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Queer Pupils at Christian Private Schools

'Theological Heteronormativity' and Colliding Rights

ABSTRACT

How are LGBT issues addressed at Norwegian Christian private schools run by free churches? In what ways do such schools safeguard queer pupils' rights and psychosocial learning environment in line with current Norwegian policy in the educational field? Based on individual interviews with seven queer women aged 20–30 about their experiences from Christian private schools, we present and discuss their stories about how sexuality in general, and homosexuality in particular, were presented at the schools they attended. Our findings indicate that the interviews somewhat reflect recent discussions and changes within Norwegian free churches. However, the dominant narrative about how LGBT issues are addressed at Christian private schools run by free churches is imbued by *theological heteronormativity*. We argue that sexuality education at these schools is provided within the framework of theological heteronormativity, which adds an existential dimension to the teaching and seems to cause insecurity and unsafety for queer pupils. Our study offers new insights into how pupils and young people might experience the collision between rights, such as Christian private schools and free churches' rights to exercise their religious freedom, even though it clashes with the right of queer people to not be discriminated against *and* their right to religious freedom.

Keywords: Queer pupils, Christian private schools, sexuality education, theological heteronormativity, Norwegian free churches, human rights

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Introduction

How are LGBT issues addressed at Norwegian Christian private schools, and what is it like for queer pupils to attend such schools? Most Norwegian children and youths attend public schools. According to Statistics Norway, less than 5% attended private schools in 2022.[1] These schools are, however, regulated by the Norwegian Private School Act, and Christian private schools are obliged to ensure a safe school environment for all. Section 1-1 specifies that "everyone associated with the school shall work to prevent pupils from being harmed or exposed to offensive words or actions" (Private School Act, §1-1 2003). Thus, all pupils at Christian private schools, including queer-identified pupils, are entitled to an inclusive and respectful school environment. In this article, we use the term *queer* to refer to people who identify as LGBTQ+, in accordance with established terminology in the Norwegian context (Langeland, Ytrehus & Rigtrup-Lindemann 2023, 12).

Parents' right to decide on their children's education and children's right to be heard and respected are both strong in Norway, which can entail conflicting interests between parents and children. Similarly, the principle of freedom of religion, which is enshrined in the constitution and is to be respected in the field of education, may collide with the school and society's responsibility to protect pupils against discrimination and to protect and recognize minority groups. Such tensions can be particularly evident in Christian private schools: these schools have the right to convey their religious beliefs, even when that involves theological condemnation of sexual minorities, while also being obligated to protect queer pupils. Strand (2011, 514) discusses the Norwegian state's duty to safeguard pupils' protection against discrimination in religious private schools, and argues that the freedom of education that accompanies freedom of religion in the Norwegian context is stronger than the protection against discrimination that is supposed to protect pupils from offensive teaching.

Pupils' experiences are poorly represented in research on how Christian private schools in Norway include theological perspectives in their teaching (Strand 2011; Grimm 2012; Steinshamn 2015). This article is

based on individual interviews with seven young queer women who have all attended Christian private schools in Norway, and it contributes to the body of knowledge about pupils' experiences from such schools. Our main research question is: What is communicated about LGBT issues, and homosexuality in particular, in Norwegian Christian private schools? Based on our findings, we argue that teaching and discussions on gender and sexualities are framed by *theological heteronormativity* in ways that may cause existential insecurity as well as limited support and safety for queer pupils at Christian private schools.

Christianity and homosexuality in the Norwegian context

Homosexuality has long been a contentious issue in Christian communities all over the world (Enstedt 2015; Endsjø 2020; Carlström 2023), which is also the case in Norway. The Church of Norway (CofN) stated back in 1954 that "homosexual acts should be regarded as the perverse and reprehensible things they are" and warned that "one must be aware that we are facing a social danger of global dimensions" (Norwegian Ministry of Children and Family Affairs 2001). Such condemning attitudes are still widespread in many parts of the world. In the Norwegian context, the public discourse is more moderate today than in 1954, but the key message that homosexual acts are unacceptable and not in line with the will of God, remains well-known within conservative Christian circles (Bye 2023; Langeland et al. 2023). A recent report on queer peoples' experiences with conversion therapy in Norway (Langeland et al. 2023, 48) revealed that nearly half of the respondents in the quantitative part of the study reported that they had "to some extent or to a large extent experienced situations where someone had tried to change or influence their sexual orientation or gender identity". The concept of 'conversion therapy' refers precisely to the perception that homosexuality is fundamentally undesirable and should therefore be removed through 'therapy'. Langeland et al. (2023, 38–39) documented that "a religious environment" was the one arena in which most participants had experienced discrimination or violations.

