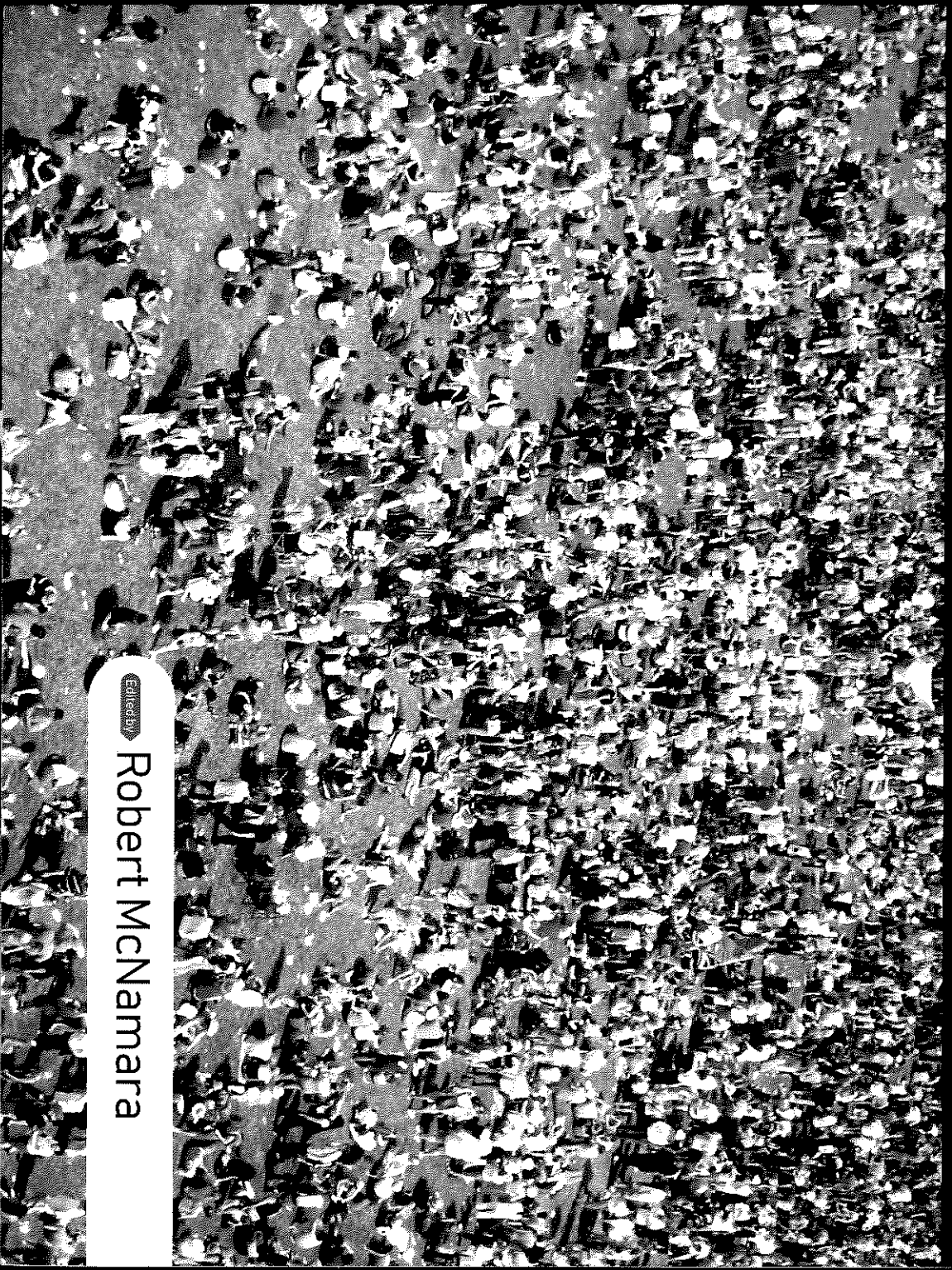


Sociology as Everyday Life

..... Voices from the Field



Edited by

Robert McNamara

Inside Out/Side, In (side): Gender, Sexuality, Desire, and the Church

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AT THE AGE of eleven, I cornered my mother for the second time with a question that would make any Southern Baptist parent shudder; at eight, it was Santa, three years later it was my sexuality, and in both cases her reassurance was ruined by my reality. Even as I was unconvinced by stories of some old white guy who yearly spans the globe in a twenty-four-hour period, I was equally confounded by my gender and sexuality in light of the Church's teaching. This was not the first time I'd had queries about gender or sex and God, it was simply the first time I'd found the courage to ask about my sexuality. I've always been curious. Since I can remember, I have wondered: Why is God "He"? Why was Adam created first? Why did the serpent approach Eve and why did she take the first bite of the "apple"? Why does God favor men? Why were there only male disciples? And, of course, why can't women be pastors, preachers, or priests?

