

Introduction

As I nest for my dissertation, I've been ferreting through people's things—letters, books, driver's licenses, etc.—attempting to understand what it means to live a life driven by desire for God and desire for men. Since coming out in college a decade ago, I've been drawn to the stories of people who have lived gayly and Christianly, in some form or another. I've found that gay life is often spent this way, ingesting gay Christian stories while attempting a life of one's own. For some people I study, the ingestion process has coincided with remarkable productivity. When no one else would publish their work, gays and queers have created their own small presses, books, journals, and magazines.

I began Homodoxy as a website for sharing my writing and eventually the writing of others. So far, the website has been a placeholder without much in the place held. The PhD is demanding. But I have wanted to share longer thoughts in a medium that can be held,

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caressed, sniffed, shared, thrown across the room, hidden . . . a book, a magazine, something.

The writings collected here were never intended to be printed together, or printed at all. Some of them were written for a public readership; others were written for classes, an audience of one professor. All of them were written during my years of graduate coursework. The book is early work, which, besides being a pretentious thing to say at this point in my life, presumes longevity and luck enough to have later work. And if I do get to write more, maybe all of it will feel early.

I offer this book to you as three things: a report on what I've been up to for the past decade, fodder for your own queer reflection and theological writing, and a prodding away from the Side A (gay marriage) vs. Side B (celibacy) framing through which many of those who identify as gay Christians see themselves and others, through which a genre of gay Christian life has been created and sold. Each of these anticipates a potential interest on your end: respectively, in my life and writing, in theological writing, and in a particular instantiation of the gays-and-the-church discussion. They are all related. This book is a picture of how my own theological and gay formation has been influenced by participating in, reflecting upon, and ultimately rejecting that engendering of gay Christian life.

The book's parts are organized from most to least

recent. The first part of the book outlines the theological perspective that has constituted Homodoxy so far: a thinking across the boundaries of the church and with the boundaries of the church—particularly as constituted by sex and sexuality—both on a methodological level and on a personal level. I visualize the approach as theology *against* the church (e.g., against a backdrop, leaning against a wall, going against the grain, etc.). The three essays here were published on homodoxy.com between 2019 and 2021. They share some of the same thoughts and return to many of the same sources. I have subsequently tweaked “Queer/Christian Collapse,” which was first envisioned as a manifesto.

The second part consists of four essays written prior to Homodoxy, during my time at divinity school. They share many of the same topics as the first part: gayness, the church, celibacy, poetry, and various forms of life writing. “Celibate Writing, Camp Reading” is interesting to me now because I wrote it during my first semester of divinity school. It is the work of a gay boy fresh from a Christian college desperately wanting to succeed in the graduate English seminars to which his divinity school granted him access. In it, I try to establish a new relationship to texts I had previously looked to for guidance—thinking critically about them without totally distancing myself from them—while trying on a queer theoretical vocabulary.

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I would be stunned to find the following year that a professor at my own school, Linn Tonstad, was taking these same texts (and their effects) seriously. The book owes much to her. “Stringfellow’s Circus,” an essay in Anglican ecclesiology, is least like the others in its peachiness towards the church. I was a fairly recent Episcopalian, attending morning prayer and getting to know people (including many queers) who were training to be priests at Berkeley Divinity School. I was wondering if I could feel as at home in The Episcopal Church in the United States of America, the denomination and its history, as I had in particular Episcopal communities. I was wondering, too, if I would be a priest. The Dunstan Thompson presentation was for a theology seminar, and the Walt Whitman essay was for an English seminar, both in my final year of divinity school.

I do not publish these essays as Important Contributions to Theology or Literary Studies or as particularly excellent works of writing that deserve a wide audience. (I am weary of writing that considers itself necessary.) I *do* like some of the thinking and writing in these essays. I like the Dunstan Thompson and Walt Whitman pieces, especially. I like how I was paying attention not only to the texts but also to how the texts and their writers were packaged, contested, and turned into something else by their readers. But I print them here—a book by me, published by a press

started by me, intended to be read by a small audience—simply because they were important for me and the work I've done since, including the dissertation I am writing on AIDS, gay theology, and the church. I want to share that with you. The essays of Part Two, then, provide a context of sorts for Homodoxy and my more recent work. I wrote most of them for seminars that, at the time, terrified me.

