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## Introduction

Spiritual beliefs about the concept of God may influence certain people on how to conduct their life. For a number of LGBTQI+ persons the integration of beliefs about God with their sexual identity and sexual orientation is considered important, especially when they attempt to make sense of their "incongruent identities", as they strive to reach self-acceptance (Deguara, 2018). For other LGBTQI+ persons the rejection of God may liberate them from the burden of guilt and shame that is inflicted on them by religious views (Bradford & Clark, 2011). This chapter explores the notion of God, as presented in Franco Buffoni's book *Più Luce, Padre: Dialogo su Dio, la Guerra e l'Omosessualita* (More Light Father: Dialogue on God, War and Homosexuality) to discuss possible connections between knowing God and knowing the self. In this work, the search for God is conceptualised through human experiences that relate to homosexuality. This book is written in the form of a dialogue between Buffoni and his nephew, who had Marxist leanings (Gezzi, 2007). Through their dialogue, concepts on God and homosexuality are shared, explored and constructed through their reflections. The book's format is similar to the structure of Tahar ben Jelloun's novel *Racism Explained to My Daughter* (2006). In *Più Luce, Padre* notions of homosexuality and of God are constructed through thought and dialogue via a social interactionist approach. This refers to "a way of building knowledge about self, school, everyday experience, and society through reflection and meaning making" (Hirtle 1996, p. 91). Social constructivism holds that meaning and knowledge are not pre-fabricated or produced by an individual in isolation; rather, knowledge is constructed by individuals who come together in discussion (Hirtle, 1996). The semi-autobiographical book *Più Luce, Padre* is divided in two parts. The first, entitled "Father", deals with Buffoni's relationship with his father, while the second part, "Light", deals with Buffoni's conceptualisation of social justice, God, religion, homosexuality and atheism. The idea of this book came about after Buffoni found a number of hand-written documents that belonged to his father. These date back to the mid-30s and the Second World War, when his father languished "in three German concentration camps, from 1943 to 1945" (Buffoni, 2006, p. 11).

This chapter presents our version of *Più Luce, Padre* that is shaped by our subjectivities. We have kept in mind Richardson's warning that "desires to speak 'for' others are suspect" (cited by Clough 2002, p. 9). The phrase in the book title "*Più Luce, Padre*" resonates with a plea that Buffoni seems to make when asking God to receive "more light". It derives from a saying attributed to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. In his biography, we read that when Goethe was about to die, a priest came to him to ask him if he wished to confess. Goethe replied: "Open the shutters to let in more light." The search for 'light' has

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become symbolic of Goethe's quest for truth. His life was marked by "a fight between the obscure forces of chaos and the need for clarification" (Zamboni, 1950, p. 267).

## The Author

Buffoni was born in Italy in 1948 and is considered a renowned author in contemporary Italian literature (Gnerre, 2012, p. 42). He undertook post-doctoral research on English and French literature in Scotland, France, England and Germany. In England, Buffoni got to know the Italian author Mario Mieli, who is considered a key advocator of sexual minority rights in Italy (Buffoni, 2018, 63). They remained friends for life; their personal relationship remained "always beautiful" (Buffoni, 2018, p. 66). Mieli's ideas on sexuality left an indelible mark on Buffoni and continued to be present in his writings. Both Buffoni and Mieli had fathers who could never accept their offspring's sexual orientation. Mieli committed suicide partly because of his father's belligerence (Buffoni & Corsi, 2018). *Più Luce, Padre* was specifically written because Buffoni wanted to free himself from his father's bad influences and be reconciled with his past (Casadei, 2007).

Buffoni has repeatedly declared that the situation in relation to gay rights in Italy is wholly shameful (Gnerre, 2012, p. 42) and unjust (Russo, 2009). Influenced by the Italian poet Vittorio Sereni, Buffoni claims that literature is an effective medium of social justice (Buffoni, 2012, pp. 25-26). One of Buffoni's critics, Massimo Gezzi, says that Buffoni made the battle for civil rights in Italy the main subject of his writings (cited by Buffoni, 2012, p. xxiv). In 2016 Italy introduced legislation on same-sex civil unions that granted same-sex couples most of the legal rights provided to married couples. The legislation also recognises gender-neutral registered partnerships. Support for populist movements and far right politics in Italy, however, continue to clash with progressive forces that demand greater equality for minorities (Trolani, 2018, p. 107). Italy occupied the 35th place in Europe with respect to LGBTQI+ rights (ILGA-Europe, 2021).

