Sexuality: A Queer Omission in U.S. Latino/a Theology

James B. Nickoloff
College of the Holy Cross
While U.S. Latina/o theologians have for a long time addressed the theological challenges posed by contemporary studies of gender—and especially of women’s psycho-social, political, and religious experiences—there has not yet been a sustained examination of the consequences for theology of a serious consideration of sexuality or sex. At the same time, studies dedicated to sexuality or sex—and in particular gay and lesbian studies—give little attention to religion and even less to systematic Christian theology. Is this innocent neglect on both sides or a mutual exclusion which serves a purpose? What might be gained from open-hearted conversation between those who reflect on the

Scripture citations are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

1 From 1993 when I became an associate member of the Academy of Catholic Hispanic Theologians of the United States (ACHTUS) to 2002, the Academy’s annual Colloquium has frequently focused on the lived experience and culture of U.S. Hispanics but has not to date analyzed sexuality or sex. The 111 essays published in volumes 1–8 of the Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology (1993–2001) cover a wide range of topics, but by my count sexuality is only mentioned six times (always very briefly). For his part, Roberto Goizueta examines the relationship among aesthetics, ethics, and reason and notes that “love is always . . . erotic love,” but he does not explore the matter further. See Roberto Goizueta, Caminemos con Jesús: Toward a Hispanic/Latino Theology of Accompaniment (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1995) 94.

2 Christine Downing brings psychology, religion, and homosexuality together in fruitful conversation in her important study Myths and Mysteries of Same-Sex Love (New York: Continuum, 1989) but does not broach theological questions per se. Argentine theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid’s recent work Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender, and Politics (London: Routledge, 2000) attempts to do theology from a commitment to “queer politics” and has the added advantage for our purposes of being rooted in the Latin American context. To my knowledge, there is as yet no work of gay or queer theology rooted in U.S. Hispanic culture.
meaning of homosexual desire and life and those who reflect on the meaning of Christian faith? And what insights could be gained if the same persons did both?

U.S. Latino/a theology is well acquainted with the politics of exclusion and its consequences for theory. In principle, no case needs to be made to Hispanic theologians for inviting to the table those who are marginalized because of their sexual lives, and no account is possible here of the undoubtedly rich variety of sexual lives found among those who call themselves Mexican-Americans, Cuban-Americans, Puerto Ricans, etc. Nevertheless, it is worth reminding ourselves (1) that all theology is necessarily colored by the theologian’s sexual life and understanding of that life, and by the sexual life and understandings of the communities to which the theologian belongs and (2) that the inclusion of formerly excluded voices often has a greater effect on “old-timers” around the table than on newcomers. For this reason, listening carefully to homosexual Latinas/os (among other sexual minorities), and in particular to their faith experiences, would likely do far more for the Hispanic community as a whole than it would for gay Latinos/as. Indeed, it would make the community more genuinely “Hispanic”—that is, more truly mestiza, more deeply interconnected, and more authentically loving.

It is true that those excluded from a conversation hold the key to authentic inclusiveness. Homosexual persons in particular make a claim on U.S. Hispanic theologians, first, because their exclusion, oppression, and suffering have until now not been addressed, and thus the work of U.S. Hispanic theologians remains incomplete. However, what we who call ourselves Christians face in homosexual persons is also an ethical question because it concerns above all the integrity of our lives, not only the well-being of others (in this case the welfare of those frequently seen as “other” by Hispanics). But there is yet a third reason for opening the conversation to sexual “misfits”: as queer theorist Judith Butler claims, echoing critical theorists since Marx, what is “repudiated/excluded within [a] system constitutes the very possibility of a critique and disruption of [a] hegemonic conceptual scheme.”

Put theologically, we might say that heresies can lead to clarification and even conversion.

3 In her discussion of Freud and Jung, Downing points out that “sex is always more than just sex” and at the same time sex is “just sex.” Downing, 96. The same could be said of theology: it is always more than God-talk and it is “only” God-talk.

4 See Goizueta, 185.

Because sexual diversity in real life goes far beyond gay and lesbian couples whose lives parallel heterosexually married couples, we should expect to see some elbows on the table as well as some new faces at the table. Newcomers might include gay men or lesbians who are heterosexually married and have children as well as a gay or lesbian lover; Latino Catholic clergy who have secret gay or straight lovers and perhaps children; young people whose exploration of sex takes them far beyond "family values"; male and female prostitutes; transvestites; and transsexuals. What about listening to married heterosexual persons whose sexual practices do not conform to the norms of Church or society? And, of course, we know that all these people's sexual lives are affected by other factors: social class, race, gender, age, political consciousness, faith and theology, to name a few. This is not a group to invite for a polite afternoon tea.

Where, then, can we turn for help with the task of appropriating sexuality theologically and with the process of spiritual and intellectual conversion which such an appropriation requires? Here I will limit myself to a brief consideration of one of the above-named groups—those who think of themselves as "gay men." This choice is not entirely arbitrary: Christianity's historical antipathy to male homosexuality—like its problematic management of sex and gender in general—tells us that something about homosexuality (and homo-sex) strikes close to the heart of what Christianity itself is about. Though gay men do not, perhaps, pose challenges as radical as those coming from some of the other persons mentioned above, I believe this group does raise important questions for theology in general and for Latino/a theology in particular. Furthermore, it denotes one of the human groups to which I unquestionably belong, so a deeper, though preliminary and certainly not disinterested, exploration may be possible here.

