

Rupkatha Journal

On Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities

An Online Open Access Journal

ISSN 0975-2935

www.rupkatha.com

Volume VI, Number 1, 2014

Special Issue on LGBT & Queer Studies

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The Homosexual as Pariah: Thinking about Homosexual Existence in the Context of Evangelical Christianity in the 1960's

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Abstract

In the 1960's some American homosexuals began to speak; they worked to establish a dialogue between themselves and a society from which they were excluded. Evangelical Christians first followed the societal pattern of silence in regards to homosexuality. Later, as the clamor and presence of homosexuals increased, many evangelicals reacted pointedly. The historical coming out of homosexuals and evangelicals' response, as it is documented in the pages of *Christianity Today*, serves as a supreme example of the pariah condition that many homosexuals and queer people were experiencing in the 1960s and continue perforce to experience today. It is the purpose of this paper to think about, in the context of evangelical Christianity's reaction to homosexuality, the homosexual as pariah; to explore the character of a marginal existence.

[**Keywords:** LGBT, homosexual, Evangelical, Christianity, pariah, marginal]

It is perplexing to live in a society of which one is not a part (as is the case of queer peoples in so many parts of the world). Where silence reigns, where speaking is a forbidden act, one very often will stumble through the world beclouded by a haze. There is no guide for the perplexed, very seldom does a hand reach through the mist and escort a person to a ground upon which one may speak, one may be. Seldom, if ever, does a whisper break the darkness of one's insecurity and say, "Go elsewhere. Here you have no place."

The act of the "Homosexual as Pariah" has not come to a close. Still, well into the twenty-first century, a queer person may be born into a family in the presence of which she may never be herself. A homosexual may live in a society from which he is excluded and at times violently oppressed. And as many gains are being made as far as political and social freedoms in some parts of the world, some states are attempting to restore laws that prevent homosexual activity, the meaning of which is a grotesque violation of the private realm of human beings; and other states have enacted legislation which equates public expression of homosexuality as a kind of "horror-propaganda" against a regime already sunk in a morass of civil rights violations.

Universally speaking, the homosexual—along with all queer peoples—is subject to an imperiled existence and it is in this context of simultaneously expanding and contracting freedom that we must contemplate what it means to be a homosexual or

queer person in society. The purpose of this paper does not go beyond an attempt to understand.

In our endeavor to understand, it seems appropriate to fall back on the historical example of evangelical Christianity's reaction to homosexuals as they began to speak out in 1960s America; through this moment in gay history, we may begin to see the quality of homosexual existence in society. In so doing, we will find that the worldview of those who are members of society is diametrically opposed to the reality of those who find themselves at society's margins. It will also become clear that the price of assimilation into decent society is nothing less than existence itself. And lastly, we shall attempt to discover a possible alternative that is open to the pariah.

I. Conflicting Worldviews

Perhaps, in our effort to trace historically the confrontation between homosexuals and evangelical Christians in the 1960s, to achieve a greater understanding of the homosexual's place in society—the price one must pay in order to live in society—it is best to begin by examining how the evangelical or fundamentalist Christian views the world. For the pariah and the full-fledged member of society have two very different and irreconcilable ways of perceiving the world around them. Hannah Arendt, in her essay *The Jew as Pariah: A Hidden Tradition*, states very lucidly this point when she says that for the pariah the “pomp and circumstance [of society] is but sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal” (1944, p. 104). More importantly, she affirms that in the eyes of the outcast, “The bare fact that the sun shines on all alike affords him daily proof that all men are essentially equal” (Arendt, 1944, p. 104). If we were to boil this down we may say: for society there is *order*; for the pariah there is *convention*.