As an afterword, I've included some passages from journals I kept in 2012, the summer and first quarter of my sophomore year of college at Seattle Pacific University, and fall 2013, when I was studying abroad at Wycliffe Hall, an evangelical institution within the University of Oxford with an interesting assemblage of tutors I loved. In 2012, I was still trying not to be gay; by the following year, I had begun to embrace it. Even as I enjoy the greater confidence of the gay man and faggot I've become, I want to be continually astonished by the life the younger me fought for through the work he was doing—and to be continually astonished by his death grip on God. Those journals were my first effort in thinking through the themes that would become my coarse work.

The writing in this book leads up to one of the main concerns that has occupied my mind for the last couple years: the concealment of gay sex within theology, including within some of theology's gay and queer varieties. You can begin to see it in my reading of Dunstan

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Thompson, but it's most palpable in the Homodoxy section, in which I write critically against the erasure of gay sex in theology, particularly where queerness is offered without it. The stigma of gay sex is something shared by all gays, including gay Christians, whether we partake in it frequently or never at all, with many people or with one person. To embrace the stigma is to embrace each other, across our differences of sexual and devotional practice. This is basic to my understanding of what it means to love my God and love my neighbor in my intellectual and personal contexts.

I'd like to believe there is a more alluring, more compelling, and more theologically satisfying way of considering different forms of faithful queer life as part of a *shared* life than the relationship between two (or more) Sides: the gay marriage crowd and the celibate crowd. Or, for that matter, between those invested in the church and those who are not. To come together under the stigma of gay sex and sexuality requires unlearning the reflexive defensiveness that gay Christians use to put straight people at ease within Christian spaces of all kinds. This would be difficult in different ways for different gays. Celibate and monogamous gays would be associating with the promiscuous, risking the respect they've fought for within their churches (and which, in many places, they still don't have). Promiscuous gays would be in proximity with

gay kindred who hold varieties of homophobic and otherwise hetero/church-approved theology.

At stake is not if these various groups desire God, but how we desire to be in relationship to one another in light of our differing understandings of what it means to desire God and to desire our neighbors. The struggle to be gay and Christian has seemingly produced or encouraged a desire to insulate ourselves from those who are gay and Christian in other ways. I recognize this, at least, in myself. Do gay Christians—across divisions of orientation (to celibacy, to marriage, or to many lovers)—desire each other? If not, which may be the case for any number of good and bad reasons, gay desire is a commonality but not a commons. It is a shared trait, but not much of a shared context for theology. It is a limited reserve for reimagining our churches, which might be alright. It remains secondary to an inherited tradition, a gospel of replacement rather than transformation, a gospel of an inherited and imposed sexual culture that supplants the need for discernment here and now. If gay Christians can't desire each other, what does theology have to learn from gay desire, really? Gay desire won't challenge our existing, ecclesially approved categories of thought. Meanwhile, gay desire remains a deep reserve for imagining life *beyond* the church, freer in many ways.

If we *do* desire each other, does the church know what to make of that? No. Do *we*? Hardly! Gay desire may

yet prove to be a fruitful context for asking who God is and what human relationality can be, in, beyond, and against “the church.” I am calling on gay Christians to give up our desire for forms of churchly authority that are predicated on the division of people into stratifications of more and less holy (see the work by Tonstad cited in the first essay). This means sloughing off the identities we’ve taken on to console ourselves and our churches, identities which have rendered us legible to one another for the purposes of debate; instead, we must insist upon our desire for one another, whatever that may mean. For some, it may require sacrificing a hard-won alignment of our *own* erotic life with That Which, Alone, Is Pleasing To God, turning from the idolatrous allure of the Only Right Interpretation to the icons of Christ found in those who we *know* are wrong. This may require or produce new kinds of ecclesial contexts—not a new church, a new denomination, or a new ecumenism, but a new interpretive context found in our orientation toward each other, forged where we can be, in our sundry bodies, together. It will remain important for gay Christians of similar experiences to have their places to gather and discuss, but the “Sides” and identities gay Christians have formed for purposes of inclusion in the church cry out to be reconsidered, ended, even queered.

In putting these essays in print, I put them to rest, like burying the bones of a ghost so it can find peace—rest,

at least, for me, as I hope they begin to dance for you. This feels particularly true of “Queer/Christian Collapse,” the writing of which has been a series of small exorcisms. I’ve been writing toward something; now it’s time to live into it.

This is only the first Homodoxy book! I look forward to publishing some of the brilliant queer voices I admire. As it stands, this book is limited by my desires, visions, and experiences. It is but a prelude to whatever Homodoxy may bring. All errors and bad judgment in it are mine. Nonetheless, I hope you like the book. Thank you for picking it up.

