

**EMBRACING THE SACRED IN THE UNFAMILIAR:
REFLECTIONS ON THE TASK OF CHRISTIAN
THEOLOGISING UNDER THE TUTELAGE
OF LGBTQ PEOPLE**

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God saw everything that God had made, and indeed, it was very
good
(Gen. 1:31)

Again, the Jews were divided because of these words. Many of
them were saying, 'He has a demon and is out of his mind. Why
listen to him?' Others were saying, 'These are not the words of
one who has a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?'
(Jn 10:19-21)

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) people are often subjected to suspicion, condemnation and exclusion by mainstream churches based on the perception that they are deviant, pathological and sinful. Consequently, they are treated as objects of unfamiliarity, derision and pity rather than subjects of experiential wisdom who can inform the theological enterprise. Through a detailed analysis and interpretation of the narratives of gay and transgender Malaysian Christians on their interweavings of gender, sexuality and faith, and navigating the post-synodal apostolic exhortation Amoris laetitia and the thoughts of various scholars, I argue that LGBTQ people can contribute to the augmentation of Christian theologising – a sort of tutelage from those whose voices are ordinarily marginalised and dismissed due to their non-normative genders and sexualities. Specifically, I propose that LGBTQ theological tutelage can galvanise the processes of (i) recognising and respecting personal theological agency; (ii) challenging gender and sexuality injustices; and (iii) interrogating and rethinking biblical interpretation.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of rights is often deployed by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) activists in defence of their identities and rights,¹ including in theological discourses such as gay and lesbian liberation theologies.² Malaysians, on the other hand, discover that any claims to rights are automatically invalidated, not least because they have been labelled as *contra naturam* proponents of a *budaya binatang* (animalistic culture), and human beings who are branded as *animals* cannot lay claim to *human* rights.³ Discursive strategies of human rights are further annulled by accusations of non-normative genders and sexualities as brazen displays of post-lapsarian distortion and wilful defiance of divine imperatives. The principal argument here is that one ceases to have to rights when what one is doing and who one is/chooses to be contravenes the law of God. In such situations, claims to purported rights are in reality manifestations of ungodliness that need to cease or in the case of LGBTQ people – usually familiar to theology only in terms of deviant iniquity – be ‘counselled’ and ‘cured.’ Subsequently, the relationship between theology and

¹ Jami K. Taylor, Daniel C. Lewis, and Donald P. Haider-Markel, *The Remarkable Rise of Transgender Rights* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2018); Beichuan Zhang and Joan Kaufman, ‘The Rights of People with Same Sex Sexual Behaviour: Recent Progress and Continuing Challenges in China’, in *Sexuality, Gender and Rights: Exploring Theory and Practice in South and Southeast Asia*, ed. Geetanjali Misra and Radhika Chandiramani (London: Sage Publications Ltd, 2005), 113–30.

² John J. McNeill, *Taking a Chance on God: Liberating Theology for Gays, Lesbians, and Their Lovers, Families, and Friends* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1988).

³ Preeti Jha, ‘Malaysia’s LGBT Community Under Siege as Government Ignores Abuse,’ *Nikkei Asian Review*, 20 November 2019, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Malaysia-s-LGBT-community-under-siege-as-government-ignores-abuse>; see also Joseph N. Goh, ‘The Word Was Not Made Flesh: Theological Reflections on the Banning of *Seksualiti Merdeka* 2011,’ *Dialog* 51, no. 2 (2012): 145–154; Julian C. H. Lee, ‘Ini Bukan Budaya Kita: This Is Not Our Culture,’ in *Punks, Monks and Politics: Authenticity in Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia*, eds. Julian C. H. Lee and Marco Ferrarese (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2016), 65–77.

LGBTQ people can only be one in which the latter must unquestioningly submit to the corrective measures of the former.

Pope Francis' post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Amoris laetitia* is explicit in its rebuttal of gender ideologies that seemingly usurp the role of a creator-God by dismantling the inseparability of gender and anatomy.⁴ The document also calls for more rigorous 'pastoral guidance' for families with members 'who experience same-sex attraction' in order for them to 'receive the assistance they need to understand and fully carry out God's will in their lives.'⁵ These unchanging, essentialist notions of biology as inevitably destiny, and the compulsory heteronormative alignment of gender, sexuality and anatomy have been debunked, perhaps most famously by the feminist Judith Butler.⁶ While it is evidently beyond the remit of this article to present the complexities of Butler's cogent theories, I agree with her that gender, sexuality and anatomy are distinct but interrelated human categories that do not necessarily have to fall into a heteronormative indivisibility. Rather than perceiving these theories as sinful ideologies, I see them as demonstrative of God's unpredictably creative prowess.

Following from these ideas, obviously contradicting *Amoris laetitia*, I hold that gender is not purely determined by anatomy, and sexuality is not solely confined to attraction between people of the opposite sex. As sociologist Jeffrey Weeks aptly describes, 'biology conditions and limits what is possible [but] it does not cause the patterns of sexual life [as it is] a set of potentialities, which are transformed and given meaning in social relationships.'⁷ His words also ring true for the designs of gendered life. Countless human beings find meaningful existence outside of rigidly normative frameworks, and they do not see themselves as abnormal, pathological or sinful.

Consequently, I propose that the insights, knowledge and experiences of LGBTQ people can tutor Christian theology. In

⁴ *Amoris Laetitia* (AL) 56, accessed at Vatican archives.

⁵ *Ibid.* 250.

⁶ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

⁷ Jeffrey Weeks, *Sexuality*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2003), 18.

other words, the lived realities of LGBTQ people can contribute to the direction and epistemological enrichment of theological pursuits, notably by those who cherish their faith as well as their gender and sexual configurations. When these individuals share stories of their lives in relation to their faith, and their faith in relation to their lives, they are effectively collaborating in the production of theological knowledge that would often be summarily dismissed and excluded. The preclusion of such knowledge solidifies the muzzling and invisibilisation of the sacred in the unfamiliar, thus halting the development and ongoing application of the deposit of faith to real lives in contemporary times.

The persistent rejection of the identities and expressions of LGBTQ people must cease, as it is little more than the perpetuation of theological violence that has no real life-giving telos. Although many LGBTQ Christians no longer look to the upper echelons of Christianity for validation or approval, or subscribe to the belief that they are abnormal and immoral, they are also aware that their personal and spiritual lives continue to be impacted by official religiosity in direct and indirect ways, particularly if they reside in countries where dominant Christian beliefs and practices are governed by heteronormative and cisnormative theological ideals, and/or ally themselves with cultural notions of conservatism.⁸

In what follows, I first pay attention to details which are pertinent to Malaysia as my case study. Then, I offer some thoughts on the strategy that frames my proposal. Thereafter, I provide a fuller discussion on LGBTQ tutelage of Christian theology before I conclude. While my discussion is meant to be ecumenical, I will give special emphasis to the theological and ecclesiastical leanings of the Roman Catholic Church which command immense deference and respect in the country. I am aware of the pitfall of providing a universal theological discourse that pays no heed to the specificities of temporal and spatial contexts, but I am hopeful that

⁸ Heteronormativity is the ideology that a specific expression of heterosexuality is 'normal,' natural and superior. Similarly, cisnormativity refers to the belief that gender is premised solely on genitalia.

the content of my discussion will resonate with realities outside Malaysia.

