It takes time to get to know a city, a university, a fresh group of people. This time is normally longer than a week, but fresher's week is a good place to start. You can find out about your college, about your course, about the other students you'll meet. No one can predict how you'll react to these experiences. Most people find starting fresh fun and worth it. New university, new start, new direction, new people, new spaces, new outlooks, new personalities, new identities, new ideas, new city, new directions, new localities, new life. Coming to university means different things to different people. Sometimes the move is hard and difficult, sometimes it comes naturally. People create the atmosphere of any university, perhaps one of the best qualities of an university is open-mindedness. There is space on campus to be who you want to be. No one has to fit an image, a stereotype, a narrative about who they are and why they are the way they are. You have noticed this diversity already, part of coming moving to a new place and meeting new people can be finding things out about your personality. This means different things to different people. In fresher's week there are many different events. There will be parties, there will be socials, there will be a chance to relax and have fun before term starts. It takes time to get to know a city, a university, a fresh group of people. This time is normally longer than a week, but fresher's week is a good place to start. You can find out about your college, about your course, about the other students you'll meet. No one can predict how you'll react to these experiences. Most people find starting fresh fun and worth it.
So you’re back in Cambridge. Perhaps this is your first time. If you’re returning you’ll notice that ‘Assume Nothing’ is a new presence around the place. This is the magazine of Cambridge University Student’s Union (in easier terms CUSU) LesBiGayTrans campaign, for those students who are lesbian, transgendered, bisexual or gay. People normally don’t fall into such easy categories. If you’re heterosexual ‘Assume Nothing’ hopefully will be interesting for you too. Often this magazine will deal with issues concerning lgbt people, but not exclusively. I hope that the appeal of ‘Assume Nothing’ will be wider than the label of a ‘gay magazine’, whatever this might mean.

This month ‘Assume Nothing’ includes a low-down on the campaign and also on gay Cambridge. Byron Deane initiates the CUSU/ Amnesty International campaign on human rights. Then the magazine turns to look at one of the biggest controversies in our society: that of religion and homosexuality. Two articles included here are based on the personal experiences of students practising either the Jewish or Christian faiths. These don’t seek to cover all perspectives or all voices, yet they provide a starting point into a debate that is often characterised by polemics and extremism.

O.C.

The CUSU LBGT EXEC

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Computing: Peter Parkes
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this month

page 4 - the lbgt exec are back for a whole new year, find out why from Tom Clarke

page 5 - Wes Streeting looks forward to making your acquaintance sooner or later!

page 6 - shut up or be shut up is the only option facing those who live in many parts of the world, Byron Deane investigates.

page 9 - what’s on?

page 10 - dan crompton goes in search of life after Kylie

page 12 - lizz waller mixes homosexuality and christianity

page 14 - personal testament, john bilchitz on being jewish and gay
Welcome back to Cambridge!

We hope you’ve had a great summer and are looking forward to another year in Cambridge – or, if you’re a grad, that you’ve had a great summer in Cambridge! Over the summer vac the CUSU LBGT Exec have been hard at work planning a number of things for this term and making sure that everything goes smoothly this term.

Possibly the biggest change we’ve gone through is the move to an all new web address and website, which can all be found at www.cusu-lbgt.com. The new site has more resources and info, including a section for each college. We’ve also changed all our emails to include the ‘T’, so they all end with @cusu-lbgt.com – see the new site for details.

Unique@Life has gone from strength to strength over the summer and has now been running continuously for a year – a first for a CUSUents club night. To celebrate this, there’ll be a very special Unique on Tues 12th October, when Dan Bryan from Big Brother 5 will be the guest DJ. For more details check out the brand new Unique website – www.uniqueatlife.com. There’ll be loads of ents and socials throughout the term, organised for everyone – keep checking our website for details.

And that’s just the start of it. We’ve joined forces with Amnesty International to run an LBGT rights campaign this term – you should be hearing more about that very soon. There are going to be more socials for women and grads, as well as an overhaul of our welfare services.

There is a new edition of The Freedom Book which was given to all freshers on arrival. If you’d like a copy, email lbgt@cusu-lbgt.com.

We hope that you have a great term, and we’ll see you at Unique on the 12th!

The LBGT Exec
From the CUSU President:

I’ve tried to think of a new way to welcome you to Cambridge without the usual trite messages about these being the best three years of your life, one of the easiest places in Britain to be L, B, G or T and how we’re here to support you. Sadly I’ve failed.

