
**IN THE MARKET OF THE CUPID VENDORS:
FOUCAULDIAN AND POST-FOUCAULDIAN CRITIQUES
OF ECCLESIAL POWER AND LEADERSHIP**

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Abstract: The exclusive practices by which ecclesial and societal power are exercised to marginalize LGBT persons from the processes of authorization for church leadership need “queering,” that is the description, disputation, and disruption of such practices. The formation of religious leadership must be queered in order to expose the heterosexist ideological control that disenfranchises Christians on the basis of their self-identified characteristics. This critique will be launched from the theological conviction that God’s strange communities mirror the inclusive queerness of God godself, and that the enfranchisement of LGBT leaders is necessary to the genius of a faith that seeks to embrace the whole human race.

Overture

Leadership in Christianity is a queer thing, to paraphrase the lesbian Roman Catholic scholar Elizabeth Stuart.¹ It emerges from the sensual body of Christ, whose people resist identification with any singular definition of who they are racially, ethnically, doctrinally, politically or sexually. It arises in response to the God who queers life, death and all embodied existence through resurrection. This queer God² calls all totalitarian

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¹ See Elizabeth Stuart, et. al., *Religion is a Queer Thing: A Guide to the Christian Faith for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered Persons* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1998).

² See Marcella Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God* (London: Routledge, 2003), 8, and Althaus-Reid’s essay, “Queer I Stand” in Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood, eds., *The Sexual Theologian: Essays on Sex, God, and Politics* (London: T&T Clark Publishers, 2005), 103-104.

understandings and practices into question by upending our notions of normalcy. No matter the centuries of struggle to limit the church's leadership to the artificial norms of hierarchy and patriarchy, at the behest of the queer God this ever-strange body of Christ always takes exception to their totalizing claims.

Ecclesial leadership is simply not "natural." As its practices reveal, church leadership as we now observe it relies on the superimposition of a spiritual control at odds with the founding premises of the carpenter of Nazareth who rejected temporal power.³ The power to mould people into ecclesial leaders, and then to authorize them as "servants" of the people of God markets itself as the ordinary way in which God selects and prepares women and men (mostly men, of course) to tend the church. The marketing schema goes something like this: Out of the membership of the whole people of God, some are set aside for representative leadership. These persons are reflective of the rest of the body of Christ. Anyone of the baptized who exhibits the gifts and graces of leadership may be called by the voice of the Holy Spirit speaking through the voice of the faithful. Yet, whole populations of the faithful are rendered ineligible for religious leadership *a priori*, by dint of their self-identities. These disenfranchised populations give the lie to the marketing strategies of control that attempt to pass restrictive practices off as "natural," "normal," or "ordinary." The struggles of people of color and women to enter the ranks of the ordained are tales-well-told. Even in communions willing to admit women to leadership, however, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Christians normally need not apply. They are the test case *par excellence* of this essay.

A visual metaphor for these hetero-exclusivist practices of Christian leadership is found on the wall of a

³ See, for example, John 18:36 (NRSV): "Jesus answered, 'My Kingdom is not from this world. If my Kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my Kingdom is not from here.'"

cubicle in the Villa Arianna in Stabiae, the playground of wealthy Romans on the Bay of Naples. The fresco named “The Cupid Vendor”⁴ was painted in the mid-first century A.D. as a wry commentary on religious and sexual practices of the elite who enjoyed the sea breezes and the striking vistas of Mount Vesuvius in luxury that was beyond the imaginations of the vast majority of commoners in the empire. A seated wealthy matron, attended by her female slave whispering in her ear from behind, is negotiating with an elderly courtesan selling *putti*, cupids. Amusingly, the vendor plucks one of the *putti* up by the wings like a chicken, its little arms and legs flailing, so the buyer can get a better look. A second cupid squats cross-legged in its coop awaiting display. Yet a third little cherub stands expectantly at the matron’s knee, as if eager for selection by its prospective new owner. How much will one pay for love, and how will its price be bartered? Is love priceless, or not? Can it be plucked out of a coop like poultry? Or can *eros* be so easily domesticated and controlled, and at what cost to those who attempt it?

The cupidity of the buyer and the seller of desire is neatly skewered by the disturbing little fresco on the wall of the lavish Roman villa. Vesuvius buried all pretensions to Roman temporal power in a series of cataclysmic eruptions on the morning of August 24, 79 A.D., wonderfully preserving “The Cupid Vendor” intact for us to consider.

The passion to serve God is not limited by norms of heterosexism and patriarchy any more than desire is a thing that can be bought and sold. As the protest singers of the 1950s and 1960s put it in the bleak lullaby, “*All My Trials, Lord*”: “If religion was a thing that money could buy,/The rich would live and the poor would die.” In the end, the exile of so-called *unworthies* is done at the

⁴ Fresco, 22.5 cm high by 28.5 cm wide. Provenance is the Castellammare di Stabia, Varano hill, in the Villa Arianna, cubicle W25. See *In Stabiano: Exploring the Ancient Seaside Villas of the Roman Elite*, Angelo Pesce, ed., (Naples, Italy: Nicola Longobardi Editore, 2005), 113.

expense of the very systems that seek to control the selection of candidates for ecclesial leadership. One day we very well may be able to look back on these processes as amusingly pretentious—but not yet.

