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THE QUEER CHRIST: RECOGNIZING OURSELVES IN THE DIVINE

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INTRODUCTION

Jesus the Christ is the foundational figure for all Christians. To millions of people he is, or at least represents, God, the divinity to which they, by calling themselves Christians, devote their lives. It should be no surprise, then, that presenting the Christ in anything but a conventional manner is potentially troubling and controversial. However, many people have seen the need for alternative images of the Christ. It would probably not surprise many Christians to see a Black Christ or an Asian Christ.¹ Even if such images might make some uncomfortable, one can see the reasoning behind them: the Christ and the gospel message are for all people and not just white Westerners.² To see a Black Christ is to state this symbolically and emphatically (and, perhaps, more historically accurately).

Alternative images of the Christ are nothing new. But what is the reaction when ones sees a queer image of Christ?³ A woman Christ, a gay Christ, a transgender Christ, an intersex Christ? An image of the Christ expressing

1 Anton Wessels, *Images of Jesus: How Jesus Is Perceived and Portrayed in Non-European Cultures*, trans. John Vriend, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), offers an introduction to how different cultures have viewed and used the image of Jesus. In particular, a brief overview of the Black Christ of liberation theology, mainly seen through the views of theologian James Cone, can be found on pages 87-91. An overview of the Asian Christ appears on pages 126-157.

2 The term "Westerner" is meant to indicate the people of Europe and North America.

3 Section 4 below provides several examples of both positive and disturbing reactions that the Queer Christ can provoke.

sexuality? These images would, and have, disturbed many, especially the institutions of Christianity including both the Roman Catholic Church and most protestant denominations. If a queer person is not an acceptable human being in the eyes of the institutional church and many individual Christians, it is no surprise that the Queer Christ would be seen as a blasphemous image. However, these images are not acts of blasphemy. Like a Black Christ, the Queer Christ symbolically and emphatically states that the Christ and the gospel message are not just for white Westerners, and not for just white, male, heterosexual Westerners. The Christ is for all people, and especially the marginalized people who were the focus of Jesus' message. In society today the marginalized includes not only women, African Americans and other racial minorities, but also queer people such as gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, transgenders, intersex people and all others that transgress the boundaries of the male heterosexual model enforced by our church institutions.

Looking at images of the Queer Christ through the theories of the anthropologist Mary Douglas and the psychologist Viktor Frankl can help us interpret these images in the light of fundamental human drives. We can see why they are both threatening to the institution of Christianity and critically meaningful to many queer Christians. Such information may not convince anti-queer Christians that they should become supportive of queer people. Oppressors should not be expected to easily give up the tools of oppression. However, the hope is that insights gained might help disrupt oppressive power

structures within the church, help those being oppressed better understand their circumstances (that is, the motivations behind the church's institutional homophobia), and help provide new meaning to those unsure about the relevance of Christ or who have rejected or been rejected by the church. To accomplish these goals, one needs to understand the motivations of the anti-queer forces and search for meaningful ways to reclaim Christianity as a truly inclusive message of love.

Why is it appropriate to use the theories of Douglas and Frankl when considering the theological question of the Christ? Theology might be understood as the intersection of Douglas and Frankl's theories: finding order in our meanings and finding meaning in our orderings. The theologian Jürgen Moltmann states that “philosophy and theology... have to do with orientation, and are disciplines which address the meaning of reality.”⁴ It is the goal of theologians to find order and meaning in the world. As respective experts in order and meaning as human pursuits, Douglas and Frankl can provide important insights to the theologian and to all Christians who turn to God to search out order and meaning in their world.

For the purposes of this investigation, “queer” will be used as an all-inclusive term to encompass, in particular, those marginalized who live on the boundaries of socially acceptable sexuality and gender and, more generally, could also be extended to include any others who do not fit into the culturally

⁴ Jürgen Moltmann, *God for a Secular Society: The Public Relevance of Theology*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 96.

normative and church enforced category of white male heterosexuality. The Queer Christ is then the Christ that transgresses the boundaries of the male heterosexual/asexual Christ model traditionally presented by the figure of Jesus.

Regarding another point of language, this discussion will emphasize that “Christ” is not Jesus' last name, but is the Anglicized Greek term for Messiah. Thus, Jesus will be referred to as male, but Christ will be presented in a gender-neutral way, using such terms as the Christ, Queer Christ, etc. This is not to deny that Jesus is accepted to have been male, but to propose that if God's Christ were to come to us today, that Christ might very well be a woman, or Black, or Asian, or even queer.

In the following pages, section one will discuss the important pertinent anthropological theories of Mary Douglas and section two will cover the relevant psychological theories of Viktor Frankl. Section three will briefly address why traditional Christology falls short of extending the gospel message to queer people. Section four will then discuss three uses of Queer Christ images - the Queer Christ in theology, the Queer Christ in drama, and the Queer Christ in art – as well as how Christian institutions and society in general have reacted to them. The conclusion in section five will treat how we might use insights gained from Douglas' and Frankl's theories to see theology, the Queer Christ, and queer friendly religious practices in a new way, proposing that new perspectives and new practices are necessary to finally disrupt Christianity's heterosexism and allow marginalized queer Christians to fully actualize their spirituality. Lastly, a

sermon inspired by the writing of this paper is included in the appendix to illustrate how the Queer Christ might be introduced into local church congregations.

1. A POLLUTING TABOO – MARY DOUGLAS

Originally published in 1966, British anthropologist Mary Douglas' book Purity and Danger, subtitled "An analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo," would eventually come to be considered a classic work in the field of anthropology. In 1995, the *Times Literary Supplement* named Purity and Danger one of the top 100 "books which have most influenced Western public discourse since the Second World War."⁵ Douglas' work will help us investigate why the institutional church often takes harmful and oppressive anti-queer positions, especially in relation to its reaction to Queer Christ images.

Richard Gauvain, in an article analyzing how three researchers studying Sunni Purity law approached Douglas' work, notes that her theories form a sort of baseline, helping demonstrate when purity beliefs are typical of or highly unusual for "ritual purity belief systems throughout the world."⁶ Gauvain also notes that "although Douglas' approach has now largely fallen out of favour with anthropologists (if not among comparative religionists), her theories

5 Paul Baumann, "Anthropology with a difference." *Commonweal* 128, no. 14 (17 August 2001): 11. Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost (accessed 12 February 2009), 11

6 Richard Gauvain, "Ritual Rewards: A Consideration of Three Recent Approaches to Sunni Purity Law," *Islamic Law & Society* 12, no. 3 (October 2005): 333-393, Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost (accessed 12 February 2009), 389.

regarding the predominantly social functions of beliefs relating to ritual purity and pollution... still dominate the field of purity studies.”⁷ It is precisely purity and pollution, where Douglas' theories “dominate,” that are applicable to the problem of religious oppression of queer people, as will be seen in the examples below. Edmund Standing concurs: “The danger posed to fundamentalists by the existence of LGBT people can be understood through the work of Mary Douglas.”⁸

In a 2002 edition of her book, Douglas presents her theme of “taboo as a spontaneous device for protecting the distinctive categories of the universe”⁹ which is necessary because “ambiguous things can seem very threatening. Taboo confronts the ambiguous and shunts it into the category of the sacred.”¹⁰ “Taboo protects the local consensus on how the world is organised. It shores up wavering certainty. It reduces intellectual and social disorder.”¹¹ One can immediately see how the Queer Christ fits into this scenario as a taboo, as a threat which challenges orthodox Christianity's conventional ordering of the world via gender and sexuality. The tabooing of the Queer Christ serves to

7 Ibid., 337.

8 Edmund Standing, "Homophobia and the postmodern condition," *Theology & Sexuality* 10, no. 2 (March 2004): 65-72, ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost (accessed 13 February 2009), 68.

9 Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London and New York: Routledge Classics, 2002), xi.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

protect the categories of male and female and resolve the ambiguity of sexual orientation.

Most of the cultural examples for Mary Douglas' theory come from primitive societies. Thus, one might object that it wouldn't necessarily be proper to extend these to our own modern society. However, Douglas does not believe this to be the case: "I am going to argue that our ideas of dirt also express symbolic systems and that the difference between pollution behaviour in one part of the world and another is only a matter of detail."¹² She continues,

The difference between us is not that our behaviour is grounded on science and theirs on symbolism. Our behaviour also carries symbolic meaning. The real difference is that we do not bring forward from one context to the next the same set of ever more powerful symbols: our experience is fragmented. Our rituals create a lot of little sub-worlds, unrelated.¹³

Douglas proposes "that rational behaviour involves classification, and that the activity of classifying is a human universal."¹⁴ The Queer Christ is a challenge to the classification of heterosexuality as the proper order of the universe, the resulting tabooing of queer people, and especially Christianity's complicity in this oppression.

There should be no doubt that the institution of Christianity sees queer people as a threat to its world view that needs to be subjugated. Homosexuality

¹² Ibid, 43.

¹³ Ibid, 85.

¹⁴ Ibid, xvii.

is an ongoing controversial subject for most Christian denominations.¹⁵ Most still restrict the participation of queer people in some way such as lack of ordination privileges or the inability to marry in the church. The Catholic Church, one of the world's largest and most powerful religious organizations, is particularly vocal and vehemently anti-gay, officially declaring "homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered"¹⁶ and that "they are contrary to natural law."¹⁷ Further, "homosexual persons are called to chastity... they can and should gradually and resolutely approach Christian perfection."¹⁸ That is, if one cannot maintain heterosexual relationships then one must strive to be asexual, which is "Christian perfection." As recently as December 2008, Pope Benedict XVI "compared behavior beyond traditional heterosexual relations as 'a destruction of God's work.'"¹⁹ Additional examples of how the church feels threatened by queerness will be offered below as we see how it has reacted specifically to Queer Christ images.

15 The Human Rights Campaign, a lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender civil rights organization, has compiled information on the stance of specific religious groups towards queer people, including non-Christian groups. See "Faith Positions," <http://www.hrc.org/issues/religion/4955.htm> (accessed 12 February 2009).

16 "Catechism of the Catholic Church," paragraph #2357, http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p3s2c2a6.htm (accessed 12 February 2009).

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid., paragraph #2359.

19 "Pope Benedict criticizes homosexual behavior," *International Herald Tribune*, 22 December 2008, <http://www.iht.com/articles/2008/12/22/europe/23pope.php> (accessed 12 February 2009).

