

Medieval Church History and Queer Ministry: Using the Historical Imaginary to Build Theological Community

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Introduction

“A woman who takes up devilish ways and plays a male role in coupling with another woman is most vile in My sight, and so is she who subjects herself to such a one in this evil deed.....”¹

This statement, made by Hildegard of Bingen is representative of much of the vitriol the medieval church liked to produce in response to same sex sexual activity. Indeed, even for as innovative (and on occasions heretical) an author as Hildegard there was neither space nor any evidence of her desire to do other than uphold traditional approaches to two women having sex.² In the face of such prejudice it is hard not to wonder whether the medieval church has anything positive to offer the queer ecclesial community. Of course, by implication this quote suggests that queer folk existed in the distant past and are not just a figment of our fertile (if not furtive), libidinous, post-modernist imaginations. Indeed, this quote indicates the existence of not only woman to woman sex, but also role playing of a type that sounds (comfortingly or disquieteningly dependent on your personal view point) like the butch/femme dichotomy. Obviously, this is a translation from Latin and linguistically at least, conveys an inherently post-medieval reading of the text. However, it is hard to know how a literal interpretation of this particular text would differ. It clearly implies same sex coupling.

In this paper I wish to elaborate on why and how medieval church history can be used to benefit of the queer community and those whom identify as its ministers. To do this, I have broken the paper into three key areas: firstly, theoretical frameworks; secondly, the practical implications of these frameworks for queer ministry; and thirdly, a case study of using the historical imaginary and what it suggests as areas for exploration in queer theology.

Some Theoretical Frameworks

This paper accepts certain assumptions about the nature of history, all of which are contentious. However, to provide a framework on which a model of queer theological community can be built through engaging with the historical imaginary, there is some justification in being dependent on contentious assumptions. Arguably, a queer community needs to approach all assumptions about history with a sense of their inherent instability, their potential for reconfiguration, and the possibility that they are always to some extent inaccurate. There is humility in such an approach. Intrinsically we start from the assumption that we *‘might be wrong’* (we might also be right). Additionally, medievalists do not have the complacent luxury of being lulled into false sense of security through having full documentation.³ We are dependent on relatively little from which to generate images of the past. Stating anything with certainty in such a situation is foolhardy.

Terrifying though it might seem, the uncertainty of historiographical propositions liberates us from the modernist models of analysis with their focus on patriarchal values; their need to write a Grand Narrative of the past as both different and more primitive than the present; and their valourizing of objectivity over a more nuanced assessment of the constant interaction between objective thought and subjective gaze. Take for example the work of John Boswell on the sexuality of Anselm of Bec (Archbishop of Canterbury, 1093-1109). John was responding in the first instance to a historical tradition that denied the possibility of Anselm being homosexual. The great Oxford Anselm scholar, Sir Richard Southern felt this to be the case, or if it was not the case, to be of no great importance. His objective thought placed a parameter on what was important, but John Boswell's subjective experience arguably broke that boundary. He expanded the objective to include the proposition that a great church leader could not only have been a homosexual, but also that this was and is important.⁴

Whereas post-modern diversity, so bound up with the subjective gaze, defies categorization, modernist history embraces it. Types, themes, events are the food of history. History stratifies the past, brings order to chaotic experiences, and sequences time. Historical analysis often tries to find the generalizable, so that frameworks can be repeatedly placed on events to allow us to make sense of them. This intellectual action struggles with the lack of order that is diversity. Without a humility-based approach to our own frameworks for historical interpretation, we could end up predicating our narratives on a triumphalism that is just as excluding as the hetero-normative approaches of straight society.

The key assumptions are as follows:

1. Historical narratives provide a coherent structure for remembrance and, in its turn, remembrance provides a coherent structure for community;
2. Historical narratives legitimize the inclusion and omission of groups within a given society and are, therefore, not value neutral. In fact, historical narratives often re-enact contemporary values, judgements and prejudices of dominant collectives.
3. Historical narratives are appropriated by and mediated through subsequent generations who use them to justify responses and actions to given contemporary events.
4. Ecclesiastical historical narratives are intrinsically linked to theological debates.
5. Ecclesiastical history has an emancipatory role for Christians.⁵

All of these assumptions are critical for Church History. Ecclesiastical historians can, for example, use interpretations of the past to justify the exclusion of certain minority groups from the Church or its hierarchy. Dependence on one particular narrative of the past can discard the potential of alternative experiences and lead to the privileging of terms of reference that relate more to one group than another. Orthodox history done in this way can support orthodox religion. However, if ecclesiastical history has an emancipatory role, it has an ethical requirement not to privilege one group over another. That it has occurred in the past is clear. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the exclusion of women and peoples of colour from the historical canon in the Nineteenth Century and how their absence related to the theological debates of the day. A narrative focused on scientific objectivity but formed within predetermined theological viewpoints cannot but bring rules to bear which exclude 'alternative' types of physical evidence, story-telling, rhetoric, and paradigm-making.