Cupid's Dancing Lesson

Contemporary LGBT Christians in the church have had to learn an intricate dance of resistance and survival in order to negotiate their lives between the pressures of cultural norms, ecclesial management, and queer counter critiques mounted in response to anti-gay bias. Often, the prejudice these queer believers face comes from their peers. Church has wounded many in the contemporary LGBT community through condemnation, rejection and indifference. The majority of queer folk who have dropped out of faith communities see them as hostile to LGBT human rights. Queer Christians who remain attached to the church face the charge that they are aiding and abetting the very institution that actively oppresses people in the sexual minority. On the other hand, heteronormative Christians press their queer co-religionists with questions of how they think they can be valid members of the faith community at all, given the nature of their sinfulness. All these considerations of queer Christians are played out against the somber backdrop of American heterosexist/homophobic politics and culture. Unlike the voices of women, ethnic/racial minorities, and postcolonials, raised to demand that they be recognized as fully human, the voices of LGBT people in general, and those of LGBT Christians in particular, have been successfully muted. Heterosexist bias in the liberal democracy likes its queers to be neither seen nor heard.

The effects of silence and invisibility upon the lives of LGBT people have been peculiarly pernicious in religious communities. The code used among queer folk for the harmful effects they suffer is “the closet.” Gary David Comstock in his study, *Unrepentant, Self-Affirming*,

Practicing: Lesbian/Bisexual/Gay People Within Organized Religion,⁵ shows definitively that LGBT people serve in the same roles of leadership, duty, and responsibility their heterosexual lay and ordained counterparts do at every level.⁶ In fact, “their involvement would appear even to exceed that of non-gay members”⁷ in the lay or non-ordained sectors of their respective traditions. They serve as board members, committee chairs, and task group members. They govern churches and synagogues, restrictive policies to the contrary but they out themselves in these same organizations at their peril. Comstock summarizes:

[The] association of higher rates of leadership with lower rates of outness would suggest that identifying openly as lesbian, bisexual, or gay may have reduced opportunities for participation in established leadership roles and positions. Many gay people affiliated with mainstream religious bodies, therefore, have forgone this kind of institutionally sanctioned participation and leadership and instead channel their efforts into activism and advocacy for change within their respective religious bodies.⁸

So, Comstock helps establish what we have popularly believed in some respects, but confounds our popular wisdom in others.

Coming out usually brings about the end of one’s employment and/or ordained status. Not coming out usually fosters emotional stress and suffering. However, about one-quarter of gay clergy and lay employees in various religious bodies are completely out in their positions.... Most gay clergy and lay employees find and hold on to the

⁵ Gary David Comstock, *Unrepentant, Self-Affirming, Practicing: Lesbian/Bisexual/Gay People Within Organized Religion*, (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1996).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 86-165.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁸ *Ibid.*

full range of traditional positions within organized religion by being completely closeted, by being out selectively to various trusted individuals, by camouflaging their orientation and relationships, and/or by compartmentalizing their social, affectional, and professional lives.⁹

The closet, however, offers only illusory security:

Even though the large majority of gay clergy and lay employees are not out, significant percentages report having been verbally harassed in seminary, prevented from carrying out their liturgical duties in local churches, and discriminated against in all forms of employment within religious bodies. Many remain closeted to avoid punishment and termination but do not always escape such treatment.¹⁰

Fear and homophobia, external and internal, keep the majority of LGBT religious leaders firmly closeted. A notable example is the widely popular author, psychologist, and spiritual director, Fr. Henri J.M. Nouwen. Out to only a few trusted friends, Fr. Nouwen saw his homosexuality as a source of shame.¹¹ Many of his readers still find this revelation about his sexual orientation sensational news, indicative of the problem surrounding honesty for so many LGBT women and men in religious institutions. Lay person or ordained minister, such a revelation ensures intense controversy. Peter Gomes notes the uniquely *ad hominem* character of homophobia in his personal account of coming out publicly at Harvard in support of besieged LGBT students:

I gave my speech, and naïvely thought that my disclosure of my own homosexuality would serve

⁹ Ibid., 164.

¹⁰ Ibid., 165.

¹¹ See Michael O’Laughlin, *God’s Beloved: A Spiritual Biography of Henri Nouwen*, (New York: Orbis Books, 2005), 10-11 and 80-81. See also Michael Ford, *Wounded Prophet: A Portrait of Henri J.M. Nouwen*, (New York: Crossroad, 1999).

to substantiate the Christian message of reconciliation in diversity and equality in Christ. I, however, rather than my message, became the subject of attention.¹²

Though supported by many for his forthrightness and courage, the attacks came thick and fast:

Many of my critics, chiefly from within the religious community, asked if I read the same Bible they did, and if I did, how then could I possibly reconcile my position with that of scripture? When arguments failed, anathemas were hurled and damnations promised. The whole incident confirmed what had long been my suspicion. Fear was at the heart of homophobia, as it was at the heart of racism, and as with racism, religion—particularly the Protestant evangelical kind that had nourished me—was the moral fig leaf that covered naked prejudice.¹³

Both internalized and systemic forms of homophobia are at work in the lives of queer folk who are forced to keep their heads down, and also within religious communities and theological academies that do not call forth the gifts and graces of people they marginalize and then label as pariahs. Little wonder that Cupid's Dance Academy suffers so many casualties, for no one can follow a cruel lead with steps as precise as Ginger Rogers' all the time.¹⁴ The shame does not lie with LGBT people who are driven to anonymity by the norms of the very religious communities they serve, and then are drubbed for a dishonesty virtually forced on them once their secret is out. While there are some notable exceptions to this programmatic heterosexism and homophobia among

¹² Peter J. Gomes, *The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart*, (New York: Avon Books, 1996), 164. Gomes is Plummer Professor of Christian Morals and Pusey Minister in the Memorial Church at Harvard University.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 165.