_A queer revelation: poor, Peruvian, and gay_

My self-understanding as a "gay man" not surprisingly is part of the lens through which I first looked at homosexuality in the world of Latin America. During the nearly two years that I lived and worked in

---

5 As we know, overuse of the term "community" in ordinary discourse has degraded and distorted it. Phrases such as "the business community" and "the defense community" serve to give a human face to alliances whose aim is domination, not human community-building.

7 The study of homosexuality in Latin America is in its early stages, though a growing literature has appeared since the mid-1990s. A starting point, and nothing more, is Stephen O. Murray, ed., _Male Homosexuality in Central and South America_ (New York: Gai Saber, 1987).
a parish of Lima, Peru in the 1980s, several young people (male and female) shared with me their struggle to accept their homosexuality. As these jóvenes were very poor people, they had little chance of going to gay clubs or gay political gatherings located in the wealthy section of the city where they might meet openly gay people for the first time in their lives. (I myself was still "closeted.") They, of course, had no access to psychological counseling. Worst of all, they faced a lifetime of struggle for material survival in a harsh world—alone. How they found the courage to come to me, I do not know. They were well aware that their heterosexual relatives and friends in the barrio at least had the right to marry and take on the struggle of life with a partner, a mate approved by family, Church, and society. The gay or lesbian young person faced an interminable solitariness, either through remaining single or through entering into what would likely be an unhappy heterosexual marriage. These had to be counted among the most marginalized of the poor, and their stories made me ask about the relationship among sexual orientation, social class, and Christian faith for the first time. Does God's self-revelation not take place in the costly disclosure—self-disclosure—of such powerless people?

Our sexuality: gay, queer, or "homo"?

Four terms—"sexuality," "gay," "queer," and "homo"—might profitably figure in any conversation today between gay Christians and U.S. Hispanic theologians. Only the first term, however, is relatively easy to define; the other three are currently quite contested. By "sexuality" I intend to refer not only to sexual desire, and thus to sexual orientation, but also to erotic behavior. As much as possible, I would encourage theologians to speak of "sex" rather than "sexuality"; this may help us to appreciate the embodied character of theology and avoid the protective abstractionism to which we are prone. Such usage also seems appropriate for a theology which calls itself "Catholic," and even more for a Catholic theology which calls itself "Hispanic" and which has carefully articulated its view of created realities as symbols mediating transcendent reality.

8The 1985 Mexican film Doña Herlinda y su hijo exposed the pain of what some imagine to be a convenient and happy arrangement in some Latin American societies.

Unlike "sexuality," the terms "gay" and "queer" are today notoriously slippery tags and in what is known as "queer theory"\textsuperscript{10} deliberately so. On the one hand, "queer" (meaning "strange") points to an oddity in either practice or theory which can be an indicator of a hidden contradiction and can thus lead us to deepen, adjust, or reject previous claims. For many homosexual, bisexual, and transgender persons, "queer" things give rise to a hermeneutical suspicion vis-à-vis received wisdom.\textsuperscript{11}

On the other hand, "queer" denotes one of two strategic and theoretical approaches to sexual politics arising from the margin of unconventional sexual lives. In significant respects the two stand opposed to each other. One is the older and more familiar work of gay and lesbian liberationist thinkers whose methods, sources, and conclusions frequently coincide with those of other liberationists (whether feminist, black, U.S. Hispanic, or Latin American) despite the fact that gay-lesbian liberationist theological work remains underdeveloped and little known outside narrow circles.\textsuperscript{12} The more recent approach to sex (eros, desire) and the politics of sex known as "queer theory" arose as a critique of the former and continues to develop, at least in part, in opposition to liberationist models. At present a lively, and sometimes acrimonious, debate is underway between what amounts to two camps whose advocates are found not only on university campuses but also in political movements. What is frequently missing from the gay-queer discussion is the voice of Christian believers, including homosexual Latino/a-Christian believers.

Let me be clear: I write as one who is a "child of the sixties" trained in liberationist methods and thought and who thinks of himself as "gay." This means that the phrase "we gay men" has meaning to me. It indicates that there is a kind of "at-homeness," intellectually and emotionally, in being with others who call themselves "gay men." Remarkably, this seems to happen—at least up to a point—even when the gathering includes persons of different social classes, races, ages, political views, and theologies. At certain times sexuality with all its emotional coloring overrides other considerations. I imagine this is what happens in some cases for Latinas, for African-American men, etc. Sharing life in such a group has a "feel" which isn't found anywhere

\textsuperscript{10}It seems inappropriate to capitalize the first letters of a term whose creators adamantly reject all fixed identities, as I shall indicate below.

\textsuperscript{11}The term is used in this sense in the title of this essay.

else in quite the same way. It’s like speaking your own language (or one of your own languages): there’s no need to translate certain things. At the same time, such identification with other “gay men” means that the differences among us—especially political and theological—take on greater weight. Family feuds can be ugly.

The reason why spending time with one’s own “kind” is indispensable is that living as a gay person in a fiercely anti-gay society and Church is like living with chronic pain or illness: you can learn to do it, and you can ignore the ache much of the time, but when your body adapts to an injury, it may be distorted in the process of accommodation. This is why when a person who is bent over (sometimes unconsciously) because of pain sees a counterpart exclaims, “Look! I’m standing up tall,” a shiver goes through the stooped person. At its core “gay community” is about the hope for, and experience of, such relief, such liberation.

While supporters and opponents alike agree that queer theory, by its very nature, cannot help but resist precise definition, there are several ideas around which its principal claims may be organized and which seem to me theoretically pertinent. Like all critical theories which stand the test of time, queer theory emerges from the lived experience of previously unacknowledged contradictions and gives rise to a consciousness which sees things in previously unimagined—and unacceptable—ways. In brief, queer consciousness is not easy to attain but, like feminist consciousness, once achieved, it doesn’t easily “go away.”