While I will not be able to address all these questions, in this article, I will address the central issue I have struggled with since my youth, which is in some way related to all the questions: Can one be a Christian and LGBTQ? Since this is a sociology textbook, we will consider the Church's historical stance on same-sex love and LGBTQ people as it relates to social norms, the construction of gender, sexuality, and desire, and the constitution and policing of certain behaviors, practices, and identities in order to create what is considered "normal" and what is considered "deviant."

The United States of America may overtly claim separation of church and state, but due to the historical collusion of the Church and Western European empires, it is necessary to consciously consider the influence of the Church upon societies, then and now. So after I share a bit more of my story, I will unpack this important entanglement en route to some important conclusions about Christianity and the LGBTQ community in the twenty-first century.

Everything changed the day I uttered the words, "Mom, am I gay?" My unsuspecting mother quickly assured me I was not. However, inside, I knew what she could not see from the outside. Unfortunately, it would take me another fifteen years before I was ready to come out. In that decade and a half, I kicked it into overdrive; there is very little I do without passion or zeal and my faith was no

exception. I memorized the Bible as my "life manual" and hid any and all feelings and romantic relationships I had with women. I wore a giant cross and dated jocks who were equally as on fire for Christ; but it was all a façade.

Outside I had it all together; inside I was riddled with doubt and plagued by fear and shame. After college, I moved to Singapore to work in a church; I was "answering God's call," and hoping I would evade greater temptation. As they say, however, "wherever you go, there you are," so rather than making things easier, the change of location left me feeling even more isolated and afraid. I played it straight until I was compelled (what I understood to be conviction from the Holy Spirit) to confess to the pastor of the church I was serving. At that point, everything changed, and not for the better. My secret was out, and it felt as though everyone knew and was disgusted by me. I was told repeatedly that I was "oppressed" or "possessed by a demon of homosexuality and a demon of unbelief," and I spent the next five years in ex-gay ministries and undergoing exorcisms, Christian counseling, and reparative therapy. I became convinced that if homosexuality was a sin and a sickness—as I'd been told time and again—and one could be delivered or healed, it was going to be me!

Stories such as mine are not uncommon. You may have heard or read or may even know someone who has experienced something similar, and it is tragically possible that this person did not survive. Ironically, while the Church's teachings on LGBTQ issues almost drove me to end my life, other teachings also deterred me from it—growing up hearing that "people who commit suicide go to Hell" prevented me from even entertaining the idea. Now, while many people who have walked in my shoes were placed on the path by their parent(s) or another concerned adult before they were old enough to make the decision for themselves, I had just turned twenty-two when I sought reparative therapy, and I did so willingly.

While I was inarguably influenced by my faith community and my family, I was coerced but never forced. I was simply acting, by faith, on what I had heard all my life and come to believe as *the* truth. Namely, that woman was created to be the feminine counterpart to man, and man alone was created in the image of God (who was unquestionably male and masculine); woman, then, was and is to willingly submit to man as his helpmate—a virtuous wife who will become a homemaker, bear children, and honor her husband above all else. Accordingly, God's perfect design is heterosexuality, and anyone who believes or practices otherwise is disordered and under the influence of the Devil.

I currently teach the Bible, religion, and philosophy at a liberal arts university in North Carolina, and I work with students who hold the above to be true, just as I did at their age. I often wonder, in fact, had my life not changed so drastically at twenty-six, might I still hold those beliefs? I moved back to the United States

after living in Singapore for three years, and two years after my return I was hospitalized; a month later I was diagnosed with Crohn's Disease. The diagnosis forced me to face my own mortality, not to mention the tremendous traumatic and psychosomatic effects of the teachings I had once held so dear. What I had been taught as truth by well-meaning, loving, genuine Christians, had betrayed me. In that time, I came to see that *their* truth was for me a lie, which led to pain, separation, and death rather than healing, connection, and life. I am absolutely convinced that had I not come to embrace myself and my story, the silence, self-rejection, fear, and the very lies that masqueraded as truth would have killed me.

Once I awoke from the nightmare that had become my life, I quit my job at the church and moved to the one place I was sure was safe for LGBTQ people like me: San Francisco. I got a job at a coffee shop, enrolled in graduate school, and began studying sexuality, religion, and the Bible from the other side. I created community with other outsiders who found a way to remain inside the Church; people who believed the Church was originally founded by "deviants" just like us. After spending a quarter of a century learning how much God hated me for my gender nonconformity and my sexual deviance, I began to embrace myself. After all, maybe God could actually love me "Just As I Am."