¹⁴ Rogers, a timeless beauty, is an icon among gay men, who note that she did everything Fred Astaire did, and did it backwards and in high heels. This observation was first made by Bob Thaves, cartoonist, in a 1982 "Frank and Ernest" cartoon strip.

churches, synagogues, and theological schools,¹⁵ there are all too few.

Enter Saint Foucault

Thanks to the work of Michel Foucault (1926-1984), we know that Christianity arose as a sweeping critique of the culture of desire of our ancestors, the Greeks and Romans. In place of this older edifice and its erotic structures, the Church built a new structure of ascetic self-denial. This was all done, of course, under the warrant given the church by the first fruits of a new creation, Jesus Christ. Yet the cupid vendors were not put out of business by any means. They simply shifted their social location, from the pagan empire to the new Christian empire, Christendom. The plural forms of community that sprang up in consequence of this new creation were apparently too rich and fruity for the empire totalists who eventually seized control of the church in its formative centuries. Instead of creating leadership on the model of the grand new experiments of the primitive Pauline and Lukan congregations,¹⁶ by the time of the pastoral epistles, the comfortable hierarchy and patriarchy of the empire had supplanted innovative strategies of community. The Holy Spirit, like a chicken, was cooped by the vendors of control. Female and male prophets,¹⁷ pan-Mediterranean spirituality,¹⁸ emancipatory

¹⁵ For example the United Church of Christ, the Alliance of Baptists, the Metropolitan Community Church, and the Union for Reform Judaism among faith communities, and exemplary anti-heterosexist and homophile programs at Episcopal Divinity School, Vanderbilt Divinity School, Chicago Theological Seminary, and Pacific School of Religion. The current furor among Episcopalians and Anglicans concerning the consecration of Bishop V. Gene Robinson by the Diocese of New Hampshire cannot overshadow the significant steps taken to celebrate LGBT people in that communion.

¹⁶ For example, see Paul's reflection on the practice of Gospel in Gal. 3:28, and Luke's revolutionary understanding of a topsy-turvy social order in Luke 12:35-37. I take both of these scriptures to refer to social realities and practices in the churches.

¹⁷ 1 Cor. 11:5 and 14:1, 5, for example. See M. Eugene Boring, *The Continuing Voice of Jesus: Christian Prophecy and the Gospel Tradition* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991), 60, 120-122.

social forms,¹⁹ and trans-gendering communities²⁰ were marginalized and anathematized by an orthodoxy that looked familiar to imperial eyes—so much so that Emperor Constantine adopted Christian orthodoxy as a primary strategy for knitting together his unraveling government.

Just as the homespun yoke of Christ was metamorphosed into the clerical stole, in effect a Roman municipal necktie, so the genius of downwardly mobile leadership Jesus himself had embodied²¹ was flipped upside down for an ecclesial version of the imperial *cursus honorum* by which patrician Roman men had climbed the leadership ladder for centuries. The Church in its official manifestations reverted to socio-divine standing in the empire. It was now “(super)natural.”

This is quite a sidestep from the early promise of radical faith communities. The faith that challenged Caesar and led Jesus to a Roman cross had given rise to “eunuchs for the Kingdom of God,”²² but in course of time these had become “manly eunuchs”²³ in imperial society. These champions of the new muscular Christian asceticism who took command of the church were steeped in absolute distinctions between male and female, and exclusive claims to superior moral character, virtue, and social privilege so ingrained in Roman chauvinism.²⁴ The oddness of their asceticism was ameliorated by the manliness of their way in the world, an ontological distinction between the hardness of men and the softness of women. This “Romanizing” of the cross removed its

¹⁸ That is to say Jew and Gentile: “No longer Jew or Greek,…” (Gal. 3:28a).

¹⁹ “...no longer slave or free...” (Gal. 3:28b and Luke 12:37).

²⁰ “...no longer male and female...” (Gal. 3:28c).

²¹ Matthew 20:20-28: “...the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve.”

²² See Matt. 19:12.

²³ The phrase comes from Mathew Kuefler, *The Manly Eunuch: Masculinity, Gender Ambiguity, and Christian Ideology in Late Antiquity* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

scandal and “normalized” those who were made vicars of the One who died upon it.

Christian Pastoral Power

But if the leadership of the imperial church might be indicted for falsely advertising themselves as the rightful heirs of the new creation, Foucault makes it clear that there was something totally new in the way their leadership was constructed. It was a new technique of power relations, “pastoral power.”²⁵ Pastoral power in the hands of Christian clerics moved into the everyday lives of Christians in a way that divided individuals into binary categories (sanctioned, heretical; impenitent, penitent; saved, damned), marked them as individuals, attached these stereotypes to their identities, and, in Foucault’s own words, “imposes a law of truth” upon the human person so totally that the individual is made into a subject, subjected “to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his [sic] own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge.”²⁶ This technique of power endures from the cradle to the grave, for it has to do with the formation and salvation of the soul.²⁷ In duration, then, pastoral power is total.