Queer theorists take a firm stand in favor of constructionist identity-formation and reject essentialist (or essentializing) views of human beings. Concluding that the categories “gay,” “lesbian,” and “homosexual” are inadequate descriptions of real people’s psychic realities and lived experiences, queer theory is both continuous and discontinuous with gay liberation and lesbian-feminist thought. Its continuity lies in its challenge to heterosexist patriarchal ideology and practice. Its discontinuity arises from its rejection of what it sees as the enduring dualism of gay liberationist and lesbian feminist thought (e.g., homosexual vs. heterosexual, male vs. female, etc.). It finds such binary thinking at the root of heterosexist patriarchy and proposes instead the openness and fluidity of identity (reminding one of certain discussions of *mestizaje*).

---

13 For a fine survey of the development of queer theory up to 1996, see Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 1996). The works of queer theory referred to in the notes of the present essay represent those which I have read and attempted to assimilate. I do not mean to suggest that these are the only, or necessarily the most important, works in the field.
Queer theorists, following the lead of Judith Butler who builds on the work of Michel Foucault in her influential work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1989), maintains that marginalized identities are both the victims of dominant discourse and the product of that same discourse. Adding further complexity to the matter, such identities reinforce the dominant discourse; that is, marginalized persons collaborate in their very marginalization—precisely in their manner of claiming their identity. As Butler puts it, “identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes.” In this suspicion, queer theorists join hands with poststructuralist and postcolonial analysts. Gay liberationists have been quick to respond to queer theorists’ rejection of identity and identity politics (not unlike U.S. Latino/a theology’s objection to postmodernism’s critique of rationality). Just as homosexual people had begun to wrest the power to define themselves away from heterosexist religion and science, queer theory informed them that concepts like “homosexual” and “identity” serve to oppress people, including themselves.

“Queer” as an “identity without an essence” takes “denaturalization” as its primary political strategy. This sets it apart from—indeed places it in opposition to—the strategy of gay liberation. Queer theorists reject the “minoritizing logic of toleration or simple political interest-representation” in favor of “a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal.” While gay liberation opposes one identity to another, queer theory resists the category of identity itself. Queer is both anti-separatist and anti-assimilationalist.

By questioning all seemingly clear and univocal identities, queer theorists challenge notions of the “normal.” They have attempted to show that much of what a culture or society considers “normal” turns out to be more exception than rule. For example, exclusively heterosexual desire and behavior are taken as in fact “abnormal” and not as an accurate description of most people’s experience. Because queer theory problematizes all normativities and normalizing discourse (which

---

15 Jagose, 96.
16 See Goizueta, 132–72.
17 See Jagose, 98–99.
19 Jagose, 98.
21 Rosemary Hennessy, quoted in Jagose, 99.
includes terms presumed to be universal), it is easy to see how it would tend to stress the differences among persons, thereby making group identity and political mobilization difficult. The logic of “queer” (employed as a noun, adjective, and transitive verb by its advocates) is strongly contested by gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender (G.L.B.T.) activists, and to a lesser degree by G.L.B.T. theorists, who see queer consciousness as an enemy of revolutionary change. Besides, it seems to me that queer theorists fail to notice the paradox that if all are different from each other, all share—that is, are similar in—being different. Individual uniqueness is grounded in a prior collective alikeness.

A fourth term, and the most recent of the four, expresses the fundamental similitude of reality. In his 1996 study Homos, Leo Bersani has reclaimed a slang term from its opprobrious function and made a significant contribution to the gay-versus-queer debate. Drawing on his knowledge of literary theory, Foucault’s history of sexuality, and the masterpieces of Jean Genet, Marcel Proust, and André Gide, Bersani joins gay and lesbian theorists in challenging the fundamental dualism of Western thought through an analysis of homosexuality, or more precisely, “homosex.” Bersani avers that “modalities of desire are not only effects of social operations but are at the core of our very imagination of the social and political. . . .” In his study of male-male desire, Bersani rejects both a strict constructionist view and a rigid essentialist position and highlights what he takes to be common to the diverse ways of being gay. At the core, he believes, lies the simple yet potentially revolutionary attraction of “like” to “like.” When society and Church assume the “hetero-ness” of all people—indeed, of all reality (which is still the case in most of the world in 2002), then we find the principle that “opposites attract” asserted, approved, universalized, made normative, and above all protected and enforced. The mere possibility of “likes attracting” is ruled out, deemed unnatural or immoral, demonized, trivialized, and/or ignored. In such a sociopolitical and cultural context, routine attempts to control or even stamp out male same-sex desire do not surprise us. Indeed, not only is “homosexuality” a term

22 Leo Bersani, Homos (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1995) 73. In this he joins others such as Catholic feminist ethicist Mary Hobgood and Althaus-Reid. See Mary Hobgood, Dismantling Privilege: An Ethics of Accountability (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2000). Althaus-Reid not only examines the place of passion (erotic desire) in the work for justice but also the place of anger in sexual passion (125–6).

23 Bersani, 73.

24 The issue is more complex than simple persecution, however, as Mark D. Jordan has recently pointed out in The Silence of Sodom: Homosexuality in Modern Catholicism (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2000). Jordan concludes that the Catholic Church, and in particular its all-male celibate leadership, is both homophobic and homo-
created by heterosexist ideology, but it is a necessary element in the preservation of that ideology. That is, gay people, especially men, have a crucial role to play in maintaining the structures of heterosexist society and Church—the role of scapegoat, of persecuted “other.” A neat arrangement in the Catholic Church, which Mark Jordan has recently examined, allows the Church to persecute the enemy and protect the enemy from “extinction.” The same may be said, of course, of Western societies in general which create, oppress, and preserve underclasses.

