

Chapter 6

Model Two: The Out Christ

1. The Out Christ

The second Christ-centered model of sin and grace for LGBT people is the *Out Christ*. The Out Christ arises out of the understanding that God reveals Godself most fully in the person of Jesus Christ. In other words, God “comes out of the closet” in the person of Jesus Christ. As Christians, we believe that the true nature of God is revealed (for example, God’s solidarity with the marginalized and oppressed) in the Christ event. That is, God comes out in the incarnation, ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Indeed, the notion of the Out Christ as the revelation of God is supported by Jesus Christ’s description in the Fourth Gospel as the *logos*, or Word of God.¹

Chris Glaser, a gay theologian and Metropolitan Community Church minister, has written about the Out Christ in his book *Coming Out as Sacrament*. In that book, Glaser describes Jesus Christ as nothing less than God’s very own coming out to humanity: “The story of the New Testament is that God comes out of the closet of heaven and out of the religious system of time to reveal Godself in the person of Jesus the Christ.”² In other words, for Glaser, the New Testament is all about God coming out in the person of Jesus Christ.

According to Glaser, it is in Jesus Christ that God reveals God’s solidarity with the marginalized and oppressed of the world. For example, God comes out as an infant who is born in “a strange town and in a land and culture dominated by a foreign power, the Roman Empire.” God also comes out in solidarity with the oppressed through the ministry of Jesus, who “defends women and eunuchs and those of mixed race (Samaritans) and responds to other races (the Roman centurion, the Syrophoenician woman).” In the crucifixion, God comes out by extending “an inclusive paradise to a crucified criminal.” And finally, in the resurrection, God

comes out as one who “lives despite human violence, a true survivor of human abuse and victimization.”³

Another manifestation of the Out Christ in the gospels is Jesus Christ’s ongoing struggle to reveal himself—that is, to “come out” about his divinity—to those around him. As the gay theologian Daniel Helminiak put it, “Jesus had the problem of ‘coming out.’” Helminiak notes that Jesus “sensed deep and unique moments within himself, but he was not able to easily share them with others.”⁴ For example, in a number of passages in the gospels—such as the messianic secret passages in Mark—Jesus instructs others not to say anything about who he is. Self-revelation for Jesus was dangerous and, in fact, it ultimately led to his execution by the religious and political authorities of his day.

At other times, however, Jesus engages in self-disclosure about his true self. He wants to know what his disciples think about his identity by asking them, “Who do you say that I am?”⁵ Jesus reveals himself quite dramatically to Peter, James, and John in the Transfiguration,⁶ as well as to Thomas and others in his post-resurrection appearances. Indeed, the entire liturgical season of Epiphany, immediately following the twelve days of Christmas, is traditionally understood as a season about the revelation of Jesus Christ to the world.

A number of theologians have also written about the Out Christ in terms of speculating that Jesus Christ might have been an ancestor to LGBT people. In 1968, the Anglican priest Hugh W. Montefiore published an essay in the anthology *Christ for Us Today* suggesting that Jesus was gay.⁷ In that essay—which created a “furore” and “spectacular publicity”⁸—Montefiore writes that the “homosexual explanation” of Jesus’ celibacy is “one which we must not ignore.” He notes that Jesus was friends with women in the gospels, but it was “men whom he is said to have loved.” Furthermore, to the extent that Jesus was an “outsider” from birth (that is, conceived out of wedlock) to death (that is, executed as a criminal), it would make sense for God to disclose Godself in the person of a gay man. This, according to Montefiore, would be consistent with God’s fundamental nature of “befriending the friendless, and identifying [God]self with the underprivileged.”⁹

In 1973, the biblical scholar Morton Smith published a work, *Clement of Alexandria and a Secret Gospel of Mark*, that also created a huge controversy.¹⁰ Smith discovered a manuscript of a lost letter from Clement of Alexandria that quotes from a passage from a secret Gospel of Mark. That passage, which is located in between the verses of canonical Mark 10:34 and Mark 10:35, refers to a secret all-night initiation rite in a tomb between Jesus Christ and a rich youth who “loved” Jesus and who had been resurrected by him. Interestingly, the youth is described as wearing only a “linen cloth over his naked body.” Clement, however, denies in his letter that the words “naked man with naked man” is in the text of the secret gospel.¹¹ Although Smith’s work has been accused of being an elaborate hoax, it does raise interesting issues about the Out Christ and helps to resolve the mystery of the naked youth who appears mysteriously in canonical Mark 14:51–52.