In this article, I utilize my experience as an ostensible outsider on the inside to think about not only the Church's historical stance on gender, sexuality, and desire, but the way in which the Church's teaching has dictated what is and is not socially acceptable. In the first section, I define the frameworks I employ and interrogate the terms around which this chapter centers: gender, sexuality, and desire, on the one hand, the Church, the Bible, and the politics of interpretation, on the other. In the second section, I broadly map the development of the Church, its (ironic) rise to power, its foundational doctrines, and its intimate relationship to politics and economies of thought and commerce, highlighting the ways in which the Church has historically represented, reinforced, and even reified social norms—particularly those within countries and cultures affected by Western European (neo)colonialism.

Next, I evaluate the Church's traditional teachings on gender, sexuality, and desire, which have established a gendered and racialized hierarchy wherein primarily white males are attributed the sole authority as divinely authorized intermediaries between God and humanity. Of course, the Church's teaching has been established on biblical doctrine. Therefore, in the third section, I address the biblical texts upon which this teaching is ostensibly based—the so-called "Clobber Passages"—arguing that rather than universal mandates from God, these texts were written in particular sociohistorical contexts and should be read accordingly. In the final section, I offer an analysis of the politics and ideologies

that have legitimated and propagated this structure of intelligibility and conclude with some reflections on the way forward.

GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND DESIRE: THE CHURCH, THE BIBLE, AND THE POLITICS OF INTERPRETATION

In sociology, there are three primary theoretical frameworks through which to think about society and social interactions (structural-functional, social conflict, and symbolic interactionism). In a more general sense, frameworks are structures that support any sort of system, object, or text, and they directly influence how and what we perceive. In fact, law professor and sociologist, *Kimberlé Crenshaw*, pointed out that we may hear or read information but will discard it unless we have the proper mental framework to hold it. One of the frameworks, which is deconstructed in the work of gender theorists and LGBTQ scholars is what we could call *binary hierarchy*. In such a dualistic structure of intelligibility, rather than perceiving two elements in an egalitarian relationship, these entities or ideas are set in contrast and the primary term is privileged and prioritized over the other.

In other words, the first concept is “on top” and, accordingly, holds power within this structure while the second is “on bottom” and does not. Some examples are public/private, good/bad, man/woman, masculine/feminine, white/black, self/other, straight/gay, and us/them. Because they *appear* to order reality, binary hierarchies such as these appear natural. However, such frameworks are constructed rather than essential. That is to say, though binary hierarchies may give the impression of inherency, they only *seem* to be natural because we live in a society that conditions, or socializes, us to identify phenomena as such, since these binary oppositions define the framework (or structure of intelligibility) through which reality is constructed and, therefore, interpreted. Those born into Western European influenced societies were raised to see the world in this way; as a result, critically analyzing this structure requires us to step back and to think like a sociologist. Before we dive into our critical sociological analysis, however, there are two sets of concepts, which should be explained directly. The first group includes gender, sex, and sexuality and the second, the Church, the Bible, and interpretation.

GENDER, SEX, AND SEXUALITY

One of the strengths and benefits of sociology is that it is interdisciplinary. In sociological research, one is not limited to a single set of scholarly discourses or resources, but may incorporate various theories, sciences, and perspectives across

disciplines. In this way, the everyday sociologist is able to approach complex notions such as gender, sex, and sexuality from various angles and multiple layers. Gender is typically conceptualized as a set of traits, characteristics, or behaviors associated with a certain biological sex. In Western European societies gender has historically been confined to “masculine and feminine,” has viewed variance as deviant, and has limited bodies to one or the other “corresponding” gender. While this paradigm is daily being challenged by research across the arts and sciences, it is still the most prevalent framework.

Since the inception of modern (Western) medicine, the doctor delivering the baby was also tasked with identifying and/or attributing the child’s sex and, therefore, “her” or “his” gender. Sex, then, has been conceived of as biological and is most often determined according to the perceived primary sex characteristics, which are those directly associated with reproduction. Bodies with ambiguous genitalia, or intersex bodies, have been and are most often still subjected to a scale and then assigned the sex and gender. Sexuality has been presumed, particularly in Western European societies, to operate according to the gender binary and to coincide or agree with a person’s gender and sex; this alignment is traditionally viewed as an expression of one’s gender where a normative male should be masculine and sexually aroused by females and vice versa. Sexuality refers to a person’s sexual or erotic attraction and is often denoted by the term *orientation*. Interestingly, the term *homosexual* did not even appear in the English vernacular until the late nineteenth century—the same time as the term *heterosexual*, because they were used over and against one another to identify two oppositional identities.

