

Wherefore Gay Spirituality or How Queer Can the Sacred Be?

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The great Karl Marx is sadly neglected these days. I don't necessarily mean in his capacity as an economic or philosophical thinker, though that is regrettable, but more as a religious one. We don't readily associate the thought of Marx with religion, but he is one of the classic figures in the sociology of religion. We all know his famous dictum about religion as "the opiate of the masses," but we often fail to acknowledge his equally perceptive view of religion as "the heart of a heartless world," to say nothing of his vibrant challenge about the need to surpass and destroy religion. Marx, though certainly very Jewish in his outlook, was, at heart, a bitter atheist. It probably helps explain why he was so creatively lucid.

I often think of Marx's challenge when I reflect on my work in Gay spirituality. I guess I do this for several reasons. First, he keeps me honest. He forces me to ask myself the fundamental questions about the real nature of religion in our world. Second, he nags at me. He insists on reminding me that you can't really appropriate the discourse and worldview of the oppressor without tainting yourself in some way. For me as a Gay man, that oppressor is most assuredly heterosexual, male, and, in the matter at hand, clerical. Finally, Marx compels me to move beyond my own comfortable engagement with Gay spirituality to some sense of the dangers that lurk within. Hence the reason for my title. It strikes me that this is really a Karl-Marx-kind-of-question, though perhaps he might have cringed a bit at the mention of the word "queer," as others in our own day and age also do. It only goes to show, I would suggest, how truly lasting and pernicious self-oppression can, in fact, be.

In my book, *Out on Holy Ground* (Pilgrim Press, 2000), I provide a sociological "take" on Gay spirituality by advocating quite explicitly for understanding and appreciating the lives and experiences of Gay men in religious, or at least spiritual, terms. I argue that our sexuality, and the ways we express it, provide us with a distinctive way of apprehending the sacred, and responding to it. I try to move beyond traditionally problematic and ultimately sterile religious condemnations of homosexuality to a far more empowering vision of the meaning of "the holy" in Gay lives today. What I say and write is part of the larger movement of re-appropriation of religious discourse by traditionally marginalized and excluded social groups. It is the expression of a sociological phenomenon in its own right, one that is unapologetically postmodern in its claims to a multiplicity of discursive sites about the so-called religious.

But re-appropriation carries a price, and that is the hard bargain whose meaning and dangers I wish to explore in this text. My title really carries two questions. First, "Wherefore Gay spirituality?" This asks about the purpose, the meaning, and the *raison d'être* of Gay spirituality. It is a fundamental question, one that forces us to look at our own position in relation to the specific value or worth of a spirituality we may choose to call "Gay." Why do we need this sort of spirituality, and what does it do for Gay men that other, more traditional forms of religious expression do not? Implicit in this question is the sense that Gay spirituality is a worthwhile thing, that it is something we need, care about, and, ultimately, that it is an integral part of our lives and communities--in sum, a reflection of our place in the world.

The second half of my question is somewhat more problematic, and therefore a bit more critical in outlook: "How queer can the sacred be?" This raises all sorts of difficult and interesting issues. It asks if the sacred can ever be "queer," that is, can it ever really include and honestly reflect the Gay experience? After all, most forms of institutionalized religion are notoriously homophobic. Why should one of the key concepts of such religious traditions--that of the sacred--not be equally tainted and discredited, illegitimate in terms of its applicability to Gay men, including its relevance in the context of a distinctively Gay spirituality? More fundamentally, why should we even care about whether the sacred can be "queered?" Why not just do it, and thereby have it done with? This is exactly what some feminist scholars have done. "Why worry about a patriarchal god?" they ask. "Why not simply give the mother goddess her due?" Why not indeed? And so, I ask: Why not therefore give ourselves, as Gay men, a queer god; a faggot god who resonates to our energy; a homoerotic god who turns us on? If we even need a god at all.