Despite widespread religious hostility and condemnation, significant

changes have occurred within the Church of Norway and other Christian communities in Norway in recent decades. In 1973, the year after the decriminalization of sex between men in Norway, the CofN appointed a committee to discuss the church's view on homosexuality. The committee's recommendations in 1977 introduced an important distinction between "homosexual orientation" and "homosexual practice", and suggested that it should not be considered inherently sinful to have a homosexual orientation. They argued that "genuine homosexuals" existed and that they could not be blamed for their "orientation". Furthermore, the committee argued that the contemporary "genuine homosexuality" was not covered by the Bible's condemnation of "unnatural sexual activity".[2] Similar discussions and arguments have been documented within the Church of Sweden (Fagerberg 1974). Despite the committee's recommendations, the CofN concluded in 1977 that the Bible's lack of recognition of homosexual relationships should be emphasized rather than "the Bible's lack of condemnation of those referred to as 'genuine' homosexuals" (Røthing 2003, 209).

By the early 1990s, two parallel views on homosexuality had emerged within the CofN, and in 1993, a new committee was appointed to investigate the church's stance on homosexuality. In the report *Homosexuals in the Church* (1995), five out of eight members of the committee argued, based on theological interpretations in line with liberation and feminist theology, that it was time for the church to accept same-sex relationships, including among its employees. However, the minority argued, in line with the distinction from 1977, that "it is not a sin to 'be' homosexual or lesbian, but it is a sin to 'live' as lesbians or homosexuals" (Røthing 2003, 206). Despite the majority's theological-based recommendations, the Church Assembly decided in 1997 *not* to allow the employment of ministers who lived in same-sex relationships. In 2007, this decision was reversed, and since 2016 it has also been possible for same-sex couples to get married in the CofN. Theological interpretations and accepting attitudes that were voiced in marginal Christian communities in the 1980s and 1990s have now become mainstream in the CofN and some other Norwegian Christian organizations and congregations. However,

despite increased LGBT-tolerance and the development of queer theology (Berg 2021), there are significant forces within the CofN, and especially in conservative Christian congregations outside of the CofN, that still consider homosexuality a sin and insist on anti-LGBT beliefs.

Our study is located within the context of Christian private schools run by Norwegian free churches. These churches are traditionally rooted in conservative theology, which typically represents anti-LGBT beliefs and condemnation of homosexual practices. Still, disagreements on these issues have been publicly voiced and discussed in recent years, and diverse positions have been made visible even within the free churches. In October 2024, however, a joint Christian declaration regarding gender and sexuality was published, which stated that only marriage between man and women is acceptable according to the Bible, and that recent ideas of gender and sexual diversity should be rejected. Several theologically conservative Christian organizations and churches have signed the declaration, including those that run the schools in question in this article.[3]

Previous research and theoretical approach

This article draws on several research fields. Firstly, as evident from the preceding section, we relate to theology and recent Norwegian church history. Furthermore, we engage with research on sexuality education, with a particular focus on homosexuality, primarily within the Norwegian context. Additionally, we draw on research on the Norwegian LGBTQ+ population, and specifically queer experiences from Christian communities.

Heterosexuality has traditionally been part of the school's invisible curriculum, due to heteronormative teaching (Epstein & Johnson 1998). Similarly, teaching and textbooks in the Norwegian context have, until recently, portrayed heterosexuality as the natural framework for sexuality education (Røthing 2008, 2017, 2023; Røthing & Svendsen 2009). However, in recent years, more complex approaches have been demonstrated, where diversity and acknowledgement of sexual minorities are also emphasized (see e.g., Støle-Nilsen 2022). Increased tolerance

and inclusion of same-sex relationships are also evident in the curricula (Røthing 2023). Nevertheless, new studies indicate that homonegative attitudes are still widespread in the school context, side by side with explicit LGBTQ+-inclusive stances (see e.g., Johannessen 2021; Hammer 2023; Sterri 2021). Moreover, textbooks can, through heteronormative representations, contribute to what Røthing (2017) refers to as "selective inclusion" of queer sexualities.

