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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

‘Again the Same Hopeless Feeling’: Christian Queer Activism as a Personal Experience in Finland, 1960s–2000s

Varpu Alasuutari[1,2]

[1]Gender Studies, Unit of Social Research, Tampere University, Tampere, Finland

[2]Gender Studies, School of History, Culture and Arts Studies, University of Turku, Turku, Finland

Correspondence
Varpu Alasuutari, Gender Studies, Unit of Social Research, Tampere University, Tampere, Finland.
Email: varpu.alasuutari@tuni.fi

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Abstract

LGBTQ people and the Evangelical Lutheran Church have a long history of tension in Finland. Christian queer activists have fought this tension since the late 1960s. This article asks how Christian queer activism was born and personally experienced in Finland from the late 1960s to the early 2000s. Theoretically, this article builds on queer history and affect theory. My data contains autobiographical texts and oral history interviews of the activists and their contemporaries, as well as statements by the Church, newspaper articles and a TV debate that help to contextualise the personal activist narratives. Using the method of close reading, I pay attention to affective circulation and moments in which activism emerged or started to decline. I argue that a wide circulation of negative affects attached to homosexuality in Finland in this era created an atmosphere that both inspired Christian queer activists to act, but as time went on, also caught them up in political despair when nothing seemed to change, making them reorient their activist hope.

Introduction: towards Christian queer activism in Finland

In November 1969, Veli Hyvärinen, a gay man living in Helsinki, Finland, was angry. He was reading an editorial in a Christian newspaper *Kotimaa*, which deemed homosexuality as something dangerous, contagious and unnatural. Furthermore, the editorial took a stance against the recent plans of the Finnish Parliament to decriminalise homosexuality: ‘To retain healthy societal morals, the duty of the society is to prevent, by all means, the unnatural of becoming natural and the deviant of becoming widely accepted’.[1] Hyvärinen strongly disagreed with the editorial, and this moment, infused by his anger and frustration, would make him an activist supporting the rights of homosexuals.

To contextualise Hyvärinen’s experience, and to set the scene, let us take a brief look at sexuality and the Church in Finland at this particular moment. According to Jan Löfström, homosexuality

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was a rather silenced topic in Finland until the 1960s, when it became a more common subject matter in Finnish everyday culture.[2] At the same time, sexuality in general became a target of public debate in Finland. The rising interest in sexuality was in line with other Western countries, in which the 1960s represented an era of sexual liberation and the beginning of gay liberation.[3] Public discussion on sexual ethics started in Finland before the Stonewall riots of 1969, which would later boost the emerging gay and lesbian movement around the Western world. Particularly meaningful in the Finnish sexual liberation was the spring of 1965, which in the contemporary vernacular got the name 'Sexual Spring': public panel discussions on sexuality were organised and special issues and books were published discussing and documenting these events and reflecting similar discussions in the neighbouring and more progressive Sweden, as well as elsewhere in the Western world.[4] Although much of the discussion related to heterosexual liberation, the idea of decriminalising homosexuality was also featured.[5] Other Nordic countries had already decriminalised homosexuality in the 1930s and 1940s, and similar developments took place in the 1960s in other European countries, such as East and West Germany, England and Wales. Finnish contemporaries argued that being part of the modern West, Finland, too, needed to update its take on sexual morals, in general, and homosexuality, in particular.[6] However, the contemporary attitudes were not only positive: homosexuality got negative publicity in scandal papers, which outed gay men and their meeting places and tried to externalise homosexuality by defining it as a 'Swedish disease'.[7] Yet, as noted by Sandra Hagman, the number of convictions of the still-illegal homosexual acts dropped after 1966, due to the increasing public discussion and slowly growing tolerance towards homosexuality.[8]

The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (hereby referred to as the Church) is officially separated from the Finnish state. Yet, the Church had (and still has) a significant and prioritised role in Finnish society as a so-called folk church: it has a close connection with the state and the majority of Finns are its members, mirroring the Lutheran folk churches in other Nordic countries.[9] In the 1960s, it also had a significant role in Finland's moral economy.[10] The sudden public focus on questions of sexuality in the mid-1960s was in stark contrast with the coy and virtuous sexuality teaching of the Church. Until then, matters of sexuality were rather silenced than brought into the centre of public debate in the Church and its teachings on family values.[11] In the changing atmosphere of the 1960s, however, the Church had to react.

In 1966, the bishops of the Church published a statement on sexual ethics, euphemistically titled *Ajankohtainen asia*, or in English, *The Current Issue*. It commented on many 'current issues' of sexual ethics that had recently received public attention, including sexual liberation, birth control and homosexuality. 'Our time has been described as a time of great changes. The state of unrest, that by no means limits to our country, is deeply affecting the lives of our people', the statement argued, acknowledging the international nature of sexual liberation and representing it as a threat to people in Finland.[12] The wary and warning tone geared up as the bishops wrote about homosexuality, defining it as dangerous, contagious, a sin and a sign of moral decay. Moreover, the statement supported the idea of conversion therapy: 'With Christian faith and suitable doctoral treatment, the homosexual tendency can be restrained even when it won't entirely disappear'.[13] With such explicit condemnation, the statement set the tone for the relationship between the Church and sexual minorities in Finland for a long time to come. The *Kotimaa* editorial in 1969, read by Hyvärinen, echoed the same condemning tones. Both *The Current Issue* and the *Kotimaa* editorial covered homosexuality with negative interpretations and connotations in ways that can be considered affective: they reinforced and circulated the idea of homosexuality as something inherently immoral and societally unwanted, or even threatening, to those considered 'healthy' or 'normal'.[14] Yet, they both had deep personal effects on Hyvärinen's life: they awakened a need to protest.

