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We Swim, We are not Swallowed¹

Taylor Klassman

An infectious hesitation towards organized religion is a constant dialogue in the queer community. This wavering is grounded in the bitter battle between separatism and assimilation of homosexuals and allies into the religious realm. A battle that forms the question of whether to integrate into the established (corrupted) community, change the community from within, or create and maintain a comfortable space that is separate for queers. In our human quest for meaning and acceptance, it can be easy to get lost in the socially constructed reality that closets God into the confines of an intolerant realm of religious straightism.

In the dialogue between culture and religion, not only can the individual be pulled under the boat, but even God can be drowned. Many individuals are so determined to seek redemption from his or her God-given "sin" of homosexuality that they lose touch with themselves. This specific type of anomy, a detachment from the self, is the most dangerous. The vulnerability that accrues from such self-doubt and longing for meaning warrants religion to sweep in and provide a plausibility structure for the sufferer to rest upon. Oftentimes, the individual blindly embraces religion, because it is better than eternal nothingness. Even worse, some may be tempted to begin counseling or enter an ex-gay ministry like Exodus International that focuses on, "Mobilizing the body of Christ to minister grace and truth to a world impacted by homosexuality"². When antagonism is the name of the game, how do we reconcile an intolerant society with a benevolent spirituality that was supposedly founded on justice and love?

History of Sexuality as a History of Social Relations

A Queer Theology is a set of ideas based around the notion that identities are not fixed and do not entirely determine who we are. With this idea, the emphasis shifts away from specific acts and identities to the myriad ways in which gender and sexualities organize and diversify society. Perceptions of sexuality change with time, just like we do; therefore, our theology needs to adjust accordingly. Why does this pose such a threat to the Church? If we exalted a new theology, or a revised theology that resembled queer theology, the Church would lose some members, but it would gain a lot as well. Robert Goss says that a queer theology can only come from our own organic experiences, our struggles and sexual con-

¹ Nett Hart, *Lesbian Desire as Social Action* (Albany, NY, 1990), 300.

² Exodus International, <http://www.Exodusinternational.org>.

text. We have been living with a theology that does not embody the community's ideals as a whole, but rather shapes the community to the preferences and expectations of a specific group.³

Even in welcoming and affirming congregations there is only a partial inclusion. By welcoming translesbians back to the Christian community, we also deny their erotic lives by not blessing their unions and not ordaining them. You can be as benevolent and welcoming as June Cleaver, but homosexuals are not entrusted with the fundamental rights of faith.

The Origin of Sex

The author Reinaldo Arenas of Cuba theorizes, "Sexual energy generally overcomes all prejudice, repression, and punishment. That force, the force of nature, dominates."⁴ Unfortunately, we are taught by the doctrine of the Church to fear sex, loathe our bodies, and deny our erotic fantasies. Our bodies translate our biological impulses that necessitate sex and life, so why does the church deny them? It seems contradictory that an institution so headstrong about the natural order would impede this natural process. Nevertheless, the Church has sustained a silenced sex and uses abstinence as a method of control and maintaining order in which believers (mostly parents) find solace. If we ignore sex and condemn it before we even have the chance to develop our understanding of it, then of course the only way we will view sex is under a microscope of judgment and evasion. Why not use the Bible and Jesus' teaching of inclusivity to our advantage? I think our species is advanced enough to take Jesus out of the direct line of sexual fire.

For example, before the introduction of Christianity, Tahitian women were uninhibited in their sexuality,⁵ but now they cross their legs, zip their mouths, and preach abstinence out of fear of God's wrath. The compromise is how to get to the sexualized body without violating the borders that have offered protection. The Church has attempted such a compromise by forging "incoherent accommodations between ascetic imperatives of denying sex and allowing erotic desire for procreation within marriage."⁶ Unfortunately, these accommodations, as skewed as they may be, do not apply to the homosexual community. Religious doctrine decided, "in all its most dangerous and exciting incarnations, sex is coded as queer."⁷

³ Robert Goss, *Queering Christ* (Eugene, OR: Resource Publications, 2002).

