

PERFORMING QUEER CHRISTIANITY: WRITING GAYNESS, RETHINKING THE DIVINE

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Abstract

This paper underscores the paradoxes attending the formation of my avowedly gay identity vis-à-vis my creative praxis and Christian background. As my gay identifications have morphed through the decades, so have my politics, poetics, and faith. My early creative work in the 1990s demonstrated my battles with Christian bigotry and homophobia. Yet it is also quite ironic that I was able to develop and nurture my dissident aesthetics precisely because of my Christian (Catholic-Born Again) and La Salle background. The guilt wore off and the voice changed, but the search for the Divine and the Sublime persists. In this paper, I reflect on my engagement with Christianity and share stories of how my reconfiguration of Christian discourse enabled me to evolve into a gay writer who no longer believes in organized religions, but keeps my faith in the benevolence of the Universe.

Keywords: Queer spirituality, Catholic education, gay literature, dissident aesthetics

I abhor attending mass. This attitude stems from the fact that when I was in high school, we—the hapless, helpless, and hopeless students—were

forced to attend the Protestant (Born Again) Sunday service every week. If we missed the Sunday service, punishment awaited us. We had to write the hymns ten times on our school stationery for the English curriculum; and submit five *tay k'hay* (calligraphy) tasks (instead of only one if we attended the service) for the Chinese curriculum.

Such a useless exercise, I thought then. And I still do now, more than 30 years after the trauma. Brenda L. Beagan and Brenda Hattie (2015) state in their study: “The psychological and emotional harm done to some participants through organized religion was extensive and knew no age boundaries” (p. 92). It wasn’t just the brute force with which the school required us to attend Sunday service that was disturbing. We had regular religious congregations in the afternoon twice a week, where the pastors spewed venomous words against all sorts of sinners. So, my knowledge of my sexual desires came at a time when I was bombarded with teachings about immorality and sex. Jodi O’Brien (2004) states: “Doctrines that condemn homosexuality constitute the ideological backdrop against which Christians initially experience their homosexuality” (p. 184).

That is why studying at De La Salle University for my undergraduate degree was such a relief. We still had religion, but the prayer and mass(ive) duties were gone. I was free to “choose” to act on my religion; I was free to attend any religious ceremony I felt like attending. Naturally, for someone like me who hated religious events, I attended none (except when required). I would visit churches, and was actually fond of praying inside a church, especially on my birthday, but there was something about having to endure an hour, listening to the homily and participating in a public ritual, that I couldn’t quite stand. To this day.

It has been more than twenty years since I wrote most of the poems in my collection *The Queen Sings the Blues: Poems, 1992-2002* (2007). Because of the symposium on queer spirituality, I forced myself to look at

my poetry again. And to my surprise, I now realize the fact that there was so much Christianity in my early poetry.

Why?

Coming from a mercantile Chinese-Filipino family, I grew up with “syncretic” religious values. Images of Jesus Christ, Mother Mary, Kwan Yin, and Toti Kong abound in our house, and no one in the family finds it odd. It is just a way of life. My parents were not quite religious in the traditional sense, even though we had saints all over the house. But we observed the feasts, both Chinese (Taoist-Buddhist?) and Christian.

What had the most tremendous impact on my consciousness as a gay subject is not my family, but my schooling. I was an “other” because I was not masculine enough, because effeminacy was construed by many to be a sign of homosexuality, and because homosexuality was supposedly immoral. There were instances when I, definitely not an alpha male, not *lalaking-lalake*, was discriminated against or mocked because I was (closetedly) gay. In the 80s, the *bakla* was looked upon as a stereotypically funny, “abnormal” creature. (Has anything really changed?) Religion and heteronormative societal values othered me.

One of my life’s blessings is the fact that I took up literature in college, studied theory, enrolled in women’s writing and feminism under Dr. Marjorie M. Evasco, and enabled myself to rethink my concept of homosexuality. Nonetheless, I will shift the voice a little bit here—you remain conscious of your role as a transgressor. You take it with you throughout your life, and it will take some time for you to reframe or rethink your religion (both its wisdom and myopia) and to see it for what it truly is—a myth.

Pardon if I do an “I-me-myself” performance in this section. I shall discuss my poetry vis-à-vis religion, or in the words of Patrick Cheng (2011), my “rainbow theology” (p. 248).