The evangelical of the 1960s regarded the foundations of American in entirely absolute terms. The structure of American society was, for these particular Christians, wholly just, a fountainhead from which emanated all freedom, a land blessed by God. In one editorial in 1958, the author claims proudly, “The United States is the bulwark of world freedom...” (*The Christian Citizen*, 1958, p. 21). To the evangelical's understanding, not only was the United States a “bulwark of freedom,” it was also “young and virile...” (*The Resurrection*, 1959, p. 20) and populated with “freedom-loving people...” (Robertson, 1959, p. 11). In an article by J. Edgar Hoover, entitled “Communism: The Bitter Enemy of Religion,” the author and director of the F.B.I. suggests that Americans should “appreciate more than ever our glorious heritage of freedom” (Hoover, 1959, p. 3). In another literary contribution, J. Edgar Hoover sums up perfectly the *Weltanschauung* of many Americans affirming, “A God-centered nation, ever humble before the majesty of the divine Creator, can keep alive freedom, justice, and mercy. This is the heritage of America” (Hoover, 1960, p. 11 [99]). These are some of the countless examples of the idealized way in which evangelicals perceived American life. To arrive at a clearer picture of American society in the 1960s, one need only contrast these ironclad views with the terrible reality of black Americans; or juxtapose the rosy evangelical vision of America with the oppressive and stifling silence that accompanied queer peoples throughout their lives.

Firstly, the obvious fact that many evangelicals considered American society wholly benevolent is not to say that these individuals believed that no problems existed in this “God-centered nation.” Secondly, evangelical Christianity is a mass religious movement, millions march in its ranks hoping to evangelize the world and strengthen God’s earthly Kingdom. Because of this plurality, therefore, we can assert most assuredly that there are dissenting views, that not all evangelical Christians beheld American society as an entirely just entity. The evangelical, too, can be a powerful critic; the pages of *Christianity Today* are also filled with damning critiques, insightful and perplexing questions, and a pathos that appears to be unaffected by the crushing weight of evangelical ideology. But the most visible, the most constantly repeated worldview is the one we have examined here.

We have mentioned previously that the beatific vision of America that many evangelicals espoused did not blind them to some problems in this country. Page after page is filled with the words “crisis,” “decay,” “decadence,” “cancerous,” “virus,” etc. One editorial describes the general contemporary life of January of 1962 stating harrowingly, “On the heels of despair have come an alarming decay of morals and a vast array of wickedness” (*The Evangelical Offensive*, 1962, p. 26 [330]). To quote Hoover again, “Here at home, alien forces strive to destroy the faith [Christianity] which forms the foundation of individual freedom. The sickness of secularism permeates large areas of our society. The Ten Commandments are ignored; the teachings of Christ dismissed” (Hoover, 1962, p. 3 [915]). The structure of American life was unquestionably holy and just for the evangelical; new symptoms of decay were the result of alien elements in the American body politic.

II. The Homosexual Speaks and Evangelical Christianity’s Response

By examining the reaction of evangelical Christians towards homosexuals who began to speak out in the 1960s, we can say with assurance that we have uncovered no historical mystery; the evangelical treatment of this issue was wholly predictable—predictability is the great virtue of the evangel.

In the first place, with respect to homosexuality, the pages of *Christianity Today*, during the late 1950s and early 1960s, are relatively silent. On the one hand, great quantities of ink could not be spared on homosexuality given that evangelical Christianity was preoccupied with vanquishing the specter of communism and a whole host of wickedness, which stood at the threshold ready to deliver its destruction. But on the other hand, this silence is perfectly and harmoniously in tune with the general societal attitude of the time. Evangelicals knew that homosexual persons existed but it was their view that they should *not* exist and especially have no open existence in public.

Christianity Today, one of evangelical Christianity’s most widely circulated periodicals, placed the slowly emerging homosexual presence in the category of the sick and alien elements that were besieging the fortress of American freedom. In short, it was a symptom of general moral and societal degeneration. In an editorial entitled

“Confusion over Criteria a Sign that Morality is Declining,” the writer claims, “One legitimate manner [to assess moral decline] is to consider the things of which a nation is ashamed. Of some things decent men and decent societies have always been ashamed. Homosexuality is one of them. The shame about homosexuality is not that the practice today is being faced and dealt with...The shame is rather that its practice is being increasingly and openly admitted and discussed without shame” (*Confusion over Criteria*, 1962, p. 25 [1173]). Here, the point that the evangelical is trying to make is that there is no room for discussion, no dialogue can be had with the homosexual, he should not speak or be spoken to as a homosexual. In addition to the nexus of silence in which evangelicals attempted to ensnare the homosexual, those who had “the impulse that destroyed the City of the Plain,” (1975, p. 69) as E. M. Forester put it, were part and parcel of this moral degeneration.

