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QUEER CHRISTIAN CONFESSIONS: SPIRITUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHIES OF GAY CHRISTIANS

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Daryl White and O. Kendall White, Jr.

This paper considers autobiographical writings of six gay Christians, in which they chronicle their spiritual journeys. Most published literature on Christian themes by lesbian and gay authors has focused, on the one hand, on theological and hermeneutical arguments against use of the scriptural canon to denounce homosexuality, and, on the other hand, on devotional writings intended to nurture lesbian and gay Christian spirituality. Strictly autobiographical writings constitute a much smaller, third category. We explore the book-length writings of six gay Christians by describing the stories as narratives, by identifying commonalities, and by concluding with observations and assessments concerning their function. Although they share some features with other and earlier forms of Christian narrative literature, such as the slave narrative and the conversion testimony, gay spiritual autobiographies chronicle and are defined by the difficulties inherent in reconciling Christian and gay identities.

KEYWORDS autobiography; coming out; Christian denominationalism; gay activism; queer/LGBT

I can remember the day
When someone first told me
What I felt in my heart should be gone.
I remember the embarrassment,
The grief and the wondering
As I questioned why God made me wrong.

I wonder if they know what they stole from me
How they robbed me of the joy of my youth.

They forced me to wander in a dark place
Full of pain that could not be soothed.

I finally found my way back to life
As I learned what it means to be gay.
Whenever I feel those chains on my soul
I break them and throw them away. ('These Chains,' Adams 1996,216)

Our fundamental goal in this article is to understand the role of spiritual autobiographies in the struggles of lesbian and gay Christians to affirm their own spirituality as they strive to achieve full participation in their churches. We consider seven books, published between 1972 and 1996, by six gay men whose narratives chronicle religious struggles in the following very different Christian traditions: Baptist, Episcopal, Evangelical, Mormon, Pentecostal, and Presbyterian. Happily, the authors describe a diversity of denominational, regional, generational and social class experiences. Unfortunately, this diversity is diminished by the fact that all are gay men, and that all, except for the Mormon, who is Mexican American, are white. Revealing ongoing processes of reconciliation, authentication and celebration, these autobiographies narrate transformations and origins, both personal and denominational, and help us to comprehend the ambivalences, dilemmas, ironies, pains and triumphs surrounding spiritual struggles to unite religious and sexual identities. Sadly, there seem to be only a handful of such book-length autobiographies.

On the other hand, there is a wide range of literature by gay and lesbian activists and their allies on the general topic of homosexuality and Christianity. These can be broadly lumped into a few categories. Some books deal with the Bible, focusing on interpretations of the handful of verses that opponents of homosexuality regularly use as their authoritative arsenal. This trend began in the mid-1980s, when New Testament scholar Robin Scroggs published *The New Testament and Homosexuality: Contextual Background for Contemporary Debate* (1983) and John J. McNeill, a Catholic theologian, published *The Church and the Homosexual* (1985) with the *imprimi potest* of his Jesuit provincial superior. Daniel Helminiak's *What the Bible Really Says About Homosexuality* (1994) is by far the most popular, being a perennial bestseller in lesbian and gay bookstores. Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong's *Living in Sin?: A Bishop Rethinks Human Sexuality* (1988) and *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism* (1991), along with Harvard professor and chaplain Peter J. Gomes' *The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart* (1996) have reached a far wider readership; however, both authors address homosexuality along with a wide range of other topics.

Alongside books on Biblical interpretation is an increasing number of volumes in which authors develop theologies specifically derived from and applicable to lesbian and gay life. Examples include Maury Johnson's *Gays Under Grace* (1983), Sylvia Pennington's *Good News for Modern Gays* (1985), and Chris Glaser's *Coming Out as Sacrament* (1988a). A quite new and growing literature

examines topics relevant to lesbian and gay religious life in particular churches, denominations, or regions. Ranging from journalism to social science and often blurring the distinction are Bruce Bawer's *Stealing Jesus: How Fundamentalism Betrays Christianity* (1988), Leanne McCall Tigert's *Coming Out While Staying In* (1996) about struggles in the United Church of Christ, and Angela R. Wilson's *Below the Belt: Sexuality, Religion and the American South* (2000), a social-science-lite travel through the South written by a lesbian political scientist who grew up in Texas.