In general, my personae are conscious of their otherness. In "Apologetic" the persona knows that his beloved thinks of him as a sinner who will burn in hell: "You must have imagined/ The circles of Hell burning/ The likes of me" (Baytan, 2007, p. 13). In "Confession," one reason he is reluctant to come out to his parents is the religious idea of homosexuality as immoral: "what have we done wrong,/ what sin, what shame" (p. 33). Quite expectedly, this sentiment appears in my nonfiction book *The Queen Lives Alone: Personal Essays* (2012) as well, especially in "Pua Iyam," because my Born Again brothers think of homosexuality as a sin, and at some point in their lives they believed that homosexuality was a mere phase that could be expunged through prayer meetings.

In "Procrastination," the persona juxtaposes love with sin at the poem's conclusion: "And you haven't even told me/ You love me enough to need me/ Like sin" (Baytan, 2007, p.19). The persona also performs the rituals of bathing, of cleansing, to purify himself, to "expunge" the sin and the beloved from his body. Indeed, the discourse of sin permeates much of my early poetry.

What quite amuses me now is the conscious juxtaposition of sex acts with religious imagery in my poetry. In "Bottom," the persona states "You must know/ I am a novitiate of pain./ My moans are pure..." (p.17). I deliberately used "novitiate," not "novice," because of novitiate's semantic reach; its meanings include "novice," but the term also denotes the period of apprenticeship and the place where novices live. It also sonically jibes with "initiate," which is what the persona is. In its twin poem "Top," the persona describes the bottom "Like a fallen angel/ Struck by God's thunderbolt" (p.18). While "Seafood" reimagines cruising and utilizes sea creatures to represent the gay men in the bathhouse, the poem ends with "victuals," which is a very religious word (p. 21). Still on cruising, the popular gay haunt Giraffe (a bar) is reimagined as a chapel where "men/ await their first taste/ of brotherly love" (p.

23), and ends with the persona's "desires/ Burning// Like votive candles" (p. 24). In a connected poem "White Angel," the sex object-addressee is likened to an angel with "a raging sword" as though he were the Archangel Michael. In "Transience," the persona talks about one-night stands, speaks to one of the many men he had an encounter with, and ends with "Because the body/ Desires/ Its own resurrection" (p. 32).

The sacred and the profane—these are vital elements in my early poetry. I was aware then that this technique of combining opposites had a long tradition in poetry, and because of my gayness, I was consciously juxtaposing two seemingly incompatible discourses to voice my protest against homophobia, to shock people, and to assert that individuals like me had nothing to be ashamed of. In a nutshell, religion gave me the language and the symbols to interpret my avowedly gay desires and to mine them for their paradoxes.

Even in the collection's closing poem, "La Puta del Mundo," the persona's awakening involves the Garden of Eden. Forbidden tree, Heaven, manna, Adam—these are just a few of the religious references in the poem (pp. 87-88). "La Puta" is clearly about the persona's epiphany. Wisdom comes at a great price—the knowledge of the body's perpetual hunger and the body's end. To top it all, the Garden is really the Garden of Earthly Delights, Bosch and all, a bathhouse. The sacred and the profane have to be rethought and reexamined in queer artistic discourses. Is it a sacrilege? I look at my poem as the imperative to salvage (in the original sense of "save") our inherited myths.

In "An Elegy for Benjie," the persona misses his friend, but also underscores his belief that there is a Paradise for gay men: "But there in God's bosom/ Where creatures sashay in the sky,/ You see us, and through us" (p. 42). It is important that the persona imagines that his friend is in Heaven. Why should gay men live in Hell? Why can't angels be campy? Why can't God be a Friend, an Ally? Why can't God be Queer? I find this idea very

important because at the body's end, what else is there to look forward to? Is death merely a release from suffering? In Christian doctrine, does Death not lead us to Eternal Salvation? And shouldn't the abject, the queer individual, be worthy of Grace and Redemption?

What do I make of all these? Why the conscious choice to invoke Christian imagery? Can one escape religion? Or does one take it with one in the search through life? As writers, we draw material from the myths we grew up with, whether they may sanctify or condemn us, whether we identify with them or not, whether we believe in the values they espouse or not. Yet to me, what matters is that religion—quite ironically—offers strategies and narratives for the reinvention of the Self, for its rebirth.

While Christian religions may seem “universal” and transcultural (well, almost) in their abrogation of the queer subject, the effects of Christianity on individual subjects vary. To begin with, do Filipinos really understand Christianity? In J. Neil C. Garcia's “Why am I Catholic,” he states “I am Catholic because the homophobic teachings of the Western Christian (and not just Catholic) church are, thankfully enough, like most other dogmas, hardly understood by Filipinos” (1998, p. 204).

