

4.2 Eternally Confused

Anna (interview), Poland

I'm 47 and I'm Polish, from Torún. I'm white and I identify as bisexual and female. My pronouns are she/her. I'm married to a man and I have one daughter.

The Catholic Church & my Grandmother

I was born and raised Catholic, and I was a very devout child. I loved church and I had an extremely religious grandmother that I spent a lot of time with. Both of my parents were working, so I was kind of bounced between one grandma and the other. One of them was extremely intelligent, very well educated and very, very religious. And she had a huge influence on me. So, I was reading the Bible with her and I actually really liked going to church. Then when I was ten or eleven, I went to music school. I started playing the flute and I played the flute in Mass most Sundays as well, which I absolutely loved. I discovered that I really liked being on stage! I enjoyed that sort of joyful way of praying and praising through the music.

That kept going until I was maybe sixteen. Then I went to high school and started thinking about the church and all that, and that I didn't understand quite a lot of things. For me, the Catholic Church often felt like one of the more oppressive expressions of Christianity. You basically go to hell for everything. And that's how I always felt. So you need to watch what you're doing. You need to watch what you're saying. It was totally to do with faith [not communism] – because when I went to high school,

communism was down already. I don't think I ever realized the part the church played in bringing communism down – it was a huge one and I will never deny it. Nevertheless, for me, the Catholic Church often felt like the main source of oppression.

Swedish Body Positivity and Homophobia

I never heard anyone mention bisexuality or homosexuality at church. When I was thinking about this and knowing we were going to do this interview, something popped into my memory. I was in Sweden, because my dad had a lot of siblings. At some point, my grandmother, the very religious one, moved in with my aunt, who lived in Stockholm. So we went there for the Christmas holidays or something like that. I might have been around twelve or thirteen. And I remember my aunt, my mum and I went to the swimming pool. I was amazed, absolutely fascinated. I really remember that, because when you went to the swimming pool in Poland at that time, women wouldn't change in front of each other. I think that was kind of the influence of the church as well, that you have to be modest, you shouldn't show yourself. And I remember all those women walking around completely naked. I was fascinated by it, but in a very positive way. It wasn't sexual at that point; I was just amazed by the beauty, the differences between women. And I was really excited about this. I really loved the freedom of it, I think. And then we went home and I was talking with my grandmother. I told her about it, then she just got furious and said, those women are going to hell. You shouldn't be doing stuff like this. You should always cover yourself; you shouldn't allow anyone to see you in this way. I remember that was the first moment – I kind of blindly looked up to her before that – when I felt, I don't agree with that. Why should we cover ourselves? I actually found it so beautiful and so liberating. So it was kind of illogical and irrational what she was saying. But I guess at that age, you just take in what these older people tell you, especially the ones you look up to.

High School & Homophobia

Once I started high school, I wasn't as involved in church as I was before. I was going less and less and I found other things more engaging – like smoking fags! Plus we moved house when I was around fifteen, and I just didn't want to go really – my parents weren't forcing me. My dad was sort of traumatized from his experiences as a kid. His mum was sick and his sister and him were placed with nuns until he was an adult. He didn't go to church and my mum wasn't really forcing me, except stuff like family gatherings, or when other people might see that I'm not going! I was quite defiant – now I know that I'm neurodivergent. So that also explained a few things. So that just caused a lot of drama until the point where I reached eighteen. We used to have family reunions with my dad's eldest brother every couple of years. One summer I said, I'm not going. At that point, I was already so against the whole institution. There was nothing that would drag me back.

You know that we have religion in schools as a subject? The priest that was the religion teacher in my high school said things that I found deeply troubling and misinformed. This was the first time I remember hearing claims from a teacher that gay people molest children, how they are all going to hell and how we need to be careful who we let into our houses, because those paedos might come and rape us and stuff like this. And telling us stuff that condoms work like erasers – if we use condoms, we might get all bruised and scratched, because if you put eraser against your skin, it will damage it. And this is how condoms work. And I was like, no, no, I don't want to be a part of it anymore.

Expressing Faith my Way

I pray in my own way. I do miss God and sometimes I do miss Well, I've been to church but not like attending mass. I've never been to a Catholic Church in the UK, only when I still lived in Poland. Poland has really beautiful churches. And I find churches peaceful and an absolute perfect place to just sit and contemplate, meditate, and pray – do whatever

you need to do. I used to go quite regularly to a place near where I used to work, near the old market square, where there are old churches. We had one baroque church where I did feel closer to God. Not only was it beautiful, but [I liked] the sound, the acoustics of the place. It is one of the few baroque churches in Europe. [omit] And it does make you feel closer to God.