According to Bersani, the revolutionary potential of homosexuality lies in its challenge to the presumption of a primordial and essential difference between male and female and their mutual attraction. In this he is at one with queer theorists. The hoped-for unity through the attraction of opposites, of course, always remains problematic, as gender studies have shown. Misogyny prevents any genuine unity between men and women. Furthermore, the assertion of a fundamental difference between men and women becomes the ground of all other constructions of oppression. Bersani claims that Western civilization (and others?) is rooted in, supported by, and only makes sense to a “hetero” mind, that is, one which always begins with difference. Such a mind cannot imagine a way of thinking which begins with sameness. In hetero-realism distinctions ground everything; blurring boundaries threatens a binary (and thus oppressive) world.

The assertion of difference can be oppressive or liberating, depending on the power of those asserting it. When the powerful point to difference, it usually oppresses; when the oppressed do so, it usually liberates by subverting. The same is true of the assertion of sameness: claims by the powerful that “we are all basically alike” obfuscate power differentials and actual oppression and ground calls for reconciliation which leave unjust relations intact. However, when those considered “lesser” claim to be fundamentally the same as those who consider themselves “greater,” the declaration is not taken as good news by the latter. Nevertheless, against prevailing views and practice, Bersani maintains that all differences are grounded in a fundamental

---

phile. Church officials persecute homosexual persons while hiding, and often taking pleasure, in the homo-eroticism of clerical culture and, indeed, of the Church itself.

25 At the same time he in no way ignores the myriad obstacles inside and outside homosexual people which often frustrate this potential.

26 As Christine Downing points out, the fundamental sameness among “men” and among “women” assumed in Western culture is part of the same structure. Men are not as similar to other men nor women to other women as we presume. Nor are men and women as different from each other as the dominant ideology presumes. See Downing, 128–32.

27 Bersani, 41, 46.
homogeneity. The “homo-mind” begins with alikeness and acts on it, without erasing difference. If “gay consciousness” pursues identity, community, and liberation, and “queer consciousness” highlights difference, individuality (some critics would say individualism), and transgression, Bersani expounds a “homo-consciousness” rooted in sameness, aloneness, and transgression which, he believes, is more likely than the first two to give birth to a new kind of society.

The “homo-minded” are, of course, neither the only nor the first to perceive a fundamental homogeneity in humanity. The Catholic Church itself at Vatican II reasserted ancient Christian tradition in noting the “single origin,” the “one goal,” and the universal “saving designs” of God. Nevertheless, the Church’s theology and practice in fact continue to take difference as bedrock (e.g., divine/human, male/female, eternity/time) and to see our pastoral task as unifying what is separated, accomplished precisely by overcoming differences. History demonstrates, of course, that beginning with difference often means staying with difference. Unity becomes an afterthought—or not a thought at all. Bersani’s “homo-mind,” on the other hand, takes sameness as “essential” and difference as “accidental” (to use Thomistic language); truly human projects incarnate a differentiated unity—not E Pluribus Unum.

Taking our cue from Bersani’s suggestive term, let us consider three challenges which the “homo-mind” poses to U.S. Hispanic theology. To help illuminate this discussion, I will draw upon two biblical figures not commonly associated with debates about homosexuality: the man born blind and the pharisee Nicodemus of John’s Gospel.

1. Relationality and solitude: a solas con Dios

U.S. Latino/a theologians have recognized relationality as constitutive of Hispanic identity, culture, and experience30 and have effectively critiqued the radical individualism of dominant U.S. culture and society.31 Home is celebrated as a source of life and meaning32 and community is called the “birthplace of the self.”33 Familial love is taken as

---

28 This is most clearly stated in Nostra Aetate, 1, but the principle grounds much of the theological discussion found in such documents as Lumen Gentium, Dei Verbum, Dignitatis Humanae, Ad Gentes, and Gaudium et Spes.
29 The motto of the United States amounts to a kind of official view of diversity.
30 For example, Goizueta, 89.
31 Goizueta, 47–76.
32 Goizueta, 111–9.
33 Goizueta, 47.
paradigmatic of the experience of love itself\textsuperscript{34} and of all human relationships.\textsuperscript{35} Heterosexual marriage is taken as a prime example of “empathic fusion” through which a man, for example, not only comes to a deeper understanding of women but even “discovers who he is, and who all of us are.”\textsuperscript{36}

The lived experience of self-affirming gay persons might lead them to question both the accuracy of the preceding analysis as well as the meaning of relationality itself. First, they would challenge any idealization of home, community, family, and marriage. We are not the only ones, of course, who endure alienation and some degree of rejection in the family, but for many of us these are the norm, not the result of exceptional dysfunction. Many people besides homosexual boys and men feel fear and suffer abuse in their communities, but for us these are often foundational experiences. We want to ask why, if “\textit{mestizaje} ‘possesses a greater ability for sympathy with stranger,’”\textsuperscript{37} Hispanic families can function as cradles of homophobia which brand even a family member “stranger” and force him into exile. Is the empathic fusion found in an idealized heterosexual marriage based on an anthropology of rigid gender complementarity which by definition leaves out persons who are not exclusively heterosexual? Such a binary view is increasingly challenged not only by feminist and queer theorists but by scientists as well.\textsuperscript{38} It implies an essential incompleteness in “male” or “female” by itself which in turn requires heterosexual union for fulfillment. The real-life consequences of such an anthropology for homosexual persons are devastating.\textsuperscript{39} In any case, a rich source for a reexamination of our anthropology is close at hand: the stories of gay and lesbian Hispanics themselves.