Foucault contends that from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, as the grip of the church weakened and the nation-state assumed more control over the lives of its subjects, this Christian pastoral power was gradually translated into the offices and officers of the state. The focus of pastoral power, which sprang from the confessional practices of the Roman Catholic Church, shifted toward the secular. Its objective changed from salvation of the soul to the health, welfare and security of the population and the individual. The number of

²⁵ Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” in *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rainbow, eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 213-214.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 212.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 214: “It is a form of power which does not look after just the whole community, but each individual in particular, during his entire life.”

officials wielding this power increased beyond clergy to include police, physicians, educators, hospital and public health officers, and even the family. Political treatises of the period present the governance of political society as a pastoral concern, strikingly similar to the management of “a household, souls, children, a province, a convent, a religious order or a family.”²⁸ The question pastoral power was created to answer was

how to introduce an economy, that is the correct manner of managing individuals, goods and wealth within the family (which a good father is expected to do in relation to his wife, children and servants) and of making it thrive—how to introduce this meticulous attention of the father toward his family, into the management of the State.²⁹

As the objectives and brokers of pastoral power proliferated, a new human knowledge developed around two foci of interest: “one, globalizing and quantitative, concerning the population; the other, analytical, concerning the individual.”³⁰

And this implies that power of a pastoral type, which over centuries— for more than a millennium—had been linked to a defined religious institution, suddenly spread out into the whole social body; it found support in a multitude of institutions. And, instead of a pastoral power, more or less linked to each other, more or less rival, there was an individualizing “tactic” which characterized a series of powers: those of the family, medicine, psychiatry, education, and employers.³¹

²⁸ Foucault, “Governmentality,” in James D. Faubion, ed., *Essential Works of Foucault, Volume 3, Power*, (New York: New Press, 2000), 205.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 207.

³⁰ Foucault in Dreyfus and Rabinow (1983), 215.

³¹ *Ibid.*

The Tactical Polyvalence of Discourses

From its earliest manifestations, the pastoral technique of power has been the occasion of resistance and struggle. Because state power now functioned pastorally, Foucault showed that current political struggles necessarily

revolve around the question: Who are we? They are a refusal of these abstractions, of economic and state violence that ignores who we are individually, and also a refusal of a scientific or administrative inquisition of who one is.³²

Older forms of subjectivity grapple with newer forms. If one force of resistance works to “refuse who we are,” its counterforce works to compose new accounts of who we are by advancing “new forms of subjectivity.”³³

For LGBT people, Foucault’s work on this point is particularly significant. In 1976, he published *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Volume I*, a historical inquiry into sexuality in Western culture. Its most controversial claim was that homosexuality was the invention of the nineteenth century. In the Renaissance, the sodomite was the perpetrator of a forbidden act, sodomy. But by the nineteenth century, thanks to the confluence of the church’s technologies of confession, the secularization of pastoral power into state power with its attendant technical power/knowledges and practices, and the growth of the medico-sexual régime with its self-proclaimed prerogatives to manage individuals’ lives by using a certain construal of the bourgeois family as its instrument, the sodomite had been eclipsed by the invention of an entirely new subject, the *homospecies*:

The nineteenth century 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. Nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by

³² Foucault, “Governmentality,” in Faubion (2000), 207.

³³ Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” in James D. Faubion, ed., *Essential Works of Foucault, Volume 3, Power*, (New York: New Press, 2000), 336.

his sexuality. It was everywhere present in him: at the root of all his actions because of 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.... 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 hermaphroditism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species.³⁴

In one stroke, Foucault had identified the social construction of the sexual binary. Homosexuality was invented to pathologize people who did not conform to the bourgeois familial norm. Homosexuality was invented to identify a class of people and make them available for clinical study and pastoral management by church and state. In so doing, however, a second species, the dominant one, was created *ipso facto*: the heterosexual. The incipient heterosexism of this speciation of the homosexual is obvious. Decency, superiority and order were ascribed to heterosexuality. Indecency, inferiority, and perversion were ascribed to homosexuality where the dominant force in the binary works to “refuse” the existence of the weaker dominated force.³⁵

According to Foucault, however, there is an endemic instability in the very discursive practices of any dominant force. Nothing may prevent the marginalization of the dominated group, but the “tactical polyvalence of discourses”³⁶ robs the dominant force in the binary of the ability to clinch the argument against their existence. In

³⁴ Foucault, *History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Volume I*, Robert Hurley, trans., (New York: Vintage Books, 1990, English translation, 1978), 43.

³⁵ This is odd, given the counterproductivity of such a refusal. Archaeologically, “homosexuality” was invented prior to “heterosexuality,” and, indeed, an apt question is whether heterosexuality has any content conceptually apart from homosexuality at all. “Not-homosexual” seems not to be much of an identity.

³⁶ Foucault, *History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Volume I* (1978, 1990), 100.

fact, discursive practice demonstrates that discourse is as uncertain a science as the sale of love and desire. *Caveat emptor* and *caveat venditor*.³⁷ Discourses are tactical elements or blocks operating in the field of force relations; there can exist different and even contradictory discourses within the same strategy; they can, on the contrary, circulate without changing their form from one strategy to another, opposing strategy.³⁸

In response to the cupidity of hetero-dominant discourse, homosexuals gave rise to new accounts of subjectivity for human persons. Foucault maps the ground for resistance to heterosexist ideology for LGBT people:

There is no question that the appearance in nineteenth-century psychiatry, jurisprudence, and literature of a whole series of discourses on the species and subspecies of homosexuality...made possible a strong advance of social controls into this area of 'perversity'; but it also made possible the formation of a 'reverse' discourse: homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or 'naturalness' be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified.³⁹

The sexual binary itself was critiqued, and queer theory was born whereby essentialist definitions of human sexual identity are overthrown in favor of a decidedly blurred binary that questions the fixity of maleness and femaleness. The last word belongs to no one. Tactical use of queer discourse and criticism expose the insidiousness and folly of "final solutions" and intolerance toward difference and ambiguity. Who is speaking, where and what episode made the use of a particular discourse necessary are critical to the tactical productivity and strategic integration of discourses, since "discourse

³⁷ "Let the buyer beware," and "Let the seller beware."

