

Challenging Traditional Religious Views of Sexual Identity: *Angels in America* by Tony Kushner

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Abstract

Angels in America's success represents recognition and visibility for LGBTQ+ communities in mainstream American drama. The paper aims to explore the interaction between religion and sexuality in Tony Kushner's play, focusing on the tension between the religious beliefs of its protagonists and their sexual identity. In this regard, the main critical framework to analyze this interaction will be queer and religious studies. This essay includes a brief introduction to Tony Kushner's life and its connection to some of the main topics in the play. This research paper analyzes the following topics in Kushner's play: the representation of both Judaism and Mormonism, the point of view of both religions about same-sex attraction, their response to the AIDS/HIV epidemic and how these doctrines perceive death. It is argued that all these topics have a significant impact on the identity conflicts that most characters have to face in this play.

Key words: *Angels in America*, Judaism, Mormonism, homosexuality, AIDS/HIV

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1. Introduction

Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes (1990) by Pulitzer-winner Tony Kushner has received much attention in recent times due to the commemoration of the first subjects diagnosed with AIDS forty years ago in the United States. Sontag contradistinguished the terms AIDS and HIV in her work of critical theory *Aids and Its Metaphors* (1989), “What is called AIDS is generally understood as the last of three stages—the first of which is infection with a human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and early evidence of inroads on the immune system” (Sontag 21). Notwithstanding the fact that being HIV or acquiring AIDS is no longer a synonym of a death sentence as it was the case in the 1980s and 1990s, the impact *Angels* has nowadays is undeniable. Being written during this lethal pandemic, AIDS/HIV is also to a great extent one of the main characters of the play. However, *Angels in America* is not just a stage play about the epidemic itself that spread worldwide at the beginning of the 80s. Tony Kushner focuses on the impact of the epidemic on the gay community since this illness has been traditionally linked to gay, bisexual and to men that had sex with other men, before being associated to drug addicts too. As these people belong to a marginalised group, the world at large began to associate having this disease or syndrome to belonging to the homosexual community. In fact, even the medical community referred to the AIDS/HIV epidemic as “gay cancer” and “gay-related immune deficiency”.

The play is set in 1985, and in order to understand the true essence of the play it is useful to remember the sociocultural and political background of the era. The elected president of the country during the most difficult years of the epidemic was Ronald Reagan, who served from 1981 to 1989. Indeed, Reagan’s presidency started the same year as the AIDS epidemic, but they did not end at the same time. Reagan’s presidential term concluded in 1989, but, unfortunately, we cannot say the same thing about AIDS/HIV.

Even though the origin of this illness is still an enigma, the first infected people in the USA trace back to the summer of 1981. Yet, Reagan and his administration remained silent about this illness or syndrome for a long time. In fact, Reagan did not mention AIDS/HIV publicly until he responded to a reporter's question at a press conference in September 1985, four years after the first symptoms of this disease were observed. Alas, more than 7,700 people had been affected and more than 3,500 people had died until the day he decided to talk about this deadly epidemic. For this reason, the homosexual community has been really

critical with his politics as it has been demonstrated that silence equated ignorance, and ignorance resulted in death.

Whereas the Reagan administration remained silent, local sufferers and supporters marched and organized protests to ask for research so that they could recognize their enemy. Apart from information, they also begged for instant health action to prevent the spreading of this illness. Indeed, raising AIDS/HIV awareness and bringing it to the public eye was essential to fight this battle, being one of the most scandalous and shocking events Rock Hudson's death due to some complications from AIDS. In fact, Rock Hudson became the first public man to admit that he was living with AIDS and he became the icon of the fight against the big epidemic that hit nearly all the world. Consequently, he cleared the path for so many public men and women and AIDS/HIV. Representation on TV, motion pictures, the news and literature became key factors to increase public awareness about this illness and remove taboos.

The previously described historical and sociocultural background played a crucial role in the creation of social stigma and prejudice towards the homosexual community both in real life and in the play. Indeed, being AIDS/HIV positive confirmed an identity, the homosexuality of the patient, so homosexuals were severely exposed to harassment and persecution. Unquestionably, not all homosexuals were infected by this illness, but this prejudice was used to set aside and isolate this community (Sontag 25). Typically, the persecution that homosexual men suffered often had its roots in the homophobic speech conducted by different churches. In fact, in *Angels in America*, religious homophobia is presented by two different churches: Jewish and Mormonism. Kushner himself is an openly gay Jewish man, and, he has admitted that he is very critical with the homophobia coming from his own doctrine. For instance, he has alluded to the fact that the suffering that Jews have gone through for the last six hundred years should have been enough torture to learn compassion (Omer-Sherman 81). Regarding Mormonism, Kushner identifies this doctrine as 'America's quintessential religion', a theology that could not come from another place but America (Omer-Sherman 87).

