

Testimonial Sexuality; or, Queer Structures of Religious Feeling: Notes Towards an Investigation

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This short essay emerges at a slant to the arguments Janet R. Jakobsen and I developed together in *Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tolerance*.¹ That book grew out of a set of dissatisfactions that Jakobsen and I share about the impoverishment of public arguments on behalf of lesbian and gay “rights” in the United States. We believe that an emphasis on “rights” rather than “freedom” is already part of the problem, and that lgbtq advocates are asking for too little when they ask for “tolerance” and “equality.” As long-time progressive and lesbian activist Amber Hollibaugh has said, equal rights should be the basement, not the ceiling, of aspirations for social justice.²

The joint venture of *Love the Sin* emerged, too, out of Jakobsen’s and my shared frustration at the impoverishment of *academic* discourse about religion, especially at the way religion does and does not feature in the critical discourses with which we have both been centrally engaged. Many scholars of religion have long been engaging questions of gender and sexuality, but scholars working in gender and sexuality studies have not been similarly interested in religion as a vector of identity and the social. As historian Ann Taves puts the matter, in her fascinating study *Fits, Trances, and Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James*, “Contemporary historians of difference are preoccupied with matters of race, gender, sexual orientation, but they rarely attend to the parallel processes by means of which religious difference or identity was (and is) constructed.”³ At a time when religious discourse—really, *Protestant* discourse—frames American public debates over homosexuality, the lack of exchange between critical approaches to the study of religion, on the one hand, and gender and sexuality studies, on the other, is more than simply an “academic” issue. What critical resources for rethinking the scope of intellectual and activist projects are lost by this relative inattention to “religion”?

Given my own institutional location—I have a joint appointment in religious studies and performance studies—I also have a vested interest in considering whether and how the rubric of “performance” might enrich both the conceptual

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vocabulary and political imagination for jointly engaging questions of religion and sexuality. One way performance studies can do this is by underscoring the vital role of practice, or performance, for both religious and sexual “identities.” Thinking through the category of performance interrupts essentialist notions of what religion “is” and shifts critical attention to the complex and sometimes discomfiting ways religion comes to mean for individuals and communities.

Feminist and queer theories have developed wonderfully supple accounts of the importance of “doing” or enacting identity.⁴ However, in general, when religion has entered into the frame of queer and even feminist academic analyses, it has tended to do so in highly belief-centered terms in which religion gets figured as the expression of irrational superstition, fear, archaic holdover, modernity’s remainder. Under the burden of such representations of religion, religious people are, at best, silly; at worst, they are the enemy of, variously, women, queers, progress, equality, freedom, futurity itself. However, such blanket proclamations as “religion is the enemy” forget more than they know. They forget or overlook the many self-identified feminists, gay men, lesbians for whom religion remains a vital site of collective belonging and meaning-making life practices. They read past the best selling non-fiction list at most gay and lesbian bookstores, a list dominated by books about religion and spirituality, with such titles as Daniel A. Helminiak’s *What the Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*, a perennial (and much-reprinted) best-seller.⁵ Doubtless, many of the readers of Helminiak’s book—and other books like it—are seeking ammunition, ways, that is, to defend themselves against Biblically-based homophobia. However, it is important to acknowledge, too, the many lgbtq people who do not think they should have to choose between “being” queer and “being” religious and for whom *The Bible* is not simply a text to be disavowed or defended against.

Finally, dismissing religion and religious people as “the enemy” is historically blinkered. Progressive politics in the United States has not always been uniformly “against” or on the other side of religion.⁶ Although there are good reasons to distrust and, even more strongly, protest the ways in which “religion” is currently being put to work in United States public life, legislation, and policies, the entry of religion into politics and public life is not in and of itself conservative. Nonetheless, when it comes to sexuality, religion is, by and large, invoked to conservative ends. Laws criminalizing consensual sodomy were an ur-example of this in the United States context. Ongoing battles over same-sex marriage are another. As a result, secularists, queer and otherwise, are not wrong to distrust public religious language or worry about the role of religion in United States public life. It is just that the story is far more complicated than usually supposed.

