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Striving For an Equal Church

Affective Utopias of Christian Queer Activists in Finland, 1960s–2000s

ABSTRACT

In this article, I explore the hopes and aims of Christian queer activists in Finland from the late 1960s to the early 2000s by conceptualising them with the notion of utopia. I approach utopia from the perspective of not-yet-existing and hopeful queer futurity (Muñoz 2009; Jones 2013), tying it together with affect theoretical notions of activism as an affectively motivated aspiration for a better world (Gould 2009). The study makes an empirical contribution to the study of queer activism and the interdisciplinary fields of queer history and queer religious studies, as well as a theoretical contribution to queer theoretical accounts of utopia. As my data, I use oral history interviews, autobiographical writings, and archival materials collected by the activists. As a method of analysis, I utilise close reading informed by affect theory (Berg et al. 2019). I ask: how did utopian thinking appear in the stories of Christian queer activists, who aimed for inclusion and equality in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland? I argue that activism always needs utopias to exist, and that utopian thinking was a central force within the early decades of Christian queer activism in Finland. I show that utopian thinking had both private and public relevance for the Christian queer activists and that by striving for inclusion and equality, the activists represented utopian voices within the Church and the local Christian queer community of the time.

Keywords: Affect theory, queer activism, queer history, utopia, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland

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utopia (noun)

1: a place of ideal perfection especially in laws, government, and social conditions

2: an impractical scheme for social improvement

3: an imaginary and indefinitely remote place

(Merriam-Webster Dictionary)

Introduction

IN THIS ARTICLE, I explore the hopes and aims of Christian queer activists in Finland from the late 1960s to the early 2000s by conceptualising them with the notion of utopia. Utopia, as described above, is in common understanding often equated with a naïve imaginary of a better world, a place that does not yet – and might never – exist, as it may always escape reality and remain but an idealistic mirage (Jones 2013; Bloch & Adorno 1988). Here, I take up the task of exploring how utopian thinking appeared within the early decades of Christian queer activism in Finland, targeting the Evangelical Lutheran Church and its antagonistic attitude towards homosexuality.[1]

The chosen time frame ranges from the birth of Finnish Christian queer activism within the Finnish gay and lesbian movement in the late 1960s to the legalisation of registered partnership in Finland in the early 2000s. The main aim of Christian queer activism in the studied era was to gain inclusion and equality within the Church. The activists wished to see a social, political, and theological change in the Church and, as a consequence, also in the wider Finnish society. As I will later elaborate on, the road towards that change has been a slow and rocky one, in which to believe in the possibility of such a change can be seen as deeply, and affectively, utopian.

Considering queer theoretical takes on utopia, to argue that inclusion-driven activism is in any way utopian may seem curious. In the canon of queer theory, LGBTQ activism that aims at inclusion to normative institutions – like, admittedly, the one studied here – has been criticised for homonormativity and failure at utopian thinking (e.g. Duggan 2002; Muñoz 2009). Yet, I argue that despite this seeming anti-utopianism,

the early decades of Christian queer activism in Finland were in fact strongly guided by utopian thinking. Thus, I aim to provide a new empirical and theoretical perspective to understand the aims and motivations of inclusion-driven LGBTQ activism by taking the interconnections of affect, utopia, and religion at the centre of my analysis. The affective entwinement of queerness and religion, in particular, is an understudied topic in the study of queer activism. Although fighting Christian prejudice is one of the central goals of queer activism in Catholic countries of the Western world (e.g., Mott 2022; Wilcox 2018), the queer activist battle against the church institution is less often explored in seemingly more permissive Lutheran countries, including the Nordics (cf. Carlström 2020, 2022).

Today, Finland, as well as our Nordic neighbours, are considered rather secular countries; yet, historically, our Evangelical Lutheran majority churches have had a strong position in our Nordic societies (Lindberg 2016). In other Nordic countries, the Lutheran churches have been more accepting towards improvements in sexual minority rights, whereas in Finland, the church has been very stubborn in this regard (Enstedt 2015; Mikkola 2020). Indeed, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (hereafter 'the Church') has a long history of opposing legal improvements in sexual minority rights: it has opposed the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1971, the law on registered partnership for same-sex couples in 2002, as well as same-sex marriage in 2017 (Kallatsa 2020; Ratinen 2017). Thus, the Church can be considered the third most powerful institution – in addition to criminal law and psychiatry – that has governed and restricted same-sex sexuality in Finland. Its power has connected to its ability to affect the opinions of the legislators and the public regarding homosexuality, stemming from its strong position in Finnish society: up until 1980, over 90% of the Finnish population were church members. The membership rate has been since in an increasing decline (being 62,2% at the end of 2024); yet, it can be stated that the vast majority of Finns (sexual minorities included) were members of the Church during the era of investigation of this article (EVL.fi 2024 & 2025a). Moreover, as I have argued elsewhere, the Church has affective