The late gay Episcopal priest Robert Williams also wrote about the Out Christ in his 1992 book, *Just as I Am*.¹² Williams, who was one of the first openly gay man ordained as a priest in the Episcopal Church, argued that Jesus was gay. He speculated that Jesus and the Beloved Disciple were lovers and that Lazarus was in fact the identity of the Beloved Disciple. Based upon the research of Morton Smith and the Secret Gospel of Mark, Williams also speculated that the rich young ruler mentioned in the gospels was the Beloved Disciple. Weaving the various stories together—of Jesus, the Beloved Disciple, Lazarus, and the rich young ruler—Williams paints a portrait of a gay Messiah who “makes it possible for you to be out and proud and still be a passionate follower of Jesus the Christ.”¹³

Finally, Nancy Wilson has suggested in her 1995 book *Our Tribe* that Jesus Christ should be understood as an ancestor to LGBT people. Among other things, Wilson touches upon transgender and bisexual issues in her work. Citing Isaiah 53, Wilson argues that Jesus Christ should be understood as a “functional, if not physical, eunuch” to the extent that he was “cut off” from his people and died without heirs. Wilson then focuses on the rather queer Bethany household of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, and how it was Jesus’ family of choice. She speculates that Mary and Martha might have been secret lovers who were described as “sisters,” and she also speculates, like Williams, that Jesus and Lazarus were lovers. Wilson

concludes that, to the extent that Jesus was fully human and thus a sexual being, he should be seen as “bisexual in orientation, if not also in his actions.”¹⁴

What do we make of these attempts of naming the Out Christ? Whether or not Jesus’ sexuality or gender identity can be conclusively proved, these narratives of “outing” are helpful in terms of challenging our preconceptions and thinking about what it means to envision a God who “comes out” to us in the Christ event. These outing narratives are also helpful in terms of understanding the dynamics of revelation within the gospels.

2. Sin as the Closet

How should we think about sin in light of the Out Christ? If the Out Christ is understood as the One through whom God most fully reveals Godself to humanity, then sin—defined as what opposes the Out Christ—can be understood as the *closet*, or the refusal to reveal oneself fully to one’s families, friends, co-workers, and other loved ones.¹⁵ Not only does the closet prevent a person from truly connecting with others, but it has a corrosive effect on the self-esteem and well-being to the extent that she is constantly forced to keep her life a secret to others.

As we have seen in recent years, the closet has a particularly toxic effect with respect to conservative Christian religious leaders who preach against same-sex or gender-variant acts and yet are secretly LGBT themselves. We have seen this in the case of Ted Haggard, the evangelical pastor who paid a male escort to give him sexual massages as well as crystal meth. I have written elsewhere about George Rekers, a prominent proponent of reparative therapy and board member of the anti-gay National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality (NARTH), who was found returning from vacation with a male escort whom he had hired from Rentboy.com, allegedly for helping him to lift his luggage.¹⁶ And there is the case of Eddie Long, the pastor of a black megachurch who had been accused by four young men of coercing them into sexual acts.¹⁷

The closet is also a serious and sinful issue for the Roman Catholic Church. In his book *The Silence of Sodom*, Mark Jordan has written about the deep closets within Roman Catholicism and the resulting tension between extreme homophobia and homoeroticism within the Roman Catholic priesthood.¹⁸ The closet is not limited to homosexuality, however. Elsewhere, Jordan and others have written about the recent sexual abuse crisis in the Roman Catholic Church and the problems that have arisen out of the ecclesial closet and the extreme repression and inability to speak openly and honestly about issues of sexuality.¹⁹ Mary Hunt has written about how the Roman Catholic Church is “suffused with secrecy and deception, and rewarding of duplicity.” She writes that the system “works” because of the “collusion of those schooled in obedience to law and authority, who adhere to codes of behavior that preserve the priesthood and the institutional church at the expense of children.”²⁰

The sin of the closet also manifests itself in LGBT communities of color. For many LGBT people of color, coming out to families and friends can be a particularly difficult process as a result of condemnation from theologically conservative churches, cultural expectations of traditional gender roles, and the anxieties of bringing shame to their families and ethnic communities.²¹ For example, “Michael Kim,” the pseudonym of a young Korean American gay Christian man, has written about the difficulties of coming out in the Korean American community.²² According to Kim: “It is a single-elimination game—I could go to Harvard, Harvard Medical, do a surgical residency at Massachusetts General Hospital, and if in the end, I am still gay, I end up with a big fat zero.” He writes about how others in the Korean community would say “Well, my son didn’t go to Harvard, but at least he’s not gay.”²³

It should be noted that the closet does not only relate to sexuality or gender identity. For example, it can take the form of downplaying other characteristics such as one’s race or ethnicity. The gay Japanese American law professor Kenji Yoshino has written about this phenomenon of blending into the mainstream in his book *Covering: The Hidden Assault on Our Civil Rights*.²⁴ For example, LGBT people of color often experience an additional closet—the ethnic closet—in trying to hide or downplay their minority status within the predominantly white LGBT community. That is,

they try to “blend in” as a result of the fetishization and marginalization described in the previous chapter.