As the evangelical saw it, not only was homosexuality and the discussion of it an example of moral decay, these manifestations of the “new morality” contained the seeds of America’s destruction. In one editorial, the author warns melancholically, “The age of innocence in America is past. The acceleration of degeneracy in the public and private lives of Americans shows itself in increasingly bitter disunity and in devil-may-care attitudes toward morality and law” (*Has America*, 1968, p. 28 [552]). The author then derides the trend to present homosexuality as “a socially acceptable way of life,” which was, to his utter dismay, being done “not only by deviates [homosexuals] but by leading clergymen and social engineers” (*Has America*, 1968, p. 29 [553]). The editorial’s conclusions, which contain overtones of doom, are “If Americans—Christians and non-Christians alike—do not soon repent of their sins of hatred, greed, violence, crime, divorce, and illicit sex—as well as other personal and social sins—turn to God, and live in accordance with his commandments, our decline will inevitably lead to the fall of the American nation” (*Has America*, 1968, p. 29 [553]).

It is, perhaps, a letter written by a homosexual and published in *Christianity Today* that best embodies the evangelical’s beliefs with regards to homosexuality or the “sex-deviant” (Sorokin, 1960, p. 3 [81]). The author of this anonymous letter instructs the reader, “Homosexuality is a manifestation of the lust of the flesh, never, in my opinion, of the love set forth in the Word of God” (*Letter From*, 1968, p. 23 [547]). This supposed homosexual, writing in 1968, goes on to assert, “To legalize homosexual activity—or give it church approval—would result in more aggressiveness of adults among youth” (*Letter From*, 1968, p. 23 [547]). What is clearly transmitted by the author is that the homosexual is a predator. The author continues by describing, with almost a tone of sadness, how the homosexual lives in society: “Society looks with great disfavor on the practicing homosexual, and he moves from place to place, job to job. He is running not only from society, but also from the lust within him. Finally he is discovered and condemned. What is the solution? Only the forgiveness of sin through Jesus Christ and constant deliverance through the Holy Spirit” (*Letter From a Homosexual*, 1968, p. 23 [547]). The author of the missive concludes triumphantly, “I am a homosexual—but I am also a servant of the living Christ who experiences God’s forgiveness and deliverance. By the

grace of God this temptation does not express itself, and I am victorious through Christ” (*Letter From*, 1968, p. 23 [547]).

It deserves to be mentioned that at least on a few occasions in the 1960s, *Christianity Today* attempted to assuage the invectives, which were hurled like poisonous darts at the homosexual. One effort to show compassion was carried out by an evangelical counselor who shares that, prior to contact with homosexuality, he did not “understand the sense of otherness that haunts the homosexual, that he feels he has no place in church or in society” (Granberg, 1967, p. 5 [893]).

On another occasion in 1969, a certain B. L. Smith asserts that homosexuality must be included amongst all other sins and that the homosexual should not be “singled out” for his participation in the sin of Sodom. The author also informs the evangelical reader that homosexuality can be found in the “catalogue of vices which exclude one from the kingdom of God” (Smith, 1969, p. 7 [935]).

As we have said, we have not unearthed here any historical secret. That the homosexual was an outcast of society was and is glaringly obvious; the fact that the homosexual was not among the elect and therefore excluded from the communion of the saints, did not require elaborate exploration. In short, we can say of the homosexual just what James Baldwin said of John in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*: “This world was not for him” (1998, p. 34). This dual-exile is immediately apparent; what is not easily ascertainable is the significance of these exiles, the result, in a word. For are we to take at face-value social exclusion? Does not such an exclusion have implications which go beyond the obvious separateness to which social pariahs are relegated?