power in (some) people's lives, including Christian queers, due to the strong emotional attachment they might have to the Christian religion or Christian rituals (Alasuutari 2020; see also Elonheimo et al. 2022). Because of the significant role of the Church in Finnish society, as well as the long history of tension between the Church and LGBTQ people, the Church has been a self-evident target of queer activism since the early days of the Finnish gay and lesbian movement (Alasuutari 2025).

Christian queer activism in Finland from the late 1960s to the early 2000s was a fragmented movement: it appeared both in solo activist actions and in small, organised groups. The strong aim for inclusion within the majority church made Finnish Christian queer activism differ from those Christian queer activist movements elsewhere in the world – like the Metropolitan Community Church in the USA – that aimed at founding new Christian queer communities outside the established churches rather than fighting for inclusion in existing ones (see e.g. Wilcox 2003). The strategies of Finnish Christian queer activists for achieving inclusion were based on creating communication between the Church and sexual minorities, as well as making their own stories visible and heard in society. For instance, the activists wrote open letters and opinion pieces in newspapers, sent private letters to bishops and priests, organised private meetings and public seminars with Church-representatives, and gave interviews in the media on what it felt like to be a gay, lesbian, or bisexual Christian in Finnish society (Alasuutari 2025; Raittila 2020). The opposition of the Church, in turn, was based on its theological doctrines defining homosexuality as a sin and marriage as a union between a man and a woman (Ratinen 2017).

In what follows, I will outline my theoretical framework around activism, affect, and utopia, and offer methodological reflections on the data and methods used in my study. Then, I will offer a close reading of utopian thinking in the stories of Christian queer activists. Focusing on affectively loaded descriptions of activists' aims and hopes, I cannot paint an all-encompassing picture of Christian queer activism nor a wider social and political change occurring in Finland in this rather long era, nor do I aim to do so.[2] Instead, I aim to show that utopian

thinking had both private and public relevance for the Christian queer activists of this era, and that by striving for inclusion and equality the activists indeed represented utopian voices within the Church and the local Christian queer community.

Theorising affective utopia

My theoretical framework builds on affect theory and queer theory, focusing on the importance of affects/emotions/feelings in activism and their interconnections with the concept of utopia. As noted by Deborah Gould (2009, 3) in her work on the history of AIDS activism of ACT UP, affects are "fundamental to political life": they move and motivate people in often unconscious ways and are, therefore, essential for the construction of social movements. Following Gould (2009, 18–21), I see affect and emotion as highly interconnected. To study affects in history, we unavoidably need to look into verbal and written expressions of affects – that is, emotions – as those are the few traces of the fleeting, vague, and ephemeral affects that remain researchable to this day (see e.g. Nagy 2018).

It can be argued that activism is always already affective: it cannot be separated from affects and emotions guiding it. To take up activism that strives towards social change, one needs to feel a need for such a change. Social movements consist of people with their personal hopes and aims, and therefore, we need to turn our analytical gaze to affects to properly understand the workings of those movements (Alasuutari et al. 2025; Goodwin, Jasper & Polletta 2000; Gould 2009). The focus on affect helps to bring light on how activism is taken up and lived with, how activism affects not only the social world but also the activists themselves, and how the activists are mobilised and motivated by affective imaginations of hopeful futures.

Hope is where affective activism interlinks with utopia. As Angela Jones (2013, 3) argues, utopias do not necessarily offer "complete emancipation or even happiness", but instead they are "suggestive of the potentiality for the future; they give hope." Thus, hope can be considered as the central affect of utopian thinking. José Esteban Muñoz states

that hope is activating and transforming, whereas hopelessness is passivating. For Muñoz, utopian hope means "feeling revolutionary": feeling that the world is not enough as it is and that living in it requires collective action and transformation. (Duggan & Muñoz 2009, 278–279). Yet, Muñoz (2009, 9) also points out that "utopian feelings can and regularly will be disappointed". In addition to hope, what is essential to utopia is therefore its potential for disappointment and failure (see also Halberstam 2011). This does not, however, deflate utopia's potential to create hope or to motivate imagining, and working towards, better worlds. I suggest that utopia, like activism, is always already affective: closely entwined with, and guided by, affective attachments with hopeful yet uncertain imaginaries for more liveable societies. Considering these essential interconnections, we can ask, does activism even exist without utopias to strive for? I suggest that it does not.