Gay experience challenges more, however, than a description of the forms relationality actually takes in a particular culture; it also questions an idealized view of relationality itself. This point is delicate since

\textsuperscript{34}Goizueta, 194–5.
\textsuperscript{35}Goizueta, 201–2.
\textsuperscript{36}Goizueta, 97.
\textsuperscript{37}Goizueta, 99, quoting José Vasconcelos.
\textsuperscript{39}Susan A. Ross set forth the Catholic Church’s “dimorphic” view of human beings and the consequences of this view for the Church’s teaching on homosexuality at the annual meeting of the Catholic Theological Society of America in 2000. For a summary, see James B. Nickoloff, “Theological Implications of the Church’s Teaching on Homosexuality” in Michael Downey, ed., C.T.S.A. Proceedings 55 (Catholic Theological Society of America, 2000) 130–1. The consequences for bisexual, transsexual, and heterosexual persons themselves are no less ruinous.
the opposite of relatedless would seem to be the individualism whose destructive effects U.S. Hispanic theology correctly condemns. And indeed, in my opinion, there can be no denying the individualistic bent of much queer theory (and postmodernist thought in general). Still, when a study of “hemos” begins with a preface called “We” and a U.S. Latino theologian includes a chapter called Nosotros, we must ask about the contrasting understandings of relatedness found in the two works.40

Alienation from family, exile from community, and expulsion by Church no doubt color many gay men’s experience and understanding of relationality; they may also lead us to a reappraisal of the experience of isolation itself. The imagery of aloneness pervades gay discourse: living in the “closet” instead of being “out,” keeping silent instead of holding forth, being careful instead of carefree, being secretive instead of forthright,41 “embracing the exile”42 instead of finding a home. Aloneness likely affects sexual experience itself from the beginning of adolescence, but while unfulfilled yearning for sex may cause frustration, the privacy of solitary experience might create a space for a rich imaginative life.43 But this is only speculation. What is the sexual experience of homosexual Latinas and Latinos, young and old? And what is its theological significance? Solitude is regularly part of the exile’s experience, but exile is not necessarily part of the experience of solitude. Being alone may or may not be the result of choice. But even when not chosen, solitude can be an experience of fullness as well as emptiness. Not “fitting in” can be a step on the road to a healthy self-affirmation and, ultimately, a step on the road to God, as the mystical traditions of many religions teach us.

The story of the man born blind told in John 9:1-41 may be taken, as I have argued elsewhere, as a paradigm of many gay lives.44 The narrative suggests a link among (1) exclusion from the community, (2) self-acceptance, and (3) encounter with God. It would have been entirely possible, we may assume, for the man to reject the gift of sight from Jesus by simply deciding to “pass” as (pretend still to be) a blind man.

40See Bersani, 1–10, and Goizueta, 47–76.
41Emilie L. Bergmann and Paul Julian Smith have taken an old code-word for “gay” as the title of their anthology, ¿Entiendes?: Queer Readings, Hispanic Writings (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995).
43It is possible that masturbation remains a privileged form of sexual experience for gay male youths—because one’s fantasies can be secret—longer than for their straight counterparts who more easily find socially approved sexual partners.
Such "passing" would have defused the conflict with his community, his family, and the religious authorities. "Passing" is a choice open to many gay men and is, in effect, the behavior commanded by both Church and society: "don’t ask, don’t tell." The blind man chose to "tell," a choice he reaffirmed each time he was called in for questioning and humiliation. In much of the narrative Jesus is nowhere to be seen (he appears in verses 1-7 and then reappears in verses 35-41); most of the time the man stands utterly alone. Even when Jesus returns (v. 35), having heard of his expulsion from the community by the Pharisees, the man’s trials are presumably not over. He does discover Jesus’ true identity—and with it his own—but there is no indication that his relationship with Jesus will soften his neighbors’ opposition. On the contrary, it seems that intimacy with God brings consolation but does not alter his fundamental isolation. Can we not find a way to affirm the redemptive potential of such solitude—simultaneously imposed and chosen—even as we recognize the grace of relationship?  

2. Self-actualization and self-denial: entregarse con autoridad

Many gay people and gay Christians will identify with U.S. Hispanic theology’s insistence on “taking power [and] becoming self-defining and self-actualizing” in a society which at best marginalizes us and at worst seeks our extinction. We agree that “moral agency go[es] hand in hand with a process of conscientization” and that “to accept suffering and self-effacement is not a virtue.” We are not surprisingly suspicious of calls to self-abnegation coming from certain quarters in the Church.

Nevertheless, two factors impel us to question what seems like a one-sided treatment of self-actualization: our own experience as human beings and, more specifically, our Christian experience. It is true that mujerista theology, for instance, does esteem one important

---

45 Leo Bersani would take us further than an appreciation of solitude. He affirms the meaningfulness and value of anti-relationality, or what he calls “an anti-communal mode of connectedness” (10) which involves a commitment to a more just society through a provisional withdrawal from the present unjust society. In this way he attempts to rethink community from the perspective of the social misfits found in the works of Proust, Gide, and Genet who turn their backs on a society which has turned its back on them.

46 Ada-Maria Isasi-Díaz, Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-first Century (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1996) 120.