Considering the above information, the aim of this essay is to analyze the impact of religion and sexuality on the characters by examining how religion shapes sexual urge in Kushner's play. I will explore this subject using queer and religious studies as the main

critical frameworks for my discussion of this play. Particular attention will be paid to both Jewish and Mormon perspectives. The first section of the paper will explain the basic features of queer and religious theories and their usefulness to approach this play. Then, I will examine some events in Kushner's life and their connection with some of the main points in *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*. The following section of the paper will be devoted to the interaction between religion and sexuality in the play, exploring issues such as the Judaism and Mormonism depiction, the reaction of these two doctrines towards same-sex love, their response to the AIDS epidemic and their beliefs concerning death.

2. About Tony Kushner

Tony Kushner did not only bring visibility to a marginalized group such as the LGBTQ+ community, but he also broke the silence about the AIDS/HIV epidemic. Anthony Robert Kushner was born in Manhattan, New York, 1956, but his family soon moved to Louisiana. Kushner comes from a Jewish family, from which he feels remarkably enriched by its tradition. From a young age music has been a big part of his life since both his parents were musicians and they encouraged him to follow their path. To please his parents, he played the cello but he soon gave up since this hobby was taking time away from his real love, writing. From a young age he knew he was different from most other boys, but he hid his sexuality until his mid-twenties. In the early 80s, he returned to New York to attend the Tisch School of Arts, where he started writing his first plays as an amateur playwright.

His second play, *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*, remains an international icon for its AIDS/HIV visibility. Published in 1990 and represented for the first time one year later, this play brought him into the spotlight. Kushner has received numerous awards, including the Tony award for Best Play and the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. In addition, Kushner was chosen to be part of Harold Bloom's *The Western Canon* (1994). In an interview for the *Seattle Times*, Kushner was asked on his choice to settle his play in the AIDS/HIV epidemic, to which he responded: "I didn't. I set out to write about what it was like to be me, a gay man in New York, in the mid-1980s, and it was not possible to do that without placing it in the middle of the epidemic". In fact, just as the AIDS/HIV epidemic was beginning in the early 80s, he identified himself as openly gay. Indeed, AIDS/HIV was very present in his surroundings; even though he did not lose any of his closest friends, he knew many people

who died. In addition, the title of the play has its root in this epidemic too: “There was a dancer I had a crush on in college, who got AIDS and died early in the epidemic. The night I found out he died, I dreamt he was in bed in pajamas and this angel crashed through the ceiling, and he was terrified. I decided to write a poem, which I almost never do, and titled it “Angels in America.”” (Kushner), a poem which unfortunately has never been published. Even though the play was published 30 years ago, Kushner highlights the fact that plays have the ability to preserve “a memory, or prevent amnesia over things worth remembering.” (Kushner). Progresses have been made regarding LGBTQ+ visibility, but there is still much to fight for.

3. Queer and Religious Theories

This section does not intend to offer a comprehensive approach to queer and religious theories, but just to summarize some of the main points of the relationship between queer studies and some religious doctrines in order to contextualize properly the discussion of how religion shapes sexual urge in *Angels in America*. In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in queer theory, an academic tool that resulted as the emergence of gender and sexuality studies in the 1990s. There has been little quantitative analysis of the roots of queer theory per se, but its origins may be traced back to the gay and lesbian activist groups, such as ACT UP, who manifested against the lack of governmental intervention in the 1980s after the arrival of the AIDS epidemic (Jenzen & Munt 1). Queer theory is a commonly-used notion in literary and sociocultural studies and yet it is a concept difficult to define precisely. One of the first scholars to define queer theory was Teresa de Lauretis in her work “*Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities*” (1991). The term “queer theory” is used by De Lauretis three interrelated senses. First, it is underlying the refusal of heterosexual standards for sexual education. Secondly, she highlights the fact that gay and lesbian studies shall be analysed as separate studies, and, finally, the importance relies on how racial issues shape gender bias (De Lauretis 4).

Many studies focus on the “indeterminable” sense of being queer. For Jagose & Genschel, “queer” refers to “an umbrella term for a coalition of culturally marginal sexual self-identifications and at other times to describe a nascent theoretical model which has

developed out of more traditional lesbian and gay studies” (47). Following this concept, Penney (11) refers to queer identity as:

After all, it’s much more easier to define yourself by specifying what you aren’t identifying essential qualities that don’t depend on a contrast with something else. In short, queer wants to subvert identity and have it too. It qualifies queer as groundless as a means of compensating for prior political blind spots, while at the same time positing a queer ground defined against a ‘normativity’, the status of which is never clearly defined.