Yet, we can also ask, following Muñoz, what counts as utopian or anti-utopian thinking? In his ground-breaking book, *Cruising Utopia*, which has become the cornerstone of queer theory canon for theorising utopia, Muñoz (2009, 20–21) argues that LGBTQ activism or politics that aims at ordinariness, inclusion, or same-sex marriage is not utopian, but to the contrary, anti-utopian: it does not even try to think about the normative world in a radically new way, but, contrarily, tries to adapt into it.[3] What is important for Muñoz, then, is the radical reimagination of, and breaking free from, existing normativities, to create new queer futurities. Jack Halberstam (2022) takes this stance even further by suggesting, rather depressingly, that truly utopian thinking that goes beyond the existing structures is impossible while being held captive by the current conditions.

When considering the core aim of Finnish Christian queer activism – the aim for inclusion within the Church – it starts to seem questionable whether such activism can ever be regarded or theorised as utopian. In Muñozian thinking, what would be utopian in this context is the abolition of institutionalised religion, not conforming to it (Muñoz 2009, 19). However, following Jones (2013, 12–15), it can be argued that Muñoz's take on utopia focuses on the realm of art and is presented in the form

of cultural theory, making it less applicable to empirical research on queer activism. Thus, I suggest that Muñoz's reading of utopia focuses on utopia in a very particular context and mode and, therefore, does not fully capture the nuances of utopian thinking in everyday experiences and histories of queer activism. Moreover, I suggest that in theorising utopia, it is helpful to go back to Ernst Bloch's work, on which Muñoz in part builds his theory. For Bloch, all utopian thinking is better than anti-utopian or pessimistic attitudes, yet he makes a distinction between abstract and concrete utopias, seeing more value in the latter (Bloch 1986; see also Levitas 1990). Concrete utopias are "relational to historically situated struggles", whereas abstract utopias are "untethered from any historical consciousness" (Muñoz 2009, 3). Thus, abstract utopias remain mere "wishful thinking" towards "Empty-Possible", as a contrast to the "Real-Possible" of the concrete utopias (Bloch 1986, 144–145).[4] I claim that the hopes and aims of Christian queer activism explored here can be regarded as concrete utopias in the Blochian sense, taking place in a historical struggle and aiming for a concrete change within a concrete institution.

I acknowledge that utopia as a concept is also used to theorise religious utopianism in Christianity, including e.g. ideas of life beyond death (Kirsch & Rota 2024), but I won't enter into those discussions in this article. Instead, I utilise queer cultural theory on utopia as a theoretical starting point (e.g. Muñoz 2009; Halberstam 2011) in order to contribute to empirical research on queer activism. I suggest that to understand the role of utopia in queer activism and politics, we need to explore it through real-life examples. Considering the interlinked nature of activism, affects, and utopia, I claim that theorising the hopes and aims of Christian queer activists as utopian thinking not only makes sense but also reveals something essential about the affectively utopian nature of this activism.

Methodological reflections

My data consists of eight recorded oral history interviews with Christian queer activists[5] of the studied era, conducted in 2021–2023, as well as

autobiographical texts (a published memoir and a diary) by two activists who have already passed away. Five of the interviews were conducted in person and three via Zoom. At first, I contacted activists who had appeared in media or were mentioned in the autobiographical texts. Then, I asked them for who to interview next, reaching thus a wider circle of interviewees. When meeting the activists, I also encountered multiple home archives, consisting of e.g., newspaper clippings, books, and letters, collected by the activists and shared with me during the research process.[6] My main focus will be on the interviews and autobiographical texts, as the hopes and aims of individual activists are most prominently discussed within them. The archival material will be used as contextualising data.