For quite a long time, I officially described myself as a non-believer, or start off by saying this. But somewhere deep inside I knew that wasn't entirely true. I do need it, and I do want it. I would go to a church if it was progressive and LGBT affirming. Because of my grandmother, I read the Bible and I read it in different ways. I read the Bible as the word of God and I read the Bible as a piece of literature. I'm always curious about all those new testaments that weren't printed and we don't have access to. I always say, that if we all lived according to Jesus's preaching, we would live in the perfect world. Over time I began to feel that the Catholic Church had moved far away from the message of Jesus, and that the institution sometimes seemed more focused on power, wealth and control than compassion.

My Bisexuality

I always form romantic relationships with women. We're more understanding, but there's also been more drunk drama in my case! I do have romantic feelings for men, as well. I really started to put some labels on it, when I was in my late 20s, early 30s. In my life it was more like I was just having fun and experimenting and just trying new things, until the point when I actually realised that I was absolutely head over heels in love with a woman. From then, I started to realise, maybe it's not experimenting ... this experiment has gone on for a long time!

But I remember shit from high school, as well. I recently confronted one of the girls from my high school class about this, because she asked me – so at some point in high school, we used to be such good friends. what happened? I was like, so you don't remember what happened?

Every year, we went somewhere in the Polish mountains, for like four or five days, with our class. And we got drunk one night and there was one female and one male friend from my class. I was 17 or 18. So he just started playing around, kissing, all three of us were. Well, I was way more focused on her than him. Someone walked in on us and made a big, big fuss about it the next morning. The friend of mine, that was with me, she was sitting there at the table with that girl I told you about. I could hear her saying, 'I think you're disgusting, you make me want to vomit!' And it was not about the fact that the guy was there. It was about the fact that she did something with me. I got furious. Then other girls and teachers joined us at our table. Apparently, I divided the whole class at the end of high school, because of that. I didn't think we did anything wrong. But they made her feel so guilty. I think it's because I have always had quite a strong personality and it was easier to bully her than say anything to me. But that was one of the first moments when I thought to myself, "You are actually a thinking person. And why would you find a girl kissing another girl disgusting to the point that people want to make you throw up? Like you have nothing [else] to talk about anymore." And when I confronted her about this three years ago, she said, 'I don't believe this; I can't believe that I said stuff like this.' Well, you did. You were then all accusing me of dividing the class.

Then I also had my best friend, who wasn't in the same class as me. I was in an English class; she was in a German class. I remember she had her best friend in her class as well, but it was always the three of us going everywhere together. And we ended up kissing as well – only myself and my best friend. And the other one was like, *come on girls, you're disgusting now. Stop doing that, I'm not a fucking gay*. I thought about it, once I started realizing that I did have romantic feelings for women as well. I think I was just kind of looking for something. But it was the 90s, early 90s, and I don't think any of us actually thought about stuff like this. You couldn't usually find any information about that – not that I was really looking, because I liked guys as well. So for me, it was ok, it was just having fun, experimenting.

When I wasn't living with my parents anymore and I working in a bar, I met quite a lot of gay people – ones I actually had some meaning-

ful conversations with. I had already finished uni in Poland, so I was in my mid-twenties, I think. And this is when I started to investigate a little more. This is also the time when I met the girl that I later had feelings for. Oh Jesus, she was my customer in the bar – she was really nice. She was so gorgeous; she was lovely as well. But she dumped me, because her girlfriend that she was with two years before that, who was like in the States, and who wasn't supposed to come back, decided she wanted to [come back]. She was a better girlfriend – apparently, as well as – and this is going back to Polish Catholicism and the way most of us were raised – the amount of people that constantly slept in that small, little apartment that I was renting, because their parents kicked them out, when they came out. These were people I met in the bar or through other friends.

My neurodivergence also had some part to play in it. I never really wanted any relationships; I enjoyed sex with both sexes quite a lot, but I never really wanted anything romantic. Maybe because I kind of never felt like I actually had feelings for someone, except for [names previous female lover]. I think this was the first time that I was actually heartbroken. I wasn't a dumper, but even if someone dumped me, I was ok. But with her, I was really heartbroken.