THE CHURCH

With an estimated 2.22 billion followers, Christianity is the largest religious group in the world. Christianity and “the Church” are used interchangeably to identify this global collective that is not so much a *what* as a *who*. The Old English word *church* is a derivation of the Greek word *kyrios*, which means “master” or “lord.” So the roots of *church* are explicitly linked to what biblical scholar Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has deemed kyriarchy, which “is best theorized as a complex pyramidal system of intersecting multiplicative social structures of superordination and subordination, of ruling and oppression” (Fiorenza 2010). As an improper noun, the word signifies an edifice and also a specific church, denomination, or sect. When capitalized, the term *Church* represents a sociocultural religious body made up of persons who understand themselves to have a unified collective identity according to a few general characteristics. All people who are members of the

Church (1) identify with Jesus Christ as his followers and, though they often distinguish between their group, type, variety, or denominational affiliation, consider themselves “Christians;” (2) worship the God represented in the Bible as the divine parent (or “Father”) of Jesus and supreme authority in the world; and (3) affirm the Bible as the authoritative Word of God (though what this means is subject to interpretation).

Beyond this universal definition, each specific church and/or denomination has its own particularity, which is often identified through the church body’s unique by-laws or doctrinal statements. Interestingly, in the first century, the movement was quite diverse. In the early fourth century, the Roman Emperor Constantine unified Rome under the one Roman Catholic Church—still the largest Christian church—and over the past century and a half other churches and denominations have diversified, emerging as people disagreed over issues related to politics, interpretation, doctrine, traditions, practices, and the like. Churches and denominations are defined by their theologies, teachings, and traditions.

Each group also has its own set of expectations and involves particular requirements; in order to be an active and legitimate member of the community (or “in-group”), one must follow certain rules. These laws or norms may be enforced by the governing body, but they might also be latent and prescribed implicitly. Because participation is primarily voluntary, as in other such social organizations, there are many more implicit norms than explicit; and one of the implicit requirements of most churches is heterosexuality. Accordingly, adherents are expected to *only* experience attraction toward and pursue intimate relationships with members of the perceived opposite gender/sex *and* to perform and, therefore, conform to the gender/sex they were assigned at birth. While some Protestant denominations have voted to include LGBTQ people and even to officiate same-sex marriages, the majority of Christian churches have not.

THE BIBLE

Literary theorist Stanley Fish coined the term *interpretive communities* in reference to churches and/or groups of people who read and interpret the Bible collectively (Fish 1982). Each church, then, is a distinct interpretive community and those communities are subdivided (and at times organized) into various smaller groups (i.e., committees, Bible studies, Sunday School classes, cell groups, family units, or other forms of social clustering). The Bible is the primary sacred text of Christianity and it can be found in the pews of every Church, the homes

of most Christians, and the bedside table of just about any hotel room south of Pennsylvania. The Bible is a collection of texts written across the Mediterranean region and over hundreds, if not thousands, of years. Through councils, conflicts, and finally consensus, a group of men with great ecclesial influence settled on the “canon”—those writings deemed authoritative. While churches may differ on the exact arrangement and inclusion, each divides the Bible into the “Old” and “New” Testaments. The Old Testament was inherited from Judaism while the New Testament is unique to Christianity.

THE BIBLE VS. CHURCH TRADITION—THE POLITICS OF INTERPRETATION

I often talk with students about the way in which interpretation is an active part of our everyday life, but most of the time it is happening unconsciously. We are constantly receiving information through our senses and those stimuli must be interpreted in order for us to make meaning in our world. Two of the most common explanations I hear when I ask undergraduate students why they believe a certain thing about the Bible are: “I don’t know, I just do” and “I believe it because that’s what it says.” Having spent eight years as a pastor before becoming a professor, I am aware that this is a prevalent perspective preached from the pulpit and, therefore, promoted in many churches, so I am not surprised by this response. In fact, when I was in college, I responded much the same way. Twenty years later, however, I am concerned that it is still so difficult, even threatening, for many of my students to take a critical step back in order to question the assumptions of their upbringing. Nothing exists in a vacuum. Even sacred texts are contingent upon context.

In order to think of the Bible more complexly, then, scholars consider the Bible in terms of three worlds that exist simultaneously behind, inside, and in front of the text. The Bible is undoubtedly a sacred text and, like any other book, it was written at a certain place, in a certain time, and for a particular purpose. Of course, because it is composed of so many different texts, and is a composite, it would be more accurate to say it was written in many places, at different times, for a number of purposes; not to mention the fact that it was copied and edited innumerable times over hundreds of years.

What this means is that different versions of the Bible actually contain different translations and sometimes very different information, not intended to be applied centuries after these texts were written. The world “behind” the text is what scholars understand to be the social context or contexts in which the Bible was written and, therefore, they employ historical critical methods in their

analyses. The Bible is literature, and scholars apply literary critical tools in order to analyze what they consider to be the world “inside” the Bible. In this way, they think about things such as a story’s characters and its plot, as well as its tensions. The final and arguably the most important influence upon the interpretive process is what scholars have deemed the world “in front” of the text. When one considers this world, she, he, or they, are looking at the context of the person or community interpreting the Bible and are attentive to the ways in which the reader’s individual experience and communal context influence her, his, or their interpretation of the text.