In my experience, values like kindness towards and acceptance of social pariahs are more evident in Catholic institutions than in other organized religions. I also feel that economics and the value of debt of gratitude (“*utang na loob*”) in our culture play an important role in the malleability of our religious homophobic values. Queer children (I refer here to all identities considered non-normative) are usually the ones who end up single, and are tasked with taking care of their parents and providing for their families, because of their disposable income. I may be wrong, but I believe that in narratives involving the return and acceptance of sons and daughters into the family fold, the value of “*utang na loob*” far outweighs “*pananampalataya*.” (Our faith is embodied through the practice of debt of gratitude.) Soon enough,

lonely parents of queer children realize the true value of being selfless and loving, which is what being Christian truly means. In my telenovela-inflected theology, the family that accepts queer children gets to experience the joys of heaven in the here and now—monthly manna from generous LGBTQI children, whose love for family is as pure as Safeguard. What is gravely sad is that queer children get accepted only through the heterosexist “logic” of compensation—that they make up for their supposed defects by sacrificing themselves and providing for the family.

Religious myths can be reinterpreted, appropriated, turned upside down, re-thought. In the words of Garcia: “meta-narrativized.” He states: “... legendizing is a demystifying, meta-narrativistic act” (1997, p. 140).

Growing up in a religious Protestant school may have somewhat damaged my spiritual life, but it has instilled in me a few good values (definitely not superiority over heathens, and not racist values, like the Chinese are superior to all the other races when it comes to Math and Business). And my education at DLSU—which is to me the most liberal and least homophobic of the major religious HEIs in the country—has helped me revise my understanding of the Christian doctrine. My excursions into theory and literature enabled me to see Catholicism, and Christianity in general, as just one of the many myths LGBTQI believers can use to nourish their souls and to find their spiritual h(e)aven. Some Christians welcome different religious practices and beliefs in their lives, performing “the holy art of bricolage” (Peter Savastino, 2007, p.12), which according to John Lardas is “the process of accumulating, organizing, and integrating various idioms into a coherent whole as an act of religious devotion” (as quoted in Savastino, 2007, p. 12). Some abandon Christianity.

As a writer, I learned early on to see my creative work as a counter-narrative, or counter-text. There is something anti-hegemonic and an-

ti-heteronormative in what I write—especially when I address religion and spirituality in my work—and this holds true for all of us LGBTQI artists.

Ironically, Christianity became a true living voice in my youth *despite* everything. I had no other myth to draw strength from. At a certain point, yes, it caused me spiritual anxiety and disturbance, but with enough critical reflection on my part, it opened itself up for re-visioning. My writing in my early to mid-20s became the beginning of Foucauldian “reverse’ discourse” in my life (Michel Foucault 1978, p. 101).

Writing is a way of purging, of vomiting, of expelling what has been shoved down your throat. However, this poison has been injected into your system. Your body, at first, fights it off, but then learns to live with it, and eventually controls it. I see this to be true of Christianity.

While some abandon their religion, some stick to it and re-conceptualize it. Garcia and John Iremil E. Teodoro are two true-blue Catholic gay men I can cite. In my case, I have moved away from religion. I have learned to value spirituality more than belonging to any religion.

Faith is a deeply personal hermeneutic practice. It is a carefully examined choice. As adults, we are free to interpret the dogmas and the texts that religions offer us, and we are free to fashion ourselves in relation to the teachings of our religion, hopefully towards our liberation. And we need not be afraid of the Bible, nor see it as the only Truth, not even as Timeless Truth. In times of crisis, I turn to poetry and sometimes to the Bible for wisdom. In *The Erotic Word*, David Carr (2003) avers:

In this way, the Bible offers a vision of sexuality that goes beyond the moralism and sexual exchange that characterizes much of our culture. The Bible does not just tell people to do whatever feels good, nor to just avoid what is bad. Nor does the Bible offer any single norm for sexuality, however much modern readers strive to create such a norm out

of a mix of Victorian images of the family, Old Testament honor laws, and early Christian texts generally ambivalent about sexuality and family. Yet this closer look at the Bible has revealed texts like the Eden creation story and the Song of Songs that evoke a sexuality joined with spirituality, an eros that involves the whole person. Taken as a whole, the Bible does not endorse any one cultural model of sexuality or eros. Yet crucial parts of it deeply affirm divine and human passion, a passion that joins humans to one another, the earth, and to God. (p. 177)

