

KUC Anniversary Forum: Democracy and Social Minorities (May 30, 2014)

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Democracy and Sexual Minorities - From Society to Church in Hong Kong

This paper examines the challenges of sexual minorities in Hong Kong, and argues that the rights of social minorities will be better protected through a more democratic political system in our community. The struggles of sexual minority Christians in Hong Kong will also be addressed, and finally, how these Christians are participating in the local movement for democracy will be presented.

Definition of Sexual Minorities: LGBTIQ

Many people in Hong Kong have not heard about the definition or know who they are. Sexual minorities are people of diverse sexual orientations or gender identities -lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, questioning or queer. In short, **LGBTIQ**. Sexual minorities represent sexuality and gender beyond heterosexual, and since our society perceives heterosexual as normative, anything that is non-heterosexual will be seen as abnormal or queer. Heterosexual is the norm and they are in the center of the society, whereas sexual minorities are being pushed to the margins. This is why we often refer to sexual minorities as the marginalized group in our society.

Some Important Facts about Human Rights and Sexual Minorities

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights asserts that "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights." (Article 1) United Nations Treaties on Human Rights have confirmed that sexual orientation or gender identity discrimination is prohibited in the International Human Rights Law. It means that it is illegal to impose distinction to others and restriction to their rights by reasons of being lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered, as equivalent to any discrimination for reasons of color, race, gender, religion and other status. This kind of

discrimination is forbidden, and laws should be enacted to forbid such discriminations.

On May 17 1990, WHO (World Health Organization) of United Nations formally took 'homosexuality' away from the list of diseases. United Nations and WHO no longer consider homosexuality as a disease or abnormal. Homosexuality is one of the normal human sex orientations. Therefore society does not need to force homosexuals to receive any treatment.

Challenges of Sexual Minorities in Hong Kong

Many sexual minority people share their painful experiences about discrimination and unequal treatment. A recent report, funded by the Constitutional and Mainland Affairs Bureau on equal rights of sexual minorities, affirm that discrimination against sexual minorities exist in our society - among their families, in schools, workplace, and public area. Many sexual minorities protect themselves against exclusion, threats and even violence by hiding their identities and remain in the closet, reluctant to come out and reveal their sexualities. The report shows that of those interviewees who have been bullied or discriminated in schools because of their sexual orientations, 61% feel helpless and lonely, 54% feel worried, and 22% have thought about killing themselves. Because of the negative label from the society, sexual minorities live under fear, shame, suppression, low self-esteem, and unable to be truthful about themselves.

Although cases of discrimination against sexual minorities still exist and have been increasing for the past years, the fight for the legislation of discrimination against sexual minorities is in its 20 years now in Hong Kong. Whereas in the last 20 years, laws to protect discrimination against disability, family status and race have been enacted. Last year, our Chief Executive CY Leung refused even to allow public consultation, and some churches supported his decision. Because of the lack of an anti-discrimination law to protect the rights of sexual minorities, they cannot receive fair treatment in terms of employment, rental, education, service provider. Their basic lives are being threatened.

Marriage Bill Amendment on Transgender Marriage

Transgender people also face much challenges in Hong Kong, and recently, the Marriage Bill amendment on Transgender marriage provokes heated arguments. The bill insists that a person must undergo full genital reassignment surgery to be considered transgender. Joanne Leung, a transgender woman, criticizes that, "To force the intrusive genital reassignment operation as a prerequisite is cruel and inhumane." Joanne told lawmakers how she went through the tough eight-hour operation. She also shared the tragedy of her two transsexual friends - one committed suicide because he was told he could not have an operation, and the other suffered depression from the process. By sharing her own experience and the experiences of other transsexual people, Joanne wants to tell our government and lawmakers that they should not treat transgender people as objects or medical cases, rather, they are human and every transgender person is different. By insisting that every transgender person must undergo reassignment surgery before transgender person can get married is a violation to their human rights. Amnesty International further points out that, in the 22nd session of UN Human Rights Council meeting, such surgeries as prerequisite violates the physical integrity of transgender persons, and their rights to be free from inhuman, cruel or degrading treatment, which is protected under International human rights law.

How a Democratic society better protects the Rights of Sexual Minorities

According to the Oxford Dictionary, a democratic society is characterized by the diversity of its people, meaning culture, age, gender, ability and sexual orientation. People should respect, appreciate and embrace the differences, and everyone in a democratic society should enjoy equal opportunity and rights. Dr. York Chow, chairman of Equal Opportunity Commission of Hong Kong, stresses that the Commission has always advocated for the legislation of discrimination against sexual minorities to protect their rights. I agree with Chow's assertion that sexual minorities do not demand for special rights or any privileges, they just want to be treated equally like an ordinary person, to be able to participate and contribute to the society, and not to be labeled negatively because of their sexual orientation. Most importantly, Chow

says that we need to educate the next generation, to help them recognize that everyone is born equal.

If a democratic society means we should respect differences and promote equality for all people, then the society should not label some people or some behaviors as wrong, abnormal or immoral just because the majority says so. In Hong Kong, many people and even churches label sexual minorities abnormal because they don't behave like the normative majority. Sexual minorities become strangers with strange behavior who threaten what the majority considers as sexual normativeness. Furthermore, democracy affirms that no one in a society should live under fear and discrimination, right now, sexual minorities still live under the shadow of homophobia.

