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Nisnis - quarterly magazine focusing on LBTQ issues

Faith and Sexuality





Hear yourself reflected

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Volume 1, Issue 1

Nisnis is a quarterly magazine that focuses on the issues of LGBTQ Ethiopians in Ethiopia and in the diaspora.

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Published by Queer Ethiopia,
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia,
© April 2021



QUEER ETHIOPIA

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“Queer Ethiopia” is an alternative space created by a group of queer Ethiopian women. It is designed to be a space for a diverse group of Ethiopian queer women whose sexual and gender identifications vary. It includes cis and trans women who may be lesbian, bisexual or asexual. This is a space where the experiences of queer people takes center stage. We hope to include personal experiences from our daily lives as queer people, various stories, interviews, original artwork and poetry. We hope it will also serve as a place where Ethiopians in Ethiopia and Ethiopians in the diaspora come as themselves to explore and create an online community.

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from the editors

It is with mixed feelings that we welcome you to the inaugural issue of Nisnis, a magazine focusing on the issues of LBTQ Ethiopians in Ethiopia and in the diaspora.

While we are excited by this endeavor, we are also dismayed by the need for it. Let us explain. During a recent conversation, a fellow Ethiopian lesbian - while discussing her journey to self-acceptance - said something profound that resonated with us. She said, "Had I known more queer people like you, had I been able to have even one conversation with someone like you, I would have maybe accepted myself sooner or at least I would have spared myself so much of the anguish and doubt that I felt". In a nutshell, she was addressing the lack of resources in our communities for LBTQ Ethiopians.

Materials written by us and for us are rare, rarer still is original material written in one of our own languages. These lack of materials written by us, for us and in a language that is ours leaves the door wide open for others to define who we are. Instead of us naming ourselves, it allows others to name us - often in ways that are demonizing and deadly. Religious leaders, civil society, government officials and journalists often advocate for our murder, for our increased imprisonment and for attacks against us. Their comments also shape society's views of us as LBTQs and even our own views of ourselves. Thus due to a lack of accurate information and representation, we toil for years before we learn to accept ourselves. Some of us attempt to kill ourselves, some of us get involved in sham marriages, some of us become traumatized, some of us are forced to leave our homes and our country and some of us are forced to leave our religion and our faith and to think of ourselves as sinners who have to change who we are to fit into society's idea of "normal".

We wish this magazine was not desperately needed. We wish we, as LBTQ Ethiopians, were represented in our full complexity and diversity and seen as citizens whose sexual orientation and gender identity were not a cause for violence. Unfortunately, the homophobia is only increasing as a sort of backlash as a few of us become visible on social media and other spaces. This increased the necessity for Nisnis.

Nisnis, which will be published quarterly, is dedicated to addressing issues that are relevant to LBTQ Ethiopians such as faith and sexuality, self-acceptance, mental health, coming out and love and relationships. To this end we welcome your comments, suggestions and contributions. Our aim is to provide a space for us LBTQ Ethiopians to define our issue by ourselves, to create a space where we can be ourselves, to find a space where we can converse with each other and to give ourselves and our community validation.

We hope to become that one conversation, that one person that we all wish our queer self had met earlier in our journey.

Welcome home.

UNCOVERING sin

Reconciliation of faith with sexuality

Nejat used to pray five times a day: At dawn, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset and after dark. Facing Mecca and wearing her hijab, she would recite the sura, rejoicing in the comfort and peace that such devout prayer brought her. As required, she fasted during Ramadan and enjoyed the gathering of family and community during fitoor, as the whole family gathered to break their fast.

Until, in a gradual process that she found isolating and that she described as a “lonesome journey”, she was no longer

praying or fasting and now only wears her hijab out of respect for her family.

The slow and painful abandonment of the rituals that used to bring a sense of connectedness all her life are a result of her learning to accept her identity as a lesbian.

"I had to deny my [lesbian] identity because of my religion," Nejat said. "It was hard to imagine where these two identities could reconcile. I don't have any reference where these two identities worked together. So I had to reject my beliefs to accept my queerness".

Nejat is not alone in this struggle of self-acceptance that arises due to religion. Crying non-stop, feeling ashamed to pray and a constant feeling of self-contempt are just a few of the emotions that were recalled when reflecting on what it meant to be an Ethiopian LGBTQ person of faith.

"It was very difficult. I had so many doubts," said Selamawit, a self identified

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on my own.
I can deny
myself then
be religious
then I will
make my
God happy.**

Selamawit

Ethiopian Christian lesbian. "I was telling myself that I can do it on my own. I can deny myself then be religious then I will make my God happy".

Selamawit, who is a practicing Protestant, said she had bought into the notion that, as someone whose sexual attraction was towards other women, that she was a sinner who was not fit to take part in various practices within her church.

"I was a member of the prayer fellowship and we used to pray in groups but I couldn't bring myself to pray. When you are told that you are a sinner, you lose strength," Selamawit said. "It is like a child who has been told that they cannot do something. It has a similar effect. 'You are a sinner, how dare you pray?' You start fighting with yourself."

