

Is Jesus Still “ACTing Up”?

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In this essay, I discuss the continuing relevance of *Jesus ACTED UP* in three dimensions: the pastoral, the academic, and the self-critical. Framing the essay with personal reflections, I first describe how the book continues to meet the pastoral needs of the LGBTIQ community, especially by channeling our rage in a constructive way. I then describe how the book continues to be relevant to the academic community by speaking truth to power. Finally, I describe how the book continues to speak to the LGBTIQ community by cautioning against a turning inwards of oneself (i.e. *incurvatus in se*). I conclude the essay with a personal note of gratitude to Bob Shore-Goss for the ways in which he personally embodies these three dimensions in his life and work.

KEYWORDS Jesus ACTED UP, Shore-Goss, LGBTQ, queer, Foucault, *incurvatus in se*

I remember when I first came across *Jesus ACTED UP*.¹ It was the 1990s, and I was spending a lovely afternoon browsing books in the Glad Day Bookshop, a gay and lesbian bookstore on Boylston Street in downtown Boston. I was a young, out lawyer who still harbored a lot of anger — or dare I say rage — against the Roman Catholic Church of my childhood, and Christianity in general.

I grew up wanting to be a priest. Instead of playing cops and robbers, I played Eucharist with Wonder Bread and grape juice. But when I realized that I was gay and “intrinsically disordered”² in the eyes of the church, I fell away from my faith. In college during the late 1980s, I came out of the closet, became involved with the gay and lesbian student organization, and began to drift away from the church.

On that fateful afternoon in Glad Day Bookshop, my eyes landed on a colorful paperback in the spirituality section with an intriguing spray-painted cover and

¹ See Goss, *Jesus ACTED UP*.

² See Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Care of Homosexual Persons” (October 31, 1986), no. 3.

an even more intriguing title. I flipped through the book and thought to myself: “I really must buy this book.” So I did. I read, marked, and inwardly digested it.³ And that book — *Jesus ACTED UP* — literally changed my life.

At that time, I could not have imagined that one day I would not only meet the book’s author, Bob Shore-Goss, but that we would both serve as ordained ministers in the same denomination, the Metropolitan Community Churches, for over 13 years. Or that, one day, we would actually collaborate as co-editors on an anthology of queer theology.⁴ Or that, some two decades later, I would be sitting on an American Academy of Religion (“AAR”) panel — along with Bob as well as some of my greatest theological s/heroes — to celebrate Bob’s scholarship and ministry. God does indeed act in queer ways.

I find it interesting that this panel is entitled “Jesus Is Still ACTing Up!” As I reread *Jesus ACTED UP* recently, I often asked myself if that was still the case. Paying homage to Bob’s Roman Catholic formation and the *utrum* tradition of medieval scholasticism, I would like to start by posing the assertion to be disproved: “Whether it is the case that *Jesus ACTED UP* is nothing more than a period piece — an interesting but irrelevant relic that merely represents a bygone era.”

The world of 2014 is, after all, a vastly different place than the world of 1994, when a diagnosis of HIV/AIDS was more often than not a death sentence,⁵ and when criminal sodomy laws were still a reality for many people in the United States.⁶ Today, we live in an age of not only protease inhibitors, but pre-exposure prophylaxis that can dramatically reduce the odds of HIV infection in the first place.⁷ In the last decade or so, the United States Supreme Court has not only struck down sodomy laws, but also the so-called Defense of Marriage Act.⁸ Indeed, as of November 2014, same-sex marriage was a reality in 35 states and the District of Columbia, as well as for some 64% of the U.S. population.⁹

On the ecclesial front, we have moved from an era of heresy trials to openly partnered gay and lesbian bishops in the Episcopal Church.¹⁰ We have also moved from the doors of St. Patrick’s Cathedral being slammed shut on Pride Sunday in NYC to a Jesuit pope who asks “Who am I to judge?” when it comes to a gay people.¹¹

And on the academic front, we have a dizzying array of queer theologies on topics ranging from queer of color critique to queer affect to queer negativity to queer

³ Cf. *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979), 236 (Proper 28).

