

The Episcopal Church and the resistance to conservative claims to a biblical monopoly: towards a biblical gay and lesbian narrative?

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Abstract

Whereas the liberal deconstruction of conservative claims about the Bible “obviously” condemning homosexual practice of any kind has been a great help to Christian and Jewish gays and lesbians seeking to reconcile their sexual and religious identities, it has done little to help them use the Bible in a gay-affirmative way. By being in essence a counter-argument against anti-gay discourse, it still leaves the Bible in a perilously close connection to homophobic imagination. Queer readings of the Bible have come as a welcome remedy. They turn their back on the question of what the Bible condemns, reclaiming the Scriptures as a positive spiritual resource for LGBT people. This is both a political and a deeply spiritual move, and it is empowering gays and lesbians in church and synagogue. Strikingly however, queer Bible commentaries do not seem to have made their way into the institutional debates of as gay-friendly a denomination as the Episcopal Church, the American branch of the Anglican Communion. In the recent Episcopalian discussion that has led to authorising the blessing of same-sex marriage, however, one may see the signs of some future full inclusion of gays and lesbians in the grand biblical narrative of creation, redemption and renewal, which is central to Christian identity.

Keywords: Homosexuality; Episcopal Church; Queer readings of the Bible.

A Igreja Episcopal e a resistência às reivindicações conservadoras de monopólio bíblico: rumo a uma narrativa bíblica gay e lésbica?

Resumo

Considerando que a desconstrução liberal de reivindicações conservadoras sobre a Bíblia condenando “obviamente” a prática homossexual de qualquer tipo tem sido uma grande ajuda para gays e lésbicas cristãos e judeus que procuram conciliar as suas identidades sexu-

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ais e religiosas, pouco foi feito para ajudá-los a usar a Bíblia de uma forma gay-afirmativa. Por ser essencialmente um contra-argumento do discurso anti-gay, ainda mantém a Bíblia em uma conexão perigosamente próxima da imaginação homofóbica. As leituras *queer* da Bíblia surgiram como um remédio bem-vindo. Elas viraram suas costas para a questão do que a Bíblia condena, recuperando as Escrituras como um recurso espiritual positivo para as pessoas LGBT. Isto é ao mesmo tempo um movimento político e profundamente espiritual, e está empoderando gays e lésbicas na igreja e sinagoga. Surpreendentemente, no entanto, os comentários bíblicos *queer* não parecem ter feito o seu caminho nos debates institucionais de uma denominação tão gay-amigável quanto a Igreja Episcopal, o ramo americano da Comunhão Anglicana. Na recente discussão Episcopal que levou à autorização da bênção do casamento do mesmo sexo, no entanto, podem-se ver os sinais de alguma futura plena inclusão de gays e lésbicas na grande narrativa bíblica da criação, redenção e renovação, que é central à identidade cristã.

Palavras-chave: Homossexualidade; Igreja Episcopal; Leituras *queer* da Bíblia.

L'Église épiscopale et la résistance aux revendications conservatrices de monopole biblique: vers un récit biblique gay et lesbienne?

Résumé

La déconstruction libérale de la vision conservatrice d'une Bible qui, "de toute évidence", condamne toutes les formes d'homosexualité, a aidé les chrétiens et juifs gays et lesbiens à réconcilier leur identité sexuelle et religieuse. Mais elle ne leur a pas permis d'utiliser la Bible d'une manière constructive. Contre-argument face au discours anti-gay, cette déconstruction laisse la Bible dans une proximité périlleuse avec une imagination homophobe. Les lectures *queer* de la Bible représentent un remède bienvenu. Elles tournent le dos à la question de savoir ce que la Bible condamne et revendiquent les Écritures comme une ressource spirituelle positive pour les personnes LGBT. C'est une démarche politique mais aussi profondément spirituelle qui renforce la position des gays et lesbiennes dans les Églises et synagogues. Il est frappant toutefois de constater que ces commentaires *queer* de la Bible n'ont guère trouvé de place dans les débats institutionnels d'une Église aussi pro-gay que l'Église épiscopale, branche américaine de la Communion anglicane. Cependant, dans les discussions épiscopaliennes récentes qui ont mené à l'autorisation des bénédictions des mariages des couples de même sexe, on peut discerner les signes avant-coureurs d'une pleine inclusion des gays et lesbiennes dans le grand récit biblique de création, rédemption et renouveau, au cœur de l'identité chrétienne

Mots-clés: Homossexualité; Église épiscopale; Lectures *queer* de la Bible.

