

Queering Christianity

Finding a Place at the Table
for LGBTQI Christians

The Bohache

Robert E. Shore-Goss,
Thomas Bohache,
Patrick S. Cheng, and
Mona West, Editors

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Unzipping Church: *Is There Room for Everyone?*

Thomas Bohache

Parking the car. Hoping it will be safe. I go up to the front door, dark of course. I look around. No one is there to see me . . . I hope. What am I doing here? I ask myself that every time I come here. A locker is cheaper, so that's what I get. I get buzzed in. I find my locker. I get undressed. Anticipation pounds in my ears. I drape the towel around me, although it doesn't fit particularly well. Should've lost more weight before venturing out. I hear a sound. I turn toward the door, and he's there. The most beautiful man I have ever seen. Our eyes meet. He smiles. So do I. "Will you be here long?" "As long as it takes." "Maybe I'll see you later?" Yeah, right. Like HE would want ME.

So I walk down the hall, trying to forget how much I want him. I pass rooms with open doors. I look in; they look back. Do I want to go in? Do I dare? I see so much beauty and feel so much pain. There's a door that everyone seems to be focused on. I look over their shoulders. It's him. So desirable. So beautiful. Yet so alone. No one will approach him. What are they afraid of?

I walk toward the orgy room. There are so many there, in various stages of ecstasy. I walk out. It's too intense. I stroll down another corridor, and there he is—the one everybody wants. But what's he doing? He's blowing a guy who's even fatter than me—rolls of flab encasing his cock so it's not even visible. And yet this Adonis is on it, gobbling it, enjoying it, taking the fat man to heaven. Is this happening?

I retreat, walk down another corridor. The selling point of this particular establishment is that it's like a maze. You never see the same person

twice. That's the way it's supposed to be. Then why do I keep seeing this guy? I turn the corner. He's getting peed on by somebody. I go the other way. He's getting fucked by a guy with one leg. I take the stairs to the roof, to get some air. He's there with a bunch of guys I've seen here for years who never seem to score. And he's doing every single one of them. What gives?

I make my way back to my locker. Start to get dressed. But then I feel a hand on my back. "What's your hurry? Where you goin'?" I stumble as I try to get into my pants. Not used to such a direct approach. And of course it's him. "I told you I'd see you later. Weren't you going to wait for me?" "I didn't know you meant it. You were pretty busy." "There's enough of me to go around!" He smiles. His eyes light up. They take me in. They love me. I've never felt this wanted before. Maybe I'll stay for a while. . . .

* * *

Does God have a sexual orientation? Sometimes I think so, but most of the time I don't. After all, isn't sexual orientation a social construct? How do we know who we are? Do we choose? Are we chosen? Is it predestined? Perhaps God meets us in our circumstances and becomes who we need God to be? If that's the case, then I guess that was God who cornered me in the locker room at the baths. That was God who was sucking and fucking and making out with the ones nobody else would touch. Isn't that the truth of the gospel?

* * *

The problem with most Christian churches is that they would be scandalized by a story like the one above, never embracing anything overtly erotic or countenancing our sexual peccadilloes. You must not sully the sanctuary with semen-laden thoughts or wet panties! You must not be conscious of your various body parts or allow yourself to become aroused if you are within the House of God. The Body of Christ is, after all, a eunuch! But you know what? In the basement of the church—beneath all the holiness and the hypocrisy and the wistful longings—God lies on a cheap pallet (maybe a sling?) waiting to be filled by our need. We are so accustomed to leaving our desires at the door that we don't realize God is inside, empty, bereft, with no one to fill Him to overflowing with Love or to quench Her longing with Joy.

God waits like an unwanted person in a sex club—holding out Hope that someone might take a chance; yearning for someone to stop walking by, to cross the threshold, to start something that might take God over the edge into oblivion. Have you ever felt this way? Have you ever dared to let yourself feel this way? Have you ever fallen forward into a future that was not prohibited by the past?

* * *

It is a commonplace of our postmodern world that theology is autobiography. Contextual theologies from women, people of color, the poor, and sexual minorities have exposed the untruth of a previous commonplace that one could be theologically objective or approach texts such as the Bible as a disinterested observer. All of us bring our own presuppositions to the study of the Divine and Her interactions with Creation; likewise, we bring our histories—particularly our sexual histories—with us as we approach a God who meets us in our circumstances, even when we would seek to keep those circumstances private or a secret. This God blows the doors off of our closets, infiltrates our decent lives, and makes us take a closer look at who we really are, not whom we want the world to see.

As a middle-aged, well-educated, white gay man who has somewhat reluctantly begun to call myself “queer,” I have come to realize how easy it is to hide behind delusions of normality, how easy it is to pass in a world that in some ways seems more accepting of difference than when I was growing up in the 1960s and coming to sexual maturity in the 1970s. But then current events intrude into this fantasy and force me to acknowledge that things have not really changed all that much. What has changed is that I have found for myself a comfortable niche where I can pontificate about sexuality and spirituality from a place of entitlement and privilege.

I have been a pastor in the Metropolitan Community Churches (MCC) for almost 25 years. I have been a biblical scholar and theologian for much of that time, always seeking to educate myself further so that I might in turn educate my congregations. In my living room or my pastor’s study or in a university library I explore worlds I have not personally experienced. I read about oppressions that go beyond those I have endured. I learn about the struggles of heroes, sheroes, and queeroes of the faith who have walked the walk, not just talked the talk. In my sermons and writing I have remained pretty mainstream (dare I say “malstream?”), even though some over the years have seen me as too liberal, too political, or too heretical.