As the interviewees remembered back on events that had taken place often decades ago, they sometimes apologised for not necessarily remembering everything essential. Moreover, while emotional events (which I believe activism to consist of) are usually well remembered, memories may also change over time (Reisberg & Heuer 2003). Thus, the written autobiographical and archival materials proved to be an important addition to my data, offering detailed glimpses into matters where memory might falter. In analysing the materials, I utilise the method of close reading that is theoretically informed by affect theory. Applying what Anna Berg and colleagues (2019) have called a "reading for affect", I have repeatedly read through the materials, focusing on affectively loaded descriptions of aims and hopes of the activists.

Following the Finnish guidelines on research ethics (TENK 2019), the interviewees were asked for informed consent to participate in this study.[7] Moreover, anonymisation – or lack thereof – was discussed with the interviewees at length. As activists, the interviewees had been intentionally open about their identities and experiences in public, often for decades. Except for one interviewee who chose anonymous participation, appearing unanonymised in this research was a self-evident preference for the participants. Likewise, I chose not to anonymise activists who have already passed away, as their public appearances had been an integral part of their activism. In the analysis, I will thus primarily use

the names of the activists who I study. This is an acknowledgement of their activist agency to choose openness. With this practice, I also support the sensibilities expressed in queer historical research and queer archiving, which have pointed out that studying queer lives and histories in queer-sensitive ways does not necessarily demand nor benefit from anonymity (Juvonen & Taavetti 2022; Peake & Hilpinen 2022).

Personal and performative utopias

When analysing the interviews and autobiographical writings of the Christian queer activists, it became clear that hope was an essential affective state in their stories. Hope for a better and more liveable future, and annoyance with the current state of affairs, motivated their activism in the face of encountered injustice (see also Alasuutari 2025). While the utopian hope for a better future may have been genuine, I suggest that it was also utilised performatively as part of their activism.

Veli Hyvärinen, a gay man who joined the first registered Finnish gay and lesbian organisation, Psyke, in 1969, was one of the very first activists in Finland who took the anti-homosexual attitudes of the Church as his target. In the interview, he explained that the injustice faced by sexual minorities at the time was multi-layered, the Church being only one – although important – piece of the puzzle:

> Back then, there still was a law that criminalised same-sex relations. And then our lovely Church said… Or let's put it this way: the official psychiatry categorised the characteristic [homosexuality] as an illness, and then the highest authority, the Church, as a sin. So, there was this lovely paradox that an illness was a sin. All these three [aspects] were of course in my mind when I started it [the activism]. Because none of these notions was true. Then things changed. (Interview with Hyvärinen 2021)

The first of these changes was the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1971. Soon after, Psyke, with the initiative of Hyvärinen, wrote an open letter to the Finnish bishops in 1972. The letter was published in Psyke's magazine, *96*, and circulated to major Finnish newspapers. The tone of

the letter was polite and hopeful: the Church, with all its influence and power, was called to change and transform the wider society along with it. The letter reflects the extent of the Church's influence in Finland in this era: it had power also in questions of sexual morals and sex education.

> As the majority of homosexuals belongs to the Church, and as the attitude of the Church still strongly impacts the attitudes of the society, we hope with this letter to make the Church re-evaluate the issue and give up its stance that judges homosexuals, in order to avoid those mental health-related and other disadvantages, which the sexually deviant are victims to without their own fault. In addition, the Church has a strong influence on the education given in our country. For this reason, we hope that the Church would use its influence to formulate future sexual education in such a way that young people, who belong to minorities, would no longer be oppressed and that eventually there would be a new, free generation that is free from unnecessary fear and anxiety. (*96*, 1972/1–2, 5)

The letter paints a utopian picture of "a new, free generation"; something that could be achieved by a fundamental change in the Church doctrine regarding homosexuality. The letter got publicity in the media, but as Hyvärinen reported in the interview: "None of the bishops reacted". For him, this was a frustrating example of the silence often faced by Christian queer activists in their activist efforts: regardless of their hopeful tones, the hope seemed to be wasted on the Church, which did not want to listen. As reported by Olli Stålström, a gay man who joined another gay and lesbian organisation, SETA, soon after its formation in 1974, the Church kept holding on to its judgmental take on homosexuality: "Back then, the actor who sustained this 'illness and sin' conceptualisation was indeed the Evangelical Lutheran Church" (interview with Stålström in 2021).