⁴ Cindy Patton & Benigno Sanchez-Eppler, *Queer Diasporas* (Duke University Press, 2000), 169.

⁵ Pepper Schwartz & Virginia Rutter, *The Gender of Sexuality* (CA: Pine Forge Press, 1998).

⁶ Robert Shore-Goss, *Gay and Lesbian Theologies* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 192.

⁷ Gargi Bhattacharyya, *Sexuality and Society* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 94.

The Biblical Argument, By Way of Religious Amnesia

Could it be that religious oppression is actually insignificant? It only exists as a reflection of a general social attitude. Bible passages are only authoritative because we allow them to be. The meaning of the Bible has been altered and in some sense scripted to fit its context. We suspect evil in the infrastructure of religion, yet we take any opportunity we can to use it to legitimate our fears or our beliefs. Can we even see ourselves reflected in biblical narratives without modern identity templates (gay, straight, woman, etc.)? However, the religious community only allows for a change in interpretation of the text that benefits their interest. In the light of this notion, we must learn to engage the text as an equal, not an authority.

We must ensure that a human construction of God's word will not govern our life in its entirety. When we forget that humans have taken the word of the Bible into their own hands, we can more easily rationalize our actions by way of biblical justification. Sometimes these actions perpetuate hate and violence, but the agents behind them site passage after passage that reinforces these actions. Whether the marginalized group is women, blacks, immigrants, or in our context, homosexuals, the oppressors will always find an argument between the lines of the Bible.

Cultural Divide

Asian Cultures

In Asian cultures, such as Vietnam, homosexuality is mocked, not outlawed. Like so many cultures, the fear of gender-bending is at the forefront of the anti-gay movement. A woman must always be obedient to a man (father, then husband, then eldest son), so when a lesbian does not rely on a man's authority, she is condemned. The discussion of sex is much less stigmatized in Asian cultures, which explains why the issue of homosexuality is not about sex, but rather factors of masculinity and femininity. In fact, in Japan older men have sex with young males called "flower boys." This action is motivated by lust alone and is considered to be non-threatening because the boys cannot be emasculated since they have not yet reached manhood. Furthermore, this action is empowering for the men and therefore upholds their necessity to remain the figure of power and masculinity. Asian women carry on uninhibited conversations about sex amongst themselves, but never in the presence of men. Interestingly, men are less inclined to talk about sex, but when they do it is often shallow and induced by alcohol.⁸

Eunuchs, castrated men, in South Asia are regarded as sacred. In fact, if you want your prayers to be heard, you are to pray to or with them to assure your words

⁸ Mei-Ling Hsu, Wen-Chi Lin & Tsui-Sung Wu, *Representations of 'Us' and 'Others' in the AIDS New Discourse: A Taiwanese Experience* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

will reach God. What can be made of this culture's profound spiritual respect for 'emasculated' men? Why do religions tend to trust these men when they supposedly value strict, traditional gender roles? The question leads back to sex. Since these men have been desexualized, they are no longer seen as a threat.

Homosexuality in the Qur'an

Much of the Middle Eastern population follows the Islamic religious doctrine of the Qur'an. The stance on homosexuality is quite similar to the understanding with that of the Bible in the Christian community. The people who are condemned as homosexuals are called *qum Lut*, or "People of Lot," taken from the story of Sodom and Gomorrah from the Bible. Most of the scripture that is used to condemn homosexuality is condemned sexuality in gender. Shari'a—Islamic law—is most concerned with public behavior of sexuality, whether it be between two men, a woman and a man, a boy and a man, etc... The only direct condemnation of homosexuals seen in the Qur'an has been interpreted from the sentiment: "Drive them out of your city: these are indeed men who want to be clean and pure!" (Qur'an 7:80-82)

