# Silence = Death, Action = Life: What ACT UP Can Contribute to Climate Activism

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Out of the depths of suffering and pain of HIV Came ACT UP,

Power to fight pack and challenge.

In the midst of pain, challenges of despair, death and grief, the failure of the churches to champion gay men with HIV

ACT UP was born from the urgings of the Spirit....The Rev. Charles Bewick1

Playwright and gay activist Larry Kramer founded ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) in March 1987 because of the emerging AIDS bureaucracy along with the cultural and institutional disregard of people living with AIDS. He met with AIDS activists and people living with AIDS who were frustrated at AIDS bureaucracy of the Gay Men's Health Crisis and its failure to take a public and political stance. Hundreds of gay men, I knew in Boston and St. Louis, were dying, and it seemed that this pandemic had genocidal dimensions that would forever leave all of us with what Eric Rofes articulated as Post-traumatic syndrome over the emotional weariness in caring for our sick friends and the grief of escalating loss.

It was a terrible decade of human loss of friends as the pandemic spread. I remember that I came down with the chicken pox, and there was yet no antibody test for HIV. Friends had come down chicken pox and shingles, and the full onset of HIV within

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> The Rev. Charles Bewick, St. Michael & George, St. Louis. Charles was one of my first HIV+ buddies. He came over as chaplain to a bishop from the United Kingdom in Anglican Studies at parish in St. Louis. Charles came down with pneumocystis pneumonia on Christmas Eve and hospitalized, and the good parishioners placed his personal belongings on the sidewalk in front of the rectory.

two years. I was convinced that I had HIV and resigned myself to a shared fate with many HIV+ gay men and with my spouse Frank. We both felt that we had been exposed to the virus, and it was only a matter of time for the symptoms would manifest themselves.

In his book, *And the Banded Played On*, Randy Shilts writes, "The bitter truth was that AIDS did not just happen to America—it was allowed to happen by an array of institutions, all of which failed to perform their appropriate tasks to safeguard the public health." Most of us believed that the federal government did not take compelling action to respond responsibly to the spread of AIDS until it threatened the wider population. Gay men with AIDS experienced a backlash of homophobia, indifference, religious intolerance, and AIDSphobia.

Many of the faith base communities either were slow in their compassionate responses or gave into the prevailing religious homophobia, then expanded with a xenophobic AIDS-phobia. Conservative churches targeted people living with AIDS as bringing God's punishment upon themselves because of their sinful sexual practices.

Jerry Falwell spoke for many fundamentalist Christians of his Moral Majority,

AIDS is a lethal judgment of God on America for endorsing this vulgar, perverted, and reprobate lifestyle...God also says those engaged in such homosexual acts will receive "in their own persons, due penalty of their error." God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah primarily because of the sin of homosexuality. Today, He is again bringing the judgment against this wicked practice through AIDS.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Randy Shilts, And the Band Played On, New York, St. Martin's Press, 1987, xxii.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Jerry Falwell, "AIDS: The Judgment of God," *Liberty Report*, no. 2, April 1987, 5, 2

Catholic institutional AIDSphobia was no better-- even though Catholic priests were three or four times a higher risk group than gay men. <sup>4</sup> Half of the entering class of Jesuits of my spouse Frank in the Missouri Province died of HIV/AIDS. Catholic priests became stigmatized and shunned by their colleagues or religious community, pushed aside into isolation where they could die and be forgotten.

ACT UP united gay men with AIDS and their friends in anger and committed themselves to direct action to end the AIDS crisis and to end lethal silence of cultural apathy and disregard. The silence was deafening, and President Ronald Reagan did not mention AIDS until 1987 and mentioned pediatric AIDS. ACT UP activists emblazoned their T-shirts, collateral stickers and buttons, and their chants with slogans: "Silence = Death, Action = Life, Ignorance = Fear." ACT UP activists lived a crisis mentality, throwing the rules of etiquette for direct action to disrupt and upset people to think about their apathy. ACT UP staged actions of non-violent civil

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Report: Priests hit hard by hidden AIDS epidemi". Actupny.org. 2000-01-31. http://www.actupny.org/YELL/catholicpriests.html; Jon D. Fuller, Priests with AIDS, America Magazine, March 18, 2000.

http://americamagazine.org/issue/280/article/priests-aids Thomas, Judy. "Catholic Priests are dying of AIDS, often in silence" Kansas City Star. 30 January 2000; "Priests Speak out in National Survey." Kansas City Star. 30 January 2000: "AIDS, Gay Related Issues Trouble Many Denominations" Kansas City Star. 30 January 2000. I coached Judy Thomas where to look in the St. Louis Jesuit archives where my husband Frank and half of entering class into the Jesuits died of AIDS. The article was so close to the truth that it was attacked institutional Catholic spokes persons and the Catholic gay organization, Dignity.

disobedience at Wall Street, picketing at pharmaceutical companies, zapping politicians with direct questions, and intruding into sacred space in a "Stop the Temple" demonstration at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City. Larry Kramer claimed, "ACT UP was the single most important thing the gay population ever achieved." Kramer's comment seems, at first, exaggerated, yet the story of ACT UP in the US is a story yet to be explored fully and culturally analyzed how it impacted and contributed to the development of the LGBT community, family movement, marriage equality, and the inclusion of gays and lesbians into the US military, and the election of open LGBT folks to political office. Earlier ACT UP activism paved the way for the LGBT civil rights of the last two decades.