Helen, who grew up in an Ethiopian Orthodox religion practicing household, had similar experiences.

"[T]he extremely dogmatic and repressive



religion I was raised in has been and still is a barrier to my self-acceptance as a queer person," Helen said when asked about the impact her religion had on her accepting herself as queer.

Ethiopia is a religious nation and as such the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council, the Catholic and Evangelical churches have repeatedly approached the Ethiopian government to push for harsher treatment of "offenders" to eliminate homosexuality. Some of the law changes proposed included the 2014 proposal to have homosexuality removed from the list of crimes for which a pardon can be granted.

The major religions in Ethiopia oppose any sexuality that is not strictly between a man and a woman and they have long agitated for a stricter law against homosexuality. Homosexuality is already a crime and is punishable by up to 15 years of imprisonment. However, as far back as 2012, leaders from various religious institutions had come together to push for

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I am not able to fit these two identities together. For me, these two identities do not fit together.

Nejat

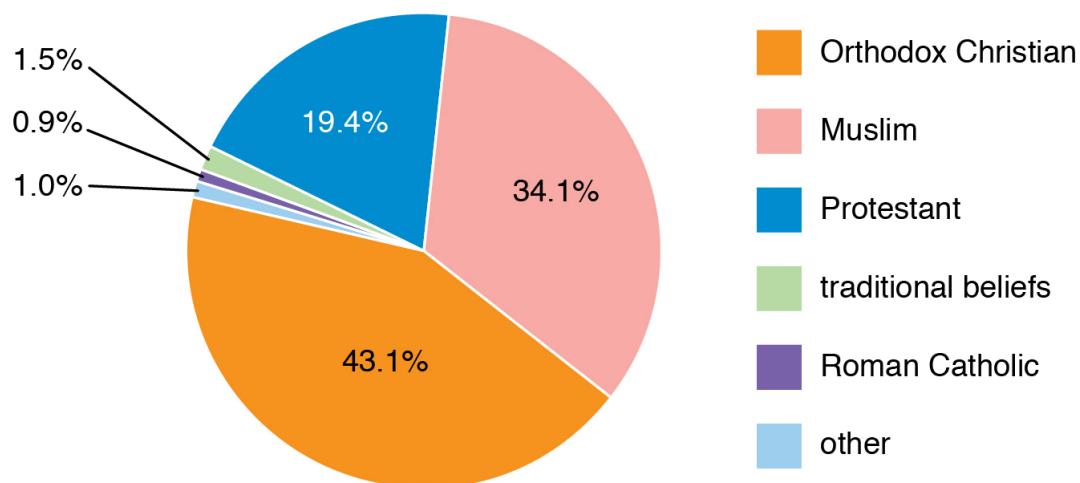
more severe penalties against homosexuality. The late Abune Paulos, the Patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, even released a statement calling upon the Ethiopian government to punish "those who are found infested with sodomite activities" and he termed homosexuality as being "the pinnacle of immorality."

In December 2008, religious leaders from the Ethiopian Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Protestant churches adopted a resolution against homosexuality. Their main goal was to urge the government to pass a constitutional amendment banning homosexuality since homosexuality is illegal under Ethiopia's penal code but it is not mentioned in the constitution.

Growing up in such hostile environments both at home and in the larger Ethiopian society, most LGBTQ Ethiopians with religious affiliations find it difficult to accept themselves. And the sense of being in the middle of an internal battle between two seemingly contradictory identities takes root.



Religious affiliation in Ethiopia (2012)



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"I am not able to fit these two identities together. For me, these two identities do not fit together. Therefore, I have rejected my Muslim identity for the most part," Nejat said.

Nejat strictly followed the teachings of her religion, as she said, "it was black and white. Like 'This is haram you don't do it'. I did everything."

Her questions about

some of the tenants of her religion were a result of her process of self acceptance and it eventually led to her full disengagements with both the rituals and the religion itself. "If it was not for religion, I would have been able to discover my sexual preference way sooner and self-acceptance would have been way easier too," Nejat said.

Being forced to "choose" between two identities and religion being a barrier to self-acceptance is a recurring issue for Ethiopian LGBTQ people who grow up in religious institutions that preach about the evils of being "homosexual".