The initial conversation in Anglicanism, as in several other denominations, about the Bible and gay and lesbian issues, starting in the 1970s, was about determining what relation, if any, what Robert Goss called "the texts of terror"¹ have with homosexuality as understood in the contemporary

¹ Goss counts nine Bible passages (other authors, such as Michael Vasey, count seven (VASEY, 1995, p. 124-138) deemed by fundamentalist Christians to be directly relevant to the homosexuality debate (GOSS, 1993, 90-94). Goss was recycling for gay issues the phrase coined by feminist theologian Phyllis Trible in her book entitled *Texts of Terror*.

West. This initial debate has largely led to a stalemate. On the one hand the liberal viewpoint considers that these texts do not in fact represent a blanket condemnation of homosexual unions as they are understood today. And on the other hand the conservative viewpoint has continued to affirm the incompatibility of homosexual practice of any kind with Scripture.

The idea of incompatibility has been at the heart of the homosexuality crisis in the Anglican Communion, ever since the 1998 Lambeth Conference of Anglican bishops defined homosexual practice as “incompatible with Scripture.”² It is in the name of this incompatibility that various Anglican Churches from the Global South have led a crusade against what they see as the advent of heresy in the Western provinces of the Communion (BETHMONT, 2010, p. 187-196). Anglicanism provides a striking illustration of the stalemate to which the institutional debate over Bible and homosexuality has led: each side is fully convinced of the rightness of its interpretation. The Episcopal Church in the United States, the most pro-gay Church of the Communion, has continued to affirm the full inclusion of gays and lesbians by redefining marriage in a gender-neutral way in July 2015 while continuing to be attacked for heresy by the Churches of Nigeria and Uganda, to mention but them. These Churches are more than ever out of communion with the American Church.³

In the light of this particular conflict the Bible seems little more than a tool either to attach the authority of Scripture to conservative prejudices (in the sense of pre-judgments) over sexuality or to call into question (and therefore detach from the authority of Scripture) what conservatives have seen as condemnations of homosexuality, giving at least the possibility of religious legitimacy to liberal prejudices.

The liberal calling into question of what had long seemed the obvious biblical condemnation of homosexuality has undoubtedly been immensely profitable to gay and lesbian Christians and Jews who felt split between two identities, sexual and religious. It has defused the terror of Biblical condemnation, showing that the Bible does not *have* to be seen as anti-gay. But as with any *des*construction, it begs for *re*construction. Gays and lesbians whose faith has taught them that reading Scripture should be the cornerstone of their spiritual lives cannot rest satisfied with a view of the Bible and

² Resolution 1.10 of the 1998 Lambeth Conference.

³ See the update by Peter Jenkins, the general secretary of GAFCON, on the gathering of the Anglican Primates in January 2016. GAFCON is the global conservative Anglican movement that seeks to “renew” Anglicanism through “obedience to the Bible.” Jenkins explains that the GAFCON primates at the gathering “maintained their integrity. They certainly didn’t take holy communion, for example, with those with whom they are out of communion.” (<http://gafcon.org/2016/01/15/gafcon-update-on-primates-2016-gathering/>)

homosexuality which is largely defined by what the Bible does not say or does not condemn. What is more, the liberal deconstruction of conservative biblical interpretation only exists in reaction to conservative discourse, thus implicitly letting the latter (and homophobic imagination) define the terms of the discussion. Claiming the Bible for gays and lesbians requires another approach whose dynamic is — to some extent at least — independent of the confrontational interpretative power game.

Since the late 1990s Anglican LGBT people, alongside other Christian and Jewish LGBT groups, more particularly in the English-speaking world, have started to claim the Bible in a queer-affirmative way, seeking to find themselves in and by the biblical narrative⁴. They have done this not only in trying to identify potentially gay or lesbian characters in the Bible, focusing on the usual stories of David and Jonathan or Ruth and Naomi, for example, but also in showing how the queerness of readers “provides a way of illuminating the texts” and how the variety of sexual minorities represents multiple viewpoints from which one may read Scripture. (JENNINGS, 2001, p. 37)

This move sidesteps institutional debates about whether it is possible to engage in a same-sex relationship and be authentically Christian or Jewish, to bring to the task of biblical interpretation the intuitions derived from the experience of identifying as gay or lesbian. In doing so gays and lesbians have started to bring their specific experience into a life-giving dialogue with the scriptural heart of their religious tradition.

