

Christology From the Margins

Thomas Bohache



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British Library Cataloguing in Publication data

A catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library

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978 0 334 04058 3

First published in 2008 by SCM Press
13-17 Long Lane,
London EC1A 9PN

www.scm-canterburypress.co.uk

SCM Press is a division of
SCM-Canterbury Press Ltd

Typeset by Regent Typesetting, London
Printed in the UK by CPI William Clowes
Beccles NR34 7TL

THE LIBRARY OF THE
DIVISION OF CHRISTIAN EDUCATION
OF THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF THE CHURCHES
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Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vii
<i>Introduction: Why Another Christology?</i>	ix
Part 1 Traditional Christologies	1
1 From Jesus to Christ: Incipient Christology	3
2 Jesus as Christ: The Development of Christology	24
3 From Christ to Jesus: Historical Jesus Studies as New Christology	45
Part 2 Contextual Christologies	65
4 A Saviour Just Like Me: Black, African and Asian Christologies	67
5 A Crucified God for a Crucified People: Latin American Liberation Christology	81
6 God's Representative as a Guide to Wholeness: Feminist Christology	103
7 A Way Out of No Way: The Christologies of Women of Colour	128
Part 3 Queering Christ	153
8 Homophobia among Christians, Christophobia among Homosexuals	157
9 'Queer' as Social Location: Legitimate Category or just Propaganda?	187
10 'Who do <i>you</i> say that I am?' I: <i>Towards</i> a Queer Christology	209

'Who do you say that I am?' II: A Queer Christology

I implied in the preceding chapters, and would like to make explicit here, that, for me, the idea of a 'queer' approach to theology, Christology or Scripture connotes imagination, playfulness, stirring up and, to some extent, spoiling what has gone before. The queer theologies and tentative moves toward queer Christology already discussed indicate that a queer methodology does not necessarily 'play by the rules'. In this, it is very much akin to feminist methodology, for we, like women, have had to search for ourselves not only in Scripture but throughout history and have often had to 'write ourselves in' to the story and force our inclusion in theological or ecclesiological discussion.

Thus, while it is helpful to study traditional Christology and the scholarly pursuit of the historical Jesus in order to be exposed to as many views as possible, nevertheless, in proposing a queer Christology, I do not feel obliged to adhere to what has gone before, either theologically or methodologically. I will elaborate by giving some examples. First, while most historical Jesus study limits itself to the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) for reliable information about the life of Jesus and largely ignores the Gospel of John, I will take all of the canonical Gospels into account in developing my Christology. I believe that something does not have to be 'factual' to be 'true'; that is, I believe we can acquire truth from the memories of the Fourth Evangelist as well as the other three, for what is important for me is how Jesus inspired others to believe that he was the Christ. Their remembrances and their Christological interpretations are important sources for my Christology, whether or not it can be 'proved' that Jesus said or did a particular thing. In fact, many of the most Christologically meaningful passages in the New Testament would be placed in black letters by the Jesus Seminar.¹ Additionally, I propose to use other Christological memories

¹ See Chapter 3. The Jesus Seminar's findings are published in Robert W.

of the early Church contained in the New Testament, even though they may not specifically discuss what Jesus himself said or did. My aim is to capture a feeling about the Christ, not to record a biography of Jesus. As we have seen in the discussion of other contextual Christologies in Part II, Christ has been imaginatively described by other marginalized groups.

Second, the scholarly community debates whether one should use non-canonical materials in doing research into the nature of Jesus Christ. For example, John Meier in his massive work *A Marginal Jew*,² dismisses the Gospel of Thomas from consideration as a valid source, whereas John Dominic Crossan places Thomas within the earliest stratum of historical Jesus material.³ I use non-canonical materials without making any judgement about their historical reliability, for, again, I believe that the reminiscences of the early Christians reflect their diverse Christologies. Whether they were factual or later termed 'heretical' is irrelevant to my purposes. I am interested in the truth that the Christ inspired in the hearts of believers.

Third, Albert Schweitzer and others have sought to differentiate the 'Jesus of history' from the 'Christ of faith'.⁴ I will not be doing that in my Christology, for I do not think it is possible to do so. Every writing about Jesus Christ, whether ancient, medieval, modern or postmodern, is, in its own way, an interpretation that comes from a place of belief or unbelief. Thus, the devout belief of Pope John Paul II inspires what he says about Christ, just as the indecent (un)belief of Marcella Althaus-Reid affects what she says.

Fourth, each evangelist began his/her account of Jesus and the Christology therein from a different temporal perspective. As noted in

Funk, Roy W. Hoover and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1993); and *The Acts of Jesus: The Search for the Authentic Deeds of Jesus* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998).

² John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, 3 volumes (New York: Doubleday, 1991-2001). His discussion of sources may be found in the first volume.

³ John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991).

⁴ See, especially, Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, trans. W. Montgomery (1906; New York: Collier/Macmillan, 1968); and Stephen J. Patterson, *The God of Jesus: The Historical Jesus and the Search for Meaning* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998).

Chapter 1, in Mark's view, Jesus' Christ-ness began at his baptism; for Matthew and Luke, it occurred at conception or birth; while for John, it always was, for Christ was the pre-existent Logos. Following in their footsteps, my Christology will begin in still another place: with Mary, for I believe that the incarnation of Christ began with his Blessed Mother, as will become much more evident as my Christology takes shape.

Some Autobiography

My concept of the Christ is most similar to the mystical views of Andrew Harvey and Matthew Fox discussed above. Indeed, Matthew Fox has been one of the most important influences upon the development of my queer spirituality and theology, for it was while reading his book *Original Blessing* that I first embraced the concept that we are all created good. In order for my reader to understand the importance of this for my theological becoming, it requires me to digress with a brief autobiographical sketch.

Growing up as a 'sissy-boy' in the Roman Catholic Church and parochial school in the period during and after Vatican II, but before its reforms had begun to filter down into local parishes,⁵ I integrated into my very personhood the notion of original sin, that each person is created with the stain of sin on his or her soul and that baptism is necessary for its removal. Moreover, I believed that 'the devil' constantly seeks a way to make us fall from God's grace and that we must be ever-vigilant to fight off Satan's temptations. My third-grade teacher (a nun) told my classmates and me in vivid detail the reason Jesus was on that cross over the chalkboard: 'You did that, because you are such bad children!' The feelings for other boys and grown men that I began to experience at puberty confused me and turned me toward God for an answer that was not forthcoming. Instead, during my four years at a Jesuit-run high school, I learned that these feelings were 'not OK', that they should not be talked about, that what 'fags' did together was disgusting, and that God hated anyone who did not get married and have children. In the 1960s and early 1970s, gender roles were relatively fixed and were just beginning to be examined by the burgeoning feminist movement. I began to be labelled because of some mannerisms and interests that

⁵ For a discussion of Vatican II and its effects, see Chester Gillis, *Roman Catholicism in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

today would not necessarily result in emotional queer bashing but did back then. Though I had never had any sexual experience and did not even know what two men or two women (or a man and woman, for that matter) could do together, I was branded a 'fag', a 'sissy', a 'cocksucker' and a 'queer', just by virtue of the fact that I was quiet, studious, did not like sports and played with girls. (How ironic that my favourite word for myself now is one that I initially heard in derision!)