CHRISTIANITY, ISLAM AND LGBTQ: CRUCIAL MALAYSIAN CONTEXTS

Malaysia is a mostly-Muslim country, as opposed to an Islamic state. While it espouses Islam as its official religion, it holds the secular Federal Constitution as the law of the land and ostensibly permits freedom of religious practice. The country comprises Peninsular Malaysia, formerly known as Malaya and located between Thailand and Singapore, and two states in the island of Borneo. Malaya gained independence in 1957, and Malaysia was formed in 1963 when the two Bornean states were incorporated into the nation. Current statistical estimates claim that Malaysia is home to approximately 32.6 million citizens and non-citizens who are largely taxonomised according to religious and ethnic demographics.⁹ The interface of ethnicity and religiosity is particularly poignant for Muslims, as “Malay” means a person who professes the religion of Islam’ in the Federal Constitution.¹⁰

The first form of Christianity in Southeast Asia was Roman Catholicism which arrived with missionaries in the Malayan state of Melaka in the early sixteenth century. Anglicanism’s foothold in Malaya began towards the end of the eighteenth century.¹¹ Other Christian missionary activities flourished from the nineteenth

⁹ Department of Statistics, Malaysia, “Current Population Estimates, Malaysia, 2018-2019,” *Population & Demography*, 2019, 2018-19, https://www.dosm.gov.my/v1/index.php?r=column/cthemByCat&cat=155&bul_id=aWJZRkI4UEdKcUZpT2tVT090Snpydz09&menu_id=L0pheU43NWJwRWVSZklWdzQ4TlhUUU09.

¹⁰ The Commissioner of Law Revision, Malaysia, “Federal Constitution” (1957), sec. 160(2), <http://www.agc.gov.my/agcportal/uploads/files/Publications/FC/FEDERAL%20CONSTITUTION%20ULANG%20CETAK%202016.pdf>.

¹¹ Michael S. Northcott, “Two Hundred Years of Anglican Mission,” in *Christianity in Malaysia: A Denominational History*, ed. Robert A. Hunt, Kam Hing Lee, and John Roxborough (Selangor, Malaysia: Pelanduk Publications, 1992), 34-74.

century onwards.¹² Today, Christians in Peninsular Malaysia consist of Roman Catholics, Orthodox Catholics, Anglicans, Lutherans, Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, Salvation Army, Assembly of God, Full Gospel Tabernacle and Evangelical Free Church.¹³ This array of Christian denominations is undoubtedly far from being exhaustive, and new communities are formed on a regular basis. Christians constitute more than 9.2% of all Malaysian inhabitants.¹⁴ 971,580 Roman Catholics make up 3.0% of the total Malaysian population.¹⁵

Despite critical differences in Christian doctrine and praxis, Malaysian churches have banded together to form alliances such as the Christian Federation of Malaysia which consists of the Catholic Bishops' Conferences of Malaysia, the Council of Churches Malaysia and the National Evangelical Christian Fellowship.¹⁶ Christian leaders perceive these alliances as indispensable in view of the increasing impingement of *Syariah* or Muslim laws - ordinarily operationalised against Muslims - on the lives of non-Muslims. Such bandings are perceived as critical to the freedom of religion assured in the Federal Constitution but consistently compromised in actual practice. Malaysians constantly encounter compulsory conversions to Islam for non-Muslims who marry Muslims, 'interfaith custody battles'¹⁷ and the banning of the

¹² Robert A. Hunt, Kam Hing Lee, and John Roxborough, eds., *Christianity in Malaysia: A Denominational History* (Selangor, Malaysia: Pelanduk Publications, 1992).

¹³ Christian Federation of Malaysia, "CFM Components," Christian Federation of Malaysia, 2018, <https://cfmsia.org/cfm-components/>.

¹⁴ Department of Statistics, Malaysia, "Population Distribution and Basic Demographic Characteristics 2010," 2010, https://www.dosm.gov.my/v1/index.php?r=column/cthem&menu_id=L0pheU43NWJwRWVSZklWdzQ4TlhUUT09&bul_id=MDMxdHZjWTk1SjFzTzNkRXZcVZjdz09.

¹⁵ Lawrence Andrew, ed., *Official Catholic Church Directory 2019* (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: Herald, 2019).

¹⁶ Christian Federation of Malaysia, "CFM Components."

¹⁷ Malay Mail Online, "Shariah Laws Already Affect Non-Muslims, SIS Says," *Malay Mail Online*, 26 November 2016, <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2016/11/26/shariah-laws-already-affect-non-muslims-sis-says/1258895>.

name ‘Allah’ for God among non-Muslims.¹⁸ Malaysian Christian theologising has responded through a dedication to interfaith and ecumenical matters. Moreover, gender issues in theology often focus on the rights of women in church hierarchies, and sexuality matters in theology concentrate on the heteronormative nuclear family and the proscription of numerous sexual acts. Relatively less work exists on theologising non-normative genders and sexualities.¹⁹

As is the case in many parts of Southeast Asia, there is often no distinction between gender and sexual identities in Malaysia, or even of actual identity categories in this respect.²⁰ In the history of the nation, gender-diverse individuals who are named in contemporary times as *lelaki lembut* (literally ‘soft men’ or feminine-acting men), *wanita keras* (literally ‘hard women’ or masculine-acting women), *mak nyah* (transgender women), transgender men, gay men, lesbian women, cross-dressers and non-binary people were traditionally accepted or at the very least tolerated in society. These included the *mak andam* (traditional Malay bridal assistants) and the *mak yong* (traditional Malay dance dramatists).²¹ There were also the *manang bali* (‘transformed’ male-to-female shamans) who served as healers and spiritual intermediaries in Borneo.²² The advent and revivalism of Islam, as well as the expansion of Christianity, often seen as necessary artefacts of Malaysian modernity that demand

¹⁸ Dian A.H. Shah, *Constitutions, Religion and Politics in Asia: Indonesia, Malaysia and Sri Lanka*, Comparative Constitutional Law and Policy (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

¹⁹ Sharon A. Bong, *Becoming Queer and Religious in Malaysia and Singapore* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020).

²⁰ Peter A. Jackson, “An Explosion of Thai Identities: Global Queering and Re-Imagining Queer Theory,” *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 2, no. 4 (2000): 405–24; Martin F. Manalansan IV, *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); Michael G. Peletz, “Transgenderism and Gender Pluralism in Southeast Asia since Early Modern Times,” *Current Anthropology* 47, no. 2 (2006): 309–40.

²¹ Peletz, “Transgenderism and Gender Pluralism...” :309–40.

²² Penelope Graham, *Iban Shamanism: An Analysis of the Ethnographic Literature*, Occasional Paper (Canberra, Australia: Department of Anthropology, Australian National University, 1987).