After reading *The Current Issue* in 1966, Hyvärinen resigned his church membership, which was an uncommon act of resistance in Finland in the late 1960s. After reading the *Kotimaa* editorial, he felt a need to do something more. More than 50 years later, in an oral history interview with me, Hyvärinen recalled the situation and his inspiration to become an activist:

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> How would I say this, now? Well, when I decided to take the bull by the horns in '69, it was unbearable that I and people like me were officially faced with such weird attitudes. … Privately, I had nothing to complain about, but since the atmosphere was what it was, one had to be careful all the time not to be revealed. It was peculiar, strange, not a real life. I happened to have my first partner then, who was close to me. And maybe it opened me up in such a way that when I came across the editorial in *Kotimaa*, which was completely peculiar, I got so angry that I decided that now I need to act.[15]

In this article, I explore the early decades of Christian queer activism in Finland via the personal narratives of three pioneering activists: Hyvärinen, Martti Kaipiainen and Ritva Kurki. The article theoretically builds on, and innovatively combines, queer history and affect theory. I suggest that to understand queer activism and its history, we need to dig deeper into the personal side of activism and focus on how individual activists were emotionally motivated (or discouraged) by the society around them. My two-fold aim in this article is, first, to deepen the research on queer activism with a focus on Church-related activism, affective histories and personal activist narratives, and second, to find new insights to think about the rise and decline of queer activism. My argument is that the wide circulation of negative affects attached to homosexuality in Finland from the late 1960s to the early 2000s both inspired Christian queer activists to act, but over time, also discouraged them and caught them up in political despair when nothing seemed to change, making them reorient their activist hope elsewhere.

The chosen era is specific not only because it marks the active period of the activists studied here, but also because of the major changes in sexual minority rights that took place in Finland during the same era. Today, Finland has a reputation as one of the role model countries of equality, along with our Nordic neighbours. Yet historically, and compared with other Nordic countries, Finland has been slow to improve the laws and regulations that have criminalised, pathologised and otherwise restricted same-sex sexuality.[16] Many important legal changes have occurred during the examination period of my study: the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1971, the depathologisation in 1981, and the law of same-sex partnership in 2002. Legal improvements are not, however, always immediately reflected in public attitudes, as noted by Riikka Taavetti. Instead, in Finland, the antiquated beliefs about homosexuality have circulated long after the legal changes, challenging thus the narrative of linear progress often attached to Western and Nordic countries.[17] This progress has been particularly slow within the Church institution, which has had a strong impact on the public opinion concerning sexual minority rights in Finland.[18]

Since the late 1960s, individual activists and small activist groups within and nearby the Finnish gay and lesbian movement have aimed at producing change within the Church. I explore these actions under the term 'Christian queer activism', acknowledging that not all the activists included in these activities identified as Christian, per se. Furthermore, it is worth acknowledging that the term 'queer activism' itself was anachronistic in Finland in the studied era, yet it allows important flexibility regarding the sexual identities of the activists.[19] It is therefore deliberately chosen over more limited 'lesbian and gay activism', which might work to hide bisexual histories also relevant in the personal narratives of this study.

My analysis focuses on three prominent figures of the early generation of Christian queer activism in Finland: Hyvärinen (1940–), Martti Kaipiainen (1923−2003) and Ritva Kurki (1939−2016). I claim that a detailed focus on personal activist experiences allows for a different, and more nuanced, kind of knowledge production in comparison with wider historical perspectives on social movements. Moreover, the detailed focus on individual activists makes sense contextually: instead of a widespread collective, Christian queer activism in its early years in Finland was small-scale, integrated into the gay and lesbian movement, and dependent on active individuals with a personal interest in the matter. This separates it from broader Christian queer activist movements in other countries in the same era, like the widespread Metropolitan Community Church founded in the USA in 1968.[20]

The activists in focus here identified either as gay, lesbian or bisexual. Kaipiainen and Kurki held Christian beliefs themselves, whereas Hyvärinen took the Church as the target of his activism for

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societal rather than faith-based reasons. They were active participants in the formation of the Finnish gay and lesbian movement and its organisations, Psyke and SETA, which had wider aspirations to support sexual equality in Finnish society. The aims of these pioneering Christian queer activists were to confront the Church for its publicly displayed anti-homosexual attitudes, to educate Church representatives on homosexuality, and to gain respect, inclusion and belonging within the Church and the state.

Studying affective histories of queer activism

What I am interested in about the early decades of Christian queer activism in Finland is the role of affect and emotion in such activism, both as a triggering and stifling factor in personal activist experiences. Affect can be defined as an embodied, and often nonconscious, intensity that has the potential to trigger action, and as an emotional stickiness that operates in our encounters with others and in the circulation of texts and flows of public speech. Emotion, in turn, can be regarded as a verbal approximation of affect.[21] My reading of affect draws both on Deborah Gould's and Sara Ahmed's theorisation, particularly in terms of affect's role in activism, as theorised by Gould, and affective circulation, as theorised by Ahmed.[22]