Yet, the hopeful tones kept reappearing in the activist narratives. Martti Kaipiainen, a bisexual man who was recruited to SETA in 1974, strongly performed hopefulness in his private letter to priest-psychiatrist Asser Stenbäck[8], an infamous opponent of sexual minority rights in Finland during the studied era:

> Surely, You will cause a lot of trouble with your actions, but in the long run tolerance and understanding will draw the long straw. We have already thus far achieved so much in the Church of Finland that it is difficult for You to destroy it all. This spontaneous and worldwide battle for freedom of homosexuals will continue, suffering temporary losses, until homosexual love will be recognised as equal with heterosexual love. (A letter to Stenbäck in 1977, reprinted in Kaipiainen's memoir 1989/2003, 39)

In 1977, at the time of Kaipiainen's letter-writing, the Christian queer activists had managed to organise seminars with Church-representatives and dialogue with (some of) the bishops had been successfully established. Moreover, the Research Center of the Church had published a study on homosexuality by Martti Lindqvist and Jouko Sihvo (1975), which gained a lot of publicity (Ratinen 2017, 651). These were, however, rather small victories. Moreover, the opponents of sexual minorities in the Church, like Stenbäck, complicated the work of the activists and refused to listen to them.[9] Thus, Kaipiainen's hopefulness above is not only attached to what has already been achieved but also to a utopian visualisation of what is yet to come. I suggest that the hopefulness in the letter can be interpreted in two ways: despite the difficulty of creating change in the Church, he kept hoping for equality to win eventually, or, performing such hopefulness was a strategically sensible thing to do in a battle that may have felt hopeless. It can also be a complex combination of both. Returning to Jones's and Muñoz's conceptualisations of utopia, hopefulness in utopian thinking goes hand in hand with the potential for failure, uncertainty, and disappointment. This surely was the case with the efforts of Christian queer activists. Interestingly, the inevitable disappointments were also acknowledged in Kaipiainen's utopian vision for the future, but they were conceptualised as temporary setbacks until reaching the end goal of equality.

Utopian hopefulness was also strategically performed in the media. Ari Saukkonen, a gay man who joined SETA and its Christian group Malkus in the early 1980s, told in the interview how he had, as a part of his activism, publicly come out in the media as a gay theologian, who

was deprived of priesthood because of his homosexuality. The article, published in a Christian newspaper *Kirkko ja kaupunki* in 1986 and titled "Young Man Has a Dream", was among the newspaper clippings he had collected in his home archive. The article states:

> Ari Saukkonen has a dream. He would like to work, sometime in the future, in the Church helping homosexuals, to ease the pain of people, whom heterosexuals cannot fully understand. The situation is in order in the sense that Ari studies theology. After graduating, he has the opportunity to work in the Church, as a priest. There is, however, one obstacle to Ari's dream. He is gay himself. (Nevalainen 1986, 9)

Here, the very personal but institutionally rejected dream of becoming a priest works as a powerful statement, emphasising the personal tragedies caused by the discrimination of homosexuals in the Church. Yet, the overall tone of the article is hopeful, as it continues: "Ari sits in his chair peacefully and believes that his dream will come true, despite all the resistance." This utopian wish for priesthood becomes somewhat ambiguous, however, when considering Saukkonen's interview, in which he admitted that he never believed he would become a priest, and retrospectively, was happy about finding a career elsewhere. He had continued giving similar interviews to other magazines in the 1990s, highlighting the personal tragedy of not becoming a priest, but admitted to me: "Personally, being a priest did not interest me one bit, but why would I say it out loud? Because it was political, interesting. I did not have to say to them that, actually, I'm not even a member of the Church anymore." Using himself as an example, he was able to critique the fact that openly gay people with same-sex partners were not ordained as priests in Finland in the 1980s. When remembering back to these times, Saukkonen said with a matter-of-fact tone: "Some things just need to be done. And then you need to think about a strategy for how to do it." The utopian tone utilised in the articles was therefore not necessarily so much about a personal hope nor a dream, but about using a personal situation as an activist tool in a performative way and thus making it political.