‘pure’ religiosity from citizens, have contributed to the rarity, stigmatisation or even extinction of such subjects.²³

Present-day LGBTQ Malaysians are often called ‘*lembut*, *sotong*, *patah*, *bapok*, *pondan*, *kedik*, *lalang*, *kunyit*, *lala*, *potaipayeh*, *ombohthu*, *gēi lóu*, *sí fāt gwái*, *bō li*, *â qúa*, *ná yǐng*’²⁴ and many other derogatory terms in Malaysian languages that signal abnormality and weakness. Little wonder therefore that terms such these have been replaced with more empowering, ‘Western-styled’ labels such as ‘lesbian,’ ‘gay,’ ‘bisexual,’ ‘transgender’ and ‘queer.’ Numerous LGBTQ and other human rights advocates canvass for gender and sexuality justice and protection, rather than marriage equality. As Malaysian gay activist Pang Khee Teik points out:

Can we even begin to talk about marriage equality when many LGBT in Malaysia are worried about losing their jobs because of who they are, they are worried of being kicked out of their families, they are worried of being bullied at schools because of who they are ... We don’t even have basic rights. We don’t even get the chance to have public conversations about it without being shut down.²⁵

Muslim legalities greatly affect issues of non-normative genders and sexualities. ‘*Liwat*’ (sexual relations between male persons), ‘*musahaqah*’ (sexual relations between female persons) and ‘crossdressing’ – often used pejoratively (and erroneously) against

²³ Julian C. H. Lee, “Malaysia,” in *Policing Sexuality: Sex, Society and the State* (London: Zed Books, 2011), 97–108.

²⁴ Joseph N. Goh, “Songsang, Confessions, and Theologizings of Divine Lavishness,” in *Unlocking Orthodoxies for Inclusive Theologies: Queer Alternatives*, ed. Robert E. Shore-Goss and Joseph N. Goh (New York: Routledge, 2020), 54.

²⁵ Quoted in Ida Lim and Melissa Chi, “Same-Sex Marriage in Malaysia? Advocates Say Even Basic Rights Still in Short Supply,” *Malay Mail Online*, 30 June 2015, http://www.themalaymailonline.com/malaysia/article/same-sex-marriage-in-malaysia-advocates-say-even-basic-rights-still-in-shor?utm_content=bufferfc9b6&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer.

transgender people – are criminalised.²⁶ These religious proscriptions are also entrenched in the Malaysian Penal Code, a legacy of British colonisation.²⁷ As experienced throughout many parts of Asia, the presence of a dominant religious system has an overwhelming influence and impact on the understanding and praxis of minority religions in that country. Yet, despite their tensions, mainline Malaysian Christian and Muslim teachings ironically appear as allies that pronounce non-normative genders and sexualities as impermissible and sinful under all circumstances.

The National Evangelical Christian Fellowship, for instance, is emphatic that ‘homosexual behaviour is considered an abomination to the God of the Church[,] smearing the reputation of the Church and scarring the witness of the Christian community in the country.’²⁸ In recent years, the Roman Catholic Church in Malaysia has organised a variety of seminars and plays in various parishes to decry non-normative genders and sexualities. No theological affirmation or support has ever been offered to LGBTQ people of faith by mainstream Malaysian churches.²⁹ Good Samaritan Kuala Lumpur³⁰ and Antioch Mission in Asia³¹ are the only inclusive and affirming Christian communities in Malaysia, but remain dismissed and ostracised by mainline churches. Seemingly in congruence with *Amoris Laetitia*’s insistence that ‘every person, regardless of sexual orientation, ought to be

²⁶ The Commissioner of Law Revision, Malaysia, “Syariah Criminal Offences (Federal Territories) Act 1997” (2006), <http://www.agc.gov.my/agcportal/index.php?r=portal2/lom2&id=1431>.

²⁷ The Commissioner of Law Revision, Malaysia, “Malaysian Penal Code” (1997), secs 377 A, B and C, <http://www.agc.gov.my/agcportal/index.php?r=portal2/lom2&id=1687>.

²⁸ National Evangelical Christian Fellowship Malaysia (NECF), “Gay Church: A Response,” *Berita NECF Articles*, December 2007, <http://www.necf.org.my/newsmaster.cfm?&menuid=2&action=view&retrieveid=930>.

²⁹ Joseph N. Goh, “The Word Was *Not* Made Flesh: Theological Reflections on the Banning of *Seksualiti Merdeka* 2011,” *Dialog* 51, no. 2 (2012): 145–154.

³⁰ “Good Samaritan Kuala Lumpur,” accessed 7 July 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/gskualalumpur/>.

³¹ Carrey Yubong, “Antioch Mission in Asia: Autocephalous (Independent) Church in Catholic Apostolic Tradition,” accessed 18 July 2017, <http://www.australianchurchofantioch.com/antioch-mission-in-asia.html>.

respected in his or her dignity and treated with consideration,³² Malaysian churches condemn discrimination and violence towards LGBTQ people. Nevertheless, their insistent stance on the sinfulness of non-normative genders and sexualities on numerous levels undermines any concrete support for such individuals.

FRAMING THE DISCUSSION: THEOLOGISING FROM QUEER AND TRANS LIVED EXPERIENCES

Traditional sources of theology are sacred scriptures, tradition, reason and human experience. Nevertheless, and echoing feminist theologians³³ queer and transgender theologians³⁴ foreground human experience as the main source of theology. Owing to the fact that human beings can only experience God 'as human beings,' both personally and through various forms of social interaction, their interpretation, comprehension and praxis of the bible, tradition and reason are fundamentally human endeavours, no matter how divinely inspired these endeavours may be. The purposeful positioning of human experience as central to theological tasks is not meant to attenuate the centrality of God in such endeavours. Instead, it is an acknowledgement of human beings as crucial conduits in understanding the operations of God in material reality. Interpretations of meanings undergirding human lives reveal the 'humanness' of human beings, including meanings that conscript the involvement of God in human experiences.

Just as queer feminist liberation theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid looks to the lives of the economically and sexually disenfranchised of Buenos Aires, Argentina as starting points of theologising,³⁵ queer feminist theologian Rose Wu takes the lived

³² AL, 250.

³³ Pui-lan Kwok, *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2000).

³⁴ This term denotes theologians who engage in interdisciplinary constructions of theology and queer theology. It may or may not be indicative of these theologians' own gender and sexual identities.

³⁵ Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

experiences of Hong Kong's LGBTQ communities within the specificities of their culture, colonial history and human rights activism as pivotal to her theological efforts.³⁶ Rebecca M. Voelkel embraces her own embodied realities as an out lesbian, theologian and activist as a theological launch pad, realising that 'sexuality and embodiment are sources of creativity, procreation, and co-creation with God and can be sources of transformation in the person, the community, and the world.'³⁷

For queer theologian Elizabeth Stuart, human experience is integral to theology but she is also adamant that personal experience 'must always be tested against experience of others ... in story-telling,'³⁸ which resonates with Orthodox theologian Saphir P. Athyal's statement that 'theology ... must be produced in the laboratory of life where it is put to test each day.'³⁹ I interpret 'testing' as ongoing theological conversation, which I pursue through continuing personal reflection and the shared readership of this article. Any theological pursuit – my own efforts included – must be approached with tentativeness and humility, and be open to critique and evolution. Otherwise it falls into the trap of theological essentialism which forgets that all theologising is a product of contextually specific temporalities and spatialities.