3. Grace as Coming Out

By contrast, grace in the context of the Out Christ can be understood as the courage to come out of the closet, or sharing one’s sexual orientation and/or gender identity with others. For LGBT people, the process of coming out can only be understood as grace, or an unmerited gift, on the part of God. There is no one correct pattern or single path to coming out. Some people come out very early in life; others wait until much later. For some people it is a slow and private process. For others, it is a fast and public announcement. Furthermore, coming out is not just a one-time process. Indeed, it is an ongoing process that unfolds in different situations and contexts throughout one’s life.

Regardless of how one ultimately comes out, the act of coming out reflects the very nature of a God who is also constantly coming out and revealing Godself to us in the Out Christ. Coming out is a gift that is accompanied by other gifts such as self-love, the love for others, and the overcoming of shame and internalized homophobia. Coming out is not something that can be “willed” or “earned”; it can only happen as an act of grace from God.

A number of LGBT spiritual writers have noted the connection between coming out and the spiritual growth of LGBT people. That is, coming out is the first step to spiritual maturity. For example, the former Jesuit priest and current psychotherapist John McNeill has written in his book *Freedom, Glorious Freedom* about a three-step process for creating an authentic LGBT self: (1) a passage from the closet to self-acceptance; (2) a passage into intimacy with another; and (3) a public passage. For McNeill, these steps are necessary in order for LGBT “health and holiness.” McNeill further recognizes that movement through these passages is not something that one can achieve through one’s own resources; rather, it is a “gift of God’s”—that is, a matter of grace.²⁵

McNeill’s model is echoed in the works of other writers who work on issues relating to LGBT spirituality. For example, Daniel Helminiak argues

that sexual self-acceptance, including the coming-out process, is necessary for spiritual growth. That is, “sexual self-acceptance leads to self-esteem, which advances human development, which includes spiritual development.”²⁶ James Empereur, a Jesuit professor of liturgy and theology, has noted that spiritual maturity begins with challenging a “conformist” model of spirituality (that is, basing one’s values solely on external authorities), which often includes dealing with the coming-out process.²⁷ The connection between coming out and spiritual maturity is echoed in the autobiographies of closeted evangelical Christians such as Mel White—the former ghostwriter to Jerry Falwell—who have found their true vocational calling after coming out of the closet.²⁸

Justin Tanis, an ordained minister with the Metropolitan Community Churches, has written in his book *Trans-Gendered* about the ways in which congregations and other communities of faith can help transgender people come out about their gender identities. Tanis lists a number of characteristics of welcoming communities, including the “visible and audible presence of trans people and programs,” which highlights the importance of creating spaces that allow trans people to come out.²⁹ Other resources for helping transgender people to come out within communities of faith include the “MCC TRANSFormative Church Ministry Program,” which is a guide produced by the Metropolitan Community Churches Transgender Ministries.³⁰

As noted above, there is not just one model for coming out with respect to the LGBT community. In fact, sometimes the “standard” model of coming out—that is, sitting down with family and friends and making the big announcement—does not work for immigrant communities or communities of color. In the Asian American community, for example, one rarely talks about sexuality, let alone LGBT issues. There are also complex social, cultural, and linguistic challenges with respect to coming out. I know of queer Asian American grassroots activists who are—and look—extremely out in their everyday lives, but they “tone down” their appearance whenever they go home and visit their families. It’s not because they are closeted, but rather it is out of respect for their cultures.

When LGBT Asians come out, however, they also help their families, friends, and those around them to discover the gift of God’s grace. Wei

Ming Dariotis, a bisexual young woman of mixed Chinese and European heritage, wrote about how her coming out has allowed her mother to make the connections between homophobia and racism. When Dariotis came out, she told her Chinese mother—who had made a number of homophobic comments in the past—what it was like to be bisexual and Asian American. Some time later, her mother heard Dariotis’ younger brother calling someone a “fag” and told him to stop. Her mother called Dariotis and said: “You would be very proud of me. I told Alex he can’t talk like that. I told him he might be very popular right now, but tomorrow it could turn around and then, because he is Chinese, they could call him a Chink, and it is just like calling the other kid a fag.” Dariotis said that she was very proud of her mother for “making a connection between racism and homophobia—they are oppressions that support each other.”³¹ By coming out, Dariotis allowed her mother to discover God’s grace by challenging and disrupting patterns of racist and homophobic behavior in herself and in those around her.