Echoing the opening line in Gayle Rubin's famous essay "Thinking Sex" (1993, p. 3), I say the time has come for us Filipino LGBTQI individuals to seriously talk about religion and sex, and to explore the interstices between queerness and religion. Melissa M. Wilcox (2006) states:

What would it mean to "queer" the study of religion, beyond the "add queers and stir" formula that has most frequently been applied to date? It would mean paying close attention to the dynamics of gender and sexuality that religions hide in plain sight, and it would mean examining the roles of religion in both inscribing and challenging heteronormativity and dualistic conceptions of gender. It might also mean queering our concept of what is religious and queering even our methodology—and in this way, queer scholars in religion hold radical potential for change. (pp. 93-94)

Wilcox's words are inspiring for intellectuals, but we must go beyond academia. LGBTQI individuals, especially the religious ones, must queer religion. Now.

Some discover their art as a pathway to what is Divine. Isn't art founded on a heightened awareness of one's place in the universe? Art requires acknowledgment of the Divine. But Art in itself is an embodiment of the Divine. bell hooks once wrote: "Writing becomes then a way to embrace the mysterious, to walk with spirits, and an entry into the realm of the sacred" (quoted in Stallings, 2020, p.138). Studying the work of bell hooks, LaMonda Horton-Stallings states: "I argue that the act of writing serves as an alternative spiritual tradition for Black intellectuals interested in deconstructing the false divides between spirituality, sexuality, and the intellect" (p.137). Stallings even asserts that "writing as spirituality promotes and fosters bisexual subjectivity" (p. 137).

It is through writing that we can reconcile the supposed opposites of Christianity and homosexuality, and resolve the supposed contradictions. To perform queer Christianity is to accept the truth that the two should never be incompatible to begin with.

One of the paradoxes in my life is that people think I am religious because I always end my meetings, my correspondences, my dealings with people with two words: God bless. Why?

Can one really forsake Christianity? The religion, yes. Its noble virtues and ideals, probably no.

I am no longer Catholic. I was never even "practicing" it when I was supposedly one. But I believe that "God bless" signifies all that is good that we would like to wish upon someone else. It is akin to the Jewish "Shalom." I say "God bless" not because I believe in the Christian God. I believe in many Gods, or I believe that the Gods manifest their Ineffable Selves in so many ways, as understood and conceived by so many religions and individuals. And the only thing that matters is that whatever our faith or religion may be, we put into practice our aspiration on a daily basis, to embody the

noble qualities and virtues that our chosen Gods possess. Faith is an endless performance of finding and living the Divine in all of us.

I prefer the word “spiritual” to “religious,” because to me the former is unencumbered by homophobic, sexist, and bigoted dogmas and traditions. One can be spiritual and religious. One can be religious without being spiritual, and vice-versa. Let me quote an important passage from an article by David N. Elkins (1999):

The word spirituality comes from the Latin root *spiritus*, which means “breath”—referring to the breath of life. It involves opening our hearts and cultivating our capacity to experience awe, reverence, and gratitude. It is the ability to see the sacred in the ordinary, to feel the poignancy of life, to know the passion of existence, and to give ourselves over to that which is greater than ourselves.

Its aim: to bring about compassion. Its effect: good physical and mental health. (p. 46)

With the pandemic, however, I find that every day is a challenge; every day is a challenge to find enlightenment or even experience awe. Elkins (2001) states: “Awe is a lightning bolt that marks in memory those moments when the doors of perception are cleansed and we see with startling clarity what is truly important in life” (p. 167). I constantly ask myself and the Universe why I am still here. The fact that I am still alive is something I accept with both remorse and relief.

My struggle as a Filipino gay man, whose mantra in life is “God bless,” continues. I am still searching for my Spiritual Self, for my wholeness (or in Buddhist terms, perhaps emptiness?). Indeed, I cannot claim to having achieved my ideal sense and level of spirituality—only that my sexuality is central to my sense of selfhood, and is not incompatible with my spiritual

existence. With “God bless,” I do not need to label myself, or be labelled as, Christian to find my sense of fulfilment. Yet I can be Christ-like in word and in deed. With “God bless,” I embrace all that is good in Christianity or any other religion, and in the God it has conjured and worshipped. A God that affirms individual uniqueness, and loves the pariahs, the disenfranchised, and the dispossessed. A God that represents justice and goodness, though these may be rare in the world. With “God bless,” I accept that nothing can be better than acts of kindness, of compassion, in this dark and hideous world. With “God bless,” echoing Elkins (1999, 2001), I acknowledge my lifelong task of accepting all of Life with humility.

Note

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