the three persons of the trinity. She believes in God the father and creator of things. She sees Jesus as the son who is both her equal and her model. He taught her how one can be divine through humanity, how to see divinity in simple things. Then she sees the Holy Spirit as the force that inspires people such as scientists. Mario also claims to have a strong sense of the trinity and a deep spiritual experience of the Holy Spirit. There were a couple of occasions when he felt the Holy Spirit so intensely and emotionally that he fell to the ground. Such physical experiences, which were not commonly mentioned by my informants, suggest a lingering degree of 'porousness' (Taylor 2007, p. 35) in my LGBT informants despite their generally non-traditional way of living their faith.

5.2 The *separati's* conceptions of God

Divine imagery is a complex issue which unites my two sets of informants to some degree. My *separati* share some conceptions of God with my LGBT informants. They also use masculine pronouns to refer to God without necessarily personifying him. Claudette refers to God as a man, "But when you go deeper you realise that for the grand design there is no gender". Claudette has no doubt that God created nature, "If there is one book I believe in, it is the Book of Genesis". Among the *separati* a view of God as an omnipotent being and creator of the universe who

watches over humanity is stronger than it is among my LGBT informants. Sylvia thinks that “God is everything in the sense that there is something which keeps us going”. Anton sees God as someone who sees and knows everything and who is everywhere. Roger sees God as “a big, supernatural force that we cannot understand, something mysterious that is there all the time, a living energy which is with us all the time. Yes he’s there”. I have also encountered a sense of immanence among my *separati*. Norman, who lives with his partner after separating from his wife, told me, “I see God everywhere, even in the dog, in a plant because I say someone has created it. Had there been no God, there wouldn’t have been the dog. I see him in everything. I don’t say there’s someone above”. Similarly, Indri is fascinated by the fact that despite the achievements of humanity, nobody has managed to create a simple flower, “I’m saying flower not a mountain, a river, a human being. Someone created this world. Christians call him God so I will also call him God”. Yet Indri is “very sceptical” about other Catholic beliefs such as whether there is a divine trinity or whether there is an afterlife. However such scepticism is not common among my heterosexual informants whose belief in the trinity, particularly in Jesus as the son of God is rather strong.

Jesus imagery is indeed more predominant among my heterosexual informants because he represents the human aspect of God who is more accessible than the mysterious, omnipotent God the father. Roger prays more to Jesus as the son of God “who takes us closer to God, as they say”. He knows “Jesus was like us” but thinks the issue of the trinity is much more complex, beyond human understanding. Sylvia’s description of how she sees God as Christ and Christ as creator who walks with her but at the same time is above her reflects this complexity,

Not God the father no. Jesus God [*Ġesu Alla*]. Jesus as creator. No not God as creator father. I see Jesus more as a friend but also as a shepherd who guides me, who walks before me. I feel awed, humbled, he is above me [*Li jkolli ċertu sudizzjoni ... fuqi*].

Paula does not have an image of God but,

When I think of God, I speak a lot to the crucifix. I have one in the office. [She also has one in her bedroom]. Sometimes I tell him, “You make me swear [*iġġiegħni*]

nitkellem pastaž, lit. You make me say rude words]”. The crucifix represents Christ who is the son of God. It’s like talking to my father who is dead but when I’m talking to God I feel there is a presence. But I don’t know what this presence is and I don’t know whether I’m going crazy...

Joanna also has no image of God but when she imagines Jesus, she sees him as they present him in pictures, “as a beautiful man with long hair, someone who is still young, a human being”. With the *separati*, however, there was no perception of Jesus as a sexual being similar to that of some LGBT informants. Jesus is someone that they can talk to ‘personally’ and without inhibitions, representing the divine in human form in contrast to God the father and creator whose image is difficult to grasp. Anna speaks to Jesus more than to God, “He’s like a brother. I am not afraid of him and if I have to say something I say it”.

The view of a judging God who condemns them and their ‘sins’ is not so prevalent among heterosexual informants. They may have seen him as a judge when they were children and they still believe that God will judge them after death but they do not see God as their judge in the sense of “waiting for you to stumble in order to punish you [*lest għalik*]” as Michael put it. It is the Church which judges them and condemns their lifestyle rather than God. God is associated with love and forgiveness unlike the Church which denies them absolution and access to communion. Therefore unlike their LGBT counterparts, my *separati*’s conception of God as love is not contrasted with a previous view of God as judge but with the Church as judge.

The representation of God as non-judgemental and forgiving among my heterosexual informants develops because they find it easier than their LGBT counterparts to convince themselves that they are “doing nothing wrong”. They may experience some internal dilemmas and doubts about their non-conforming lifestyle especially when they initially find themselves in such situations. However, they tend to neutralise any guilt they may have with regards to their lifestyle. They do this by blaming their ex-spouse for their circumstances especially if it involves the breakup of their marriage or other negative experiences such as domestic

violence or infidelity. They also blame the Church for not granting them or their current partner an annulment and therefore come to see their choices as being constrained rather than voluntary. Such neutralisation techniques (Sykes & Matza 1957) help to alleviate the conflict at a much earlier stage enabling them to clear their conscience and to feel at peace with God. Sonia, who is single and lives with her foreign boyfriend, used to feel guilty and undecided about her cohabitation. However all it took to appease her conscience was a chat with an “open-minded priest” who assured her that she was doing “nothing wrong”.

The ‘not my choice’ argument is often made by the *separati*. Bianca feels that she was constrained to find another man because of the situation she found herself in due to her cheating husband. She did not succeed but at least she tried to save the marriage:

It’s not as if I’m living with a married man, that I’m breaking up a family. On the contrary, it was someone else who broke my own family. I did not break someone else’s family. When we met he was already separated.

Consequently, they tend to project a sense of victimhood, of being unfairly judged by the Church after being unfairly treated by an ex-spouse. Their indignation at being prohibited from having another chance at love by the Church is compensated for by a belief in a merciful and more understanding God. Sylvia thinks that “Jesus would surely want me to live this life rather than being angry and living alone. Because humans are not meant to live alone. That’s why I got married”. Lisa, who is divorced and in a civil marriage with two daughters from the second marriage, is also convinced that she is on the right track, “In God’s eyes I do not feel that I’m doing anything wrong because it was not my choice and I’m sure that the God that I love, the God of mercy and love did not want me to be alone for all these years while a priest would be with his brothers in a convent”.

Such sentiments are strengthened by a notion of God as someone who knows everything and everyone inside out, who knows what is in the heart and mind of individuals. Michael believes in a loving God who does not want him to live a dark and sad life because he made a mistake [by marrying his ex-wife],

God forbid! [*Alla ħares!*]. If that is my God then he is a God I don't believe in. My God is not such a God. If God knows everything he knows what he created in me. He knows exactly the street I walk in, he knows that my intentions are not to live in sin, against his word, to hurt someone else or to hurt God but to live a good life [*nghix ħajja tajba*].

Another way in which my heterosexual informants absolve themselves of any guilt in the eyes of God is by putting forward the argument of 'not harming others'. As indicated earlier, it is not uncommon for informants to redefine their notion of sin in a way which departs from official Church teaching, often based on a social code morality (Day 2011, pp. 131-133). Indri believes he is "absolutely doing nothing wrong. It would be wrong if I am in a relationship and I have someone else". Similarly Nina, the teenage mother, does not think of her sexual relationship with her boyfriend in terms of sin, "not when I got pregnant and not even now" because for her sin is doing something which harms others.

It's true that you shouldn't have sex outside marriage but if I have a creature of God, I would feel guilty if I neglect her and don't take care of her. I may sound selfish saying that I am ok with God but I feel that God loves us all as we are.

Heller (2003, p. 1022) argues that when one feels judged by others, that judgement is internalised in such a way that it becomes similar to the shame one feels before God. The Eye of God which can see people's every move and their deepest and intimate feelings is the "generalized eye of the Other. One is ashamed before God's Eye just as one is ashamed before the neighbor's eye". However, the shame that my *separati* experience within their moral communities does not seem to be reflected in how they see themselves in God's eyes. Therefore, not unlike my LGBT informants, they tend to project an image of a benevolent and loving God in terms of their own image. They neither believe that they are 'bad', nor do they see God as their judge.

5.3 The *separati*'s relationship with God

My heterosexual informants' relationship with God tends to be less dramatic and complex than that of their LGBT counterparts. They do not have the same issues to settle with God. God is hardly blamed for their separation and cannot really be

blamed for their lifestyle choices. Any guilt feelings they may have until they get used to the idea of being in a relationship with someone who is not their spouse tend to be short-lived. Their belief in a supreme and powerful God who knows and sees everything may lead them to ask certain favours from God and to promise things in return. He is someone with whom they may negotiate not only when they expect a miracle but more importantly in terms of how to live their life. It is to him that they turn when they feel hurt and misunderstood by the Church seeking to put their mind at rest that they are on the right path.

When Paula's five-year old son had an almost fatal accident, she used to spend hours in the hospital chapel crying and speaking to God. She used to pray that if her son was going to be a vegetable, he should take him. If he were to let him live, her prayer was that she would be able to see him go for communion on his own. Paula believes that it was her faith which kept her going in these difficult times. Her sister used to tell her that God would not give her more than she is capable of bearing,

I used to tell him, "I can't bear losing my son. You have to do something about it". I used to tell him I could not bear this cross, "You have to give me a smaller one and I will carry it but don't take my son away from me. You have already taken away a lot of things in my life". And I think he heard me.

She even "made a pact with God". She told him, "If my son gets better, at first I was going to tell him that I will give up sex. But then I decided that that was too hard, so I gave up chocolate. But I told him both sex and chocolate no". It was also through negotiation with God that she used to minimise her guilt when she started dating again after her separation. She felt that she already had her fair share of suffering in life and so God could not expect her to make more sacrifices.

Many informants speak to God as if talking to another person. They may express anger. They may thank God. They may ask for guidance or they may just speak to him about their day. Some pray in church while others pray at home, when they go for a walk or whenever they feel the need. God is one of those "persons" Michael turns to for advice. For him it is like talking to a friend or a brother, "He

tells you, 'Don't take that route' or I tell him, 'Today I screwed up'. Yes I talk to him. And sometimes I tell him, 'Where are you, my friend? Are you hiding today when I need you?'" Sometimes they feel that God listens to them and sometimes not.

Some speak to him every day; others only when they feel the need or depending on their relationship with him at that time. They may speak to him when they are alone. Paula and Anna like to thank God with their husbands during their evening walk or before they go to sleep. Some ask for favours such as when Nina prayed to God for her daughter to be admitted in a Church school. Others ask for miracles as Paula used to do in hospital. Some speak to God when they feel they have done something wrong, instead of going to confession, a sacramental tradition that seems to have declined in significance. Others speak to God when they feel misunderstood or misjudged by the Church.

People may reach out to God in different ways and in different places. However, there are those who still feel drawn to the ambience which can only be provided by a church when they want to speak to God. They may have stopped participating in church rituals but may still feel closer to God in church as "he will always be there". Sonia, who lives with her atheist boyfriend, does not frequent church regularly nowadays but she still needs the environment of a church to feel God's presence, "There are those who feel spiritual near the sea. I get lost. I don't feel the spirituality. I need that environment, the warmth, the smell of incense, maybe because I grew up in it". Others find God through Gospel music while Nina, the youngest of my informants, connects with God through an application she receives every day on her mobile phone called *Bible App*.

The *separati's* view of an almighty God may also elicit anger towards him if they feel that God is responsible for certain events in life like death or illness, although it is not a commonly shared sentiment and rather transient. When Anna lost her husband she was very angry but then she calmed down and accepted it,

I speak to God as if I'm speaking to you but when my husband died I was angry. I was very angry, "Why me?" Thank God I had my daughter [*Alla ħares ma kellix it-tifla*, lit. God forbid I did not have my daughter]. I still went to Church but I felt angry but then you get over it.

Anger at God may be manifested in a subtle way. Once, during my brief participant observation with the *Caritas* group, we were eating together. It was the first day of lent when Catholics are expected to fast and to abstain from eating meat. It is also customary for believers to make some small sacrifice especially linked to the eating of sweets on this first day of lent. During dinner nobody actually ordered food containing meat and the conversation was bound to dwell on lent for a while. Two of the women declared that they were not making any sacrifices since, "We made enough sacrifices already as it is". One of them then said that all she had eaten on *Ras ir-Randan* [Ash Wednesday] was chocolate coconut kisses. She couldn't stop eating them. I could not help but feel that she was doing this as an act of defiance, against God perhaps, for making her suffer when her husband left her with four children for a younger woman.

Anger may lead informants to question God's love or existence when faced with their misfortunes. When Joanna separated from her abusive husband, she had to bring up her two small children on her own. Her husband had left her penniless and pregnant with their second child and there were times when she was angry at God for abandoning her. However when she returned from hospital to find the landing of her flat filled with things bought for her baby by her generous neighbours, her faith in God's love was restored. One mitigating factor against anger is the belief that as humans, people cannot understand God's ways. The enigmatic nature of God is evidence of his supernatural attributes. Lisa had lost her father when she was three months old. She comes from a big family which had more than its fair share of deaths. Despite losing three of her brothers and other close family members, she did not despair or blame God because of her strong faith. Nor was she angry at God for not being able to have children before she was almost forty because "You either believe or you don't". Paula also claims not to have been so angry at God when her son almost died. She was angrier at those

responsible for her son's accident than at God although there were times when she questioned God during these dark times.

Although Lisa and Paula may attribute their lack of anger to their strong faith in God, what distinguishes LGBT from non-LGBT informants is that the former often consider their sexuality to be natural, innate and God-given. It is much easier for non-LGBT informants to shift the blame on someone other than God than it is for those who take an essentialist view of their being created as non-heterosexual beings. When unable to put the blame on another human being, it is not unlikely for people to see the supernatural as the responsible agent (Gray & Wegner 2010, p. 11).

For my *separati*, having a good relationship with a God who loves them without judging them is important. Since many tend to portray themselves as being victims of circumstances who are misunderstood by the Church and judged by their moral community, God's love contributes significantly to their serenity.

5.4 It's all part of God's plan

Convinced of God's blessing, all informants tend to see themselves and their relationships as part of God's plan (Gross & Yip 2010, p. 45; Thumma 1991, p. 340) even if they go against the morality of his Church. It is common for LGBT Catholics to argue that they were created by God and that their sexual orientation is God's gift rather than a choice they made themselves (Dillon 1999, p. 125; Gross & Yip 2010, p. 54; Wilcox 2002b, p. 505; Wilcox 2003, p. 71; Wolkomir 2001, p. 308; Yip 1997b, p. 172). Once they overcome their initial conflicts they tend to accept their sexuality as being as valid as heterosexuality since it was equally created by God. This perception provides LGBT Christians with a theological and ontological tool with which to confront heteronormativity and the stigma attached to their non-conforming sexuality. It is part of the legitimation process that my informants go through in seeking to come to terms with their conflicts. It is one way of reassuring themselves that they are in God's good books. Being able to declare that one was

created so by God carries much more weight than just saying that one is born LGBT (Wilcox 2002b, p. 504). Gianluca's argument echoes quite a few others both in Sicily and Malta: "If God created me in his image, I am his creation, so I cannot be a mistake. If he created us in this way we cannot be wrong. It is a mistake if I try to become straight because it will go against God's plan and against myself". If one believes that one is created in God's image, one's sexuality comes to be seen as part of one's self rather than separated from the rest of one's whole being.

Tyrone once told me that within the Catholic Church one has to deal with the contradiction that sexuality is a gift from God but also a sin unless expressed within a Catholic marriage between a man and a woman. However once they start coming to terms with their sexuality, most of my LGBT Catholic informants tend to associate their sexuality less with sin and start embracing it as a divine gift. It is a talent, a charisma which they feel obliged not only to accept with grace but to make it their mission through which they may serve God. They become convinced that they are God's special and unique creations. Like Orsi's (2005) cripples and Sultana's (2011) amputees, they learn to perceive themselves as special in God's eyes because, not despite, of their difference. They are blessed children of God who loves them dearly and who chose them for a special destiny. They even come to perceive their suffering as a means of spiritual growth and of getting closer to God.

Noah feels a sense of resignation that his life circumstances are part of God's plan. He does not get angry anymore when things do not go as he plans because, as he claims, "You realise that your situation, your orientation is there for a reason and that you can still do good with what you have". Believing that he is part of a larger scheme of things makes his many questions less difficult to answer. As already indicated, Martin was very concerned about going against God's plan when he wanted to remove his breasts. God had given him a female body and he had been specifically admonished by his psychologist priest not to go ahead with the surgery. However, his parish priest assured him that God would still accept him if he did. He told me, "At that point I felt relieved and I felt a sense of heat in my

chest and I felt that this was God telling me to go ahead". Nowadays, Martin feels that he has found exactly what God has planned for him since he has recently entered a new field of activity which he sees as a calling from God and which he feels compensates for not accepting his God-given body:

My communication with God has become better as if he wanted to tell me, 'Can't you see that I had a plan for you?' It's as if I found what God wanted from me. I had never imagined myself doing this. So finally I'm satisfying God's plan in a way. It's like a vocation. I feel that it's coming from God. Nothing happens without God.