To challenge the church's world view is to challenge the very order of the universe for many Christians and we should not expect this challenge to succeed easily. Douglas shows that “a challenge to the established classification is brought under control by some theory of attendant harm”²⁰ and “uses impaired health as the threat”²¹. Knowing that the church has classified a male dominated heterosexuality as the only proper form of sexual expression for humanity,²² then by Douglas' assertion it should come as no surprise that the church has associated transgressors of this heterosexual model (i.e. queer people) with pedophilia, condemned them to hell, blamed them for AIDS as well as natural and man-made disasters, and warned that they will seduce others to their perverted, transgressive lifestyle.²³

Douglas also points out that “feared contagion extends the danger of a broken taboo to the whole community.”²⁴ The marginalization of queer people becomes necessary: “Uncleanness or dirt is that which must not be included if a

20 Douglas, xi.

21 Ibid.

22 For example, the Catholic church clearly delineates that male domination is considered the proper order of the world through its patriarchal model that refuses to ordain women into the priesthood. Likewise, the previously quoted Catechism of the Catholic Church shows that it does not consider anything other than heterosexuality to be proper.

23 Specific cases of this condemning rhetoric are well known. For examples, the late Rev. Jerry Falwell blamed feminists, gays, and lesbians for the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks (<http://archives.cnn.com/2001/US/09/14/Falwell.apology/>, accessed 28 January 2009), the organization Repent America blamed Hurricane Katrina on homosexuals (http://www.repentamerica.com/pr_hurricanekatrina.html, accessed 28 January 2009), and Pat Robertson accused feminists of turning women into lesbians (<http://www.pbs.org/opb/thesixties/topics/revolution/legacy.html>, accessed 29 January 2009)

24 Douglas, xiii.

pattern is to be maintained.”²⁵ Thus queerness becomes dirty, the pollution that can corrupt the pattern of heterosexual society. Same-sex marriages seemingly become capable of corrupting good, orderly heterosexual families.

However, it is important that while “dirt is essentially disorder,”²⁶ what is defined as polluting dirt is not the result of a universal moral order, Christian or otherwise: “There is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder.”²⁷ Many Christians believe that God, through the Bible, provides a universal moral order. The important factor is not whether a moral order exists, but that from Douglas' anthropological point of view, notions of pollution are not the result of any such moral order.

Since pollution comes from a violation of an established ordering system, but is specific to a culture and not part of any universal order, the established order must be challenged if the pollution is to be accepted into the system instead of rejected as a contaminating taboo. Therefore, Christian-backed heteronormativity must be challenged if Christianity is to be a truly welcoming place for queer people. Otherwise, institutional Christianity will remain an oppressive environment for the queer person who is denied ordination, denied marriage, and even denied full personhood by anti-queer rhetoric that condemns and batters the self-esteem of queer people by labeling them as inherently sinful.

25 Ibid., 50.

26 Ibid., 2.

27 Ibid.

If queerness is the polluting dirt with which we are concerned, then it should be noted that, for Douglas, “no single item is dirty apart from a particular system of classification in which it does not fit.”²⁸ That is, if queerness is the “pollutant” but, in fact, is not “dirty,”²⁹ then it is our (Christian) society's system of classifying the universe that is wrong. From this light, we should be able to see why it is critical that the heterosexual norm be challenged while also understanding why the challenge is so emotionally distressing for those invested in that norm.

The male-female binary can arguably be considered one of humanity's most basic categories of cultural organization. In the Christian tradition, many people see this fundamental classifier as ordained by God from the beginning of creation: “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.”³⁰ It is from this binary, the idea that only male and female exist and that the only proper pairing is one man with one woman, as well as the patriarchal notion that the male must always be dominant, that the heterosexual norm arises, making taboo anything or anyone that threatens this fundamental notion of human order.³¹ Because Christianity

28 Ibid., xvii.

29 The human dignity of queer people is assumed. The purpose is not to argue that queer people are not in fact dirty but to gain insights on why institutional Christianity often insists that they are.

30 Gen 1:27 (New Revised Standard Version)

31 Biblical scholars that challenge this patriarchal heterosexist interpretation include, among others, Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978) and Ken Stone, *Practicing Safer Texts* (New York: T&T Clark International, Inc., 2004).

has helped enforce this norm through the male heterosexual/asexual model of Jesus, the Queer Christ becomes taboo. Standing states:

Douglas's analysis is relevant here for it shows that the quest for 'purity' which lies at the heart of evangelical fundamentalism is a specific reaction to the dissolution of societal certainty, a dissolution that in this case has occurred with the emergence of the postmodern condition. Fundamentalism is reliant on binary thought, and therefore operates within a stringent form of the false heteropatriarchal dichotomy of male/female. Those who openly and explicitly fuck with gender are dangerous in this context, for they challenge the purity codes of fundamentalism.³²

Challenging heterosexism may be essential for the future of Christianity itself. The Christian marginalization of the feared, the disorderly, and the dirty is the very human seeking of purity, an orderly and comforting system of classifying our universe. Douglas notes, "Purity is the enemy of change, of ambiguity and compromise. Most of us indeed would feel safer if our experience could be hard-set and fixed in form."³³ But she also notes the inherent danger in pursuing purity: "The quest for purity is pursued by rejection. It follows that when purity is not a symbol but something lived, it must be poor and barren. It is part of our condition that the purity for which we strive and sacrifice so much turns out to be hard and dead as a stone when we get it."³⁴

At least intuitively, Douglas' assertion seems correct. As a child, the church of which I was a part called into question the morality of playing cards,

32 Standing, 68.

33 Douglas, 200.

34 Ibid., 199.

going to movies, dancing, and, of course, listening to rock music was strictly evil. Yet, how dry and boring life would be without such diversions.

Therefore, we might consider whether the Queer Christ may not be only good for queer people. The Queer Christ might also be one important way to prevent Christianity from becoming as “hard and dead as a stone” through its pursuit of a false purity. Such a “pure” church sees the white male heterosexual as the highest form of humanity. Diversity is anathema. Such a church, through its enforced sameness, becomes irrelevant to a diverse humanity. Truly, it becomes hard and dead as a stone.

2. AN ULTIMATE MEANING – VIKTOR FRANKL³⁵

Viktor Frankl, founder of a school of psychology known as Logotherapy and a World War II survivor of the German concentration camps, lived and worked in Vienna, Austria, where he was Professor of Neurology and Psychiatry at the University of Vienna Medical School, until his death in 1997 at the age of 91. Frankl, recipient of 29 honorary doctorate degrees and a visiting professor at several United States universities including Harvard, received the Oskar Pfister Award from the American Psychiatric Association. He wrote 32 books, has been published in 32 languages, and his most famous work, Man's Search For Meaning, has sold over 10 million copies in the United States alone. Frankl's

³⁵ Much of the background material on Viktor Frankl has been adapted from a paper written by the author in fulfillment of the requirements for TEC351 Theories of Change in Personal & Social Transformation, Chicago Theological Seminary, Fall 2007.

vision is embodied in his theories of existential analysis and Logotherapy, which is officially recognized as a scientifically based school of psychology by The American Medical Society, the American Psychiatric Association and the American Psychological Association.³⁶ Through Frankl's theories on humanity's need to search for meaning, we gain insight into the important role the figure of the Queer Christ can play for queer people.

The Will To Meaning

For Frankl, humanity's primary drive is the desire to find meaning in life. He believed this drive, which he called the "will to meaning," can be satisfied under all circumstances in one of three ways:³⁷

1. By creating a work or completing a deed
2. By experiencing something or encountering someone
3. By one's attitude toward unavoidable suffering

Meaning through a work or deed is relatively self explanatory and would include acts such as writing a book or composing a piece of music. Meaning through an experience or encounter could be the experience of art or nature, for example, or meaning through love of another human.

³⁶ Viktor Frankl Institut, "Life and Work," *The Official Website of the Viktor Frankl Institute Vienna*, <http://www.viktorfrankl.org/e/lifeandwork.html> (accessed 20 February 2009).

³⁷ Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search For Meaning* (New York: Washington, 1985), 133.

Love can be particularly important. Frankl believed it is the “ultimate and the highest goal to which man can aspire.”³⁸ He saw three levels of human attraction (sexual, erotic, and love) which correspond to the three dimensions of a human (the physical, psychic, and spiritual, respectively).³⁹ Love finds its deepest meaning in the spiritual being of the beloved. It is the only way one person can know the true essence of another.⁴⁰

Meaning through suffering is possible because suffering challenges us to change ourselves when we cannot change our situation. It is important to note that suffering is not a necessary ingredient for meaning. If suffering is avoidable, then the cause of the suffering should be removed. However, if the suffering cannot be relieved, then we can find meaning through our attitude toward the suffering. Frankl believed that if it were not possible to find meaning in suffering, then survival itself would have no meaning, either.⁴¹

Several links between this basic statement of Frankl's theory and the Queer Christ can be drawn. Like any other human, the queer person is driven to find meaning in life. The Queer Christ has the potential to enable this search for meaning. One might find meaning through the creation of an image of the Queer Christ or through an encounter with the Queer Christ. Such an encounter may

38 Ibid., 57.

39 Viktor E. Frankl, *The Doctor and The Soul*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1969), 132-137.

40 Frankl, *Man's Search For Meaning*, 58.

41 Ibid., 135-137.

even find expression through psychic and spiritual love as defined by Frankl. Turning to the Queer Christ for love will be discussed further below using Donald Boisvert's book Sanctity and Male Desire as an example.

Frankl's expression of finding meaning in suffering might be read as a mandate for the queer person to search out a meaning in their oppression and queer people should indeed look for meaning in their persecution at the hands of the church. However, we need to take special note that Frankl specifies that such a meaning can only be found if the suffering cannot be avoided. The oppression from church imposed heterosexism is potentially avoidable and so we must then work to undo this oppression. While there is meaning to be found in how queer people endure their persecution, that meaning is lost if they are not simultaneously trying to change, when they can, that which oppresses them. One way of doing this is by challenging the institutions of Christianity through the Queer Christ.