Since the 1990s, the 'affective turn' has occurred in humanities and social sciences, but historiography has focused more on emotions, leading to the development of the field of history of emotions.[23] Yet, following Benno Gammerl, I propose that historiography would benefit from a wider use of affect theory, as it brings analytical nuance and new possibilities to history of emotions.[24] This is particularly true in exploring what affects and emotions do and how they participate in producing social change. Affect theory has been particularly productive in queer history: the attention to affect has proved useful in exploring the discriminative histories of queer lives and the affectively powerful histories of queer activism.[25] As argued by Gould, political action cannot be studied effectively without considering affective intensities as relevant elements in these processes: hope and despair, or optimism and pessimism, are particularly pertinent to activist thinking, feeling, action and inaction. Yet, how they shape activism remains contingent.[26] Following Craig Griffiths' observations on the ambivalence of gay liberation, I contend that in the study of queer activism, the affective focus helps to make sense of the 'tensions and complexities' inevitably present in such activism.[27] Such tensions and complexities are particularly relevant in Christian queer activism, due to the coexistence of two deeply emotional and personally meaningful aspects that are often considered contradictory: religion and queer sexuality.

To study affect and emotion in history, materials documenting 'the affective dimensions of human lives' are essential, including diaries, private correspondence, oral history, filmed interviews and other forms of personal narratives.[28] Thus, the primary materials of this study consist of personal narratives: a memoir by Kaipiainen, a diary by Kurki, and an oral history interview with Hyvärinen. I have also interviewed three of their activist contemporaries: Olli Stålström, Jorma Hentilä and Lisa Byland. All the interviewees were active in the Finnish gay and lesbian movement in the studied era and knew some or all of the activists at focus here. To contextualise the personal narratives, I also use textual traces and documents – or fragments of queer pasts, as termed by Taavetti – that were mentioned in the personal narratives.[29] These include newspaper articles (e.g. of the Christian newspaper *Kotimaa* and queer magazines *96* and *SETA*), three sexual ethical statements by the Church, and a TV debate by YLE, the national public broadcasting company in Finland. The personal activist narratives guided the collection of other materials: meaningful activist moments mentioned in the personal narratives led me to look for documents contextualising them further. The ephemerality of queer memories and the fragmented nature of queer history support such a use of multiple data types.[30] All materials were originally produced in Finnish; quotations presented in this article are my translations.

Despite having the option of anonymity, all the interviewees agreed on the unanonymised use of their interviews. Given their decades-long work as queer activists who are open about their identities to the public, none of them considered anonymity necessary nor preferred when reporting the results

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of this study. Similarly, I have not anonymised the autobiographical texts, which are published and openly available in their unanonymised form.[31] Given the historical openness of the activists, the anonymisation would not only be difficult but also potentially disrespectful and thus unethical. By avoiding anonymisation, I respect the agency of queer activists in choosing to be open about issues that may be considered sensitive or private, for example, on the level of contemporary EU legislation. Studies in queer history and queer archiving have resisted the automatic assumption of sensitivity and vulnerability often linked to queer lives and have fought to ensure that queer existence is seen and heard as a legitimate part of the cultural memory and not just as something private and sensitive.[32] My study follows these acts of resistance, arguing that what may be sensitive for the mainstream may be political for those involved.

I utilise close reading as my analytical tool and use affect theory as its interpretive and theoretical framework. In closely and repeatedly reading (and, in the case of the interviews and the TV debate, also listening and watching) the materials, I have paid attention on the affectivity/emotionality shown by the texts themselves on the level of lexicon. Moreover, I paid attention to the interplay between the public texts and the private activist feelings, which led to private and public activist actions. Therefore, I intended to find, and provide an understanding of, moments that had affected, moved or triggered the activists and their activism in encouraging or discouraging ways.[33]

In what follows, I offer a reading of Christian queer activism as a personal experience in its early stages in Finland. My reading goes through various decades covering the decriminalisation of homosexuality and the legalisation of same-sex partnership in Finland, following a small number of pioneering activists and focusing on particular moments in this rather long period of time. Within the scope of one article, my analysis cannot paint an all-encompassing picture of Christian queer activism nor the wider social change in this long era, nor does it aim to do so. What it does aim at is to provide a detailed insight into the personal side of Christian queer activism and its motivations and discouragements. My reading will start with moments in which the activists under study took activism up, feeling angry yet hopeful. Then, I will proceed on to moments when they gradually gave activism up, being affected by political despair, defined by Gould as 'feelings of political inefficacy and hopelessness, the sense that nothing will ever change' regardless of activist efforts.[34]

Feeling angry yet hopeful: the emerging Christian queer activism

Returning to Hyvärinen's story introduced at the beginning of this article, it seems clear that getting angry about the negativity attached to homosexuality may inspire activist action. As argued by Gould, anger has often been the driving force of activism; this was the case, for example, in the AIDS activist movement ACT UP.[35] However, anger is not the only affect/emotion that matters in activism. Building on José Esteban Muñoz's work on utopia, activism also needs a hopeful sense of futurity and a belief that one's actions may indeed change the world.[36] I suggest, thus, that in addition to feeling angry, it was essential for Christian queer activism to emerge that the activists were able to feel hopeful, too.