The ravages and grief of the losses through HIV, along with the advent of retrovirals, directly contributed to the shift of direction from urgent compassionate care and the grief rituals of the Names Project and the AIDS Quilt to the family and marriage movement.<sup>7</sup> Deborah Gould concludes, "The story of the AIDS movement is a story of political possibilities, of what can happen when people collectivize their efforts to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Linda Hirshman, *Victory: The Triumphant Gay Revolution—How a Despised Minority Pushed Back, Beat Death, Found Love, and Changed America for Everyone*, New York, HarperCollins, 2012, kindle edition, location 3381.

Hirshman, *Victory*, location 3192 to location 3655. Deborah Gould, *ACT UP: Emotion and ACT UP's Fight Against AIDS*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2009.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Robert Goss & Dennis Klass, *Dead Not But Lost: Grief Narratives in Religious Traditions*, AltaMira Press, 2005, 270-276.

address their grievances and enact their desires." The tragic loss of many gay men in the earlier decades and the passion anger of ACT UP galvanized and energized the LGBT movement with an expansive imaginative vision of fighting for civil rights and greater inclusion into society and the churches. The energy of communal grief from the loss of so many to AIDS evolved into political action, the Names Project and the AIDS quilt, but it morphed into a more integrated movement whose goals were family, marriage equality, and civil rights.<sup>9</sup>

### The Passionate Forges of ACT UP

Grief is often channeled into passionate action, and this was the situation of myself at the loss of my spouse of sixteen years, Frank, and my brother Bill to AIDS. A couple of years earlier, I joined ACT UP St. Louis and spent six months with the Boston chapter as I competed the finishing touches of my dissertation. ACT UP and also Queer Nation St. Louis provided me with a channel for the grief of so much loss and devastation of the AIDS pandemic and homophobic backlash. When *Jesus ACTED UP* was published, I felt a restless urge to anchor myself in a religious community that would allow me to be fully myself as a gay Christian and serve as a clergy/priest. In my explorations for a community, I searched for prophetic community that mirrored the unapologetic and challenging liberation theology of my recent book. I was attracted to the prophetic

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Gould, *ACT UP*, loc. 5360.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Though what I wrote about the AIDS Quilt and its role in creating the shift in culture from separation to mainstreaming can also be traced to the catalytic role of ACT UP in the new activism of the late 1990s and following: Robert E. Goss & Dennis Klass, *Dead But not Lost, Grief Narratives in Religious Traditions*, New York, AltaMira Press, 2004, 270-276.

activism and justice actions of Rev. Troy Perry and the Metropolitan Community

Church. I joined, but one of the first actions I did was to design a religious stole for worship that would remind me my days within ACT UP: the loss of loved ones and grief catalyzed into direct action. The stole was red, the liturgical color for martyrs and Pentecost, with a pink and a black triangle at shoulder length. On one panel in dark blue, there was stitched the words Silence = Death, and on the other panel, Action = Life. Those prophetic words crystallized my earlier faith commitments to following Christ and the institutional challenges for the poor and the marginalized by Latin American liberation theologies of Gustavo Gutierrez, Leonardo Boff, and Jon Sobrino and others. Liberation theologies stress God's fundamental option for the poor and oppressed has sensitized me to the marginal and outcast.

Activist interventions provide an alternative means and vision for social change. My experience with ACT UP and Queer Nation in St. Louis harnessed a dormant urge to involve my in direct action movements that the Jesuits and graduate studies of diverse religious traditions of non-violence and civil disobedience from Jesus and the Buddha, to Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr, Daniel Berrigan, Thich Nhat Hanh, the Dalai Lama, Desmond Tutu, and many others.

In many ways, my ACT UP activism envisioned alternative ways of engaging social concerns, risk-taking, belonging to a change movement, confrontation and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> The pink triangle was placed on gay men on their prison uniforms in the Nazi concentration camps and black triangle on the prison uniforms of lesbians. It was a memory of homophobic genocide. See Richard Plant, *The Pink Triangle: The Nazi War against Homosexuals*, New York, Holt Paperbacks, 1988.

challenge, and practicing a political spirituality flavored with a utopian desire for change and a more just world. ACT UP activists never shunned away from political incorrectness if it was to shock apathetic consciences or shake the complacencies of silence and denial. But they never resorted to physical violence.

#### Retrieval of the Jesus' Temple Action as Theological Method

The "Stop the Church" demonstration at St. Patrick's Cathedral with Cardinal John O'Connor is perhaps one of the most remembered ACT UP demonstration. The New York chapter of ACT UP took six months of debate and planning on the precise action against the Cardinal O'Connor, the leaders of Roman Catholic institutional resistance to safe-sex. O'Connor was the American face of the Vatican ultraconservatism; he opposed the somewhat enlightened letter of the American Conference of Bishops, *The Many Faces of AIDS; A Gospel Response* (1987). Cardinal O'Connor opposed any use of condoms, even to prevent transmission of HIV. His close working relationship with then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger forced the pastoral re-issuing of another American Letter on AIDS, but this time issued by the entire US Conference of American Bishops. Ratzinger forbids any use of condoms, supporting O'Connor's resistance to the American Catholic Bishops. Cardinal O'Connor became the favorite poster target to many AIDS activists and for ACT UP, New York.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Mark D. Jordan, *Recruiting Young Love: How Christians Talk about Homosexuality*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2011, 186-188.