A note on my use of the term "sacred" might be in order. I see it in two ways. At a theoretical level, it refers to a construct found in most forms of religious thought. It is a category meant to help define and understand what religion is, precisely because religion itself uses it so extensively and frequently. This sacred gets translated into any number and types of beliefs, rituals, stories, and divine figures or images. This is the material that, as a sociologist of religion, I work with. A version of this sacred might be "the god without and above," as is found in the Christian tradition for

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example. In another sense, however, "sacred" can be much more amorphous and internalized. In this perspective, it becomes a form of consciousness, a way of looking at and understanding reality, whether personal or collective. Thus, "the queer sacred" really refers to the multiple ways in which we, as Gay men, can learn to discern our experience, including our sexuality, as potentially spiritually meaningful and illuminating. This does not deny the compelling need some of us may have, however, for a sacred which is more traditional in its engagement with creator gods and the like.

When my book was published, a well-known closeted theologian had a highly unusual reaction to it. When I asked him what he thought, he refused to answer. Upon being pressed, he mentioned, somewhat angrily and to my surprise and subsequent chagrin, that he thought a fascist could write the same thing. It took me a while to understand what he was saying, once I got over the initial shock. What he was saying, I believe, was that he rejected totally my positive, proud, and defiant portrayal of Gay life today, particularly the case I was making for Gay culture as the manifestation of some religious impulse. For him, this was the same thing the fascists had done in glorifying their own discredited racial or political ideology. For this theologian, homosexuality (he would shy away from the term "Gay") is above all a moral or ethical issue, because he fundamentally believes, as the Catholic Church does, that there is something inherently problematic about it. If it's a problem, then it needs correcting. It certainly isn't cause for celebration. Isn't it strange how heterosexuality is never spoken of as a moral problem in theology, though it is the source of a great many ethical concerns in our culture? That's what happens when you're the norm. You get to decide who and what the problem is. That's what happens when you're a famous closeted theologian. You can't really see how your being Gay can be a source of joy and, most distressing of all, divine grace. Otherwise, you might have to make some rather uncomfortable choices.

I mention this theologian because, sad to say, his reaction is much like that of the Christian institutions of which he claims to be a part. I totally reject the discourse of "homosexuality-as-ethical-problem" so typical of most theological thinking. It is ultimately degrading, and any self-respecting Gay man, especially if he considers himself a man of faith, must acknowledge this and refuse to buy into it. It also confirms what we already know about most religious groups, and not only the Christian ones: that the vast majority of them are both anti-erotic and homophobic. This is the real and persistent problem, particularly for minorities who choose to define themselves in sexual terms. If the language of these religious groups is so negative and condemning in terms of their perspectives on human sexuality, what can one possibly say about what, or who, they choose to call "sacred" or "divine." Isn't it equally tainted and biased? If Marx is right in his assertion that our gods are merely projections of ourselves and our interactions with each other, then these gods are problematic in the extreme, full of prejudice and hatred toward us.

This may seem dramatic, but as I tell my class in religion and sexuality: whether and how we choose to define our gods and goddesses as erotic beings has a great deal to say about us as a culture. Moreover, if these divine beings, or this sacred power, are seen as asexual, then there isn't much there that resonates in any real and tangible way with our own life experience, whether we be hetero-, homo-, bi-, or trans-.

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The "Wherefore"

The fundamental assumption of most forms of Gay spirituality is that they provide positive and beneficial sources of healing, identity, and vision for Gay men, and that they also act as powerful antidotes to religious oppression, at both the personal and collective levels. Within this paradigm, the erotic plays a critical and determinant role. It becomes "sacred," almost divine by nature. Because we are fundamentally distinguished from others by virtue of the object of our sexual attraction and desire, as Gay men we possess a special understanding of the erotic. Above all, it is based on the salutary and defining power of sameness; it is defiantly masculine; and it includes the significant element of active receptivity, which is, I would argue, a fundamentally spiritual attitude toward life. Gay spirituality is about men who love men, and about how these men make sense of such desire, and celebrate it, in ways that are humanly liberating.