Chris argues that once he accepted his homosexuality, he became convinced that his calling is now to help others deal with their identity struggles through *Drachma*. After years immersed in teaching catechism classes, there was a time when he could see nothing outside life in the *MUSEUM*. Joining *Drachma* and becoming its coordinator soon after his 'coming out', Chris is convinced that this was God's plan for him. Not allowed to be pastorally active within the Church, God led him through another road. The belief that LGBT individuals have a particular mission assigned to them by God was found to be quite ubiquitous among LGBT believers. They may be called to fight oppression, to raise awareness about LGBT issues among heterosexuals and to spread the word of God especially among lapsed LGBT Christians (Wilcox 2003, p. 160). Luigi, one of the founders of *Ali d'Aquila*, told me that once, a priest who was expelled from the Church due to his open support of homosexuality, told him that God had given him (Luigi) the gift of homosexuality and that he should try to make the most of it. While in the past, Luigi used to see his homosexuality as a defect now he sees it as a gift from God [*un dono*]. This made him realise that he did not have to change since being given such a gift from God, he feels justified in practising his homosexuality without too many reservations. The claim that their sexual orientation is not just innate but also a gift from their creator, provides LGBT believers with a good argument against those who label them deviants or sinners. Believing that their sexuality is a sacred gift not only facilitates its acceptance but makes it something worth celebrating (Wilcox 2002b, p. 506; Wilcox 2003, p. 71).

By the same token, LGBT Catholics are in a better position to argue that they do not have a choice regarding whom to love and that their relationships are willed by God (Dillon 1999, p. 125; Wilcox 2002b, pp. 504-505). Margherita is convinced that her secret relationship with a woman who still lives with her (male) partner and who has a child could not have been possible unless God willed it: "It was God who brought her my way. It is so beautiful that it cannot be otherwise. I don't want to cause any harm to someone else, destroying another love. But I had the fortune to meet her only because God wanted it". Gabriella does not believe that God will condemn her for being in love. There were times when she spoke to God about her relationship with her girlfriend and asked God to guide her otherwise should he disapprove of it. She never felt that God was telling her that she was on the wrong path, "On the contrary, there were moments when I would say, 'God really approves of what I am doing' rather than the opposite. So I always felt blessed."

Yet, there are a few who, while having learnt to accept their homosexuality still do not see it as a gift. Once during a *Drachma* meeting, Chris asked the others what they thought they could do with their "special attribute". This had some reactions even from Tyrone who challenged Chris, arguing that being gay does not give one any special attributes. On another level, Adriana, who found it very hard to reconcile her homosexuality with her faith, still cannot conceive of her homosexuality as a divine grace. Even today that she has found some peace through *Ali d'Aquila*, she is still rather sceptical about homosexuality:

No I do not see it as a gift. It's a situation. *Dono no, dono no, dono no, dono no* [not a gift, repeated four times]. I would accept my son if he were homosexual. But he would be happier if he is not. I would prefer him not to be. He would be happier if he has a family. I see it as a variant of human sexuality. Not an affliction. Before it was an affliction yes, a tragedy.

It is not only members of the LGBT community who tend to legitimise their sexuality or their lifestyle choices in terms of God's plan for them. Lisa, whose first marriage ended in divorce and without any children, believes that it was God who wanted her to have children when she was almost forty and not yet married to her second husband. She takes such things as a sign that she is on the right track since,

God could have given me children during my first marriage. It was not because I did not want them. God decided to give me children outside marriage [*Il-bambin għoġbu jtihomli barra ż-żwieġ*]. He even provided me with the means to get married since I did not want my children to be brought up outside marriage [referring to the introduction of divorce legislation in 2011].

Similarly Claudette, who is separated and who has two children from another relationship which also did not last, is just as convinced that her children came from God, especially her second son who is “a miracle”. She believes that, “He came from God. He was not planned and he shouldn’t have come. Their father also realised. That’s why I believe that it was God”.

5.5 God’s presence in the relationship

During the marriage celebration of Chris and Tyrone, Mario was one of the orators. During his speech, addressing the couple, he was bound to mention the central place that God occupies in their relationship,

As all of us gathered here today know, you also have another great love in your lives. Both of you have searched deeply and intensely for God, and both of you have dedicated good years to that journey, a journey that continues for you, as individuals and soon as a married couple. And yet, it is the love we show for one another that is a tangible indication of his presence and nothing else. His presence multiplies love and nourishes our relationships and not destroys them.

A number of participants consider God to be an important part of their relationship. They feel the presence of God in their relationship despite it not being blessed by the Church. Feeling the presence of God in the relationship is both a reflection of their love for God and of God’s love for them once they reconcile their conflicts. It is also an affirmation of the acceptance of their intimacy in God’s eyes, in contrast to its condemnation by the Church. Luigi used to see homosexual love as contradictory to his values. Nowadays he sees it “as a realisation of my Christian self to find a person who loves me and whom I can love. The completeness I have with my partner is a realisation of the love of God”. Joseph feels that the love he shares with his husband is the same love he shares with God even if his husband does not believe in God. Although he could not get married in front of God, he is still convinced that God blessed his marriage and is

present in the relationship. Godwin has always seen Jesus as the fulcrum in his relationship. He described the relationship between him, his partner and Christ as a triangle. He feels that it was God's presence that has kept them together for three decades.

Some link their love for their partner and their love of God more directly to their sexual relationship. There were those who even described their relationship as a means of finding and glorifying God by offering him their love. Daniel who, like Chris is in a relationship with another *Drachma* member, is convinced that despite the way that the Church demonises sex, "God wants us to enjoy sex. It is a way of glorifying God, a way of finding God". He always tries to keep this in mind when he is intimate with his boyfriend. Daniel believes that sex is a vital element in the relationship. For him it has a significance which goes beyond the physical even if he believes that "being able to touch all the parts of another person's body" is a beautiful thing. My Catholic informants felt quite comfortable with sexual intimacy despite the Church's position although they are more sceptical about casual sex. Intimate love within a committed relationship has even been described as a sacrament in itself, a celebration of their love for God and for each other. For some of my spiritually-profound LGBT informants, sexual experience may even verge on the mystical as they become one with God in their physical unity. Chris sees himself and his partner as being "A reciprocal sacrament for each other because what does sacrament mean? It means the presence of God between us. Now I want to be the sacrament for Tyrone to find God through me. Sexuality is sacred. In fact Tyrone has a very beautiful sentence: 'Sex is the language of God'". This idea of love being sacramental is apparently taken from Christianity and boldly applied to homosexual love, essentially putting homosexual and heterosexual love on the same level despite the Church's very clear definitions of acceptable amorous relationships. According to the Catholic imagination, when two people are engaged in sexual love, God reveals himself and his grace to them through this same love (Greeley 2000, p. 7). It also points to the theological capital that quite a few of my LGBT informants have and which enables them to effectively resolve some of their conflicts.

Although there are those who see prayer as a very intimate affair, for others, speaking to God with their partner is a very important aspect of their relationship. Godwin prays to Jesus every day and he makes it a point to read from the Bible every day with his partner,

We do it together yes. Especially after we make up after a fight over some silly issue. After we get together, we feel that we should thank God. We speak to God and although I do not see him, I know that he is present.

For Luigi, praying with his boyfriend every evening is a commitment they made since they became a couple,

Before we go to sleep and for us it is a beautiful way to end the day and which unites us together and which unites us with God. It is a moment which gives us a lot of peace and it's beautiful to sleep serenely. Even when we are not together we do it on the phone.

5.6 The distant or absent God

While God plays an important part in the life of my informants who negotiate with him, thank him, ask him questions, shout at him or ask for forgiveness, who are intimate with him in prayer and feel his presence, there are moments when God seems distant, sometimes absent. There was a time when Francesco, who was active in the *Focolare Movement* in Sicily, could not find God:

I did not feel God inside me. I could find him in the tabernacle or when I prayed. It was as if there was a wall, there was a distance.

Despite the fact that belief in God is so pervasive among my informants, there are moments when they doubt God's existence or feel abandoned by him. Doubts in God's existence may be accompanied by a lack of understanding of God's ways, by a sense of disappointment at God for not being really there when they need him. When Paula's son almost died, praying in the hospital chapel brought her closer to God. At the same time, however she felt that God had given her too much on her plate especially after her failed marriage and its consequences, "I used to ask him why he continued to test me. I used to ask him to help me understand. 'What do you want from me?'" At times she also questions the existence of God as well as the mysteries of faith such as the resurrection of Christ although she

acknowledges that this is contradictory to her almost constant belief in a higher being who takes care of humanity.

Sonia was almost apologetic about her previously uncritical belief in God. She had never questioned God's existence before being challenged by her atheist boyfriend. Since they started living together, she feels more conscious about this and has started questioning more. However, she still feels a certain sense of comfort in the belief that she can turn to God in prayer,

When you have a problem in life and you try everything and cannot solve it, I turn to prayer. Some way or other I feel that I have an outlet [*sfog*] even if I cannot see God. Now whether God exists or not, as long as I feel better, there's nothing wrong.

Questioning the existence or the presence of God is inevitable for believers who tend to engage in questions for which there are no readily available answers. This is especially more so for my Maltese gay informants who have a sound knowledge of theology. My informants live in a society which facilitates this questioning process. For some, the experience of doubting can be very emotional and even traumatic. Daniel has moments where God seems to be distant. Yet his relationship with God also has its tender and intimate moments:

My relationship with God is not so strong at the moment but it's there. On the one hand I feel that I want to go alone and at the same time I feel him pulling me towards him. I have at times doubted his existence and asked myself whether life without him would be better. I feel something sweet, like God is taking care of me. He still loves me and wants me. He doesn't want me to leave him. When I was younger, I was also very romantic in terms of Jesus. I have this beautiful image of Jesus in my room, which my aunt had given me. There were moments when I felt a close relationship between us. There were moments when I used to cry and I used to rest my head against the image. I have not done it for some time now.

Mario, who claims to have had an almost mystic experience of the Holy Spirit, also had moments "of doubt, of darkness, of desperation" where he did not feel the presence of God and which for him corresponds with sin. During the wedding oration of Chris and Tyrone, mentioned earlier, he described his sense of the presence of Jesus as a struggle:

As we struggle with intimacy and with each other, at times feeling far away from each other and at other times too close, so we struggle with the presence of

Jesus, at times overwhelming us with love, more often than not leaving us feeling dry, veiled in darkness and with the experience of nothingness.

Karl, an early *Drachma* member, describes his experience of God as very turbulent and emotional, characterised by moments or periods when he relates to a beloved God and feels like being on top of a mountain as well as by moments of darkness when he is distant from God. Karl is a gay man in his thirties who does not doubt God's love for him despite the dark moments that characterise periods of his life. During these dark moments he senses God's presence but he keeps him at a distance. He sees him as "approachable and yet not so approachable". These dark episodes may be triggered by some traumatic event such as the death of someone close or a broken relationship:

It shatters everything and everything collapses around you. You lose your sense of meaning, you lose who you are. You question God. You become atheist. It's a volcano of emotions. In psychology we call it the shadow. In spirituality we call it the dark night of the soul. In psychiatry it's depression. It's a very ugly place.

The feeling of a distant God does not necessarily invoke an experience of "the dark night of the soul". Nor am I implying that the experience of any of my informants is similar to that of any of the great mystics. However this sense of "spiritual dryness and depression" was a central feature of mystical experience which was also described as "'mystic death'" or "'the great dereliction'" (Barratt Browne 1923, p. 476). In this early work, Barratt Browne describes the "dark night" as an experience characterised by a sense of spiritual emptiness, temptations, at times accompanied by apparitions of the devil, "doubt, despair, and an unrelieved melancholy". These experiences also tend to be accompanied by contrasting feelings of pleasure and pain as well as excitement and depression (Barratt Browne 1923, p. 476).

Henry has managed to placate his troubled soul since he joined *Drachma*. He now rarely questions God's love for him but from time to time the nagging questions return as does his depression. The following translated excerpts from a much longer reflection he shared through email correspondence in June 2017 throws some light on what goes on through his mind:

Darkness which can be cut with a knife. Depression. The lack of sense in life. What do I do? I have entered a black tunnel, but cannot find the way out. I lost all hope. As if the world stopped... The singing of birds for me has lost its significance.

But God knows that I have lost all sense.. God has apparently disappeared, at least from the places where I am used to find him. Where has he gone?

I feel a great internal sadness, as if I lost my own soul. Because that's how I feel – like a lost soul.

In such moments God comes in. As he always does. He who has always taken care of me, in every moment of desperation. I try to find my roots but I do not find them, I try to put my feet on the rocks, but I find nothing... I cry for sense amid this senselessness. Writhing in pain because I know that if I lose him I would have lost everything....

[Dlam taqtgħu b'sikkina. Depression. In-non-sens tal-ħajja. Fejn naqbad nagħti rasi? Dħalt ġo mina sewda, bla ma nista' nsib mnejn noħroġ. Tlift kull tama. Bħal donnu d-dinja waqfet. Jekk jinstema' l-għana tal-għasafar, għalija tilef kull sinifikat....

lzd'Alla jaf li dħalt f'dan in-non-sens.... Alla donnu sparixxa, almenu mill-postijiet fejn drajt insibu. Fejn mar tgħid ?.... Inħoss dwejjjaq kbar interjuri. Qisni tlift ir-ruħ tiegħi stess. Għax hekk inħossni – qisni ruħ mitlufa.

F'mument bħal dawn Alla jidħol. Dejjem jidħol għalija Alla. Dak li dejjem ħa ħsiebi, f'kull mument ta' disprament. Infittex għeruqi ma nsibhomx, nipprova mmidd saqajja fuq il-blat, ma nsib xejn...

Nitbekka għas-sens qalb dan in-non-sens. Nitkagħweg bl-uġiġħ għax naf li jekk nitlef Lilu nkun tlift kollox...]

5.7 The absent mother of God

During my fieldwork there was hardly any reference to the Madonna, the mother of God who, although not a deity, in the Catholic tradition, may be considered a close parallel (Greeley 2000, p. 91). Marian devotion is ubiquitous in Maltese society as evident in the numerous niches of the Madonna which dot the island and the many houses named after her. Malta's national hospital is called *Mater Dei*, Latin for 'mother of God'. It is not uncommon for Maltese homes, especially those of older generations to have holy pictures and statues of the Madonna and candles lit in front of them. The rosary is a prayer which families used to say not only in church but together at home although nowadays this tradition has declined. There are seven parishes in Malta and Gozo dedicated to *Santa Marija* whose *festa* is celebrated on the 15th of August. There are other towns and villages whose parishes are dedicated to the Madonna such as the Madonna of Lourdes, the Madonna of Pompei, Our Lady of the Graces, or the Madonna of the

Lilies. This apart from the passionate devotion that the Maltese have for Our Lady of Sorrows [*id-Duluri*]. I have entered a few homes of informants who had pictures of the Madonna hung on their walls or on their shelves. However, the devotion for the mother of God which manifests itself so distinctly on a national level was not reflected in my conversations with informants. The only informant who expressed her devotion to the Madonna was Sylvia:

I pray to the Madonna more than I pray to God. I have her everywhere in the house, even outside the door. I see her as a mother, as a woman who suffered a lot so when I talk to her she understands me. I pray to her so that she prays to Jesus.

Considering that my *separati* are more 'traditional' in how they live their religion, this is rather surprising. Perhaps gay informants and heterosexual women may feel a closer affinity with Jesus, as a man. As indicated, my *Drachma* informants are more likely to identify with saints or mystics who are closely associated with sexual symbolism or more specifically with homosexuality unlike the gentle mother of God who is an obedient virgin.

Conclusion

While there is no doubt that God plays a central role in the life of all my informants, how they imagine and relate to God varies among my two sets of informants. My LGBT Catholics' view of God depends on their perception and valuation of self. Low self-esteem and a perception of themselves as sinners, evil and dirty evokes images of God as judge. A view of the supernatural as a loving, merciful God is only consistent with an image of self which is worthy of divine love and mercy (Benson & Spilka 1973, p. 298). The homonegativity that my LGBT informants may internalise from their familial, social and/or religious environment has a negative impact on their self-concept, influencing how they perceive and relate to God. My *separati* relate to God from the periphery of both society and Church as they live the stigma of being *poġġuti* in a traditionally Catholic society with strict norms about appropriate sexual behaviour, particularly that of women. However, the secularisation processes taking place in contemporary society have made it possible for individuals to challenge received morality and to take a more

active approach to how they live their faith. As the conditions of belief changed (Taylor 2007, p. 41), individuals feel they have the right to challenge and question both God and his Church. For both LGBT and non-LGBT informants the comfort derived from believing in God's love and acceptance can be a source of both healing and strength as my *separati* confront the social stigma and the Church's condemnation and my LGBT Catholics struggle with their doubts, their dilemmas, their low self-esteem and their fragmented sense of self.

As I will show in the next chapter, reconstruction of the self is a long process which entails psychological, moral and social adaptations for my LGBT informants. Conflict tears them apart. However, the closer they move towards a positive concept of self, the closer they feel to God and the stronger they feel in terms of dealing with Church authority and regulations.

