

Kuan Yin: Mirror of the Queer Asian Christ

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For many women, goddesses function as a mirror in which they can see the divine image within themselves. According to Laurie Sue Brockway, an interfaith minister who writes about goddess worship on the internet, men have been “raised with images and pictures of divinity that have instilled confidence in them and made them feel connected to God.” By contrast, women have not had that same experience. As a result, women “need a Goddess mirror we can hold up and look into, an image that confirms our own divinity and empowers us to be *all that*.”¹

People who are lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender share many of the same experiences of women in terms of not having images of the divine that affirm our full humanity. In the Christian tradition, images of the divine (for example, Jesus and Mary) are often stripped of all traces of eroticism and sexuality. Such images of the divine also reinforce an essentialist view of gender by assigning the traditional roles of femininity and masculinity to women and men respectively. This often translates into hostility and homophobia against queer people, who are defined by our very transgression of sexual and gender roles.

The thesis of this paper is that Kuan Yin, the Asian goddess of compassion, can serve as a mirror of the queer experience. Specifically, Kuan Yin affirms three aspects in the life of queer people that are often missing from traditional images of the divine: (1) queer compassion; (2) queer sexuality; and (3) gender fluidity. In other words, Kuan Yin can be an important means by which gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people can see ourselves as being made in the image of God.

Part I of this paper will discuss preliminary issues of methodology and social location in terms of my research on this subject. Part II will explore the ways in which the historical connections between Kuan Yin and the themes of queer compassion, queer sexuality, and gender fluidity can serve as a mirror of the queer experience. Part III concludes with some reflections on the connections between the queer attributes of Kuan Yin and contemporary Western christology. In particular, the paper will explore some interesting connections between Kuan Yin as a mirror of the queer Asian Christ and the traditional three-fold office of Christ (that is, priest, king, and prophet) as articulated by Karl Barth in Volume IV of *Church Dogmatics*.

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¹ See Laurie Sue Brockway, “The Goddess Rocks!,” *SoulfulLiving.com* (April, 2003). Available at http://www.soulfulliving.com/goddess_rocks.htm.

I. PRELIMINARY ISSUES

Following the practices of feminist theologians, this paper recognizes that scholarship is neither a neutral nor an objective enterprise. Accordingly, I begin with a brief reflection on issues of methodology and my social location.

A. Methodology

Research on queer issues is often a difficult enterprise because often our voices have been silent or erased from the historical record. These difficulties are compounded in the area of Kuan Yin studies because of differences in language and culture with respect to original sources. Although there have been a number of studies in English on Kuan Yin as the goddess of compassion,² most of these studies do not devote much attention to issues of queer sexuality or gender fluidity. Even the studies that do touch upon these subjects are not written primarily from the queer experience. For example, the one study that explores issues of sexuality, *Kuan-yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokitesvara*,³ is written largely from a heteronormative perspective (that is, the bulk of the study fails to mention queer sexualities or gender identities at all), and is therefore somewhat limited in its usefulness with respect to a queer study of Kuan Yin.

Recognizing the difficulty of relying upon the existing scholarship in this area, this paper draws upon a number of nontraditional sources in its exploration of the intersections between Kuan Yin and queer people. For example, this paper relies upon sources as diverse as historical studies of queer people in Asia,⁴ an anthology on homosexuality and world religions,⁵ an encyclopedia of queer myth and symbols,⁶ queer

² See, e.g., John Blofeld, *Bodhisattva of Compassion: The Mystical Tradition of Kuan Yin* (Boston: Shambhala, 1988); Sandy Boucher, *Discovering Kwan Yin, Buddhist Goddess of Compassion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999); Martin Palmer, Jay Ramsay, and Man-Ho Kwok, *Kuan Yin: Myths and Prophecies of the Chinese Goddess of Compassion* (London: Thorsons, 1995).

³ Chun-Fang Yu, *Kuan-yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokitesvara* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

⁴ See, e.g., *Asian Homosexuality*, ed. Wayne R. Dynes and Stephen Donaldson (New York: Garland Publishing, 1992); Bret Hinsch, *Passions of the Cut Sleeve: The Male Homosexual Tradition in China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Tsuneo Watanabe and Jun'ichi Iwata, *The Love of the Samurai: A Thousand Years of Japanese Homosexuality*, trans. D.R. Roberts (London: GMP Publishers, 1989).

