

Embodiment as Incarnation: An Incipient Queer Christology

Thomas Bohache

tombohache@att.net

Abstract

This article suggests that modern contextual Christology could benefit from the articulation of a Christology from the social location of sexual orientation. Queer people (that is, those identifying as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, intersexual, supportively heterosexual or a combination thereof) indoctrinated in the Judaeo-Christian tradition often display what the author terms 'christophobia' – a revulsion both toward all things Christian and toward Jesus Christ himself. This christophobia, developed in response to generations of homophobic religion, oppression and religious gay-bashing, and based not on fact but on millennia of heteropatriarchal interpretation, consumes many queer people and forces them away from a productive and wholistic journey with the Christ. This paper suggests that once christophobia is recognized, queer Christ-seekers can access a part of their very selves from which they have been kept separate: the divine anointedness that is the very Christ presence. This requires going back to the basics – re-examining the spiritual landscape, looking for clues to the Queer Christ who empowers queer consciousness. This author begins his quest for the Queer Christ with Mary of Nazareth, who bore the Christ in her very body. Examining the biblical stories of the Annunciation, Visitation and Nativity, he demonstrates how modern-day queer Christians can conceive and birth the Christ in their very bodies, in their very sexualities, as Mary herself did so many centuries ago. Once this Christ presence is birthed by queer people, it 'queers' whatever it comes in contact with, stirring up heteropatriarchal traditions and spoiling the heteronormativity that has gone unchallenged for so long. This Christ presence animates its bearers to reclaim their position in church and society as the true, queer anointed.

Introduction

For two thousand years, theologians have developed a wide-ranging variety of Christologies – articulations of the person and work of Jesus

as Christ. Every Christology has its origin in the story of Jesus of Nazareth. Any doctrine of the person or work of Christ can be traced ultimately to the life of this Jewish man who lived and died in Palestine in the first century of the Common Era. Over the past few hundred years, scholars have debated how much we can know about this actual historical person, Jesus; yet, for two thousand years, the paucity of information about his life has not hindered countless people from developing theologies about who Jesus was in relation to the God of his understanding and what Jesus did for the people of his time and for humankind in perpetuity.

Although beliefs in Jesus' saving power as the Christ began to develop within ten years of his death,¹ the first stories of Jesus' life are contained in the gospels of the New Testament, which began to be composed some forty years after his death. Thus, one can see that from the start Christology (literally, 'talk about Christ') did not necessarily depend upon the historical events of the life of Jesus, but originated rather from the effect his life had on those around him, as they began to believe that in this Jesus they had encountered the Divine.

For the majority of Christian history, Christology has been articulated by those of the dominant class in church and society, that is, white, educated, heterosexual men. About thirty years ago, however, various marginalized groups began framing their own Christologies based upon how the Christ figure intersects with their own social location. Thus, there have developed what I call 'contextual' Christologies through the lens of race (Black and Asian Christology²), ethnicity and class (Latin American liberation Christology³), gender (feminist Christology⁴), or a

1. For dating of the New Testament materials, I rely upon Bart D. Ehrmann, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2nd edn, 2000); and Marinus de Jonge, *Christology in Context: The Earliest Christian Response to Jesus* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1988).

2. For Black Christology, see, for example, Kelly Brown Douglas, *The Black Christ* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994) and the sources cited therein. For Asian Christology, see, for example, C.S. Song, *Jesus, the Crucified People* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996 [1990]).

3. See, for example, Leonardo Boff, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological View* (trans. Paul Burns and Francis McDonagh; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993); and Jon Sobrino, *Jesus Christ Liberator: A Critical Christology for Our Time* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1978).

4. See, for example, Rita Nakashima Brock, *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power* (New York: Crossroad, 1991); Isabel Carter Heyward, *The Redemption of God: A Theology of Mutual Relation* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1982); Julie Hopkins, *Towards a Feminist Christology: Jesus of Nazareth, European Women and the Christological Crisis* (London: SPCK, 1995); Rosemary Radford Ruether, *To Change*

combination of all three (womanist Christology,⁵ *mujerista* and Latin American women's Christology,⁶ Asian feminist Christology⁷). One perspective that has been lacking among these contextual Christologies until quite recently is the voice of those whose social location is informed by sexual orientation, what I call 'queer' Christology.⁸

During the past year, I have developed such a queer Christology, through which I seek to excavate my authentic, embodied self as a queer Christian. By looking at the story of Jesus of Nazareth, I seek commonality between his story and my own, so that other queer persons may recognize that in Jesus they have met a brother who can lead them further on their journey toward enlightenment, wholeness, and fulfillment—to the discovery of their very 'Christ-ness'. Thus, an explicitly queer Christology will also suggest a queer anthropology (theology of personhood), soteriology (theology of salvation), and ecclesiology (theology of community). Of course, a comprehensive queer Christology requires an entire book and should examine the complete life of Jesus, as well as his death and beyond, in order to fully explore the intersection of queers' lives with the Queer Christ.⁹ This article begins by examining why a queer Christology is necessary and concludes by suggesting how one

the World: Christology and Cultural Criticism (New York: Crossroad, 1981); and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus, Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* (New York: Continuum, 1994).

5. See, for example, Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989); JoAnne Marie Terrell, *Power in the Blood? The Cross in the African-American Experience* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998); and Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993).

6. See, for example, Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *En La Lucha = In the Struggle: A Hispanic Women's Liberation Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993); and Nelly Ritchie, 'Women and Christology' in Elsa Tamez (ed.), *Through her Eyes: Women's Theology from Latin America* (trans. Jeltje Aukema; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), pp. 81-95. (*Mujerista* Christology emanates from North American women of Hispanic descent, while Latin American women's Christology emanates from South America.)