III. The Price of Social Exclusion

The primary characteristic of the relationship between homosexuality and evangelical Christianity is silence. Practically nothing is said regarding the children of the cities on the plain prior to 1960. And when the issue is addressed it is done so only occasionally. We may speak of a general bewilderment, on the part of many evangelicals, that homosexuals dared to speak at all. When, in 1964, some Protestant members moved to establish a Council on Religion and the Homosexual with the purpose of “establishing a dialogue,” it appears as if the evangelical viewed such an effort as preposterous (*Sexual Dialogue*, 1965, p. 50 [806]). And as we mentioned earlier, it was shameful, in the opinion of *Christianity Today*, that the practice of homosexuality “is being increasingly and openly admitted and discussed” (*Confusion over*, 1962, p. 25 [1173]). The issue here is not mere silence or the attempt by some evangelicals to stifle a dialogue.

Because homosexuality is not *always* easily detectable in a person, the person in question, in order to make himself known, must put his existence as a homosexual into words. Just as God, in the beginning, spoke in order to bring about light; so, too, must the homosexual, in order to create a new beginning, speak to bring about his existence. Therefore, speech itself carries with it an added weight for queer peoples, as such an act involves one's very existence.

Thus, by society attempting to eliminate speech, to squelch dialogue, to envelop the homosexual in an iron veil of silence, more is done than simple banishment from society; the violence wrought upon the individual who is forbidden to articulate the self is the disintegration of his existence. The homosexual who finds himself in such an oppressive environment will find that his very motion and development are arrested. He cannot move in the world of men, he cannot act through speech to make himself known, to voice his ideas, give life to his affections, air out his sorrows, let shine his humanity. If the wages of sin is death; the price of admittance to society is existence. Henning Bech, the Danish author of *When Men Meet*, captures this idea perfectly when he states, "One lament recurs over and again in the hundred-year history of the homosexual: that he cannot be himself" (1997, p. 95).

Returning briefly to the "Letter from a Homosexual," the author states triumphantly, "By the grace of God this temptation [homosexuality] does not express itself, and I am victorious through Christ" (*Letter from*, 1969, p. 23 [547]). Thus, the consequence of victory through Christ, the result of being reborn, is the annihilation of the self. The author asserts that it is the temptation that does not express itself; in reality, it is his very being that is not given expression. The evangelical, in exchange for salvation, demands one's existence.

It was perhaps Hannah Arendt who has best comprehended the danger of nonexistence in connection with pariahdom. In *Rahel Vernhagen: The Life of a Jewish Woman*, Arendt avers: "Rahel's struggle against the facts, above all the fact of having been born a Jew, very rapidly became a struggle against herself" (1974, p. 13). In like manner, the homosexual, unable to even speak, is violently forced back upon himself; must struggle with the very reality of his own existence. Arendt pursues further the implications of the pariah in society and says:

For what blasts human relationships is never alienness or baseness or vanity but only the ignoring of this appeal, in which we want to have it recognized that we are human beings. If the appeal fails, if the other refuses to *listen* to reason, there remains nothing human, only the eternal differentness and incomprehensible otherness of physical substance (*italics mine*) (1974, p. 153).

But is it in the following quote that the palpable danger of nonexistence is made real: "And the greatest injury which society can and does inflict on him is to make him doubt the reality and validity of his own existence, to reduce him in his own eyes to a status of nonentity" (Arendt, 1944, p. 114).

In our brief historical examination of homosexuals and evangelical Christians, we found that the cleavage between these two groups was not only characterized by silence. There is sufficient evidence, and the evangelical is not alone in this attitude towards homosexuals, that evangelical Christianity attempted to place homosexuals in the context of moral, political and social decline. Homosexuality was increasing; "deviates" were spreading like a contagion (*Laws Against*, 1969, p. 32 [134]). The author who argued in *Christianity Today* that support of homosexuality in the Church or in society would bring

about an increase in adult “aggressiveness” among the youth; thus, the homosexual is typified as a predator (*Letter from*, 1969, p. 23 [547]).