Gender and sexual identity can be linked to religious identity as they both share the fact that they are an uninterrupted process of production, by way of explanation, gender and religious identity are not an identification we are born with, but rather identities that we form throughout our lives (Jenzen & Munt 6). Nevertheless, it is not so easy to find sharing elements between being queer and being religious as many churches have anti queer policies. Even though each church has their own doctrine, emphasis will be given to Jewishness and Mormonism.

Jewishness is the only religion that can be understood as being both an ethnicity and a religion, referring to it as an ethno-religious identity. Alienation is a common feeling among gay and lesbian Jews, having ambivalent sentiments toward their Jewish identity, resulting in rejection towards the leaders of the church and the Jewish community. In fact, many gay and lesbian Jews find themselves coerced to choose just one identity: being queer or being Jew (Schnoor 43). For example, Gary, one of the gay man interviewed for Schnoor’s research on *Being Gay and Jewish: Negotiating Intersecting Identities*, conveyed his rejection towards the superimposition of anti-gay sentiments in the Torah. Additionally, he notes that same-sex love scenes can be found throughout the Torah, but that these scenes are denied or ignored for homophobic reasons (Schnoor 53). In the same vein, another interviewee notes the double oppression queer Jews have suffered whilst pointing out that Nazis murdered both Jews and homosexuals (Schnoor 55).

Although differences of opinion still exist, there appears to be some agreement that Mormonism is one of the most homophobic doctrines throughout the world. In fact, the Mormon church believes that everyone is born heterosexual and that homosexuality is just an aberration that can be and must be avoided (Olaiz 129). In this dissertation, the terms

Mormonism and LDS [The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints] are used interchangeably to refer to a religious group that accepts the concept of Christianity as well as its founder's revelations, Joseph Smith. The Official Web Page of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter- Day Saints defines the relationship between Mormonism and same-sex attraction as:

Feelings of same-sex attraction are not a sin. (...) The attraction itself is not a sin, but acting on it is. Even though individuals do not choose to have such attractions, they do choose how to respond to them. With love and understanding, the Church reaches out to all God's children, including [those with same-sex attraction].

In 1977 a national organization for queer people with LDS backgrounds called Affirmation was founded in order to help Mormons come out. James Kent, former executive director of Affirmation, admits that the representation of queer people given by the media or his own church was exaggerated, hypergeneralized and ludicrous. For instance, he constantly heard rumours about gay men during his childhood and youth stating that gay men had a fetish with leather, they were children's molesters and they were classified as men who hated God and his values (Olaiz 125). This is some evidence that Mormonism's internal homophobia affects queer people with LDS background. This can be illustrated briefly by the fact that queer Mormons learn to hate themselves and in some cases may result in taking their own lives as in the case of Stuart Matis and D.J. Thompson, two gay men in their 30s that were active both in the LDS Church and sexual life. They committed suicide due to the oppression and pressure they had to face to choose just one identity, being either homosexuals or Mormons (Olaiz 129). Regarding the future relationship between queer people and LDS, the former executive director of Affirmation has a rather pessimistic attitude, pointing out that the only way the church changes its attitude toward homosexuality is to have many members of the church challenge the leaders of the church (Olaiz 130).

4. Religion and Sexuality in *Angels in America*

One of the most interesting approaches is the juxtaposition Kushner creates by interrelating religion and sexual urge. In this section, emphasis will be given to four topics of analysis: representation of Judaism and Mormonism, their attitude towards

queerness, their response to the AIDS/HIV epidemic and, finally, their approach to death.

4.1 Judaism and Mormonism

In *Angels in America* Kushner presents an assemblage of characters who seem to be really different from one another: African Americans, drug addicts, homosexuals, women, drag queens, Mormons and Jews. But, in fact, they find themselves connected through a common feature: their otherness and outsidership. In spite of their dissimilarities, nearly every character can be classified either as a Jew or a Mormon with hardly a couple of exceptions: Belize, whose religious identity we never get to know, and Prior, a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant.