## The Human Father

Buffoni claims that he had a difficult childhood, mainly due to his strained relationship with his father, whom he describes as "very aggressive" (Buffoni, 2006, p. 23) His father used to pick fights with him for the pettiest reasons, rendering his life miserable. Buffoni claims that when his father "got angry, he would do it strongly, and in a scary way" (2006, p. 20) and these moments would drive him to hitting his son because he believed that this would make him

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obey (2006, p. 21). His father could never accept his son's homosexuality even though he never confronted him directly about it. Buffoni says that, according to his father, having a homosexual son would have implied that he produced "an abnormal child" (Buffoni, 2006, p. 25). Buffoni states that his father opposed "in all possible ways his organically homosexual nature, waging a merciless war against it" (2006, p. 18) and hated anything that "the homosexual loved and cultivated" (2006, p. 91).

Buffoni's father adhered to the doctrinal teachings of Pope Pius XII and had a "pre-conciliar Catholic mentality" (Buffoni, 2006, p. 24). His rigidity in observing the rules of the Church (2006, p. 58) led him to reject homosexuality (Buffoni, 2006, p. 24). Buffoni explains that his father, who was a war-time soldier, was so much obsessed with rules that when he had the opportunity to run away from a concentration camp during the Second World War, he refused to escape, because that would have meant that he was disobedient to the law: "Better a prisoner in Germany than suffering illegality" (2006, p. 72) Growing up, Buffoni reacted by rebelling against his father's ideas (Buffoni, 2006, p. 25). Buffoni rejects his father but sometimes wishes he could somehow reconcile himself with him and all their past recriminations (Casadei, 2007, p. 21). Contrastingly Buffoni speaks with great affection about his mother, who was widowed for thirty years and lived for her son, eagerly waiting for his visits while they phoned each other everyday (Buffoni, 2018, p. 12). Buffoni never wished to have been different (Buffoni, 2006, p. 25). He firmly believes in Horatio's Latin axiom that "Naturam expellas furca, tamen usque recurret," meaning that "you can drive nature out with a pitchfork, but it will keep coming back" (Buffoni, 2006, p. 26).

## The Divine Father

Buffoni asserts that humanity has always believed in God, because it was always confronted by realities that could not be explained or understood through reason. In *Più Luce, Padre* he quotes Hume, who affirmed that "the mind submerged in distrust, in fear and in sadness, resorts to all possible means to obtain those secretive powers, which it believes our fortunes depend on" (2006, p. 146). With the Enlightenment reason took centre stage and Buffoni claims that from the Copernican revolution onwards, reason has been the foundation on which the existence of the "finite" world could be understood (2006, p. 140).

Buffoni believes that we should put on an armour and rely on ourselves instead of trusting in a God. Belief in God is just "a profound declaration of mistrust in the abilities of man" (2006, p. 139). Buffoni emphasises the point that humanity believes in God because of the strong need to fear something: "if man (sic.)

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does not consciously fear God, then it is his unconscious that seeks something for him to be afraid of, and this something can be an airplane or the secret police" (2006, p. 139). Buffoni claimed that as a species we have to renounce the idea of God "for ourselves" (Buffoni, 2006, p. 146). Buffoni rejects belief in God because it is not derived from reason but it is based on imposed dogmas and myths (2006, p. 173), and fabricated through "magic" (2006, p. 156). According to Buffoni the human race has been abandoned: "we are alone: no one has ever wanted us; no one has ever loved us" (2006, p. 165). The idea of an absent God is linked with the notion of an inhumane Church, which discredits the sexuality of gay persons. He perceives the Church as a "totalitarian machine of control and repression of consciences" (2006, p. 113). He mentions the *Index librorum prohibitorum* as an example — the infamous list of books which according to the Church were not allowed to be read. In *Più Luce, Padre* he refers to the claim by the Catechism of the Catholic Church that all homosexual persons should be "accepted with respect" (Roman Catholic Church, 1992, para 2358). Buffoni claims that this phrase gives the impression that homosexual persons are "some sort of pitiful human cases, some sort of old relatives suffering from loneliness" (2006, p. 101). Buffoni distinguishes between the Christian message, coming from Christ, constructed on peace and forgiveness (2006, p. 99) and "the history of Christianity as a story of violence and criminality of the Church" that according to him insists "on dogmas and on sacraments [...] rather than on the message of love" (2006, p. 99).