7. See, for example, Chung Hyung Kyung, *Struggle to Be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990); and Kwok Pui-lan, *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2000).

8. Christological work has been done by such queer scholars as Robert Goss, *Jesus ACTED UP: A Gay and Lesbian Manifesto* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), and *Queering Christ* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2002); and Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2000).

9. Much of the material contained herein is from my Master of Arts thesis at Georgetown University, *Who Do YOU Say that I Am: Elements of a Queer Christology* (May 2002; Chester Gillis, thesis adviser), to be published as a book in the near future.

might commence a queering of Christ, through the examination of incarnation as an essential component of an embodied Christology. I hope that this work will contribute to understanding among and between the queer and non-queer communities. I pray that it may serve as a bridge between those who are seeking to follow Christ as fully authentic persons and those who may until now have taken their place in Christianity for granted and not realized the exclusionary nature of much of Christian theology and practice. In this task I remain aware that my work is speculative and travels into uncharted territory. Moreover, I am quite cognizant that this is only one person's idea of what a queering of Christ might mean. My own social location as a middle-aged, middle-class, educated, gay, white, male clergyman from a Roman Catholic background informs my work; however, I am also aware that extensive research and reflection empower me to realize my context and constantly examine who is being left out¹⁰ of my christological imaginings.

Why a Queer Christology?

When one endeavors to do Christology from a queer perspective, one encounters hostility and oppression on two fronts. A heteropatriarchal logic manifested in both individual and institutionalized homophobia has influenced the Christian Church and much of Christian theology, due to the unexamined assumption of heteronormativity and compulsory heterosexuality as the divine plan, witnessed tangibly in the ongoing marginalization of gay and lesbian persons from full participation in Christianity. There is, however, another more pressing reason why there must be a queer Christology: the deep-seated feeling among many gays and lesbians that Jesus Christ is not an option for them, that he, as the embodied representative of God, hates them, and that they have no place in either Christ's church or the Kingdom of God he announced during his earthly ministry. This is a mindset that I call 'christophobia'. It is as factually bankrupt as homophobia and just as pernicious, for it separates many spiritually focused and religiously gifted individuals from a path that could bring them the fulfillment they have sought and been unable to find elsewhere.

Let me be clear at the outset that I am in no way suggesting that Christ is 'the only way' for everyone, especially for all gays and lesbians. My

10. For this notion of who is being left out, I am indebted to Carter Heyward, *Touching our Strength: The Erotic as Power and the Love of God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), p. 96; and *eadem*, *Staying Power: Reflections on Gender, Justice, and Compassion* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1995), p. 99.

point is that there are many in the queer community who yearn to be followers of Christ but believe that this is impossible. Many have successfully found meaning in Twelve Step spirituality, New Age theosophy, and Eastern religions, and they have a spiritual home.¹¹ Others, like myself, spent years 'in the wilderness' flitting from one spiritual fad to another before an experience of the *true* Christ made us realize the pointlessness of our christophobia. This work is for those who are still in the wilderness, seeking the Christ who meets them in their wandering and welcomes them home.

How do I know there is christophobia among homosexuals? Why, it's there, wherever one looks, if one has an eye to see it. It's in the self-deprecating humor found in gay novels and plays. It's in the 'I'm going to hell anyway, so I'm going to have a good time doing it' attitude among many of the young people with whom I come in contact through my ministry in the Metropolitan Community Church. It's in the relief and tears I see when someone really 'gets it' that Christ can be their friend, their teacher, and their savior, if they will let him. It's in the joy they radiate when they receive Holy Communion for the first time with that new mindset of what womanist theologian Delores Williams calls 'somebodiness'.¹² And it's in the sadness and despair that I see when church and society's homophobia has done its job so well and the insidious specter of christophobia has gained such a strong foothold in the queer psyche, that the gay or lesbian person just walks away, further down the path of loneliness, despair, and degradation and into the arms of addiction, casual sex, or – worst case scenario – suicide.

A recent coming-of-age novel points out that many queer youth live in this tension between their nascent feelings and their religious upbringing:

11. 'Perhaps the most compelling evidence of gay people's shifting away their religious backgrounds is the consistency with which various studies have reported their current religious affiliations. Differing noticeably from their religious backgrounds, the current religious affiliations of gay people in various geographical areas at various times over twenty years have remained consistently low with regard to Protestantism and Catholicism, high with regard to Judaism, and very high with regard to "other" and "no" affiliation'. Gary David Comstock, *Unrepentant, Self-Affirming, Practicing: Lesbian/Bisexual/Gay People within Organized Religion* (New York: Continuum, 1996), p. 58.

12. Delores S. Williams, 'A Womanist Perspective on Sin', in Emilie Townes (ed.), *Troubling in my Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), pp. 130-49 (144-45).

'Of course, things are on the up and up now that we've got one of *us* in the Vatican'. A delighted smile takes hold of her; Nana has treated the recent appointment of the first Polish pope as a kind of modern-day miracle.

Robin bites into his sandwich and stops listening. He likes everything about his grandmother but her unwavering belief... Flashes of going to mass: people mumbling lengthy, memorized prayers, standing, sitting, kneeling like robots, the priest trying to convince everyone (even himself?) about the lessons in the Bible. Lessons thousands of years old! What did the Bible have to say about guys like Larry, who bullied and hurt people and got away with it? What did it have to say about high school? Or wet dreams, or Todd Spicer, or thinking about boys the way you're supposed to think about girls?

