

**Conviction as Divine Influence or Human Manipulation:**

**LGBTQ+ Christians and a Harmful *Habitus***

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#### *Abstract*

*Experiencing same-sex attraction can be a devastating situation for a young Christian growing up within a condemning religious community, as it is often seen as sinful and morally wrong. Religious conviction always plays a central role in the difficulty of reconciling faith and an LGBTQ+ identity, since it is accepted to be of divine influence. There is an underlying tension through this piece of whether conviction is of divine or human origin. Using research conducted with LGBTQ+ Christians, this essay offers an examination of religious conviction as a social process. Bourdieu's concept of the habitus provides a helpful tool in understanding the occurrence of conviction through the learned processes, internalizations, and embodiments of LGBTQ+ Christians as they navigate a Christian social field--structured by fundamental concepts of the human, human nature, and how to live a life of flourishing that are constrained by knowledge-power relations--that rebukes their experience as sinful. By drawing on critiques of the habitus, studies of feeling, emotion, and the processes of assigning these meaning, and ethnographic work in a manipulative Christian setting, this paper questions the purpose for many of the afflictions LGBTQ+ Christians face and illuminates the elaborate, pervasive process involved in LGBTQ+ Christians developing a habitus within Christian social fields that inflicts harm.*

## Introduction: Convictions of a Gay Christian

How does a young gay Christian come to view his same-sex attraction as sinful? Is the involvement of conviction, shame, and self-hatred a manifestation of a broken sexuality in need of redemption, suggesting this experience is inferior by nature or a consequence of deception from the depraved world or supernatural forces? The process of assigning such values to the experience of one's sexual attraction can either be a development of natural proceedings or enculturating mechanisms. Yet one of these potential answers is typically never considered by this young man growing up in an environment where the sinfulness of his same-sex attractions is simply accepted as reality, where there is only space for conviction leading to surrender and repentance. In this essay, I want to investigate the process through which conviction translates affect to condemn queer sexualities as sinful and the negative reverberations pervasively embodied as a consequence of this occurrence.

What transpires in Christian communities that compels an LGBTQ+ individual to deny, suppress, or reject this aspect of their<sup>1</sup> existence and accept it as sinful, meaning morally wrong? Queer sexualities are by definition different than the majority. Within these Christian environments, however, such profound difference can be seen as going against divine intentions of human nature. Thus, the discomfort of this difference can translate into the moral conviction that this experience is sinful and needs to be denounced. It is a complex process that occurs through interactions of the individual and their surroundings to engender an internalization of

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<sup>1</sup> They/them/their pronouns are used throughout this paper as a singular pronoun to generally encompass gender expressions besides those that often use he/him/his or she/her/hers.

homophobic teachings, interactions, and feelings. The ultimate goal for these individuals is often relief from their non-normative desires, which can be greater religious devotion and even efforts to change their physical experience, such as conversion therapy. The fruits of this investigative labor suggest that the acceptance and internalization of this reality--the subsequent steps being an embodiment of internalized oppression and an enskillment of the bodies of queer Christians, adapting to their social field in order to conform to the ideal of life set forth--can have lasting harm in the formulation of their *habitus*.

There are many questions circulating how this process might be realized. What might the role of the *habitus* play, as a set of dispositions, a structured structure, an embodied history, in the experience--and possibly the production--of religious conviction? What characteristics of the social field of certain sects of Christianity might lead to such a disposition, accepting one's same-sex attraction as sinful, evoking fear, shame, and other negative feelings? What are the forces involved in this occurrence, and how might they be related in what has come to be the difficult experiences of many LGBTQ+ Christians? Essentially, what are the ways sexuality comes to be invested with oppression and suffering, and what are we to make of it when what is considered to be divinely inspired conviction seems to lead directly to personal suffering?

In this essay I want to examine how Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* can shed light on the harm often inflicted upon LGBTQ+ Christians by their religious communities. First, this exploration necessitates a macro-lens to engage the processes of distinguishing the human and defining human nature that is implicit in the structures and phenomena discussed as becoming internalized and embodied. As such, I scrutinize frameworks of social understanding that have informed Christian concepts of the human, human nature, and the fulfilling life, recognizing that

grid works of knowledge and power moves as contextual forces in individual lives. In moving to the lives of individuals, these contextual forces manifest in many religious experiences that shape the knowledge embodied by queer Christians. Using Bourdieu's theoretical contributions, I place the *habitus* as central in the role of creating conviction surrounding same-sex attraction through the affect that exists in a Christian social field. The learning inherent within most Christian environments thoroughly invests individuals and the collective, and it becomes structured and embodied in a way that persists, simultaneously preserving within the individual a history of interactions, feelings, and experiences while maintaining the rhetoric and traditions of the surrounding institutions. The feelings and emotions vested in these processes are entangled with religious significance and the potential for manipulation, taking the form of phenomena such as conviction, hope, shame, and so on, which then places the struggle of LGBTQ+ Christians in a perplexing position of discerning the tensions between divine will and human will in their suffering.

## Concepts of the Human and Sexuality

Considerations of the human and human nature are key to elucidating important mechanisms operating in this discussion--for what makes us human becomes the central idea for the ways in which we are meant to express our humanity throughout life, and thus our sexuality. Aristotle called humans the rational animal, observing that humans exhibit a distinct potential for rationality. This potential for rationality is meant to be realized throughout life, and provides the distinction for which to separate ourselves from other 'animals.' Descartes' renowned statement, "I think, therefore I am," provides a succinct sample of this line of thinking. Rationality has thus been accepted as a staple among conceptual distinctions of the human. As such, Aristotle's

formulation has had profound reverberations throughout the Western world, contributing to a network of knowledge with influences that remain relevant today.