The genesis of the play occurs in Sarah Ironson's funeral, Louis' grandmother, which is being conducted by Rabbi Isidor Chemelwitz. Rabbi Isidor's speech reveals Jewish traditionalism and respect for their own community when he expresses astonishment as he names Sarah Ironson's family members and there is a name which is not traditionally linked to Judaism, "Lesley, Angels, Doris, Luke and Eric (*Shrugs*) Eric? This is a Jewish name?" (10). The funeral speech wants to emphasize the origins and more precisely the heritage of the Jews present at this event; they should never forget their ancestors since their descendants will always carry a part of them. Jews should not just remember their predecessors, but they should also be proud of their religious identity as Jews. Nevertheless, there is no hint of pride in his Jewishness in the play's main Jewish character, Louis Ironson, until Act Three. Indeed, Louis' awareness of his religious identity occurs only when he discusses America and its democracy with Belize. In this discussion, Louis declares that he was aware of himself as a Jewish man for the first time when he encountered an openly gay Jamaican man with anti-Semitic ideas in London some years ago (Freedman 107). Religion is supposed to be a tool for guidance and salvation. Consequently, Louis appeals to his religion to ask God for help, for instance, when Prior is shitting blood and he cannot do anything, so he desperately addresses the celestial being "Oh God oh God oh God help me I can't I can't I can't" (50). Nevertheless, religion fails him, even Rabbi's response is quite dissatisfying and encourages him to find consolation in Christianity:

RABBI ISIDOR CHEMELWITZ: You want to confess, better you should find a priest.

LOUIS: But I'm not a Catholic, I'm a Jew.

RABBI ISIDOR CHEMELWITZ: Worse luck for you, bubblah. Catholics believe in forgiveness. Jews believe in Guilt. (25)

Kushner also introduces the other queer Jew character, Roy Cohn, using traditional anti-Semitic representation. In his first appearance, he manifests, "I wish I was an octopus, a fucking octopus. Eight loving arms and all those suckers. Know what I mean?" (11). In the Nazi Anti-Semitic propaganda, Jews were commonly portrayed as octopuses, thus, "the multiplication of phalli suggested by the arms is reoriented by the trope of the suckers, which unites implications of cheating, vampirism, and fellatio in a vivid image of monstrosity that is both recognizably Jewish and demonstrably queer" (Freedman 110). Therefore, Roy Cohn's characterization emphasizes his atrocious, wicked and powerful nature. Roy Cohn, similarly to Louis, does not acknowledge his Jewishness proudly because he is aware that he belongs to an oppressed religion and that the fact that he belongs to the Jewish community makes him a target for Anti-Semitic people. In other words, he does not want to be associated with an oppressed minority, he hides both his Jewishness and homosexuality. Moreover, he just wants to be defined by his clout or success in his professional life. Therefore, Louis and Roy's common feature is the ability they possess to hide their sexual and religious identities when they feel they need to. For instance, both characters can be found hiding their homosexuality several times; Louis at his grandmother's funeral and Roy at the hospital.

Kushner represents three Mormon characters to show another theism that is present in the American religious communities. Moreover, Mormonism is known to be "The Most American Religion" (Coppins). In popular culture, Mormon characters are on the whole represented as provincial, conventional and narrow minded, and the LDS characters of *Angels in America* are no exception (Austin 27). Indeed, the only characters who talk frankly about their religion are Mormons, even though throughout the play they query and challenge their doctrine several times. Opposed to the Jew characters who were not active in their religion, we could say that Joe, Harper and Hannah are quite active in their Mormonism. Even though we cannot see them going to

church, they try to follow the doctrine of the church that states what characteristics Mormons should have in order to be good Mormons . For instance, Joe approaches his own Mormonism during his first appearance with Roy Cohn when he asks quite abruptly if his superior could stop naming God, “Could you please not take the Lord’s name in vain?” (14). During the conversation Joe is in the shadow for most of the time, but he knows that, as a good Mormon, his church asks him to support and defend his religious background at all costs, so he interrupts Roy while he is speaking even though he has a great respect for him.

Apart from support for the LDS Church, it also specifies what the followers of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-Day Saints should not do to be a proper Mormon. Harper, in one of her hallucinations after swallowing several pills of Valium, expresses her disappointment towards herself since she is aware that she is letting down her Mormonism by taking too many pills, “It’s terrible. Mormons are not supposed to be addicted to anything. I’m a Mormon” (32). As a matter of fact, addiction to drugs is not the only dependency that is punished by the LDS church, in fact, all kinds of addictions are penalized. Indeed, when Joe, in a desperate attempt, calls his mother to confess his homosexuality, Hannah ignores the content of his son’s words and she focuses on the fact that his offspring is under the influence of alcohol, “Drinking is a sin! A sin! I raised you better than that!” (79). Anything or anyone that does not follow strictly the rules the church is implying will simply be un-Mormon. Harper demonstrates an accurate description of the LDS church, “This [the Mormon Visitor’s Center] isn’t a place for real feelings” (196). That is why these characters try to live up to God’s expectations, but their failure in not meeting the expectations will show, as Kushner states, that this kind of perfection is far from reality (Hutchison Jones 18). Namely, Harper accepts her failure as a Mormon woman and she even jokes about it when she identifies herself as a Jack Mormon, “Jack Mormon. It means I’m flawed. Inferior Mormon product. Probably comes from jack rabbit, you know, I *ran*” (190). At the end of the play, after Joe has acted on his homosexual desires, he will try to go back to his life as a Mormon heterosexual man with Harper, but Harper decides to leave him and start a journey with less influence from Mormonism. In short, the Mormon characters presented in the play are constantly tempted to do things they are not supposed to do according to their church’s doctrine.