He shakes his head to clear his thoughts, hating the fact that one piece of confusion inevitably leads to another: that thought he just had about boys—about liking boys instead of girls—that was a thought he'd never quite made into a sentence before, with a beginning, a middle and an end, even in his head. He concentrates on chewing his sandwich, on the way the slippery meat with the smooth flecks of green olives and pimentos sliced into it wads up into the bread between his teeth. Salt and sweet on his tongue. A lump going down his throat into his belly. A beginning, a middle, and an end. Communion never had any taste at all.¹³

Gay playwright Christopher Durang, himself a refugee from Catholicism, in his hilarious and bittersweet play *Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All to You*, has the protagonist, Sister Mary, rail against her pupils that homosexuality is 'the sin that makes Jesus throw up!' and the play concludes with Sister Mary, in a homophobic frenzy, shooting dead a former student whom she has learned is gay but has just gone to confession, so that his soul might still go to heaven.¹⁴ In this way, by caricaturing one nun's homophobia, Durang also reveals his own deep-seated christophobia.

Gay journalist Dann Hazel documents his own christophobia:

[H]omosexuality grew into a controversy of faith—*my* controversy of faith. I became a 'marginalized Christian'... For many years, I thought of Jesus as a maverick, a revolutionary, an innovator. He was the pattern for my life. He was a savior personal enough that I could speak to him in prayer and tap into the strength I gleaned from our conversation to move forward—always forward—in life. Now, because I am part of 'the controversy', I often feel betrayed by the same religion that once gave my life meaning. But most of all, I experience sadness and anger—the way a

13. K.M. Soehnlein, *The World of Normal Boys* (New York: Kensington Books, 2000), pp. 52-53.

14. Christopher Durang, 'Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All to You' (c. 1986), in *idem*, *Christopher Durang Explains It All to You: Six Plays* (New York: Grove Press, 1990), pp. 167-214.

surgery patient might feel after he discovers he's gone under the knife unnecessarily... How could I find it in my heart to pledge myself to this faith, the way I had once pledged? How could any of us—gay and lesbian Christians, and straight allies in the fight with us—take that leap? We had become what [Bishop John Shelby] Spong calls 'believers in exile'.¹⁵

Gay/lesbian church founder Troy Perry relates that the single most challenging thing he encountered when attempting to found a Christian Church for homosexual persons was the belief among gays and lesbians that they could not be gay and Christian, that Jesus Christ was no longer an option for them, as long as they were 'practicing' homosexuals.¹⁶

Some examples of real-life christophobia will document that it is a fact of queer life that a queer Christology might ameliorate:

The attempt of gay men to merge their Catholicism with homosexuality has always seemed to me touching but doomed... There can be no commerce, no conflation of, these two things. Fellatio has nothing to do with Holy Communion. Better to frankly admit that you have changed gods, and are now worshipping Priapus, not Christ.¹⁷

I cannot be queer in church, though I've tried... I long for a kind of spiritual intensity, a passion... I don't know what I want in a church, finally; I think the truth is that I don't want a church.¹⁸

A Jewish lesbian friend told me that she can't fathom how anyone of conscience would live in the South. Along the backroads of the state in which I live, one finds enormous crosses erected in threes. She told me, half-jokingly, that she's afraid that if her car breaks down while she's driving through the South, she'll be nailed to one of those crosses.¹⁹

I'm at a place in my life where I'm clarifying and answering questions. I wish I knew of a religion that will fill in all the blanks for me... At ten years old I was confirmed, and I learned a lot about how to follow Jesus.

15. Dann Hazel, *Witness: Gay and Lesbian Clergy Report from the Front* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2000), pp. 136-37, citing John Shelby Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die: A Bishop Speaks to Believers in Exile* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998).

16. Troy D. Perry with Charles L. Lucas, *The Lord Is my Shepherd and He Knows I'm Gay* (Los Angeles: Nash Publishing, 1972), pp. 77, 103-105; and *idem*, in a 1981 sermon memorialized in the documentary film *God, Gays, and the Gospel: This Is Our Story* (1983).

17. Andrew Holleran, 'The Sense of Sin', in Brian Bouldrey (ed.), *Wrestling with the Angel: Faith and Religion in the Lives of Gay Men* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1995), pp. 83-96 (83).

18. Mark Doty, 'Sweet Chariot', in Bouldrey (ed.), *Wrestling with the Angel*, pp. 1-10 (6).

19. D.G. Miller, 'Trying Grace', in Bouldrey (ed.), *Wrestling with the Angel*, pp. 131-46 (136).

But basically I believed it to please Mama... Yet a couple years later I accepted Christ... I have a feeling that something touched me. Somebody, something, I felt the power; I knew there was something out there that had picked me to love... Anyway, when I went to the performing arts high school, I started falling away... Little things made me believe that 'I'm such a sinner; I can't handle it', and I started getting into that deep valley... [and, after attending a non-Christian church] my early beliefs that Jesus was God's only son kept creeping in, so I felt blasphemous... My mother and my sister follow the Bible, point-blank, and if it's [lesbianism] a sin, then I'm wrong; they keep saying, 'All you have to do is turn back and ask God for forgiveness, and we'll never mention this again'.²⁰

[I]f I honestly state who I am—a gay woman, a gay Christian—then I apparently am part of a movement which you find 'outrageous' and 'unacceptable'.²¹

Fortunately, many gay and lesbian people are able to separate the message of Jesus Christ from the message of a homophobic Christian Church and have been able to remain within traditional Christianity. However, many others—perhaps even the majority of gays and lesbians—find themselves separated not only from Christianity but also from Christ, because the origin of Christian homophobia has been wrongly attributed to Christ.²² So integrated has the message of homophobia become with the Christ message that it has given birth to a very real inward consciousness that I have termed 'christophobia'. This christophobia goes beyond mere 'ecclesiophobia' (aversion to the Church) and strikes at the very heart of queer persons' view of what it means to be created in God's image, to be 'saved', or to be 'in right relation' with God and with one another. Many other examples and personal testimonies could be cited here, but I believe the above discussion will suffice to show that a new, queer Christology is required if gays and lesbians are to overcome contemporary Christian homophobia and their own christophobia. Once this intersection of homophobia and christophobia has been named, I believe it is possible to describe an unapologetic queer Christology—how the Christ figure might be appropriated by the queer community as example, savior and guide to wholeness.