Research indicates that many queer people lead good lives in Norway today. In 2013, a living conditions survey concluded that the similarities in living conditions between heterosexuals and LGB-people were greater than the differences (Anderssen & Malterud 2013, ii). However, the study also showed that LGB-individuals had a higher incidence of suicidal ideation, suicide attempts, and mental health issues than the heterosexual population (see also Hellesund 2008). Similarly, a more recent living conditions survey, which also includes transgender individuals (Anderssen et al. 2021), indicates that LGBT-identified persons have, on average, poorer mental health than heterosexual and cisgender individuals. Other studies focusing on specific groups of queer individuals, such as queer people in rural areas (Eggebø, Almli & Bye 2015), queer individuals with an immigrant background (Eggebø, Stubberud & Karlstrøm 2018), and queer people employed by the Church of Norway (Elgvin, Grønningsæter & Larsen 2020), highlight complexity and duality. Being queer in Norway today is characterized, on the one hand, by experiences of marginalization, bullying, and poor health, and on the other hand, by recognition, inclusion, and good quality of life.

Qualitative studies of queer lives often have a narrative approach. Stubberud, Eggebø and Andersen (2022, 51) have, based on qualitative interviews with 99 queer individuals, identified six overarching themes that refer to "important events in queer lives": 1) experiences of feeling different, 2) negative encounters with others related to gender and sexuality, 3) exploration of identity around gender and sexuality, 4) coming out as queer to loved ones, 5) entering queer communities, and 6) reflections on kinship, family, and children. These overarching themes are also found in studies that specifically focus on queer experi-

ences within Christian communities and congregations (see Bye 2023; Carlström 2021, 2022, 2023; Langeland & Widahl 2023; Langeland et al. 2023). However, Christian queer individuals often include an overarching, theological dimension in their narratives of significant events. Thus, experiences of being different, negative encounters with others, and stories of coming out to loved ones are tied to theologically grounded acceptance or rejection, where the latter, for many, is associated with sin and ultimately the fear of eternal damnation after death (Bye 2023; Langeland et al. 2023; Carlström 2021, 2022, 2023).

Queer pupils' experiences at Christian private schools have not, to our knowledge, previously been studied in the Norwegian context. A Canadian study on young queer Catholics who had attended Catholic schools showed that these young people were understood as mentally ill and attempted to be 'redirected' to become heterosexual (Callaghan 2016). Similarly, an American study found that sexual minorities attending religious schools experienced more negative attitudes from their peers than sexual minorities in public schools, and that queer pupils were less open about their sexual orientation in religious schools (Stewart, Heck & Cochran 2015; see also Kosciw et al. 2012).

This article is positioned within a social constructivist tradition where narratives of identities and sexualities are seen as being shaped within historical, cultural, and social contexts (see Hellesund 2008; Lützen 1998; Stubberud et al. 2022). For Christian youths, the theological perspectives on sexuality and gender presented to them in their Christian communities constitute a crucial context for the shaping of their norms and emotions regarding sexuality. The heteronormative assumption that everyone identifies as heterosexual, unless otherwise stated, usually permeates conservative, Christian denominations and churches, such as Norwegian free churches. Thus, heteronormative attitudes and norms may be and feel even more critical and normative in such contexts than in secular environments (see Bye 2023; Langeland et al. 2023; Carlström 2021, 2022). In Carlström's (2022) studies of LGBTQ+ individuals' experiences in free churches in Sweden, she uses the term *hegemonic heteronormativity* to refer to the position of heterosexuality

within these environments, which goes beyond the normativity that is already inherent in the concept of heteronormativity. Our findings in this article are in line with Carlström (2022) regarding the hegemonic position of heterosexuality within Norwegian free churches. However, we argue that the hegemonic position of heterosexuality is theologically constituted and legitimized within conservative Christian communities, and that the theological fundament for heteronormativity adds another dimension that cannot be captured in the secular term hegemonic heteronormativity. Thus, we suggest that the term *theological heteronormativity* is useful for both describing and analysing queer experiences in non-affirmative Christian environments.

Methodological and ethical reflections

This article is based on semi-structured, retrospective qualitative interviews with seven lesbian/queer-identified women, all of whom had attended Christian private schools. The interviews were conducted by Langeland and Widahl for their MA thesis (2023) and focused on what it was like to attend Christian private schools where teachers and peers were likely to hold anti LGBT-beliefs. Semi-structured interviews are well-suited for exploring subjective experiences, and the interview guide emphasized the participants' perspectives and past experiences through both concrete and open-ended questions (Kvale & Brinkmann 2015). Retrospective interviews were chosen partly because we believed that it could be challenging to recruit participants while they were attending Christian private schools, but the primary reason was due to research ethical considerations: as the interviews were to focus on sensitive topics, the retrospective distance could make the interviewees more comfortable answering the questions and less vulnerable, thereby weakening the power asymmetry between the researcher and the participant during the interview (Kvale & Brinkmann 2015, 51–52). However, an obvious weakness with regards to retrospective interviews is the challenges related to what one remembers in hindsight, in addition to common tendencies to remember past events in ways that align with one's later experiences and viewpoints (Repstad 2007).

