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List of Contributors

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Lucy Tatman is the author of Knowledge that Matters: A Feminist Theological Paradigm and Epistemology. She has taught in the Program on Gender and Culture, Central European University, Budapest, and in the Warren College Writing Program, University of California, San Diego. She is currently a lecturer in Gender, Sexuality and Culture, at the Australian National University, Canberra, and is attempting to complete Numinous Subjects, a series of reflections on the images, figures and significance of the sacred in contemporary Western culture.
In the United Kingdom Myra Hindley and Rosemary West have become cultural icons of evil. Hindley spent all her life behind bars, trapped by the media construction of her crimes as particularly vile, precisely because she was a woman. West, against whom little hard evidence was applied, seems to have been punished in part for her exposure of the mess and malignancy that can underlie heterosexual normativity. In her article Elisabeth Storrs employs Girard’s theory of the scapegoat to explore the complex cultural connections between gender, sexual orientation and evil.

Of course, as EL Kornegay points out, sexual perversion, evil and degradation have also been attributed to blackness in the Western world and in the process of trying to resist that conflation the black community has often demonized the non-heterosexual. Through an analysis and queer reading of the story of Ham, Kornegay moves towards the formulation of a sexual discourse of transformation which will destabilize concepts of normativity in the black community.

Robert Goss also troubles the waters of heterosexual normativity in his article which explores the implications for a theology of sexuality of the traditional idealization of religious life in Catholicism, a life which itself was constructed as fundamentally eschatological in character. Goss suggests that the religious life prefigures a form of eschatological relating, which is erotic but not monogamous or heterosexual.

If in the current ecclesiastical context Goss’s views appear shocking, even sacrilegious, then Lucy Tatman would argue that he must be on to something. She argues that the sacrilegious is often the guardian of the sacred, keeping the semiotic ‘wet’, whereas religion dries and hardens into a symbolic devoid of the semiotic and incapable of dealing with the sensual, erotic and fleshy. A theology of sexuality is therefore dependent upon theologians being willing to think blasphemous thoughts.
In his article Gerard Loughlin demonstrates how the reading of Scripture can be kept ‘wet’ by engaging in a process of reading ‘in Christ’, a process which allows the text to live and move in the Spirit. Applying this methodology to often cited and argued-over verses of Romans 1, Loughlin argues that the passage may be about sexuality and its ambiguous place in the divine economy but it is not about homosexuality, as such.

*Theology & Sexuality* will now be published three times a year. The editors are always pleased to receive long and short articles for consideration for publication.
‘Our Scapegoat’: An Exploration of Media Representations of Myra Hindley and Rosemary West

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Abstract

The purpose of the article is to explore Girard’s (1986) concept of the scapegoat, from a feminist perspective, by applying it to media representations of Myra Hindley and Rosemary West. First, Girard’s theoretical approach to the concept of the scapegoat is outlined; secondly, the article describes some of the theoretical issues which surround female serial killers; this includes an analysis of media representations of women, especially if they are criminal; thirdly, the academic literature on media representations of Myra Hindley and Rosemary West is reviewed; fourthly, the work of Girard (1986) is applied to the media representations of Myra Hindley and Rosemary West; fifthly, Noddings (1989) is used to demonstrate how cultural associations between women and evil, the resulting hatred of female bodies and, by implication, their sexuality, underpin the scapegoating of Myra Hindley and Rosemary West. In conclusion, the article further reflects on the material discussed.

This article arises out of (a) a long-standing Quaker concern for those engaged in the criminal justice system (see Newell 2000; Arriens 2002; Hoyle et al. 2002), (b) the apparent inability of the Christian community at large to participate in and challenge media discourse(s) on crime and punishment, and (c) my curiosity in exploring why Myra Hindley and Rosemary West appear to have borne the burden of the responsibility for the crimes for which they were found guilty; their male partners in crime seem to have been largely absolved of their respective roles in the killing process.

Underpinning this discussion is an acknowledgment that the concept of retribution is rooted in Judeo-Christian attitudes towards crime and punishment. Historically this has had a significant determining influence on the development of the criminal justice system and penal policy in...
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Britain (Gorringe 1996). Jones (2002) provides us with a useful evaluation of this legacy and urges Christians with a commitment to social justice to incorporate the criminal justice system into their vision. In addition, many Christian denominations, have, both in the past and in the present, responded creatively to the challenges posed by engaging with all those involved with the criminal justice system (Jones and Sedgwick 2002). This is work which needs to be more widely known and could usefully inform Christian theology and engagement with public discourse(s) on crime and punishment. This leads us to explore the concept of the scapegoat.

Girard (1986: 12) explores the concept of the scapegoat through differing aspects of collective persecution. The idea of collective persecution is defined as acts of violence dedicated directly at a particular group by a rabble of murderers. The example he gives is the persecution of the Jews during the Black Death. This is distinguished from the collective resonance of persecution; this involves acts of violence, such as witch-hunts, which are legal in form, but are fuelled by the extremes of public opinion. However, the distinction between collective persecution and a collective resonance of persecution is not clear-cut. In the UK, current examples of both collective persecution and the collective resonance of persecution include some public treatment of asylum-seekers, serial killers and paedophiles.

Girard (1986) suggests that there are three stereotypes that contribute to the overall stereotype of persecution. These are (1) the stereotype of crisis, (2) the stereotype of accusation, and (3) the stereotype of victims.

In describing the stereotype of crisis Girard (1986) suggests that this is characterized by institutional collapse resulting in the negation of hierarchical and functional differences between people and the development of a cultural sameness that is both dull and hideous. In societies that are not in crisis the impression of difference can be differentiated, diversity welcomed and reciprocal elements are concealed by the culture and the nature of the exchange. In situations where societies are breaking down there is a speeding up of the tempo of positive exchanges; these only occur when absolutely necessary. Negative exchanges also increase and become more visible as insults, blows, vengeance and neurotic symptoms.

Negative reciprocity brings people into opposition with one another, increases the uniformity of their behaviour and is responsible for the prevalence of cultural similarity. This lack of differentiation is both actual, in terms of human relationships, and mythic, in the sense that cultural uniformity has been projected on to the whole universe. The processes of uniformity have been created through reciprocity and the
experience of social crisis appears to be little affected by the diversity of their causes (Girard 1986: 13-14).

In the stereotype of accusation the increasing obscurity of culture leads men \[sic\] to feel disconcerted by the enormity of the disaster, but not to explore the underlying causes; the idea that they might affect the causes by learning more about them remains minimal. There is a tendency to explain the cultural crisis in moral or social terms. However, people generally blame society as a whole or those who apparently seem particularly harmful. The suspects are accused of a particular category of crimes (Girard 1986: 14).

In terms of collective persecution, particular accusations are characteristic because their very mention makes modern observers suspect that violence is in the air. First, there are those violent crimes against those whom it is criminal to attack. These include particular individuals such as a king, a father or other representation of the supreme patriarch and those who are weakest and most defenceless in society. Secondly, there are sexual crimes. These frequently contravene the strictest social taboos in the culture concerned. Thirdly, there are religious crimes, for example the sacrilege of the host; this too, transgresses profound social taboos (Girard 1986: 15).

These crimes seem fundamental as they attack the foundation of the cultural order and embrace the family and the hierarchical differences which underpin the social structure. Ultimately the persecutors usually convince themselves that a small number of people or single individuals are extremely harmful to society. The stereotypical allegation rationalizes and sustains this belief by apparently acting in the role of mediator. This apparently bridges the enormous gap between the (insignificant) individual and society as a whole (Girard 1986: 15).

The stereotype of victims refers to the crowd’s choice of victims, which at times seems to be quite random. The crimes of which the victims are accused may be real, but the persecutors choose their victims because the group to which the victim is especially susceptible to persecution, rather than because of the crimes they have committed.

Being a member of an ethnic or religious minority is an important feature of victimhood, since few societies do not subject these minorities to discrimination or persecution. In addition to cultural and religious factors there are also purely physical criteria such as sickness, madness, genetic deformities, physical disability or accidental injury. In fact, from a linguistic perspective, the language associated with disability is sometimes used to further victimize marginalized people or groups (Girard 1986: 18).

Although the groups already described may be regarded as marginal outsiders, the rich and powerful are also victimized. Girard (1986: 19)
maintains that, statistically, the rich and powerful are more at risk from persecution than any other group. Extremes, not only of poverty and wealth, but vice and virtue, beauty and ugliness, and the strength of the most powerful, become weaknesses in the face of the crowd. In addition, the boundary between rational discrimination and arbitrary persecution is difficult to trace. At heart, persecution is based on difference.

Each time direct or indirect violence is reported we need to ask whether it includes any or all of the following: a description of the social and cultural disorder that leads to a loss of difference (the stereotype of crisis), fundamental crimes which challenge the social, cultural or political order (the stereotype of accusation) and/or whether the suggested authors of the crime themselves suggest victimhood, or an absence of difference (the stereotype of victims).

The use of two or more stereotypes within a document indicates persecution. Their existence convinces us that:

1. the acts of violence are real; 2. the crisis is real; 3. the victims are chosen, not for the crimes that they are accused of, but for the signs that they bear, for everything that suggests their guilty relationship, and 4. the import of the operation is to lay the responsibility for the crisis on the victims and to exert an influence on it by destroying these victims or at least by banishing them from the communities they ‘pollute’ (Girard 1986: 24).

This leads us to examine some of the theoretical issues involved in exploring media representations of female serial killers.

In her discussion on the female serial killers, Skrapec (1993: 242) suggests that the criminal justice system, criminological researchers and the media view aggressive criminality as essentially masculine in origin. Murder is predominantly a male crime with women being seen as the exception rather than the rule. That women have long been, and continue to be, multiple murderers, profoundly challenges deeply held assumptions about women and their capacity to nurture others. In referring to the United States, Skrapec (1993: 243) suggests that between 12 per cent and 17 per cent of homicides are committed by women. For a similar discussion in the UK context see Dobash et al. (1995).

Typically, women who kill are cast as ‘black widows’ (women who kill their husbands, children or other relatives), or as ‘angels of death’ or ‘mercy’ killers (women who kill patients in their care); like female multiple murderers they have not been examined as a group except in the most notable of cases. Nor has any comparative work been undertaken between female and male murderers. Skrapec (1993: 244) cautions against making easy assumptions about differences between male and female murderers and suggests that the critical distinction between the
two groups lies in the *modus operandi* of the activity, not in the under-
ly ing motives.

In terms of the serial murderer, definitions remain problematic. For
Skrapec (1993: 245), a serial murderer is someone who kills at least three
people over a period of time; the killer may or may not have had previous
knowledge of the victim. The inclusion of a sexual component to the
definition of serial murder is problematic for some authors, though
Kelleher and Kelleher (1998) view the sexual predator as being one
feature of their classification of female serial murderers. For some serial
murderers sexual violation and the killing process are intimately connec-
ted. For others, sexual violation may not be an intimate part of the
murder, but the circumstance of the killing may be highly charged and
souvenirs from the body or the scene may be kept for later masturbatory
fantasies. The view that Cameron and Frazer (1987) take—that sexual or
lust killing is solely a male phenomenon—is rejected by Skrapec (1993);
she provides many female examples, both current and historical, from
the US and Europe. Cameron (1996) suggests that the media viewed both
Myra Hindley and Rosemary West as serial killers.

Kelleher and Kelleher (1998: 10) suggest that female serial murderers
fall into two broad categories: those who commit crimes alone and those
who do so in partnership with one or more perpetrators. Female serial
killers who are part of a team act in very different ways to those who act
alone. There are few similarities between those perpetrators who act
alone and the criminal who works in conjunction with someone else,
especially if her partner is a male sexual predator. This broad categoriza-
tion into those who kill with and those who murder without a partner
cannot address questions of motivation.

In stressing the ideological importance of the media Naylor (1995: 79)
quotes from Chibnall thus:

> the power of newspaper interpretation lies in their ability to make events
intelligible at a mundane, ‘commonsense’ level, to provide a guide for
practical activity and to alleviate the need for further investigation and
consideration. The self-confident and assertive style in which the interpre-
tations are communicated complements their general claim to represent
the opinions of all right-minded people and encourages their ready accept-
ance as self-evident and ‘obvious’… This commonsense mode of under-
standing trades off myths and stereotypes which provide simple, comfort-
able, ready-made pictures and explanations of things (Chibnall 1977: 44).

Naylor (1995: 81) suggests that the following typology may be devel-
oped from media coverage of women’s crime.

1. Madonna/whore
2. Sexual passion/love as an ‘excuse’ for crime
3. Reproduction and madness
4. The figure of evil—the witch—the monster
5. The criminal woman as ‘not woman’
6. The female as devious and manipulative.

While recognizing that there is not necessarily a neat ‘fit’ between this typology and individual women criminals, Naylor (1995: 84) proposes that Myra Hindley could be placed in both the sexual passion/love category and the figure of evil—the witch—the monster. Placing Rosemary West in this typology is more problematic; one of the threads in her image seems to be that of the monster. In terms of her sexuality, there seem to be interesting resonances with the Madonna/whore imagery. There also appears to be a thread of the criminal woman as ‘not woman’ in her representation. She does not, however, have the same iconic status as Myra Hindley, who remains fixed in the public imagination as the feminine face of evil. This leads us to explore the media representations of Myra Hindley and Rosemary West in greater detail.

Birch (1993) suggests that the police photograph of Myra Hindley, taken in 1965 at the time of the Moors Murders, depicting her with bleach-blonde hair, hooded eyes and staring blankly from the page, has become synonymous with the idea of feminine evil.

Like the image of Medusa, this photograph has acquired the attribute of myth, the stony gaze of Britain’s longest-serving woman prisoner, striking terror, mingled with fascination, in those who look upon it. At once atavistic—drawing its power from potent symbols of wicked women from the Medusa to seventeenth-century witches—and portentous—what kinds of acts might women be capable of?—that image has become symbolic of the threat of femininity unleashed from its traditional bonds of goodness, tenderness, and nurturance. It strikes at the heart of our fears about unruly women, about criminality and about the way gender is constructed (Birch 1993: 32).

Since 1965 Myra Hindley’s image has continued to have a bizarre grip on the public imagination and has become detached from the subject, the woman who committed those crimes all those years ago. The symbolic weight she bears exceeds the crimes that she and Ian Brady committed at a particular time and in a specific place all those years ago. One of the reasons Birch (1993: 33) suggests that makes this case unique is the fact of her gender; the assumption that it is worse for a woman to be involved in killing children than it is for a man.

Myra Hindley’s reputation is endemic in her femininity, and this is significant for all women. Her image has been used to communicate the horror of femininity, distorted from its ‘natural’ course; this does not mean that the process is intentional or conspiratorial, though in some
cases it may be. Unconsciously, her image has come to represent some of our most commonsense and paradoxical views of women. On the one hand to be a woman is to be passive and naive (Myra Hindley was the dupe of Ian Brady). On the other, her agency can only be explained by her cunning and her taintedness (she is imbued with evil, deviousness and guile). Myra Hindley’s acts deserve our moral repugnance but her image sits uneasily somewhere between the two poles (Birch 1993: 35).

Myra Hindley has become the arch villain and her attempts to gain her freedom have been cited as evidence for her lack of real penitence and of her ‘evil’ nature. In this context, the relationship between femininity and ‘evil’ implies guile, manipulation and deceit. The source of this evil has never been defined. If it is natural, Myra Hindley cannot be blamed for her crimes; if it is acquired, then we need to explore its origins and source. If evil is imposed from outside, as Christian thinking would have it, Myra Hindley stops being a human being, or even a woman at all (Birch 1993: 49).

In reflecting on that photograph of Myra Hindley, we need to be reminded of the gap between what we see and what we know, since the photograph has often sat alongside articles which unintentionally interrogate its meaning—mad or bad? devil or dupe? In doing so, an abyss is created between the belief that femininity guarantees idealism, nurturance and nature, and its opposites: violence, dissoluteness and nihilism. Its purpose is to distance the onlooker from the ‘monster’ it portrays, at the same time reminding us of our own capacity for ‘evil’. It is perhaps one reason why we find the gaze of a single, childless, sexually active woman who kills children so disturbing. It is ultimate fury against and rebuttal of the much vaunted maternal instinct and cuts through the boundary of sexual difference (Birch 1993: 53).

Myra Hindley’s media presence was reinvigorated when her photograph was given a reworking in the ‘Sensation’ exhibition at the Royal Academy in 1997. Here Marcus Harvey used a plaster cast of a child’s hand to make an enlarged picture of the police mug shot of Myra Hindley. Kent (1997: 17) suggests that this recreation gained its mesmeric ferocity through its juxtaposition of opposites—evil and innocence, small and large, touch and vision, the immediate and the mythic.

Walker (1998) suggests the picture of Myra Hindley in the ‘Sensation’ exhibition acts as three kinds of sign—index, icon and symbol. In his semiotic analysis, Walker (1998) suggests that Harvey’s painting can be understood as a supersign, embodying indexical, iconic and symbolic meanings. Here, the indexical sign is associated with the size of the painting (11 ft by 9 ft) and the way in which, in creating such a big picture, the artist endowed it with a quality associated with public
memorials. These are usually associated with heroes and heroines, not criminals. In terms of the picture’s iconic nature, the units of mark in the black and white acrylic paint are made by the plaster cast of the palm of a child’s open hand, not that of a paintbrush. The handprints are an example of an indexical sign, since they span the history of art from cave painting to the present day; they may also be regarded as iconic since they resemble the shape of hands. In this picture therefore, small indexical/iconic signs are used as the building blocks of a larger, different iconic sign. The handprints are poignant because they represent all the children murdered by Hindley and Brady. The painting is symbolic in the sense that Myra Hindley’s face is considered as a sign of evil (Walker 1998: 56-57).

What is interesting about Kent’s (1997) and Walker’s (1998) contribution, is that the visual images in the art world seem to be treated in a significantly different way to those in news media. Although, from an historical perspective, the world of art and the news media may on the surface have had little in common, postmodernism and the increasing commodification of all kinds of artistic artefacts has changed this. The reason is that particular visual images, whatever their provenance, are increasingly spread, reused and reworked across a range of media forms.

From this discussion, there are profound questions to be asked about the standards by which femininity is judged and the ways in which female serial killers unsettle our assumptions about women. In this context we can see how the logic of opposite extremes and the ideological norms of female behaviour combine to refuse her any agency, to make her the ‘innocent victim’ of a psychopathic megalomania or to cast her as essentially wicked. The mythology of Myra Hindley demonstrates that we do not have an adequate language for female killing and this case disrupts the terms in which gender is held in place (Birch 1993: 61).

In discussing the crimes of Fred and Rosemary West and Rosemary’s subsequent trial Wykes (1998: 233-34) suggests that sex and violence constitute a good media story. The media industry is characterized as a mature industry where male norms have prevailed for more than 200 years. The maleness of the occupation in terms of its history, ideology and working practices embeds it in patriarchy, where masculine power depends mainly on female passivity, family and marriage. In the case of the Wests, where conventional gender norms are distorted out of all proportion, the requirement to report accurately may lead to a conflict between the needs of commerce and the needs of patriarchy. The media hype over the case was symptomatic of a broader political agenda, which sought to highlight and extol traditional conservative family and gender
relationships even though the Wests’ family and marriage were sites of aggression, sexual abuse and homicide.

The police and other authorities had known the Wests for some time before February 1994, the month when the police began to dig the garden in 25 Cromwell Street, Gloucester. One explanation for the reluctance to interfere in the relationships of the Wests is the powerful mythology that surrounds the family in our culture and social organization. The current mythology is based on a cultural shift that occurred in the latter part of the nineteenth century that refashioned women as passive, maternal, married, monogamous and well-mannered and viewed husbanding and fatherhood as ‘tamed’ masculinity (Wykes 1998: 235).

As it is currently constructed, the family was created as the site for adult sexuality and childhood innocence; children were to be educated by the state and subject to parental control; families were to be supervised by the medical profession. Under the cloak of traditionalism the notion of the family is not made problematic for either women or children. Instead of analysing the dangerousness of families, journalists tended to adopt a strategy of deflection. This moves all discussion of family problems into discourse where everything except the actual causes is discussed. Feminism, lesbianism, female promiscuity and psychosis take preference over any discussion of the dysfunctional or terminal problems associated with male heterosexual husbandry and fatherhood. Male heterosexuality and paternity, the most entrenched and oppressive of patriarchal sites, remain hardly defined. Criticism of masculine power and values was reduced, deflected or obliterated in the case of the Wests (Wykes 1998: 236-38).

During the course of the trial the primary media discourses were legal and sexual. In blaming Fred and Rose, the media personalized the crimes, pathologized the causes and avoided any criticism of masculinity. This means that nowhere in the public discussion of these crimes was there any attempt to make problematic men’s violence towards women and children. The guilty verdicts against Rose were pre-empted by newspaper headlines during the course of the trial; after the trial the tabloid newspapers ignored the legal arguments and focused solely on constructing Rose’s sexuality as debauched. The tabloid accounts also almost exclusively reported the feminine in a disparaging way and supported a traditional set of gender norms and principles. Even the Wests’ victims had negative connotations—they were from children’s homes, lesbians, runaways, fostered or hitchhikers. There was almost nothing in the reportage about the male clientele who bought sex at Cromwell Street; newspapers reported that some were West Indian, but not that others were white, British and heterosexual. Most men involved
in the press coverage were members of the legal profession. The effect of this was to put femininity on trial — tried by established icons of masculinity (Wykes 1998: 238).

Although the accounts of both Fred and Rose were personalized, they were both qualitatively and quantitatively different. The story was not of male sexual violence, but of female inadequacy as a mother and perversion as a wife; it provides an example of what happens to incompetent girls who leave home too young and/or take lifts from strangers (Wykes 1989: 239-40). This view does not take account of the negative media images of Fred West as the story broke.

One reason for the interrogative gap is that the case against the Wests challenges deeply held and culturally determined beliefs and symbols about home and family. For most of us home is a taken-for-granted concept about place, individuality, solitude and safety. During Rosemary West’s trial ‘home’ became a ‘house of horrors’ in which family members, especially if they were female, and young women were imprisoned, used in sex scenes in Fred’s snuff videos, tortured, raped, abused, killed and buried in unmarked graves (Wykes 1998: 241).

We are also reminded, not only of the prevailing myths around the family, but also of our profound cultural resistance to fully recognizing the nature and extent of domestic violence and abuse, in all its forms. The failure to both theorize and analyse the cultural representations and values associated with gendered violence, led the criminal justice system, in the case of the Wests, to fail to intervene effectively earlier. Over and over again heterosexual, paternal masculinity within the family is regarded as unproblematic, even when there is evidence of the devastation caused across the generations. Male violence is safe behind closed doors; responsibility for male violence is projected on to female psychopathology or stranger danger; it is protected by the myth of home and family, sustained in language through organizations and popular culture (Wykes 1998: 242).

According to Wykes (1998: 241), Fred and Rose came from large families that in many respects appeared normal, though each had an allegedly overbearing father. As a couple, their public image reflected the conventional idea of British family life—heterosexual couple with a mortgage, children, industrious and sociable. Nothing about their adult lives has been suggested as being the origin of their sexual violence, incest and murder. It may be the case that either or both of them were sexually abused as children, but no one has suggested that as children they were familiar with abduction, torment or murder linked to sexuality. Nor do their backgrounds suggest an adult future of prostitution, pimping or procurement of the creation of pornographic video material. However,
what was hardly discussed in the press was the potential criminal commerciality of the West enterprises.

This view of the Wests is challenged by Burn (1998), who provides a fuller, darker picture, not only of the Wests’ relationship but also, in part, describes the social milieu in which their relationship developed. In this account, although many questions remain unanswered, their activities seem to have a more plausible provenance than Wykes (1998) allows.

In order to explore how a family could go so astray we need to take a critical view of family life; this is difficult in a political and social climate that is almost universally pro-family. In the controversy surrounding Fred and Rosemary West, it was the women who were largely critiqued, and by extension, their femininity, maternity and sexuality (Wykes 1998: 223-24).

All those involved in the lives of Fred and Rosemary West, their families of origin and their customers appeared unaware of the terminal, life-denying patriarchy at the heart of 25 Cromwell Street. This blindness did not result from ignorance, but because masculine values are so much a part of the cultural hegemony that they appear natural; that to objectify them, to make them ‘other’, requires a conscious act of will. To place dominance under our analytic gaze is disturbing because it requires us to question our own subjectivity, the families in which we are constellated and the language of our community, both of which are embedded in masculine ideology. The masculine model of home and family remains self-perpetuating because it makes alternative models—lesbian, gay, single, communal—deviant (Wykes 1998: 244).

Furthermore, masculine interests and values buttress journalistic ideology and practice so knowledge is power and power is patriarchal. Work on the discourses of representation and explanation offers some insights in the case of the Wests and suggestions for further work; however, primacy is often given to the production and exchange of meanings in a given situation, rather than to the contextualization of those processes within specific powerful cultural and economic locations (Wykes 1998: 245).

Many questions about what happened at 25 Cromwell Street are likely to remain unanswered. Examples include: the Wests were known to sell sex—why were no prosecutions brought for the soliciting or possession of obscene material? Why were Fred’s videos destroyed when an earlier assault case was dropped? Why did the nearby children’s home have no record of the connection between some of its children and the Wests? (Wykes 1998: 245).
It is not possible to see Rosemary West as a victim of the violent abuse of masculine and commercial power, but it is easy to see her as a scapegoat. This is the point made by Moore (1997) about Myra Hindley. In a rare commentary by a Christian, Moore (1997) outlines how Jesus, by his cross and resurrection, has freed human beings from the need to scapegoat; he also reminds Christians that Jesus was a victim in his earthly life and was scapegoated, even though he had done nothing wrong. Christians are required to delight in the criminal just as much as they do in Jesus. The dynamic tension between a desire to scapegoat and the demand to see the criminal as a victim is wonderfully portrayed at the end of the film Dead Man Walking. Moore (1997) reminds us that one dreadful side-effect of Myra Hindley’s evil is that it puts her beyond the reach of our compassion and locks us into a pattern of scapegoating that is beyond the love of Christ. This means that what may have happened to her in her years of captivity does not exist for us. Moore’s (1997) comments are as relevant for Rosemary West as they are for Myra Hindley.

In attempting to provide a feminist framework for understanding the crimes committed by Rosemary West, Cameron (1996–97) suggests that she may have experienced abuse as a child and have been subject to abuse from Fred. In her endeavour to account for the differences in responses by women and men to personal experience of abuse she suggests that:

Women and men are not in the same position, even when both are suffering the most hideous abuse: for they live in a world that treats their suffering differently. It is both more important, culturally speaking, for men to transcend it, and more conceivable that they could. Masculinity is by cultural convention incompatible with victim status, whereas femininity is not. Women in patriarchal society are given little or no sense of entitlement and power, and are thus more likely than most men to feel trapped in the victim position (Cameron 1996–97: 51).

We are also reminded that in patriarchal cultures, hierarchies of gender are used to police other hierarchical social relations, for example the use of rape in male prisons. Variations in those who occupy the dominant and subordinate positions in the social/sexual hierarchy can occur without the overall structure being altered. This view fails to take account of the situations in which women do have power (e.g. in many areas of the workplace and over children and vulnerable adults) and the complex ways in which the expression of spiritual, emotional and/or physical pain may be influenced by gender, age, cultural, historical, biological, social and/or religious factors. This leads us to explore Giraud’s (1986) work in relationship to the discussion of media representations of Myra Hindley and Rosemary West.
In considering the stereotype of crisis in relationship to Myra Hindley, whether Britain in the 1960s can be described as a time of social and cultural disorder, leading to a loss of difference, remains an open question. The social, cultural and economic changes, in the UK, as outlined by Marwick (1998), did not lead to institutional collapse, resulting in the negation of hierarchical and functional differences between people and the development of a cultural sameness that is dull and hideous. Nor is it possible from his work to establish any evidence for a speeding up of the tempo of positive exchanges and an increase in negative reciprocity.

In exploring the stereotype of accusation, it is difficult to understand in this context what Girard (1986) means by the obscurity of culture. The ferocity of public reaction to Myra Hindley’s crimes was mediated by the press who were keen to exploit a good news story. It may be the case that the moral outrage at her crimes was expressive, in part, of a more profound anxiety at the cultural changes already alluded to and of womanhood in general, gone awry. In terms of collective persecution, Myra Hindley’s crimes were directed against one group whom it is criminal to attack—children. It is not possible, more than 30 years after the crimes were committed, to establish whether there was any sexual motivation present in this context. Myra Hindley can be understood as having committed a religious crime in this sense: that having profoundly offended the (patriarchal) values of the newspaper industry in particular and the public in general, she was in fact offending against God the Father (see Daly 1986).

In relationship to the stereotype of the victim, Myra Hindley became a scapegoat, because she was a woman. Ian Brady’s relative obscurity, in comparison to Myra Hindley, means that she bears more than her share of public opprobrium for the crimes they committed together. In this context, Myra Hindley has been persecuted for her gender, thus highlighting differences in public and media attitudes towards men and women who murder children. In addition no public explanations have been given to account for the underlying factors which contributed to these crimes being committed and, unlike Mary Bell (see Sereny 1972), Myra Hindley has not produced her own account of the events.