20. 'Denise: Moving Beyond the "Fashion Show"', in David Shellenberger, *Reclaiming the Spirit: Gay Men and Lesbians Come to Terms with Religion* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998), pp. 55-75 (56-59, 61, 64).

21. Comstock, *Unrepentant, Self-Affirming, Practicing*, p. 69, quoting a woman named Tracy Archibald on her exit from the Presbyterian Church.

22. See the statistics in Comstock, *Unrepentant, Self-Affirming, Practicing*.

What Is a 'Queer' Christ?

Invariably, when the topic of a queer view of Christ or a queer Christology or a queering of Christ or the Queer Christ comes up, it leads to the question, 'Are you saying that Jesus was gay?' I believe the answer to this question must be a combination statement and question: 'Not necessarily, but what if he were?' The fact is we have no evidence that the historical Jesus was even sexual, let alone homosexual or heterosexual. There is disagreement as to whether there were even such categories in ancient society; essentialists such as John Boswell and Nancy Wilson²³ will tell us that 'gays and lesbians' have existed in all times and must therefore have been present in Jesus' day and age, while constructionists such as Judith Butler and Virginia Mollenkott²⁴ will tell us that the categories of gender and sexuality cannot be universalized today, let alone retrojected into the past. There is evidence, however, that same-sex sexual activity was recognized in the ancient world and both embraced and castigated at different times and in different places.²⁵ Contrary to traditional church teaching, there is no scriptural evidence that Jesus was celibate or that he engaged in sexual activity; there is no mention of whether he was married or unmarried; there is no evidence that he had ever been in love or fathered children.²⁶ One can only 'read the silence' and speculate upon what the texts do and do not say.

All Christology is interpretation – the intersection of the Jesus figure with one's theological sensibilities and social location. This is what differentiates Christology from the quests for the historical Jesus. Christology goes beyond the mere retrieval of historical information in order to impose a 'meaning' on that data that transcends space and time and

23. John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); Nancy L. Wilson, *Our Tribe: Queer Folks, God, Jesus, and the Bible* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995).

24. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, *Omnigender: A Trans-Religious Approach* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2001).

25. See, for example, Tom Horner, *Jonathan Loved David: Homosexuality in Biblical Times* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978); Bernadette J. Brooten, *Love between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); and Martti Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World: A Historical Perspective* (trans. Kirsi Stjerna; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998).

26. William E. Phipps, *Was Jesus Married? The Distortion of Sexuality in the Christian Tradition* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970); and *idem*, *The Sexuality of Jesus* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1996).

any historical or social categories. Thus, women have been able to develop a Christology that is broader than the fact of Jesus' physical maleness, while those of African, Asian and Hispanic descent have been able to develop a Christ figure that looks like them and endures their torment in a white world, despite the fact that Jesus himself would have been physically of the Caucasian race. In this sense, perhaps queer Christologists have an easier time of it, for we do not prescind from a historical datum of Jesus' heteronormativity; the gospels are silent regarding his sexuality or lack thereof. Thus, my answer, 'Not necessarily'. One cannot answer any question about Jesus' sexual orientation or sexual activity. Nevertheless, one can extrapolate from the fact that if one is fully human, as the Nicene Creed declares Jesus to be, then at least the possibility of a sexuality is implied in his personhood. Moreover, excessive concentration on whether or not Jesus was gay distorts the issue of how he can be a queer Christ, for it injects the specter of homophobia into the discussion. There are many in our heteropatriarchal world who see deviation from the standard of compulsory heterosexuality and rigid gender roles as sinful and unnatural; to even suggest that Jesus could have so deviated becomes the ultimate blasphemy. Indeed, even among queer people who have not yet fully grappled with their internalized homophobia and what it means that they themselves are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, seeking, or supportively straight, there is a knee-jerk reaction when the words 'gay'/'queer' and 'Jesus' are mentioned in the same sentence. One must ask about the source of such a reaction; hence, my question, 'What if he were?'

Some gay/lesbian interpreters have stated that they believe that Jesus was gay and had homosexual relations with his disciples.²⁷ They place much emphasis upon the fact that Jesus traveled and lived with 12 other men and assume, using modern categories, that this evidences a gay sensibility. What they ignore, however, is that in ancient Palestine the genders were largely segregated; it would have been perfectly commonplace for a group of men to travel, work, eat, and relax together; it also would not have been unheard of for them to engage in some sexual activity with one another.²⁸ The purpose of the gospels was not to record social or sexual history, but to inspire belief in Jesus' Christ-ness. The

27. Robert Williams, *Just as I Am: A Practical Guide to Being Out, Proud, and Christian* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1992), pp. 116-23.

28. Regarding gender issues, see the articles in Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (eds.), *The Women's Bible Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), as well as the essays on individual books of the Bible. Regarding same-sex affinity in the ancient world, see Nissinen, *Homosexualism in the Biblical World*.

evangelists evidently did not think that the issue of same-sex relations affected Jesus' ability to be Christ, or else I suspect that they would have found a way to include a prohibition from the lips of Jesus.²⁹

A queer Christology will not try to argue for or against the gayness of Jesus, but will seek rather to determine what his Christ-ness says to marginalized peoples of all generations, including today's queer community. The queer consciousness that has recently developed goes beyond notions of 'gay' or 'lesbian' and seeks to critique heteronormativity and heteropatriarchal patterns of domination.³⁰ This is where a queer Christology intersects with biblical studies, for we can discern from Jesus' recorded words and deeds how he felt about power relations. I believe this is a much more interesting and productive area of discussion than wondering about Jesus' sex life, for, when it comes to Jesus' social and political philosophy, we know a great deal. Thus, if someone were to persist in asking me about Jesus' sexuality, I would facetiously answer, 'Well, I don't know if he was gay, but he certainly was queer!'

