

4.1 You're Kind of Dismissed

Christelle (interview), France

Introduction

I'm currently 22 years old. I'm half French and half Madagascan and I live in Paris. I am mixed ethnicity and identify as European, black and biromantic. I've been questioning lately, but for now, I mostly go by she/her and identify as a woman – so, female cisgendered at the moment.

Growing up in Madagascar

I've been really into religion since an early age. For background, my mom is Catholic and my dad is Lutheran and it's in that church that I was raised in Madagascar. It's actually one of the biggest Protestant organizations. So I went to Sunday school from a very young age, where I was put with the kids. I've never really questioned my religion or anything. I was a believer from three, when I started Sunday School, to twelve, when I started middle school.

There was a point at which I started having my doubts, as I approached my preteens. I would encounter other friends with different religions and we would talk a lot. So at that time, I was very interested in other religions, but still going to Sunday School. My teacher at Sunday school really, really liked to debate issues at this time. So we talked about religion a lot and I think it was at that moment when my faith was the strongest, because she was very open-minded and talked about the fact that the church was improving and trying to move with social standards,

and how it had maybe not done good things in the past. How there are so many parts of the Bible and not every part has to be... I mean, everything has to be considered separately. So I think my preteens and early teens was the moment where my faith was the strongest, I would say between 12 and 16.

Then I started high school and that was when it was tough, because I realized that I also liked non boys. I had a non-binary friend then. I started having crushes on girls as well. Sexual orientation was not really a topic. Sexuality was talked about – I mean, obviously, some of my cousins they would have like boyfriends, girlfriends, but they were all straight.

I went to an international French school. It kind of helped me realize things because we had gay teachers that were out. I was actually raised in the Protestant church and it's my mom who's a Catholic woman. There was no religious agenda at the school, but most of my cousins were at Catholic schools. And it kind of gave me opinions outside of school. And so that's when I was questioning the fact that I think [liking girls] is bad and everything and it wasn't even a topic that I could ask my Sunday school teacher.

So it was really hard for me to put the two together [faith and sexuality], and I think I really kind of distanced myself from the church. I mean, I was still going because of my parents and everything but my personal faith was.... it was hard. , and it was at the time when I arrived in France, too.

Moving to France

It was after I arrived in France at 18 when I realized there were people who were bisexual or just in queer spaces in general, that had their faith. It really helped me to put the two together,

I still don't go to church spaces – maybe once a year or so with my family, for let's say Christmas or just on my own – but mostly, I pray by myself. I haven't really been involved with the church, but I am more [involved] in my faith, now, because I've been realizing that I could put it together. Also, I've seen some activists on social media and things like that,

who are very out, but also talking about their religion. It really helped me. For example, in France, there's but Floralie Resa. At the time, her name was Queer Chrétienne, but now she's changed her name.

I moved to France at 18. I've never been to any queer Christian organizations, but I'd like to. I am actually wondering now, why haven't I done it before? Because I really want to.

There was a time where I didn't know the difference between wanting to be really good friends with someone and actually having a crush on them. So that was me before, in middle school, I guess. There were these moments. But it was in high school that I really realized it – so in terms of age, 15 or 16. I realized, I don't only like guys – and actually, at that time I had a boyfriend. I came out to him and he was very, very positive. I think I was confused at first. Before I came out to him, because he was the first person I came out to, I was online, typing am I a lesbian, am I bi?

I used to have aches and pains, things like that, looking at it, but then I was like, yes, but I still like my boyfriend. I'm attracted to him. So yeah, I was just online, trying to find out. There were many resources, but not as many as there would be, if I did those searches now. So I just told him, hey, I like boys and girls, and also those people who are kind of in-between – I didn't know what non-binary was then – like this person. I said, I think that's bisexual. He was like, 'Oh, right, well do you still like me?' That was his question. I was like, 'Yeah, I still like you.' So that was really simple and easy – though I was very scared at the time. He's an ex now. But at the time, it was like, I want to marry this person and everything.

So that was when I was still in Madagascar and then I arrived in France. In Madagascar, he was actually the only person I informed about being bisexual, within my close circle, because people didn't talk about it. And there were no role models. Because I had a boyfriend, I could just not say it.

Feeling Safe

And after I actually arrived in France, from the get go, I felt much safer. For context, it's really not safe in Madagascar for queer people. Holding hands, they would just think you were friends, but kissing, you might get beaten. It's really bad. Some people are trying to change it, but it's still really bad, especially if you come from certain areas. There was that lesbian couple, where one of them ended up in prison. It was a lesbian couple and one of them actually tried to remove her girlfriend from a violent situation in her family. And the family heard that, they were really angry. They tried to put the blame on her, about alienating her from them and things like that. She ended up in jail because the girlfriend was 18 and the other was 17. So they said this is abusive, because she's a minor.

My parents don't know [I'm queer]. I have an older sister and she knows, and my cousins here as well. I'm not out at university – they don't hear about my relationships in general. I'm actually out to all of my friends. I came from a French international school and most of [my friends] are in France now, so these people, I came out to them. And also some cousins that are still back home, so my mother's side of the family because it's my mom who is French. They have all been fine about it. Both my parents are alive, though they're separated. They're both abroad now. I haven't come out to them.

