

Rethinking Sin and Grace for LGBT People Today

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INTRODUCTION

Sin is a difficult issue for many, if not most, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (“LGBT” or “queer”) people of faith. It is the primary reason why LGBT people are denied full participation in the life of the Church, including the denial of sacraments and rites such as same-sex marriage and ordination, as well as the denial of many secular rights such as civil marriage and anti-discrimination laws. Sin also torments LGBT people starting from a young age. That is, we are taught very early on that same-sex acts are sinful, and we will be condemned to eternal punishment in hell if we fail to repent and abstain from such acts.

As a result, many LGBT people are unable to understand what grace -- that is, the unmerited gift of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ -- is all about. If a central part of our identity (if not *the* central part), which is the ability to experience embodied love and pleasure with another human being, is understood as intrinsically sinful and in need of repentance and abstinence, then why should we care about God’s grace? In fact, what kind of sadistic God would create people one way and then insist that they change who they are in order to attain salvation? It is not surprising, then, that many LGBT people have turned away from the Church and organized religion.

Even for those of us who remain in the Church, however, sin and grace are difficult topics to discuss, and these subjects often are avoided by LGBT pastors and theologians. The lack of discourse about sin and grace in ecclesial and theological contexts is highly problematic because it has led to a devaluing of christology and the role of Jesus Christ in the economy of salvation. In other words, if there is no sin, then there is no need for grace or redemption in the form of God’s breaking into the world in the person of Jesus Christ. Thus, many LGBT people of faith see Jesus Christ as a great prophet or teacher, but not as truly God or the Word made flesh. As such, christological discourse -- including incarnation, atonement, and eschatology -- has been weakened in the LGBT faith community.

This essay will argue that the traditional condemnation of sexual acts between people of the same sex (“same-sex acts”) is based upon a legal model of sin and grace that is fundamentally flawed. Instead, this essay proposes a christological model of sin and grace that is based upon Karl Barth’s work in volume IV of his *Church Dogmatics*. That is, rather than defining sin in terms of specific acts or omissions, Barth defines sin as

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that which opposes the grace of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. In other words, according to Barth, the traditional legal model of sin has it backwards! Rather than starting with an autonomous definition of sin, we must start with the grace of Jesus Christ and understand sin as anything that is opposed to the grace of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ.

In addition to arguing for a christological understanding for sin and grace, this essay will also use examples from the LGBT Asian American experience to illustrate how sin and grace is present in the lives of LGBT Asian Americans today.¹ One of the reasons for citing these examples is to give voice to a perspective that has not been widely acknowledged in either LGBT or Asian American theologies.² These examples also illustrate how the christological model of sin and grace might speak to the experiences of various groups within the LGBT community.

THE TRADITIONAL LEGAL MODEL OF SIN AND GRACE

The Church traditionally has talked about sin and grace in legal terms. For example, same-sex acts are understood as sinful because they violate biblical law, natural law, and/or other divine prohibitions against such acts. To sin is to violate God's laws or commands, just as Adam and Eve committed the first sin by disobeying God and eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the Garden of Eden.

¹ For writings about the LGBT Asian American experience, see Quang Bao and Hanya Yanagihara, eds., *Take Out: Queer Writing from Asian Pacific America* (New York: Asian American Writers' Workshop, 2000); Song Cho, ed., *Rice: Explorations into Gay Asian Culture and Politics* (Toronto: Queer Press, 1998); David L. Eng and Alice Y. Hom, eds., *Q&A: Queer in Asian America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998); Kevin K. Kumashiro, ed., *Restoried Selves: Autobiographies of Queer Asian / Pacific American Activists* (Binghamton, NY: Harrington Park Press, 2004); Russell Leong, ed., *Asian American Sexualities: Dimensions of the Gay and Lesbian Experience* (New York: Routledge, 1996); Sharon Lim-Hing, ed., *The Very Inside: An Anthology of Writing by Asian and Pacific Islander Lesbian and Bisexual Women* (Toronto: Sister Vision Press, 1994); and Gina Masequesmay and Sean Metzger, eds., *Embodying Asian / American Sexualities* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009).