My suggestion that LGBTQ people can tutor theology also draws on pastoral theologian Cody J. Sanders' idea that all churches can learn 'from those who have been oppressed, hidden, and silenced by the teachings of those in positions of sexual and gender privilege,'⁴⁰ namely by 'looking carefully, attentively, and

³⁶ Rose Wu, *Liberating the Church from Fear: The Story of Hong Kong's Sexual Minorities* (Kowloon, Hong Kong: Hong Kong Women Christian Council, 2000).

³⁷ Rebecca M. M. Voelkel, *Carnal Knowledge of God: Embodied Love and the Movement for Justice* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2017), xviii.

³⁸ Elizabeth Stuart, "Lesbian and Gay Relationships: A Lesbian Feminist Perspective," in *Christian Perspectives on Sexuality and Gender*, ed. Elizabeth Stuart and Adrian Thatcher (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1996), 302.

³⁹ Saphir P. Sathyal, "Towards an Asian Christian Theology," in *Biblical Theology in Asia*, ed. Ken Gnanakan (Bangalore, India: Asia Theological Association, 1995), 84.

⁴⁰ Cody J. Sanders, *Queer Lessons for Churches on the Straight & Narrow: What All Christians Can Learn from LGBTQ Lives* (Macon, GA: Faithlab, 2013), 12.

appreciatively at the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender persons who have for too long been forcefully kept at the margins of church and society.⁴¹ To this end, I suggest ways in which LGBTQ people, whose gender and sexual identities and expressions figure largely in, and are integral and thus indispensable to their very existence in a world that dismisses them, can enrich theology. I also showcase the voices of Christian and non-Christian gay and transgender Malaysians from actual interviews to contextualise the discussion.⁴² My research endeavours over the years inform me that for LGBTQ people who are simultaneously invested in their gender, sexual and faith identities, the convergence of these identities in everyday life produces enormous tensions, yet fuels creative experimentations that affirm these identities.

QUEER AND TRANSGENDER THEOLOGICAL TUTELAGE

In proposing that LGBTQ communities can enrich theology, and as I have said elsewhere in relation to gay and bisexual men, ‘I am not implying that non-heteronormative people are incapable of manifesting the antithesis of God’s radical love ... Rather, it is the *actions* and *decisions* of non-heteronormative persons that conceal and reveal the holy and the good.’⁴³ To believe that persecution and victimisation produces saintly martyrs by default is an exercise in naivety. I suggest that it is more useful to see sacredness and ethical traits in the actions of non-normative genders and sexualities,⁴⁴ rather than simplistically painting

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² These narratives are derived from various qualitative research projects between 2011 and 2016 that involved in-depth, face-to-face interviews with gay and bisexual men, and transgender people on gender, sexuality and faith. The issues I raise may not be unique to Malaysia, but they do reflect the socio-cultural, political and faith realities in the country.

⁴³ Joseph N. Goh, *Living Out Sexuality and Faith: Body Admissions of Malaysian Gay and Bisexual Men* (London: Routledge, 2018), 33; original emphasis.

⁴⁴ Joseph N. Goh, “Why Is It Wrong?: Conceptualisations of Sexual Wrongdoing and Sexual Ethics among Gay-Identifying Malaysian Men,” in *Doing Asian Theological Ethics in a Cross-Cultural and an Interreligious Context*, ed. Yiu Sing

LGBTQ people as automatically channelling godliness as some Christian writers seemingly believe.⁴⁵ This section emphasises the relationships of gay and transgender Christians with God and their fellow human beings *in life-giving ways*, their negotiations with ecclesiastical hierarchies, and how such actions and decisions in which they attempt to be true to themselves can be understood as avenues through which LGBTQ people can tutor theology.

RECOGNISING AND RESPECTING PERSONAL THEOLOGICAL AGENCY

The numerous ecclesiastical councils and condemnations of heresies in Christian history demonstrate mainstream theology's obsession to unequivocally ensnare the identity of God and limit divine fluidity to the cordons of ecclesiastical sanctions. Mainly dogmatic in the past, such efforts today have, to a large extent, shifted to sexual ethics. LGBTQ issues are particularly targeted. I contend that Christianity's rejection of LGBTQ identities and behaviours stems from its self-perception as the final bastion against moral pollution – a certain 'Christian' pride and saviour complex that are ordinarily uncontested, and which find resolute alliance with socio-cultural productions of conservatism and traditionalism.

In Malaysia, the unprecedented rise of local and international LGBTQ visibility and activism has galvanised a sort of moral anxiety and an impetus to restore perceived moral decay and contain the spread of HIV, particularly through a strict surveillance of the media.⁴⁶ While Malaysian Islam continues to be at the forefront of such efforts, Malaysian Christianity comes at a close second, as evinced in the aforementioned examples. The evidently inordinate focus of these excoriations, namely who does what to whom in (and outside) the bedroom, and the obligatory

Lúccas Chan, James F. Keenan, and Shaji George Kochuthara (Bengaluru, India: Dharmaram Publications, 2016), 347–60.

⁴⁵ Toby Johnson, *Gay Spirituality: The Role of Gay Identity in the Transformation of Human Consciousness* (Los Angeles, CA: Alyson Books, 2000).

⁴⁶ Sarina Mohd Som, "Kerajaan Perlu Tegas Pantau LGBT," *Sinar Online*, 20 February 2018, <http://www.sinarharian.com.my/nasional/kerajaan-perlu-tegas-pantau-lgbt-1.800175>.

conformity of physical appearance and comportment to normative societal expectations reduce LGBTQ Malaysians to their genital activity and reinforce a misplaced confidence in biology as inevitable destiny. The act of blaming HIV infection on LGBTQ people is equally evident.⁴⁷

As alluded to earlier, these antagonistic attitudes constitute a well-meaning yet overzealous effort on the part of Malaysian Islam and Christianity to stem what is perceived as the tide of moral decadence that will corrupt traditional Christian values and lead unsuspecting Malaysian souls to perdition. While this effort may seem to be a noble moral imperative at first blush, I argue that the actual reality is quite the reverse. This effort is a condescending moralistic attitude that undermines the theological agency of LGBTQ Malaysians – their capacity to discern the workings of God in their lives. The following exchange I had with ‘Pipa,’ a 40-year old Roman Catholic gay man who has ceased church attendance in favour of a personalised Christian-based spirituality, attests to his theological agency:

I am who I am, and not by choice, and not by any doing by anybody, I think that has a big part in accepting ... myself as a gay man ... I did not do anything wrong, my parents did not do anything because I’m created that way. And I’m not imperfect because of that ... this is a gift to you, and you must be responsible about how you use it ... if I can talk to people who are ... struggling to accept gayness ... then I have a responsibility to use my sort of experiences, and my sort of beliefs, to try to help them.