The Spiritual Dimension

The human, according to Frankl, is a three-dimensional being. The physical, psychic, and spiritual dimensions combine to make us what we are. The spiritual dimension is what separates humans from animals and is where our need to find meaning originates.⁴² Frankl noted that even in concentration camps, one's spiritual life could deepen. The ability to find spiritual treasures

⁴² Frankl, *The Doctor and The Soul*, x.

and freedom within oneself may explain, according to Frankl, why some frail prisoners were able to survive the camps while more physically robust ones did not.⁴³

The queer person should consider seriously the value of the spiritual dimension. This aspect of life underlines the importance of addressing the oppression of queers by Christian institutions. Although queer people can and have abandoned the church, others will need, or at least prefer, to deepen their spirituality through the Christian faith. The Queer Christ is a way to both undermine the oppressive power of institutional Christianity as well as a way, by recognizing ourselves in the Christ and the Christ in ourselves, to find the spiritual treasures within that Frankl said are so important.

Humans, although not free from biology, heredity, and environment, are not fully conditioned and determined either. Humans are ultimately self-determining and are free to take a stand toward the conditions of life.⁴⁴ In fact, Frankl believed that the capacity to rise above one's conditions is a main feature of humanity⁴⁵ and the freedom to choose one's attitude in the face of unavoidable suffering is a human's ultimate freedom.⁴⁶ It cannot be taken away. Frankl noted that "Fundamentally, therefore, any man can, even under such circumstances,

43 Frankl, *Man's Search For Meaning*, 55.

44 Ibid., 153.

45 Ibid., 154.

46 Ibid., 12.

decide what shall become of him - mentally and spiritually. He may retain his human dignity even in a concentration camp."⁴⁷

Georgia Gojmerac-Leiner, in an article discussing the application of Frankl's work in ministering to the sick, offers the analogy of the human's spirituality and a tree's roots: "Awareness of spirituality arises out of the need for it, like a tree composting its own leaves to nurture the soil around itself, sending forth roots to anchor itself. Or, again, a tree with its roots can keep the soil from eroding thereby maintaining the bank on which it is growing as well as itself."⁴⁸ Like Frankl, Gojmerac-Leiner, is stressing that spirituality and spiritual freedom come from within one's self and are an innate part of our being, allowing us to survive the worst horrors of life.

Spiritual freedom is what makes life meaningful in the end.⁴⁹ It is this spiritual freedom which allows the queer person to rise above oppression, say no to the institutional church's enforced model of heterosexuality, and affirm that the Christ is gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, intersex, white, Asian, African-American, Native American, male, female, etc. and all of these and more at the same time.

47 Ibid., 87.

48 Georgia Gojmerac-Leiner, "Revisiting Viktor Frankl: his contributions to contemporary interest in spirituality and health care," *Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling* 59, no. 4 (2005): 375-379, ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost (accessed 12 February 2009), 376.

49 Frankl, *Man's Search For Meaning*, 87.

Frankl said that “the two basic human capacities, self-transcendence and self-distancing, were verified and validated in the concentration camps.”⁵⁰ He defined self-transcendence as a reaching beyond ourselves for something other than ourselves. The true meaning of life is found in the world rather than within one's own psyche. Self actualization is not an attainable goal but is only a side effect of self transcendence of one's human existence. That is, being fully human, finding meaning, is about looking outside ourselves and living for something or someone other than oneself.⁵¹ In Christianity, we look outside of ourselves to the Christ to help us rise above our own selfish desires in our search for meaning. The Christ becomes arguably the most important object of transcendence for Christians. For those who cannot reach out to a Christ that does not reflect their lives and their stories, they may find that ability when reaching out to the Queer Christ. Meaning is not found by merely identifying with the Queer Christ but occurs when that identification allows the queer person to see the divine in themselves and thereby knowing themselves, like the Queer Christ, to be worthy and capable of transcendence. On the other hand, the male heterosexual/asexual Christ communicates that queer people are neither worthy or capable of transcendence – of finding meaning outside of their own selfishness.

The concentration camps confirmed for Frankl that humans are largely driven by ego, instinct, and drives. However, the camps also demonstrated the

50 Viktor E. Frankl, *Viktor Frankl: Recollections: An Autobiography*, trans. Joseph Fabry and Judith Fabry (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing, 2000), 97.

51 Frankl, *Man's Search For Meaning*, 133.

human capacity for self-transcendence. Frankl noted, "Man is that being who invented the gas chambers of Auschwitz; however, he is also that being who entered those chambers upright, with the Lord's Prayer or the Shema Yisrael on his lips."⁵² That is, humans, who possess an incredible capacity for cruelty when reduced to ego, instinct, and drives, also intuitively know that they are more than biological machines. They are able to transcend the sum of their instincts and drives to become something more.⁵³

Spirituality is irreducible in that it cannot be explained by something that is not itself spiritual. Instincts and drives can influence one's spiritual aspect but they do not cause or explain it.⁵⁴ Spirituality comes from the unconscious as does the conscience, another irreducible concept.⁵⁵

Responsibility is another critical concept for Frankl, especially in relation to our freedom. The emphasis on responsibility may be one of the reasons Frankl's ideas are not as widely known. Richard Shweder writes "Yet [Frankl's] views continue to be something of a heresy among many psychotherapists in the United States, where the causes of distress are still thought to reside outside the

52 Matthew Scully, "Viktor Frankl at Ninety: An Interview," *First Things First: The Journal of Religion, Culture, and Public Life*, April 1995, http://www.firstthings.com/article.php3?id_article=4031 (accessed 7 November 2008).

53 Ibid.

54 Frankl, *The Doctor and The Soul*, xviii.

55 Ibid., xx.

control and will of the sufferer."⁵⁶ He goes on to note that "Many American clinicians find Dr. Frankl's belief in the power of self-determination difficult to accept."⁵⁷ Nancy Benvenga blames a "victim mentality that has virtually obliterated any notion of personal responsibility for one's actions."⁵⁸

Regarding responsibility, Frankl states, "freedom is in danger of degenerating into mere arbitrariness unless it is lived in terms of responsibility."⁵⁹ "To explain man's being free, the existential quality of the human reality would do; however, to explain his being responsible, the transcendent quality of conscience must be considered."⁶⁰ A religious person recognizes this transcendence whereas an irreligious person only sees the immanent aspect of conscience and doesn't ask about its origins or to what one is responsible.⁶¹ One can believe in transcendence but not call it "God."⁶²

Although Frankl usually made a strict distinction between the spiritual and religion, he sometimes let that distinction become blurred. Frankl never said

56 Richard Shweder, "Read. You're Getting Very Unslepy," *The New York Times*, 7 September, 1997, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?sec=health&res=9401E5D71130F934A3575AC0A961958260&scp=5&sq=viktor%20frankl&st=cse> (accessed 20 February 2009).

57 Ibid.

58 Nancy Benvenga, "Frankl, Newman and the Meaning of Suffering," *Journal of Religion & Health* 37, no. 1 (March 1998): 63-66. Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost (accessed February 12 2009), 63.

59 Frankl, *Man's Search For Meaning*, 156.

60 Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search For Ultimate Meaning* (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing, 2000), 61.

61 Ibid.

62 Ibid., 63.

that God exists as a supernatural being, but he believed that there is a religious sense rooted in every person's unconscious depths.⁶³ In addition to the instinctual unconscious, Frankl believed in the existence of a spiritual unconscious.⁶⁴ He thought that it was dangerous to see spirituality or religion as coming from instinctual drives.⁶⁵ Religion needs to be personal, not universal.⁶⁶ The personal nature of the spiritual is often reflected by those Christians who talk about a having a personal relationship with God. This personal aspect reinforces that we cannot coerce everyone into the white, male, heterosexual model of Jesus that the Church has historically held as its ideal. The Queer Christ allows for a truly personal messiah.

The Ultimate Meaning

Frankl also held out the hope of an ultimate meaning. Comparing the possibility to the situation of an ape used for medical testing where the ape surely cannot understand the reason for its suffering, Frankl asked, "Is it not conceivable that there is still another dimension possible, a world beyond man's world; a world in which the question of an ultimate meaning of human suffering

63 Ibid., 14.

64 Ibid., 31.

65 Frankl, *The Doctor and The Soul*, xx.

66 Frankl, *Man's Search For Ultimate Meaning*, 149.

would find an answer?"⁶⁷ He contended that any ultimate meaning exceeds the abilities of humans to understand.

Frankl saw religion as humanity's search for this ultimate meaning.⁶⁸ According to Ajit Das' understanding of Frankl, "ultimate meanings come from the awareness that there is order in the universe and that each individual is part of that order."⁶⁹ Frankl proposed that humanity may get closest to ultimate meaning on a symbolic level through religion. He believed that meaning is unique and specific to each individual. Likewise, religion needs to be personal and there is no such thing as a universal religion. He compared religion to language: one is not better than another.⁷⁰ That is, just as one language as a system of communication is not better than another language, any one religion is not better than another as a system of symbols with which to approach ultimate meaning.

Frankl believed that happiness is not something one is owed or that you can even obtain it directly. It is a by-product of finding the meaning that life

67 Frankl, *Man's Search For Meaning*, 141.

68 Frankl, *Man's Search For Ultimate Meaning*, 17.

69 Ajit K. Das, "Frankl and the realm of meaning," *Journal of Humanistic Education & Development* 36, no. 4 (June 1998): 199, Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost (accessed February 20 2009).

70 Frankl, *Man's Search For Ultimate Meaning*, 148-149.

offers to you.⁷¹ We must ask what life demands from us and not what we want from life.⁷²

What is life, what is God, demanding from queer people? Where is the meaning offered that leads to happiness? Can a religion which tells queer people they are not good enough both directly and forcefully as well as indirectly through the ideal of the white, male, heterosexual Christ figure help queers find that meaning? It is questionable whether a religion that uses its most important symbol, the Christ, as an affront to the dignity and humanity of queer people is capable of symbolically pointing queer people to an ultimate meaning. The Queer Christ might provide a more meaningful symbol that celebrates God incarnated as humanity in all its diversity, a symbol that is more personally meaningful than a Christ figure with which many people cannot readily identify.

Jim Lantz identifies three "major responsibilities of human life"⁷³ that he attributes to Frankl: to notice, actualize, and honor the "meaning potentials"⁷⁴ in life. He describes the role of the therapist as "a co-explorer who helps the client discover the reality of the meanings and meaning potentials that call to the client for their discovery, actualization and re-collection as a way to 'shrink' the

71 Frankl, *Man's Search For Meaning*, 141.

72 Scully.

73 Jim Lantz, "Phenomenological reflection and time in Viktor Frankl's existential psychotherapy." *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology* 31, no. 2 (Fall2000 2000): 220-231. Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost (accessed 12 February 2009), 221.