⁴ See Shore-Goss et al., *Queering Christianity*.

⁵ In 1994, AIDS became the leading cause of death for all Americans between ages 25 to 44. See the AIDS.gov timeline at <https://www.aids.gov/hiv-aids-basics/hiv-aids-101/aids-timeline>.

⁶ See *Bowers v. Hardwick*, 478 U.S. 186 (1986) (which upheld criminal sodomy laws as constitutional).

⁷ For more information about PrEP, see the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website at <http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/prevention/research/prep>.

⁸ See *Lawrence v. Texas*, 539 U.S. 558 (2003) (striking down sodomy laws); *United States v. Windsor*, 133 S. Ct. 2675 (2013) (striking down the Defense of Marriage Act).

⁹ For the most current statistics on same-sex marriage, see the Freedom to Marry website at <http://www.freedomtomarry.org/states>.

¹⁰ See, e.g. Addington Hall, *A Thorn in the Flesh*.

¹¹ See Press Conference of Pope Francis During the Return Flight, Apostolic Journey to Rio de Janeiro on the Occasion of the XXVIII World Youth Day (July 28, 2013).

temporality¹² that makes the 10-page appendix in the back of *Jesus ACTED UP*, “Michel Foucault: Genealogical Critique,”¹³ seem downright quaint.

Several years ago, the AAR formed a Committee on the Status of LGBTIQ Persons in the Profession (“AAR LGBTIQ Committee”), and the 2014 AAR annual meeting has over 25 LGBTIQ-themed events and panels, ranging from “Tongues Untied: Gay Men and the Sacrament of Sex” to “Outlaws and In-Laws: New Constructions of Family from Bowties and Brassieres to Bootlickers and Beyond.”¹⁴

And, of course, Glad Day Bookshop in downtown Boston, along with most other independently run gay and lesbian bookstores, no longer exists, having closed its doors some fourteen years ago due to economic pressures.

So what is the relevance of *Jesus ACTED UP* today? Times have changed dramatically. Is Jesus still ACTING UP?

Three dimensions of the relevance of *Jesus ACTED UP*

In the remainder of this essay, I want to suggest three ways in which this text remains not only relevant, but of key importance to queer lives today: (1) the pastoral; (2) the academic; and (3) the self-critical. Furthermore, it is no accident that these three dimensions are deeply intertwined with Bob Shore-Goss’ own life and ministry.

The pastoral dimension

I am amazed at the ways that *Jesus ACTED UP* continues to meet the pastoral needs of LGBTIQ folk, especially by helping us to channel our rage in a constructive way. So many of us still bear the deep wounds of the toxic, queerphobic religions of our childhood.¹⁵ *Jesus ACTED UP* gives its readers the permission to tap into our inner rage and to use it as a means of constructive change and transformation rather than a path to self-destruction. In a key passage in the book, Shore-Goss compares the December 1989 ACT UP protest in St. Patrick’s Cathedral to Jesus’ “Stop the Temple” disturbance. He writes:

The crumbling of the communion wafer was an act of personal rage against Cardinal O’Connor. ... The holy rage of the ACT UP protester was justified. ... Enraged, [Jesus also] attempted to disrupt the sacralized commerce and activity in the Temple courtyard during a pilgrimage festival time.¹⁶

In my own experience of pastoring to LGBTIQ Christians in the church and in the classroom, something incredibly powerful happens whenever someone makes the connection between her, his, hir or their rage, and Jesus’ overturning of the tables in the Temple. Shame is transformed into pride. Despair is transformed into hope. Anxiety is transformed into confidence. And fear is transformed into courage.

¹² See Cheng, “Contributions from Queer Theory,” 153–69.

¹³ See Goss, *Jesus ACTED UP*, 181–90.