Stemming from Aristotle's thinking, notions of rationality took on a religious hue with the prominent Italian philosopher, Saint Thomas of Aquinas, who incorporated more biblical perspectives of the human while still relying on the contemporary knowledge of his time. Much of theological anthropology wrestles with the issues of the human's relation to God. Thomas's contention was that all creatures are created in the likeness of God, but humans are the ones specifically said to be created in God's image. The differentiating factor is that humans are considered to have a soul, a "subsistent form," which "animates" the body and "order[s]" its relation to all of its parts (Pope 2014, 15). Nevertheless, the question remains: Being (made in) the image of God, what does it mean for humans to be human? Thomas of Aquinas proclaimed the distinction of humans to be our participation in a divine order of the natural world, which still relied on views of rationality like those of Aristotle's. Stephen Pope articulates Thomas of Aquinas' view, saying, "As rational creatures we are obligated to conform to the divinely created 'order of nature'" (2014, 15). Such an obligation that Pope mentions, unique to the bearers of the image of God, postulated by scripture and prominent Christian authority, characterizes what the life of a human should look like. Thus, not only is the human distinction rationality, but this is so because God distinctly created humans to realize this capacity in order to recognize and comply to divine will.

While this vision still remains relevant to Christian philosophy, it has taken on different shapes and forms. This field, what has come to be called "theological anthropology," can be described as "considering human persons precisely in terms of their relationship to God" (Sachs

1991, 10). In *The Christian Vision of Humanity*, Sachs draws from the *Gaudium et Spes*, saying the key elements of a Christian or theological anthropology are “(1) the inviolable dignity of every human person, (2) the essential centrality of community and (3) the significance of human action” (1991, 8). This outline can translate the human to be defined in terms of the soul each person is said to possess, the capabilities for humans to relate to other humans, and the call for every human to conform to the “order of nature,” in Thomas of Aquinas’ terms. However, these characteristics do not deal with the quandary posed by what caused this distinction, besides the biblical account that God created humans in ‘his’ image.

Within this worldview, it is granted that God created the world and the humans in it, professing humans to be human and creating a boundary for distinction. Yet this assumes the state in which humans exist in the world, claiming superiority without fully explaining its origin. This ideology provides reasoning for humans’ relation to God (created in ‘his’ image), and thus our relation to the rest of the world (everything else created in a ‘likeness,’ not a reflection), but this does not capture the implications of such constructions built to exceed the rest of the natural world. Why are humans ‘human’? If it is an inclination for conceptualizing a rational quality of the world, what has provided this capacity for rationality? These constructions are taken for granted as natural: God has created the humans in this way. As such, depending on how it is wielded, the power within this knowledge can result in an imbalance, a superiority over nature to all those who can claim the status of human. The true conflict within this formulation is whether this particular distinction of human, a result of Western thinking and Christian theology, is objectively true. Faith, science, philosophy, all attempt to uncover this mystery: What might be divine fact and what might be the claims of humans?

Theological approaches are integral in concepts of the human, as religion has been so intricately entangled with historic thought. Nevertheless, social perspectives bring a new dimension to this investigation. An example is how the work of the widely influential French scholar Michele Foucault can contribute to this discussion. Rather than being concerned with truth, Foucault's method averts preoccupations of what the human is and concerns himself with how power is involved in this inquiry; he contemplates the political use of truth, how people leverage truth and the power plays it is caught up in. This was his strategy in the famous debate with Noam Chomsky, side-stepping the question of what is human nature to postulate how human nature as a concept came into being. In the debate, Foucault imagined a conceptual grid in which knowledge and notions of truth are maintained and understood. Yet as Foucault saw knowledge to be inherently tied to power, there is an implicit power that guides understanding by systematic rules everyone's thinking comes to obey (Debate). This grid is a history of thought, and within this framework, people search for identity, coherency, and so forth; the grids of knowledge transition like one network to another over time, illuminating and obscuring reality in a conceptually cohesive way. In this manner, a social analytical approach sheds light on other forces involved in constructs of the human that may not be entirely spiritual or divine.

From this perspective, the intricacies of power must be recognized, as it has come to thoroughly invest life, transform life. Power is coupled with knowledge, allowing what is known to be realized, and Foucault calls the power associated with the knowledge of human "bio-power" (1976). This concept of biopower allows the human's biological existence to reflect its political existence, and in Foucault's use, this is consequently the process that has given rise to sexuality as a concept, for it illustrates brilliantly how knowledge and power has invested life,



particularly the politics of biopower. With this concept, sexuality is leveraged by the state and functions to govern the individual as well as the regulating of the population, and since homosexuality does not edify the state in terms of reproduction and violates norms associated with it, it is not advocated. As such, knowledge surrounding sexuality and power invested in it have constructed and constrained the experience of humans that has come to be known as sexuality.

Sexuality is of utmost importance in this exploration, as it is central to concerns of human nature, and it is important to incorporate a theological anthropological view to add to this social approach. Working within a Christian perspective, author and Professor of Theology, Jack Rogers, claims, “In discussing sexuality, we are really asking: How can we know what it means to be authentically human? What does it mean to be a human being in relation to other human beings and to God? Are there norms that govern the behavior of all persons?” (1994, 162). This echoes many sentiments previously expressed in theological anthropology’s interpretation of what the human is. In this light, sexuality serves a divinely inspired purpose rather than one set forth by the state.

Homosexuality, on the other hand, can often be seen in Christianity to conflict with the purpose of sexuality God has set forth. Rogers states, “God's intention for sexuality is the marriage of one man to one woman in lifelong fidelity” (1994, 170). This leaves little room for any alternate expression, and in fact, Rogers goes on to explain that human sin and the fall after Eden has led to these alternate sexualities, and thus, are neither of God nor “the best arrangement for human happiness and the raising of children” (1994, 170). In such a way, it is often considered that homosexuality and queer sexualities are sinful and/or a result of human

brokenness, but there is still a call for these individuals' sexualities to be redeemed. In his work "Awaiting the Redemption of Our Bodies," Richard Hays states, "We are in bondage to sin but still live accountable to God's righteous judgement of our actions. In light of this theological anthropology, it cannot be maintained that a homosexual orientation is morally neutral because it is involuntary" (1994, 10). In discussing arguments against "homosexual expression," Jeffrey S. Siker elucidates, "[I]t may be that some individuals having a homosexual orientation will continue to struggle with their sexual orientation as the *old self gives way to the new self in Christ*" (1994, 180, emphasis mine). To put it another way, this line of thinking sees homosexuality and queer sexualities in terms of brokenness and as related to sin, for it conflicts with the divine purpose of sexuality as revealed through scriptural authority and tradition.