One of the tasks Jakobsen and I set ourselves in *Love the Sin* is to complicate this story of a necessary antagonism between religion and sexuality. We suggest that the “danger” or “problem” that sexual freedom comes to represent cannot be

understood apart from the history of religion in the United States and, in particular, from the history of the under-realization of the religious freedom promised by the First Amendment to the United States Constitution: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” Because all United States laws regulating homosexuality are, at base, religious in derivation, we contend that religious freedom is a structural condition of sexual freedom. In this essay, however, I want to take a different tack, sketching, in a preliminary way, some benefits to queer theory and to LGBTQ activism of “getting religion.” A new or renewed openness to the categories of religious experience may pay unexpected dividends by revealing some surprising company—strange bedfellows, if you will. In what follows, I turn my attention to a relatively recent genre of religious self-narratives, the coming out *of* homosexuality story. This turning toward is also a turning back.

In July 1998, a coalition of fifteen anti-gay groups took out a series of full-page ads in *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *The Washington Post*. The sponsoring organizations were: Alliance for Traditional Marriage-Hawaii, American Family Association, Americans for Truth about Homosexuality, Center for Reclaiming America, Christian Family Network, Christian Coalition, Citizens for Community Values, Colorado for Family Values, Concerned Women for America, Coral Ridge Ministries, Family First, Family Research Council, Liberty Counsel, National League Foundation, and Kerusso Ministries. The particular ad that interests me appeared in the *New York Times* on the thirteenth of July and featured Anne Paulk, “wife, mother, former lesbian.”⁷ In the fine print of the ad’s text is laid out Paulk’s story of coming out of homosexuality and into the “hope and healing” that a relationship to Christ can promise.

Because the ad is the focus of an extended analysis in the third chapter of *Love the Sin*, I do not want to belabor the arguments presented there. It will suffice in this context to offer a brief description of the advertisement and its scrupulously measured interplay of text and image. The upper third of the ad is dominated by a close-up of Paulk. It is the sort of photograph that would not be out of place in the weddings section of the *Sunday Times*. Paulk is a 30-something white woman with shoulder-length hair. She rests her face on her left hand, drawing attention to her wedding band and diamond ring, which prominently sign newfound commitments to God, husband, and self. Her story unfolds over seven sections of accompanying text, and it follows many of the conventions of the evangelical conversion narrative, complete with unexpected detours, willful evasions, and an arrival that is also a coming home. Once she did not know who she was and so she grasped at answers provided by others. Through self-study, appeals to a power greater than herself,

and intense social engagement with others like herself, she has been able to leave a false life behind and come to the truth of the self. Her story is at once particular and universal. She speaks of the “God-shaped hole in everyone’s heart” that only Jesus can fill. Anne Paulk’s victory thus need not be hers alone.

In staging Paulk’s self-discovery as a coming out of lesbianism narrative, the ad brilliantly and very knowingly recasts the relations between homosexuality and heterosexuality. Within the terms of the ad’s “repressive hypothesis,” heterosexuality, not homosexuality, is secular culture’s tabooed subject. This is not heterosexuality in any simple sense. It is not enough for Paulk to reorganize her desire away from women and to men. In fact, there is little in the text of the advertisement to suggest that Paulk now “desires” men. What she desires – and “we” can too -- is the “*transforming love of Jesus Christ*” (italics in original).

The contours of Paulk’s conversion narrative, its confusions and arrival, will be familiar, perhaps painfully so, to many lesbians, gay men, and other “modern sexual subjects” who have struggled to come out to self and others about the felt truth of their sexual “identity” and desires. Moreover, even though the ad is obviously crafted with an eye to its impact on public political debates about gay identity and gay rights in the United States, there is no reason to doubt the sincerity of Paulk’s testimony. I would go so far as to suggest that, far from discrediting her, the public political re-purposing of Paulk’s testimony places Paulk and her story within a longer American history of Protestant revival, in which believers gave public witness to their sins and praised God for their salvation. Here is another place where performance-centered approaches can lend much to the discussion. These “exercise[s] in the collective performance of emotion,” to use John Corrigan’s terms,⁸ testified to the state of the individual participant’s soul at the same time that they also served to enact and assert group membership (usually over and against non-members). Consequently, I would argue even more explicitly now than Jakobsen and I did in *Love the Sin* that it is actually more helpful to take Paulk’s narrative at its word than to dismiss it as so much political packaging/unapologetic homophobia on the part of the ad’s fifteen co-sponsors or as wishful thinking/internalized homophobia on the part of Anne Paulk. Taking Paulk’s story at its word, as in some meaningful sense *her* words, attunes us to what may be shared structures of feeling between religious and sexual “identity.” Taking Paulk’s conversion experience seriously and locating its historical antecedents also point to the value of joining the history of sexuality (and its modern invention) to the history of religion (and *its* modern invention). In a deep sense, we moderns *are* that joining, to wit, hyphenated but never fully secular subjects.