Move to the UK and Marriage to a Man

I met my now husband online in 2009. We first married in 2011. Because I wasn't really doing anything meaningful in Poland, I decided to move to Ireland. Because he's Irish, I decided to move there. I lived there for a few years, and then we moved to Scotland when he got a job. He is Catholic but he doesn't go to church. But I did find it fascinating that Irish Catholicism is slightly different to the Polish one. On the outside, they seem to be far more open-minded and liberated, but once you actually start digging into it, it's actually worse. I come from the big city and he comes from a rural area and I think that changes the way people think, as well.

I remember I was in the pub with some wee guy sobbing into my sleeve, asking 'How can I come out here? This is crucifying me. I need to leave. I need to go to Dublin, I need to go to London. I can't stay here.' So it is the same [as Poland] in a sense. But in Poland, it's not as political as it is in Ireland. So I was trying to see it from both sides, from both perspectives but again not absolutely understanding it. Why is there so much hatred and pain? Because of religion. Both religions are Christian religions. Both believe in the same God, just in a different way. And that was the issue with christening my child, because I didn't want to do it, because I wanted her to make her own choice when she's ready. But for him it was political. So I did it for him. I think she was two and a half years old when I actually did it.

But I also agreed to this, because it was sort of during my grandmother's 90th birthday celebrations – not the religious [grandmother], the other one. She was religious, just not to the extent that the other one was. And she was so happy that my daughter got christened – it was like a birthday present. I only had one cousin from that side of the family, so I decided to make her a godmother. So grandmother was over the bloody moon, but for me it had nothing to do with religion. Nothing. Because I also don't believe in that, and logically to me it's a pile of poop, that a child wouldn't be able to get to heaven if it's not christened.

I think I got married because all of my friends already were. We did get along really well, like he's neurodivergent as well, so that does add a certain level of understanding. Although we didn't know it then, we know it now. I was quite up front about being bisexual; he never had an issue.

I'm out – for example at the high school reunion, the one I talked about, where I confronted people. I tell everyone that I'm bi and that if I got divorced right now, I would probably not pursue men anymore. But being bisexual wasn't really a thing when I was younger. Actually, I would say that at high school, you said bisexual if you wanted to have fun. And I was like, *I'm not going to be bisexual, I'm not going to be bisexual, I'm not going to be bisexual*. But there wasn't bi [as an orientation] and I think to some extent, it's still like that in Poland. It's just someone who doesn't really know what they want or a way to justify what you're doing. At the end of the day, you will end up with them anyway. And I don't really know much

about bisexual male experiences – only one, but he was in a gay relationship. And at that point, he used to prefer to be in a relationship with a guy. He liked some women, but it was kind of like the other way round. He was the only one I actually ever spoke to about that [bisexuality].

In my family, I only really spoken about it to two really close male cousins, who are like smaller brothers to me. They both know because they both met my girlfriend. My parents are alive and actually I told my mum three years ago. I told her that I liked girls and that I had always liked girls. To which my mum said only one thing: *That's fine. How are you actually doing that?* Mum, you actually want me to describe it to you?!

You know what, I think that I trained my parents well, because I was raised by homophobic and racist parents and now I have parents who are neither of these things. Well, when it comes to my dad and racism, sometimes we need to have a serious discussion about stuff, because he still finds jokes that were funny in the 70s funny now and they're not. I had so many gay friends and they used to come to our house as well. They [parents] just sort of got over it and it's not an issue anymore. And I was quite forceful about that as well, because my sort of reasoning behind this was that if you don't know something, you will never understand it. And what better than hands on experience? So I was inviting them [queer friends] for lunches, for dinners, forcing my parents to be at the same table with them.

Marriage, Children & Bisexuality

There's no contradiction between my faith and sexuality anymore. When I was in high school, I never really had conflict with myself, because I could tell myself that I was going to end up with a guy anyway, that's just a phase and there's nothing to it. I also had that grandmother voice in my head, telling me it was wrong, for quite a while.

My daughter knows that I'm bi, we talk about it a lot. She says she's bi as well. She's had a crush on a girl for quite a long time. She told me she had a crush on her friend – that just makes me feel so good, that

she trusts me, the fact that she doesn't even have to think about it, it's normal. She's nine years old.

But honestly, it wouldn't be the same if I didn't study sociology. I agree that everyone should do sociology. I actually think it's very, very important. I remember when I was choosing my course in Poland, when I finished high school. Everybody was saying, if you don't know what to do with yourself, go study sociology, But it was in a negative way. I don't think anyone is ready for the amount of thinking you actually have to do.