¹⁴ See “2014 LGBTIQ Themed Sessions,” American Academy of Religion Website, <https://www.aarweb.org/about/2014-lgbtqi-themed-sessions> (hereinafter “2014 LGBTIQ Themed Sessions”).

¹⁵ For a psychological perspective on rage and the lives of gay men, see Downs, *The Velvet Rage*.

¹⁶ Goss, *Jesus ACTED UP*, 148.

As a pastor, Bob understands the critical importance of allowing people to express themselves and their feelings. It is no accident that he has continued to serve as a pastor through all these years, most recently at MCC/UCC of the Valley, an ecclesiastical oasis where ecumenical and interfaith concerns intersect with genderqueer, leather, and ecological activism — not to mention the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence!¹⁷ *Jesus ACTED UP* is a deeply pastoral work.

The academic dimension

The central theme of *Jesus ACTED UP* — of speaking truth to power — is still deeply relevant to the theological academy, and especially with respect to seminaries and divinity schools under the control of the church. As the current chair of the AAR LGBTIQ Committee, I have seen many cases of exclusion with respect to talented queer scholars in the fields of theology and religious studies. Shortly before the 2014 AAR annual meeting, I received a message from a feminist religious studies scholar who had been denied tenure at her institution. The official reason given was that she spent too much time writing on gender issues, and not enough time on religious ones. But the real reason was that she was an out lesbian.

I think of Bob's own contentious tenure case at Webster University from just over a decade ago. I am reminded of how Bob's office was targeted in a hate crime, and how his copy of *Jesus ACTED UP* was "carved out and stuffed with rotting meat."¹⁸ I recall how Bob was endorsed for tenure by his department, but how others ultimately "moved to repeal the recommendation for tenure."¹⁹ And I think of how Bob has continued to persist with his amazingly productive teaching and writing outside the formal contours of the tenure track.

Despite the fact that there are now openly queer theology and religious studies professors at academic institutions throughout the United States, the theological and religious studies academy is increasingly becoming a bifurcated world of haves and have-nots, particularly with respect to the tenured positions. To this end, the AAR LGBTIQ Committee sponsored a special topics forum at the 2014 AAR Annual Meeting on "Queering the Profession" and challenging the "structures of the academy through and beyond the content of scholarship."²⁰

If we are to be true to the binary-busting commitments of queer theory and theology, we must examine the lessons of *Jesus ACTED UP* in light of our own social locations as scholars and academics who live a hybridized existence as well as on the margins and borderlands. *Jesus ACTED UP* is a work that continues to speak to the academy.

¹⁷ See the MCC/UCC in the Valley website at <http://www.mccinthevalley.com>.

¹⁸ See "Rev. Dr. Robert E. Shore-Goss," The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Religious Archives Network, <http://www.lgbtran.org/Profile.aspx?ID=56>.

¹⁹ See "Rev. Dr. Robert E. Shore-Goss," <http://www.lgbtran.org/Profile.aspx?ID=56>.

²⁰ See 2014 LGBTIQ Themed Sessions.

The self-critical dimension

For me, one of the most powerful sections of *Jesus ACTED UP* relates to Bob’s warning against becoming too complacent and turning inwards on oneself (that is, *incurvatus in se*²¹). Bob writes:

Our *a priori* acceptance by God means we have the capacity and responsibility to act justly ... not only for ourselves but for all persons threatened by heterosexist hierarchies of power. ... The oppression of one group is linked to the oppression and exclusion of other groups.²²

This warning against turning inwards is particularly relevant to the LGBTIQ community today when the forces of homonormativity (including, some would say, the focus on same-sex marriage to the exclusion of all other forms of queer kinship) can threaten the transgressive nature of queerness in our political, economic, and ecclesial spheres.²³

