

(Please Don't) Take Me to Church

By Allie Begin

ABSTRACT. Sexual inequality has been an issue of debate for centuries. Recently, the push back against this inequality has been at an all time high. Social norms are changing and groups that have previously been marginalized are beginning to find liberation and empowerment. This drastic shift in mindset would not have been possible without the strong backing of influential people. This essay analyzes the work of Irish musician Hozier in his recent song *Take Me to Church*. Specifically, this piece will examine his disapproval for the way religious institutions control sexuality, polarize sexual binaries, and attack homosexuality with a negative hyper focus. Through a sociology and Queer studies lense, the lyrics of this song will be examined and presented as an intentional and powerful resistance against these oppressive behaviors.

Introduction

French enlightenment writer Voltaire once said, "With great power, comes great responsibility". When most people think of power, they think of world leaders and politicians; however, celebrities who are constantly in the spotlight also hold a tremendous amount of power. This spotlight allows them to use their craft as a platform to impact society's beliefs and behaviors. In the song *Take Me to Church*, the Irish musician Hozier speaks out against the unjust social control exercised by religious (in this case Catholic) practices. Drawing from the sociology and Queer studies perspectives, this paper will analyze the way *Take Me to Church* challenges religious institutions for their control of sexuality, polarization of sexual binaries, and negative hyper focus on homosexuality.

Religion as social control

Religious control is by no means a new concept. When Spanish missionaries colonized California in the 1700's, they forced Catholicism on the Native Indians in the area. Previously, these Indians had been free to explore many different sexual practices, including homosexuality. However, "Spanish church officials agreed on the need to eradicate homosexuality as an affront to God and Spanish men alike" (Hurtado 171). These principles quickly infiltrated the Indian communities who believed they had to comply to survive. This is just one of the many examples that prove religious control has deep, historical roots. In fact, sociologists have studied this phenomenon for nearly a century.

According to Chapter 59 in the Seidman text, religions like Catholicism "condemn and at times punish sexual behavior deemed deviant or inappropriate...religious teachings are key factors in enforcing the normative status of heterosexuality" (Grove 415). *Take Me to Church* boldly voices disapproval with the way religious practices ostracize certain people who do not fall in line: "Every Sunday's getting more bleak, a fresh poison each week. We were born sick, you heard them say it" (lines 7-9). In these lyrics, Hozier is referring to the Catholic teachings as poison, because these beliefs are spreading the oppressive and often toxic attitudes towards homosexuals. This outlook helps keep congregations in accordance with acceptable behaviors because nobody wants to be told they have something wrong with them.

The song's most ominous interpretation of religious control can be found in the chorus: "I'll worship like a dog at the shrine of your lies, I'll tell you my sins and you can sharpen your knife" (lines 19-20). Here, Hozier depicts Catholic believers worshipping like dogs, because of their blind obedience to officials; he also expresses disapproval of religion's deceptive claims and ways of "forgiving" mistakes. In an interview with *New York Magazine*, Hozier further criticizes religious control because of its harm to

humanity: “[the church] undermines humanity by...teaching shame about sexual orientation.” Catholicism presents an inflexible framework that distinguishes insiders from outsiders, creating a binary of right and wrong. *Take Me to Church* challenges these binaries.

Challenging binaries

A common theme seen in the queer studies perspective is the notion of “[challenging] the way all of us are classified and controlled by binaries such as male/female, feminine/masculine, heterosexual/homosexual” (Murphy 493). To most people, a “normal” man is masculine and a “normal” woman is feminine. This gender binary leaves no room for variation, thus out casting anyone that does not fit into these clear-cut molds. In regards to social norms of sexuality, hegemonic heterosexuality portrays a heterosexual person as “normal” and a homosexual person as “abnormal”. Gay rights activists spend much of their energy pushing back against the idea that heterosexuality is the *only* normal [Murphy].