The next chapter will accompany my LGBT informants along their 'journey' towards eventual self-acceptance and self-affirmation. As indicated earlier, my two sets of informants experience conflicts of a different nature and live their faith differently. It is LGBT informants who are most distressed by the experience of living with an incongruent sense of self, torn apart by guilt, fear and doubt which dominate many hours of introspective thoughts and sleepless nights. However, with professional help and through the employment of various tactics, they manage to reconstruct a self-affirming narrative which reflects their transformation.

Chapter VI – RECONSTRUCTING A FRAGMENTED SELF

Introduction

This Chapter explores how LGBT Catholics deal with intra-personal conflict. This conflict can be overwhelming and is primarily and more intensely experienced by LGBT informants. That most LGBT individuals who are brought up in a Catholic or Christian environment often have to deal with the dilemma of their apparently irreconcilable sexuality and faith is well documented (*inter alia* Dillon 1999; Gross & Yip 2010; Grubbs & Exline 2014; Lapinski & McKirnan 2013; Levy & Edmiston 2014; Levy & Reeves 2011; Mahaffy 1996; Rodriguez 2010; Schuck & Liddle 2001; Subhi et al 2011; Subhi & Geelan 2012; Thumma 1991; Toft 2014; Trammell 2015; Wilcox 2002b, 2003; Wolkomir 2001; Yip 1997a; Yip 1997b). While their Catholic identity becomes an integral part of who they are since childhood, their sexual self is by comparison rather unfamiliar. Their same-sex desire is even more confusing because it is seen as 'bad' or 'deviant'. They think that they are the only ones having these feelings. This 'newness' is not meant only in the sense of newly discovered but also in terms of acknowledging a gay or lesbian identity which is in itself a relatively new concept which was not written about before the mid 1970s (Epstein 1978, p. 134). Their emerging self is incongruent with the hetero-normative ideals which they internalised from their social, cultural and moral environment and which they might have come to idealise. Internalised homophobia creates disharmony within the self causing enormous conflict and pain. In LGBT informants this internal conflict is extremely profound because it concerns issues related to their sense of being, conflicts which are not experienced by my heterosexual informants. As indicated in the previous chapters, the main concerns of the latter are with the Church and with others who they feel condemn their lifestyle and exclude them from full social participation. They are not internally torn apart by their sense of dissonance in self and identity as are LGBT Catholic informants. One pertinent contrast between LGBT and heterosexual informants is that for the former, the conflict is not just about lifestyle choices and behaviour which is condemned by the Church. It is primarily about accepting

themselves as non-conforming *beings* not only non-conforming *actors*. Even if Church teaching condemns homosexual *acts* rather than what it calls homosexual *tendencies* within the person, in practice LGBT individuals still think of *themselves* as being 'bad'. Therefore the Church's teaching causes profound dilemmas pertaining to their sense of self and inner being.

Personal conflict may affect individuals in different ways and at different levels of intensity but the experience tends to leave an indelible mark on the person. The contradiction inherent in being LGBT and Catholic influences their view of themselves and the path they will take towards a coherent construction of self. Dealing with this contradiction also presents an opportunity for the emergence of an empowered sense of who they are (Taylor & d 2014, p. xiii). Informants eventually learn to cope with their feelings and find ways of reconciling their conflicts, although they may never completely resolve them. They may even come to perceive their homosexuality as a source of pride and their experiences as an opportunity for personal and spiritual growth.

The different ways in which LGBT and heterosexual informants experience and live the conflict is reflected in how the two groups seek to manage the conflict. This is because in some respects my LGBT informants live the conflict as modern selves who are also spiritually profound, introspective, faithful beings who are not afraid to engage with the Church's teaching to develop their own individual morality. Drawing upon the Catholic tradition itself, they seek to develop an alternative, LGBT-affirming moral hermeneutic, a process aided by therapy, reflection, prayer, priestly advice and other techniques which enable them not only to find themselves but to relocate themselves within Catholicism. Through what Foucault (1984, p. 29) calls "practices of the self" such as self-reflection, self-knowledge and self-examination, individuals engage with the established and prescribed moral code in a process of "moral subjectivation". Such processes enable them to reconstruct their fragmented self and to 'reclaim' their rightful place in religious texts which was denied them through heteronormative theological interpretations. Some of these techniques aid in the development of this

alternative moral hermeneutic. The narrative itself both contributes to the reconstruction of their dissonant sense of self as well as reflects this process of reconstruction.

This may be indicative of Taylor's (2007, p. 38) argument that selfhood is experienced differently in contemporary, secular societies. Rather than perceiving secularisation merely in terms of institutional transformations, it may be seen as an experiential transformation, which involves "the emergence of an individualised, buffered, immanent, rationalised way of experiencing selfhood" (Baldacchino & Kahn 2011, p. 5). Taylor (2010, p. 306) argues that secular societies are witnessing a "fragmentation of the spiritual" which has lost its capacity to unite whole societies. According to Taylor (2007, pp. 35-41), the buffered self is synonymous with contemporary secularity in the West as opposed to 'nonsecular' or 'premodern' selves which he associates with a time and place away from contemporary Western secular societies. Although neither of my two sets of informants fits neatly into the description of 'buffered' selves, LGBT Catholics are closer to this experience of selfhood. Although the *separati's* lifestyle may suggest a secular worldview, the way they live their religion is more traditional than that of their LGBT counterparts. They are less likely to engage theoretically and introspectively with Church teaching even if they are critical of the Church. They are more religious than spiritual, respecting certain norms such as refraining from eating meat on Good Friday, or from receiving communion according to the Church's teaching and having holy pictures and statues at their homes. As socially embedded selves, their morality is relational rather than individualistic and the way they seek to reconcile their conflicts is tactical rather than interpretive such as not taking communion for fear they will be judged by people in the congregation or hearing mass in a different parish. In contrast, LGBT participants are much less concerned with social morality as their main concern is their relationship with God and with reconstructing an integrated sense of self.

6.1 Reconciling religious and sexual identities

The negotiation of an integrated identity can be an arduous task filled with hurdles and disappointments. Each experience which unfolds through the stories narrated by my informants about how they struggled (and some still do) with their conflicts is unique, even if the underlying causes of conflict may somehow unite them (Subhi et al 2011, p. 196). Some experiences are less painful as informants manage to cope with their dilemmas more successfully and in a shorter time than others. Others go through a great deal of stress and suffering, at times even risking death. LGBT people of faith deal with their conflicts in different ways. They may reject either their sexual or their religious identity; they may succeed in reconciling both identities; they may compartmentalise the two aspects of their identity or they may continue to live with the conflict (Levy & Reeves 2011, p. 54; Rodriguez & Ouelette 2000, p. 334). Research has shown that the conflict experienced by LGB individuals may lead them to leave their religion or to modify their religious practice (Lapinski & McKirnan 2013, p. 866; Schuck & Liddle 2001, p. 71). They may choose their religion over their sexuality, struggling to conform to social expectations, praying that their sexual desires will go away (Wilcox 2003, pp. 10-11). Others choose their LGBT identity and reject their offending Church while others try to find a middle ground. According to Rodriguez & Ouelette (2000, p. 334), rejection of one's homosexual identity may involve seeking reparative therapy, something which hardly featured among the participants in my study. Among my LGBT Catholic informants the initial reaction was often to deny or to fight against their sexuality, to make it go away rather than to abandon their religion. Although a few kept away from God or from religious rituals for periods of their life, giving up this aspect of one's identity was not generally an option. Most informants sought ways of reconciling the two seemingly incompatible elements as they eventually recognised the importance of retaining both.

Compartmentalisation (Rodriguez & Ouelette 2000, p. 334) involves efforts to keep faith and sexuality distinct from each other. This may serve to counteract the stigma especially among those who are not yet open about their sexuality (Yip & Page 2013, p. 122). Otherwise they may have to face the consequences.

Compartmentalisation may also take place in contexts where people feel it makes more sense not to reveal their sexual orientation even if they may be 'out' or if they may have been engaged in same-sex relationships. A number of my gay informants who for a time lived in a religious community had to put their sexuality aside while they were with their respective orders. Gabriella deliberately chose not to be open about her sexual orientation when she was officially involved in Church activities. She even used to chair one of the Church's commissions without letting her bisexuality surface or interfere in any way. She was 'out' only to a few people at the time "but to be part of that I understood that I had to in a way, not show who I really am. I used to feel it. It used to limit me and to frustrate me". In fact there are those who resist compartmentalisation and prefer to seek ways of integrating the two aspects of their identity or to take other decisions such as avoiding participation in religious activities. Gabriella eventually "felt that this was not who I am and I had to be 'out' to the world, so I stopped these things".

Some writers have sought to explain the process of religious and/or sexual identity development by identifying a series of often linear and progressive stages (Fowler 1981; Troiden 1989a, 1989b; Cass 1979, 1984). However, stage models have been called into question not only for their assumed progressive linearity but also for their tendency to be prescriptive (Levy & Reeves 2011, p. 56). Furthermore, these theoretical models did not combine faith and sexual identity development but were only concerned with either one or the other. Other studies (Lapinski & McKirnan 2013; Levy & Lo 2013; Levy & Reeves 2011) produced models of identity conflict resolution which sought to combine both dimensions of identity, also in terms of stages or processes.

I will be approaching identity reconstruction as a process of synthesis where individuals seek to reconcile their different statuses and experiences into an integrated sense of self through a hermeneutic process in which they themselves are both subjects and objects of interpretation. Based on his ethnographic fieldwork among gay Muslims in Indonesia, anthropologist Tom Boellstorff (2007, pp. 141-143) describes his interlocutors as having to deal with their being

“ungrammatical”. Within Islamic Indonesian society, homosexuality is not only considered false but also incommensurable, as if it does not exist. Dealing with their faith and sexual desires as Muslim gay men is like having to make sense of a phrase which reads “earth happy twelve the”. Therefore interpretation is of utmost importance especially in the absence of an Islamic discursive framework concerning homosexuality. Most of my informants were brought up in a social and moral environment which also did not offer them much in terms of self-understanding except the interpretation of the Roman Catholic Church. However, nowadays contemporary society provides them with “new mechanisms” (Giddens 1991 p. 2) which enable them to take an active role in the construction of their own identity and which may leave an impact on the wider social context. The reconstruction of self-identity is not simply shaped by outside forces in a passive way but is acted upon by LGBT Catholics who frequently seek the help of others such as therapists, priests and theologians, prayer and support groups to guide them in their endeavours to build an alternative hermeneutic of the self. Rather than passively accepting their stigmatic label, LGBT Christians develop an affirmative self-identity which counters that of the Church but is simultaneously embedded within Catholicism and enables them to remain within the Catholic fold.

6.2 Means of narrativisation

A self-affirming narrative emerges out of a process of negotiation and growth through which LGBT Catholics strive to achieve some degree of balance or reconciliation between their incongruent sexual and religious identities without following any particular pattern. It is a continuous process rather than a “two-dimensional or bipolar construct” (Rodriguez 2010, p. 17). It is not a dichotomous experience of switching from one state to another or a linear, progressive sequence of events. It is a transitional process during which LGBT Catholics make use of what in the literature are often referred to as strategies (Mahaffy 1996; Pietkiewicz & Kołodziejczyk-Skrzypek 2016; Rodriguez 2010; Rodriguez & Ouelette 2000; Wilcox 2003, 2009; Yip 1997a, 1997b, 2005a; Yip & Page 2013) in their

efforts to understand and accept themselves and the possibility that one can be both LGBT and Catholic. At any time during this process of identity negotiation or reconciliation, the doubts and the questions may return. It is a process characterised by ups and downs, by progress, satisfaction and reassurance as much as by anxiety, depression and nagging questions. These processes imply some kind of action or initiative on the part of the individual. They are ways of coping with the conflict, of reducing the guilt and the fear. They are attempts at answering the many questions and understanding oneself. These endeavours appear to be rather similar within Judaism, Christianity and Islam (Wilcox 2009, p. 166).

Here I will be discussing the ways in which my LGBT Catholic informants sought to engage with their conflicts. Especially in the beginning some may have joined religious orders, sought spiritual direction, often combined with psychological help. They may have tried to repress their sexuality while seeking to learn more about their feelings and about the experiences of others in a similar situation. They may have sought help from friends, knowledge from books and websites. They may have joined faith-based groups such as *Drachma* and *Ali d'Aquila*. Such endeavours equipped them with the necessary tools and the skills to eventually be able to reconstruct a more coherent sense of self and to develop an alternative moral hermeneutic which embraces both their faith and their sexuality.

6.2.1 The combination of therapy and spiritual direction

Very few of my LGBT Catholic informants did not consult a psychotherapist, a psychologist or even a psychiatrist, to help them come to terms with their sexual orientation or with their internal conflicts arising from their incongruent sense of self. For some, therapy is an integral part of their life. For others it is about a temporary turbulent period in their life where they needed to deal with specific issues while some keep returning to their therapist whenever they feel the need. This is not surprising in our 'therapeutic culture' where therapy has become an institution carrying a great deal of legitimacy (Illouz 2008, p. 6). Giddens (1991 p.

34) contends that therapy has become the “secular version of the confessional”. *Drachma* itself has a special arrangement with a psychologist who specialises in sexuality-related issues to offer his services for free to *Drachma* members.

As a result of the medicalisation of social life, what was once considered to be a moral issue has now become a disease which needs to be healed and the individual who goes to therapy is a “diseased self” whose self development was, according to Illouz (2008 p. 173), obstructed or hindered in some way. However, it is moral dilemmas which often push my informants towards therapy. In fact, while some manage to deal with their fears and doubts through therapy alone, others feel the need to combine their therapy with guidance and support from a spiritual director. They may consult a therapist who would himself be a priest or a theologian. I have already made reference to the important role of individual priests in giving my informants spiritual direction. Adriana, the Sicilian lawyer who was brought up within the *Focolare Movement*, only started to find some relief from her devastation through therapy. Her psychologist helped her deal with her guilt, confusion and with her many conflicts and to gradually and reluctantly learn to accept her homosexuality as natural. However, psychology could only help her “accept things from a human point of view” because “regardless of what the psychologist said, although it did feel natural to me, I could not reconcile the human dimension with what God wanted from me”. She only started to address these aspects of her conflict through *Ali d’Aquila* although she still continued visiting her therapist, “Because I want to reconcile these doubts, I want to complete the journey”. Tyrone started seeing a therapist when he was twenty-one years old and still consults her now in his late thirties, especially in relation to his issues with intimacy. His main problem lies with his attraction to both women and men and with apparently having a ‘choice’. It was while he was consulting a theologian friend of his that he seemed to finally come to his “cathartic moment”. The theologian told him that he is sexually attracted to both sexes but relationally attracted to men, “And it was as if he summarised my life for me. And I wept and wept. I finally could understand myself and relate my two sides”. Nowadays, Tyrone does not believe that he can choose with whom to fall in love even if he

can choose whether or not to go to gay bars or whether or not to watch gay porn. Illouz (2008, p. 173) refers to the “therapeutic narrative” of the self which is embedded in a sense of victimhood and suffering. It enables individuals to speak about themselves and to understand themselves through their own narrative using therapeutic language as Tyrone did when speaking about his relief at finally coming to an understanding of his torn sense of self. This is helped by the diffusion of psychological knowledge and its broader accessibility.

When Debbie was devastated by her guilt at suspecting she is a lesbian, her friend who was studying psychology recommended one of his lecturers to her. She started therapy and, “After six, seven months I could joke about my sexuality”. Francesco considers therapy to have helped him to “look inside” himself, more in the sense of dealing with issues which had been suppressed or ignored for years rather than simply in terms of introspection. He was part of the *Focolare Movement* in Palermo when he was younger until he left because he could not even speak about his homosexuality, let alone express it while still within the Movement. However, it was still a psychologist who worked as a volunteer with the same *Focolare Movement* who started him on his ‘journey’ together with a priest from outside the Movement. He was confused and he could not speak about his problems. Psychotherapy taught him how to explore his feelings, not only in relation to homosexuality but also in terms of unresolved issues with his parents as well as in his search for God. It helped him to see things differently. He could even, for the first time, express his anger and criticism at the Church.

This fusion between therapy and spiritual direction was experienced most strongly by some of those who were in religious formation. While hardly any of my informants considered the issue of their homosexuality to have featured as a strong motivating factor behind their decisions to join a religious order, in some cases, conventual life might have unconsciously served as a safe alternative to having to deal with their homosexuality or as a means of proving that they are not ‘bad’ persons, as they might have felt at the time. Yet for a couple of my informants, it was the experience of religious life itself which enabled them to

effectively reconcile their spirituality with their homosexuality, to find and accept themselves, to be 'liberated'. When Joseph went through the discernment process with his mentor to decide whether he wanted to join the order, he claims that his sexuality did not play a role as "the only sexuality that could have been part of it was heterosexuality". It was through therapy that Joseph could finally face his homosexuality which he had denied and repressed for many years.