47 Isasi-Díaz, 161.

48 Isasi-Díaz, 63.

49 For example, Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Letter to the Bishops of the Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons” (1986) 11–2.
form of self-denial, namely, that which is (freely) undertaken for the sake of *la lucha*, or the fight against forced self-denial. Mujeristas know that their work "requires the denunciation of all destructive senses of self-abnegation."50 While the destructive sense of self-sacrifice is well-analyzed in U.S. Hispanic theology (and others, such as womanist theology), and while a positive sense of self-denial is implied *en la lucha*, a careful description and theological interpretation of self-sacrifice, even self-effacement, seem necessary.

Let me be clear: I am not speaking here about sacrifice, negation, or denial carried out by anyone other than a self-defined, self-respecting, and self-motivated person. *La lucha auténtica* is not only voluntary but can only be carried out by those who have achieved, or are in the process of achieving, a strong sense of self (as we find in virtually all forms of liberation theology: black, Latin American, feminist, U.S. Latino/a, womanist, and gay/lesbian). We are not talking about "other-sacrifice"—which is the very history we are attempting to re-make—but self-sacrifice, carried out for a freely chosen and conscious purpose (liberation of the whole human community).

Why is this point so important to gay men? Like other oppressed people struggling for survival and liberation, we recoil from deadly images of sacrifice.51 But perhaps more than other groups, our experience, and more specifically our sexual experience, may lead us to reconsider the meaning of self-surrender. (To repeat: self-surrender is the opposite of forced surrender.) In their sexual experiences homosexual men (like others) discover that pleasure and pain can be directly, not inversely, proportional.52 Sometimes as one increases, the other does as well. A temporary and freely chosen "self-shattering" can be intrinsic to good sex. At the same time self-mastery cannot be entirely separated from the experience of self-shattering.53 If Bersani is correct in asserting

51 See, for example, Dolores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1996).
53 See Bersani’s treatment of this, 98–104, where he describes sex as violent (and not as communal, egalitarian, nurturing, unitive, or loving), which for him is not univocally negative since this is what makes a (beneficial) shattering of the self possible. Here I believe Richard Rambuss is correct to point out that Bersani’s amounts to an essentialized view of sex. Rambuss, for his part, sees sex as potentially violent and anticommunal, etc., but not necessarily so. This would mean that sex may be unifying (and integrative) or disruptive (and integrative). Of course, it may also be dis-integrative. See Richard Rambuss, "Christ’s Ganymede," *Yale Journal of Law and Humanities* (1995) 77–96.
that sexual desire colors "our very imagination of the social and political," we dare not avoid a careful examination of our most intimate moments with ourselves and with others which for many people, at least in part, occur while they have sex.

But it is not only our lived human, in this case sexual, experience which makes gay men question a one-sided understanding of self-denial. Our reading of scripture (inseparable, of course, from our daily lives, our sexual lives, and our political commitments) also convinces us that self-sacrifice and self-realization are not, in the final analysis, incompatible. Another figure in the Gospel of John, one who seems closely related to the man born blind, provides an illustration. I am referring to the Pharisee Nicodemus who, in addition to Jesus, might readily be taken as an embodiment of the "good shepherd" described in the chapter immediately following the story of the man born blind.

Nicodemus appears three times in the Gospel of John. We first see him, apparently fearful, visiting Jesus by night to inquire about Jesus' identity (3:1-2). Despite his office and his learning, this Pharisee humbly acknowledges his confusion (3:4) and gives free rein to his curiosity. He remains silent after Jesus' explanation of rebirth in water and the Spirit (3:5-10). Yet the second time we see him, Nicodemus is defending Jesus and his disciples and reprimanding his fellow Pharisees: "Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?" (7:51). He appears a third and final time at Jesus' death when he and Joseph of Arimathea, a "secret disciple," together bury the body according to Jewish custom (19:39-40). The change in Nicodemus' behavior is striking as he boldly takes leave of his fellow Pharisees and joins his society's pariahs by anointing the murdered body of the One who chose to be, and whom they saw as, their rabbi. In this act of solidarity with social outcasts, Nicodemus undergoes the "rebirth in the Spirit" which he could not earlier understand (3:4, 9). Like the man born blind, Nicodemus presumably failed to find answers to all his questions, even at the end. Yet

54 Bersani, 73.

55 The "loss of self" inherent in transcendence, interpersonal communion, and contemplation has been analyzed as part of the aesthetic experience by U.S. Hispanic theologians. What I am suggesting here is an analysis of sexual experience with the same question in mind: Is the loss of self which occurs in sex also an experience of transcendence, communion, and contemplation? Other lines of inquiry also suggest themselves: the relationship between sexual experience and reason, and between sexual experience and justice.

56 One feature which strongly suggests that John 10 is closely related to the previous chapter is the fact that in both chapters the "Jews were divided" by what confronted them—namely, the testimonies of the man (9:16) and of Jesus (10:19).
uncertainty did not prevent him from accepting the invitation to conversion, to self-emptying, to acknowledgement of the humanity he shared with outcasts. Both Nicodemus and the man of John 9 were “born blind,” both received “new eyes” from Jesus, and both chose public solidarity with the One who revealed to them the truth of their fundamental homogeneity. In accepting the shattering of their old selves and in living out this truth they actualized themselves.

Nicodemus’ trajectory embodies Jesus’ words to those Pharisees who “did not understand what he was saying to them” (10:6). Indeed, they might have been Nicodemus’ own words: “I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father” (10:17b-18). The “good shepherd” lays down his or her life not to see it end in nothing but in order to take it up again. And one takes it up again not simply to demonstrate one’s genius, like a magician, for self-denial and self-actualization (death and resurrection) but to fight (luchar) for “eternal life” for those whose lives are in danger of being lost or stolen (10:28).