Gay spirituality consists of three inter-related elements. First, it acts as critical religious discourse. By this I mean that it provides a positive, and ultimately subversive, counter-interpretation to traditionally homophobic forms of religious language and belief by valuing the person and experience of the oppressed homosexual. Call it a form of liberation theology. Second, Gay spirituality is grounded in, and should also give rise to, political analysis and engagement. In other words, it is an important part of the larger struggle for Gay rights, a way of reclaiming our own past and our future equality with the majority. In this particular situation, religious institutions are the political battlefield. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, Gay spirituality is proudly and brashly affirmative of gender and the erotic. It is an essential means of reclaiming, in the face of persistently puritanical and anti-erotic public posturing, the centrality of sexuality--in this case homoeroticism--to the human experience. Gay spirituality, in other words, likes to talk dirty, and it does so out loud.

There is a further dimension of Gay spirituality that warrants highlighting. It can be argued that the sum of our experience as Gay men, both individually and collectively, can and should be read as part of a spiritual phenomenon. Many believe that there is something transcendent, and in fact "holy" or "sacred," about who we are and what we do, and that we have a privileged role to play in the world and in history. Contemporary Gay spiritual writers and historians have remarked on this. Much about us as Gay men can give rise to a sense of "the religious" in our lives. Our struggles with oppression, our

unique life journeys, our sad and funny coming out stories, our losses, our friendships, our sexual encounters and rituals, our so-called ghettos, our redefined sense of family, our political activism, our loud and proud celebrations, our marginal and defiant history, our dreadful encounter with the horror of AIDS: all these, and so much more, seem to summon us to a broader and richer appreciation of what can perhaps be called our vocation in the world, to a sense of wonder and gratitude about where we stand as individuals and as a community. It is precisely in this standing that one encounters what can ultimately be understood, and hopefully appropriated, as the sacred. Gay spirituality is, at heart, very much an existential necessity, a fragile question of survival. Other forms of marginal and marginalized spirituality are really no different in this regard. They all have to do with valuing and defending one's precious experience in the face of persistent negation and denial.

Gay spirituality, or choosing to see Gay culture and experience as manifestations of the religious or spiritual impulse, therefore calls into question, in a very tangible and direct way, the monopoly of religious institutions over what is seen as sacred or holy. It places the sacred squarely on the margins, at the ever-shifting and fluid intersections between sexuality and identity, or between the erotic and the social. Most obviously, Gay spirituality is a dual process of re-appropriation and re-affirmation: the former, because it is a deliberate strategy designed to counter religious and moral condemnation; the latter, because it is a discourse spoken from a position of self-acceptance and pride. Not all out Gay men are religious, of course. But perhaps all out Gay men could be seen to be carriers of the spirit in some oddly perverse theological way-- "spiritual vessels," to re-frame and re-claim the old church language applied so negatively to women down through the centuries.

Oppression, particularly when directed toward sexual difference, knows no frontiers.

The "How Queer"

The second half of my equation, or rather of my question, asks "how queer?" The first observation one should make is how contested the concept of "the sacred" is in the study of religion. The term is inherently problematic for a variety of reasons: because it still reeks of a certain Judeo-Christian flavor; because it denotes a subtle

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lingering theism; because it implies a duality distinguishing it from the so-called profane. While these may indeed be serious theoretical objections, the fact remains that the concept has passed into common parlance. Its value as a common frame of reference is therefore assured.

When I ask the question "How queer can the sacred be?" what I am really asking is: "How far can we go in re-claiming our experience as Gay men in religious terms?" In other words, is there, and should there be, anything preventing us, as Gay men, from staking a claim on the ineffably holy?