During his religious formation which lasted six years, he had been seeing a psychologist priest and,

I woke up and went in front of the mirror in my room. I looked into my eyes and I said, "Joseph you are gay and there's nothing wrong in that". And that's where I liberated myself. I cried a lot. There was a big lump in my throat, and a huge burden. I arrived there because of the therapy I was doing with that Father although by then I had stopped going because I did not think it was going anywhere.

Joseph also attributes his ability to break down his enormous barriers to his studies in philosophy which made him realise that there are a lot of grey areas in life. Coming from a scientific academic background, he was used to seeing the world in either black or white. Through therapy "I succeeded in saying it. I knew what was in the box". He could finally confront his internal dilemmas and stop believing that he was an 'intrinsically bad' person.

While Nick's story is very different from that of Joseph, he was also in religious formation when he was referred to professional counselling by his novice master to deal with his conflicts. Nick's experience of the Maltese gay scene in his youth had instilled in him a feeling of being evil and dirty. He had moved away from God but returned when he felt God was calling him. He wanted "to live the gospel at a radical level" but psychologically he also wanted to prove his worth as a gay person in God's eyes. Nick joined the order after more than a year with the *Charismatic Renewal Movement* where he had learned to perceive homosexuality as evil. However, he had always thought that God saw him as a bad or evil person. Counselling helped him to acknowledge the love of God.

Being able to acknowledge one's feelings, to evaluate them and speak or even joke about them, to try to find solutions with the tools provided by therapy is a reflection of emotional competence or intelligence. Illouz (2007, p. 4) considers the possession of "emotional competence" not only as a form of capital which may prove to be socially beneficial especially in a culture of "emotional capitalism" but also as a means of enabling middle class people to find happiness in their private life. This claim tends to assume that middle class people are more likely than their working class counterparts to be emotionally competent, that they are better able at reflecting upon their feelings, emotions and experiences and at articulating them in such a way as to help them to resolve their issues cognitively.

One way in which one may look at how social class and sexuality intertwine is through the concept of 'intersectionality' (Weston 2010, pp. 15-16) which was developed by Crenshaw (1991) in her work on identity politics and women of colour. Intersectionality assumes that gender "is never just gender" (Weston 2010 p. 17) but the way it is experienced or negotiated is influenced by other factors such as one's religion, social class, age and ethnicity. In the case of my informants, being LGBT, Catholic and middle class (and mostly male), was bound to affect the process of dealing with identity conflict. Having the privilege of a tertiary education and a sound knowledge of theology certainly made both the therapeutic language and concepts as well as various schools of theology, including gay-affirming theologies more easily accessible to my LGBT male informants. Their educational capital enabled them to enhance their knowledge about their situation, to read about it, to use therapeutic tools and concepts to evaluate their conflict, to reflect on it, to rationalise it. They could articulate their ideas and challenge taken for granted assumptions such as Church doctrine and social norms about sexuality and in the process develop an alternative, self-affirming, moral rhetoric. Considering the tendency for research on LGBT sexuality to draw upon samples of middle class, white participants (largely male), it is not the first time that the issues of social class and LGBT sexuality have been explored within the context of faith groups, although they tend to remain undertheorised according to Taylor (2010, p. 38).

6.2.2 Reflective deliberation

It is common for LGBT informants to engage in self-reflection, another means of narrative development. This is usually a rational, introspective process of deep pondering in which informants reflect upon themselves and their life as they try to make sense of who they are and where they are heading. The importance they give to therapy also reflects this process of reflection in which the individual is confronted with multiple options and alternatives (Giddens 1991, p. 34). When I interviewed Luigi in Palermo in August of 2015, he told me that he was taking a break from religious practice. He was “*in pausa*” as he put it. He had “chosen to exclude myself, to reflect a bit”. He had started questioning at around sixteen and when I met him he was in his early thirties. When he was about twenty, he had abandoned his role of catechist and embarked on another period of reflection which lasted for about two years. The combination of educational capital and therapeutic discourse serves to enrich this contemplative self-analytic process and to equip the individual with the required explanatory vocabulary. It enables them to develop their personal narrative which as I will be arguing, serves as a way of bringing together the pieces of their life in a more coherent manner, not in a chronological sense but as a discerning, interpretation of their story in terms of analytical categories and processes, “as parts of a plot” (Polkinghorne 1991 p. 136).

As identity has become more fluid, transient and elusive in contemporary society, individuals may disassociate themselves from traditional roles, structures and norms and engage in “reflexive life projects with the self in the driver’s seat” (Gross & Yip 2010, p. 56). With the onset of individualisation (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002) in late, advanced or reflexive modernity, it has been suggested (Giddens 1991, p. 3) that individuals are increasingly looking inside themselves as agents and sources of meaning rather than towards traditional systems and structures. However, as I have argued, my informants are reluctant to let go completely of traditional systems of meaning. As modern reflective selves, individuals are not necessarily anti-institutional. On the contrary they may draw upon the resources provided by institutions and belief systems and engage with

them in a critical, interpretive fashion. Indeed, such views, which were also expounded by Heelas (1996), have been criticised for assuming the existence of a self-reflexive self while ignoring the social, structural and cultural formations which are bound to have an impact on the formation of the self. They also tend to assume that resources are equally distributed (Wood 2007, pp. 60-65).

These long periods of contemplative thinking and deliberation undertaken by LGBT informants could at times take different forms of expression as well as become interactive. Chris described an intense period of reflection during his early encounters with *Drachma*, when he was still trying to decipher himself, after having quit his role of Catechist within the *MUSEUM*. He explained to me how he used to express his deep thoughts in writing, engaging in dialogue with Mario. However his reflections were also a way of pouring out his soul to God:

I remember it was Thursday after Easter. And I was doing my usual walk around Mosta and I had a brainwave/inspiration and I went home and wrote a 3000-word letter of a gay Catholic and that was my big breakthrough. I sent it to Mario [previous *Drachma* coordinator] and he told me how beautiful it was and whether he could put it on the website [under a *nome de plume*]. And from then on I started putting in writing what was in my mind and I wrote about 40,000 words in that period. It was also an intense spiritual experience. It was not just an expression of my thoughts but it was almost in dialogue with God. Internally I was literally addressing the big issues and also arguing with them: Sexuality, on a biblical, theological, sexual level and I was sending them to Mario and putting them on the website. I was still seeing my spiritual director. And after every one, Mario used to send me comments and reflections and I felt that it was a good virtual space in which I was growing. And I was making big strides..... And this encouraged me to continue writing and writing and writing.

Although for my Maltese Catholic informants, a Catholic identity is to a large extent a 'given', this is still negotiated, questioned and explored just as much as sexuality in this process of introspective self-understanding where the self is "routinely created and sustained in the reflective activities of the individual" (Giddens 1991 p. 52). This "relationship with the self" is not just about becoming conscious of the self, getting to know the self but also about becoming "ethical subjects". Individuals establish their moral goals and transform themselves into "subjects of moral conduct" (Foucault 1984, pp. 28-29). Writing about the context of rural Ireland, Salazar (2006, pp. 115-116) sees a shift from a sexual morality

which was based on disciplining the body, especially women's bodies, to a sexual morality which disciplines the self "as a knowledgeable and responsible subject". Individuals cannot become ethical subjects unless they become knowledgeable. Consequently, Salazar sees what he terms "obedience-sexuality", where sexual morality is based on the dictates of the Church, being replaced by "knowledge sexuality". Foucault (1984, p. 29) however contends that every morality, broadly speaking, encompasses both these elements, i.e. established moral codes and forms of subjectivation. They can never be completely set apart although they can develop independently from each other. Among my informants, the development of the 'ethical self' is embedded in Christian principles which are however revisited and re-evaluated in the process of engaging with the self. My informants tend to consider their experience as a way of testing and developing their faith. They had to ask questions which they would not have asked had they not been faced with the challenges of their sexuality. The conflict they had to go through therefore gave them the opportunity to reflect critically on their faith, often strengthening it in the long run, even if for a time, they may have distanced themselves from God or from the Church. This engagement with the faith from the standpoint of one's lived realities is a process which non-LGBT informants also experience to some extent as their circumstances in life 'force' them to approach their faith from a new perspective and to ponder on their life and their faith in a way they never needed to before.

Chris told me that since leaving *MUSEUM*, he went through a process of "faith deconstruction". He had come out of a religious context where one hardly questions anything that the Pope or the Church said,

You almost have a crisis of conscience if you question. Once I was out of the confines of *mużew* I had a certain degree of freedom and one of my main targets was to deconstruct myself and my faith. In *mużew* there were a lot of guilt complexes. So I felt I needed to deconstruct my faith to find out what is essential in my faith. I needed to explore why. I needed to build my faith as a mature person not simply accept everything that the Church tells me.

6.2.3 LGBT-affirming religious communities and support groups

Despite their desire to be accepted by the Church and their endeavours to justify their rightful place within the wider religious community, LGBT Catholics may be pushed towards “subaltern communities of faith” (Thumma & Gray 2005 p. xiii). Rodriguez (2010, pp. 19-20) considers joining an organisation which promotes both homosexuality and religion as one of the principal, if not *the* main sites of identity integration for LGBT Catholics. From his research into the life stories of gay male Christian couples, Yip (1997c, pp. 123-128) found that participation in such faith groups served many functions. Participants could give and receive moral and emotional support. They could interact socially without needing to hide their sexuality. Especially for those who feel alienated from the Church, these religious groups offer a safe space where one could meet others in the same situation and know that they are not alone. LGBT-affirming environments offer a ‘safe space’ where individuals feel they can be themselves (Kaufman & Johnson 2004, p. 822). In these spaces, individuals could learn to affirm their sexual and spiritual selves by engaging with Christian theologies of sexuality and at the same time strive for change within the Church.

Although homosexuality has historically been the target of intolerance in Christian communities (Boswell 1980, p. 4), LGBT people appear to have been involved in these communities at least since the middle of the 20th century (Hopkins 2014, p. 163). There is evidence that the formation and development of faith-based LGBT activism formed part of the gay rights movement from the beginning. The stigma and the homophobia which were so endemic within institutional Christianity and which often pushed LGBT believers out of local church communities upon ‘coming out’, led to the formation of LGBT faith organisations which not only challenged Church doctrine, discourse and authority on matters pertaining to sexuality but also offered LGBT individuals a path towards sacralisation (Hopkins 2014, p. 173). In contexts where these are available, LGBT people of faith may form part of gay-positive churches such as the *Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches* which originated in the United States but which offer services in different countries across the world, informally known as *MCC* (Rodriguez &

Ouelette 2000; Wilcox 2003). Rodriguez & Ouelette (2000, p. 335) define a gay-positive Church as “a formal Christian religious institution that preaches a positive message about homosexuality and ministers specifically to the gay and lesbian community”. No such communities exist in Malta and Palermo. Although *Drachma* was supported by some members of the Catholic clergy, LGBT congregations do not exist. In Palermo, members of *Ali d’Aquila* participate in the Catholic community of *San Francesco Saverio* which is administered by Father Cosimo Scordato who practises an inclusive policy, welcoming people from all walks of life, different faiths and having different personal circumstances including LGBT Catholics. This has made a difference in the life of the members of *Ali d’Aquila* who felt drawn once again to religious rituals. Francesco, who was previously active in the *Focolare Movement*, had not been attending church for many years. He was angry “that I could not live my life as myself, where I could not present myself as I am”. Now he just goes to *San Saverio* where he has experienced some “strong moments”. He told me that once, during mass, Father Scordato told the congregation that there were homosexuals among them,

You know he sort of made it official and he said, “Here we do not discriminate against homosexuals”. And he asked us to stand up so that the community will know who we are. He is about seventy. He is an activist and very open about a lot of things like female priesthood and being anti-mafia.

However, *San Saverio* is a gay-friendly church not a gay-positive church. It welcomes LGBT individuals but it is not specifically concerned with facilitating the integration of non-heterosexuality and faith. Wilcox (2009, p. 187) would describe the impact of the LGBT Catholic community on *San Saverio* as a “queering of sacred space” in the sense that religious communities not only shape LGBT individuals and “sacralize” queer spaces but may themselves be transformed by queer selves.

In the absence of gay-positive or even gay-friendly spaces within the Church itself (*San Saverio* being an exception), gay-positive groups such as *Drachma* and *Ali d’Aquila* fill the void that many LGBT Catholics are faced with in their search for such faith niches. Although *Drachma* prefers to present itself as ‘a safe space’ for

individuals seeking spiritual and sexual integration rather than as a support group, at times it finds itself performing the latter role. Either on an individual basis or during the monthly meetings, *Drachma* guides those who seek its support or those who attend the meetings in how to develop a more positive conception of self. Like other groups with a similar mission such as *Accept* (Wolkomir 2001), *Quest* (Yip 1997b), *Dignity* (Dillon 1999), *Faith and Rainbow* (Hall 2015) or *Good News* (Thumma 1991), *Drachma* and *Ali d'Aquila* help people to redefine their situation, to revise their Christian ideologies, constructing a modified version of Christianity which accommodates their sexuality. It is a challenging process which enables LGBT Christians to regain their confidence as authentic Christians, to believe in the possibility of being gay and Christian (Wolkomir 2001, p. 311). These groups help them to fight and overcome their “deviant” label (Yip 1997b, p. 178) and to realise that they are not the only ones who are struggling with their conflicts. This contributes significantly to the development of a positive self-identity. Such groups help them to redefine their sense of self and to realise that being gay and Christian is “no longer an oxymoron” (Drumm 2005, p. 47; Wolkomir 2001, p. 308), that there is no one universal way of living and experiencing Catholicism (Dillon 1999, p. 31). Through group participation, they learn how to ‘come out to God’ (Glaser 1991) as both sexual and spiritual beings.

Some of those who approach LGBT faith groups for the first time tend to be still struggling with their conflicting identities although, as Chris likes to say, “Members are at different stages of their journey”. There are those who approach such groups because they are attracted to their alternative spiritual dimension. Similar to what I observed among the *separati*, others may be lured by the possibility of meeting someone with whom to start a relationship. Those who are drawn to these groups are likely to have formed part of other faith-based groups in the past or may still do. Some *Drachma* members do not attend regularly because they are more involved in *Christian Life Community* (CLC). CLC is not an LGBT-positive group but they feel accepted there. This does not apply, however, to certain other groups to which some members of *Drachma* or *Ali d'Aquila* belonged in the past. The years that Henry spent with both the *Neocatechumenal Way* and the

Charismatic Movement left him scarred leading him to describe *Drachma* as “a breath of fresh air”. When he started attending *Drachma*, he was still struggling to understand why the Church did not accept him. He still doubted God’s love for him as a gay person. *Drachma* helped him “to distinguish between God and the Church, between my relationship with Jesus and my views about the Church”. *Drachma’s* philosophy goes a step further than this, reassuring its members that God loves them not despite their homosexuality but *because* of it. Chris likes to remind members of the group that “*Drachma* may be at the periphery of the Church but, being close to Jesus, it is in the centre because the centre of the Church is Jesus”. As I will explain in more detail, one important function of *Drachma* in the narrativisation process undertaken by informants is to equip them with the skills and the resources for the *reading* of holy texts from an LGBT perspective. In Chapter II, I showed how *Drachma’s* interpretation of the parable of the lost coin is completely different from how it is generally explained in Catholic teaching. In this way *Drachma* not only challenges the official interpretive authority of the Church but transfers that authority upon itself and upon its individual members. It guides its members in deconstructing hegemonic religious discourse and reconstructing the meaning of God’s words to fit the LGBT experience. Both *Ali d’Aquila* and *Drachma* conduct their activities within an inclusive philosophical framework which draws upon alternative (mainly Catholic) theologies and spiritualities specifically meant to facilitate the emergence of a more positive and integrated self-concept among LGBT faithful.

Since its foundation, *Drachma* offered its members the theological tools to understand themselves and their sexuality away from the structures of the Catholic Church but still through Catholic theology. Kurt feels that it was through *Drachma* that he grew spiritually and learned how to approach the scriptures from a different perspective:

Mario used to give many interesting perspectives and I started developing my own perspective. Whereas before I was rigid, so this is what it’s saying.. ok you understand the context of those times but I never thought I could look at it from a queer perspective and *Drachma* helped me to do that. We used to watch these films, docudramas about people who are gay and their experience in the Church and they were very interesting. They were a learning experience.

For those who, like Kurt, nowadays are at peace with themselves as gay Catholics, *Drachma* used to offer a space in which to embrace and share Catholic theology and to contribute to theological debate. However, nowadays, there is very little that *Drachma* still offers these people who have taken a peripheral role. Once individuals manage to integrate their spirituality with their sexuality and feel at peace with God, they may feel equipped with the right tools so that they “can be of service to others”. Debbie nowadays represents *Drachma* in international fora especially since she lives abroad. She feels that considering how much she struggled until she realised that “it’s ok to be lesbian and Christian”, she felt that she “could not move away”,

Because I struggled so much to ‘come out’, I wanted to pass on a message and I wanted it to be loud and clear. You have to help people because there are other LGBT people suffering, not being able to reach out, not being able to talk about it, not being able to integrate, to reconcile their sexuality and spirituality, so I stayed with *Drachma*, and I’m still with *Drachma* to a certain extent.

