



BLESSED BI SPIRIT

Bisexual People of Faith

edited by Debra R. Kolodny
foreword by Mary E. Hunt

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DEBRA R. KOLODNY

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Acknowledgments

SHEPHERDING THIS WORK has been a blessing. I have learned much from each contributor, delightful and courageous people all, and I have learned much about myself and my relationship with God. It was not always easy. I obviously do not share all of the opinions of all of the authors, nor do I share a practice or theology with most. Through it all I strove to ensure the authenticity of each author's voice, to accurately depict and differentiate personal experience from long-standing tradition or practice, and to honor difference. I appreciate the willingness of each author to engage in this challenging work as I endeavored to create a cogent and respectful whole. Thank you.

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To my friends and family who supported me in the long gestation process, to my Rosh Chodesh group who conducted ritual with me, to my partner, Ken, who was my in-house computer guru and technical support, and to all of those who journey with me on my path . . . you are an inspiration to me one and all.

Baruch HaShem. Blessed be the Name.

Foreword: Conjectures of a Supportive Bi-Stander

MARY E. HUNT

LET ME JUST ADMIT IT UP FRONT. I used to joke that being bisexual meant having sex twice a year, or, less creatively, that bi-sexuals were people who bought sex. Such jokes were a way for righteous, if beleaguered, lesbian and gay people to express a certain disdain for people whom we thought had not quite arrived, were hedging their bets, or saving their skins in a violently homo-hating environment. It was assumed that they were not helping “the cause” and might even have been hurting it some by not clearing up the ambiguity of their sexuality. Transgendered people did not enter our consciousness in those days, and if they did I can only imagine the jokes we would have conjured. “Queer” was still used derisively, not yet reclaimed as an umbrella term for all sexual outlaws who refuse to conform to rigid roles, and it certainly did not, in those unenlightened days, include bisexuals.

Fortunately, I have learned the error of my ways, namely, that such jokes only display the fears and ignorance of the jokester and show a profound disrespect for other peoples’ lives. Such jokes are horizontal violence of the worst order, and the act of telling them is an example of oppressed people copying their oppressors. Now I know a little more about why I and so many committed lesbian and gay activists, including religious people who should have known better, joked about bisexuality and failed to take it with the seriousness it deserved in the past two decades. I would like to mend my ways and encourage a more mature, respectful conversation with those who will forgive the indiscretions.

As a lesbian, I am honored to join the bisexual people who are offering their reflections in this volume so that all religious communities might

benefit from their wisdom. I do so as a white feminist theologian from the Catholic tradition with a preferential option for those who are marginalized. Today that includes bisexual people, who have been left aside both by heterosexuals who wrote them off as queer and by lesbian and gay people who wrote them off as undecided. Theirs is too much wisdom to waste.

Trappist monk Thomas Merton wrote a popular book entitled *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, in which he claimed (in language I have updated to reflect current usage), "I do not have clear answers to current questions. I do have questions, and as a matter of fact, I think one is known better by her/his questions than by her/his answers. To make known one's questions is, no doubt, to come out in the open oneself."¹ I am not sure that he meant "come out" as we do today. Nonetheless, I have gratefully adapted his title to frame my own thinking about how the religious insights of bisexual people must be added to the mix of those who seek spiritual and political justice. It is precisely the injustice to bisexual people that I and others committed by trivializing their experiences and negating their claims to selfhood that needs to change. Religion is a good place to start. Theology, like sexuality, is complicated and contested territory.

Out of the Theological Void

Theology and spirituality articulated from the perspective of bisexual persons are long overdue. Yet virtually all bi theological reflection to date has been derivative, with "bisexual" a category tacked on reflexively to "lesbian/gay." For me and for other lesbian and gay theologians to "add bisexual and stir," as if doing so discharges our obligation to include more people and is therefore enough, is to miss the importance of being changed by every new insight. Now we too need to stop, listen and act differently because our bi friends speak.

What better reason could there be to build a new branch of theological reflection and spirituality, given that theology, understood in feminist liberation terms, begins with experience? And, what does the experience of bisexuals represent? As far as I can tell, there is no common agreement on the various and sundry categories of sex and gender, much less any consensus on what constitutes a bisexual. Even our most basic categories,

¹ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1968), 5.

such as male and female, man and woman, are no longer fixed. Cross-gender or transgender people raise new, important questions. Thus, even such long-standing terms as lesbian and gay are less than clear. It could be that a male friend today will be a female friend tomorrow, causing cataclysmic conceptual shifts for the people in the relationships, mixing up what were once thought to be fixed categories. This is the fruit of tremendous work in both sexology and biology that is still only in its infancy. Attempts to dismantle “the apartheid of sex” that has so limited all of us are important justice struggles.²