In Girard’s concept of the scapegoat, although it is not possible in the case of Myra Hindley to establish the stereotype of crisis, it is possible to establish that she fits into the stereotype of accusation and the stereotype of victims. In this case, therefore, she fulfils the demand that two of the three categories apply to her. In this context it is possible to establish that (1) her acts of violence were real, (2) the crisis is real in the sense that she profoundly challenges our notions of womanhood, (3) in becoming a sign of evil, her photograph demands that she must be considered guilty.
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in relationship to her victims, and (4) in her imprisonment she was banished from the community she was believed to ‘pollute’.

In reflecting on the issues in relation to Rosemary West, the work of Harvey (1990) is pertinent to the stereotype of crisis. Despite the significant political, economic and cultural changes outlined by Harvey (1990), institutional collapse resulting in the negation of hierarchical and functional differences between people and the development of a cultural sameness that is both dull and hideous does not appear to have taken place. Nor is it clear what relationship there is between his arguments and an increase in the negative exchanges characterized by blows, vengeance and neurotic symptoms. It is difficult to establish whether there is increasing opposition between people, an increase in the uniformity of their behaviour and the prevalence of cultural similarity. Nor is it possible to establish whether a cultural crisis exists because of the difficulty in applying this aspect of Girard’s (1986) theory to the modern context.

In considering the stereotype of accusation, the press appeared disconcerted at the enormity of a disaster that appeared to strike at traditional views of women, their sexuality and family life. This was, in essence, a moral crisis and little attempt was made to understand the underlying factors which contributed to Rosemary West’s behaviour in this context. Like Myra Hindley, Rosemary West has not herself provided a plausible account for her actions.

In terms of collective persecution, the accusations against Rosemary West made the media suspect that violence was in the air. Her victims were not seen as vulnerable because many of them lived on the margins of society—they were lesbians, runaways, children from the children’s home across the road. Rosemary West’s persecution was primarily based on her sexual crimes and her violent, debauched sexuality, thereby contravening the strictest social taboos of ‘normal’ heterosexuality as expressed in marriage. Like Myra Hindley, she can be understood as having committed a religious crime in this sense; that having profoundly offended the (patriarchal) values of the newspaper industry in particular and the public in general, she was in fact offending against God the Father (see Daly 1986).

In the stereotype of victims, Rosemary West was persecuted, because of the perception that (1) her femininity had gone awry through her explicit sexuality and debauched sexual orientation; (2) she was an incompetent mother—a sex offender who was unable to protect her children, and (3) her violent sexuality and lesbianism/bisexuality. Like Myra Hindley, Rosemary West became a scapegoat because of her gender; Fred West’s
suicide in prison appears to have absolved him of most of his responsibility in the crimes for which his wife was convicted.

In terms of Girard’s (1988) typology Rosemary West can be regarded as a scapegoat because although the stereotype of crisis cannot be upheld she certainly fulfils the categories of the stereotype of accusation and the stereotype of victims. It is possible therefore, that in the case of Rosemary West, (1) the acts of violence are real, (2) the crisis is real in the sense that her crimes challenge some of the most deeply held views about women, (3) she was chosen, not for the crimes she was accused of, but for the signs she bore and everything that suggested her guilty relationship, and (4) her imprisonment enabled her to be banished from the community she sought to ‘pollute’.

Two aspects of the concept of scapegoat which Girard (1986) does not address, are (1) the close cultural association between women and evil in the West, and (2) issues relating to the portrayal of gender and sexual orientation.

In exploring a feminist approach to evil Noddings (1989) suggests that:

Woman as body, as vessel, has been worshipped, coveted, feared and hated. The sexual passion of man has been explained by the seductive and insatiable desires of woman, and thus everything naturally related to woman has been morally suspect. Not only have we lost the eloquent feminine in moral matters, but also by establishing half the human race as scapegoat we have failed to come to grips with the problem of evil (Noddings 1989: 43).

In relationship to Myra Hindley, we have already seen that the work of Birch (1993) supports the above views; she reminds us of the ways in which not only has the frequently reproduced picture of Myra Hindley become divorced from the reality of her as a human being but that her image has become symbolic of the threat of femaleness, let loose from the conventional ties of righteousness, gentleness and nurturance. This means that in Noddings’ (1989) terms she is to be both feared and hated. As Birch (1993: 52) suggests, the treacherous, sexually active, bleach-blonde femme fatale, so popular in the postwar film noir genre, is both desired by men as well as feared. This reflects a culture defined by men that is split into the unknowable (female) and the knowable (male). Noddings (1989) also refers to the ‘sexual passion of man’, referring to the male viewer, or consumer of the visual texts; his passion is ‘explained by the seductive and insatiable desires of woman’ [Myra Hindley] (Noddings 1989: 43), made all the more powerful because of her ‘otherness’ from him.

In linking the image of Myra Hindley to those of the Medusa and the seventeenth-century witches, Birch (1993) reminds us of the long histori-
cal gaze of men upon women. Not only do visual images of men not have a comparable imagery or associations for women spectators, but in this context, women as spectators or consumers of the media image remain largely absent. Newspapers are owned and created by men and for male readers; this is partly reflected by the ‘page three girls’ (notice the use of language—girls, not women) in the tabloids. The broadsheets tend to have features designed specifically for women readers. This supports the contention made by Wykes (1998) that the media industry is at root profoundly patriarchal.

From the perspective of Rosemary West different issues arise. That ‘woman as body, as vessel, has been worshipped, feared and hated’ (Noddings 1989) is, at a profound level, one underlying factor in the social and sexual control of women in marriage and the family (Wykes 1998). Man’s sexual passion, and its explanation via the seductive and sexual desires of women, is graphically illustrated in the discussion on Rosemary West; any media discussion of the dysfunctional or terminal problems associated with male, heterosexual husbandry and fatherhood remained absent. Rosemary West’s sexuality was represented as being debauched and her femininity was described in a disparaging way. She became morally suspect during the course of her trial, in part because of her sexuality, but also because her victims had negative connotations—they included runaways, hitchhikers, lesbians and children from children’s homes. Following her sentence and admission to jail, the tabloid press reported her as having engaged in ‘lesbian romps’ with Myra Hindley. In her discussion of the depiction of lesbians on death row, Farr (2000) reflects on the importance of the social construction of gender and media representations of lesbianism; she suggests that these offenders were typically portrayed as manly and man-hating women, who vent their rage and irrational desire for revenge through killing. This view seems to me, in part, to underscore the discussion of Rosemary West’s sexuality and to feed into the misogyny and misreporting at the heart of her trial.

Farr’s (2000) argument is given further weight by Winter (2002) who compares and contrasts the role of judicial summing up in the trials of Myra Hindley and Rosemary West. She maintains that a critical difference between the two trials was that the case against Myra Hindley is strongly supported by the evidence and that the evidence against Rosemary West was weak. Winter (2002) maintains that a significant factor in the successful prosecution of Rosemary West was the portrayal of her gender.

The differences in the approaches to gender are most acute in relation to the construction of each woman’s role. In Myra Hindley’s case, the judge,
like the prosecution in the main body of the trial, makes some concessions to her subordination and passivity. The position in the summing up in Rose West’s trial is very different. The judge’s complete acceptance of the prosecution case (its narrative and sex/gender construction) means that he also endorses the construction of Rose West’s dominant role. In emphasizing, exploiting and condemning Rose West’s sexuality… the judge influences the jury towards conviction. Furthermore, the heavy focus on Rose West’s sexuality, the implicit condemnation not only of violent sexuality but also lesbian and bisexual sexuality, and its use to incite prejudice against Rose West shores up the norm of heterosexuality, and thus implicitly the categories of male and female (Winter 2002: 363).

The scapegoating of Rosemary West can be seen in the representations of her deviant femininity and sexuality. At a more profound level, it can be seen in the absence of any public discourse that makes problematic white masculinity and male violence as embodied in Fred West. In this context the analytic gaze, and its associated language, is embedded in masculine ideology (Wykes 1998). The result of this is not only to exclude the feminine in moral matters, but also to make problematic the development of a female discourse that is genuinely independent of the dominant ideology (Butler 1993).

Applying Girard’s (1986) concept of the scapegoat to media representations of Myra Hindley and Rosemary West has been problematic for the following reasons. Although Marwick (1998) and Harvey (1990) outline many significant economic, political and cultural changes that have occurred in Britain and in Western Europe, it is, for example, easier to apply this concept to the Bosnian genocide of 1992–95 or the Rwandan genocide of 1994 than it is to media representations of Myra Hindley and Rosemary West.

In spite of the problems outlined above, we have seen that both Myra Hindley and Rosemary West fulfil Girard’s (1986) criteria for the stereotype of accusation and the stereotype of victims. This means that they fulfil the requirements set out by Girard because they meet two of the three criteria. However, Girard’s (1986) theoretical approach to the concept of the scapegoat is helpful only in part. In this context we need to take account of the complex ways in which gender, sexual orientation and criminal behaviour are socially constructed in a world that is saturated by visual images via local, national and international media institutions. The scapegoating of Myra Hindley and Rosemary West has been communicated in a self-confident and assertive style; this interpretation of their crimes has been communicated in such a way that suggests that all right-minded people can have no other opinion and that this view is self-evident and ‘obvious’. This commonsense form of understanding trades off myths and stereotypes which view Myra Hindley as
combining something of the Madonna/whore and sexual passion/love imagery; in Rosemary West’s case there seems to be a combination of the Madonna/whore imagery with the criminal woman as ‘not woman’ (Naylor 1995).

Jantzen (1998) suggests that the Western symbolic order is underpinned by a patriarchal philosophy of religion and that this is reflected in the principal social/cultural institutions; in a postmodern world media institutions are increasingly significant players in the social, cultural and economic world and remain underpinned by the same symbolic order referred to by Jantzen (1998). In this context this is amply illustrated by Birch (1993), Naylor (1995), Wykes (1998), Farr (2000) and Winter (2002).

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Abstract

This article explores black homophobia as a co-constitutive phenomenon which harbors the fear of the loss of a black archetypal identity that can be understood as (hetero)normative. Using a method of queering black homophobia from a hetero non-normative viewpoint, an exploration of the authenticity of a liberation viewpoint that is multivocal, multidimensional, and offering an interpretation that is inclusive of identities that trouble the waters of black hetero-patriarchal hegemony will be in question as it relates to the role of the Hamitic hypothesis and those interpretations that conflate evil, sexual perversion, and human degeneration within blackness.

Introduction

While there will be those who deny the present state of gay oppression in black churches, many heterosexuals will support the validity of this claim and begin the difficult task of challenging black theology and church structure that define homosexuality as immoral.1

The understanding of ‘blackness’ expressed as male and female, family and community, straight or gay, in or out, is inextricably connected to the Bible and the validation expressed therein. The black biblical hermeneutic is one that reflects the prideful affirmation that we are an equal and precious part of God’s creational genius. The hard-fought gains for righteous inclusion in God’s plan are precious to who we are as a people and our protection of that understanding is of the utmost importance. For many in the community the efficacy of the Word is bound up within a

The hermeneutical framework that has freed us from the biblical narrative on the one hand and bound us to it on the other. Through biblical interpretation we made what was essentially ‘ungiven’ within the biblical narrative an existential ‘given’ within the community; we found ourselves and God where we were told neither existed. It is for this very reason that the word (as an interpretive strategy) has become the Word (the validating mandate of God). However, our interpretation(s) often harbor the same punitive exclusivity and dogma writ large that was used to define an immoral and unethical pathology of African identity and develop reasons for our subsequent enslavement. Though we have embraced a hermeneutical task with a genius that reveals our ability to survive, liberate, and to elevate, we still suffer from the unspoken effects of oppression in the form of sex, gender, and race upon the black community and the black church. James Evans asserts that there are ‘three pillars’ of biblical interpretation: (1) the first is based on the experience of the people of Israel as recorded in the book of Exodus (Exod. 1.12), which he also calls the ‘Hebrew model of interpretation’ and associates with the ‘struggle for political emancipation in African-American experience, thereby reversing the patriarchal paradigm espoused by biblical defenders of slavery’; (2) the second is based on biblical references to Ethiopia, Cush and Egypt with key motifs found in Ps. 68.31, which he calls the ‘Ethiopic model’ and associates with addressing the need for cultural integrity and racial pride, countering the Hamitic argument for the inferiority and invisibility of African-Americans; and (3) the New Testament where the affirmation of Jesus’ positive stance toward the downtrodden and oppressed ‘gave sustenance to the struggle for survival and freedom in a hostile society’. These ‘three pillars’ are imbedded in a hermeneutical tradition that speaks prophetically against the socially accepted sanctions rooted in a profanized divine edict.

There are three elements that Evans says are key (and very possibly profoundly unique) to understanding the role of the Bible in African-American life: multivocality, multidimensionality and interpretation which constructs meaning ‘where it is not readily apparent’. When a queer lens is applied to Evans’ assertion, serious questions can be raised concerning the multivocality, multidimensionality, and the construction of interpretation ‘where it is not readily apparent’ with regards to black homophobia and the black church. If multivocality is present within the

2. See James H. Evans, We Have Been Believers (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992), pp. 53-62.
3. Evans, We Have Been Believers, pp. 40-45.
4. Evans, We Have Been Believers, p. 44.
tradition, why then is the gay voice so silent? If multidimensionality is present within the tradition, why is the so-called homosexual not one who exists openly and equally alongside the others? Why does the act of gay appropriation and interpretation of the biblical text have no positive meaning or value that is at least ‘readily apparent’? What role does sex, gender and race play in the construction of that which is not readily apparent within the black church? My task here is not to take on concepts of immorality as suggested by Horace Griffin, but to queer the issue of multivocality, multidimensionality, and interpretation in order to elucidate what is not readily apparent, and develop discourse that transforms the debate and troubles the waters of black homophobic oppression found in the black church and community. My interest in this topic will be explored further in a more comprehensive fashion at a later time, but for the purposes of this project, my work will be limited to Evans’ Hebrew/Ethiopic model (of biblical interpretation) with particular attention given to the Hamitic myth/hypothesis which, when viewed co-constitutively, reveals how multivocality and multidimensionality relates to the construction of an interpretation of the curse that is not ‘readily apparent’ and to show how this came to embody the concept of sexual deviancy, which led to the perpetuitous condition of slave/outsider of the black race and black homophobia. In order to proceed I will first offer a working definition of queer theory (if that is possible) and black homophobia (a hetero non-normative claim). Secondly, I will talk about how Ham’s actions/in-actions, Noah’s curse, and black homophobia co-constitute denial: the denial of voice, the denial of otherness, and the denial of greater meaning for the black church, the black community and black identity. Finally, I will propose how we might move toward ‘Black Theology as a Sexual Discourse of Transformation’ which, at its best, troubles the waters, transforms the debate, and creates change.

Queer Theory: What it Is and What it Is Not

As stated earlier, this project is an attempt to queer what is not readily apparent with regards to black homophobia in the black church and the community. What is queer? What is queer theory? Laurel C. Schneider articulates these important characteristics (among many) about queerness and queer theory:

Queer theory is not just for or about so-called homosexuals. It is critical theory concerned principally with cultural deployments of power through social constructions of sexuality and gender... Why queer theory employs ‘queer’ in its name is important for understanding the basic presuppositions of the discourse. In theoretical terms, ‘queer’ has come to denote a hermeneutical position similar to other late-twentieth-century theories
such as third-wave feminism and post colonialism, homosexuality, heterosexuality, race, nationality, woman, and man. As a term queer refers to anything outside of the norm.\textsuperscript{5}

It becomes immediately apparent that for the task at hand queer theory is more than adequate. Queer theory allows me to do three very powerful things: First, it gives me the authority to speak. I open with an epigraph in which Horace Griffin implores us to begin the difficult task of challenging black theology and church structure that define homosexuality as immoral. The most difficult task of speaking out against difficult issues is finding support for what you say and feeling that you have the authority to do so. Griffin’s blessing and queer theory’s claim that it is ‘not just for or about so-called homosexuals’ validates my attempt to speak and call to be heard. Secondly, it gives me a method. By using queer theory I can get at my primary concern: how the ‘deployments of power through social constructions of sexuality and gender’ affect the multivocality, multidimensionality, and the construction of interpretation ‘where it is not readily apparent’ with regards to black homophobia, the black community, and especially the black church. Finally, it gives me a location. In the act of my willfully moving outside of my own concept of normal, by intentionally relinquishing my constructed self and bringing my identity into question, I become queer; I seek another ‘outsider viewpoint’ (outside of myself). As such my location reveals the co-constitutive viewpoint of one who chooses to take on the process of hominization: an altered state (a hominexus), which I define as the acceptance of an ever-evolving inter-relational, non-normative, destabilized, de-naturalized, de-essentialized human identity.\textsuperscript{6}

**Black Homophobia: A Hominized Viewpoint**

The assertion can be made that black homophobia is, in itself, a co-constitutive construction that holds the products of black oppression and


\textsuperscript{6} I use these terms as a means by which I might be able to move beyond the constraints or dangers of reinscribing heteronormativity upon my queering processes. I seek to become completely vulnerable by using a term that is neither gender or sexually specific. Hominization is that process. The term hominexus is a combination of ‘hominoid’, meaning any of the superfamily of primates including humanity and ‘nexus’, meaning a connection, tie, link, between individuals and/or groups. Hominexus serves as a means of defining me as being a human that is seeking to evolve into one who seeks connectedness based on sameness with other humans rather than disconnectedness based on a set or subset of perceived difference.
the hallmark of colonialism: the negative deployment of race, sexuality, gender, identity, and power. Colonial thought ensured that the abnormally grotesque essence of blackness would come to validate the normativity of whiteness through the racialization of black sexuality (blacks are sexual deviants) and the sexualization of black identity (sexual deviancy is the reason for blacks being oppressed). The conflation of black identity and sexual deviancy has created an ‘archetypal Other’. Black identity as an ‘archetypal Other’ has created the powerful phenomenon of black binarisms: black as a condition that is too flawed, too abnormal to be normal in and of itself; it must have a culturally prescribed normal pole to give it value. Cornel West says ‘The Afro-American encounter with the modern world has been shaped first and foremost by the doctrine of white supremacy...’. The inferences of white supremacy have created the normalcy by which blackness seeks to overcome its otherness. That normal pole, developed as such through the modern discourse of white supremacy becomes the value-added affixture that makes black, black and normal or as in the case of black sexuality, black and abnormal. As such, the black identity, coupled with sexual deviancy and grotesqueness has caused the need of another more ‘normal’ pole to help it overcome its lack of a sexual ‘correctness’: heteronormativity. West says ‘This logic [of white supremacy] is manifest in the way in which the controlling metaphors, notions, and categories of modern discourse produce and prohibit, develop and delimit, specific conceptions of truth and knowledge, beauty and character, so that certain ideas are rendered incomprehensible and unintelligible’. When this is applied to the use of black binaries as a means by which the ‘archetypal Other’ might be overcome, the assertion can be made that white supremacy makes ‘incomprehensible and unintelligible’ the idea that blackness is some-


8. Haynes, ‘Original Dishonor’, section 3. Haynes notes that Benjamin Braude observes the medieval imagination saw Ham as ‘archetypal other, the examples of qualities not to be emulated...Ham imagery provided a great variety of themes that, given the appropriate social need, could be bent in any number of directions’.


thing that can be understood as normal—especially within the binary of black heterosexuality. In claiming the other (normal sexual pole) we in fact buy into the concept of black inadequacy because all normal poles (man, woman, etc.) belong to whiteness, maleness, and the supremacy the two together come to embody. The rationale of ‘twoness’, the binated embodiment of ‘unreconciled strivings’ remains forever susceptible to white supremacy due to the perceived correctness of heteronormative positioning that is inextricable from the perceived deviance and attrited condition of blackness. Because of this, all black binaries are judged first by their blackness (not within the concept of the normative gaze).\(^{11}\) Second, all black binaries are judged as deviant (physical and mental inferiority implies cultural primitiveness and sexual looseness).\(^ {12}\) Third, all black binaries are never judged as being ‘normal’ (due to the idea that normal belongs to whiteness).\(^ {13}\) As such, our claims to be wholly identified still suffer from the delusional concepts offered within the idea of heteronormativity. Black heteronormativity can never be achieved because the ‘archetypal Other’ is needed to maintain white hegemonic discourse and fuel its concepts of supremacy. Black homosexuality suffers the weight of this unresolved ontological argument of normality for it presupposes the accursedness of the ‘archetypal Other’ which blackness seeks to escape. Black homophobic discourse is created in defense of the perceived ability to proclaim any type of prototypical identity that might be considered righteous, normal, and beyond the constructed ‘Other’ of blackness. If we continue to limit our understanding to binaries of male/female, white/black, so-called gay/so-called straight, black/white, saved/sinner, or in/out, we will never destabilize the colonial constructions of our imposed grotesqueness and be truly transformed. Black homophobia reveals a fear of challenging the places that have tradi-

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11. West, *Prophesy Deliverance!,* p. 54. West says, ‘The recovery of classical antiquity in the modern West produced what I shall call a "normative gaze", namely an ideal from which to order and compare observations. This ideal was drawn from classical aesthetic values of beauty, proportion, and human form and classical cultural forms of moderation, self-control, and harmony’.

12. West, *Prophesy Deliverance!,* p. 59. See West’s section on ‘Theoretical Consequences: Restrictive Powers in Modern Discourse’. I make the assertion that the devaluation of the African developed through the ‘normative gaze’ encompassed the sexuality of the African as well.

13. West, *Prophesy Deliverance!,* p. 64. Paraphrasing West, I make the assertion that the justification of racial differences ‘grounded in nature, that is ontology and later biology’ preclude the ability of blackness, even in its binated form, from ever becoming a part of what is considered normal within the Western discourse of white supremacy.
tionally been the repository of our validation, pride, self-worth, wholeness, and righteousness: the Bible and the black church. Second, black homophobia expresses the fear of losing the ability to claim a normative identity and the frail stability that comes along with it. It is less a fear of the so-called homosexual and more a fear of questioning the powers that have shaped our identity: the power of white supremacy and the black church. Black homophobia sustains the subconscious belief of black abnormality, our ‘archetypal otherness’, and ensures that whiteness will remain a powerful hegemonic measure of normativity.

*Epistemology of the Tent*

Stephen R. Haynes says:

> through the centuries the dominant paradigm for interpreting Ham’s transgression has been sexual… Thus, for nearly two millennia biblical interpreters have held Ham and his descendants responsible for everything from the existence of slavery and serfdom to the perpetuation of sexual license and sexual perversion (including incest and sodomy), to the introduction of magical arts, astrology, idolatry, witchcraft, and heathen religion.\(^\text{14}\)

As such, a biblical interpretation infused with sexual deviancy and *blackness* would come to affirm the infamy of Ham and his progeny. Ham and his descendants would become the foils for the creation of their own undoing and for the introduction of sexual evil in the world at large. I want to explain here my reasons for calling this Noah’s curse, something which is quite contrary to the concept of it being Ham’s curse (which by the way is itself a mis-designation). Queerly stated, as an outsider, as one who is expressing a hetero non-normative viewpoint, the first place to begin destabilizing the reasons for black homophobia and black grotesqueness is in re-naming, re-placing, and reinterpreting the act. These three elements will be used to develop an *epistemology of the tent*.

*Re-naming the Act*

Gerhard von Rad says that curses are ‘proclaimed by specially authorized persons (cult prophets?) and supported by the faith community’.\(^\text{15}\) Only Noah has the power and the ability to curse; only Noah has the power and the ability to name. It is quite interesting to me that Ham,

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though clearly at the center of the act is not the one who is cursed, but his son, Canaan (Gen. 9.25). At least on one level we re-name the act when we understand the power dynamics of the event, which clearly shows that Noah has the power to curse and that it is Canaan who becomes the accursed. Why then is this a power Noah chooses to levy against his son’s progeny? Walter Brueggemann states, ‘Canaan is not to be understood as an ethnic grouping, but as a characterization of all who practice alternatives to obeying the sovereignty and trusting graciousness of Yahweh’.\(^ {16}\) Accordingly, it can be said Canaan becomes synonymous with another way of being that is considered to be outside of the plan of YHWH (God). Canaan must also be understood in the context of estrangement from claims of land. What then is the role of Ham? If Canaan is understood as representing the land then Ham must be understood as the people embodying those who practice the alternative and in doing so, become estranged from the land (of Canaan) and the ‘graciousness of YHWH’. What does this have to do with blackness and black homophobia? ‘Cursed be Canaan; lowest of slaves shall he be to his brothers’ (Gen. 9.25). Ephraim Isaac tells us that this verse has fallen prey to great misinterpretation by ‘medieval Jewish, Christian, and Muslim theologians transferring the curse of Canaan on to Ham’.\(^ {17}\) This interpretation is central to the colonial construction of blackness as the estranged abnormal other that is outside of the graciousness of YHWH. Black homophobia is in part built on the concept of the fear that to accept alternative ways of being is a condemnation of our community and ensures our estrangement from the graciousness of YHWH.

**Re-placing the Act**

For the purposes of this project we will first deal directly with the actions that took place inside of the tent (Gen. 9.20-21). It is obvious, especially in light of the preceding exegetical re-naming I have provided, that the event is fraught with ambiguity and reversal. Randall C. Bailey says the tent is ‘generally associated with security’.\(^ {18}\) If this is the case, the ques-

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17. Ephraim Isaac, ‘Ham (Person)’, *ABD*, IV, pp. 31-32.

18. Bailey calls attention to Gen. 31.33, ‘where Rachel is safe from Laban’s search for his gods; Josh 7:21, where Achan places the *herem* in his tent for safe keeping; … 2 Sam 6:17, where the ark is placed within a tent. He also says that trickery is associated with the tent in Judge 4:17ff., where Jael tricks Sisera into her tent, a place he thinks is safe’. Randall C. Bailey, ‘They’re Nothing but Incestuous Bastards: The Polemical Use of Sex and Sexuality in Hebrew Canon Narratives’, in Fernando F. Sergovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (eds.), *Reading from this Place: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995), pp. 121-38 (134).
One can say the tent is the holder of Noah’s knowledge of his secret self. It is, in effect, a secret garden (Edenesque) hidden from the view of the world. It is quite interesting a fruit (grapes in this instance) would again be central to the disclosure of knowledge. That it is apparently fruit which reveals sexual knowledge here in the new world after the flood is quite profound. What is also interesting is the fact that the feminine dimension is not readily apparent inside of the tent, but assumed. Yet, it is here as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick says, ‘knowledge’ and ‘sex’ become conceptually inseparable and available. The uncovering (knowing) of the father in the new world, re-visits the uncovering (knowing) of the Creator in the Beginning (Eden). Like the Creator, Noah is above reproach and therefore found blameless for his indiscretion, beguilement, intoxication and knowing. There is no Eve (no feminine) to be blamed here (for dishonor, for shame, for sin), but then there is Ham.

Revealing the Act

Ham becomes the foil for Noah’s sexual secrets and as such is cursed for ‘outing’ Noah to his brothers. When viewed queerly, something more befalls Ham which is just as prominent and powerful. One must also understand in the tent, Ham becomes Eve and with his feminization befalls the same fate as Eve. In becoming feminized Ham feels pain and estrangement in association with his children just as Eve did. In the epistemology of the tent, where knowledge means sexual knowledge and secrets mean sexual secrets, we are also shown that the feminine, characterized as Ham (as the sexual deviant), is a key component of Noah’s ability to curse Canaan. The heteronormative patriarchal positioning of Noah, Shem, and Japheth is righteously opposed to the accursed homoerotic non-normative feminization of Ham. How does secrecy become ‘this secret’ (homoerotic and feminized) and how does ‘this secret’ become raced? The re-covering of Noah by Shem and Japheth can be said to represent the closeting of the homoerotic and the blessing


20. Nahum M. Sarna, The JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989) concerning Noah’s drunkenness interprets there is no blame attached to Noah since he was ‘oblivious to the intoxicating effects of his discovery’ (p. 65).

21. Sarna, The JPS Torah Commentary, p. 65, points out the fact that Noah’s actions take place inside his tent and this makes Ham’s behavior ‘all the more contemptible’.
of heteronormativity.22 The feminization of Ham and the cursing of Canaan becomes the damning of openness, of sexual difference, of the feminine, of homonormativity. The abnormally grotesque sex/gender construction of Ham-femme has to be created in order to maintain Noah’s honor and hide his own homoerotic identity. The secret becomes raced when the curse is transferred from (the land of) Canaan on to (the people) Ham where subsequently, he is blackened and comes to embody sexual deviancy expressed as the masculine effeminate. Black homophobia is a fear of the tent (or the closet). It is a fear of becoming feminized, it is a fear of losing patriarchal positioning, it is a fear of access to normalcy, and it is a fear of embracing our own uniquely queer non-normativity. This is an interpretation which reveals something not ‘readily apparent’, but significant to our understanding of black homophobia.