Islamic culture shares many of the same views of homosexuality that have already been discussed. First of all, the attraction of grown men to male youth is absolutely normal, because it does not pose a threat of emasculating the male in power. Another idea is that men often experiment with other men, because men and women are kept segregated so vehemently. They have sex with other men to simply fulfill biological "needs." Lesbians can only be punished if four witnesses prove that she has committed a crime, and then she is allowed to either repent or be punished, because there is no issue of emasculation. The overarching theme of homosexuality in Islam returns to the notion of gender-bending and the upholding of male dominance in the gender hierarchy. As long as that is not threatened, homosexuality is just as often ignored as it is punished.⁹

Buddhism

Homosexuality in Buddhist culture is just another form of desire and humanly wants that is condemned under Buddhist law. In Buddhist society, all forms of sexuality are indicted, because it is tied to desire and Buddhists stress the need to obliterate wants altogether. Another fear is that two men or two women loving each other is a "civilizing" process, because it departs from the natural order. Buddhists fear the implications that civilization will impart on the Buddhist individuals path to Buddha.

⁹ Qur'an

The only text that has any real doctrinal value in Buddhism is the “Vinaya,” which is essentially the rulebook for Buddhists. It says that homosexual acts threaten the monastic community by blurring sexual difference. Furthermore, individuals could “play” with sexual boundaries by engaging homosexual sex as long as they remain starkly male. This fear of gender-bending is again the most distinct issue with homosexuality in the eastern hemisphere.

Following the trend of gender roles, Buddhist culture focuses on the active and passive (masculine versus feminine) roles of sexual partners and not biological gender. By engaging in sex, we create two victims: the consumer and the consumed, both of these individuals are condemned. For instance, a “Chigo” is a young male lover who is a student of his spiritual teacher. This relationship is more romantic and admired than sex with a woman --which is ridiculed and seen as spiritually purposeless—because there is spiritual motives behind their lustful release.¹⁰

Separatism Helps Ease the Alienation from Ourselves

In a state of oppression, the marginalized find unity in exclusion. In anomy from the ruling order, do we find community? Or is it the other way around: in denying ourselves (becoming alienated) do we find unity with the dominant consciousness? Homosexuals can hide in the shroud of the sacred in order to escape social shame. What is a better way to avoid persecution and rejection than to disappear in an institution theoretically based beyond this world? Within this frame, we subject ourselves to the oppressive notion that the out-group (homosexuals) needs concessions rather than the in-group (heterosexuals) needs correction in their close-minded views. The constant debate about “queer people’s demands for inclusion have created an unprecedented, often contentious dialogue about who we are and where we belong,”¹¹ because you cannot force yourself into membership someplace where you have no place. Therefore, must a Zion (a land of no people for a people with no land) be exalted for gays to have any place at all to call home?

The truth about a “Queer Nation” is that “any cultural product we point to must belong to others too- the power of being everywhere means that there is no safe haven of community.”¹² If we create a gay or lesbian “culture” it cannot truly be ours, because it would most likely follow in the footsteps of imperialist creation. Furthermore, we would create a community based solely on who we

¹⁰ Jose Ignacio Cabezon, *Buddhism, Sexuality, and Gender* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992).

¹¹ David Shneer and Caryn Aviv, *Heeding Isaiah’s Call* (New York: New York University Press; 2006), 265.

¹² Gargi Bhattacharyya, *Sexuality and Society* (New York: Routledge; 2002), 29.

sleep with; so, “how do we decide when people’s shared activities are sufficiently similar to constitute a common culture?”¹³ If we clump ourselves under this umbrella of who gets us off, then “the homosexual subject can now claim an identity without an essence,” because who we are is less than skin deep.¹⁴

If we continue to assert the most crucial part of our identity as our sexuality, how can we enter a social community -- especially any religious community -- that has historically viewed such affirmations as taboo? Should we focus on breaking these traditional taboos or on finding ways in which we can more easily penetrate social boundaries through recognizing our similarities to the existing order? Even if we reinvent or renegotiate this blueprint of the community, it will always be a construction. Furthermore, how can we expect society to accept us when we define ourselves in exclusion to that dominant order? Is the gay community’s fear of and aversion to religion also a communally produced norm, something passed down from a historically shared experience?