This issue of being of service to others was similarly felt by those who feel integrated enough within *Ali d’Aquila*. Luigi, one of the founders of the group in Palermo, also observed that within the Church there is a vacuum in terms of pastoral services for LGBT Catholics that is being filled by these organisations.

Especially since Chris took over its coordination, *Drachma* has not managed to develop in such a way as to continue being relevant to this ‘generation’ of LGBT Catholics whose main interest is to live their spirituality more profoundly. Therefore, while remaining in touch with *Drachma*, they have generally stopped being active participants. There are those who have turned away from *Drachma* completely because they feel that it has become too much involved with Church structures, seeking ecclesiastical approval. Karl felt that *Drachma* was holding him back, “They’re too concerned with the Archbishop [*Mohħhom fl-isqof!*]”. Theresa was also disappointed with Chris because he gives her “too much the feeling of a priest. He preaches. You cannot relate”.

When I joined *Drachma* as a researcher it was in transition as Chris had just taken over its coordination. Considering his background as a catechist, Chris sees his role as being primarily of a pastoral nature, especially in the absence of such a space within the Church. He likes to refer to *Drachma* as “a sacred, safe space” which offers members “a sense of community, a sense of family, a sense of belonging. I am very protective first of all because it is a sacred space and at the same time I have to protect these vulnerable people”. Chris’ approach is effective, especially with those who yearn for a sense of community and for the opportunity to share their experience with others. While the current *Drachma* formation still does not present itself so much as a support group, the sharing of stories is being given more space, mainly because there are those who feel the need for it. It is not the first time that during meetings, individuals start talking about their own personal experiences rather than stick to the topic at hand and Chris seems willing to give them this space especially since this may have a therapeutic effect for some.

I remember the time when Henry shared his story during one *Drachma* meeting. He was very keen to speak at length about his experiences and he was irritated every time he was interrupted before he finished narrating his story of guilt, depression, doubts and pain and of how he eventually found some hope in *Drachma* and his new relationship. The following email, reproduced almost verbatim, shows the significance that sharing personal experiences within the group has for *Henry*:

14th July 2014

What a beautiful talk and sharing yesterday! You gave me the courage to speak out Kurt and the rest. It was so genuine and touching. Now that I write I feel like a warm feeling inside. The meeting was blessed. Thanks for everything. I owe much to Drachma for keeping me going. I’ve really found a family, more than a family. You are all GREAT people. God bless you.

Due to his past experience of belonging to faith communities, for Henry this sense of ‘family’ is very important, perhaps also because he has lost both his parents and his brother. However it is not only individuals like Henry who manage to reap some benefits from *Drachma* even if not everyone desires this sense of community as strongly as Henry. Daniel and Noah who met through *Drachma* and

are in a relationship, both consider *Drachma* to have been beneficial in one way or another. Daniel discovered *Drachma* through the internet. He had been reading John McNeal's theology but since he joined *Drachma* he started reading more about gay spirituality and alternative theologies. Noah says that what he got most from *Drachma* is,

That you can be Catholic and gay at the same time and the fact that I met other people who are more advanced in their journey than me and that it is not impossible. It means that I am not alone and that already means a lot to me. I just felt exonerated. I was not part of the Church. Since I joined *Drachma* I am reading more, you discuss with others and you learn.

According to Noah, *Drachma* also helped his relationship with God although "It never went back to how it was before, when I was young. I did not go back to that piety but I acknowledge his presence more". Under Chris' coordination, *Drachma* has become more structured as an organisation and more diversified in its activities. It organises public lectures very often in conjunction with *Drachma Parents*. It meets Church authorities, it published a book for parents with LGBT children, it organises the occasional mass, a few social activities as well as its monthly prayer meetings. Attendance fluctuates and people come and go although around ten people used to attend regularly during my fieldwork. These managed to build quite a strong bond among themselves although I would not go as far as describing their relationship as one based on "mutuality of being" or kinship (Sahlins 2013, p. 2). It was a relationship which transcended *Drachma* as indicated elsewhere but still based on rather loose ties.

Ali d'Aquila also seeks to meet the needs of its members through the facilitation and support of those who feel integrated enough to be in a position to help others. According to Luigi, "Listening to others is already enough". The effectiveness of such groups is mostly felt when they succeed in alleviating the pain and in addressing the insecurities of those who have been suffering for years as a result of their conflict.

However, such LGBT faith groups do not appeal to everyone, especially to those who prefer to seek their spirituality, support structures or friendships elsewhere, away from group structures and even beyond the boundaries of Catholicism. Nick is one of those who do not involve themselves much in church rituals, except for the occasional mass. Yet spirituality is very important in his life. He finds *Drachma* very limiting. On the few times he attended he felt that,

There's a lot of victimisation. Pity me, the Church does not understand me. I don't pity myself. There was a time... Why limit yourself? Why do you have to be Catholic gays? My partner and I were always searching, searching... the Quakers were the closest [to our sense of spirituality]. You don't have to be Catholic. You sit down for an hour and reflect. No ceremonies, it's about the silence. You can be Catholic, atheist, buddhist. If you're Christian you pray to a Christian God...pray to whatever, an hour of silence and deep listening.

Joseph and Steve do not frequent *Drachma* because they refuse to be relegated to second division, so to speak. Both feel that as gay persons they should be embraced by the Church as part of the wider community and not made to find shelter in some 'ghetto' as Joseph calls it. This does not mean that those who actually participate in LGBT faith groups like *Drachma* would not like to be part of an all-embracing Church. However, Joseph is also sceptical about *Drachma's* efforts to negotiate with Church authorities. He feels that reaching out to the Church is futile, "Because in the end *Drachma* will not succeed in bringing about a change in the Church. The archbishop is not doing anything to take a stand to take to Rome, it's all bullshit at the end of the day". Steve also feels that his place is within the wider Catholic community. He is critical of *Drachma's* philosophy of 'queering': "The Church could be the straightest place on earth and I would still feel comfortable in it. If in the Church nobody is gay, why should I keep searching so that I will find someone who is like me in order to feel ok?"

Despite their limitations, LGBT faith groups have the important role of facilitating the acceptance of one's sexuality as part of God's wider plan and that it is possible to be an LGBT Catholic. They enable LGBT believers to reconstruct their identity in terms of a reinterpretation of how one can live the Catholic experience without having to give up or repress any aspect of what makes them who they are.

6.3 Narratives of a reconstructed self

The various sources of support, learning, understanding and spiritual growth furnish LGBT Catholics with the necessary techniques and skills which facilitate the process of identity reconstruction. They provide them with “the rhetoric of conversion” (Harding 1987, p. 167), a blend of practices, symbols and vocabulary which enable them to shift from “from one worldview, or mind-set, to another”; to revisit their cultural assumptions and re-evaluate their self-concept equipped with these newly acquired methods of organising and interpreting their experiences (Harding 1987, p. 168).

My LGBT informants speak of this process of self-transformation as a ‘journey’ of growth, exploration, self-reflection and discovery. Journey and travel metaphors are common in the literature pertaining to identity negotiation among LGBT people of faith (inter alia Browne, Munt & Yip 2010; Gross & Yip 2010; Rodriguez 2010; Rosser 1992; Schnoor 2006; Shallenberger 1996; Subhi et al 2011; Taylor & Barnes 2015; Thumma 1991; White & White Jr. 2004; Wilcox 2003, 2009; Yip 1997a, 1997b, 2002; Yip & Page 2013) and are often used by both my Maltese and Sicilian informants. Seeing one’s self-transformation in terms of a journey is a metaphor which is derived from contemporary Western spiritual discourse and which is not exclusive to LGBT people of faith. It implies that there is some kind of destination which for LGBT informants could be a goal such as self-acceptance or achieving a coherent sense of identity. However, there is also the notion of a path or a road that one travels as one seeks to enhance one’s theological understanding and spiritual growth and to ‘find’ oneself in the process. The ‘journey’ that my informants embark on is rather fluid, characterised by many hurdles and one whose destination is never reached with any certainty. From their perspective as Catholic believers, my informants also “journeyed with God” (Wilcox 2003 p. 50).

LGBT informants view their ‘journey’ of self-reconstruction as an experience of change from an ‘old’ to a ‘new’ self, reminiscent of the ‘born again’ spiritual experiences found in some Christian denominations. During one *Drachma* meeting, the discussion revolved around a reading of a letter that St Paul wrote to

the Ephesians (Ephesians 4:20-24)³¹ urging them to shed their old self, “corrupted by its deceitful desires and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness”. From the discussion that ensued, it emerged that for *Drachma* members, the ‘old’ self is not that of someone who had homosexual desires or relationships and who changed one’s ways by controlling such desires in order to live according to Catholic teaching. On the contrary, the ‘old’ self was described as “not being who I really am”, denying one’s homosexuality while the ‘new’ self means accepting oneself, acknowledging and accepting God’s love. LGBT Catholics learn to perceive God as the one who created them, who knows them and their desires and who does not condemn them for loving other men. It is about a shift from a past self riddled with doubt and guilt towards a more integrated and confident sense of self. It is a conception of self which emerges from an evolving narrative of sexual and spiritual integration. Writing about autobiography and change, Barros (1992, p. 1) notes that with stories about one’s life, the narrator is declaring that s/he has not always been as s/he is now. It implies that there is a ‘before’ and ‘after’ as individuals experience some kind of transformation. This fits very well with the idea of the self as ‘a journey’ held by many of my informants and with the idea of shedding an ‘old’ self and putting on the ‘new’ self. Despite the idea of a past self being replaced by a ‘new’ self, however, the narrated self is still not presented as a dichotomous contrast where one leaves the past behind and simply moves forward to a new present as a changed person. It is a continuous process of self-exploration, construction, deconstruction and reconstruction of one’s narrative. It is “a kind of inner rite of passage” (Harding 1987, p. 170) which LGBT Catholics experience as they engage with various resources which empower them to continue on their ‘journey’.

Individuals are not simply products of culture (Cohen 1994, p. 139). As thinking beings, they are capable of manipulating and adapting the knowledge, the

³¹ 20 That, however, is not the way of life you learned 21 when you heard about Christ and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. 22 You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; 23 to be made new in the attitude of your minds; 24 and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

material, the symbols, the concepts and meanings, the tools which culture puts at their disposal. Indeed, some of my informants even claimed that they did 'their own' therapy. While the concept of agency is more ubiquitous in sociological literature, Geertz's (1973, p. 5) depiction of culture as "webs of significance" spun by individuals and in which they themselves are suspended is, according to Cohen (1994, p. 134) the closest anthropological equivalent. Foucault (1984, cited in Laidlaw 2002, p. 323) makes a similar argument in his discussion of how individuals engage in 'practices of the self'. He argues that the individual can only be actively engaged in practices which are culturally and historically produced, suggested or imposed.

The self is a "self in action" (Schrag 1997, p. 42). Knowing oneself is being able to tell one's story "in which the self is announced as at once actor and receiver of action" (Schrag 1997, p. 1). The self unfolds as a transformed, integrated sense of identity develops in conjunction with the emergence of a personal narrative which is capable of perceiving the spiritual/divine and the religious/institutional as separate spheres. It is a narrative which employs a vocabulary of neutralisation; which is inspired by alternative interpretations of religious texts. It is embedded in the rhetoric acquired through therapy, spiritual direction, reading and deep reflection. Narratives "hold the potential to inform, maintain, constrain or transform identities" (Creek 2014, p. 140) as identity is partly constructed through the stories people tell about themselves.

6.3.1 Stories of the self

Something which struck me about some of my LGBT informants was their enthusiasm to speak about their experiences. Although some were hesitant at first, many were willing to tell their story not only because I asked them to but because through telling their story they could make sense of that same story. Nowadays, stories about intimacy, and more specifically about homosexuality are no longer "a microscopic experience" (Plummer 1995, p. 87). What were once secret 'not talked about' stories, nowadays have taken on a more public, even

political character. Modern societies have witnessed a 'discursive explosion' (Foucault 1976, pp. 30-35). In our media saturated "therapeutic/expressive culture" (Plummer 1995, p. 125), sex is increasingly being talked about and analysed, creating a scientific and analytic discourse that furnishes the telling of sexual stories. However, the telling of stories is much more than sharing a biographical narrative within a cultural and historical context. It is also a means of making sense of one's life. The self comes to understand itself "at the crossroads of discourse and narration as a who of discourse in the guise of a narrating self, a *homo narrans*" (Schrag 1997, p. 26). As story-tellers, narrators can find themselves in stories which have already unfolded as well as endeavour to build a consciousness of self through becoming part of the plot of stories that are being made. Stories of the self involve a series of events which are organised together and come to make sense as part of an overall plot. Somers (1994 p. 616, italics in original) sees this as a process of "*causal emplotment*" involving the putting together of "connected parts" which are "embedded in *time* and *space*". As the self emerges, one is better able to tell one's story. Although stories are assembled from bits and pieces of experiences, recollections and memories, narrators are driven by a thread which helps them to bind together the different pieces into a plot (Plummer 1995, pp. 39-40). This thread in my informants was instigated by my questions and interests as a researcher but also by their primary concern to come to terms with themselves as both sexual beings and believers. In this sense, as indicated in Chapter II, I myself played an important role in the narrativisation process of my informants. Narrating one's story is more than just *speaking* to a researcher about one's experiences as one notes a "shift from a focus on *representational* to *ontological* narrativity". (Somers 1994, p. 613, italics in original).

Narratives are continuously evolving and being revised as new experiences, interactions and understandings may provide new perspectives on one's life and unforeseen circumstances may present new challenges. In the case of LGBT informants, the self is constantly being constructed and reconstructed in a non-linear fashion. Having diverted from the 'straight' path dictated by social and

moral expectations, narrators may go back and forth in time as they reinterpret their past experiences on the basis of more recent experiences and knowledge (Wilcox 2009, p. 178). Temporality is closely connected with the development of the self in a complex way. The self is enriched by temporal narrative. The self is a “temporalized self” emerging out of a series of events and experiences which are not just something which happened and is now gone. The individual’s past events are always open to new interpretations and new meanings just as the future is not simply a series of events that have yet to happen but a reading of “the self as possibility”, a “script in the making” (Schrag 1997, p. 37).

While *Ali d’Aquila* in Palermo gives central importance to personal narratives, within *Drachma*, the sharing of stories tends to be a rather recent development which was not encouraged when Mario was its coordinator. Under Mario’s direction, *Drachma*’s scope was not to act as a support group but as a space where sexuality and spirituality could be explored and reflected upon theologically. However, *Drachma*, together with the undertaking of academic studies in theology and in the humanities, still provided the necessary tools for its members to construct and reconstruct their own informed narratives, even if not to share them. Karl was telling me about his past involvement in *Drachma*, his studies in social work and the Masters in theology course which some members of *Drachma* had decided to do together. These enabled him to explore different spiritualities within Christianity and to explore the human aspect in more depth:

The deeper you go, it’s about who you are. The use of allegory, symbols, archetypes in literature, allegorical narratives. So this opened a new world, the artistic world, the literal and philosophic world of family and relationships. You learn to deconstruct certain types of intimate relationships and how one expresses his identity through stories.

Within *Ali d’Aquila*, sharing one’s story as well as listening to others telling their story are both considered to be salient features of the transformative experience and are given their due importance. According to Giovanni,

Testimonies are very much part of the meetings. Our testimonies are short and told by different persons. Our method allows everyone to say something about his or her life, about a particular theme. So every month gives you a better

knowledge of each other. Not one long story. We discovered during the workshop of conflict management that sharing is important.

Giovanni also gave me a small booklet published by *Ali d'Aquila* containing personal stories written by members of the group called *Testimonianze di fede e omosessualità: I giovani del gruppo Ali d'Aquila si raccontano* [Testimonies of faith and homosexuality: The young people of *Ali d'Aquila* tell their stories]. Luigi, one of the founding members of *Ali d'Aquila* had previously been part of another group, called *Coinonia*, an inter-confessional Christian group which combined sexuality with Bible study. He had been invited by a friend from the Valdensian Protestant Church because, as Luigi told me, "I felt the need and he knew that I wanted to speak about my experience with others". Some may want to share their stories with the scope of helping others who are still struggling with trying to come to terms with being LGBT persons of faith (Taylor & Barnes 2015, pp. 18-19). Listening to others narrating their experiences and how they coped with their conflict helps Adriana to deal with her own conflicts. Hearing the experiences of others, she realised that one can "continue to live normally" as a lesbian and a Catholic. Another interesting observation which attests to the value attached to stories by some of my informants from Palermo was made by Lucia during our conversation concerning the Church's perceived distance from the everyday life experiences of certain groups in society. I asked Lucia whether she feels that she has relegated herself to the margins of the Church because of her lesbian relationship. She told me that from her perspective, it is the other way round, "It is the centre of the Church which is away from the periphery because that is where the stories of life unfold. It is the Church which has distanced itself from the life stories of those who are separated, divorced, migrants..."