While such long-used terms as “man” and “woman” are in flux, so too is “bisexual.” In using this term, I add the proviso that we are all talking about something that is changing quickly, as science, culture, and our children’s children grow. Most religions teach that the human person is finally much more than the sum of her/his parts, a useful resource for living with this profound ambiguity that characterizes contemporary knowledge about sexuality. In my tradition, when things get this complicated at least we can dig into our texts and claim, “in all things, charity.” Other traditions have similar options, proving what Daniel C. Maguire calls “the renewable moral energy of religion.”³

Theology, from a feminist liberation perspective, is the way in which religious people share insights, stories, and reflections on issues of ultimate meaning and value. It is more an art than a science, more a process than a product, more an invitation than a dictum. Although every tradition does not have one, theologies are ways we talk about what is important to us, assuming that the divine is part of the equation. Into this light we need to bring bisexual peoples’ ways of believing, acting, and hoping so that the whole global community may learn something new. That is why bisexual theologies and spiritualities will, I predict, take their rightful place next to lesbian, gay, queer, and transgendered approaches.

Several Supportive Conjectures

I offer the following conjectures as food for thought in this larger theological conversation. I intend them as supportive affirmations that might be useful in moving the conversation toward deeper insights.

² For a provocative example of this literature, see Martine Rothblatt, *The Apartheid of Sex: A Manifesto on the Freedom of Gender* (New York: Crown, 1995).

³ Daniel C. Maguire, “Population-Consumption-Ecology: The Triple Problematic,” in

Bisexual people must speak for themselves

The history of theology is replete with instances of people speaking for others with dreadful consequences. The most obvious example is men who spoke for women for millennia in Judaism and Christianity until finally, quite recently, we women began to name our own questions and offer our own answers. Likewise, heterosexual hegemony meant that lesbian/gay people never were permitted voice (much less vote, in most instances) on religious policies and principles, directives and ethical pronouncements that pertained to us. Now that we are beginning to make some progress, including the welcome words of queer Muslims and Buddhists, queer pagans and witches, it would be a contradiction to restrict bisexual people from full expression, even if what they say calls into question and/or contradicts lesbian/gay experiences. Theology is not a game to win but a process in which to participate faithfully.

It is not that bisexual experiences as such are so unique. Issues of race, gender, economic access, physical ability, nationality, and age all shape different points of view, as does sexuality. But openness to learning from bisexual experiences is one more acknowledgment of the importance of particularity. It points out the critical need for categories to expand as people increasingly speak for themselves.

Hesitation by some lesbian/gay religious activists to hear bisexual people on their own terms likely stems from the same fear of change with which heterosexual people greeted our early efforts. If indeed one could be lesbian/gay and Christian, for example, perhaps even an ordained minister in that faith, then it seemed that certain taboos and teachings had to go by the wayside. This proposition continues to wreak havoc in many denominations and religious groups. Heterosexual people found it threatening to think that they could be lesbian/gay. Likewise, if being bisexual is acceptable, what does that mean for homosexual people? Could they also be bisexual? Surely some lesbian and gay people find asking such questions to be more than they want to explore, an understandable reaction given how difficult it has been to get this far. But it is still no excuse to abort an important conversation.

Rather than welcoming such insights as part of the unfolding mysteries of creation, many people simply add "bisexual" to a kind of laundry list of "l/g/b/t" people for whom they struggle without ever hearing the

particularity of bi experiences on their own terms. I have done this in my work, erring on the side of a kind of inclusion that is really a subtle way to exclude. This is a liberal trap to be named and avoided.

The alternative is no more attractive, namely, leaving out bi until and unless bisexual people speak up, the theory being that advocacy for oneself is important. But the pernicious nature of our current situation is that we are damned if we do and damned if we don't, for which the only way out is for bisexual people to lead the way. This will take some doing since it will mean leaving aside the unspoken competition in queer communities for the prize as "most oppressed." It will involve tossing overboard the mistaken notion that bisexual people are more privileged than lesbian/gay people. And it will require adopting the mind-set that while there is plenty of oppression to go around, there is an infinite amount of love and justice that can be put to the service of social change. Religious teachings as simple as "love your bi neighbor" can't hurt.

Bisexuality reminds us that "either/or" questions and answers are largely unhelpful in religions as in daily life

Once bisexual people join the conversation as full partners, it is harder to see the world in binary categories—heterosexual/homosexual; out/closeted; ally/enemy. The world no longer breaks down into hierarchically dualistic categories, with one of the binaries always positive or good, the other negative or bad. In fact, the binaries are no longer operative because something has come along to break their spell. Enter bisexuality, a third option among, perhaps, many.