The evangel goes further, stating in no uncertain terms that the eradication of homosexuality, along with all other symptoms of moral decline, is a requisite for survival. “The overthrow of Christian sexual morality,” says *Christianity Today* in 1964, “is the final stage of this general moral decline” (Marcel, 1964, p. 4 [108]). The maintenance and continuance of America’s glorious heritage, of its power, hung in the balance.

That the homosexual has been traditionally viewed as the harbinger of all evil, that he embodied the wickedness of the dark human heart, and that he carried inside him like black stains upon his soul the seeds of the world’s destruction, all of this, like silence, was nothing new. Superficially, the issue of the “demonization” of homosexuals appears to rest on a simple and ancient animosity cultivated to perfection over centuries.

Yet, if we dig deeper we will discover that this demonization, this forcing of the homosexual into the role of the predator or agent of destruction, involves inextricably his existence as a human being and as a homosexual. Abraham Joshua Heschel, in his work *The Insecurity of Freedom*, asked prophetically, “What is the spirit of the age? It is, I believe, the instrumentalization of the world, the instrumentalization of man, the instrumentalization of all values” (1966, p. 40). In Heschel’s mind, “The instrumentalization of the world leads to the disintegration of man” (1966, p. 41).

Hence, in being forced to play the role of degenerate, the homosexual is made into an instrument; he is not allowed to be simply that which he is: a homosexual. All his actions, both in the form of deeds and speech, are redirected and forced to flow into a mold which is not of his own making. He, in the eyes of society, does not just love another man, but rather he is a participant in the “lust of the flesh” (*Letter from*, 1969, p. 23 [547]) for which there is surely divine retribution. Forced into the frame of the destroyer of society, of America, the homosexual is utilized by society for the purpose of conjuring up visions of doom and the homosexual serves as a target for the latent angst, fear and uncertainty in some areas of American life.

No longer a human being, the homosexual no longer resembles one. His hopes of love and of affection are transmogrified into “a symptom of God’s wrathful withdrawal from man who refuses to acknowledge him as God” (Smith, 1969, p. 7 [935]). The homosexual, once he is forced through the sieve of demonization, emerges lacking inherent human qualities; he cannot exist in this world as he is; existence is once again denied him. Barred from participation in humanity, forbidden, as it were, to exist, where is the homosexual to turn? What place may he find for himself? Is there a ground upon which he may cultivate existence?

IV. The Worldlessness of the Pariah

If a homosexual desires to exist, his existence cannot be found or realized in society; this is especially true of societies that employ weapons such as silence and dehumanization.

Because a homosexual cannot, existentially speaking, *be* in such an environment, one alternative is opened up for him: worldlessness. Once again we must turn to Arendt who is a kind of intellectual patron saint of marginalized peoples. Arendt writes, “...in extreme cases in which pariahdom has persisted for centuries, we can speak of real worldlessness.”

But what is the character of the absence of a world? How is one to move in it? How can a homosexual, through worldlessness, exist? To continue, Arendt says, in her contemplation of “humanity in dark times,” that the humanity which is very often a product of pariahdom:

is dearly bought; it is often accompanied by so radical a loss of the world, so fearful an atrophy of all the organs with which we respond to it—starting with the common sense with which we orient ourselves in a world common to ourselves and others and going on to the sense of beauty, or taste, with which we love the world... (1958, p. 13).

A world in which the human organs are atrophied, at first glance, does not seem a desirable alternative to nonexistence and dehumanization in society. In another instance, Arendt refers to worldlessness as a “form of barbarism” (1958, p. 13). It is clear, according to Arendt, that the potential danger of worldlessness is barbarism, a closing off the world, an aloofness that has the potential to dry up the roots of man’s social being. Elsewhere, Arendt offers, as an example of worldlessness, the action taken by some Jews in the face of nonexistence in European society saying that they organized a “vehement protest,” and sought to deny “the reality of the social order and [confront] it, instead, with a higher reality” (1944, p. 104). Thus, in the experience of those Jews who rebelled against their social reality and of the few homosexuals who began to speak out in 1960s America, we can deduce two significant elements: firstly, there is an acceptance of one’s reality, a coming to terms with one’s nonexistence in society; secondly, and perhaps more important, there is an *act* of rejection, a realization that the social edifice has been created *only* by men.