But I have come to a point in my life where I realize that there is no safe place in decency. Pat Robertson and Benedict XVI do not care that I have not been a flamboyant queer or that I live a pretty boring middle-class lifestyle. To them, my choice of affectional partner and what I do or think of doing with various body parts renders me indecent. To the majority of Americans I am undeserving of common courtesies or the institution of marriage; when people like me endeavor to speak the truth of our daily lives as others do so freely, we are castigated for making public what should be kept private. Since the heteronormative logic of our world labels as indecent or depraved what we see as normal, what's the point of trying to fit in? After all, what does it mean to be normal, and who gets to decide? Who keeps score as to whether you have played by the rules, and which or whose rules are we even talking about?

One of my favorite stories in the Bible is contained in the Book of Esther. Esther is a young Jewish girl living in the Persian Empire who wins a beauty contest and becomes queen. No one (including the king) knows she is Jewish, however. All is well until one of the king's ministers decides to persecute the Jews. Esther's kinsman Mordecai sends a message to her asking for help from her position of privilege. She is at first disinclined to help, noting that she is only one wife among many and must wait her turn for intimacy with the king. Mordecai confronts her fear and trepidation—her unwillingness to show her truth to the world—by pointing out that her place in the royal household will not protect her if her Jewish identity becomes known. "Perhaps you have come to royal prominence for such a time as this," he suggests to her. Esther's mind is changed by his words (she repents—*metanoia!*), and she comes out as a Jew to her husband the king, saving her people in the process. This is a story with a nice tidy happy ending, but it imparts an important truth: We are never safe, even when we think we are, even when we have carefully erected an edifice to seal us off from real people with real problems.¹

What this means for me at this time of my life is that there is no refuge in decency. As long as queer people remain colonized by heteronormativity and the church is seen as the province of those who are right with God (which frequently translates to those who are "on the right"), none of us will be safe. Like Esther, I need to come out and become disreputable, indecent, non-accommodationist, non-assimilated, queer. While the MCC as a denomination has been on the forefront of inclusion of sexual minorities in Christianity,² and while I believe that it is still for me the best place to pursue a Christian life, I nevertheless believe that MCC needs to go further than it has gone. There is still work to be done.

Indeed, I believe in some ways MCC has gone backwards in seeking to show the dominant society that we are just like everybody else and in striving for marriage equality above all else, often at the expense of other important issues.³ The truth as I see it is that queer people (including those who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, intersex, questioning, asexual, and supportively straight⁴) will NEVER be just like everybody else by virtue of the fact that we (like African Americans) have a legacy of discrimination in our genetic memory and through our sexual activities, affectional preferences, and/or bodily integrity challenge the dominant heterosexist, heteropatriarchal, heteronormative mind-set that (in)forms American structures, systems, laws, customs, and everyday moralities. It is within this context that I would like to propose what I call a disreputable ecclesiology.

* * *

The late queer postcolonial theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid rocked the theological and academic world when she described an "indecent theology," that is, a theology that prescind from the experience of those not considered "decent" by church and/or society.⁵ She boldly stated that theology should come from sexual storytelling of everyday people, rather than the grand narratives of old white straight men in the academy.⁶ Moreover, she challenged both liberation theology and feminist theology for losing touch with their constituent base by selling out to the dominant forms of (heterosexual) theology, which she called "T-theology" (for totalitarian or tradition-based theology).⁷

A disreputable ecclesiology must start from this notion of indecent theology, for a church of decent people keeps its doors barred against those who might upset the status quo or insist that the church do the gospel.⁸ Indeed, I have often thought that a decent church of the 21st century would probably turn away Jesus himself, inasmuch as he would—for starters—need to get a haircut, trim his toenails, and wash his feet, not to mention use some deodorant and probably even "man-groom"! Furthermore, Jesus would probably be asked to leave contemporary Christian churches because of those who make up his entourage—whores, drunkards, cast-offs from society who might engage in behavior considered inappropriate by the decent. They might laugh at the wrong times, clap their hands, or speak too loudly; they might even flaunt their differing sexualities. It seems to me that the doorkeepers of decency are like the U.S. Supreme Court justice who said he couldn't define pornography but would know it if he saw it: Their subjective opinions about behavior

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(including such items as manners, breeding, and social comportment) become the nebulous criteria that leave many on the wrong side of the church doors. And these are churches that, if asked, would pride themselves on being welcoming of newcomers, not recognizing that the newcomers who are welcomed must have already passed an unwritten test of decency and propriety. The ones who don't are simply frozen out.

Who are the disreputable in this scenario? They are the blacks who don't act like white people, the Latin@s who don't confine themselves to English when speaking, the gays and lesbians who might act effeminate or mannish (according to whose standards?), the transgendered or intersexed who do not fit one gender or another as clearly as the majority might like and—deeper still—want to use restrooms they shouldn't (according to whose dictum?). They are those who do not pursue a heterosexual binary or a monogamous style of relating. They are those who might have a different view of God or Christ or sin or church. They are any people who make the majority feel uncomfortable and lead them to question their privilege and the definitions behind which they hide.

I have become aware of this on many occasions during my ministry in MCC, but two particularly obnoxious examples immediately come to mind. The first occurred a number of years ago when a local association of churches—at the urging of two member congregations—had decided to review the propriety of MCC's membership in their organization on the grounds that we were not a Christian church because—among other things—our website pointed out that we ministered to gays and lesbians without expecting them to repent and that we did not regard Christianity as the exclusive path to salvation. What surprised me the most during the course of this debate was when a clergy colleague of mine, who had always been extremely supportive of MCC and prided himself on the fact that his church was a welcoming church, announced that, whatever the other churches' feelings about MCC or our ministry, we could all certainly agree that “we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” It was at this point that I realized that the churches around me were probably more tolerating than welcoming and that they were oh-so-magnanimously allowing us into their presence because they were letting sinners into the fold. I did not and do not want to be part of a community that regards who I am as a sin that needs to be overlooked or “given up to God.” Certainly I do not claim that I am not a sinner, but my particular sins do not include being gay.