Such explanations are important to bring forth in an evaluation of the human, human nature, and the subsequent ways humans are to pursue flourishing in life. At this point, considering the two different lines of thinking, these three fundamental concerns are either divinely imbued with meaning or have been gradually and imperceptibly constructed and assigned meaning. Either way, currently it can be seen that these notions are involved with networks of power, which has led to people's suffering and oppression. The question is whether or not this might be justified as divinely inspired or affected by divine influence of truth.

### Constructs of the Human and Heteronormativity

The process through which these constructs materialized and metastasized can be seen to have had a vast range of effects. It does seem that existing concepts of the human, human nature, and the life of flourishing one pursues out of these understandings has been involved in the suffering and oppression of certain populations, a direct result of power and the political use of

truth, as Foucault worked to expose. But truth that is not manipulated by power is not an unjust oppressive presence. Might it be seen that truth can be caught up in power? What could be revealed through examining the application of constructs of the human?

Truth, knowledge, and power could possibly be better fleshed out as social realities by investigating the project of heteronormativity that is perceived to pandemically exist today. Cathy Cohen, in “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens,” defines heteronormativity as “localized practices” and “centralized institutions which legitimize and privilege heterosexuality and heterosexual relationships as fundamental and ‘natural’ within society” (1997, 440). Roderick Ferguson takes this a step further, drawing on the racial pathologizing that has classified African Americans as “nonheteronormative,” with the construct of race historically informing sexuality (2000, 420). Cohen and Ferguson both work to prove that heteronormativity functions as a way of advocating not only for heterosexuality, but for a very specific form of heterosexuality catered to those of a certain state-sanctioned status, class, race, gender, and other markers of privilege that support the “prescribed norm,” culminating into this project of heteronormativity (Cohen 1997, 457). The power involved in these constructs of our culture has created particular understandings that are constantly informing the lives of individuals and populations today.

As such, constructs of the human and the ways in which people should live a good life in light of this are increasingly policed, and it is based on this structure that illuminates certain aspects of existence while shrouding others. In particular, the notion of rationalism, rooted all the way back to Aristotle, still holds weight today, and it has become a defining marker for some individuals’ and populations’ source of privilege or oppression. Ferguson draws from Gunner

Myrdal's pathologizing of African Americans in *An American Dilemma*, in which he explores emotionalism in churches, the increasing rationalism in white populations, and the enduring irrationalism of African-American populations, all based on their respective ways of worship. The irrationality of African Americans and support of a "whiteness as goodness/purity and ... blackness as uncleanness/badness" binary historically rendered African American's existence to be 'other' in understandings of the human (Ferguson 2000, 433). The issue here is that during slavery and throughout the time of emancipation, African-Americans were not afforded the rights and autonomy that white people enjoyed. Much of the evidence used to claim African-American's outsider status, however--"lack of common law marriages, out-of-wedlock births, lodgers, single-headed families, non monogamous sexual relationships, unmarried persons, and homosexual persons and relationships" (Ferguson 2000, 423)--involved direct interventions of white people in the lives and rights of African-Americans.

These interventions and the construct of the human in which they were working around thoroughly infuses and constrains the lives of populations that can be considered 'other.' Within the distinctions that have been made, there are particular systems in which people are supposed to live their lives. Ferguson explains, "Regimes of rationality thus designate legalized heterosexual and patriarchal marriage as the institution that can regulate sexuality and thus confirm the rationality of the subject" (2000, 421). Continuing with this line of argument, he elaborates, "As modes of difference typically deemed irrational, blackness and homosexuality have historically symbolized the antithesis of citizenship and have thus been deemed incommensurate with the rights thereof" (Ferguson 2000, 421). Thus, by refusing the same rights and legal statuses to African Americans, which were interpreted to confirm the rationality,

legality of sexuality, and value of citizenship of human subjects, African Americans were not granted the same status of 'human' on the grounds that their ways of life were 'other' to the pervasive project of the American state. The entanglement here is very tedious, and it hopefully serves to provide a glimpse into the intricate ways in which oppressions are entangled within this grid of knowledge-power that informs the human.

As can be seen, there is power surrounding and constructing knowledge of the human, human nature, and the pursuit of a life of flourishing. The application of notions related to these three fundamental aspects of being has brought suffering in various ways. This web of knowledge-power proves to be thoroughly enmeshed in American culture, with Christianity's tacit presence. Rationalism has been used to impact social structures while also characterizing the very definitions of who can participate in these realms. In the same vein, rationalism is tied up within Christian distinctions of human life, while Christian institutions, along with the state, have participated in processes that render certain individuals and populations lacking the full capacity to claim and be granted the superior status of human. From a social perspective, this project can be recognized as strikingly unjust, but the question remains as to whether truth fits into this at all. More insidiously, however, it can be seen that these broader processes take shape within the lives of individuals. The question of human manipulation or divine truth takes on a graver tone when it is directed at personal perceptions of the world and self, right and wrong, and an acceptable life.

## LGBTQ+ Christians: Where Knowledge-Power Becomes Personal Knowledge and Embodiment

If knowledge and power can be so central in the flourishing and suffering of entire populations, how might this impact the ways individuals conceive of their place and their life within this culture? Reverting back to the core focus of this essay, how might such contextual forces be involved in a young gay Christian thinking their sexual orientation is sinful? Besides the belief that it could be of divine influence, an understanding produced by some degree of an exposure to truth and God, is it possible that the affect animating this young gay Christian's experience is translated into conviction based on enculturating processes that occur within Christian communities? How might power-knowledge on the large scale evolve into personal knowledge and embodiment? In this portion of the essay, I want to examine this process, as I think Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, an embodied history, internalized as second nature, and forgotten as history can shed light on this phenomenon and the lattice-work materializing experience, which in this case would be those specific to faith and queerness<sup>2</sup>.