After high school, I went on an odyssey of self-hatred. I had been brought up to revere the Catholic Church and priests and nuns as divine representatives to such an extent that, unlike many queers, I believed that they spoke for God and that God was saying, 'I hate you; get away from me.' There ensued a period of tremendous emptiness. During college, I found solace in academics; after college, I found solace in alcohol, drugs and anonymous sex. My philosophy in those years seems to have been, 'Well, if God hates me anyway, and if I am going to hell, then what's the difference? I might as well have a good time doing it!' But the problem was, I was not having a good time doing it. I was miserable, empty and self-hating. I never for a moment believed that I was afflicted with a sin; I knew I had always been the way that I was and had done nothing to cause it or provoke it. Nor did I believe that my inclinations could be taken away if I prayed hard enough or fasted or abstained or did novenas to Our Lady. I stopped going to church; my attitude toward God was that he (and in those days, God was definitely 'he') had abandoned me. Unlike some queers, I never felt guilty or ashamed, only puzzled, because I could not understand how God could hate something that was so natural, so beautiful and so fulfilling.

When I was 25, I met a man the same age as I was, who suggested that I come with him to church. I said, 'You've gotta be kidding me!' and began to ridicule him. He told me that his church was different, it was 'the gay church' (Metropolitan Community Church). I told him I had heard about it and was not interested in being part of a group of queers who were playing church; didn't they know that God hates them? Well, I may have been vehement in my reaction to the suggestion, but I did go to church because I wanted to see this fellow again. I will never forget my first visit. The pastor was a woman, which was shocking to me. I realize now that had the pastor been a man, I would not have integrated the message in the way that I did, because the priests had done their work well. Reverend Jane preached a message entitled 'Prosperity', and she said over and over again that God loves everyone – even gays and lesbians (we weren't 'queer' yet) – and that God wants the best for us

and offers to us the gift of prosperity if we will accept it. She made it sound so simple. I chose to accept God's gift, and for me that meant accepting the gift of my sexuality and the realization that I was born good, that I was born queer, and that God looks upon me and says, 'This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased' (Matthew 3.17).⁶

I became quite involved in the church and am celebrating my twentieth anniversary as clergy in the Metropolitan Community Churches. It has been a rewarding journey that has been enriched by my natural bent toward academics. I began to want 'proof' for what I now knew in the depths of my being. Could one really be a follower of Christ and a 'practising' homosexual? I was assured spiritually that one could, but I wanted to find out for myself in a concrete way. Thus began my 20-year relationship with the Bible and theology, culminating in this queer Christology.

What is 'Christ'?

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

My initial understanding of the Christ comes from the Greek root, meaning 'anointed'. A 'Christ' is an anointed being. This anointed being has received its essence from God. For me, Christ is a part of God that has always existed (John 1.1) and that has become one with humanity. I believe that the Christ is the relational part of God, the part that is anointed to bring good news to humanity. This was how Jesus was Christ – he was anointed to bring good news, to set captives free and to announce God's favour (Luke 4.18–19). Unlike many Christians, how-

⁶ Throughout this chapter, unless otherwise noted, translations from the New Testament are my own.

ever, I do not believe that this Christ presence resided only in Jesus of Nazareth. I believe that this Christ presence dwells in all people, that it is innate to our being and our consciousness. Many people choose to embrace this Christ presence and allow it to animate their lives, to anoint them and make them prophets of good news who, like Jesus, proclaim God's favour. Others do not recognize the Christ within; consciously or unconsciously, they block their anointedness and do not share the good news of Christ. With Meister Eckhart, I believe that we are called 'to be other Christs'. We study the life of Jesus whom we call Christ because the fullness of his life, the tragedy of his death, and the mystery of his resurrection show us the possibilities of human becoming – how human persons may accept their Christ-ness and move into wholeness with God. I believe that human life is a journey to this wholeness, this Christic consciousness, this oneness with God within and without. Like Jesus, we have detours along the way, but I believe that God is always at the end of the journey, leading us on, welcoming us as the parent welcomed the prodigal (Luke 15.11–32).

The foundational Scriptures from the Bible that solidify this notion for me are found in Genesis and in John, and both involve what is referred to as God's Spirit or, in Christian parlance, 'the Holy Spirit'. The Hebrew word for 'spirit' also means 'breath' or 'wind'. This is the Spirit that soared over the primal waters before creation (Genesis 1.1) and is the same Spirit that was 'breathed' into the first human creature after God formed that human creature from the soil of the earth (Genesis 2.7). God created humanity in God's very own image: 'In God's image, God created them; male and female God created them', and challenged them to protect and take care of the earth (Genesis 1.27–28). This Scripture tells me that whatever God creates carries God's imprint; God's Spirit is contained in humankind, and after humankind was created, God noted that now the creation was 'very good' (Genesis 1.31). We are very good creatures of a very good God. We are each created in God's own image, so everywhere we see humanity, we see God; every person we encounter can teach us something about God, for they carry the divine spirit/breath within. Think about the ramifications of this thought: that means that God is white, black, brown, yellow, red; God is male, female, intersexual, transgendered; God is gay, lesbian, straight, bisexual and non-sexual; God is strong and weak, old and young, able-bodied and physically challenged. And yet God is greater than all of this and more than all of this, for God has not stopped creating. There will come forth many more manifestations of God. Throughout the Hebrew Testament, 'anointed'

CHRISTOLOGY FROM THE MARGINS

people, kings and prophets, women and men, carried God's special commission to lead people. If we continue with the notion of anointedness meaning Christness, there were other Christs before Jesus and after Jesus. They have pointed people toward wholeness. But people do not always do what is best for them; human greed, pride and arrogance get in the way of us accepting our divine commission and our own anointedness (Genesis 3). Thus, Christ figures have continued to be born, continued to tell their truth, and – many times – continued to be ignored, killed, or both. But the creation goes on, and the Christing of human lives continues.

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

This is a Christian view of the Christ. I am constantly aware of how this Christ is used as a weapon by Christians against Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Wiccans and people of other faiths, as well as those of any religion who are considered to be 'other', for example, feminist women, non-heterosexuals, the poor and the colonized. Therefore, one must be on guard, in developing a Christology, to be inclusive and address the reality of our pluralistic world. Theologian Chester Gillis reminds us, 'Only a Christianity that sees itself in the context of the world religions will make sense in the twenty-first century,'⁷ that we must be vigilant to root out Christian imperialism and what I call 'Christofascism'.⁸

Therefore, I need to position my Christology with regard to the other religions of the world. I see the Christ figure as being a part of God – the Source, the Real, the Ultimate, whatever we choose to call it. I said

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

8 I have encountered this term in the writings of Carter Heyward, who attributes it to German political theologian Dorothee Sölle. Sölle first uses the term in *Beyond Mere Obedience: Reflections on a Christian Ethic for the Future*, trans. Lawrence W. Denef (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1970). I am indebted to Lawrence Osborn for this citation.

above that I believe the Christ is the relatedness of God, but to use the very word 'Christ' is to capture that relatedness for a Christian milieu. Nevertheless, the concept of 'anointedness' can be meaningful in every culture and in every religion. The concept of relatedness and sharing good news is a part of every spiritual tradition. My thoughts of Christ are meant for a Christian audience, and a queer one at that. Nevertheless, because queers have been excluded in history and today, I believe we cannot be exclusive of others. Queer Christology must acknowledge other paths to the one Source and other forms of anointedness and relatedness that have no relation to our concept of Christ. In saying that the Christ Spirit is present in all people, I do not mean to co-opt anyone's tradition or thrust my Christ upon them. It is simply my limited, Christian vocabulary for saying that the divine relatedness and anointedness dwells in all people. We must allow others to express that divinity in the ways that bring them wholeness and lead them onward to their human becoming.⁹

Incarnation

My queer Christology begins with Mary of Nazareth, for if each of us carries the Christ within us, I believe that we can learn much about what it means to bear Christ from the few glimpses of Mary that we see in the New Testament. Most of the information we have about Mary comes from the first and second chapters of Luke, known by biblical scholars as the Infancy Narrative.¹⁰ Those who do historical Jesus research dismiss the infancy narratives in Luke and in Matthew as containing nothing historically reliable about Jesus' conception or birth; they point out the inconsistencies, the mythological elements and the sheer unbelievability of a virginal conception.¹¹ I will leave aside questions of the virgin birth, for I suspect that much of the (Catholic) Church's insistence upon Mary's (perpetual) virginity comes from discomfort with sexuality, the

⁹ See Chapter 2 for a more complete discussion of the new pluralism in theology and Christology.