⁵ See *Homosexuality and World Religions*, ed. Arlene Swidler (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1993).

⁶ See Randy P. Conner, David Hatfield Sparks, and Mariya Sparks, *Cassell's Encyclopedia of Queer Myth, Symbol and Spirit* (London: Cassell, 1997).

tantric sex manuals,⁷ contemporary reflections and poetry by queer Buddhists,⁸ and biographies of queer Buddhists.⁹

In the end, I was surprised at the amount of information that I was able to uncover on the intersections between Kuan Yin and queer people. Initially, I did not expect to find much in this area. However, it soon became apparent that there were in fact a number of interesting historical and contemporary connections between Kuan Yin and the queer experience. Much more work needs to be done in this area, but I hope that this paper is a step in the right direction.

B. Social Location

I write this paper as an openly gay Asian American man who is within the Christian tradition. Although I have tried in my own theological reflection to locate myself within the classical Western biblical and theological tradition,¹⁰ I have been frustrated at the difficult task of finding texts and images that reflect the experiences of my people (that is, other queer Asian American Christians) and that affirm ourselves as beloved children of God.

For some time I have been intrigued by the goddess Kuan Yin. Something about her image resonates deeply with my Chinese-American heritage, and in past years I have kept a statue of her by my desk. Although I would not say that I worship the goddess per se, I do feel that the image of Kuan Yin allows me to make a connection between the divine and many of the people in my family who I love (for example, my mother, my aunts, my cousins, and my deceased grandmother).

Even though I have been openly gay since my college years and have been in a same-sex relationship for nearly twelve years, my interest in Buddhism and Kuan Yin started about two and a half years ago, around the same time that I was beginning to become much more comfortable with my spirituality and seeing myself as an embodied and sexual being. That was also the time during which I began to lose over sixty pounds of weight that I had gained during several years of practice as a lawyer (which I believe was an external manifestation of my unhappy internal state).

As a result of my experiences of religious reawakening over the last few years, I have been intrigued by the possibility of Kuan Yin serving as a christological figure for

⁷ See, e.g., Bruce Anderson, *Tantra for Gay Men* (Los Angeles: Alyson Books, 2002); Jeffrey Hopkins, *Sex, Orgasm, and the Mind of Clear Light: The Sixty-Four Arts of Gay Male Love* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1998).

⁸ See, e.g., *Queer Dharma: Voices of Gay Buddhists*, ed. Winston Leyland (San Francisco: Gay Sunshine Press, 1998); *Queer Dharma: Voices of Gay Buddhists, Volume 2*, ed. Winston Leyland (San Francisco: Gay Sunshine Press, 2000).

⁹ See, e.g., David Schneider, *Street Zen: The Life and Work of Issan Dorsey*, 2d ed. (New York: Marlowe & Company, 2000); Joan Tollifson, *Bare-Bones Meditation: Waking Up from the Story of My Life* (New York: Bell Tower, 1996).

¹⁰ See, e.g., Patrick S. Cheng, "Multiplicity and Judges 19: Constructing a Queer Asian Pacific American Biblical Hermeneutic," *Semeia* 90/91 (2002) at 119-33.

queer Asian people. For me, it has been difficult to envision the Jesus Christ of the gospels and the Western Christian tradition as being *both* queer and Asian (although I do recognize that queer theologians and Asian theologians have tried to do so in their respective areas¹¹). It is my thesis that Kuan Yin might serve as a symbol of salvation and wholeness for queer Asian people of faith, and it is to this topic that this paper now turns.

II. KUAN YIN AND QUEER PEOPLE

A. *Mirror of Queer Compassion*

The first aspect in which Kuan Yin can serve as a mirror of the queer experience is queer compassion. For many queer people, traditional images of the divine in Christianity are anything but compassionate. For example, God is portrayed as an angry deity who sends down divine punishment on homosexuals, such as the wiping out of the residents of Sodom and Gomorrah.¹² Similarly, God is depicted as abhorring individuals who engage in same-sex practices by sentencing them to death,¹³ and punishing idolaters by making them fools and inflicting them with same-sex desires.¹⁴ Indeed, Paul claims outright that homosexuals will not inherit the kingdom of heaven,¹⁵ which is not a very compassionate depiction of God.