Such a change in a whole way of thinking is extremely upsetting—in the most helpful way possible! Think of it in terms of how we have been taught to see the world: God/world; human/animal; male/female; white/black; heterosexual/homosexual, with the first of the pair always valued more highly than the second. Bisexual people contradict this dynamic because they are living proof that it is an inadequate way to think. It excludes their reality entirely.

The lesson for theology and ethics is clear: a primary way of thinking that has been foundational for whole religious traditions is no longer adequate. Ethics based on right/wrong, true/untrue, good/bad that ignore the context in which something is done, the circumstances that shape it, are not nuanced enough to deal with twenty-first century life. I do not mean to suggest that bisexuality is a cure-all, but symbolically and epistemologically it is a giant step forward. For religious people it means that we

can enter into the fullness of our traditions and let the mysteries unravel a little more easily because of the contribution of bisexual people.

*Bisexuality may increase in frequency now that
it is more acceptable on its own terms, prompting
the need for new religious reflection*

Theology and ethics are imaginative activity because none of us has ever lived in a fully just and loving world. We can only imagine. In the case of bisexuality, the number of people who self-define as bisexual may increase, including some now lesbian/gay-identified people, not to mention some heretofore heterosexuals, because their imaginations have been enlarged, their possibilities multiplied. This comes as a threat all around—to conservative heterosexuals who do not want to lose any more ground than they have “lost” already in what they call the sex wars, and to some progressive queers who think that pushing the envelope means we have to clone ourselves in order to make headway.

The former dynamic is beyond my ken, as I cannot imagine how one holds back the tides of change other than engaging in the repressive tactics of the religious right, which I abhor. But the latter dynamic intrigues me because I think the temptation to adhere to categories and thus, as in all hierarchical dualism, for bisexuality to continue to be put down results from a serious lack of imagination on the part of some of my lesbian and gay colleagues.

I prefer to learn from women and men who describe experiences I have not had, and then try to imagine the theological and spiritual consequences. For example, Jan Clausen, a longtime lesbian who left her woman partner for a man, now describes herself as a “floating” woman.⁴ What does this mean religiously? Who else is floating and where might she or he be headed? Does this mean that the rest of us are, by contrast, standing still? Is it time for us to examine our experiences, to see if we are stuck rather than simply clear?

Taking bisexual people seriously, realizing that if they can be who they are I must reexamine myself in their light, prompts such questions. It does not mean that I will necessarily become bisexual. In my case that seems highly unlikely unto impossible, given my relational history and current commitments. But the impetus to “never say never,” the screen against saying “I’m not a bisexual but . . .,” comes from an honest if rigorous

⁴ Jan Clausen, *Apples and Oranges: My Journey Through Sexual Identity* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999).

engagement with this new, growing reality on its own terms. Only then can we ask what it means in a particular faith tradition, and what it means for us. That is the stuff of serious reflection. There is plenty of work to do.

Bisexuality points toward theological fullness

A good place to start such theological reflection is to ask what the reality of bisexuality says about the divine. Do bisexual people have new insights into the nature of the divine? If so, what might they be, given the move beyond “either/or” and the increase in imaginative possibilities? What about ethics? Bi people help to clarify the need for more nuanced ethical reflection. What about matters of fidelity and family that arise so often when relationships are in the balance?

To most questions about religion and bisexuality the only adequate answer now is “we don’t know yet.” We do not know what new insights will emerge, what new claims on human freedom and what new contributions to human community will bubble forth as more people are able to live in the fullness of who they are. And as they are part of creation, they reflect a fuller sense of that divine-human cooperation, therefore revealing more and more of the divine itself. It may be premature to say so, and not for me to do as a supportive bi-stander, but I think this will be the next step as the conversation deepens. I await it eagerly and cheer it on in the meanwhile.

Conclusion

What it is for me to say is how we who are lesbian and gay can be supportive bi-standers. Implicit, of course, is that we encourage our bi friends to speak out, not in relation to our issues but on the compelling basis of their own. Second, we can begin to jettison our “either/or” approaches to religious reflection, not waiting for them to name the ambiguity but to embrace it ourselves. Third, we can make clear in our own thinking and writing that when we include bi, we do so because we have been attentive to bi people, not simply because it is politically correct to be rhetorically inclusive. Finally, we can stay alert to the religious insights to come from bisexual people, allowing them to permeate our sometimes rigid, if ever so hard-won, perceptions. That way we honor the divine, who is surely as bi as she is anything else.

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Introduction

Blessed Bi Spirit

THE CHALLENGE OF FINDING A TITLE for this work was considerable. What words could reflect the spectrum of spiritual tradition practiced and described by a group as large and diverse as the one represented in this anthology? Some authors argued that shortening the word bisexual to “bi” stripped us of our humanity, of our sexuality, and should therefore be avoided. In a work that seeks to honor the sexual *as* spiritual, we certainly didn’t want to perpetuate this dualism. Others resisted the pun in using the word “bi” as a stand-in for the word “by.” Puns are for books on humor, not for serious works, they said. While we didn’t want to diminish the value of the content by making light of it, many felt that lightheartedness was an essential element of a spiritual path. Perhaps you have heard the one about angels flying because they take themselves lightly?