During his Easter blessing in 2014, Patriarch Abune Mathias of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church said, "I would like to confirm to all Ethiopians that the Ethiopian Orthodox Church will fight this grand sin

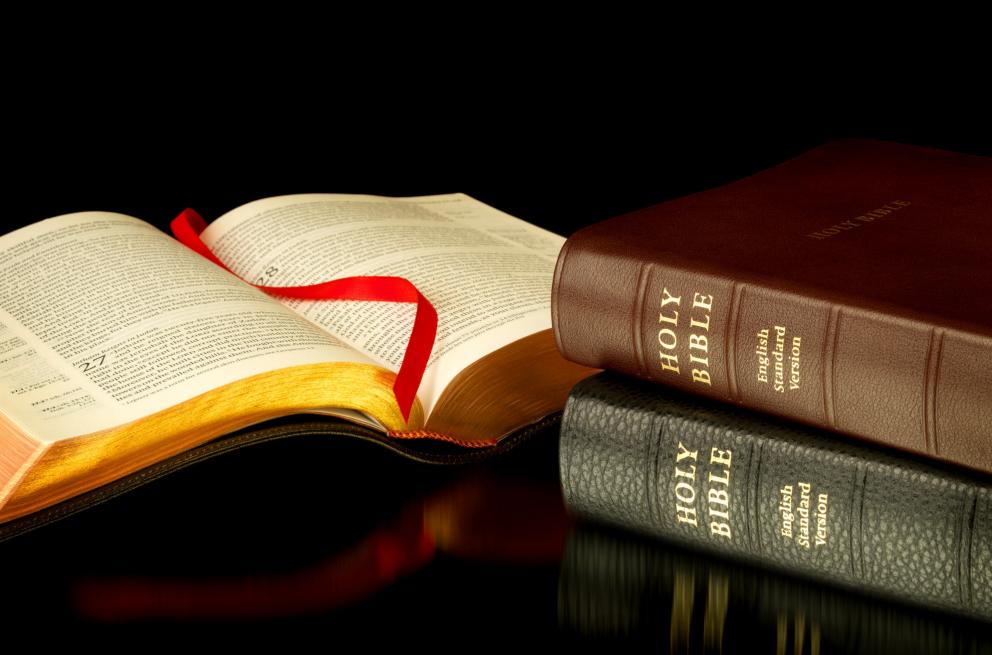
fiercely to the end. It is outside of God's and Nature's laws. Everyone should resist it. It is unnatural. It is condemned in the Bible".

Rev. Dr. Tolosa Gudina, the senior pastor of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church of Atlanta, during a speech on March 14, 2021 at the Addis Ababa Stadium to mark the first anniversary of the Ethiopian Gospel Believers' Churches Council briefly addressed his views on homosexuality.

"Racists and homosexuals are the same because they both oppose God's law," he said during the event where the President of Ethiopia and various ministers including the Minister of Peace were in attendance.

Such public declarations of homophobia are common. Whenever issues related to LGBTQ people arise, whether in places of worship





or public spaces, it is often in a disparaging manner and in a language which makes it difficult for LGBTQ of faith to accept themselves.

"My pastor is homophobic. I know that side of him," Selamawit said. "But I feel like I need to try to understand by placing myself in their place. I don't know I might be the same".

She has even found herself in spaces within her church where intense and rampant homophobia was at full display. She recalls of a time where she found herself in a room where a documentary about "homosexuals" was being played.

"I was trying to go to a different room and I found myself there. I was sitting at the back. I couldn't leave after they started talking about this issue. It was hard. The worst and so explicit. I don't know, it was a horrible experience. Videos and they were even showing the anatomy In a church," Selamawit said. "It was difficult at the time and they are still actively going around showing it to others".

These painful experiences shape the experiences of Ethiopian LGBTQs and how they make sense of their sexuality later on in life as they become more aware of their sexuality.

"Religion kept queer language and knowledge from me as long as it could; imagine how confusing it must have been to have queer thoughts but not know what they are," said Helen. "When I finally found out about queer people, I had the reactions I was conditioned to have: disgust and condemnation".

While some have left the religion of their parents or at least the active participation within those institutions during the process of self-acceptance or even perhaps as a condition of self-acceptance as LGBTQs, some like Selamawit have remained within it. While she initially found it difficult to accept herself as a lesbian and even prayed for God to help "remove" her attraction to women, she eventually made peace with it. She said she came to that realization after watching God take away

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Helen

"things that I thought were not good and that I didn't want to do anymore" but that, no matter how long she prayed, her attraction to women would just not go away.

"It is not something that He can take away. I am not saying that God cannot but that it is something that he did not want to change," Selamawit said. Upon this realization, "I stopped fighting with myself. I started hating myself. I didn't want that to happen. I don't believe that God's spirit is not something that makes you do that. I don't believe that there is a God that make you hate yourself or others".

This realization and self-acceptance led to her continuing her active participation within her church. The key for her was understanding and developing a personal relationship with God and learning to question the interpretation of the Scripture as strictly homophobic.

"You should try to personally understand spiritual things and you

should not allow others to throw what they understand at you. You should personally dig, understand and then you should pray if you have to pray and read and understand His words and if you believe that it is not right, that is enough," she said. "How long can you deny or lie to yourself? Until when, you understand? It is who you are. It was very hard but at the end of the day I came to accept myself".

Hayat, a Muslim who describes her gender expression as "tomboyish" but also a someone who is flexible with how she labels herself said she is not certain about what her religion prescribes. While some argue that Islam accepts it, she said, others are adamant that it is a sin. This conflicting view has not had a major impact in her understanding of her religion when it comes to her sexuality.