By contrast, Kuan Yin is the very essence of compassion. Her name means the “One who Hears the Cries of the World,” and she is the “living expression of loving compassion.”¹⁶ As a female incarnation of the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara, she delays her own release into Nirvana in order to pour out compassion upon the lives of those who seek to be released from suffering. She is available to all people, regardless of gender, ethnicity, age, class, national origin -- and sexual orientation and gender identity as well! Kuan Yin hears the cries of those who suffer and grants their wishes, as long as the cries are well-intentioned.

It is not surprising, therefore, that many contemporary queer Buddhists have seen Kuan Yin as a mirror of queer compassion. In an essay on the queer Buddhist experience, Kobai Scott Whitney mentions Kannon -- the Japanese Kuan Yin -- in his discussion of compassion. He argues that queer Buddhists are called to listen to the “pivotal injunction of *Kannon* to listen to the cries of the world.”¹⁷ According to Whitney, queer Buddhists must be particularly aware of the seductive effects of “lesbian/gay consumerism” that turn us away from such cries.¹⁸ This is because many of

¹¹ See, e.g., Robert E. Goss, *Queering Christ: Beyond Jesus Acted Up* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2002) (queer); Choan-Seng Song, *Jesus, the Crucified People* (New York: Crossroad, 1990) (Asian).

¹² See Genesis 19.

¹³ See Leviticus 18:22; Leviticus 20:13.

¹⁴ See Romans 1:27.

¹⁵ See 1 Corinthians 6:9.

¹⁶ Palmer, xii.

¹⁷ Kobai Scott Whitney, “Vast Sky and White Clouds: Is There a Gay Buddhism?,” in Leyland, 23.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

us do not have children to support and thus have the luxury of excess income and discretionary spending. In addition, there are people all around us (including in queer communities) who are not only poor in terms of money, but who are also poor in spirit, good looks, or even charm. All of them are deserving of our compassionate treatment.¹⁹

In the same section in which Whitney mentions Kannon's command to listen to the cries of the world, he also talks about Issan Dorsey-Roshi, an openly gay founder of the Hartford Street Zen Center in San Francisco who was known for his compassion to those who were at the margins of society.²⁰ As described in his biography *Street Zen: The Life and Work of Issan Dorsey*:

[Dorsey] was a drug addict, he was gay, he appeared in drag, and he died of AIDS. For many years he lived right on the edge, befriending junkies, drags queens and albies who lived precariously like him, on the edges of society. When he died, a Zen teacher and priest, he was still befriending and caring for those whom our society rejected then and continues to reject now, people ill with the AIDS virus.²¹

Although Whitney does not make the connection explicitly, it is clear that he sees Dorsey as modern-day queer Kannon who acted with compassion with respect to the cries of the world.

Kuan Yin as a male Bodhisattva also appears in contemporary queer Buddhist poetry. In the poem *O Nobly Born*, the gay Buddhist poet Trebor writes about an ex-boyfriend who "ripped me off / and went back on junk." Instead of feeling rage at his ex-boyfriend, Trebor sits alone in meditation. He rings the Tibetan bell that his ex-boyfriend gave him, which "he must have stolen." He sees himself as "sitting right next to Chenrezig," which is the Tibetan version of Avalokitesvara. In his compassion for his ex-boyfriend, Trebor becomes Chenrezig himself. In the closing lines of the poem he says, echoing the words of a Bodhisattva, "*I vow to deliver him.*"²²

In sum, Kuan Yin -- as herself or in her various forms as Kannon or Chenrezig -- can be seen as a symbol of queer compassion for gay people who seek an image of the divine that is neither angry nor vindictive. By listening to the cries of the world, queer people see Kuan Yin reflected in ourselves. Miraculously, we become incarnations of divine compassion, something that is generally denied to us in the orthodox Christian tradition.