*Troubling the Waters*

The refutations that have been offered in response to the prevailing heteronormative interpretations of Noah’s curse have done much in the way of building a black ontology that allows for ‘being black’ to encompass archetypes that are nearer to heteronormativity and whiteness than those which were central to the propagation of a hermeneutic which formed the colonial understanding of black as less than equal. Through the religion of the African in America a hermeneutic was born that has always proclaimed the normativity of the black identity. The efforts to liberate the African in America from the shadow of the gospel of black grotesqueness and deviancy encompassed the whole community. It was as Evans posits a multivocal and multidimensional effort that developed a new and powerful hermeneutic of liberation which restored blackness into the family of God. We see ourselves no longer as the disinherited, but in moving forward as a community we have failed to maintain a religious coherence that is multivocal and multidimensional. The black hermeneutic that re-formed the center has now itself become the center, leaving a multitude of its people on the margins of the gospel message. *Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me* (Mt. 25.45). Who and what does black homophobia hide? Who and what are we attempting to keep inside of the tent (closet)? In our push for normalization have we allowed our spirit to become co-opted

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22. Interestingly, Randall C. Bailey points out that it is the act of re-covering Noah by Shem and Japheth which draws suspicion, especially since the tent is generally associated with security. Bailey says, ‘This causes the reader to think that maybe the suspicion of sexual innuendo is misdirected. It must have been only voyeurism on Ham’s part’ (Bailey, ‘They’re Nothing but Incestuous Bastards’, p. 134).
by the dominant culture? Do we help maintain the very structures that we once fought to overcome? Does black homophobia reveal to us what we ‘do not do for the least of these’? I am not implying that the so-called homosexual is the sole representative of the least of the black community or the black church. This line of questioning is meant to reveal the absence of certain dimensions and certain voices at the table. The presence of the poor, the under-educated, the young, the old, the so-called homosexual are the ‘least’ evident in the place that has long been central to the formation and maintenance of our identity: the black church. The relationship between the multivocality of the biblical narrative and the multidimensionality of African-American experience of which James H. Evans speaks has developed a black ontology which includes everything short of gay/lesbian identities as well as those who do not fit neatly into definitions of black normality. There is a denial of the external reality of the other, a sort of sexual/cultural autism which directs those who do have a voice to favor the hetero-normative interpretations that conserve the presuppositions of the Hamitic hypothesis and ensures black homophobia will remain intact. Interpretation as an act of human appropriation has done little to construct new meaning where it is not readily apparent; rather it has buttressed the old. We must begin to ‘trouble the waters’ that have lain placid for far too long and develop a sexual discourse of transformation which gives voice, presence and understanding to ‘the least of these’.

Multivocality

Concerning the issue of multivocality, I feel it is appropriate to begin with the question of ‘What voices are present?’ as a means of understanding what voices are not present with regards to my queer understanding of Ham and its relation to black homophobia. ‘…Cursed be Canaan; lowest of slaves shall he be to his brothers’. He also said, ‘Blessed by the LORD my God be Shem; and let Canaan be his slave. May God make space for Japheth, and let him live in the tents of Shem; and let Canaan be his slave’. The voice of Noah is one that is supravocal. His voice is heard above all others and represents the voice of patriarchy, the masculine, righteousness (heteronormativity), inclusivity, exclusivity, and even God (covenant making). Noah’s supravocality creates a chasm into which the feminine, the homoerotic, Ham, Canaan, even Shem and Japheth fall deathly silent. Even the animals of the ark are not heard. The tent becomes a place where the story is de-vocalized and in its place the supra-imposition of Noah’s perspective becomes the witness of what was ‘uncovered’ and expressed by Ham. The loudness of Noah is more a concern for his shame/fear than it is a concern for Ham’s actions/
inactions (sexual/asexual): Is a curse levied against Canaan for what Ham did (engage in a homoerotic act with his father or find his brothers engaged in a homoerotic act with their father and each other) or for what he did not do (respond to his father’s drunken advances or those of his brothers or both)?

Why is the voice of the accursed so silent? One of the most striking observations concerning Noah’s curse is the silence of Ham. We are told Ham does say something, but never is that utterance identified with any degree of certainty. Randall C. Bailey says, ‘The story is fraught with ambiguity as to what exactly happens… Rather our concern is that the ambiguity leads the reader to resolve that something sexual has transpired, and regardless of the act, it was enough to justify a curse of slavery upon at least one of the descendants of Ham’. It seems Ham’s silence brings in other voices (most notably Noah’s supravocality) which prevent him from ever being heard. His actions are colored by those who have the power to speak and to be heard. This act of ‘calling out’ by Ham has the effect of silencing him and once this is done, other acts of oppression or devaluation of Ham and his descendants are readily sanctioned, condoned, and accepted in both ancient and modern times.

The silence surrounding black homophobia reveals the silence imposed upon Ham and appropriated by the supravocality of colonialism. Our own silencing of the so-called homosexual is in essence a silent acceptance of white supravocality: we allow them to speak for us. In creating black homophobia as a means of silencing what we fear (either the loss of identity, feminization, the threat to black patriarchy, or the admittance of it [black identity] being a product of whiteness), we have in fact re-enacted the silence of Ham and placed the yoke of grotesqueness firmly upon our own necks. We have come to sustain our own oppression by becoming oppressive as evidenced by our abandonment of multivocality (representing the many) for supravocality (representing the righteous few or the righteous one). There is no multivocality here just a lone (supra) voice making unilateral decisions. Ham’s discovery becomes Noah’s shame, his silencing, Noah’s curse. Black homophobia is the black church’s shame; the surrounding silence, its curse.

Multidimensionality
What is multidimensional about the African-American experience? What helps us recognize there are many sides to life? Of course one can point directly to our history of being both slave and free as the most evident

example of that multi-dimensionality. DuBois says it best when he states, ‘One ever feels twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder’. DuBois’ ‘twoness’ does not include straight or gay, yet does not our community ‘wrestle’ with this dimension also? If not, what do we really wrestle with? Is black sexuality not impinged upon these unreconciled strivings? Does the so-called homosexual trouble the process of reconciliation? Is this the basis of black homophobia? Can we truly say we are multi-dimensional if we purposely exclude the homosexual dimension of our community? That Ham is left without the ability to be reconciled to his father or his brothers, his progeny estranged from the land, and relegated to slavery pose for us the dilemma of reconciling ourselves to those in the church and community who are different yet of the same body? It is quite obvious Noah creates two dimensions: one encompassing the land of the blessed and one encompassing the land of those who shall be displaced and enslaved. One might take this a step further and view the land of the blessed as the land of heteronormativity (Shem and Japheth) and the land of the accursed as the land of the homoerotic (Ham/Canaan). Since blackness has been long associated with the land of the accursed one can begin to understand the reasons for the rejection of Canaan (and abnormality) for the right to dwell ‘in the tents of Shem’ (normalcy). If one is to inherit the land then one must accept the reality of Noah. In view of this we disavow multidimensionality in the rejection of Canaan, for the supradimensionalism of the tents of Shem where our homophobia reinforces heteronormativity and the promotion of one way of being. If we are to become truly multidimensional we must embrace the so-called homosexual in order to dismantle black homophobia and be reconciled before we are torn asunder.

**Interpretation**

Horace Griffin says:

Two primary reasons account for African American’s negative view of homosexuality: 1) Slaves were mainly converted to Christianity by conservative white Christians who were sex-negative and opposed to homosexuality; 2) African Americans have recognized that conspiring with mainstream society in targeting homosexuals as the ‘despised other’ frees them from the deviant label of being sexually immoral and provides a degree of social acceptance.26

26. See Griffin, ‘Their own Received them Not’, p. 114.
Kelly Brown Douglas attributes black homophobia to black oppression saying, ‘While the Black church and community share the logic of others who denounce homosexuality, their particular history of White racist oppression and sexual exploitation makes Black homophobia appear even more passionate, trenchant, and unyielding’.27 The interpretive paradigms that support the less evident issues of sex, gender, race, and colonialism which drive black homophobic discourse can be easily identified if both the assertion of Griffin and Douglas are correct. What then, must be understood and challenged for us to truly begin to trouble the waters and reveal the truth concerning black homophobia? Cornell West says black sexuality is a ‘form of black power over which whites have little control—yet its visible manifestations evoke the most visceral responses, be it one of seductive obsession or downright disgust’.28 The obsession with homoerotic seduction is centered on the threat to the Christian claim to so-called heterosexual stability. The disgust directed at same-sex desires in the black church is the visceral response to a type of reasoning that views such love as a threat to masculinity, family and community. With regards to black homophobia being viewed as a threat to black masculinity Douglas says:

Even as homosexuality is seen as a threat to Black families, Black families have been held responsible for causing homosexuality, especially among males. Following the logic of the Moynihan Report,29 many Black homophobic arguments stress the importance of a male-dominated family model. They suggest that the absence of such a model leaves young Black males woefully susceptible to the ‘disease’ of homosexuality. This is based on the false assumption that male homosexuality is equated with effeminate behavior. In the minds of various Black thinkers, homosexuality indicates a defect in the development of Black masculinity and is a perversion to manhood.30

This sense of perversion rooted in the masculine effeminate (Ham) becomes the biblical accursedness bestowed on blackness. One must add

29. Kelly Brown Douglas is referring to a report written by then Assistant Secretary of Labor and Director of the Office of Policy Planning and Research, Daniel P. Moynihan in 1965 on the ‘Negro Family’. Douglas says the ‘report opens by presenting the “deterioration of the Negro family” as the “fundamental weakness of the Negro community”’. According to Douglas, Moynihan “clearly named the black woman as the culprit’. Black femininity, especially black matriarchy, was the core problem imposing a ‘crushing burden on the Negro male’ (Sexuality and the Black Church, pp. 50-52).
30. Douglas, Sexuality and the Black Church, p. 103.
to this the concept of the ‘lesbian threat’. Such a perversion is seen as a direct threat to the community’s concept of strength, independence, and dominance. Secondly, it is seen as a direct threat to black male patriarchy. Lastly, it reinforces the concept of the accursed nature of black femininity and black sexuality, especially black homosexuality. When the issue of black masculinity and black homophobia are viewed co-constitutively it can be said that the loss of the former is a fear of the loss of black patriarchal dominance and the control of black female bodies and femininity; the perpetuation of the latter the means by which those things are accomplished while still refusing to address the larger issues of sex, gender, race and power. The community still suffers because black masculinity and heteronormativity continue to validate themselves at the expense of the ‘archetypal other’ embodied by black homosexuality. Our protection of black masculinity perpetuates racism, sexism, gender bias and white power rather than develop solutions to our sexual silence and the multiple forms of oppression it belies. Kelly Brown Douglas says ‘White culture has created an image of Black people as sexually deviant has been through its attacks on the Black family’. As such one of the responses of the black community and black church has been to ‘advocate White family norms—that is to espouse a family model more acceptable within a White patriarchal and heterosexist society’. Because the concept of the model of the Western family, with its stability and heterosexual patriarchal formation highly prized, ‘all other forms—for example, the extended family, the female headed family, the lesbian family—are devalued’. Accordingly, the assertion can be made that the black family embodies the normalization of black roles and identities; black homophobia embodies a fear of the loss of the efforts to ‘clean up images of black sexuality’ as well as negate the threat of what is seen as ‘nonproductive and genocidal’ with regards to the maintenance of the

31. Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, p. 104. Douglas points out that ‘no individual is perhaps seen as more challenging to male prerogatives than a lesbian’. She quotes Cheryl Clark who says ‘The black man may view the lesbian—who cannot be manipulated or seduced sexually by him—in much the same way the white slave master once viewed the black male, viz. as some perverse caricature of manhood threatening his position of dominance over the female body’ (from ‘Lesbianism: An Act of Resistance’, *This Bridge Called my Back*, pp. 131-32).
34. Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, p. 100. See Douglas’s use of Cheryl Clark regarding the black community’s response to the perceived threat of homosexuality to the black family.
black family. Black homophobia reveals a fear of the perceived fragility of the black family in light of homosexual relationships. But as more and more children are left without even one person to assist in their development the real fragility lies in our inability to relinquish our phobia and come to understand that the black family cannot afford to view itself according to the Western ‘heterosexual dyad’. This attitude (of homophobia) is a direct threat to the community. The community’s dogmatic approach to Scripture coupled with its zealous desire to emulate and, therefore, perpetuate the dominance of white cultural mores ensures that we will continue to support ideologies that do not engender the hope and freedom for all within the community. Black homophobia plays into the hands of white cultural power because it not only disallows the exposure of the relationship between itself and issues of race, sex, gender and power, it also creates discord among a community of people that cannot afford to expend energy on infighting while the ‘structures of oppression that truly threaten Black life’ remain intact.

Douglas says, ‘The fact that homosexuality can be considered harmful to Black well-being is inextricably related to the sexual exploitation and denigration of Black people by White culture’.36 As such, it can be said black homophobia is a direct response to white cultural hegemony and white cultural power which directs and denies the impact/role of white culture in the construction of black identity. Black homophobia becomes problematic in the maintenance of black identity for it (black homophobia) reveals to us that blackness is a performance of whiteness. We carry forward the fears of white folk as our own; it is their conceptualization of black identity that we maintain and not our own. White fear of black sexuality is a fear of black identity and black power; black fear of homosexuality is a fear of white power’s ability to deny us the crumbs that are found on the floor of their ‘tents’. We have closeted our power for the tents of whiteness. Claiming homophobia is claiming rightness according to white cultural hegemony and denies our ability to define ourselves on our terms, reinforcing the colonial notions of Ham and our own fear of losing access to claims of normativity and an identity that is valid according to the biblical text. White cultural hegemony has created and relies on the willingness of the black church and black community to maintain sexual suppression in the form of homophobia in order to deny black agency and closet issues concerning sex, gender, race and power. The homophobic utterances of the church defeat its own prophetic edge and liberative zeal.

Black Theology as a Sexual Discourse of Transformation for ‘The Least of These’

Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me’. Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me (Mt. 25.37-40).

What has come to my attention of late is a sense of the feeling that the spirit of God has left the construct of liberation. Liberation was once the home of a great movement that heralded the call of God to ‘let my people go’. Over the years the liberation movement has come to seem less relevant to a church and community which has gained access to popular culture and its offering of success. Today, the church speaks of liberation in economic terms. Righteousness is often measured by what one drives, where one lives, and by what one can ‘tithe’. It is my assertion, based on the magnitude of the continued mis-education of our children (and adults); the overwhelming dross of persistent generational poverty; urban renewal shrouded in asset based community development gentrifying, fracturing, and disenfranchising whole neighborhoods; and the threat to future generations to various health-related issues from diabetes, heart disease, obesity and HIV/AIDS, that the spirit of liberation has lost its power. Somewhere along the way, the leadership of the church and community made a Faustian deal that ensures the future for some at the expense of the other. Yet when I look at the biblical narrative and the history of the movement of the Spirit of God, I see the power always rests with ‘the least of these’. This queer analysis has revealed black homophobia is a fear of power — power which cannot be controlled. It is the power that rests with ‘the least of these’: the poor, the sick, the imprisoned, the misunderstood, gays and lesbians. As it was with Ham, as it was with Jesus, as it was with the slave, as it is at present in the gay and lesbian community, the Spirit of freedom and Transformation is in the place where it would be least expected and not ‘readily apparent’.

The Limits of Liberation

One of the most powerful elements found within the biblical message is its concern for the other. It is the concern for the other that needs to resonate within the black church and its appeal to the world to always do what is right with regards to the least of these. As stated earlier, Evans reveals it was the gospel message of the New Testament that
affirmed for the black church Jesus’ positive stance toward the down-
trodden and oppressed and ‘gave sustenance to the struggle for survival
and freedom in a hostile society’. We understood the black church and
community was considered ‘the least of these’. Black theology embodied
the claim to a valid and valued identity viewed as God’s own. With
regards to this James Cone says this:

Black people affirm their being. This affirmation is made in the whole
experience of being black in the hostile American society. Black theology
is not a gift of the Christian gospel dispensed to slaves, rather it is an
appropriation which black slaves made of the gospel given by their white
oppressors. Black theology has been nurtured, sustained, and passed on
in the black churches in their various ways of expression. Black theology
has dealt with all the ultimate and violent issues of life and death for a
people despised and degraded.37

Black theology has been and remains to this day the primary catalyst of
liberation thought and action. It is a source of nurturance the black
church has used to deal with issues regarding degradation and oppres-
sion. This is the reason black theology has long been seen as a theology
of liberation. A black theology of liberation

seeks to plumb the black condition in the light of God’s revelation in Jesus
Christ, so that the black community can see the gospel is commensurate
with the achievement of black humanity… The message of liberation is the
revelation of God as revealed in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Freedom
is the gospel. Jesus is the Liberator.38

How then is black liberation relevant to the conversation surrounding
a queer re-construction of Noah’s curse and black homophobia? Interest-
ingly, James H. Evans says that liberation is ‘multidimensional’ and is
expressed as follows:

physical liberation: refers to the innate desire of all human beings to enjoy
freedom of movement and association and the rights of self-determination,
spiritual empowerment: where African-Americans come to understand
and reclaim their intrinsic worth as human beings, and cultural liberation:
refers to the freedom from negative self images, symbols, and stereo-
types.39

In keeping with a queer perspective of revealing meaning which is not
readily apparent, it becomes obvious that black liberation has not been

37. James H. Cone, ‘Black Theology: A Statement of the National Committee of
Black Churchmen’, in James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore (eds.), Black Theology:
p. 37.
39. Evans, We Have Been Believers, p. 16.
concerned with sexual liberation. Evans says a common distortion of liberation is that it is ‘unidimensional’. On whose distortion is this based? The claim of liberation as ‘unidimensional’ is a valid one for it is a heteronormative univocal construct concerned with the ‘unreconciled strivings’ for coherence (of the black identity) in terms of man/woman, rich/poor, black/white. The abnormal ‘other’ is the antitype that liberation wishes to silence and distance. It is a case of supradimensionalism where the subsumption and silencing of homosexuality occurs and the multidimensionality which our community expresses as an inherent characteristic is not to be found. The freedom of Jesus upon which black liberation is founded is replaced with the estrangement of Ham and the cursing of Canaan. With black liberation the point of righteousness begins to take on the moralistic pietism of popular notions of salvation. This being the case, black homophobia can never be properly addressed by the apologetics of liberation talk. Cornel West says there are five stages in the development of black liberation theology: (1) ‘Black Theology of Liberation as a Critique of Slavery’; (2) ‘Black Theology of Liberation as a Critique of Institutional Racism’; (3) ‘Black Theology of Liberation as a Critique of White North American Theology’; (4) ‘Black Theology of Liberation as a Critique of U.S. Capitalism’; (5) ‘Black Theology of Liberation as a Critique of Capitalist Civilization’. Of the final point of evolution West notes:

The present challenge to black theologians is to put forward an understanding of the Christian gospel in the light of present circumstances that takes into account the complex ways in which racism (especially white racism) and sexism (especially male sexism) are integral to the class exploitative capitalist system of production as well as its repressive imperialist tentacles abroad; and to keep in view the crucial existential issues of death, disease, despair, dread, and disappointment that each and every individual must face within the context of these present circumstances. This theological perspective requires a move into a fifth stage: ‘Black Theology of Liberation as Critique of Capitalist Civilization’.

West’s quintessential development of black liberation, though co-constitutive in nature, is primarily concerned with the underlying existential issues of capitalist wherewithal. West says that black liberation, while concerned with the amelioration of the ‘socioeconomic conditions of black people’, it does not have a clear-cut understanding of what that ‘amelioration amounts to’. There is a failure to be specific and as such issues that do not fit within the context of the normalized discursive structure of black exploitation and oppression are silenced. It is not my

40. See West, Prophesy Deliverance!, pp. 103-108.
intention to critique West (noting that his body of work and critique of liberation has evolved since 1982), but to highlight the limits of black liberation theology as something that even in its most refined form does not speak directly to the issue of black homophobia (in 2003). It is obvious we cannot get to the issues of sex, gender and race with the present understanding of black liberation, for it has difficulty in looking back (or in the mirror) for fear of losing the fleeting manna of the capitalist influences of the present. Liberation buys into the binary of in/out and is limited by its inability to move beyond the self-interest of those who vocalize its claims. When it comes to black homophobia, liberation has run its course and has failed to dismantle the homophobic impulses of the church and the community. Irene Monroe says that black liberation promotes ‘black male heterosexuality as the icon of racial suffering and for black liberation at the expense of those who suffer from multiple forms of oppression—that is women, lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgender people’.\textsuperscript{41} James Cone says, ‘Like our failure to deal with classism, sexism blinded us to the depth of the problem of oppression in the black community, and it stifled the development of the human resources for fighting against it’.\textsuperscript{42} If we are to maintain a queer perspective, we must reinterpret this and say sexuality and our fear of the homoerotic has blinded us to the depth of the problem of oppression and the development of all human resources; it is the flaw that is not readily apparent to the black church. Cone makes this statement:

Black theologians and ministers, men and women, have major problems to face in the church and the society. Will we be able to face them adequately and thereby create structures in our churches and the community that are liberating? Do we have the courage to ‘tell it like it is’, not only in relation to white racism but also in regard to sexism and classicism in our churches. Telling the truth can be a risky venture in a church that defines its life on the basis of the professional self-interest of its leaders. It is always much easier to tell the truth about others, and black theologians and preachers have done this task well. But the critical task of the gospel is whether we can tell the truth about ourselves.\textsuperscript{43}

\textsuperscript{41} Irene Monroe, ‘When and Where I Enter, then the Whole Race Enters with Me’, in Robert E. Goss and Mona West (eds.), \textit{Take Back the Word: A Queer Reading of the Bible} (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2000), pp. 82-91 (85).

\textsuperscript{42} Cone acknowledges the weakness of black theology to be its lack of sexual analysis. He states that, ‘If we blacks are not self-critical in regard to our historical failings, we will not be able to correct ourselves in the present so that we can create a meaningful future’. James H. Cone, \textit{For my People: Black Theology and the Black Church} (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), pp. 96-97.

\textsuperscript{43} Cone, \textit{For my People}, pp. 97-98.
As I have stated earlier, ‘White cultural hegemony has created and relies on the willingness of the black church and black community to maintain sexual suppression in the form of homophobia in order to deny black agency and closet issues concerning sex, gender, race, and power.’ Kelly Brown Douglas says,

When Black churchgoers approach human sexuality as a vessel of sin and evil—as they perceive it to be only about genitals and sexual activity and as they refuse to promote frank public discourse concerning sexuality—they betray their enslaved religious heritage in that they have adopted the dominant Western European and Euro-American tradition of spiritualistic dualism and pietism.44

Liberation has been co-opted by popular culture (e.g. Black Theology of Liberation as a Critique of Capitalist Civilization) and what we have been liberated ‘from’ (black abnormality and estrangement from the land) is subverted by that which we have been liberated ‘to’ (the ‘tents’ of Shem: the American dream). Liberation exposes the paradoxical nature of the black church—its ‘twoness’; it is both the most ‘radical of black institutions’ and most imbued with the ‘mythology and values of white America’45 and it stands to be torn asunder by its inability to reconcile itself to ‘the least of these’.

**Conclusion: Transformation as the Next Step**

In my queer abandonment of liberation the question arises of ‘what now?’ Speaking as a queer theorist, I would have to say a clear-cut answer defeats the purpose of this paper. This paper is to ‘trouble the waters’ and give us new angles to old situations, which gives rise to new meanings, not give a definitive answer. Yet, I am compelled to at least offer a step in the direction of a new and queer way of thinking of responses to the question ‘what now?’ We must build upon the horizon of Cone, the prophetic methodology of West, and the radical boldness of Douglas. We must build a response that engages tradition by developing transformative discourse that refers to the innate desire of all human beings to enjoy freedom of movement and association and the rights of self-determination, while claiming our intrinsic worth as humans beings in a culture that is free of negative self images, symbols, and stereotypes. It must be a discourse that is a reclamation of black body-identities and their myriad expressions. The transformative next step that must be taken is

44. See Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, p. 121.
imbedded in black anti-homophobic discourse that struggles with dismantling the heteronormative forces of oppression that keep our ability to unify locked in a conservative struggle for the maintenance of black identity. We must have a sixth stage—a new horizon: Black Theology as a Sexual Discourse of Transformation.

How do we begin to form a black theology as a sexual discourse of transformation? Kelly Brown Douglas says, ‘Anything less than a positive acceptance of human sexuality heralds a faulty conception of what it means to be created in the image of God revealed in Jesus Christ’. Black theology as a sexual discourse of transformation is one that liberates black bodies from becoming conformed to this world. It is a theology of perpetual renewal where the will of God reveals our own image as the image of ‘the least of these’: a mirror image of God’s self in each and every one of us. How might it be done? We must take a methodology that effectively unmask falsehoods. West proposes a ‘dialectical methodology’ consisting of a ‘three-step’ procedure of negation, preservation and transformation.

Negation: First, we must adopt an approach that is ‘highly critical of dogmatic viewpoints of the gospel, questioning whether unjustifiable prejudgments are operative’. The black church must be transformed from a ‘place’ that holds onto orthodoxy and liberation dogma to a ‘space’ where the ideas of sexual deviancy can be dismantled and where reconciliation can begin. As such we are then able to negate ‘past understandings of the gospel’ and transform them ‘into new ones’. We must acknowledge and affirm the gay and lesbian voices of our church and community and begin to celebrate the multivocality that is our heritage. It is in effect the restoration of ‘sacred space’, a liminal experience in which a new all-inclusive understanding can be attained and maintained. This is a movement ‘into a new situation, not a return to the old’ where the destruction of the old ways of being and understanding usher in transformation.

46. See Douglas, Sexuality and the Black Church, p. 121.
47. West, Prophesy Deliverance!, p. 109.
48. E. Patrick Johnson in speaking about the ‘communion between spirituality and sexuality’ speaks of transforming the ‘sacred space’ of the church into the secular ‘space’ of the club so as to liberate the body. I am taking this understanding and applying this transformative step to the church. E. Patrick Johnson, ‘Feeling the Spirit in the Dark’, in Constantine-Simms (ed.), The Greatest Taboo, pp. 88-109 (105).
Preservation: Second, by attempting to expand our understanding of black people, black sexuality, homoeroticism, and homosexuality, we might come to ‘preserve the truth God sides with the oppressed and acts on their behalf’.\textsuperscript{50} We must acknowledge our \textit{multidimensionality} and embrace the gay and lesbian members of our church and community, revel in their stories, welcome their talents, and rejoice in their living as a gift of God’s creational genius.

Transformation: Finally, in believing ‘in the living presence of God and the work of the Holy Spirit’ we must ‘acknowledge the constant and unfolding process of the gospel’.\textsuperscript{51} West says, ‘Paradoxically, the gospel is unchanging, yet it is deepened by embracing and encompassing new human experiences’.\textsuperscript{52} For West, the gospel ‘must speak to every age’. For a Black Theology as a Sexual Discourse of Transformation it must speak to everyone without respect of person. We must begin to practice black theology as a sexual discourse of transformation that expresses an \textit{interpretation} of that which is not readily apparent and begin to dismantle the fear of our own non-normativity and embrace difference—we have those who can show us the way. It all begins with ‘the least of these’.

\textsuperscript{50} West, \textit{Prophesy Deliverance!}, p. 109.
\textsuperscript{51} West, \textit{Prophesy Deliverance!}, p. 109.
\textsuperscript{52} West, \textit{Prophesy Deliverance!}, p. 110.
Proleptic Sexual Love: God’s Promiscuity Reflected in Christian Polyamory

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Abstract

Goss acknowledges the value of pair-bonded relationships to the Christian community but wants to explore the ethical and theological space for envisioning Christians whose erotic lives fall outside monogamous relationships. He takes seriously Elizabeth Stuart’s suggestion that the restoration of an eschatological paradigm for rethinking queer sexual relationships. Goss claims that Christ becomes the paradigm for multi-partnered relationships in spiritual encounters within religious communities and perhaps a means for rethinking non-monogamous relationships.

One of the most tenacious ideas about sex is that there is one best way to do it, and that everyone else should do it that way. Most people find it difficult to grasp that whatever they like to do sexually will be thoroughly repulsive to someone else, and that whatever repels them will be the most treasured delight of someone somewhere…¹

While I recognize pair-bonded couples as gifts to the Christian community, I want to explore the ethical space for those queer Christians who fall outside of the defined boundaries of a committed relationship. Most explorations within the queer community in the last decade have been either in the right to marry movement or the opposition to import heterosexist models of marriage within the queer community. While anti-marriage critics and the right to marry movements would both agree that sex is a community-building function, the right to marry proponents would limit that function to the coupled individuals whereas

anti-marriage critics would likewise argue that many same-sex communities are built upon the bonds generated from casual or non-monogamous sex. This essay will not denigrate the value of pair-bonded, same-sex relationships at the expense of elevating polyamorous relationships, but it will open space for theological reflection on the value of polyamorous relationships.

This reflection on polyamory arises out of an event in my transition from the Jesuits and a theological insight from Elizabeth Stuart. First the event I want to recall is my exit interview from the Jesuits with a superior many years ago. As I articulated the reason of falling in love as sufficient reason for my discernment to leave the Jesuits, my superior said directly to me: ‘You can stay in the Jesuits and be promiscuous, but you can’t settle down with one person’. That statement recognized that polyamorous relationships do exist within the Jesuits and male religious life.

The second is a theological suggestion in Elizabeth Stuart’s essay, ‘Sex in Heaven: The Queering of Theological Discourse on Sexuality’. Stuart takes another trajectory when she observes how queer folks have unconsciously connected sexual desire to the afterlife and that non-monogamy is presumed in heaven. She calls for the restoration of an eschatological paradigm to rethink contemporary queer sexuality; she concludes:

Communities of resistance and solidarity create eschatological visions of ‘life after’ in order to provide some common content to hope and struggle for liberation. At the same time they seek to subvert this dreaming by ‘deliteralizing [their] own utopias, returning the future possibility to the present community… Eschatological reflection does create a safe space to dream impossible dreams, to discuss in the context of playfulness what is ultimate and essential to humanity and to divine life. Because it is the realm of the impossible, only the foolish or the insane would claim to be able to speak with or of absolute truth, and so within this discourse it may be possible for representatives of various Christianities and sexualities to engage in genuinely productive debate on sexuality. We have tried with little success to meet each other in the past and the present. Perhaps the time has come to focus less on sex in those days and sex in these days and more on sex in the next days, which is a profoundly Christian methodology. Christianity is as much about dangerous futures as it is about dangerous memories.2

Stuart claims that Christians might best examine sexuality at the present not by looking back at past traditions and formulations but by looking eschatologically at sex and sexual relationships. Christian eschatological

imagination opens up new possible configurations of relationships, and queer eschatology raises even more possibilities.