The other incident took place just a couple of years ago when I attended a continuing education event at a prestigious seminary. During

the break, a professor at the seminary asked me what church I was from, to which I replied the MCC and began to explain who we were. "Oh no," she interrupted me with a big smile, "I've heard of your church. But I would imagine that the Unitarians would be more appropriate conversation partners for you." I was speechless at this statement, not because I have anything against Unitarians, but because it was clear to me that beneath her words was the implication that I did not belong in dialogue with other Christians. Why? Who was she to say that I was less able to follow Christ than Presbyterians, Methodists, Episcopalians, or Baptists? Did her heterosexuality or her traditionalist orthodoxy somehow make her an automatic doorkeeper for Christianity? Maybe I should have offered her a "W-W-J-D" bracelet, but somehow despite her academic and ecclesiastical pedigree I don't think she would have gotten it.

A disreputable ecclesiology does not countenance incidents such as these. A disreputable ecclesiology does not think of ways to keep people out but is instead always trying to figure out how to bring more people of as many different varieties inside. A disreputable ecclesiology does not insist that certain people only deserve the crumbs that fall from the masters' tables. A disreputable ecclesiology does not have checklists for membership but instead simply says, "Welcome. You are loved." A disreputable ecclesiology is not repelled by what the world judges indecent but is drawn to it and utilizes it as a hermeneutical key for understanding the promiscuous love of God.

During its more than four decades of ministry MCC has been a vocal proponent of inclusivity. We were among the first denominations to ordain women and practicing homosexuals, to minister to those suffering with HIV/AIDS, and to empower non-gendered language in worship and hymnody. Over the years MCC has widened its ministry beyond the gay and lesbian communities and has reached out to the transgendered, the intersexed, and the supportively straight. Some congregations have been inviting of leatherfolk, the polyamorous, those attracted to S/M/B/D, the differently sexual, and the nonsexual, while certain MCC clergy have blessed relationships that included more than two people.⁹ We have pursued bar, bathhouse, prison, and internet ministry. Theologically, we have justified this radical inclusivity by comparing it to the Reign of God as envisioned and announced by Jesus himself—a place where, according to him, the disreputable will enter before the proper and the downtrodden will precede the elite.

But we must go further! Instead of apologizing for our sexuality, we must begin to flaunt it even more! Instead of being ashamed of our sexual

acts and assuring decent Christians that we are just like them because we favor "long-term, committed relationships" or "faithful, monogamous partnerships" that look just like marriages,¹⁰ perhaps we need to queer the scenario, upset the apple cart of the status quo, talk about our deviances, and explore the ways in which our sexual stories might tell God's story. As some in MCC are fond of saying, "If you can't fix it, feature it!" For example, what might it mean to explore the theological ramifications of glory-holes? I am from a generation of gay men that, for whatever reason, was either forced or chose to conduct much of our intimate behavior in the shadows, in the streets, in alleys or doorways, or in subterranean parking lots. Was it personal shame or the specter of the closet or the impossibility of openness or the tyranny of heteropatriarchal laws and mores that led us to the parks and the baths and the sex clubs? Or was it the exuberance of sexual feelings that did not want to be confined to one room of the house but desired to roam free of constraints? (And at the same time sounding an awful lot like God's erotic love!) A disreputable ecclesiology is not afraid to talk about these types of experiences; it does not force them to be confessed in hushed tones but rejoices in the possibilities for spiritual growth to be found in them.

Marcella Althaus-Reid through her indecent theology pointed us in this direction and now, in Christic fashion, has gone on ahead of us to prepare a place for all of those whom T-theology and imperialist Christology would deny a place at the table. She believed that the future of all theology lay in queer theology, arguing that we must fetishize the theological discussion.

A queer liberation theology (or "indecent theology") needs to look for other love locations . . . we need to turn to another route, a perverted turn in the road. This is the point when queer thinking is required. . . . The point is that by queering body theology we may be led to discover the traces of a queer God and through that the traces of Other covenants, lost pacts and revelations of God in an underground history of love. . . . In rheology, and especially in the configuration of a queer body theology, fetishism is the praxis of transfiguration of reality in the sense that it reflects something: it is the reflection of spiritual Otherness.¹¹

I quote her at length because she saw so clearly how, in the words of Audre Lorde, the master's tools would never dismantle the master's house.¹² We must indeed look in other love locations to find the piece of God that has been excluded with the Others who are not here but could be if we asked them.

This is where inclusivity can become problematic. Latin American liberation theologian Frederico Pieper Pires, from Brazil, has pointed out that the problem with inclusion is that it welcomes people only to a point. Ironically, there is usually a norm that people still need to adhere to if they are to be included: We are including them in *something*; they want to be included in *something*.

All systems create criteria to distinguish truth from untruth. . . . [E]very system produces its own truth and policies of truth in order to control existing differences and indicate the transgressors. . . . Inclusion, then, presupposes an absolute identity as the organizing centre of all differences. Everything moves towards an absolute identity. . . . Differences have to be overcome. . . . Multiplicity is, then, reduced (again) to the One . . .¹³

Oftentimes churches—including MCC—state in their publicity and evangelistic materials that they welcome diversity and differences, but once people are brought in by this message, the congregation (wittingly or not) begins to erode those differences that they were trying to attract in the first place, somewhat like lovers who, after they have come together and formed a relationship, try to change the exact things about the beloved that they were initially drawn to. Truly inclusive churches (disreputable ones?) must be on guard against molding newcomers to standards that dissolve their individuality and uniqueness as children of God.