After much dialogue and searching, *Blessed Bi Spirit* emerged as the phrase best capable of holding all of the intentions of this collection. *Blessed*, read as an adjective with the accent on the first syllable, invites the reader to ponder what particular blessings an embodied bisexual spirit might be living or offering. *Blessed*, read as a verb in the past tense and pronounced “Blest,” invites the reader to “hear” the word “Bi” as “by” and to think about the spiritual blessings bestowed upon bisexuals, unique to our particular way of living and loving.

And, in choosing this title, we express an essential bisexual spiritual

truth. Regardless of the structure, rituals, and principles of our path, or of the divine name to whom we offer our prayers, bisexual people of faith live consciously and continually in the place where the twain meet. Taking action and being acted upon, offering blessings and receiving them, dwelling in our immanence as we remember and yearn for and experience transcendence. We *are blessed bi spirit*.

Blessed and Yet under Attack

Many of us have heard that there are three things we are *not* supposed to talk about in “polite” company: sex, religion, and politics. Because we might offend someone when we articulate a view so disparate from theirs that the ensuing conflict takes on a life of its own, we are told to keep our views on these matters to ourselves.

We are about to break the rules. Politely.

Merely breaking this rule is not noteworthy. Others have talked about the intersection of spirit and sex in very positive ways. For example, in the past twenty years there has been a proliferation of texts and workshops on tantric sex, the Eastern spiritual practice that is explicitly sexual.¹ Access to the sexual principles and practices contained in Jewish kabbalistic texts such as the *Zohar*, once limited to those who could read Hebrew, is now available to a wider audience as more English-writing authors speak of them.² Body Electric workshops held around the United States integrate a variety of spiritual paths with sexual experiential exercises, inviting participants to specifically integrate spirit and body through sexuality. Certain pagan practices have long connected sex and spirit. This is true in many rituals, and it reaches its most powerful intersection in the rarely practiced Great Rite, where two people channel the energies of God and Goddess, literally becoming divine beings incarnate.³ Many have also focused on sexual orientation and religion. Congregations that intentionally welcome gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) members are on the rise. GLBT-specific denominations are expanding their ministries.

¹ See, for example, June Campbell, *Traveller in Space: In Search of Female Identity in Tibetan Buddhism* (New York: George Braziller, 1996).

² See, for example, Arthur Waskow, *Down to Earth Judaism: Food, Money, Sex and the Rest of Life* (New York: Quill, William Morrow, 1995), 296, 304–6, 311, 370.

³ Margot Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America Today* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 110.

Heterosexual and GLBT faith leaders are speaking out publicly regarding the spiritual wholeness of people, regardless of sexual orientation.⁴

Discussion of the intertwining of sex and politics was brought to new heights in the late 1990s when White House sex scandals dominated media attention and almost brought down a sitting president. During this same period, the political arena was flooded with extraordinarily negative rhetoric condemning naturally occurring, loving, and respectful sexuality on religious grounds. The vituperative opposition of the Christian Radical Right to same-sex marriage, adoption by same-sex parents, rescission of sodomy laws, passage of hate crimes legislation, and ending workplace discrimination based on sexual orientation has further intermingled sex, politics, and religion in public discourse. This hate was personalized in 1999, when a print and television advertising campaign sought to convince homosexual and bisexual peoples that they could and should convert to heterosexuality.⁵

This personalization, fueled by specious scriptural or faith-based arguments, has instigated a rise in hate crimes against GLBT peoples. And, in its most profane manifestation, we see small angry bands of “believers” screaming “GOD HATES FAGS” at the funerals of gay men killed because they were gay.

So much for politeness.

Destiny

It is in this climate, and at this time, when hearing the voices of an all too frequently invisible population is so critical. Why, though, is a conversation particular to the bisexual spiritual experience so important, and also unique?

Individuals blessed with the possibility of a love that transcends the artificial, socially constructed boundary of gender identity (masculine/feminine) as well as the biologically constructed boundary of sex (male/

⁴ The Religious Leadership Roundtable, established in July 1998 in order to amplify the voice of pro-GLBT faith organizations in public discourse, promote understanding and respect for GLBT people, and promote understanding of and respect for a variety of faith paths and for religious liberty within GLBT communities is a good example of the growing positive faith focus on sexual orientation diversity.

⁵ This was created and funded by groups such as the Family Research Council, the Christian Coalition, the Center for Reclaiming America for Christ, Concerned Women for America, and the American Family Association.