Eschatological visions of sex in heaven are not entirely new. With the Reformation and the more positive evaluation of conjugal, marital relations, such visionaries as Emmanuel Swedenborg, William Blake, and other romantic writers understood that human, erotic love would continue in heaven.3 Both Swedenborg and Blake believed that the marital relations would continue in heaven. Earlier a more radical vision was introduced by the Puritan poet John Milton in Paradise Lost. Milton’s interpretation of heavenly sex is not only polymorphously fluid but also might earn the label ‘queer’. Listen to Milton:

For spirits when they please
Can either sex assume, or both; so soft
And uncompounded is their essence pure,
Not tied or manacled with joint or limb,
Nor founded on the brittle strength of bones,
Like cumbrous flesh, but in what shape they choose,
Dilated or condensed, bright or obscure.
Can execute their airy purpose,
And works of love or enmity fulfill.4

For the poet, sexual love in heaven is transformed into redemptive love. Angelic spirits can achieve a level of unobstructed, free love that human sexual love can hardly attain or imagine on earth. Heavenly love among the angels is endless, rapturous and amorous: Milton writes, ‘Total they mix, Union of Pure with Pure’.5

In the queer spirit of Milton, let me proceed with another trajectory of eschatological exploration. The story of the Sadducee test in Mk 12.18-27, appearing in Mt. 22.23-33 and Lk. 20.27-40, becomes the matrix for bringing the two strains of my thoughts together. It is a passage where the Sadducee critics challenge Jesus on the notion of the afterlife. They propose to Jesus the example of a woman who has been married seven times and ask him, ‘In the resurrection, whose wife will she be? For the seven had married her’ (Mk 12.23). Jesus responds, ‘For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven’ (Mk 12.25).

5. Paradise Lost, VIII.627 in Goldberg and Orgel, Milton, p. 144.
In my years in religious life, I heard several sermons on this passage. ‘Like angels in heaven’ justified celibate religious life. ‘Like angels’ was understood as ‘sexless’ by centuries of Christian thought that transformed angels from sexual beings in the intertestamental period to sexless, disembodied spirits. Biblical scholar William Countryman writes:

Think…of the little letter of Jude, where it appears that early Christians were teaching that you needed to have sex with angels in order to gain high standing in heaven. Jude refers to this teaching only in veiled ways, but that is what he’s attacking. Of course, his readers knew the Hebrew Bible (mostly in Greek translation), and they knew the story in Genesis 6.1-4 about angels having sex with human women and the offspring being giants. Jude refers to that story and also to the story of the men of Sodom who in the same manner as these angels ‘went after strange flesh’ (Jude 7, referring to Genesis 18).6

Even today if you suggest that angels were sexual in a sermon, many Christians suffer an erotophobic, panic attack, picturing their sacred icons of angels popularized by such a program as Touched by Angel. The idea of a ‘sexual’ Della Reese as an angel is too much to bear, even for some queer Christian imaginations.

But if you strip away the overlay of more than a millennium and a half of Christian readings of sexless angels and ask what is intended by the phrase ‘like the angels’, the intent of Jesus’ logion is that there is no marriage and family in God’s coming reign. God abolishes the institution of marriage, which is understood as a property right and ownership of women.7 But traditionally, ecclesial exegetes have understood that this text not only abolishes marriage but also sexuality because of its narrow interpretation of marriage for the purpose of procreation. But nothing merits such a reading of the abolishment of sexuality, and a queer reading can restore sexuality to the coming reign of God. Certainly, Jesus attacked marriage as the patriarchal possession of women in marriage and the patriarchal family, on which the Jewish and Roman political order of domination was based. One can maintain that Jesus was asserting the abolishment of patriarchal marriage in the coming reign of God. Virginia Mollenkott writes:

Milton interpreted Jesus’ remark about no heavenly marrying or giving in marriage (Matt. 22.29-30) to mean not that there would be no sex in

heaven, but rather that sex in resurrection bodies would have none of the binary possessiveness and constriction of marriage in a fallen world. Instead, as Jesus put it, resurrection bodies would be ‘as the angels in heaven’—a vision of astonishing freedom.\(^8\)

A queer reading might likewise affirm that there is no marriage and patriarchal family, but it also might assert that there is sexuality without procreation in the coming reign of God. But there is no more marriage. This is confirmed in the Lukan version of the story when Jesus says, ‘Indeed they cannot die anymore because they are angels in heaven’ (Lk. 20.36). The Sadducees are traditionalists who reject the Pharisee solution of resurrection to the afterlife but who, in addition, find transcendence of death in the lives of their descendants. In God’s coming reign, there is no need for marriage and children when you live forever in resurrected bodies. But does that abolish sexuality in the age to come? Or is the reign of God a giant bathhouse for queer sex and other polymorphous forms as Milton dares to imagine?

The radical commensality and anti-family tradition of the early Jesus movement lost its cutting edge towards the end of the post-persecution period of the Roman Empire. As it developed in the Egyptian desert, early Christian monasticism was an eschatological, anti-family, ascetical movement.\(^9\) Through their austere, ascetic practices and prayers, the early anchorites attempted to regain the gifts of paradise that were lost due to the primal sin of Adam and Eve. They attempted to live the foretaste of Christian salvation. Monasticism continued the eschatological orientation of the earlier Jesus movement with a longing to recover the lost gifts of paradise but continued the anti-family and anti-marriage elements of the early Jesus movement. Christian monasticism provided an alternative Christian construction of sexuality to marriage. Anthony and the desert hermits attempted to live like angels, eschatological exemplars who tried to live in close proximity to God but within the world. Even with the practices of celibacy, Christian monastics struggled with the temptation of sexuality and erotic fantasies. Monasticism and the later evolution of religious orders were, thus, sexual communities with an eschatological vision of sanctification and a vision of loving non-exclusively. These communities channeled and expressed human sexuality towards the love of God and love towards one another.

Ever since its beginnings, Christian monastic communities have been predominantly homosocial, monogendered environments, providing an

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opportunity to establish a religious lifestyle outside of married life. Many men attracted to the same sex found religious communities to be a place where they could meet similarly inclined males. But I want to maintain that these were also erotic communities, whether implicitly or explicitly expressed. The struggle to refrain from sex is a thoroughly erotic decision; it did not, however, preclude all erotic unions within the monastic confines.

In such homosocial, Christian communities then as it is the case now, there were a fair number of people who were attracted to the same sex and who discovered meaningful relationships with members of their same sex in their quest for holiness and contemplative union with God. Some expressed their love or loves to other members of the same sex. Otherwise, there would be no history of the prohibitions for same-sex contacts, attachments or particular friendships.

In examining early monastic rules and Christian penitential texts, it is necessary to apply the principle ‘where there is smoke there is fire’. Or in this particular case, where there are prohibitions against homoerotic behaviors, there is same-sex activities, erotic friendships, and folks falling in love with one or more members of their communities. For example, St Augustine cautioned a group of monastic women to love one another, but not in a carnal fashion. St Basil warned fellow monks of the dangers of handsome, young monks.

It is frequently the case with young men that even when rigorous self-restraint is exercised, the glowing complexion of youth still blossoms forth and becomes a source of desire to those around them. If, therefore, anyone is youthful and physically beautiful, let him keep his attractiveness hidden until his appearance reaches a suitable state.

Basil warns monks to keep their distance and to avert their eyes from beautiful monks. Any male monastic or religious, if honest, will narrate how they wanted to spend time with someone they fell in love with, attracted to that beautiful person or persons in community, or work at developing intimate bonds with several members of their community. Centuries later, Aelred of Rievaulx expresses his internalized fears of explicitly homoerotic relations within the monasteries when he complains:

12. Basil, De renuntiatione saeculi 6, quoted in Boswell, Christianity, p. 159.
To enter the homes of some of our bishops—and still more shameful, or some of our monks—is like entering Sodom and Gomorrah. Effeminate, coiffeured young men, dressed up like courtesan, strut around their rumps half-bare. Scripture says about them: ‘They have put boys in a brothel’.13

While Aelred warns of the danger of homoerotic love and attachments within monasteries, he launches into a discussion of the passionate friendship of Jonathan and David.

St Basil and other monastic writers understood well the attraction to the same sex as a natural inclination yet an inclination to be restrained. The second Council of Tours in 567 prohibited monks and priests from sleeping more than one to a bed while the Benedictine Rule advocated all monks sleep in the same room with the abbot’s bed in the center. St Benedict also mandated that a light be kept burning at night in the dormitory.14 The Benedictine rule, along with later monastic rules and charters, instituted regulations to prevent sexual relations between monks. In a more recent time, the custom book of the Jesuit novitiate, proscribed ‘particular friendships’, a religious euphemism for emotional entanglements and not peculiar to Jesuits only. There was a famous slogan: *Numquam duo, semper tres* (‘Never two, always three’). This was not a justification for threesomes but a proscription against dyadic same-sex relationships. Love between the brothers had to extend to any particular individual and include the others of the community. I was guilty of many particular friendships during my Jesuit novitiate and later studies, but there were many of us falling in love with one another in the Society of Jesus. Sex activist and teacher Joe Kramer called his experience within the Jesuits a ‘homosexual heaven’; it provided inspiration for his notion of a beloved community of men who would celebrate open erotic rituals to celebrate a communal polyamory.15 This makes sense when you add the love ethic of Christianity. It was very natural for male religious to fall in love with one another as they tried to cultivate minds and hearts of love for Christ and one’s neighbor.

These eschatological communities have been erotic communities where men have fallen in love with God and with one another. If we consider how Catholic male monastics and religious men have been socialized over the ages, then it becomes apparent that the bridal mysticism so engrained in the formation process of monastics and priests has contri-

buted to a polyamorous atmosphere. Men were taught to pray and live as the brides of the male Christ. The language of the Song of Songs, conflated with the intertextual image of Christ as bridegroom from the Christian testament, is used as the primary text, which already has strong erotic scenes of penetrative and oral sex between two lovers. The language of prayer and relationship with Christ is thoroughly erotic. Bernard of Clairvaux and his Cistercian successors gave voice to a bridal mysticism that originated with earlier Greek and Latin churches. From the thirteenth century until our contemporary period, religious women developed this tradition of bridal mysticism. In his ‘Sermon 68’, Bernard asks, ‘Who is the Bride and the Bridegroom? He is our God, and she, I dare to say, is us’. He speaks of Platonist love of Christ, starting with the carnal love of Christ moving to a loftier spiritual love. Monastic males engaged Christ in contemplative prayer as his bride, and there is no question that this passionate love stimulated erotic feelings and carnal love of Christ. Medievalist scholar Barbara Newman writes, ‘If monks wished to play the starring role in this love story, they had to adopt a feminine persona—as many did—to pursue a heterosexual love affair with God’.17

Aelred of Rievaulx uses erotic language to speak of his love for God and his love for fellow monks. He refers to the relationship between Jesus and the beloved disciple as a ‘marriage’. The picture of the beloved disciple reposing on the breast of Jesus became ‘a special sign of love’. Passionate friendship was for the Cistercian abbot a means to embrace Christ. By embracing a fellow brother as passionate friend, Aelred felt that one could ascend in contemplation to a passionate embrace of Jesus. He writes, ‘Thus, ascending from that holy love in which we embrace our friend to that in which we embrace Christ, we will joyfully, with open mouth pluck the spiritual fruit of friendship’. It is Dante’s epiphany of Christ in Beatrice but discovered in the erotic relationships within community.

Let me interrupt this trajectory momentarily with an excursus into the contradictions in traditional Christian nuptial theology. The images of

Jesus as bridegroom to the Church in Eph. 5.25-33 provides the foundation and source of the Christian theology and spirituality of marriage. At its worst, patriarchal Christianity has justified sexuality and women’s submission in marriage to their husbands. Evangelical Christians and the Promise-keepers use such a text to demand the submission of wives to their husbands; obedience becomes the hallmark of their theologies of marriage. Catholic tradition has used this text not only for female submission but submission of the laity to its episcopal caste. At its least toxic moments, Christians have used the notion of Christ as the bridegroom of the church to provide the grammar for a theology of marriage to express the love and faithfulness of God. Christ is faithful to his church, justifying monogamous fidelity in marriage. One’s earthly marital partner becomes a window to God, reflecting divine love, fidelity and grace.

We see this in Dante’s love of Beatrice in his entrance into Paradise, for she guides him first to the Virgin Mary and then with her assistance to the living light of the Trinity where ‘three spheres, which bare/Three hues distinct and occupy one space, the first mirroring the next, as though it were/Rainbow from rainbow, and third seeming flame/Breathed equally from each of the first pair’. It is only when Dante gazes into Beatrice’s eyes which move him towards the triune God and how Beatrice’s light is transformed into the radiant light of Christ in the midst of the triune God. It is through the erotic desire for and love of Beatrice that Dante discovers the polyamorous God.

Nevertheless, there are serious problems with this nuptial metaphor of Christ as the bridegroom to his church. The very seams can easily be unraveled with a bit of queer critique. The church is perceived as bride; the church, however, consists of plurality of males and females as brides. Christian writers have attempted to singularize the collective entity of the church to downplay the inherent gender contradictions. There are as many gender or transgendered anomalies in the notion of the church as bride as in the male monastic expressions of bridal mysticism. For example, Virginia Mollenkott observes:

In Ephesians 5...the male Christ is said to have a female body—the Church...Again and again in early Christian writings gender is played out and broken open in order to reveal the nature of the redeemed ecclesial person. Christ, the ‘husband’ or ‘male’, is the head and source of the ‘wife’, the ‘female’ body which in turn is instructed to grow up into the ‘male’ head (Ephesians 4.15). As members of the church, Christian men are

Christ’s ‘bride’ as much as women are and Christian women, like men, are embodiment of the ‘male’ Christ and therefore Christian ‘brothers’.22

Certainly the gender codes are ironically rendered quite fluid in Eph. 5.25-33 despite it traditional usage to maintain rigid, patriarchal gender codes. But let me point out the obvious that the Christian tradition has astutely ignored. The model of Christ as bridegroom is limited as long as we accept the notion of church as bridegroom without comprehending the collectivity of the church. When the church is understood as a collective of countless men and women, married and unmarried, with a variety of sexual orientations and gender expressions, then Christ becomes the multi-partnered bridegroom to countless Christian men and women. His faithfulness and love to them may well express the growth of love, mutual devotion, and faithful commitments in pair-bonded heterosexual and same-sex relationships. Yet Christ is polyamorous in countless couplings and other erotic configurations. This polyamorous Christ may be more faithful to the reading of the sexual abnormalities of the Song of Songs. The lover is a sexual outlaw, not a bridegroom as the sanitized Jewish and Christians read the text.23

While Christianity often begrudgingly affirmed the need for marriage on earth, it has rejected marriage in heaven because of the logion of Jesus that there is no marriage in the kingdom of heaven. In the communion of saints, promiscuous love is a given; the exclusivity of earthly, marital relationships are superseded by an inclusive vision of love. Thus, the Christian tradition of the asexual or celibate Christ has sheltered and even blinded us to the erotic and polyamorous reality of Christ as bridegroom; it has also contributed to the split of sexuality from the sacred, contributing to a Christian history of erotophobia and sexual shame.

Let me redirect our discussion to same-sex, male monastic and religious communities. In bridal mysticism, Christ is also the multi-partnered bridegroom whose nocturnal visitations open males in religious community to a deep spirituality and highly erotic encounters. Christ becomes the paradigm for multi-partnered relationships in spiritual encounters, and if he is encountered in other members of the community, then what happens in prayer becomes translated into the practice of erotic love for fellow brethren. It is quite natural to understand how erotic love and friendships happened within monogendered communities.

22. Mollenkott, Omnigender, p. 129.
What is represented in the multi-partnered Christ? Perhaps as queers appropriate the image of the polyamorous Christ, what surfaces is a value more important than the notions of faithfulness, obedience and submission, and even monogamous love. It is the image of the promiscuous Christ. Christ is a promiscuous lover. The promiscuous Christ speaks in radical terms of the ‘unconditional grace of God’, an eschatological concept so threatening to church leaders, who attempt to control who has access and does not have access to God’s grace. Throughout history, they have attempted to regulate and restrict sexual relationships. Likewise, we must also assert that church leaders have failed miserably in controlling the promiscuous lover, the Christ. The promiscuous Christ is found erotic love; it is the impulse to love human beings and to love God simultaneously. God’s love is configured in all sorts of erotic relations.

Several years ago, Kathy Rudy explored how the gay male community models morality in diverse types of sexual relationships, including coupled as well as multi-partnered relationships. She argues that sex within the gay communities is not anonymous since partners are chosen because they belong to that community or because they communicate non-verbal signs and cruising that they participate in that world. It is relational because it functions as a way of including members into itself as an entity larger than themselves. Rudy writes:

> The sex that produces unitivity also produces a desire to be open, to include others. Once we feel the joy that accompanies the breaking down of our own spiritual and physical boundaries, we are able to feel more open about the prospect of sharing new life with and in others. Once the bonds of individualism are broken, we desire to bring others in. We may do so by conceiving children, or by understanding the new life in the union, itself, to be the thing that has been created.24

Rudy looked to the gay male community to model unitive love for the church, and she noted in the question and answer period that same-sex religious communities may model many of the same features of the gay community. She concluded, ‘The Church needs the model of gay sexual communities because Christians have forgotten to think about social and sexual life outside the family.25

Christian ethics has too long spent time in dualistic theological thought that poses a series of binary oppositions: Celibacy versus marriage, monogamous marriage versus polyamorous relationships. It has failed

to account for the transgressive eros, the illicit relationship in the Song of Songs that the rabbis and early Christian writers intuited as one of the most sublime metaphors for the reality of the spiritual and erotic communion with God.\(^{26}\) This illicit relationship between a man and a dark skin woman in the Song of Songs was transformed into an ecclesial romance between a bridegroom and a bride, between Christ and the soul. In the process of this transformation, the radical transgressiveness of the Song of Songs was lost. The differences between monogamy and polyamory recede as we understand that Christ is the sexual outlaw, the multi-partnered groom whose erotic visitations and love-making render the differences slight. What ethicists might want to focus their attention on is how sexual desire is grounded in an eschatological vision where grace perfects human eros into divine love and what constitutes just good sex.

Now let me return to the beginning of this article. What the Jesuit superior was saying to me in my exit interview was his explicit recognition that monogamous sexual relations impede the eschatological mission of the community to love in a polyamorous fashion. It was perfectly alright with him for me to be in multi-partnered erotic relationships with other members of the community, but it was not alright to settle down with one person. Catholic religious superiors have often recognized the psycho-sexual dynamics that are embedded within a monogendered community, yet they also continued to foster and stimulate erotic relations of men with a Christ, who is already in multiple-partnered relationships, hardly exclusive yet recognizing the human need for touch, warmth and erotic intimacy. The floodgates of transgressive eros have opened in the last decades monogendered, religious communities. If Catholic religious communities escape the new Vatican inquisition waged on homoerotic men in the priesthood and religious life, maybe they can experiment more openly and acknowledge candidly that their erotic communities are more closely akin to openly promiscuous, gay male communities. They might develop some guiding norms for representing the eschatological vision of no marriage in heaven and erotic communion with Christ and others.

\(^{26}\) King, ‘A Love as Fierce as Death’, p. 141.
Blasphemous Thoughts

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Abstract

The sacred, from the Latin sacer, originally meant both blessed and accursed. This article begins by remembering the intolerable qualities of the sacred as it is imagined, figured and mythed in Western culture. It is then argued that within Western culture there is a significant difference and unresolvable tension between ‘the sacred’ and ‘religion’—a tension/difference strangely akin to that between the semiotic and the symbolic as theorized by Julia Kristeva. It seems that one of the functions of religions-as-institutions is precisely to control, tame, and make more manageable the sacred. In practice this means controlling sexual, sensual bodies—especially those bodies most closely associated with messy physicality and bloody corporeality.

Sadly, there are those who consider sexy theology to be quite sacrilegious, to have nothing to do with ‘Real Religion’, to be in fact quite blasphemous. I have been thinking about this relationship between the sexual, sensual sacrilegious and Religion lately. Thinking this relationship, curiously enough, through the lens of the sacred.

What if the sacred is always already sacrilegious? What if the sacred is always already blasphemous, always already on the verge of unbearable? And what if this blasphemous, intolerable sacred is imagined to be the very foundation of Religion (with a capital R)? What if, that is, the sacred is simultaneously both the fundamental subject matter of Religion and the bane of Religion’s existence?

I want to sketch one way that ‘we’ (and by ‘we’ I mean specifically, narrowly, those of us who are relatively privileged inhabitants of the Western, still primarily Christian, symbolic universe) might begin to think about this question: What if, in the West, the sacred is hegemonically imagined and enacted as both the fundamental subject matter of Religion and the bane of Religion’s existence? Why might it matter, and
to whom? Before we can think further these questions there are two tiny theoretical issues to be dealt with: what do I mean by ‘the sacred’ and what do I mean by ‘Religion’?

The sacred. The brief conception of the sacred that I am about to offer could be read (in sober, measured tones) as a list of key terms. Or it could be read as a whirling mass of metaphors, each one gliding and spinning among all the others, each one immeasurably enriched by the presence of all the rest... As I am writing from an epistemic location within the area of gender, sexuality and culture you might be anticipating that I am about to present an amalgamation of feminist and queer theories of the sacred. Because it is not a minor point, let me say immediately, no. The conception of the sacred that I am about to offer I wrote after immersing myself in texts by Rudolph Otto, Mircea Eliade, Rene Girard, Martin Buber, Paul Tillich and so on. For reasons which may or may not become obvious, I have attempted an excessively faithful distillation of their thoughts on the subject.

The sacred, the holy. The *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, the numinous.1 Unknown untouched pure wholly other terrifying awful overwhelming presence most alluring of physical attractions—power inescapable all-encompassing dark bloody heat touch burning light source life madness danger terror death touch trembling longing burning pleasure presence knowledge gone.2 Present yet absent. Known yet unknown. Lived, felt, feared, celebrated, yet curiously unthinkable. All but inexpressible. Unpardonably unreasonable. Almost almost irrational. But not quite. There seems to be a logic to the sacred, a deep, dark, enfolding, slippery logic. A fleshy, chaotic logic. Contained, yet always bursting forth, erupting, demanding, desirable, dark, terrible... A bloody logic, a threshold logic.3 The logic of the womb, perhaps.4

3. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, p. 181. ‘The threshold concentrates not only the boundary between outside and inside but also the possibility of passage from one zone to another (from the profane to the sacred...)’.
4. See Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (trans. Ronald Gregor Smith; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2nd edn, 1958), p. 25. ‘Every child that is coming into being rests, like all life that is coming into being, in the womb of the great mother, the undivided primal world that precedes form. From her, too, we are separated, and enter into personal
Simultaneously blessed and accursed.\(^5\) And yes it is a gendered logic, a racialized logic, a sensual sexual logic, all together all at once. The sacred, the holy, the numinous. The signifiers multiply, gather and disperse: their single commonality, a resistance to control.\(^6\)

So much for the sacred, what about Religion?

Although I am sorely tempted to suggest that Religion is just like pornography, we all know it when we see it, I won’t. Instead I will offer the following working definition, cobbled together (not so faithfully) from thinkers like Eliade, Ninian Smart, William Paden, Mary Douglas and Mary Daly, with a dash of Foucault: as I use the term ‘Religion’ refers to the practice of organized, institutionalized expressions of faith. In other words, at the first whiff of Ritual, I smell Religion; I detect a hierarchical (and boringly gendered) division of both labour and knowledge; I sense the closely monitored allocation and distribution of power and authority; I see the construction and imposition of strict boundaries — between the spiritual and the profane, the pure and the polluted, the proper and the improper, the worshipped and the damned, the divine and the flesh. Most of all I witness control, at least the attempt (on the part of some) to control, define, discipline, systematize and regulate the practices, beliefs, behaviours and bodies of others. In short I understand Religion to be an institution seeking to impose certain values, practices, rules and meanings upon a most unruly if not downright recalcitrant range of uncertain embodied experiences, events, and ‘ineffables’. At its best I think Religion tries to make meaningful, to make somewhat orderly the chaotic confusions of life and death as these confusions course through our different bodies. At its worst I think Religion rules everything out. That it denies chaos, denies confusion, denies death, denies entirely the pulsing, raucous profusion of pleasures, pains, multiplicities and differences that constitute shared, entangled life. Monotheisms in particular seem susceptible to this Religious tendency toward denial.

If these are plausible sketches of ‘the sacred’ and ‘Religion’ as they are imagined and enacted within dominant Western culture, then it would

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seem that the relationship between the two is bound to be somewhat tense, particularly if Paul Tillich is correct and ‘the universal religious basis is the experience of the Holy within the finite’. As I read him, he really is suggesting that the holy or the sacred is the basis, the foundational subject matter of Religion, all religious institutions. If this is true, then it is possible to explain or at least describe the relationship between the sacred and Religion in the manner according to Derrida:

A purely rational analysis brings the following paradox to light: that the foundation of law — law of the law, institution of the institution, origin of the constitution — is a ‘performative’ event that cannot belong to the set that it founds, inaugurates or justifies. Such an event is unjustifiable within the logic of what it will have opened. It is the decision of the other in the undecidable. Henceforth reason ought to recognize there what Montaigne and Pascal call an undeniable ‘mystical foundation of authority’.

Think about it. The sacred as the ‘mystical foundation’ of religion, as the originary event so bloody overwhelming that it cannot belong, cannot be contained by any reasonable Religion, cannot be justified by either Word or Spirit. It is an intuitively appealing description of the relationship between the sacred and Religion, but perhaps a little too rigidly dichotomous. What I mean is, yes, Derrida can be used to explain the repression of the sacred by Religion; he can help us to understand Religion’s bent toward denial, but I am not sure he can explain the sometimes welcome presence of the sacred within Religion. Nor can he help us to ponder the possibility that the sacred needs Religion, albeit differently than Religion needs the sacred. In very other words, I think Derrida’s ‘purely rational analysis of the institution of the institution’ can help us to think about a hateful relationship between Religion and the sacred, but it cannot help us to think a loving relationship between the two. (Note: I didn’t say tender or gentle, I said ‘loving’.)

Is there a theory that might help us to think a relationship of love and hatred and welcome all at once? Well, maybe. It might be possible, and possibly illuminating, to think the relationship between the sacred and Religion through Julia Kristeva’s notions of the semiotic and the symbolic. I am busily hedging this paragraph with ‘mights’ and ‘maybes’ because although Kristeva herself associates the sacred with the semiotic and

Religion with the symbolic, she never suggests that the sacred is the foundation of Religion. Nor does she invest the sacred with as much terrifying strength as I suspect it has, or at least has been mythed to have. Finally, recently she wrote, ‘I am convinced that this new millennium, which seems so eager for religion, is in reality eager for the sacred.’¹⁰ I fear that this new millennium really is eager for Religion; and I think that Kristeva’s theory of the semiotic and the symbolic can, maybe, help us to understand why. With these caveats in place, then, how does she theorize ‘the symbolic’?

According to Kristeva, the symbolic is the realm of clear, distinct and separate subjects and objects.¹¹ It is the realm of grammar, logical structure, systematization, categorization; rules are made and obeyed in the realm of the symbolic, for without them chaos and confusion would reign supreme; meaning could never be made clear; there would be no differentiation between self and Other, signifier and signified.¹² Kristeva more or less agrees with Lacan, the symbolic is the realm of social organization ‘according to the imperatives of paternal authority’, or the Law of the Father.¹³ But in her thought the symbolic is also always indebted to, dependent upon, and suffused with the semiotic.¹⁴ The semiotic, whose originary home is the chora: space of the nurturing maternal body.¹⁵ Imaginary space of the not yet signifying, the not yet clearly distinct or separate, the not yet fully ordered.¹⁶ What then constitutes the semiotic, traces of which, according to Kristeva, are forever pouring forth from the chora and coursing through the symbolic?

For a start, sounds. Tones, rhythms, pulsing cadences, sounds flowing mobile liquid sounds all mixed and intermingled driving pounding beats insistent and demanding, soothing and unsettling.¹⁷ The semiotic is comprised in part of the physical vibrations of which sound is

¹¹. See Kristeva, Revolution in Poetic Language, pp. 52 and 86. ‘The [symbolic] encompasses the emergence of object and subject, and the constitution of nuclei of meaning involving categories: semantic and categorical fields’.
¹². Kristeva, Revolution in Poetic Language, p. 29. ‘the symbolic—and therefore syntax and all the linguistic categories—is a social effect of the relation to the other’.
composed, the material ‘stuff’ of all spoken words, no, more, the mate-
rial ‘stuff’ of all signifying practices—the movements, the gestures, the
waves and the jerks, the unequivocally corporeal elements of language.\textsuperscript{18} Written language too.\textsuperscript{19} The muscular chipping of marks into marble, the
slippery sticky smearing of blood onto stone, the scratching of any inky
substance onto papyrus or scroll or paper, even the tapping of fingertips
onto a plastic keyboard. And from whence the urge, the drive, the
energy to move the body in order to make such sounds, gestures, marks?
In the gospel according to Kristeva bodily drives too are elements of the
semiotic.\textsuperscript{20} In sum, the materiality, the physicality of every signifying
practice, every signifying subject, is drenched in semiotic fluid: sounds,
movements, bodily drives—all slick and slippery with the semiotic.