I have always been impressed by Bob’s commitment to giving voice to those who occupy different social locations. My first exposure to queer Asian American theology was the essay “Webs of Betrayal, Webs of Blessing” by the Reverend Leng Lim. That essay was published in 1997 in Bob’s anthology *Our Families, Our Values: Snapshots of Queer Kinship*.²⁴ Bob has encouraged and nurtured many other theological voices that differ from his own, such as Justin Tanis’ groundbreaking work on transgender theology in *Trans-Gendered: Theology, Ministry, and Communities of Faith*.²⁵

In his 2002 book, *Queering Christ: Beyond Jesus ACTED UP*, Bob wrote: “Queer has widened my self-definitions by navigating me into uncharted waters where I engage in conversations with people whose identities are shaped by particular markers and personal experiences quite different than my own.”²⁶ Perhaps Bob’s awareness of the importance of self-critique was honed by his own unconventional scholarly background — as a Jesuit priest with a ThD in comparative religion and Buddhism.

Not surprisingly, Bob has refused to rest on his laurels, and his current work on constructing a queer green theology is a wonderful example of how Bob constantly remains self-critical in his own scholarship.²⁷ *Jesus ACTED UP* is a work that continues to model the importance of self-criticism in scholarship.

A critical quibble

Lest my paper be seen as nothing more than a canonization or hagiography of Saint Bob Shore-Goss,²⁸ I will say that one of the critiques that I do have of *Jesus ACTED*

²¹ See, e.g. Jenson, *The Gravity of Sin*.

²² See Goss, *Jesus ACTED UP*, 173.

²³ See, for example, Warner, *The Trouble with Normal*; Cheng, *From Sin to Amazing Grace*, 101–10 (where I discuss the Transgressive Christ).

²⁴ See Lim, “Webs of Betrayal, Webs of Blessing,” 227–41.

²⁵ See Tanis, *Trans-Gendered*.

²⁶ Goss, *Queering Christ*, 233.

²⁷ See Shore-Goss, “Grace Is Green: Green Incarnational Inclusivities,” 65–81.

²⁸ See Halperin, *Saint Foucault*.

UP is that, notwithstanding the Foucauldian appendix in the back, the term “queer” is often used by Bob as a proxy for an identity-based marker. That is, Bob often uses “queer” as a synonym for lesbian and gay folk, as opposed to a true anti-identitarian signifier or as an “identity without an essence.”²⁹ But that is a very small quibble in the larger context of the book’s significance in the field of queer theology.

A concluding note

I want to end this paper with a personal note of gratitude, not just for Bob’s ground-breaking work and ministry, but for the ways in which he embodies the three values of the pastoral, the academic, and the self-critical. About a decade ago, I was going through a particularly challenging time with my doctoral studies and my family life. My father had been diagnosed with cancer, and I no longer felt that doing theology mattered. I had left my doctoral program and was not planning on returning.

I remember how Bob reached out to me and helped me believe in myself, in my theological voice, and in the fact that my voice mattered. He was pastoral, but he also understood the academy and encouraged me to be self-critical about my life decisions. I did eventually return to my doctoral program, and I did finish my degree. Shortly thereafter, Bob generously agreed to write a blurb for my first book, *Radical Love*.³⁰

The closing words of *Jesus ACTED UP* seem particularly appropriate in looking back upon this time of despair in my life: “But God had the final word and raised up Jesus as the queer Christ, a symbol of dissidence and hope for all queers.”³¹

Perhaps, in the context of the AAR annual meeting and its traditional academic conference setting — with all of its attendant hierarchy, anxiety, despair, heartbreak, disgust, jealousy, shame, and even brutality — the kind of deep relationality exhibited by Bob Shore-Goss is the most radical and queer way in which one can act *in persona Christi* so as to model Jesus Christ “ACTing UP” today.

Thank you, Bob, for your life, for your ministry, and for your scholarship. Yes, Jesus is still ACTing UP. And may you continue to “ACT UP” for many more years.

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²⁹ Ibid., 62.

³⁰ Cheng, *Radical Love*, i.

³¹ Goss, *Jesus ACTED UP*, 180.

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