Academic histories that discuss contemporary homosexuality and religious life include John Howard's *Men Like That* (1999)—a detailed history of gay male life in Mississippi—and Michael Quinn's *Same-Sex Dynamics Among Nineteenth Century Americans: A Mormon Example* (1996)—a historical description that focuses on Mormons and Salt Lake City. John Boswell's groundbreaking study, *Christianity, Social Intolerance, and Homosexuality* (1980), explored homosexuality and Christianity from the first century to the Renaissance. Although much of the aforementioned literature is written in a personal voice or shifts between third-person and first-person narratives, in this article we examine solely book-length, purely autobiographical narratives that we choose to call 'gay spiritual autobiographies.'

We selected autobiographies, rather than reviewing all of the aforementioned literature, because they provide detailed, passionate accounts of struggles to reconcile religious and sexual identities—struggles the authors felt compelled to publish. As such, they are not narrowly theological, or historical, or sociological commentaries; as life narratives they weave all of these aspects together, and their integration is the underlying subject of this essay. Of course, life-changing experiences are grist for the narrative mill. As personal accounts of gay life in the churches, published gay spiritual autobiographies often are also the stories of key players in denominational struggles and rather well-known personalities in the rather not-well-known—indeed, often closeted—world of lesbian and gay Christianity. For gay and lesbian Christians typically find themselves between a rock and a hard place: on one side, they are scattered among denominations that are either politely inhospitable or even rudely so; yet on another side, they find themselves in sexual communities that, if not downright anti-religious, are at least hostile toward Christianity. In order to explore these dynamics, we begin with brief synopses of these autobiographies, presenting them in the order of their publication. Then we consider them as a genre by describing the stories as narratives, by identifying commonalities, and by concluding with observations and assessments concerning their possible function in queer communities.

Synopses of the Narratives

Troy Perry

Perhaps the first gay Christian autobiography was *The Lord is My Shepherd*

and He Knows I'm Gay by Reverend Troy D. Perry ([1972] 1997), founder of the Metropolitan Community Church. In this book Perry narrates his boyhood in Tallahassee, Florida and southern Georgia as well as his early religious and sexual experiences; his call to ministry in the Church of God and his subsequent expulsion after being outed by a gay lover; his divorce; his military service; and his eventual move to Los Angeles, where he came out and founded his ministry to the gay Christian community. Although remaining in print since first coming out and enjoying a twenty-fifth anniversary edition, this book was followed in 1990 by *Don't Be Afraid Anymore: The Story of Reverend Troy Perry and the Metropolitan Community Churches*—a book that is twice as long, and much better written (Perry 1990). This volume covers much of the same narrative as Perry's earlier autobiography, but focuses much more on the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) and, most significantly, pays much more attention to the role of women in the formation and current make-up of the denomination. Although the second book is primarily a history of the church, not of its founding pastor, Perry's role in the narrative remains central.

Malcolm Boyd

With the publication of *Take off the Masks* in 1978, Malcolm Boyd, a well-known Episcopal priest, social critic, political activist, and author of over two dozen books, came out as a gay man. In the 1960s Boyd had pioneered the entry of a new generation in progressive Christian action with his book of prayers, *Are You Running With Me Jesus?* At a time when 'generation gap' was a new phrase, Boyd was presented by the mainstream press as a young, radical priest who was breaking high-church decorum with his 'armpit theology,' expressing religious belief in the language of the younger generation and embodying socially progressive Christian values. He was making traditional religion relevant to a new generation. In *Take off the Masks*, Boyd (1978 [1993]) describes his life of earnest, enthusiastic attention to social justice—including college ministry, anti-Vietnam War activism, inner-city ministry in Indianapolis, and participation in the civil rights marches in the South. Although committed to fighting against oppression, he suppressed his own homosexuality. He planned on coming out publicly in a memoir, but imagined it would be published posthumously. Nevertheless, once out, he involved himself fully in gay rights political activism, writing several more books on gay issues and actively participating in the Episcopal Church's AIDS ministry (Boyd 1987).