This paper comes out of my fascination for the way in which biblical narratives have been used in the last fifteen or twenty years to spiritually feed Christian and Jewish gays and lesbians. This fascination, however, has been accompanied by some degree of frustration. I have been left with the sense that the creative side of queer biblical hermeneutics has hardly entered the realm of the equally creative queer theological reflections that have arisen in a mainline denomination like the Episcopal Church. The lack of considered dialogue between the two enterprises is to be deplored. Not just because it considerably reduces the power of a gay-friendly approach to Christian tradition, but also because it leaves one with fragmentary queer narratives of Christianity which still lack wholeness. While I am not sure how this wholeness may be reached, the remarkable convergence between some biblical and theological narratives relating Christian tradition to the gay and lesbian experience of coming-out in the broadest sense of the term suggests that it is not an impossible goal.

⁴ A number of books have accompanied and inspired this trend. See in particular WEST and GOSS, 2000; STONE, 2001; GUEST et al, 2006; DRINKWATER et al, 2009; HORNSBY and STONE, 2011.

Although queer theology and Bible commentary take into account the experience of many marginalized groups (all those behind the letters in LGBT or LGBTQI or any other association of letters that may be used), I will focus exclusively on gays and lesbians and their queer gaze on the Bible and Christian theology, the only queer gaze that has direct relevance to an Anglican debate that is specifically about homosexuality.

1. Queerly inhabiting the text

Queer readings of the Bible can and should be seen as an attempt by LGBT people to seize power within the Christian or Jewish community. As the title of *Take Back the Word*, a book of queer readings of various Bible passages published in 2000 indicates, one is claiming ownership of Scripture and therefore of some measure of religious authority. A gay-affirmative reading of the Bible is as political as an anti-gay reading. But it would be both oversimplistic and unfair to see it as merely the product of religious politics. Gay and lesbian Bible readers who have been seeking to find themselves in the biblical narrative, have also done so out of some inner need coming out of the depths of their spiritual lives. This is a point that gay Catholic theologian James Alison insists on:

I'm not talking ... about a strategic matter: "Hey guys, the Bible has some good stories. If we can learn to tell our story in Bible terms, we can turn the table on our enemies by occupying the high moral ground." That would be a cynical exercise in marketing: finding the right story. No, I'm talking about something rather different. My conviction is that there is only one Bible story, and that it is the story told by God, and it is within this that we are invited to inscribe ourselves. ... [I]t is not a question of us searching for a story, but of discovering, slowly, painfully, and through endless muddle and losing the thread, that we are being invited to inhabit a story which is one not of reaction, but of being called into being and rejoiced in. It is much more a question of discovering ourselves to have been dragged into an unimagined story than of us sitting down after some crime and working out how best to sell ourselves when the cops come by. (ALISON, 2001, p. 196-197)

Just as the story of the coming out of Egypt is about the creation of Israel as a people whose being is to be found not in reaction to Egyptian oppression but in being chosen by God to be the dwelling of the divine presence, so the story of gay and lesbian coming out only acquires its wholeness and authority, says Alison, when it leaves behind purely reactive

dynamics to embrace an affirmation of being that does not even feel the need to demonstrate its power to homophobic pharaohs.

Queer bible commentaries have taken many different paths and have to some extent changed since the 1990s. Notably, with the increasing acceptance of gays and lesbians in Western societies, queer commentators have given more attention to the dangers of gay and lesbian complicity with an oppressive system which they are given increasing opportunities to be themselves part of (especially when they belong to the right class and have the right skin colour).⁵ In doing so, queer Bible commentators are attempting to rise to the Christian or Jewish challenge of furthering justice for all human beings. This kind of concern has logically come after a period of attention given to the spiritual meaning of coming out, possibly the most recurrent theme in those queer Bible readings of the late 1990s and early 2000s that are most obviously homiletic and that attempt to connect Bible stories to the narratives of gay and lesbian lives. It is on these coming-out readings that I would like to focus since they are in fact part of the same gay and lesbian liberationist move that has been behind Episcopalian discussions about including same-sex couples in the definition of marriage.