In the late 1960s, a shift towards sexual liberation, as described above, created such hope and made it possible for Hyvärinen and others to join the public debate about homosexuality and the Church. Most importantly, there now was a debate to join: the Finnish gay and lesbian movement had taken its first steps towards organising by forming the Discussion club Psyke in 1968 and SETA (*Seksuaalinen tasavertaisuus ry*; Sexual Equality) in 1974, the first gay and lesbian organisations in Finland.[37] In Nordic comparison, the organising started rather late: in Scandinavian countries, the gay and lesbian movement had started organising already decades earlier, the first gay and lesbian organisations dating back to 1948 in Denmark and 1950 in Sweden and Norway, respectively.[38] Finnish queer activists were well informed about the discussions and legal changes occurring outside of Finland and were encouraged by transnational examples, particularly in our nearest neighbour Sweden, where homosexual Finns were known to emigrate in the hopes of finding a more open-minded society.[39] Yet, in the 1960s and 1970s, the Finnish atmosphere was also changing, as noted by Hyvärinen's contemporaries, gay activists Stålström and Hentilä. According to Stålström, the beginning of the 1960s had

been ‘completely horrible; homosexuality was then a sin, an illness, a crime, and for the leftists a bourgeois vice’.[40] Hentilä, in turn, recollected how ‘along with cultural radicalism, a sexual liberation began to take place, and the attitudes about queer people started to somewhat change’.[41]

In this atmosphere, Hyvärinen, who personally did not adhere to the Christian faith, felt a need to correct falsehoods circulated by the Church and Christian media: he wrote a pungent opinion piece in *Kotimaa* as a response to its anti-homosexual editorial. In the original piece sent to the paper, he described his emotional turmoil caused by the editorial:

> After reading [the editorial] I was caught up in severe depression. The sexual majority in Finland may apparently currently publish any kind of mental-health-undermining and falsely argued propaganda whatsoever. … Published in the main newspaper of the majority Church, it paints a sad picture of the situation in our society. Since the text is written by an academically educated editor, or at least published with his permission, I feel like running straightaway to the Gulf of Finland with a millstone around my neck: apparently, there is no cure to stupidity, not even education. I write this being deeply aware that my words fall on ears that can no longer hear.[42]

The strongly emotional language in Hyvärinen’s piece, hinting towards depression, pessimism and a suicide wish, allows his deep annoyance to pour through the text. It shows a glimpse of his motivation to jump, eventually, not in the Gulf of Finland but in the activist debate supporting homosexuals. The opinion piece can also be regarded as a public coming out: Hyvärinen defended homosexuality in public with his full name, which was extremely rare at the time of the criminalisation of homosexuality. *Kotimaa* published Hyvärinen’s text in a heavily redacted form, focusing not on its emotional aspects described above, but on his firm support for homosexuals: ‘Homoeroticism has existed always and everywhere, and it is not as such a sign of depravity or decay’.[43] The publication of the opinion piece made Hyvärinen an activist: he was soon recruited to Psyke, where he was to continue his activism against the Church-related condemnation of homosexuality.

In 1971, homosexuality was decriminalised in Finland as a part of a sex crime legislation reform. This did not, however, immediately lead to wider acceptance of homosexuality. In fact, it resulted in a legal backlash: in the law reform process, the Family Affairs Committee of the Church recommended that public favouring of homosexuality ought to be criminalised instead. This resulted in a so-called ‘encouragement ban’ of homosexuality (in use from 1971 to 1999), which restricted the public representation of homosexuality, especially during its first decades, resembling the Section 28 that would later come into effect in Britain. Although the encouragement ban is often remembered as a dead letter with no tangible effects in the form of legal prosecution, particularly after the mid-1980s, it undeniably had its effects on the attitudes attached to homosexuality in Finland: too positive or even too neutral representations of homosexuality in media could result in official complaints and self-censorship.[44] Following Ahmed’s vocabulary, it was negative rather than positive affects that got stuck to homosexuality in Finnish public discourse in this era. Through repeated public speech acts, this attachment to the negative got circulated forward, reinforcing the idea of homosexuality as something unwanted. I suggest that such an affective circulation contributes to building up and maintaining dreary atmospheres that have wide-reaching effects on people living and operating within them.

However, the ban did not prevent the publishing of queer magazines *96* and *SETA*, with a rather marginal circulation, nor did it entirely stifle the political discussion on homosexuality in Finnish newspapers, including *Kotimaa*. In 1972, Psyke published an open letter to bishops in its *96* magazine, written by Hyvärinen, repeating his Church-critical arguments and contesting the claims made by the bishops in *The Current Issue*.[45] The letter got public attention in newspapers, but the bishops never answered. This silence marked an end to the Church-related chapter of Hyvärinen’s activism, as I will later elaborate on.

Alongside Hyvärinen, other activists joined the battle against the Church in the 1970s. One of them was Seppo Kivistö, a homosexual youth worker in a Christian congregation in Helsinki, whose homosexuality was forcefully revealed to the public in 1974.[46] After the revelation, Kivistö was

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fired from his position, leading to public discussion in newspapers and TV – and the first public demonstration in support of homosexuals in Finland, organised by Psyke and SETA.[47] Later, Kivistö became SETA's social secretary and the leader of its Christian circle for homosexuals, operating from 1976–1977 until Kivistö emigrated to Denmark where he later died, leaving no written activist narratives behind except for his articles published in the *SETA* magazine.[48]

The Kivistö case and its wide publicity in Finnish newspapers marked a starting point for the activist journey of Kaipiainen, a married bisexual man, a high school teacher and an active Church member, who lived in Ilomantsi, a small town in Eastern Finland. Kaipiainen's memoir, *Jotakin ehkä tietäisin … Mukana homojen vapautustaistelussa* [Something I Might Know … In the Gay Liberation Battle], records a personal activist mobilisation that was immediate, visceral and strongly guided by affect/emotion: it was something to be done instantly with an internal urge, with concrete actions and without hesitation.[49] As a result of his activist awakening, he wrote a letter to Kivistö and a supportive opinion piece in *Kotimaa*. These actions started a new, emotionally satisfying chapter in his life, as he recounts in his memoir:

