

What makes Jesus salvific for the Queer Community?
A Moltmann-Inspired Essay in Christology
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This essay asks the question of what it would mean for Jesus to be salvific for the queer community, and since I have only about ten minutes to speak here, we will—all of us—have to settle for some fairly quick answers!

First, some caveats: this essay seeks to speak both *from* and *to* the experience of queer persons—that is, those persons whose sex and gender identities stand at variance with the expectations of a heteronormative culture—and *from* and *to* the experience of queer persons for whom discussion about the moral status of their sexual desires is no longer up for the debate and, moreover, has been concluded in favor of celebrating their sex and gender identities as well as the “acts” that come with it. In other words, my essay here is queer-positive, and does not seek to engage debates about the morality of same-sex attraction and homosexual acts.

Next, this essay presumes, by way of its title, an entity known as the “queer community.” One could easily make the argument that the suggestion of something like a “queer community” involves a starry-eyed view of queer history—one that, crucially, denies that queer women have felt betrayed by queer men, spawning forms of lesbian feminism both of moderate and radical forms; and one that also is forced to deny that queer of color, both women and men, have felt (and still do feel) betrayed by their white counterparts. I want to deny none of this, and, instead, want to insist on using the term to point out two things: one, that I am interested in speaking about a class of persons who share a common space, that of the geographic United States; and two, that this class of persons are united by their common performative disregard, dissent from, and rejection of compulsory heterosexuality. I mean nothing more, and nothing less, than this by the term, ‘queer community.’

Moving beyond caveats to my thesis proper, I want to advance the following: that what makes the person of Jesus salvific for the queer community is his passionate loving ministry, death, and resurrection that displays the radical and ultimately inexplicable closeness of God to each and every human creature, and further, that Moltmann's embrace of patripassianism manifested in his rejection of what he terms the 'apathic' God offers key insights into the depths of Christ's mission of solidarity and reconciliation. What I am proposing, therefore, is a Christology, and it is one that I think is not only apposite for members of the queer community and their experiences, but also—I would like to say—one that is apposite to the experience of those who do not identify as queer. In order to get there, though, I need to point out deficiencies in two queer Christological projects that have been put forward by two of the leading lights in queer theology—one by Robert Goss, and the other by Marcella Althaus-Reid.

Goss' queer Christology advances three claims, but we can only focus on one here: that Jesus was a gay man who acted on his same-sex attractions in male-male sex acts (or, more precisely, accepted a paradigm of sexual relating common in Ancient Greece in which older males [*erastes*] would develop relationships with younger males [*eromenoi*], which would include anal penetration).¹ I see major problems with this thesis for two reasons. The first is that Goss' hypothesis about Jesus' sexual identity and practice is wrapped up in silence. When Goss uses canonical sources, he argues from silence that Paul is himself a repressed homosexual,² and that Jesus' sexual orientation as a gay man was covered up by subsequent biblical authors.³ Goss' argument is not strengthened by his use of the non-canonical "Secret Gospel of Mark," on the basis of which Goss, following historian Morton Smith, believes Jesus initiated male members into secret *gnosis* through sexual rituals. Scholars, however, have rejected the authenticity of this source on the grounds that there are no extant versions of the document; it is only quoted in a

letter of which there is only one copy by Clement of Alexandria (d. 200) who himself was taken aback by the document's irregularity nineteen centuries ago. Most scholars believe it to be a "conflated pastiche" of the canonical gospels used to serve gnostic agendas.⁴ In sum, we simply won't know what Jesus' sexual identity or practice was like,⁵ and therefore, drawing critical Christologies on the basis of Jesus' sexual orientation are bound to be fruitless.

With the lack of textual evidence in view, the second reason why we should reject Goss' thesis that Jesus was a gay man is that insisting on such is actually another act of theological colonization that attempts to universalize a particular worldview (in this case, is a particular sexual orientation) and to make such a view normative in Christology without any justification. In other words, Goss' view does what theologians, imagining Christ as heterosexual, have done in order to normalize heterosexuality in Christian theology and Christology. Without such justification, asserting Christ's particularity as a gay man has the effect of excluding experiences of Christ that others could legitimately have as a result of this textual silence—if Christ's homosexuality is maintained, asexual persons are precluded from understanding Christ asexually; heterosexuals from understanding heterosexually, etc.—and all of which can be legitimately developed at the level of personal devotion because there is nothing in the text to mandate its non-development. Such an observation stands behind why, for example, Jesus, Mary, and certain saints (e.g., Augustine) are portrayed in a variety of races and ethnicities. In needlessly and unjustifiably asserting a certain particularity as normative for understanding Christ, then, we actually harm the *universality* of Christ's mission to all persons.