Considering this, I think Bourdieu's concepts can yield fresh understandings of the intricacies of how knowledge-power and cultural structures, in terms of how they are of human efforts, become dispositions informing distinctions at play. In drawing from Bourdieu, I would like to consider these systems in terms of how they relate to the ways in which people express life and relate to the structures molding their experiences, using his concept of the field,

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<sup>2</sup> When using the term queer as a descriptor of sexualities, sexual orientation, or persons, I am referring to the 'other' produced by the racial, colonial, national project of heteronormativity. The enterprise of heteronormativity not only upholds heterosexuality as prevailing but ultimately privileges very specific manifestations of sexuality, gender, and other facets of personhood, which are connected to multi-sited oppressions and imbalances of power rampant within the West.

characterized by different forms of capital, and the ways in which people navigate it with the *habitus*. For LGBTQ+ Christians, traversing the social field of Christianity and embodying the *habitus* is socially, emotionally, physically, relationally, and spiritually charged, as the very existence of an LGBTQ+ Christian can collide with some Christian's unambiguous terms of what the human is, what human nature is, and how one is supposed to live in this world. By stepping through these macro processes swirling with power and knowledge relationships, we can now, more fully informed, grapple with the intimate realizing of personal knowledge and embodiment.

Bourdieu's concept claims an intricate dynamic of the *habitus* (deeply rooted habits, dispositions, and skills) capital (recognized assets that are often difficult to acquire and valued in the field), and the field (the landscapes of social histories in which these concepts are navigated) all work in concert, structuring individuals' experience of life and distinction of self. Of these, I am most concerned with *habitus*. Even though it works within this play of field and capital, *habitus* most profoundly captures the forces and processes that characterize LGBTQ+ Christians' existence within a faith system that can contradict their experiences of being human and expressing life with the faith's own theory of what is human.

*Habitus* is said to engender all "reasonable," "common sense" behaviors that are possible within the limits of regularity (Bourdieu 1980, 55). These dispositions are "positively sanctioned" because they are adjusted to a logic of a particular field and have a specific future to anticipate (Bourdieu 1980, 56). With this in mind, it is understandable that certain dispositions--like homophobia, which incorporates beliefs, perceptions, and so on--can become "reasonable" in a setting where it is condoned by scriptural and human authority, presented in

modelled behavior, and all ‘other’ or contrary behaviors or alternatives remain absent.

Interestingly, it is the *habitus* that is inscribed within this that enables institutions to be fully realized, as these institutions become objects not only through “things,” the logic outside “individual agents,” but also through bodies, the “durable dispositions to recognize and comply with the demands immanent in the field” (Bourdieu 1980, 57-58). In saying this, Bourdieu is explaining that *habitus* is fundamentally involved in structuring the systems and institutions that structure it.

To go off of this idea, the *habitus* generates behaviors within the parameters of the field, which is structured by already structured institutions, and produces “individual and collective practices” (Bourdieu 1980, 54). Meanwhile, other practices that are established and remain outside of these parameters, those that are most “improbable,” become practices that are “unthinkable” (Bourdieu 1980, 54). The process of learning becomes central at this juncture, but to illustrate this more vividly for LGBTQ+ Christians, the reasoning process for homophobia--condoned, modelled, and unrefuted--within non-affirming communities of Christianity makes homosexuality as well as any form non-normative sexuality “improbable.” As homophobia rejects people that claim queer sexualities, leading these individuals to either flee Christianity or denounce this lived experience, it renders queer sexualities within this particular field nonexistent. More than “improbable,” the absence of queer sexualities in the face of the opposing rhetorics leads it to become “unthinkable.”

Homophobia, transphobia, and the very prevalent heteronormativity persists within Christian communities. This can translate into a phenomenon that Thomas Bohache calls “christophobia” within the LGBTQ+ community, an internalization of oppressions that makes a



Christian faith seem unviable for people based on the LGBTQ+ identity they claim (2003, 12). These dynamics make it seem almost impossible for people to integrate their faith with their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, and this is especially the case when these intersect with other sites of oppression. Many times devout Christians have lived their entire life in the closet, opted for celibacy, or resorted to ex-gay efforts in light of this. The “atrocities” within the church’s handling of LGBTQ+ issues, historically and currently, are often “a warning” to LGBTQ+ individuals within faith spaces “to stay silent about their queer identity” (Ivey 2014, 56). Therefore, it is not surprising that LGBTQ+ people often abandon their faith in the face of these difficulties. For those that do not flee, the thinking seems to follow that if such challenges truly stem from an opposition to LGBTQ+ expression or identity by God, then the torment might be necessary in order to live a righteous life. Such difficulty may seem blatantly wrong or like needless misery, but the tension surrounding what is the divine role and what is the human role in this makes the struggle seem nonnegotiable.

*Habitus* permeates an individual’s thoughts, feelings, and movements through its infinite generative capacity, though it is also strictly limited, being a product of social institutions that are themselves structured. This means that external structures (institutions, interactions, knowledge) create parameters for the *habitus*. For LGBTQ+ Christians, this can have a negative effect as experiences of difficult surroundings become internalized. Harm can rise as a result of navigating a field of regulation, surveillance, condemnation, and manipulation, which becomes reflected in a person’s inner-workings of the self. The most common attribution to this effect, in the example of LGBTQ+ Christians, is the concept of internalized homophobia--the largely unperceived act of accepting negative thoughts, feelings, messages, and other forms of external

stimuli as true to a degree in which it is incorporated into one's very sense of self and being. Analyzing this on an individual basis with the concept of *habitus* can perhaps shed light on the many complex ways in which people learn and develop inclinations personally.