¹⁰ See, for example, Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991), pp. 36-44, 49-53; for a feminist reconstruction of the infancy narratives, see Jane Schaberg, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus: A Feminist Theological Interpretation of the Infancy Narratives* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987).

¹¹ See, for example, John Shelby Spong, *Born of a Woman: A Bishop Rethinks the Birth of Jesus* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992).

CHRISTOLOGY FROM THE MARGINS

origin of sin and the nature of the atonement; the early Church Fathers and others, in believing that Jesus came to ransom humanity from sin, believed that he himself had to be incapable of sin and that, therefore, his conception and birth had to be 'sinless' as well.¹² I have stated above that I believe that sexuality is a gift from God;¹³ sexual intercourse does not transmit sin; thus, in my Christology there is no need of a virginal conception, although I would not discourage others from holding such a view if that were theologically and personally meaningful (provided it did not mask an unconscious sex negativity).

Luke 1.26-38 describes how Mary finds out that she is pregnant. The narrative tells us that an angel from God visits her and tells her that she will bear a child who will be called 'Son of the Most High'. Rather than dismissing this story as a fanciful creation of the early Church, I would read it with a queer hermeneutic of stirring up, possibly spoiling, and imagining what God has to say to queers through this story. Indeed, a queer hermeneutic and Christology will not only *queer* but it will *query*: it must be a questioning and a turning over of layers of heteropatriarchal tradition to reveal what lies beneath. I understand seven elements to this story:

- 1 Mary is greeted, 'God is with you!'
- 2 Mary is perplexed.
- 3 She is told, 'Don't be afraid!'
- 4 She is assured, 'You will do great things.'
- 5 Mary doubts, asking, 'How can this be?'
- 6 Mary is reminded, 'Nothing is impossible with God.'
- 7 Mary decides, 'Here I am, God's servant.'

I believe that Mary of Nazareth in this story can serve as the paradigm for queer empowerment. Most queer people have gone through periods of their lives when they have felt lost or alone or abandoned by God; but often, a stranger comes into our path, announcing to us, 'God is with you!' The queer person, based on past experience, is perplexed by a greeting such as this; doesn't God hate queers? Past hurts and internalized oppression bring up a wall of fear. At this point, often the queer person turns away and goes off on his or her own. But there are just as

¹² See Elaine H. Pagels, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent* (New York: Random House 1988).

¹³ See Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), Chapters 1-2, for the rhetorical-critical view that the interlocking word order of Genesis 1.26-28 indicates that sexuality can be understood as 'the image and likeness of God'.

many who face their fear and listen to the next message, 'Don't be afraid.' The messenger from God tells us, 'Walk out of your past. Do not give the past the satisfaction. There is a whole future awaiting you, if you will receive it.' The messenger assures us, 'You will do great things because God is with you.' Nevertheless, the queer person is still in doubt, because homophobia and Christophobia have done their work so well. We ask, 'How can this be? Who, me? What could God possibly have in store for me?' Once these doubts are expressed and spoken to the universe, however, if we are truly open to letting go of our doubt and insecurity, the messenger speaks on and reminds us that 'nothing is impossible with God'. 'I can love queer people if I want to', God says; 'no church or state can place a boundary upon my love. I created every person in my very own image. I am a queer kind of God; I stir up and spoil what humans create with their agendas of power and oppression. Turn to me; allow me to queer you.' And in the end, for many queer people, there comes the gift of acceptance of the situation. 'Here I am, God! Let it be for me according to what your messenger has promised.' The gift of acceptance from God is a powerful gift for those who have been refused acceptance, and it leads toward self-acceptance. This is the beginning of queer Christology: acceptance.

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

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

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

Literary critics acknowledge that the most important element in a chiasm is the centrepiece.¹⁴ Here the idea in the centre of the chiasm is

¹⁴ On chiasms in biblical interpretation, see, for example, David E. Garland, *Reading Matthew: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the First Gospel* (New York: Crossroad, 1995), p. 164.

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

We would like to think that, once we accept God's love and agree to birth the Christ, that it will be a smooth journey, but again the story of Mary of Nazareth (Luke 1.39-56) tells us otherwise. Directly after Mary's acceptance in Luke 1.38, we are told that she set out 'with haste' (Greek *meta spoudés*) and went to visit her cousin, who was also pregnant. Feminist biblical scholar Jane Schaberg has pointed out that in Greek the expression *meta spoudés* is a phrase used in emergency situations:¹⁵ Mary was running for her life! She was in a panic, and she fled. This was not a simple trip to visit a friend and pass the time of day. This was denial and escape from a terrifying situation. But her cousin Elizabeth was pregnant, too; her cousin Elizabeth had been given a gift from God also. They shared their experiences, and Mary again came to resolution and spoke one of the most beautiful and moving passages of Scripture, a manifesto for all oppressed people:

My soul magnifies the Sovereign One, and my spirit rejoices in God my rescuer. For God has examined and approved the low in status. Surely from now on people of every time will call me fortunate, for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and God's name is holy. . . . God has brought down the powerful and has lifted up the oppressed. (Luke 1.47-49, 52)¹⁶

If the annunciation story may be seen as a story of queer self-acceptance and a 'coming out' into our creativity to birth the good news of Christ, then the story of the visitation follows the queer journey as

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

16 Of course, most biblical scholars recognize that the Magnificat is an adaptation of Hannah's song in 1 Samuel 2.1-10. See Schaberg, *Illegitimacy*, pp. 93-4.

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

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

Thus, in my queer Christology, incarnation is an acceptance that we bear Christ within us – the part of God that is instilled in us to bring forth from ourselves the offspring of Christ-ness: self-empowerment, creativity, awareness of creation, joy, love, peace and justice-making, to name but a few.¹⁷ That's what a queer sense of incarnation means for me – that God becomes one with humanity through the assurance that God has always been present and that the realization of this presence will

¹⁷ Matthew Fox, in his book *Sins of the Spirit, Blessings of the Flesh: Lessons for Transforming Evil in Soul and Society* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1999), seeks to have a Christian dialogue with Eastern religions by enumerating the gifts that can be birthed from within if we pay attention to our body chakras.

give birth to human infusion with divine anointedness as Christ. In relation to Jesus' incarnation, my view is that Jesus is a model for one who had, in Schleiermacher's words, a 'perfect God consciousness'. Jesus was so open to receiving God's anointing that his life and ministry can be paradigmatic for all of those who seek to walk the Christ Way, to become Christ themselves, and, like our mother Mary, to birth other Christs.

Life and Ministry

From the incarnation, this queer Christology moves on to the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, through which we can glimpse the Christ's journey to carry out his mission of proclaiming the good news, liberating others from oppression, and proclaiming God's favour. Like the other liberation Christologies discussed in Part II, my queer Christology gives a central place to the concept of the reign of God (Greek *basileia tou theou*). It is widely agreed that Jesus' primary message was that God's rule/reign/realm/kingdom was coming near (Mark 1.15). I prefer the verbal, 'action' quality of the words 'reign' or 'rule' because they show that God's *basileia* is active and immediate among us, not a specific place where we go at some appointed time. For me, the word *basileia* carries both a temporal and spatial connotation: Jesus was telling the crowds, 'The place and time of God's power is here.' That was indeed good news for people who had been held in bondage by a series of foreign governments and the more oppressive strains of Judaism. Jesus' announcement of the reign of God was meant to let people know that no other ruler or government or religion or hierarchy could hold sway over their lives; only God could. To contemporary queer people, this proffering of the reign of God as a gift of the Christ through Jesus' preaching is good news, for it affirms for us that, although we may be second-class citizens in many countries, although we are unable to marry and may have our children taken from us, although in many jurisdictions it is a crime to express our love, nevertheless in the reign of God – the place where *God* rules – there is freedom and liberation for all people. A queer Christology of empowerment that sees all of us as anointed Christs requires that each one of us proclaim this good news to all we meet. By queering the status quo – stirring it up and spoiling it – we can help to make that reign of God a more present reality day by day.