6.3.2 Separating God from his Church

As indicated in the previous chapter, one effective way in which my informants develop a positive narrative of the self is by changing their perception of God and their idea of how God perceives them. Arriving at a view of God as non-judgemental and all-embracing essentially entails distinguishing him from the

ecclesiastical institution. God comes to be perceived as perfect and is contrasted with the Church which is perceived as a fallible institution. Both sets of informants go through this process. For LGBT Catholics however, this tends to be a longer and more painful experience. When the internal conflict is still overwhelming, the Church's position on sexuality, especially by LGBT informants, tends to be interpreted not only as their rejection by the religious community but also as a rejection by God (Marcellino 1997, p. 46). However, with time they learn to differentiate the two.

Godwin makes a distinction between "that which is given to me by God and that which is representing what has been given to me by God". He feels that the Church transmits that which is given by God "in a deformed way". Within any institution "there is the imprint of man who is not perfect". He feels that the Church does not give a faithful representation of the word of God: "I don't feel that God is against me because I'm gay especially if you read the Bible and you see his teaching. When you see him forgiving those who used their sexuality to give pleasure to men, he himself says, 'I will not judge you'". Joseph, like Godwin, is not a *Drachma* member. Learning to accept his homosexuality during his spiritual formation, he contends that the Church's stand on homosexuality is based on an "antiquated theology". He "never felt judged by God because I'm gay or because I kiss a man or because I have sex with a man". His argument is that, "There is no decree from God that gays are bad or that their actions are bad. St Paul used to say that sodomy is wrong but that is within a cultural context." Joseph feels that, "Although the Church is the Church of Christ, it is a Church made up of people and people are corrupt. They refuse to see that God can also love two males and that my love [for my husband] is equal to love between a male and a female".

Gabriella, a psychologist who is in a cohabiting lesbian relationship, is also not a *Drachma* member. She feels that one turning point in her life was when she started studying psychology and took theology as a subsidiary area, "From theology I learned how to separate God from the Church and I think nothing helped me more to resolve my inner conflicts". She had to separate "the rigid

element of the Church from the spiritual element of religion in order to be able to live them and embrace them". Nick distinguishes between religion which he associates with the Church and spirituality which is about his relationship with God. Nick had just ended a homosexual relationship of thirteen years when he spoke to me:

Religion is more about rituals, externalities, feasts, saints, creeds, you know. Spirituality is something internal, me and God, and the God inside, the universal cosmic God, not the Catholic God. Nowadays I'm out of it [religion]. I was created because I'm loved and no Pope will convince me that I'm going to hell. *Anzi* I'm a good person. I'm concerned with virtue, with doing the right thing, being there for people. For me God is an experience. It is just being, the silence, listening, peace. God is not something they said in Church. The church is the last place where I could find God.

Some of my informants identify as spiritual rather than religious and a few prefer to affiliate themselves with Christianity which is broader and more Christ-centred rather than with Catholicism which they see as more Church-centred. For some of my LGBT informants, spirituality may at times verge on mysticism as evident in Nick's words. Detaching spiritual space from ecclesiastical religion and identifying as spiritual rather than religious offers LGBT Catholics another way of living their faith (Thumma & Gray 2005, p. xiii). Rodriguez (2010, p. 19) claims that distinguishing between 'religion' and 'spirituality' is a common feature in the spiritual 'journey' of gay and lesbian Christians often occurring after having 'come out' to oneself and to others.

In Palermo, I noted similar trends. Once individuals succeed in detaching God from his Church, it becomes easier for them to accept themselves as loved creatures of God. Margherita and Adriana have very different stories and have experienced the conflict in different ways and at different levels of intensity. Margherita has had an intimate relationship with God since she was young. Her issues were always with the Church,

because the Church has always kept people like me in the margins, considered us to be sick, and all the other labels that the Church has given us. That we are sinners... This has kept me away from the Church but not away from God. I have always seen God as an entity that is capable of immense love. The wicked God who judges us, who punishes us, I have never seen God in that light despite my

Catholic school formation. I never feared God. I have always seen God as love. I have always felt accepted by God.

In contrast, Adriana found it very difficult to set apart the teaching of the Church and its disapproval of homosexual relationships from God's words and judgement. She suffered for years and only started to disconnect God from his Church since her encounter with *Ali d'Aquila*. At the time of the interview, she was still finding it difficult to keep them apart in her troubled mind,

Because for me, whatever the Church said was always right. Up to a point, God and the Church were still the same. I could not separate them. I make the separation now. Yes God was a judge. I always felt that in the end I would have to justify myself in front of God. I had huge feelings of guilt and now I am at peace for the first time and not thinking about going to hell... Now I don't believe that I'm going to hell even if the Church tells me that I am committing a sin. Because I think that the Church has limitations because it is human. I do not feel that I'm wrong but that I'm different. I am very conditioned. I still have guilt deep down. I do not always succeed in separating God from the Church.

For LGBT participants this process has a deeper significance because as long as they continue equating the Church's teaching with God's judgement, they find it difficult to accept themselves. The separation not only provides peace of mind and a sense of reassurance. It is also a strong argument which is often used against the Church's official position on homosexuality which, LGBT Catholics feel, contributes to the stigma attached to their homosexuality (Yip 1997a, p. 116). Having God on their side compensates for the stigma as well as for the Church's perceived rejection and empowers them to develop a self-affirming narrative.

6.3.3 Techniques of neutralisation

Part of the narrative of my LGBT informants reflects efforts at containing the contradictions between one's received morality and one's actions which are in opposition to that morality. They do this by employing techniques of neutralisation. These are rationalisation processes which protect the individual from self-blame (Sykes & Matza 1957, p. 666). The concept of neutralisation was developed in relation to juvenile delinquency to describe how young people seek to absolve themselves of any guilt or blame after, or at times even before, breaking the law. By using techniques such as denial of responsibility, denial of

injury or condemning the condemners, deviants render agents of social control ineffective and seek to avoid harming their self-image. Although the context of my study is not analogous to young people committing delinquent acts, neutralisation theory may be applied to my informants who also engage in moral reasoning to neutralise their guilt and to justify their lifestyle decisions. It is not uncommon for both LGBT and non-LGBT informants to use some form of neutralisation technique to justify their 'illicit' relationships or sexual desires by trying to shift any blame away from them. I have shown earlier how my informants, especially the *separati*, tend to embrace a social code morality, arguing that their lifestyle is not harming others and therefore they are sure that God will not judge them. Reference to the Bible narrative of Jesus refusing to judge the accused adulteress is often brought up by my informants to reassure themselves that God is merciful and forgiving. In Chapter III I have also pointed out that condemning or discrediting the Church or "attacking the attacker", as Yip (1997a, pp. 117-122) calls it, is also rather ubiquitous among my informants. This rationalisation process helps individuals to develop a more positive self-perception and increases their self-worth, enhancing the potential for self-acceptance and identity integration.

Among my LGBT informants, one of the commonest arguments is that being gay was not their choice. They were created by God and their sexuality is part of who they are. However, informants tended to justify their sexuality or their lifestyle decisions on the basis of different reasons. When I spoke with Adriana in Palermo, she was almost convinced that God will save her in spite of her homosexuality, "I know because I did not choose to be gay". She tried everything in her power to conform to the teaching of the Church but she could not fight her feelings anymore. Gianluca, a young member of *Ali d'Aquila* who was brought up in an accepting environment at home, justifies his homosexual lifestyle by referring to the scriptures. He feels that the message of the Church does not reflect what is written in the Bible. In the Bible, Jesus does not condemn homosexuality, despite being outspoken and not afraid to challenge stereotypes. In a somewhat similar vein, Michelle claims that she lets the commandments guide her as to what is a sin and not, "In the commandments there is nothing written about loving a person of

the same sex". While admitting that by marrying another woman, she is technically breaking one of the commandments, she then turned to what must be the commonest technique of neutralisation used by informants regardless of sexual orientation, that of not harming others. Godwin's argument is based on the claim that his homosexual relationship of almost thirty years is in "keeping with the principles of heterosexual relationships". It is based on love and commitment. He does not "run around".

6.3.4 Revisiting religious Texts

One way in which LGBT faith groups facilitate the development of an affirmative sense of identity is through the revisiting of sacred texts. Christianity is one of those religions whose teaching is directly inspired by written texts and it is mainly on these texts that the Church bases its condemnation of homosexuality. This may make it difficult for individuals to overcome the contradictions they encounter when trying to remain within a faith community whose holy scriptures are interpreted as denouncing homosexuality (Meek 2014, p. 101). There are those who disregard the scriptures and prefer to base their knowledge of God on their personal experience rather than on an old book whose contents have, through the ages, been passed down orally, transcribed and translated several times (Wilcox 2003, p. 75). Yet there are many others who choose to remain committed to Christianity and its holy texts, despite what they perceive as a condemnation of their sexuality. They find it difficult to throw away an important part of their identity which they draw from a wider cultural, historical and religious tradition and a shared memory (Dillon 1999, p. 17; Gross & Yip 2010, p. 55). The 'queering' of religious texts (Yip 2005a, p. 51) involves a rereading of the scriptures which enables LGBT Catholics to reposition themselves within the Catholic tradition where the dominant interpretation either rendered them invisible or relegated them to the margins. They do this through a "historical-critical hermeneutic" (Thumma 1991, p. 340).

A growing literature on homosexuality and Christianity which started in the middle of the 1970s with publications such as those of John McNeill (1993) and Robin Scroggs (1983) (see White & White 2004, pp. 204-208 for a brief review) helped to reduce the stigma attached to being gay and Catholic and represented a shift away from guilt and sin to spiritual liberation. When John McNeill published *The Church and the Homosexual* in 1976, he urged gay Catholics to consider their homosexuality as a gift from God (Taylor & Snowdon 2014, p. xvi) rather than as an abomination. However, at that time, access to such texts was limited unlike today where, together with the increase in publications of this kind, there is a vast array of websites, *Facebook* pages and other resources easily accessible on the internet. Considering how often excerpts from the Bible are quoted to censor homosexuality, it is understandable that LGBT Catholics would seek to produce an alternative theology that not only challenges their condemnation but also produces theological capital which enables them to grow spiritually (Yip 2005a, p. 50). Browne, Munt & Yip (2010, pp. 36-42) classify these works into three broad, corresponding types. Defensive apologetic writings aim to re-contextualise and reinterpret passages from the scriptures such as the narrative of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorra, often used to denounce homosexuality without taking the historical and cultural context into consideration. Another category of writings, referred to as the 'cruising' of texts by Browne, Munt & Yip (2010, p. 39) or as the 'outing' of texts (Yip 2005a, p. 57) seeks to highlight instances of same-sex intimacy or eroticism in the Bible and argues that the holy texts are not in themselves against LGBT, as many people believe. On the contrary, any symbolic references to anything remotely non-heterosexual have been consciously erased by heteronormative theological interpretations. A third category considered to have turned "theology upside down" (Browne, Munt & Yip 2010, p. 40) seeks to develop a theology of the body and sexuality affirming the close affinity between sexuality and spirituality and which does not reduce sexuality to genital acts but perceives sexuality as reflecting a wider spectrum of human relational, sensual, emotional and loving capabilities as well as one's relationship with the divine who created humans as diverse sexual beings.

Many of my LGBT informants were introduced to these queer interpretations of holy texts through *Drachma* or *Ali D'Aquila* even if some had sought them on their own. The scope of *Drachma* has essentially been about revisiting the word of God from a gay perspective from the outset. As Mario explained, "Gay people are often absent within the God narrative, the Christian narrative. We were 'rewriting' it and placing ourselves there". This is done not only through readings and reflections during *Drachma* meetings but also through the proliferation of such knowledge through public seminars and talks. A crucial step for *Drachma* was establishing personal contact with James Alison, the British theologian and former priest who came to Malta twice on *Drachma's* invitation. Kurt was introduced to *Drachma* when he attended one of his public lectures during his first visit back in 2007. He was "blown away by how James interpreted Bible theology in a way which was conservative but which made a lot of sense from a queer perspective". Although Bardella (2001, p. 121) argues that one needs to see the development of these queer spiritualities as part of the wider theologies of liberation, their strength, from my informants' perspective, lies in their being grounded in traditional Catholic theology. In Chapter III I discussed how *Drachma* disputes Church doctrine using Catholic theological arguments. LGBT-affirmative interpretations of the holy texts involve more than an attempt at justifying same-sex desires and relationships through historical or biblical alignment. It reflects the contemporary trend of shifting interpretive authority from religious institutions to the individual.

At *Ali d'Aquila*, the revisiting of texts with the help of alternative theologies is also a common practice. Adriana had read many books about homosexuality. However it was through *Ali d'Aquila* that she was introduced to other writings which "explain the Bible in a different way" and which she found very helpful. It is not uncommon for members of the LGBT community to criticise the way that the Church tends to de-contextualise certain biblical passages and use them to condemn homosexuality without considering the cultural and historical context in which they were written. Gabriella, one of my bisexual informants pointed out that one needs to remember that the Bible was written by men and that "Whatever was written is embedded in history and cannot be interpreted

literally". The importance of historical and cultural contextuality was one of the topics addressed by James Alison when he visited Malta in 2015 during his meeting with the LGBT community arguing that the notion of homosexuality did not exist at the time that the Bible was written. He was critical of how literal translations of words or interpretation of passages have completely twisted the original meaning, thus challenging the infallibility of traditional interpretations of such texts as products of the dominant discursive practices of the time and which therefore cannot be universally applied. At the same time, critics have argued that by seeking to interpret religious texts within the framework of contemporary societies, one would be falling in the same trap of imposing culturally-specific notions and meanings to texts which were written ages ago (Yip 2005a, p. 60).

As indicated, the 'outing' of religious texts refers to how members of the LGBT community attempt to find evidence in religious texts of same-sex intimacy which is then used to justify their own love. References to stories such as those of Ruth and Naomi or David and Jonathan which imply the possibility of more than friendship are sometimes made by *Drachma* members. Chapter V also points to a few attempts at the queering of Jesus. I heard about the story of Ruth and Naomi from Mario during one of our conversations. According to Mario,

It is the most beautiful love text we have and we read it during weddings and this is a text about two women. It's just a paragraph and one tells the other, "Wherever you go I go; where you are buried, I want to be buried too". They're not gay. They're married with children but in that culture, 2000 years before Christ, it's a very profound love between two women. I don't tell my friends such words. But it is a reading that is very controversial. Scripture has to be interpreted and the idea that you do not interpret is mistaken.

Being Catholic is a defining characteristic of my informants. LGBT Catholics engage with Catholic teaching to produce a theology which affirms them as Catholics but which at the same time legitimises their difference and embraces their love. Their own reinterpretation of the holy texts enables them to 'rewrite' a theology which, while not in line with the official doctrine of the Church, provides them with a justification to continue being part of the Church as LGBT Catholics.

Adriana experienced a dramatic transformation since she came into contact with *Ali d'Aquila*. She grew up within the *Focolare Movement* where her mother is also very active and where, since acknowledging her homosexuality, she felt stifled. She was “desperately” searching for homosexual Christian groups. She had joined *Ali d'Aquila* less than a year before I met her in Palermo. I am going to quote Adriana at some length because her testimony is a heartfelt narrative of the positive effect that both therapy and joining an LGBT-positive group had on her life experience in terms of self-acceptance. From a person riddled with guilt, anxiety and conflict, believing that God does not love her because of her sinful desires, Adriana started experiencing her faith and her sexuality as a changed person, more convinced of God’s blessing than before:

Then last September I met *Ali d'Aquila* and things changed from black to white [da così a così]. I had too many guilt feelings. Being close to them, their concrete experiences; their way of being believers, loved by God, and living their relationships in the light of the sun. They are people who go beyond their sexuality. I am more than what I do under the sheets. I can, as the *Focolare Movement* always taught me, love others. That is the most important thing. I have to be an instrument of God, to love others. That is how I solved my problem. What will change if I love another man or another woman? I can love everyone, even sexually. I can still be an instrument of God’s love. God loves me because I am a human being 360 degrees and I can do so many things. My sexuality is not an obstacle to love.

Yes I speak with my husband [separated but still living together at the time of the interview] about these things now. I remember this conflicting message I had written to Francesco. I knew Francesco from *Focolare*. I wrote this: ‘How can I be loved by God? In what way can I reconcile this conflict, all that I had suffered?’ But last time when I reread the message, I realised how much I had evolved. I have made peace with myself. I now have another relationship and I feel that this love which is so pure and so noble makes me a better person. The fact that I am now fully living my affective side and my sexual side, I feel more disposed to be an instrument of God. When I was with my husband I was so depressed. I was in a cage but I succeeded in getting out.

For me *Ali d'Aquila* is important because I hear the experience of others. The conflict is there. If one does not live the Christian message of the Church, the conflict is there. You cannot say it is not there. They are people with a good formation of Christianity. They are very knowledgeable of the Bible. The conflict can be resolved with the same theological tools of the Catholic Church, a parallel, alternative theology. So there are instruments for solving the conflict. They are more advanced than me because I cannot take communion without confessing first. I was brought up this way. I cannot help it.