We set two main criteria for our strategic recruitment of research participants: 1) relevant experience, and 2) variety. To ensure the former, we required that all participants identified as queer and had attended a Christian private school for a minimum of three years. Additionally, we set an upper age limit of 30 years to limit negative aspects of retrospective interviews, and to ensure that participants had experiences from the same time period. To ensure the latter, we emphasized diversity in terms of both grade levels, geographical location, and type of school. To recruit participants, Langeland and Widahl contacted the Snapchat channel *Hverdagsskeiv* [Everyday Queer]. The account had 16,000 followers, and each day a 'guest' was invited to take over the channel and post pictures and video clips. The two researchers were given the opportunity to be guests for a day, during which they shared information about the project, including research ethical guidelines and rights, and provided contact information. All seven research participants were recruited in this way.

The participants in this study were aged 20–30 at the time of the interview, all identify as lesbian/queer and have an ethnic majority background. All of them had attended Christian private schools for 3 to 8 years, including primary schools, secondary schools, high schools, and boarding schools. The participants came from various parts of the country, they attended different types of Christian schools, none attended the same school, and to our knowledge none knew any of the others. Anonymization of research participants is a central research ethical requirement. To ensure anonymity, we present the participants collectively rather than individually, and the names used in the article are fictitious. Quotes from one of the participants are assigned to two different names to guarantee her anonymity.

The study was approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD, today Sikt), and research ethical guidelines have been followed. All participants received comprehensive written information about the study and their rights, and informed consent to participate was given both in writing and orally. To strengthen the quality of the interviews, all participants were sent the interview guide and comprehensive

information in advance (Kvale & Brinkmann 2015), and particularly before retrospective interviews, it is crucial to provide good information. Four of the interviews were conducted in-person, while three were conducted digitally due to geographical distances. The interviews lasted for an average of about 70 minutes. They were all recorded and were transcribed verbatim afterwards. Concrete details and dialectical expressions that could help to identify the participants have been removed.

The data analysis involved the systematic processing, interpretation, and coding of the interviews. We strived to find codes that reflected the empirical data, and the analytical process was not driven by theory (Tjora 2021, 218–225). While processing the data, we considered the perspectives in each interview, and at the same time closely examined all interviews to find both similarities and differences between them. Thus, we searched both "lengthwise" and "crosswise" in the material (Haavind 2000, 35). For their MA thesis, Langeland and Widahl (2023) had focused on the research participants' narratives about recognition and lack thereof, and applied Honneth's (2008) theories on recognition to analyse data. For this article, we have been particularly interested in what emerged as distinctive about teaching and communication about homosexuality at Christian private schools. Røthing supervised the MA thesis of the other two authors and has had the main responsibility for writing this article, albeit in close cooperation with Langeland and Widahl.

Results

Inadequate and one-sided teaching

Sexuality education in Norway is often considered inadequate and limited (see e.g., Sex and Society 2022), which is also evident in our interviews. For instance, Frida stated that "there was absolutely nothing about it. No sexuality education at all", while Maja argued that "several teachers just skipped the topic. We [pupils] said that we needed it, but they said we didn't have time or weren't entitled to it." Similarly, Iben described a teacher who had retrieved a PowerPoint from online

resources, which included information about sexuality, but the teacher still left out everything about sexuality.

Previous research has suggested that teachers are hesitant to teach about sexuality because they feel incompetent or because it is a topic that may cause tension and discomfort among pupils (see e.g., Hind 2016; Stubberud et al. 2017). However, a different explanation is present in our data. According to Maja, as mentioned above, the teachers expressed that the pupils were not entitled to sex education, and Leah argued that "Sexuality was a topic that the teachers just didn't want to talk about. Yes, it felt as if they saw it as dangerous." These descriptions indicate that teachers chose not to teach about sexuality because the pupils, in their opinion, were not supposed to learn about it, not because of their own insecurity or incompetence. The current national Norwegian curriculum does, however, clearly state that pupils in Norwegian schools are entitled to sexuality education (Røthing 2023).