To be 'queer' means to stir things up and even perhaps spoil them, in order not to settle for the easy answers of the status quo.³¹ The Queer Christ articulates a solidarity with the marginalized of his day and our day, in order to show that the God consciousness of each person goes beyond the limitations of their physical existence. The incarnation of God in a human body (whether it is Jesus' alone or that of every human person) demonstrates that the divine and the physical intersect in a

29. In fact, some would say that Matthew has included an implicit *approval* of same-sex relations by Jesus in his comments about 'eunuchs who have been so from birth' (Mt. 19.12). Wilson, *Our Tribe*, pp. 128-29. Wilson credits John McNeil, SJ, for originally applying this dominical remark about eunuchs to gay and lesbian people in *The Church and the Homosexual* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed, Andrews and McMeel, 1976). See also Frederick J. Gaiser, 'A New Word on Homosexuality? Isaiah 56:1-8 as Case Study', *Word and World* 14.3 (Summer, 1994), pp. 280-93.

30. See, for example, Lisa Duggan, 'Queering the State', in Peter M. Nardi and Beth E. Schneider (eds.), *Social Perspectives in Lesbian and Gay Studies: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 564-72; Martha Gever, 'The Names We Give Ourselves', in Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha and Cornel West (eds.), *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), pp. 191-202; Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, *Omnigender: A Trans-Religious Approach* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2001); and Carol Queen and Lawrence Schimel (eds.), *PoMoSexuals: Challenging Assumptions about Gender and Sexuality* (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 1997).

31. This is how queer theologian and activist Robert Goss uses the term. See also the definitions in Ken Stone (ed.), *Queer Interpretation and the Hebrew Bible* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2000), and Robert E. Goss and Mona West (eds.), *Take Back the Word: A Queer Reading of the Bible* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2000).

powerful and mystical way, that the physical is important and can never be divorced from the spiritual, and that the Divine yearns to become one with the human over and over again, resulting in the eternal cycle of birth and rebirth, death and resurrection, creation and salvation.

An Autobiographical Digression

Like many christologians, my view of Christ emanates from my own experience. My christological interest began when in 1985 I first read Matthew Fox's *Original Blessing*³² and realized that we are all created good. This realization was extremely important for my theological becoming, for, growing up as a 'sissy-boy' in the Roman Catholic church and parochial school in the period during and after Vatican II, I integrated into my very personhood the notion of original sin, that each person is created with the stain of sin on his or her soul and that baptism is necessary for its removal. Moreover, I believed that 'the devil' constantly seeks a way to make us fall from God's grace and that we must be ever vigilant to fight off Satan's temptations. My third-grade teacher (a nun) told me in vivid detail the reason Jesus was on that cross over the chalkboard: 'You did that, because you are such bad children!' The feelings for other boys and grown men that I began to experience at puberty confused me and turned me toward God for an answer that was not forthcoming. Instead, during my four years at a Jesuit-run high school, I learned that these feelings were 'not OK', that they should not be talked about, that what 'fags' did together was disgusting, and that God hated anyone who did not get married and have children. I stopped going to church; my attitude toward God was that he (and in those days, God was definitely 'he') had abandoned me. Unlike some queers, I never felt guilty or ashamed, only puzzled, because I could not understand how God could hate something that was so natural, so beautiful and so fulfilling.

When I was 25, I began my journey with the Metropolitan Community Churches (MCC), where I first heard the truth that God loves everyone because of – not despite – who they are and that God wants the best for us and offers to us the gift of prosperity if we will accept it. I chose to accept God's gift, and for me that meant accepting the gift of my sexuality and the realization that I was born good, that I was born queer, and that God looks upon me and says, 'This is my beloved son, in whom

32. Matthew Fox, *Original Blessing: A Primer in Creation Spirituality* (Santa Fe, NM: Bear and Company, 1983).

I am well pleased' (Mt. 3.17).³³ I became quite involved in the church and am now in my fifteenth year as clergy in MCC. It has been a rewarding journey, yet in the course of that journey I began to want 'proof' for what I now knew in the depths of my being. Could one really be a follower of Christ and a 'practicing' homosexual? I was assured that one could, but I wanted to find out for myself. Thus began my 20-year relationship with the Bible and theology, culminating in this queer Christology.

A Place to Start: What Is 'Christ'?

As noted above, it was Matthew Fox's notion of original blessing that first stimulated me to christological reflection. When I stopped believing in original sin and embraced instead the notion that all creatures are born from the goodness of the One Source, God, that realization made me begin to ask about Christ. What was the purpose of the Christ? How did Jesus' life intermingle with the Christ figure? What was the meaning of Jesus' death? What happened in the Resurrection? And what happens now? I received no one answer to these questions, nor did the answers come all at once. My christological journey has been one of 'becoming', a bit at a time, as I meet new people and become exposed to new scriptures, books and theologies, take them in, process them with God, and begin to believe anew.