There was never a full consensus on the action directed at Cardinal O'Connor and St. Patrick's Cathedral, for the consensus remained divided whether it would succeed or not and whether it was appropriate or not. The intention was to disrupt the Cardinal's sermon but not other parts of the mass. But as with the best plans of direct action and non-violent civil disobedience, there is always the human factor that provides for the possibility of failure and the risk of confusion. ACT UP was under the impression that it could control the demonstration, but as the demonstrators laid down in the aisle, Cardinal O'Connor stepped on the ACT UP demonstrators to get to the podium to speak. 12 It provoked the activist speakers to scream out their demands with the Catholic congregation yelling back and the police removing the protesters on stretchers. The ensuing melee broke down the discipline of all parties. Cardinal O'Connor dramatically played the martyr, holding his crozier with his miter on; he said, "I always feel anguish when I meet people who hate for any reason. We must never respond to hatred, but only with love, compassion, and understanding."13 ACT UP New York never had a chance with an ecclesial "drama queen," who was accustomed to the Byzantine politics of the institutional Roman Catholic hierarchy and New York.<sup>14</sup> O'Connor masterfully turned the tables on ACT UP New York in the public media.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Hirshman, *Victory*, loc. 3477 to 3507.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Jordan, *Recruiting Young Love*, 188.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> My characterization of Cardinal O'Connor as a "drama queen" is not misplaced. O'Connor was masterful in using his power and influence behind closed doors of Byzantine Vatican politics, in the American Conference of Bishops as well as New York City politics. Even though I had sympathy with ACT UP New York, the protesters were

And Tom Keane, a Catholic demonstrator, after the chaotic and loosing battle against O'Connor, would go up to communion, take the wafer into his HIV body, and spit out it to the floor. The demonstration went too far in invading sacred space and blaspheming the communion wafer. ACT UP's "Stop the Church" action and the desecration of the communion wafer provided the media with charges of sacred desecration that backfired in public opinion on the disruptive action. It made me squeamish as a former Jesuit priest when I heard about the publicity.

There was little public sympathy even in the queer community over the action at St. Patrick's Cathedral. And last summer with my husband at Christ College at Oxford University, the mention of *Jesus ACTED UP* ignited a distant but still active memory of the incident in an Australian Catholic priest, who then engaged me in a conversation about blasphemous actions of ACT UP. I countered with the AIDSphobic violence and homophobic actions of Cardinal O'Connor and his stepping upon and walking over the bodies of gay men with AIDS to get to his podium. It seemed a betrayal of his priestly vocation of following in the foot steps of Christ who humbly washed the feet of his disciples as any household slave and who did step on gay HIV bodies as a "prince of the Church."

a sacrificial lamb devoured by an experience carnivore of ecclesial politics. I might draw a parallel on the outcome between the ACT UP activists and Jesus here.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> I heard Tom Keane speak on a panel about the incident at the Politics of Pleasure Conference at Harvard University that brought gay/lesbian academics and activists together. Though he rationalized his action against the proportionate violence of Cardinal O'Connor and the institutional church, it appeared to me that it still bothered him as a Catholic and the whole demonstration and it troubled me as a former Catholic priest but equally troubled by Cardinal O'Connor's actions.

Mark Jordan writes about the intrusion of HIV gay bodies into sacred space where the ritually protected body of Christ:

Why, the former altar boy asks, is the desecration of a host more offensive to the worshippers—or The Times—than the desecration of human beings for whom Jesus surrendered his body and blood? Jesus was hardly so fastidious about his body. Its desecration in these circumstances can be read as not reinforcing te binary between gay and church, but crossing it decisively. The body of Jesus is spit out in a church precisely as the body of the infected have been spit out by the church. The body of the protester at the altar rail, the bodies dropping onto the cathedral floor, the gay body with AIDS may be plague body, but it can be a witnessing body, a martyr's body, a saintly body. 16

I angst over the whole event because of my Catholic background as a Jesuit priest and my devotion to the eucharist, but remained sympathetic towards ACT UP, and I had witnessed so many stigmatizing actions of institutional Catholicism against gay bodies with HIV and its doubly stigmatizing Catholic priests with AIDS. Half of my deceased lover Frank's entering class of Jesuits died of HIV. There was callous cover-up, stigmatizing, ostracizing, and mistreatment of Catholic priests with AIDS by their colleagues and by the Catholic hierarchy. When I saw the video clip of Cardinal O'Connor walking over the bodies of gay men with AIDS in St. Patrick's Cathedral, it was hard not to see in his actions in mistreating and stigmatizing bodies of gay friends and priests who died of AIDS or even the body of my lover Frank trampled by the church that he so loved as youth, as a gay man who loved Christ and as a gay lover who loved myself. I bluntly stated,

The holy rage of the ACT UP demonstrator was justified, but the means of expression were unfortunate.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Jordan, *Recruiting Young Love*, 189.

The charges of blasphemy, sacred contempt, and sacrilege were also leveled at Jesus for his "Stop the Temple" disturbance at so-called trial scene (Mark 14:53-65) He violated sacred space just prior to a religious festival. Enraged, he attempted to sacralized commerce and activity in the Temple courtyard during a pilgrimage festival time. He offended the Temple clergy and clerical aristocracy by challenging their authority. He upset the general public of Jerusalem who had financial interest in the Tempe. He was criticized, arrested, beaten and executed for his staged action in the Temple.<sup>17</sup>

Dignity Boston denied me celebrating eucharist because of the above words and raising the question what was the real blasphemy in the "Stop the Church" demonstration at St. Patrick's Cathedral and even later colleagues within MCC were always a bit ambivalent with the correlation of Jesus' demonstration with the ACT UP protest. This ambivalence or feeling of blasphemy seemed to mirror the reactions of Jewish observers of Jesus' Stop the Temple action.