Statements I have heard in my research reflect processes of internalizing homophobia and negativity surrounding LGBTQ+ expression and identity. Matthew Smith claimed, "I don't remember, like, any like explicit kind of messaging around, like, homosexuality being wrong, but it was totally in the air that we kind of breathed growing up." Marcus Kyle adds to that, naming the distinctions, "Secular and worldly and ... if nothing else, not Christian." This becomes embodied, as Smith shared of the experience: "I just thought that was normal [...] to try to hide this part of myself because I was terrified of, like, if anyone finds out about this." These accounts can reveal that what Bourdieu spoke of happens at the level of the collective and the individual, and as previously mentioned, living this process becomes embodied as history, internalized as second nature, and forgotten as an actual history. Such a phenomenon is not essentially organic, which extends inquiry to the expanse of learning and embodiment.

## Embodied Knowledge and Enskillment

Considering the *habitus*' generative capacity, it is necessary to recognize that learning is implicit within the phenomenon of navigating a social field, internalizing the external structures and sentiments, and embodying knowledge. The purpose of this learning is for the individual to better fit into their environment. Yet for LGBTQ+ Christians, this is a complex case, for the demands of one's environment often directly conflicts with this person's lived experience, and this can manifest in feelings of conviction and a pursuit of redemption from a sinful sexual orientation. Enculturative proceedings are constantly at work in people's lives and bodies,

whether acknowledged or not, and so, the role of the *habitus* and the embodiment and enskillment that occurs in relation within non-accepting Christian communities can place LGBTQ+ Christians in a predicament.

Greg Downey has contributed important work regarding the *habitus* and embodied knowledge, critiquing Bourdieu's concept by incorporating biological anthropology, psychology, and other relevant disciplines. He contends in "Practice Without Theory" that "bodily learning" (Downey 2010, 525) and developing an "embodied knowledge" not only implies that the body learns through history and experience and the internalizations of these, but that these forces also contain the power to transform the material body (Downey 2010, 526). Downey elaborates, "[The body] does not memorize the past, it enacts the past, bringing it back to life" (2010, 526). In this discussion, embodied knowledges are both biological and cultural, conscious and unconscious, a more nuanced facet of Bourdieu's *habitus*. This process incorporates mimesis as a form of learning, where people perform behaviors and practices they are exposed to, whether it is at the level of the conscious or the unconscious. Downey quotes Bourdieu in saying, "What is 'learned by the body' is 'something that one is'" (2010, 526), and so the "deep structuring" (2010, 535) of practices experienced by an individual, like those outlined above, is the "enskillment" (2008, 210) of bodily systems, constantly creating what the body is.

"Enskillment" is a term borrowed from Tim Ingold, and Downey places it happening within an "enculturative setting" (2008, 210). Enskillment captures how "skills are a form of coordination between a person's body, perception, resources, tools, and environment" (2008, 211), which allows an individual to function better in their environment. Skill is learning and responding, and we are always learning from the environment around us and our relation to it. In

“Scaffolding Imitation in Capoeira” (2008), Downey offers that learning itself is a skill, coordinating the body with its environment in order for it to better accomplish the tasks set before it, and again, this process involves changes in the materiality of the body--evoking Bourdieu once more, “What is ‘learned by the body’ is ‘something that one is’” (Downey 2010, 526). Occurring within the context of a person’s enculturative environment, enskillment engages a person to more successfully function within their setting.

The complexity of bodily learning and embodied knowledge is integral within an examination of LGBTQ+ Christians and the internalizing of oppressions, like homophobia. The telos of this learning is to allow agents to better acclimate to their environment, to perform tasks with greater efficiency and accuracy, as well as to be integrated into their environments more seamlessly. Karson Galindo, in an interview with me, said of their sexual orientation, “I would just learn how to manage my attractions and learn how to stifle myself.” Similarly illustrating this principle, Jason Livingston expressed, “The only way that they saw for me to be a good Christian was to stop being honest about what I was experiencing.” For an LGBTQ+ individual growing up within these condemning Christian settings, acclimating to such an environment and learning rhetoric and practice and desire (in order to better carry out the task of being a Christian within these environments) requires an enskillment that directly conflicts with lived experiences. LGBTQ+ Christians are not simply learning what kind of lives to have, but what kind of feelings and experiences they should accept and express in order to aspire for that life. Learning is a deeply integral aspect of being, occurring at levels of consciousness and unconsciousness, meant to allow knowledge to be embodied and the body to better adapt to its environment, but as can be seen, this can be an inherently emotional process.

## The Emotions in Learning

The process of learning for LGBTQ+ individuals--and more generally, much of the learning surrounding gender and sexuality for everyone--in Christian environments is not uninvolved with emotions. Matthias Roberts, a prominent figure in creating content around LGBTQ+ Christian matters, provides a poignant example in his book *Beyond Shame*. When talking about growing up in a Christian environment where he was always taught to cover his eyes, turn away, claim to not want to see any suggestive image, he explains, “Years later, I realized how troubling it was that I was taught to respond to seeing a woman’s body in a way that mimics the classic expression of shame” (2020, 2). Roberts continues, “It made no sense to me that I shouldn’t look at people’s bodies, but the aversion of my eyes gradually became involuntary” (2020, 2). Put another way, Roberts’ religious upbringing not only trained him to physically respond to situations with a shame response but primed him to experience these feelings. Such an account of growing up in a conservative Christian setting links teaching surrounding purity and spirituality with the bodily responses of feelings like shame. Keeping this firsthand account in mind, the emotions and feelings present in this process of learning is an important component to explore.

With Bourdieu’s claim that what is learned by the body is what the body is, and Downey saying embodied knowledge involves a material change of the body, it should thus be explored on a deeper level how *habitus* and embodied knowledge might affectually play out. Kay Milton explains that learning and emotion influence one another, creating a compelling process through which emotions and feelings are embedded in this concept of *habitus*, the notion of embodied knowledge, and the process of enskillment. She suggests that emotions are “pre-social and

pre-cultural,” existing independent of involvement of external relations to give them meaning (Milton 2005, 203). However, she relates emotion to the processes Downey has discussed, saying, “one of the main ways in which emotion connects the individual to their environment is through the process of learning, and learning, like emotion, cannot be fully understood through either biological or cultural approaches” (Milton 2005, 208). In such a way, it is not simply the learning of skills and the bodily processes of adaptation that connects an individual to the world around them, but feeling and emotion is intrinsically informing this process. If Bourdieu said what is learned by the body is what the body is, this suggests the body is not merely a collection of material parts, systems, and their abilities, but it is also the feelings that animate that.

