

Christ as Grand Marshal of the Queer America

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“Christ as Grand Marshall for Queer America”

Due to the heteropatriarchal interpretation of scripture and its tradition, the greater Christian Church has continuously oppressed and marginalized Queer America (that which exists outside the heterosexual normative).¹ This subjugation by the Christian community inhibits queers from pursuing productive religious lives or fruitful relationships with Christ. As a result, there develops in the queer psyche a ‘christophobia’ that includes a revulsion toward all things Christian, including Jesus Christ himself.² Eventually, the queer believer may walk away from Christianity altogether, inviting a life of loneliness, despair, and unscrupulous behavior. This paper suggests creating a new Christology, one focused on a “Queer Christ”; one, which creates a religious environment welcoming to the marginalized twenty-first century queer community. This Christology is based on social location, culture and experience, and is enriched by a comparison to how post-modern Hindu scholars have answered questions involving homosexuality. I submit that the traditional Christian community can be more effective in its outreach and evangelism by welcoming the marginalized faithful, and not forcing the heterosexual paradigm upon them as a prerequisite to worship.

The American Psychological Association defines homosexuality as an enduring pattern of emotional, romantic, and/or sexual attractions to members of the same sex. It is integral to those intimate personal relationships that meet deeply felt needs for love,

¹ The Queer Movement is composed of beautiful life experiences of all types of Queer people living in the margins of society. Queer Theology was born from this distinctive and quirky consciousness in need of great social and political reformation. This is reflected by the term ‘Queer’, which carries the original experience of violence or terror amongst the Queer community.¹ It is through these experiences, as being part of the queer community that must lead to innovative ways of hearing and seeing Christ.

² Christophobia is a term coined by scholar Thomas Bohache.

attachment, and intimacy. These patterns may arise, and persist, without any prior sexual experience. Homosexuality goes beyond sexual behaviors; it includes nonsexual physical affection between partners, shared goals and values, mutual support, and ongoing commitment.³ Although research so far is inconclusive, social and biological scientists think that both nature and nurture play a role in a person's emotional and physical need for same gender relationships. Furthermore, people experience little or no sense of choice about this development. The Barna Research Group estimates that 20.8 percent of males and 17.8 percent of females in the United States report either homosexual behavior or homosexual attraction beginning at the age of 15.⁴

Christianity has notoriously taught that homosexuals are mentally unstable, unhealthy human beings unable to enter and sustain committed loving relationships pleasing to God. What happens to this argument if the entire foundation upon which it is built is false? If homosexuality is not a choice, and homosexuals desire the same things as heterosexuals, then why are homosexuals so stigmatized? For example, Christian Churches financially backed California's Proposition 8. Those churches urged that homosexuals should not be married because their unions would destroy family values.

How do Christians come to this conclusion? Catholic hierarchical discourse and moral theology describe and analyze gay men and lesbians —without ever listening to their experiences regarding sexuality, oppression and ostracism. How can any majority speak for any minority without having walked in their shoes? In January 1996, twenty or so leaders of the Christian right launched an anti-homosexual network called the

³ American Psychological Association. "For a better understanding of sexual orientation and homosexuality." Answer to your Questions. (2008).

⁴ Barna Group. Americans Draw Theological Beliefs From Diverse Points of View. Ventura, CA: Barna Publishing Group, 2002.

National Pro-Family forum.⁵ Over fourteen million dollars a year is poured into this campaign against homosexuals. This thirty million strong politico-religious force fervently believes the Bible demands condemnation of homosexuality.⁶ “It has been estimated that Christian churches are responsible for at least 40% of the homophobia in the United States.”⁷