In *Love the Sin*, Jakobsen and I suggested, in a footnote, that the ex-gay ad was thinkable as a kind of reverse discourse. The term “reverse discourse” is Michel Foucault’s and refers to a movement within discourse in which previously marginalized groups or identities come to speak on their own behalf, appropriating

the same vocabulary previously used to disqualify them as subjects. The one example Foucault offers of this phenomenon is an apparently approving one: homosexuality speaking in its own name.⁹ Anne Paulk's ex-gay narrative—with its sampling of a genre (the homosexual coming out story) and a set of assumptions (a core self divided from itself)—is an important reminder that “reverse discourse” is a strategy not just deployed by those on the cultural margins, but also usable to reassert dominant values.¹⁰

I do not so much want to take back that footnote, as complicate it. First, for all the ways in which the ex-gay narrative reasserts dominant values—both heteronormativity and Christonormativity—this does not mean that the groups that co-sponsored the ad nor, crucially, the individuals who people these groups, necessarily occupy the cultural center in the United States. At minimum, many if not most “feel” marginalized by secular culture. Moreover, there may be more accuracy to this feeling of marginalization than many of us on the cultural and political left, who feel equally (if differently) marginalized by Protestant dominance, care to admit. By way of another example, think of the firestorm of often rancorous public debate over Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*. Despite a history of evangelical anti-Catholicism, evangelicals were the film's most passionate defenders. In part, this has to do with the way criticism of the film was experienced by many Christian evangelicals in the United States as an attack upon their Christian identity.¹¹

This is a delicate issue. As Jakobsen and I have argued in another context, “. . . in the United States currently, we have a three-part relation among Christian secularism [that is, a secularism whose specifically Reform Protestant origins remain active], mainline Protestantism, and conservative Protestantism. The Christian right develops its cultural power both by drawing on its connection to the Christian aspect (itself supported by mainline Protestantism) of hegemonic Christian secularism and by claiming to be oppressed by that same secularism.”¹²

Second, if Paulk's narrative is an example of reverse discourse it may also bear the trace of what Raymond Williams has called the “residual.” By residual, Williams means “certain experiences, meanings, and values” that cannot be expressed or verified or legitimated within the terms of dominant culture, but rather gain their resonance and life-value in relation to—as a relation to?—some previous social and cultural institution or formation.¹³ The residual is a survival strategy in at least two ways. First, it is the living remnant of cultural forms that belong to an earlier “phase” (and religion, notably, is Williams's first example of the residual); second, this remnant becomes a vehicle for self- and group expression for those whose experiences and values are, as it were, out of sync with the dominant.

Williams's discussion of the residual takes place in an enigmatically brief chapter entitled “Dominant, Residual, and Emergent.” This last term is the most valorized of the chapter's three keywords. In the emergent “new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships and kinds of relationships are continually

being created,"¹⁴ while the residual is a term freighted with known-ness and past-ness.