If I understand Kristeva even a little, without the semiotic not a single
Law of the Father could ever be uttered, gestured or inscribed. And
without the symbolic there would be no Others with whom to share, or
fight about, those Laws. Crucially, Kristeva insists that the semiotic and
the symbolic are always, more or (usually) less, intermingled.\textsuperscript{21} As I
picture her theory, although all our words might start out wet, they soon
dry off. The symbolic is an arid realm indeed, resistant to everything
fluid, uncertain, confused enough to escape established categories. And,
here’s the thing, as human beings in the plural we do need those cate-
gories that enable us to tell up from down, here from there, nectar from
ambrosia; we need those logical linguistic structures whose presence
enables us to, about their proper order, disagree. The symbolic also gives
to all the elements of the semiotic their uniqueness; the symbolic gives
to each of us our own uniqueness: I, you. Meanwhile, the semiotic
enlivens the symbolic, enables it to hum with meaning, with possibility,
with possibilities of the otherwise: I, you, oui?

Within Kristeva’s theoretical framework, either a ceaseless flood or a
ceaseless drought would result in our annihilation as signifying subjects.
Quite logically, she argues that we need the semiotic, we need the
symbolic, and we need them to be intermingled. At this particular point

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{18} Kristeva, \textit{Revolution in Poetic Language}, pp. 27 and 40. ‘The semiotic is
articulated by flow and marks...’.
\item \textsuperscript{19} Kristeva, \textit{Revolution in Poetic Language}, p. 100. ‘The text’s semiotic distribution
is set out in the following manner: when instinctual rhythm passes through ephemeral
but specific theses, meaning is constituted but is then immediately exceeded by what
seems outside meaning: materiality, the discontinuity of real objects’.
\item \textsuperscript{20} Kristeva, \textit{Revolution in Poetic Language}, pp. 27-28.
\item \textsuperscript{21} Kristeva, \textit{Revolution in Poetic Language}, p. 62. ‘...the semiotic, which also
precedes it, constantly tears it open... what remolds the symbolic order is always the
influx of the semiotic’.
\end{itemize}
in time I am not at all worried about the non-existent threat of flooding, but I am deeply concerned about the current drought. Interestingly, Kristeva claims there are only three wellsprings of the semiotic powerful enough to soak the symbolic through and through: strong enough, in other words, to affect and change the grammar, the logic, the rules of the symbolic, the laws of the Father. This revolutionary trinity is comprised of poetry, madness, and holiness.

It is telling, I think, that in this our era of Information Technology and the War Against Terror there seems to be no time at all for poetry; there are more and more drugs to manage madness; and Religion is returning in the most blatantly misogynist and boringly heterosexual of forms. It is telling, I think, that the initiator of the war against terror claims to be a born-again Christian (being born of a woman not good enough). It is telling that he cannot seem to abide the Other — any Other, who is, after all, always already tinged with the foreign, the strange, the dark, the feminine, the sensual, the sexual. It is telling that he cannot stand uncertainty, that he seeks to eradicate all that terrifies him. It is also telling that he mangles the English language, does immeasurable violence to it. Don’t ‘misunderestimate me’, even when his utterances are grammatically in order they are devoid of meaningful content; ‘I answered all the questions.’ Which tells us precisely nothing.

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We are bearing witness, I think, to an enactment of the symbolic almost entirely devoid of the semiotic. We are bearing witness, I am sure of it, to an enactment of Religion at war against the sacred. Is it time to be blasphemous? Is it time to utter the intolerable, to call upon the sacred to once again infuse Religion with a terrible mystery, a sensual allure, an ecstatic celebration of all flesh, all incarnate bodies? Is the Western symbolic already so parched, so dry that it is crumbling apart, disintegrating into a jagged jumble of barren signifiers: empty, meaningless shells? To what does ‘weapons of mass destruction’ refer, exactly? Not to the bombs which are being dropped, but to those that don’t exist? What does ‘collateral damage’ mean? You damaged our bomb when we dropped it on you, so we’re even? The meaning, the very possibility of


meaning, and the mattering, the blasphemous possibility that all bodies matter, the simple not-so-simple acknowledgment of all our entangled lives—no life ever fully separate from all the rest—might this be what is at stake right now? Burning at the stake in the son’s war against the Holy Other?

Intolerable questions, admitting of no certain answers.

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Once upon a time, not so long ago, a bunch of old white men were able to myth the sacred as terribly feminine, frighteningly and desirably Other; their words were, if not dripping, at least damp. And they were able to live with their myths of the sacred, to welcome them, lovingly and hatefully, into their texts upon religion. Once upon a time, now, a bunch of us might want to consider furthering their efforts. Upon insisting, now, loudly, on the sacred, terrifying, alluring and unutterable flesh. Upon honouring all bodies. And yes, to do so is to risk, perhaps, being named ‘enemy combatants’. At last, a meaningful term. It means we are all of us already surrounded by a war—a war against the intolerable enemy, a war against the feminine, against the dark, against the sensual and sexual, a war against all unruly, recalcitrant bodies.
Pauline Conversations: Rereading Romans 1 in Christ*

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Abstract

One of the most insidious forms of Christian idolatry is the fetishizing of biblical texts, as when the meaning of Romans 1 is (wrongly) stabilized as condemning homosexual love-making. With Karl Barth we can learn how to converse with Paul in Christ, so that we can benefit from what Paul has to teach us, and his teaching can benefit from what we have learned under the tutelage of the Spirit. In this context we learn that in Paul’s day there were no homosexuals, and Paul learns that there are homosexuals in our day, some of whom are included within the body of Christ, where they are learning to love God in their loving of one another. The article uses the work of Bernadette Brooten, David Halperin, Mark Jordan and Martti Nissinen; and discusses the work of Eugene Rogers and Douglas Farrow.

At the beginning of the fifteenth century, Konrad Witz (1400–47) pictured the birth of Christ, the moment when God became visible in the world. But the painting does not show Christ’s nativity. Instead it pictures a simultaneous event in Rome, when the Tiburtine Sibyl showed Augustus Caesar a vision of the Virgin with her child, circled in the light of the sun.¹ The painting is not as we might imagine such a scene, nor as

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¹ An earlier version of this essay was given as a paper to the Durham Research Seminar on Idolatry (April 2003), organized by Stephen Barton, and I would like to thank him and all those who responded so generously on that occasion, in particular David Clough, Jimmy Dunn, Walter Moberley, and Paul Murray. I would also like to thank Tina Beattie, Gavin D’Costa and Eugene Rogers for subsequent comments. Needless to say, none are responsible for remaining infelicities.

¹ The earliest surviving version of this legend is to be found in a sixth-century chronicle by John of Malalas. The story was used to legitimate the foundation of the Church of the Ara Caeli on the Capitoline Hill in Rome, but gained its widespread popularity from Jacobus de Voraigne’s *Golden Legend* (thirteenth century). The story’s career was no doubt helped by—and conflated with—St Augustine’s account of a
it was usually depicted by other artists, with Mary and her child looking down from the clouds. Witz’s emperor makes no pretence at archaic dress, but appears as a medieval prince, clad in a sumptuous gown with fur trim, and a hat-crown that is so pushed on to his head that his right ear has been folded over. The Sybil is neither an old woman nor an enticing girl, as in some later Renaissance paintings, but a plain, matronly figure. As always with Witz, his characters are somewhat squat and their clothes are the true subjects of his painting. They are richly coloured, lovingly rendered, and fall in elaborate folds. Though caught in a moment of astonishment, the two figures are strangely still, as if carved in paint. Augustus has risen from his couch and is standing beside the Sybil. Both have raised hands: the Sybil pointing to the sky while the emperor is shielding his eyes from the light of the sun. We are drawn to look at these solid figures, standing on a green cloth. We look at them looking, but can see nothing of what they are seeing. The emperor’s vision is absent, though everywhere illuminating the painting, since the two figures are set against a gold ground, absolutely abstract in its formality, but casting light all around them.  

Witz’s painting demonstrates the impossibility of visualizing the invisible God, since it shows us the vision of the Virgin by not showing it. In this way Witz overcomes the double-bind of Christian iconography, which is to undertake a visual *via negativa* that will show and not show at the same time. The Christian imagination is held in the tension between the command not to image God and the command to repeat God’s image everywhere, since God became visible in Christ and the church is to bear him witness throughout the world. This is the double-bind at the heart of the iconoclasm that has plagued Christianity from its beginning. On the one hand the invisible God cannot be made visible, and all attempts to do so must be idolatrous; on the other hand, the invisible God has become visible in Christ, and so materiality, which normally can only reflect light, has become the light by which to see the poem by the Erythraean—or Cumaen—Sibyl, in which she foresees the coming of Christ and is so vehemently opposed to the worship of false gods that Augustine insists she is ‘to be counted among those who belong to the City of God’. See Augustine, *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans* (trans. Henry Bettenson and intro. John O’Meara; Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1984 [1972]), Bk XVIII ch.23 (pp. 788-92). For the medieval Sibylline tradition see Bernard McGinn, *Teste David cum Sibylla: The Significance of the Sibylline Tradition in the Middle Ages*, in Julius Kirchner and Suzanne F. Wemple (eds.), *Women of the Medieval World: Essays in Honor of John H. Mundy* (New York: Blackwell, 1985), pp. 7-35.

2. Witz’s remarkable painting is in the collection of the Musée des Beaux-Arts at Dijon, France, and can be viewed on its website (http://www.ville-dijon.fr).
world. It thus follows that the idolatrous is not the image as such, but the image that fails to show the invisible in the seen. But how does one picture the unseeable?³

**Flowing Pictures**

Bruno Latour has found the double-bind at the heart of iconoclasm and named it an iconoclasm: the confrontation of two opposite but necessary imperatives. Latour offers several examples of iconoclasm, but early defines it as an iconoclasm that does not know whether it is being destructive or constructive, a breaking that might be a making.⁴ Iconoclasm is about the danger of living with images, and the impossibility of doing without them, iconoclasm and iconophilia conjoined. In this Latour locates an almost irresolvable dilemma, a madness or frenzy, and finds its resolution in a making of images that is also a breaking, a practice that will prove to be theological.

Latour maps out the madness that must befall anyone who seeks to follow the second commandment. First of all one recognizes that if one is oneself a creature, made by a transcendent divinity, then everything one makes has not really been made by you, but by another. ‘Either you make or you are made’. Secondly, it is impossible to stop making images. Even iconoclasm gives rise to countless images of images’ destruction; and images insinuate themselves everywhere, even—as we will see—in the simple reading of Scripture. Even the command against images commands an image, a memorialization of the denied object: the golden calf that is constantly repeated whenever its destruction is recalled. It is from this double bind that there issues either the denial that the images have been made by human hands, or the denial of their efficacy, of their ability to show truly. But either response insinuates its alternative, establishes the truth of its opposite. This is Latour’s iconoclasm.⁵

The dilemmas of the iconoclash are somewhat weakened when one remembers that God is not a thing, and so not a competing agent with ourselves. As ‘first cause’, God is the agent of our agency, and so it is not that we either make or are made, but that we make because made. God makes our making, and so we can imagine the making of images that

³ It should be noted that this is a matter of picturing the invisible as such, and not merely the unseen-but-potentially-seeable. It is a matter of seeing the invisible in the visible.


show what no eye has seen. Christianity can imagine what Latour dis-
allows. But at the same time, this theological reflection also strengthens
Latour’s iconoclasm, since in believing that the unseeable may be seen—
the unshovable shown — the Christian is tempted to mistake what can
be seen for what is yet always unseeable, the imageable for the unimage-
able. The Christian is tempted to take a short-cut on the via negativa, and
so forget that the path that leads into the darkness — in which God alone
is seen — leads along and not around the via positiva.

The iconoclasm leads Latour to wonder if we have misunderstood the
second commandment. He adumbrates four classes of iconoclast: the As
who are against all images; the Bs who also destroy images, but are not
against them as such, only their ‘freeze-framing’, their absolutizing,
fetishizing; the Cs who are only against the images of others; and, finally,
the Ds who break images only by accident, unintentionally, innocently.6
Latour reveals himself to be a B, and adduces a theological paradigm for
his position, for in Christianity he finds images that already announce
their insufficiency, images of the dead Christ that already bespeak their
breaking; and a practice of redirection from one image to another, a
refusal of singular devotion.

The Emmaus pilgrims see nothing in their fellow traveller as painted by
Caravaggio, but the breaking of the bread reveals what they should have
seen, what the viewer can only see by the very dim light the painter has
added to the bread. But it is nothing but a painting. Redirecting
attention is always the job those pictures try to do, thus forcing the faithful to move
from one image to the next. ‘He is not here. See the place where they laid
him’ (Mark 16.6).7

For Latour, idolatry is overcome through a ‘cascade’ of images, and by
constantly moving from one to another, settling on none. Thus Latour
suggests a ‘safer reading’ of the second commandment: ‘Thou shall not
freeze-frame any graven image’.8 But, as Latour half suggests, this has
always been known in the Christian tradition, among those who have
sought to follow the one person in whom the iconoclasm is overcome,
since Christ is the true image of the divine, being at one and the same
time made and not made by human desire — the fruit of the Spirit in the
life of the Virgin. Moreover, as Latour suggests, Christ as image avoids
idolatry through constant redirection, for Christ is always ahead, and we

iconoclasts were Cs. See Joseph Koerner, The Reformation of the Image (London:
are forever catching up. We have hope of catching sight of God in Christ only by running after, along the via positiva, which is the via negativa as long as we keep running.

There can be no question of denying the materiality or manufacture of the image, as in the orthodox tradition of the sudarium, the image not made by human hands (acheiropoetos). This can only be taken seriously when it is taken as a joke, pointing up the manufacture of the image by denying its making. The icon shows us the invisible God in an utterly contingent, culturally specific iconography, a writing—and icons are always written, not painted—that leaves us in no doubt that it has been written by human hands.

Latour draws a distinction between the religious and the ‘critical mind’ on the basis of the distinction between those that seek to deny and those who seek to discern the human hand in the world’s making. Latour’s most famous trick is to have aligned science not with the critical but with the religious mind.

The only way to defend science against the accusation of fabrication, to avoid the label of ‘socially constructed’, is apparently to insist that no human hand has ever touched the image it has produced. So, in the two cases of religion and science, when the hand is shown at work, it is always a hand with a hammer or with a torch: always a critical, destructive hand.

In the face of this impasse, Latour imagines a revealing of one’s hand which does not deface but divines the power of the image, that brings the gods closer by displaying their human fabrication.

Icons have become prized aesthetic objects, but their allure derives not from some supposed mystical quality, but from the tradition of denial in which they are written. In this way the crude, mass produced plaster saint, daubed in garish colours, may be less of an idol than the silver-framed icon, since one could never doubt the humble manufacture of the former, the banality of its provenance. It is not a wondrous object that bedazzles the eye. It stops our sight in another way, since its very paucity reminds us that what it has to show is not what can be seen.

The difference between idol and icon has to do not with material production but with practices of looking, and so any idol may become an icon, and any icon an idol. There is no escape from idolatry in iconoclasm, for the iconoclast in his zeal betrays a true idolatry, as Martin Luther

noted of Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt. The iconoclast falls prey to an iconoclasm, since the destruction of images secretly acknowledges the very power that is said to be an illusion.\textsuperscript{12} Or, more subtly, we might say with Joseph Koerner, that in destroying the image, the iconoclast reaffirms its power to represent, but now in its destroyed state imaging its own materiality and divinity’s absence.\textsuperscript{13} And there is no escape in the banishing of images and the favouring of words, for as Martin Luther also noted, the text gives rise to images.

\begin{quote}
I know for certain that God desires that one should hear and read his work, and especially the passion of Christ. But if I am to hear and think, then it is impossible for me not to make images of this within my heart, for whether I want to or not, when I hear the word Christ, there delineates itself in my heart the picture of a man who hangs on the cross, just as my face naturally delineates itself on the water, when I look into it. If it is not a sin, but a good thing, that I have Christ’s image in my heart, why then should it be sinful to have it before my eyes?\textsuperscript{14}
\end{quote}

The church cannot rid itself of idols by refusing images and favouring only words, since words too can play their part in practices of misperception, idolatrous regimes. Rather the church must constantly mobilize its images and traverse its scriptures. The church must keep running after. It must not freeze-frame any graven image, nor stabilize any text, for if the written word can produce images, it can produce icons that may become idols, fetishes for our wanting.\textsuperscript{15}

\textit{Romans 1}

Romans 1 might be/come such a text, a frozen fetish; particularly appropriate because it has to do with idolatry, with mistaking the material for the ‘invisible’ God, whose ‘power’ and ‘nature’ may yet be seen in the world (1.20). Idolaters are ‘fools’ who both see and fail to see, who take images of things in the world—people, birds, four-footed animals and reptiles—for the ‘immortal God’ who is to be seen in such things but is other than them (1.22-23; cf. Ps. 106.19). They worship the creature rather than the creator, and so fall away from the truth and instead of desiring

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{12} Latour, ‘What Is Iconoclash?’, p. 19.
\item \textsuperscript{13} Joseph Koerner, ‘The Icon as Iconoclash’, in Latour and Weibel (eds.), \textit{Iconoclash}, pp. 164-213 (183).
\item \textsuperscript{14} Luther, \textit{Werke} (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883–1980), 18, p. 83; cited and translated in Koerner, ‘Icon as Iconoclash’, p. 205.
\item \textsuperscript{15} It must not stabilize any text, even the most illustrious, for that would be to foreclose on its plenitude, on God’s infinite depths. Who can fully essay the meaning of even a single verse (1 Jn 4.16)?
\end{itemize}
God lust after *akatharsia*—‘impurity’ (1.24-25). With their desire disordered, these fools are given over to ‘degrading passions’.

Their women exchanged (*metellaxan*) natural intercourse (*phusike chresis*) for unnatural (*para plusin*), and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own person the due penalty for their error (NRSV 1.26-27; cf. 1 Cor. 6.9).

Sexual perversity derives from idolatry, from a failure of sight, and from this failure derives all manner of other evils. ‘Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious towards parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless’ (1.29-31; cf. Gal. 5.19-21). This catalogue of wickedness is itself a death sentence, since, as Paul reminds us, God has decreed death for those ‘who practise such things’ (1.32), and God carries out the sentence in giving them over to their passions, which are the ‘due penalty for their error’ (1.27), the expression of God’s ‘wrath’ (1.18).

Idolaters die because they cease to look upon God; they cease to see the creator in the creature, and instead find divinity in things made by creatures. They see things as divine.

When we no longer see God in the creature we see the creature as God, and our desire is ordered wholly toward the creature, to the flesh of his or her body. ‘Everything then becomes Libido: life becomes totally erotic’. This is the young Karl Barth, who, in his commentary on Romans makes rather little of Paul’s identification of idolatry with sexual perversity. For Barth, Paul is not so much concerned with particular sexual practices as with a failure of sight, an inability to see the ‘infinite qualitative difference’ between God and world, creator and creature, between the ‘Wholly Other’ and ourselves. It is not so much that men

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17. This is to understand the offence as itself the penalty, but alternative readings would be that the men are punished with venereal disease or effeminacy. One may note that Paul describes the men’s ‘shameless acts’ as ‘impure’ (recalling the ‘abominable’ act of Lev. 18.22; cf. 20.13) rather than ‘sinful’. This leads Gareth Moore to argue that ‘Paul sees same-sex practices as a punishment for sin, rather than as sinful’. But this is to suppose that Paul does not see the men’s sin as its own punishment—being shameful. It is nevertheless the case that Paul does not describe same-sex acts as sin. See Gareth Moore OP, *A Question of Truth: Christianity and Homosexuality* (London: Continuum, 2003), p. 94.


are given over to desire for men, and women for women, as that both men and women are given over to lust for a world become divine, for creatures that no longer show their difference from the creator.

This then is the fateful text in which Paul linked idolatry with sexual perversity, enshrining Jewish and pagan commonplaces in what was to become a key text for the Christian tradition, so that heretical beliefs have always betokened lax morals. Paul’s linking of sexual perversity with idolatry can be found in other Jewish writers, like Philo and Josephus, and derives from the Wisdom of Solomon.20 Perhaps Barth offers a more subtle reading of Paul than Paul himself provides, for it might be said that Paul merely repeats a common critique of idolatry that was standard in both Jewish and pagan polemic, drawing a contrast between the unsophisticated who believe in visible images and the more philosophically minded, who acknowledge an invisible divinity. To the former Paul has ascribed a standard list of moral failures, which are shunned by those who know better. Barth, however, finds in Paul a searching critique of a general human tendency to misperceive, to miss the difference between creator and creature that creation—on Paul’s account—everywhere discloses. Barth is most in agreement with Paul when he sees that the passage is not really about sexual misdemeanours, but about our natural idolatry, but Barth extends this insight when he finds the idol to be ourselves, the ‘No-God’ that we serve under the name of ‘God’.21 In Barth, Paul’s idolatrous Greeks become Barth’s fellow Christians, who worship not so much birds and four-footed things as themselves and the things they have made: ‘Family, State, Church, Fatherland’.22

But Barth’s reading of Paul is utterly Pauline, for Paul’s list of Gentile failings is itself parabolic, a rhetorical artifice in which he offers not so much a description of actual people as a conspectus of his readers’ prejudices, the too-easy judgments by which they themselves will be judged. For the twist in Paul’s harangue, is that the Roman Christians are no better placed than the idolatrous pagans, given over to their vices. ‘[I]n judging your fellow-man you condemn yourself, since you, the judge, are equally guilty’.

It is admitted that God’s judgement is rightly passed upon all who commit such crimes as these; and do you imagine—you who pass judgement on the guilty while committing the same crimes yourself—do you imagine that you, any more than they, will escape the judgement of God? (NEB Rom. 2.1-3).

20. ‘For the worship of idols, whose name it is wrong even to mention, is the beginning, cause, and end of every evil’ (Wis. 14.27).
21. Barth, Epistle to the Romans, p. 44.
22. Barth, Epistle to the Romans, p. 50.
If Paul's readers had begun to feel smug about themselves, they have been roundly disabused and reminded that they are no better than those whom they judge as idolaters. But are we to suppose that the Roman Christians had committed the very ‘same crimes’ that Paul has laid upon the pagans, or is it that Paul's indictment is to be read in its generality and not in its specifics? That it is, first and foremost, an invitation to self-reflection rather than the condemnation of others?

Now we can begin to see how a text like Romans 1 can itself become an idol and how this can be avoided. For if we can turn family, state, church and fatherland, into idols then we can do the same with Scripture, which is as much of our making as any of these other realities. Idols are not given in and of themselves, but appear when certain objects, certain ideas and practices, are established in relations of fear and hope, of desperation and pious want. And this can be as true of our most cherished and revered objects, ideas and practices, as of those we disdain as crude and laughably false, the idols of others. It is when we think that we ourselves are free of idols that they become most subtle and insidious, because invisible to our sight. We then suffer a double blindness, for we not only fail to see the different difference of creator from creature, we fail to see that this failure attends all our seeing. We fail to see that we must see what cannot be seen: God's invisibility in the visible.

Idolatry is not something from which Christianity escapes, but something with which it must constantly negotiate as its always present possibility. At least the church knows this when it is prepared to learn from someone like Karl Barth and his way of reading Scripture. For Scripture becomes an idol when it stops moving, when it ceases to change, and Barth never allowed it to do that. For Barth Scripture has to speak to us today, it has to move us now, and any fruitful reading of Scripture has to hear this speaking, caught up into the movement of Scripture itself, which, if it is to be the word of God, has not ceased to be the medium of God’s encounter. But Scripture is this medium not as the transcription of a word given once and for all in the past, for Scripture is not the memory of what has been, or not only that, but also of what is to come, of what is even now arriving, in the church’s practice of faithful reading.23

Traversing Texts

God is always the same but humanity is not. As human beings we are always changing, across the generations and in our own lives, and

23. See further Gerard Loughlin, Telling God’s Story: Bible, Church and Narrative Theology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999 [1996]).
human nature is not something from which we deviate and decline but to which we aspire and ascend. We do not (fully) know what it is to be human for we are still and always learning what it is to live in Christ, whose humanity is being disclosed in and through our learning. Thus Scripture, if it is to speak to our changing condition, must transcend the historical and cultural contingency of its first making, and live in the practice of its reading, which cannot be a simple matter of retrieval, of reconstruction—the virtual display of an archaic past—but the formation of a present encounter in which the past and the present are transfigured and the future arrives. This is why the church has always known, at least until the advent of modernity, that Scripture has many senses and that its reading requires many readers, many sites of encounter, since reading is a church practice and the church is never one person or group of people, no matter how exalted. (One might say that the gifts of the Spirit are distributed throughout the body, so that faithful reading may fall to some people more than others. But the Spirit, being free, constantly redistributes her gifts. Those who look for faithful reading in one place—say in a magisterial office—are seeking an easy life, an idol of security against the Spirit’s movement.)

In the nineteenth century, John Henry Newman advocated this view of Scripture reading. Being open to the premodern, patristic church—and so to our postmodern world—Newman did not take fright at the thought of a multivalent, indeterminate text, a Scripture that, given once and for all, is never understood once and for all. ‘The All-wise, All-knowing God cannot speak without meaning many things at once’, Newman declared.

Every word of His is full of instruction, looking many ways; and though it is not often given us to know these various senses, and we are not at liberty to attempt lightly to imagine them, yet, as far as they are told us, and as far as we may reasonably infer them, we must thankfully accept them. Look at Christ’s words, and this same characteristic will strike you; whatever He says is fruitful in meaning, and refers to many things.

Karl Barth, writing out of a different ecclesial tradition in the twentieth century, did not attempt to imagine the senses of Scripture lightly, and he understood that reading Scripture was a matter of the imagination, an exercise of ‘creative energy’, as he declared in the second preface to

his commentary on Romans, and which energy he found in Luther’s and Calvin’s reading of Scripture. Calvin’s wrestling with the text was so energetic that he broke down the walls between the first and sixteenth centuries. ‘The conversation between the original record and the reader moves round the subject-matter, until a distinction between yesterday and today becomes impossible’. By a ‘creative straining of the sinews, by a relentless, elastic application of the “dialectical” method’, Calvin is able to speak with Paul about Christ. But it is not so much Calvin’s and Barth’s precise methods that matter. What matters is that Barth is prepared to engage with the text in pursuit of Christ in Christ, and seeks to find there the ‘Word in the words’.29

When I am faced by such a document as the Epistle of Paul to the Romans, I embark on its interpretation on the assumption that he is confronted with the same unmistakable and unmeasurable significance of that relation [between man and God] as I myself am confronted with, and that it is this situation which moulds his thought and its expression.30

This is to say that reading Scripture is a church practice, which assumes that both reader and writer, Barth and Paul, share the same corporeal context, both being parts of the one body of Christ. And that, of course, is an utterly Pauline assumption, the root of all his theology — which is not justification but incorporation; justification through incorporation, through life in the community of faith.

Moreover, we read Paul on Christ in order to know what it is to live in Christ today, and so we are always pushing beyond reading as recognition or retrieval, toward reading as expectant entreaty, engaged anticipation; as prayer. It is only in this context that we seek to know what Paul knew, assuming that he knew more than we about the body in which we both participate, though differently.31 This may be to push Barth further in the direction of understanding the reading of Scripture as an ecclesial, indeed eucharistic, practice, than Barth would have wanted to go himself, but at the very least Barth points us to a reading of Scripture that resists idolizing the text, because it resists stabilizing its meaning and relevance. This resistance is all the stronger when we recollect that Scripture reading is a communal practice, undertaken by many

27. Barth, Epistle to the Romans, p. 7.
29. Barth, Epistle to the Romans, p. 9.
30. Barth, Epistle to the Romans, p. 10.
31. ‘Paul knows of God what most of us do not know; and his Epistles enable us to know what he knew’ (Barth, Epistle to the Romans, p. 11).
who read not as isolated individuals, alone with their Bibles, but as members of the one body gathered at the altar. For it is only at the Lord’s table that they can share and offer their reading in the hope of receiving its truth in return.32

They may have to wait for the truth of their reading to fully appear, for it comes to them as the completion of Christ’s work, the making of the human body in his own, which is an eschatological accomplishment, which for us, in time, appears only and for ever on the horizon. Such readings have to be tested; they have to agree with our other readings of Scripture, with the ‘dogmas and confessions’ of the church, and they must bear good fruit.33 But these tests are themselves tested, since if the readings are true, they will lead us more ‘deeply’ into Scripture, challenging superficial readings,34 and we may find that the church’s ‘traditional norms’ need to be revised.35 This is to draw out an unstated implication of Barth’s analysis. He insists on Scripture as the final and absolute norm,36 but its ‘investigation, exposition and application’ has to be pursued;37 we have to labour for its meaning in the Spirit. The Scripture may be the ‘regular way’ to Christ, but as such it is an undertaking, a journey, an adventure. Strange new readings can call the church to repentance.38

The hearing of Christ in such readings will always be doubted by some, even by most in the church. ‘As a rule there will be only a more or less feeble vanguard of hearers which is persecuted by a large majority of non-believers, and an apparently not inconsiderable rearguard of those who never seem to hear aright in this respect’.39 Consequently, the strange voice must be heard with circumspection, and can never be made definitive for the whole community. Rather it should be made to bear fruit. Those who hear Christ’s word in alien readings should not keep it to themselves. ‘They should hold it up as an invitation and summons to others, to the whole community, to share it with them’.