In order for true inclusivity to work—and this is where a disreputable ecclesiology as I have begun to describe it becomes important—all bodies must be seen as important. Toni Morrison vividly illustrates this in her novel *Beloved*, when former slave Baby Suggs, Holy, is preaching to other former slaves in her makeshift church in The Clearing.¹⁴ She points out to these human creations of God, who had formerly been the chattel of other human creations of God and yet had somehow made their way to freedom, that they must love their flesh: “‘Here,’ she said, ‘in this place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard.’” Nobody else is going to do it for them: “Yonder, they do not love your flesh. They despise it. . . . *You* got to love it, *you!* . . . This is flesh I’m talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved.” Moreover, every part of that flesh is important—not only the heart and the mind (the decent, respectable parts?), but also the liver and the neck and even or especially the private parts.¹⁵ (Recall the statement of St. Paul in 1 Cor. 12:23 that the parts of the body which are the least respectable are the ones we treat with greater dignity.)

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Thus, in the disreputable ecclesiology I am proposing, church members must be encouraged to value all *their* members—the feet and armpits that sweat and smell, the genitals that make us feel good and help us to make others feel good, the hands that we use to caress ourselves and others, the mouths which thirst and with which we praise God, ingest food, and lick and suck and kiss our beloved. And once people appreciate their own members, they can then turn and encounter and embrace and encourage the members of other members. In the Christological controversies of the early church, Gregory of Nazianzus pointed out that “what has not been assumed cannot be redeemed.” In the same way, in our churches today what we do not acknowledge and treasure, we cannot welcome and include in any truly meaningful or theological way.

But for the bodies of sexual minorities to be counted and countenanced—in order for us to be heard into speech—we must talk about our sex. Unlike other minorities (women, people of color, the differently abled), one cannot immediately see our status of Other by looking at us, for the markers of our minority status lie within. Our Otherness is written on our body but must be translated by our minds, hearts, and spirits. It is deep within that we carry the scars of our Othering. Since one of the ways in which we have been Othered is through the charge that it is our sexual selves that constitute us as sinners, that by virtue of the ways in which we express our eroticism and our intimacy we sin, I would like to suggest that we SIN REALLY BIG. Heteronormative paradigms will always see us as sinners, whether they will own up to it or not. (Note such doublespeak as “I support gay rights, but marriage is between one man and one woman,” endorsed even, until recently, by the president of the United States.) So why not be the best sinners we know how to be? Why not express our sexuality in such a remarkable and authentic way that it is the quintessence of sin in the eyes of the majority? That would be truly disreputable!

Lest the reader think I am being facetious, I call to our consciousness the first major essay of feminist theology, by Valerie Saiving, who pointed out that sin was usually defined according to the experience of (white, heterosexual) males.¹⁶ For them, the greatest sin against God was pride, the making more of oneself than one ought. Nevertheless, as Saiving showed so brilliantly, for women pride is the opposite of sin; it is unpride which was for generations their sin. For many women, on Saiving's view, pride would be a virtue and not a sin, for what women needed was confidence in their authentic selves, not denigration; thus, the true sin was to not practice pride and to disparage the brilliant creation of God that women represented.

In her last book, the late radical feminist theologian and philosopher Mary Daly concurred. She noted that, because today's world is still in the grip of patriarchy, women need to overcome the disconnect within them so as to heal the fragmentation that patriarchy continues to inject into the planet.¹⁷ As Daly reminded her readers over and over again in her body of work, this disconnect, which women apprehend from their daily lives in a world ruled according to men's desires and rules, teaches them that their very nature is a sin against the male norm. Efforts to empower woman's full personhood sin against the structures and systems set up to serve men. The sins of womankind are presided over by a male God, who has been created in the image of men and served by the Church, which Daly terms a "phallocracy."¹⁸

In the same way, queer Christians must SIN BIG! We must flaunt the abominations God created us to be, for our authentic personhood involves manifesting what T-theology calls sin. Indeed, for queers true sin would be to *not* practice our sexuality, for by such a sin of omission we would be denying our personhood—a blaspheming of the Holy Spirit, which Jesus called the unforgiveable sin (Mk 3:29). Oftentimes queer Christians are reluctant to show who we really are and to be vocal about our sexual stories for fear decent people will not like us anymore.¹⁹ But, you know what? If that's all it takes, then they don't really like us anyway. If they wanted the best for us, if they saw us as true children of God on an equal par with themselves, they would not withhold basic human rights. They would not insist that we conform to standards of so-called decency not of our making. They would not suggest that our unions are less than theirs or that we pose a threat to their children.