4.2 Religion and Same-sex Love

Same-sex attraction, in all its possible ways, is undoubtedly present in the play. Many characters manifest their homosexuality from the starting point, others, as in the case of Hannah, find their opportunity to open themselves and explore their sexual urge during the play. As afore mentioned, queer Jewish people conventionally feel pressured to choose between their religious identity and sexual orientation. In the play, Louis can be found 'hiding' his homosexuality by acting more *butch* during his grandmother's funeral since his traditional Jewish family is present. If we are to give a definition to the term in italics, the online dictionary *Merriam-Webster* defines the term "butch" as "Notably or deliberately masculine in appearance or manner". Traditionally, femininity has been linked to the homosexual community, so acting butch would be the solution to avoid sounding gay (Kulick 260). Hence, by looking more masculine, Louis is trying to look like a heterosexual man. Indeed, in Scene 4, Louis introduces himself as "Lou" because if he pronouns his full name they will hear the sibilant S, a manner of speech known as *gay lisp* that is linked to the gay community of North American English (Servick). Consequently, just with a small act as avoiding to pronounce the sibilant consonant, he is camouflaging his homosexuality and therefore he follows the manner of speech of heterosexual men. Quite the opposite to Louis' case, there seems to be a minor character in the funeral who does not hide her lesbianism. At the funeral, just judging someone's appearance, Prior declares that Louis is not the only gay family member in his Jewish family, "Oh and by the way, darling, Cousin Doris is a dyke" (20). Therefore, it could be said that Louis hides his homosexuality to his family because of his fear of coming out to his traditional Jewish household and how they will react to his coming out. However, there seems to be another member who has come out of the closet and therefore does not hide her homosexuality. Thus, it can be assumed that homosexuality may be acceptable in Louis's family but that the problem lies in Louis and in his insecurities.

Harper's discourse when she encounters Prior for the first time is the perfect example to define Mormonism's attitude towards same-sex love. Immediately upon Prior's confession that he is homosexual, Harper replies asserting that "Oh! In my church we don't believe in homosexuals" (32). As earlier mentioned, homosexuality is

not punishable in Mormonism, but acting on behalf of it is. Hence, Joe, as a gay Mormon, has to choose between his sexuality and religious identity, finally selecting the latter. As a consequence, Joe has to sacrifice his sexual desire towards men as this is harshly punished in his church (Hutchison-Jones 18). Therefore, in an attempt to conceal his flaw, he decides to marry a woman and follow the doctrine imposed by the Mormon church. During the tête-à-tête in Scene 8, Joe reveals his insecurities and gets vulnerable whilst discussing his behavior but avoiding to name his main issue, homosexuality. Even though he does not explicitly define his “deep or ugly thing”, just the fact that he is talking about it may be regarded as a big step into the beginning of self-acceptance

Does it make any difference? That I might be one thing deep within, no matter how wrong or ugly that thing is, so as long as I have fought, with everything I have, to kill it. What do you want from me, Harper? More than that? For God’s sake, there’s nothing left, I’m a shell. There’s nothing left to kill. As long as my behavior is what I know it has to be. Decent. Correct. That alone in the eyes of God. (40-41)

Eventually, after having some intersections with Louis, Joe finds courage within himself to face reality and ultimately admits to his wife that he knew there was something wrong with him from the moment they got married, yet, he truly believed that with great effort he would be able to change his sexual urge. However, he has learned that he is not able to change neither his behaviour nor sexual identity. Still, the term *homosexual* cannot be heard explicitly because it is a term that he is too afraid to be associated with. Just before acting actively on his sexual urge, he is aware that he will be punished for falling into temptation and having a sexual encounter with Louis, “I’m going to Hell for doing this” (123). After Louis’ discovering that his new lover Joe is in fact Roy Cohn’s assistant, he decides that he will be no longer meeting him as it goes against his principles to be in contact with someone who is in touch with the famous far-right lawyer Roy Cohn. The end of this relationship results once again in Joe Pitt being alone in all its senses: he has lost both his Mormon life with Harper and also his gay life with Louis. Consequently, as his male lover’s feeling towards him is repulsion, he reaches the conclusion that the only way to save himself is to go back to his past Mormon life with Harper. Thus, in a desperate attempt to retake the relationship with his wife, Joe starts a pity party so that Harper will feel sorry about him and

consequently accept to keep with their marriage, “ I don’t know what will happen to me without you. Only you. Only you love me. Out of everyone in the world. I have done things, I’m ashamed of. But I have changed. I don’t know how yet, but... Please, please, don’t leave me now” (283). Unfortunately for him, Harper decides to leave him, and this is the last thing we get to know about him.