All these things are true. For most people, their three years at university are the best three years of your life.

Although I have had the whole summer to adjust to life as a graduate and now sabbatical president of Cambridge University Students’ Union (CUSU), fond memories remain engrained in my mind of late nights at Ballare (or Cindy’s if you’re a traditionalist), attending lectures with a hangover (occasionally), late night punting along the Cam in the summer and dancing the night away until dawn at May Balls. I love this place and am glad to be here for another year. In short, these really ought to be the best three years of your life. It’s trite, but hopefully it will be equally true.

Secondly, this is (usually) one of the easiest places in Britain to be L, B, G or T. The culture of the University is, on the whole, one of a tolerant, progressive and diverse community. Sure, it has its stuffy parts in places, but on the whole you should find yourself feeling accepted and comfortable.

Every college has an LBGT rep, usually as an officer in the college student union (known typically as a JCR or MCR) and all are supported by CUSU LBGT, one of our autonomous campaigns.

We, CUSU and CUSU LBGT that is, are here to support you. Let me say from the outset that CUSU LBGT do an outstanding job at supporting its members and even those who don’t self-define as L, B, G or T but who are either affected by sexuality issues facing their friends around them or who simply care passionately about equality and want to support our campaign. CUSU LBGT campaign to change attitudes, to fight prejudice and also to support its individual members. They also run our weekly LBGT clubnight – “Unique” – in conjunction with CUSUents every week at Life, the only weekly student-run LBGT night in the UK!

Welcome to Cambridge, welcome to CUSU and see you at Unique!

Wes Streeting
CUSU President
Not only political activists are political prisoners

Bryony Dean on the Amnesty International campaign for LBGT rights

It feels very obvious to write to the Cambridge LBGT community that exploring sexuality or gender orientation is a right, not a luxury.

Homosexuality has been legal since 1967, so aside from harassment from ignorant individuals, the LBGT community can sleep relatively comfortably, because Britain’s legal protection extends to sexual as well as ethnic minority.

But in over seventy countries worldwide, homosexuality is still a crime. Amnesty International published “The Louder We Will Sing” in 1999, a ‘handbook’ for dealing with LBGT rights, to try and clarify what these rights are, and to address the problem. For example, Rastafarian artists at a Jamaican festival in 2003 performed songs inciting hatred for “batty-bwoys”, which were well received by the public. J-flag, Jamaica’s only LBGT support network, receives many allegations of violence, rapes and abuse every month. Making sexuality a ‘crime’ makes individuality criminal, so the individual becomes vulnerable to attack, and those who want to help are powerless to stop this abuse. Until the Jamaican prime minister can be persuaded to modify Jamaican law – the “abominable crime of buggery”, a ‘crime against the person’, is still punishable by hard labour or imprisonment – Jamaican police will tacitly support these attacks.

In Ecuador, Narda Torres’ complaint to the police of harassment and rape threats (12th June 2001) was ignored; she was subsequently attacked, but her attackers remain uncaught. Torres believes this was because the police knew that she was a lesbian, and that they felt her ‘abnormal’ sexuality was at fault, not her attackers, whose motives for harassment were to try and ‘correct’ her abnormality. This threat is common where homosexuality is criminalized, often practised upon young lesbians by their families.

Transgender people are also subject to abuse: since their gender identities do not conform to a social or religious ‘norm’, it is believed that they must be homosexual.

Egypt began a crackdown upon their LBGT community on May 11th 2001: around 60 men at Queen Boat, a gay club, were arrested upon charges of “crimes against religion”; at least 52 went to trial, but even those not convicted were branded “Satan-worshippers” and “sexual perverts” in the local media.
Since then, at least 179 men have been taken into custody on charges of “habitual debauchery”, and suffered prosecution or torture. Finally, on 1st January 2002 in Abhra, Asir province, three Saudi Arabian nationals were executed, believed to be a punishment for homosexual ‘crimes’, although the details of their cases remain mysterious. Those held in custody for homosexuality are considered political prisoners by Amnesty International.

‘at least 52 went to trial, but even those not convicted were branded “Satan-worshippers” and “sexual perverts” in the local media.’

In April 2003, Brazil proposed a resolution for the Human Rights commission: that gender and sexual orientation be considered human rights. In response, the Special Rapporteur Paul Hunt clarified that “sexuality...is a fundamental aspect of an individual’s identity” and that “sexual rights include the right of all persons to express their sexual orientation...without fear of persecution” (2004).