One final point to be emphasized about the Bible and its interpretation, in light of the three worlds of the text, is that one may never simply read the Bible at face value. Just as it was not written in a vacuum, we cannot read the Bible (or any text) independent of our culture, biases, and preconceptions—we are always reading, as we are living, under their influence. To say the Bible is a complex, layered, and theologically robust text, is an understatement. Even as there is no way to fully understand another human being (or ourselves), due to the processes of socialization and the subconscious, the words that exist on the pages of the Bible will never be identical to those read or heard.

There are too many variables involved to ever establish an absolutely accurate and viable interpretation of biblical texts. Another major variance regards ancient (oral and figurative) versus modern (literal and literary) frameworks; this major difference demands that the contemporary reader set aside her, his, or their post-Enlightenment predisposition toward rationalism and empiricism. Since this task is nearly impossible, the responsible reader must at least remember that the authors of the biblical text wrote almost two thousand years ago with no intention of being read in the twenty-first century (much less guiding millennials)—most of Jesus’s followers at the time believed the world would end before their lives did. In this way, then, the Bible must be taken seriously without having to be interpreted literally. In considering how we might take the Bible seriously, without necessarily taking it literally, we must also consider the way in which ideology influences the interpretation of the Bible, as well as the translation and transmission of one particular perspective over another—this, of course, is largely a matter of politics and power.

THE AUTHORITY OF THE CHURCH: PATRIARCHY, POWER, AND PERFORMATIVITY

While Jesus Christ is recognized as the founder and figurehead of Christianity, the religion finds its roots in an Ancient Near Eastern cult that would evolve into

Judaism. Interestingly, much like heterosexuality was only identified and named in relation to homosexuality, historians have argued that while Judaism predates Christianity by hundreds of years, it was cultural and did not gain its status as a religion until Christianity came to define itself over and against its parent tradition, establishing itself as a movement entirely independent of Judaism—a process that happened around the fourth century, when Constantine ruled the Roman Empire. One might say Judaism began with a small nomadic tribe living around contemporary Israel-Palestine, who called themselves “Israel,” worshipped the god YHWH and the goddess ASHRH, and shared various oral traditions that would eventually be collected and recorded after their temple was destroyed and a significant number of their community was enslaved in Babylon. The Hebrew Bible (which Christians renamed the Old Testament) is a collection of the folktales, traditions, poems, proverbs, and apocalypses orally transmitted by these people who have also been called “Hebrews.”

This community, which was itself a composite, would eventually rebuild their temple only to see it destroyed again by the Roman Empire in 70 CE. It was not long before this traumatic event that the Galilean Rabbi, known as Jesus of Nazareth, was performing miraculous feats and teaching about the Kingdom of God as a way of life. While Jesus taught the law given by God to Moses (whose name means “Messiah” in Hebrew), it is written that he believed “the greatest commandment” is to love God and others “as you love yourself” (Mark 12:28–34; Luke 10:27; Matthew 22:37), which was his interpretation of an ancient Hebrew commandment (cf. Deuteronomy 6:5).

The life, teachings, and miracles of Jesus are recounted in four books of the New Testament, which are collectively called Gospels, from the Greek work *euangelion* (“good news”). Each individual account offers a slightly different perspective on Jesus, but all seem to agree on a few central ideas: in particular, that the Rabbi’s teachings were so unconventional that he was persecuted by the Roman Empire as well as teachers and practitioners of his own (Jewish) culture. In fact, his teachings and practices are what led him to death by crucifixion. Much of what churches now practice and teach comes not from the teachings of Jesus, but the writings of Paul—a Jewish Jesus follower and apostle—who believed Jesus was the Christ (which means “Messiah” in Greek) and the so-called Church Fathers—the men who held authority in the early Church. Paul has had such a profound impact upon Christianity that one might even say Christianity would not be Christianity without Paul—on account of his divine calling to preach the good news (*euangelion*) of Jesus Christ to non-Jewish Gentiles, which led to numerous missionary journeys and epistles.

All of Jesus's teachings and miracles, and his life and his death, have been filtered through Paul. Of course, the Paul we read in the New Testament is not unfiltered either. While we have access to the letters he wrote various churches, these writings have been heavily edited. The Bible's scribes determined what would and would not be included in these texts and in the fifth century CE the canon was determined by some of the later Church Fathers. Prior to this decision, numerous councils had been held wherein the heads of the Catholic Church—who were all men and many of whom were deemed the Church's Fathers—gathered to determine the creeds, conventions, and theologies of Christianity.