The interviews indicate that there was little planned or explicit teaching about sexuality. However, several participants pointed out that sexuality was implicitly addressed through conversations about Christianity, and that the teaching was based on the Bible. "The Bible was, in a way, the textbook", according to Emma. Similarly, Frida argued that "the goal of this type of teaching was to convey the Bible", and that "the Christian aspect overshadowed everything else, and private life and the teacher's own Christian beliefs were very much incorporated into the teaching." Maja conveyed similar experiences: "In secondary school, it was very much like 'I believe in God, you must believe in God – God's rules are the truth'. Period. [...] There was no dialogue, just what was true." Nora, on the other hand, dryly commented, "There was no talk about lesbian sex because it doesn't exist. Not in the Bible", and reflected on the teaching in the following way:

> We did have some sex education, but it was based on the Bible. The purpose was to prepare us for the typical Christian A4-life. Yes, that you should marry a man, have children, and not have an abortion. [...] At that time, I was quite indoctrinated into this way of thinking, so I

> can't remember thinking, 'Wow, I can't believe we're learning this, it's crazy.' Because I was raised in a Christian family and had received that information all the time, I was used to thinking that way. And then it's sort of not surprising, because you don't question things when you believe it's the whole truth all the time. [...] The one who taught us was very adamant, he had very Christian opinions. So we believed what he said and adhered to it.

In line with Nora's depiction, many of the research participants described the teaching or communication about sexuality as one-sided. God and the Bible were used as authorities and justifications for the viewpoints and norms, and several participants highlighted that the teaching was presented as absolute truth, thus excluding any dialogue, questions, reflection, or diversity of opinions. Several mentioned that teachers used the classroom as a platform to convey their personal views about homosexuality as wrong and sinful, and the teaching was described as closely intertwined with preaching the Christian gospel. Thus, living a heterosexual life was presented as an important dimension of the Christian message being communicated at the schools.

Compulsory heterosexuality

Previous research has shown that, in various ways, heterosexuality appears as compulsory in the school context, and pupils are met by heteronormative assumptions (see e.g., Epstein, O'Flynn & Telford 2003; Martinsson & Reimers 2008; Røthing 2008; Stubberud, Prøitz & Hamidiasl 2018). Therefore, it is not surprising that the participants in our study reported that heterosexuality was taken for granted and portrayed as mandatory in Christian private schools. However, at these schools, compulsory heterosexuality is *theologically* justified, as illustrated by Nora's statement referenced above: sexuality education was based on the Bible, and teachers gained authority for their teaching by referring to the Bible. Similarly, Leah described how heterosexuality was theologically justified:

> I remember we talked about something related to Pride in class, and the teacher was saying that we had to be careful about what we read and were influenced by. Then he brought up this thing about gender and orientation and stuff. He was clear that he was against it. Then he talked about how God created man and woman, and that's just how it was. And no one said anything against it. Because it was just the way it was. [...] I remember feeling uncomfortable because Pride was also me. Yes, I was afraid of what the others would think of me. I had actually planned to attend Pride that year but ended up not going.

According to Leah, heterosexuality was portrayed not only as preferred but also as God-given and the teacher referred to God in his condemnation of homosexuality. This contributed to her not participating in the Pride event, as she had planned. At other times, there was no explicit reference to God or the Bible, but this was still taken for granted as an *implicit* reference. Iben, for instance, recounted how she once hung up a Pride banner in the classroom but was immediately told by a teacher to take it down: "We have to take that down! It's too political. We don't stand for this!" The teacher's argument seems to be twofold: the banner is "too political", but it is also something that "we" don't "stand for". We interpret the latter as a reference to the school's theological stance.

Heterosexuality as a norm and ideal was also expressed in practical arrangements and rules. For example, Mette recounted an annual event organized by the school, where girls were asked in advance to write down the name of the boy they wanted to be paired with for the evening. Then a committee would put together the pairs, and they would "go on a romantic walk around the school grounds. And the last stop was like a photo stop in a dark room, where you were supposed to kiss." Mette discussed with classmates if she could write down the name of a girl instead, but a teacher said it was easier if a girl went with a boy. Mette commented on the experience as follows:

> I didn't feel included, and it was something everyone was supposed to participate in. [...] So I felt uncomfortable when I had to write down a

> boy's name, and he had expectations of what would happen during the walk, you know. I found it very uncomfortable, to put myself in that situation, so I chose not to participate in the event. And rather spare myself from all that.