In joining women and others who have been Othered by the dominant culture, queer people who decide to sin big by being disreputable are turning away from T-theology and turning toward that with which we have been gifted by our loving, amazing God. When we feel and claim what our bodies in all their sexual, gender, and emotional complexity are telling us, we are giving birth to God, who has been birthed and rebirthed in bodies since time immemorial. Moreover, we are exposing the lie that any one person or group can make decisions about other people that result in their being labeled sinners and dismissed from a human-based (heterosexual) economy of salvation founded on supposed decency.²⁰ Thus, Samoan theologian Tavita Maliko, in discussing the way gender and sexuality among indigenous Samoans have been categorized by European scholars, asserts, "The church defines people according to its theology of sin. Whatever you do, if you don't use your penis the way

you are supposed to, then you are a homosexual. Whatever that means!"²¹ In explaining that there are more than two genders recognized in Samoa and that these genders do not neatly align themselves according to western binary notions of sexual orientation, Maliko insists that one should not judge another according to standards that have been artificially created from another culture's data and prejudices. To do so is to perpetuate the worst sort of colonialism. Postcolonial theology has therefore demanded an undoing of this First World (Christian) dominance and has called for self-naming and personal theologizing by the colonized themselves,²² much the way feminist theologians a generation ago encouraged women to engage in a process of self-naming resulting from consciousness raising.²³

Indeed, one of the most controversial ways in which women raised their consciousness during the Women's Movement of the 1960s and 1970s was by passing around a speculum or mirror during group meetings, so that each woman could examine in detail—perhaps for the first time—her own vagina. By looking at and talking about what the overarching patriarchal culture told them they should not look at or talk about, thus reclaiming their vaginas from the pornographic male gaze, women were empowered not only to love their bodies as they were but also to employ a metaphorical speculum to other parts of their lives which had been heretofore unexamined.²⁴ In the same way, I believe that disreputable churches might offer the same sort of forum for self-examination to those in today's world who have had their sexual stories muted and their sexual assertiveness taken away by notions of decency and propriety. I have often as a pastor wondered why congregation members are able to talk in whispers in the corner or at a party about their intimate lives but feel ashamed to share the same sorts of matters out in the open at church. Do we really think that God does not know what we do with our bodies? Are we naïve enough to think that we can divorce our sexual selves from the rest of our lives? At times like these, God reminds us, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you" (Jer 1:4); and Jesus chimes in to point out that there is "nothing hidden that will not be revealed" (Lk 8:17).

"But what are you really getting at?" the reader might ask at this point. "Are you saying that churches should become a forum for sex talk where anything goes?"²⁵ My answer to this important concern is of course not. We must always, in all of our church discussions, be sensitive to the feelings and sensibilities of others. We must always look for ethical ways in which to discuss matters of behavior, as I have noted elsewhere in this anthology. However, at the same time we must guard against unnecessary

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prudishness which comes from deep-seated sex negativity and erotophobia and continually monitor whether we are slavishly pandering to the heteronormative status quo. Each community will approach this differently, based upon its context, history, and demographics. Issues such as when and where discussions of eroticism should take place, as well as how to include the input of parents of young people, should be kept in mind whenever a faith community embarks on the journey to disreputability. But we avoid the invitation to disreputability at our peril, for we can see this disreputability among the earliest followers of Jesus, who were castigated as sinners by the dominant society. As New Testament scholar Greg Carey reminds us, in the ministry of Jesus (and among his contemporary followers) what is at stake is the difference between deviance and legitimacy.²⁶ And if the earliest Christians took the risk of sinning big according to their culture's estimation, then we can do no less.

One way in which a church community can encourage itself to sin big is to begin discussing the notion of sin altogether, something that many queers, including those in MCC, have been reluctant to do. When we articulate what sin really is—and how queer folks' sin may not look the same as that of nonqueers—we will be in a better position to welcome those whose existence we might not have even acknowledged at a previous time in our lives. The recent work of queer theologian and MCC minister Patrick Cheng is foundational in this regard, for he has proposed "a Christological model of sin and grace" by introducing various models of Christ for LGBT people, with each model including a sin against that model and a type of grace that flows from that model.²⁷ For example, the Erotic Christ is "the very embodiment of God's deepest desire for us." The Erotic Christ models the appropriateness of physical touch as he empowers the human eroticism that derives from the Godhead Itself. To sin against this Erotic Christ is to concentrate solely on one's own self-gratification at the expense of the grace of reciprocity and mutuality with one's erotic partner.²⁸ Cheng's other Christic models are equally productive of a theology of wholeness sorely needed in queer communities; the Erotic Christ, however, is perhaps the most helpful for my purposes here because this Christ presides at the sacrament of our transformation from keepers of unexamined decency to practitioners of full-blown (!) disreputability.

In a disreputable church made up of disreputable people who are indecent by virtue of who they are, how they believe, and why they live as they do, mutuality and reciprocity as the grace of the Queer Christ and the fruits of a Queer Spirit are essential, as is the recognition that sins of

self-centeredness and self-focused thinking or behavior do not help the church progress or prosper. The Greek word for “church” is *ek-klēsia*—an entity “called out” to be or do something. The word “community” is from the Latin word *com-munire* meaning “to build together.” A church community, then, is a gathering of people “called out to build together”—what? Perhaps the Reign of God that Jesus mentions so much in the gospels? An early Christian teacher instructed his followers that they were “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people who are God’s own possession,” whom God has “called out of darkness” into the amazing light, reminding them, “Once you weren’t a people, but now you are God’s people” (1 Pet 1:9–10).²⁹ Those whom society would cast aside and whose very personhood many governments and churches do not recognize come to realize in a disreputable church that they are indeed home, that God has called them together for such a time as this and chosen them to be God’s very own.

In speaking of Jesus’ announcement of the Reign of God in Mark 1:15, biblical scholar Melinda Quivik writes, “Anyone who introduces a whole new way of thinking is bound to a difficult task.”³⁰ Her words could also apply to the building of a disreputable church founded on the dangerous precept that everyone is welcome not only in God’s Reign but also in God’s Church—two entities that do not always have the same constituents. It is a difficult task to vision beyond decency, respectability, and appropriateness. The graced and gracious mutuality that is required as an organizing principle is what moral theologian Thomas Breidenthal has termed “radical availability,”³¹ noting that in discussions of sexuality, spirituality, and salvation one must constantly ask the question, “Who is my neighbor, and what does that have to do with me?”