In these readings, coming out is usually related to the theological theme of creation or resurrection (which from a Christian perspective is the same thing, since resurrection is about new creation). Different biblical stories of being (newly) created or risen from the dead have been read from a queer perspective: Jacob being recreated as Israel in his fight with the angel (KAHN, 2009, 43-46), the coming-out of Egypt as liberation from a death-giving closet and as the creation of a new covenantal identity (WEST, 2000, p. 71-81), Lazarus being raised from the dead (PERKINS, 2000, p. 196-205), and the quasi-resurrection of Jonah being spewed out of the fish, whose interpretation by James Alison has the unusual characteristic of being both an exercise in biblical criticism and in systematic theology (ALISON, 2001, p. 86-104). I shall dwell on Alison's reading of Jonah because it best shows, it seems to me, how queer readings of the Bible may relate to such great theological themes as creation and redemption. This is, I suggest, a possible avenue for some queer inhabiting of the biblical narrative to enter the realm of denominational discussions. By queer inhabiting, I do not mean the mere use of Bible references to construct a queer theology (as is the case for

⁵ See HORNSBY and STONE, 2011, in particular Deryn Guest's paper on Jael, in which she considers the cost to trans people and others of seeing Jael as "a celebratory, resonant figure for lesbian readers" (p. 33) and the chapter by Lynn R. Huber on the Great Whore, in which her lesbian gaze on the Whore is the occasion to reflect on the dangers of gays and lesbians being assimilated into a consumerist, capitalist culture (p. 314-315).

example in the queer critique of the natural law tradition –a critique I have commented on in BETHMONT, 2013)– but a fusing of queer and biblical narratives that enables one to interpret one’s life both queerly and biblically, whatever one’s sexual orientation.

James Alison invites his reader to inhabit the beach onto which the great fish vomited Jonah. Alison sees Jonah as setting himself up to be thrown into the sea. Jonah wants to die because he cannot bear what he senses God’s call to go and preach to Niniveh means. God does not want to punish Niniveh; he wants to save it. God is not interested in maintaining a religious order in which, says Alison using an analytical framework borrowed from René Girard, other people are declared bad so that I might be declared good. Jonah’s attachment to that order disguises an inner chaos of fear and self-hatred, says Alison, that means estrangement from himself and from God. This estrangement leads to Jonah acquiescing in being killed. The story however does not end there thanks to the fish who swallows Jonah. The great fish, says Alison, “is nothing other than God holding Jonah in being in the midst of darkness and fear” (ALISON, 2001, p. 91).

This interpretation coincides with Alison’s sense of a profound identification with the story of Jonah: “I have found myself inscribing my own story into it.” He writes:

My own story has been one in which I knew at some level ... that the word of God was one of love. But as I grew up I was unable to allow myself to hear it in the depths of my being. Those depths were utterly prisoner to the voices of hatred which form us as gay people ... canonised by an ecclesiastical voice which has been so tied up in all this that it has been incapable of discerning between the voice of the world and the voice of God. So it says: love, and do not love; be, and do not be. The voice of God has been presented as a double bind which ... destabilises being into annihilation, and thinks that annihilation to be a good thing.

And of course, the true horror is not that there is a ‘they’ out there, doing this to a pure and innocent ‘us’, finding it both necessary and apparently righteous to hold on to vanities and apostasise from the source of lovingkindness. ... The result is that at some time our ‘I’s are likely to have been fully consenting participants in the hatred and fear. ... Like Jonah, I managed to set myself up to be thrown overboard in a storm ... and like Jonah, I found that just where I thought that I had at last managed to get myself completely thrown away, I found myself caught and held through the depths in which the ... ‘yes’ of God started to ... bring forth the terrifying novelty of an unbound conscience. I found myself having been vomited up on the shore, and wondering where on earth is Niniveh, and what on earth to say to it. (ALISON, 2001, 94-95)

So when James Alison/Jonah is spewed out on the beach, it is very much a risen, new creature that starts walking up the beach and endeavours to find a new voice. A new story begins which has no clear script, the preface of which is “one of being killed, and finding oneself held in a life that can not longer be destroyed” (ALISON, 2001, p. 96). For Alison the new story results from a rediscovery of the doctrine of creation, a rediscovery that is uniquely available to those who were declared “things that are not” (ALISON, 2001, p. 100) but who have found that they have been miraculously held in being by God himself. Their experience has taught them that “the story-of-creation-as-moral package” which seems “an expression of Christian orthodoxy, is very much at work in what has killed us” (ALISON, 2001, p. 99). Alison refers to the doctrine that sees homosexuality as part of fallen nature, a corruption of the original, antelapsarian order of creation which Christians have been empowered by God to recover. The effect of this doctrine, he says, is that the message heard by gays and lesbians is the following:

as you are, you are not really part of creation. ... Your longings, desiring, seeking after flourishing and sense of what is natural ... have absolutely no relationship with creation. ... it is only by a complete rejection of your very hearts that you may come to know something of what is meant by creation. (ALISON, 2001, p. 99)