“In April 2003, Brazil proposed a resolution for the Human Rights commission: that gender and sexual orientation be considered human rights’

These might seem fair sentiments to readers of the magazine and representatives of the twenty countries to support Brazil’s resolution, and governments in South Africa, Ecuador and Brazil recently made moves to incorporate protections for the LBGT community into their domestic and constitutional law. Yet, the resolution was postponed for debate this year – for the second time – until 2005; countries including Pakistan opposed the UN’s right to tackle sexuality, and forums in Beijing and Dubai deliberately wrote LBGT communities out of human rights documents. The movement towards asserting LBGT rights has begun on a worldwide scale, but needs much work.

As long as authorities in certain countries refuse to decriminalise homosexuality, or protect LBGT communities from abuse, Amnesty International needs concerned individuals to persuade foreign governments to change legislation. Next term, Cambridge University Amnesty International and CUSU LBGT begin a joint campaign to reassert LBGT rights around the world, and anyone reading is invited to press for the basic freedoms that people from every nation ought to have the right to.

“The Louder We Will Sing”: http://web.amnesty.org/library/print/ENGACT790031999

Cambridge University Amnesty International: http://www.srcf.ucam.org/amnesty/
CUSU LBGT

we’ve got a new website...

...and we’ve got a new URL

www.cusu-lbgt.com

9 to 2: 2 for 1 on all drinks before 11: Life Nightclub

unique

with special guest DJ

Dan Bryan from Big Brother 5

www.uniqueatlife.com
Whatever could be going on this Fresher’s Week?

Chat and a coffee?  
Thursday 7th October  
2pm  
EAT (Next door to Boots)  
Freshers Chilled Social  
A chance to meet other freshers in a relaxed atmosphere.

Unique@Life  
Tuesday 12th October  
9pm-2am  
Life  
Cambridge’s only weekly LesBiGayTrans club kicks off another year in style with a very special guest:  
Dan Bryan from Big Brother 5 will be DJing and hanging out.

Freshers’ Squash  
Tuesday 12th October  
9pm  
THE COW  
Come and meet the LBGT Exec and other freshers before moving on to....  
With 2-for-1 on all drinks before 11 it’s the only place to be every Tuesday night - we’ll see you there!
I’m a gay man. But what does that mean?

For me, being gay isn’t about the stereotypes; conforming or not conforming to them. It’s about self-awareness, and learning about being yourself.

When you come out, and hope to receive your welcome pack to the ‘Gay Community’, with all the information you need, all your questions answered, and someone to show you the cool places to hang out, it can be a bit disheartening to find that no-one is actually on hand to explain what or where that community is.

As pooves we are, after all, a large section of society, united purely by our sexual preferences, and so our ‘community’ is as diverse and wide reaching as society in general.

‘This list of stereotypically ‘gay’ attributes will have some of you darting for the computer room’

That means that being a gay man can mean so many different things. Mincing scene queens. Tight t-shirts with quippy statements. Effeminate voice, accompanied by wild hand gesticulations. Smirnoff Ice. Newly-designed hair (courtesy of my faaabulous stylist Andreas at Toni & Guy). Dancing like a bitch to Steps (and knowing the moves). These are just some of the preconceptions people have of gay men. This list of stereotypically ‘gay’ attributes will have some of you darting for the computer room to send an email to CUSU LGBT in anger at my narrow-minded bigotry. Others of you may think I’m a psychic genius capable of phenomenal insight into your lifestyle.

‘being gay is being happy about what you discover.’

But for me, that difference is what being gay is about. Going through the personal journey (for want of a better and
less group-therapy phrase) of evaluating your sexuality means that we have had to examine our likes and dislikes, our personality and our individuality closely to come to a conclusion about our sexual preferences.

I’m not saying that being gay makes you the most sorted person ever (like hello, 40% of us have attempted suicide apparently), but personally, it certainly has allowed me to have that extra head-start in “finding myself” (whatever that means) and figuring out a lot about myself in a way that I wouldn’t otherwise have been able to without a library of self-help books and an 8-week meditation retreat. Perhaps the introverted examination and overanalysed self-exploration is one of the reasons for our higher depression rate. Who’s to say?