Antonio Feliz

In 1988 Antonio Feliz published *Out of the Bishop's Closet*, a narrative of two comings out: coming out as a gay man and coming out of the Mormon Church. Prior to coming out, Feliz appeared to be living the ideal Mormon life. He served a mission, married a devout Mormon woman while at Brigham Young

University and, with his devoted wife, had four children. Beginning his career as the leader of a Spanish-speaking congregation in Los Angeles, Feliz ascended the Mormon hierarchy, eventually gaining employment in the church welfare program in Salt Lake City and becoming bishop of a local congregation. His work put him in contact with the top leadership of the church: the apostles and the prophet. But this ideal life had not-so-ideal undercurrents. As an insider, he became aware of abuses of religious authority. Eventually no longer able to suppress his attractions for men he met at work and church, Feliz came out and was excommunicated, divorced, and separated from his children. In the latter part of the narrative, he chronicles his efforts to help organise chapters of Affirmation, the lesbian and gay Mormon organisation, and his continuing struggle among its members to construct loving, affirming social relationships within the context of a Mormonism they attempt to reconstruct.

Chris Glaser

Chris Glaser's *Uncommon Calling* (1988b) is by far the most comprehensive of these gay Christian autobiographies, intertwining a history of gay and lesbian activism in a Presbyterian denomination, an articulate theology, and a very personal narrative. Glaser is not a celebrity or a public figure and does not tell the story of a new church; instead, he describes in some detail the struggles around the status of homosexuality and lesbian and gay members in a well-known mainline Protestant denomination. Within this denominational story Glaser intertwines the story of his own efforts to become ordained in his southern California congregation. At a young age, Glaser knew both that he was gay and that he was called to ministry. His narrative describes the ways in which he has performed the compatibility of these two identities. He came out to his family while in college, left the Baptist church of his upbringing, and joined a more hospitable Presbyterian church. In seminary at Yale he organised a ministry to lesbian and gay seminarians, continued his work in the campus Christian ministry at the University of Pennsylvania, and served for a decade in the Lazarus Project, begun by Presbyterians in West Hollywood. Unlike the other narratives considered here, Glaser's story is not about the closet. Being out to both family and church, he struggles with homophobia, a set of prejudices that memoirs of the previous decade had described but had not named.

Mel White

We now move to the 1990s. By the beginning of this decade, public struggles for gay rights had evoked political backlash. Coupled with abortion, gay issues were central in the formation and growth of the Christian Right. Jerry Falwell and the Moral Majority became iconic representations of this new, religiously political position. In 1995 Mel White published *Stranger at the Gate*, in

which he chronicled his conservative evangelical upbringing in California, his early years at a Christian college, his experiences at Fuller Seminary in Los Angeles, his heterosexual marriage, and a very successful career in Christian broadcasting and public relations that culminated in ghost writing for Jerry Falwell (White 1995). His descriptions of tortured struggles with his homosexuality make for painful reading as he endures cycles of 'sin' and repentance. He successfully repressed his sexual needs, only to have them reappear and be successfully forced away again. Meanwhile, his career contributed to the fundamentalist machinery of repression. When White finally came out, he joined the MCC ministry for a time. Eventually he founded Soulforce, an activist organisation with media savvy that employs traditional techniques of public protest and civil disobedience to struggle for full lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender inclusion in Christianity.