For those of us whose 'belonging' is located in the queer world, a hetero-normative church

history silences both our lived-experience and those of queers who may have gone before us.

Practical Implications

This clearly has practical implications for queer ministry, both in terms of the negative impact of the dominant hetero-normative historical discourse and the positive effect of reclamation.

The first is the impact of dominant historical narratives and their relationship to so-called theological truths that come to embody prejudice. Put bluntly, queer Christians are absent in many ways in the medieval historical record because what was determined as acceptable to record was determined by an exclusive minority. It is only by inference that we can begin to draw pictures of a possible queer past. Often our inferences are drawn from such sources as pre-Reformation penitential literature, which categorize sins and their appropriate penances or from clerical diatribes against sodomy.⁶ The categories focus on certain actions rather than any sense of identity. The penances related to the mechanical aspects of sex. For today's Church Historians then how difference was 'felt' as opposed to *acted* becomes a question answered through the application of modern-day narrative frameworks. These *presentist* narratives are regarded with degrees of indifference, suspicion, ethnographic curiosity (we become the 'tribe' under observation), or self-identification (which can lead to a tendency towards self-suffering guilt).⁷

This absence is a problem. Churches that base their membership in part on tradition can bolster up their rhetoric of exclusion citing the historical record as justification. From a pastoral point of view, the reassurance of the possibility of previous queer experience, affirms us, and moves us from isolation. We are no longer the '*only gay in the village*', but part of a wider group with a history and potential tradition that includes us. As we reclaim the past we may also allow it to help us explore issues of intimate relationships, celibacy, chastity, and sexual activity as they relate to us here and now.⁸

The second implication is one of trust. Historical narratives in the West have increasingly become something produced by intellectuals. If these folk have not got an ethical predisposition to recognizing the importance of difference, why should we engage in their exclusive practices? Why should we generate narratives that may conform to their models? Perhaps we shouldn't, at least not in an unaware manner. Within LGBT medieval ecclesiastical historical studies the scholarship tends to focus on male-to-male acts and homoerotic friendship between men. Lesbians, transsexuals, transvestites, and bi-sexuals are relatively less likely to form the basis of a large research project in church history circles.⁹ Is this imbalance evidence of our own privileging tendencies and representative of the relative power of certain groups within the queer community? Additionally, even where the LGBT community is represented in the scholarship, as it has adopted sociological and anthropological models, the language has grown so complex that some of the texts seem impenetrable. This is not, however, the time for anti-intellectualism, but rather the time for bridging the divide between the so called low-brow and high-brow approaches; to integrating these different models and generating more inclusive approaches to academic and non-academic study of Church History. Effectively, medieval church history developed in this way could be used to renegotiate trust between members of our queer communities.

Arguably, and perhaps less theoretically, the third implication is the facilitation of humour and its potential to liberate from shame. This is where the historical record can be used to positive effect. I mentioned earlier that penitential literature has been the focus of much

debate with respect to queer sexuality, particularly that of male-to-male relationships. In fact, women are well represented in this literature too, as are most physical bodies in all their glorious quirkiness. The medieval clerics, though drawn to prohibiting immorality, could not help but be immersed in issues of the body. Asceticism, for example, has at its core physical practices that might be considered 'Other' if not down right sado-masochistic from today's perspective.¹⁰ But the body was considered a gateway to Heaven or Hell. As a consequence clerical literature is full of sex and its relationship to salvation. Much of the historiographical discussion in current scholarship is serious and balanced. The power of the rational mind to rid something of its fleshly existence and turn it into abstraction (like the medieval exegetes who managed to view the *Song of Songs* as allegory only) is pervasive, excluding and at times, not much fun. I have discovered that using texts from such a distant past to engage an audience in discussing sexuality opens them up to a range of responses including embarrassment and its attendant handmaid, humour. Issues of masturbation, dildos, anal sex, and promiscuity, for example, can then easily be integrated into the conversation and re-appropriated as shameless. As can death. For a community that still lives within the shadow of sexually-transmitted diseases the power of this should not be underestimated.

The drawing together of reassurance, trust, and humour through queer interpretations of ecclesial history into a community culture is potentially something that feeds self-belief. Self-belief can nourish agency. From a queer theological perspective this is significant. Consider Marcella Althaus-Reid's notion of the nomadic queer community which constitutes its own theologians, "dismantling and rearranging liturgies made of other bodies' borders".¹¹ Such constitution arguably requires the self-belief that we can be agents that overturn boundaries made by others. The disruption of which Marcella so eloquently writes necessitates risk taking. To do this without falling into oppressive behaviours that place us as morally superior religious people over inferior others, especially fundamentalists, arguably requires confidence.