Normative utopias of inclusion

When striving for inclusion within the Church, the Christian queer activists emphasised their ordinariness and a wish for acceptance. Lisa Byland, a lesbian who had joined SETA and the Christian group Malkus in the late 1970s together with her partner Ritva Kurki, explained in the following way their motivations to appear in the media as part of their activism:

> And it became quite important to us, too. Suddenly, we thought that we want to show that there are perfectly ordinary, as ordinary as there can be, people who are gay or lesbian. That it's not just for artists or very peculiar people. (Interview with Byland 2021)

Here, the focus on ordinariness functions as a strategy to prove their worthiness as Christian lesbians, and essentially, as human beings, in a world that deemed homosexuals as suspicious and sinful. As argued by Muñoz, such wishes can be seen as normative wishes for inclusion, and therefore, anti-utopian more than utopian. However, in the wordings of the activists themselves, it was indeed the inclusion that was seen as utopian, especially because it seemed so difficult to achieve within the Church. Kurki, who was the leader of Malkus in the early 1980s, explains in her diary what she understood with utopia and what was it that she was striving for in her activism:

> In two weeks, I should give a commentary speech on the topic: "My Utopia". I have been thinking about my utopia. It is simple, childish, and impossible: a land in which a sheep eats grass with a lion, and no one wants to harm each other, all sorts have space to live as they are. What else can one say about this? […] My utopia is to see announcements by gays and lesbians, too, on the Married and Engaged columns in newspapers: "We are creating a new, shared home, welcome to have coffee. Pekka and Toivo, or Irja and Riitta." I do not wish us to mimic the ways of the heterosexuals unless it feels right and fitting for us. (A diary entry, April 4th, 1989, Kurki 2019, 207–208)

Kurki's diary entry shows two things: that utopia was a concept used in the work and imaginations of the Christian queer activists, and that it was fitting with their cause in the sense of idealism and acknowledged naivety and impossibility. In Kurki's diary, there is a constant fluctuation between hope and hopelessness, caused by the reluctance of the Church to change its doctrine regarding homosexuality as a sin. Kurki's utopian vision of inclusion is guided by what she hoped could be true but what she believed to be impossible. Her utopia also has a more tangible aspect: same-sex marriage. Kurki acknowledges that this wish can be interpreted as mimicking the ways of heterosexuals, but she calls for the possibility to do so anyway, justifying it affectively by arguing how this would feel "right and fitting".

Same-sex marriage and Church weddings had not been among the aims of Christian queer activism during its early years, as it was imagined simply impossible. Yet, as the wider gay and lesbian movement started to lobby for a registered partnership act in Finland towards the 1990s, the question became relevant also for Christian queer activists. Eventually, recognition of same-sex couples was regarded as one of the concrete ways in which society, and the Church, could show their acceptance of sexual minorities.

The wish for legal and religious recognition of same-sex couples can be accused of homonormativity (cf. Duggan 2002); yet, in Finnish Christian queer activism, this wish led also to interesting scenarios of rebellion and resistance, some of which had tones of camp. For instance, Saukkonen recalled how he had, as an activist performance, taken up the role of a priest to wed four same-sex couples in a public marriage ceremony during the Liberation Day, an early predecessor of Pride in Finland, organised by SETA in 1994. The wedding had no juridical nor religious recognition, yet it gained a lot of publicity both within and outside of Finland:

> As I have always said, they did not accept me as a priest, but when I started to wed people, there was CNN and the French television present, and a couple of thousand people, and four couples, immediately. So, I won't start wedding people for nothing. *laughs* (Interview with Saukkonen 2022)

Similar rebellion against the Church policy on who can or cannot become a priest and who can or cannot be wedded was performed by another gay theologian, Pauli Löija. Löija had become an activist in the mid-1990s. Like Saukkonen, he had been rejected from the priesthood by the Church because of his homosexuality. However, in his queer community, he was known as a theologian. In 2002, when the law on registered partnership for same-sex couples came into effect in Finland, he was invited to wed a male couple in a private garden party in the Finnish countryside, effectively taking up the role of the priest while not officially being one. In remembering back to the event, Löija noted how utopian his act of performing a marriage ceremony had been at the time:

> Back then it wasn't even dreamed of that any priest could wed any gay couples in marriage. Oh my God, I have been a fake priest in 2002 and asked those [wedding ceremony] questions! (Interview with Löija 2023)

The acts of Saukkonen and Löija show how aspiring for the normative can have rebellious undertones: performing the restricted roles and rituals, they took matters into their own hands and disregarded the authority of a normative institution. Becoming a self-authorised priest had also affective importance to them on a personal level. The queer community was, at the time, the only congregation that would recognise their priesthood.