³⁸ Foucault, *History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Volume I* (1978, 1990), 101.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it.”⁴⁰

The Queer Event and the Will to Power

Is God a modification of power? In other words, is God the ultimate sanction against the will to power that queer folk have in society at large, and for purposes of this essay, against their desire to choose and be chosen as leaders in their communities of faith? The God discourse of the dominant ecclesial culture strikes at the heart of the LGBT desire to share in leadership by reinforcing the *a priori* spiritual disqualification of self-identified, self-affirming, practicing queers from the processes that would admit them to offices of lay and ordained service. Since as Foucault has claimed, every history is a history of the present, the introduction of the individual as a sexual being open to the scrutiny of the church may be taken as a given. The sexual binary of the repressed Victorian era, and the evolution of the use of the bourgeois (read “nuclear”) heterosexual family as an instrument to marginalize LGBT Christians from representative leadership, are used by the current judicatories and magisterial bodies of the church to render queers unfit to serve.

Creation narratives are heterosexually reinterpreted to limit human beings to at most two sexual destinies: married to a member of the opposite sex, or celibate. Passion narratives are reinterpreted to link homosexuality, bisexuality, and transgender sexuality to the catalogue of sins for which Jesus died. Levitical purity codes and Pauline sin lists are hermeneutically tinkered with⁴¹ to level the ultimate condemnation of God, not against idolatry as the ancient logic of Romans 1

⁴⁰ Ibid., 101, 102.

⁴¹ See Ronald E. Long, “Disarming Biblically Based Gay Bashing,” in Deryn Guest, Robert E. Goss, Mona West, and Thomas Bohache, eds., *The Queer Bible Commentary*, (London: SCM Press, 2006).

intended,⁴² but against the latent homosexuality lodged in each of our souls since the Fall of Adam. The option, “Adam and Steve, not Adam and Eve,” exists as a potential for every person by attachment to the myth of the Fall, not just homosexuals, threatening to destroy the integrity of the family and society, and to rob those who succumb to same-sex seductions of their very salvation.⁴³

Power/knowledge is not sinister *per se* for Foucault.⁴⁴ Yet one must be particularly careful at this point not to read him as endorsing the sinister outcomes of technologies of power relations that oppress and marginalize people. Even moderate thinkers, like the theologians Walter Wink and John Howard Yoder, have appropriated Foucault’s philosophy in dangerous ways they probably never intended, linking power/knowledge to the biblical “Powers,”⁴⁵ and then further situating these spiritual/material/political forces within the compass of the myth of the Fall, as fallen but redeemable.⁴⁶ There is nothing innocent about power in

⁴² Dale B. Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 51-64.

⁴³ For an example of this sort of heterosexist/homophobic hermeneutics, see Robert A.J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2002), especially his “Conclusions” chapter at the end of the book. Work like Gagnon’s is among the most extremely homophobic in the American academy, but modern heterosexist interpreters of scripture seem to be blind to the ancient logic that supported texts like Romans 1:18-32. As Dale Martin shows, lodging homosexuality and homosexual practices in the myth of the Fall is a serious, homophobic move [Dale B. Martin, (2006)].

⁴⁴ See Stewart Clegg, David Courpasson, and Nelson Phillips, “Critical Theories,” in Clegg, Courpasson, and Phillips, *Power and Organizations* (London: SAGE Publications, Ltd.), 9.

⁴⁵ Note, for example, William Tyndale’s 1526 translation of Romans 13:1, the source for the phrase, “the powers that be” in the English Bible: “Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: The powers that be are ordained of God.”

⁴⁶ See Walter Wink, *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 7 and 12; and John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans and Sons, 1994), 142, 153-155, and 159. Better for LGBT people that they should have

Foucault's account of it. When associated with explosive cultural and moral struggles over sexuality, social power can wield the full force of its technologies of control and punishment to ruin lives with a mere accusation of sexual misconduct, as Yoder himself ruefully learned before his death.⁴⁷ Unlike the Powers, persons sexualized by scandal know no rehabilitation in this world, and will know no redemption until the world to come.

As Marcella Althaus-Reid suggests, however, wherever Powers become totalizing, a queer hermeneutic of suspicion must be widened to encompass them.⁴⁸ The cupidity of totalizing power must be queered by naming it for what it is. The work of the queer interpreter is in itself an act of resistance and struggle. Foucault's perception and sensitivity to the totalizing way this technique of power relations operates is surely due in part to his own life as a semi-closeted queer.⁴⁹ He knew that despite the problems resisting heteromorphous power, it had to be done, and it could be done. The silence and

made the hermeneutical move toward scripture's problem with idolatry rather than toward the Fall.

⁴⁷ "Beginning in 1992, [Yoder] endured the most painful years of his life (as, no doubt, his wife did, too). In June of 1992 Yoder was put under the discipline of the Indiana-Michigan Conference of the Mennonite Church for allegations of sexual misconduct.... The process concluded in the summer of 1996, with the Church Life Commission and the Indiana-Michigan Conference of the Mennonite Church saying that they encouraged 'Yoder and the church to use his gifts of writing and teaching'" Mark Thiessen Nation, "John Howard Yoder: Mennonite, Evangelical, Catholic," in *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* (July 2003) <http://www.goshen.edu/mqr/pastissues/july03nation.html>. Retrieved on March 14, 2007. See also Nation's book, *John Howard Yoder: Mennonite Patience, Evangelical Witness, Catholic Convictions*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2006). Yoder's personal conduct and its import for his ecclesial and academic significance remain controversial.