"I like to think that I can be both. I am seeing someone right now and I think the two [being Muslim and queer] can go together," she

said.

As someone who presents in a more masculine manner, Hayat said she still follows the expectations when she goes to the mosque for prayers. She says Ethiopia being a conservative nation has meant that she needs to be careful and respectful about how she presents in some places.

"I usually pray at home and only go to the mosque for Jumma prayers. When I go to the mosque, I wear the hijab and do all that is required according to our religion," Hayat said. "I wear a dress and do the other things that are a must for my prayers to be received. But I don't wear the abaya like some women do".

Haben Atsebha, who grew up in a conservative Protestant family and attending a religious elementary and secondary school, never thought that her religion and her attraction to women was a contradiction or that they were ever in conflict. She was more concerned about her family and what they



I don't feel a separation between being queer and being a Christian.

Haben

would say if they found out that she is a lesbian.

"I don't feel a separation between being queer and being a Christian. I believe God created me just as I am and it would be wrong to think that He created a mistake," Haben said.

For others the contradiction proves to be something that cannot be reconciled and thus they are forced to choose one identity while rejecting the other.

Nejat's decision to leave her religion was a journey fraught with a lot of emotional stress and it was one that was not made lightly.

"Abandoning a space

that you have belonged all your life is very isolating," she said. "Even if you say you don't really care much about the institution and being in a group there is some security that you find from having some kind of institution that you relate to, that you [have belonged to] all your life".

Nejat also said she carried a lot of anger at her religion and the way that it was practiced.

"I don't think I have processed my feelings in detail and know exactly how I feel but I am just angry. At times it is really depressing. It keeps me up at night. I feel very confused. I don't know if I am



making the right decision," she said. "So the major reaction is just being angry. Really angry at religion, the institution and all this made up shit".

Helen's journey to self-acceptance was also only possible due to her rejection of the religion that had long been a part of her life. Like Nejat, being queer and religious was not something that she felt she could make coexist.

The Ethiopian Orthodox church, a conservative form of Christianity of which Helen's family is a member, teaches that homosexual acts are a sin, not part of Ethiopian culture, immoral and as such it is strictly forbidden. These teachings take a toll on believers and inflict fear for years.

"I have not reconciled my queer and religious identities because I don't have a religious identity anymore. I miss the ceremony and spiritual connection I felt as a devout person, but not nearly enough to find harmony with that institution that traumatized me," Helen said.

In fact, her acceptance of her queer identity was only possible after an active rejection of her religion.

"I accepted myself as queer a few years after leaving the church and I don't think it would have been possible for me otherwise. I needed to denounce the god I was told about. I needed space from all the repression to have freedom of thought," Helen said.

The conservative understanding and practice of her family's religion meant

that Helen was not able to reconcile with her sexuality. She was not even able to name her feelings and find comfort in them even after she named them.

"I was 23 when I finally admitted to myself that I am attracted to women. Even then I remember thinking, 'I will never live an openly queer life.' I was glad to be done fighting but I was still ashamed," she said.

There was a sense of ease at coming to terms with her queer identity and a sense of being able to forge a new road but she still feels a certain amount of unease due to the trauma that she experienced due to religion, she said.

"Self-acceptance is complicated, although I am working to get rid of that shame and be brave, I still find myself feeling unlovable and undeserving of a happy life," Helen said. "It is a daily struggle to feel good about who I am and to feel good enough. I am proud of myself for putting up a fight."

Regardless of how far Helen has come with being comfortable and accepting of herself as queer, her final words are a reminder that rather than a destination, self-acceptance is a continuing journey.

"I think a healthy spiritual connection and support can shore me up when it all gets to be too much. Sometimes I find myself praying to the universe. I burn incense and it calms me. I meditate. And I am still searching for what feels right and whole," Helen said.



I wear a dress and do the other things that are a must for my prayers to be received. But I don't wear the abaya like some women do.

Hayat



Deliverance

Healing from a traumatic ultra-religious upbringing

It was the summer of 2020 amid preparing for a trip to Ethiopia when I suddenly confessed to my friend that I'm terrified my family might see my queerness, kidnap me, and take me to Tsebel. This isn't a hyperbole – I have seen it happen.

I was socialized as a girl in a religion that loathes women. I bristled against all the sexism and literal patriarchy I was forced to respect, but I eventually internalized the hatefulness, exclusivity, and obsession with purity. My identity became entangled in a



cycle of pursuing perfection, failing, hating myself, and having contempt for others. As my family's approval and affection were tied to my "good" behavior, I did my absolute best to be seen as pious. I was an expert performer and I succeeded, especially as I began pointing out the religious "failures" of

others. Unable to know who I truly was, it felt like I was being slowly consumed by a black hole, and I couldn't see a way out.