My initial understanding of the Christ comes from the Greek root, meaning 'anointed'. A 'Christ' is an anointed being. This anointed being has received its essence from God. For me, Christ is a part of God that has always existed (Jn 1.1) and that has become one with humanity. I believe that the Christ is the relational part of God, the part that is anointed to bring good news to humanity. This was how Jesus was Christ—he was anointed to bring good news, to set captives free, and to announce God's favor (Lk. 4.18-19). Unlike many Christians, however, I do not believe that this Christ presence resided only in Jesus of Nazareth. I believe that this Christ presence dwells in all people, that it is innate to our being and our consciousness. Many people choose to embrace this Christ presence and allow it to animate their lives, to anoint them and make them prophets of good news who, like Jesus, proclaim God's favor. Others do not recognize the Christ within; consciously or unconsciously, they block their anointedness and do not share the good news of Christ. I believe what Meister Eckhart says, that we are called 'to

33. Throughout this article, unless otherwise noted, translations from the New Testament are my own.

be other Christs'.³⁴ We study the life of Jesus whom we call Christ because the fullness of his life, the tragedy of his death, and the mystery of his resurrection show us the possibilities of human becoming – how human persons may accept their Christ-ness and move into wholeness with God. I believe that human life is a journey to this wholeness, this christic consciousness, this oneness with God within and without. Like Jesus, we have detours along the way, but I believe that God is always at the end of the journey, leading us on, welcoming us as the parent welcomed the prodigal (Lk. 15.11-32).

The foundational Scriptures that solidify this notion for me are found in Genesis and in John, and both involve what is referred to as God's Spirit or, in Christian parlance, 'the Holy Spirit'. The Hebrew word for 'spirit' also means 'breath' or 'wind'. This is the Spirit that soared over the primal waters before creation (Gen. 1.1) and is the same Spirit that was 'breathed' into the first human creature after God formed that human creature from the soil of the earth (Gen. 2.7). God created humanity in God's very own image: 'In God's image, God created them; male and female God created them', and challenged them to protect and take care of the earth (Gen. 1.27-28). This Scripture tells me that whatever God creates carries God's imprint; God's Spirit is contained in humankind, and after humankind was created, God noted that now the creation was 'very good' (Gen. 1.31). We are very good creatures of a very good God. We are each created in God's own image, so everywhere we see humanity, we see God; every person we encounter can teach us something about God, for they carry the divine spirit/breath within. Think about the ramifications of this thought: That means that God is white, black, brown, yellow, red; God is male, female, intersexual, transgendered; God is gay, lesbian, straight, bisexual and non-sexual; God is strong and weak, old and young, abled and differently abled. And yet God is greater than all of this and more than all of this, for God has not stopped creating. There will come forth many more manifestations of God. Throughout the Hebrew Testament, 'anointed' people – kings and prophets, carried God's special commission to lead people. If we continue with the notion of anointedness meaning Christ-ness, there were other Christs before Jesus and after Jesus. They have pointed people toward wholeness. But people do not always do what is best for them; human greed, pride and arrogance get in the way of us accepting our divine commission and our own anointedness (Gen. 3). Thus, Christ figures have continued to be born, continued to tell their truth and –

34. Quoted in Matthew Fox, *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ: The Healing of Mother Earth and the Birth of a Global Renaissance* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), p. 121.

many times—continued to be ignored, killed or both. But the creation goes on, and the christing of human lives continues.

What makes me believe that we each carry this Christ-ness within us? The Gospel of John tells us the story of Jesus' disciples gathered in a room that was locked out of fear. But the Risen Christ came through the walls and said, 'Peace be with you!' The Risen Christ breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit'. This Holy Spirit is Christ's breath, communicated to us to inspire us to be Christs in our own time: 'As my Parent has sent me, so I send you' (Jn 20.19-22). The disciples used that Christ-ness to found a movement that has persisted to the present day. The hope of the world lies in that Christ breath that we carry within, that anointedness that we have received.

This is a Christian view of the Christ. I am constantly aware of how this Christ is used as a weapon by Christians against Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Wiccans and people of other faiths, as well as those of any religion who are considered to be 'other', for example, feminist women, non-heterosexuals, the poor and the colonized. Therefore, one must be on guard, in developing a Christology, to be inclusive and address the reality of our pluralistic world. Theologian Chester Gillis reminds us, 'Only a Christianity that sees itself in the context of the world religions will make sense in the twenty-first century',³⁵ that we must be vigilant to root out Christian imperialism and what I call 'christofascism'.³⁶

Therefore, I need to position my Christology with regard to the other religions of the world. I see the Christ figure as being a part of God—the source, the real, the ultimate, whatever we choose to call It. I said above that I believe the Christ is the relatedness of God, but to use the very word 'Christ' is to capture that relatedness for a Christian milieu. Nevertheless, the concept of 'anointedness' can be meaningful in every culture and in every religion. The concept of relatedness and sharing good news is a part of every spiritual tradition. My thoughts of Christ are meant for a Christian audience, and a queer one at that. Because queers have been excluded in history and today, I believe we cannot be exclusive of others. Queer Christology must acknowledge other paths to the one source and other forms of anointedness and relatedness that have no relation to our concept of Christ. In saying that the Christ Spirit

35. Chester Gillis, *Pluralism: A New Paradigm for Theology* (Louvain: Peeters Press; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 28.

36. I have encountered this term in the writings of Carter Heyward, who attributes it to German political theologian Dorothee Sölle. I have been unable to find the term in Sölle's writings, however.

is present in all people, I do not mean to co-opt anyone's tradition or thrust my Christ upon them. That is my Christian vocabulary for saying that the divine relatedness and anointedness dwells in all people. We must allow others to express that divinity in the ways that bring them wholeness and lead them onward to their human becoming.