Conclusion

The reconstruction of a fragmented self and the development of a positive self-identity can be a onerous, relentless process but it is also a means of self-realisation and spiritual growth. Most LGBT Catholics in my study eventually tend to embrace both the LGBT and Catholic aspects of their identity rather than reluctantly having to give up one of them. However, not everyone manages to do this successfully (Lapinski & McKirnan 2013, pp. 855-856; Yip 1997a, p. 113) and a few keep struggling. Identity negotiation is not only a means of developing a more coherent sense of self but also an opportunity to engage with faith in a critical way. Religious identity, which is initially taken for granted, is revisited, questioned and reconstructed. As their sexuality enters the equation LGBT informants are bound to reconsider their faith and where they stand within their religious tradition. This enables them to mature spiritually and to build a more profound relationship with God even if in the process they might dent their relationship with the Church.

When my LGBT informants were growing up and experiencing their first sexual desires, they could not attach a name to their feelings. This came later when they 'came out' and started identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual or trans as they started having more access to concepts, symbols and the emancipatory language which developed over the years. The recently implemented LGBT-friendly legislative framework as well as the proliferation of LGBT support groups across Malta and Gozo nowadays make it easier for LGBT individuals to incorporate the non-heteronormative aspects of self into their identity narrative. When my informants started struggling with their sexuality and gender, these were not as fluid and diverse as they are now and individuals did not have the conceptual mechanisms to enable them to forge their personal identity. When speaking to me about their past, my informants tended to look back at their sexuality or gender as if it were something that was there for them to discover or acknowledge throughout this process rather than as an aspect of themselves which is constantly being constructed and reconstructed until they could speak of it in terms of an 'identity'.

Drawing upon different sources of knowledge and experience, LGBT informants sought to redefine themselves in a coherent way, often in opposition to Church sexual morality. They did not accept the Church's teaching and its definition of themselves without question despite the 'cognitive dissonance' (Festinger 1957, p. 16) that this created in them. Rather, they sought to equip themselves with the necessary tools until they managed to come to terms with who they are and with how they could be themselves *despite* the Church's teaching on homosexuality. Once they manage to reconcile their conflicts and to reach a certain level of identity integration, they no longer consider their sexuality as a sin or as an abomination. They come to see it as God's creation, as a gift or a blessing and themselves as part of God's plan. This gives legitimacy to their negotiated claims that it is possible to be LGBT and Catholic and secures their place within the faith. Their initial distress is transformed into positive feelings of self-acceptance and gratefulness to God, at times even pride, at being who they are and what they have managed to achieve. More importantly, their serenity comes from the possibility of not having had to reject or deny any aspect of their identity since both are important elements of who they are, although some degree of accommodation may have been necessary (Thumma 1991, p. 345). Giovanni from *Ali d'Aquila* considers himself to be well integrated. He has accepted his homosexuality although he would have liked to have been able to do this without undergoing so much trauma. At the same time he is grateful for the experience:

I realised that my homosexuality is a gift because it gave me the opportunity to meet people of every kind because if you are gay in a way I've been... Maybe in the next life I would desire to be more serene like Gianluca [a young member of *Ali d'Aquila*]. But in my life I came into contact with so many different people for sex, for political reasons, for friendship. I thank God for it. Homosexuality now is an important part of me. Christianity is also important. However, even if being part of the identity it doesn't mean... it is also problematic.

As Giovanni's last point suggests, conflict resolution is never complete. From time to time doubts and questions may resurface. Like many of my informants, Adriana continues to visit her psychologist because she still feels the need to reconcile the position of the Church with her personal life, "At certain times, during my journey, I have doubts... Sometimes I feel that I should have a love relationship without the

sexual relationship as the Church wants, just friendship". The self continues to be in the process of reconstruction. Self-acceptance is a very important step towards some degree of conflict resolution and identity integration (Lapinski & McKirnan 2013, p. 855; Levy & Reeves 2011, p. 63) but there are different forms of acceptance.

There are those, like Adriana and Henry, who accept their sexuality with a sense of resignation, as if it is a cross to bear, a "test or a trial" (Wilcox 2003, p. 71). They would rather not have to carry it although they accept it with grace. Others are more assertive about their sexuality and about their rightful place within the Catholic community, despite having to relinquish certain 'privileges' such as having an active role in the parish or getting married in church. At the same time, they may not necessarily believe in politicising their sexuality as in attending the Pride March or being involved in LGBT rights groups. Being LGBT is just part of who they are in the same way as being Catholic. However, within a heteronormative cultural and religious context, it is understandable that there are also those who may want to express a sense of pride in being different and having been able to manage their conflicts and to be themselves. These not only welcome their sexuality but celebrate it with pride (Cass 1979, p. 152; Wilcox 2002b, p. 506; Wilcox 2003, p. 71). Once Nick accepted that he was created in God's image and that he could not be a mistake, he could accept his homosexuality and even come to "love" it, "Today I thank God I'm homosexual. Because I love the way I see the world. It's a perception of the world. It's not just a sexual orientation. It's my personhood". For Gianluca, participating in different Pride celebrations is not just some colourful fun but a real statement of pride. However, *Ali d'Aquila* gives much more importance to the Pride celebration than *Drachma*. This could be due to the higher degree of politicisation that exists within *Ali d'Aquila*. *Drachma* is less concerned with civil rights and more bent on building a dialogue with the Church than with making political statements. Although some of my Maltese LGBT informants do take part in the Pride March and *Drachma* has occasionally participated as an organisation, I did not encounter the same passion for the Pride among my Maltese informants.

To conclude, one may construe the transformation experienced by my LGBT informants as a process of 'conversion'. From non-conforming sinners, wanting to hide from the knowing, judging eyes of God, they come to view themselves as loved creatures of God. Their 'journey' takes them from a dark place filled with guilt and shame to a point where they may even feel pride in being who they are. They come to embrace their new self and want to share their story with others, even as their identity remains in a state of construction. The narrative developed by my LGBT informants is in stark contrast to that which emerges from the experiences of my *separati* who reluctantly had to let go of their former conforming marital and familial status which gave them respectability in the eyes of their social and moral community. They do not embrace their new non-conforming identity as *poġġuti* which they feel has been 'imposed' on them and which continues to be a source of shame within their moral community despite the greater acceptance of alternative lifestyles in Maltese society. Unlike LGBT informants the *separati* would rather not speak about their unwanted status and 'constrained' lifestyle choices or else tend to construct a narrative of victimhood. They are angry at the Church for refusing to bless their relationships but are intimidated by it at the same time. My LGBT informants are also critical of the Church's teaching on homosexuality and, like the *separati*, keep hoping that one day the Church would revise its teaching on sexuality. However their hermeneutical 'journey' empowers them in their endeavour to engage critically and dialogically with the Church until they are able to reclaim their rightful place within the Catholic community.

CONCLUSION: SEXUAL MORALITY AND RELIGIOUS BELIEF IN CONTEMPORARY MALTA

Introduction

My research provides an anthropological understanding of secularisation through the analysis of intimate relationships in Maltese society. It contributes to the still underexplored yet growing field of the anthropology of Catholicism. It investigates how Catholics in Malta, and to some extent in Sicily, who deviate from Catholic teaching in their lifestyle choices, live their faith in a traditionally Catholic society and how they relate to the Church, their principal source of tension. The study seeks to capture the lived experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans (LGBT), divorced and separated Catholics engaged in intimate relationships which fall outside the boundaries of Catholic Church morality ethnographically. It approaches the analysis of secularisation through the lived experiences of believers whose particular circumstances place them at the 'lapsed peripheries' of Catholicism, disconnected from the normative core of rituals and practices and explores the ways in which these Catholics seek to maintain their ties with the centre (Norget, Napolitano & Mayblin 2017, p. 19) in a society where Catholicism has traditionally defined many aspects of personal, social, cultural and political life and consequently has a strong impact on their sense of identity. A study of lived religion in Maltese society could not ignore the institutional dimension of Catholicism particularly that contained in Church teaching about sexuality with which the lives of my informants are strongly bound. Catholics living in the peripheries of the institution may find creative ways in which to create their own 'unauthorised centres' away from the 'authorised centre' (Coleman 2017, p. 278) as evident in the 'blessings' of same-sex unions performed by Mario or as represented by communities like *Drachma* in Malta and *San Saverio* in Palermo. At the same time, they still seek to reach out and to engage in dialogue with the centre.

The study is contextualised within broader questions related to modernity. The relationship between the religious and the secular is explored through

ethnographic fieldwork with *Drachma LGBTI* in Malta and *Ali d'Aquila* in Palermo supplemented by in-depth personal conversations with individuals who fall within the established criteria of being Catholic believers engaged in intimate relationships which digress from official Catholic teaching. I wanted to establish whether and how modern Catholics who are living their faith and engaging in intimate relationships in a changed socio-cultural landscape still draw upon Catholic morality despite the competing secular sources of morality at their disposal. Has the authority and relevance of the Catholic Church declined or has it managed to retain its influence even as contemporary Maltese society is increasingly becoming ostensibly less conducive to religion? Has Malta experienced a shift towards a new kind of morality, no longer drawn largely from biblical sources and ecclesiastical hermeneutics but from other reality-defining agencies or plausibility structures or has modern Malta retained its Catholic character? What does it mean to be Catholic in contemporary Malta?

7.1 My ethnography within the anthropology of Catholicism

Within anthropology the study of Catholicism, and Christianity more broadly, has been rather marginal because as Cannell (2006, p. 3) suggests, Christianity was assumed to be 'obvious'. It was the religion of most European anthropologists who may have felt that it could not yield anything that was not already known. Both the cultural 'otherness' of certain forms of Christianity such as Christian fundamentalism as well as its similarities rendered its study problematic for anthropologists (Robbins 2003, p. 193). Anthropologies which focus specifically on Catholicism are even fewer even if ethnographic fieldwork about aspects of Catholicism was still carried out before the label was necessarily invented (Coleman 2017, p. 277). One reason for this may be that Catholicism has historically, not least in the Southern European context, been associated with firmly established systems of power in the same way that 'whiteness' or 'maleness' were (Norget, Napolitano & Mayblin 2017, p. 4). There are those who are sceptical of formulating anthropologies of specific religious traditions and prefer to focus more broadly on the study of religion (Meyer 2017, p. 305).

However, the development of a distinct anthropology of Catholicism, which emerged in response to the more predominant anthropology of Christianity, may serve to expand rather than limit anthropological inquiry (Coleman 2017, p. 273). It serves to highlight not only its peculiarities in comparison to other forms of Christianity but also how these peculiarities play out differently across different cultures. One way in which ethnographies of Catholicism distinguish themselves from the broader anthropology of Christianity is in terms of continuity rather than departure from the past (Norget, Napolitano & Mayblin 2017, p. 5), a theme also emerging from this study. Producing an anthropology of the religion of the people under investigation brings out the idiosyncracies of that specific Catholic community and allows for cross-cultural comparison. For while Catholicism is centralised in terms of its institutional, organisational and theological core, its everyday practices, devotions and expressions are historically, culturally and politically bound to specific locations or regions such as that of Southern Europe.

Contemporary Maltese society has changed significantly from the time when the popular but scandalous series *Il-Madonna taċ-Ċoqqa* was screened on television at the end of the 1970s. The series had rocked the nation because it had dared to cross the boundaries of the connection between sexuality and religion. Malta has since then ostensibly become a modern, secular state which has witnessed a spate of transformations, not least within the sphere of intimate relationships. The Maltese have apparently become more liberal where religion and sexual relationships are concerned, an observation which was particularly underscored when a majority of voters opted for divorce legislation to be introduced on the island, disregarding the Church's appeal to preserve the sacredness of the sacrament of marriage. Indeed I had started this research process thinking that in contemporary Maltese society, the Catholic Church had lost much of its significance particularly as a source of sexual morality. With their vote, the Maltese seemed to be sending the message that they wanted the Church to stay out of their love lives; that they wanted to live their intimacy as modern selves regardless of Church morality. I was wrong. My study suggests that despite the undeniable shifts in how the Maltese are experiencing intimacy, they have not

relinquished their attachment to the Catholic Church and its morality. Church teaching may no longer be the standard against which the Catholics in my study gauge their sexual behaviour; it may no longer sway the popular vote but the Church still carries substantial significance in the lives of Catholic believers. Believers may end up living at the fringes of the Church as a result of their lifestyle decisions; they may even abandon the Church. Yet they do not necessarily do this voluntarily.

Despite the criticism and the anger that the Church elicits, despite its apparent intolerance of dissension, it appears to have maintained its hold on the Catholics in my study, including those who claim to have abandoned it. My Catholic informants may be classified into a three-pronged typology according to how they relate to the Church. *Assimilators* remain actively engaged with and within the Church despite their criticism. *Deserters* leave the Church in the sense that they discontinue to participate in communal rituals and sacraments. A third group, whom I call *Affiliators* overlaps with either of the other two and consists of those who seek moral communities either within or outside the confines of the Church like *Drachma*. It may appear that individuals have become the ultimate bricoleurs (Rountree 2014, p. 96), finding creative and idiosyncratic ways of how to live their faith, challenging the interpretive authority of the Church. Yet like Rountree's Maltese pagans, their innovation is paradoxically still embedded within the Catholic tradition, for example, they may justify a cohabiting relationship on the grounds that it is a committed, faithful, long-term relationship similar to the sacramental marital bond which is blessed by the Church.

Church teaching about sexuality is a continued source of serious tension for those living outside the boundaries of Catholic morality such as LGBT and divorced/cohabiting Catholics or, as I often refer to the latter in the study, the *separati*. However, despite the 'immoral' lifestyles that bind the Catholics in the study, there are issues which clearly distinguish LGBT Catholics from non-LGBT others. Both LGBT and non-LGBT Catholics experience tension with the Church due

to the incompatibility between their lived realities and the moral prescriptions of the all-powerful ecclesiastical institution. The most severe conflicts of LGBT Catholics however are internal and personal in contrast to the conflicts of the *separati* which are of a social and relational nature. While both are concerned with how they are perceived by the other, LGBT Catholics are primarily concerned with how they are perceived by God while the distress of the *separati* emerges out of the social judgement which they experience or imagine and which makes them feel ostracised from the moral community. LGBT Catholics are devastated by guilt because of their same-sex desires, ashamed in the eyes of God. The *separati* are ashamed to participate in communal rituals under the judging eyes of a church congregation where their 'sin' becomes more blatantly pronounced. Consequently they may refrain from taking communion or even from participating in mass worship in order to mitigate their shame. However, their shame persists within the context of their religious congregation. They find solace in the belief that, unlike the Church, God will not judge them. A vital distinction is made between God and his institution on earth, an important prerequisite for the eventual minimisation of conflict among Catholics in the study. LGBT Catholics also view God as being in opposition to the Church. However, their liberation occurs when they are able to look retrospectively upon a judgemental, vindictive God and come to embrace a view of God as loving and merciful. This emancipatory process however takes time and corresponds with their transformation in self-perception. When they were 'sinners', God was a judge; when they redeem themselves, God is reimagined as a source of love rather than as a lawgiver. The 'journey' towards a certain degree of identity coherence among LGBT Catholics entails the harmonisation of two seemingly irreconcilable aspects of one's identity: the sexual and the spiritual dimensions of the self. The reconstruction of the self enables LGBT Catholics to engage critically with their faith, with the Church and with themselves as sexual beings. Drawing inspiration from therapeutic sources, priestly advice and the writings of LGBT-affirmative theologians, they seek to develop an alternative hermeneutic which embraces their sexuality as an integrated part of their identity without having to renounce their faith. As ethical subjects, individuals use different means to make "themselves into certain kinds of persons", as they

‘choose’ the type of self they want to be (Laidlaw 2002, p. 324). While the conflict is never completely resolved and the self remains in the process of reconstruction, they do tend to achieve some degree of synthesis which enables them to assert themselves as LGBT Catholics worthy of salvation and deserving their rightful place within the Catholic community of faithful as equally loved creatures of God.