Coming out

I would say I am biromantic. It's really easy for me to get romantic feelings for women, but with cis men, it takes a lot of time. I actually have to get to really know the person before I get romantic feelings, unlike with sexual attraction, where I don't really experience a difference. I have actually been questioning it a lot, because, for example, in lesbian spaces, they talk about compulsory heteronormativity. I've read about it, but I don't relate to it at all, so that's why I keep my labels as bisexual.

At first, I was only going to queer nightclubs. When I first arrived in France, it was during COVID, so I was mostly making online friends

then. At that time, also, when I arrived in France, I kind of started being really out. I would not say hello, 'I'm Christelle, I'm bisexual,' but I would mention it, without feeling like I did back home, to my friends – like my new friends or people who I just met, people who are in my life since I arrived in France, people I've worked with. At first, there was COVID, so there weren't really gatherings, and then I went to queer nightclubs and parties. And then I wanted to meet people outside of this time, just in normal life. I went to the LGBTQ Centre in Paris, for painting workshops and crocheting – those were the two spaces – also, sometimes on Discord. I haven't gone to the in-person meetings, but there's the Bi Cause association in France. We do online meetings and sometimes I join in. But most of my queer friends are atheist or New Age. I don't really have Christian queer people around me and I would like to have some more.

But my first time being into queer spaces was actually in Ireland when I did an Erasmus internship at a research lab. Back then, I went to a drag show and it was the first time I felt really safe in my identity. I think this event opened the doors for me, so I could join other spaces in Paris (the LGBTQ+ centres, nightclubs and workshops mentioned already). This happened around 2022, when COVID started to settle down.

Music is a very big part of my life (I was in the choir at church and learned piano and played in a band as well). I am very much into lyrics and listening to queer artists (mostly sapphics) has really helped me, plus I have made lovely friends at concerts.

In terms of my ethnicity, I don't think it impacts on matters of faith. On my Madagascan side – on my black side – people are very, very religious. So, I think it impacts my faith in the fact that at a young age, I didn't really know any different, maybe. The church is fundamentalist. Last year, some people gathered in the streets for Pride month. I mean no-one ended up in jail, but the general opinion, though I can only see what's on social media, was that it was really bad.

In church, they just don't talk about it. Last year was actually the first time I heard at least my church talk about it, the Lutheran Church. The leader of the national church actually made a statement – along the lines of "I don't care, so long as it's not in my space." Like, you should not be

mean to people, but you should not be soft. But if there's someone in the church, you can talk to them – which is like passive violence. It's the view hate the sin, love the sinner.

It can be harder to be black and queer than white and queer. For example, me and other black friends have been in racist encounters with people. That's actually why I'm trying not to go to queer nightclubs, because I've had verbal racism happen there. Sometimes, you have your own topics you want to talk about when you're non-white. Sometimes when you're trying to talk about some issues, like societal problems that are linked with being a person of colour, you're kind of dismissed.

An ideal church for me would be, first of all, accepting. It would bring people together, to study the scriptures, whilst really taking account of societal changes. I often talk about this person when I talk about my faith, but I'm still going to talk about this Sunday School teacher that I had back then, who said the church is slowly changing and maybe some things are not the way she'd like them to be. So, I think the ideal church for me is one which is accepting of this fact and which mostly focuses on the faith and Jesus. That would be the church for me.

For me – and I've always said this since I was a kid – Jesus is big bro. He's looking after me. And he's someone I can talk to. I can't put it into words, but I feel that he helps me in my life every day. I can't even explain it, but I feel the positive effects. Maybe for some people, it's meditation, or whatever, but praying helps me every day, as does the word of Christ.

Being Bi & Mental Health

Being bi does impact on my mental health, both in queer spaces and non-queer spaces. You're not taken seriously and it has even impacted relationships. One of my former girlfriends, she would either just say that I was a closeted lesbian, or biphobic stuff, like you're just going to leave me for a man. Those words weren't very good to hear. This has affected my mental health.

Now I'm in therapy, actually, which is a really good thing and those outside words don't upset me as much. But in non-queer spaces, but also in queer spaces, you feel like you don't fit.

I'm studying Health & Safety Management but I'm actually going to take a gap year, for my mental health. So I'm going to work on that too, through putting my studies on hold for one year.

The church has also helped me in terms of my mental health, especially when it comes to therapy. I grew up with a parent who was very anti-therapy, so the only way for me to get counselling was through the church. I neither felt the need, nor felt ready, to talk about my sexuality, so it was mostly on other personal matters, but it did help me. It was when I arrived in France though, that I finally went to a certified therapist, and my mental health has been so much better since then. I changed therapists many times and I wasn't out with some of them, but the ones I felt the most comfortable with knew and helped me navigate through it and even showed me ways for me to reconcile with my faith.

The best thing about being bi is probably seeing people as they are. I'm not saying that people who aren't bi doesn't see people as who they are, but I would say like it takes a lot of time to admit you're bisexual, at least for the people I know who are bisexual, and myself. There's a lot of questioning. I'm very self-aware and the experiences I've had with people, both romantically and non-romantically, have helped me. It was a struggle at first, but now I love being bisexual. It took some time, but now I fully embrace it.

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