The teleological drift of Williams's language—"new phase," and "earlier social formations and phases of the cultural process"—seems at odds with his caution one chapter later, in his much-cited essay on "Structures of Feeling," against prematurely foreclosing experience and its living, pulsing possibilities by naming it as past. In particular, he warns against assuming that the social is the fixed and explicit, knowable and known to the last and first degree.¹⁵ In fact, it is this worry about the habit of mind that regularly converts experience into the past tense of "finished products" that leads him to speak of "structures of feeling" instead of what he acknowledges is the "better and wider word," namely, "structures of *experience*."¹⁶

The distinction between the emergent and the residual, though, is in service of something else. Williams wants to get at what counts as, and how we know, what is really oppositional, a-slant, to the dominant versus what is merely a "new phase of the dominant culture."¹⁷ Relations between the dominant and the residual, Williams explains, are easier to understand (and thus take the measure of) than between the dominant and the emergent. This is so because, again in his words, "a large part of it [the residual] relates to earlier social formations and phases of the cultural process."¹⁸ Significantly, Williams does not seem to imagine that active ongoing engagement with the past can contribute to the formation of new meanings and values; does not imagine that the new relations he entitles "emergent" might include an altered relation to the past in the present. As historian Molly McGarry argues, though, *the residual remains emergent*.¹⁹ Alongside this trenchant observation we might also note, with Foucault, that "we are much more recent than we think."²⁰

To refer to the residual in Paulk's ex-gay narrative is thus to situate the present meanings and values expressed in such testimonials in relation to earlier, but by no means finished, processes and professions of the modern self. In an intriguing essay on "Religious Experience and the Formation of the Early Enlightenment Self," historian Jane Shaw argues that the rise of interiority and individuality, and the practices of self-examination associated with both, developed earlier and across more diverse social strata in England than in France.²¹ She identifies several reasons for this, but the crucial factor to stress here is differences between Protestant and Catholic forms of self-examination—forms and practices that, in both England and France, were being secularized over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with contested religious experiences being transformed, under pressure of scientific "reason," into categories of medical diagnosis. Shaw, along with other religious studies scholars, here points us towards a recognition of the Protestantness of the modern rational self.²²

Attending to this Protestant connection means making some major adjustments to Foucault's history of sexuality, at minimum to its reception and circulation in an

Anglo-American context. If we have become, as Foucault argues in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, a singularly confessing society, the chattering modern subject belongs as much, if not more, to such public and semi-public venues as meeting halls and public squares, church basements and theatres as to the screened off confessional box. To put the matter more bluntly: in practice, Foucault's talkative subject is closer to the Protestant testimonial than the Catholic confessional.

I am still thinking through the implications of this for a history of sexuality and religion, but here, by way of conclusion (let's call it an open ending), are some pointers towards future research:

(1) To speak of testimonial, rather than confessional, sexuality and subjectivity is to attune ourselves more systematically to the collective and performative contexts in which experiences, feelings, and practices make up people.

(2) This performative casting of the modern sexual subject also recommends performance studies as a crucial methodological resource for thinking religion and sexuality side by side.

(3) Much work remains to be done on the residual, perhaps connecting it to the queer historical touch that Carolyn Dinshaw has modeled in her recent *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- And Postmodern*.²³ There Dinshaw presses us to take seriously the possibility that the past can renew the present and project the future, *and* that such a renewal and projection are not the same thing as seeing the past only in the light of the present (or vice versa).

(4) Narratives of cultural declension (from Augustine to Oprah, from Freud to Jerry Springer) will have to be rolled back to take account of the objectification of emotion and commodification of personal testimony that were early on a feature of Protestant practice (from Puritan diary-keeping to the Pentecostal revival tent to the spiritualist séance).

(5) Some persistent contradictions in homophobic discourse—in which homosexuality is attacked for being “unnatural” and for being too “animalistic,” or in which one and the same person considers homosexuality a sin (a moralizing discourse) and a sickness (medicalizing)—may evidence earlier nineteenth-century debates between religious and emergent scientific discourses, as well as within and between Protestant denominations, over such phenomena as trances, visions, speaking in tongues, communing with spirits, and religious emotion more generally. Were such phenomena to be classed as true religion, or false? Genuine

religious experience or hysteria? In such debates, a discourse of “the natural” was not on the side of science only. Spiritualist discourse about “natural religion” is a case in point.