The choices made by these powerful men have defined Christian orthodoxy, or right belief. Rather than a Church leader, however, the first council (at Nicaea) was convoked by the Roman Emperor Constantine. In fact, once he instituted the Christianization and, therefore, greater unification of the Roman Empire in the early fourth century, these ecumenical councils made all the Church's most important decisions. Constantine's rule undeniably established and secured the relationship between the Roman Empire and the Church; the authority of Rome and the authority of the Catholic Church henceforth became synonymous. Ironically, a movement begun in the first century by a Galilean peasant, which was anti-Rome and arguably anti-imperial, was—by the early fourth century—the very tool through which the Roman Empire colonized lands and people.

Now, while the term *colonization*, like the term *homosexuality*, postdates the Bible, the process is as old as empire itself, and one could argue Rome was one of its most effective implementers. (In fact, its reinterpretation and redeployment of the message of Jesus may be one of the most convincing arguments for this case.) Colonization is, at its most basic, the process of establishing a colony, and it historically entails a more powerful entity acquiring territory from a weaker entity, typically by force. This process not only entails the appropriation of land but the extrication of goods and services, as well as the acquiescence and often absolute annihilation of the cultural practices and traditions of the people previously occupying this land (if not the people themselves).

One of the most insidious results of colonization, and particularly of colonization by Western European empires, is the loss of many of the rich and diverse traditions, practices, and relics from societies and cultures around the world. Due to the collusion of Christianity and various empires since Rome, an especially unfortunate and all-too-ironic legacy of the life of Jesus of Nazareth, and his message of loving others in spite of difference, is its appropriation by a patriarchal hegemony that has historically operated with the intent to level difference and derogate diversity in favor of deference to its traditions, values,

beliefs, and practices, as well as its primary framework: hierarchical binaries. The predominant hierarchical binaries that characterize the collusion of Christianity and Western European empires define the social norms in all its colonized territories and place Western European powers on the side of God (as man) and, therefore, the good, towering over other religions, cultures, practices, and peoples, who are equated with evil and other weak and/or negative qualities, ideas, or entities.

Colonization, then, mandates that one perform according to this binary system. The nefarious repercussion of this relationship is the way in which this particular framework has kept almost all the explicit authority in the Church in the hands of cisgender, heterosexual males, which has thus relegated women to second class status and shamed and shunned LGBTQ people.

CHURCH HIERARCHY AND THE BINARY GENDER SYSTEM

It has become a bit of a truism to say that those in power do not surrender that power easily, if at all. If we take this to be accurate, it is no wonder that women do not hold great official authority in the Catholic Church or many of the largest Protestant denominations worldwide. The Church Fathers did not desire to share their authority with women and, as a result, Church tradition has dictated the leadership and, therefore, trajectory of the Church across time and place. Interestingly, however, when one looks to the precedent set by Jesus in the Bible and in other noncanonical gospels (those deemed heretical by the Church Fathers and so not included in the canon), there were undeniably women who held leadership positions in the early Church. In fact, we read in the New Testament that Jesus himself appeared to and entrusted the message of his resurrection to women before men. (See Matthew 28; Mark 16; Luke 24; and John 20.) In the Church, dominated by cisgender males, it would appear that Jesus's practices, and even the egalitarian approach taken by his earliest followers, have been dismissed and almost entirely disregarded to maintain a very particular—patriarchal and heterosexist—type of order in the Church. I believe this bias has not only been detrimental for the Church but has led to its demise and has the capacity to destroy it, unless it is radically disrupted. In order to do so effectively, we must identify and critically analyze the ways in which hierarchical binaries, and specifically the binary gender system, have led to the misinterpretation of the Bible, the misrepresentation of God, the disfiguration of the body of Christ, and the inexcusable shaming and shunning of LGBTQ people.

THE AUTHORITY OF THE BIBLE; THE AUTHORITY OF (LGBTQ) EXPERIENCE

The Bible and Humans: The Clobber Passages, Queries, and Queer Interventions

As I shared, after I came out, I moved to California—searching for LGBTQ friendly communities, not to mention more tolerant congregations with more inclusive theologies. Prior to my exodus, however, I began to read the work of pastors, prophets, and poststructuralists, who had already been interrogating the oppression and dehumanization of LGBTQ folks, both inside and outside the Church.

Since the early 1990s, theorizing of gender as performance has exploded. Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* is typically recognized as the text that incited this trend. Butler (herself influenced by Foucault's use of Nietzsche) argued that gender is "the discursive/cultural means by which 'sexed nature' or 'a natural sex' is produced and established as 'prediscursive,' prior to culture, a politically neutral surface on which culture acts" (Butler 1990). In so doing, she exposed the way in which gender—as with sexuality and desire—is composed of culturally scripted acts, not biological facts. That is to say, there is no stable gender or sexual identity, there are only sociocultural scripts that, when performed over and again across time, feign stability. The means by which a human being is either "properly" male or female—masculine or feminine respectively—as well as whom one should desire, has become so deeply entrenched in Western European society that these roles in fact *appear* to be static, substantive, and natural—as if they had existed as such since the origin of time itself or since creation.