⁴⁸ Althaus-Reid, "Queer I Stand," in Althaus-Reid and Isherwood (2005), 104.

⁴⁹ Foucault was open about his gayness only to a select circle of people. In fact, he was drawn to the bondage fetish community and anonymous bathhouse sexual encounters. He never lived openly as a gay man in the academy or in public. At his death in 1984, members of his family publicly denied that he had died as a complication of infection by HIV/AIDS.

secrecy of the institutional church about its own sexual prejudice and ideology might indeed secure its power to rule bodies and souls, and manage them with prohibitions for a time.⁵⁰ But this was not the whole story: “[Silence and secrecy] also loosen its holds and provide for relatively obscure areas of tolerance.”⁵¹

Localized resistance through events of repetitive direct action at these soft spots within ecclesial power can marshal the tactical strengths of discourses against régimes intent on imposing their power over bodies. Such revolutionary actions are anchored in the experience⁵² of marginalized people, and bring the event of oppression to the light of day. The subjects of repression exercise the will to power that the systems of control have tenaciously sought “to dominate and dissolve.”⁵³ This method of resistance serves a double purpose for LGBT people: not only does it offer productive tactical ways to fight against anti-queer repression, but it requires them to face and overcome the narcissistic wounds inflicted on them by the silence and invisibility of the closet.

The grip of repression upon subjugated people can be weakened by two modes of attack, according to Foucault: Either by a “desubjectification” of the will to power (that is, through political struggle in the context of class warfare) or by the destruction of the subject as a pseudosovereign (that is, through an attack on “culture”: the suppression of taboos and the limitations and divisions imposed upon the sexes; the setting up of communes; the loosening of inhibitions with regard to drugs; the breaking of all the prohibitions that form and guide the development of a normal individual). I am referring to all those experiences which have been

⁵⁰ Foucault, *History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Volume I* (1978, 1990), 101.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Foucault, “Revolutionary Action: ‘Until Now,’ in Donald F. Bouchard, ed., *Language, Counter-memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 231.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 219.

rejected by our civilization or which it accepts only within literature.⁵⁴

The assaults must be carried out on a broad front so that both consciousness and institutions are shaken up:

If it were a question of raising consciousness, we could simply publish newspapers and books, or attempt to win over a radio or television producer. We wish to attack an institution at the point where it culminates and reveals itself in a simple and basic ideology, in the notions of good and evil, innocence and guilt. We wish to change this ideology which is experienced through those dense institutional layers where it has been invested, crystallized, and reproduced. ...Humanism is based on the desire to change the ideological system without altering the institutions; and reformers wish to change the institution without touching the ideological system. Revolutionary action, on the contrary, is defined as the simultaneous agitation of consciousness and institutions; this implies that we attack the relationships of power through the notions and institutions that function as their instruments, armature, and armor.⁵⁵

The last ditch of defense against revolutionary action is to attempt to reassert control of liberated people, not by painting what they are doing as evil, but rather as “abnormal” and to justify this claim by asserting that the change would be bad for the individual. Foucault draws out what this last ditch effort reveals: “These are expressions that signal the fundamental duality of Western consciousness.”⁵⁶

This also means that we can't defeat the system through isolated actions; we must engage it on all fronts—the university, the prisons and the domain

⁵⁴ Ibid., 222. Foucault expounded these ideas in a 1971 interview with lycée [high school] students seeking to change the educational system, and was published originally in *Actuel* No. 14 in November of that year.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 228.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 230.

of psychiatry—one after another since our forces are not strong enough for a simultaneous attack. We strike and knock against the most solid obstacles; the system cracks at another point; we persist. It seems that we're winning, but then the institution is rebuilt; we must start again. It is a long struggle; it is repetitive and seemingly incoherent.⁵⁷

Yet, if he is right, the power/knowledge that expresses the energy of the system and also gives the system its unity by reproducing itself in the processes by which it moulds and authorizes leaders, is the very force that offers the most effective point of resistance and the starting place for opposition to the repression it enforces on the souls and bodies of people. The strength by which the church sexualizes individuals and disqualifies some on the basis of abnormality, pastoral power, is also the delineation of the limits of such power over the individuals it seeks to manage.⁵⁸ The exercise of pastoral power empowers those it seeks to govern as free people, free to act, to resist, and to rise to power themselves. In discussing the nature of pastoral power relations, Foucault writes:

When one defines the exercise of power as a mode of action upon the action of others,...one includes an important element: freedom. Power is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are free. ...The relationship between power and freedom's refusal to submit cannot therefore be separated.⁵⁹

The queer event in the desire of LGBT Christians to take their rightful places in church leadership alongside their heterosexual colleagues is the exercise of their power as free people. It is the liberation of *eros* from the restraints of prejudice and denial, the uncaging of the cupids, queer and straight, from the control of the ecclesial vendors

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Foucault in Dreyfus and Rabinow (1983), 225.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 221.

who hold them captive. “To queer a thing” is to foul it up, to shake up the presuppositions on which the framework of something rests. To contend that heterosexist ideology, not gospel, underpins white straight male pyramids of ecclesial power is to begin the queering of ecclesial leadership. Further, to assert that people of different races and ethnicities, abilities and disabilities, economic and class locations, genders and sexualities are as worthy for church leadership as white straight males is to queer the debate up a notch.