I learned about sex in tandem with shame about it. Sexuality in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church is just another angle from which one can assess their own or other's purity. Anything sexual was impure, especially for women. I was taught that women are not sexual beings nor are they allowed to enjoy sex. Repeatedly, implicitly, and explicitly, I heard, "Sinful are the women who own their entire personhood including their sexuality." The only thing more sinful are two people of the same gender freely expressing their attraction for each other.

I remember the first time I learned about same-sex loving people: I was 10 and my best friend and neighbor whispered in my ear that there are men who sleep with other men and they're called gibre-sodomawiyan and that was why Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed. I was horrified, and to be perfectly honest, I was appalled. What other reaction could I have after growing up in an ultra-religious household?

I forgot (or suppressed) this memory until I came to the US and saw a TV show scene of two women kissing and my heart lurched in a way that connected me to them. I felt sheer terror in that moment. I was so afraid of being a lesbian, of breaking rules, and of being condemned that I retreated and suppressed any feelings or thoughts of

being queer. That fear and denial lasted for decades, well into my 20s.

I finally found my way out and left the church 8 years ago. Four years ago, I found some peace in finally accepting my queerness. My family knows neither of these things. I avoid church and say that I cut my hair because I just got tired of caring for it. I lie because my family and culture still scare me. I am not ready to be honest with them about who I am. I don't know if I will ever be. Maybe, I'll just quietly disappear from their lives. Whenever I decide to live my truth out loud, I know I will most likely lose contact with most of them. It's a fact that my heart is getting used to as I strive to build my own small queer community.

To this day, the idea of purity and its attached feelings of shame and disgust still haunt me. Although I have worked very hard to intellectually unlearn all the hateful ideas, finding safety and solace in my own body evades me. I am still uncovering suppressed memories of queer sexual experiences, and trying to work through all the internalized homophobia and transphobia.

But, I'm hopeful about continuing to do the work to heal myself from all the trauma of growing up in such a stifling environment. Each day I survive my toxic and ultra-religious conditioning is a day further from the ideas of perfection or restriction, and closer to a future where I will feel at home in my body and spirit.



LOVE & SIN

An atheist's journey to heartbreak

It was a long distance phone call and as always I expected that we would talk about the mundane happenings in our lives in the tradition of "Hey, how was your day?"

I was in the midst of telling her a joke about something related to religion when instead of her usual laughter and slight admonition at making jokes about religion, her tone turned serious and she eventually informed me towards the end of that phone call that I am a sinner. And my sin was being a lesbian.

I remember my heart skipping a beat when she described both of us as sinners - well, to be exact, me still living in it and her in the process of repenting. It was hard to reconcile her statement with the fact that this woman was my partner of 10 years.

Needless to say, our relationship ended soon after that conversation in large part because she was reforming and becoming "closer" to God which entailed not being in a "sinful" relationship.

My relationship with sin is rather nonexistent. I have been an atheist since the tender age of 16. In fact, I had done more thinking about faith, religion and God since meeting her than ever before and had my own difficulties in making sense of her guilt and the way she understood her faith and her God.

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... it was confusing how she was able to articulate how much she loved me and in the same breath tell me that her God disapproved of her loving me.

At times, it was confusing how she was able to articulate how much she loved me and in the same breath tell me that her God disapproved of her loving me. I could not understand why someone would pray to such a cruel God. When we met, she was not very religious but she would fast and she would occasionally go to church; but she gradually started

becoming more religious and it was hard for her to reconcile the way she understood her religion with her loving me. I like to think that I always remained respectful of the space she needed as she figured out things that seemed like contradictions to her but I have always wanted to ask her: What kind of god would play such a terrible joke on his devout follower? What kind of god would not support love, in all its myriad forms? What kind of god would make her doubt that the god who created her had created an imperfection, and in particular, in a facet of her life that is central to her happiness? What kind of choice is the choice to choose one's "faith" over one's love?

In part, I know that my difficulty was also due to the way that I lived faith and religion at home. While my parents shared the same religious background, they worshiped differently - one going to church every morning and the other despising religion and church to the point of never setting foot in one unless it was for a funeral. I grew up in a household that allowed me to form my own ideas about what I believed and valued. When I started asking questions about the existence of God, my parents did not discourage me. When those questions led to my articulation that the concept of a supreme being was a fallacy,

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I remember thinking that “suppressing” a very essential part of what makes you human to “honor” Him seemed like something a loving God would never ask of His followers.

although they did not agree and they discussed with me the ways that they felt God's presence, they did not send me to a church for an intervention.

Coming from this tradition, I had difficulties understanding her God. Even when I believed in a God, the God of my childhood - based on the teachings of my parents - was a loving God, one who repeatedly urged everyone to love their neighbor (and thus yourself since it is hard to love someone else without really loving yourself). However, and regardless of how difficult and foreign it often was, I had always persisted in my efforts to better understand her faith.

But I admit hearing the words “You are a sinner” was heartbreaking not only because I realized it cemented the fact that our relationship was coming to an end but also because I also understood that she was reverting back to her old self which suppressed her sexuality.