² For theological reflections on the LGBT Asian American experience, see Patrick S. Cheng, "Multiplicity and Judges 19: Constructing a Queer Asian Pacific American Biblical Hermeneutic," *Semeia* 90/91 (2002): 119-33; Patrick S. Cheng, "Reclaiming Our Traditions, Rituals, and Spaces: Spirituality and the Queer Asian Pacific American Experience," *Spiritus* 6, no. 2 (2006): 234-40; Patrick S. Cheng, "Roundtable Discussion: Same-Sex Marriage," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 20, no. 2 (2004): 103-07; Michael Kim, "Out and About: Coming of Age in a Straight White World," in *Asian American X: An Intersection of 21st Century Asian American Voices*, ed. Arar Han and John Hsu (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 2004), 139-48; Eric H.F. Law, "A Spirituality of Creative Marginality," in *Que(e)rying Religion: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gary David Comstock and Susan E. Henking (New York: Continuum, 1997), 343-36; Jeanette Mei Gim Lee, "Queerly a Good Friday," in *Restoried Selves: Autobiographies of Queer Asian / Pacific American Activists*, ed. Kevin K. Kumashiro (Binghamton, NY: Harrington Park Press, 2004), 81-86; Leng Leroy Lim, "'The Bible Tells Me to Hate Myself': The Crisis in Asian American Spiritual Leadership," *Semeia* 90/91 (2002): 315-22; Leng Leroy Lim, "Webs of Betrayal, Webs of Blessings," in Eng and Hom, *Q&A*, 323-34.

By contrast, grace is traditionally understood as God’s forgiveness (that is, justification) of those who have committed sins and who have repented for such violations of God’s laws. God’s grace is truly a gift because there is nothing that humans alone can do to repair the breached relationship between God and the sinner. Grace is also understood as a gift that allows the sinner to refrain from future violations of God’s laws (that is, sanctification).

As noted above, same-sex acts traditionally have been viewed as violations of both biblical and natural law. Although there are only a handful of biblical passages that discuss same-sex acts (for example, Gen 19:5, Lev 18:22 and 20:13, Rom 1:24-25, 1 Cor 6:9, 1 Tim 1:10), they have been cited time and time again to “prove” the sinfulness of such acts. Furthermore, the Roman Catholic Church has also relied upon natural law to argue that human sexuality must always be expressed in the context of procreation, and any delinking of sexual pleasure and procreation is a violation of God’s law.³

By contrast, grace under the traditional legal model is understood as God’s forgiveness of those who have engaged in same-sex acts (that is, justification) as well as God’s assistance in helping such people to abstain from such prohibited acts in the future (that is, sanctification). In other words, to accept God’s grace is to refrain from having any non-procreative sex, including same-sex acts.

There are a number of problems with this traditional legal model of sin and grace. First, this model detracts from a central message of the New Testament, which is justification by grace alone. By characterizing sin as the violation of God’s eternal laws, the focus inevitably shifts to who may or may not be violating such laws. This in turn leads to an obsession with groups that are thought to be sinners (for example, LGBT people), as opposed to a focus on God’s unmerited grace, which is actually the only thing that can help *any of us* to overcome the bondage of original sin.

Second, the traditional legal model results in an obsession with defining precisely what the rules for right and wrong behavior are. Specifically, this takes the form of endless argumentation and prooftexting over what the Bible “actually” says about same-sex acts. What does the word “know” mean in the Sodom and Gomorrah narrative in Genesis 19:5? What does it mean for a man to lie with another male “as with a woman” in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13? Was the prohibition against same-sex acts in Romans 1:24-25 really about idolatry? What about the words used to describe people who engage in same-sex acts in 1 Corinthians 6:9 or 1 Timothy 1:10?

A great deal of ink has been spilled over the last few decades over interpreting a handful of “texts of terror” for LGBT people. While I believe in the importance of biblical exegesis, I also think that a narrow focus on what God prohibits or allows in scripture takes away from the larger framework of original sin and the theological

³ Mark Jordan has argued that the idea of “sodomy” was invented precisely because of ecclesial anxieties about delinking pure sexual pleasure from procreation. See Mark D. Jordan, *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997).

significance of Jesus Christ in salvation history. That is, the Bible becomes simply a book of rules, as opposed to the revelation of God's relationship with -- and love for -- humanity as the Word made flesh.

THE CHRISTOLOGICAL MODEL OF SIN AND GRACE

As an alternative to the traditional legal model, this essay will propose a christological model of sin and grace. Such a model is based upon the approach used by Karl Barth in volume IV of his *Church Dogmatics*. Although Barth would likely reject the use of experience (for example, LGBT experience) as a source for theology, I still believe that the christological model is a more appropriate way of thinking and sin and grace for LGBT people today.