As described above, the activists' stories of same-sex marriage, and hope for a Christian blessing of such marriages, are deeply entwined with an idea of impossibility. The impossibility is emphasised when contrasting Kurki's diary entry from 1989 with the present times: 36 years later, the Church in Finland continues debating whether or not same-sex marriage should be allowed (EVL.fi 2025b). Laws may change, and individuals within normative institutions may change, but the Church as an institution has proved to be slow and reluctant to change its core principles and theological doctrines, deeming such a change utopian as a result.

Radical equality

Interestingly, not everyone participating in the activities of Christian queer groups of the time aspired for theological or societal change. Some participants were happy in finding a community of Christian homosexuals and were not that interested in battling against the Church.[10] This was the case in the wider Finnish gay and lesbian movement, too, in which some were just looking for a community. As described by Stålström: "There were people who, how to describe it, were politically cautious, who were cautious of 'not rocking the boat'. It was a commonly used term back then, [meaning that] one should not make too much noise about homosexuality." In contrast to such cautious members, the hopes and aims of the more activist-oriented members of Christian queer groups stood out as radical.

An anonymous interviewee described how they had not found SETA's Christian group Malkus in the late 1980s as a place that would fit their ideas and aspirations as an activist.[11] Instead of joining Malkus, the interviewee participated in founding another activist group, TELHO, a group for lesbian and gay theologists. For this interviewee, Malkus was not radical enough, whereas for some members of Malkus, the interviewee was too radical in their aims:

> There was a Malkusian gay who was grown into self-discrimination, I believe, and he was sort of very anxious about my comments. He was like: "Is nothing enough for you?". When they [from the Church] were giving these tiny things. I said: "Of course, for me, equality is enough." And the mouth of that guy fell open, like completely. Clearly, it was the first time when he heard the idea that we could demand something like equality. Surely, we are still far away from it. (Interview with an anonymous interviewee, 2022)

As the quotation shows, there were internal conflicts between Christian queer activists and those Christian queers who just wanted a community. What was a self-evident goal for the anonymous interviewee – to achieve equality in the Church – was completely unintelligible,

and maybe utopian in the negative sense, to some Christian queers of the 1980s. Similar conflicts are reported in Kurki's diary (1983/2019, 171–172) and repeated in the interview by Jorma Hentilä, a gay man who joined SETA in the late 1970s and was active in Malkus in the 1980s: "Part of the people in Malkus sort of got tired with it that Ritva saw Malkus as a battling organisation. And others thought of it as a calm get-together, and suchlike" (interview with Hentilä 2021). I suggest that these tensions show how exceptional the aim for equality was at the time, even within Christian queer groups themselves.

The utopian nature of the aims of Christian queer activists was emphasised in the interviews, in which it was possible for the activists to retrospectively look back into their activist days and compare them with present times. Many reported that despite the frustrating slowness of changes within the Church, some change had, indeed, taken place, yet much still needed to be done. The anonymous interviewee recounted that: "The times that you are interested in are completely different than the current ones", explaining that the jump from the theological understanding of homosexuality as a sin to the current marriage discussion had been, in fact, huge. On the whole, the Church has become more polyphonic with vocal supporters, stubborn opponents, and those who aim to be neutral in terms of sexual minority rights (Järviö 2017; Kallatsa 2022). According to Laura Kallatsa (2020), only a few priests in the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church of today consider homosexuality a sin, yet 25 % still consider homosexual deeds as a sin. However, over half of the priests consider sexual minorities as a natural part of "God's creation". Thus, the theological doctrine, or its interpretation, has not fully changed, even though a gradual shift towards acceptance can be seen in the attitudes of the priests (Kallatsa 2020, 40–41).

Although the present situation remains ambiguous at best, Byland recognised – and celebrated – a shift in the atmosphere, when comparing the past and the present times:

> We wouldn't have believed it at all that we would make it here. Now we sometimes talk with friends: "Do you still remember?" Back then we

> wouldn't have believed that one day we would see such a time. (Interview with Byland 2021)

As can be seen from Byland's quotation above, sometimes retrospective reminiscence revealed that despite all the efforts done to change the Church, the change may have been too utopian to be actually believed to happen. Moreover, some of the activists still thought so. As reminded by Löija, equal treatment of sexual minorities in the Church of Finland is still not achieved as the marriage debate is ongoing. When asked if he believed such a change to be possible in future, he responded:

> It may be possible, but it is a very slow process. For instance, if the Synod decided that church premises are open for weddings of same-sex couples all across Finland, I would not see it during my lifetime. (Interview with Löija 2023)

In the activist stories, then, an equal Church comes across as a radical wish: something that the activists were affectively attached to and actively working towards, but which remained utopian, something that may always remain unachievable.