Living a Life of Fantasy

The overwhelming advice that the homosexual community is greeted with when trying to reconcile with the Church is that we must choose not to act on our desires. The truth is we can choose to live as who we are through our actions; however, we cannot choose to be gay or not. So, what is the problem with following the Church’s advice? Is it not an assurance of affirmation, even ego exaltation, to keep one’s self within the comfort of homogeneity? The reality is that “everyone becomes straight by default, full membership of this elite grouping can require certain badges of affiliation,”¹⁵ so maybe we can just go with the flow. If we do not rock the boat by acting in defiance of our predetermined roles, then we are assured a place in the dominant order. However, Jesus said, “Your faith has made you whole” NOT, “Your faith has made you like everybody else.” It can be so easy to lose the sense of who we are, because acceptance can be so attractive. Glaser makes a profound distinction between uniformity unity; you are still queer even if you do not look or act like it.¹⁶ When our society relies so heavily on stereotypes of both homosexuals and heterosexuals, “The press can call gays ‘invisible’ only by ignoring that this invisibility is visibility as straight”¹⁷ when the lines that distinguish these stereotypical lives are blurred.

¹³ Ann Ferguson, *Is There a Lesbian Culture?* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1990), 66.

¹⁴ David Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (Oxford University Press; 1995).

¹⁵ Gargi Bhattacharyya, *Sexuality and Society* (New York: Routledge; 2002), 25.

¹⁶ Chris Glaser, *Gay Christians Should Accept Their Homosexuality* (San Diego: Greenhaven Press; 1993).

¹⁷ Laurie Essig, *Queer in Russia* (London: Duke University Press; 1999), 106.

Suffering:

Our spiritual lives are infected by ideals of sacrifice and suffering in order to be deserving of God's love. Does that mean we are expected to sacrifice our autonomy by denying our homosexuality? The current state of affairs for many homosexuals is to suffer under skin that is not our own, to suffer from hatred and injustice because of our sexuality or other shallow social implications. Is this the essence of suffering that Jesus Christ intended as he bled on the cross for us?

The implication of suffering is that it will be followed by some measure of healing. This ease from pain may be a "cure" out of homosexuality. Those who pursue this type of healing believe that "sexual otherness was a temporary fall from heterosexual grace, not a permanent marker of a stable and abiding self;"¹⁸ therefore, the injuries that accrue from the fall can be bandaged and remedied. However, there is stark differentiation between being nursed back to health and being forced to swallow the metaphorical pill of heterosexuality. The healing that ensues from accepting who we are without hesitation is the healing that will lead to reconciliation with God.

Ex-Gay Ministries:

To implement this notion of conversion from the homosexual lifestyle to the "normal" heterosexual lifestyle, a business of ex-gay ministries and counseling has arisen. Some conversion techniques include: behavior therapy, masturbation punishment, brain surgery, and emetic persuasion (vomit-inducing meds).¹⁹ The fact is that in 1990, the American Psychological Association stated that scientific evidence shows that reparative therapy does not work and that it can do more harm than good. Furthermore, in 2001, The US Surgeon General's Call to Action to Promote Sexual Health and Responsible Sexual Behavior asserted that homosexuality is not "a reversible lifestyle choice."

Despite the truths of these arguments against conversion methods there are still dozens of organizations that promote and practice these methods. American Family Association, Christian Families with Faith for Lesbians and Gays, Family Research Institute, Focus on the Family, Jews Offering New Alternative to Homosexuality, and the Traditional Values Coalition are a few on the list.