The Real Beginning: 'Incarnation'

My queer Christology begins with Mary of Nazareth, for if each of us carries the Christ within us, I believe that we can learn much about what it means to bear Christ from the few glimpses of Mary that we see in the New Testament. Most of the information we have about Mary comes from the first and second chapters of Luke, known by biblical scholars as the Infancy Narrative.³⁷ Those who do historical Jesus research dismiss the Infancy Narratives in Luke and in Matthew as containing nothing historically reliable about Jesus' conception or birth; they point out the inconsistencies, the mythological elements, and the sheer unbelievability of a virginal conception.³⁸ I will leave aside questions of the Virgin Birth, for I suspect that much of the (Catholic) Church's insistence upon Mary's (perpetual) virginity comes from discomfort with sexuality, the origin of sin, and the nature of the atonement; the early Church Fathers and others, in believing that Jesus came to ransom humanity from sin, believed that he himself had to be incapable of sin and that, therefore, his conception and birth had to be 'sinless' as well.³⁹ I believe that sexuality is a gift from God;⁴⁰ sexual intercourse does not transmit sin; thus, in my Christology there is no need of a virginal conception, although I would not discourage others from holding such a view if that were theologically and personally meaningful (provided it did not mask an unconscious sex negativity).

Lk. 1.26-38 describes how Mary finds out that she is pregnant. The narrative tells us that an angel from God visits her and tells her that she

37. See, for example, Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991), pp. 36-44, 49-53; for a feminist reconstruction of the Infancy Narratives, see Jane Schaberg, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus: A Feminist Theological Interpretation of the Infancy Narratives* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987).

38. See, for example, John Shelby Spong, *Born of a Woman: A Bishop Rethinks the Birth of Jesus* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992).

39. See Elaine H. Pagels, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent* (New York: Random House 1988).

40. See Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), chs. 1-2, for the rhetorical-critical view that the interlocking word order of Gen. 1.26-28 indicates that sexuality can be understood as 'the image and likeness of God'.

will bear a child who will be called 'Son of the Most High'. Rather than dismissing this story as a fanciful creation of the early church, I would read it with a queer hermeneutic of stirring up, possibly spoiling, and imagining what God has to say to queers through this story. Indeed, a queer hermeneutic and Christology will not only '*queer*' but it will '*query*': It must be a questioning and a turning over of layers of hetero-patriarchal tradition to reveal what lies beneath. I understand seven elements to this story: (1) Mary is greeted, 'God is with you!' (2) Mary is perplexed. (3) She is told, 'Don't be afraid!' (4) She is assured, 'You will do great things'. (5) Mary doubts, asking, 'How can this be?' (6) Mary is reminded, 'Nothing is impossible with God'. (7) Mary decides, 'Here I am, God's servant'.

I believe that Mary of Nazareth in this story can serve as the paradigm for queer empowerment. Most queer people have gone through periods of their lives when they have felt lost or alone or abandoned by God; but often, a stranger comes into our path, announcing to us, 'God is with you!' The queer person, based on past experience, is perplexed by a greeting such as this; doesn't God hate queers? Past hurts and internalized oppression bring up a wall of fear. At this point, often the queer person turns away and goes off on his or her own. But there are just as many who face their fear and listen to the next message, 'Don't be afraid'. The messenger from God tells us, 'Walk out of your past. Do not give the past the satisfaction. There is a whole future awaiting you, if you will receive it'. The messenger assures us, 'You will do great things because God is with you'. Nevertheless, the queer person still is in doubt, because homophobia and christophobia have done their work so well. We ask, 'How can this be?' Who, me? What could God possibly have in store for me? Once these doubts are expressed and spoken to the universe, however, if we are truly open to letting go of our doubt and insecurity, the messenger speaks on and reminds us that 'nothing is impossible with God'. I can love queer people if I want to, God says; no church or state can place a boundary upon my love. I created every person in my very own image. I am a queer kind of God; I stir up and spoil what humans create with their agendas of power and oppression. Turn to me, allow me to queer you. And in the end, for many queer people, there comes the gift of acceptance of the situation. 'Here I am, God!' Let it be for me according to what your messenger has promised. The gift of acceptance from God is a powerful gift for those who have been refused acceptance, and it leads toward self-acceptance. This is the beginning of queer Christology: acceptance.

But acceptance of what? If we look at the seven elements I have delineated, a chiasm will become clear:

'God is with you!'	Divine presence
Perplexed	Doubt
'Don't be afraid!'	Confrontation of fear
<i>'You will do great things'.</i>	
'How can this be?'	Questioning
'Nothing is impossible with God'.	Resolution of doubt
'Here I am!'	Acceptance

In a chiasm, each of the elements balances another. Thus, here the announcement of the divine presence is balanced by the concluding acceptance of that presence; the doubt is balanced by the resolution of doubt; the confrontation of fear is balanced by further questioning prior to the resolution of doubt.

Literary critics acknowledge that the most important element in a chiasm is the center piece:⁴¹ Here the idea in the center of the chiasm is the messenger's statement, 'You will do great things', highlighted in italics above. A queering/querying of the Annunciation story will have as its central meaning the affirmation that God calls us to do great things. For Mary, that great thing is conceiving the Christ in her body. For queers, that great thing can consist of allowing Christ to take Christ's place within us: It means conceiving of our self-worth, our creativity, and our birthright as children of God (sons and daughters of the Most High) who can give birth to the Christ. This is good news for every oppressed person, but especially for queers, who are often led to believe that we cannot and should not give birth to anything.

