New others and old others: the effects of a successful LGBT lobby on religion in the public space

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In this short paper, I would like to take the opportunity to explore some themes related to LGBT activism and the shifting role of religion in contemporary European societies. In my current research project, entitled “Contested Privates: the oppositional pairing of religion and homosexuality in contemporary public discourse in the Netherlands”, I compare the mentioned “oppositional pairing” which we observed in the Netherlands to three other national contexts: Sweden, Serbia, and Spain. The underlying question of my sub-project is whether and to what extent the particular historical and political configurations of these countries shape debates on religion and homosexuality. I will make a general comment on how I, in this short paper, conceive of the term “activism” before moving to two examples of the influence of contemporary LGBT activism on the role of religion in the public space.

In the conference description, activism is described as “the critique of forms of inequality experienced or articulated by autonomous groups as well as by civil society actors and social movements and actors within the institutions in order to work towards progressive change”. This definition raises two questions with me. One: does the phrase “actors within the institutions” imply that in institutions as such cannot be activist? And two: what is meant exactly by “progressive”? According to whose standards? I ask these questions because in my research I encounter and discuss two forms of activism in the public space: that of LGBT groups (or LGBT-friendly actors) and that of religious groups. That both try to tackle forms of inequality might be evident, but they do not both do so in order to evoke progressive change in the sense of supporting a socially and/or morally liberal and inclusive framework which the authors may have been referring to. More particularly, I would describe the (often conservative) religious minority groups which raise their voices in debates in the Netherlands, Sweden and Spain as activist in the sense that they react against a sensed “minorisation”, but the change they pursue is one of social conservatism rather than progression.

The power granted to the other

The first issue I would like to discuss, is that of the power that is granted to whatever actor/institution/system it is one wishes to tackle when being involved in any form of activism, lobbying, etc. And a question related to this is: is it possible to be activist by being silent, by not speaking or acting up? Let me clarify these questions by giving an example from my research project. During recent fieldwork in Spain I encountered a number of LGBT activists who, without exception, pointed at the Roman Catholic Church as their main opponent. On the one hand they all painted a picture of the RCC as an institution whose influence in Spanish society is diminishing, and were apt to point out that most Catholics in Spain are ‘cultural Catholics’ who turn to the church for life rituals but not for moral guidance. Catholic opposition to homosexuality, then, is no longer (or no longer as strongly) institutionalised in Spanish society as it used to be, and the rejection of homosexuality is limited to the public statements of individual church representatives high up in the hierarchy (bishops, cardinals). On the other hand, the statements of these individual church leaders will evoke much debate every time. When the bishop of
Granada (well-known particularly for his blunt statements on homosexuality and gender) is quoted in a newspaper, he will be met with editorials, blogs, and resentful reactions on national television. In this case, it might be strategically wiser to just ignore these statements, for in opposing them, the bishop is in fact offered a stage for his views which would otherwise be limited to the local newspaper of Granada. Yet, not to respond, however strategically wise it might be, could give the impression of silent approval, something activists might want to avoid. And: to what extent do the statements of a single bishop provide activist groups with the opportunity of self-identification? To some extent at least, LGBT groups in Spain are dependent on the old, familiar other of the RCC for their right to exist. This is probably a dilemma faced by activists in other topics and field as well.

**The space granted to the other**

A second issue I would like to discuss it that of the space that is granted to opponents once the (discursive or “real”) struggle over representation has been won. More specifically, I am referring to the social position of conservative religious groups in countries like the Netherlands and Sweden, where over the past few decades the tables have been turned: whereas religion once upon a time was an evident actor in the shaping of social lives and national identities, at present the acceptance of homosexuality has become an important marker of what it means to be Dutch or Swedish. A first observation from debates in the Netherlands and Sweden (for instance on same-sex marriage, marriage registrars with consciousness objections and responses to controversial art) is that the allergy to conservative religion is so deeply embedded in many LGBT lobby groups that any reference to religion is met with a Pavlov-reaction. In Sweden, conservative religious opposition to the introduction of same-sex marriage was met with a strategy of mockery, making a dialogue impossible. At the same time the religious opponents to same-sex marriage had adjusted their message to a secularized society, framing them not in religious terms but rather in terms related to biology, history or culture. In the light of the previous issue (why grant discursive power to an opponent whose social position is less strong than your own), the question rises whether other responses can be imagined which lead to less polarization. Another reason for (non-religious) advocates of LGBT rights to critically review their own position towards religion, is that a polarized debate leaves ample room for those “caught in the middle”: religious LGBT’s. This becomes clear from a case in Spain where students were arrested after, in a Pussy Riot kind of way, entering a chapel on the university campus to shout statements against the church’s rejection of homosexuality. While the non-religious LGBT movement strongly condemned the arrest and demanded the release of the students, the Christian LGBT movement was hesitant and argued that entering a sacred place in this way might not be the best way to go. The non-religious LGBT movement then distanced itself from their Christian former allies and stopped the cooperation.

While in some national contexts conservative religious groups have become a minority and in that sense the “new other”, the strategies, attitudes and conceptual tools of the “old others” have not moved along with the tide, perhaps creating gaps that are wider than necessary.