ACT UP lost the Stop the Church media skirmish to a homophobic institution, but for me it stood for the moral advocacy of stigmatized and shunned gay men living with HIV/AIDS. In an essay "Resisting Religion, Spreading Love," author William L. McLennan explores Jesus' Temple action and uses a rationale raised by popular writer Garry Wills:

...Jesus stressed the love of God and love of neighbor as central religious duties. He constantly crossed line of ritual purity to be with those considered unclean—lepers, the insane, prostitutes, adulterers, and collaborators with Rome. Garry Wills asks who the outcasts and cursed of our day—with whom Jesus would be quick to align himself in love. "Gays and lesbians," is Will's answer. He writes about Christian groups that carry placards saying "God hates fags" at the funeral of gay men who died of AIDS—and about Christian burials being denied to openly gay men. As Wills puts it, IS there any doubt where Jesus would have stood in those episodes? ...He was the gay man, not with his haters. This is made all clearer by the fact gay are called unclean for the same reason were

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Goss, Jesus ACTED UP, 148.

other outcasts of Jesus time—because they violate the Holiness Code of the Book of Leviticus."<sup>18</sup>

ACT UP activists, for me, configured Jesus' earlier action in the demonstration in the Temple. They stood up for gay men and people living with IV/AIDS when the churches did little to provide sanctuary, safe welcome and pastoral care, but only offered condemnation and stigmatizing their erotic lives and living with disease as sinful. It was prophetic action of love, but maligned as blasphemy by new Temple authorities who made people living with HIV/AIDS sinners and outcasts.

## **ACT UP and Queer Dissidence as Transgressive Praxis**

Jesus' direct action in the Temple provided me with a template for queer

Christians for direct action and for developing a transgressive, albeit "queer" liberation theology. Jesus' actions were offensive in staging the Temple demonstration and provided myself with an in your-face, unapologetic and queer disruption of homophobic Christian theology and opened an interpretative context beyond Christian interpretations that allegorized and sanitized the action into a "cleansing of the Temple." It provided me a central symbolic media for a theological method to queer, to disrupt the institutional ecclesial theologies that excluded and harmed LGBT folks. Queering the theological symbolics of Christian theologies and practices that excluded became a hermeneutical strategy for breaking down theological divisions to provide inclusion of LGBT outcasts within Christianity.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> William L. (Scotty) McLennan, "Resisting Religion, Spreading Love," in *Resist! Christian Dissent for the 21st Century,* ed. by Michael G Long, Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 2008. 66. Wills quotation is from: Garry Wills, *What Jesus Meant*, New York, Viking 2006, 32.

I found queer cultural critic and social theorist Jonathan Dollimore opens the "perverse dynamic" as form of symbolic inversion or cultural insurgency and resistance in his attempt to retrieve lost histories of perversion. <sup>19</sup> I contextualized the public insurgencies of ACT UP and Queer dissidence from Dollimore's insightful description of "transgressive re-inscription: a turning back upon something and a perverting of it typically if not exclusively through inversion and displacement." <sup>20</sup>

When I was writing *Jesus ACTED UP*, I was simultaneously working on my dissertation at Harvard Divinity School on the Mad Saint movement and *The Life of Milarepa* by Tsang Nyon Heruka. The mad saint movement in Tibet provided a critique of institutional Tibetan Buddhism with a symbolic inversion and parody of expression and sometimes bizarre or carnivalesque behaviors to contradict and challenge religious cultural codes and social norms with an alternative, imaginative vision of religious values.<sup>21</sup> My experience of ACT UP and queer activism brought me in touch with the semantic and imaginative transgressions that often invert symbols and social values

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Jonathan Dollimore, Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1991.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence*, 323. See my essay, Robert Goss, "Insurrection f the Polymorphously Perverse: Queer Hermeneutics," in *A Rainbow of Religious Studies*, ed. by J. Michael Clark \* Robert E. Goss, Las Colinas, Monument Press, 1996, 9-31.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Robert E. Goss, *The Hermeneutics of Madness: A Literary and Hermeneutical Analysis of the Mi-la'i-rnam-thar by Gtsang-smyon Heruka*, unpublished dissertation, 1993, Harvard University. My study of the outrageous behaviors of mad saints contributed to a moment of insight talking about mad saints in class and suddenly comparing their outrageous ludic behaviors with he Sisters of erpetual Indulgence: See where I discuss the Sisters as queer tricksters: Robert Shore-Goss, "Holy Spirit as Mischief-Maker," in *Queering Christianity: Finding A Place at the Table for LGBTQI Christians*, Santa Barbara, Praeger ABC-CLIO, 2013, 97-120.

and create new semantic fields of meaning such as the retrieval of the "pink triangle" that Nazis forced gay prisoners to wear. What was originally a symbol of oppression, criminal deviancy, and gay and lesbian genocide was inverted into a symbol of empowerment, pride, and challenging actions. At the same time, I was working on a manuscript on the historical Jesus, and I found that the Temple disturbance fraught with parallels with queer disruption and transgressive action. I read the Temple disturbance with the Sanhedrin's charges against Jesus while they delivered him to Pilate: "We found this man perverting the nation..." (Luke 23:2) The word used in Greek diastrepho has the notions of subverting, perverting, or turning away. Jesus challenged the holiness codes of various Pharisaic groups and the Temple leadership with his kingdom message and praxis. Jesus "perverted" institutional religion as ACT UP and queers have done so in their recent challenges. Jesus was an outsider, who was consistently rule-breaker and proposed a radical inclusiveness at table; he challenged his religious and cultural normativity.<sup>22</sup> He challenged the Temple authorities and intruded upon sacred space. For his critics, Jesus turned religion "inside out and upside down." I concluded in my reflections on the ACT UP demonstration and Jesus' Temple disturbance: "The Jesus tradition within biblical sources is far more conflict laden and open to gueer political hermeneutics." 23

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> Moxnes understand Jesus as "queer" because he challenges the gender construction of his society and the Roman world. Halvor Moxnes, *Putting Jesus in His Place: A Radical Vision of Household and Kingdom*, Louisville, Westminster/John Knox, 2003, 72-107.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Goss, Jesus ACTED UP, 149.