Marc Adams

We end this section with a summary of Marc Adams' book, *The Preacher's Son*, which was published in 1996. This memoir is very different from the others here described and from others of which we are aware. It is not the story of a well-known founder, minister, writer, or activist, or even (like Feliz) of someone who was in the right place at the right time. It is a simply-told story of one person's struggle to find love. Not only does Adams give us a well-told story of triumph and rejection, he lets us see a religious world of which most are unaware. Adams grew up in a very conservative and sectarian Baptist community in rural Pennsylvania, and was educated in a small Christian school and at Jerry Falwell's Liberty College, where he fell in love with another man. Reading like a novel, *The Preacher's Son* describes closeted gay life at this conservative Baptist college, the efforts of the administration to suppress homosexuality, and the struggles of gay and lesbian students to survive. With only a semester to go, Adams quit Liberty and was reunited with his freshman-year lover, with whom he moved to Los Angeles. Accompanying this story line is one that relates Adams' relations with his parents and siblings. The book ends as his family, one by one, rejects him. The reader turns the last page to find a poem, 'These Chains,' which was quoted at the beginning of this paper.

There is no clear agenda in this book beyond the sharing of experience, and the authority of the text is the narrator's experience itself. However, the author and his companion, Todd Tuttle, have gone on to found Heartstrong, Inc.: in their own words, 'a non-sectarian outreach established to provide educational resources, compassion and understanding to GLBT and allied persons adversely affected by the influence of conservative religious educational institutions.' The website identifies it as 'the place for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered students from religious schools' (www.heartstrong.org). Together, they authored *Do's and Don'ts of Dealing with the Religious Right* (Adams and Tuttle 2000).

Discussion

Theological Innovation

A central part of these autobiographies is the presentation of a theology: sometimes elaborated, sometimes nascent, and sometimes present but embedded. Although Adams does not focus on the transformation of his theological understandings and only mentions that he finds in the Liberty College library the means for rethinking Biblical literalism, he ends his book with a powerful poem that simply and clearly affirms that abuse steals and constricts, but its chains can be broken and cast off. Likewise, Feliz eventually reinterprets the stream of dilemmas and epiphanies with which he tells his story as Zen koans, in a new and very personal religious understanding he labels 'Zen Mormonism.'

All of these writers are strengthened by exegetical work that places apparent scriptural condemnations of homosexuality in a different light. Of all the authors, Glaser is by far the most theologically productive. Throughout his autobiographies and in other essentially theological writings, Glaser uses Biblical story and metaphor to express himself; Lazarus' tomb becomes the generic gay closet, and coming out acquires the spiritual status of a sacrament through which truth, love, and grace become revealed. All of the narratives deal with relationships of self to family, church, friends, lovers, and God, and with the transformation of these relationships from confining and abusive to loving and healthful ones. Lonely self-hate is transcended by loving embrace, and painful rejection is replaced by graceful assurance.

Coming Out

For queer folk who wish to participate in their religious communities more fully, visibility is often a first step. Central to this effort is the task of constructing a public visibility that replaces or at least outshines the negative representations of homosexuality extant in the faith community and in society at large. Achieving visibility is a personal struggle as well as a public process. In each of these narratives, the author presents a three-fold coming out process: coming out to oneself, coming out to God, and coming out to one's religious community. In the literature in which many lesbian and gay Christians describe their spiritual journeys, coming out is more a course than a literary trope; it is a gay way of being born again. All of the aforementioned autobiographies describe personal resolutions of the same menacing dilemma: how to know oneself sexually, to know oneself spiritually and to combine these two in a healing unity. Each takes from this experience a mission to continue the struggle for transformations in his life and in his religious community.

One's religious roots can easily run as deep as the roots of one's sexuality. The religious and the sexual can grow around each other, in tension and in consonance, drawing as they grow from all that is around them. They can form unevenly and often parasitically, one maturing at the expense of the other, one