Prior to announcing God's reign, however, Jesus was baptized, an event that each of the canonical Gospels records in its own way

(Matthew 3.13-17; Mark 1.9-11; Luke 3.21-22; John 1.32-34). The baptism is one of the first of the eight thresholds mentioned by Andrew Harvey in his mystical Christology; it is a threshold humans must cross, too, if they wish to follow Christ. In a queer context, I believe the baptism symbolizes the 'coming out' process, when gay and lesbian persons finally come to terms with who they are and seek to shed the homophobia that has accrued in their psyches during their formative years. The coming out process 'cleanses' the queer person so that they are able to preach good news without the impediment of past baggage.¹⁸ Nor is it limited to gay/lesbian queers: I believe that every person who is 'queer' according to my definition has to 'come out' and be 'baptized' into non-heteronormativity; my own father is a wonderful example of a heterosexual man who 'came out' as the father of a gay son and is now a champion of homosexual rights in Church and society, but, like my own coming out, his was a process that did not happen overnight.

Once Jesus was baptized, he began his public ministry, which, according to the Gospel record, consisted of parables, sayings, sermons, healings, exorcisms and other miracles. In examining this public ministry, I would like to focus upon Matthew's Gospel; for I propose that, in the ways set forth below, Matthew, for whatever reason, is the 'queerest' Gospel. It contains stories and sayings that have special relevance to a queer consciousness, just as Luke's Gospel has been claimed by liberation theology as the Gospel of the poor: 'Jesus always communicates meaning to human existence by responding to the implied questions of those searching for a salvation or liberation.'¹⁹ In the case of queer Christians seeking inclusion in the heterosexually dominated institutional Church, I believe that Matthew's Gospel is prophetic, for the author of Matthew (whoever he or she may have been) was writing to a community of Jewish Christians who were having trouble accepting the influx of gentiles into their midst.²⁰ The message of inclusion of those who are different is a theme that one can see throughout the Matthean account of Jesus' ministry, and this is good news for queers who seek

¹⁸ See L. J. Tessier, *Dancing After the Whirlwind: Feminist Reflections on Sex, Denial, and Spiritual Transformation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), pp. 104-11.

¹⁹ Roger Haight, *Jesus Symbol of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), p. 78.

²⁰ Matthean scholar J. P. Meier even goes so far as to say that Matthew's Gospel centres on 'one central crisis: a once strongly Jewish-Christian church is becoming increasingly Gentile in composition'; John P. Meier, *The Vision of Matthew: Christ, Church, and Morality in the First Gospel* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), p. 28 (emphasis added).

both to be included themselves and to include others. Some examples will demonstrate my theory.²¹

'Raca'

Matthew's is the only Gospel to include an obscure reference to a derogatory epithet from the ancient world. In explaining how he would not abolish the Torah but fulfil it, Jesus broadens some of the Mosaic laws that were being taken legalistically among some sectors of Judaism. For example, he notes that adultery can be a sin of the heart and mind in addition to a sin of the body (Matthew 5.27–28); and he encourages his followers to 'turn the other cheek' rather than exact 'an eye for an eye' (Matthew 5.38–39). In the same way, Jesus expands the concept of harming another: instead of merely condemning the act of murder, Jesus points out that 'if you are angry with someone, you will be liable to judgement' and 'if you call someone *raca*, you will be liable to the council' (Matthew 5.21–22). The New Revised Standard Version translates this phrase 'insult a brother or sister' and adds in a footnote that the Greek text literally reads 'say *raca* to', noting that this is 'an obscure term of abuse'.²² A number of years ago, biblical scholar Warren Johansson suggested that this might be an obscure reference to same-sex intercourse, similar to calling someone a 'fag' or 'dyke' today.²³ I am not certain I agree with Johansson's conclusion due to his lack of solid evidence; however, I do see in this 'fulfilment' of Mosaic law an encouragement on Jesus' part to be more tolerant of others. Surely this is good news for those who are marginalized in contemporary society – that, in Jesus' estimation, when one insults another or calls another names, one is in effect guilty of murder – literally, character assassination.

The Centurion and his Boy

The next example is more concrete. Matthew 8.5–13 tells the story of a Roman centurion who approaches Jesus to request healing for what most translations render as his 'servant'. However, the Greek calls the

²¹ For traditional commentary on these passages, see Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991).

²² The Society of Biblical Literature, *The HarperCollins Study Bible*, New Revised Standard Version (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), p. 1866.

²³ Warren Johansson, 'Whoever Shall Say to His Brother, *Racha* (Matthew 5:22)', *Cabirion* 10 (1984), pp. 2–4.

one in need of healing the centurion's 'boy' (Greek *pais*). In the ancient world it was not uncommon for a master and a slave to be in a pederastic relationship.²⁴ (Even in today's world in some segments of the queer community, one can still hear references to a man and his 'boy'.²⁵) Clearly, the centurion cares deeply for his 'boy'; though a gentile, he comes to a Jewish healer for relief, admitting that he is not 'worthy' for Jesus to come into his house. According to a queer hermeneutic, might this not be an example of possible shame on the part of the centurion for the type of relationship in which he was involved – one that ancient society frowned upon? Perhaps this story of the centurion requesting healing is more than just a master wanting to save a beloved servant, as traditional exegesis has held; it is in fact plausible that Jesus is tacitly approving a same-sex relationship. I realize that arguments from silence are problematic; nevertheless, in the same way that feminist biblical interpreters are able to 'read the silence',²⁶ I believe that queer interpreters can read between the lines of this story and see not only an example of same-sex devotion, but also an instance where Jesus could have condemned the practice of homosexuality but did not. Moreover, Jesus not only heals the centurion's boy but remarks that he has not found such faithfulness among his own Jewish people (Matthew 8.10). In this way, Matthew once again may be urging his Jewish Christian community to include those who are different, a theme of some concern to him. Further, that this status of master and 'boy' was of importance to Matthew is evidenced by the fact that Luke, in using a common source, refers to the centurion's 'slave' (Greek *doulos*).²⁷ (See Luke 7.1–10.)

²⁴ "Boy" in Greek connotes a catamite or youth in a homosexual/pederastic relationship in the Greco-Roman world. These relationships were socially acceptable and not uncommon in that culture. . . . When the Gospels were written the practice was very alive. . . . [R]eaders or hearers of the story in the first century would unquestionably conclude, given the language that is used, that the centurion was a pederast and his boy a catamite'; Raymond J. Lawrence, Jr, *The Poisoning of Eros: Sexual Values in Conflict* (New York: Augustine Moore Press, 1989), pp. 70–1. See also Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Ancient World*, p. 71: 'Young male slaves in Rome could serve as long-term beloved.'

²⁵ See, for example, Carol Queen and Lawrence Schimel, eds, *PoMoSexuals: Challenging Assumptions About Gender and Sexuality* (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 1997).

²⁶ For this reading strategy, see Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984).