Mainstream culture and frequently LGBT circles pathologized ACT UP. I watched how governmental AIDS agencies such as the Health Department and state Social Services refused to deal with grassroots AIDS service organization. Over time, ACT UP mainstreamed these organizations because of its direct actions at governmental agencies and the health care system, and state governmental agencies found themselves rather relieved and wanting to work with milder AIDS service organizations than ACT UP activists. I always thought that one of the significant achievements of ACT UP was to mainstream the grassroots AIDS service organizations through its perceived reputation of public direct actions. Author Linda Hirshman notes that ACT UP changed the public images of gay and lesbian activists as determined and creative leaders, and these image changes impacted the gay revolution for the good.<sup>24i</sup> Second, she offers an often-forgotten conclusion about ACT UP:

No other social movement has leveraged public resources so effectively. They essentially redefined the content of the liberal state to include spending large amounts of resources to protect a vulnerable minority from a fatal disease.<sup>25</sup>

ACT UP accomplished prophetically what the churches were unable to impact or change; they empowered change towards the revolutionary progress of human rights of LGBT folks in the second decade of the twenty-first century.

However, ACT UP remained a theological template or symbol for my queer theology: My queer theology, I admit, is strategic—that is, it is temporal, transient, and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Linda Hirshman, *Victory: The Gay Revolution*, New York, Harper Collins, 2013, loc. 3640.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> Ibid.

revisable.<sup>26</sup> One may take extreme counter positions in an argument or debate to move theological partners or critics to a more dialogical middle position. Certainly, I started with "queer" nominally as a coalition term for lesbian/gay, but it moved readily to a term of insult turned against homophobic culture and heterosexist theology. I cite the example of the Atlanta chapter of Queer Nation where several members of the organization were arrested in a demonstration against the Cracker Barrel Restaurant. They wore t-shirts emblazoned with "faggot" and "queer," and they were thrown into holding cells with homophobic cell mates. Their cell mates could only come with the word "sissy" to insult the Queer Nationals. I wrote: "Queer is transformed from a word coined against gay men and lesbians into an empowering word of social rebellion and political dissidence."<sup>27</sup> Queer was synonymous with the passionate energy of the Stonewall Rebellion and every ACT UP and Queer Nation demonstration. Loughlin points out the irony of "queer" based in insult:

Given the use of "queer" it is perhaps perverse to describe theology as queer: for theology serves the very churches where such insults are thrown, where those who love their own sex were named "sodomites" (to be burned) and now

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> My exposure to the apophatic philosophy of Madhyamika Buddhism pointed out the dangers of the reification of any theological position. Similarly, Loughlin comprehends "queer" within apophatic Christian theology: "about our speaking about God—is that we do not know what God is, only what God is not. ... The most we can properly say about God is that God is., which is not a description but a point of theological grammar. In analogous way we can say that *queer* is, even if we cannot say in what queer consists other than by pointing to the effects of its deployment." Gerard Loughlin, "What is Queer? Theology after Identity," *Theology & Sexuality*, vol. 14, January 2008, 151. Loughlin statement is so very Catholic grounded in the ineffable mystery of God and so Buddhist by pointing to the ineffable. It can be experienced but not really described.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> Robert Goss, *Jesus ACTED UP*, 39.

described as "objectively disordered (to be re-ordered). The churches are places to where queers are harassed.<sup>28</sup>

Loughlin correctly understands "queer as insult tuned back" at its abusers. <sup>29</sup> It has the prophetic challenge and perverse bite of Jesus' demonstration in the Temple. During my Queer Nation days, I had a pink t-shirt made with the words stitched "Intrinsically Evil, Objectively Disordered." I wore the t-shirt to remind Catholic clergy and Catholic laity of their harmful rhetorical slogans and public exclusions of gay and lesbian Catholics, I threw back Cardinal Ratzinger's harmful slogan describing us in their faces. That was my early understanding of "queer", transgressive, in your face, empowered and proud challenge, and blatant disregard for what you thought of me as a faggot, queer, sodomite or sinner. I even started introducing myself in public lectures on the issue of gay/lesbian issues and later queer theological focuses as a "sodomologist." A sodomologist, as I defined it, was a one who studied historically the exclusion, the labelling of, and violence against people who erotically loved different from mainstream culture

"Queer" was evolving into actions "turning upside down, inside out" heteronormative theologies. It originated for me from two biblical verses: Luke 23:2 where Jesus is charged "perverting the nation" and Acts 17:6 where accusations are levelled against Paul and Silas for "turning the world upside down." Jesus and his early movement had queered, disrupted and transgressed religious rules and theologies.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> Gerard Loughlin, "Introduction," in *Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 2007, 8

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> Ibid, 8.

Their praxis and ministry had a prophetic edge that disturbed the religious peace and political status quo.