7.2 Secularisation: Is Malta a resistant niche?

The vote for divorce legislation seemed to be a wakeup call that Catholic Malta may not have remained so Catholic after all. Relationship trends such as the greater visibility of alternative sexualities, the increase in cohabitation, separations, extra-marital sex and civil marriages suggest that Maltese society is increasingly drawing upon secular sources of sexual morality. However, while nobody can deny that Malta has indeed become a more secular, modern society, and that relationship choices are less guided by Church morality, Malta’s modernity remains persistently Catholic (Baldacchino 2011, p. 109; Taylor 1999, p. 7). Modern Maltese believers living at the edges of the Church still yearn to form part of the Catholic moral community despite the conflicts that they experience due to the internalisation of Catholic morality. The teaching of the Catholic Church is no longer seen as a prescriptive, infallible model to be adopted wholly and literally. Individuals nowadays believe they have the right to choose what is relevant to their personal experience and to discard what is not. They are living their faith and their sexuality in very different social conditions than they did only a few decades ago. Secular developments have created an environment which makes it possible for individuals to challenge the dictates of prescriptive morality. The moral milieu of contemporary individuals in Western modern societies is distinctively characterised by how respect for humanity is incorporated in national legislation (Taylor 1989, p. 11). The past few years have seen civil rights, particularly LGBT rights and those pertaining to marriage and relationships increasingly becoming part of Malta’s legislative framework. This may have given Maltese Catholics a stronger sense of being rights-bearing citizens and enhanced their sense of entitlement. As modern individuals they feel they have the right to

choose how they want to live their life as long as they do not 'harm' others. They have a right to love and to be loved, even if that love is not in line with Church morality. They feel that their rightful place is within Catholicism. They object to being labelled 'sinners' by the Church even as they acknowledge that their lifestyle is sinful in terms of official Catholic teaching. They dismiss Catholic teaching as irrelevant to contemporary lived realities even as they romanticise it and wish they could have been in a position to respect it. This sense of ambiguity, of contradiction suggests that a degree of ambivalence characterises the faith of the Maltese as much as it does their Europeaness (Mitchell 2002a, p. 2). My informants live their faith as 'ambivalent Catholics'. The 'rights' culture which affords them this sense of 'freedom' to choose coexists alongside a Catholic-inspired moral culture which constrains them while to some extent, it continues to influence their individual morality, even in relation to sexuality. Hence the shame and the guilt and their efforts not to deviate too much from Catholic morality. They live between two conflicting moral realms as they struggle with the tension between their personal/sexual desires and social/institutional moral obligations (Heintz 2013, p. 8). They need to resolve the dilemmas emerging from conflicting values (Clough 2007, pp. 143-144), in this case love/family and faith/religious integration. They seek to establish a moral self which is at once individual, emerging out of creativity and self-reflection as much as from the interaction with a social morality that transcends the self (Rasayanagam 2013, p. 104). Despite their 'freedom' to challenge what Taylor (1989, pp. 17-21) calls moral 'frameworks', modern individuals' rational, introspective self-evaluation is still performed within a broad Catholic moral framework, even if they have a wider choice of frameworks and their morality is individually constructed. There is a dynamic relationship between the moral values received during socialisation and actual life experiences and practices. Values and abstract ideals are transformed as a result of life situations and experiences while they continue to influence the decisions, choices and practices pertaining to everyday realities (Howell 1997, p. 4).

There is a persistent sense of continuity with the past as individuals refuse to let go of their Catholic identity and of their sense of belonging within the Catholic community. There was a time when, going through 'the crisis' of the incongruence between their faith and their sexuality, especially LGBT Catholics may have felt they were 'bad' or 'evil'. However, as they reconstruct their sense of self as modern individuals living outside the boundaries of Catholic morality, they redefine what it means to be a Catholic and assert their rightful place within the Church. There is a clear combination of "the duplicity of 'modern' thought that simultaneously reveals its contiguity with the 'pre-modern', or non-modern" (Mitchell 2002b, p. 8). The 'traditional' and the 'modern'; secularity and faith; individualism and community belonging; rationality and religious sentimentalism are intertwined in the lives of ambivalent Catholics. They may seek to rationalise the decisions they make about their sexual relationships; they may manage to develop a parallel hermeneutic to that of the Catholic Church but they still feel a strong pull towards Catholic symbolism, rituals and community. The Church also carries profound spiritual significance since it represents Christ's presence on earth and is the administrator of the sacraments. Church bells do not necessarily entice Catholic informants to mass any longer but those who keep away mostly do so because of the conflicts that institutional prescriptions impose on them. They yearn to receive communion but the rules of the Church exclude their participation in the sacrament. They prefer to get married in Church but have to content with lesser alternatives.

Catholicism not only defines and unites Maltese Catholics culturally. It is not only a shared memory and a received faith tradition. Catholicism is an important aspect of the imaginary of Maltese Catholics, even of those who are not living by its principles. It defines how they see the world. In this imaginary, the presence of the sacred is insidious and the hand of God in everyday life experience and events is undisputed. The importance of asserting their place within Catholicism is about belief as much as it is about community belonging. The Catholic faith in Malta does not seem to have lost its communal character for modern individuals despite the individualistic trends that the island has been witnessing in terms of lifestyles. The

religious community provides the social and cultural effervescence needed by Catholic traditionalists and the moral and spiritual cohesion sought by the less traditional LGBT Catholics. The latter in particular yearn to have a more active role in the parish. In Maltese culture, the parish was traditionally the centre of both village and religious life which were not so distinguishable in the past (Boissevain 1993). Nowadays, the everyday life of the Maltese has shifted away from the village core and church attendance has drastically declined. However, for the believers in my study, the desire to belong and participate within the local religious community remains.

Initially it was presumed that with socio-economic development, Malta would experience a wave of secularisation similar to that witnessed in other European countries. However as time passed and further research was carried out even by the same social scientists, it became evident that Malta does not fit so neatly into the European model. As David Martin (n.d., p. 14) observed, Malta (together with a few other countries) may be a “resistant niche”, an exception which did not follow the pattern of European secularisation. Abela (1991) consequently approaches the analysis of social change in Malta in terms of a traditional and post-traditional continuum rather than as an irreversible process of secularisation. Maltese Catholics have become more secular in their lifestyle choices, disregarding Church rules, but still seeking the blessing of the sacred.

Baldacchino (2011, p. 104) was also perplexed by the seemingly paradoxical nature of Malta’s modernity. In what is supposed to be a modern space populated by seemingly modern buffered selves, belief in miracles, a purportedly pre-modern feature, persists. Within the context of the making of Malta’s first saint, Baldacchino brings out a number of peculiarities which hardly fit neatly into Taylor’s (2007) model of the transformation of religiosity in the West. This led Taylor (2011a, p. 128) himself to suggest that certain Western societies such as Malta may be construed as being “on the edge of the West”, since they are still in the process of becoming “fully secularised”. According to Baldacchino (2011, p. 108) Malta is still “in the waiting room of modernity” as pre-modern beliefs and

practices persist in a supposedly secular society. While Malta can boast of a number of modern features such as a post-industrial economy, these coexist with other traits which suggest that Malta has not quite reached the secular age as classically conceived and that the Maltese may not be such buffered selves after all (See also Mitchell 2017). Modern Malta is perhaps less 'enchanted' than it was a few decades ago, but the sacred still permeates everyday life including sexual intimacy. Belief in God is still high and saintly devotion manifests itself in various forms. Chris collects crucifixes and believes that God is present when he is intimate with his partner. Lisa believes that it was God's will that she found a house right in front of a church dedicated to St Rita to whom she attributes a number of miracles including curing her sister of cancer. She believes that she herself only got pregnant because she believed blindly in the powers of St Rita of the Impossible:

Once I said, "Madonna how could I have forgotten *Santa Rita*, I have been trying to have children for thirteen years!". The following month, not even the following month, the following week I made the test and I was pregnant. I was in church with my sister [who was at her home during the interview, confirming such mysteries]. I had not yet taken the test and I told her, "I'm pregnant, you wait and see". I felt at that moment that she had answered my prayer [qalghetli l-grazzja, lit. she had granted me the grace]. Don't ask her for any trivialities. I pray to her all the time. But you cannot have one iota of doubt.

Despite the clear secular shifts, the sacred persists in the everyday life experiences of individuals in modern Malta. This does not necessarily imply that my informants are living in some time warp but that inherent within Catholicism there is a tension between the spiritual and the rational; "between popular and canonical understandings of the sacred" (Baldacchino 2011, p. 118). The experience and expression of faith may be embedded within the "poetic" or "popular tradition" of Catholicism (Greeley 2000, pp. 76-77) which is transmitted through socialisation and lived in the everyday life stories of ordinary believers. It is sacramental, devotional and experiential and more likely to be observant of traditional Catholic practices such as fasting and attending spiritual exercises during lent. The *separati* tend to be closer to this model. There is a discernible belief in miracles among such faithful traditionalists which are believed to be performed not only by God

but also by the saints whose pictures they display reverently in their homes. They pray for miracles when faced with situations beyond their control such as death, illness or the inability to conceive and may interpret certain events as miraculous. LGBT Catholics are more likely to live their faith as modern Catholics who tend to be attracted towards the theological, intellectual aspect of Catholicism and to self-identify as spiritual rather than religious. They are more likely to depersonalise God and to hold abstract conceptions of the divine. They are closer to what Greeley (2000, pp. 76-77) calls the “prosaic” aspect of Catholicism; the “high tradition” associated with the Church magisterium and with theological writings to which they have access through LGBT faith groups or the study of theology and with which they seek to engage intellectually and spiritually. Yet, despite the power that this has on the lives of LGBT Catholics, it is undermined by the even stronger impact of lived experience. It is through the immediacy of their everyday realities that they redefine Catholic symbolism, scripture and ritual and reconstruct their sense of morality. The combination of theological knowledge and lived experience gives them the strength to redefine themselves as LGBT and Catholic and to reassert their belonging within the faith. LGBT Catholics are introspective, questioning, modern individuals. Yet can they be described as fully ‘buffered’ individuals (Taylor 2007, p. 27) when they tell stories of fainting due to a strong sense of the presence of the holy spirit or of experiencing a strong heat in the chest as some of my informants do? An embodiment of the supernatural (Mitchell 2017, p. 212) rather suggests a persisting sense of ‘porousness’ (Taylor 2007, p. 35). This despite the efforts of the modern world to “assiduously and systematically [discipline] the senses not to experience sacred presence” (Orsi 2005, p. 12). Like the more traditional *separati*, LGBT Catholics also have their saintly devotions and reverence towards sacred symbols. The theological significance they attach to sacraments as rites which transmit grace is more pronounced among them and is extended to human love and sexual intimacy. Their spirituality conveys a subjective dimension of their faith, embedded in everyday life, particularly close to their body and to their sexuality yet still strongly anchored within Catholicism. It is an “affirmation of ordinary life” (Taylor 1989, p. 14) combined with a sense of autonomy particularly evident in the interpretive

authority which the Catholics in my study claim for themselves but which still draws inspiration from Catholic morality. Catholic informants are living their faith within a context which is arguably modern in many respects but which has not shed its pre-modern Catholic character. In the words of Heelas (1998, p. 3), it is as if in Malta “the religious has become less obviously religious, the secular less obviously secular”.

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CONSULTED LEGISLATION

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Civil Unions Act 2014 (Act IX of 2014), Chapter 530 of the Laws of Malta,
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Gender Identity, Gender Expression and Sex Characteristics Act 2015 (Act XI of 2015), Chapter 540 of the Laws of Malta.
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Affirmation of Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Gender Expression Act 2016 (Act LV of 2016), Chapter 567 of the Laws of Malta.
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<http://www.justiceservices.gov.mt/DownloadDocument.aspx?app=lp&itemid=28609&l=1>

Cohabitation Act 2017 (Act XV of 2017), Chapter 571 of the Laws of Malta,
<http://justiceservices.gov.mt/DownloadDocument.aspx?app=lp&itemid=28387&l=1>

Embryo Protection (Amendment) Act 2018 (Act XXIV of 2018), Chapter 524 of the Laws of Malta,
<http://justiceservices.gov.mt/DownloadDocument.aspx?app=lp&itemid=29136&l=1>

APPENDIX 1: My informants

Name/ Pseudonym	Nation- ality	Age	Level of Education	Occupation	Group	Sexual Orientation/ Gender Identity	Relationship Status
Mario	Maltese	36	Tertiary	NGO work	Drachma	Homosexual	Single
Tyrone	Maltese	39	Tertiary	Education/ Administration	Drachma	Bisexual	In a cohabiting homosexual Relationship. Married by the end of the study.
Chris	Maltese	37	Tertiary	Academic	Drachma	Bisexual	In a cohabiting homosexual Relationship. Married by the end of the study.
Daniel	Maltese	24	Tertiary	Student/ Clerical	Drachma	Bisexual	In a homosexual relationship
Noah	Maltese	30	Tertiary	Computing	Drachma	Homosexual	In a homosexual relationship
Henry	Maltese	42	Tertiary	Education/ Administration	Drachma	Homosexual	In a cohabiting homosexual relationship
Vincent	Maltese	38	Post- Secondary	Clerical	Drachma	Homosexual	Single
Arthur	Maltese	53	Secondary	Self-employed	Drachma	Homosexual	Civil Union
Kurt	Maltese	28	Tertiary	Managerial	Drachma	Homosexual	Civil Union
Karl	Maltese	30	Tertiary	Administration	Drachma	Homosexual	Single
Martin	Maltese	25	Post- Secondary	Family Business	Drachma	Transgender heterosexual	In a Relationship with a woman
Debbie	Maltese	48	Post- Secondary	Taxi driver	Drachma	Homosexual	Single
Theresa	Maltese	48	Tertiary	Psychologist	Drachma	Still grappling with her lesbian identity	Separated mother of two/in a lesbian relationship
Polly	Maltese	28	Primary	manual/ cleaning	Drachma	Transgender heterosexual	Single
Joseph	Maltese	40	Tertiary	Academic	None	Homosexual	Married to a man
Godwin	Maltese	48	Tertiary	Academic	None	Homosexual	In a non- cohabiting long-term gay relationship
Nick	Maltese	44	Tertiary	Academic	None	Homosexual	Single after a long-term homosexual

							relationship
Steve	Maltese	31	Tertiary	Education/ Administration	None	Homosexual	In a cohabiting homosexual relationship
Gabriella	Maltese	36	Tertiary	Psychologist	None	Bisexual	In a cohabiting lesbian relationship
Michelle	Maltese	34	Post- Secondary	Office Work		Homosexual	In a civil partnership
Giovanni	Italian	43	Attended university for 6 years but stopped before graduating	NGO work	Ali d' Aquila	Homosexual	Single, series of homosexual relationships
Gianluca	Italian	23	Tertiary	Student	Ali d' Aquila	Homosexual	In a homosexual relationship
Lucia	Italian	37	Tertiary	Sales	Ali d' Aquila	Bisexual	In a cohabiting lesbian relationship
Laura	Italian	42	Post- Secondary	Baby-sitter	Ali d' Aquila	Homosexual	Single
Francesco	Italian	40	Tertiary	Administration	Ali d' Aquila	Homosexual	Single, just out of a homosexual relationship
Luigi	Italian	32	Tertiary	Consumer Affairs/ Alternative Travel	Ali d' Aquila	Homosexual	In a cohabiting homosexual relationship
Adriana	Italian	40	Tertiary	Lawyer	Ali d' Aquila	Homosexual	Still living with her ex- husband and son and in a lesbian relationship
Margherita	Italian	46	Tertiary	School management	None	Bisexual	In a secret lesbian relationship with a married woman
Giuseppe	Italian	44	Secondary	Personal Assistant to his partner	Ali d' Aquila	Homosexual	In a cohabiting Homosexual Relationship
Sylvia	Maltese	45	Post- Secondary	Clerical	None	Heterosexual	Separated and in a cohabiting heterosexual relationship. Grown up daughter from marriage,
Lisa	Maltese	44	Tertiary	Part-time consultancy	None	Heterosexual	Divorced In a civil

				work			marriage with two daughters from second marriage.
Bianca	Maltese	44	Post-Secondary	Learning Support Assistant, previously secretarial	None	Heterosexual	Divorced. In a cohabiting heterosexual relationship with a grown up son from previous marriage.
Paula	Maltese	49	Post-secondary	Senior Administration	None	Heterosexual	Annulled first marriage. In a civil marriage. Grown up son from first marriage.
Julia	Maltese	44	Post-secondary	Learning Support Assistant	None	Heterosexual	In a civil marriage with a man whose first marriage was annulled. Has a daughter from her only marriage.
Claudette	Maltese	45	Post-Secondary	Insurance	Attended Youth Fellowship for a time	Heterosexual	Separated. Has two sons from a cohabiting relationship following marriage break up. Single but in a series of relationships.
Norman	Maltese	42	Tertiary	Management	None	Heterosexual	Separated, 2 children. Applied for divorce. Lives with partner who is divorced.
Michael	Maltese	55	Tertiary	Engineer and Business owner	Men for Christ	Heterosexual	Separated with two sons from previous marriage. In a partially cohabiting relationship.
Roger	Maltese	60	Secondary	IT officer	None	Heterosexual	Separated, with four married children. Had a number of relationships,

							one lasting three years.
Indri	Maltese	45	Tertiary	Civil protection	None	Heterosexual	Separated with grown up daughter from previous marriage. In a cohabiting relationship.
Sonia	Maltese	32	Tertiary	Project Manager	None	Heterosexual	In a cohabiting relationship with her foreign partner. Both single.
Anna	Maltese	56	Post-Secondary	Learning Support Assistant	None	Heterosexual	Widowed and in a civil marriage with a divorced man. Grown up daughter from first marriage.
Nina	Maltese	19	Tertiary	Student	None	Heterosexual	Single. In a non-cohabiting relationship with the father of her baby. Lives with parents.
Stefania	Maltese	43	Secondary	Self-employed Business	None	Heterosexual	Annulled marriage. In a cohabiting relationship with foreign partner. One grown up son from marriage.
Joanna	Maltese	46	Secondary	Inactive, previously receptionist	None	Heterosexual	Divorced. In a cohabiting relationship. Two grown up sons from previous marriage.
John	Maltese	40	Tertiary	Middle Management	YSSG Caritas	Heterosexual	Divorced/ Single
Jimmy	Maltese	46	Secondary	Technical	YSSG Caritas	Heterosexual	Separated/ Single
Anton	Maltese	45	Post-Secondary	Middle Management	Cana Therapeutic Group for separated persons	Heterosexual	Separated and in a civil marriage. Daughter from second marriage.