One should not necessarily accept an independent existence to the presumably "sacred," since to do so would be to deny the very premise of any analysis of religion as first and foremost a human enterprise, a cultural activity created by women and men in interaction with each other. Because human beings traffic in the symbolic and the mythical on a daily basis however, as scholars we must contend with these realities, precisely because they make sense to human beings, and human beings use them to explain themselves and their place in the world. This is how we create meaning. This does not mean that we should locate this meaning outside ourselves, as though it had an autonomous, self-contained existence. We must adopt a critical stance of methodological atheism, as we should whenever we engage in any process of serious self-reflection.

The facile answer to my question is that, as Gay men, we can really go as far as we want in re-appropriating the sacred. I say this for several reasons. First, anyone can lay a claim on the so-called sacred, except, of course, when religious institutions have already staked it out for themselves. Herein lies the crux of the problem. It is precisely when two conflicting approaches to the holy clash--one institutionalized; the other very much marginalized--that conflicts emerge and, more seriously, heretical condemnations are issued. The question then becomes how far one is willing to go in asserting one's right, and whether this includes, ultimately and hopefully quite symbolically, the enflamed stake.

Secondly, and this was raised earlier, we must ask ourselves quite honestly whether we even need such a contested theological category and artifact as the sacred. Increasingly, the loci of what is holy or sacred for Gay men is being fixed within Gay culture itself. In other words, it is what we create that is the source of our transcendence. Who therefore really needs something standing outside us, especially when this something, or, even worse, someone, is so intent on condemning us to perdition? Finally, I am concerned about the process of co-option. It is much the same argument I have with respect to the issue of Gay marriage. When you want to be like them and play by their rules, then you permit them a judgmental gaze on you and your life choices, and that of others who are like you, "outcasts" all. Their power of normalcy now claims you. I'm not really sure Gay men should or want to give up their marginal status as cultural and sexual gadflies, as religious outsiders and critics. There is a certain measure of self-protection in standing outside the circle, as much as it may irritate them and the gods and states they create in their image. This distance can be both a physical and a psychological bonus--a safe space--but it also carries an element of defiance and subversion, which is, I would suggest, what we should never, ever give up.

We need to turn the old sacred-profane dichotomy on its head, with all due respect to Mircea Eliade. It is really in the so-called profanity of our lives as Gay men that our sacred is molded and lived out. We

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can call it sacred, that is, something standing outside us, but it is really our collective experience, our Gay culture which is holy, and sacred, and transcendent, and the ultimate source of the numinous power and energy we feel when we celebrate ourselves as a community. It is precisely this that we must cherish and hold on to. Since the sacred is the mirror of how we claim our lives and places in the world as an empowered sexual minority, then it really stands inside us. It is really the Gay experience, trans-historical and trans-personal, writ large, projected onto the heavens. The sacred is, in its very essence, us. I think Marx might agree, though he would no doubt cringe at the mention of the word "heaven." Let's just say that it's heaven on earth.

In sum, the sacred can be as queer as we say it is or want it to be. The adjunct, however, is that we must reject other, more traditional definitions of what is considered sacred. This means that we must deny, dispute, disparage, and decry all institutionalized forms of religiosity. They are all hypocritical, anti-erotic, and homophobic, because they all use us as convenient moral or ethical targets. The other equally important thing we must do is learn to see ourselves, our history, and our communities as truly sacred and holy, not in any explicitly religious way, but as manifestations of something larger and more meaningful than our disparate isolated lives. This may be seen as a fundamentally religious attitude toward life, but it is the only one that makes sense in the face of all that we have undergone, and no doubt still will.

I return, in closing, to my friend, the closeted theologian. I guess I was confused, if also a little angry, when he dismissed so readily what I had written. But I also felt pity for his self-imposed doctrinal closet, and sad that he was so intensely caught up with what is most assuredly a dying paradigm. That, I think, is what ultimately saves us as Gay men, as sacred fags: this refusal to bend knee before false idols. The great Karl Marx would most assuredly agree.

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