‘we should pray at the altar of Kylie’

Some gay men will find the stereotypes fit them perfectly; others will be mortified at the suggestion that we should pray at the altar of Kylie. Our diverse community means that being gay is totally what you make it. It’s about being yourself, and being comfortable with what that is – so not forcing yourself to conform to the stereotypes, nor shying away from certain characteristics because they’re ‘too gay’. To come to the conclusion that you’re not straight, and then eventually telling people about that, is such a huge progression in knowing about yourself. You’ve gone through a lot to figure out who you are, and for me, being gay is being happy about what you discover.
What does it mean to be a gay Christian?

To many people it’s a simple oxymoron, but for me a belief in Jesus as the son of God is an important part of life...and I just happen to be gay. The number of LBGT support organisations for Christians of all denominations suggest that there are thousands of people in a similar situation, so why is there still a belief that you can’t be gay and Christian?

I believe that the love of God is unconditional. God doesn’t ask people to change their hair, their jobs, their partners, their hobbies, their nationality or their sexuality before they come to him – he loves us for who we are. In Romans 8:38-39 Paul assures us that “Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord”. Once we accept the love of God we become whole – and no fundamental preacher who disagrees can change that. But aren’t you just ignoring what Jesus said? Jesus never mentioned homosexuality, so the only teachings we have are from the Bible. In Romans 1.26-27 Paul condemns people for engaging in sexual activities that are against their nature, which is widely taken to mean homosexuality. However, here Paul is addressing individual homosexual acts (such as orgies) rather than homosexuality itself and there are no mentions of long-term, committed gay relationships in the Bible.

So why do so many disagree? Some people, many of whom claim to represent the Christian faith, condemn homosexuality
on the basis that it is irreconcilable with Old Testament biblical teachings. The Reverend Fred Phelps writes that “sodomites are wicked and sinners before the Lord, are violent and doom nations, are abominable to God...and produce by their very presence in society a kind of mass intoxication”. Not only does this conflict with all the teachings of love and tolerance, acceptance and patience which are central to Christianity, the Bible prohibits many things, only one of which is homosexuality.

‘I’m glad to be a Christian, I just happen to be gay as well.’

It is extraordinary that the same people who regularly quote the bible as being anti-gay, fail to observe these other prohibitions. They shave, wear polycotton shirts, eat prawn cocktails and take out mortgages without any qualm, but criticise homosexuals because of the Bible. So why do we continue to believe that you can’t be gay and Christian? Is it because we know that God turns away all homosexuals who believe in him or is it because of prejudices and traditions that exist in our own society, rather than in the bible itself?

I believe that it’s time to accept the living, loving God. Not one that exists only in the Bible texts written some three thousand years ago, but who is with us now and has always been with us. I believe that God is omnipresent – he sees and knows everything that has been, and is to come, and so there is no point in hiding my sexuality from him. Being truthful with God is an important part of my life, and when I became a Christian it would have been false and wrong to suddenly deny my other feelings.

I became a Christian five years ago (at a time when I was already out) and how I worship Jesus has nothing to do with my sex life, or the gender of my partner. However, it does have a lot to do with following the example of Christ, loving God and sharing my beliefs with others. As a gay Christian it can be difficult to worship with others, or discuss the obstacles and problems that you experience. To this end, many people find the support offered by groups such as Young Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement (YLGC) to be invaluable, and I’ve enjoyed worshipping both with these groups and at my local church. Locally, ‘Revelate’ is a multi-faith group for religious LBGT students providing support and socials throughout each term. For more information, you might like to visit the Revelate website at www.srcf.ucam.org/revelate.

So will the situation ever change? Some people will always condemn homosexuality on the basis of Christian belief. They may genuinely believe that ‘God hates fags’ or they hope that’s the case to justify their own prejudices. However, as an openly gay Christian, I’ve found support and understanding from both within the Church and beyond. When people ask me if I find it difficult to offset contradictory beliefs, I say no – there is no doubt in my mind as to the love and charity of Jesus Christ, and I’m glad to be a Christian, I just happen to be gay as well.

www.srcf.ucam.org/revelate
Much has been written about the tension between being Jewish and gay.

The recent film ‘Trembling before G-d’ highlighted the difficulties many individuals have in reconciling their natural sexual orientation with the supposed prohibition in Orthodox Jewish law against gay sexual activity.

I grew up as a religious Jew and was beset by conflict in my teenage years concerning my sexuality and religion. Whilst for many that conflict leads them to reject a part of themselves, for me it was never an option to reject either my Jewishness or my homosexuality. The conflict forced me to be creative; I had to find a way to draw together the different facets of my life.

