



# Honest To God



"Now that you've come out as gay, when are you going to ditch the God-stuff?" Over the past two years, I've been asked this

question more times than Ruby Rose has had tattoos. It's become a conversational staple.

This was one aspect of coming out that I hadn't anticipated. My gay orientation was unacceptable to most of my Christian community; I'd expected that. But suddenly, as I began stepping into LGBT spaces, I realised my Christian faith was now unacceptable to some.

This perspective makes total sense. After all, religion has done a huge amount of damage over the centuries. Many LGBT people, myself included, carry scars from negative faith-based attitudes. I'm the first to admit that religion needs to repent; we can't just sweep the harm under the carpet.

But pressure to choose between two aspects of my identity gave me a strange feeling of déjà vu: Previously, my orientation had been kept in the closet. Now I was being encouraged to closet my faith.

It's taken me until my 30s to figure out who I am and to feel at home with

that. Having come this far, I'm not allowing any closets in my life – other than the one that holds my stereotypically large collection of checked shirts and leather brogues.

So, letting go of either my orientation or my faith is not an option. Both are crucial parts of who I am. For me, living an authentic life means embracing the two – even if some see them as an unusual pairing.

I'll be honest – the combination hasn't been easy. Parts of the Bible have, at times, been difficult for me to process. And I've despaired at the way some Christians oppose LGBT equality; like the Church of England refusing to allow same-sex weddings within their walls, and penalising priests for marrying their same-sex partners.

So why do I stick around? Despite all the difficulties, one thing keeps me believing: And that is my sense of a genuine relationship with God.

It might sound weird or kooky, but ever since I was a little girl I've felt a very real connection to Someone up there. Someone who, I believe, is the Creator – or Source – of everything around us.

It's always felt like a friendship more than a religion. Prayer has rarely seemed cold or formal; more like an honest chat with someone you love

VICKY BEECHING SPEAKS CANDIDLY ABOUT KEEPING THE FAITH

and trust. I talk to God in everyday language, as I would to any friend – about my day, my hopes and my fears.

Somehow, despite my rollercoaster journey with faith and LGBT identity, I've been able to divorce the bad behaviour of religious people and institutions from the Person of God. Because of this, my faith has remained intact and remains an important part of who I am.

Honestly, I think God is as grieved by homophobia as we are. The shortest verse in the New Testament is this: "Jesus wept." I think Jesus has shed many tears over the way religion damages LGBT people. So, despite all the negativity, my connection to God hasn't been tarnished.

Another thing that keeps my Christianity alive and kicking is the powerful example that inspiring people of faith have set. Household names like Desmond Tutu and Mother Teresa; and more importantly, the myriad of believers who quietly get on with doing good in the world – most of it unseen and unknown.

These people show God's love in action as they "walk the talk". They inspire me that faith can promote kindness, grace and inclusion. Christianity should, after all, be a faith centred on unconditional love; that's what it

means to me and why I'm so captivated by the example of Jesus' life and death.

Since coming out, it's been fascinating to meet lesbians and bisexual women from other faiths and chat about their relationship with religion. Despite coming from different belief systems, there are many overlaps in our experiences.

Sam Lee-Khan is a friend I met via Twitter. She identifies as Muslim and lesbian, and her journey with faith and sexuality has been extremely difficult. Sam's religious upbringing taught her that being gay was deeply sinful; worse than committing murder. Same-sex relationships were utterly taboo and never openly discussed by anyone in her community.

The only way Sam survived this was through in-depth counselling and by slowly coming out to a few trustworthy friends. When she hit her 20s, Sam began to wonder if there were other Muslim lesbians like her, somewhere out there. When she discovered there were, and that LGBT Muslim groups existed, she finally found safe spaces where both parts of her identity were affirmed.

I was saddened to hear that Sam has faced hostility toward her faith from other lesbians in LGBT bars and clubs. Despite this, she's passionate about following Islam and prays five times a day. Her faith makes her feel grounded and when life's tough it brings her great comfort to know that Allah is close by.

Ariel Friedlander identifies as lesbian, Jewish and a rabbi. We met at a conference in Liverpool where we both spoke on a faith and sexuality panel.

Ariel sees her orientation as a gift from God; part of the way she was created and designed. But it's not been easy for her – she faces major tensions from less progressive parts of Judaism. Also, outside of the synagogue, people constantly tell her that organised religion is the source of many of the world's problems, and question why she keeps believing.

Rabbi Ariel is proud of the way

Liberal Judaism has promoted equality: in 2005 they were the first religious movement to publish a liturgy for same-sex commitment ceremonies.

She's keen to help other Jews to interpret the Torah accurately, showing them that it contains nothing that opposes same-sex relationships. Her work as a rabbi enables her to change hearts and minds in this way, and to promote a message of kindness and compassion. Women like Ariel and Sam are brave pioneers; blazing a trail for other Jews and Muslims to follow.

Within Christianity experiences are, likewise, varied. Some lesbians and bisexual women choose to stay within liberal churches and, as a result, rarely experience negativity. Denominations like the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) or the Quakers have provided wonderful, LGBT-affirming environments for years.

For other Christians like me, our churches are more traditional, so the path has been less simple. One solution to this may seem obvious: run a mile from the conservative places of worship and set up camp in the liberal ones.

This may sound good in theory. But in reality, many of us feel a strong sense of home in the worship communities in which we were raised. Our friends and family are often there, and it feels comfortingly familiar. So, despite the difficulties, many of us want to stay.

For me, this has been the hardest part: my heart belongs in those traditional churches; the Evangelical congregations. That's the place my songs are still sung. It's where I grew up and spent my entire adult life.

But most Evangelical churches will not allow openly gay people to take leadership roles. So, attending them feels "triggering" to me; it reminds me I can stand in the pews, but I'm not welcome to lead the singing or preach sermons any more – which I used to do when I was in the closet.

So, deciding where to go to church is a strange balance. If I attend a liberal congregation, I feel I don't belong as

it's not really my faith tradition. Yet, if I go to an Evangelical church, I feel like a stranger there too as I can only half-participate due to the glass ceiling.

In all honesty, my relationship with the church is challenging, for all the reasons I've shared. I still attend because it's important to me; but it doesn't feel like the safe, welcoming family it used to.

Hopefully, as time passes and Christianity evolves, being LGBT will cease to be a problem there. Then we can focus on issues like helping those in need, and showing society what unconditional love looks like. Bring on that day!

We all possess multiple identities – different aspects of who we are. Living authentically means embracing them and being free from the pressure to choose. Your identities may or may not include religion, but perhaps there are other things you've felt the need to mute, or reject, in order to feel accepted.

Some gay and bisexual women have said they've felt pressure from their friendship circle, their family, or workplace, to present as more "femme", or more "butch", than they'd like. Or to stay quiet about their political views, their mental health, or their gender identity. It's sad that we might be out of the closet with our orientation, yet still be under pressure to erase other parts of ourselves to keep others happy.

When we live as our true selves, we shine our unique light into the world. As the poet Ralph Waldo Emerson put it: "To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment."

May you find the freedom to be fully yourself, fully alive and fully authentic. This may or may not involve religious faith, but regardless: don't let anyone make you choose between the crucial and precious aspects of who you are. @vickybeecking

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