74 Ibid.

existential-meaning vacuum.”⁷⁵ The Queer Christ provides a meaning potential that needs to be noticed, actualized, and honored. Further, in as much as Christians proclaim the Christ to be alive and a force in our current lives, the Queer Christ can also be a co-explorer in discovering other meanings in life.

3. A FAILING CHRISTOLOGY

Christology is the theory, or theories, of the nature of the Christ. More specifically, it is the church “doctrine of the divine and human natures in”⁷⁶ Jesus the Christ. To take the idea of the Queer Christ seriously, Christology needs to be addressed. In what ways do traditional Christological teachings fall short and how does the Queer Christ address those failings? Once this theological question has been addressed, we can turn in the next section to real life examples of Queer Christ images, how they have been received, and the insights we gain from analyzing them through the ideas of Mary Douglas and Viktor Frankl.

In traditional Christological teachings, the conventional interpretation of Jesus as the Christ falls short of what it really means to be human and therefore lacks its full potential for meaning. This is especially true for queer people who could greatly benefit by seeing their humanity in Jesus because they are so often told by the church that they are less than human. The Queer Christ can help address this problem.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 222.

⁷⁶ Van A. Harvey, *A Handbook of Theological Terms* (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 48.

Although traditional church doctrine declares Jesus the Christ both fully God and fully human,⁷⁷ some aspects of Jesus' humanity are conveniently ignored. Jesus is presented as perfect, male, and asexual, or at least a heterosexual virgin. How many people can see their own humanity reflected in such a perfect being? How many people can see their own humanity reflected in a male asexual or even in a male heterosexual virgin Christ? Surely there are some, but this limited version of Jesus' humanity makes it difficult for many, and especially the marginalized queer person, to identify with Jesus as Christ.

Do we need to identify with the Christ for the Christ to be meaningful? If the Christ represents the epitome of humanity for Christians and if part of the reason the Christ is human is to know what it is to suffer as a human, then the answer is yes. A Christian must be able to see their humanity represented by the Christ to say, "Yes, I can live a Christ-like life just as I am, loved by God just as I am." A Christian must be able to see their humanity represented by the Christ to be able to say, "Yes, God, through Christ, understands me."

Theologian Robert Goss states the problem this way: "Within Protestant and more recent Roman Catholic christological discourse, Jesus the Christ becomes a model of heterosexuality, a foundation for legitimizing heterosexist

⁷⁷ For example, the Nicene Creed, from the 4th century CE, confirms Jesus as "true God from true God" and "truly human." See "Nicene Creed," United Church of Christ web site, <http://www.ucc.org/beliefs/nicene-creed.html> (accessed 20 February 2009). The "Definition of the Council of Chalcedon," from the 5th century CE, also confirms Jesus as "truly God and truly human" and is "accepted as a symbol of Christian doctrine by the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Anglican, Reformed and Lutheran churches." See "Jesus Christ is both human and divine," United Church of Christ web site, <http://www.ucc.org/beliefs/jesus-christ-is-both-human.html> (accessed 20 February 2009).

Christian truth and social constructions on marriage and family.”⁷⁸ Goss asserts that “If the Christ is not queer, then the gospel is no longer good news but oppressive news for queers. If the Christ is not queer, then the incarnation has no meaning for our sexuality.”⁷⁹ He argues, “A queer christology begins with the experience of homophobic oppression and gay/lesbian reverse discursive experience. It is discourse rooted in gay/lesbian practice. This is the practice of christology constructed in the midst of human suffering and real oppression: it stands contrary to the practices of ecclesial christology.”⁸⁰

Although I will not attempt to articulate a full christology, I do propose that the Queer Christ needs to be a fully human, imperfect, sexual Christ who is still fully divine and not necessarily male. The Queer Christ needs to disrupt the church's enforcement of the heterosexual norm and allow queer people formerly disillusioned with institutional Christianity to fully realize their relationship with God. That is not to say that God can only be found through Christianity, but the Queer Christ is necessary for queer Christians – and beneficial for all Christians. For if the Christ is relevant only to people who fit the molds approved by the church, then Christ is not relevant to anyone. The Queer Christ begins to re-imagine a truly inclusive Christ welcoming to all people seeking God.

⁷⁸ Robert E. Goss, *Queering Christ: Beyond Jesus Acted Up* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2002), 151.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 168.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 163.

Donald Boisvert agrees not only that if Jesus was human he must have been a sexual being, but also that it is necessary to relate our saintly figures to queer culture: "I choose to see my saints as somehow relevant to contemporary gay culture. This requires an imaginative leap. It is, however, a necessary leap, for only by doing so can we hope to contribute to the elaboration of a relevant gay spirituality in this day and age. There is, in my estimation, no more compelling or necessary task for the gay scholar of religion."⁸¹

The need for a sexual Christ should now be clear, but why an imperfect Christ? First, humans are imperfect. If the Christ is to know what it is to be human, then the Christ must know what it is to be imperfect. Second, the church's rhetoric of sin⁸² labels the queer person as inherently sinful. The Christ must not only know what it means to be unjustly labeled sinful, but the Christ must know what real sin is in an intimate firsthand way as all humans do. In fact, there is Biblical evidence to support such a depiction of the Christ in the person of Jesus. For example: Jesus lied (John 7:8-10), Jesus dishonored his parents (Luke 2:46-48), Jesus vandalized the temple (Matt 21:12, Mark 11:15-16, Luke 19:45, John 2:15), and Jesus calls a woman a dog because of her nationality (Matt 15:24-26, Mark 7:26-27). While all of these scriptures are usually

81 Donald L. Boisvert, *Sanctity and Male Desire* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2004), 17.

82 A common view of sin equates it with wrong-doing. This definition is part of the problem. I would propose that sin needs to be redefined, perhaps as separation from God (which does not necessarily imply wrong-doing). One's "queerness" does not in itself separate one from God and thus is not sinful. In fact, for a queer person to live counter to their "queerness" would be a separation from God and would in fact be sinful. I would therefore propose that traditional church teachings on homosexuality actually lead people to a state of sin. Unfortunately, further pursuit of this topic is beyond the scope of this paper.

interpreted such that Jesus the Christ did nothing wrong in his actions, one can also argue that if anyone today acted in the same way the action could, and normally would, be called sin.

Jungian analyst and Episcopal priest John Sanford states that the perfect Christ in fact leaves us with an incomplete model of salvation:

... the usual Christian's understanding of Christ leaves out our dark side from our relationship to God. Instead of a reconciliation of opposites taking place, and a wholeness emerging, a one-sidedly "perfect" person is held up to the Christian as the conscious goal of religious life. But this leaves our unredeemed shadow side in a chaotic condition, banished to the unconscious psychic realm, from which position it perpetuates the war of the opposites. We can rightly assert that we are not yet redeemed in a psychological sense.⁸³

Sanford's further statement of this problem of trying to banish the dark side from Christ's humanity as well as from our own humanity brings to mind both Douglas' comments about an unrelenting pursuit of purity resulting in a life as hard and dead as a stone as well as Gojmerac-Leiner's analogy of spirituality to the roots of a tree:

The Christian tree is uprooted and preserved in a glass freezer. We gaze at its cold beauty but cannot touch its living essence, because its roots are no longer in the soil of the soul.

It is the religious task of our age to reroot this Christian tree in the living substance of our inner being. Then that symbol Christ brings to life will become known to us again, and we will become men and women who know we can hope for wholeness.⁸⁴

Through the Queer Christ, a Christ that is fully human, we can re-root Christianity in the diverse soul of humanity. Through the Queer Christ, queer

⁸³ John A. Sanford, *Dreams: God's Forgotten Language* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1989), 149.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 154.

people, and all people, can once more discover a “hope for wholeness” that is lost in a Christ of “cold beauty” who is unrelated to the real lives of human beings.

Does an imperfect Christ imply that God is imperfect? It will be helpful to first expand upon the notion of perfection, which Sanford notes can be understood in two ways. First is the concept of perfection as “free from sin, dark thoughts, or any contamination from evil.”⁸⁵ The second way of understanding perfection is being “whole, complete, in order and harmony.”⁸⁶ Both the Christ and God can be considered perfect in the second sense. To be human, however, the Christ must necessarily be imperfect in the first sense, but this does not imply that God also struggles with sin and doubt. This may seem like a contradiction since Christian theology equates God and Christ through the concept of the Trinity, but it is no more of a contradiction than saying that the Christ is both fully human and fully divine at the same time. These are in fact paradoxes that have always been inherent in the concepts of the Trinity and the duality of Christ's nature.

Does an imperfect Christ over-emphasize the humanity of the Christ and remove the Christ's divinity? I do not believe so. The Christ's divinity (i.e. Godliness) is reflected in the Christ's wholeness and represents what humans can aspire to be. The fact that the Christ can be whole, complete and in harmony

85 Ibid., 68.

86 Ibid.

with God while also living an imperfect human life, struggling with sin and doubt, should be seen as a great hope for all of humanity.

4. THE QUEER CHRIST

We turn now to examples of the Queer Christ in theology, in drama, and in art to investigate how and why Christ has been conceived of as queer and how the church and society has reacted. We look to Mary Douglas and Viktor Frankl to interpret these examples and understand why these and new Queer Christ figures are necessary to disrupt Christian heterosexism.

The Queer Christ In Theology

Donald Boisvert wrote the book Sanctity and Male Desire as a “theological reflection on [his] life experience.”⁸⁷ The book itself is a survey of many saints and how “images of masculine sanctity can indeed be very powerful sites for the emergence of a healthy and positive gay identity.”⁸⁸

Boisvert notes the irony of a church that disavows homosexuality but then asks young gay boys to “adore and worship”⁸⁹ “attractive masculine”⁹⁰ saints. In his discussion of Jesus, the erotic is clearly at the forefront. Noting Jesus’

⁸⁷ Boisvert, *Sanctity and Male Desire*, 7.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 9.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 8.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 11.