Thank you to Abbie Phelps, who helped me navigate Adobe InDesign. Thank you to Cynthia Sleight, who I asked to copyedit some of the more recent work. Thank you to everyone who donated and pre-ordered to help me cover printing fees. Thank you to the teachers whose courses prompted this work: Amy Hungerford, Andrew McGowan, Chloë Starr, Kathryn Tanner, Linn Marie Tonstad, Eboni Marshall Turman, and Michael Warner. Thank you to my family, my friends, my husbands dead and alive, my God, my dog.

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Queer/Christian Collapse: An Invitation to Gay/Queer Theological Writing

To all who live gayly with some sort of relationship to Christianity or a stake in queer theological writing, with love, in the hopes of a common future. Grace and peace, etc.

*Virtues, I take my leave of you forever,
I will possess a heart most free and gay;
Your service is too constant, you know well.
Once I played my heart in you, retaining nothing;
You know that I was to you totally abandoned;*

...

*Thus I lived a while in great distress,
I suffered in many grave torments, many pains endured.
Miracle it is that I have somehow escaped alive.*

—MARGUERITE PORETE, *THE MIRROR OF SIMPLE SOULS*

*We are the ones who can and must work out a theology
of “homosexuality,” not the ones who hold power in the
churches.*

—RICHARD CLEAVER, *KNOW MY NAME:
A GAY LIBERATION THEOLOGY*

I will walk before the LORD in the land of the living.

—PSALM 116:9, KING JAMES VERSION

Queer/Christian Collapse

To do queer theology is to speak from theology's silent hole: the place where, traditionally, the sodomite goes. To some, the practice is a disgusting one (others of us kind of enjoy it), but it is nonetheless what sex and gender deviants do when they come to consciousness within the Christian matrix, curiously wandering into the church from off the street or popping up from the pews or daisy chained chairs in a moment of self-recognition and alienation. The moment is for some an instant and for others a very long process; either way, it's a kind of crisis. They speak, squawk, scream from the silence, or run out of the building, or attempt to claim the pulpit, sometimes all three.

What is theology's silent hole?

Circa, say, the year 1300, somewhere in Europe. A sodomite enters the confessional. The priest sticks to his training, deftly steering the sodomite's confession through and around sodomy without ever speaking the word.

Medieval priests and theologians worried that sodomy was so excessive, so unnatural, that speaking it would facilitate its spread within the church. It was so excessive and so unspeakable that it came to mean a variety of things, including the still quite popular varieties of anal sex and gender deviance.¹ Speaking of

a medieval manual intended to instruct priests in confessional etiquette (and thus moral theology), Mark D. Jordan writes, “Those guilty of the sin that cannot be named, that makes them less than human, are rendered mute as animals before God.”² Sexual deviance kaleidoscopes into disability, animality. How can one talk to God if one isn’t human?

The sodomite is born within theological systems that classify human behavior in gradations of its sinfulness and goodness. The church’s taxonomies of sin have always also been taxonomies of people, and the sodomite, a figure of pleasure and perversion, is one of their unhappy inhabitants. This is an historical phenomenon, as Jordan traces it, and also a feature of much theology today: How few words can one devote to homosexuality in one’s theology? to sex, generally? How generically can one speak of sex and gender and still consider that base covered? How much can one say about gay/queer sex without having to listen to someone who does it? The sodomite’s hole is still often tiptoed over or around or found under a different name, only spoken of in euphemism.

Like any body, the body of Christ is a complex system, and it has ways of jettisoning its waste. When sodomitic waste isn’t expelled, it builds up, eventually gaining consciousness.

The sodomite, once self-conscious, knows it must

either stay quiet, convert (sexually), leave, or die. When sodomites do none of the above, they often become some kind of theologian, happily or by necessity. The speaking sodomite is forced to argue for its own existence, its presence at the table, or whatever else it may desire.

Towards these ends, the sodomite draws on gay vernaculars, churchy words, practiced ecclesial accents, and its own experiences of God and others—anything it can—in its effort to climb out of the hole, making itself presentable enough to be understood as a theologian by nonsodomites. Outside the hole is where (allegedly) sexually normal Christians live. It is a dangerous place for a sodomite, who must choose to change itself beyond recognition to fit in or remain lonely and despised—both lead to destruction. Thus, the sodomite may *not* try to climb out of the silent hole. It may dig even deeper into it, becoming less concerned with making itself easy for the above people to understand, preferring instead to stew in its *own* rich juices and those of its fellow hole dwellers. The hole still might sound silent to those who live beyond it, but put your ear to it like a conch shell and you'll hear echoes of cackling, crying, laughing, and moaning—sodomites living in ways they deem appropriate to who and what they are as creatures. Finally, some sodomites go both ways, in and out and in and out, either with the purpose of acting as an intermediary/

translator/peace broker between the two places, or just because they are torn and never quite at home in either. They might wonder if it's possible to get away entirely. (And if so, through what extreme? In or out?)