Does the Bible actually say that homosexuality is wrong? Simply put, exegesis is colored by “presuppositions” of the interpreter, no matter what methodology is undertaken. The Bible reflects the mores of cultures so firmly rooted in the ancient past, that we must question its relevance in our modern times.⁸ For two thousand years, theologians have advanced wide-ranging interpretations of Christianity and Christology, including subjective portraits of the person and works of Jesus Christ. By focusing on a Queer Christology, Christianity can be revitalized, made more inclusive, and thus fulfill its stated “mission.” Those marginalized communities of recent times, women, and ethnic minorities, have used Christology to experience a relationship with Christ, each other, and the larger Christian population. Christology goes beyond the mere retrieval of historical information, since that information may or may not be accurate. Thus, Christology (literally, ‘talk about Christ’) is not totally dependant upon the historical events of the life of Jesus. Rather, it also considers the effect his life had on his contemporaries as they began to believe that, in Jesus, they had encountered God. Unfortunately, Christian history sees Christology being interpreted by the dominant class

⁵ *Rolling Stone*. "The Holy War On Gays." (March 18, 1999)

⁶ *Rolling Stone*

⁷ *Religious Tolerance*, "SUICIDE AMONG GAY AND LESBIAN YOUTH." Ontario Canada: Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance, 2005.

⁸ *ibid*

of society: namely, white, educated, heterosexual men.⁹ Since Christology is an articulation of the divine, it is subject to misappropriation by any one group or powerful person. Seen through the lens of these groups, the Christian Church and its theology have been manipulated to foster individual and institutionalized homophobia. Many members of the Queer community do not believe they can be Christians. Many forget that the desire to commune with God belongs to all who seek Him. “They come to believe that Christ, as the embodied representative of God, hates them. They feel alienated from Christ’s church and the Kingdom of God he portrayed during his earthly ministry.”¹⁰ This is a mindset that Thomas Bohache calls ‘christophobia’. Christophobia goes beyond mere ‘ecclesiophobia’ (aversion to the Church); it damages the queer person’s ability to seek relationships with God and Christians. The queer person sees only a path of loneliness, despair, and degradation.¹¹ Yet, with the creation and acceptance of a Queer Christology, these individuals can see themselves *imago dei*. When queer people recognize themselves in Christ and his life (living at the margins), death (finding power in powerlessness) and resurrection (liberation from those that hate and oppress), then a queer Christology is created. “And in the end, for many queer people, there comes the gift of acceptance of the situation. ‘Here I am, God!’ Let it be for me according to what your messenger has promised. The gift of acceptance from God is a powerful one for those who have been refused acceptance, and it leads toward self-acceptance. This is the beginning of queer Christology: acceptance.”¹²

⁹ Bohache, Thomas. "Embodiment as Incarnation: An Incipient Queer Christology." *Theology & Sexuality*. 1355-8358. New York, NY: The Continuum Publishing Group, September 2003. 9-29.

¹⁰ *ibid* 11

¹¹ *ibid.* 14

¹² *Ibid* 9-29

Robert Goss in “Erotic Contemplatives and Queer Freedom Fighters” explains that a “queer Christology requires the following contours: 1) the critical reconstruction of a reliable core of information on the historical Jesus, his message and parabolic practice of God's reign, and the political world of first-century C.E. Palestine; 2) the faithfulness to the metaphorical language of biblical testimony about Jesus as the "Christ" and its diverse Christologies; 3) the stripping away of misogyny, homophobia/heterosexism, racism, anti-semitism, and colonialism/imperialism from Christological assertions; 4) responsiveness to the sexual salvation of queer Christians; and 5) the empowering of queer Christian practice for liberation and the liberation of other groups.”¹³ In order to open their hearts to Christ, queer people must go back to Christ the Liberator, the redeemer and savior of the marginalized. Christ is the relational aspect of God, the anointed one, he who brings forth the Good News to all humanity. The downtrodden and oppressed are critical components of that humanity! “Jesus' vision of God's reign rejects exclusive, privileged, gendered, and hierarchical networks of social power. There is an inclusiveness in Jesus' outreach to women, tax collectors, prostitutes, Samaritans, lepers, sinners, or the throw-away people of his society.”¹⁴