forming by deforming the other. Whether in hostile or nurturing surroundings, the two must often grow in relation to each other. Whether the two are mutually creative and healthy or mutually destructive and unhealthy, coming out and coming to terms matters. For those whose religious and sexual lives are so intertwined, coming out is often inherently ambivalent. Yet one does not simply come out *from*—one also comes out *into*. Coming-out discourse often emphasises the state from which one emerges and the positive consequences for the individual and society of newly achieved visibility. Coming out is never abstract; rather, it is always a coming out of, into, and in the midst of concrete social formations—groups, situations, networks, congregations and denominations. Consequently, the experience can be both personally transformative and socially integrative. The latter may involve integration into a religious-gay subculture (such as Feliz's work with Affirmation among Mormons and Glaser's work with the Lazarus Project among Presbyterians), where actively religious lesbian and gay members seek to claim their place within their respective denominations or a broader Christian tradition. In gay Christian autobiographies, the distinguishing features of each narrator's denominational home function as much more than context, color or narrative background. Denominational features, including structure and polity, affect the strategies that lesbian and gay Christians can employ in legitimating their claims to the tradition.

Denominational Context

Christian denominationalism is in many respects the result of centuries of splits, expulsions, branches, mergings, and fresh starts following in the wake of a long string of doctrinal wars. Indeed, conflicts over the moral nature of homosexuality and the status of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered and transsexual members are today endemic in Christian organisations. In their doctrines, creeds, confessions and theologies, in their ritual expressions, in their proscriptions and prescriptions, and in their organisational polities, these religious institutions are heirs to traditions in which sexuality—particularly the social relationships of sex—have posed a chronic threat. The pleasures of sex have been especially problematic for Christian theologians, who have struggled over the centuries to reconcile the necessities of procreation with the perceived dangers of eroticism. In these autobiographies, two dimensions of denominationalism play prominent roles: the authority structure of the denomination and its degree of sectarian isolation. Often referred to as polity, the authority structure of a denomination consists of its social organisation, governing principles, and distribution of power. Sectarianism refers to the religious body's degree of isolation—both from other denominations and from public, secular life. Conversely, non-sectarianism implies that the religious body is at home in the broader secular society and its public life.

Because of their sectarian roots, Antonio Feliz, Marc Adams, Troy Perry, and Mel White shared some common experiences as they came to reconcile their

sexuality and their spirituality. Throughout the bulk of his narrative, Feliz struggles with his belief in Mormonism as the only true church, his deep regard for the teachings of Joseph Smith, and his devoted obedience to Mormon priesthood leaders. He could not simply walk away from these traditions. He had experienced too many religious epiphanies to reject Mormonism, and each epiphany—even (perhaps especially) when it seemed to be precipitated by sexual doubts—bound Feliz even more tightly to Mormon authority structures. At first glance his title, *Out of the Bishop's Closet*, sounds rather sensational, but Felix had served as the bishop of several congregations and was professionally employed in the church's social service organisation; coming out for him was also coming out from what began as an overwhelmingly satisfying ecclesiastical life with highly prized career possibilities.

Likewise, Marc Adams grew up in a very conservative, deeply sectarian Baptist family in small-town Pennsylvania. Their community of Baptists was so sectarian and world-rejecting that Jerry Falwell was regarded as a liberal. Adams went to a Christian school too small to have grades and classes; students studied independently, using modules. When he was the equivalent of a high school sophomore, Adams learned about Falwell's founding of a Baptist college, and he discovered a dream. But Adams' matriculation at Liberty College was a struggle financially, theologically, and emotionally. Nonetheless, his independent studies in the Liberty library revealed a way out of fundamentalist literalism. Both Feliz and Adams narrate leaving their institutions, yet both devote themselves to those who struggle within. Feliz works with Affirmation: Gay and Lesbian Mormons, and Adams founded Heartstrong, Inc. with his companion from his Liberty College days.

Both Troy Perry and Mel White share common evangelical roots and life-long commitments to propagating the Christian gospel. Troy Perry experienced a call to minister that was so powerful he could not ignore it even after being thrown out of his Pentecostal ministry twice, from two rival Church of God denominations. When he finally accepted a call to minister to gay people, that call did not come from a denominational body, nor did he seek approval from one. He started an independent church, and what began as a gathering of 12 men and women in his Los Angeles home one October morning in 1968 has become the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches, a predominantly gay/lesbian/bi/trans denomination of over 40,000 members and 300 churches in 18 countries (www.ufmcc.com). Although the MCC is broadly ecumenical, drawing on a wide range of Christian worship practices, it also retains much of the Pentecostal, evangelical roots of its founder and many of its members. Perry's two autobiographies narrate the founding and development of this new denomination. Not satisfied with the MCC's sectarian tendencies, he ends his first book with a call for all churches to open themselves to gay participation so that 'gay churches' will no longer need to exist.