An important feature of this silence: to be named a sodomite is to be tethered to a geographical place in the past, always long gone and for many, far away. It is to be made anachronistic. Jordan writes, "The Sodomite ought to be exiled from his homeland as unfit for citizenship, and yet the Sodomite is conceived by definition as a citizen of an ancient, enduring city, the city of Sodom."³ Sodomy thus proved useful to European colonizers of the "New World," who, upon encountering the land's inhabitants, sometimes referred to indigenous peoples as sodomites to justify murdering them and taking their land.⁴ As Héctor Domínguez Ruvalcaba writes, "The so-called sins against nature... served as a type of 'just cause' rationale for the conquest."⁵ Association with Sodom is a kind of displacement, and Europeans made this displacement literal in the colonization of the land that was made to be America and through the murdering of its inhabitants.

To exist as a sodomite is to live under judgment and impending destruction, not just by God, but more immediately, by the church. No judgment, no sodomite. No looming annihilation for sex and gender deviance, no sodomite.⁶

Living under threat, sodomites develop peculiar and creative habits of reading and appreciation and affirmation. Some of us make the unlikely claim that in our living and being together, including in the sex and gender practices that define our place of residency, we, too, have seen God and have felt God seeing us. We, too, have met Jesus. Those of us who have seen and felt the presence of God's utter transcendence with us here in theology's silent hole don't always know what to make of it. Our testimony is blasphemous to others, and it has been grounds for tossing us out of churches, families, the land of the living. So many keep their secret knowledge to themselves.

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Once again: queer theology speaks from theology's silent hole.

In the following, I will speak more of "queer" and "queerness" than of "sodomy," because the theology spoken from within the sodomite's silence has become popularly called *queer theology*. This shift involves a reframing of the relationship between the people in question and the church. Many sodomites are born within the church, even if they're burned at the stake by the church, outside it. The "queer" in "queer theology" invokes queer theory. Where "queer" or queer theory enters theology, it is sometimes portrayed as an intruder from outside the church, or positively, as a

discourse *verypolite* and *verynice* seeking entry, or very very commonly, as an inspiration from beyond to reconsider what is going on in the church as already always queer. This theology is influenced by a field that sees itself as originating, living, and holding influence primarily, if not entirely, outside of whatever it thinks theology is. In my view, this theology still speaks from theology's silent hole.

Queer theologians turn to sources from beyond the church to make sense of sex, gender, etc., and they *sometimes* turn to their own *defensively curated* experiences. Some attempt to do queer theology by redeeming the sodomite's silent hole, saying that the sodomite or queer person can exist in a better seat in the hierarchy of morality—wherever it is that good, Christian cishets (cisgender heterosexuals, i.e., not trans, not gay) sit. Some have tried to make the sodomite good, or rather, scrubbed today's would-be sodomites of their association with that nasty old city by making “queer” and “Christian” basically the same thing.

Which leads me to the main point of this whole thing:

WE MUST ALLOW SPACE BETWEEN

“CHRISTIAN”

and

“QUEER”

By far, the most common provocations made by queer theologians are that CHRISTIANITY IS QUEER and HAS *ALWAYS BEEN* QUEER! It even *MUST* BE QUEER to be true Christianity.⁷ Such claims are familiar enough. And by now, critiques of such claims may be familiar enough, or may not be! Many texts that make these arguments have valuable insights, and many of these authors have opened up new vistas for queer theology, but the *sheer volume* of queer work in theology that agrees that “queer = Christian” *ought to give one pause...*

Perhaps I have already divided my readers into two camps: those who enjoy such claims and agree with them, and those who have no use for them.

Those in either camp may be familiar with the work of Linn Tonstad, who has written many a page critiquing these types of statements. See the end notes for various citations of her work throughout. Mark D. Jordan’s body of work—especially here, “On Queer Theology Lost”—is also swimming in my head. [Sections in smaller print comment on what comes before or, as here, show my work.]

Does Christianity ever absorb a language, a discourse, a theory, a *people* (!!!) without fundamentally changing it?

What does it mean to do a specified theology, a _____ theology—here, a *queer* theology? Is it *ever* simply bringing together two discourses or two ways of being without any need for mutual modification?