For Barth, as with the rest of his theology, the starting point for thinking about sin and grace is Jesus Christ. That is, Barth contends that it is impossible to start with a definition of sin that has its own independent ontological status (which is, of course, what the traditional legal model attempts to do). Sin is nothingness; it is a privation of good, as opposed to being part of God's created order. As such, Barth views any attempt to establish an independent doctrine of sin to be a sin in itself!⁴

Instead, Barth understands sin as whatever is opposed to the grace of what God has done for humanity in Jesus Christ. That is, sin is defined in relational terms to Jesus Christ. It cannot be reduced to a laundry list of commandments to obey. Not only is this approach more comprehensive than the traditional legal model, but it is also more flexible in terms of taking into account the diverse contexts in which humans exist.

Barth sets forth three christological models of sin and grace. The first model relates to sin as *pride* and grace as *condescension*. That is, to the extent that Jesus Christ is the grace of God's coming down from heaven for our salvation (that is, condescension), then sin is defined as humanity's urge to raise itself up above God (that is, pride).⁵ Liberation theologians have characterized this as the sin of economic and political subjugation of the marginalized.⁶

The second model relates to sin as *sloth* and grace as *exaltation*. That is, to the extent that Jesus Christ represents the grace of God's lifting up of humanity in the victory of the resurrection (that is, exaltation), then sin is humanity's refusal to rise to the level of

⁴ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, trans. G.W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), 4/1, 139-42.

⁵ Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 4/1, 142-43.

⁶ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, trans. and ed. Caridad Ina and John Eagleson, 15th anniversary ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 103; James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 20th anniversary ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 106-09.

what God has called us to be (that is, sloth).⁷ Feminist and womanist theologians have characterized this as the sin of hiding or the negation of the self.⁸

The third and final model relates to sin as *falsehood* and grace as *true witness*. That is, to the extent that Jesus Christ represents the grace of God's fullest revelation of Godself to humanity (that is, true witness), then sin is humanity's refusal to recognize the truth of that revelation (that is, falsehood).⁹ Certain contemporary theologians have characterized this as the sin of refusing to recognize the truth of the Christian message in an increasingly secularized world.¹⁰

Building upon Barth's work, the remainder of this essay describes four christological models of sin and grace that arise out of the experiences of LGBT people. The models use the experiences of LGBT Asian Americans to illustrate how sin and grace manifest themselves within in a specific social context. It is my hope that these models can lead to a more thoughtful discussion -- as opposed to silence or avoidance -- about what sin and grace mean to LGBT people today.

MODEL ONE: THE EROTIC CHRIST

The first christological model of sin and grace for LGBT people is the Erotic Christ. According to Audre Lorde, the Black feminist lesbian writer, the erotic is about relationality and desire for the other; it is the power that arises out of "sharing deeply" with another person. The erotic is to "share our joy in the satisfying" of the other, rather than simply using other people as "objects of satisfaction."¹¹

The Erotic Christ arises out of the reality that Jesus Christ, as the Word made flesh, is the very embodiment of God's deepest desires for us. Jesus Christ came down from heaven not for his own self-gratification, but rather for us and for our salvation. In the gospels, Jesus repeatedly shows his love and desire for all those who come into contact with him, including physical touch. He uses touch as a way to cure people of disease and disabilities, as well as to bring them back to life. He washes the feet of his

⁷ Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 4/1, 143.

⁸ Valerie Saiving Goldstein, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," *Journal of Religion* 40, no. 2 (1960): 108; Judith Plaskow, *Sex, Sin and Grace: Women's Experience and the Theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1980), 3; Delores S. Williams, "A Womanist Perspective on Sin," in *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering*, ed. Emilie M. Townes (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 147.

⁹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 4/1, 143-44.

¹⁰ Joseph Ratzinger and Jürgen Habermas, *The Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion*, ed. Florian Schuller, trans. Brian McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006), 55-56.

¹¹ Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" in *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection*, ed. James B. Nelson and Sandra P. Longfellow (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), 76-79.

disciples, and he even allows the beloved disciple to lie close to his breast at the last supper.¹²

Conversely, Jesus is touched physically by many of the people who come into contact with him. He is touched by the bleeding woman who hoped that his powers could heal her. He is bathed in expensive ointment by the woman at Bethany. After his resurrection, Jesus allows Thomas to place his finger in the mark of the nails and also to place his hand in his side.¹³ All of these physical interactions are manifestations of God's love for us -- and our reciprocal love for God -- through the Erotic Christ.