Democratic Society eliminates a Hierarchical System of Sexual Value

Our society, and even our churches is operated on a patriarchal system; as a result, a hierarchical system of sexual value is constructed. We have dominant male vs. submissive female, heterosexual relationship-procreation vs. homosexual relationship-unnatural. Such a hierarchical system also creates a binary opposites of good/natural/heterosexual sex vs. bad/unnatural/homosexual sex. This system also ensures some people the rights to dominate, exclude and discriminate others. Democracy affirms that sexual rights is human rights. We see a development starting with the 1995 Beijing Conference on Women's sexual rights by establishing that human rights include, the right of women to have control over and make decisions concerning their own sexuality, including their own sexual and reproductive health. At the 14th World Congress of Sexology, the WAS (World Association for Sexual Health) adopted the Universal Declaration of Sexual Rights, which includes 11 sexual rights. Number 4 is the right to sexual equity. It means people should not be discriminated against because of their sex, gender, sexual orientation, age, race, class, religion, physical disability, etc. A democratic society that promotes sexual rights builds on the basic right of freedom, dignity and equality for all people.

The Situation of Sexual Minority Christians in Hong Kong

We now move from the society to Church, and see what is the situation of sexual minority Christians in Hong Kong. Not only do we suffer discrimination and marginalization from the society, we also face the same unjust treatments in the church. I will share my own experience when I attended a church in Hong Kong few years ago. Our church leaders demanded that I went through a confession of my sin once I revealed that I am a lesbian, and told me that I had to end my twenty-two years of relationship with my same -sex partner. Eventually, I told them that I disagree with their stand, and they stopped my serving in the church. I had no support from anyone and had no choice but to leave that church. My story is just one of the many stories of sexual minority Christians with similar treatment in their own church.

Last year, the Evangelical Yan Fok Church organized an open concert 「愛家共融祈禱音樂會」 at the Government Head Quarter on Jan 13. These churches supported the Chief Executive's decision to ignore public demand for a consultation for legislation against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. The concert's organizer claimed a large turnout of 50,000 Christians. Opposing voices against the public consultation is clear, their disapproval is base on the belief that homosexuality goes against the Christian tradition that endorses heterosexuality.¹ Christians' rejection of a consultation was seen by the public as unloving, oppressive, and against the universal value of human rights. Despite the "love" expressed by those Christians and pastors during the concert, sexual minority Christians actually felt rejected and marginalized. The organizing Church and Christians at the concert have demonstrated an exclusive and discriminating stand against sexual minorities, by arguing that the Bible and Christian tradition affirm heterosexual normativeness. These Christians pledge their love for homosexual Christians and yet, insist that they must be converted before they deserve the same rights and equal treatment as heterosexual Christians.

¹ Johnny Tam, "Christians in Prayer Rally to Fight Gay Law Proposal", *South China Morning Post*, January 14, 2013.

May 15 this year marks the twentieth anniversary of the International Year of the family. As time changes, family composition undergoes diversification: family size is smaller, less heterosexual married couples wanting to have children, single parent family, divorcees, same sex couples family, and family with those who are not blood relations. A campaign initiated by three main denominational churches condemn same-sex relationship by imposing their value of "heterosexual marriage and monogamy" on all Christians. Their slogan, "one male one female, one husband one wife" emphasizes that this is the only family value that the Bible affirms. On their 3 page newspaper ad, these churches declare their stance firmly by condemning homosexual act is sin and God detests same-sex relationship. They further claim that for the good of the society and the next generation, they are concern about challenges from the equal rights movement of sexual minorities, and therefore must uphold the biblical values and their freedom to express.

What I find contradictory and hypocritical is their last claim. They assert that everyone is created equal in God's image, and there should be no discrimination against a person or a group. They care for the sexual minorities, and pray that they will be converted. Yet, two days after their ad, they further organized a rally with 25,000 turn outs and shouted loudly their stance - "homosexuality is sin!", "oppose same-sex marriage!", "oppose the legislation of discrimination against sexual minorities!" Their actions are a complete contrast to what they tell sexual minority Christians - that they love them and treat them as equals.

In contrast to an exclusive and discriminate stand against sexual minorities from the mainline churches, what did some churches do?

Covenant of the Rainbow: Towards a Truly Inclusive Church

Last year, Christian organizations, local churches and theological student fellowships in Hong Kong initiated a campaign called the 'Covenant of the Rainbow: Towards a Truly Inclusive Church'. We believe God loves everyone. We affirm all lives and uphold equality for all people

regardless of their race, gender, language, age, occupation, sexual orientation and gender identity, or level of abilities. We invited churches in Hong Kong to promote an inclusive and equal community where people embrace each other with respect and acceptance. We stress that the core value of the gospel is love, not hatred and discrimination. 'Covenant of the Rainbow' collected over 700 signatures who supported the creation of inclusive church communities where all are welcome, and to uphold human dignity and equality for all in God's world.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the challenges of sexual minorities in Hong Kong, and contended that the rights of social minorities will be better protected through a more democratic political system in our community. I have also named the struggles of sexual minority Christians in Hong Kong, and asserted that their participation in the local movement for democracy is significant for accomplishing equal rights both in the society and in the church.

Today, 'Covenant of the Rainbow' continues our mission and call the church to provide a safe, respectful, accepting and trustful environment where sexual minorities may participate freely in church life; and give them equal opportunities to serve in the church according to their calling.

'Covenant of the Rainbow' and Queer Theology Academy affirm our solidarity with sexual minorities and work in partnership to promote gender justice and equal rights for them. Through publication and education, we create a channel for Christians to get to know sexual minorities, listen to their stories and learn about their struggles, and with a hope to eliminate homophobia. We continue to support a democratic society that affirms the equality of sexual minorities and support their claims to their civil rights.