Akin to many other LGBTQ people around the globe who subscribe to monotheistic faiths yet reject their religious hierarchies,⁴⁸ Pipa’s clear and conscious denunciation of official

⁴⁷ Malaysiakini, “Rosmah: Anti-LGBT Stance Is to Curb HIV, AIDS,” *Malaysiakini*, 26 November 2012, <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/215195>.

⁴⁸ Kath Browne, Sally Munt, and Andrew K. T. Yip, eds., *Queer Spiritual Spaces: Sexuality and Sacred Places* (Surrey, UK: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2010).

ecclesiastical disapprobation of his sexuality is a product of personal theological conviction. He shatters the presumptions that being gay is a matter of flippant ‘choice,’ exterior human influence, personal culpability or the failings of his parents.

By replacing these presumptions with the belief that his sexuality is the consequence of being ‘created that way,’ Pipa embodies the ‘hope that God will not rest content until he [sic] has brought forth the communion of beings that he has intended of creation from the beginning.’⁴⁹ His keen awareness that being gay is ‘a gift’ of God dispels the notion that he is somehow ‘imperfect’ and echoes Pope Francis’ words in *Amoris Laetitia* that Christians ‘are capable of carrying out their own discernment in complex situations [as the church is] called to *form* consciences, not to *replace* them.’⁵⁰ For Pipa, an *in-formed* conscience from years of Roman Catholic faith formation advises him that his embodiment of purposeful divine creation is bundled with a divine mandate to ‘be responsible’ by helping other men who may be ‘struggling to accept’ their sexuality by sharing the inter-weavings of his own ‘experiences’ of sexuality and ‘beliefs’ or faith with them.

Similar to Pipa, ‘Aadesh,’ a 41-year-old Malayalee-Indian Malaysian who identifies as a non-practising Roman Catholic gay man also acknowledges ‘the gift of being gay’ that helps him chart the course of his spiritual life:

I finally realised, the gift of being gay ... And therefore, I have had to ... find my own sense of God ... I mean I do long for community and I have asked myself ... how will I begin to create community for myself ... I do think that spiritual communities are important in sort of supporting each other, and then that’s something that I don’t have because so much of my faith at the moment ... is very individual.

⁴⁹ Ronald Long, “One Gay Man’s Trinitarian Faith,” in *Queer Religion*, ed. Donald L. Boisvert and Jay Emerson Johnson, vol. 1 (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2012), 227.

⁵⁰ *AL*, 37; added emphasis.

It is upon the cognisance of this ‘gift’ that Aadesh embarks on the quest to unearth his ‘own sense of God,’ whereby ‘his sense of godliness is infused with his understanding of sexual attraction, and vice versa.’⁵¹ This pursuit of a relationship between him and the divine that is unique to his own existence as a gay man is necessary as he does not discover it in formal Christian structures despite a ‘long[ing] for community’ that provides spiritual support. The rejection of official religiosity propels him towards the need to form a concomitant individual and communal spirituality that is amenable to his sexual identity, a recognition that ‘when God created human beings in God’s own image, sexuality and spirituality were the twin gifts from God to everyone,’⁵² even if such a project is fraught with ambivalence and confusion. What emerges to the fore is the criticality with which Aadesh recognises the need for God and community in his life beyond the curtailments of heteronormative borders that are sanctioned by ecclesiastical hierarchies.

The firm belief of both men that God is operating in their lives ‘through,’ not ‘despite’ their sexuality, reminds Christianity to recognise and respect the active presence of God in the discernment, conscience and ethical decisions of all individuals who struggle against societal norms to lead meaningful lives, notably those who have long been marginalised due to their non-normative gender and sexual identities and expressions. These convictions may not be devoid of doubt and uncertainty, but I hold that God both collaborates with, and is experienced ‘amidst the messiness of life as lived’⁵³ in personal theological agency.

⁵¹ Joseph N. Goh, “Bridging Benedictions, Enlightening Embodiment: Interpretations of Spirit through Desire among Gay and Bisexual Malaysian Men,” *Journal for the Study of Spirituality* 7, no. 2 (2017): 135.

⁵² Rose Wu, “A Pedagogy to Empower Queer Voices in Hong Kong,” in *God’s image* 34, no. 2 (2015): 33.

⁵³ Andrew K. T. Yip, “Coming Home from the Wilderness: An Overview of Recent Scholarly Research on LGBTQI Religiosity/Spirituality in the West,” in *Queer Spiritual Spaces: Sexuality and Sacred Places*, ed. Kath Browne, Sally Munt, and Andrew K. T. Yip (Surrey, UK: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2010), 45.

CHALLENGING GENDER AND SEXUALITY INJUSTICES

Queer theologian Patrick S. Cheng underscores the overall distrust of human sexuality in the history of Christianity⁵⁴ while queer theologian Hugo Córdova Quero observes how ‘theology has historically invested huge amounts of energy into fitting the *decent* patterns of societies ... and condemning those that are considered *indecent*.’⁵⁵ Theological and ecclesiastical praxes continue to be gripped by an uncontested prominence and prevalence of patriarchy, androcentricity, sexism, heteronormativity and cismnormativity, which I argue are gender and sexual injustices in Christianity. Pope Francis acknowledges the ‘male authoritarianism, domination, various forms of enslavement, abuse and sexist violence’⁵⁶ in Christian history. Yet his vision of ‘a Church with open doors’⁵⁷ is ironically at odds with the Church’s unequivocal denial of presbyteral ordination for women,⁵⁸ overt gay men⁵⁹ and post-operative transgender people,⁶⁰ as well as unsatisfactory responses to the performance of toxic and abusive

⁵⁴ Patrick S. Cheng, *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology* (New York: Seabury Books, 2011).

⁵⁵ Hugo Córdova Quero, “The Prostitutes Also Go into the Kingdom of God: A Queer Reading of Mary of Magdala,” in *Liberation Theology and Sexuality*, ed. Marcella Althaus-Reid (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2006), 81; original emphasis.

⁵⁶ AL, 42,

⁵⁷ Ibid. 234.

⁵⁸ Quoted in Stephanie Kirchaessner, “Pope Francis Says Women Will Never Be Roman Catholic Priests,” *The Guardian*, 1 November 2016, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/nov/01/pope-francis-women-never-roman-catholic-priests-church>.

⁵⁹ Congregation for Catholic Education, “Instruction Concerning the Criteria for the Discernment of Vocations with Regard to Persons with Homosexual Tendencies in View of Their Admission to the Seminary and to Holy Orders,” 4 November 2005, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_20051104_istruzione_en.html.