Joe’s mother, Hannah, is one of the characters who undergoes an important evolution regarding her ethics. Hannah, who is represented in her first appearance as an archetypal Mormon woman, does not accept his son’s homosexuality since same-sex love is not supported by her church. However, she becomes quite interested in homosexuality when she meets Prior and she tries to understand his sexuality, “Would you say you are a typical... homosexual?” (235). In addition, there seems to be enough evidence to suppose that she is not heterosexual when she declares that she is not interested in men at all “I don’t find it an appetizing notion, two men, together but men in *any* configuration...” (240). Almost at the end of the play, she has removed all her prejudices and she even becomes part of a lesbian scene when she shares a long hot-kiss that ends in an enormous orgasm with the Angel. In presenting Hannah’s character, Kushner wants to highlight the fact that no one can deny his or her sexual orientation, even Hannah, who is represented as traditional and close-minded towards homosexuality, nearly at the end of the play can be seen starring in a lesbian scene.

4.3 Religion and AIDS/HIV

In the vast majority of plays dealing with AIDS/HIV, the epidemic is utilized for easy compassion to attract readers and/or viewers, but in Kushner’s play, the disease encapsulates the issues of sexual urge and death in the 1980s (Hornby 189). In fact, Kushner emphasizes the mental health issues rather than the changes brought by the disease. Due to the fact that most people suffering from AIDS/HIV were infected by sexual transmission, the disease was understood as a punishment one gets for oneself. Similarly, Sontag (1989) tries to describe the reason why the vast majority of citizens perceived this epidemic as a punishment :

An infectious disease [AIDS/HIV] whose principal means of transmission is sexual necessarily puts at greater risk those who are sexually more active- and is easy to view as a punishment for that activity. True of syphilis, this is even truer of AIDS, since not just promiscuity but a specific sexual *practice* regarded as unnatural is named as more endangering (26)

It is necessary here to clarify exactly what is meant by “not just promiscuity but a specific sexual *practice* regarded as unnatural”. The term “promiscuity” refers to promiscuous sexual behavior, in short words, having many sexual partners and most of the times it is with rather negative connotations. It should be taken into account that one of the seven deadly sins classified by Christianity is Lust, an uncontrolled, illicit sexual desire. Consequently, anyone who had unbridled sexual desire should be harshly punished. In fact, Christianity declared that sex between a man and a woman should exclusively happen to conceive children. Thus, because homosexual sex cannot lead to pregnancy, this sexual practice was classified as “unnatural”. Furthermore, if we bear in mind that AIDS/HIV has been traditionally associated with men who have sex with other men, we are talking about a sexuality that has been historically negatively regarded by Christianity. So, as a consequence of the deadly sin Lust, it appears that traditional Church’s rejection towards homosexuality alone is not the causative factor of perceiving the AIDS/HIV disease as a punishment.

The AIDS/HIV epidemic is compared with The Plague that occurred in the 14th century mostly in Afro-Eurasia when Prior encounters his ancestors. The sharing feature between these two epidemics is that they are both described as a “pestilence”, that is to say, “a contagious or infectious epidemic disease that is virulent and devastating” (*Merriam-Webster*). Prior’s ancestor, Prior I, died because of The Plague, or as he names the epidemic “the spotty monster” (90), and in the present, Prior is suffering from a modern epidemic. The fact that these two family members living in different centuries have suffered from different pestilences suggests that epidemics have been active from the beginning of the world. It also implies that nobody is safe from epidemics regardless of their gender, race, sexuality or social class.

Roy Cohn’s character is the perfect example to understand the misconceptions that were built around this illness. First and foremost, it is necessary to remark that Cohn refuses to call the disease he has acquired by its name. When Doctor Henry

suggests that his patient is suffering from a syndrome called the Human Immunodeficiency Virus, Cohn gets quite defensive expressing that this disease “afflicts mostly homosexuals and drug addicts” (44). Cohn threatens his doctor insisting that what he has is liver cancer, and not AIDS, because “AIDS is what homosexuals have” (47). Later on, in Act 5 of *Perestroika*, Cohn confronts his fellow colleague Joe and he finally admits the reason why he did not acknowledge that in fact he is suffering from Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, “AIDS. I didn’t want you to get the wrong impression” (268). An implication of this is that if he were to admit he had AIDS, he would be automatically labeled as homosexual or junkie, something he was avoiding to do at all costs.