It is the idea of origins and that gender, sex, sexuality, and desire were clearly delineated "in the beginning," which leads me to the Bible, Creation, and those biblical passages affectionately deemed "the clobber passages." Churches often claim they hold anti-LGBTQ views and prohibit same-sex sexual relations due to the Bible's teaching and God's creative design and desire for humanity. However, personal, cultural, and ideological biases undeniably precondition biblical interpretation.

There are seven passages traditionally considered to be homophobic and anti-LGBTQ; they are Genesis 1:27, Genesis 19 (cf. 18:20), Leviticus 18:22 (20:13), Deuteronomy 23:17–18, Romans 1:26–27, 1 Corinthians 6:9, and 1 Timothy 1:10. Contrary to conservative Christian interpretations of these passages, over the past few decades, LGBTQ biblical scholars, theologians, and ministers, such as Marcella Althaus-Reid, Ellen Armour, Patrick Chen, Bob Goss, Deryn Guest, Teresa Hornsby, Virginia Ramey Molenkott, Ken Stone, Justin Tanis, and Mona West, as well as their allies in Christian ministry, have sought to dispel this

misinformed view, to identify the way in which the cultural context of all biblical texts is entirely contingent upon their historical framework, and to provide alternative readings to the misinterpretations and misrepresentations of these passages, which are LGBTQ affirming rather than shaming or condemning.

The Bible was written around the Mediterranean over the course of almost a thousand years, the Bible's authors and editors were men (because women were generally uneducated), and their primary concerns were (1) constructing their communal identity as the people of God over and against other pagan cultures and (2) maintaining order within their own social group. In the time the Bible was recorded, one's identity and value were determined according to his or her cultural status, where elite men were at the top of the hierarchy and female slaves were at the very bottom. People did not conceptualize identity in terms of sexuality or sexual orientation because who one had sexual relations with was not a marker of identity—it was a behavior. The idea of homosexuality as an identity, therefore, was entirely foreign to the biblical world.

Since we do not have the time to deconstruct each of the seven passages, I will address the larger issue LGBTQ Christians emphasize. Rather than interpreting the clobber passages as condemning homosexuality specifically and more generally excluding LGBTQ people from Christian fellowship unless they repent and change their behavior, LGBTQ Christians and their allies highlight the overall message of the Bible and the Good News of Jesus, which is one of love and acceptance. Each of these texts, like all texts in the Bible, represent the particular biases of their author and his community, and in the case of all the biblical texts that appear to be about homosexuality, the actual issues at hand were either the maintenance (or establishment) of social order or procreation (the means to growth as a community). Laws or stories about those who have transgressed (or sinned) operate not only to perpetuate the established sociocultural structures but are often instituted to create them. Just like the existence of LGBTQ people shines a light on lived reality in distinction from ideology, so the laws instituted in the Bible reflect a culture in which those in power wanted to create order through the prohibition and enforcement of particular cultural practices.

Why would you institute a law to ensure a particular practice if people were already naturally performing that behavior? Or why prohibit an activity unless it was in some way threatening official power or its maintenance of order? Unfortunately, due to the pervasion of patriarchy in Judeo-Christian tradition and Church polity, men and women have been restricted to very specific gender roles, which are often located in the second creation story of Genesis—Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden—where man appears to have been created in God's image and woman led to the "fall" of humankind. If we are not cognizant of the three worlds

of the text (behind, inside, and in front), we might interpret this literally, rather than realizing the story was written by a community trying to answer existential questions and create a narrative to support their (hierarchical) social order, where man rules over woman and woman's desire is for man (see Genesis 3:16).

The portrayals of gender and sexuality pervasive in popular culture continue to be inflected by restrictive gender binaries and normative modes and models of intelligibility, which can indubitably be found in the Bible. However, while the Church (and its biases) may have had tremendous influence upon culture and views regarding gender, sexuality, and desire over the past two thousand years, with the exponential influx of information and capacity to communicate with various peoples and cultures around the world, social perspectives and practices are shifting, and the Church is losing its foothold. In fact, this is one of the reasons Bishop Jack Spong wrote a book entitled, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*, which was published a decade after *Living in Sin? A Bishop Rethinks Homosexuality*.

In the former, Spong (1990), a Bishop in the Episcopal Church, argues that as culture is shifting, the Church must reevaluate and revise some of its most deeply entrenched, misinformed, and condemning ideologies and traditions. In the latter, he describes his own path toward embracing gay and lesbian people and ultimately encourages the entire Church to do likewise. Spong is not the only Christian minister who has written books in support of full LGBTQ inclusion within the Church; another is Jack Rogers. Rogers, a Presbyterian minister, shares his own personal journey and interpretation of the clobber passages in *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality*. His argument, like Spong's, is based not only on the radical love of Jesus—who never once spoke directly about sexuality or gender—but on his understanding of the Bible reflecting cultural norms regarding social status rather than God's views on someone's gender identity or sexual preference.