⁶⁰ John Norton, “Vatican Says “Sex-Change” Operation Does Not Change Person’s Gender,” *National Catholic Reporter*, 19 September 2011, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/vatican-says-sex-change-operation-does-not-change-persons-gender>.

masculinities in many dioceses, parishes, seminaries and religious houses.⁶¹

Injustice is also manifested as theological distrust, ignorance and indifference towards contemporary gender and sexuality studies. Pope Benedict XVI sees “gender” as a new philosophy of sexuality’ and ‘profound falsehood.’⁶² Pope Francis has been conveying mixed messages on issues of homosexuality. He has made ostensibly affirming remarks, such as, ‘if someone is gay and is searching for the Lord and has good will, then who [is the pope] to judge him?’,⁶³ and ‘there are people that prefer to select or discard people because of the adjective [gay]. These people don’t have a human heart.’⁶⁴

At the same time, Pope Francis has spoken adamantly, even harshly against ‘gender theory,’ which he criticises as an insidious ideology that ‘seeks to cancel out sexual difference because it no longer knows how to confront it.’⁶⁵ He has also denounced homosexuality as a form of ‘fashionable’ mentality.⁶⁶ In *Amoris laetitia*, the pope proclaimed that ‘there are absolutely no grounds for considering homosexual unions to be in any way

⁶¹ Siobhan Heanue, “Indian Nuns Risk Isolation and Expulsion from Catholic Church by Speaking Out About Rape,” *ABC News*, 1 December 2019, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-12-01/indian-nuns-speak-out-about-sexual-abuse-at-hands-of-clergy/11724262>.

⁶² Benedict XVI, “Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI on the Occasion of Christmas Greetings to the Roman Curia,” (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2012), http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2012/december/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20121221_auguri-curia.html.

⁶³ Francis, “Press Conference of Pope Francis during the Return Flight,” Apostolic Journey to Rio de Janeiro on the Occasion of the XXVII World Youth Day, 28 July 2013, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/july/documents/papa-francesco_20130728_gmg-conferenza-stampa.html.

⁶⁴ Quoted in Liz Dodd, “Pope Condemns ‘Heartless’ Discrimination Against Gay People,” *The Tablet*, 10 April 2019, <https://www.thetablet.co.uk/news/11610/pope-condemns-heartless-discrimination-against-gay-people>.

⁶⁵ Francis, “General Audience of 15 April 2015: The Family - 10. Male and Female,” 2015, para. 155, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2015/documents/papa-francesco_20150415_udienza-generale.html.

⁶⁶ Francis, as quoted in Agence France-Presse, “Gay ‘Trend’ Influencing the Catholic Clergy,” *Free Malaysia Today*, 2 December 2018, <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/world/2018/12/02/gay-trend-influencing-the-catholic-clergy/>.

similar or even remotely analogous to God's plan for marriage and family.⁶⁷

Feminist theologian Mary Hunt describes the teachings of these popes as 'the Roman Catholic Church's rejection of a half century of development on human anthropology.'⁶⁸ The Church has also turned its back on the American Psychiatric Association's dismissal of 'Ego Dystonic Homosexuality' as a disorder since the revised third edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* in 1987.⁶⁹ Although Pope Francis' remarks were not levelled against individual LGBTQ persons whose dignity he affirms and for whom he appears to have a soft spot,⁷⁰ the absolute stance of both popes on an ontological gender complementarity and sexual difference – and consequently, the unrelenting condemnation of same-sex marriages – is unmistakable, and resonates strongly with the attitudes of Malaysian churches.

Feminist theologian Mary Daly aptly declares that 'if God is male, then the male is God.'⁷¹ I humbly offer a similar take that if God is exclusively male, masculine and straight, then only the male-bodied, masculine-acting and straight man is God(ly).⁷² I reiterate my belief that patriarchy, androcentricity, heteronormativity and cisnormativity are unjust ideologies of gender and sexuality which have been enshrined in Christian theologies and have little patience for diverse gender and sexual expressions that fall short of or exceed normative expectations. 'Schulz' is a 28-year old Roman Catholic trans man. An avid church goer, he bemoans the ideological underpinnings that appear in his

⁶⁷ AL, 251.

⁶⁸ Mary Hunt, "Vatican's 'Dumbed Down Version of an Old Argument' on Gender Can't Stop Changes in Catholicism," *Rewire News*, 25 June 2019, <https://rewire.news/religion-dispatches/2019/06/25/vaticans-dumbed-down-version-of-an-old-argument-on-gender-cant-stop-changes-in-catholicism/>.

⁶⁹ Jack Drescher, "Out of DSM: Depathologizing Homosexuality," *Behavioral Sciences* 5, no. 4 (2015): 565-75.

⁷⁰ For instance, AL, 250.

⁷¹ Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1985), 19.

⁷² I suggest that assigned female at birth women who adhere to heteronormativity and cisnormativity can also fall within this ambit of approval but in a lesser way.

interaction with a priest when he seeks counsel about his female-to-male transitioning, Gender-Affirming Hormone Therapy and the possibility of Gender Affirming Surgery:

I went all the way ... to meet this one priest and I told him everything but his question was ... are you ... transitioning because you felt you had ... to step up and be the man in your family? ... So, I did tell the priest, look, I'm not doing this because I needed to ... conform to be a man or to step up and be a man in the family, no! ... he told me to go and seek help with psychiatrist. Then, my question was, are you saying that this is a mental illness? Because I don't see this as a mental illness ... His final reason was ... I hope you do not go through that transition because the body is a temple of God ... God views us as his child. As a creation of his ... I don't think he has a problem with me being a trans man

Schulz's disappointment lies in the fact that his best efforts to explain the complexity of his gender identity to an ecclesiastical representative are met with evidently reductionist responses that range from painting him as merely assuming a compensatory male role in his family to 'a mental illness' and defiling his 'body [as the] temple of God.' Such pseudo psychological feedback from the priest constitutes gender and sexuality injustice on several counts.

It is ignorant of the World Health Organisation's rebuttal of 'transsexualism' as a disorder and subsequent amendment of the term to 'Gender Incongruence' in reference to transgender and non-binary people in its latest International Classification of Diseases (11th revision) manual.⁷³ It is equally ignorant of the crucial change from 'Gender Identity Disorder' to 'Gender Dysphoria' in fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* in 2013.⁷⁴ It fails to acknowledge the profound embodied

⁷³ Titia F. Beek, Peggy T. Cohen-Kettenis, and Baudewijntje P. C. Kreukels, "Gender Incongruence/Gender Dysphoria and Its Classification History," *International Review of Psychiatry* 28, no. 1 (2016): 5–12.

⁷⁴ William Byne et al., "Gender Dysphoria in Adults: An Overview and Primer for Psychiatrists," *Transgender Health* 3, no. 1 (2018): 57–70.

interiority and lived experiences of a transgender person in favour of a cisnormative bias that a ‘surgical operation is so superficial and external that it does not change the personality’⁷⁵ of the person. It rehearses Pope Benedict XVI’s fear that:

‘Gender’ ultimately ends up being man’s [sic] attempt at self-emancipation from creation and the Creator. Man wants to be his own master, and alone – always and exclusively – to determine everything that concerns him. Yet in this way he lives in opposition to the truth, in opposition to the Creator Spirit.⁷⁶

The priest’s response shows that he is oblivious to and/or dismissive of the theological view that each person ‘actively participates alongside of God in the lifelong project of creation.’⁷⁷ In this regard, the temple of God is a continuing edifice rather than a structure accomplished at birth or conception. Transgender people are neither ‘tampering with the created order’⁷⁸ nor pursuing emancipation from God. As transgender theologian Justin Sabia-Tanis asserts, they seek collaboration with the Creator towards fulfilling the ongoing vocation of gender identity and expression.⁷⁹ The priest unwittingly exemplifies the reality that ‘churches are ignorant of and/or disinterested in the issues, needs and concerns of transgender people [and] thus complicit in the

⁷⁵ Vatican, as quoted in Norton, ‘Vatican Says “Sex-Change” Operation Does Not Change Person’s Gender.’