B. Mirror of Queer Sexuality

The second aspect in which Kuan Yin can serve as a mirror of the queer experience is queer sexuality. Traditional Christian images of the divine do little to

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Schneider, xi.

²² Trebor, "O Nobly Born," in Leyland v.1, 406.

affirm human sexuality, queer or otherwise. God the Father is an asexual deity without a consort. God the Son is portrayed as human in every way except with respect to his sexuality. God the Holy Spirit is feminine but without a body. Mary, the *theotokos*, is a virgin mother and, in the Roman Catholic tradition, conceived without the stain of original sin. Traditional Christian theology has not been of much help either. Since Augustine's time, Christian theology has characterized sexual lust or concupiscence as God's punishment of humans for the Fall and has condemned all sexual acts that are non-procreative in nature.

By contrast with the erotophobia of the Christian tradition, Kuan Yin takes the form of a goddess who is radical in terms of her embodiedness and sexuality. As Dr. Chun-Fang Yu notes in her study, Kuan Yin was not simply a "sexual tease," but she actually "engaged in sexual activities in order to carry out the mission of salvation."²³ For example, in her incarnation as the Woman of Yen-Chou, Kuan Yin had sex with any man who wanted it. Interestingly, this resulted in the man being "free from sexual desire forever."²⁴ Indeed, sex can be a "powerful tool of spiritual transformation," and a Bodhisattva such as Kuan Yin can use "sex as a skillful means (*fang-pien*, *upaya*)" to achieve enlightenment.²⁵ Yu also points out the connections between a prostitute and a Bhodisattva. Both are free to:

bestow their gifts equally upon all [both] are singularly driven to seduce and satisfy their customers, and effectively employ a wide variety of different skills aimed at pleasing all types of beings.²⁶

Finally, Kuan Yin is connected to tantric rituals. One story describes how she appears as a beautiful woman who excites the King of Pleasure who did not believe in Buddhism. By using her sexuality, she makes him into a protector of Buddhism.²⁷

Queer people have seen Kuan Yin as a mirror of their sexualities for centuries. There is a fascinating tradition of medieval stories from Japan that involve the goddess Kannon appearing in the form of handsome young men. These youths had sex with Buddhist priests in order to bring them to enlightenment. These stories are named after *chigo*, who were the youths that were involved in homosexual relationships with such priests. Same-sex relationships were common in medieval Japan, and the moral of *chigo* stories was not condemnation, but rather religious awakening as the result of such relationships.²⁸

For example, in *The Story of Kannon's Manifestation as a Youth (Chigo Kannon Engi)*, Kannon takes the form of a thirteen or fourteen-year-old youth. The youth appears to a devoted Buddhist monk who had made monthly pilgrimages to a temple dedicated to

²³ See generally Yu, 421.

²⁴ Ibid, 424.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ See Margaret H. Childs, "Chigo Monogatari: Love Stories or Buddhist Sermons?," in Dynes and Donaldson, 1-5.

Kannon. The youth does “all he could to please the monk,” and the monk’s love for the youth is “unparalleled.”²⁹ After three years, the youth dies, and the monk is overwhelmed with grief. However, presumably the monk realizes the impermanence of all things, including love. He opens the coffin after thirty-five days, and the eleven-headed Kannon appears in the place of the youth. Kannon tells the monk that in seven years the monk will be escorted to the highest grade of paradise in the Pure Land where he will be reunited with the youth on a lotus petal.³⁰

Similarly, in *A Long Tale for an Autumn Night (Aki no Yo no Nagamonogatari)*, Kannon appears in the form of a handsome sixteen-year-old youth. The youth has a love affair with a monk who had made a pilgrimage to a temple dedicated to Kannon. Their encounter is described in highly erotic terms of scent, sight and touch, and they are described as “open[ing] their hearts to each other” and exchanging vows as “they lay together” through the night.³¹ The youth is kidnapped by goblins, and ultimately commits suicide by throwing himself into a river. The monk is devastated, but ultimately it is revealed that the youth was the goddess Kannon, who used the youth as a means to lead the monk to salvation.³²