²⁷ This is one of many examples in the Gospels of Jesus praising the faith of a person whom society would dismiss as 'other'. For example, Luke 7.36–50, tells of the woman 'with a bad reputation' – whom exegetes persist in referring to as a

The Canaanite Woman

Matthew 15.21–28 relates a similar story in which another non-Jew, this time a Canaanite woman, is rewarded for her perseverance in her quest for healing for her daughter. Matthew's version of this story even has Jesus himself go so far as to utter a racial slur, comparing gentiles to 'dogs':

Jesus replied [to her request], 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.' But she came and prostrated herself before him, saying, 'Help me, Lord.' He answered, 'It's not fair to take food meant for children and throw it to dogs.' She replied, 'Indeed, Lord; yet even dogs eat crumbs from the master's table.' At this point Jesus answered her, 'Woman, great is your faith!' (Matthew 15.24–28a)

Once again, Jesus commends the faith of one who is a non-Jew. Moreover, Jesus seems reluctant at first to minister to the gentile in this story; the woman herself must be assertive in getting the treatment she deserves. I believe a queer interpretation of this story will notice that oftentimes the Christian Church, like Jesus in the story, is reluctant to give queer folks their just deserts; frequently queer activists must resort to extraordinary means to get a hearing, as in the demonstrations by ACTUP and QueerNation.²⁸ A queer Christology recognizes that the justice of God supersedes all human conventions, a message that Matthew was intent on sharing with his community as they struggled to cope with gentiles encroaching upon their territory.²⁹ Perhaps one might also suggest Christologically that in this situation the Christ Spirit overruled the man Jesus and his human prejudices. A queer Christology sees hope in this story that the Christ Spirit in our world and in all people will somehow overcome the predisposition of many toward intolerance and homophobia.

prostitute although it says this nowhere in the text – who had such great faith in Jesus that she crashed a dinner party and washed his feet with her tears.

²⁸ See Goss, *Jesus ACTED UP*, Chapter 2.

²⁹ See Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000).

Clean and Unclean

Immediately preceding the story of the Canaanite woman, Jesus addresses the difference between clean and unclean, when it is pointed out to him that his disciples eat without washing their hands (Matthew 15.10–20). Jesus differentiates between bodily cleanliness and cleanliness of the heart, noting that 'what comes out' of a person's heart is what renders that person unclean – 'evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander' (Matthew 15.19). While I am sure many Christians would include homosexuality under the category of 'fornication' in Jesus' remark, nevertheless I believe that Jesus is pointedly telling his followers that they should not judge others' behaviour but instead examine the state of their own hearts. A queer Christology will always keep this in mind; the state of the heart is that by which God judges the state of one's life. Outsiders are not in a position to judge.

Miraculous Feedings

The theme of nourishment raised in the story of the Canaanite woman is made explicit in the two instances of miraculous feedings that bracket her story (Matthew 14.13–21 and 15.32–39). Most Jesus scholars have dismissed the so-called 'nature' miracles as fanciful creations of the early Church.³⁰ However, a queer Christology, in seeking a deeper truth beyond what is factual, will see that whenever the Christ Spirit is at large in the world, people's needs will be met. The hospitality of God is infectious. The reign of God as envisioned by Jesus is a place and a state of mind and heart where all people are welcome, where all people are ministered to, and where all people have enough. Thus, John Dominic Crossan points out that Jesus' 'open commensality' is the determining element of both his message and his danger to the status quo.³¹ A queer sensibility that seeks to stir up and spoil the status quo will be welcoming of everyone; we who have been kept from many tables, both literally and figuratively, dare not keep others from the table. In this regard, I must point out that one of the most disquieting and painful issues that I

³⁰ See Chapter 3.

³¹ John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), pp. 341–4. See also Marcus J. Borg, *Conflict, Holiness, and Politics in the Teachings of Jesus* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1984; second edition 1998), pp. 93ff; and Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, p. 137.

see in the queer community is the intolerance and divisiveness that one sometimes finds among segments of the community; for example, rich, privileged 'A-gays' often discriminate against drag queens, transgendered folk, leather people and those whose sexuality is considered 'kinky' or 'bizarre'. I contend that, in our quest for a place at the table, we must never become the 'new Pharisees' in the lavender togas.

Eunuchs

Matthew is the only evangelist to include the dominical remarks about marriage concerning eunuchs. When the disciples suggest that because Jesus' policy on divorce is so stringent, perhaps it is better not to marry, Jesus replies:

Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given. For there are *eunuchs who have been so from birth*, and there are eunuchs who have been made so by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves so because of the realm of heaven. May anyone who is able receive this saying. (Matthew 19:11-12; emphasis added)

Nancy Wilson has pointed out that two of the three categories of eunuch enumerated by Jesus are fairly easy to figure out: those who have been made eunuchs by others are those men who have been castrated, perhaps because of slavery or conquest of war. Those who have made themselves eunuchs might be those who castrate themselves (such as the priests of the Mother Goddess known as the *galli*) or those who deliberately refrain from procreation. But what about those who are 'eunuchs from birth'? Essentialists such as Wilson would say that this refers to gay and lesbian people.³² Though I am not a strict essentialist, I know that I did not intentionally choose my sexual orientation. Could Jesus not be referring to those who, from their birth, have not 'fit' into the predominant gender and sexuality categories?³³ I believe so, and if this hypothesis is tenable, it is yet another example of Matthew's desire to

³² Wilson, *Our Tribe*, pp. 128-9.

³³ This lack of congruence with established categories of gender and sexuality would include not only those with same-sex affinity, but could also include women who act outside of gender expectations such as Lydia in Acts and heterosexual men who are sterile (although in patriarchal antiquity the man was never sterile; it was always the woman!).

have the Christian community to whom he was writing focus on greater inclusivity of all people in the body of Christ.

I believe that the Gospel of Matthew, in these six instances, shows itself to have an agenda of inclusion of diverse peoples in God's reign. Of course, the other canonical Gospels have a message of inclusion as well; for example, Luke tells the stories of the woman searching for the lost coin and the return of the prodigal (Luke 15.8-32), while John includes the story of the woman taken in adultery (John 8.2-11). The other source that I would like to highlight in discussing Jesus' ministry, however, is the non-canonical Gospel of Thomas, for I believe that it includes unique sayings and different versions of canonical sayings that mediate the gospel of Jesus for a queer milieu. For example, Thomas' Gospel states:

Jesus said, 'Those who seek should not stop seeking until they find. When they find, they will be disturbed. When they are disturbed, they will marvel, and will rule over all.' (Logion 2)

Jesus said, 'If your leaders say to you, "Look, God's imperial rule is in the sky," then the birds of the sky will precede you. If they say to you, "It is in the sea," then the fish will precede you. Rather, God's imperial rule is inside you and outside you. When you know yourselves, then you will be known, and you will understand that you are children of the Living God. But if you do not know yourselves, then you live in poverty, and you are the poverty.' (Logion 3)

His disciples said to him, 'When will God's imperial rule come?' [Jesus replied,] 'It will not come by watching for it. It will not be said, "Look, here!" or "Look, there!" Rather, God's imperial rule is spread out upon the earth, and people don't see it.' (Logion 113)³⁴

These three logia, or sayings, demonstrate a departure from the way Jesus is portrayed in the canonical Gospels.

The Jesus of Thomas is much more 'in your face' than the Jesus of Matthew, Mark, Luke and certainly John. This 'in your face' quality is attractive to a queer Christology, for queer theory and activism asserts that this type of confrontational, transgressive stance is necessary to effect change in today's heteronormative world. The Jesus of Thomas

³⁴ 'The Gospel of Thomas' in *The Complete Gospels: Annotated Scholars Version*, ed. Robert J. Miller (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge Press, 1992), pp. 305, 322, rendered in inclusive language.