In “Emotion (or Life, the Universe, Everything),” Milton understands emotion through using an “*ecological* model,” inspired by “the relationship between an organism and its environment” (2005, 202). Expanding on this idea, she says, “What we learn, through our engagement with our environment (social and non-social), shapes our emotions-it affects the way our bodies respond to environmental stimuli ... how we perceive those responses ... and it affects how we display those feelings in action. There is no place in this model, for a polarisation between biological and cultural (or social) models of emotion” (Milton 2005, 205). Essentially, Milton is claiming that emotion cannot be parsed into isolated realms of biological or cultural, as emotions seems to impact learning and perceptions to external stimuli as well as be impacted by these things. In such a way, looking at the relations that occur can be extremely informative. What might this reveal about conviction and the desires a person can have for healing from a broken and sinful sexual orientation? I consult this research because it can inform this development of *habitus* and embodied knowledge and provide more nuance, especially when

considering LGBTQ+ Christians and the emotions embedded in *habitus*, embodied knowledge, and enskillment that may directly oppress one's self on the basis of community ideals.

As LGBTQ+ Christians often experience intensely negative mental and emotional health outcomes--fear, depression, anxiety, self-hatred, self-harm, and suicidal ideation--this can be seen to reflect the tension inherent in dissonance between their personal experiences and the social field being navigating. The process of learning how to better coordinate one's body with their environment, to adapt to better accomplish the tasks in front of them--in this case, these tasks may be living a good Christian life, upholding Christian community standards, or engaging in sanctioned relationship--is saturated with feeling and emotion. More so, the emotions associated with this are extremely complex. Marcus Kyle articulated it as:

I would say one of the most harmful things that happens to a person in communities where you're being asked to shut down your orientation or to reject your gender is that you have to start what you think is selectively numbing different parts of who you are and the emotions that you feel, but over time you numb all of them. ... You just set your life and your world up in a way where it's not that you lose the capacity to feel, but it just completely reorients your relationship to your feelings--you know, to the point where you're aggressively denying hopelessness. You're aggressively denying despair and anxiety, depression ... and that's what makes it really dangerous--is all that stuff is living in your mind, it's living in your body, it's living in your spirit. But in order, you know, to live into what you think is faithfulness to Jesus, you are just shutting all of that down.

The quote shows the intricate ways in which emotions are involved in this process of learning and embodiment, grappling with the parameters of "improbable" and "unthinkable" and the aspirations of conforming to one's environment and the values set forth. The language used is extreme, but it relays the intensity of this struggle and the stakes underlying it, for this depends

on notions of what the human is, what is human nature, and the life of flourishing people should pursue in light of this.

Understandings of feeling and the body are very important in postulating how a Christian should live their life. Conservative Christianity, notoriously considered homophobic, can often be seen as advocating for a distrust of the body for queer individuals, partitioning a “true self,” the “heterosexual person God created them to be,” and a “false self” that is “deceived by their flesh” (Burack 2014, 38). Whereas, more liberal Christianities express a different way of identifying with one’s humanity and God’s relation to that: “[A]ll manner of embodiment and embodied experience is a further unfolding of the divine/human reality that we live” (Isherwood 2015, 1351-1352). Fundamentally, this is the context giving texture to the field in which the individuals that I am discussing navigate, and it frames the structures involved in these learning and embodiment processes. However, what occurs within this context to taint embodiment, learning, and feelings in a way that can be so harmful for LGBTQ+ Christians?

### The Christian Context and Manipulation (?)

The *habitus* and this process of bodily enculturation, producing embodied knowledge and enskillment (Downey 2101, 535), is bound up in feelings and emotions, but it remains important that this occurs within grids of of knowledge-power and structured institutions that provide and shape the learning experience. This process is especially intimate for religious concepts. From a Christian setting, it is necessary to examine how faith systems, especially in the right conditions, inform the ways in which people experience their feelings and the meanings attributed to them. Additionally, this is relevant to the skills and rhetoric they learn, not to mention the



understandings and structures internalized. It is a complex dynamic even simply in physical terms, but adding the spiritual layer is necessary for a full exposition.

The primary mechanism I want to use for this analysis is conviction--though it occurs in context with other feelings, like shame, fear, hope, paranoia--as it is quite compelling for this topic of embodied learning. How might various affect become conviction through the *habitus*? Anthropologist Jessica Johnson, in *Biblical Porn: Affect, Labor, and Pastor Mark Driscoll's Evangelical Empire*, explains conviction "in terms of gut feeling which signals desires and passions simultaneously biological and social, examining how they activate and contaminate habits of the everyday" (2018, 9). Johnson conducted an ethnography of Mars Hill church in Seattle, Washington, researching the "Evangelical Empire" Pastor Mark Driscoll was cultivating, using conditions of affect and labor, manipulated by way of sexualized and militarized dynamics (2018). Johnson claims Mars Hill mobilized "an affective ecology such that fear, hope, conviction, shame, and paranoia circulated to spiritual, economic, and political effect" (2018, 21). I am interested in looking at how the forces that have already been discussed in this paper translate into a religious setting, and Johnson's rigorous analysis provides excellent grammar to discuss this phenomenon.