It is in Arendt’s elaboration of the idea of worldlessness as a realm in which one may rebel—reject the world—that is of supreme significance to us. The pariah, as we have demonstrated previously, has been deprived of the ability to act and speak (another form of action), and therefore to exist, in the realm of men. Though the potential for human action has been cut off for pariah peoples, action and existence are opened up for him in the form of rejection. Active and conscious worldlessness—itself an act of repudiation—becomes for the pariah, a realm in which the human possibility of action is restored. It seems, for those who desire to be, to exist as they are, the only real alternative is worldlessness, that is, rejection of the social unreality around them.

V. Conclusion

In our brief examination of the historical confrontation between evangelical Christianity and homosexuals who began to reject the world around them and the silence that obliterated their existence, we have found that the issue at hand was not purely social

exclusion. Firstly, evangelicals clung desperately to a view of American that, universally speaking, did not exist; it was, in a way, a worldview that blinded many evangelicals to the realities of the untouchables who lived amongst them. Secondly, through the weapons of silence and demonization the homosexual was not permitted to act or to speak and therefore he was not allowed to exist. No longer content to be refused action, some American homosexuals in the 1960s decided to consciously reject the world around them, to commit the social sin of speaking, to put into words their existence and to give life to the consciousness of a people that had been dormant for ages. This very act of speaking was an acceptance of one's nonexistence in the world, a rejection of such a condition, and an embracing of worldlessness—a realm where the homosexual was afforded movement. These individuals made a conscious decision to no longer accept the idea that to speak, and therefore to be, is "shameful." Barred from the Kingdom of God and nonexistent in "decent" society, the homosexual said essentially: "We don't care. We have for so long been exiled from these two realms; today, we choose to speak, to act, to be."

But evangelical Christianity's treatment of homosexuality is not unique. Evangelicals were both exponents and participants of the mainstream American society as it existed in the 1960s. What is important for us is that the actions taken and the words spoken by many fundamentalist Christians in regards to homosexuals is an example of a pattern of social being that is repeated the world over. The historical example we have chosen for the purpose of fleshing out the dichotomy between social exclusion, which is akin to nonexistence, and worldlessness—for some the only realm of action—is a form of social interaction which is not limited to a particular time, a certain place, a specific group of people. This pattern of social oppression may be reproduced in a family in rural America, in a fundamentalist religious movement or in a nation where political or social freedom is precluded by legislation or social more.

The homosexual and the queer person are still pariahs. It is in this current global context of inhumanity that we must think about what it means to be excluded from society and to contemplate what course of action can be taken for those fellow human beings who find themselves in a milieu in which existence has become or continues to be an impossibility.

Perhaps, through remembering and thinking about the historical example of evangelicalism's approach to homosexuality, particular aspects of queer existence may become clearer for those persons who find themselves in the midst of a suffocating environment, an environment where one cannot act or speak, a world that is difficult to make sense of. But, and it deserves to be repeated endlessly, that it is not separateness that is one's fate as a queer person; rather, it is a fate of nonexistence, a suspension of action and speech. George Santayana's thoughts about the protagonist of *The Last Puritan*, Oliver Alden, seem particularly apt for this occasion in which we have attempted to simply think about queer existence. He states with poignancy:

But will he [Alden] ever have the spiritual clearness, the spiritual courage to be himself? And if not, being suppressed and hopeless and morally confused, will he

have the physical stamina to live on?...And this obscure modern martyrdom would be sadder in its way than that of Golgotha. It would not save any world. It would not even save any soul (Santayana, 1936, p. 224).

The question of existence and nonexistence, being and nonbeing, acting and not acting, speaking and not speaking, continues, in our contemporary world, to hang over the queer person like a sign of terror. Though it does not constitute a guide for the perplexed, in realizing that by sacrificing one's existence, "It would not save any world. It would not even save any soul," one may perhaps see things more clearly.

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