⁷⁶ Benedict XVI, “Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the Members of the Roman Curia for the Traditional Exchange of Christmas Greetings,” (*Libreria Editrice Vaticana*, 2008), http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2008/december/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20081222_curia-romana.html.

⁷⁷ Jakob Hero, “Toward a Queer Theology of Flourishing: Transsexual Embodiment, Subjectivity, and Moral Agency,” in *Queer Religion*, ed. Donald L. Boisvert and Jay Emerson Johnson, vol. 2 (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2012), 144.

⁷⁸ Yip, “Coming Home from the Wilderness,” 38.

⁷⁹ Justin Sabia-Tanis, *Trans-Gendered: Theology, Ministry, and Communities of Faith* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2003).

silencing of their voices.⁸⁰ Schulz's self-identification as God's 'child' and belief that God does not see his self-affirmed gender identity as an issue is predicated on a theological position that God purposefully begins and sustains his createdness as a trans man, not unlike Pipa who believes that he is created by God as a gay man.

'Henri,' a 30-year-old self-described 'liberal Anglican' gay man traces gender and sexuality injustice in mainstream biblical interpretations that fuel and sustain heteronormativity and cisnormativity:

Homosexuality was perhaps frowned upon in ancient Jewish society... but then they also again forbid eating shellfish, forbidding women entering the temple when, you know, they're having their period, and so on and so forth, and I think, well, why do you accept the others and not these, why are you picking and choosing?

Henri seemingly acknowledges the possibility that 'homosexuality' was proscribed 'in ancient Jewish society.' That he contrasts this view with dietary prohibitions and the barring of menstruating women from temple services suggests that Henri is alluding to biblical injunctions which he sees as constitutive of ecclesiastical legalities. His reference to 'shellfish' possibly reflects a popular interpretation of Leviticus 11.9-12, which literally forbids the consumption of aquatic creatures that do not bear fins or scales. Leviticus 15.19-30 describes the 'uncleanliness' of a woman's bodily emissions but makes no mention of her disqualification from the synagogue, which is possibly a prohibition based on certain Jewish customs. As a Christian who references the Hebrew scriptures, it is evident that he understands them as part of the Christian biblical canon.

The accuracy of such interpretations notwithstanding, Henri's point is clear. He is puzzled by an inconsistency he detects in which the 'sinfulness' of 'homosexuality' – which he probably

⁸⁰ Joseph N. Goh, "Trans/Forming Church in the Asia Pacific Region: Narratives of Hospitable Ecclesiology by Philippine and Tongan Transgender Women," *QUEST: Studies on Religion & Culture in Asia* 4 (2020): 7.

understands as same-sex expressions between men – is retained and codified in mainstream Christianity while the other interdictions are excluded. I hold that Henri sees this disparity of ‘picking and choosing’ biblical verses for theological jurisprudence as ill-informed and unjust. Ultimately, it is an act of justifying the rejection of non-normative genders and sexualities through an unmethodical selection of scriptural references for ecclesiastical legalities that impact negatively on LGBTQ people. I will discuss this point further in the next section.

A gay man’s identity and expression cannot be simplistically disavowed by laws that to all appearances draw on arbitrary choices of biblically based injunctions. A transgender person’s self-affirmed gender identity is not a wilful defiance of divine ordinance but, borrowing sociologist Andrew K. T. Yip’s words, ‘an embodied process of spiritual growth, intimately connected to an individual’s relationship with herself/himself, God, and others, as a gendered, sexual, and spiritual being.’⁸¹ This notion foregrounds the imperative for a ‘departure from an “it’s wrong because the church/bible says it’s wrong” attitude that demonstrates an uncritical approach to gender and sexual diversity, and which occludes possibilities for a greater understanding of non-heteronormative subjects.’⁸² Both Schulz and Henri manifest a critical standpoint that challenges the unjust ossification of cisnormative and heteronormative framings, and by extension patriarchal, androcentric and sexist systems in both pastoral care and biblical theology.

INTERROGATING AND RETHINKING BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

My final point deals with the reality of unyielding monovalent scriptural interpretations and biblical theologies that often form the basis of LGBTQ vitriol. Clobber passages, also

⁸¹ Yip, “Coming Home from the Wilderness,” 38.

⁸² Goh, “Why Is It Wrong?,” 360.

known as ‘texts of terror’⁸³ are used to substantiate the sinfulness of non-normative genders and sexualities that include Genesis 19, Judges 19, Leviticus 18.22 and 20.13, 1 Timothy 1.9-10, Jude 6-7, and Romans 1.25-27. What I find noteworthy is that popular condemnations of LGBTQ in Malaysia and beyond are often based on deeply problematic, anachronistic and frequently inaccurate English translations of these passages.⁸⁴

‘Rainbowboy,’ a 22-year-old Lutheran gay man expresses a sense of doubt in regard to the purported sinfulness of being gay:

As a Christian basically, every Sunday we have to go to church, we have to pray every night before I sleep, I still do that, and, although I can’t say I’ll be abiding all the laws in the bible ... I don’t steal ... I don’t kill anyone ... the only thing that I find myself sinning is because of my homosexuality, I’m not sure if it’s entirely sin or not ...

Rainbowboy’s admission that he does not conform to ‘all the laws in the bible’ resonates with Henri’s somewhat literal understanding of scripture as an ethical enchiridion. By listing a careful observance of the various signifiers of his faith that include church attendance, bedtime prayers, and the avoidance of theft and murder, he appears to be resolute in his Christian identity. That which effectively destabilises this resoluteness is his identity as a gay man, which further buttresses my argument that Rainbowboy interprets the bible literally as a manual for moral issues, similar to many other ‘Christians [who] believe that the Bible holds the answer to all concerns, including questions of gender and sexual identities.’⁸⁵ What is particularly noteworthy to me is that even though Rainbowboy harbours doubts over the purported sinfulness

⁸³ Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1984).

⁸⁴ See also Ronald E. Long, “Introduction: Disarming Biblically Based Gay-Bashing,” in *The Queer Bible Commentary*, ed. Deryn Guest et al. (London: SCM Press, 2006), 1–18.

⁸⁵ Kristine C. Meneses, “Queering the Parables: A Hermeneutical Orgy in the Process,” in *God’s image* 34, no. 2 (2015): 56.

of homosexuality, the bible acts as a source of ambiguity and tension rather than certitude and equanimity to his human and Christian identities.

Much scholarship has flowed into reinterpreting and recasting these difficult and often ambiguous passages in non-harmful ways as a response to homonegative and transnegative interpretations, in which LGBTQ people read and understand the bible 'from [their] unique social locations [and are thus] able to articulate more clearly how the Word of God has touched [them].'⁸⁶ For clinical psychologist, scientist and theologian Fraser Watts, 'both views have their own integrity and intellectual coherence.'⁸⁷ Nonetheless, it is helpful at this juncture to recall Wu's exhortation 'to recognise the pluralism of the biblical experience of faith, ethos and community and to note that it requires a careful examination of each text in all of its appropriate contexts - literary, cultural and theological.'⁸⁸ The bible is fundamentally a product of human experiences of God in human lives according to particular times and places.