“seminaked vulnerability”⁹¹ in typical portrayals of the crucifixion, Boisvert says, “Worshiping the handsomely glorious body of Jesus hung from the cross, gay men can enter into an act of erotic and spiritual intimacy with their lord.”⁹² He goes on to explain the importance of this gay erotic connection to Jesus: “Homodevotion, whether subtle or blatant, to the paradigmatic figure of the Christ subverts and destabilizes many religious claims over our bodies and lives. In embracing the broken body of Jesus, in all its precious parts, we also embrace and begin to heal our own broken and spurned bodies.”⁹³

Boisvert continues to queer the image of Jesus, calling his blood a “surrogate liquid,” a stand-in for the semen that is symbolic of what it means to be male. He notes the Eucharist is a ritual in which we not only symbolically take Jesus' body into ours, but also share it with others. This erotic desire for Jesus' semen is defiant of the heterosexual norm. The Queer Christ “upsets everything that is heterosexually normative and sacred: gender, family, marriage, children, career, love, and desire themselves.”⁹⁴

Through the gay erotic Jesus, Boisvert claims his intent “has been to question and destabilize, to reframe the discourse of sanctity in a different and, for gay men at least, more meaningful and relevant context.”⁹⁵ “Queering

91 Ibid., 171.

92 Ibid.

93 Ibid., 172.

94 Ibid., 195.

95 Ibid., 207.

implies a stretching, at times a breaking of the limits and bonds that circumscribe, from a theologically orthodox point of view, the proper ways of relating to the holy. Queering implies nothing less than receiving the saint's seed rather than bathing in his grace; penetrating or being penetrated by him rather than offering him empty tokens of worship and adoration."⁹⁶

Clearly, Boisvert is proposing an alternative view of Jesus the Christ to provide a more meaningful way for gay men to find an intimate relationship with God through Jesus. This seems to be exactly what Frankl has proposed humanity needs to do in its search for the ultimate meaning: finding a personal, unique meaning outside ourselves through religious symbols. Meaning which, for Boisvert, seems to be enhanced by queering the image of Jesus the Christ. Through the gay erotic Jesus, Boisvert looks to Jesus to discover the psychic and spiritual love in which Frankl finds so much significance for humans.

The road to publication of this queer view of the saints was not without its bumps, however. One might have expected few problems as the book was published by The Pilgrim Press, the publishing arm of the United Church of Christ, which stands proudly among the very few Christian institutions which strongly support queer people. This was not to be the case.

Boisvert recounts the story of his book's publication, recalling that just a week before its scheduled printing, the "Church's Ministry Interpreters" requested a long list of changes to the manuscript. Most of the changes asked for

⁹⁶ Ibid., 211.

the use of less explicitly sexual language.⁹⁷ These modifications were on top of others requested during the original editing process.⁹⁸ Boisvert speculates on the reasons behind the last minute problems with his publisher:

Why might a liberal Christian denomination such as the United Church of Christ and its publishing arm, the Pilgrim Press, respond in this way? What was it about my stories and words that touched such a sensitive nerve? As far as I knew, there were no potentially damaging legal issues. I was not soiling anyone's good name or reputation, though, in a spirit of critical engagement, I do take a few choice swipes at some highly placed Catholic clerics, all now dead. There were no doubt a variety of reasons for their reticence. On one level, they appeared to be motivated by a certain measure of political correctness. This would explain the concerns with such issues as play-acted violent or inter-generational sex, imaginary incest, or even the torture, mutilation and death of St. Sebastian. I also suspect that there were particular images and forms of language that simply made people uneasy, whether having to do with bodily parts or fluids, or with the dynamics of gay erotic performance. An apparently more insidious reason concerns the polluting nature of queer desire and queer religious discourse generally.⁹⁹

Boisvert proceeds to relate his hypothesis to Douglas' theories, proposing that queer desire is a "paradigm of cultural pollution," seen as threatening because it refuses to fit into proscribed cultural roles.¹⁰⁰ He says the goal of his book was "to give gay, especially Catholic, men a sense of entitlement of their own spiritual and erotic voices"¹⁰¹ and proposes that interpreting "the so-called

97 Donald L. Boisvert, "Talking Dirty about the Saints: Storytelling and the Politics of Desire," *Theology & Sexuality*, Vol. 12(2) (2006), 167.

98 Ibid., 171.

99 Ibid., 172-173.

100 Ibid., 174.

101 Ibid.

sacred” with a “polluting” homoerotic lens is actually beneficial, “making it slightly less luminous and distant, [and] may hopefully render it more authentic and approachable.”¹⁰²

Boisvert believes that one passage fantasizing a sexual liaison with Jesus was not allowed in his book not because it was inappropriate, but because it simply raises the issue of seeing Jesus in an erotic light. It was a contaminant. It risked polluting people's minds with images of Jesus as a sexual being.¹⁰³ Boisvert contrasts the rejection of this fantasy with the public and church acceptance of Mel Gibson's movie *The Passion of The Christ*.

What Gibson did, of course, was religiously and theologically orthodox, and certainly very heterosexually normative. Not a shadow of suspicion or even the slightest doubt about it. But what about my case? Homoerotic desire for the same suffering Jesus? Very, very suspicious. And very, very problematic. The defiantly straight Catholic film director can get off on the passion and suffering of his saviour, but the gay scholar of religion cannot express it in print.¹⁰⁴

For Boisvert, challenging the notion that queerness is polluting by projecting it onto the “so-called sacred” is a critical step in the fight for human decency against oppressive religious structures. “The more breaches we can create in the religiously homophobic edifice, the better our chances of finally reclaiming our spiritual and human integrity. Every time someone offers a queer counter-discourse of inclusion and encouragement, rigid and set religious

102 Ibid.

103 Ibid., 175.

104 Ibid., 176.

foundations become ever more slightly unstable.”¹⁰⁵ The Queer Christ, seen as a contaminant by the religious establishment, is, in reality, more of an antidote to the religious oppression of queer people. By helping queer people find their “spiritual and human integrity,” the Queer Christ can help point humanity, queer and not queer, to an ultimate meaning.

The Queer Christ In Drama

The now infamous 1998 play *Corpus Christi*, written by Terrence McNally, tells the story of a gay Jesus figure named Joshua who lives in Corpus Christi, Texas, and is having a love affair with his follower Judas. McNally describes the play in the preface to the published script.

Corpus Christi is a passion play. The life of Joshua, a young man from south Texas, is told in the theatrical tradition of medieval morality plays. Men play all the roles. There is no suspense. There is no scenery. The purpose of the play is that we begin again the familiar dialogue with ourselves: Do I love my neighbor? Am I contributing good to the society in which I operate or nil? Do I, in fact, matter? Nothing more, nothing less.¹⁰⁶

Needless to say, *Corpus Christi* caused a furor when it was first staged in New York City in 1998. Theater officials received death threats for themselves and McNally as well as threats to burn down the theater, prompting the Manhattan Theater Club to cancel the play.¹⁰⁷ Only after artists and civil liberty

105 Ibid., 177.

106 Terrence McNally, *Corpus Christi: A Play*, (New York: Grove Press, 1998), vi-vii.

107 “Censoring Terrence McNally,” *The New York Times*, 28 May 1998, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9C07EED71238F93BA15756C0A96E958260> (accessed 13 February 2009).

organizations protested the cancellation, was the decision reversed.¹⁰⁸ Protesters demonstrated outside the theater. William Donohue, president of The Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, which organized the protests, described the play as “replete with vulgarities, with obscenities directed toward a world religion” and stated that he “regarded [the play] as hate speech,”¹⁰⁹ labeling it “disgusting.”¹¹⁰ The Rev. Benedict J. Groeschel, of the Franciscan Friars of the Renewal, called the play a “terrible blasphemy to be removed from public life.”¹¹¹ Interestingly, outrage was not limited to Christian institutions. The London staging of the play a year later prompted a death sentence for McNally by the Shari’ah Court of the UK.¹¹²

The language of the protesters makes a clear link with Douglas' theories of purity. Labeling the play as vulgar, obscene, disgusting, and so terrible it should not be allowed for public viewing shows that it is regarded as a polluting influence, an impurity, and one that must be excised through condemning rhetoric and threats of violence.

108 Robin Pogrebin, “Not Just Another Opening For Disputed McNally Play,” *The New York Times*, 13 October 1998, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9406E4D6163AF930A25753C1A96E958260> (accessed 13 February 2009).

109 Ibid.

110 Neil Macfarquhar, “‘Corpus Christi’ Has a Preview, and Protesters,” *The New York Times*, 23 September 1998, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9906E7DF1F30F930A1575AC0A96E958260> (accessed 13 February 2009).

111 Ibid.

112 “UK Fatwa for ‘gay Jesus’ writer,” *BBC News*, 29 October 1999, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/493436.stm> (accessed 13 February 2009).

McNally, however, sees the ability to show Christ as queer as critical to finding meaning in a relationship with God.

If a divinity does not belong to all people, if He is not created in our image as much as we are created in His, then He is less a true divinity for all men to believe in than He is a particular religion's secular definition of what a divinity should be for the needs of its followers. Such a God is no God at all because He is exclusive to His members. He is a Roman Catholic at best and a very narrow-minded one at that.¹¹³

Fortunately, there is evidence that plays such as *Corpus Christi* are having an important beneficial impact. A review of a 2008 New York City revival of the play notes that gone were the protesters, arguments about free speech rights, and special security precautions that surrounded the original production.¹¹⁴ This does not mean that the play's premise of a queer Christ has been accepted, but it seems to not be viewed as quite the contaminant that it once was.

Criticism has not disappeared entirely, however. Interestingly, some of the criticism actually shows that Queer Christ images have exactly the effects I would propose that they should have. One commentator stated "controversy ensues whenever a particular image preferred among one segment of believers is publicized as so as to negate other images... project a Jesus where his humanity is stifled and you undercut those with a theology of a manly Christ."¹¹⁵ While the

113 McNally, v.

114 Jason Zinoman, "A Modern, Gay You-Know-Who Superstar," *The New York Times*, 22 October 2008, <http://theater2.nytimes.com/2008/10/22/theater/reviews/22corp.html> (accessed 13 February 2009).

115 Anthony Stevens-Arroyo, "On Faith: Catholic America: A Gay Jesus and Catholic Art," *The Washington Post*, 2 December 2008, http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/catholicamerica/2008/12/a_gay_jesus_and_catholic_art.html (accessed 20 February 2009).

Queer Christ need not negate the traditional image of the Christ, but complement it, if it indeed undercuts a theology of a manly Christ then it is having its desired effect as such a theology marginalizes queer people.