We would like to think that, once we accept God's love and agree to birth the Christ, that it will be a smooth journey, but again the story of Mary of Nazareth (Lk. 1.39-56) tells us otherwise. Directly after Mary's acceptance in Lk. 1.38, we are told that she set out 'with haste' (Greek *meta spoudés*) and went to visit her cousin, who was also pregnant. Feminist biblical scholar Jane Schaberg has pointed out that in Greek the expression *meta spoudés* is a phrase used in emergency situations:⁴² Mary was running for her life! She was in a panic, and she fled. This was not a simple trip to visit a friend and pass the time of day. This was denial and escape from a terrifying situation. But her cousin Elizabeth was pregnant, too; her cousin Elizabeth had been given a gift from God also. They shared their experiences, and Mary again came to resolution and

41. On chiasms in biblical interpretation, see, for example, David E. Garland, *Reading Matthew: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the First Gospel* (New York: Crossroad, 1995), p. 164.

42. Schaberg, *Illegitimacy*, p. 89: 'But *meta spoudés* is a phrase that merits some pause and study. In the Greek translations of the Hebrew Bible it often has *overtones of terror, alarm, flight, and anxiety*' (emphasis added).

spoke one of the most beautiful and moving passages of Scripture, a manifesto for all oppressed people:

My soul magnifies the Sovereign One, and my spirit rejoices in God my rescuer. For God has examined and approved the low in status. Surely from now on people of every time will call me fortunate, for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and God's name is holy... God has brought down the powerful and has lifted up the oppressed (Lk. 1.47-49, 52).⁴³

If the Annunciation story may be seen as a story of queer self-acceptance and a 'coming out' into our creativity to birth the good news of Christ, then the story of the Visitation follows the queer journey as well, showing us that even after we accept who we are and our status as children of the Most High, we will still encounter panic that would tempt us to flee. Oftentimes we find someone else who has gone before us, someone who can share her or his experience with us that, indeed, God is in control; and then we, like Mary, can achieve final resolution, as we declare that our inner beings are a mirror of God's very being and that what has happened to us in finding the Divine will mean a reversal of fortune for our oppressors: They will topple from their positions of power and heteronormativity and those who have been oppressed will be lifted up and given a place in God's realm. This is the good news that Elizabeth teaches Mary and that older queers who have traveled the journey can teach the young.

We next see Mary when Jesus is born in Lk. 2.1-20. It is a difficult birth: the journey is long and arduous; there is no room at the inn. But Mary gives birth anyway, because she has promised to do so; and God's messengers appear once again, this time proclaiming, 'Glory to God in the highest! And peace to all those whom God favors!' A queer appreciation of the Nativity is the realization that Christ *will* be born, no matter what the circumstances. No matter how hard it is, no matter how perilous the journey, no matter that folks might not receive us, once we have agreed to give birth to the Christ in self-empowerment and creativity, Christ *will* be born. Much of the world will have no knowledge that we have given birth to this Christ; most will continue to go about their business and their oppressing of others. Some, like King Herod in Matthew's version of the birth of Jesus (Mt. 1-2), will seek to destroy what we have birthed; they will seek to take our Christ Presence from us. But those who witness the birth of queer self-worth and creativity will

43. Of course, most biblical scholars recognize that the Magnificat is an adaptation of Hannah's song in 1 Sam. 2.1-10. See Schaberg, *Illegitimacy*, pp. 93-94.

offer the assurance, 'Peace attaches to all those whom God favors', through the gift of God's Christ Spirit.

Conclusion

Thus, in my queer Christology, incarnation is an acceptance that we bear Christ within us – the part of God that is instilled in us to bring forth from ourselves the offspring of Christ-ness: self-empowerment, creativity, awareness of creation, joy, love, peace and justice-making, to name but a few.⁴⁴ That's what a queer sense of incarnation means for me – that God becomes one with humanity through the assurance that God has always been present and that the realization of this presence will give birth to human infusion with divine anointedness as Christ. In relation to Jesus' incarnation, my view is that Jesus is a model for one who had, in Schleiermacher's words, a 'perfect God consciousness'. Jesus was so open to receiving God's anointing that his life and ministry can be paradigmatic for all of those who seek to walk the Christ Way, to become Christ themselves and, like our mother Mary, to birth other Christs.

Once we accept our embodiment as incarnation of our Christ-ness, we can then develop additional christological insights from the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, our journey must not stop with Christ's resurrection; rather, we must recognize that, if we are each incarnated to be Christs, the early church's receiving of the Spirit at Pentecost must be paradigmatic as well. Pentecost is the opportunity for everyone to have a share in the Divine Spirit. Every day is Pentecost for every Christian, especially for queer followers of the Christ Way. We are told that the Spirit came upon the believers and gave them the ability to speak to others in their own languages (Acts 2.1-11). I have stated previously that for me the Christ Spirit was breathed out upon us when Jesus came through the walls of fear and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit' (Jn 20.22). Often, however, it is our first impulse to keep that Spirit to ourselves; the Pentecost experience, however, teaches us that this Christ Spirit cannot be contained, that, like fire, it travels fast and consumes everything in its path. The Queer Christ animates his/her followers to

44. Matthew Fox, in his book *Sins of the Spirit, Blessings of the Flesh: Lessons for Transforming Evil in Soul and Society* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1999), seeks to have a Christian dialogue with eastern religions by enumerating the gifts that can be birthed from within if we pay attention to our body chakras.

45. See especially Robert Goss's queer interpretation of the resurrection in *Jesus ACTED UP*, pp. 81-85.

speak to others in their own language: This tells me that there are many diverse ways to tell the Christ story and to share the Christ Spirit. There are many 'queerings' possible because of that restless Spirit that burns to be shared. There are many sub-communities within the queer community that need to be shown the Christ: bisexuals, transgendered, transsexual, intersexual, differently sexual, non-sexual, supportively heterosexual, people of leather and lace, celibate people, those into S/M and those into 'vanilla' sex, those who are single or partnered and monogamous, as well as those who are in open relationships or triads. Our God of diversity empowers us to share the Queer Christ in diverse ways to diverse people in their own languages. May it be so!