To say that I am radically available is to say that anyone can become my neighbor: anyone can get under my skin. The word *neighbor*, after all, simply means someone who is *nigh* to me, close to me. . . . Nearness is experience of the other as neighbor . . . [, one who is] neither reducible to being an extension of myself nor able to be dismissed because he or she is different from me . . . [H]owever much we may prefer to think of ourselves as essentially separate from and independent of one another, . . . the truth is that we are always already available to every other human being, and cannot prevent even a momentary encounter with a stranger from touching us to our very core.³²

Whenever we encounter another person, we do so with our physical bodies, and this physical nearness engages our sexuality—our ability to relate to another. Breidenthal asserts that every human being is made in

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the image of God, and for him that image is our capacity to love. We love our neighbors through our bodies, and, in reaching out to another, our action is "always an answer to God," who calls us to relationship with those who are "nigh."³³ This nearness to others sanctifies us—makes us holy, like God. The process of sanctification that traditional theology tells us is the work of the Christian Church is, then, actually a drawing near to others and a recognizing of our radical availability to one another—the grace of reciprocity.³⁴ To cut oneself off from this is, as Cheng reminds us, sin—a relational brokenness between us and God, tangibly manifested in the rupture between us and one another.

Thus, anyone can be our neighbor. Everyone is, in fact, already our neighbor, whether or not they look, act, talk, or think like us. When we reach across divides of respectability or decency to join ourselves to a neighbor, we are indeed creating the Reign of God which Jesus, in older translations, said had "drawn nigh"! Indeed, Breidenthal sums up his argument Christologically with the emphatic statement, "The whole point of the Incarnation is that the Word of God has become our neighbor,"³⁵ or, as the literal translation of the Greek would have it, "has pitched its tent among us" (Jn 1:14).

It was as a body that the Word of God—Jesus, God's Christ—pitched that tent. It was as a body that he welcomed a disparate, often motley group of followers. In the words of ethicist James Nelson, we experience the Gospel ("good news") in our bodies or not at all!³⁶ It is in our bodies that we meet the world and interact with our neighbors in radical availability and grace-full mutuality: our black, white, red, yellow, brown bodies; our male, female, transgender, intersex bodies; our gay, lesbian, bisexual, straight bodies; our young, middle-aged, old bodies; our fat, thin bodies; our beautifully smooth, beautifully wrinkled bodies; our fully abled, differently abled, disabled bodies; our pierced, tattooed bodies; our laughing, crying, bleeding, shitting, fucking bodies. The body is the vehicle through which we apprehend and live the message of church. Ministry is about meeting the world, and we meet the world in our own bodies, one body at a time. We must never downgrade these bodies or apologize for them or what we do with them or pretend that they are any different than they are. As Toni Morrison reminds us, we need to love these bodies, love them hard: "For this is the prize."³⁷

* * *

So what would it take to make the church disreputable? I would like to suggest that the answer lies in the title to this chapter: We must unzip

church! Think about what happens when we unzip our clothing: We are not restrained. We can breathe. Our junk falls out! When we unzip, we no longer cover over those parts of the body some deem less worthy of respect. We show our unmentionables. We shatter the illusion of what might be kept hidden within. What is revealed might in turn contradict the image we present by our zipped-up appearance. Unzipping forces us to take an honest look at ourselves, and it allows others to see us as we really are.

Much has been made in the queer communities of coming out of the closet (i.e., telling the truth about one's sexual self). Nevertheless, it is possible to be out of the closet and still zipped up to protect what others might label indecent, unacceptable, or just plain nasty. Moreover, keeping ourselves respectably zipped up allows us to conform to the heteronormative logic that controls our culture. It allows us to pretend that we are just like everybody else. I remember my father, years after I had come out to him, watching coverage of the Los Angeles Pride Parade on television and turning to me to say, "You aren't like that, are you?" At that point in my journey, I was keeping myself pretty zipped up, so rather than engage him I pretended not to know what he was getting at and said of course not. Talk about blaspheming the Holy Spirit! I may have been ready to tell him I was gay, but was not yet ready to tell him how queer I was!

It is fear that keeps us zipped up, and fear that keeps us from unzipping church. For once you unzip and your junk falls out, you can't pretend anymore. You can no longer claim to be something you're not. You can't aspire to decency when your indecency and disreputability is there for all to see. But unzipping brings with it a sense of freedom and a feeling of ultimate relief—sort of like wearing pants that are a size too small in order to make yourself appear thinner than you are. When you unzip and let it all hang out, you feel so much better.

Pioneering gay priest, psychotherapist, and theologian John McNeill, who is now a proud member of MCC has discussed the necessity of queer Christians overcoming our fears. For McNeill, fear not only stands between us and our personal authenticity but also between us and our sisters and brothers:

The fear that we should seek to be liberated from is that kind of paranoid fear that impoverishes our conscience and cripples our response to those around us, numbing us to their needs because of anxiety about our own needs, blinding us in such a way that we fail to recognize those around us as our brothers and sisters.³⁸

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As long as we are in the grip of this fear, we will be unable to envision, create, and see to fruition a church where everyone is welcome, included, and equal. McNeill points to the coming of the Christ as the moment when the world was challenged to give up its fear; in the infancy narratives the birth of Jesus is accompanied by the repeated admonition, "Do not be afraid" (Matt 2:20; Lk 1:14, 1:30, 2:10).³⁹ If Jesus' birth signaled that one could live without fear, how much more his announcement of the Reign of God showed people tangibly through his words⁴⁰ and deeds that they could come out of fear into God's love and grace. It is this Reign of God that a disreputable church enacts day by day.