The same commentator goes on to say “religious art belongs to believers” and “McNally's gay man... would have little artistic worth without the attendant subversion of other people's religious symbols.”¹¹⁶ The message is somewhat subtle. Only “believers” have a right to the Christ's image and if you don't accept the approved white, male, heterosexual/asexual Christ, then you aren't a true believer. It is precisely this marginalization that can and should be countered, in part, by the image of the Queer Christ.

The use of images such as the Queer Christ ultimately reveal that they actually pollute nothing that isn't already polluted: anti-queer policies and rhetoric of religious institutions that find the order of their world, and therefore their power, threatened. Through such successful challenges, the Queer Christ offers hope to queer people looking for an ultimate meaning on a Christian spiritual journey. Minister, author, and art historian Kittredge Cherry concurs:

The queer Christ is necessary because conservatives are using Christian rhetoric to justify discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people. Christ was killed for teaching radical love, and now his image is being twisted to promote hate.

116 Ibid.

Those who have been left out of traditional Christian imagery are reclaiming, defusing, and transforming the old systems of symbolism.¹¹⁷

The Queer Christ In Art

The Queer Christ is found in the work of many artists. Cherry expresses the importance of these works: “These radically new Christ figures embody and empower people who are left out when Jesus is shown as a straight man. They can free the minds of everyone who sees them”¹¹⁸ and “start to compensate for institutional religion’s past biases and omissions.”¹¹⁹ For Cherry, the Queer Christ offers an important alternative to the picture of a white, male, heterosexual Jesus which is no longer sufficient. She believes the images are “not a reaction – they’re a revelation.”¹²⁰ The Queer Christ images “do even more than empower women and LGBT people. They liberate the Christ who dwells within every individual.”¹²¹

In a 1997 exhibition meant to show what radical forgiveness looks like, artist Alex Donis painted kissing, famous, same-sex figures who held opposite viewpoints. Some of the provocative images paired Kennedy with Castro, the

117 Kittredge Cherry, “The Queer Christ Arises for the Good of All,” *Tikkun*, <http://www.tikkun.org/archive/backissues/tik0803/religion/jesus> (accessed 20 February 2009).

118 Kittredge Cherry, *Art That Dares: Gay Jesus, Woman Christ, and More*. (Berkeley, CA: AndroGyne Press, 2007), 7.

119 Cherry, “The Queer Christ Arises for the Good of All.”

120 Cherry, *Art That Dares*, 8.

121 *Ibid.*, 17.

Pope and Gandhi, and Jesus with the Hindu god Rama. The reaction to the exhibition was not only threatened violence but very real violence. The gallery's windows were smashed twice and two of the artworks were destroyed, including that of Jesus and Rama, the Hindu embodiment of the ideal family man.¹²²

A 1993 painting by Becki Jayne Harrelson shows a male Christ hung on the cross. Instead of a sign saying "King of the Jews," above his head a sign written in blood simply states "FAGGOT." Harrelson says her "purpose is to de-shame our human sexual natures, especially gay sexuality, and present it as a sacred act."¹²³ The painting has been called "sick and disgusting" on "conservative Christian" websites and galleries in Harrelson's hometown of Atlanta have refused to exhibit the work.¹²⁴

In an exhibit titled "Ecce Homo," which opened in Stockholm, Sweden, during gay pride week, 1998, Elisabeth Ohlson Wallin displayed a series of photographs showing Jesus in a "contemporary LGBT context." In one of the photos, "Sermon on the Mount," Jesus is surrounded by gays and lesbians dressed in full leather gear. In another, Jesus' baptism is portrayed in a gay bathhouse with full frontal nudity. The exhibit caused considerable controversy,

122 Ibid., 35-38. A reproduction of "Jesus and Lord Rama" appears on page 36. Donis' website can be found at <http://www.alexdonis.com/> (accessed 20 February 2009).

123 Ibid., 43.

124 Ibid., 44. A reproduction of "The Crucifixion of Christ" appears on page 45. "The Crucifixion of Christ" and Harrelson's other artwork can also be viewed at the artist's website: <http://www.beckijayne.com/> (accessed 20 February 2009).

generating bomb threats and causing Pope John Paul II to cancel an audience with Sweden's Archbishop after the Archbishop approved a tour of the photos through many congregations of Sweden's state Lutheran church. During a tour of continental Europe, two of the photos were destroyed by an axe-wielding man and Ohlson Wallin's life was threatened.¹²⁵

Importantly, the Queer Christ in art is represented by more than male images. Robert Lentz, a Franciscan friar and iconographer, was forced in 2005 to give away the copyright and have his name removed from ten of his icons in order to keep peace with the Archbishop of Santa Fe, New Mexico. One of the banned icons, "Christa Sophia," depicts a dark-skinned female Christ with a nose ring, holding a figurine of a fertility goddess.¹²⁶

In December 1999, Janet McKenzie's painting "Jesus of the People" won an art competition sponsored by the *Catholic National Reporter*. It shows Jesus as a black woman, dressed in robes and wearing a crown of thorns. Many people were outraged by the depiction, accusing McKenzie of blasphemy and racism and threatening her safety. The painting itself had to be displayed behind Plexiglas when it toured the United States from 2000 to 2003. However, as with

125 Ibid., 71-77. A reproduction of "Sermon on the Mount" appears on page 74. "Sermon on the Mount" can also be viewed at http://www.ohlson.se/utstallningar_ecce.htm (accessed 20 February 2009) along with other photographs from the "Ecce Homo" series.

126 Ibid., 49-55. A reproduction of "Christa Sophia" appears on page 55. Lentz's art, including "Christ Sophia," can be viewed at <http://www.trinitystores.com/> (accessed 20 February 2009).

many of the other artists' works above, there was also positive reaction, showing that these images indeed provide deep significance for many.¹²⁷

Lastly, in 1984, Edwina Sandys exhibited a sculpture of a naked female crucified Christ for ten days at the Episcopal Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City. One bishop called it "theologically and historically indefensible,"¹²⁸ while other people considered it pornographic. The "Christa" sculpture, controversial from its beginning, still has the power to disrupt over twenty years later. An exhibit at Alaska Pacific University in Anchorage, Alaska, in 2006 was canceled not because it included the "Christa" sculpture but because it included a *photograph* of "Christa."¹²⁹

However, once more, others proclaim the deeper meanings of such images. Speaking of the "Christa" sculpture, Carter Heyward states,

Christa perhaps can touch many christian women at embodied spiritual depths that Christ cannot, because he has become a living symbol of our humiliation, suffering, and death at the hands of christian men. Christa can reflect this humiliation as being specifically the result of men's sin against women. She can signal the need for our resistance.¹³⁰

127 Ibid., 57-63. A reproduction of "Jesus for the People" appears on page 58. McKenzie's art, including "Jesus of the People," can be viewed at the artist's website <http://www.janetmckenzie.com/> (accessed 20 February 2009).

128 Ibid., 79.

129 Ibid., 79-81. A reproduction of "Christa" appears on page 80. Sandys' art, including "Christa," can be viewed at the artist's website <http://www.edwinasandys.com/> (accessed 20 February 2009).

130 Carter Heyward, *Touching Our Strength*, (San Fransisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 116.

These works of art depicting a Queer Christ, such as the “Christa,” can reach many queer people at levels not possible by the white, male, heterosexual Christ, thus offering a map, or at least a signpost, to an ultimate meaning.

The negative reactions to these artworks closely mimic how Douglas predicts those holding society's power will react to what threatens the purity of their world views. How we find and preserve order in our worlds, which concerns Douglas' theories, and how and where we find meaning in our worlds, which concerns Frankl's theories, intersect generally in theology and intimately in the images of the Queer Christ. According to Cherry, gathering ourselves at this intersection is critical: “People of faith and conscience have the right—even the duty—to create alternative spiritual iconography.”¹³¹

5. CONCLUSION – DISRUPTING CHRISTIAN HETEROSEXISM

Reactions to images of the Queer Christ clearly coincide with Mary Douglas' theories on purity and pollution. The Queer Christ does not fit into the white, male, heterosexual/asexual model of Jesus enforced by the church. It violates the proper boundaries of the world as defined by most church institutions. And the church reacts as Douglas predicts, with condemnations of dirt and taboo. Queer Christ images are labeled as inappropriate and not to be published. They are called blasphemous, vulgar, and disgusting, and result in threatened and actual violence to those creating and presenting the images.

131 Cherry, “The Queer Christ Arises for the Good of All.”

In addition to threatening the world view of the church, the Queer Christ also threatens the patriarchal hierarchy that permeates society and the church. Douglas suggests that “many ideas about sexual dangers are better interpreted as symbols of the relation between parts of society, as mirroring designs of hierarchy or symmetry which apply in the larger social system.”¹³² The very idea of queerness does not fit in with patriarchy's model of men dominating women. Instead of man over woman, acceptance of queer people gives us models of men with men, women with women (with no man in the picture at all!), women over men, males that identify as woman, females that identify as man, and people that don't identify as man or woman. The very existence of queer people threatens patriarchy with chaos.

The Queer Christ heightens this threat by asking the question of where is God in relation to queer people? Jürgen Moltmann states,

If our organs of perception encounter something like, something familiar, or something that already corresponds to ourselves, we feel endorsed, and that is pleasing to our senses. If our organs of perception encounter something different, strange or new, then the initial effect is pain.

The pain shows us that we must open ourselves, in order to take in the other, the alien and the new.¹³³

The Queer Christ is the other, the alien, and the new to the institutional church. It shakes its foundations and causes it pain. The Queer Christ is the face of the other in Emmanuel Lévinas' philosophy which “presents the exteriority

132 Douglas, 4.

133 Moltmann, 144.

that calls into question the machinations of thought and thus makes thought's totality and sameness tremble."¹³⁴ The Queer Christ is the face of the other which "breaks through the enjoyment of ego-centered existence" of the church "and shows it to be unjust and irresponsible."¹³⁵

The Queer Christ as the face of the other is also important in disrupting the heterosexism of the church because of the fact that queer people are often invisible. Unless they are marching in a gay pride parade or participating in some other event which makes them visible, queer people often are not distinguishable from any other person. The invisibility of queer people makes them an easy target for church oppression. To oppress people who have no face is to oppress without challenge. In fact, the only way for queer people to be officially accepted in most churches is to remain invisible. For the Catholic church, gays must remain celibate. For many conservative protestant churches, the only option is for a gay person to "convert" to heterosexuality. To act on their humanness, their sexuality, is to become visible and that is not acceptable. The Queer Christ puts the face of the other on all queer people and issues the challenge to church oppression.