3. Disillusionment and expectancy: confiar de nuevo

A crucial turning point in many gay people’s personal journeys is easy to name: it’s the moment when they recognized the fact that they had been lied to by all, or nearly all, of the people they trusted most—parents, other relatives, teachers, friends, newscasters, coaches, priests, political leaders. This shattering discovery can easily increase our sense of aloneness; at the same time it may propel us on the journey of self-actualization. The way forward is often solitary—and in some sense permanently so, even when we manage to find the “gay community.”57 While patriarchal culture makes healthy relationships between men and women (when they happen) almost miraculous, the same culture lies about same-sex relationships and punishes those who manage to establish them.

Although it is possible to recognize a lie and replace it with the truth, the untruth is never forgotten. Nor do we forget who lied to us. Whether the lie was spoken by one’s family, one’s church, or one’s country (and then repeated by oneself), it always leaves a scar. But what becomes of those who are the targets of such deception (and then

57See the works of John McNeill on the conversion journey of gay men, in particular his Taking a Chance on God: Liberating Theology for Gays, Lesbians, and Their Lovers, Families, and Friends (Boston: Beacon, 1988).
self-deception), in this case those who are told that their hearts are “filthy,” their minds are “disordered,” and their acts are “intrinsically evil”? For some, of course, trust remains elusive and cynicism becomes a way of life. They believe nothing they hear, especially when it comes from those who lied to them. Others manage to squeeze the lie into a tiny compartment of the mind which allows them to live as if nothing nasty had ever happened. They continue to believe what they are told, except in one area of life (because something nasty did happen). Is there another path besides cynicism and credulity, neither of which produces critical consciousness or effective political engagement?

The story of the man born blind of John 9 might again prove instructive here. I have always been struck by the marvelous combination of humility and boldness which marks this figure. Time and again he stands by what he knows from first-hand experience (“I was blind, now I can see,” thanks to the man Jesus; 9:25). Three separate interrogations fail to make him assert more—or less—than he knows (9:8-11, 15-17, 24-34). The parallel to many gay people’s daily experience is obvious. But a shift occurs in the man when, during their investigation, the Pharisees “reviled” him for his impatience with them (9:28). Realizing that his questioners are lying, the man not only finds a new reserve of courage; he discovers his own theological voice. When they say, “We don’t know where [the man Jesus] comes from” (9:29), they are not telling the truth. They do know where Jesus comes from, as the man himself is about to point out. They simply refuse to accept the truth. The man’s audacity in standing up to his tormentors by standing by the truth of his experience makes a gay reader jump for joy. In a single sentence he then expresses the core of the evangelist’s message: “If this man [Jesus] were not from God, he could do nothing” (9:33). Jesus is from God. It’s as simple—and troubling—as that. The Pharisees, whom Jesus so often calls “hypocrites” because of their lies, respond to the man with indignation: “You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us”? (9:34a). And then “they drove him out” (9:34b), that is, they drove the truth away. To those who repudiate the truth spoken by the man born blind, Jesus says, “your sin remains” (9:41b).

A person who did not see who Jesus is now sees, but his perception of the truth about Jesus is inseparable from his insight into others. He now knows that the Pharisees and he—and all others—are in an important respect the same. Like him, the Pharisees are learners; like them, he is a teacher. He is fundamentally like his questioners, not essentially different, as they wish to believe. Many self-accepting homosexual Christians today have discovered that what most arouses opposition to us is our refusal to be invisible (“closeted”). We have decided to be visible like anyone else in the Church. We assert that our distinctive sexuality is
more fundamentally like than unlike heterosexuality or bisexuality, and
this leads us to claim the same rights as others, not to ask for something
different ("special" rights). But it also means more: when homosexual
Christians say, in words or deeds, to other members of the Church, "We
are in essence the same as you," they unself-consciously contribute to the
process of shattering the "fantasy of opposites" (such as male/female,
clergy/lay, Christian/non-Christian) on which too much theology and
ecclesial life rest. What makes homosexual Christians different—and
in this perhaps like Hispanic Christians in general—is their stubborn
insistence on the equal dignity of all. Consciously or not, they advance
a vision of reality rooted in commonality, continuity, and solidarity and
call into question attitudes based on dissimilarity, rupture, and discord.
But such testimony will only be heard from those who recognize the lie
("you were born in sin") and recognize the equal dignity of the liar.
Both Jesus and the man born blind speak to those "who don't under-
stand" again and again, "so that those who do not see may see, and
those who do see may become blind" (9:39).

What course does the man take after the events recounted in John
9? No further mention of him is found in the Gospel, but it is not hard
to guess his fate. If he continued to stand by Jesus and by the truth of
his own lived experience, his future must have been difficult, indeed.
Jesus' so-called "Farewell Discourses" (John 13:31—17:26), troubling to
many for their apparent dualism, come alive if people like the man
born blind are taken as the addressees. "If the world hates you, be
aware that it hated me before it hated you" (15:18). "Because you do
not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world—there-