In spite of the fact that having AIDS/HIV equates to losing physical fitness and, in many cases, losing friends or family members, this illness can also make you find refuge in places or in people no one would expect. This can be illustrated briefly by analyzing Prior’ and Hannah’s relationship. Indeed, Prior finds himself all alone because he has been abandoned by his only companion, his lover Louis. However, quite unexpectedly, he finds comfort in Hannah, the mother of his ex-lover’s boyfriend, and begs her attention in a desperate way, “Stay with me” (242). Following the rules imposed by Mormonism, Hannah should not be assisting Prior since he is an active homosexual who supposedly has been infected by sexual means. Making use of the good relationship these two characters develop, Kushner wants to emphasize the fact that sometimes we find ourselves strictly following what our churches state and we tend to forget that we are all humans despite our religious differences. Prior and Hannah, who according to their beliefs, are one another’s enemies, find a safe place to help each other. Thus, Kushner is questioning religion and suggesting that churches’ rules may be too strict and suffocating for those who belong to them.

4.4 Religion and Death

In Kushner’s play AIDS/HIV are inevitably associated with death and the connection between death and religion becomes a prominent issue. The significance of death in *Angels in America* is illustrated by the fact that the play starts with a funeral

Sarah Ironson's one. Even though death is perceived as an enemy and consequently a sorrowful event, Kushner adds more layers to it. In fact, as exemplified by Sarah's funeral, burials can be regarded as conventional events that bring together family members who have not seen each other for a long time, as in the case of Louis and his Jewish family.

Sarah Ironson's funeral is conducted following strictly the Jewish traditions concerning death. The Jewish point of view towards death is defined by four parameters: society, time, space and mourning texts. The play starts with Rabbi Isidor Chemelwitz's eulogy speech talking about the deceased Sarah Ironson. The rabbi is not alone in the synagogue, he is accompanied by the deceased's family since the dead should never be alone and they shall be accompanied by their community. Regarding time and place, tradition states that a cemetery is the place for the dead and, since death is a socially marginal event in time, mourning should exclusively occur at restrained times of the year (Bar-Levav 6). In fact, Sarah's burial illustrates most of these traditional features in Jewish ceremonies about death. Louis's grandmother is not alone in her last rites, her community and family members are present, too. According to Jewish tradition, Jewish cemeteries are sacred locations where the dead should remain undisturbed, that is why they are usually located in the outskirts of cities. We can assume Sarah is being buried at a cemetery at the outskirts of the community since the funeral home was located in the Upper West Side, but the graveyard is not near. Kushner indicates in the stage direction "*The funeral service for Sarah Ironson has just concluded and Louis is about to leave the cemetery*" (19). Indeed, the 2003 miniseries adaptation of *Angels in America* produced by HBO shows clearly that the burial ground is to a great extent far from the city since Louis is forced to take a bus to reach the cemetery ("Bad News"). Ultimately, neither Sarah Ironson nor the funeral are mentioned after giving an end to it. As tradition marks, once relatives and friends have mourned the dead, time has to pass until they mourn the dead again.

Still, even though Judaism's reaction towards death seems to be reasonably clear, Louis expresses his doubts: "Jews don't have any clear textual guide to the afterlife; even that it exists. I don't think much about it. I see it as a perpetual rainy Thursday afternoon in March. Dead leaves" (38). Nevertheless, the truth is that Louis indeed *does* wonder about the aftermath quite a lot, for instance, when he implies her

grandmother's soul should not leave the lid because she is in a better place now. Furthermore, Louis dares to joke about the aftermath. At the moment Louis learned his lover had AIDS, he got horrified and abandoned his lover when he most needed him. Even though he does not want to admit, deep down Louis knows that what he did is not morally correct and he feels guilty and miserable, "I can't help myself, plus I'm *trying* to commit suicide, what's your excuse?" (73). In spite of the fact that Louis does not represent the archetypical Jewish man, he accepts to conduct the ritual of saying the *kaddish* to his biggest enemy, Roy Cohn, when the latter is dying. The *Kaddish* is a ritual that can be only said in the presence of a group of at least ten people. However, as it is forbidden to leave a dying person alone, Louis conducts this ritual even though only Roy and himself are in the room. Death appears in the play as an event respected by the Jewish characters who are willing to neglect their personal issues and gather to say goodbye for the last time.