The connections between Kuan Yin and the tantric rituals described by Yu in her study³³ can also be seen in the reflections of contemporary queer Buddhists. Jeffrey Hopkins has written about how queer sex is a means by which gay men can become aware of “more profound levels of mind.” Indeed, queer sex allows for the “possible development into extraordinary insight.”³⁴ For Hopkins,

in fully conscious orgasm, etc., the mind can experience its own fundamental reality devoid of grosser attitudes, such that the truth can be fully manifest [I]n fully pleasurable orgasm, etc., there need not be a drowning in a dimming of insight; these states can be a means of seeing what is the basis of phenomena the foundation of appearance, the ground behind appearances.³⁵

In his groundbreaking book, *Sex, Orgasm and the Mind of Clear Light: The Sixty-Four Arts of Gay Male Love*, Hopkins creates a queer tantric sex manual that is based on the Buddhist sex manual *Tibetan Arts of Love*. The chapters are explicit (the chapter titles include “Pinching and Scratching,” “Playing with the Organ,” “Methods of Union from the Rear,” and “Oral Sex”), and they reflect the embodied nature of gay male sexuality.³⁶ Trebor, the queer Buddhist poet, sums up the themes of this section nicely in his poem *Ode to Buddha*:

Teach me your tantra

²⁹ Margaret H. Childs, trans., “The Story of Kannon’s Manifestation as a Youth,” in Leyland, 360.

³⁰ Ibid, 359-62.

³¹ Margaret H. Childs, trans., “A Long Tale for an Autumn Night,” in Dynes and Donaldson, 13.

³² Ibid, 6-25.

³³ See Yu, 426 (describing Kuan Yin in a Tibetan *yab-yum* embrace).

³⁴ Jeffrey Hopkins, “What Does It Mean to Practice Tantra?” in Hopkins, 107.

³⁵ Jeffrey Hopkins, “Why Tibetan Buddhism Is Sex-Friendly,” in Hopkins, 75.

³⁶ Hopkins, v.

sing me your song
fuck me right out of being
with your blessed dorje dong!³⁷

In sum, Kuan Yin can serve as a mirror of the queer experience by affirming queer sexuality.

C. Mirror of Gender Fluidity

The third aspect in which Kuan Yin can serve as a mirror of the queer experience is gender fluidity. Queer people are defined by our transgression of gender boundaries. Gay men and lesbians do not conform to traditional gender roles because we happen to partner sexually and emotionally with people of the same sex. Bisexual people also do not conform to such roles because they refuse to restrict their partners to just one sex, but rather remain open to sexual relationships with people of both sexes. Finally, transgender people resist society's categories of gender performance (for example, drag or cross-dressing). In some cases, transgender people feel that they have been physically assigned the wrong sex from birth and seek sex reassignment surgery.

Traditional Christian teachings have done little to allow queer people to see gender fluidity as a characteristic of the divine. Biblical teachings reinforce gender roles, such as the teaching that wives should remain silent in churches and be in submission to their husbands,³⁸ and that women should not teach or have authority over a man.³⁹ Ecclesial traditions from Eastern Orthodoxy to Roman Catholicism to the Southern Baptist Convention refuse to ordain women as priests or ministers, solely on the basis of their sex. People who transgress traditional gender roles or fail to conform to "family values" are seen as deviants.

By contrast, Kuan Yin is characterized by gender fluidity at the very core of her being. In her study, Dr. Chun-Fang Yu traces the evolution of Kuan Yin from the male Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara in India to the female goddess in China. According to Yu, Kuan Yin was initially depicted as male -- complete with moustache -- until the tenth century. Yu's hypothesis is that the feminization of Kuan Yin in China was a response to the "patriarchal stance of institutional Buddhism and Neo-Confucianism," both of which lacked "feminine symbols and female practitioners."⁴⁰ Kuan Yin has also taken on various genders in her incarnations as Kannon (Japan), Kwan Um (Korea), and Chenrezig (Tibet).

It is no surprise that queer people through the centuries have embraced Kuan Yin as a mirror of their gender fluidity. For example, in the Ming and Ch'ing dynasties, male actors who played female roles -- that is, men who were able to express their gender fluidity on stage -- were described favorably as being as "beautiful as Kuan-yin."