If, as Das indicated, ultimate meaning comes from an awareness of order, then the ideas of both Douglas and Frankl come together to help us develop a theology of the Queer Christ. The Queer Christ is not only a challenge to an ill-

134 Norman Wirzba, "Emmanuel Lévinas." In *World Philosophers and Their Works*. Vol. II. Edited by John K. Roth. (Pasadena, CA: Salem Press Inc., 2000), 1094.

135 Ibid., 1093.

defined order, but the Queer Christ is also a challenge to find the meaning that life offers to queer people. We must find meaning in suffering caused by the church, a meaning which becomes deeper as we seek to disrupt future suffering. Ultimate meaning is approached through religious symbols. The Queer Christ is such a symbol. Using our spiritual freedom with a responsibility to God, queer people can reject institutional church oppression in favor of a personal religion¹³⁶ in the midst of a new Christian community, finding transcendence and meaning in the Queer Christ which speaks of the universal acceptance and love of God.

When considering the Queer Christ we should also be sensitive to the issue of idolatry. The Queer Christ is a challenge to heterosexism. The Queer Christ is the face of the other. The Queer Christ is an important pointer to ultimate meaning. However, the Queer Christ is not an image which should replace traditional images, but complement them. In the end, like the person of Jesus the Christ portrayed in the Bible, the Queer Christ should enhance our understanding of God and not become a substitute god.

Additionally, some may be attempted to dismiss the Queer Christ as historically inaccurate. However, Jesus as Christ is a historically cloudy figure as well. Jesus the historical man was not white and it is highly questionable whether he would have been asexual. Some scholars have even questioned if

136 Advocation of a personal religion should not be understood to imply that religion should be private. Christianity is still a religion of community. A personal religion does imply that everyone is ultimately responsible for finding their own religious meaning and that such meaning cannot be dictated by an institutional patriarchal hierarchy.

Jesus was a historical figure at all.¹³⁷ But, perhaps most importantly, to try to deny the Queer Christ on the basis of historicity is also to deny the Black Christ, the Asian Christ, and any other representation of the Christ that is not one of a Jewish Middle Eastern man in 1st Century Israel. Denying these portrayals is to risk making Christianity unadaptable to any non-Western culture and for any people who cannot fit into the approved white male heterosexual/asexual model and therefore make Christianity irrelevant to a large portion of the world.

We should also recognize the mythic element of the Christ. Even Jesus' story as a historical figure has mythic powers. Psychotherapist Edward Tick states,

Myths, we must remember, are not just stories of the past, of magical times or of the folk imaginations of traditional cultures... Rather, myths comprise eternal images and archetypal patterns that are alive in the sense that they unfold symbolically in our lives... In modern terms, myths and archetypes can awaken in and for us when we speak to and seek their powers as living god images and when we intentionally seek to immerse ourselves in their imagery and landscape.¹³⁸

Next to the story of a historical Jesus as the Christ and its mythic power, we can put the mythic power of the Queer Christ. However, it is important that the Queer Christ is not just a symbol, regardless of one's opinion of the historical accuracy of the Queer Christ. Tick points out that it is important that a mythic figure not just be representative of power, but that it actually be that power: "in

137 Timothy Freke and Peter Gandy, *The Jesus Mysteries: Was the "Original Jesus" a Pagan God?* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2000) makes an interesting case that the story of Jesus is a Jewish adaptation of the pagan Osiris-Dionysus myths and shows the similarities between the stories, noting that the Osiris-Dionysus myths predate Christianity.

138 Edward Tick, *The Practice of Dream Healing* (Wheaton, Illinois: Quest Books, 2001), 171.

order for us to restore vitality to psychological life, to reclaim and heal our souls, we must not only *think*, but *experience* as well. In order to experience transpersonal energy, we must personify and imagine, for we can only experience God through personification.”¹³⁹

The Queer Christ, then, not only symbolizes the transformative power of God for queer Christians, and all Christians, but the Queer Christ, in any and all of its representations, *is* that transformative power. To deny the Queer Christ is to deny an important opportunity: “Whenever a culture banishes a god image, in effect, it censors people from achieving certain kinds of awareness and having certain kinds of experiences.”¹⁴⁰ To deny the Queer Christ is to deny the transformative and transcendent power of recognizing ourselves in the divine.

Symbolism And Ritual

Douglas notes that societies have “several ways of treating anomalies:”¹⁴¹ they can condemn or ignore them, as the traditional church has tried to do with queer people, or they can alternatively “try to create a new pattern of reality in which it has a place.”¹⁴² It is this creation of a new pattern that we must attempt. The Queer Christ can not only help disrupt the current heterosexism of the

139 Ibid., 161. Emphases by original author.

140 Ibid., 168.

141 Douglas, 48.

142 Ibid.

church, but it can help us build anew. In the Queer Christ we find both necessary danger and power. “This is why, though we seek to create order, we do not simply condemn disorder. We recognize that it is destructive to existing patterns; also that it has potentiality. It symbolises both danger and power.”¹⁴³

Douglas notes that “The special kind of treatment which some religions accord to anomalies and abominations to make them powerful for good is like turning weeds and lawn cuttings into compost.”¹⁴⁴ Queer people and the symbol of the Queer Christ can become the fertile ground in which grows a new church. Douglas proposes that “Any complex of symbols can take on a cultural life of its own and even acquire initiative in the development of social institutions.”¹⁴⁵ Frankl also proposed that symbols are important signposts to an ultimate meaning. Can the Queer Christ be part of that complex of symbols which builds a new, truly inclusive church and that takes us even closer to an ultimate meaning in God?

One way to start this process is through ritual. Tom Driver proposes “that there are three major gifts that rituals bestow upon society.”¹⁴⁶ Rituals help reinforce and even create “social order,” foster community, and become “agents of transformation,”¹⁴⁷ Driver believes that the power of transformation is the

143 Ibid., 117.

144 Ibid., 202.

145 Ibid., 170.

146 Tom Driver, *Liberating Rites: Understanding the Transformative Power of Ritual* (Charleston, South Carolina: BookSurge, 2006): 131.

147 Ibid., 132.

most important of these gifts, especially for those outside of society's power structures: "That is to say, we cannot well appreciate the power of ritual unless we see its usefulness to those in need, especially those who, having little social power and, being the victims of injustice, have a need for the social structure to be transformed."¹⁴⁸ If our goal is to transform the injustices in homophobic Christian society, then ritual provides a powerful tool.

Jim Lantz's articulation of Frankl's three major life responsibilities is also helpful in pointing to the use of ritual. What better way is there to notice, actualize, and honor life meanings, such as the Queer Christ, than through ritual? Douglas believes "ritual recognises the potency of disorder" and "expects to find powers and truths which cannot be reached by conscious effort."¹⁴⁹ Appropriate rituals help us find, or notice, the power and truths in the disorder of the Queer Christ. According to Douglas, "Social rituals create a reality which would be nothing without them."¹⁵⁰ "For us, individually, everyday symbolic enactment does several things. It provides a focusing mechanism, a method of mnemonics and a control for experience."¹⁵¹ That is, ritual can also help us actualize the truths that we find in the Queer Christ. Lastly, ritual can be used to help us

148 Ibid., 166.

149 Douglas, 117.

150 Ibid., 77.

151 Ibid., 78.

honor the truths that we have found and actualized, making them “forever real.”¹⁵²

Challenging Proposals

The Queer Christ, as a transgressor of church enforced boundaries of gender and sexuality modeled by the white, male, heterosexual/asexual Christ, disrupts church sponsored heterosexist oppression. The Queer Christ can also be a powerful symbol in the rebuilding of an inclusive church. The development of appropriate rituals can help us notice, actualize, and honor the truths inherent in the Queer Christ. But, what form might those rituals take?

Keeping in mind Frankl's warning that one religion does not fit all people, that religion needs to be personal, developing a one-size-fits-all ritual is perhaps not a realistic goal. However, all Christians who desire to reject the heterosexist religious oppression of queer people, should give consideration to what rituals are appropriate to their communities and to them personally. Rituals should, of course, present the face of the other, the face of the Queer Christ, to Christian traditions which would rather keep queer people invisible and silent. Rituals should also be completed regularly. The foundation of patriarchal heterosexism runs deep in our churches and a brief exposure to the face of the other represented by the Queer Christ will not be sufficient.

152 Lantz, 227.

Many possibilities for rituals exist. Terence McNally thinks of his play *Corpus Christi* as ritual. "The play is more a religious ritual than a play. A play teaches us a new insight into the human condition. A ritual is an action we perform over and over because we have to. Otherwise, we are in danger of forgetting the meaning of that ritual, in this case that we must love one another or die."¹⁵³ Perhaps an inclusive church could sponsor an annual production of a play such as *Corpus Christi*.

Other ideas might incorporate readings which use images of the Queer Christ into worship services. Or perhaps incorporate artwork of the Queer Christ. Or we might design ceremonies using the Queer Christ to honor those queer people who have suffered persecution at the hands of the church. Or we might find gay saints to hold up and honor. For example, Boisvert says of Matthew Shepard, who was cruelly beaten and murdered in 1998, "We have made him Saint Matthew Shepard, Martyr, for that is what we need him to be. That is how we can truly make sense of his irrational, terrifying death."¹⁵⁴

In whatever way we choose to use the image of the Queer Christ, it will disrupt church heterosexism and provide meaning for queer people. In the Queer Christ, we find danger, power, and truth: the danger to the established oppressive order, the power for transformation of the individual and the church, and the truth of God's inclusive love.

153 McNally, vii.

154 Boisvert, *Sanctity and Male Desire*, 189.

APPENDIX

The following sermon was preached by the author at Phoenix Community Church, Kalamazoo, Michigan, on Sunday, March 29, 2009. The hope is that this sermon can be an example of how one might begin to introduce the Queer Christ in local church congregations in a practical way.

Recognizing Ourselves in the Body of Christ

1 Corinthians 12:12-21,26 (NRSV)

As most of you know, I'm currently finishing my Masters degree at Chicago Theological Seminary. My words tonight have been inspired by my thesis. In this season of Lent, this season of reflection on self and our relationship to God, I hope these words are thought-provoking, perhaps radical. And I hope they are loving and hopeful. I ask that God use these words for God's purposes.

In part, I'm going to be talking about an issue which probably seems like old news to us here at Phoenix – the relationship of gays and lesbians with the larger church. As gay and lesbian people, we already know the issues. As a church that already welcomes the LGBT community, we might wonder what more there is that we can do or say.