Jesus embodied God's love and justice. He flaunted his solidarity with the oppressed and the marginal, despite the prominent culture's disdain. Thus, God's compassion for and solidarity with queers is made possible through Jesus' life as a radical and his power of redemption. “The queer Christ-seekers can access a part of their very

¹³ Goss 243

¹⁴ Ibid 243

selves from which they have been kept separate: the divine anointments that is the very Christ presence with one's theological sensibilities and social location.”¹⁵

Jesus can be co-opted as the queer Christ, becoming one with the oppressed people of his and all societies throughout the ages. Jesus, as the queer Christ, becomes God's liberating word of grace for all queers.¹⁶ Queer Christians can read the Bible from the vantage point provided by their social location, practices and experiences. These queer readings can create fresh modes of Christian theological practices, which allow a new spirituality to emerge in the struggle for queer liberation and justice.¹⁷

Looking at homosexuality through the lens of Hinduism, Christians can access another perspective on homosexual love. Hindu astrologers say that for thousands of years, the “third sex” (defined as homosexuals, transgendered and the intersexed) have been an intrinsic part of Indian society. Ancient India's sexual fluidity has been well documented in early Sanskrit writings, art and architecture. Both homosexuality and transgender identity are observed in Vedic texts such as the *Kama Shastra* and *Mahabharata*. It appears in scriptures like the *Bhagavata Purana*, composed around 3000 B.C.¹⁸ Throughout these Hindu and Vedic texts, the Supreme Lord and multitudes of revered saints and demigods, are able transcend gender norms. Hindu deities may be hermaphrodites (half man, half woman), males who become female or females who become male. Deities may be born from two males, or from two females, or from a single

¹⁵ Standing 66-70

¹⁶ Goss 243

¹⁷ *ibid* 243

¹⁸ Vanita, Ruth. *Love Rites Same Sex and marriage in India and the West*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

male or a single female. There are deities with principal companions of the same gender.¹⁹

For example, in a Medieval Hindu scripture, the narration describes how the god Ayyappa was born of intercourse between the gods Shiva and Vishnu — when Vishnu temporarily took a female form. The *Krittivasa Ramayana*, a fourteenth-century text still popular today, tells us that the hero-king, Bhagiratha, was brought down the Ganga River to earth. He was born to and raised by two widows, who made love together with divine blessing. His very name derives from the word *bhaga* (vulva) because he was born of two vulvas.²⁰

These are only a few of many examples in Hinduism, where deities are not bound by gender restrictions. Furthermore, under the Supreme Lord, the various living entities manifest the full spectrum of sex and gender possibilities. From the impersonal perspective, the soul is not male, female, or hermaphrodite; from the personal perspective, it is desire that dictates the form taken by the soul. In the mundane sphere, the soul assumes various gender roles in the pursuit of material enjoyment; but in the spiritual world, roles are adopted for transcendental purpose – to reciprocate with the Supreme Lord and to render loving service.

In Indian society, traditions of same-sex desire continued into the periods of medieval Hinduism and Indian Islam. Only the arrival of the Christian Europeans branded such Hinduism as idolatrous, its range of sexual practices immoral. The British

¹⁹ Das Wilheml, Amara. *Tritiya-Prakriti: People of the Third Sex*. Xlibris Corporation, 2007.

²⁰ *ibid*

rulers turned India into a ‘third sexophobic’ nation by incorporating their European prejudices into education, law and politics.²¹

With the exception of the *Hijras* community, very little of the third sex tradition continues in India today. Hijras are transgendered males of semi-sacred status, considered to be vehicles of divine power. They conduct artistic performances, such as singing and dancing when a male child is born or at marriage ceremonies. They are servants at Hindu temples. “They imitate many aspects of the feminine gender role: they wear women’s dress, hairstyles and accessories; they imitate women’s walk, gestures, voice, facial expressions and language; they prefer male sexual partners and experience being sexual objects of men’s desires; and many identify themselves as women.”²² The *Hijra* demonstrate that Western Christian sex and gender dichotomies lack true universal dominance, even within western Christian societies.