Concluding remarks

In this article, I have argued that Finnish Christian queer activism from the late 1960s to the early 2000s was both affective and utopian: it was motivated by an affective drive for a better, equal, and not-yet-existing Church. The affectivity and the utopian nature of the activism came across as an interplay of hope and hopelessness, discontentment with the present conditions, and a need to imagine and strive for more liveable conditions for Christian queers. This need was motivated by an affective attachment to the Church and Christian religion.

As shown in the activist stories discussed above, utopian thinking comes across in Christian queer activism as having two aspects. First, it was a personal, affective state that motivated the activism. The hope for a better and more equal Church (and as a result, for a more equal society/

world) was a prerequisite for the activists to become activists: without such a hope, there would be no reason to fight for change. Second, it was a public and performative act: a strategic tool to utilise in the activists' private and public communication with Church-representatives and in their media appearances. The two aspects were not, however, mutually exclusive, and utopian thinking could also operate on both levels at the same time in complex and enmeshed ways.

Instead of merely wishing to adapt to a normative religious structure, the activists aimed to restructure it in substantial ways. This was a radically utopian aim within the Church – and as the affective conflicts show – even within the local Christian queer community itself. Christian queer activists may have not demanded the abolition of institutional religion, but instead, they were demanding the abolition of Christianity's theological interpretation deeming homosexuality as a sin and marriage as a union between a man and a woman. This, I suggest, can be seen as a utopian aim in itself.

To argue that the hopes and aims of Christian queer activism in Finland had utopian elements challenges the Muñozian way of defining a wish for inclusion as always already anti-utopian. Thus, in addition to the empirical contributions described above, my article makes a theoretical contribution by widening the understanding of utopia in the study of queer activism. To conclude, we need to take a deeper look at the nuances, contexts, and affects of inclusion-driven LGBTQ activism before deeming it unfit for utopian thinking.

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NOTES

1. Although this article focuses on the Evangelical Lutheran Church as Finland's majority church, it would be interesting to conduct research also on the activist histories of LGBTQ people in the Finnish Orthodox church and the free churches, which are considered more conservative. For their attitudes towards sexual minorities, see e.g. Metso & Kallatsa 2018 and Kejonen & Ratinen 2016.
2. For a wider description of the actions of Christian queer activists in this era, see Raittila 2020.
3. Muñoz is not alone in this argument: also elsewhere in canonical queer theory, activism and politics that aim at inclusion to the heterosexual mainstream have been criticised for producing homonormativity (e.g. Duggan 2002).
4. However, Ruth Levitas (1990) criticises Bloch's disregard of abstract utopias and notes that the distinction between abstract and concrete utopias is not always clear-cut.
5. I acknowledge that 'queer activism' in this context is an anachronistic term. However, I choose it over a more contextually accurate 'gay and lesbian activism', as a deliberate attempt to carve out space for diversity of sexuality and gender existing already in these times and to include bisexual and transgender histories that have often been hidden or disregarded (Hutchings 2018; Stryker 2008).
6. On the need and desire to collect and self-archive materials of the queer and trans pasts, see e.g. Riseman 2022. The self-archived materials donated to me will be archived at the Labour Archive in Helsinki, Finland, which welcomes queer historical materials in its collections.
7. According to the Finnish guidelines for ethical review in human sciences, no ethical pre-evaluation is needed in non-medical research e.g. if the study is based on published materials, or if the study participants are adults and the principles of informed consent are followed. For details, see TENK 2019.
8. Following the decriminalisation of homosexuality, Stenbäck, together with the Family Affairs Committee of the Church, recommended a new law, the so-called "encouragement ban", which made it illegal to encourage people into homosexuality. Later, Stenbäck filed official complaints on the national broadcasting company YLE for radio and TV programs that he considered to violate this law by representing homosexuality in a too-positive or too-neutral light. The encouragement ban was in effect until 1999 (Ratinen 2017).
9. According to the memoir, Stenbäck never answered Kaipiainen: "Of course, I never expected and never got any response" (Kaipiainen 1989/2003, 39).
10. On a need for community in Christian queer activism, see e.g. Wilcox 2003.
11. I use singular they here instead of gendered pronouns to protect the anonymity of the interviewee.