I think my husband knows that my daughter identifies as bi, but they don't really talk about it. We don't talk, so I don't really know, but I don't think he would be bothered about that. I read somewhere a few years ago, which was actually quite interesting, that neurodivergent relationships tend to fall apart when a third party appears – and ours would be the child. And that would be kind of 100% true for us. Plus, I think there's also a lot of blame towards me. I was told by my Polish doctor – they don't really know why – but it seems like I can't really have children. I had some miscarriages before. They don't really know where it's coming from, perhaps as a result of having celiac disease, which would be a perfect explanation as it can cause miscarriages, and an inability to conceive, to carry the pregnancy and so on. But it has been diagnosed so it's managed. And I got pregnant.

The Ideal Church

An ideal church would be one where I can see and feel that everyone is accepted, regardless of anything. It doesn't matter who you are, where you're from, how you look, who you love. Nothing else matters. Like Jesus said, we are all brothers or sisters. We're all human beings and we should treat ourselves with love and respect. We all deserve that. A place where I can openly discuss how I'm feeling, where none of my feelings are wrong, and all my feelings are valid. If I'm lost, I can discuss it with people that support me or help me find whatever I'm looking for.

Who is Jesus to You?

Jesus is a really cool guy. I love the way he talked, about how we should live – though I don't think you should tell anyone how to live. And then we took the guidance he provided and twisted it in so many ways. Yet we are still evoking his name. The Polish Church is great at that. It is so involved in politics and uses that to do horrible things, to oppress women and to oppress minorities.

Being Bisexual

I'm not sure I feel there are positives to being bisexual. I don't think it's positive; it's confusing. And sometimes I think it's actually difficult. I think it would be easier to be straight or gay, and I have always felt like that, especially within the gay community. It's just recently – maybe a year and a half ago – that I decided I'm going to identify myself as queer. Because I'm sick of not being accepted in one community and not being accepted in the other. And for straight guys, it's just a fun thing – ok, let's do a threesome. Fuck you, go away please! And for lesbian women, it's like hmm, not really, because you're bisexual and you're going to leave me for a guy. You can't win. The girl I was with, I know she had huge issues with that and I think ultimately, that's why our relationship broke down. Because the other girl was just safe for her. She never knew that she wouldn't find me – her words – “sucking someone's dick.” I was monogamous though, because I was besotted with her. I'm still getting that vibe that bisexual people are incapable of being monogamous. She was like, why can't you just be gay? Because I'm not. I just love people and I don't really care whether they're male or female. I don't care, and I actually do not care whether they're cisgender or transgender. And that's the thing – I just like humans!

Living in Scotland

No one makes a big fuss about being queer in Scotland, and I like that. I think I always need to watch who I'm talking to in Poland, if I want to talk about this. No-one cares really [in Scotland], or at least that's what I've found. Or maybe I was just lucky enough to be around people who don't care at all. It's definitely more open-minded, without the huge influence of the Catholic Church screaming at you from left, right and centre, that this is wrong, that gay people are depraving our children. For me, the sexual abuse scandals involving Catholic clergy in Poland have deeply damaged the credibility of the Church.

Hopes for the Future

I'm focusing on my education right now. I've just got a care job, where I'm going to be doing quizzes and fun stuff with elderly people. I'm actually quite excited about that. I went there to meet them all on Tuesday, and they were fantastic. They just welcomed me. So I'm going to be doing that – it's an internship. So, it's just for three months. It kind of involves sociological knowledge, but also what I'm doing now – political communication. I chose political communication and public affairs so that I can sort of use the sociological knowledge in practice. I'm interested in policy and I'm interested in changing policy. I'm interested in female issues and I'm furious about how medical science treats women, and how limited access to treatments are – for example, for the menopause, because I'm going through it. But also access to certain services – there should be equal access for everyone. So that would be something that would really, really Interest me.

I always wanted to be a politician since I was 18, but I don't think I can be a politician in this country because I'm not a British citizen. And I'm not going to lie, I don't want to [be a British citizen] because I have settled status, so I don't really have to. I don't want to be anyone's subject! I am morally slightly at odds with Great Britain. I don't think I want to

be part of a country that has colonized other countries around the world and never apologized.

Closing Thoughts

I think every single one of us, subconsciously, deep in our hearts, always know who we actually are. But then, it takes so much time – for me, it took so much time to admit certain things to myself, actually allow myself to open up to myself, it that makes sense. Actually it's been recent – the past four or five years. So I'm nearly fifty and I feel like I'm just slowly now uncovering everything that there is.

This chapter reflects the personal experiences, memories and interpretations of the author. Names and identifying details have been changed or omitted for privacy.