Walking Systemic Interventions

Marcella Althaus-Reid, a self-identified queer theologian, takes Foucault’s insight into pastoral power’s polyvalence, and moves on into the heart of ecclesial thought and practice, into the construction of theology itself. She strips theologians naked and exposes their ideological genitalia. Every theologian is a sexual theologian. Every theology implies a sexual and political praxis, either conscious or unconscious. Just as the church’s dogmas and pastoral practices are suffused by sexual ideology no matter how much the church tries to deny it, the church’s teachers are exponents of a sexual party line, based on a variety of responses to “discrete and accepted social codifications.”

What regulatory, decent order has organized the systematic theological sexual discourse in Christianity? Which sort of classroom ideology is behind a theological ethics which reproduces and encourages an attitude of theological submission to one specific epistemological model such as idealized heterosexuality in the making of systematic theology? ...Moreover, we may like to ask which are the connections between a colonial sexuality which not only gave God a penis but also regulated what that penis was supposed to do.”⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Althaus-Reid, “Queer I Stand,” in Althaus-Reid and Isherwood (2005), 106.

One thinks of the denials of Oz behind the great emerald machine, “Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain!” But Althaus-Reid’s critique is more deeply penetrating than fingering an obvious malefactor cloaked out of sight. The dichotomy between flesh and spirit is false. Transcendence in theology is a stalking horse for heterosexist ideology. Centralization and hierarchical pyramid-making create marginality, non-adepts, and flesh-denying abstractions. She outs the alliance of theology and heterosexism, and forces it into the open from the closet where it had hidden.

God is not a modification of ecclesial and state power. God is queer, the original queer who stands in solidarity with the aliens and strangers who make up concrete communities of unashamed sexual experience, of sufferings, and the joys of desire and love. The queer God and the strangers to the church’s theology who companion with her “stand queer,” according to Althaus-Reid, that is, as a challenge to *status quo* ecclesial power:

When I say that I “stand queer,” I want to make clear that I stand in a tension: alone, with full responsibility for my discourse but also with my particular community of struggle. That community is made up of strangers who cast a highly suspicious hermeneutical circle in the attempt to unveil the complexity of the sexual base lying below the construction of the Church’s dogmatics and politics alike. By doing so, queer theologies also try to find the presence of the stranger God, who stands outside the classroom definitions of heterosexual thinking and is among us.⁶¹

I stand as a queer among queers, as I stand for the circle of hermeneutical suspicion to be taken towards new limits, and for the presence of the strangers of theology to share stories from which a new face of God may appear.... Queer we may stand, with a sense of pride and resistance which

⁶¹ Ibid., 103.

comes from the sharing of our own stories and own sufferings, and the silence of a theology which has assumed too many things about sexuality and God.⁶²

Althaus-Reid furthers the work Foucault began by assaulting and deconstructing binaries that have been invented by theologians and clerics to advance neocolonial/heteronormative theologies masquerading as expressions of gospel compassion. In reality, they are wolves in sheep's clothing. She writes:

I have argued that a God at the margins is not a marginal God. The latter would be a real God within the margins, and a God with a substantial difference from the charity models which present us with a God coming to our margins, so our borders. It is precisely that movement of coming towards the marginalized that betrays that God. Where does this God belong? Which cartography of salvation has this movement towards the margins traced?

The theology at the margins that I would like to pursue as a part of a queer trajectory in theology is not a neocolonial theology where an economic and affective model of relationships need to be either expelled from the system or incorporated by providing an understanding alien to what real margins are. Margins are not margins except for the colonial mentality.⁶³

Local initiatives of queer communities “perv” the consciousness and institutional politics of the church. This starts when communities of strangers unite their differing epistemologies in struggle against the heterosexist arrogance of a church leadership that sells sexual management and social oppression as “God’s will” or “the natural order of things.” Althaus-Reid calls this

⁶² Ibid., 104.

⁶³ Ibid., 105-106.

“perving” of the church “putting her hands under the skirts of God”:

If the theologian puts her hands under the skirts of God, she is establishing a different pattern of dialogue with the sacred and with herself and her community of resistance. This heralds the end of unnecessary transcendence and the beginning of sensual concretization in theology.⁶⁴

As the *theologoi* of the faith community change, its *ethos* changes; and as the *ethos* of the faith community changes, the institutional leadership must change as well. It becomes inclusive rather than exclusive, consensual rather than coercive. The *ethos* of pastoral power, born in the struggle between desire and denial, moves away from its unnaturally autocratic heterosexual ideology, and toward a “perved” pastoral power informed by consensual queer trajectories in theology:

Queer theology is a theology of alliances in agreement with their own diversity, in consensual loving dynamics. Consensuality here also means dialogic, even if code-breaking at times. A consensual relationship with the Church and God belongs to a different order than the old hierarchical, autocratic style of organizing people and theologies to which we are accustomed.

We start our own reflections from our own sexual stories. We lift God’s skirts after having lifted our own first. In lifting our skirts, we remind ourselves of our own identity at the moment of doing theology while we remain committed to theological honesty. It is from an alliance of sexual epistemologies in disagreement with heterosexual ideology and not vice versa that we reflect on grace, redemption and salvation.