> I was downright forced to write it [the opinion piece] amid all those texts condemning Seppo and Martin [Schreck; Kivistö's partner], which appeared in the late summer of '74 especially in the Christian newspaper *Kotimaa*. … Soon after, Seppo wrote me a thank you note for the piece and for the letter I wrote him earlier and encouraged me to join an organisation called SETA, founded in the spring of 1974. I joined immediately. … As a result of the events of summer '74, there was a change in me: my previous pedantry was gone, and the world started to seem marvellously beautiful around me.[50]

As a member of SETA, Kaipiainen attended Church events and seminars vocally supporting sexual minorities. As a cornerstone of his activism, he sent private letters to bishops and priests who he personally knew. As he further reports in the memoir, the activist empowerment changed his personal life and saved him from a feeling of a slow death.[51] He had hidden his bisexuality ever since realising it in the 1950s, feeling constantly more and more burdened by the secret. Becoming an activist meant coming out as a bisexual to his wife, children, work community and the Church, and later, via public interviews on TV and in newspapers, to the whole Finnish nation.[52] Thus, in addition to affecting the world, activism could also affect the internal lives of those involved in it in deeply meaningful ways. Moreover, Kaipiainen's activism affected his wife, Anna-Liisa Kaipiainen, who stayed by her husband and became what in present-day terms could be described as a strong ally to Christian queer activism.

Another important figure of the early generation of Christian queer activism was Kurki, a devoted Christian lesbian who lived her life in Helsinki, and later in a nearby town Vihti, with her partner Byland. As told in the interview by Byland, in the late 1960s and the early 1970s, they lived their shared life in silence, not having much contact with other lesbians or gays. Yet, Kurki followed the emerging newspaper discussions on homosexuality and the news about the foundation of SETA. Eventually, and out of curiosity, Kurki and Byland attended the Christian circle for homosexuals led by Kivistö. Soon after, Kurki and Byland joined SETA. There, Kurki became an activist and Byland her pivotal supporter.

In her diary, *Totuus teki vapaaksi* [The Truth Set One Free], Kurki writes about her early steps of activism in SETA in the late 1970s and the early 1980s, describing her feelings in very embodied terms: 'Something in me is bubbling, trying to get out, but I don't know in which form'.[53] She is interested in changing the society but waits for a trigger to do so. The trigger comes later, on a walk with Byland when they talk about Kurki's experiences in SETA's telephone service:

> It is emotionally draining, because many are burdened by issues of life and death, and nothing seems to help. On the contrary, they are pushed down. Change or go to hell! It is terrible because a human cannot cast its skin or say to God: 'You made a mistake with me, recreate me.' With gays of [Christian] faith, the self-discrimination seems to be

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> remarkably stronger than with gays of no faith. If in one's own congregation the pastor has said that God won't accept you like that, how can the caller believe me, a stranger on the phone? I feel so helpless. I feel so lonely. There, walking with Lisa by my side, I muttered to myself: 'God, if you want to send someone to be the apostle of the gays, then send! If you can use me, so be it, use me![54]

The emotional suffering of both the callers and the activists answering the phone can be traced from other sources, too. In his interview, Hyvärinen recollected how the telephone service work both in Psyke and SETA had been shocking in embodied ways. 'You would often even tremble', he said when remembering back to the telephone service, and even decades later, the memory of the callers' distress brought tears to his eyes and deep emotionality in his voice.[55] In *SETA* magazine, Kivistö wrote about the political importance of the telephone service, stating how the callers' 'primary problems were related to hiding the homosexual and bisexual tendencies due to pressure from the Church and society'.[56] In the 1970s and the early 1980s, the views of the Church thus continued to colour the public opinion on homosexuality, which showed up in deeply disturbing ways when the activists picked up the phone.

What was particularly touching for Kurki was the suffering of Christian homosexuals in this atmosphere. Her activist awakening described above had a Christian undertone, as she addressed God directly, offering herself to be of help. This shows how deeply emotional a matter the discriminatory attitude of the Church was for Christian homosexuals, and how entangled Christian queer activism was to these emotions. This moment re-geared Kurki's emerging activism towards the Church in a more accentuated manner. Soon after, Kurki attended a Church seminar as SETA's representative, defending homosexuality in public.[57] Despite her initial fear of how such openness would be met by her colleagues and family, the event also stirred other emotions in Kurki: 'For us, that evening was revolutionary, it had many glimpses of hope'.[58] This experience encouraged Kurki to take up a more active role in Christian queer activism: she resurrected the Christian circle of homosexuals founded by Kivistö, renaming it Malkus, and led it for the five following years.

Hentilä, who had known Kurki, told me that Kurki was afraid of public speaking and publicity, but 'When publicity was needed, when one needed to speak, to stand up, she stood up'.[59] As reflected in Kurki's diary, the courage to take up the stand and defend homosexuals in the Church was a very embodied experience for her, taking her over without a conscious decision to do so:

> I don't even plan in which meetings I am going to talk and which not. When I start trembling in my chair and my heart pounds in my chest like it's breaking, I know that soon I will talk, and I can't shake it until I have spoken.[60]

In addition to her powerful speeches in Church seminars, Kurki's activism in Malkus had many forms. During her leadership, Malkus organised discussion groups with invited speakers, both from the Church and other fields of society, actively followed and participated in the public discussion, gave statements, sent letters and offered a much-needed community for Christian homosexuals. In the early 1980s, Kurki and Byland also visited a Christian queer group in Uppsala, Sweden, called EKHO – The Ecumenic Group for Christian Homosexuals, aiming and succeeding to establish Nordic collaboration and personal friendships with other Christian homosexuals.[61]

As shown here, negative attitudes towards homosexuality sparked activism in defence of sexual minorities. The excerpts discussed here are also examples of affective/emotional language in their own right, emphasising how the activists-to-be were moved towards political action in a matter of great emotional importance.