The Building Blocks of a Queer Theological Community

To facilitate discussion I have engaged small groups of LGBT folk in exploring visual representations of biblical texts from the thirteenth and fourteenth century 'moralized bibles'. These *Bibles Moralisée* were designed primarily for senior members of the medieval aristocracy, mainly kings and queens of France.¹² They centred on the visual representation of biblical stories as a method of instructing the laity in the principles of Christian theological thinking. Such bibles reveal shifts in medieval theological discourse, but they also provide powerful visual doorways to the corridors of contemporary discussion about how the ecclesiastical past can be used to generate frameworks to on which to develop queer theology.

The manuscripts of the *Bibles Moralisée* provide a rich source of illuminations and one depiction which has been of particular use to me shows the scene of Naomi and Ruth on the road from Moab, entering Jerusalem.¹³ Using this picture I have asked participants to write down a brief synopsis of what story they think is being depicted. I do this without identifying the provenance of the picture to encourage a reading not necessarily influenced by existing knowledge of the particular bible text. At the close of the discussion, however, I do reveal the historical context, manuscript details and date of the text.

In response to the picture certain common themes occur. The first is the power of desire. The groups tell stories which express that essentially it doesn't matter how much prohibition

appears to be applied by the Church, people still drink from the glass of the erotic that is diverse sexuality. Whether consciously or unconsciously desire will out. In these discussions the image is seen as a narrative of the two women's desire leading them to be excluded from the town that seems to be depicted behind them. Added to these stories are the notions of lovers, gossip and secrets, different configurations of intimate friendship, and the belief in hidden communities in which sexuality would have been expressed. This last point is important because historians will often rally to an argument that assumes queer sexual identity is a post-modern expression and not evident prior to the creation of the concept of the 'closet'. Any searching for queer communities in the historical past is a problem from such an approach as it accuses the reader of 'bad historical technique'. From this perspective, the imposition of contemporary preoccupations is not acceptable in objective history. However, such strictures need to be challenged. After all, can ecclesiastical history ever be truly objective? And can we ever really prove that hidden communities, with their own language, social practices and culture, were not generated by those who could not follow the Church's norms?

The second theme that participants have reflected upon is the possibility of 'camping-up' the image. Here the medieval image shows the seduction of a younger woman by an older one. For some this seduction is narrated as a parody of what I would call the 'Sister George Syndrome'. This syndrome is the left over impact of the articulated fear so well expressed in the final dark scene of seduction in the 1968 film version of the play of the 'Killing of Sister George'. This scene, I would argue, portrays a homophobic tragedy that played into heterosexual fears about what older lesbians are and what they do. Older lesbians are not, of course, the only gender to be singled out as morally dangerous, emotional game-players. Both religious and secular fear of queer 'otherness' is not exclusive to one gender or age group. In the LGBT parodying response to the image of Naomi and Ruth in the *Bibles Moralisée* the queer community is responding to heterosexual fears of the ultimate corruption of young people into 'perverse' sexuality. We are parodying the narrative of the powerful older woman seducing the younger one. The parody here fulfils the role of extending the heteronormative repetitive fear through 'sending it up' with critical difference.¹⁴ The critical difference, for example, is that it is ok for young women to choose to explore their sexuality with older women. The critical difference is also that older queer folk, often so seemingly invisible, do exist and have healthy sex lives. As an ecclesial community we perhaps need to engage in more rigorous debate concerning age and stage prejudices and how they come through in our readings of the past.

Of course, for some, the narrative is not a parody but an expression of how powerless they felt in the face of the sexual expertise of a more experienced partner. This is surely also significant locus for queer theological debate, encompassing, as it would need to: managing power and oppression, ethics, morality, self-belief and shame.

The third theme, and one that has been less well represented in the discussions that I have experienced, but one I am keen to pursue more thoroughly with groups, is of the power of difference to disrupt. In some ways, individual disruption and the agency it might bring is an under-represented area of scholarly activity in positivist history, though as more researchers turn to queer readings of the past, they themselves are acting as disrupters of the norms of historiography.

These themes provide a structure upon which to place our understandings of the past. This does not need to be done to the exclusion of other historiographical approaches. It does, however, seem to be a first step in both challenging heteronormative historiographical

reasoning and making the past relevant to contemporary queer experience. From this we can build a community theology that answers our religious and spiritual questions whilst working within and against normative visions of the past.