A few days after the sinner conversation, I remember thinking how incredibly tough it must have been for her to make sense of her love and attraction to me when so much of the Biblical teachings and interpretations told her how sinful it is. I knew that part of her struggle at that point was her sense that being a lesbian and a Christian were simply not compatible.

I also remember thinking how the God she worshiped could give her someone to love but deem it a sin to love that person. My discussions with her about religion and queerness

centered around that sense of love and the fact that (in her view) that God created us in his likeness. I don't know enough about the Bible, but I remember thinking that “suppressing” a very essential part of what makes you human to “honor” Him seemed like something a loving God would never ask of His followers.

Her calling me a sinner and the breakup of the relationship also made me think of religion in a way that I have never had. I came out as a lesbian two or three years after I came out as an atheist. Was coming out as a lesbian made easier by the fact that I no longer believed in a God? Perhaps. But the brand of Christianity practiced and preached in my household was about the need to treat everyone equally, to empathize, to be compassionate, . . . I don't recall anyone using scripture in terms of what sets of being you were (dis)allowed to be - our discussions and the teachings were more about an arching principle that we were supposed to use as a framework by which to live our lives. And for this reason I have yet to hear an opposition about my queerness from any of my siblings due to religion, faith or God. They have mostly managed to hold on to the teachings of our youth, the idea that Christianity and perhaps religion itself, is about kindness, compassion, empathy, love, respect and generosity.

Love being a sin has never been a part of our equation.

Can faith and sexuality be reconciled?

These are samples of responses from a questionnaire that was posted on a Facebook page ...

 **Yohan Sola**
yes I think they really do get along together. I always pray for a wife. And every time I pray I get good and even better answers. So I worship my God and I am a lesbian at the same time.

 **Đàmøñ Lèvî**
I consider myself as spiritual person rather than religious person, so I only take the positive things and my only principle is ባንተ ላይ አንዳራረጋገዥና ማተፊልግዥና ነገር በለላ ስወር ላይ አታቸው, that's all and I see sin from this perspective and I see God from my point of view and not what the religious people see,  I have got my inner peace with it

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No doubts

**Chosen to be queer, proud
of being made in His image**



In the society that I live in, same sex attraction is considered as something someone chooses and that it is only about and for sex. The distorted understanding that resulted from inaccurate cultural and religious teachings is that same sex attraction is about excessive sex, that it is a trend adopted from a spoiled Western lifestyle and that it is a destruction of our ancient culture and history. Therefore, same sex attraction is not seen as a space where healthy and true relationships that are about more than sex are built.

But for someone such as me, who struggled to accept her queer identity in the midst of outdated customs and thinkings and who is exhausted from efforts to follow the path of least resistance to avoid conflict and to make it easier to live within this society and for whom the meaning of life had become so meaningless that I attempted to end my life, it is not difficult to understand that queerness is not a chosen identity.

“Good things come to those who stick around,” as my people say. What young person, who has yet to live life to its fullest would actively choose to live life in a manner that is unacceptable by society? Why would that young person then choose to end their own life because they don’t want to align their feelings with what society already accepts? Why would one choose death as being the only option if one is able to change one’s queerness? These questions can be difficult to answer for someone who does not fully understand the feeling of wanting to die. To begin with, I have never been bothered by the religious teachings that same sex attraction is a sin. Since I grew up in the Church closely observing as the pastors, evangelists and those who are generally considered the

fathers of the Church secretly attempt to place themselves in positions of power and because I watched as they blatantly broke the rules of the Church and the words of the very Bible they held as they delivered sermons only to then prioritize their own personal interests that were based on greed and jealousy and because I knew that the teachers taught the Bible only as they understood it and not as it was meant to be understood, the distorted and flawed interpretation of same-sex attraction did not pit me against my Creator and what I felt in my heart was my true identity..

Instead, what caused me the most conflict was the fact that I pretended to be someone that I was not to fit into my circle and the fact that I used to experience such a sense of loneliness during those times that I decided to be my true self as I felt that effort to accept myself created a distance between myself on one side and my family and friends on the other side. In the end, it was this feeling of loneliness that made me lose interest in living and that is why I tried to kill myself.

But it didn't work out, and I was able to experience another day. The fact that I survived used to frustrate me. This frustration was at its worst especially whenever I heard my family's repeated questions of why I tried to kill myself and what was lacking or missing in my life to make me take this measure. As I lay in the hospital bed, I would angrily and bitterly confront God and ask "Why

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did I survive?" "Why didn't I die?" and "What kind of luck did I have that I couldn't even successfully end my life?"

But my anger and frustration began to subside as the days passed and I started taking to heart the words of my doctors and my family. I repeatedly started hearing the word "you are lucky". When I arrived at the hospital, I couldn't breathe and my body was cold. I felt that I

didn't survive by the wisdom of science or by the timely intervention of my family. So how did I survive? I don't know. The doctors don't know. My family doesn't know. But I had miraculously regained my breath. So I started thinking if my survival was perhaps for a reason? What if it is because there is a life I have to truthfully live?