Carter Heyward, the lesbian theologian and Episcopal priest, has written about the Erotic Christ in the context of the "radically mutual character" of Jesus Christ's life, death, and resurrection. For Heyward, the significance of Jesus Christ lies not only in the ways in which he touched others (both physically and otherwise), but also in the ways in which he was "healed, liberated, and transformed" by those who he encountered. This power in mutual relation is *not* something that exists solely within the trinitarian relationship between God, Jesus Christ, or the Holy Spirit. Rather, this power is present in *all* of us who have ever "loved, held, yearned, lost."¹⁴

Sin as Self-Gratification

So what is sin and grace in light of the Erotic Christ? If the Erotic Christ is understood as God's deepest desire to be in relationship with us, then sin -- as what opposes the Erotic Christ -- can be understood as self-gratification, or the complete lack of mutuality or concern for the needs and desires, sexual or otherwise, of one's partner.

For many LGBT people, sin in the context of the Erotic Christ takes the form of sexual practices in which one's partner is treated as merely an object of gratification or something less than a full person (for example, sex arising out of addiction). Many gay men, particularly those who struggle with sex addiction, have engaged in anonymous, unsafe, and/or drug-fueled hook-ups in which self-gratification is the primary if not only concern. The sex addict's partner or partners are reduced to objects for stimulation and not seen as human beings in themselves.

A number of LGBT Asian Americans have written about the sin of self-gratification, particularly as a way to lessen the pain of self-hatred and low self-esteem. For example, Guy Nakatani, a gay Japanese-American man who was diagnosed with full-blown AIDS at the age of twenty, first began having sex with other men at the age of fifteen in order to escape the trauma of being Asian and gay in high school. For Nakatani, "more was better" and, because his first priority was "filling up the void," his

¹² Matt 9:29; Mark 7:31-37 (healing); Mark 5:35-43; Luke 7:11-17 (raising the dead); John 13:1-20 (foot washing); John 13:23 (Beloved Disciple).

¹³ Mark 5:28-34 (bleeding woman); Mark 14:3-6 (ointment); John 20:24-29 (Thomas).

¹⁴ Carter Heyward, *Saving Jesus From Those Who Are Right: Rethinking What It Means to Be Christian* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 74. See also Carter Heyward, *Touching Our Strength: The Erotic As Power and the Love of God* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1989).

“needs completely overwhelmed any judgment” and he was “never concerned about anybody else.”¹⁵ This is the sin of self-gratification at work -- using one’s partner as an object for stimulation and not as a fellow human being.

Grace as Mutuality

By contrast, grace in the context of the Erotic Christ is mutuality, or the awareness of being-in-relationship with the other. As Lorde describes it, grace can take the form of something as simple as “sharing deeply any pursuit with another person” such as dancing.¹⁶ For Heyward, the grace of the Erotic Christ necessarily takes the form of “justice-love” and sharing in “the earth and the resources vital to our survival and happiness as people and creatures.”¹⁷ Grace is understanding that we are all connected deeply to each other. As such, we must do more than just engaging in one-on-one interactions with others. Rather, it requires a commitment to changing how we see and interact with the world.¹⁸

Many LGBT Asian Americans experience the grace of mutuality when they come together with other LGBT Asian Americans socially, politically, or sexually. For example, Yoko Yoshikawa, a Japanese-American lesbian activist, wrote about the joy of seeing a gay Asian American man with a jacket that read “San Francisco-Born Gay Man of Korean Descent” at a protest of the racist depiction of Asians in the Broadway musical *Miss Saigon*. Yoshikawa felt a deep connection with that man because of their shared experiences as LGBT Asian Americans.¹⁹

MODEL TWO: THE OUT CHRIST

The second christological model of sin and grace for LGBT people is the Out Christ. The Out Christ arises out of the reality that God reveals Godself most fully in the person of Jesus Christ. In other words, God “comes out of the closet” in the person of Jesus Christ; it is only through the incarnation, ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ that we understand the true nature of God (for example, God’s solidarity with the marginalized and oppressed). Indeed, the notion of the Out Christ as the revelation of God is supported by Jesus Christ’s description as the *logos* or Word of God.²⁰

¹⁵ Molly Fumia, *Honor Thy Children: One Family’s Journey to Wholeness* (Berkeley, CA: Conari Press, 1997), 231-35.

¹⁶ Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic,” 77.

¹⁷ Heyward, *Saving Jesus*, 71.

¹⁸ For a discussion about the ethics of eroticism, see Marvin M. Ellison, *Erotic Justice: A Liberation Ethic of Sexuality* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996).