How? New Testament scholars have pointed out that one of the hallmarks of Jesus' ministry was what they call his "open commensality,"⁴¹ that is, his policy of eating with many different types of people. MCC pastor and queer theologian Robert E. Shore-Goss has asserted that this policy of open commensality is at the heart of the message and ministry of MCC: "The practice of open commensality enables a queer church to invite the sexual stories of disparate queers into a matrix of dis/grace."⁴² I concur and would go so far as to say that it must be the cornerstone of any church that claims to be inclusive or demonstrative of the type of radical, unconditional love that Jesus embodied. For it is in this "matrix of dis/grace" that the Church of Jesus Christ becomes disreputable.

Sociologists suggest that meals reflect society in microcosm. We can tell a lot about people by whom they eat with.⁴³ Open communion is paradigmatic of the Body of Christ which includes all people. And just as Jesus Christ, through his *physical body*, enacted the meal that was to become the Christian Church's primary sacrament of grace that incorporates us into the Body of Christ (the Church), we receive that Communion (common/union) into our *physical bodies*; or, as I suggest in my Prayer of Consecration on Sundays in MCC, just as the physical elements of bread and fruit of the vine become part of our physical bodies, so too the Christ Spirit contained in it becomes a part of our spirits, Christing us and making us one. In the Eucharist the bread is *opened* to us (not broken!)⁴⁴ as God is *opened* to us and we enter in: One might say we are invited to *penetrate* God in the Eucharistic celebration. But to do so we have to unzip.

I find it incomprehensible that any church would dare to invoke the communion of saints in its communion liturgy and then deny physical communion to anyone. But as Roman Catholic womanist theologian M. Shawn Copeland reminds us, "Even as the table includes, it excludes."⁴⁵ I recall my two most recent experiences in the Roman Catholic Church of

my upbringing—my nephew's wedding and my father's funeral. I had intended to receive Communion with my family, for I still consider myself in some ways a Catholic; but then the celebrant noted that if you were not a baptized Catholic "in a confessed state of grace" you were welcome to come forward and receive not Communion but a blessing. That changed my mind (made me repent?) instantly: Would Jesus have offered a blessing but no food? I doubt it. When my older sister (a fellow refugee from Catholicism) whispered to me, "Are you going up?" I replied, "No way. If I can't have their communion, I don't want their blessing." I am sure there are many who have felt as I did, who have felt pushed away by the very churches that they have supported with their presence, their participation, their loyalty, and their money. At those times, Jesus says, "Come on! Let's go eat somewhere else!"

How often we take for granted our inclusion in that Communion meal—until it is taken away from us. I wandered for six years with no church home before I was invited to an MCC, and on that first day over 30 years ago, I can still remember hearing the invitation to open communion, spoken by a lesbian woman to a church full of disreputable queers. Even then, however, I still had to turn to the person next to me and say, "This is my first time here. May I take communion?" She looked at me and said with a smile, "Of course you can! You are home!" But is everyone at home, even in an MCC congregation? Or do we still place restrictions on the table? Are cross-dressers able to come forward without hearing tittering from the pews? Are those who flag red or yellow or brown able to come forward and be embraced the same as others, without question or judgment? Are lovers in a three-way relationship able to stand at the altar just as they are, or do they have to pretend that they are just friends taking Communion together? Can a daddy bring his boy to Communion on a leash without the pastor being brought before the board of directors? Can a straight couple with their children step forward without being asked by the usher if they are sure they are in the right place? I wonder. Some MCC pastors still disinvite people to open communion by requiring in their invitation that the person be a baptized Christian who has confessed their sins!

Is MCC a disreputable church? Not yet, but it could be if we would unzip it and let our junk come out. We have the choice whether to live out our sexual stories every day of the week, wherever we are, or to go back into the closet of respectability that requires we be fit and suitable according to a heteronormative logic of decency. I live in the hope that those who have known restriction and discrimination will not feel compelled

to practice it themselves. I live in the hope that we will embrace our disreputability in Shore-Goss's matrix of dis/grace, within the tension that lies between Cheng's sin of self-focus and grace of mutuality. I live in the hope that we will not only queer the table but the entire Body of Christ. Only then will there *really* be room for everyone.

NOTES

1. I am reminded of the professor in Philip Roth's novel *The Human Stain* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), who was dismissed from his position for use of a racially charged epithet and branded a racist, when in actuality he himself was a light-skinned African American passing as white.

2. See Troy D. Perry with Thomas L. P. Swicegood, *Don't Be Afraid Anymore: The Story of Reverend Troy Perry and the Metropolitan Community Churches* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990).

3. I must acknowledge that my husband and I did, after much soul searching, get legally married in Massachusetts in 2005. We recognize that the institution itself is heteropatriarchal in structure but hope that, by our modeling of a different sort of marriage partnership, we might queer the institution and give others food for thought.

4. I am aware, with my colleague Susannah Cornwall, that not all of those who self-identify in this way wish to be included under the umbrella category queer. See Susannah Cornwall, *Sex and Uncertainty in the Body of Christ: Intersex Conditions and Christian Theology* (London: Equinox, 2010), 205–6. Rather than use it in this way, I agree with Patrick S. Cheng that perhaps a more productive use of the term is as a signifier for the notion of transgressiveness and a shattering of boundaries and binaries. See Patrick S. Cheng, *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology* (New York: Seabury Press, 2011), 5–8.

5. Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2000).

6. *Ibid.*, 130–31.

7. Marcella Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God* (London: Routledge, 2003), *passim* but see esp. her definition at 172, note 4.

