

**We Drink From Our Own Wells:  
the Development of a Gay and Lesbian Theology and Spirituality (2016)**

**by Rev'd Fr Philip John Bewley**

**A discussion paper given at St Bartholomew's Anglican Church, Burnley, Victoria, Australia.**

This short paper serves as a short presentation of the history and development of what I call 'Gay and Lesbian Theology and Spirituality' and the prophetic role it can play in the modern church.

The Gay Liberation Movement saw its beginnings in the early 1970s when Gay and Lesbian people claimed the right to define themselves under their own terms, making equal claims under the law. That struggle still exists today with the fight for marriage equality, the right to make equal claims to the institution of marriage under the law.

This social movement has forced (and is still forcing) the churches, in varying degrees, to face the whole issue of homosexuality and same-sex relationships. What began to emerge was a discourse known as Gay Liberation Theology. This is a movement which has developed from the 'ground up' and not from the 'top down.' Gay theologians managed to take a dominant Christian discourse which rendered them sinful, sick and even harmful to the common good, and transformed it into a theology and spirituality which argued that a person's sexuality provided the point of contact between God and themselves.

In a post Freudian world, we are conditioned to believe that "everything is sex, at least to some extent anyway - even if sex is not everything." Those who identify with being gay or lesbian, are in a large part, acknowledging that their sexual identity is a major part of who they are as a person, and that it penetrates and informs their whole personality. As Françoise Susset (a Canadian Clinical Psychologist) has put it: 'Our sexuality is an indivisible aspect of our humanity. To ask us, regardless of our sexual orientation, to deny and reject our sexuality - who we fantasize about, who we desire, who we fall in love with, who we love - is to ask us to split ourselves away from the most fundamental part of our being, the place which is at the centre of our humanity, from which all longing, desire, passion and creativity emerges.' Therefore, I think it is safe to say, that an openly gay Christian would say that their sexuality affects the way they pray, the way they turn to God, and the way they live in the Spirit.

Simon Bailey (a Church of England priest who died of an AIDS related illness in 1995) brought this to the attention of the LGBT community in his essay on Gay Spirituality published in 1998. He says: 'I first began to think about all this when I was introduced to the work people have begun to do on the spirituality of women... Women can pray differently, pray outside the straitjacket of conventional spirituality, pray according to themselves: and it occurred to me to ask, could this apply to gay people too? Could they also be outside the convention, different? There seems to me to be many parallels between the women's movement and the gay one; the main difference being the gay one is a few hundred years behind the women's one.' And as Bailey has also pointed out: 'St Bernard of Clairvaux said: 'Everyone has to drink from his own well.' ...We have to turn to *this* well in us and search its depths: there is not in any case any other way of praying than drinking from your own well - so it is this or no real praying.' Therefore, it is safe to say, that Gay Theology and Spirituality speaks from one's own experience and from the depths of one's own being.

Gay Christian experience, by its history and very nature, exists on the edge of the Church. It is therefore largely seen as at one with other oppressed groups within society and within the Church - with Jews, the poor, the handicapped, black people, and women. It has its historical roots within Liberation theologies, which emerged in the 1960s through the Latin Church in South America (where the voice of the poor within those churches was beginning to be heard) and Black Liberation theologies from the United States, inspired by the Civil Rights Movement.

Interestingly, the quotation of St Bernard became the title of a pioneering book on Liberation theology by Gustavo Gutierrez, *We drink from our own wells*. This work was concerned with the growing liberation theology and spirituality emerging from the Latin American Church. It was about a praying people living in oppression. Such people saw within their own situation a solidarity of spirit, a strong sense of common humanity and common prayer. This Liberation theology and spirituality was seen as a gift to the whole church, even if it was, at that time, unwilling to receive it. Many parallels can be drawn today by many sections of the Christian Church unwilling to except the gift of Gay Theology and Spirituality to the wider Christian Community.

One aspect of living on the margins of the Church is a sense of self-awareness and self-knowledge not found to the same degree within mainstream Christianity. This grows out of an awareness of being different, and leads in many gay people to search into the depths of their souls and reflect.

One thing this self-awareness seems to mean for many gay people is a deeper, stronger consciousness of the body. Here, Gay Theology and Spirituality can find parallels within Women's spirituality. Our bodies pray too, not just our so-called souls, and in an incarnational theology, the body and the spirit cannot be separated. This awareness of the body therefore leads to a sense of solidarity with all creation. Gay Theology and Spirituality therefore avoids an 'other worldly' form of spirituality which risks dualism between sexual experience and the life of prayer and worship. And people like Adrian Thatcher (an English Theologian) have made these thought-provoking analogies: 'It is surely obvious to anyone who has received the gift of their lover's body in love-making and the gift of Christ's body in the Eucharist that there are many unexplored parallels between these two life-sustaining, life-enhancing, life-creating activities.'

Chris Glazer (an American Gay Theologian) has also written a number of books exploring such themes, urging the church to explore the possibility of sexuality as a means of experiencing God, as another form of sacrament. In his book *Coming out as Sacrament*, he writes: 'From the majority heterosexual perspective, it is better to scapegoat, sacrifice and excommunicate those of us who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered than for heterosexuals to confront their own alienation from their bodies and their sexuality, their own sexual infidelities and distortions, their own lack of spiritual-sexual integrity and certain gender indemnity, their own ignorance and injustice – in short, their own inability to recognise the sacramental nature of the body and of sexuality.'

The religiosity of gay people is also explored by Rollan McCleary (a Queensland scholar) in his book 'A Special Illumination.' He believes that many gay people, especially gay men: 'have an inbuilt spiritual potential which relates them more than others to religion at the esoteric, mystical or ecstatic levels – which is to say at the margins. If prophets need to be people at the margins, then gays are... prophets, at least potentially.'

This is something I have often thought about myself. Which begs the question, why have many priests and religious over the centuries been obviously 'gay' and why do gay people offer themselves for ordination in the various churches?

So, as a theological discipline, Gay Theology and Spirituality, has, I believe, an on-going prophetic role in the life of the modern church. We are here to remind the church that one's sexuality is a means of experiencing God, and until heterosexuals confront their own alienation from their bodies and sexuality, their own spiritual-sexual identity, it is next to impossible to have a discussion about same-sex relationships, when in essence, the church still hasn't come to terms with the sexual revolution of the 1960s and its response to it. As long as 'straight sex' is sold to us as some kind of 'necessary sin,' how can 'gay sex' ever be considered anything other than an 'unnecessary sin?'

Gay Theologians have the ability to remind us that any theology of sex must take as its starting-point the radical, the mysterious, and even scandalous nature of the incarnation - God took flesh, and in that flesh, God took a sexuality. The fact that the Divine immersed itself in flesh, and in that process immersed itself in a sexuality, and thus flesh and sexuality is now Divine, is surely something we Christians must rejoice and give thanks for.

Some questions for discussion:

How do we think our sexual orientation informs our spiritual life?

What do we make of St Bernard's quote: 'everyone has to drink from his own well'?

What gift can LGBT people make to the life of the wider church?

In what way can we say that Gay Theology and Spirituality is prophetic?