CHRISTOLOGY FROM THE MARGINS

encourages us to keep on seeking for what we need, but warns us that when we find what we are searching for, we will be disturbed. This is sometimes the case with civil rights: when slavery was abolished, blacks became ghettoized and their poverty skyrocketed; when women began to assert their rights, they were placated by the resulting tokenism of a few women in high-profile jobs; and when US gays and lesbians began to receive a hearing from such politicians as President Bill Clinton, they were ultimately disturbed by betrayal in the form of the military 'don't ask, don't tell' policy and the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA).

Jesus in Thomas' gospel encourages queer readers to know themselves, with the caution that if one does not become proactive in knowing oneself, poverty is the result, and the queer person who has been inattentive to their own becoming is the source of the poverty, indeed the very bankruptcy of the queer liberation movement. Moreover, Thomas' Jesus portrays the reign of God as already present all around us, but people don't see it because they are so preoccupied in looking elsewhere. As a result, others will take advantage of God's reign (or 'imperial rule') to the exclusion of those who are inattentive. What a wonderful commentary on the requirement of all oppressed people to take care of themselves and be vigilant for their rights and prerogatives. If the oppressed do not look after themselves, they will be left 'in the back of the bus', while everyone else rides up front.

Two elements of Andrew Harvey's Christology are also instructive for a queer Christology of Jesus' ministry. The second threshold in Harvey's scheme is Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. Harvey believes that everyone who seeks to embrace the mystical Christ must go through a period of temptation, testing and wandering in the wilderness. This is certainly a part of queer experience. Jesus went into the wilderness to collect himself and was tempted by the devil. (See Matthew 4.1-11; Mark 1.12-13; Luke 4.1-13.) Those who go on a journey of self-search are often tempted by various demons. Some are ejected from their churches, families and jobs to wander aimlessly, often seeking solace at the bottom of a bottle, at the end of a coke spoon, or from the temporary lift of casual sex. Others drift from one relationship to another, seeking from another person the wholeness that they could derive from a relationship with the Christ. But as Delores Williams notes of the experience of black women, the wilderness is often the place where God meets the wanderer and helps her or him to 'make a way out of no way'.³⁵

³⁵ Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), p. 108.

'WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?' 2

Lesbian Episcopal priest M. R. Riley concurs from a queer perspective:

We are a people whose entire past has been eradicated. We must dig deep, unearth it, fit the broken fragments back together as best we can, preserve it, pass it on, so that never again will one of ours be left to perish in the desert for the lack of vision.³⁶

Like Jesus, queer people can find Christ in the desert of the heart, in the wilderness of coming out in a hostile world. We can cross the threshold into the promised land of our Christ consciousness.

When we do so, we, like Jesus, are prepared to encounter the threshold of transfiguration, in which we see a foretaste of what we can become – the possibility of health and wholeness, a unified community of sisters and brothers who help one another and fight for one another. Jesus was revealed in all his splendour as the Risen Christ in the Transfiguration (Matthew 17.1–13; Mark 9.2–8; Luke 9.28–36); each day, gay and lesbian people have transfigurational foretastes of our Christic becoming as we foster our self-esteem, take care of ourselves, make love, forge a partnership and perhaps even raise children – against the odds to the contrary.

While we are on that 'high', we experience in our queer Christology the triumph and joy of Jesus' entry into the city of Jerusalem on Palm Sunday (Matthew 21.1–11; Mark 11.1–11; Luke 19.28–38). Matthew tells us:

The crowds that went ahead of Jesus and those that followed kept shouting, 'Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in God's name! Hosanna to the highest heaven!' When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the entire city was disturbed, asking, 'Who is this?' But the crowds kept saying, 'This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth of Galilee.' (Matthew 21.9–11)

As I view this story from a queer context in the contemporary world, there is one major issue. In today's world, if all people can be Christs, as I have argued throughout the course of this Christology, what does it mean 'to come in God's name'? Many queer people are anointed to

³⁶ L. William Countryman and M. R. Riley, *Gifted by Otherness: Gay and Lesbian Christians in the Church* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2001), p. 108.

bring good news to their own community and to the world at large, but, like the onlookers in Jerusalem, others may ask, 'Who is this who presumes to speak or act in God's name?' In answering this question, it is instructive to see how the continually shouting crowds around Jesus answered it; they said, 'This is the *prophet* Jesus.' I believe it is significant that out of all the Christological titles contained in the Gospels (Christ, Messiah, Lord, Son of God, Son of Man, etc.), 'prophet' is the form of identification selected by the crowds. This signals to me that those who 'come in God's name' are prophets, anointed to do God's work as the Hebrew prophets were, filled with a message of confrontation and judgement as those same prophets were, and ready to die for justice as prophets have been throughout time. We can call to mind recent prophets who spoke a truth that was unpleasant to hear – Abraham Lincoln, Sojourner Truth, John F. Kennedy, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks, Che Guevara, Gloria Steinem, Betty Friedan, Mohandas Gandhi, Anwar Sadat, Harvey Milk, Troy Perry, the rioters at Stonewall – many of whom have been silenced through incarceration or assassination.

From a queer perspective, the Palm Sunday story empowers us to action – collective action, like the crowds who, in partnership with Jesus, stormed the city of Jerusalem to 'act up'. Like the crowds on Palm Sunday, we must not be silenced. Like Jesus, we must accept our prophetic, Christic role to criticize, change, and replace systems and structures in Church and society that perpetuate all kinds of oppression, not just homophobia and heteronormativity. We must be in solidarity with all who struggle for equality – women, people of colour, the poor, the aged, the young, the differently abled, and those of questionable gender or sexuality. In doing so, we must constantly ask ourselves what it means to 'come in God's name', what it means to speak and to act 'in God's name'. Do we use God's name in vain, for our own violent and sinful agendas, such as those who bomb abortion clinics in God's name or fly planes into buildings in Allah's name, or advocate 'killing a queer for Christ'? Or do we use God's name to lift up the lowly as Mary envisioned in her Magnificat, to create justice and liberation as Gandhi and King advocated, and to proclaim good news and the year of God's favour as Jesus did?

This is how the life and ministry of Jesus become paradigmatic for revealing a queer Christology: he demonstrated what God was like. He solved the problem of God's true nature articulated in Hebrew wisdom literature (especially the book of Job). He showed in his person a perfect

'WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?' 2

God-consciousness and revealed in his words and his deeds the face of God – One who is with the oppressed, One who tells good news in the midst of bad, One who lifts up and carries those who are crucified by their peers. And because the people saw God in this Jesus, they called him the Son of God and, many years after his death, came to believe that Jesus himself was God. A queer Christology recognizes that when we emulate Jesus, we become sons and daughters of God and create God in our midst through the incarnation of the Christ in our bodies, minds, and spirits.

Passion, Death and Resurrection

The events of the last week of Jesus' life are well known and are recorded by all four of the canonical Gospels. (See Matthew 26.36–27.56; Mark 14.32–15.41; Luke 22.39–23.49; John 18.1–19.37.) While I do not want to overemphasize the passion and death of Jesus in a queer Christology, nor do I wish to underestimate it. Many people, myself included, prefer to concentrate on the joy and new life of Easter Sunday rather than the death and hopelessness of Good Friday. However, as Matthew Fox points out in his interpretation of Meister Eckhart's mystical theology, we must embrace the negative path before we can break free of it and enter the creative and transformative paths.³⁷ True creativity and authentic transformation come out of privation. Jesus had to experience a humiliating and painful death before he could become fully Christ in the resurrection. In the same way, I believe that queer people often must encounter humiliation, discrimination, physical and emotional torture, and even death in order to birth liberation for all. The Christological importance of the cross for queers is the possibility of meeting God in our pain and receiving ultimate transcendence. Two of Andrew Harvey's thresholds to experiencing the mystical Christ are Jesus' agony in Gethsemane and his death; Harvey sees these painful experiences as cathartic for Christic becoming.