As things that were not but have been found held in being, gays and lesbians finding themselves alive on the shore can start to partake of a sense of wonder as parts of creation, literally created from nothing. The so-called “natural” order that has played such a great part in annihilating them is revealed as a social construct that has nothing to do with God’s creation but with maintaining a “human space of violent idolatry” (ALISON, 2001, p. 103). As a consequence, a new imagination is being born on the beach in which God “is quite removed from any justification of the present order, and yet ever palpitating beneath the vertiginous possibilities of the bringing of a divine order into being” (ALISON, 2001, p. 103).

Gay and lesbian coming out to live as they are and affirming their createdness is thus taken up in God’s story of bringing about his new creation and revealing the vanity of an idolatrous order that passes for divine (and that happens to be heteronormative). The wider Church need therefore not fear the public visibility of gays and lesbians but rather it must start to recognise in the queer story of coming out the story of God bringing about his new creation in all.

2. Queer theology and the Episcopalian conversation on same-sex unions

It seems to me that the incipient gay and lesbian inhabiting of the biblical text, sidestepping institutional discussions about “what the Bible really says about homosexuality,”⁶ is paralleled by the method of the Episcopal Church in working towards its policy of full inclusion for gays and lesbians. After an initial period of taking part in the usual institutional discussions, starting in the late 1970s, this Church has moved on to relating the spiritual meaning of gays and lesbians coming out and forming same-sex unions to Christian tradition as interpreted from an American, Anglican perspective.

The Episcopal theological document entitled “Faith, Hope and Love: Theological Resources for the Blessing of Same-Sex Relationships,”⁷ is the latest in a series of study documents about same-sex couples and the blessing of their unions.⁸ It goes further than any other in queerly inhabiting the heart of Christian tradition in a way that echoes what queer Bible readings set out to effect. “Faith, Hope and Love” was drafted in response to a resolution by the 2009 General Convention of the Episcopal Church which called on the Standing Committee on Liturgy and Music (SCLM) to develop resources for the blessing of same-sex unions. The preface defines the work of SCLM as an invitation to “the wider Church to reflect with us on how God is working today in the committed relationships of same-sex couples” (Faith, Hope and Love, 2012, p. 13). In the same way as queer Bible commentaries try to uncover how the stories of queer lives meet Bible stories (and through them,

⁶ Several books with this kind of title are good illustrations of this kind of debate: on the liberal side, Daniel A. Helminiak’s *What Does the Bible Really Say about Homosexuality* (San Francisco, CA: Alamo Square Press, 1994) and on the conservative side, Kevin De Young’s *What Does the Bible Really Teach about Homosexuality* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2015).

⁷ Hereafter referred to as “Faith, Hope and Love”.

⁸ “The Blessing of Same-Sex Relationships,” in Reports of the Standing Liturgical Commission with the Theology Committee of the House of Bishops to the 72nd General Convention (1997 *Blue Book*, 285-300); “Theological Aspects of Committed Relationships of Same-Sex Couples,” in Report of the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music to the 73rd General Convention (2000 *Blue Book*, 205-232); “The Gift of Sexuality: A Theological Perspective,” A Report of the Theology Committee to the House of Bishops of the Episcopal Church, March 2003 (2003 *General Convention Journal*, 780-788, http://episcopalarchives.org/webdav/GCminutes/Journal_2003/2003gcjournal-index2.pdf). The latter study is much broader than the blessing of same-sex unions but includes this topic. The Blue Books or reports to General Convention are available on the website of the Archives of the Episcopal Church http://www.episcopalarchives.org/e-archives/gc_reports/.

if we follow Alison, the story told by God⁹) in order to open new paths on which queer readers may deepen the meaning of their religious vocation, SCLM proposed to uncover how the experience of same-sex couples meet Christian practice and how both can be interpreted theologically, taking the whole Church further in the understanding of its mission and vocation. The title of the publication gathering the SCLM resources for the blessing of same-sex unions is telling: *I Will Bless You and You Will Be a Blessing*. The life-giving blessing and recognition given by the Church to same-sex couples should give rise to their being life-giving for others, thereby affirming not just their gay or lesbian identities but, more importantly from a religious point of view, the significance of their contribution to the mission of the Church which is “participating in God’s reconciling work in the world” (Faith, Hope and Love, 2012, p. 17).