In 1994, I remember appearing on a panel of the Gay Men's Issues in Religion Group at the American Academy of Religion with Gary Comstock and J. Michael Clark, and I believe that it was Michael Clark who looked me at incredulously and commented on why I would even use Jesus and his basileia (kingdom) hermeneutics for arguing a queer perspective. It made no sense whatsoever to Clark's post-Christian perspective or to Comstock's deconstruction of Christology and his post-feminist gay theology. Frankly, I felt some intellectual disdain from some of the panelists that I was theologically anachronistic because of my faith alignment as gay Christian. I passed this off as "oppression sickness," an ambivalence felt by men gay men that Christianity has been problematic and harmful. But it is also typical of many gay and lesbian scholars in religion, for the attitude of many LGBT scholars in Queer Studies maintain a disdain for anything religious or theologically Christian. Mark Jordan has written how queer theory and theology are entangled in jealous relations.<sup>30</sup> This is not only true of university programs of Queer Studies Departments but frequently also the departments of Religious Studies. It also has impacted religious scholars because of past institutional Christian opposition and exclusion to people with sexual differences and gender diversities. Jordan observes,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> Mark D. Jordan, "Religion Trouble, *Gay and Lesbian Quarterly*, 13-4, 2007, 563-575.

Queer theory can usually fit within LGBT studies, so long as it isn't too cerebral or strategically disruptive. Theology, by many definitions, cannot fit within religious studies. It is excluded as partisan advocacy.<sup>31</sup>

Academic studies of LGBT studies and Religious studies set up frequently exclusive boundaries against theological exploration. The antagonism is further flamed by the fact that "Queer theology does not come after queer theory by successful hybridization. It is also there all along, inside queer theory – and, indeed before queer theory, as competing parent, its disciplinary root and rival." Jesus ACTED UP was too partisan in its theological commitments to a queer Christian liberation theology, combined with a praxis grounded in ACT UP and Queer Nation. Such a transgressive theology pushed emotional and sacred buttons for gay religious scholars escaping from homophobic Christian pasts, and it troubled conservative gay and lesbian Christians by linking their sanitized or domesticated images of Jesus with the sacred contempt of ACT UP or Queer. Jesus ACTED UP faced the dual phobias—the Scylla of christopobia among gay religious scholars and Charybdis of religious homophobia. 33 This is a difficult theological to navigate through unapologetic subversion and perversion.

Jordan has noted that queer theory is the successor of theology. This has been underscored the family resemblance between theology and queer theory. Theology in challenging multiple norms is inherently queer. Loughlin asserts boldly,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> Jordan, "Religion Trouble," 564-565.

<sup>32</sup> lbid, 573.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> Thomas Bohache, *Christology from the Margins*, London, SCM Press, 2008, 157-186, 214- 216.

Theology is a queer thing. It has always been a queer thing. It is a very strange thing, indeed, especially for anyone living in the modern West of the twenty-first century. For theology runs counter to a world given over to material consumption, that understands itself as "accidental," without any meaning other than that which gives to itself, and so without any fundamental meaning at all. Against this, theology relativizes all earthly projects, insisting that to understand ourselves we must understand our orientation to the unknown from which all things come and to which they return, that which –as Christian theology ventures is known and received in the life of Jesus.<sup>34</sup>

I pointed out to Michael Clark and the other panelists what they deemed as oppressive was liberative for my gay Christian praxis, and that I was the only one on the panel, who was a member of ACT UP and Queer Nation. I found myself theologically comfortable as a defiant and perverted Christian, an unlaicized Catholic priest, sexual alive, and fighting for queer community. I claimed Jesus the Christ as queer—the one who perverted the nation and the church. Since then there has been a growing body of queer theological writings that followed in claiming Christ as a queer symbol for liberation with partisan faith commitments.<sup>35</sup> Thomas Bohache writes,

Thus, in my queer Christology, incarnation is an acceptance that bear Christ within us—the part of God instilled in us to bring forth from ourselves, the offspring of Christ-ness: self-empowerment, creativity, awareness of creation, love, peace and justice-making, to name but a few. That's what a queer sense of

<sup>34</sup> Gerard Loughlin, "Introduction," in *Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body*, ed. Gerard Loughlin, Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 2007, 7.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> Goss, *Queering Christ: Beyond Jesus ACTED UP*, Cleveland, The Pilgrim Press, 2002; Deryn Guest, Mona West, Thomas Bohache, Robert Goss (ed), *The Queer Bible Commentary*, London, SCM Press, 2006. (especially the Second Testament contributions); Halvor Moxnes, *Putting Jesus in His Place: A Radical Vision of Household and Kingdom*, Louisville, Westminister John Knox Press, 2003; Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions n Sex, Gender, and Politics*, New York, Routledge, 2001, Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, New York Routledge, 2003; Patrick S. Cheng, *An Introduction to Queer Theology: Radical Love*, New York Seabury Books, 2011.

incarnation means for me—that God becomes one with humanity through the assurance That God has always been present and the realization of that presence will give birth to human infusion with divine anointedness as Christ.<sup>36</sup>

It was Jesus as outsider, his disruptive behaviors, his rule breaking and transgressions for the sake of compassion, and challenging message that provided me with a model and motivated me to take such a faith and political stance. I understood that the prototype of my queer transgressive theology was Jesus the Queer Christ. I asked the other panelists about what radical politics that they were involved with and received no answer. I delighted quietly in my queer mischief that I created that day on the panel.