¹⁹ Yoko Yoshikawa, “The Heat Is On *Miss Saigon* Coalition: Organizing Across Race and Sexuality,” in Eng and Hom, *Q&A*, 55.

²⁰ John 1:1.

Chris Glaser, the gay theologian and Metropolitan Community Church minister, has written about the Out Christ in his book *Coming Out as Sacrament*. In that book, Glaser describes Jesus Christ as nothing less than God's very own coming out to humanity: "The story of the New Testament is that God comes out of the closet of heaven and out of the religious system of time to reveal Godself in the person of Jesus the Christ."²¹

For Glaser, God reveals God's solidarity with the marginalized and oppressed of the world in Jesus Christ. For example, God comes out as an infant who is born in the midst of the filth of a stable in "a strange town and in a land and culture dominated by a foreign power, the Roman Empire." God also comes out in the ministry of Jesus, who "defends women and eunuchs and those of mixed race (Samaritans) and responds to other races (the Roman centurion, the Syrophenician woman)." In the crucifixion, God comes out by extending "an inclusive paradise to a crucified criminal." And finally, in the resurrection, God comes out as one who "lives despite human violence, a true survivor of human abuse and victimization."²²

Sin as the Closet

If the Out Christ is understood as the One through whom God most fully reveals Godself to humanity, then sin -- as what opposes the Out Christ -- can be understood as the closet, or the refusal to reveal oneself fully to one's families, friends, co-workers, and other loved ones. Not only does the closet prevent a person from truly connecting with others, but it has a corrosive effect on the self-esteem and well-being to the extent that she is constantly forced to keep her life a secret to others.

Many LGBT Asian Americans have written about experiencing the sin of the closet. For them, coming out to families and friends is particularly difficult, particularly due to unique cultural issues such as theological fundamentalism, cultural patriarchy, and immigrant anxieties.²³ Rich Kiamco, a gay Filipino man in New York City, wrote about his experiences of coming out to his parents: his father reacted by saying that they would "cure" him of his homosexuality; and his mother reacted by giving him a Bible and telling him that she would pray for him.²⁴ LGBT Asian Americans also experience an ethnic closet by trying to hide their minority status within the broader white community. For example, David Lee, a Chinese-American gay man, wrote about dying his hair orange-blond in college in order to separate himself from that "class of laughable Asians."²⁵

²¹ Chris Glaser, *Coming Out As Sacrament* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 85.

²² Glaser, *Coming Out As Sacrament*, 82-84.

²³ Eunai Shrake, "Homosexuality and Korean Immigrant Protestant Churches," in Masequesmay and Metzger, *Embodying Asian / American Sexualities*, 147.

²⁴ Richard Kiamco, "Powershowgirl: Unaccessorized," in Bao and Yanagihara, *Take Out*, 113.

²⁵ David C. Lee, "All-American Asian," in Kumashiro, *Restoried Selves*, 74-75.

Grace as Coming Out

By contrast, grace in the context of the Out Christ can be understood as the courage to come out of the closet, or sharing one's sexual orientation and/or gender identity with others. For LGBT people, the process of coming out can only be understood as grace, or a unmerited gift, on the part of God. There is no one correct pattern or single path to coming out. Some people come out very early in life; others wait until much later. For some people it is a slow and private process. For others, it is a fast and public announcement.

Regardless of how one ultimately comes out, the act of coming out reflects the very nature of a God who is also constantly coming out and revealing Godself to us in the Out Christ. Coming out is a gift that is accompanied by other gifts such as self-love, the love for others, and the overcoming of shame and internalized homophobia.²⁶ The grace of coming out is not something that can be “willed” or “earned”; it can only happen as an act of grace from God.

Many LGBT Asian Americans have written about the grace of coming out, particularly in terms of strengthening relationships with their families and loved ones. For example, Wei Ming Dariotis, a bisexual young woman of mixed Chinese and European descent, wrote about how her coming out ultimately has brought her closer to her mother. Her coming out has also taught her mother to make the connections between homophobia and racism, which are two “oppressions that support each other.”²⁷ Thus, coming out has been a gift for not only Wei Ming, but also for her mother.