8. "Decency, like money and like religion, is a currency of power." Kathleen M. Sands, "Civil Unions, Colonialism and the Struggle for Sexual Decency in Hawaii," in *Dancing Theology in Fetish Boots: Essays in Honour of Marcella Althaus-Reid*, ed. Lisa Isherwood and Mark D. Jordan (London: SCM Press, 2010), 59.

9. For a wonderful example of this sort of "dis/grace-full" church in MCC, see Robert E. Shore-Goss, "Dis/Grace-full Incarnation and the Dis/Grace-full Church: Marcella Althaus-Reid's Vision of Radical Inclusivity," in *Dancing Theology in Fetish Boots*, 10–16.

10. This is what some apologetic gay theologians stress in their work; see, for example, Eugene F. Rogers, Jr., "Sanctification, Homosexuality, and God's Triune Life," in *Theology and Sexuality: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Eugene F. Rogers, Jr. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 227–28.

11. Marcella Althaus-Reid, "Feetishism: The Scent of a Latin American Body Theology," in *Toward a Theology of Eros: Transfiguring Passion at the Limits of Discipline*, ed. Virginia Burrus and Catherine Keller (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 146–49.

12. Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, ed. Audre Lorde (Trumansburg, NY: The Crossing Press, 1984), 110–13.

13. Frederico Pieper Pires, "Liberation Theology, Modernity and Sexual Difference," in *Liberation Theology and Sexuality*, 2nd ed., ed. Marcella Althaus-Reid (London: SCM Press, 2009), 114–15, 117, 119.
14. Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), 87–89.
15. For an excellent discussion of this scene, see Joy R. Bostic, "'Flesh That Dances': A Theology of Sexuality and the Spirit in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," in *The Embrace of Eros: Bodies, Desires, and Sexuality in Christianity*, ed. Margaret D. Kamitsuka (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 277–96.
16. Valerie Saiving, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View" (1960), *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, ed. Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), 25–42.
17. Mary Daly, *Amazon Grace: Re-Calling the Courage to Sin Big* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 2.
18. Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation, with an Original Reintroduction by the Author* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), passim but esp. 1, 19, 69, 71.
19. Another frequently made argument for not talking explicitly about sexuality is that we will confirm what the majority thinks about us rather than encouraging them to see us as just like them. African Americans have found themselves in a similar predicament vis-à-vis sexuality, for the white majority has held up the stereotype of the hypersexual black person, which has made some black people reluctant to discuss sexual matters at all, for fear of confirming the stereotype. See Kelly Brown Douglas, "Black and Blues: God-Talk/Body-Talk for the Black Church," in *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection*, 2nd ed., ed. Marvin M. Ellison and Kelly Brown Douglas (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 54–57.
20. Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 76.
21. Philip Culbertson and Tavita Maliko, "A G-String Is Not Samoan': Exploring a Transgressive Third-Gender Pasifika Theology," in *Homosexualities*, ed. Marcella Althaus-Reid, Regina Ammicht Quinn, Erik Borgman and Norbert Reck (London: SCM Press, 2008), 62.
22. See, for example, Musa W. Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2000); Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005).
23. See, for example, Nelle Morton, *The Journey Is Home* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985).
24. For the culmination of this liberating mind-set, see Eve Ensler, *The Vagina Monologues* (New York: Villard, 2007).
25. A similar question is addressed by Alison R. Webster in her book *Found Wanting: Women, Christianity and Sexuality* (London: Cassell, 1995), 32.
26. Greg Carey, *Sinners: Jesus and His Earliest Followers* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009), 126.
27. Patrick S. Cheng, "Rethinking Sin and Grace for LGBT People Today," in *Sexuality and the Sacred*, 105–18. This argument is expanded in his book *From Sin to Amazing Grace: Discovering the Queer Christ* (New York: Seabury Books, 2012).
28. Cheng, "Rethinking Sin and Grace," 108–10.
29. This translation is from the Common English Bible, www.commonenglishbible.com, 2011 (emphasis added).
30. Melinda Quivik, "Third Sunday After the Epiphany," in *Preaching God's Transforming Justice: A Lectionary Commentary, Year B*, ed. Ronald J. Allen, Dale P. Andrews, and Dawn Ortoni-Wilhelm (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 77.
31. Thomas Breidenthal, "Sanctifying Nearness," in *Theology and Sexuality*, 344.
32. *Ibid.*, 344–45.

ernity and Sexual Difference," in Althaus-Reid (London: SCM Press,

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, www.commonenglishbible.com,

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eology and Sexuality, 344.

33. Ibid., 347.

34. Ibid., 352.

35. Ibid., 351.

36. James B. Nelson, *Between Two Gardens: Reflections on Sexuality and Religious Experi-* ence (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1983), 17–18.

37. Morrison, *Beloved*, 89.

38. John J. McNeill, *Taking a Chance on God: Liberating Theology for Gays, Lesbians, and Their Lovers, Families, and Friends* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), 47.

39. Ibid., 47–48.

40. The gospels record Jesus himself telling people not to be afraid (e.g., Matt. 10:26, 14:27, 17:8; Lk 12:32; Jn 14:27). See McNeill, *Taking a Chance*, 48–50.

41. John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peas-* ant (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 341–44. See also Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 131–33; and Thomas Bohache, *Christology from the Margins* (London: SCM Press, 2008), 247–48.

42. Shore-Goss, "Dis/Grace-full Incarnation and the Dis/Grace-full Church," 11.

43. "Few human activities so reveal the truth about our social lives as our dining com- pany. . . . Meals reflect basic social realities. Social scientists would say that societies *encode* their values in their dining practices." Carey, *Sinners*, 18.

44. This phrasing is a hallmark of the consecration liturgy of MCC's Rev. Elder Darlene Garner.

45. M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 61.