“Faith, Hope and Love” considers same-sex partners as covenanted households, together with married couples and monastic communities. Speaking of same-sex couples as covenanted households enables SCLM to avoid considering the question of whether committed same-sex relationships should be seen as marriages. They sidestep the habitual discussion about whether the absence of the opposite gender in the couple does or does not rule out the possibility of an analogy with marriage. Rather the document insists on the variety of forms that Christian households have taken in church history (Faith, Hope and Love, 2012, p. 40-42) and defines the core nature of the covenant as giving “ourselves over to another in faithful relation” (Faith, Hope and Love, 2012, p. 49). This gender-neutral nature of covenant is placed within the framework of “God’s own declaration of the goodness of creation” (Faith, Hope and Love, 2012, p. 34). God’s sustaining and saving love for his creation is celebrated by the Church in Baptism and Eucharist, the “sacraments of God’s covenant of creating, redeeming and sustaining love ... The sacramental life of the Church strengthens us to give ourselves and to receive others as we contribute to the coming of Christ’s realm ‘on earth as it is in heaven’” (Faith, Hope and Love, 2012, p. 36). Household covenants are therefore reflections and embodiments of the Covenant between God and the Church. Households are places where human beings find themselves in God by giving their lives to another.

By relating covenanted relationships to the whole theological narrative of creation and redemption, reenacted in the sacramental life of the Church, “Faith, Hope and Love” gives meaning to these relationships, independently

⁹ Although this way of linking the Bible narrative to the story told by God is peculiar to Alison, several queer Bible commentators relate Bible stories to what God is doing in the life stories of gays and lesbians and more generally in the world.

of the presence or absence of gender complementarity or of procreation, so often invoked in conservative discourse. Connectedness, companionship and self-offering become the marks of the Christian vocation which is lived out in the many different embodiments of Covenant, including same-sex unions.

This theological view of same-sex relationships affirms their being part of the goodness of creation and as such capable of being blessed to become blessings in their turn. God's creation and renewal are thereby declared as much part of gay and lesbian life as of heterosexual life. Like James Alison's Jonah walking up the beach, same-sex couples who are thus affirmed and blessed can become God's messengers of grace to the Ninivehs of their times.

However, whenever "Faith, Hope and Love" refers to the Bible to speak specifically of gay and lesbian unions, the old, apologetic use of Scripture resurfaces (Faith, Hope and Love, 2012, p. 46-48). This is understandable in a denominational document that must also address conservative arguments against the inclusion of same-sex couples in the life of the Church. But arguably this need not exclude gay-affirmative readings, which might have given some scriptural language to those passages in which the authors refer to what God is doing in the lives of same-sex couples¹⁰. The identification that a series of queer authors have made between biblical stories such as the coming out of Egypt and the gay and lesbian story of trusting God on the journey of coming out of a death-giving closet towards new life¹¹ would not have been out of place in a chapter about biblical interpretation within a theological document that seeks to answer the question of what the Church would be blessing if it blessed same-sex couples. But gay and lesbian lives are not talked about in biblical language. This seems to indicate how isolated queer readings of the Bible still are from denominational conversations on homosexuality. No matter how well known they may be to conversation participants, they do not make their way in. The other major recent Episcopal document on homosexuality, *To Set our Hope on Christ*, which tackled the issue of the ordination of gays and lesbians in committed same-sex relationships, was not any different in that respect (*To Set our Hope on Christ*, 2005, p. 17-23).

¹⁰ The end of chapter 4, for example, on biblical interpretation mentions the importance of "listen[ing] to the narratives of sanctification and holiness within the relationships of same-sex couples and to discern and testify to the work of God in their lives" but does not say that these narratives may be told in biblical language (Faith, Hope and Love, 2012, p. 57).

¹¹ See Mona West's reading of Exodus: "when queers risk the passage out of the closet, risk trusting in God, a new self is discovered that is able to enter in relationship with a God who was thought to regard queers as an "abomination" (WEST, 2000, p. 75).