MODEL THREE: THE TRANSGRESSIVE CHRIST

The third christological model of sin and grace for LGBT people is the Transgressive Christ. The Transgressive Christ arises out of the reality that Jesus Christ was crucified by the religious and political authorities of his day for refusing to conform to their standards of behavior. Indeed, Jesus is constantly seen in the gospels as transgressing the commonly-accepted religious and legal boundaries of his day. In a world obsessed by purity codes, he touches those who are unclean, including lepers, bleeding women, and the differently abled. He eats and drinks with outcasts such as tax collectors and sinners.²⁸

²⁶ Gershen Kaufman and Lev Raphael, *Coming Out of Shame: Transforming Gay and Lesbian Lives* (New York: Doubleday, 1996); John J. McNeill, *Taking a Chance on God: Liberating Theology for Gays, Lesbians, and Their Lovers, Families, and Friends* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 54-74 (“Lifting the Burden of Guilt, Shame, and Self-Hate”).

²⁷ Wei Ming Dariotis, “On Becoming a Bi Bi Grrl,” in Kumashiro, *Restoried Selves*, 46.

²⁸ Matt 8:1-4; Luke 17:11-19 (lepers); Matt 9:18-26; Mark 5:21-43 (bleeding women); Mark 7:31-37 (differently abled); Matt 9:9-13 (tax collectors and sinners).

Jesus also challenges the religious authorities with respect to their teachings (such as healing on the Sabbath, and the grounds for divorce). He rejects his biological family, and he is rejected by his hometown. Many of his parables are about those who are on the margins of society, such as Samaritans.²⁹ As such, the Transgressive Christ can be understood as God's solidarity with the suffering of LGBT people and others who refuse to conform to the rules of the principalities and powers of this world.

Robert Goss, the gay former Jesuit priest and current Metropolitan Community Church minister, wrote about the Transgressive Christ in his book on LGBT christology, *Jesus Acted Up*.³⁰ In that book, which was an angry theological response to the silence and inaction of both civil society and the Church with respect to the HIV/AIDS crisis, Goss argued that Jesus Christ is a model for "transgressive practice" with respect to advocating for sexual justice.

Specifically, Goss compared Jesus' actions in driving out the animal merchants and overturning the tables of the money changers in the Temple³¹ to the ACT UP/New York protest in St. Patrick's Cathedral during the height of the HIV/AIDS crisis in which a protester crumbled up a consecrated host instead of eating it. For Goss, both actions "violated sacred space, transgressed sacred ritual, and offended sensibilities." Yet, according to Goss, both acts exhibited a "profound reverence for the sacred based on God's justice-doing."³²

Sin as Conformity

If the Transgressive Christ is understood as the One who is tortured and executed for daring to break society's rules, then sin -- as what opposes the Transgressive Christ -- can be understood as mindless or blind conformity with the rules of the ruling majority. The sin of conformity is something that occurs within all groups, including the LGBT community. For example, it is easy for gay men to get caught up in the white, middle-class gay male "scene" in which superficial standards of beauty, body types, and material possessions are the only measure of a person's worth.

There is also the destructive behavior of "mainstream" lesbians and gay men who look the other way -- or fail to speak up -- with respect to the sufferings of other people on the margins (LGBT or otherwise), whether it be issues of racism, social and economic injustice, or hostility towards marginalized elements (such as transgender and bisexual people) within the LGBT community itself. In fact, the sin of conformity can easily lead to mob violence against an innocent scapegoat or even the genocide of entire groups.

²⁹ Mark 3:1-6 (Sabbath); Mark 10:2-12 (marriage and divorce); Mark 3:31-35 (rejection of family); Matt 13:53-58 (rejection by hometown); Luke 10:29-37 (the good Samaritan).

³⁰ Robert E. Goss, *Jesus Acted Up: A Gay and Lesbian Manifesto* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993).

³¹ Matt 21:12-13; Mark 11:15-17; Luke 19:45-46; John 2:14-22.

³² Goss, *Jesus Acted Up*, 149-50.

Many LGBT Asian Americans have experienced the sin of conformity with respect to the broader white LGBT community. For example, Justin Chin, a gay Chinese-American performance artist, has made fun of how many gay Asian “Castro boys” fall into four archetypes: the superficial party boy, the submissive boyfriend, the angry activist, and the moody artist.³³ LGBT Asian Americans have also experienced the sin of conformity by refusing to challenge the standards of beauty as portrayed in the white LGBT media. As long as LGBT Asian Americans measure and judge themselves by standards that are imposed by others, they will never be able to love themselves for who they are.

Grace as Deviance

By contrast, grace in the context of the Transgressive Christ can be understood as deviance, or the willingness to transgress social, legal, and religious boundaries and norms. As in the case of coming out, one’s ability to challenge such boundaries and norms is not something that can be “willed” or “earned,” but is rather a gift of grace from God. Although there is always the very real risk of crucifixion for challenging societal norms, there is also the promise of resurrection on the other side in terms of being true to one’s own God-given sexual orientation and gender identity.