In defining affect for her ethnography, Johnson draws from the work of Kevin Lewis O'Neil, postulating, "Affect as a religiously managed and politically manipulated sensation" that functions to make "legible a series of spaces that are not necessarily territorial but that are nonetheless deeply political" (2018, 17). Johnson then draws on how she witnessed "fear, hope, conviction, shame, and paranoia circulated" to form what Sara Ahmed coined an "affective economy" (2018, 17). Through this "affective economy," "emotions play a crucial role in the

‘surfacing’ of individual and collective bodies through the way in which emotions circulate between bodies and signs” (Johnson 2018, 17). That is, within this context, feelings and affect were seen to disseminate spiritual messages through bodies and symbols. To place this in a religious context, Johnson describes a specific instance when Pastor Mark Driscoll argued that there was a need for feelings to be more central in the faith in order to involve the surrounding secular culture “through emotional and affective means that touched the heart, increased the pulse rate, and primed the collective mood” (2018, 31). Driscoll wanted to create an environment that yielded both physical and affective responses in order to make the faith and his church more appealing. In such a way, it can be seen that manipulation of these feelings potentially creates a visceral effect that profoundly characterizes navigating Christian settings, and as we have seen, these feelings are a fundamental aspect of learning and existing as a member of these communities.

Conviction, in these terms, serves a very deep purpose. It is often explained as being the work of the Holy Spirit, for it seems to be a prompting of bodily feelings and emotions. More empirically, Johnson claims conviction is a “surplus affective value which troubles felt distinctions between the sinner and saved, profane and sacred, subject and object, and spiritual and worldly” (2018, 6). As such a unique phenomenon, conviction cannot be passed over within this discussion, especially considering LGBTQ+ Christians traversing external and internalized homophobia, membership in these communities, and the ideals of (heterosexual) human nature and a godly life. It was always my experience, growing up in church, that conviction was attributed to the work of God. However, if conviction might be an “affective value” that can be manipulated in religious circumstances, maintaining a “political valence” (Johnson 2018, 9), it

must be scrutinized in more detail, especially when considering its implicit ties to learning and “enskillment,” through which individuals better adapt to their environment and become more adept at accomplishing tasks set before them, and the meaning of the feelings that color these learning processes.

This “political valence” that conviction holds sheds light on the more insidious side of conviction, and Johnson examines it from an approach that encapsulates it within power relations rather than an actual movement of the divine (Johnson 2018, 9). She professes conviction has an “affective capacity to register as a belief that feels like one’s own, but may be steered,” which seems to connect affect with conviction through a particular *habitus* (Johnson 2018, 9). In such a way, conviction internalizes feelings that could have been propagated by outside sources, religious authority in this example. The fact that manipulation of one’s environment and its affective qualities can be accepted as one’s own feelings in the name of the divine brings new caution to this conflict of discerning divine influence from that of humans.

Conviction affects the dispositions, movements, perceptions, feelings, and embodiments that associate with the *habitus*. As such, in conditions like those Johnson discusses and the topic I am exploring of LGBTQ+ Christians, this can function in harmful ways. The ways in which people experience conviction, the conditions that lead it to materialize and dissipate, the meanings assigned to it, and the patterned skills of experiencing it (learning emotions, the stimuli, physical responses, and subjective feeling that Milton draws upon, which I will discuss below [2005, 201]) seems to fit within a framework of the *habitus*. The body *learns* from its past. The body *performs* its past. Thus, conviction appears to be legible through processes of the *habitus* from navigating a Christian social field.

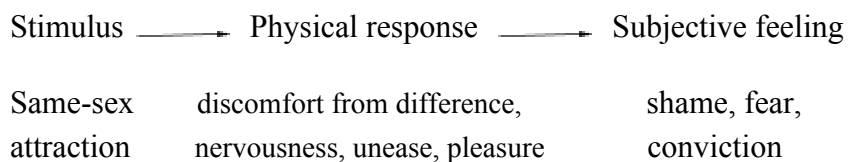
Conviction can be an exceedingly strong experience for LGBTQ+ Christians, especially those that have internalized the homophobia surrounding them, as it can be bolstered by feelings of fear, shame, and hope in ways that compel these individuals to be in compromising positions. Learning how to better coordinate, adapt, and accomplish tasks in Christian environments is a serious engagement for these individuals. Both Karson Galindo and Marcus Kyle described their experiences in conversion therapy, each having participated in it in varying degrees for around a decade. Kyle describes the conviction that led to his entrance to conversion therapy, saying that at the age of fourteen he was experiencing difference around his sexual attractions and gender and realizing, “It’s not okay, per the faith system, you know, that I believe is worth any sacrifice. ... and so I spent almost ten years a part of Exodus International Affiliates, imagining that conversion therapy was both legitimate and something that I was self-selecting into.” Conviction in this example, sanctioned so concretely, brought about true harm in intensifying the difficulties individuals endured, as a result of what they considered to be their own desire, in an effort to try to learn how to navigate this field in a better coordinated way.

The drastic impacts of this can relate to the concept of “spiritual abuse” used by the informants in Johnson’s ethnography. In an interview with a former member of Mars Hill, spiritual abuse is defined, “When one narrative voice controls the emotional power of the narrative” (Johnson 2018, 31). As such, the feelings associated with certain experiences people have are constrained to a logic determined by spiritual authority. This relates to how the affect of conviction can be manipulated into leading people to think it is their own feeling, their own desire, that carries a unique personal meaning. Spiritual abuse is qualified further by the informant as “emotional abuse” that takes place on a “social level ... with religious

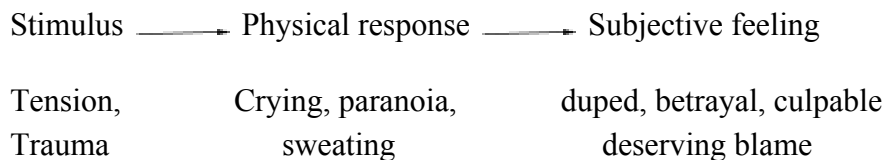
rationalizations” (Johnson 2018, 31-32). Spiritual abuse is often seen in the aftermath of involvement within this environment, particularly when distanced from affects of conviction. Although people experience some effects while they are actively engaging in these Christian settings, the potency of the manipulation is typically only realized to be foreign when they reach a point of disengagement. In these terms, I think it can be said that this plays, directly or indirectly, into one’s *habitus*, embodying and internalizing knowledge of one’s social field.