While official Church authority may appear to institute and maintain the established social order, LGBTQ theologians, biblical scholars, ministers, and their allies, for the most part, understand Jesus's ministry, teaching, cohort, and performance of the miraculous to have been a politically charged disruption of social norms and the reason why he was crucified. Through often provocative means, LGBTQ theologians and biblical scholars draw our attention to what the Church has traditionally denied or swept under the rug; namely, the queer origins of Christianity. Utilizing the work of queer theorists, like Judith Butler, they expose the constructedness of the very idea of origin, essence, or fixed (gendered, racialized, classed, etc.) identity. In all his inordinance and indeterminacy, Jesus performed a countercultural existence, which was resurrected in the lives of his followers. Accordingly, LGBTQ scholars claim the disruption of norms, not

their maintenance, to be the legacy of Christianity and, therefore, challenge the Church to embrace, not exile, queer Christians.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

I cannot help but wonder, if Jesus stepped into 2018 and saw the sort of judgment and intolerance the Church has shown to LGBTQ people, WWJD? (What Would Jesus Do?) Admittedly, life is messy, and it seems to be a messy sort of solidarity to which Jesus called others. In fact, when considered through the experience and interpretations of the LGBTQ community, the Church is both the issue and its antidote. If Jesus was interpreting and embodying the ancient Hebrew teaching that love is the highest law, the early Church would have undoubtedly been a queer space filled with deviants and society's outcasts.

Jesus himself, as represented in the gospels, was a deviant and a sociopolitical revolutionary, and the Church, despite claims to the contrary, has always been composed of the very bodies it has officially identified as deviant and threatening. What LGBTQ biblical scholars, theologians, ministers, and allies highlight—that queer bodies are important precisely because of their capacity to disrupt cultural convention—is that those whom the Church has rejected might be the very ones who will save it.

LGBTQ people are a legitimate and necessary part of the body of Christ particularly because they fail official systems and expose their constructedness, thereby challenging us to question: if the system is capable of breaking down, is anyone truly capable of perfectly performing the standard? When we interpret LGBTQ lives through the teaching of Jesus, queer obstinacy and provocations might instead be interpreted as a refusal of oppressive rules and roles that delimit divine creation and creativity. And this refusal of the hegemony of homogeneity is precisely, I would argue, what LGBTQ folks offer a Church so desperately in need of diversity.

By highlighting the ways in which the lines that institute intelligibility are constructed and perpetually disrupted, LGBTQ people offer all humans the opportunity to live beyond the restrictive binaries that threaten to divide and destroy us. The Church is undoubtedly a complex institution, one which has oppressed *and* liberated, and represented various interpretations of the same text, reflecting the way in which no single identity, ideology, or ethic can be absolute or universal; *life is*, and everywhere life is, it is in all ways always diverse, dissident, and downright dirty.

Since we have no access to the original ancient texts found in the Bible—only copies of copies—and we don't inhabit the same temporal or cultural space as

the authors, how might we better understand our reactions and respond more ethically? At the very least, thinking with and through LGBTQ experience and LGBTQ affirming biblical interpretation might just help the Church and all of us to be a little more aware of and tender toward the messiness of life and the ways in which, as hard as we may try, none of us conforms absolutely to the prescribed rules or (gender) roles, regardless of our culture, race, or place.

I'd like to conclude with a quote from Judith Butler (2009), who writes,

If we accept the insight that our very survival depends not on the policing of a boundary—the strategy of a certain sovereign in relation to its territory—but on recognizing how we are bound up with others, then this leads us to reconsider the way in which we conceptualize the body.

Ultimately, the Church, as the Bible, exists as an enigma; for even as it has historically represented the perpetuation of the binary gender system, homophobia, transphobia, misogyny, and even racism, it ensures their impossibility. After all, the Church understands itself as a body and claims to be the Body of Christ in the world (1 Corinthians 12:27) and the Bible contains one of the most egalitarian statements of any ancient sacred text: “In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male and female” (Galatians 3:28).

As LGBTQ Christian advocates and allies have asserted for years, the Church is a champion of love and liberation as it blurs lines and betrays rigid binaries, emphasizing community, interdependence, and incarnation. (The very idea of Jesus as God-Man blurs the definitive boundary between human and divine, power and vulnerability!) Therefore, if the Church wants to survive and thrive in the twenty-first century, I believe it is called now more than ever to embody the radical challenge of Jesus Christ and to live in love and harmony as responsible citizens of this, our shared, world, working to understand *what* got us here and *how* we all might intentionally live together toward a better tomorrow.

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