On the other hand, Mormonism's attitude towards death in the play is utterly different. Harper, who is going through a Valium addiction, wonders about the aftermath quite a lot. For instance, when her husband is offered a job in Washington, she declines this offer because she refers to this city as "a giant cemetery, huge white graves and mausoleums everywhere" (23). In addition, through the story, she alludes to black holes, a place where no human fleshy bodies could survive intact: "Then they went on to a program about holes in the ozone layer. Over Antarctica. Skin burns, birds go blind, icebergs melt. The world's coming to an end" (28). Indeed, Harper informs us that the "Judgement Day" and, consequently, the total destruction of the world are entering in the near future (Smith 153). The idea of global annihilation does not scare her and, as a matter of fact, she believes the apocalypse will represent the answer to all her complications, especially with her marital problems with Joe:

"I feel... that something's going to give. It 's 1985. Fifteen years till the third millennium. Maybe Christ will come again. (...) Maybe the troubles will come, and the end will come, and the sky will collapse and there will be terrible rains and showers of poison light, or maybe my life is really fine, maybe Joe loves me and I'm only crazy thinking otherwise, or maybe not, maybe it's even worse than I know, maybe... I want to know, maybe I don't. The suspense, Mr. Lies, it's killing me" (18)

Whenever death seems to be approaching Prior, the angel comes to him to show him his new path, that of the prophet. Anyone who is familiar with Mormonism will observe a direct association between the title of the play and Mormon symbolism (Savran 217). Kushner does not only use Mormonism to present three Mormon characters: the whole conceptualization of an angel appearing to an American prophet has its root in Mormonism too. Additionally, the sacred history affirms the prophet Joseph Smith witnessed the arrival of an angel in his own bedroom with a sanctified, hidden book (Austin 29). The angel itself is recognized as the Angel Moroni nowadays. On the authority of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saint, an angel called Moroni appeared to the prophet Joseph Smith to inform him of the existence of a primitive record engraved in plates (Britannica). Kushner includes details of Joseph Smith's role as the creator of Mormonism into the visions Prior encounters. This is evident in the case of the angelic callings they both receive to carry a new gospel to the ends of the planet. Besides, in both cases we get glimpses of hidden books they find as they become prophets (Austin 29). Joseph Smith was elected to translate and write down in a book the characters engraved in the plates. Similarly, Prior has also been requested to write the new prophecy in some kind of notebook, "I've been given a prophecy. A book. Not a *physical* book, or there was one but they took it back, but somehow there's still this Book. A prophecy" (159).

On the whole, Kushner wants to demonstrate that religions which have negative attitudes towards homosexuals looked away when thousands of gays were being infected by a lethal virus. Near the end of the play, Belize confesses he hates the country where he lives in. According to the American Dream, the USA is the land of freedom and opportunity for everyone. Nevertheless, this definition of his country does not match what he observes everyday, "You come with me to room 103 over at the hospital, I'll show you America." (230). Hence, Belize's description of America contains these three words, "Terminal, crazy and mean" (230). Terminal since thousands of people are dying, insane as a result of lack of information and governmental intervention and, finally, despicable because not many people cared about the infected since they were mainly homosexuals.

5. Conclusion

The main goal of the current study was to analyze the interconnection between sexuality and religion in *Angels in America*. The queer and religious theories I have briefly introduced earlier were used as background to analyze how the main characters are defined by their sexuality and religion. By publishing this play, Kushner wanted to represent the truth of America in a period defined by Reagan's presidency and the beginning of the AIDS/HIV epidemic. The play presents two of the religions that best represent America: Judaism and Mormonism. In the play both religions are portrayed as conservative doctrines that offer very little room for dissenters. Thus, during the play, Jewish and Mormon queer struggle to obey the rules of their churches. In fact, Judaism and Mormonism embrace a rather negative attitude towards queerness. Therefore, at some point of the play, all queer Jewish and Mormon people hide their queerness since they are aware they are breaking their doctrine's rules. Similarly, a big stigma is built around AIDS/HIV. Being infected by AIDS/HIV equated to being homosexual, so no religious person would be willing to admit that they had been infected. Moreover, religious people perceived AIDS/HIV as a punishment for having committed "a sin", having sexual interaction with someone of their same sex.

Hence, in *Angels in America*, Kushner represents the issue of how to live following the rules of their religious community without losing one's sexual identity. In fact, the characters who are both religious and queer at the same time struggle with their dual identities. Traditionally, the interaction between religion and queerness has been represented as a problematic issue where just one identity should be selected. In fact, the play embodies the desire of integrating both identities. The author himself, who suffered this conflict since he is both gay and Jewish, wanted to demonstrate that it is possible to be queer and religious at the same time. In addition, the ending of the play emphasizes this idea since queer Jews and Mormons, except Joe, of whom we do not have much information at the end, are able to reconcile both parts of their identities. Moreover, the optimistic ending of the play may suggest a hopeful and positive future for queer believers who want to remain within faith communities.

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