My interest here lies less in securing absolute proof of the 'correct' biblical interpretation - for or against LGBTQ people - than in highlighting the dehumanisation and pain to which LGBTQ Christians are invariably subjected when they realise that the sacred texts which many of them have befriended since childhood and on which they anchor meaningful existence in relation to God have been deployed as the impregnable divine enemy against them. 'Samantha,' a Christian *mak nyah* in her forties reveals her frustration with bible-bashing attitudes:

I am who I am now ... I am very happy with my life
... I was baptised a Christian when I was 14. I have

⁸⁶ Cheng, *Radical Love*, 14; also consult Deryn Guest et al., eds., *The Queer Bible Commentary* (London: SCM Press, 2006); Robert E. Shore-Goss and Mona West, eds., *Take Back the Word: A Queer Reading of the Bible* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2000).

⁸⁷ Fraser Watts, "A Way Forward for the Church of England on Homosexuality?," *Fraser Watts* (blog), 16 February 2017, <http://www.fraserwatts.co.uk/way-forward-church-homosexuality/>.

⁸⁸ Wu, *Liberating the Church from Fear*, 66.

a bible I read sometimes ... I have asked myself ... Why did God make me like this? I also ask, who wrote the stories that condemn people? I believe a lot of this is man-made. I believe that God exists because this world exists ... I do not turn my back to God. I am just confused about people who use the Bible to condemn [*mak nyah*].

Samantha shares with Pipa, Aadesh and Schulz the belief that she is who she is as divinely destined, and this self-acceptance and self-affirmation lead to a state of being 'very happy with [her] life' as a trans woman. In stating that she 'do[es] not turn [her] back to God,' Samantha implies that she does not see her transgender identity as antithetical to her Christian identity. I propose that Samantha's identity as a trans woman is as important to her as her Christian identity, which is premised on her baptism, her ownership and reading of her bible, and her faith in a creator-God who 'exists because the world exists.' Instead, what frustrates and baffles her are scriptural interpretations that 'condemn [trans women].' It is '[hu]man-made' condemnatory 'stories' or transnegative biblical interpretations that unsettle this faith and cause her to question her own createdness.

As discussed earlier, a vast majority of Christians regard the bible as an anchor of faith and a life manual. Nevertheless, when its core message is entangled with its cultural packaging, when it is perceived as a metaphysical artefact rather than a collection of human testimonies with human limitations, and when it transmutes into a villainous, exclusionary and condemnatory force for people who aim for lives of veracity and authenticity, its interpretations need to be interrogated and reconsidered.

Rainbowboy's and Samantha's conflicts which emanate from scriptural homonegativity and transnegativity prompt Christianity to rethink unproblematic interpretations that exclude and assail gay and transgender people. Their inner turmoil demands the unveiling of scriptural 'claims about a God who is passionately partial to the poor, who enlists people in justice-doing,

and who promises a just society for all.’⁸⁹ As ‘religious texts become an arena where power relations are played out, in the construction and contestation of often opposing truth claims,’⁹⁰ Rainbowboy’s and Samantha’s lived experiences challenge Christianity to engage in more nuanced readings of the bible and critical constructions of biblical theology.

CONCLUSION

I conclude my musings on LGBTQ theological tutelage with additional questions for reflection: How can Christianity recognise and respect the creative workings of God beyond the pale of the norm? What are socio-cultural gender and sexuality norms encrusting theological formulations and ecclesiastical praxes that need to be revisited? In what ways can Christianity reconsider injunctions against human expressions that are integral to meaningful human existence, such as love and relationships? How can Christianity adopt an open-minded engagement with contemporary scholarship on gender and sexuality that is evocative of *fides quaerens intellectum*? What are alternative biblical interpretations beyond accusations of *crimen contra naturam* that can better affirm the diverse creativity of God who saw all that God had made and found it very good? Given that tradition is always in flux, what are courageous forms by which the church can serve the world by ‘help[ing] us not only to live truly and creatively within the Christian tradition but also to empower one another as one Body of Christ’⁹¹

LGBTQ people’s human relationships and encounters with God are often summarily repudiated, and I am reminded of feminist theologian Yong Ting Jin’s concern that ‘there is a serious contradiction between the way the Church is understood theologically and ... experienced reality.’⁹² Often, corrective

⁸⁹ Robert E. Shore-Goss, *Jesus Acted Up: A Gay and Lesbian Manifesto* (San Francisco, CA: Harper San Francisco, 1993), 99.

⁹⁰ Yip, “Coming Home from the Wilderness,” 37.

⁹¹ Wu, *Liberating the Church from Fear*, 77.

⁹² Yong Ting Jin, “Church - A Community of Faith, Struggle and Tradition,” in *God’s image* 28, no. 2 (2009): 49.

counselling or coerced celibacy are disguised as pastoral care for lesbian, gay and bisexual people. Many transgender and non-binary people remain helpless in the face of being misgendered and deadnamed. Beneath the seemingly benign and tolerant idea that LGBTQ people need to be helped and ‘accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity’⁹³ are real marginalisation and condescension. LGBTQ people are seen and treated as outsiders who merit special assistance, rather than members of God’s family who can offer their genders and sexualities – the gifts of their very selves – to their social and faith communities. Marginalisation and condescension are not of God. I admit that there is real fear in unanchoring oneself from the familiarities that have grounded one in meaningful existence, but I also contend that the moment has arrived to try new things in theology.

A genuine desire to learn from LGBTQ people is not a matter of succumbing to liberal and ‘worldly’ mechanisms or bowing to the pressures of LGBTQ advocacy. It is to see that ‘God is now incarnate in relationships between persons who strive for ... justice, mutuality, compassion, peace, *shalom*.’⁹⁴ It is to understand that God is present ‘in the realms of the seemingly unconventional and peculiar [and] can perhaps be encountered in previously unimagined places, including the lives of [LGBTQ] Malaysians.’⁹⁵ It is to value the imprint of God in all flesh-and-blood gender and sexual embodiments. It is to boldly appreciate, claim and execute in concrete ways Pope Francis’ statement that ‘God is not afraid of new things.’⁹⁶

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⁹³ John Paul II, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd Ed (E-Book) (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), sec. 2358, <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catechism/catechism-of-the-catholic-church/epub/index.cfm>.

⁹⁴ Stuart, “Lesbian and Gay Relationships,” 303.

⁹⁵ Joseph N. Goh, “Bethlehem Revisited – The Sacred in the Unfamiliar,” *Malaysiakini*, 22 December 2012, <http://www.malaysiakini.com/letters/217261>.

⁹⁶ Quoted in The Huffington Post, “Pope: ‘God Is Not Afraid Of New Things,’” *The Huffington Post*, 19 October 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/10/19/pope-homosexuality-church-gay_n_6010904.html.