The result of these programs is repression, not evolution. We can submerge our desires so deep that there is no motive for any sexual intimacy. So individuals walk out of these institutions with an overarching sense of denial. Focus on the Family produced a documentary that highlights these "success" stories of the

¹⁸ Ibid, 57

¹⁹ George Weinberg, *Society and the Healthy Homosexual* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press; 1973).

rejuvenating results of ex-gay therapy, like Exodus International's program. The documentary opens with the narrative of Melissa Fryrear, an ex-lesbian who was saved by God. Fryrear cracks joke after joke about the trials and tribulations of being a straight girl, from the heels to the makeup, it is a tedious job. It is ironic and unfortunate that her understanding of the heterosexual world revolves around the stereotypical life of a woman. She seems too distracted by heated eyelash curlers to notice that she is in fact a lesbian.

Mike Haley, a well-known author in the ex-gay business, takes the stage and begins his narrative about his homosexuality induced by issues with his father. Since he was a child, this was not who he was and his father did not want to accept him because of it. Haley believes that the cause of his homosexuality was his God-given desire to be accepted by his father was not met. Mike now considers himself lucky that a very persistent ex-gay counselor essentially stalked him until he conceded to begin a program. After a few months he was "cured" and soon enough was ignoring his same-sex attractions so that he can start a new life with his wife. Mike never admitted to a full conversion, he simply admitted that he was no longer content living outside of the sexual norm and being condemned by his family. Haley believes that programs like Exodus are the churches "best kept secret," but maybe they have been kept a secret for a reason.²⁰

Love the Sinner, Hate the Sin

For a moment, let us suppose that the Christian right is correct in believing that homosexuality is a sin for which we must repent. They operate under the premise that one chooses into sin just as one can choose out of sin. After all, the truth about sin is that "One cannot live in the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world simultaneously... One cannot be dwelling in the light of God and also be in darkness. He cannot be in the service of Christ and simultaneously in the service of sin."²¹ All of these sentiments make perfect sense; the issue is what the Church requires of us to reach salvation.

We must deny who we are and who we love in order to enter God's kingdom. The essence of sin is the transgression of virtue; however, the essence of virtues is that "virtues are the guides, not the jailers of our nature."²² Furthermore, even when the homosexual sinner repents, salvation is not achieved. Reconciliation is dependent on the penitent--the judge or accuser-- not the confessor. The journey that we are tracing right now is of a homosexual who feels he or she has something

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ W.E. Shepard, *Wrested Scriptures Made Plain*, <http://www.Eternalsecurity.us>; 2008.

²² James P. Hanigan, *Homosexuality: The Test Case for Christian Sexual Ethics* (New Jersey: Paulist Press; 1988), 114.

to repent for, he or she is hungry for forgiveness. The bible tells us, "He who is full loathes honey, but to the hungry even what is bitter tastes sweet" (Proverbs 27:7). This contrived salvation may taste sweet to those who are starving for righteousness, but beware of the bee that makes honey sweet.

"The love that dare not speak its name"

Vulnerability has risen from the depths of fear and yearning for a transcendent being to comfort us. When we enter the religious realm, we become enculturated into the rituals and ideologies of that congregation. Unfortunately the same silence that burdens the gay community is the silence that shelters it from backlash and animosity from a dominant voice that inherently disagrees with the homosexual lifestyle. Audre Lorde conveys a stark truth: "We have been socialized to respect fear more than our own needs for language and definition, and while we wait in silence for that final luxury of fearlessness, the weight of that silence will choke us."²³ So the question is not whether the gay community needs to reclaim religion, but whether or not religion and homosexuality can be merged in a new, organic relationship that defies the barriers of our social stigmas.

In a state of cognitive dissonance, we can resolve our conflict by changing our moral schemas to fit the implications of society, or by changing our actions to fit the anomy that will come with our moral integrity. True resolution is when a homosexual fully emerges from the closet as gay. "A homosexual person is gay when he regards himself as happily gifted with whatever capacity he has to see people as romantically beautiful... to be gay is to be free of the need for ongoing self-inquisition."²⁴ To be gay is to no longer look in the mirror and see the reflection of our sexualities. Rather it is to see the stars in our eyes and the love pulsing through our veins; it is to see a love that does not discriminate, even against God.

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