According to Mette, the school encouraged compulsory heterosexual romance in a way that excluded her. Others talked about heterosexuality as a natural framework for social interaction, but at the same time, as something that the schools strictly controlled. Sofie, for instance, mentioned a Christmas party where girls and boys were *not* allowed to dance together. Others told about rules for where and how pupils could be together at school and in the dormitory:

> It wasn't allowed for a girl and a boy to be alone in the room, and that you shouldn't go alone to the bus shelter or other private places. But there were never any worries if two girls went alone to the room and such, it was just nice and cosy. (Leah)

> There were also very strict rules at the dormitory that you were not allowed to have overnight visits from the opposite sex. And if someone of the opposite sex was found in your room after a certain time, it was considered an overnight visit. So, the girls could share a room with other girls, but not boys. (Maja)

Such strict regulations of interaction between girls and boys stem from the traditional Christian ideal of sexual abstinence before marriage (cf. Røthing 1998). At the same time, the rules suggest that homosexuality was not only prohibited but also unthinkable. Nora touches on this when saying that "lesbian sex was never addressed because people don't think that girls can have sex with each other". Strict regulation of compulsory heterosexuality can, paradoxically, create a space for same-sex intimacy and sexuality, which both Leah and Maja seem to be aware of (cf. Carlström 2023). At the same time, the theological condemnation of homosexuality in Christian private schools, as described by the research

participants, can deter young people from availing themselves of such opportunities.

School as an unsafe space

The one-sided communication about sexuality and compulsory heterosexuality contributed to several participants in our study experiencing school as an unsafe space. When asked if she felt the school was a safe place, Nora initially answered, "Yes, I did. In many ways, at least", and then added, "but whether it was a safe place to be queer, I'm a little unsure". Frida echoed a similar sentiment: "It was very safe for those who fit into the Christian box. And if you didn't, well then maybe it wasn't so safe." Others were more explicit in describing their feelings of insecurity and fear associated with attending a Christian private school. Leah, for example, said, "I felt like I was carrying this big secret, that if I came out, I'd probably be expelled." Fearing exposure and, at worst, expulsion from school, she was focused on fitting in, and she "tried to push away who I was":

> I didn't feel like I could be myself and wear what I wanted. I mean, flannel shirts and such were very popular, but I didn't feel like I could wear them because it would be too masculine for a girl. So, I wore tops and dresses, and felt very uncomfortable at school.

Several participants mentioned the importance of 'passing' as heterosexuals through clothing style and hairstyle to avoid being exposed as queer. Sofie described it as follows:

> I felt like I lost a part of myself [...] that I couldn't really be myself, that I wasn't good enough. I felt more like I had to fit into the stereotype of 'girl', in a way, and I felt very much that anything I did outside of that stereotype became like I was making a statement, that if I wore colourful clothes or did something with my hair, it was like I was 'saying something'.

Whilst Leah feared being expelled from school if she was exposed as queer, Sofie described an even greater fear: "You were supposed to end up in Hell, and yeah, there was nothing I could do about it other than stay in this closet of mine." Kari, another participant who feared being exposed as queer, recounted the following incident from a science class:

> There was a small section about theories on how someone could become homosexual, including one theory about lesbians. It said that you could become lesbian, or thought you were lesbian, because you had previously lost your mother, and therefore desired a maternal role model, or you missed that maternal role. Thus, you seek a female partner. And I have lost my mother. [...] I remember, when the teacher said that I sat completely still. I sat all the way back in the classroom and thought 'Now I can't move! If I move now, people will think I recognize myself in this.' [...] I also thought that now that my friends hear this, and I had very many Christian friends too, now they will think that's why I like girls, and then they'll exclude me from our group of friends.

Kari feared being ostracized if her Christian friends realized she was lesbian. In addition, Kari understood the teacher's 'theory' about lesbianism as an indication that it could be changed if one received the right 'help' and 'treatment' for their maternal longing. Many queer Christians from non-affirming backgrounds have experienced that family, friends, or Christian leaders want to 'help' them to become heterosexual (Bye 2023; Carlström 2023; Langeland et al. 2023).

Frida, who was open at school about being queer, was, like Leah and Sofie, aware of the (expected) relationship between sexual orientation and heterosexual gender norms (cf. Butler 1990), and experienced negative consequences after challenging the gender norms:

> I cut my hair in my second year of high school. It really became obvious. And then there were fewer people who talked to me and fewer people who invited me to parties. [...] It all felt really strange. No one else had told me that I'm gross, weird, or unnatural before. [...] But at the Chris-

> tian private school, it was really like that. You felt like everyone thought it was true, that it was gross, wrong, and weird to be queer. So, then I started feeling it too, in a way.

Frida continued by describing how the attitudes she encountered at school had consequences:

> That feeling, that there was something wrong with me, stayed with me for a long time. I thought like 'Ahh damn! They're going to see that I'm gay right away, and then they'll think, "Ew..." and not like me.' The first five months (after finishing school), I walked around with a really, really strong anxiety and couldn't relax at all, and it still lingers. Not because people weren't nice to me, but I couldn't let go of the feeling that maybe they thought I was gross.