When God restored my breath, it was while I was still at the hospital - and it was with so much motivation and without any confusion, fear or hesitation - that I realized that I needed to accept myself. I'm indeed lucky!

The fact that I got lucky and survived has helped me understand that this queerness I have fully embraced is a life God chose for me and not a choice that I made. And I always thank God for that.

I believe that one day we will be able to live in our country with our queerness and dignity respected. Given the current discrimination in our country based on ethnicity and language and the ongoing human rights violations that have prevailed against even the traditional and religious practices our society takes pride in, it seems futile to dream of a society that will accept queerness as a human right. However, it's always good to hope for the better so I personally continue to do so.

It is my hope that a generation will be created in my country that is against human rights abuses and discrimination on the basis of race, gender, language, sexual orientation as people don't even choose any of this.

Surviving religion



Creating home outside of religion, church

My family is a follower of the Protestant Christian faith. Starting from when I was young enough to play with coloring on Saturday mornings to taking D.V.V.S courses during winter breaks and to baptism courses and salvation, I followed my family's footsteps.

My mom is a very devout believer. She is a Protestant who believes that

only her faith will allow her to enter heaven, and that the God she worships appreciates tears and intense supplication accompanied by heartfelt tears. When I think about my childhood, I distinctly remember my mom praying day and night and saying, "Lord please forgive us. Mercy be upon us." When the world is in chaos or hardships abound, she would say, "It's the sin of humans that got us here. Ask God for forgiveness." No matter what happened, my mom would never miss church on Sundays and she would always take us with her.

In addition to attending church every Sunday, my mom is a part of a Bible study group. It is made up of a group of church members who lived near each other and who would gather at one of their houses every Saturday evening to study and discuss parts of the Bible. My entire worldview was influenced by the Bible. In addition to twice-weekly meetings, I read my Bible and then prayed every single evening. I believed I was pure and chosen; Following the directive of "He who believes in Christ...", I strived to keep my entire being on the path outlined by the Bible.

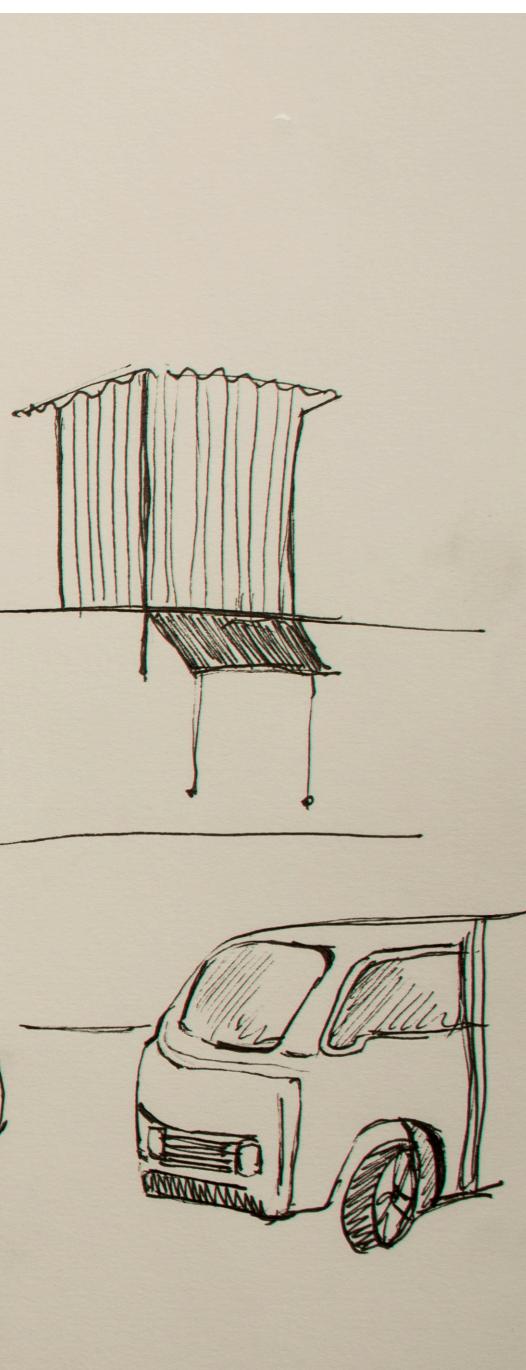
Until my late teenage years, I never had any doubts or questions about the Bible. When I confronted my attraction to women, I tried to control myself in many ways. I thought, God does not love me or the identity I



I used to sit in the front or near the middle at church, but once these feelings of attraction to women, shame and guilt came up, I was afraid, and I began sitting in the back.

am becoming and I tried very hard to distance myself from these feelings and attraction to women. While my peers were serving in the church with pride and commitment, I found myself prostrating with the weight of shame and guilt.