Mel White was raised in an evangelical home and church community, graduated from an evangelical college, and received graduate degrees in minis-

try and in communications. Although White pastored evangelical churches, he worked primarily as a talented and successful Christian filmmaker and writer. As a ghostwriter for many in the Christian political right, including Oliver North and Jerry Falwell, he finally broke with this group and served for a time as Dean of the MCC Dallas cathedral before founding Soulforce, a civil disobedience-based organisation that challenges the homophobia of established Christian denominations through organised protest and demonstrations.

In order for these authors to come out religiously, they had to work their separate ways through the religious authority structures and the sectarian isolation of their denominational homes. Indeed, coming out for each was deeply painful work, as he thought, felt and acted his way out of the confines of authoritarian and sectarian strictures.

On the other hand, Chris Glaser and Malcolm Boyd worked within (relatively) hospitable, nonsectarian denominations whose authority structures allowed for democratic participation in denominational governance as well as for diverse Biblical interpretation. As a teenager Glaser left the Baptist church of his youth and joined the Presbyterians, perceiving them to be gay-friendly. Glaser narrates his development as a gay minister and focuses on struggles in the Presbyterian church. Although not the first denomination to address these issues (the United Church of Christ was the first to ordain an openly gay minister, in 1972 in San Francisco), the United Presbyterian Church began serious consideration of ordination in 1974, when a local association requested direction on the issue from the Maryland Synod. To address the question nationally, the denomination created a task force, of which Glaser was the only gay member. His narrative ends with the rejection of the task force's report at the 1978 General Assembly in San Diego. Having begun their discussions in the mid-1970s, the Presbyterians continue to this day to debate issues surrounding the status of lesbian and gay members.

Unlike the other authors, Malcolm Boyd found his activism and struggle not with his denomination, but in the broader arena of US society. In fact, his activism is overwhelmingly public in character, including his early work in the campus ministries of public colleges, his considerable civil rights activities and his more recent work on gay issues, especially HIV/AIDS ministry.

Political Influences

If scripture provides these autobiographers with a sacred means for understanding themselves, American politics provides a secular means. In addition to finding themselves in Biblical images, these writers also often understand themselves in reference to the African-American Civil Rights Movement. This reference plays at least a double role: as a pathway to self-understanding and moral empowerment, and as a persuasive rhetorical strategy. In the former case, this comparison seems to be one way in which some authors came to understand themselves not as lonely individuals cursed to a

state of spiritual isolation, but as a people who can overcome their oppression. Homophobia is understood, named and presented as a parallel to racism and less frequently to sexism. In the autobiographies considered here, the authors do not explore these parallels in ways that would reveal significant differences among racism, sexism and homophobia. The authors only present commonalities, and these are typically presented as assertions rather than conclusions. Consequently, the comparisons remain essentially rhetorical in that they are arguments constructed to convince both reader and author.

Chris Glaser, narrating his activism within the Presbyterian Church USA, often understands himself in reference to the struggles of Jews and African Americans; and throughout his narrative, he celebrates the spiritual rewards that accompany his own suffering. He describes the pivotal moment in his denominational activism as follows:

The most profound comfort I received came from Dr. Thelma Adair, who just two years before had been the first black woman elected General Assembly Moderator. I was standing behind her in line for the women's breakfast the day before the crucial vote on [gay and lesbian] ordination within the full Assembly. She turned to me and simply reflected, 'When I first started coming to general assemblies more than twenty years ago, blacks could not stay in the same hotels with white commissioners. We had to stay in private homes in outlying areas.' That was all she said, but in those few words she placed the gay struggle within an appropriate perspective (Glaser 1988b,195).