Take Me to Church echoes many of these same beliefs: “My Church offers no absolutes...the only heaven I’ll be sent to, is when I’m alone with you” (lines 10, 12-13). Here, Hozier (a heterosexual) describes his *own* Church where, unlike the Catholic Church, it’s not all black and white. His heaven is experienced through the love he feels for someone, regardless of the “type” of love it is. In his music video, Hozier shows a homosexual male couple—in love despite religious persecution. There are several romantic scenes between them where the gender and sexual binaries deemed acceptable by the church are overtly challenged. The lyrics coupled with the video paint many different pictures of what love can look like. Every person is portrayed as “normal” even if they do not fit the cookie cutter visions of Catholicism. In his interview with *New York Magazine*, Hozier also says, “The song is about...reclaiming your humanity through an act of love. Turning your back on the theoretical thing...and choosing

to worship or love... something that can be experienced.” Here, Hozier takes the attention away from the labels of binaries and stresses the importance of the feeling of love itself. There is a broad spectrum of what love can look like, and categorizing different kinds of love as normal or abnormal should not be the focus.

In the 1980’s, sexual theorist Gayle S. Rubin wrote: “It is up to all of us to try to prevent more barbarism and to encourage erotic creativity.” Thirty-five years ago, there were fewer people boldly expressing desires to push sexual boundaries. This support for “erotic creativity” implies that practices outside the “norm” should not be means for persecution. Now, decades later, these opinions have spread and encouraged others to challenge these binaries. Hozier is a perfect modern example of someone actively working to prevent the barbarity of sexual persecution, and to promote equality around sexual creativity. In *Take Me to Church*, Hozier is discouraging a hyper-focus on homosexuality, by introducing sexuality as an all-encompassing, fluid concept.

From homosexuality to sexuality in general

Believe it or not, there were times in history when people were free to express whatever sexual desires they pleased. Unfortunately, “The science of sexuality conceptualized our diverse somatic experiences into a coherent, organized subject called sexuality” (Seidman 10). The natural diversity of sexual behavior was stifled by the assignment of restrictive labels, and the narrow-minded practices of the church work to strengthen this societal view. In order for people to have an identity, they are often pressured into belonging to one category or another. Without these controlling categories, people would feel much more comfortable exploring sexual variety. “Queer studies shifts the focus from homosexuality to sexuality and broadens our view of sexuality to see it also as a type of social control”(Seidman 10).

The lyrics of *Take Me to Church* suggest that Hozier encourages society to view homosexuality as just one part of a much bigger picture: “There is no sweeter innocence, than our gentle sin” (line 43). In the part of the music video that corresponds with these words, a group of religious radicals are assaulting one of the men in the homosexual relationship. Hozier is speaking in defense of this couple by calling their relationship an act of sweet innocence. He views these acts as innocent because they are just an organic part of human nature. The most powerful statement made in Hozier’s *New York Magazine* interview articulates these feelings: “Sexuality... regardless of orientation is just natural... sex is one of the most human things.” An article published in *New York Daily* suggests that Hozier’s powerful words “present sensuality as a path to righteousness” (Farber). This is an important point because it means that *all* sensual acts are good and right, not just the ones deemed good and right by religious scripture.

Sociologist Diane Richardson says, “sexuality is not determinate or unidirectional, but complex, dynamic, contingent, fluid and unstable” (464). Sexuality cannot be accurately understood if people only condone a small portion of sexual behavior. It is imperative that people zoom out and learn to respect all aspects of human sexual behavior as natural and constantly changing. This shift in mindset could be an enormous step in putting an end to sexual persecution once and for all.

Concluding thoughts

If human beliefs are learned, this means they can be changed. It is up to everyone to stand up against sexual inequality. In just one song, Hozier strives to change public opinion by criticizing sexual control, restrictive binaries, and narrow views of sexuality put forth by religious institutions. Luckily, these actions are starting to become more and more common. One amazing example of this happened recently when Pope Francis invited a

transsexual, who had been kicked out of his own Catholic church, to the Vatican for a hug [*The Huffington Post*]. These small acts of kindness are paramount for changing public attitudes. The increase in these occurrences foreshadows a promising future for humanity. We may ask ourselves *how can I make a difference if I am not in a spotlight?* But the truth is, these acts do not only have to come from those in power. We interact with others everyday, which means we have an opportunity to change lives everyday. It is our responsibility to find the courage to question the status quo. Through our rhetoric and our behaviors, we have the power to do something great. It is easy to sit back and think none of these things affect us, but in the wise words of Hozier, "a violation of humanity affects us all" (*New York Daily News*). The burden now rests on our shoulders: we must better ourselves, and better each other, so together we can better tomorrow.

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