While initially, queer meant gay/lesbian in my identity politics early in the 1990s, it was immediately expanded through greater association and education with transgendered clergy and colleagues, Vicki Kolakowski and Justin Tanis, and transgendered folks in MCC. Gender-transitions queered fundamentalist gender binarism by revealing how fluid the lines of binary gender are. Justin Tanis speaks of the process of blurring in the priestly account in Genesis 1:

...God separates the day from the night, the sea from the land, and the plant from the animal, our own observations of the creation reveal less differentiation than the text seems to imply. Day and night are not fixed entities with clear boundaries where one ends and the other begins; every day contains dawn and dusk, which creates time in which day and night exist together. The tides make it difficult to see where the division of land end and sea begins, because the earth continues on under the sea and the sea rises up to cover the shore. Distinguishing plant from animal, as in the case of coral, is not always easy. ... even when God was creating apparent opposites, God also created liminal spaces in which the elements of creation overlap and merge. Surely, the same

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> Bohache, *Christology from the Margins*, 241-241.

could be said about the creation of humanity with people occupying many places between the poles of female and male in way similar to the rest of creation.<sup>37</sup> "Trans" brought a form of transgression into fundamentalist gender-binarism; "trans" embodied change or move into limminal spaces--the twilight or in-between spaces of emerging identities from what was considered as frozen or permanent categories.

Transitions and transformations were introduced into the landscape of rendering gender with greater uncertainty, fluidity, and apophatic tensions.<sup>38</sup>

This was also true with bisexuals. Marcella Althaus-Reid, a Bi/Queer theologian, opened decent theological constructions with her indecent Bi/Christ theology, or doing theology without underwear and in laced up corset with leather boots. Her hermeneutics had a shocking-style of a carnivalesque reversal, revealing the violence of sanitized decent or vanilla patriarchal theologies and raising the graced voices of the indecent. He Bi/Christ troubles traditional patriarchal christologies with a bisexual fluidity with an incarnational intrusion of sexual and gender-variant stories of the poor and the marginalized: "At the bottom line of Queer Theologies, there are biographies of sexual migrants, testimonies of real lives in rebellions made of love, pleasure, and suffering." Her intrusiveness into theologies with dis/graceful stories is grounded in a sexual epistemology of migrant stories of the sexual lives that undermine the false borders

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup> Justin Tanis, *Trans-Gendered Theology, Ministry and Communities of Faith*, Cleveland, Pilgrim Press, 2003

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup>. Susannah Cornwall, "Apophasis and Ambiguity: The "Unknowingness" of Transgender," in *Trans/Formations: Controversies in Contextual Theology*, ed. by Lisa Isherwood and Marcella Althaus-Ried, London, SCM Press, 2009, 13-40.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> Althaus-Redi, *Indecent Theology*, 8.

between decent and indecent. God's face is to be outside the borders of decent theologies—in the loving pleasures and lives that decent theology pathoologizes.<sup>40</sup>

With these queer mentors from the transgendered and the bisexual theologians, I wrote "Transgression as a Metaphor for Queer Theologies," exploring the intersections of queer theory and theology. My intention was to make room and space for further transgression of my own current queer methods for theological analysis:

The Latin *transgredior* means "to pass over, to go beyond, or to advance. *Transgredior* is an action that carries a person across fixed boundaries or beyond borders. Transgression destroys traditional boundaries or undermines established paradigms by revealing their fragility and instability. It challenges of regulating discourse. Who is canonically allowed to speak? Who can speak for me?<sup>41</sup>

With the notion of *transgredior* as an action that carries queer "across fixed boundaries or beyond boundaries," I note Patrick Cheng's "insurrection of subordinated" voices in his queer method of "erasing binary boundaries" and his raising up of diverse, rainbow, hybrid voices from racial, ethnic, and religious intersectionalities.<sup>42</sup> First, Cheng's notion of queer as erasing or dissolving binaries of sexuality, gender, life and death, divine and human through radical love locates itself in the apophatic grounding of the Christian

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup> Robert Shore-Goss, "Dis/Grace-full Incarnation and the Dis/Grace-full Church: Marcella Althaus-Reid's Vision of Radical Inclusivity," *Dancing Theology in Fetish Boots; Essays in Honour of Marcella Althaus-Reid*, ed. Lisa Isherwood & Mark D. Jordan, London, SCM Press, 2010, 1-6.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>41</sup> Goss, Queering Christ, 229.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>42</sup> Patrick S. Cheng, *An Introduction to Queer Theology: Radical Love*, New York, Seabury Press, 2011; *Rainbow Theology: Bridging Race, Sexuality, and Spirit*, New York, Seabury Press, 2013.

notion of Trinity. The radical love of the triune community dissolves the boundaries of the divine and human in God's incarnation of Christ. He affirms,

....the doctrine of revelation can be understood as God coming out to us. This self-revelation is grounded in God's love for us, and it is a radical kind of love because it dissolves existing boundaries that separate the divine from the human, the powerful from the weak, and knowing from unknowing. In fact, the doctrine of revelation can be understood in terms of apophatic (or negative) theology, in which our knowledge of God—like our understanding of the category "transgender"—is always in a state of transformation and knowing. 43

He and others subvert my own paradigms that are born of white-gay contextuality, albeit open-ended, but constantly in need of subversion to prevent anew metanormativity. Cheng uses a method of inserting the erotic lives of peoples of color, often forgotten or silenced by white gay male voices. Cheng adeptly inserts "multiplicities, middle space and mediation in his critique of monochromatic theology that promotes "singularity, staying home, and selecting sides."<sup>44</sup> These insertions disrupt the racialized metanarratives that exclude, and Cheng searches for the unity in the apophatic life of the triune God.

Queer is a method that recognizes the apophatic, a negative that defies stability and fixity, empty of absolutes. While queer theory and some queer theorist border on perpetual deconstruction with reconstruction and frequently engagement of society for change, queer theology recognizes the apophatic dimensions of "queer," it recognizes the openness and instability of categories of normativity. David Halperin writes in Saint Foucault.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>43</sup> Cheng, An Introduction to Queer Theology, 48.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>44</sup> Cheng, *Rainbow Theology*, 86-141.

Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. *There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers*. It is an identity without an essence. "Queer" then, demarcates not a positivity (i.e an identity) but a positionality *vis-a-vis* the normative.<sup>45</sup>

Queer challenges the normativities of each generation, it relativizes all reifications of positions through transgression, erasing binary boundaries, introducing multiplicities and hybridities, perverting and making indecent, or raising ambiguities or the liminalities. While some gueer theorists have recognized through the contestation of heteronormativity through apophatic readings of texts and interrogations of cultural practices, some have evolved into anarchic deconstruction or into queer academic dilettantism, and others have also begun to realize the link between queering and ethics—that is, agency for social change. Queer theologies, from its beginnings, undertook various methods of queering to not only contest meta-narratives and metatheologies, but to social engage and change them. They understood from that engaging the mystery of God, or for Christians the triune God, is gueer enterprise in its own right. Jay Johnson uses David Matzko MCarthy's phrase "to disturb the world with God" to discuss the apophatic dimensions of Trinitarian theology as gueer.<sup>46</sup> Johnson asserts, "The queerness of theology disturbs the modern West by bearing witness to the God whose very essence is relation itself."47 The intra-relational experience of God as triune community of love provides the metaphysics of inter-relatedness. The Buddhist notion

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>45</sup> David Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards A Hagiography*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1995, 62.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>46</sup> David Matzko McCarthy, "Desirous Saints," in *Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body*, ed. Gerard Loughlin, 307.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>47</sup> Jay Emerson Johnson, *Queer Theology for Christian Witness*, New York, Seabury Press, 2014, 147.

of "emptiness" that renders all reifications and positionalities as unstable and open also provides a profound metaphysics of inter-relatedness, or what Thich Nhat Hanh terms as "interbeing." Such relativizing of absolutes or erasing boundaries for non-dual experience provides the basis for Buddhist practice of compassion. The apophatic dimensions of Buddhist notions of emptiness lead to compassionate engagement of society with the intention to eliminate suffering.

Finally, I remember the stories in divinity school about Thomas Aquinas at the end of his life, whether it was a through a stroke or through a mystical experience, compared his theological writings to straw (*mihi videtur ut palea*). Theological formulations are never written in stone but always in straw; they are written in apophatic style, always remembering of the divine mystery of interrelatedness. Apophatic awareness comprehends that theological writings are strategic, always revisable, tentative, open, unfixed, and continuously superseded. I have been cognizant of the theological abuses that I and other LGBT folks have experienced from fundamentalist readings and static applications of Aquinas' theology and theological meta-narratives, often white and patriarchal and always excluding someone. In a similar fashion, Marcella Althaus-Reid has recognized a similar insight to Aquinas but applied to queer theology that it must "stubbornly" affirm its refusal to fix or stabilize itself.<sup>48</sup> Theology, ideally, is challenging, strategic, revisable, and tentative and open but never abusive and frozen in "permanent" categories. ACT UP and the model of Jesus taught me how

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>48</sup> Marcella Althaus-Reid, "The Bi/girl Writings from Feminist Theology to Queer Theology," in *Post-Christian Feminisms: A Critical Approach*, ed. by Isherwood, Lisa & McPhillips, Kathleen, Aldershot, Ashgate 2008, 110.

strategic theological utterances are, but it was coming to understand the triune divine life of God as Buddhist koan that opened the depth of profound mystery invades our lives and renders everything we write as "straw."

#### **Queer and Green:**

At times, I wonder whether the grief from losses during the height of the pandemic has ever left me. Or had it become embodied and become dormant as the years have gone by. I written several pieces on grief and religion, and these were ostensibly studies of the phenomena of grief and how it functions in religion. But it was also autobiographical explorations of the nature of grief within me. I realize that grief over time becomes minimized, but it never leaves you. It has unconscious grip over your psychological DNA and becomes compounded with further grief and loss in life. I wonder how the losses AIDS in the 1980s and 1990s prepared me for the last battle of my life: the reverence of life and the care for Earth.

Climate change has many parallels to the early phases of HIV/AIDS: public denial, the deafening silence from many quarters, the stigmatizing of green activists, corporate profiteering and greed, the callousness for life, and the fragility of hope in face of present and future climate impact. We have created a culture of disposability through our greed for fossil fuels without much reflection how carbon dioxide emissions have impacted the environment.

As I study about climate change, read many eco-theologies, show documentaries, read about animal suffering, I have been frustrated with the lack of

movement on environmental justice or greening of MCC churches. There has been recalcitrance within the leadership to engage the issues about climate change or even to speak about them from the pulpit. This has prompted my search for church that has wider justice program than LGBTIQ issues. It does not mean abandoning these earlier theological commitments but widening my engagement. There was a personal need for a wider forum for justice issues: immigration, environmental justice, racism, economic inequality, animal rights, poverty, AIDS and religious stigmatization, homeless, and global issues.

Frankly, I found the claims of the MCC leadership that MCC was the pre-eminent human rights LGBT justice church exaggerated and that they had little foundation in reality. In the last decade, MCC had lost the prophetic edge that drew me in the 1990s with the retirement of Rev. Troy Perry as Moderator, and there was a major drain of the pool of theological, pastoral, and leadership talent to the United Church of Christ. My own church decided to dually affiliate with the United Church of Christ in 2013 and all its clergy started to fulfill the requirements of the UCC privilege of call, official UCC recognition of ministry. I completed this process with the granting of my own privilege of call by the Central Association of the Southern California and Nevada Conference of the UCC.

I direct you two attachments in this section: My Privilege of Call paper for the central Association and the companion essay: "Queer and Green: Compassionate Care for the Earth."

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