When Glaser was appointed to a national committee over a more militant colleague, he even questioned whether or not he was an Uncle Tom.

'Again and again,' writes Malcolm Boyd in an early autobiography (in which he does not mention homosexuality), 'I have been propelled outside my private life—that wall-to-wall carpeted ghetto—into involvement in battles outside' (1965, 131). His involvement in African American civil rights began in earnest with his appointment as chaplain at Wayne State University in Detroit and his energetic participation in marches, freedom rides, sit-ins, and press conferences. Speaking at college campuses across the country, he championed the 'underground church,' an institution enlivened not by traditional doctrines, but by issues of social justice. In *Take off the Masks*, written over a decade later, Boyd looks back on his Civil Rights activism, referring to this time as his 'asexual years.' With some irony, he acknowledges that only after establishing himself as an anti-establishment priest and a successful writer did he come out—and even this was accomplished gradually. Boyd describes a remarkable dilemma in which his own human rights were subordinated to the rights of others. When he was ready to come out in 1975, he submitted an essay to a national magazine, only to be convinced by the editor not to publish it because it would undermine his effectiveness as a political activist and a religious leader. By the next year, however, Boyd was participating in Gay Pride events.

Mel White, also an accomplished professional writer, spent his early years deeply involved in conservative evangelical political action. Upon coming out, White threw himself into public activism directed at the homophobia of the church with the founding of Soulforce, which uses highly visible civil disobedience that is directly modeled on the effective actions of Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. Both Boyd's and White's stories involve gradual personal transformation and sustained activism, though for White the process of coming out also included an equally profound political change.

Troy Perry frequently alludes to the Civil Rights Movement as he recounts the Metropolitan Community Church's participation in the Gay Liberation Movement in Los Angeles in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Furthermore, Perry identifies as the pivotal event in his transformation a moment in which his life is saved through the ministrations of an African American nurse. Living an anomic life in Los Angeles several years after coming out, Perry tried to kill himself, and while he was recovering in the hospital he felt that God called him to accept himself and to minister to others in his community. Reflecting on his racially segregated upbringing, Perry writes:

You see, sometimes I think that in my Southern background, I felt that God must surely carry a shotgun. Otherwise why the rigid attitudes that never yielded on such high points of bigotry as color of a person's skin, race, national origin, sexual orientation, lifestyle, religious beliefs, political affiliation, and all the rest. It took my acceptance of my own homosexuality for me to realize that all the barriers of prejudice must come down, not only in my own area of lifestyle, but in all areas of intolerance ([1972] 1997, 127).

The struggle of African Americans not only provides ways for our narrators to think and talk about themselves; it also may shape the gay Christian autobiography itself.

What we have called 'gay spiritual autobiography' is not only another type of Christian confessional literature. It also shares many features with the slave narrative. Themes of capture, punishment, abuse, escape, separation, refuge, freedom, and reunion find easy corollary in stories of gay religious struggle. In both the slave narrative and the gay spiritual autobiography, providence and grace figure prominently and intertwine discovery and struggle in the telling of a new coming into being. This new identity flows from two inseparable sources—the heroic struggle itself and its triumphant telling, its publication. The two genres also face similar rhetorical challenges. The overarching need to be persuasive compels a concern with the authenticity of the narrative; to be persuasive, the narrative also must be believable. Neither the slave narrative nor the queer confession is simply autobiography, if by that term we mean unique stories uniquely told. They have more than an individually expressive, 'literary' purpose. Both genres have overriding political, although by no means exclusively secular, agendas. In an essay on the slave narrative as literature, James

Onley writes compellingly about the need of the narrator to establish firmly his/her real existence: 'Of course the argument of the slave narratives is that the events narrated are factual and truthful and that they all really happened to the narrator, but this is a second-stage argument; prior to the claim of truthfulness is the simple, existential claim: "I exist" ' (1985, 155). The slave narrative performs legal, moral, intellectual, and spiritual personhood and agency, and the narrator's struggle is not only against the institution of slavery, but also with sponsors who publish and therefore shape their works. The authors of slave narratives wrote of slavery and thereby performed their agency as well as their literacy: the book itself constituted physical evidence of both.