From different sexual epistemologies we may find different ways of understanding not only the

⁶⁴ Ibid., 102.

salvific project but alternative church structures, too. For instance, the role of permutations has a pedagogical function: to understand the complexity of the dynamics of change in the Church. The scenes of exchanges between femmes and butches, or men in high heels and women in drag have much to teach the churches about change, the importance of performances and the joy of plurality to be embodied in us.⁶⁵

The body of Christ is already “perved” by two millennia of the initiation of queer folk into its membership. What is wanting is the courage and wit of their sexual descendents to out themselves and the church as the adulterated community of difference it already is, at least on one level; and by these tactics of freedom to challenge the repression of flesh and spirit that have robbed the church of its sensual potency. The minority report on the church is that it is the consensual alliance of all those who in loving difference no longer abhor ambiguity, and no longer assert that the church knows more about the world and God than it actually does. Orthodoxy exists side-by-side with heterodoxy today, and it always has. For example, there has never been only one authorized version of the Jesus story, nor has there been a single, approved and sanitized theological account of atonement. The church has been none the weaker for living with ambiguity and difference at critical theological and structural junctures, and is actually stronger because of it. It will not be weakened by the lifting of sanctions against open LGBT people in positions of ecclesial leadership, either. But this will not come about overnight, or without conflict. As Foucault intimated, the struggle is long, seemingly incoherent, and the risks and losses attendant to it are costly and real.

To draw attention to the adulteration of the body of Christ by the baptism of the bodies of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Christians is to offer the contemporary church a modest proposal: that until queer

⁶⁵ Ibid., 107-108.

folk are fully enfranchised in leadership, the church should probably quit baptizing them, padding their membership rolls with their names and their coffers with queer money. Local, well-timed acts of resistance can be fruitful, as the recent demonstrations of dozens of queer pastors and seminarians in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America shows. They outed themselves as non-celibate queers in an act of devotional disobedience to protest the highly publicized removal of an Atlanta Lutheran pastor in an open same-sex relationship. Their action encouraged leaders to vote not to discipline or punish clergy in active same-sex relationships, a first in American Lutheranism. While the message sent to the church is a mixed one, blending historic acts of liberation with reluctance to change traditional interpretations of scripture, the decision to allow pastors in gay and lesbian relationships to continue their ministries is a significant example of shifting pastoral power.⁶⁶

The very resistance to the heterosexist ideology that undergirds the patterns of white, straight, male authority and power in the church is, thank the queer God, built into the knowledge/power relation itself. As Foucault has written, “The relationship between power and freedom’s refusal to submit cannot...be separated.”⁶⁷ Althaus-Reid believes that to the extent queer folk are honest theologically and willing to be completely themselves in church and state, they are walking systemic interventions. She learned this assertion of honesty and freedom from native Peruvian poor people, and adopted their witness for queer theology under the title, *Volver a nuestras almas*: “To go back to our own souls”—the expression Peruvian indigenous people use when they feel alienated living in the big cities of the white people

⁶⁶ See Susan Hogan-Albach, “Gay Lutheran Clergy Come Out of the Closet,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, August 8, 2007, accessed on 8/13/07 at <http://www.suntimes.com/lifestyles/religion/501201,CST-NWS-lutheran08.article>, and “Lutherans to Allow Pastors in Gay Relationships,” *Reuters*, August 11, 2007, accessed on 8/14/07 at http://news.yahoo.com/s/nm/20070811/us_nm/religion_lutherans_dc.

⁶⁷ Foucault in Dreyfus and Rabinow (1983), 221.

and in need of encountering their true identities once more. They go back to the mountains and they say, "I am back to my soul." Strangely, queer theology also has a praxis of going back to our souls. This is a path made of ruptures and recoveries, in order to find our true selves again.⁶⁸

It is curious, and *queer* [emphasis hers], to discover that, paradoxically, to come back to our souls should not be done through a path of harmony, but in diversity, dis-order, and justice.... And even if queer theology is just another utopia kicking against the dogmatics of heterosexual ideology, proving that in the end not even by challenging heterosexual ideology can we transform this world, our duty is to exist. Doing theology as if touching God under her skirts is a duty of love and justice and an encounter with God among us.⁶⁹

Queer theology was born in the furnace of therapeutic pathology, heterosexist loathing, and the horrors of the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s. Though it was invented to serve a community of outcasts, the queer work it does is on behalf of the whole church and the whole race. The theology of pastoral power needs the explosive, regenerating experience of queering every bit as much as gendered theologies and neo-colonial theologies do.⁷⁰ The pedagogy of Christian leadership needs queering, as well, so that the formation of all the church's leaders would include the lessons queer communities have to teach: that difference is not an alibi for coercion, but rather a boon to the renewal of the Good News; that the practice of solidarity in difference need not mask disagreement or prejudice, but instead seeks ways to work and love one another together in the face of the challenges to human existence on this shrinking planet we all call "home."

⁶⁸ Althaus-Reid in Althaus-Reid and Isherwood (2005), 108.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 104-106.

Most of all, the church of Jesus Christ who is presented joyously in the difference of the gospels needs the gifts, graces and voices of LGBT people in order to make a credible witness to all the kinds and conditions of the human race. It is clear enough that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Christians are no longer going to settle for the tender mercies of the ecclesial closet, nor for the crumbs that fall from the eucharistic table. Honestly and freely, they are out in the church, and do not intend to be driven into silence and invisibility ever again. It is also clear that God will have a church inclusive of all God's children, representatively led by persons from every community that responds with faith to God's call. If the current institutional church is not that great coming church, then what we now know as church will likely be passed by. Like Vesuvius, God will not be denied forever. Until the church opens its arms to all the faithful, and learns to celebrate the full enfranchisement of them all, including LGBT folk, in the doing of theology in their own authentic voices, there will not be a whole Christ speaking to the world.