Conclusions

In all of this, we need to avoid naivety. Modernist objectivity has been a useful tool for providing an analysis of the Church's past that incorporates those on the margins of ecclesial communities. It has questioned the emotional reading of theological tracts and artefacts from the distant past. The visceral emotionalism of contemporary evangelical readings, after all, is not just limited to one group of people, we too could fall into it. Our readings of both heterosexuality and those who choose celibacy may not necessarily be just. Our emotionalism and fear has the capacity to embody prejudice every bit as much as that of other Christian groups. Nonetheless, if we accept that the imperative of Queer Ministry is to nurture queerness, rediscovering, reconfiguring, and reclaiming ecclesiastical history through the queer historical imaginary may well be a vocational aspect of that ministry and one from which we should not shy away.

¹ Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, trans. C. Hart & J. Bishop. Paulist Press: New York (1990), p. 279.

² J. Murray, 'Twice Marginal and Twice Invisible: Lesbians in the Middle Ages.' In *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, eds. V.L. Bullough & J. A. Brundage, Garland Publishing: New York (1996), p. 199.

³ G. Duby (1994) *History Continues*, trans. A. Goldhammer, University of Chicago Press: Chicago (1994), pp. 46-47.

⁴ For further details of this debate see: B. O'Brien, 'R.W. Southern, John Boswell, and the Sexuality of Anselm.' In *The Boswell Thesis*, ed. M. Kuefler, University of Chicago Press: Chicago (2006).

⁵ For a powerful exploration of its emancipatory power see: E. S. Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation*, Beacon Press: Boston (1992).

⁶ For a thorough approach to same-sex love that comprehensively uses the penitential literature see, A. J. Frantzen, *Before the Closet: Same Sex Love from Beowulf to Angels in America*, University of Chicago Press: Chicago (1998). Michel Foucault also utilized his knowledge of penitential literature when constructing his notion of the post-reformation shift in approaches to sexuality. See: M. Foucault *The History of Sexuality*, volume 1, trans. R. Hurley, Penguin: Harmondsworth, pp.18-20 & pp. 107-108.

⁷ R.I. Simon is particularly interesting on this topic. Though he is discussing reactions to indigenous First Nations accounts of history, his point is equally valid for queer historical studies. See, R. I. Simon, *The Touch of the Past: Remembrance, Learning, and Ethics*. Palgrave-Macmillan: New York (2005), especially p. 18.

⁸ See, for example, L. Isherwood, 'Christian Celibacy: The Hidden History.' In her, *The Power of Erotic Celibacy: Queering Heteropatriarchy*, T & T Clark: London (2006).

⁹ J. Murray, 'Twice Marginal and Twice Invisible: Lesbians in the Middle Ages.' In *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, eds. V.L. Bullough & J. A. Brundage, Garland Publishing: New York (1996). This is not to deny the significant work of authors such as Michelle Sauer or Deryn Guest, just to point out that to date there is a relative imbalance in the focus of church history and the queer community. (M. Sauer, 'Representing the Negative: Positing the Lesbian Void in Medieval English Anchoritism,' in *Third Space* 3/2 (March, 2004), pp.70-88; and at: http://www.thirdspace.ca/articles/3_2_sauer.htm. And, D. Guest, *Lesbian Biblical Hermeneutics*, SCM Press: London (2005). On transgendered identification

and the medieval sources see: V. R. Mollenkott, *Omnigender: A Trans-Religious Approach*, The Pilgrim Press: Cleveland (2001); V. L. Bullough, 'Cross Dressing and Gender role Change in the Middle Ages.' In *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, eds. V.L. Bullough & J. A. Brundage, Garland Publishing: New York (1996). (NB This latter article does not explore that possibility that the sources from which he quotes may represent the mediation of transexuality within medieval society.)

¹⁰ For an interesting, if challenging, alternative discussion of ascetism utilizing the work of George Bataille as a heuristic device, see Karmen MacKendrick, *counterpleasures*, State of New York Press: Albany (1999), especially chapter 4, 'asceticism: *seducing the divine*.

¹¹ M. Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, Routledge: Abingdon (2003), p. 52.

¹² Cf J. Lowden, *The Making of the "Bibles Moralisees": The Book of Ruth*, vol. II, Penn State University Press: Philadelphia (2000).

¹³ For the image see: www.jham.com/.../ruth_popups/bible_moralisee.htm. The image relates to Ruth I: 19-22.

¹⁴ Elizabeth Stuart illustrates how parody can work within queer theology in: E. Stuart, *Gay and Lesbian Theologies: Repetitions with Critical Difference*, Ashgate Publishing: Aldershot (2003), pp. 108-110.