I used to sit in the front or near the middle at church, but once these feelings of attraction to women, shame and guilt came up, I was afraid, and I began sitting in the back. I was



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convinced the church leaders knew everything I did and every time there was a youth program, I would not go up to the front for greetings or discussions. These feelings kept me from building friendships with my peers at church. In my eyes, they were righteous and I had something inside me that needed to be delivered. I was not up to par, so I created a distance between them and myself.

It was rare for me to leave youth programs I took part in without crying. I would spend the entire time pleading with God and beseeching for him to say, "This is the last time you will feel this way – I have healed you." Tears and prayer could not stop my attraction to women. There is one particular day that I remember... It was at Muluwongel Ketena Hulet church and there was a prayer program. The pastor would gesture towards a row of seats and say, "There is one child in this direction who is possessed by so and so. Come forward!" and he would "heal" people from different spirits.

On this day, he gestured towards the row I sat in and yelled very loudly, "In this row, there is one woman who refuses to return to the path of righteousness." He was speaking in tongues. My legs and hands became drenched in sweat. I became consumed by fear, started sobbing, and thought, Today is the day I will be humiliated. Simultaneously, I was surprised to find myself persevering and asking, Where is the God that told me "Don't be afraid, for you won't

be ashamed"? Regardless, the program ended without the "humiliation" that I was so afraid of. I don't think I have attended another prayer service at Muluwongel church since then. But I have experienced many more instances like this one ... where the pastor is teaching fear and guilt instead of love; where I've spent many days at church in fear and anxiety instead of finding joy in the hope it's supposed to provide ...

Instead of the pastor who said, "God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us," the voice of the pastor who screamed "Those who don't follow God's path will perish" rang in my ear. I felt like I was the only lesbian at church and that I was submerged in the deepest waters of sin. This feeling made me distant from my family; I used to think, what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? . "Give me a sign, tell me you love me", I would often implore the God who I believed hated me. Through all of this, I served as a leader of a group in the church. When the stress of service became too much, I made the excuse that I was too busy to serve and left the group. Imagine isolating yourself from your family and from church friends while thinking that you are committing the greatest sin and that you are living a life of darkness?

Years passed and still my identity did not change. I have an intense feeling for women: A feeling of a woman's love for another

woman which cannot be expelled through fasting or prayer. I don't think I have ever begged for anything as much as I have begged God to change my sexual identity. Day and night, I was consumed by thoughts of changing my sexual identity. But it did not happen! Why would God change someone that He has created in his own image? He wouldn't because there is no mistake! There is nothing that can compare to the peace I have experienced since the day I accepted myself. However, there was still a struggle in resisting against the Sunday sermons that preach about me as if I am a special creature and a sinner.

You can guess how I feel when the church I knew my whole life and grew up in, and where I attended services diligently and consistently uses my identity as a scandalous sermon starter. I can usually dismiss the misunderstandings of those around me by chalking it up to misinformation. But how can the church, that is supposedly the house of God, preach hatred? "Hate the sin, love the sinner" is a popular saying amongst those Christians that preach hate. They use this saying to condemn and judge same-sex lovers. Christ ordered us to love our neighbors, not to pinpoint the sin of others. If we must pinpoint sin, it has to be ours. To begin with, the fact that I am a lesbian or that I love women is not a sin. But let me leave that debate for now and continue with sharing my journey in the church. I could not understand the God of the

church.

The sermons that declared "Pray, for the Lord is angry" and "Beg for His mercy" confused me. What kind of God does as he pleases? Why do we have to beg for mercy? Why does the God that is a God of love want our pleading and for us to ask Him to not be angry? The questions abound. Then there are the church testimonies: "Eight people died in a car crash but I was saved because the Lord has covered me in His blood – please praise Him for me." I don't understand these testimonies. Were the eight people not covered by the Lord's blood? It continues, "I am the only one at work who is a follower of the Lord and I got a promotion." These and other philosophies that promote the "chosen seed" ideology are part of the reason why I fled from the church.

Some people say, "Don't look at the deeds of people, just focus on God; missing church because of the behavior of people is lazy and irresponsible." This comes from those who aren't marginalized and have a lot of privilege. People go to church seeking unity, right? How can I unite with people who hate and stigmatize my identity? How can I choose to be insulted and condemned? When I say this, I don't mean to disparage those who choose to lead a queer and a religious life. This is only my own journey, and it does not mean that everyone must leave church. But my experience is that church and the god of the church are not for me.



People go to church seeking unity, right? How can I unite with people who hate and stigmatize my identity? How can I choose to be insulted and condemned?

Can faith and sexuality be reconciled?

These are samples of responses from a questionnaire that was posted on a Facebook page ...

 **Woldegabriel**

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 **Akilas Yoh**

I started questioning my religion before i knew i was gay, Lol, now i am gay atheist, when i see some people's comments i feel really sad for them, religion is very harmful especially for those LGBT community who take it very seriously

 **Mes Robel**

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