They should show themselves to be such as have heard a true word and been radically smitten by it. They should bring forth the appropriate fruits.

32. For something on the ‘rights’ of those who are gathered at the altar see further Gerard Loughlin, ‘Gathered at the Altar: Homosexuals and Human Rights’, T&S, 10.2 (2004), pp. 73-82.
34. Barth, Church Dogmatics, IV.3, p. 126.
35. Barth, Church Dogmatics, IV.3, p. 127.
37. Barth, Church Dogmatics, IV.3, p. 131.
38. Barth, Church Dogmatics, IV.3, p. 129.
39. Barth, Church Dogmatics, IV.3, p. 132.
And then, with a readiness to be corrected, they should leave it to the power of the true word, by the ministry (and not the assertive claim) of its confession, to cause its truth to shine to others and to awaken its recognition and confession in them too. If it is a true word, the time will inevitably come sooner or later when it can make its way and do its work in and to the whole community.40

It is in the light of Barth’s reflections on what may at first appear as alien readings of Scripture, that the church must venture to traverse Scripture again. Such new readings may speak words and show signs that resonate with the depths of Scripture and the devotion of the saints, and yet challenge their familiar appropriations. And when we begin to attend to such readings we may discover that all our comforts and satisfactions are turned upside-down, and we are challenged to think again, to find the world remade. We may find that a text which had frozen begins to thaw and starts to move, as in the way of a conversation, where one remark gives way to the next, and, calling for a response, finds its correction, supplementation, fulfilment, in what comes next, and what comes next inspiring yet more words—so that in their midst the Word may appear and move us ever onwards, into God.

Idol Bodies

Saving Romans 1 from idolatry is, as with any other text, a pragmatic undertaking, since the text’s meaning may be stabilized in more than one way. But commonly its meaning is frozen when it is assumed, and occasionally argued, that this text condemns homosexual practices, homoerotic relationships, same-sex affections and companionships, as these intimacies are paralleled by other-sex couples, in ‘straight’ liaisons and heterosexual marriages. This fixed and certain condemnation is most insidiously assumed in translations of the Bible, and in some of the most respected, such as the New English Bible (NEB) and New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). Most readers of these texts will not know the strangeness of Paul’s terms, the ambiguities of their interpretation and the distance between the world from which they come and our own. Translation necessarily freezes the text, settling its meaning, which is always more uncertain, more mobile, in the original.41


41. And then there are the scholars who inform the translations, who bring to the task not only their undoubted technical skills, but also their cultural convictions, their upbringings and social milieus, their generational and gendered locations, the contingencies of which they do not always realize—having been tutored in ways of thinking and feeling that were in part formed by previous, equally unreflective, determinations.
Paul lived in a world of rigid social hierarchies. Some people might have moved between its levels, but the levels themselves remained firmly in place: as between men and women, masters (and mistresses) and their slaves, adults and children. As numerous studies have shown, what horrified (male) people in the ancient world was that a (male) person might lose his social standing, his place in the hierarchy and slip, irredeemably, downwards. And this might happen if a man having sex with another man was thought to have taken the passive role, the part of the ‘woman’, which social marker was always already degraded. ‘Within this horror, to be a woman is to be something defective, something already half-polluted, something disreputable’. And what horrified about female-female sex was that women played the part of the ‘man’, becoming active when they should be passive.

Paul does not tell us what the women who exchanged natural for unnatural sex got up to, but taking the active role in sex with men would have been sufficient to condemn them as acting contrary to nature. It is Paul’s paralleling of the women with the shameless men, that most strongly suggests that the women were indulging in some form of same-sex intercourse — making this the only reference to ‘lesbianism’ in the Bible. Men and women were so essentialized that ancient cultures could not imagine that a man might lie with a man as with a man; instead he must do so as with a woman. And likewise a woman could not lie with a woman as with a woman, but must do so as if with a man. Thus those who loved their own sex were impure because they crossed gender boundaries. Cross-dressing was outlawed for the same reason (see Deut. 22.5).

Those readings which find the bodies of modern homosexuals in Romans 1 assume that we know what Paul’s Gentile idolaters got up to when they exchanged natural for unnatural (para phusin) practices, that Paul shares the same concept of nature as ourselves and that this concept — whatever it is — makes sense. It assumes that what horrified in men’s conduct was that they were having sex with one another, rather than

of the biblical material. For a startling example of how a scholar can read his cultural assumptions — here about which bodily organs and orifices do and do not allow for ‘mutual and pleasurable stimulation’ — see R.A.J. Gagnon, The Bible and Homosexual Practice (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), pp. 254-56.

44 Brooten, Love between Women, p. 237.
45 See Brooten, Love between Women, pp. 245-53.
with women, when it might have been that what horrified was that they were having sex with one another rather than with women or boys, since having sex with boys was more or less acceptable among pagans in the ancient world. Decorum would have been breached not by having sex with one’s own sex, but by taking on a passive, socially inferior role. Some men would have had to play at being ‘women’. Might this be what Paul thought would affront his readers? But such a possibility — however unlikely — cannot be entertained, even momentarily, once we have stabilized the text as referring to the utterly modern character of the ‘homosexual’.

Even Karl Barth succumbed to this misreading when, in the *Church Dogmatics*, he sought to understand homosexuality as idolatry. Barth bizarrely supposes that those who love their own sex deny the humanity of the other sex. The homosexual tries ‘to be human in himself as sovereign man or woman, rejoicing in himself in self-satisfaction and self-sufficiency’. This is to be given over to the ‘worship of a false god’, a sort of self-worship or auto-divinization. But though there are idolaters in Romans 1, there are no homosexual bodies, and so none that are worshipped as gods.

The most amazing fact with regard to the use of the Bible in debates about gay and lesbian sexuality is that the Bible says absolutely nothing about homosexuality. It is hardly possible to make this point with enough strength, because almost all commentators, both scholarly and casual, assume the opposite. When you are certain of what a text says you can see what it does not say. Thus, to take but one example, Douglas Farrow equates homosexuals with sodomites, and sodomites with Paul’s *arsenokoitai*, and so finds homosexuals in Paul’s list of those who, while not inheritors of God’s Kingdom, are yet sanctified through their incorporation in Christ. Perhaps Farrow has been misled by the NRSV’s too easy translation of *arsenokoitai* as sodomites. It is not that Farrow is guilty of eisegesis — which is inherent in all exegesis — but that he is so partial in espying its presence, especially when, as here, it is so egregious.

Scripture says absolutely nothing about homosexuals, and even less about homosexuality, and this should not come as a surprise, for the Bible says very little about most modern problems, and homosexuality is nothing if not a modern concern. The Catholic Church addressed it for the first time in the twentieth century because it had only just been invented in the preceding century, beginning to inform people’s lives in

46. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III.4, p. 166.

the early to mid-twentieth century. But it was only in the nineteenth century—as Michel Foucault must still teach us—that the ‘homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology’. Moreover, this ‘personage’ was completely given, conditioned and consumed by his sexuality.

It was everywhere present in him: at the root of all his actions because it was their insidious and indefinitely active principle; written immodestly on his face and body because it was a secret that always gave itself away. It was consubstantial with him, less as a habitual sin than as a singular nature.48

In 1869 Karl Maria Kertbeny (the assumed German name of the Hungarian Benkerdt) became the first person to use the term ‘homosexual’ in print, but it was Richard von Krafft-Ebing who established its fame.49 It entered the English language in 1892 with Charles Gilbert Chaddock’s translation of Krafft-Ebing’s Psychopathia sexualis (1887). It is important to note the late date for the invention of the ‘homosexual’—though not as late as the invention of the German ‘heterosexual’ in 1887 and the English in 189250—but even more important to note that the settling of its meaning, and its widespread adoption in the twentieth century, marked a new way of thinking of human identity in terms of ‘sexuality’. For it imagines that each person has an inner essential core of sexuality which can be variously orientated, and which is given—made known—by the object of erotic interest, by the sex of that object: male and/or female. This way of thinking is now so dominant in the West that it appears entirely natural; just the way things are. But as a way of categorizing and evaluating people it is relatively new, a late child of modernity. Thus, as David Halperin notes, ‘although there have been, in many different times and places (including classical Greece), persons who sought sexual contact with other persons of the same sex as themselves, it is only within the


last hundred years or so that such persons (or some portion of them, at any rate) have been homosexuals’.  

And, we might add, it is only in the last hundred years or so that other persons have been heterosexuals, and only in the last fifty years or so that a portion of homosexuals have been gay, lesbian or queer.

Previous sexual identities had been ordered by practices (permitted and outlawed) and ideas of legitimate gendered behaviour. Thus, the earlier nineteenth century category of the sexual ‘invert’ was more of a gendered than a sexual identification, since while it included people with an erotic interest in their own sex, it also encompassed people whose interests deviated from their gender, from what was considered proper to their sex, such as men who liked cats or women who wanted political power. While the notion of homosexuality ascribed a range of interests, attitudes and behaviours to those whom it marked, it above all characterized them in terms of their sexual desire for a particular object, namely a person of their own sex, and applied this characterization to both males and females, unlike, for example, the earlier term ‘sodomite’, which was used exclusively of male bodies.

Homosexuality also differs from earlier terms in being ‘scientific’ rather than social or moral. It claims a new objectivity—homosexuality has observable traits or symptoms—which allows for a distinction between the medical condition and its moral evaluation, and so for its eventual revalorization and the emergence of ‘gay liberation’ and ‘gay pride’, both of which depend on the preceding establishment of a homosexual essence or identity. Thus what began as a pathology became a politics and, more recently, a ‘life-style’, a certain regime of production and consumption.

There are those who believe that the modern concepts of homosexuality and heterosexuality name universal conditions, the poles of human sexuality, which are invariant across cultures and throughout history, and that ‘homosexuality’ can thus be used for any appearance of the homoerotic, of same-sex affections and acts. But while the universal reality of the latter is not in question, their social construction, meaning

51. Halperin, ‘One Hundred Years’, p. 29.
53. Halperin, ‘One Hundred Years’, p. 16.
54. The most prominent exponent of this view is John Boswell, as displayed in the subtitle of his best known work, Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997). It will be noted that Boswell replaces the pathological ‘homosexual’ with the political ‘gay’.
and value, have always been subject to differing regimes of discursive power (for the semiotic is always political), and it is their meaning and value— their sacramental possibility— that is at stake in this discussion.

In relativizing our conception of sexuality as a modern and not an ancient idea, we are left with the problem of how to speak about past concepts and constructions, about the lived experience of the people by whom they were inhabited. We are tempted to suppose that they must really have thought and felt as we do, and simply used different words to talk about the same thing. We arrogantly assume the naturalness of our discourse; its rightful hegemony. But it is precisely this prejudice that we must call in question, and this questioning which we can barely articulate, for whatever terms we think most neutral for describing the phenomena of sexual want and practice will always betray their contingent, cultural provenance—as already with ‘sexual want and practice’. But if we allow for this near **aporia**—the impossibility of speaking transculturally without embarking on the almost endless mediation of at best analogous terms and concepts—we can start to rid ourselves of the illusion that past peoples really did think as we do, and we can start to discuss their difference from ourselves. But it is hard work.

The recent Church of England report on *Some Issues in Human Sexuality* (2003) fails at the outset, and this despite rehearsing the historicist argument in some detail. Its authors fail to learn from their own learning, and conclude that while such terms ‘as “homosexual” and “heterosexual” may be modern’, people were always aware ‘that there were certain individuals who had an innate attraction to members of their own sex and therefore, although the term “homosexual” may be recent, the idea that lies behind it may be an ancient one’. But the ‘idea’ is precisely not

55. There can be no question of an acultural, universal something—say ‘sexuality’—that might be given in an impartial, ‘objective’ discourse. What we are as human beings, what we are always in the process of becoming, appears in and not apart from our multiple mediations and meanings. These can be judged only by what we are called to be, and what we are called to be only appears in the possibilities that open for us, which, for Christians, open in the body of Christ, in flesh irradiated by grace.

56  *Some Issues in Human Sexuality: A Guide to the Debate* (London: Church House Publishing, 2003), 5.3.37 (p. 182). The report was a follow-up to an earlier Church of England report, *Issues in Human Sexuality* (London: Church House Publishing, 1991). *Some Issues*, throughout its discussion of Rom. 1.24-27, assumes that Paul is referring to homosexuals and homosexuality, though it is not entirely consistent on this point, since at 4.4.19 (p. 154) it tells us—rather surprisingly—that ‘Paul would have been aware that people were attracted to, and could love, members of their own sex. But this behaviour went with an equal capacity for heterosexual activity’. But if Paul thought this then he did not have the idea of homosexuality. At this point, *Some Issues* tells us that Paul held an ancient concept of ‘bisexuality’— ‘to use our term’—but this
ancient, and no ancient individuals thought that they or others were homosexual, that they could be characterized as having a ‘sexual orientation’, let alone an ‘innate attraction to members of their own sex’. Paul gives no indication of thinking like this—but merely refers to men having (some kind of) sex with other men, and women having (some kind of) sex with other women, and, moreover, sex in the context of idolatry.57

*Analogous Sexualities/Discourses*

Foucault drew a distinction between the nineteenth-century’s homosexual and the earlier figure of the sodomite, which distinction he characterized as one between a ‘nature’ and an ‘act’, a disposition and a practice. Sodomy became homosexuality when the act became the man—and for the most part we are talking of men—the outward form of an inward life. ‘Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphrodisim of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species’.58 Foucault’s distinction, however, has proved to be in need of further complication. For Mark Jordan has shown that the medieval and early-modern sodomite was more nearly a species than Foucault either knew or acknowledged, a precursor of the homosexual, though conceptually more inchoate and subject to a more ‘hysterical’ response. Sodomy and the sodomite were no less a matter of invention than homosexuality and the homosexual, but one developed by Christian theology rather than medical science.

Mark Jordan dates the invention of *sodomia* to Peter Damian in the eleventh century, who, in his *Book of Gomorrah* (*Liber Gomorrhianus*), coined the term on the basis of blasphemy (*blasphemia*).59 Before there had only been sodomites and their practices, but from now on there would be a new essence and identity, a possibly contagious disposition, which did not have to be acted out in order to be present. The *Book of* is as confused and question begging as the suggestion that he held our notion of homosexuality. He held none of these notions.

57. And what of the twentieth-century’s non-idolatrous homosexuals? Paul had no resources for asking and answering such a question. He had no experience of same-sex couples who experience God’s grace in their loving of one another. We cannot ask him of that of which he was ignorant, but instead learn from him in our learning of how the Spirit still works to undo our idolatries. Thus we may read his texts aright, as no longer shibboleths but movements of the Spirit.


Gomorrah was addressed to Pope Leo IX, urging him to take action against those clerics who practised the ‘sodomitic vice’ or ‘sodomy’ — which newly coined term was the fateful ‘abstraction of an essential sin’. This abstraction was drawn from an already existing character, the ‘sodomite’, who was thus further constituted as the exemplar of a ‘range of human acts, activities, or dispositions’. While Peter is repeatedly concerned with the acts that constitute sodomy, these are the acts of a particular character, a particular condition, which, while it might change — Peter is concerned that the sodomite will desist from his actions — will not really do so, since the sodomite is likened to a demoniac and desiring of death. If the sodomite is to be cured it will be in the next life.

Jordan is adamant that medieval sodomy was in no sense modern homosexuality. Like the Bible, ‘medieval moral theology’ has ‘absolutely nothing’ to say about homosexuality. ‘“Homosexuality” is no more discussed by medieval theology than are phlogiston, Newton’s inertia, quarks or any of the other entities hypothesized by one or another modern science. “Sodomy” is not “homosexuality”’. However, in the medieval sodomite Jordan does find a precursor for the modern homosexual in the sense that, like the homosexual, the sodomite is a personage with a definable identity, an ‘anatomy and physiology, personal history, and secret community’. The possibility of categorizing people according to their sexual desires was made possible by the medieval invention of the sodomite. When we think of ourselves or others as homosexuals it is because the medievals had first thought of sodomites, people who are defined by a set of sexual practices and desires.

This does not mean, of course, that the Sodomite is the nineteenth century’s homosexual. The identities are different, as are the notions about identity itself. It does mean that the invention of the homosexual may well have relied on the already familiar category of the Sodomite. The idea that same-sex pleasure constitutes an identity of some kind is clearly the work of medieval theology, not nineteenth-century forensic medicine. So too any rejection of the Christian account of Sodomy may well carry with it the rejection of identity as a necessary category for thinking about same-sex pleasure.

And Jordan’s last point is crucial, for both the notion of the sodomite and of the homosexual make same-sex pleasure the mark of an identity, in the way that a society might imagine left-handedness as the marker of a certain character, a certain type of sinister personage, who gives herself

60. Jordan, Invention of Sodomy, pp. 49 and 161.
63. Jordan, Invention of Sodomy, pp. 163-64.
away by writing, or wanting to write, with her left hand. As with the homosexual, the act—writing with the left hand—is the sign of a preceding disposition, a prior and sinister desire. Today most people would think it absurd that left-handedness was a marker of a particular kind of personage, who might be opposed to the dextrous, the right-handed, in the manner that we take sexual orientation to be the marker of a specific, stable and culturally transcendent identity; the marker of an entirely bodily life. But the comparison is not innocent, because the left-handed have been viewed as deviant, portending deeper threats, and requiring correction, enforced normalization. (Humans can be the silliest of animals.)

However, we must further complicate Foucault’s and Jordan’s story. For just as the sodomite might be considered analogous to the homosexual, so the ancient world had a similar personage, at least one similar personage, who was alike constructed in terms of his sexual proclivities. But being analogous this person is also interestingly different from either the sodomite or the homosexual. Bernadette Brooten, in her study of *Love between Women*, discusses the example of Soranus of Antioch (as translated by Caelius Aurelianus), who, in his two-part treatise *On Acute and on Chronic Diseases* (*Peri oxeõn kai chroniõn pathõn*), details the case of soft men (*molles*), who become effeminate and adopt a passive role with other men, being penetrated rather than penetrating. For Soranus this is a disease of the soul, consequent upon the failure to moderate sexual desires. Since such men can have periods of remission, when they again become penetrators of both boys and women, Soranus’s distinction between healthy and unhealthy men is not the modern one between heterosexual and homosexual persons (which categories include both men and women), but an ancient one between active and passive men; between proper men and those who suffer from desiring to become as if women.64

At one point in his discussion, Soranus likens these soft men to those women—*tribades*—who suffer the reverse disease of pursuing other women, of aspiring to an active, masculine role in sexual congress.65 As with the men, the unbridled lust of these women leads them to adopt the contrary of their natural sexual role, and censure falls on those women who wish to be active rather than passive, as it falls on those men who wish to be passive rather than active. But their partners are blameless, at least with regard to male-male encounters,66 which further points up

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66. Brooten disputes the symmetry that David Halperin seems to suggest between male and female homoeroticism, arguing that while the active partner in male-male
that here we are not dealing with anything like the modern concept of the homosexual, but with one of its precursors. Except that in some ways the earlier ideas live on in Western culture, as when it is supposed that (active) homosexual men are invariably the corruptors of otherwise (passive) heterosexual boys, and all sexual encounters are imagined as taking place between dominants and submissives. Most importantly, Soranus understood homoerotic desires to be pathological, and debated both their cause and possible cure. He debated whether the condition might be hereditary or congenital, and by way of cure he advocated mind control and, for some women, clitoridectomy. Soranus studied in Alexandria and practised medicine in Rome at the beginning of the second century AD, so while not contemporaneous with Paul, he demonstrates the possibility that Paul might have known of those among the Gentiles who were deemed to be something like Soranus’s *tribades* and *molles* (soft men). So perhaps it was such people of whom Paul was thinking in Romans 1. But whether or not we make this supposition, we cannot say that Paul had any idea of modern homosexuality or of homosexual persons, and we must remember that Paul associated ‘unnatural’ sexual inclinations and practices with idolatry, with a fundamental misperception of the world.

It is only because the terms homosexual and homosexuality—and their derivatives, heterosexual and heterosexuality—are now so ubiquitous that we suppose that they or their cognates were always ready to hand. But if nothing else, it is clear that Paul’s Gentiles were not homosexuals, since they ‘exchanged’ their natural passions for perverted ones (taking ‘nature’ in a purely biological sense). There is no idea in Paul of a variant desire—a homoerotic orientation—as is now commonplace. Modern homosexuals do not exchange their natures but live them out, when they are out.

sex was blameless, both passive and active partners in female-female sex were censured. See Halperin, ‘One Hundred Years’, p. 23 and Brooten, *Love between Women*, p. 161 n. 54.

67 This was nicely sent up in Russell Davies’s 1999 television drama *Queer as Folk* (UK Channel 4), in which the ‘boy’ becomes the pursuer of the older man.


70 None of this is to suggest that people in the past did not engage in sexual practices similar to our own, or that they did not recognize that people had particular sexual tastes. But though the past did, as we have seen, construct categories of person out of those tastes and acts, and then suppose that the latter were the expression of the preceding dispositions, the past did not then suppose the neutrality of the first and the reprehensibility of the second, as in some modern (ecclesial) theories.

Unnatural Sight

Can those who engage in unnatural acts see God? It was said, according to Suetonius, that the young Augustus Caesar practised such acts,\footnote{Suetonius, ‘Augustus’ in The Twelve Caesars (trans. Robert Graves and Michael Grant; Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 2003 [1957]), 68 (p. 85).} and yet in Witz’s painting he is allowed to look on God in heaven, seeing the Christ child on his mother’s lap. The painting is but one of several panels that were made for an altarpiece, so that standing there, the emperor would have stood in the presence of Christ himself, as his body appeared in the consecrated elements of the communion; in a miraculous realization of the emperor’s vision. Augustus is perhaps emblematic of Paul’s idolatrous Gentiles, since, according to Suetonius, Augustus slept with men,\footnote{‘As a young man Augustus was accused of various improprieties. For instance, Sextus Pompey jeered at his effeminacy; Mark Anthony alleged that Julius Caesar made him submit to unnatural relations as the price of adoption; Anthony’s brother Lucius added that, after sacrificing his virtue to Caesar, Augustus had sold his favours to Aulus Hirtius in Spain, for 3,000 gold pieces, and that he used to soften the hair on his legs by singeing them with red-hot walnut shells’. Suetonius, The Twelve Caesars, 68 (p. 85). It should, however, be noted that Suetonius goes on to discount these calumnies. ‘Augustus easily disproved the accusation (or slander, if you like) of prostituting his body to men, by the decent normality of his sex-life, then and later; and that of having over-luxurious tastes by his conduct at the capture of Alexandria, where the only loot he took from the Palace of the Ptolemies was a single agate cup—he melted down all the golden dinner services’. The Twelve Caesars, 71 (p. 87).} and encountered the Sibyl, as the medieval legend has it, when the Senate entreated him to declare his own divinity, to become his own idol—Barth’s ‘No-God’. But the Sibyl was able to show Augustus that divinity was otherwise than in himself, that it was becoming incarnate in a very different kind of life, in a more mundane humanity.

[O]n the day of Christ’s birth…the Sibyl, alone in a room with the emperor, consulted her oracles, at midday a golden circle appeared around the sun, and in the middle of the circle a most beautiful virgin holding a child in her lap. The Sibyl showed this to Caesar, and while the emperor marvelled at the vision, he heard a voice saying to him: ‘This is the altar of Heaven’. The Sibyl then told him: ‘This child is greater than you, and it is he that you must worship’… The emperor, understanding that the child he had seen was greater than he, offered incense to him and refused to be called God.\footnote{Jacobus de Voraigne, The Golden Legend (trans. William George Ryan; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), ‘The Birth of Our Lord Jesus Christ According to the Flesh’, I, p. 40.}

Augustus Caesar is not quite the epitome of Paul’s Gentile idolater, since while a pagan he is yet—in the thirteenth-century legend—vouchsafed...
sight of true divinity, and knows his own limitations (though deified after his death). But we can hardly think him other than a worshipper of idols, and, if we follow Suetonius, suspect of the very perversions that Paul seemed to think attended such worship. And yet, while Paul also seemed to think that such people could not enter the Kingdom (1 Cor. 6.9-11), later Christians were to vouchsafe to Caesar a direct vision of what they themselves could see only hiddenly, on the altar of the Mass.

Contra Natura

Though Paul may know more about Christ than we, perhaps he does not know everything. By entering into that conversation in which the centuries are overcome, as in Barth’s reading, Paul can learn something from his modern readers, and we can again learn from this newly illumined Paul, who will not have ceased to grow in the knowledge of Christ that he has to teach us. For then he will be able to tell us what perhaps he knew all along, that, as well as the Gentiles who failed to see and so fell into ‘impurity’, there are also those who, like the divinely illumined emperor, did dimly see the different difference of God. For these people too life becomes ‘totally erotic’,74 but not in the sense of unbridled libido. It becomes an unlimited, transcendent desire, which, being God’s eros that moves the sun and the other stars, draws the soul out of herself in order to find herself again, but now differently in God. These are men and women who by moving in God’s own movement—participating in God’s dispossessive desire—learn to love other men and women, and learn to love God in their loving.75

Indeed Paul may have come to see that Christ’s body was utterly queer. For Paul had already come to see that Christ included the unnatural mingling of Jew and Gentile. For it was not only women who held intercourse with women, or men with men, whom Paul considered as acting para phusin (unnaturally), but also God, who, contrary to nature (para phusin), was grafting Gentiles into the true vine of Israel. ‘Now I am speaking to you Gentiles…cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree’ (Rom. 11.13, 24; emphasis added).

Eugene Rogers has picked up on Paul’s striking vinicultural image and suggested that just as Paul could imagine God acting contrary to nature in grafting Gentiles into the true vine of Israel, so we can imagine

74. Barth, Epistle to the Romans, p. 53.
God as again acting contrary to nature—in excess of nature—and grafting those who (were once thought to) act contrary to nature into the vine of Israel/Church.

God loves also the Gentiles: wild olives, adopted children, strange children—idol-worshippers whom God had given up to desires in excess of nature, para phusin... God saves those who act in excess of nature by an act in excess of nature... As God grafts Gentiles, the wild branches, onto the domestic covenant of God’s household with Israel, structured by the Torah of the Spirit, so God grafts gay and lesbian couples (whom detractors also associate with sexual licence) by a new movement of the Spirit onto the domestic covenants of straight women and men.76

Douglas Farrow objects to this reading of Paul by noting that while Paul’s Gentile idolaters act contrary to their own nature, God does not act in excess of ‘his own nature’, but against the ‘self-contradiction into which human nature has fallen among the Gentiles’.77 But Rogers never supposes that God does act against his own nature—which is an absurd proposition, since God’s ‘nature’ is God’s act78—but rather, as Rogers puts it, ‘against the standard’.79 Indeed, neither God nor the Gentile idolaters act against their own natures, when nature is understood as an inner essence, a spiritual or biological determinism. There is a perfect parallel, pace Farrow, between God’s contradiction of nature and that of the Gentile idolaters, for the nature contradicted is the law by which societies, animal and human, are contingently ordered.80


78. As a student of Thomas Aquinas, Rogers knows that God is God’s nature, and that God’s nature or essence is God’s existence, and that God’s existence is pure act. Summa Theologia, 1a, q2, a3 and a4.

79. Rogers, Sexuality and the Christian Body, p. 65.

80. Farrow’s lack of an historicist sensibility bedevils many of his arguments. Thus he suggests (p. 267 n. 15) that Rogers and others are inconsistent when complaining that homosexual relationships are not recognized (as legitimate) in Scripture and that such relationships are found in the Bible (Ruth and Naomi, David and Jonathan). But there is no inconsistency in finding passionate same-sex friendships in the Bible without any discussion of homosexual relationships, since the former were not named—and so not constructed and experienced—in terms of the latter concept. Farrow’s claimed inconsistency could only show up if we supposed that homosexuality might
For Paul, the natural is the conventional, and the unnatural is that which contradicts the given. The unnatural is that which breaks order and crosses borders. It is contrary to common sense, and common sense is given by social conventions, the forms of life by which a culture is constituted. Thus it is that nature can teach Paul that long hair degrades a man but glorifies a woman (1 Cor. 11.14-15), just as Paul’s pagan contemporary, Seneca (c. 4 BC–65 AD), found men wearing women’s clothes unnatural (contra natura), along with raising flowers in midwinter, growing orchards on rooftops, living by candlelight and seeking to preserve the glow of youth against the advances of age.81

The last example of living against nature is particularly pertinent, because Seneca’s ill-advised youth are seeking to maintain their allure for those men whose tables and beds they serve.82 But while disapproving of their sex lives, Seneca’s chief disdain is for their denial of age, and while many of his examples of unnatural life concern the forcing of (biological) nature against its bent, they also include the contradiction of social norms, as with Paul’s example of hairdressing. Indeed, Paul’s example is fascinatingly counter-intuitive for anyone who supposes that the natural is what nature does, as opposed to what culture teaches, for what could be more unnatural — contra natura — than to cut one’s hair?

have been discussed in the Bible. But this would be to approach the Bible as if it had been written by people schooled in the twentieth century.