Slave narratives and gay Christian confessions may share certain rhetorical strategies, but it must be noted that they differ significantly. Authors of slave narratives intended to challenge ideologies and negate a series of beliefs concerning Africans as a people and slavery as a social institution. By their very existence slave narratives negated European assumptions that Africans were subhuman and therefore incapable of reasoned, literate, moral expression and collective agency. In their personal, public witness to the inhuman cruelties of slavery, the writers of slave narratives challenged assumptions that slavery was supposedly necessary and somehow represented progress. The thousands of slave narratives published before the abolition of slavery in North America were vital to the success of abolitionism and remain a collective testimony of both historical and contemporary importance.

Queer Christian confessions, however, emerge from a very different socio-historical nexus, whose central features are invisibility and opprobrium. In the gay spiritual autobiographies considered here, the fundamental claim—'I am gay and I am Christian'—strives to negotiate the complexities of both queer invisibility and moral opprobrium. Queer indeed! Before coming out, these narrators were known and respected in their particular religious communities. Their sexuality was hidden by mutual complicity, a complicity strengthened by cultural taboos as well as by faith-based moral judgment. The authors foreground this fact in the titles and subtitles of their autobiographies. In the title of his first autobiography, Troy Perry affirms that 'The Lord is My Shepherd and He Knows I'm Gay,' as if to say, 'God knows it, I know it, and now I'm telling you.' Mel White locates himself in contemporary US political discourse with the subtitle, 'To Be Gay and Christian in America.' Chris Glaser seems to speak directly to the church with his subtitle, 'A Gay Christian's Struggle to Serve the Church.' There is a profound irony in these titles. Most of these authors achieved success and respectability within their religious communities by keeping their sexuality invisible and indeed inconceivable. The escapes they narrate are often from a situation they actively, energetically and creatively helped to construct. Of course, this escape is not from the slave South to the free North, nor in some cases is it even an escape from an oppressive religious community. If escape is an appropriate term, it must be placed in a new, more metaphorical geography: it is an escape from an old self to a new self. Even in *The Preacher's Son*, with its

strong sense of an escape from the rigid fundamentalism of both family and school, the central part of Marc Adams' story takes place in the heart before he leaves the confining strictures of home or campus. Escape is the proper metaphor here; for in confronting and escaping their situations, the authors must also confront themselves. Even coming out contains a spatial metaphor, located perhaps in the home, the dwelling—a coming out of the closet and into the living room.

Conclusion

The autobiographies discussed here suggest that visibility is a critical step in a process of coming out that has both sexual and religious significance. Members of Christian congregations—and especially those on the sectarian side of the denominational spectrum—are often unaware that they worship, pray, commune and fellowship with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered and transsexual co-religionists. The ignorance of the former depends on the silence of the latter. For queer folk who wish to participate in their religious communities more fully, it is crucial to construct a public visibility that replaces, or at least out-shines, the negative representations of homosexuality extant in the faith community and society at large. Achieving visibility is a personal struggle as well as a public process. As autobiographies, the volumes discussed here illustrate the essential uniqueness of each person's life as illustrated in his story of coming out. Together they also reveal important commonalities that suggest a new, gay way of being born again. Each author describes multiple comings out: coming out to oneself, coming out to God, and coming out to one's religious community. These comings out are also multiple transformations: personal, interior lives are changed; the divine is discovered anew and in the midst of social action and interaction; social relationships are irrevocably altered, created and recreated; congregations and denominations are presented with unforeseen challenges and opportunities. Queer Christian confessions describe personal resolutions of the same menacing dilemma: to know oneself sexually, to know oneself spiritually and to combine these two in a healing unity. Each author takes from this experience a mission to continue the struggle for transformations in his life and in his religious community.

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