The necessity not to depart from a common theological language with conservatives in a denomination where not all agree on the full inclusion of gays and lesbians may make one shy of using the often very personal queer readings of the Bible, usually written in the first person by queer authors. The strong queer subjectivity is unacceptable to those who consider that it indicates *eisegesis* rather than proper *exegesis*. Of course, what queer Bible commentaries are simply pointing out by exhibiting their subjectivity, their embodiedness and the commentator's agenda is that no text exists independently from what the reader brings to it:

our very notion of “Bible,” our very sense of “Bible” as a material product with a fixed form and meaning is itself a performative effect of our engagement with particular texts and our engagement in particular interpretive practices (including but not limited to those practices most widely accepted in biblical scholarship) in very specific contexts. Such an argument raises critical questions about the extent to which a single, stable “Bible”, preexists our interactions with diverse manuscripts, texts, translations, hermeneutical assumptions, scholarly and other collective traditions, strategies (implicit or explicit) for reading, contexts for teaching, or institutions of publishing. “Bible” may not be a foundation upon which interpretation takes place but rather a product of the very practices that are assumed to rest upon that foundation. (HORNSBY and STONE, 2011, p. x)

By unsettling the very notion of what the Bible is and its stability, queer Bible commentaries may be difficult to use in denominational conversations, because they might give the impression that the very possibility of abiding by the authority of Scripture is called into question.

The difficulty may also derive from the often communitarian spirit of queer writing: they usually posit their readership of choice as the LGBT community,¹² whereas a denominational document must be addressed to all members of the denomination. And yet, as Alison's writings sufficiently indicate the queer inhabiting of the Bible can easily be related to the very theological themes that a denominational document like “Faith, Hope and Love” works with.

¹² An example is of this communitarian approach is *Gifted by Otherness*, written by two Episcopal priests, which mixes theological, personal and biblical reflections (including a fascinating queer reading of Exodus by Ritley in chapter 10) (COUNTRYMAN and RITLEY, 2001).

3. Liturgical practice as the way towards the union of biblical and theological queer discourse?

The sense of a fragmentary, somewhat disconnected gay and lesbian Christian discourse remains. Given the central importance of liturgy in Anglicanism, connecting Bible stories to the narrative of gay and lesbian lives in the Episcopal Church may come from liturgical practice. When the 2015 General Convention of the Episcopal Church approved the gender-neutral definition of marriage, it also authorized for trial use two different marriage rites to be used indifferently for same-sex and opposite-sex couples: one is a gender-neutral version of the marriage service in the 1979 Book of Common Prayer (the current standard liturgy of the Episcopal Church) and the other is a new liturgy originally drafted with same-sex couples in mind¹³ and revised to be made available to all couples.

The recommended Bible readings in the first rite are almost the same as in the 1979 Book of Common Prayer; only those passages or verses that were deemed too gender-specific were taken off the list.¹⁴ But some of the passages that have been common features of Episcopal weddings for nearly forty years may have a queerer ring when they are read in the celebration of a same-sex wedding. For example, the public reading of Ephesians 3:14-19¹⁵ may give the families founded by same-sex couples some starting point to biblically connect themselves to God.

More interestingly, the second, new liturgy for marriage gives an almost completely new list of possible readings, some of which have the potential to empower gay and lesbian couples to fuse their stories with the biblical narrative. The list includes 2 Cor 5:17-21, a most unusual reading for weddings, at least in Anglicanism. This passage was used in the theological document as an important biblical reference to develop a vision of the eschatological vocation of covenanted relationships in general as “proclaimers and instruments for the new creation that God is bringing about” (Faith, Hope and Love, 2012,

¹³ It was adopted by the 2012 General Convention as a provisional liturgy of blessing of same-sex “unions”, the word marriage being intentionally left out.

¹⁴ Genesis 2:4-9, 15-24 and Mark 10:6-9, 13-16 about the man and the woman becoming one flesh. The verses from Ephesians about husbands loving their wives and wives being obedient to their husbands was also seen as inappropriate and the passage recommended in the Book of Common Prayer was truncated to Ephesians 5:1-2 (instead of 5:1-2, 21-33).

¹⁵ “I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love...” (New Revised Standard Version. All quotes from the Bible follow the NRSV).

p. 23).¹⁶ As a public reading in the marriage service, the verse may acquire a performative function: it not only declares the marriage to be part and parcel of God's mission of salvation and renewal, but it may also become a biblical celebration of the createdness of a same-sex couple, much in the way in which James Alison describes the rising to new life of his gay Jonah.