According to Buffoni, belief in God is "irresponsible" as it leads to a false sense of superiority (2006, p. 146). Those who do not believe in the same God are considered the "not-chosen" (2006, p. 147). This leads to exclusion and also to the dehumanisation of the other. For Buffoni "the greater the conviction that one is chosen by God, the greater the level of acrimony waged between religions, the greater the

exclusion, the greater the racisms, the greater the foreclosures” (2006, p. 147). Buffoni declares that “atheism is the best way to spread the values of tolerance, freedom, pluralism, equality and intelligence” (2006, p. 162). According to him, social justice is achieved through atheism, because without the concept of God, reason prevails and superstitions abate. He berates Dante for condemning atheists, such as Farinata, Cavalcanti, Ubalдини, Federico II and others. These were cast in the tenth circle of hell, according to *The Divine Comedy*. Buffoni emphasises that we should reject these ideas and concentrate more on what reason dictates (2006, p. 161). Buffoni’s rejection of the idea of God is however shaken at times. He admits that when he feels weak and tired, a part of him would want to believe in God so much (2006, p. 116).

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## Implications of the Work

Underlying Buffoni’s thinking about what it means to be homosexual, there is a search for meaning and purpose in life. By stating where he is coming from and by drawing on his understanding of the social constructs of sexuality, Buffoni links the personal with the political and the religious, in order to make sense of the complex links that bind them. Richardson claims that “knowing the self and knowing about the subject are intertwined, partial, historical, local knowledges” (2000, p. 929). Più Luce, Padre suggests that Buffoni makes a connection between the human (biological) and the divine father — both seem to have let him down. Buffoni’s dysfunctional relationship with his human father seems to have shaped his idea of God.

Buffoni creates his own alternative God, which is reason, but it seems that even reason is not enough when he feels tired of life. Buffoni’s statement on his vulnerability that led him to contemplate belief in a God implies that reason is also rendered flawed and limited in the face of life’s harsh realities. Underlying this theme there is an expressed yearning and a plea to God for “more light”. This might mean that Buffoni contemplates a partial knowing of God. This belief may lead to the readiness to open up spaces for getting to know aspects of the self that were previously ignored. Buffoni’s desire to believe in a God “in moments of tiredness” (2006, p. 116) perhaps arose from his need to derive some understanding, compassion and support. Even when he was young, he wished to find solace and comfort in his father. While there appears to have been some form of reconciliation with his biological father (Casadei, 2007), Buffoni’s conflict with the idea of a God seems to have intensified in his subsequent writings (see for example Buffoni, 2018).

Being homosexual has made Buffoni confront himself and grapple with existential questions. Più Luce, Padre implies that being homosexual leads one to examine the relationship with self, family, friends, colleagues and even God. Concepts of God are often enmeshed with religious views on homosexuality. In Più Luce, Padre God is presented as the unknown other who seems to be accused of abandoning humanity. The concept of God intertwines with mediated practices of sociality that castigate sexual minorities. Più Luce, Padre argues that belief in God, as transmitted through the doctrine of the Catholic Church, has led to injustice and mistreatment of homosexual persons. Yet, within the Church, there are forces that work to destabilise the marginalisation of LGBTQI+ persons by the same institution. There is however, an “ambivalent relationship” between a number of LGBT Catholics and the Church (Deguara, 2021). Religious doctrine is considered a source of conflict and distress to them

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and to their parents, but in other aspects also a source of comfort and solace (Cassar & Grima Sultana, 2016, 2018). Contradictions run through Più Luce, Padre. These reveal the same contradictions inherent in human nature and resonate with the contradictory experiences of lived homosexuality within homophobic cultures. We may argue that contradictions in conceptualising God are a tool in themselves that might be employed to better understand the self, as they reflect the dilemmas and

struggles present within the paradoxes and ironies inherent in the ways homosexuality is understood and lived out. Più Luce, Padre claims that atheism is more effective in spreading the values of tolerance, freedom, pluralism, equality and intelligence. Atheist communist countries have, however, trampled upon fundamental freedoms and even used systematic violence and persecution to silence a number of dissenting authors. One might also argue that countries that promote violence and persecution, and attempt to dehumanise whole populations are not acting reasonably. Persecution and injustice also stem from lack of reason.

## Conclusion

The writing space that Buffoni allocates to discuss God in Più Luce, Padre may suggest that notions of a God are embedded in parts of his psyche, despite his insistence on the banality of belief in a God. Più Luce, Padre presents homosexuality as a valuable means that may contribute to increased self-awareness. Reflections on one's sexuality may lead to a deeper knowing of the self. Although reason is a useful and essential tool for human survival and advancement, it has its limitations, as by itself it cannot resolve all the mysteries of human existence. The mysteries of human existence and the cosmos cannot be solely understood by reason. Although Buffoni seems to denounce 'magic', we argue that belief in a better world that is yet to come, may be useful to affect agency aimed at the transformation of the world into a more just, more joyful, more peaceful and loving place for LGBTQI+ persons, that is grounded in hope.

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