We must recognize, however, that we ourselves do not always reap the benefits of our struggles; many times it is those who come after us who are gifted by our suffering. Thus, African-American poet and essayist Maya Angelou reminds us:

³⁷ This is a theme in all of Fox's work, but see especially *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ*, pp. 167, 199.

CHRISTOLOGY FROM THE MARGINS

When we cast our bread upon the waters, we can presume that someone downstream whose face we will never know will benefit from our action, as we who are downstream from another will profit from that grantor's gift.³⁸

Is this not the very meaning of what theologians have called Jesus' vicarious suffering for humanity? I agree with Rita Nakashima Brock that Jesus' suffering and death were not willed by God, that such a view of salvation relegates God to the role of abusive parent.³⁹ I concur with Jürgen Moltmann and Robert Goss that God was suffering with Jesus on the cross, that God did not plan the crucifixion but could not necessarily stop it, and that our hope as Christians comes from how God reacted to the crucifixion of Jesus and reacts to contemporary crucifixions.⁴⁰

In this regard, the interpretative moment – the hermeneutical key, if you will – for my queer reading of the crucifixion is the death of Matthew Shepard, a gay college student in Laramie, Wyoming, who was beaten, tied to a fence and abandoned to die alone in the wilderness. Eyewitnesses stated that Matthew looked like a 'scarecrow' on that fence,⁴¹ but might he not also have looked like the crucified left by the side of the road in Roman Palestine for others to notice and learn a lesson from? I believe that Matthew Shepard is the most famous example of the crucifixions of gays and lesbians that have occurred for generations. His humiliation and suffering were meant, like the scarecrow, as a warning for queers to 'keep away' from 'decent' people, and, like ancient crucifixions, as an example to queers of what might happen if they 'flaunt' themselves on heteropatriarchal territory.

Where was God in this situation? I believe that God was with Matthew as he hung there dying – comforting him, taking away his

38 Maya Angelou, *Wouldn't Take Nothing for My Journey Now* (Toronto: Random House of Canada, 1993), pp. 15–16.

39 Rita Nakashima Brock, *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), pp. 53–7. See my discussion of Brock in Chapter 6.

40 Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, trans. R. A. Wilson and John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1974), pp. 1–5; Goss, *Jesus ACTED UP*, pp. 76–7.

41 Edward J. Ingabretsen, *At Stake: Monsters and the Rhetoric of Fear in Public Culture* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2001), pp. 178–9. See also Beth Loffreda, *Losing Matt Shepard: Life and Politics in the Aftermath of Anti-Gay Murder* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); as well as the HBO film *The Laramie Project* (2002).

pain, and assuring him that God would welcome him to Godself when his suffering finally ended. However, I believe that God was present in an even more tangible way. There was something redemptive above Matthew's experience; it did not go unnoticed, as other atrocities against homosexuals have been. The horror and brutality of his death, the perpetrators' insistence that he 'had it coming' because he had 'come on' to them, and the media circus created by homophobic hatemongers at his funeral served to bring the issue of queer-bashing into the public consciousness, and some steps have been taken to preclude this from happening again.

Terrence McNally, in the introduction to the printed version of his play *Corpus Christi*, makes explicit the Christological link between Matthew and Jesus and concludes that we 'forget his story at the peril of our very lives'.⁴² American studies scholar Ed Ingebreetsen, in discussing the phenomenon of monsters in pop culture, has elaborated on the Christological importance of Matthew Shepard, noting that 'Jesus' short life was marked continuously by scandal, beginning with his shame-filled birth out of wedlock in a stable and ending with the ignominious death of a criminal.'⁴³ Shepard's grotesquely 'transfigured' body, like Jesus' own, presents a scandal and an offence to 'decent' people. The category of 'monster' has thus been created in popular culture for those whom the majority find scandalous and offensive:

The stigma created by the interlocking legal and social taboo surrounding the homosexual body (symbolic as well as actual), extends an ironic tribute to the original scandal of Jesus – whose *sacred* body is likewise characterized by monstrosity, offense, and riddled with pain. Both are bearers of social opprobrium.⁴⁴

We, like the women who watched Jesus' death from a distance, may emulate them by drawing closer to the graves of modern-day martyrs in order to witness the resurrection God has in store for all oppressed and marginalized people.

I agree with Robert Goss that Easter was the moment when God made Jesus queer. This is when God 'queered' or 'spoiled' the spoiling of God's Son by raising him from the dead. This is when God stirred up the status quo by vindicating the deaths of political martyrs for all time

⁴² McNally, *Corpus Christi*, p. vi.

⁴³ Ingebreetsen, *At Stake*, pp. 180–1.

⁴⁴ Ingebreetsen, *At Stake*, pp. 180–1.

and saying 'no' to the oppressions associated with discrimination in all its forms. In a strictly queer context, the Christ that God queered on Easter says, 'Never again!' the same way that holocaust survivors try to make some sense of that tragedy. The queer Christ not only bursts forth from the empty tomb, leaving behind the graveclothes of homophobic violence and compulsory heterosexuality, but also is resurrected in each of us as we accept our queerness – our divine birthright to imagine, to stir up, and to spoil in God's name.

As we do that, I believe that queer Christians can also emulate the mysterious figure of the Gospel of John known as 'the one whom Jesus loved' or, in popular terminology, 'the Beloved Disciple'. Who is the Beloved Disciple? There have been many theories,⁴⁵ but the final answer is that we do not know. It may have been John; it may have been Thomas; it may have been Lazarus; it may have been Mary of Magdala. Each of these possibilities has been proffered, but each is not without its problems. In my queer Christology, I see this Beloved Disciple in a different way: I choose to see the Beloved not as a historical person but as a metaphorical clue left to us by the Fourth Evangelist. The Beloved Disciple can be any person who believes that Christ has risen without having the proof at hand; the Beloved Disciple can be the queer person of faith who believes that God has a plan for her/his life and believes that there will be an end to heterosexist oppression, even though at present there seems no end in sight. For those of us who are striving to follow and become the queer Christ, the Fourth Evangelist speaks down the corridors of time: 'Blessed [fortunate; commendable] are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe' (John 20.29).

Beyond Resurrection

It is significant that, in the mystical Christology of Andrew Harvey to which I have alluded throughout my own Christology, three of the eight thresholds to the mystical Christ occur after the human Jesus' death. While it is certainly important to live our lives according to the wisdom

45 See, for example, James H. Charlesworth, *The Beloved Disciple: Whose Witness Validates the Gospel of John?* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1995); Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, two volumes (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966–1970); Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1998); and Robert E. Goss, 'The Beloved Disciple: A Queer Bereavement Narrative in a Time of AIDS', in *Take Back the Word*, ed. Goss and West, pp. 206–18.

that Jesus imparted during his own path along the Christ way, it is essential that we recognize that a queer Christology must ultimately progress beyond the life of Jesus of Nazareth and into the lives of all believers – all of the 'other Christs' that Eckhart describes. According to Harvey, Christ was resurrected, ascended to God and returned in the flames of Pentecost to empower the Christian community forevermore. I agree that these three thresholds can be informative; however, I would go further into the lives of the first Christians by examining some post-resurrection events, for, after all, Christology is the apprehending of Christ by the community gathered in his name, beginning with the New Testament witnesses and progressing to today's seekers.