As such, the diversity found in Hindu deities and the Hijra model may help Westerners reflect on their own cultural norms. This diversity encourages flexibility and fosters accommodation of those individuals who do not fit easily into the normative culture. The recognition of a third sex in ancient Hinduism is relevant in Christian society and inter-religious dialogue, which has only recently begun to recognize and accommodate queer citizens. Some Hindu scholars/religious teachers have recently welcomed members of the third sex into their religion. Srinivasa Raghavachariar, head priest of the Srirangam temple, “stated that same-sex lovers must have been cross-sex lovers in a former life. The sex may change but the soul retains its attachments, hence the

²¹ Vanita

²² Nanda, Serena. *Neither Man nor Woman*. Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1999.

love impels these souls towards one another.”²³ A Shaiva priest performed a marriage ceremony of two women; having studied Hindu scriptures, he concluded, “Marriage is a union of spirits, and the spirit is not male or female.”²⁴ Several Gaudiya Vaishnava (Hindu) authorities emphasize that everyone passes through various forms, genders and species in a series of lives; therefore, let us not judge each other by the material body alone, but view everyone equally on a spiritual plane, mindful of God’ compassion.²⁵

Homosexuals should not be disallowed from cultivating morally commendable qualities within or outside of romantic relationships merely because of that status.²⁶ Homosexuals can - and do - have Christian-based concepts about commitment and love. Through the sheer intolerance of the Church and its imposed celibacy, many homosexuals are forced to choose between an “acceptable” Christian life, or a secret, (often excessive) lifestyle that can become deviant. If the Church would open its arms to loving homosexuals, maybe then committed love between homosexuals can be celebrated rather than discouraged.

The Hindu understanding of the material body and the genderlessness of true human nature are concepts worthy of deeper examination by the Christian community. This may help Christians transcend notions of queers as deviant members of society. Indeed, in other cultures and religions, queers have been revered and deities have crossed gender lines. Running as a common thread through stories of third sexes are values like compassion, love, greatness and power. These Hindu stories have inspired queers to

²³ Shakuntala, Devi. *The World of Homosexuals*. Vikas Publishing House, 1977.

²⁴ Vanita

²⁵ Das Wilhelm

²⁶ Christians ought to embrace the idea of gays getting married because it implies the embracing of the "family values" that Christianity espouses -- a stable home, monogamy, etc. With all the orphaned/abandoned children out there that loving gay couples have adopted, why then is it bad for society to allow them the same rights as a heterosexually committed couple?

move out of the shadows of society. They can love freely one another, and Christ.

Reaching out to queer society is not about condemnation but about love. Christians who have been quick to persecute others need to ask themselves: “who are these that we persecute?” Are they truly living against Christ? Christ is for all, especially those living at the margins of mainstream culture.²⁷

For a successful outreach to queers, Christians must balance scripture, scientific research, and human nature with a new understanding of the queer community. The often knee-jerk rejection of scientific research on these issues must be avoided. The community is the “tradition” of the Christian faith and practice. Heterosexuality may be the acknowledged and even preferred norm, but it does not follow that homosexuals are to be excluded from Christian life. There are three main distinguishing factors to carefully work through: (a) normative evaluations of homosexuality as a general sexual orientation; (b) evaluations of concrete justifiability of homosexual acts in specific circumstances, and (c) the moral character and potential of a homosexual person.²⁸

Queer sexual orientation and sound morality are not mutually exclusive. The Christian community is called to aid a brother or sister suffering and in need of God, regardless of orientation. Rather than attacking queer culture, it must see these citizens as complementary, seeking revelation of moral truths and renewed commitment to faith. The Christian community would profit by enjoying the presence of all of humanity’s variety.

²⁷ “For God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him.” (John 3:16-17)

²⁸ Cahill Lisa Sowle, “Moral Methodology: A Case Study,” in Ronald Hamel and Kenneth R. Himes, eds., *Introduction to Christian: A Reader* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 551.

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