81. Seneca, 17 Letters (trans. C.D.N. Costa; Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1988), Letter 122.7-8 (p. 151). The Stoic commonplaces shared by Seneca and Paul allowed later Christians to imagine the two having been in correspondence with one another, producing (forging) in the fourth century a collection of Seneca’s letters to the apostle. See L.D. Reynolds, The Medieval Tradition of Seneca’s Letters (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), ch. 6. However, it may be that Seneca was more Pauline than Stoic in the matter of sexual ethics, being out of line with both earlier (Zeno and Chrysippus) and later Stoics (Antipater, Hierocles and Epictetus) in shunning eros as inherently unsettling, a passion that undoes reason. And in this, Seneca may have been more Pythagorean than Pauline, since Paul did allow for a strange form of passionless sex (1 Cor. 7.3-4). See Kathy L. Gaca, The Making of Fornication: Eros, Ethics, and Political Reform in Greek Philosophy and Early Christianity (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), pp. 61-62, 111-13; and Loughlin, Alien Sex, pp. 180-82.

82. ‘Another [slave] who serves the wine is dressed like a girl and struggles with his age. He is not allowed to escape his boyhood but is dragged back to it, and though he now has a soldier’s bearing he is kept smooth-skinned by having his hair rubbed away or pulled out, and he spends a sleepless night divided between serving his master’s drunkenness and his lust—a man in the bedroom and a boy at the dining-table’. Seneca, 17 Letters, Letter 47.7 (p. 31).
Carnal Asymmetries

Just as there is nothing odd in Rogers’ reading of Paul on God’s queering of Israel, so there is nothing ‘curious’, as Farrow thinks, about Rogers’ reading of ‘gay and straight’ into Paul’s list of the social distinctions that are overcome in Christ—between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female (Gal. 3.28)—since once again Rogers’ move, in which he is not alone, is entirely in line with Paul’s argument. Paul’s distinctions are both natural and conventional, constructions of social life, and subject to deconstruction within the ambit of Christ’s life; and the same is true of our modern distinction between gay and straight. To suppose otherwise would be to suppose a distinction that was somehow more fundamental than even the difference between the sexes; a border that could not be crossed even by Christ. It is of course true, as Farrow suggests, that Paul would have been surprised, indeed mystified, by the inclusion of our distinction, since it would have been unknown to him, dependent on a regime of thought he would have found utterly alien, as strange to him as some of his ways are to us.

Farrow supposes that Paul would have found homosexuality on a list of ‘proscribed activities’ that placed a person outside of Christ, rather than on the list of social distinctions overcome in Christ. But no such list as Farrow supposes was available to Paul, and it is certainly not the list that Farrow cites (1 Cor. 6.9-11; cf. 1 Tim. 1.9-10). That list only appears to include what the NEB calls ‘homosexual perversion’ because modern twentieth century categories have been read back into Paul’s text.

85. Farrow offers strangely hasty readings of Scripture. Thus at one point he discusses the story of Sodom in Genesis 19, and assumes that the attempted rape of Lot’s visitors by the Sodomites was a sexual rather than a social act, a matter of lust rather than aggressive power. He attributes to the Sodomites a general proclivity that only later tradition would associate with their name, and which Genesis 19 nowhere supposes. Farrow speculates that sodomitical practices, ‘having become commonplace through consensual relations’ among the Sodomites, might have undermined the ‘social structures of conventional domesticity, and so also of hospitality (Farrow, ‘Beyond Nature’, p. 266 n. 13). Not only does this ignore what Genesis 19 actually says, but it also reverses the relationship between the Sodomites’ general inhospitality (as generally understood in later biblical texts—Ezek. 16.49; Wis. 19.13-17; Lk. 10.12) and the particular act of xenophobic aggression described in Genesis 19. It also offers a psychosocial explanation which tells us more about Farrow’s own anxieties than it does about the Sodomites. The paranoid fantasy which Farrow projects onto Sodom is given a modern location by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger who warns that when gay
Other English translations of the Bible are no better, the NRSV, for example, favouring ‘male prostitutes’ and ‘sodomites’.

The relevant Greek terms on which the translators have imposed their own century, are *malakos* and *arsenokoites*, and while their interpretation is fraught with difficulty, not least because the latter term appears first in Paul, we can be fairly sure that they did not mean homosexuals.\(^8\) Various meanings have been proposed for *arsenokoites*, and it certainly has something to do with sexual behaviour, since *koite* means ‘bed’ as a place for sex. But *arsenokoites* could as well refer to a man who sleeps around — taking the first part of the word, *arsen* (= man or male), to be the subject, the one who has sex — as to one (male) who sleeps with men — taking *arsen* to be the object, the one with whom sex is had. If we accept the latter reading, then it nicely partners *malakos*, meaning ‘soft’, when that is understood as referring to an ‘effeminate call-boy’, as Robin Scroggs has it,\(^8\) the younger *philerast* to the older *paederast* — the *arsenokoites* (possibly). But even this is conjecture, since *malakos* may just mean a soft, effeminate man, one who is too easily seduced by various pleasures which are not necessarily, though most likely, sexual. But what we can be sure of is that Paul does not refer to homosexual men, whose sexuality is orientated to their own sex, for such personages were not part of his world. Paul did not know of ‘sexuality’ or of ‘sexual orientation’ or that people of the same sex might enjoy companionable long-term relationships that were also sexual.

Indeed, it is uncertain that Paul could have imagined ‘straight’ relationships as both sexual and companionable, as erotic and true friendships, as today we might wish for in a marriage. This is because while he undoubtedly allowed for a greater equality between the sexes than many of his contemporaries, not least in the bedroom (1 Cor. 7.3-4), he yet

affections are given legal protection, ‘neither Church nor society at large should be surprised when other distorted notions and practices gain ground, and irrational and violent reactions increase’ (Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons, 1986, section 9). See also ‘The Homosexual Movement: A Response by the Ramsey Colloquium’, First Things, 41 (March 1994), pp. 15-20. For sensible discussion of the story of Sodom see Martti Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World: A Historical Perspective* (trans. Kirsi Sjōerna; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), pp. 45-49. Nissinen reminds us that the raping of male enemies is an immemorial form of political subjugation, and not a matter of homoeroticism. We can trace the practice from the Athenians’ humiliation of the defeated Persians at Eurymedon in 460 BC to 2003 AD and the treatment of Iraqi prisoners by (some of) their American captors.

86. For more on the interpretative problems see Nissinen (*Homoeroticism in the Biblical World*, pp. 113-18), whose discussion is largely followed here.

understood the relationship between husband and wife as hierarchical or asymmetric, though with both parties alike subject to Christ (Eph. 5.22-33), within the mutual slavery of the ecclesial body (Eph. 5.21). For what David Halperin has shown in relation to Athenian society held true for the ancient Mediterranean world in general, including Hebrew society, namely that sex was not so much a mutual activity, as an action that one person performed on another, the active upon the passive. The ‘natural intercourse’ (phusike chresis) against which Paul’s idolatrous Gentiles turned, consisted in the male ‘use’ (chresis) of the female. For a man to have sex with a woman (or boy) was for him ‘to use’ (chraomai) the woman (or boy), and for the woman (or boy) to be used by him.88 Thus one might say that Paul’s idolaters turn away from using other people for their own pleasure. What Paul thinks natural we can only think, if not unnatural, then at least improper or immoral for those who, in Christ—and as Paul himself teaches—are learning to love one another in mutual subservience (see 1 Cor. 7.3-4).

Furthermore, ancient sex was never between social equals, but always between a superior and an inferior person.89 The adult was always superior to the child, the master (or mistress) to the slave, and the husband to the wife. Thus it was that a same-sex relationship had to be between a man and a boy, since if it were between two men, one of them would have to play the part of the ‘woman’, the passive role, and so disgrace his social standing. This is not to say that such encounters did not take place, or that there were no husbands and wives who enjoyed true friendship, as between equals, but that this is not how erotic relationships were constructed in contemporary discourses. The erotic was the social, and any respectable man feared to take on a socially inferior role, just as any respectable woman would fear to reach above her status, by playing the part of a man.

Incidentally, this erotic regime provides one of the best reasons why we should not think the friendship between David and Jonathan homoerotic, since it would have been a relationship between virtually social equals.90 Yet, paradoxically, in their passionate affection for one another,

88 See Brooten, Love between Women, p. 245.
89 See Halperin, ‘One Hundred Years’, pp. 29-38; and Brooten, Love between Women, pp. 250-51.
90 See Nissinen, Homoeeroticism in the Biblical World, pp. 53-56. ‘It is…possible to interpret David’s and Jonathan’s love as an intimate camaraderie of two young soldiers with no sexual involvement. What is striking in this relationship is the equality of the two men. There is no trace of the distinction, elsewhere so central, between the active and the passive role. Perhaps for this very reason Jonathan’s love was for David dearer than woman’s love! [2 Sam. 1.25-26]’ (p. 55).
David and Jonathan provide us with one of the ancient world’s most powerful images of loving friendship, of a kind that was not then socially available to other-sex couples. The possibility of erotic heterosexual friendship would have to wait upon modernity, and is even now not often realized. The ancient world could only imagine true friendship between same-sex couples, and just in so far as Paul did begin to imagine something like true friendship for married spouses, he imagined—anachronistically speaking—the heterosexualization of passionate homosexual friendships. But the degree to which he did so remains a moot point.

Our distinction between ‘gay and straight’ is not in Paul, but we can bring it to our conversation with Paul when we are prepared to attend to his discourse and allow him (in his texts) to be informed by what we have learned in our day; truths that were only nascent in his. If we believe that God can set all our cherished distinctions at nought, grafting Gentiles into the vine of Israel, freeing the slave while enslaving the free, and finding women of equal worth with men, then we can also believe that God can act in excess of nature and undo even the distinction between gay and straight.91 This is because the Bible does not advance any teaching against ‘homosexual persons’ and their relationships. Rather, it tells us of a God who in Jesus goes out to all those who are feared and despised so as to bring them into a radical koinonia of mutual subordinations, where each can serve the other because they are no longer worshippers of idols, but participants in the life of God.

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If we can read Paul so that the centuries and profound cultural differences between ourselves and him are overcome, and our reading becomes a ‘conversation’ in which Paul can learn as much from his interlocutors as they from him, then we may indeed find a Paul who might—as the late Michael Vasey suggested—‘be more at home today in gay rather than non-gay society’.92

91. I am of course aware that many Christians have refused to accept these ‘undoings’ and instead persecuted Jews, enslaved their fellow humans (whose fellowship they have refused to acknowledge) and denigrated and destroyed women, while all the time claiming support from biblical texts: the idols that command their fears and passions.

92. See Michael Vasey, Strangers and Friends: A New Exploration of Homosexuality and the Bible (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1995), p. 133. ‘[Paul] shared Jesus’ non-familial emphasis and lifestyle (I Corinthians 7.25-35; 9). He treated no group or person as inherently unclean. His letters show a quality of tenderness, open emotion and gentleness (cf. II Corinthians 10.1) that is far removed from the heterosexual
If we are to find such a Paul it will be by reading him in Christ, looking to understand Paul only insofar as we finally understand not Paul but Christ, the life of the body in which both Paul and we participate. This will mean participating in the movement of the Spirit, in which the text will itself be found to move, to change, to live. For unless we look to read with the Spirit — allowing the Spirit to read (in) us — the text will solidify into an object over against us. It will become a golden calf for our fear and worship. Scripture is only life for us — the Word of God to us — when it is alive, when it moves and flows, when its authors hold converse with us in our world, where we live. Then it becomes an iconic, non-idolatrous text, in the light of which we can see differently. Then we can not only rewrite the second commandment, we can also reread Paul as Barth directs and so augment Paul’s deepest insight into Christ’s body, in the life of which essential identities or personages — idol bodies — are not necessary for our pleasures, joys and salvation. For in Christ’s body there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female, there is no longer gay or straight; for though different all are one in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3.28).93

masculinity of our culture. He was happy to use feminine imagery of his relationship with others (I Thessalonians 2.7-8). He had strong non-sexual relations with women (Philippians 4.2; Romans 16). He had strongly emotional relationships with younger men (II Timothy 1.1-8; II Corinthians 2.13). One might add that he experienced ostracism and desertion by the church (II Timothy 1.15).93

93. Christ does not destroy but transfigures our differences, allowing us to find the other in ourselves, so that we are no longer opposed but transformed in/to one another. See further Gerard Loughlin, ‘Baptismal Fluid’, Scottish Journal of Theology, 51 (1998), pp. 261-70.

1978 was a year rich in both disappointment and hope for the burgeoning Christian women’s movement campaigning for a gender inclusive transformation in the theology and praxis of the British churches. In November, a motion in the General Synod of the Church of England in favour of the ordination of women to the priesthood failed to obtain the necessary two-thirds majority—and this despite the fact that only three years before the Synod had accepted that there were no fundamental theological objections to such a move. ‘Lord, give us women priests, but not yet’, as Augustine might have said. Yet the growth in the number of organizations across the denominational spectrum committed to a Christian feminist vision of change had been so rapid, that the same year also saw the creation of the Christian Women’s Information and Resources Project to exchange ideas and promote co-operation between them. Now housed in the John Ryland’s University Library in Manchester, its hitherto little exploited archive provides a rich vein of material for both historians and theologians, as Jenny Dagger’s fascinating new book makes clear.

At one level, her study is a valuable contribution to the history of the British Christian women’s movement of the 1970s and 1980s about which little has so far been written. She begins by outlining the achievements and limitations of first-wave Christian feminism in the nineteenth and early twentieth century which succeeded in effecting a paradigm shift that replaced the traditional image of women as made in the image of the sinful Eve with a far more elevated notion of women’s spiritual gifts. These were now deemed to be superior to those of their male counterparts and used to justify women’s involvement in a wide range of educational and philanthropic activities both inside and outside of the home. At the same time, this emphasis upon women’s unique capacities served to reinforce the gendered polarities of Victorian and Edwardian society in ways that associated masculinity with rationality and leadership, and femininity with emotionality and passivity. Equally problematic was the ambiguous delineation of women’s sexuality that such a construct of gender entailed, etching upon the male psyche the disturbing dichotomy between the sexually faithful but innocent wife and the scarcely redeemable but often enticing prostitute.

This historical context is an important one for Dagger’s work, since she uses it to explain why second-wave Christian feminists continued to find the myth of Eve both a challenge and an inspiration. By the beginning of the 1970s what Diana Collins called ‘the rehabilitation of Eve’ came to stand for a theological project committed to an affirmation of women’s autonomy, and to a far more open and celebratory
acceptance of women’s sexuality than in the past. As evidence of the difference between first and second-wave Christian feminism, Daggers instances Patricia Dunker’s paper on John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* which was read at the Oxford Women’s Theology Seminar in 1984 and was critical of the way in which traditional norms of heterosexuality, marriage and motherhood have been used to reinforce patriarchal control of women’s lives. Equally radical at the time, was the emergence of a lesbian identity that further challenged assumptions about sexuality and gender. According to the members of the Feminist Theology Project, women’s sexuality was not about a heterosexual versus a lesbian identity, but about reclaiming their bodies and breaking the mould of the past. Drawing on these and many other examples, Daggers proves convincingly that the British Christian Women’s Movement deserves to be seen as part of the wider movement of second-wave feminism in British society during this period, a recognition that has been hitherto obscured by an over-concentration on the single issue of women’s ordination.

For readers of this journal, however, Jenny Dagger’s book offers more than simply a useful exercise in historical retrieval. In her last two chapters Daggers also raises a number of theological issues that still have considerable importance for our attempts to construct usable theologies of sexuality and gender in the present. Although Daggers uses the concept of the rehabilitation of Eve as a heuristic device with which to make overall sense of Christian feminism within Britain, she acknowledges the extent to which it contained very diverse understandings of women’s liberation. Thus Margaret Hebblethwaite’s 1984 book *Motherhood and God* was really only a restatement in more contemporary terms of the traditional trope of women’s distinctive and superior spiritual qualities, and was sharply criticized in *New Blackfriars* by Mary Pepper for ignoring issues of power and gender inequality within the churches. More generally, second-wave Christian feminism in Britain never acquired the cutting edge of its American counterpart as exemplified in the writings of Carter Heyward and Rosemary Ruether. In one of the most interesting sections of her book, Daggers continues to trace these tensions between conservative and radical readings of feminist theology up to the present day and wonders whether the rise of neo-orthodox critics of feminist liberation theology and the continued opposition to women’s ordination within sections of the Roman Catholic and Anglican churches might yet limit the transformative potential generated by British women’s groups in the 1970s and 1980s. This is of course only one possible reading of the current situation and one that may not give sufficient weight to the ongoing impact of those convulsive social and cultural changes that are still best characterized as postmodernity. Because of its capacity to provoke such debates, Jenny Daggers’ meticulously researched and richly detailed book can be read with profit by anyone interested in the study of gender, sexuality and feminism.

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in a manner faithful to the intent of the series by serving as ‘companions’ rather than ‘introductions’. As ‘companions’, or conversation partners, most of the essays assume a working—even sophisticated—knowledge of feminist theological approaches and issues. Some essays are more successful in helping the reader understand complex or nuanced concerns, or in acknowledging the often ‘marginalized’ voices of women whose methodological, epistemological or contextual presuppositions are different from those of ‘traditional’ Western feminism. Although not all the contributors are Anglo-Americans, almost all have worked predominantly in Anglo-American contexts. (The notable exception is Mercy Amba Oduyoye).

Like other Cambridge Companions, the essays are divided into two sections. The first section deals with the ‘shape’ of feminist theology while the second addresses feminist ‘themes’ taken from the traditional loci of Christian theology. One needs only to read the essay titles in the first section to glimpse the state of play in feminist theology—namely, that there is no one form or method that defines this discipline as such. The reasons are foundational to its origins, which Susan Frank Parsons addresses in her preface as she describes its main developmental tracks—the early, liberationist approach of critique and reconstruction and the later, more philosophical, phenomenological and global approach to religion(s). The essays fairly represent both.

Rosemary Radford Ruether’s opening chapter on ‘The emergence of Christian feminist theology’ is a helpful entrée. A concise summary, it paints the historical and contextual landscape of feminist theologies from every continent, including key figures and literary contributions. Ruether makes clear that the larger rubric of ‘feminism’ sets the criteria for reconstructing tradition. Carol Christ’s chapter on post-traditional theologies also introduces the history, contemporary contexts and significant leaders of Goddess, Wiccan and neo-pagan spirituality and ritualism, and the alternative approaches of Mary Daly, Grace Jantzen and Daphne Hampson.

Except for Ruether’s essay, all of the chapters in this first section of the book discuss feminist theology as a particular sub-discipline; that is, feminist theology as ‘intercultural discourse’ (Kwok Pui-Lan), ‘philosophy of religion’ (Pamela Sue Anderson), ‘theology of religions’ (Rita Gross), ‘post-traditional thealogies’ (Carol Christ), ‘biblical hermeneutics’ (Bridget Gilfillan Upton), or ‘dogmatic theology’ (Parsons).

Pui-Lan critiques the pride of place given by feminism to Western culture with its assumptions about women’s experience and its obfuscation of feminist theology’s intercultural character and contributions. Gross picks up on the lack of serious theological dialogue between Western and non-Western cultures and moves it into the realm of inter-religious dialogue. Frustrated by what she perceives as a lack of truly religious diversity, she critiques the tendency to limit diversity to race, class, culture, sexual orientation or Christian interpretation, thus limiting religion’s pluralism.

Anderson challenges the androcentrism and secularity of philosophy and the philosophy of religion. Echoing Continental feminists such as Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, she proposes the disruption of philosophical systems of thought by constructing new conceptions of reason and belief processes from women’s embodiment as the source of epistemic access.

Upton and Parsons consider feminist hermeneutics and dogmatics, respectively. Upton briefly describes the development of feminist biblical studies and the challenges facing certain approaches to texts, interpretation and ‘authority’, leading the reader through an interpretative exercise on two New Testament texts. Parsons argues that while Christian feminist theology rejects traditional dogmas, it nevertheless has
its own dogmatics. These dogmas are based on a particular set of presuppositions that raise concerns in terms of dominating principles and over-emphasis on methodology in lieu of actual theology.

Though the first half of the volume addresses feminist theology as something other than traditional theology, the second half specifically engages traditional Christian doctrines through reinterpretation and reconstruction. The chapters on creation, ethics, pneumatology (spirituality) and eschatology show these to be working categories for virtually all feminist theologies. Not so for the chapters on the Trinity, Jesus Christ, the Church and the sacraments, which assume continuity with Christian tradition while simultaneously raising new contextual challenges and/or interpretations.

Janet Martin Soskice’s chapter on the Trinity is a particularly fine example of engagement between feminism and Christian tradition that maintains the integrity of both. Soskice clearly articulates the problems that the doctrine of the Trinity raises for feminist and other modern theologies, which generally maintain ‘low’ Christologies with little or no emphasis on the – particularly immanent – Trinity (which is also a source of heretically hierarchical models of relationality). Soskice, however, argues for the necessity of the Trinity for a truly Christian doctrine of God that saves one ‘from stifling androcentricism’. She explains how the doctrine preserves God’s otherness, endorses the fundamental goodness of human persons, defeats monarchianism and challenges philosophies of the One in favour of the Trinity’s perichoretic communion of unity in diversity expressed in outpoured love. Soskice also constructively addresses the question of Trinitarian naming, countering false views of ‘maleness’ in God from historical and contemporary resources within the Christian tradition.

Mercy Amba Oduyoye’s chapter on Jesus Christ is written from a specifically African context but serves the wider discipline of contemporary Christology. The contributions and perspectives she offers reaffirm Jesus’ divinity, which is all but absent in most contemporary theology. There is also strong affirmation of Jesus’ full humanity and its uniqueness, that is, that the only human contributing to Jesus’ biology was female. Both ‘natures’ are essential in the interpretations Oduyoye describes, assuming that only as God can Jesus liberate and redeem and only as ‘the true human’ can he mediate women’s humanity.

Nicola Slee’s chapter on the ‘Holy Spirit and spirituality’ deals with the question of ‘spirit’ and the Holy Spirit in feminist thought. She traces women’s historical spirituality in general and then defines ‘feminist spirituality’ as specifically linked to the experience of feminist conscientization. Slee also describes the Spirit-based panentheistic/pantheistic ‘Trinitarian’ theologies of Elizabeth Johnson and Sallie McFague. Celia Deane-Drummond’s chapter on ‘Creation’ is similar as it focuses on ecofeminism’s panentheistic/pantheistic cosmologies which use cyclical and female reproductive metaphors.

Parson’s chapter on ethics calls for humanity’s transformation by the goodness of God into transforming agents who seek the equal human rights of each person in the context of relationships. She raises the difficult questions posed by postmodern understandings of both the human subject and ‘God’, and their concomitant challenges regarding morality and truth. Susan Ross poses the questions of humanity, ethics and equality within the meaning of the Church’s sacramental life and practices, calling for justice and gendered reality at every level of ecclesial life from her own experience.
The book ends with Valerie Karras’s chapter on eschatology, written from a traditional Eastern Orthodox position. She rejects feminist theology’s general trend toward a realized, this-worldly eschatology, arguing for an eschatological vision that is both realized and unrealized. Critical of Western classical theology and feminist theology as ‘two sides of the same methodological coin’, she also rejects concepts of a ‘reformed’ future based on human effort and ideals rather than transformation by God in Jesus Christ (which includes ‘the abolition of sexual differentiation’). This last chapter clearly marks the greatest contrast to the beginning of the volume.

How is it, then, that all of these different understandings of ‘theology’ are considered ‘feminist’? The volume is timely, but it serves as its own best example of the challenges and inherent ironies in ‘feminist theology’ and its elusive ‘feminist audience’. As diversity within the discipline exponentially increases, debate continues as to whether ‘feminist theology’ can serve as an appropriate or even accurate term to describe the religious thought and praxis of the world’s women. Moreover, as women’s diversity is most often understood in oppositional terms, identity is not only defined in opposition to patriarchy, but, for instance, in the case of womanist or mujerista traditions, in opposition to Anglo-American ‘feminism’. Given that ‘feminism’ is fundamentally committed to inclusivism, however, it must embrace difference — even if that ‘difference’ includes women whose social, political or religious location is situated in the systems and traditions that feminism seems to reject out of hand — that is, traditional Christianity. The modernist presuppositions and methodologies at work in virtually all feminist discourse (which Parsons recognizes as both its ‘promise and the problematic’), often undermine its own goals. In a sense, feminist theology makes its own procrustean bed, trying to fit the ever-expanding possibilities it offers into some kind of common framework at the very time when pluralism and post-modernity clamour that it be set free from such constraints. To shift metaphors, one’s attempts to build feminist theology from solid ideological foundations are undermined by the shifting tectonic plates of postmodernity and religious diversity. (These and other concerns are addressed in such volumes as Deborah F. Sawyer and Diane M. Collier [eds.], Is there a Future for Feminist Theology? [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999]). Nevertheless, it is a challenge that feminist theology recognizes, celebrates and welcomes, as this volume attests.

Cherith Fee Nordling


A strange reversal has occurred around issues of sex and gender, at least in the United States, or at least for me. Let me explain. When I was in seminary and graduate school studying theology in the late 1980s and early 1990s, I felt I was able to be completely open and honest about my feminist convictions and attachments, while at the same time, I am ashamed to say, I felt it was much too dangerous to come out as a lesbian. Now, a little more than a decade later, homosexuality is enjoying a surge of interest among both secular and religious Americans; with issues like gay bishops, gays in the military, gay marriage, gay families, and gay adoption debated daily in the news. Being gay, it seems, has become much more accepted, at least among my friends and family. However, declaring that I am a feminist, I find, is a much more risky prop-
osition today than it was a decade or so ago. People respond with incredulous stares or pithy declarations—women have already achieved equality, what more do we want—or, most often, with complete apathy. I sometimes think the world can tolerate only a certain amount of conversation or interest in issues of gender and sexuality, and if the national discussion turns to gays, women’s issues have to be silenced, and vice versa. If you are both a woman and gay, you have to pick one identity or the other as the most important way to represent yourself. Few people seem to really understand how connected these identities are, both politically and personally. The academic destabilization of both gender and sexual preference has, in my opinion, often only confused the matter; troubling gender and resisting homo- and hetero-sexual identities have not really helped us to grasp how these two categories are completely interdependent. We are still operating as if the struggle for women’s liberation exists independently of the struggle for gay representation and acceptance.

Elizabeth Stuart’s *Gay and Lesbian Theologies* draws this problem into sharp relief. First, her props. This slim scholarly volume accurately and professionally reviews and critiques most major Western Christian theologies that identify as gay or lesbian. In the first half of the book, she categorizes them both chronologically and thematically, with chapters on the early forefathers’ testimonies of gay persecution in the church, the identity-based gay male writings of the mid-1980s and the lesbian erotic-based writings of the same period. Stuart finds each of these strategies lacking, noting that they function largely as apologetics attempting to include gays and lesbians in existing social structures, rather than as challenges to the coherence of social structures themselves. None of these early writings, she argues, passes her litmus test of theological success, a test which she locates in their ability to adequately respond to AIDS. The work here is stellar; she honors the early writers for their courage and path-breaking ventures, but longs for a more coherent way to incorporate homosexuality into Christian theology. The second half of Stuart’s work addresses the destabilization of sexual identity categories such as are found in contemporary queer theories. Here, she reviews a half dozen book projects (mine included) and accurately summarizes the general contours of each of these works. Stuart is supportive of queer work in theology, but suggests that those of us writing in the field need to be less ‘idealistic and nihilistic’ in our approaches. I take her to mean by this that we should be providing more concrete proposals for ways to incorporate queer critique into Christian theology specifically and Christian life in general. Again, I think she is correct. If the goal here is to move beyond apologetics and use queer theology to disrupt accepted social structures and norms, how exactly, are we going to go about doing that?

My criticisms of Stuart’s book are threefold, and the first ties directly to this question. While Stuart’s summary and analysis of existing gay and lesbian theologies are exceptional, the reader is left with some sense of dissatisfaction at the lack of Stuart’s own voice or proposal in this field. (The book is 114 pages, and only the last nine are devoted to her own comments on reconstruction.) Her work here centres on the role of baptism in the reconstruction of queer Christian identity, but is sadly underdeveloped, beyond noting that in Christ—in the life of the Church?—all existing identities are to be washed away in becoming sisters and brothers of Jesus. We need to see more exactly how Elizabeth Stuart would make the deconstruction of gay and lesbian identity a salient project for Christian theology, and Stuart should read this
point less as a criticism than as an invitation to expand her thinking into the realm of normative and constructive theology.

My second quarrel lies at the level of project conception. Let me be clear: every theology student should read this book, as it will orient them immediately to the history and problems attached to homosexuality and theology. It is an excellent road map of where we have been, and points in the direction of where we might be going. But therein lies the conflict: where we (queers and Stuart) want to be going is in the direction of post-identity politics and theology. We want a world where gays are not only tolerated, but where the practices and sensibilities of gay and lesbian communities can be associated with long-standing goods of the Christian tradition. We want a world where gay and straight are not significant terms, especially in relation to theology. Why then, I ask, write a book about gay and lesbian identity projects? And why name it Gay and Lesbian Theologies when what is really desired is something like post-gay and lesbian theologies, or post-identity Christian politics?

My final criticism is vague, but it leans back to my opening comments in this review. I continue to believe that it is a serious mistake to talk about sexuality without sustained and serious attention to gender (what would it even mean to be ‘gay’ or ‘straight’ if there were no subjects called ‘men’ or ‘women’?). Stuart does not take on feminism as a central concern in this book, and so in a way I am faulting her for something she does not set out to do. Perhaps it is the way that she sees the AIDS crisis as the central event for all gay and lesbian reality (thereby rendering males the center of attention, once again), perhaps it is the ease with which she breezes over church teachings on procreation and reproduction. But, for me, the book lacks a certain sensitivity around feminist issues. Perhaps it is just that I want to live in a world where I can be both gay and feminist, and want my reading material—especially theology—to reflect the hope of such a reality.