At this point, I would like to refer back to Milton’s work. While Milton claims that the emotions we feel are “pre-social and pre-cultural” (2005, 203), the meaning assigned to them and the intricate ways that we experience them are informed by our surroundings. Milton uses a model contrived by William James that creates a pathway for emotion, from “Stimuli” to “Physical response” to “Subjective feeling” (2005, 201). Through these three steps, both biological and cultural forces can be recognized as molding what we call emotion or feeling. This is relevant, I believe, because Christianity often plays such a pervasive role in people’s lives, and as Johnson alludes, the communities of a Christian faith can have a direct influence on the experience, perception, and responses to feelings and emotions, especially in the case of spiritual abuse and the aftermath that can be just as potent. This phenomenon of spiritual abuse manifesting can be expressed through Milton’s appropriation of James’s model:

Within the abuse



## The aftermath



The pertinence of this lies in how the *habitus* is the internalization of these meanings that permits spiritual abuse and allows the projection of these to reaffirm the external structures. The body *remembers* and *performs* the meanings that have been assigned to these feelings based on the Christian social field the individual has navigated, and even the aftermath of this experience can allow little relief.

This is a deeply pervasive and systemic occurrence of conviction and the interaction between an individual and their external surroundings. It is sobering to contemplate how one learns to interpret their feelings, experiences, interactions and the symbols surrounding them, especially when an individual's agency is evaluated. It is observed that there is an elaborate process that can occur in LGBTQ+ Christians believing and internalizing that their sexual orientation or experience of gender is sinful, broken, and wrong. More insidiously, however, there is a lasting effect, as the aftermath continues to pose difficulty for these individuals; the internalizations, embodiment, and enactment does not dissolve overnight. In the end, however, the main question to address is this tension I have been referring to all along, the tension between discerning divine influence and human manipulation in all this.

## Conclusion: The Social Processes of Divine and/or Human Influence

How might feelings associated with experience and learning, characteristics of the social field leading to certain dispositions, and the role of the *habitus* be related for LGBTQ+?

Christians? The ultimate culmination of this project lies in probing this tension where the divine and/or the human can be attributed the origin of conviction, and subsequently the space where conviction muddles the distinctions between sacred and profane (Johnson 2018, 6). This occurs in relation to the *habitus* and in the context of a Christian social field. “Felt distinctions” and preconceptions of “profane and sacred . . . spiritual and worldly” are challenged by conviction in the way that the affectual conditions called conviction are said to indicate some degree of truth (Johnson 2018, 6). This tension is especially crucial in the structuring of *habitus*--an incorporation of embodied knowledge, learning, and enskillment--as Bourdieu claims *habitus* has a bearing on distinguishing what is possible and what is not, what is accessible and what is not, what is “for us” and what is not: “a division as fundamental and as fundamentally recognized as that between the sacred and the profane” (1980, 64). For LGBTQ+ Christians, the experience of this proves to be conflicting, for institutions, tradition, and scripture (all attempts to establish Truth) are often used to refute lived experience and the claiming of an LGBTQ+ identity, and so the division is fundamental indeed.

I would like to conclude this essay with a recent example I came across during my fieldwork that illustrates the opposing perspective, which I have yet to incorporate. From a segment called “Set It Straight” on the Christian Broadcasting Network, there is an interview on YouTube with George Carneal, author of *From Queer To Christ* entitled “Former Gay Reveals Truth of LGBTQ Agenda Flooding the Culture: They're Sanitizing the ‘Horror Stories.’” During the interview, in response to the question about whether there should be laws in the United States banning conversion therapy, Carneal professes, “Absolutely not. The way they [non-conservative Christian culture] tell it, they act as every counselor out there is doing harm to an LGBT

individual, and it's not the case. ... What they need to understand is there are LGBT individuals who do not want these feelings. And they want help getting that healing and wholeness they want so they can have a family and children" (Former 2020, 2:57-3:30) As a result of the position articulated in this interview, the phenomena discussed throughout this essay hopefully are more enfolded.

The internalization of external sentiments, the embodiment and enskillment, the meanings given to certain emotions and feelings, and the potential for affect to be spiritually manipulated--all of this phenomena allows deeper insight into Carneal's claim, "they want help getting that healing and wholeness they want" (Former). If this desire is a product of an individual traversing a Christian social field, there is no other reason for why a young gay Christian come to view their queer sexual orientation as sinful, in need of rejecting and changing, besides the constant embodying and internalizing of religious messages of condemnation. Otherwise, this desire is of divine inspiration. Still, it can be seen throughout this essay that foundational understandings of human, human nature, the life one is meant to live, and the ways in which people are to experience these. In addition to processes of individual lives, broader cultural structures and forces preserve this tension through associations with knowledge-power and *habitus*. Therefore, this tension--and the ways in which embodiment, learning, conviction, and the durable, transposable, dispositions of a structured, regular and regulated *habitus* are involved within it--will forever exist: ambiguity surrounding what is human will, what is be divine will, and how people consequently interact with truth.

If nothing else, I have discussed in this paper how intricately social processes are involved in experiences of life that can be seen to be always occurring in some degree. As such,



if what I have discussed--a young gay Christian understanding in the very core of their being that their same-sex attraction is sinful--is truly of God, then the *habitus* (bridging actual human nature to the structures formed outside of it, relating to it) is burdensome but necessary, the conviction is accurate, and the lengths people must go in order to better embody knowledge and religious structures, coordinate to this environment, and perform the tasks of being a godly human with a righteous nature and an upright pursuit of fulfillment and the natural order are legitimated. Given that the spiritual authority is leading in a way pleasing to the divine and ultimately edifying to the person and the world, then following the parameters set forth in what is good and reasonable, improbable and unthinkable should be learned, internalized, and embodied. In other words, same-sex attraction is a manifestation of brokenness and redemption should be sought. However, if this is not the case and what has been examined through this essay is of pure human doing--leveraging knowledge-power and manipulating affect to manufacture conviction and advocate for a life of struggle and internalized, embodied oppression--then what has been observed is an extremely complex and multifaceted system in which people are subjugated to pervasive technologies and structures that shape their knowledge, feelings, thoughts, movements, experiences, and sense of self in devastating and ultimately unjust ways.

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