The list also includes passages that were never mentioned in "Faith, Hope and Love." On top of various passages about loving God and neighbour,¹⁷ unsurprisingly, the story of Ruth and Naomi and of David and Jonathan are included, thus canonizing the long-standing queer reading of these texts.¹⁸ But more unexpected texts are also recommended. Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 on the value of companionship¹⁹ is easily queered and adapted to the story of a same-sex couple since the two lying together, as has often been remarked, are two people of the same sex.²⁰ More interesting, however, is the inclusion in the list of the eschatological vision of a renewed world at peace with itself in Micah 4:1-4.²¹ The end of war and enmity and of fear can be heard by a same-sex couple as, among other things, the promise of a homophobia-free world of which their blessing in marriage is a token. As with 2 Corinthians 5:17-21, reading such a passage in the celebration of a

¹⁶ This quote is from the first chapter which starts with a quote from 2 Cor 5:17-19.

¹⁷ Mark 12:28-34; Luke 6:32-38; John 17:1-2, 18-26; Romans 12:9-18; Galatians 5:14, 22-26. These passages, however, differ from traditional Episcopal marriage readings in that, in line with one major theme of "Faith, Hope and Love" they serve to evoke the missionary vocation of a Christian marriage. Most of them insist less on the love which the two spouses should have for one another as on their mission as a Christian couple to love all their human brothers and sisters and become agents of renewal in the world.

¹⁸ One should note that the 2007 marriage service of the Scottish Episcopal Church (as indeed *A New Zealand Prayer Book*) does list the story of Ruth and Naomi as one possible reading. The Scottish liturgy even has a collect that reads: "O God, whom to follow is to risk our whole lives: as Ruth and Naomi loved and held to one another, abandoning the ways of the past, so may N. and N. not be divided, but travel together into that strange land where you will lead us." This collect is all the more remarkable that the Scottish rite is not (yet) open to same-sex couples. Reference to the story of David and Jonathan, however, is to my knowledge unprecedented in an Anglican marriage service.

¹⁹ This text is one of the possible readings in the 2007 marriage liturgy of the Scottish Episcopal Church and of Marriage Service 2 of the 2004 Irish Book of Common Prayer.

²⁰ "Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help. Again, if two lie together, they keep warm; but how can one keep warm alone? And though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one. A threefold cord is not quickly broken." The previous verse, Eccl. 4:8, mentions sons and brothers.

²¹ The end of the passage reads as follows: "they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken." To my knowledge no other Anglican liturgy lists this text as a possible marriage service reading.

same-sex marriage may serve to include in the grand biblical narrative of salvation and renewal the progress of the social inclusion of gays and lesbians in contemporary Western society.

Finally 1 John 3:18-24, a possible reading in the marriage service of *Common Worship* (the latest prayer book of the Church of England) and of the 2007 Scottish Episcopal liturgy, is suggested in the new inclusive marriage rite: “Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.” This text may take some special significance for same-sex couples. Christian gays and lesbians who have come out of a closet in which their hearts condemned them because of their same-sex desire may hear the proclamation of the power of love — including their own love as a couple —, testifying to the fact that they are being held in God’s truth. Reading this text in a same-sex wedding is a powerful way of telling a gay and lesbian story in biblical terms and of protecting its sacredness from the attacks of anti-gay discourse claiming a monopoly on the Bible.

In spite of the continuance of the institutional debate about “what the Bible really says about homosexuality” — a consequence of continuing conservative attacks on Anglican provinces like the Episcopal Church that seek to more fully include gays and lesbians into their lives — the queer use of Christian theology in the latest Episcopalian discussions, leading to the authorisation of inclusive marriage rites, signals the possibility of a coming together of Episcopalian church life and a queer approach to the Bible. This possibility and its liturgical expression, however, will not make it easier for the Anglican Communion to work its way towards reconciliation between provinces like Nigeria and Uganda and the Episcopal Church. As public celebrations of same-sex unions multiply and an increasing number of Episcopalians, both gay and straight, come to hear Bible stories as including the lives of gays and lesbians, the discussion about “what the Bible really says” — the only discussion in which Anglican conservatives are so far willing to be engaged — will appear more and more irrelevant and disconnected from people’s experience of the Bible. The challenge for the Anglican Communion will be to encourage Anglicans on both sides of the divide to find ways of retaining the sense of still being one community of Bible interpreters.

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