(6) Historical work with nineteenth-century primary texts has yielded a rich and richly evocative language of “come-outers.” The term refers to individuals who left—came out *from*—mainstream Protestantism and went *into* the range of more enthusiastic Protestant sects born in the American nineteenth century (e.g., Pentecostalism, Seventh Day Adventism, Christian Science). Come-outers also migrated towards spiritualism. Work remains to be done pursuing possible connections between this religious language of “come-outers” (as well as “closet devotions”) and twentieth-century understandings of “coming out of” the closet and “coming out *as*” homosexual. Such research might ask whether/how the secularization of sex and its subjects has erased or written over earlier religious discourses and worldviews and how such residual discourses offer alternative ways to imagine and enact sexual as well as religious subjectivities in the present.²⁴ What, for example, might be the points of connection between earlier and still active Christian understandings and practices of coming out *from* and the professions of sexual selfhood—coming out *as*—that help to make up the putatively secular and oh-so modern subject of sexuality?

(7) American religious freedom has come to mean, as Janet Jakobsen acutely observes, the freedom to act Protestant even when you are not. In view of this Christian dominance, how might tracing the cross-hatching of religious and sexual identities as structures of feeling help to interrupt some of the usual ways of telling the story of sexuality versus religion and “being” secular versus “having” values? This is more than an academic question of refining our conceptual vocabulary. The stakes are no less than asking what kind of social world we can imagine and work towards.

Notes

1. Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, *Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tolerance* (New York: New York UP, 2003). I want to thank Iris Smith Fischer for her helpful suggestions for revising this version of the essay. An expanded version of it will appear in *The Blackwell Companion to LGBT/Q Studies*, ed. George Haggerty and Molly McGarry (London: Blackwell),

forthcoming. Finally, I owe a special debt of gratitude to Janet R. Jakobsen, my dear friend and frequent collaborator. This essay could not have been written nor even thought without her.

2. Amber Hollibaugh, panel discussion, "Class, Race, and Sex: The Future of Difference," *The Scholar and the Feminist XXX: Past Controversies, Present Challenges, Future Feminisms*, Barnard College, New York, N. Y., 9 April 2005.

3. Ann Taves, *Fits, Trances, and Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999) 12.

4. The most influential such account is Judith Butler's discussion of gender performativity. See especially her *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

5. Daniel A. Helminiak, *What the Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*, rev. and exp. (San Francisco: Alamo Square Distributors, 2000).

6. See Rebecca T. Alpert, *Voices of the Religious Left: A Contemporary Sourcebook* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2000).

7. Untitled advertisement, *The New York Times*, 13 July 1998: A11.

8. John Corrigan, *Business of the Heart: Religion and Emotion in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 2002) 82.

9. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1978) 101.

10. One page after naming homosexuality as his one example of reverse discourse, Foucault himself cautions against assuming that reverse discourse necessarily belongs to any one strategy, moral division, or ideology. 102.

11. I want to thank my religious studies colleague Elizabeth A. Castelli for many vibrant discussions about the way this film has been taken up into a modern-day rhetoric of "The Persecuted Church."

12. Janet R. Jakobsen with Ann Pellegrini, "Dreaming Secularism," *World Secularisms at the Millennium*, special issue of *Social Text* 64 18.3 (Fall 2000): 15.

13. Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977) 122.

14. 123.

15. 128.

16. 132, emphasis mine.

17. 122.

18. 123.

19. Private communication. My discussion of the residual's relation to the emergent is heavily indebted to conversations with McGarry.

20. Michel Foucault, "Practicing Criticism," *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings 1977-1984*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman (New York: Routledge, 1988) 156.

21. Jane Shaw, "Religious Experience and the Formation of the Early Enlightenment Self," *Rewriting the Self: Histories from the Renaissance to the Present*, ed. Roy Porter (London: Routledge, 1997) 61-71.

22. For starters, see Jakobsen's analysis of the secularization of Protestant body regulation, a process that implies the Protestantness of the modern sexual self. *The Value of Ethics: Sex, Secularism*

and Social Movements. Forthcoming.

23. Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- And Postmodern* (Durham: Duke UP, 1999).

24. See especially Molly McGarry, "The Quick, the Dead, and the Yet Unborn: Untimely Sexualities and Secular Hauntings," *Secularisms*, ed. Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini. Forthcoming.