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith rejects both "special" and
equal civil rights for homosexual persons. Addressing itself to the "conscientious
legislator, voter, or church authority who is confronted with such issues," it holds
that "[i]ncluding 'homosexual orientation' among the considerations on the basis of
which it is illegal to discriminate can easily lead to regarding homosexuality as a
positive source of human rights, for example, in respect to so-called affirmative
action or preferential treatment in hiring practices. This is all the more deleterious
since there is no right to homosexuality which therefore should not form the basis for
judicial claims. The passage from the recognition of homosexuality as a factor on
which basis it is illegal to discriminate can easily lead, if not automatically, to the
legislative protection and promotion of homosexuality. A person's homosexuality
would be invoked in opposition to alleged discrimination, and thus the exercise of
rights would be defended precisely via the affirmation of the homosexual condition
instead of in terms of a violation of basic human rights." See Congregation for the
Doctrine of the Faith, "Some Considerations Concerning the Response to Legisla-
tive Proposals on the Non-Discrimination of Homosexual Persons" (July 22, 1992),
par. 13 (emphasis added).

fore the world hates you” (15:19). “But they will do all these things to you on account of my name, because they do not know [see] the one who sent me” (15:21). “If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have sin; but now they have no excuse for their sin” (15:22). “If I had not done among them the works that no one else did, they would not have sin. But now they have seen and hated both me and my Father” (15:24). The speech continues in chapter 16: “They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, an hour is coming when those who kill you will think that by doing so they are offering worship to God” (16:2). After the Catholic Church’s expulsion of individuals (e.g., Jesuit theologian John McNeill) and groups (e.g., the Catholic gay and lesbian organization Dignity) for affirming their homosexuality as a gift—and therefore as a right, and after the brutal murder of people such as Matthew Shepard in Wyoming in 1998, how can gay Catholic men fail to find such texts full of meaning?

Gay Catholic men today, and among them gay Hispanic Catholic men, are a thorn in the side of the Church and in the side of theologians. The truth of our lives (that “likes” attract and can establish relations of beauty, justice, and reason) makes us different from others and forces those others to look at facts which some find disconcerting. The followers of Jesus in history have not, on the whole, made peace with their bodies or with sex, which means we have lied about God in our bodies and about God in our erotic desires and practices. Gay Catholics make the Church look directly at the human body and at sex—and therefore at God—because it is (only) there that we differ from others. While powerful forces seek to protect the lie that only opposites attract, homo-truth, like other repressed truths, has always found a way to break through and leave its mark in human history.

In the United States we are currently witnessing a great conflagration in the Catholic Church; the combustibility of lies makes such firesstorms inevitable. Are the flames those of Jesus’ Spirit, purifying the ekklesia of untruths which suffocate and kill? At such a time cynicism

---

Unfortunately, the notorious murder of Matthew Shepard represents only the tip of the iceberg of anti-gay hate crimes. According to the annual report of the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs, Anti-Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Violence in 2001, there were 1,887 hate crimes reported in 2001 nationwide based on sexuality, including 11 murders, 82 rapes or sexual assaults, and 732 assaults or attempted assaults. The rest of the incidents involved robbery, vandalism, intimidation, and verbal harassment of sexual “misfits.” These figures, of course, represent only those incidents reported to civil authorities.

Leo Steinberg has carefully studied an example of this phenomenon in The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion (New York: Pantheon, 1983). His theme is of particular relevance to the present essay.
makes some turn smug or vengeful, while naïveté leads others to believe that fundamental change is impossible. But those who know they have been lied to and who have learned to love those who lied to them without forgetting the lies, hope and believe that the truth shall set us all free (John 8:32).

A queer colloquium: una teología “homo” de conjunto

It is queer that U.S. Latino/a theologians have not to date examined sexuality and sex with the same analytical rigor and commitment to justice which inform their theological appropriations of other dimensions of society, culture, and faith. Who can say what they will find when they take a hard look at the mystery (sacramentum) of sex and, in particular, the complexities of Hispanic sexual lives? It is perhaps less surprising that students of sexuality display little interest in Christian theology, even the liberationist kind. The reasons for, and the political effects of, the lack of conversation between these two groups of scholars are worth seeking, but such a search would take us beyond the scope of the present essay.

Two immediate consequences of such mutual disinterest, however, are clear. First, those who consider either faith or sex in isolation from (or even worse, in opposition to) the other inevitably fail to plumb the depths of both. Can sexuality legitimately be conceived apart from its spiritual meaning, its mystery? Can the life of faith adequately be understood apart from a consideration of the most intimate and potentially humanizing dimensions of our lives? Furthermore, does the current two-way silence not prevent those on each side of the scholarly divide from recognizing themselves in those on the other? To speak about sex (especially “unacceptable” sex) and faith (especially Christian faith) in the same conversation is to open our eyes to the “homo-ness” of all speakers.

Those who ask about the theological meaning of sex and the sexual meaning of theology propose what might be called by Latino/a theologians a teología “homo” de conjunto. Let me restate three areas in which U.S gay Christians might put to U.S. Hispanic theologians in such a conversation. (The queries which Latino/a theologians might propose for gay/queer theology must be left for others to suggest.) These areas arise from the lived experience of faith of sexually marginalized people, some of whom no doubt call themselves “Hispanic.” First, we might ask how God redeems those whom Hispanic families, communities, and churches exclude because of their sexual lives (or for other reasons) and how solitude, imposed and/or chosen, may be redemptive. Second, we might press for a clearer understanding of the relation-
ship between self-actualization and self-denial and for a word about the salvific value of self-sacrifice. Finally, we might urge attention to the complex role of untruth in the construction of personal identities, the growth of faith, and the formation of political commitments. With Latina and Latino colleagues, we homo-Christians invite the Church to grow theologically—indeed, to reject dangerous falsehoods. Even more importantly, we ask our Hispanic colleagues to allow us to join them as equals in the common quest for truer faith, stronger hope, and more effective love.