³⁷ Trebor, "Ode to Buddha," in Leyland v. 1, 404.

³⁸ 1 Corinthians 14:34.

³⁹ 1 Timothy 2:12.

⁴⁰ Yu, 21.

According to Yu, one man made a painting of his male lover of seventeen years, who was an actor, in the pose of Kuan Yin during the seventeenth century. The painting was a wedding gift for a relationship that undoubtedly transgressed the traditional gender roles of its day.⁴¹

Kuan Yin was also embraced by lesbians throughout history as a symbol of gender fluidity. In the nineteenth century, certain Chinese women belonged to societies such as the Golden Orchid Association (the *jin lan qi*), which was an organization that “sought to integrate feminism, lesbianism, and spiritual practice.”⁴² Many of these members participated in union ceremonies with other members of the Association and included wedding feasts and ritual gifts. Some of the sexual practices of the Association included lesbian lovemaking called “grinding tofu.”⁴³ The members of this association honored Kuan Yin as a goddess who not only protected women but also rejected the traditional gender role of heterosexual marriage.

Contemporary queer Buddhists have also embraced Kuan Yin as a symbol of gender fluidity. According to David Fernbach, a gay activist and social philosopher, men can learn from Kuan Yin’s gender transformation. He writes:

the wonderful example of love shown by Kuan Yin requires, if it is to develop on any large scale in society, a process of de-masculinization, of reasserting the maternal culture, not as something ascribed solely to women, but as a quality that men must equally display.⁴⁴

Jim Wilson, a contemporary queer Buddhist practitioner, has also reflected upon the ways in which Kuan Yin can challenge the sexism of the traditional Buddhist praxis. For Wilson, Kuan Yin is an important female image of enlightenment and possibly the first “trans-sexual deity.”⁴⁵

In sum, Kuan Yin has been a symbol of gender fluidity for queer people through the centuries. Because of the fact that she has evolved from male to female over the course of several centuries, Kuan Yin is a mirror of the divine for people who do not fit within society’s conventional gender roles.

III. KUAN YIN AS MIRROR OF THE QUEER ASIAN CHRIST

Thus far I have suggested that Kuan Yin serves as a mirror that reflects three key aspects of the queer experience: (1) queer compassion, (2) queer sexuality, and (3) gender fluidity. The mirror is a powerful theological symbol. It is the symbol of Venus and femininity. It is a symbol of self reflection, self affirmation, and beauty. For many people, the goddess is a mirror in which they can see the divine within themselves,

⁴¹ Yu, 424, 548 n.9.

⁴² Conner, Sparks, and Sparks, 208.

⁴³ Ibid, 161.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 208.

⁴⁵ Jim Wilson, “Practicing Buddhism As a Gay Man,” in Leyland, 62.

particularly if they have been excluded from traditional images of the divine because of sex, gender, race, sexual orientation or other factors.

Interestingly, the mirror also plays an important role in classical Christian theology. John Calvin, for example, uses the mirror as one of the functions of the law. In Book II of the *Institutes of Christian Religion*, Calvin argues that the law is like a mirror in which our sinfulness is disclosed.⁴⁶ This is consistent with the epistemological focus of Calvin's theology in which humanity's ability to see properly is distorted by original sin. According to Calvin, only through the spectacles of scripture are humans able to see properly.⁴⁷

Karl Barth also uses the symbol of the mirror, but primarily in a christological sense. For Barth, true humanity can only be seen in the reflection of Jesus Christ.⁴⁸ Similarly, the sinfulness of humanity is only revealed in what God has done for us in Jesus Christ.⁴⁹ Indeed, it can be argued that the entire *Church Dogmatics* is a reflection on orthodox theology as seen through the mirror of God's encounter with us in the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Taking Calvin's and Barth's use of the mirror as a theological symbol and queering it, I would like to conclude this paper with an exploration of Kuan Yin as a mirror of the queer Asian Christ. As Dr. Hyun Kyung pointed out recently in class, the connection between Kuan Yin and Jesus Christ is not new. It appeared as early as the seventh century when Nestorian Christianity arrived in China. Later, in the sixteenth century, the Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci also made a connection between Kuan Yin and Jesus Christ.