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The slowness of changes, political despair and reoriented hope

Next, I will turn to argue that the circulation of negative affects not only sparked activism but, over time, could also discourage it. I suggest that this is due to the slowness of changes in the Church, leading to political despair and the need of reorienting the activist hope. In this part of the analysis, I will jump to moments in which activism started to lose or change its meaning in the lives of the activists under study.

As mentioned above, Hyvärinen stepped away from Church-related activism in the 1970s, discouraged by the bishops' silence to his actions: 'Yes, I left it completely. I did not meddle with it later at all. I thought that whatever. What can you do?'.[62] When I asked whether the non-response from the Church was frustrating (expecting that it might be), he said: 'Well it might have been frustrating, too. But I shrugged my shoulders, what of it? What does it belong to me? If they don't understand speech … *laughter*'.[63] The bishops' silence can be seen as yet another meaningful moment in Hyvärinen's activist life, marked in the interview by indifference, disinterest, bitter humour and even laughter (more so than the expected frustration itself).

The decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1971 had been a clear victory for the gay and lesbian movement in Finnish society, yet the silence of the bishops and their reluctance to discuss homosexuality in public showed how difficult it was to create change in the Church. For Hyvärinen, the solution was to reorient his activist hope to other issues within the gay and lesbian movement, as the hope seemed to be wasted on the Church. Thus, instead of exiting activism entirely, his activism got re-geared towards different goals. For example, he took part in AIDS activism in the 1980s, which became an essential part of gay activism in Finland and elsewhere in the world following the global AIDS crisis.

The discouraging breaking points of Christian queer activism were not necessarily single recognisable moments, like in Hyvärinen's case, but rather a series of disappointments, or even victories that felt too small, and too slow. For Kaipiainen and Kurki, an example of such a disappointment was the publication of the Church statement on sexual ethics in 1984, titled *Kasvamaan yhdessä* [Growing Together]. Although the rhetoric had somewhat shifted compared with its predecessor, the *Current Issue* of 1966, its message was not that different: homosexuality was defined as not desirable according to the law and as unnatural and a sin according to the Bible. Homosexuality had been depathologised in Finland in 1981, and as a consequence, the views supporting conversion therapy had been mitigated in the Church statement. Yet nonetheless, the statement argued that homosexuality needed to be prevented by supporting the 'family life' and the so-called 'normal heterosexuality'.[64] Thus, the statement recirculated the negative attitudes attached to homosexuality once more. However, the statement also highlighted the dignity of homosexuals as human beings and abandoned the idea of homosexuality as contagious included in the previous statement. As Teemu Ratinen has argued, Malkus had managed to influence the steering group writing the statement, making it more favourable to homosexuals and, therefore, counting as a small activist victory.[65]

However, Kaipiainen and Kurki were not happy with the result, as reported in Kurki's diary. Kurki wrote opinion pieces in *Kotimaa* and *Helsingin Sanomat*, the biggest newspaper in Finland, criticising the Church's statement. She also discussed the issue with Kaipiainen. Both expressed exhaustion and disappointment – or a feeling that Gould would describe as political despair:

> Kaipiainen from Ilomantsi called and thanked me for the opinion piece in *Helsingin Sanomat*. They [Kaipiainen and his wife] are very disappointed in the bishops' statement, too. 'Ten years we have worked with the Church to share proper information, but it does not seem to hit home.' I constantly think of resigning from the Church, but thus far I've been thinking that it is better to try to influence it from the inside, after all. I don't know what more is needed for the final resignation decision. The Church would of course be happy to get rid of its 'sinners'.[66]

Here, we can see how the constant circulation of negativity, repeated in powerful public documents like Church statements on sexual ethics, may eventually start to wear the activists down. What is essential here is the question of passing time, which deepens the feeling of political despair: the negativity attached to homosexuality that had, at first, made the activists snap and rebel against it, could over time turn into something so burdensome that it started to exhaust their activist hope and motivation. Contrary to the relative ease with which Hyvärinen regeared his activism, Kurki and Kaipiainen as Christians had a stronger personal attachment to the cause of Christian queer activism, and thus leaving the activism – or leaving the Church – was something to be done only with a heavy heart. At this point, Kaipiainen had already resigned from the Church. Kaipiainen's decision, as reported in his memoir, echoed a similar state of disappointment Hyvärinen had experienced a decade earlier. In his letter to a bishop reprinted in the memoir, Kaipiainen stated: 'This kind of Church has no significance to me, which so categorically rejects a discussion its member considers important'.[67]