In the scripture reading tonight, Paul says we Christians are all baptized into one body, the body of Christ. These words of Paul seem to me to be an invitation, of sorts, to ask some questions:

What is the body of Christ?

What meanings do Christ and the body of Christ hold for us and for the greater church today?

Usually when we talk about Christ, we think of the historical figure of Jesus, a middle eastern Jewish man living out his ministry around the year 30 CE. However, the concept of the Christ is often used in a more abstract way.

We see images of Christ as:

African American,

Native American,

or Asian.

The Bible refers to Christ as

the Word,

the bread of life,

and the source of living water.

Paul, in his letter to the Corinthians, uses the body of Christ as a metaphor for the church. It is this image I would like to play with a bit.

Paul tells us that the head cannot say to the feet, "I have no need for you." But, don't churches try to do this all the time? It's interesting that Paul uses the example of feet. In the book of Ruth, when Ruth uncovers and lies at the feet of

Boaz, we aren't really talking about feet, but it's a euphemism for the sexual organs. Ruth and Boaz aren't just taking a nap on the threshing floor, but there's some hanky-panky going on there.

What happens to Paul's analogy if we extend this Old Testament euphemism to his New Testament words? Churches today do indeed say to the feet, "I have no need for you." The church often gets embarrassed by sexual organs – especially when they don't fit with how the church thinks they should be used. It tries to excise them from the body. It says, "I have no need for you."

If it can't remove them, then it at least wants to cover them up – make them invisible. The head saying to the feet "I have no need for you," gets repeated often today when parts of the church say to all of our gay, lesbian, and transgender brothers and sisters, "I have no need for you."

We often see the church trying to get rid of those who remind us of our sexuality, who don't fit in with how we think things should be in the world:

It says: let's get rid of the gay people, the lesbians, the transgender people.

It says: If we can't get rid of them, at least make sure they stay quiet.

It says: Certainly, they can't be allowed to act on their dirty, disgusting natures.

These attempt by parts of the church, the body of Christ, to cut off other parts of the body is shameful and often weighs heavily on my heart. We here at Phoenix welcome LGBT folks and other marginalized people and we should be proud of that. But is it enough?

When I look outward from within this refuge of welcome, out to the world, I still feel the rejection. When I saw the anti-marriage Proposition 8 pass in California last November, and saw the role of churches in that attack on LGBT people, I felt the rejection. When I see the backlash against our own Kalamazoo City council's attempt to pass a non-discrimination ordinance, I feel the rejection. And I have to ask myself: is our message of welcome enough?

I invite us all to reflect on what it means to be the body of Christ here and now in this modern world. I am thankful that I am personally part of Christian organizations that honor, support, and love transgender, lesbian, gay, and all people regardless of whether they fit into the heterosexual mold that church institutions often claim as the only proper way to be.

But, I must confess that although the church is a vital part of my spiritual journey, I often don't like the church, at least the version that wants to be the very heterosexual, asexual, even neutered body of Christ. I get tired of being told that I, as a gay man, am inherently sinful; that we are responsible for everything from 9/11 to Hurricane Katrina to the very disintegration of society.

My own church tells me I am loved by God, but this is not the message I get from the church at large. And, so, I confess I am tired of "church" because this is one thing we should not debate: that each and every person, whether gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, or however else we choose to identify ourselves, is a loved child of God. Our human dignity and worth as children of God are not up for discussion.

I believe we need to lament the church, the body of Christ, in our modern time. Borrowing from the words of the Psalmist, we need to cry out to God:

Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep, God?
Awake, don't cast us off for ever!
Why do you hide your face?
Why do you forget our oppression?

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my
groaning?
O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but
find no rest.

But we should not stop with a lament. The good news of Christ is too important to give up. The message of hope and love promised to us by God is too important to us individually and too important to the world to abandon it to those who would excise LGBT people from the body of Christ.

I want to take one more step beyond the typical welcoming stance. I want to take a step beyond fitting LGBT people into existing Christian institutions and structures.

I am going to start by using a different word. That word is "queer." It is a reclaimed word, once used to denigrate LGBT people, but because of that it still has the power to be provocative, to make us stop and think. Some of you might not like this word, but I ask that you bear with me because I think the word has a power that is important.

Queer is also a catch-all word which can stand for everyone included in the initials LGBT. But it also goes beyond those initials to signify anyone who doesn't see themselves as fitting into the approved model of the white male

heterosexual that so often gets held up by society and, yes, by the church, as the epitome of humanity.

It is this model that gets presented to us in the typical portrayal of Jesus as the white male heterosexual Christ. And it is upon this model that I want to reflect more deeply.

Returning to Paul's analogy of the body of Christ, as a queer man who considers himself part of that body, I need to declare that the body of Christ itself must be queer. How can the foot be queer and not the hands, eyes, ears, and the rest of the body?

Christianity calls us to recognize ourselves in Christ's humanity. Doing so teaches us that God knows what it is to be human with all of our imperfections, with all of the trials we live through every day. Doing so gives us hope and knowledge that we too can have a whole, complete relationship with our loving God.

And, yet, if the Christ is not queer, then how am I to recognize myself? If the church rejects the queer person, makes them invisible, or so belittles them that they reject the church, if the queerness is removed from the body of Christ, then how do I recognize myself?

Let's imagine for a moment and ask ourselves if Christ was to come today in our society, who would Christ be?

An African American?

A Native American?

A woman?

A transgender or intersex person?

A gay, lesbian, or bisexual person?

Perhaps a queer African American woman?

Imagine for a moment what effect the insistence of much of Christianity that the Christ couldn't possibly ever be a woman or ever be gay has on queer people. Imagine for a moment a Queer Christ.

It was a piece of artwork that first inspired me to consider the Queer Christ seriously. A 1993 painting by Becki Jayne Harrelson shows a male Christ hung on the cross. Instead of a sign saying "King of the Jews," above his head a sign written in blood simply states "FAGGOT." Harrelson says her purpose in creating this painting was to de-shame our human sexuality and present it as sacred.

But what was the reaction of the church and society? The painting has been called "sick and disgusting" and galleries have refused to exhibit it. Other portrayals of the Christ as a woman or as queer have been denounced as disgusting and blasphemous by Christian leaders and have been met with violence, both threatened and very real.

Why are responses to a Queer Christ so often overwhelmingly negative? Why is the Queer Christ such a taboo? We can find at least a partial answer in the work of the late anthropologist Mary Douglas. Her theories on purity and

taboo show that human societies use taboo to protect the ways that we order our worlds.

When something doesn't fit into our classification system, it becomes a taboo. The existence of queer people is a threat to the sex and gender categories of male and female and how those categories are supposed to work in the world. And so, since queer people don't fit neatly into the approved order of the universe, they become a taboo.

And the church reacts to queer people just as Douglas' theories say they will. The church sees that queer people don't fit into their so-called natural order, makes them a taboo, and, to enforce that taboo, declares them harmful, a pollutant, a contagion that will infect all of society if not held in check. The marginalization of queer people becomes necessary. Queerness becomes dirty, the pollution that can corrupt the pattern of heterosexual society. Same-sex marriages seemingly become a disease capable of corrupting good, orderly heterosexual families.

The Queer Christ can help combat this persecution. Douglas further notes that societies, instead of condemning or ignoring that which doesn't fit into the accepted order of things, as many churches do with queer people, can also sometimes react by creating a new reality where the anomaly has its place.

This happens partly through symbols and ritual. By embracing the Queer Christ in the rituals of our lives as a symbol of God's inclusive love, we can help transform Christianity and our society into places of true welcome, for it is

through meaningful symbols and ritual that humanity can change. Symbols help us point to higher meanings and rituals integrate those meanings into our lives. Christians can embrace the Queer Christ in ritual and help transform all of our institutions into places where God's expansive, welcoming love can be found for all people.

The Queer Christ is also the face of the other that forces Christianity to look deeply into itself and ask difficult questions. Unless we are marching in a pride parade or participating in some other such public event, queer people often are not distinguishable from any other person. The invisibility of queer people makes them an easy target for church oppression. For to oppress people who have no face is to oppress without a challenge. In fact, the only way for queer people to be officially accepted in many churches is to remain invisible. For a queer person to act on their humanness, their sexuality, is to become visible and that is not acceptable.

The Queer Christ puts the face of the other on all queer people and issues the challenge to church oppression. The Queer Christ challenges homophobia and the notion of queerness as a pollutant. The Queer Christ challenges white male heterosexuality as the best and only proper way to be in the world.

But, the Queer Christ not only helps disrupt the heterosexism in the church, but it can help us build anew. For, returning to the ideas of Mary Douglas, we find that things that don't fit the perceived order of the universe are

not only dangerous, but powerful. In the Queer Christ, we find not only the danger to existing classifications, but the power to create new ones.

For me, the Christ has necessarily become queer. And I offer the power of the Queer Christ to you, as well. To those that the image might offend, I request only that they look deeply inside themselves and ask, "Why?" But if the image of a Queer Christ offers you meaning, then let the images of

a woman Christ,

a gay Christ,

a lesbian Christ,

a transgender Christ

stand along side images of

Jesus the Christ,

the African American Christ,

the Native American Christ,

the Asian Christ,

all as symbols of God's loving work in this world.

For me, I have tired of Christian folks telling me I am less than human. Even as part of a welcoming church, we still hear that message constantly from the world. I'm tired of it. I'm crying out to God: "When will this end?"

And I turn back to the words of Paul: "As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,' nor again

the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.' ... If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it."

We are a part of the body of Christ. A queer body, a Queer Christ. Let us not suffer together, trying to reject parts of the body, but honor the diversity of all of our parts: the straight body of Christ, the LGBT body of Christ, the body of Christ that doesn't proclaim silly sex and gender based boundaries: the Queer Christ.

If, and in whatever way, we choose to use the image of the Queer Christ it will disrupt church heterosexism and it will provide deep meaning for many queer people who can see themselves, and therefore the hope of God's love, within the Queer Christ. In the Queer Christ, we find danger, power, and truth: the danger to established oppressive orders, the power for transformation of the individual and the church, and the truth of God's inclusive love.

Let us embrace that love.

God calls us to a journey of love and transformation. Let us rejoice as part of the precious body of Christ, following, as our next song says, the God of rainbow on our journey together.

Amen.

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