I would like to suggest that some interesting connections can be made between (1) Kuan Yin as a mirror of the queer Asian Christ and (2) the threefold nature of Jesus Christ as articulated by Karl Barth in Volume IV of *Church Dogmatics*. Although these connections are tentative, they do represent my attempt at constructing a queer Asian christology by using Kuan Yin as a theological source of reflection.

For Karl Barth, Jesus Christ is manifested in the threefold office of priest, king, and prophet. As priest, Jesus Christ descends from heaven into earth, which is a reflection of the divine kenosis or emptying.⁵⁰ I would like to suggest that this downward movement parallels the idea of Kuan Yin as a mirror of compassion. Kuan Yin descends from the cosmic sphere in her various incarnational forms to hear and address the cries of the world. For queer people, Kuan Yin meets us in the depths of our suffering, whether it is discrimination, exclusion, queer bashing, or HIV/AIDS. For queer Asian Christians, Kuan Yin hears the cries of our suffering as social and political outcasts in a white, racist queer world. She also hears our cries as outcasts in our racial and religious communities.

⁴⁶ John Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion* II.vii.7.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* I.vi.1.

⁴⁸ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/2.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* IV/1, IV/2, IV/3 v.1.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* IV/1.

By descending towards our suffering through her queer compassion, Kuan Yin is Jesus Christ, our high priest.

As king, Jesus Christ ascends from earth to heaven, which is a reflection of the divine glorification of humanity.⁵¹ This upward movement parallels the idea of Kuan Yin as a mirror of queer sexuality. Through tantric sexuality, Kuan Yin is able to lift us out of our state of ignorance towards enlightenment. For queer people, Kuan Yin brings us out of our self-hatred and self-loathing, and affirms our sexuality as a means for experiencing the divine. For queer Asian Christians, Kuan Yin affirms our identities as sexual beings. We are no longer seen as asexual eunuchs by the queer, Asian American and Christian communities, but rather as *sexy* and fully embodied persons. By lifting us up through her queer sexuality, Kuan Yin is Jesus Christ, our king.

Finally, as prophet, Jesus Christ is the true witness who liberates us from falsehood.⁵² I would suggest this final office of Jesus Christ parallels the idea of Kuan Yin as a mirror of gender fluidity. As a multi-gendered deity, Kuan Yin is a true witness of the richness of gender in the human experience. Kuan Yin says “Nein!” to gender essentialism and liberates humanity from the falsehood of sexism and stereotypes. For queer people, Kuan Yin allows us to live as true witnesses of who we are, particularly with respect to our gender identities. For queer Asian Christians, Kuan Yin allows us to escape the gender fascism of our Confucian and Christian heritage. She allows us to transgress stereotypes of passivity, submissiveness and sexual “bottoms” in the queer community. By liberating us from falsehood through her gender fluidity, Kuan Yin is Jesus Christ, our prophet.

In this paper, I have tried to suggest some of the ways in which Kuan Yin reflects the full divinity and humanity that is within queer people. In particular, I have explored the ways in which Kuan Yin reflects our experiences of compassion, queer sexuality, and gender fluidity. I have also tried to draw some connections between Kuan Yin as a mirror of the queer Asian Christian experience and the three-fold office of Jesus Christ as articulated by Karl Barth. Although a full exploration of the christological implications of Kuan Yin for queer Asian people is beyond the scope of this paper, it is my hope that these reflections might serve as a springboard for future work in this area. I close with a quote from the poem *If Thich Nhat Hanh Was a Fag Like Me*:

For just this once
I will take one step
and remember that I am nothing but what I give
humble myself
before the grace and gift of being gay.⁵³

⁵¹ Ibid. IV/2.

⁵² Ibid. 1V/3.

⁵³ Trebor, “If Thich Nhat Hahn Was a Fag Like Me,” in Leyland v. 1, 407

For many queer Asian Christians, Kuan Yin may be the mirror that allows us to see the “grace and gift” of being queer, Asian and Christian.

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