My early conflicts related to the supposed prohibition in Leviticus on gay sexual activity. I no longer believe such a prohibition exists and there are in fact several recent alternative interpretations of these verses.

However, when struggling with these verses, I was struck by the fact that in between the two chapters containing the supposed prohibitions lay a chapter (Leviticus 19) with a number of remarkable universal ethical insights, including the famous injunction not to place a stumbling-block before the blind, and to love your neighbour as yourself. These insights are interpreted by a famous rabbinic figure to represent the essence of Judaism’s ethical message: the rest of Jewish law, Rabbi Hillel proclaims in the Talmud, is commentary upon the basic ethical principle: ‘whatever is hateful unto you, do not do unto others’. I was struck by how wonderful it would be if people took this message to heart, and used these basic ethical principles to interpret the supposed prohibitions. It was inconceivable that homosexuality would remain condemned in light thereof.

‘Jewish history of the last two thousand years displays evidence of tremendous forbearance by individuals in the face of large-scale insecurity and oppression.’

These ethical reflections about the essence of Judaism were reinforced by a historical consciousness which has been strongly ingrained in me. Jewish history of the last two thousand years displays evidence of tremendous forbearance by individuals in the face of large-scale insecurity and oppression. Wouldn’t it have been easier to simply give up one’s beliefs across these centuries rather than to suffer from the persecution which culminated in the Holocaust? Yet, individuals
stood firmly by their beliefs and identities, although marginalized and discriminated against for their differences. Although born into a world where Jewish identity was more secure, I too grew up with a sense of vulnerability as a Jew, and an understanding of my marginality. That sense of difference was enhanced by discovering as an adolescent that I was attracted to members of my own sex. Being gay was not an option any of us discussed seriously at school: it was a curiosity and a matter for mockery. Or worse, punishment and guilt. Yet, despite these social pressures and chains of the mind, feelings of sexual attraction and romantic crushes did not feel wrong or perverse, but beautiful and life-affirming.

I dreamt the dreams of falling in love, the fantasies of holding hands, kissing and making love with the handsome, sensitive class-mate. I couldn’t speak about it at the time, I was different. Yet, I was imbued with the sense of the wholesomeness of these dreams.

As I recognised my gay identity, I also became interested in the history of homosexuality. I learnt that it was really modern to understand individuals as having a relatively fixed sexual orientation. That the traditional Jewish texts had never spoken to such a reality nor would they have condemned it, had they understood it.

I learnt also about the persecution of gay people throughout history, including

`‘Trembling Before G-d’`

Sandi Simcha DuBowski’s ‘Trembling Before G-d’ explores the lives of Orthodox and Hasidic Jews who are gay or lesbian. Charting London, Miami, San Francisco and L.A. lives DuBowski’s film represents an effort to express the dilemmas faced those who are Jewish and gay.

The film release coincided with the launch of an educational project aimed at exploring the experiences and lives of Jews who were of LGBT identity. A number of screenings and discussions have been held, largely through facilitators in Jerusalem.

DuBowski’s documentary received international recognition. Details of the film and related materials can be accessed at www.tremblingbeforeg-d.com.

O.C.
the Holocaust, and how gay individuals had carved out spaces for themselves – the arts, for instance - in which to be able to realise their identities. And I learnt about the courage and activism that was necessary to translate equal gay rights into reality, a battle that is still continuing.

The more I learnt about my Jewishness and homosexuality, the more I understood that they were complementary. Both insisted that I recognise my difference from the majority of others, but in no way did this diminish me. Both insisted that I understand what it is to marginalized, to be silenced. And my own experience spoke of the urgency of breaking the silence, of being authentic, of standing up against oppression. Both identities also spoke of the need to be active in fighting for one’s civic equality and one’s right to live a fulfilled life.

These features of the gay and Jewish experience now form a crucial part of my identity and my ethical world-view. They have led me to understand and empathise with the position of all sentient creatures that are not treated with respect for the simple reason that they are different. Many people in minority communities desire to lose a sense of their own distinctiveness and blend in. Yet, ironically, it is in the very thing that sets us apart, that makes us other, that we have the ability to discover our deepest humanity.

John Bilchitz

Poetry - Writing - Essays - Photography - Drawing - Talkback?

Assume Nothing

We want provocative new work and responses.

Mail: editor@cusu-lbgt.com