Meanwhile, the Church of Sweden had started to ordain openly gay and lesbian theologians as priests. For Kurki, who had personal connections with Swedish Christian queer activists, this seemed utopian when compared with Finland.[68] Throughout the 1980s, Kurki shared in her diary how she felt more and more disappointed with the Church, which did not seem to change, and its homophobic attitudes that were circulating everywhere around her. Furthermore, there were internal tensions within Malkus, as some of its participants were more interested in finding a community of Christian homosexuals than fighting against the Church, which had been the main aim for Kurki's activism.[69] In emotionally charged diary entries, Kurki wrote how 'the whole world made me cry'.[70] As Byland recalled: 'Ritva got tired then, disappointments followed. And a feeling that we won't get forward, it may not succeed after all, maybe'.[71] The disappointment led Kurki to reconfigure her activism: 'I am not exhausted to fight for the gays, but the manner of fighting and the arena needs to change now'.[72] She continued giving interviews in the media but gave up her leadership in Malkus in 1985. In 1989, she finally decided to resign her Church membership, reporting how she had 'again the same hopeless feeling' and noting pessimistically how the activists 'slowly, slowly, slowly proceed with small steps towards nothing'.[73] Malkus continued its work with a new leader, gay theologian Ari Saukkonen, but Kurki and Byland no longer attended its gatherings with the same intensity. Instead, they gave space for the next generation, feeling hopeful for them in the midst of their political despair: 'Little by little, our group will get bigger and stronger. The next generation may already have it easier with this matter, although the darkness feels great'.[74]

Finnish Christian queer activism indeed continued evolving and got new forms. In addition to Malkus, TELHO, a group of lesbian and gay theologians, was founded in the mid-1980s, continuing the activist efforts for a few years until being replaced by other groups.[75] As the negative affects around homosexuality kept on circulating, new activists stumbled onto them and decided to join the activist battle. At the same time, however, older activists started to feel exhausted by being constantly exposed to the very same affects. I suggest, thus, that the passing time and the sedimented layers of anger and disappointment – as well as the slowness of changes and the diminishing hope – deepened feelings of political despair and made old activists reconsider their activist efforts. The activism itself kept going, however, as activists were continuously replaced by new ones not yet affected by political despair. This is in line with later observations of social movements often relying on such continuous replacements, as individual activists eventually tire and step aside.[76]

Moving on to the 1990s, legal recognition of same-sex couples was quickly becoming a heated topic of the sexual minority rights discussion in Finland, following Nordic examples. Denmark legalised same-sex partnership in 1989, Norway in 1993, Sweden in 1995 and Iceland in 1996.[77] While legal recognition of same-sex couples in Finland was a purely secular matter, the Church strongly opposed it.[78] By this time, Kaipiainen and Kurki had downgraded their activism but had not disappeared entirely from the public eye. In 1996, they appeared in a TV debate, titled *Homoliitto-ilta* [The Gay Union Night], in which the need for a law on same-sex partnership was debated by its supporters and opponents. The debate, televised by YLE, gave visibility to sexual minority rights and was both a culmination point for political and activist debates, but also a starting point for further public discussions

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of the necessity of legal protection for same-sex couples in Finland. It also shows how the aims of the wider Finnish gay and lesbian movement, which in the 1990s focused more and more on 'rainbow familism' following the Nordic trend (including e.g. lobbying for the law on same-sex partnership and adoption), were closely entwined with the battle against the Church.[79]

The debate itself reflected an ongoing change in Finnish society and its attitude towards sexual minorities: a topic that had in previous decades been entirely silenced, and then restricted by the encouragement ban, was now considered something that could and should be televised to the whole nation. This growing tolerance towards sexual minorities has been suggested to stem from the frequent public appearances of queer people in the media, as well as the efforts of the gay and lesbian movement to equalise legislation.[80] Although the encouragement ban was still in effect (and would be discarded as a part of the criminal code reform of 1999), the debate included voices supportive of homosexuality. However, Christian voices were also strongly represented in the debate. As argued by Teemu Taira, Finland had long been affected by secular modernisation and the role of the Church in Finnish media had diminished from what it had been in the early 1960s, making religion more of a private matter.[81] Yet, in terms of sexual minority rights, religious discourse was nonetheless welcomed.

The debate included a videotaped interview of Kurki and Byland (which was, for a reason unknown to me, cut from the archived version) and had Kaipiainen and Hentilä among the debaters.[82] The TV debate is a tangible example of the continued flow of negative attitudes being attached to homosexuality and circulated forward via religious arguments and media outlets. The religiously aligned heterosexual debaters opposing the law referred to homosexuality as a sin, an illness and a deviance, going off on theological tangents and repeating the negative arguments recirculated for decades. The debaters supporting the law on same-sex partnership, many of whom were queer themselves, were clearly troubled by having to listen to such discriminatory discussion: they raised their voices, talked out of turn and ventilated their frustration by laughing bitterly out loud or throwing in pungent comments, showing both anger and discomfort in their bodily gestures. As recalled by Hentilä, the TV debate reflected the tone of the public discussion of sexual minority rights in the 1990s in Finland in general. 'It felt hopeless', he said.[83]

Yet, when it was Kaipiainen's turn to speak in the TV debate, he spoke of hope. Publicly performing activist optimism, Kaipiainen talked about his long activist career and explained how the work of SETA had managed to shift the views of the Church and society, no matter how slow the shift had been. 'I think it has changed quite a lot', he said when describing the attitude towards homosexuality in Finland.[84] He also shared, with a smile and a burst of relieved laughter, how happy he was for the younger generation, who could now live more freely. This can be understood as reoriented hope: even if the Church had not been able to change quickly enough for his generation, it just might for the generations to come. According to him, the signs of this were already visible. Despite all the hopelessness he had felt along the way, the hope was thus not entirely lost – just redirected towards the future.