Similarly, Leah also talked about the negative consequences of experiences at the Christian private school:

> It took a long time before I dared to come out to friends and stuff, even though I was done with that school. It kind of stuck with me then, for several years, before I was able to be open about it. [...] It sort of affected my self-esteem, I would say. That I thought I wasn't good enough and that there was something wrong with me. And since we didn't hear anything about it [queer sexuality], I thought what I felt couldn't be right. Lots of thoughts like that followed me for a long, long time. Thoughts that I actually needed professional help to process.

School should be an arena that facilitates safe identity development. The experiences from Christian private schools, as described by the participants in our study, indicate that these schools did not meet this requirement.

Support and efforts at showing consideration

A recurring theme in almost all the interviews is that the participants felt lonely at school regarding their sexual identity. Several did mention teachers

who wanted to be supportive, but for queer pupils, it was not certain that it was safe to approach adults at the schools. Iben described this duality:

> I felt that the teachers cared about us, so in that sense, it was safe to be there. But regarding my sexual orientation, well... then you sort of kept that away because you were afraid, they would say something [negative]. [...] There were some teachers that I felt I could talk to, but I was still very afraid to go and talk to them because I felt that they had– I felt they were people with very many prejudices. So, I didn't dare. But if there was something I wanted to talk to them about, apart from my orientation, then I would definitely have gone to that person.

As sexual orientation was a difficult topic for several of the participants, it was paradoxical that this was precisely the topic they could not safely discuss with the teachers at the Christian private schools. Like Iben, Frida experienced that "there were people" who cared and whom she theoretically could talk to, but that "it wasn't a safe place to talk about such things". Leah, on the other hand, said that she actually tried to talk to the teachers but felt that she "wasn't acknowledged for the feelings I had when I felt different".

However, a few participants talked about attempts at the Christian private schools to show consideration to queer pupils. Maja described a morning meeting at the beginning of the school year, where some teachers stated that homosexuality was wrong and that people who practiced it would end up in Hell. This prompted the principal to react:

> The principal stood up and said that the morning meeting was over and that everyone should leave. Then we were told afterwards that these teachers were not allowed to have morning meetings anymore. Because the principal knew that there were some openly queer pupils at the school, and it was stated in the rulebook that teachers were not allowed to impose their views on the pupils. So, I think that was very nice, because even though he himself may not accept it according to his faith, he was a fellow human being.

Maja greatly appreciated that the principal took control of the situation to protect pupils from discriminatory statements from the teachers, and she continued:

> The principal was much younger than these teachers, so I remember thinking it was quite brave of him to stand up to them. Yes, he was sort of like 'The world isn't like that anymore, and here we can't say exactly what we want.' I remember that warmed me. Yes, he was very empathetic and caring, he cared about us pupils. I'm very glad he was the principal all three years I was there. [...] He really meant that anyone could come to the school no matter what background they had. And that meant a lot to me at the time. There were other openly queer people when I started at the school. And one of them was very clearly open and wore a Pride T-shirt almost every day without being bothered for it. And I think that's because of the standard the principal set. So, he made it easier for many of us.

This story illustrates how a responsible leader can make a big difference. According to Maja, the principal contributed to making the school a safe place to be, even for queer pupils. Another two participants talked about caring teachers, and in these cases support for queer pupils was implicitly theologically legitimized:

> One time, there had been shooting at some gay bar[4], and someone made a comment about homosexuals. And then the teacher spent the entire class talking. Firstly, he talked for a long time about how we must not be so hateful. And that God loves everyone, including homosexuals, and that what had happened was incredibly sad. And then he put on some music, and yeah... then we just talked for the rest of the class. But he was sort of the only one like that. (Sofie)

> I remember a teacher who was different from the other teachers at the school. One of the first classes we had with him, someone said something nasty about homosexuals because we were watching a movie. Then

> he stopped the whole class. And I remember he sat on the desk, not behind the lectern, but sort of down low with us. And then he spoke very calmly and used very careful words, and trod very carefully. Yes, put things into perspective, without having to wag his finger. Yes, he was very calm, so we became calm and paid attention. He still referred to the Bible and all that, but he believed we had to accept homosexuals. He kind of used God in it. God loves everyone, including homosexuals. (Frida)

Sofie and Frida describe two teachers who both referred to the same statement: "God loves everyone, including homosexuals". This statement can be understood in light of the theologically grounded differentiation between homosexual orientation and homosexual practice, which had already been proposed and discussed in the Church of Norway back in 1977. The statement "God loves everyone, including homosexuals" may imply an attempt to convey that homosexual practice is still understood as sinful, even though it is assumed that God also loves homosexual people.