The risen Christ appeared to two of Jesus' followers as they walked along the road toward Emmaus (Luke 24.13–35). We are told that as they walked, Jesus joined them as Christ, but they did not recognize him; they continued to talk about their problems, their distress over what had happened to Jesus, and their disappointment that what they had hoped for had not materialized. I believe this story is paradigmatic for all of us who travel life's journey focused on our own problems and our own agendas. We are unwilling to realize that Christ walks with us because we are making our journey 'all about us'. The disciples traveling to Emmaus finally recognized Jesus 'in the breaking of the bread' (Luke 24.35), a simple, ordinary, everyday gesture that brought Jesus back into their consciousness and made them see the risen Christ. In the same way, queer people of faith can look around our daily lives for everyday miracles to be found in the ordinary parts of our daily round: the Christ is made known to us in our individual circumstances, if we will allow our eyes to be opened to the extraordinary within the ordinary. An encounter with Christ transforms our journey, 'queering' it by stirring it up and surpassing our expectations.

We can also gain nourishment for our journey from the experience of another solitary traveller whose story is told in Acts of the Apostles 8.26–40 – the Ethiopian eunuch. Here is the quintessential queer, one who is outcast on several levels: black, possibly gay, possibly intersexual or transgendered.⁴⁶ He has gone to worship at the Jerusalem temple, but is going home unfulfilled, for the Torah prohibits any male whose genitals are not intact from worshipping (Deuteronomy 23.1). He, like many queer refugees from religion, was on 'a wilderness road' (Acts

⁴⁶ Wilson, *Our Tribe*, pp. 128–31. For a traditional interpretation, see Ben Witherington, III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1998).

8.26). But the apostle Philip joins him and – in a scene that looks remarkably like a gay ‘pick-up’ to me – explains to the eunuch the Scriptures he is attempting to read and goes on to assure him that he may be baptized into the Christian movement.⁴⁷ Thus, this person who was marginalized on several levels becomes the first non-Jewish convert to the Christian faith. This is good news for queers! When we are taught that there is no place for us in the churches or in society, messengers from God announce to us that we have a place with the queer Christ, who breaks down barriers, who queers the structures and systems that would seek to keep people out. Like the eunuch, we can ask, ‘What is to prohibit me from being baptized?’ and the risen Christ, the queer Christ, speaks to our hearts and says, ‘Absolutely nothing!’

Harvey makes much of the fact that Pentecost is the opportunity for everyone to have a share in the mystical Christ. I believe that every day is Pentecost for every Christian, but especially for queer followers of the Christ way. We are told that the Spirit came upon the believers and gave them the ability to speak to others in their own languages (Acts 2.1–11). I have stated previously that for me the Christ Spirit was breathed out upon us when Jesus came through the walls of fear and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’ (John 20.22). Often, however, it is our first impulse to keep that Spirit to ourselves; the Pentecost experience, however, teaches us that this Christ Spirit cannot be contained, that, like fire, it travels fast and consumes everything in its path. The queer Christ animates his/her followers to speak to others in their own language: this tells me that there are many diverse ways to tell the Christ story and to share the Christ Spirit. There are many ‘queerings’ possible because of that restless Spirit that burns to be shared. There are many sub-communities within the queer community that need to be shown the Christ: bisexuals, transgendered, transsexual, intersexual, differently sexual, non-sexual, supportively heterosexual, people of leather and lace, celibate people, those into S/M and those into ‘vanilla’ sex, those who are single or partnered and monogamous, as well as those who are in open relationships or triads. Our God of diversity empowers us to share the queer Christ in diverse ways to diverse people in their own languages. May it be so!

⁴⁷ It is significant that the text the eunuch is reading is Isaiah, which includes the promise of God to the eunuchs that are faithful to God that God will give them a name that shall be not be ‘cut off’ (as other things have been). See Gaiser, ‘A New Word on Homosexuality?’

Epilogue

Has Christ Been 'Queered'?

This study has offered a new Christology to the panoply of liberation Christologies that seek to interpret the Christ figure from various social locations. The social location in this instance is sexual orientation, namely a 'queer' location, as I have defined that term – imaginative, playful, stirring up, sometimes spoiling what has already been spoiled, but always interpreting Christ through the lens of justice for all people, especially those marginalized because of their sexuality.

Have I succeeded in this endeavour? Only my reader will be able to answer that question. However, I would like to critique my queer Christology, employing the guidelines set forth by theologian Roger Haight in his discussion of constructive Christology. In suggesting what Christologies in an increasingly postmodern age should look like, Haight says:

First, postmodernity involves a radical historical consciousness. Gone is the confidence in progress, goals toward which history is heading . . . All knowledge is local. . . . In christology a return to the historical Jesus is a sign of historical consciousness. . . . It seems clear that postmodernity demands new interpretations of Jesus of Nazareth.

Second, postmodernity involves a critical social consciousness. . . . One of the marks of modernity is the turn to the subject, to universal and critical reason, as the foundation of truth. Now the human subject appears to be a function of history, of social arrangements . . . The various socially mediated christologies are both a recognition of the fundamental sociality of human existence and a reaction against any reductionism. . . . Liberation christologies are a reassertion of human subjectivity and freedom, but a personal human subject-with-others, a freedom in society, and the sociality of human existence. . . .

Third, postmodernity involves a pluralist consciousness. At no other time have people had such a sense of the difference of others, of the pluralism of societies, cultures, and religions . . . But postmodernity

provides an opportunity for dramatic new christological meaning. The discovery of pluralism is precisely a discovery of the 'other' . . .

Finally, postmodernity involves a cosmic consciousness. . . . We need a christology that will confirm the importance of a common humanity.¹

Does my Christology fulfil Haight's criteria? I believe so. First, my queer Christology has demonstrated a localized knowledge, speaking from my own experience as a queer interpreter. I have been careful to reiterate that this is only one queer Christology among many that can and will be envisioned. I have looked to the historical Jesus for some information about Jesus Christ; yet, I have not limited myself to the results of historical Jesus research nor the most allegedly 'reliable' factual data on Jesus. Rather, I have been guided by my belief that 'something does not have to be factual to be true'. I have chosen to find truth not only in the 'facts' of Jesus' life but in the way he was interpreted by his followers then and now. This is true Christology.

Second, I have captured the relational quality of Jesus Christ in my Christology. I have sought to portray the importance of the Christ figure by how it is appropriated and used by a community, in this case the queer community. I have not presumed to imply a universal consciousness, nor have I accepted it uncritically from others. Ultimately, the queer view of Christ will only succeed if it is applied in community; one of the problems with what I have called 'Christophobia' is that it has isolated individuals from God who is Source, Saviour and Sustainer.

Third, I have been respectful of pluralism in my Christology. In my definition of 'Christ' in Chapter 11, I very carefully stated that I use a Christian vocabulary because my audience is the queer community that has emanated from Judaeo-Christian culture. However, I believe it was also clear that my view of Christ – human anointedness to share good news – could cross over between religions and was an idea that could function in various interfaith settings. Additionally, I believe my queer Christology has been inclusive of other types of pluralism. By examining and analysing the other liberation Christologies in Part II, I showed just how diverse the thinking is on this topic so that my own small contribution could be situated in an overall context.

Fourth and finally, I have articulated a queer Christology that can be shared among many segments of society – 'queer' or 'non-queer'. I have

¹ Roger Haight, *Jesus Symbol of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), pp. 331–4.

EPILOGUE

not created a separatist Christology or one that is so nuanced and detailed that it will only appeal to a group of biblical scholars or queer theorists. I have intentionally sought *not* to shock, although I may have inadvertently done so, for it has been my intent in creating this Christology to appeal to the so-called 'middle-of-the-road' gays and lesbians as well as the 'cutting-edge' queers.

I have learned much on this journey, especially that the queer Christ has infused this work because I am he. As Jesus said that he and his Parent were one, so too I believe that I and the queer Christ are one. I pray that those who have read this study have encountered the Christ who meets us all in the very depths of our being – and our queerness.