Hopeful was also the afterword of Kaipiainen's memoir, written in 2001, describing his post-activist years and expressing a 'devoted wish' for the law on same-sex partnership to finally pass. The law did indeed pass in 2001, as the last one in the Nordic countries, marking a long-awaited victory for the Finnish gay and lesbian movement.[85] Kaipiainen noted the victory on the last pages of his memoir but did not comment on it any further, leaving thus its description affectively blank.[86]

Immediately after the law on same-sex partnership had passed, the bishops of the Church published yet another statement. They emphasised the importance of the union of a man and a woman, explained how the Church will not bless same-sex couples, and stated that 'from its employees, the Church requires behaviour that is in line with its traditional doctrine'.[87] However, on the level of the lexicon, the condemnation of homosexuality was no longer quite as visible as in previous Church statements, showing a shift in the atmosphere: previously expressed blatant disapproval could now be expressed only in between the lines. The message hidden underneath was, however, much of the same: homosexuality remained unacceptable in the eyes of the Church. Yet, the legal change made clear that

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the power of the Church to influence Finnish society and the lawmakers' decisions had diminished over the decades.

By this time, Kurki too was living her post-activist years and wrote her diary less and less often. According to Byland, 'We, of course, followed what happened, but her time and enthusiasm were taken up by painting'.[88] In her diary, Kurki commented on the victory months later: 'Have I even told you that the parliament accepted the law?! I was travelling, and Lisa cheered for it here alone'.[89] Here, I read a tone of a flat affect: an underperformance of emotion where one would expect clearer emotionality, like an expression of joy.[90] Kurki wrote about the new law as a strictly secular victory, which it obviously was, hoping that the life would now become easier for younger generations in the society at large, but no longer expressing hope for a change in the Church specifically. Kurki and Byland registered their 33-year-long relationship soon after, the description of which echoed the same tone of flatness: 'We'll be just the two of us, and there will be no celebration'.[91] This emotional flatness at the face of an activist victory present both in Kaipiainen's and Kurki's autobiographical writings becomes understandable in the context of political despair and reoriented hope: while it was a victory, it was not the kind of victory they had been fighting for, and the acceptance they fought to attain within the Church remained unreached. As they were retiring from activism, their hopes were already with the generations to come.

Conclusion: on activism as a personal experience

I have explored here the early decades of Christian queer activism in Finland with a focus on activism as a personal experience. As shown here, the activists both affected the society around them via their activism but were also themselves affected in contingent ways: the circulation of negative affects attached to homosexuality was the driving force making them act, but also something that wore them down as time went by, making them give up certain positions, like Church membership, certain forms of activism, or activism altogether. Applying Gould's theorisation on activism and affect, the fluctuation of Hyvärinen's, Kaipiainen's and Kurki's affective states over the decades, as reported in their personal narratives, can be theorised as an interplay of anger, hope and political despair.

Following Ahmed's idea of affective circulation, I have shown that homosexuality's attachments to negative affects, like fear and hostility, has a long history in Finland, in the creation and support of which the Church has had a significant role. Looking at the issue over a long period allows the perseverance of such negative attitudes – as well as the slowness of societal change – to become visible. Living in a society with publicly displayed (and Church-supported) anti-homosexual attitudes, but also a hopeful sense of futurity, made Hyvärinen, Kaipiainen and Kurki Christian queer activists, who were willing and able to believe that their actions could change both the Church and Finnish society. However, as time went on and the activist victories remained small and slow, anger got stifled and despair grew larger than hope. The society around them did change, yet the Church remained stubbornly unchangeable, leading to political despair.

As noted by Gould, political despair has the potential to destroy activist movements: it can be seen as a passivating affect/emotion and as such an unwanted and disregarded reaction in activist communities.[92] Yet, on an individual level, it affects activists in substantial ways and cannot, therefore, be disregarded in the study of history of activism. I suggest that political despair does not necessarily affect the activists simply in passivating or entirely hopeless ways, as one could imagine. Instead, as shown in this article, political despair led the activists to reorient their hope to different activist aspirations or to different temporalities and generations to come, leaving the stage for younger activists to take over.

In this case, the hope was not in vain: new activists joined the battle as the old ones retired, taking care of the continuity of Christian queer activism in Finland, as reported elsewhere.[93] As a result, Christian queer activism in Finland did not disappear nor wane, even if its early generation got

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exhausted and gradually stepped aside. While similar kind of activism and debates have taken place also in other Nordic countries and their folk churches, the Finnish case can be considered exceptional in its stubbornness: to this day, the Church refuses to marry same-sex couples, although same-sex marriage has been legal in Finland since 2017.

The current analysis provides a new understanding of the deeply personal side of Christian queer activism, showing how societally circulated negativity got under the activists' skin and moved them in encouraging and discouraging ways. Due to the methodological decisions, my analysis is inevitably fragmentary because of its detailed focus on individual activists and particular moments in their activism. Thus, further research is needed to explore more deeply the development of the social, cultural and political landscape in which Christian queer activism emerged and evolved, as well as the transnational connections and inspirations of this activism.

ORCID

Varpu Alasuutari https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7333-1781

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Varpu Alasuutari is a postdoctoral research fellow at Tampere University (Finland), working in the research project *Affective Activism: Sites of Queer and Trans World-Making*, funded by the Research Council of Finland. Alasuutari is also affiliated with Gender Studies at the University of Turku, Finland. Alasuutari's research interests include queer history, queer activism and negative affects in queer life and queer death.

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