Closing discussion

We will conclude this paper by briefly discussing the following three aspects of our findings: diversity and support, theological heteronormativity, and colliding rights. Firstly, our findings demonstrate a certain complexity and diversity of perspectives on LGBT issues at Christian private schools. The narratives about support and consideration from teachers, presented in the previous section, may reflect ongoing discussions within Norwegian free churches and indicate that homo-inclusive attitudes are, to some degree, present even in these contexts.

Secondly, the main tendency in our findings is that teaching and dissemination about sexuality in Christian private schools are permeated not only by a presentation of heterosexuality as preferred and most desirable, as the concept of heteronormativity suggests, but also by a theological justification for this heteronormativity. God and the Bible are used to legitimize heteronormative dissemination, and thus reference is made

to something that within a conservative, Christian framework has absolute authority. This strengthens the authority of the dissemination and adds another dimension than that provided by secular, non-theological heteronormative dissemination. As demonstrated in the narratives of our research participants, when the school's dissemination on a subject, such as homosexuality, is framed by a theological superstructure, the teaching is given a distinct existential character, as the individual's salvation and life after death are ultimately at stake. To capture this specific authority and existential dimension, we argue that the term *theological heteronormativity* is relevant. It emerges as a primary empirical finding in our study, as well as a useful analytical concept. When heteronormativity is theologically grounded, homosexuality is not only considered unwanted and wrong but also as a serious sin in the eyes of God. Thus, heterosexuality may not only appear as preferred but also as a prerequisite for living a life in accordance with God's commandments, and thus also as a prerequisite for attaining eternal life in Heaven after death. Consequently, theological heteronormativity entails a dramatic dimension for the individual, which can shed light on the concerns and insecurities present in the narratives of our research participants.

Thirdly, our study suggests that collisions between rights can have a negative impact on vulnerable groups, such as LGBT youths at Christian private schools. The right to freedom of religion is highly ranked in the Norwegian context, and according to the Norwegian Private School Act, these schools have considerable freedom to design their education as they wish (Strand 2011). This right and freedom is particularly related to religious education, and according to our participants, the schools' teaching and dissemination about sexuality did primarily take place in religious education. However, according to the current national curriculum, sexuality education should also be provided in science and social studies (Røthing 2023), and even Christian private schools have an obligation to comply with this. If sexuality education at Christian private schools is only provided within the framework for religious education, as indicated by our findings, pupils will not be offered secular education about, for instance, variations in identities, sexual orientation, and

gender expression, as well as their own and others' boundaries related to emotions, body, gender, and sexuality (social studies curriculum), or about sexual health and reproductive rights (science curriculum). Furthermore, our findings indicate that teaching and dissemination about sexuality are characterized by predetermined, God-given, and theologically justified answers, which prevents dialogue and dissent. Consequently, sexuality education in Christian private schools, as described by the participants in our study, is not in line with current Norwegian educational policies, which clearly state that pupils should be trained in perspective-taking and critical thinking, and where dialogue, dissent, and diversity of opinions are highly emphasized (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training 2017, 2020).

In sum, our findings point towards several colliding rights. In line with Strand (2011), our study suggests that the right to religious freedom that protects the Christian private school's right to offer offensive and LGBT-hostile sexuality education collides with LGBT pupils' right to protection against discrimination as well as the right to sexual health and wellbeing. Secondly, as Endsjø (2020) has argued, the right to freedom of religion applies to LGBT people and people who adhere to LGBT-supportive theologies, as much as to those who adhere to anti-LGBT beliefs, and includes "the right not to believe and not to be forced to live according to other people's religious belief" (Endsjø 2020, 1681). The theologically grounded heteronormativity that, according to our participants, seems to permeate conversations about sexuality at Christian private schools, may, however, limit the freedom of religion of people with pro-LGBT beliefs. Finally, the right to religious freedom that protects the Christian private schools and their right to offer education that prevents dialogue and critical thinking regarding LGBT issues clearly collides with children's right to education that promotes and encourages perspective-taking and critical thinking. Based on these findings, the question may be raised of whether the Christian private schools actually fulfil their obligations not only to queer pupils but to their pupils in general.

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NOTES

1. www.ssb.no/utdanning/grunnskoler/statistikk/elevar-i-grunnskolen.
2. The term usually refers to Romans 1.26 (cf. Brooten 1996).
3. Information about the declaration in Norwegian: https://www.felleskristen.no.
4. Sofie refers to an incident prior to the shooting at London Pub, which was known as a gay bar, in Oslo in June 2022. She might also be referring to the killing of 50 people at a gay nightclub in Florida in June 2016.