For Althaus-Reid's part, the Christ whom she offers the queer community exists as the symbolic representation of the transgression of theological boundaries, particularly as theological boundaries normalize heterosexual patterns of relating. To this end, she makes use of three views

of Christ that are similar to one another. The first one is that of the "Bi-Christ," the Christ who always seeks an identity outside of heterosexuality—defined as a systematic worldview governed by binary divisions that avows a sort of comprehensiveness in its constant re/production of dual divisions, such as found in the binaries of man/woman and gay/straight.⁶ The second is the view of Christ as the "Unjust Messiah," the Christ who is constantly upsetting established categories of propriety and correctness in order to engage in relationships that lack such social securities, and doing so by being involved in "un-just relationships, that is, unrestricted, open, larger relationships than the ones prevalent in Jesus' historical times."⁷ The third is the Christ encountered by people undergoing conscientization processes, who make demands of Christ by specifying to Christ what it would mean for them to be saved: in other words, this is a specification of salvation "from below."⁸ While I believe that Althaus-Reid's views of Christ shows us a Christ who is salvific at a symbolic level, this symbolic power is only minimally connected to the *actual person* of Jesus of Nazareth, which has the effect of rendering Jesus of Nazareth optional in an ostensibly Christian framework. The result is a problematic situation that is exactly the opposite of Goss': here, the universality of Christ is asserted to the exclusion of Christ's particularity as a human being.

I believe that a Moltmann-inspired Christology offers a way of viewing the person and work of Christ in a way that does not unjustifiably universalize a particular experience, as Goss' Christology does, nor evacuate Christ's particular humanity, as Marcella Althaus-Reid's does, while still remaining true to the experience of the queer community in the United States. The answer is to see Christ as the passionate lover whose ministry, death, and resurrection reveal the radical closeness of God by solidarity with those suffering, and by effecting reconciliation between victims and victimizers. To understand this point, it's important to characterize the

experience of the queer community in the United States, a characterization that cannot responsibly be done without taking into account the suffering that many queer persons have undergone on at least three fronts: classically, there is the suffering that the queer community experienced through the AIDS crisis; more recently there is the suffering the queer youth undergo in the experience of homelessness (up to 40% of all homeless youth are queer-identified)⁹; and, most consistently, the suffering effected by theological systems that exclude queer persons from full participation in the sacraments as well as from positions of formal authority in various Church hierarchies. Moltmann's Christology emphasizes two features relevant to the queer community's experience.¹⁰ First, God's solidarity with the queer community's suffering is a solidarity that Moltmann emphasizes by asserting that Christ's death is an event that causes suffering in the Father.¹¹ In other words, the whole Godhead is involved in the death of the Son, a Godhead whose ideal is not a platonic idea of impassibility and distance, but is instead the idea of a being who enters into the suffering of another closely. Second, Christ's ministry of reconciliation through the cross provides the occasion for the queer community to recognize when it itself has been the victimizer, specifically in the sexism of the queer movement and the racism of the queer movement, neither of which is behind us. In other words, this is a point about intersectionality: the queer community is just as much a victim of oppression as it is a perpetrator of it, although it may not be a victim and perpetrator in the same sense.

What Moltmann's solidarity and reconciliation Christology signal to the queer community, then, is that the ultimate depths of God's solidarity with those suffering—to have even the Father suffer—is unto the reconciliation of all of God's creation, queer or not. This is concentrated in the person of Jesus Christ, who continues to love passionately, even through the

trial of his own suffering when he feels abandoned—just as many queer persons dying from AIDS or living on the street feel abandoned. Most importantly, it keeps the queer experience in view without either colonizing it by asserting a unjust particularity as has been done in heterosexual theologies, nor does it leave the *Logos* without a human form, a belief at the very heart of Christianity.

¹ Goss, *Queering Christ*, 120.

² Goss, *Queering Christ*, 124.

³ Goss, *Queering Christ*, 117.

⁴ Raymond Brown, S.S., *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 835-836. Goss himself acknowledges that Clement thought the document was irregular.

⁵ Dale Martin, "Sex and the Single Savior," in *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation*, 91-102 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006).

⁶ Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 117.

⁷ Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 156.

⁸ Marcella Althaus-Reid, "Do Not Stop the Flow of My Blood: A Critical Christology of Hope among Latin American Women," in *From Feminist Theology to Indecent Theology: Readings on Poverty, Sexual Identity, and God* (London: SCM Press, 2004), 44-59.

⁹ Nick Ray, "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Youth: An Epidemic of Homelessness." In *Kicked Out*, ed., Sassafras Lowrey (Ypsilanti, MI: Homofactus Press, 2010), 181.

¹⁰ Jurgen Moltmann, "The Crucified God: Yesterday and Today; 1972-2002," trans. Margaret Kohl, in *Cross Examinations: Readings on the Meaning of the Cross Today*, ed. Marit Trelstad (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 131-132.

¹¹ Jurgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ: Christology in Messianic Dimensions*, trans. Margaret Kohl (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990), 166-178.