It is not without a sense of irony that I realize I have criticized Stuart for two mutually competing strategies (i.e., she’s too attached to the label ‘gay/lesbian’ and not attached enough to the label ‘woman’). That is the state of affairs that post-structuralism has left us in. We know we need to move beyond identity politics, but we also have to make sure that we generate the right amount of homage to our misguided forbearers, that we carry forward the correct formula of political convictions produced by those misguided stable labels. As we live through this shift into a world with different markers, we don’t want to forget who we are or where we came from. Elizabeth Stuart’s book will, without a doubt, help us to remember.

Kathy Rudy


‘What is it to be a human being? … We are animals left with three undeniable facts: that we are animals who are born, who reproduce sexually, and who will die’ (p. 1). With these words Beverley Clack opens her stimulating discussion of how human life can be meaningful or spiritually fulfilling. What is it, given that we are embodied, finite and mortal, to engage with human depths? As Clack points out, many of the varying strands of seeking meaning and spirituality in the West have been based on efforts to resist sex and/or conquer death. How if, instead, we were to accept both? What sorts of spiritual fulfilment would be open to us then?
Clack chooses seven major thinkers of the Western tradition who approach questions of sex, death and the meaning of life in different ways. The first two are Plato and Augustine. Clack shows how their distrust of the body and especially their fear of sexuality is linked with an understanding of death as that which releases the soul from the body. Spirituality, or a life of meaning, consists in nourishing the soul and denying the body, so that even in this life it can already participate in the ultimate transcendence which death brings. Two things are especially important. First is the gendered nature of Plato’s and Augustine’s discussions. As Clack shows, for them, as for much of the Western tradition, the female is linked with the body, and thus with sex and death. Spirituality is therefore implicitly masculine, linked with rationality and with God; and conquering death involves mastering the female. Secondly, transcendence is defined as escape from the body: it is in other words the opposite of immanence. I would have wished for a fuller discussion of Plato and Augustine, which would reveal that both of them are much more complex and nuanced in their attitudes to sex and death than Clack allows; nevertheless Clack is surely right in taking their distrust of the body as foundational for Western thought.

In a surprise move characteristic of Clack’s creative insight, she then discusses Sartre and de Beauvoir. Although neither of them would accept a Christian perspective, or try to resist sex, Clack shows that they are remarkably similar to Plato and Augustine in that they define human meaning in terms of freedom, especially freedom from the constraints of the body and the physical. Transcendence consists of this freedom, for Sartre the freedom of rationality as expressed in writing. Death, like all physicality, is absurd. Clack’s discussion is fascinating. I would have liked a greater recognition of the impact of war on Sartre and de Beauvoir, and their experience of the Resistance as the setting in which freedom, especially the ability to say no (even if it meant death) was taken as constitutive of transcendence. I would also have liked a discussion of Heidegger, who, as Clack notes in passing, ‘views death as a positive boundary’ (p. 43), which gives meaning to life. How was it that although Sartre drew so much from Heidegger, Sartre nevertheless labelled death as absurd?

Clack turns next to a discussion of Freud, who serves for her as a fulcrum. Freud concentrated on sex and death, eros and thanatos, as the driving instincts of human existence. He placed both of them firmly within the context of embodiment and sought no extra-bodily transcendence. Moreover, he (sometimes) saw how both sex and death have been constructed to control women (though I would argue, as Clack does not, that Freud reinforced that control). Yet Freud was able to see that we can accept our bodies and our transience and still find meaning, ‘a new depth and beauty for humanity’ (p. 77). The allusion to beauty, in particular, cries out for further attention, neglected as it has been in Western thinking about human transcendence: Clack’s brief comments here deserve full exploration.

But if sex and death are constitutive of human nature, not to be resisted or overcome, is any sort of transcendence possible? Clack offers a chilling discussion of the writings of de Sade, a man who presents visions of sexual brutality in a meaningless universe. The assumption of de Sade is that if there is no possibility of escaping the flesh, then we are reduced to it; and he rings the changes on the possibilities of violent brutality. Moreover the horrific cruelty he presents is visited by men on women. Clack shows how revulsion at the worldview presented by de Sade returns us to the idea of transcendence, recognizing its importance anew even while accepting that its Platonic-Augustinian definition will not do.
For a better version, Clack turns finally to Seneca. As a Stoic philosopher of the Roman Empire, Seneca held to the importance of ‘living in accordance with nature’ (p. 104), fully accepting the realities of the physical body, sex and death. As Clack shows, for Seneca transcendence is not the opposite of immanence, as it is for Plato or Augustine. Rather, it is the opposite of reductionism, the account of the human which sees the biological as all that can be said, and which therefore sees life as meaningless and thus as readily open to Sadeian brutality as to beauty. Transcendence in this sense goes beyond the body-soul dualism, and enables an awareness of multi-faceted life, the life of the universe. It is thus within the physical, not apart from it, that meaning and spiritual fulfilment are to be found. Meaning does not require escape from sex and death, but rather living life to the full in the explicit recognition that it is finite. Finitude and the inevitability of loss make what we have more precious, not less. Sex, and all our relationships, is a valued part of life, a life that is bounded by death.

Clack has given a splendid exposition of sex and death in Western thought. She began, however, by accepting three undeniable facts, and discussed only two. What happened to birth? Clack nods in the direction of its importance, but then says that it can be subsumed under the heading of sex, since sex is necessary for birth to occur. But this will not do. I have argued elsewhere that it is precisely the focus on death and mortality at the expense of birth and natality that has mired the West in a preoccupation not only with escape but also with mastery and violence. Natality is not reducible to sex or even to birth (let alone to motherhood); it is rather, like mortality, a philosophical category. Clack sometimes seems to feel that she must choose between them—and indeed that I do: birth or death, natality or mortality. But this cannot be so. Humans must come to terms with both. It is the almost exclusive preoccupation with death that has led to the underestimation of birth and natality. Clack’s book would have been even better than it already is if she had engaged with the latter as well as the former.

For example, her assumption throughout is of the self as an atomistic individual, seeking meaning, grappling with instincts, facing death. Sex enables the individual to enter into relationships, to be sure; but Clack’s starting point is the solitary self. Now, one of the implications of natality is that we are from birth always connected. We may, sadly, sever connections; we may die alone. But we cannot be born alone; we are already in a web of relationships—physical and sexual—that link us, ultimately, with all of life. If Clack is seeking for an understanding of transcendence connected with the life of the universe, its beauty and fragility, here is a good place to start.

Again, natality is the basis of beginnings, of newness coming into the world. Clack is concerned with spiritual fulfilment, but her discussion of creativity is stuck mainly in the context of Plato’s privileging of spiritual creation over physical reproduction. Yet is it not the case that a key aspect of our immanent transcendence is our delight in creation and in our own ability to create? Here is where newness can enter the world, out of desire premised not on a lack, but on over-flowing generosity. Sex and death are enormously important. Viewed in the context of natality their meaning for contemporary spirituality involves neither evasion nor the need for mastery but acceptance, creativity and joy.

Grace M. Jantzen
Book Reviews


1978 was a year rich in both disappointment and hope for the burgeoning Christian women’s movement campaigning for a gender inclusive transformation in the theology and praxis of the British churches. In November, a motion in the General Synod of the Church of England in favour of the ordination of women to the priesthood failed to obtain the necessary two-thirds majority—and this despite the fact that only three years before the Synod had accepted that there were no fundamental theological objections to such a move. ‘Lord, give us women priests, but not yet’, as Augustine might have said. Yet the growth in the number of organizations across the denominational spectrum committed to a Christian feminist vision of change had been so rapid, that the same year also saw the creation of the Christian Women’s Information and Resources Project to exchange ideas and promote co-operation between them. Now housed in the John Ryland’s University Library in Manchester, its hitherto little exploited archive provides a rich vein of material for both historians and theologians, as Jenny Dagger’s fascinating new book makes clear.

At one level, her study is a valuable contribution to the history of the British Christian women’s movement of the 1970s and 1980s about which little has so far been written. She begins by outlining the achievements and limitations of first-wave Christian feminism in the nineteenth and early twentieth century which succeeded in effecting a paradigm shift that replaced the traditional image of women as made in the image of the sinful Eve with a far more elevated notion of women’s spiritual gifts. These were now deemed to be superior to those of their male counterparts and used to justify women’s involvement in a wide range of educational and philanthropic activities both inside and outside of the home. At the same time, this emphasis upon women’s unique capacities served to reinforce the gendered polarities of Victorian and Edwardian society in ways that associated masculinity with rationality and leadership, and femininity with emotionality and passivity. Equally problematic was the ambiguous delineation of women’s sexuality that such a construct of gender entailed, etching upon the male psyche the disturbing dichotomy between the sexually faithful but innocent wife and the scarcely redeemable but often enticing prostitute.

This historical context is an important one for Dagger’s work, since she uses it to explain why second-wave Christian feminists continued to find the myth of Eve both a challenge and an inspiration. By the beginning of the 1970s what Diana Collins called ‘the rehabilitation of Eve’ came to stand for a theological project committed to an affirmation of women’s autonomy, and to a far more open and celebratory
acceptance of women’s sexuality than in the past. As evidence of the difference between first and second-wave Christian feminism, Daggers instances Patricia Dunker’s paper on John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* which was read at the Oxford Women’s Theology Seminar in 1984 and was critical of the way in which traditional norms of heterosexuality, marriage and motherhood have been used to reinforce patriarchal control of women’s lives. Equally radical at the time, was the emergence of a lesbian identity that further challenged assumptions about sexuality and gender. According to the members of the Feminist Theology Project, women’s sexuality was not about a heterosexual versus a lesbian identity, but about reclaiming their bodies and breaking the mould of the past. Drawing on these and many other examples, Daggers proves convincingly that the British Christian Women’s Movement deserves to be seen as part of the wider movement of second-wave feminism in British society during this period, a recognition that has been hitherto obscured by an overconcentration on the single issue of women’s ordination.

For readers of this journal, however, Jenny Dagger’s book offers more than simply a useful exercise in historical retrieval. In her last two chapters Daggers also raises a number of theological issues that still have considerable importance for our attempts to construct usable theologies of sexuality and gender in the present. Although Daggers uses the concept of the rehabilitation of Eve as a heuristic device with which to make overall sense of Christian feminism within Britain, she acknowledges the extent to which it contained very diverse understandings of women’s liberation. Thus Margaret Hebblethwaite’s 1984 book *Motherhood and God* was really only a re-statement in more contemporary terms of the traditional trope of women’s distinctive and superior spiritual qualities, and was sharply criticized in *New Blackfriars* by Mary Pepper for ignoring issues of power and gender inequality within the churches. More generally, second-wave Christian feminism in Britain never acquired the cutting edge of its American counterpart as exemplified in the writings of Carter Heyward and Rosemary Ruether. In one of the most interesting sections of her book, Daggers continues to trace these tensions between conservative and radical readings of feminist theology up to the present day and wonders whether the rise of neo-orthodox critics of feminist liberation theology and the continued opposition to women’s ordination within sections of the Roman Catholic and Anglican churches might yet limit the transformative potential generated by British women’s groups in the 1970s and 1980s. This is of course only one possible reading of the current situation and one that may not give sufficient weight to the ongoing impact of those convulsive social and cultural changes that are still best characterized as postmodernity. Because of its capacity to provoke such debates, Jenny Daggers’ meticulously researched and richly detailed book can be read with profit by anyone interested in the study of gender, sexuality and feminism.

*Sean Gill*


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Pui-Lan critiques the pride of place given by feminism to Western culture with its assumptions about women’s experience and its obfuscation of feminist theology’s intercultural character and contributions. Gross picks up on the lack of serious theological dialogue between Western and non-Western cultures and moves it into the realm of inter-religious dialogue. Frustrated by what she perceives as a lack of truly religious diversity, she critiques the tendency to limit diversity to race, class, culture, sexual orientation or Christian interpretation, thus limiting religion’s pluralism.

Anderson challenges the androcentrism and secularity of philosophy and the philosophy of religion. Echoing Continental feminists such as Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, she proposes the disruption of philosophical systems of thought by constructing new conceptions of reason and belief processes from women’s embodiment as the source of epistemic access.

Upton and Parsons consider feminist hermeneutics and dogmatics, respectively. Upton briefly describes the development of feminist biblical studies and the challenges facing certain approaches to texts, interpretation and ‘authority’, leading the reader through an interpretative exercise on two New Testament texts. Parsons argues that while Christian feminist theology rejects traditional dogmas, it nevertheless has
its own dogmatics. These dogmas are based on a particular set of presuppositions that raise concerns in terms of dominating principles and over-emphasis on methodology in lieu of actual theology.

Though the first half of the volume addresses feminist theology as something other than traditional theology, the second half specifically engages traditional Christian doctrines through reinterpretation and reconstruction. The chapters on creation, ethics, pneumatology (spirituality) and eschatology show these to be working categories for virtually all feminist theologies. Not so for the chapters on the Trinity, Jesus Christ, the Church and the sacraments, which assume continuity with Christian tradition while simultaneously raising new contextual challenges and/or interpretations.

Janet Martin Soskice’s chapter on the Trinity is a particularly fine example of engagement between feminism and Christian tradition that maintains the integrity of both. Soskice clearly articulates the problems that the doctrine of the Trinity raises for feminist and other modern theologies, which generally maintain ‘low’ Christologies with little or no emphasis on the – particularly immanent – Trinity (which is also a source of heretically hierarchical models of relationality). Soskice, however, argues for the necessity of the Trinity for a truly Christian doctrine of God that saves one ‘from stifling androcentrism’. She explains how the doctrine preserves God’s otherness, endorses the fundamental goodness of human persons, defeats monarchianism and challenges philosophies of the One in favour of the Trinity’s perichoretic communion of unity in diversity expressed in outpoured love. Soskice also constructively addresses the question of Trinitarian naming, countering false views of ‘maleness’ in God from historical and contemporary resources within the Christian tradition.

Mercy Amba Oduyoye’s chapter on Jesus Christ is written from a specifically African context but serves the wider discipline of contemporary Christology. The contributions and perspectives she offers reaffirm Jesus’ divinity, which is all but absent in most contemporary theology. There is also strong affirmation of Jesus’ full humanity and its uniqueness, that is, that the only human contributing to Jesus’ biology was female. Both ‘natures’ are essential in the interpretations Oduyoye describes, assuming that only as God can Jesus liberate and redeem and only as ‘the true human’ can he mediate women’s humanity.

Nicola Slee’s chapter on the ‘Holy Spirit and spirituality’ deals with the question of ‘spirit’ and the Holy Spirit in feminist thought. She traces women’s historical spirituality in general and then defines ‘feminist spirituality’ as specifically linked to the experience of feminist conscientization. Slee also describes the Spirit-based panentheistic/pantheistic ‘Trinitarian’ theologies of Elizabeth Johnson and Sallie McFague. Celia Deane-Drummond’s chapter on ‘Creation’ is similar as it focuses on ecofeminism’s panentheistic/pantheistic cosmologies which use cyclical and female reproductive metaphors.

Parson’s chapter on ethics calls for humanity’s transformation by the goodness of God into transforming agents who seek the equal human rights of each person in the context of relationships. She raises the difficult questions posed by postmodern understandings of both the human subject and ‘God’, and their concomitant challenges regarding morality and truth. Susan Ross poses the questions of humanity, ethics and equality within the meaning of the Church’s sacramental life and practices, calling for justice and gendered reality at every level of ecclesial life from her own experience.
The book ends with Valerie Karras’s chapter on eschatology, written from a traditional Eastern Orthodox position. She rejects feminist theology’s general trend toward a realized, this-worldly eschatology, arguing for an eschatological vision that is both realized and unrealized. Critical of Western classical theology and feminist theology as ‘two sides of the same methodological coin’, she also rejects concepts of a ‘reformed’ future based on human effort and ideals rather than transformation by God in Jesus Christ (which includes ‘the abolition of sexual differentiation’). This last chapter clearly marks the greatest contrast to the beginning of the volume.

How is it, then, that all of these different understandings of ‘theology’ are considered ‘feminist’? The volume is timely, but it serves as its own best example of the challenges and inherent ironies in ‘feminist theology’ and its elusive ‘feminist audience’. As diversity within the discipline exponentially increases, debate continues as to whether ‘feminist theology’ can serve as an appropriate or even accurate term to describe the religious thought and praxis of the world’s women. Moreover, as women’s diversity is most often understood in oppositional terms, identity is not only defined in opposition to patriarchy, but, for instance, in the case of womanist or mujerista traditions, in opposition to Anglo-American ‘feminism’. Given that ‘feminism’ is fundamentally committed to inclusivism, however, it must embrace difference — even if that ‘difference’ includes women whose social, political or religious location is situated in the systems and traditions that feminism seems to reject out of hand — that is, traditional Christianity. The modernist presuppositions and methodologies at work in virtually all feminist discourse (which Parsons recognizes as both its ‘promise and the problematic’), often undermine its own goals. In a sense, feminist theology makes its own proudest bed, trying to fit the ever-expanding possibilities it offers into some kind of common framework at the very time when pluralism and post-modernity clamour that it be set free from such constraints. To shift metaphors, one’s attempts to build feminist theology from solid ideological foundations are undermined by the shifting tectonic plates of postmodernity and religious diversity. (These and other concerns are addressed in such volumes as Deborah F. Sawyer and Diane M. Collier [eds.], Is there a Future for Feminist Theology? [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999].) Nevertheless, it is a challenge that feminist theology recognizes, celebrates and welcomes, as this volume attests.

Cherith Fee Nordling


A strange reversal has occurred around issues of sex and gender, at least in the United States, or at least for me. Let me explain. When I was in seminary and graduate school studying theology in the late 1980s and early 1990s, I felt I was able to be completely open and honest about my feminist convictions and attachments, while at the same time, I am ashamed to say, I felt it was much too dangerous to come out as a lesbian. Now, a little more than a decade later, homosexuality is enjoying a surge of interest among both secular and religious Americans; with issues like gay bishops, gays in the military, gay marriage, gay families, and gay adoption debated daily in the news. Being gay, it seems, has become much more accepted, at least among my friends and family. However, declaring that I am a feminist, I find, is a much more risky prop-
position today than it was a decade or so ago. People respond with incredulous stares or pithy declarations—women have already achieved equality, what more do we want—or, most often, with complete apathy. I sometimes think the world can tolerate only a certain amount of conversation or interest in issues of gender and sexuality, and if the national discussion turns to gays, women’s issues have to be silenced, and vice versa. If you are both a woman and gay, you have to pick one identity or the other as the most important way to represent yourself. Few people seem to really understand how connected these identities are, both politically and personally. The academic destabilization of both gender and sexual preference has, in my opinion, often only confused the matter; troubling gender and resisting homo- and hetero-sexual identities have not really helped us to grasp how these two categories are completely interdependent. We are still operating as if the struggle for women’s liberation exists independently of the struggle for gay representation and acceptance.

Elizabeth Stuart’s *Gay and Lesbian Theologies* draws this problem into sharp relief. First, her props. This slim scholarly volume accurately and professionally reviews and critiques most major Western Christian theologies that identify as gay or lesbian. In the first half of the book, she categorizes them both chronologically and thematically, with chapters on the early forefathers’ testimonies of gay persecution in the church, the identity-based gay male writings of the mid-1980s and the lesbian erotic-based writings of the same period. Stuart finds each of these strategies lacking, noting that they function largely as apologetics attempting to include gays and lesbians in existing social structures, rather than as challenges to the coherence of social structures themselves. None of these early writings, she argues, passes her litmus test of theological success, a test which she locates in their ability to adequately respond to AIDS. The work here is stellar; she honors the early writers for their courage and path-breaking ventures, but longs for a more coherent way to incorporate homo-sexuality into Christian theology. The second half of Stuart’s work addresses the destabilization of sexual identity categories such as are found in contemporary queer theories. Here, she reviews a half dozen book projects (mine included) and accurately summarizes the general contours of each of these works. Stuart is supportive of queer work in theology, but suggests that those of us writing in the field need to be less ‘idealistic and nihilistic’ in our approaches. I take her to mean by this that we should be providing more concrete proposals for ways to incorporate queer critique into Christian theology specifically and Christian life in general. Again, I think she is correct. If the goal here is to move beyond apologetics and use queer theology to disrupt accepted social structures and norms, how exactly, are we going to go about doing that?

My criticisms of Stuart’s book are threefold, and the first ties directly to this question. While Stuart’s summary and analysis of existing gay and lesbian theologies are exceptional, the reader is left with some sense of dissatisfaction at the lack of Stuart’s own voice or proposal in this field. (The book is 114 pages, and only the last nine are devoted to her own comments on reconstruction.) Her work here centres on the role of baptism in the reconstruction of queer Christian identity, but is sadly underdeveloped, beyond noting that in Christ—in the life of the Church?—all existing identities are to be washed away in becoming sisters and brothers of Jesus. We need to see more exactly how Elizabeth Stuart would make the deconstruction of gay and lesbian identity a salient project for Christian theology, and Stuart should read this
point less as a criticism than as an invitation to expand her thinking into the realm of normative and constructive theology.

My second quarrel lies at the level of project conception. Let me be clear: every theology student should read this book, as it will orient them immediately to the history and problems attached to homosexuality and theology. It is an excellent road map of where we have been, and points in the direction of where we might be going. But therein lies the conflict: where we (queers and Stuart) want to be going is in the direction of post-identity politics and theology. We want a world where gays are not only tolerated, but where the practices and sensibilities of gay and lesbian communities can be associated with long-standing goods of the Christian tradition. We want a world where gay and straight are not significant terms, especially in relation to theology. Why then, I ask, write a book about gay and lesbian identity projects? And why name it *Gay and Lesbian Theologies* when what is really desired is something like post-gay and lesbian theologies, or post-identity Christian politics?

My final criticism is vague, but it leans back to my opening comments in this review. I continue to believe that it is a serious mistake to talk about sexuality without sustained and serious attention to gender (what would it even mean to be ‘gay’ or ‘straight’ if there were no subjects called ‘men’ or ‘women’?). Stuart does not take on feminism as a central concern in this book, and so in a way I am faulting her for something she does not set out to do. Perhaps it is the way that she sees the AIDS crisis as the central event for all gay and lesbian reality (thereby rendering males the center of attention, once again), perhaps it is the ease with which she breezes over church teachings on procreation and reproduction. But, for me, the book lacks a certain sensitivity around feminist issues. Perhaps it is just that I want to live in a world where I can be both gay and feminist, and want my reading material—especially theology—to reflect the hope of such a reality.

It is not without a sense of irony that I realize I have criticized Stuart for two mutually competing strategies (i.e., she’s too attached to the label ‘gay/lesbian’ and not attached enough to the label ‘woman’). That is the state of affairs that post-structuralism has left us in. We know we need to move beyond identity politics, but we also have to make sure that we generate the right amount of homage to our misguided forbearers, that we carry forward the correct formula of political convictions produced by those misguided stable labels. As we live through this shift into a world with different markers, we don’t want to forget who we are or where we came from. Elizabeth Stuart’s book will, without a doubt, help us to remember.

*Kathy Rudy*

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‘What is it to be a human being? … We are animals left with three undeniable facts: that we are animals who are born, who reproduce sexually, and who will die’ (p. 1). With these words Beverley Clack opens her stimulating discussion of how human life can be meaningful or spiritually fulfilling. What is it, given that we are embodied, finite and mortal, to engage with human depths? As Clack points out, many of the varying strands of seeking meaning and spirituality in the West have been based on efforts to resist sex and/or conquer death. How if, instead, we were to accept both? What sorts of spiritual fulfilment would be open to us then?
Clack chooses seven major thinkers of the Western tradition who approach questions of sex, death and the meaning of life in different ways. The first two are Plato and Augustine. Clack shows how their distrust of the body and especially their fear of sexuality is linked with an understanding of death as that which releases the soul from the body. Spirituality, or a life of meaning, consists in nourishing the soul and denying the body, so that even in this life it can already participate in the ultimate transcendence which death brings. Two things are especially important. First is the gendered nature of Plato’s and Augustine’s discussions. As Clack shows, for them, as for much of the Western tradition, the female is linked with the body, and thus with sex and death. Spirituality is therefore implicitly masculine, linked with rationality and with God; and conquering death involves mastering the female. Secondly, transcendence is defined as escape from the body: it is in other words the opposite of immanence. I would have wished for a fuller discussion of Plato and Augustine, which would reveal that both of them are much more complex and nuanced in their attitudes to sex and death than Clack allows; nevertheless Clack is surely right in taking their distrust of the body as foundational for Western thought.

In a surprise move characteristic of Clack’s creative insight, she then discusses Sartre and de Beauvoir. Although neither of them would accept a Christian perspective, or try to resist sex, Clack shows that they are remarkably similar to Plato and Augustine in that they define human meaning in terms of freedom, especially freedom from the constraints of the body and the physical. Transcendence consists of this freedom, for Sartre the freedom of rationality as expressed in writing. Death, like all physicality, is absurd. Clack’s discussion is fascinating. I would have liked a greater recognition of the impact of war on Sartre and de Beauvoir, and their experience of the Resistance as the setting in which freedom, especially the ability to say no (even if it meant death) was taken as constitutive of transcendence. I would also have liked a discussion of Heidegger, who, as Clack notes in passing, ‘views death as a positive boundary’ (p. 43), which gives meaning to life. How was it that although Sartre drew so much from Heidegger, Sartre nevertheless labelled death as absurd?

Clack turns next to a discussion of Freud, who serves for her as a fulcrum. Freud concentrated on sex and death, eros and thanatos, as the driving instincts of human existence. He placed both of them firmly within the context of embodiment and sought no extra-bodily transcendence. Moreover, he (sometimes) saw how both sex and death have been constructed to control women (though I would argue, as Clack does not, that Freud reinforced that control). Yet Freud was able to see that we can accept our bodies and our transience and still find meaning, ‘a new depth and beauty for humanity’ (p. 77). The allusion to beauty, in particular, cries out for further attention, neglected as it has been in Western thinking about human transcendence: Clack’s brief comments here deserve full exploration.

But if sex and death are constitutive of human nature, not to be resisted or overcome, is any sort of transcendence possible? Clack offers a chilling discussion of the writings of de Sade, a man who presents visions of sexual brutality in a meaningless universe. The assumption of de Sade is that if there is no possibility of escaping the flesh, then we are reduced to it; and he rings the changes on the possibilities of violent brutality. Moreover the horrific cruelty he presents is visited by men on women. Clack shows how revulsion at the worldview presented by de Sade returns us to the idea of transcendence, recognizing its importance anew even while accepting that its Platonic-Augustinian definition will not do.
For a better version, Clack turns finally to Seneca. As a Stoic philosopher of the Roman Empire, Seneca held to the importance of ‘living in accordance with nature’ (p. 104), fully accepting the realities of the physical body, sex and death. As Clack shows, for Seneca transcendence is not the opposite of immanence, as it is for Plato or Augustine. Rather, it is the opposite of reductionism, the account of the human which sees the biological as all that can be said, and which therefore sees life as meaningless and thus as readily open to Sadeian brutality as to beauty. Transcendence in this sense goes beyond the body-soul dualism, and enables an awareness of multi-faceted life, the life of the universe. It is thus within the physical, not apart from it, that meaning and spiritual fulfilment are to be found. Meaning does not require escape from sex and death, but rather living life to the full in the explicit recognition that it is finite. Finitude and the inevitability of loss make what we have more precious, not less. Sex, and all our relationships, is a valued part of life, a life that is bounded by death.

Clack has given a splendid exposition of sex and death in Western thought. She began, however, by accepting three undeniable facts, and discussed only two. What happened to birth? Clack nods in the direction of its importance, but then says that it can be subsumed under the heading of sex, since sex is necessary for birth to occur. But this will not do. I have argued elsewhere that it is precisely the focus on death and mortality at the expense of birth and natality that has mired the West in a preoccupation not only with escape but also with mastery and violence. Natality is not reducible to sex or even to birth (let alone to motherhood); it is rather, like mortality, a philosophical category. Clack sometimes seems to feel that she must choose between them—and indeed that I do: birth or death, natality or mortality. But this cannot be so. Humans must come to terms with both. It is the almost exclusive preoccupation with death that has led to the underestimation of birth and natality. Clack’s book would have been even better than it already is if she had engaged with the latter as well as the former.

For example, her assumption throughout is of the self as an atomistic individual, seeking meaning, grappling with instincts, facing death. Sex enables the individual to enter into relationships, to be sure; but Clack’s starting point is the solitary self. Now, one of the implications of natality is that we are from birth always connected. We may, sadly, sever connections; we may die alone. But we cannot be born alone; we are already in a web of relationships—physical and sexual—that link us, ultimately, with all of life. If Clack is seeking for an understanding of transcendence connected with the life of the universe, its beauty and fragility, here is a good place to start.

Again, natality is the basis of beginnings, of newness coming into the world. Clack is concerned with spiritual fulfilment, but her discussion of creativity is stuck mainly in the context of Plato’s privileging of spiritual creation over physical reproduction. Yet is it not the case that a key aspect of our immanent transcendence is our delight in creation and in our own ability to create? Here is where newness can enter the world, out of desire premised not on a lack, but on over-flowing generosity. Sex and death are enormously important. Viewed in the context of natality their meaning for contemporary spirituality involves neither evasion nor the need for mastery but acceptance, creativity and joy.

Grace M. Jantzen