Many LGBT Asian Americans have written about the grace of deviance in their lives. For example, Kaii, a transgender woman of Hawaiian, Chinese, Filipino, and Samoan descent, has described trans people as the gift of grace to the world: “We’re actually angels. We were sent down to earth to soak up all of man’s sins. I was set up to earth to make people laugh and happy, to give them counseling that they need.”³⁴ Van Darkholme, a gay Asian erotic artist and leatherman who produces and stars in kink and fetish videos, has written about how much he loves and enjoys what he is doing, despite the fact that it may seem deviant to others.³⁵ And Lani Ka’humanu, a mixed-race and bisexual poet from Hawaii, has written about the grace of her deviance: “I am a proud, visible and vocal mixed race multicultural woman. I claim it all and have no shame for it is the truth.” According to Ka’humanu: “Assimilation is a lie. It is spiritual erasure.”³⁶

MODEL FOUR: THE HYBRID CHRIST

The fourth and final christological model of sin and grace for LGBT people is the Hybrid Christ. Hybridity is a concept from postcolonial theory that describes the mixture

³³ Justin Chin, *Attack of the Man-Eating Lotus Blossoms* (San Francisco: Suspect Thoughts Press, 2005), 62-65.

³⁴ “Kaii,” in Andrew Matzner, *‘O Au No Keia: Voices From Hawai’i’s Mahu and Transgender Communities* (Bloomington, IN: Xlibris Corporation, 2001), 112-13.

³⁵ Van Darkholme, blog post (Feb 5, 2007) on <http://www.vandarkholme.com/journal/07journalfeb.html>.

³⁶ See Lani Ka’ahumanu, “Hapa Haole Wahine,” in *The Very Inside*, ed. Lim-Hing, 451-52.

of two things that leads to the creation of a third “hybrid” thing.³⁷ For example, the experience of being a racial minority or an immigrant within the United States can be described in terms of hybridity. In the case of Asian Americans, they are neither purely “Asian” (because they live in the United States) nor are they purely “American” (because they are of Asian descent). Rather, they are a third “hybrid” or “in-between” thing, which ultimately challenges the binary and hierarchical nature of the original two categories of “Asian” (outsider) and “American” (insider).

For me, the Hybrid Christ arises out of the theological understanding that Jesus Christ is simultaneously divine *and* human in nature. He is neither purely one nor the other. In the words of the Athanasian Creed, Jesus Christ is simultaneously both “God and human,” and yet he is “not two, but one Christ.”³⁸ As such, he is the ultimate hybrid being. This hybrid nature is reflected in the double consciousness that is experienced by many racial minorities in the United States such as Asian Americans, African Americans, Latino/as, Native Americans, and others.

Marcella Althaus-Reid, the late lesbian theology professor from the United Kingdom, wrote about the Hybrid Christ in her book *Indecent Theology*. Specifically, Althaus-Reid wrote about the “Bi/Christ,” in which the bisexual Jesus challenges the “heterosexual patterns of thought” of hierarchical and binary categories. Just as the bisexual person challenges the heterosexual binaries of “male/female” and “straight/gay,” the “Bi/Christ” challenges the either/or way of thinking with respect to theology (for example, by deconstructing “poor” and “rich” as mutually exclusive categories in liberation theology) and therefore can be understood as the Hybrid Christ.³⁹

Thus, a theology of the Hybrid Christ recognizes that Jesus Christ exists simultaneously in both the human and divine worlds. This can be seen most clearly in the post-resurrection narratives. As a resurrected person with a human body, Jesus Christ is “in-both” worlds (that is, both human and divine), and yet he is also “in-between” both worlds (that is, neither purely human nor purely divine).⁴⁰ Although this can be a painful experience -- metaphorically speaking, Jesus Christ has no place to lay down his head⁴¹ -- his hybridity is what ultimately allows him to build a bridge between the human and divine.

³⁷ In postcolonial theory, hybridity refers to the “creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonization.” In other words, the interaction between the colonizer and the colonized gives rise to a “third space” that destabilizes such categories and “makes the claim to a hierarchical ‘purity’ of cultures untenable.” See Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* (London: Routledge, 2000), 118.

³⁸ *Symbolum Quicumque* 34, in Philip Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 6th ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 2:69 (“*Qui licet Deus sit et homo; non duo tamen, sed unus est Christus*”).

³⁹ Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender, and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2000), 114-16.

⁴⁰ For an Asian American theological reflection on the hybrid nature of Jesus Christ, see Jung Young Lee, *Marginality: The Key to Multicultural Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995), 85.

⁴¹ Matt 8:20.

Sin as Singularity

If the Hybrid Christ is defined as the One who is simultaneously both human *and* divine, then sin -- as what opposes the Hybrid Christ -- is singularity, or the failure to recognize the reality of existing in multiple worlds. For example, sin is failing to recognize the complex reality of multiple identities within a single person, which in turn silences the experiences of those individuals who exist at the intersections of race, gender, sexual orientation, age, and other categories. As postcolonial theorists have pointed out, this kind of singularity (for example, defining the “gay” community solely in terms of sexual orientation and not taking into account race) results in the creation of a number of “others” who are never fully part of the larger community and thus feel like perpetual outsiders (for example, LGBT people of color).

Eric Wat, a Chinese-American gay man, has written about experiencing the sin of singularity in the form of being rejected by both the straight Asian American community as well as the white LGBT community. Because of the one-dimensional nature of singularity, Wat’s racial identity as an Asian American is erased within the predominantly white LGBT world, whereas his sexual identity as a gay man is erased within predominantly straight Asian American world. For Wat, LGBT Asian Americans are “nobody’s children,” and they are “forever left in the middle of the road, unacceptable to those at either side of the street.”⁴²

Grace as Hybridity

By contrast, grace in the context of the Hybrid Christ can be understood as hybridity, or existing in the interstitial or “in-beyond” space between two or more intersecting worlds. In an essay entitled “Disrupted / Disruptive Moments,” Black lesbian theologian Renée Hill has written about how her theological reflection has been shaped by her existence at the “intersections, in-between places, and borderlands” of her identities of race, gender, and sexual orientation. Hill’s own experience of this hybridity as an “African American lesbian, Christian, theologian, and worker for justice” has convinced her of the need to create new “multireligious and multidialogical” processes for doing theologies and to embrace “questions, disruptions, and moments of ambiguity and uncertainty.”⁴³

Like Hill, LGBT Asian Americans have written about the grace of hybridity. For example, Wat writes that, instead of being caught in the middle of the race / sexuality divide, “gay Asian men must find that *third side of the street* where we can grow, find our voices, learn about ourselves, and educate others about who we are, so that eventually

⁴² See Eric Wat, “Preserving the Paradox: Stories From a *Gay-Loh*,” in Leong, *Asian American Sexualities*, 78.

⁴³ See Renée Leslie Hill, “Disrupted / Disruptive Movements: Black Theology and Black Power 1969 / 1999,” in *Black Faith and Public Talk: Critical Essays on James H. Cone’s Black Theology and Black Power*, ed. Dwight N. Hopkins (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 138, 147-48. For more about sexuality and the Black church, see Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999).

we can join them at both sides of the street.”⁴⁴ Ann Yuri Uyeda, a queer Asian American activist, wrote about her “overwhelming” experiences in being in a room of nearly 200 queer Asian American women for the first time: “[We were] Asian and Pacific Islander. And queer. All at once. And all together.”⁴⁵ Indeed, the very fact that theological writings by LGBT Asian Americans such as Eric Law, Jeanette Lee, Leng Lim, and myself have been emerging in recent years,⁴⁶ as well as writings by allies such as Kwok Pui-lan,⁴⁷ can be attributed to the grace of hybridity.

CONCLUSION

In this essay, I have argued that LGBT Christians must continue to wrestle deeply with the theological doctrines of sin and grace. Because LGBT people have been hurt by the traditional legal model of sin and grace, I believe that these doctrines should be rethought in christological terms such as the Erotic Christ, the Out Christ, the Transgressive Christ, and the Hybrid Christ. It is my hope that a christological model of sin and grace will allow LGBT people of faith to enter into a more meaningful theological dialogue among ourselves as well as with the broader theological community as we enter into the third millennia of the Christian tradition.

⁴⁴ Wat, “Preserving the Paradox,” 80 (emphasis added).

⁴⁵ Ann Yuri Uyeda, “All at Once, All Together: One Asian American Lesbian’s Account of the 1989 Asian Pacific Lesbian Network Retreat,” in Lim-Hing, *The Very Inside*, 121.

⁴⁶ See sources cited in footnote 2.

⁴⁷ Kwok Pui-lan, “Asian and Asian American Churches,” in *Homosexuality and Religion: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Jeffrey S. Siker (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2007), 59-62; Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 100-21.