In the end, communities of color have their unique ways of dealing with the coming out issue, which can take the form of God’s amazing grace. For example, I never had to “come out” to my Wai Puo (that is, my maternal grandmother). Early on in our relationship, I had simply invited Michael over to have lunch with Wai Puo. He loved her cooking, and she in turn loved cooking for him. Wai Puo always treated us like we were together and in the same way that she treated the other married members of my extended family. She just knew. Because she was so accepting of Michael, this set an example for the other members of our family. We have been blessed with the grace of coming out.

Study Questions

1. Who is the Out Christ? What does it mean to say that God comes out of the closet with respect to Jesus Christ?
2. Which depiction of the Out Christ in this chapter appeals to you the most? The least?
3. What is sin in light of the Out Christ? How does this sin affect closeted conservative Christian leaders? The Roman Catholic Church? Communities of color?

4. What is grace in light of the Out Christ? How does this grace help with respect to the spiritual growth of LGBT people?
5. Have you experienced the grace of coming out in your own life? If so, how? If not, how might you experience the grace of coming out in other contexts?

For Further Study

The Out Christ

- Glaser, *Coming Out As Sacrament*
- Helminiak, *Sex and the Sacred*, 111–28
- Montefiore, “Jesus, The Revelation of God”
- Smith, *Clement of Alexandria and a Secret Gospel of Mark*
- Smith, *The Secret Gospel*
- Williams, *Just as I Am*, 111–23
- Wilson, *Our Tribe*, 132–48

Sin as the Closet

- Boisvert, *Gay Catholic Priests and Clerical Sexual Misconduct*
- Hunt, “New Feminist Catholics”
- Jordan, *Silence of Sodom*
- Jordan, *Telling Truths in Church*
- Kim, “Out and About”
- Shrake, “Homosexuality and Korean Immigrant Protestant Churches”
- Yoshino, *Covering*

Grace as Coming Out

- Dariotis, “On Becoming a Bi Bi Grrl”
- Empereur, *Spiritual Direction and the Gay Person*
- Helminiak, *Sex and the Sacred*, 53–64

- McNeill, *Freedom, Glorious, Freedom*, 51–89
 - Metropolitan Community Church Transgender Ministries, “MCC TRANSFormative Church Ministry Program”
 - Tanis, *Trans-Gendered*
 - White, *Stranger at the Gate*
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- [1](#) For a discussion of the doctrine of revelation and queer theology, see Cheng, *Radical Love*, 44–49.
- [2](#) Chris Glaser, *Coming Out As Sacrament* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 85.
- [3](#) Glaser, *Coming Out As Sacrament*, 82–84.
- [4](#) Daniel Helminiak, *Sex and the Sacred: Gay Identity and Spiritual Growth* (Binghamton, NY: Harrington Park Press, 2006), 122.
- [5](#) Matt. 16:15.
- [6](#) Matt. 17:1–8.
- [7](#) H.W. Montefiore, “Jesus, The Revelation of God,” in *Christ for Us Today*, ed. Norman Pittenger (London: SCM Press, 1968), 101–16.
- [8](#) Montefiore, “Jesus, The Revelation of God,” 109 n.2.
- [9](#) Montefiore, “Jesus, The Revelation of God,” 109–10.
- [10](#) Morton Smith, *Clement of Alexandria and a Secret Gospel of Mark* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973). Smith presented his findings to a non-academic audience in Morton Smith, *The Secret Gospel: The Discovery and Interpretation of the Secret Gospel According to Mark* (Middletown, CA: Dawn Horse Press, 1982).
- [11](#) Smith, *Clement of Alexandria and a Secret Gospel of Mark*, 447.
- [12](#) Williams, *Just as I Am*, 111–23.

- 13** Williams, *Just as I Am*, 123.
- 14** Wilson, *Our Tribe*, 132, 140, 147.
- 15** For a key work in queer theory about the closet, see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, updated ed. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008).
- 16** Patrick S. Cheng, “‘Ex-Gays’ and the Ninth Circle of Hell,” *Huffington Post* (May 20, 2010), available at <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rev-patrick-s-cheng-phd/ex-gays-and-the-ninth-circle/582825.html> (accessed on December 11, 2011).
- 17** For more homophobic individuals who were caught in gay sex scandals, see the Gay Homophobe website, available at <http://gayhomophobe.com> (accessed on December 11, 2011).
- 18** Mark D. Jordan, *The Silence of Sodom: Homosexuality in Modern Catholicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).
- 19** See Mark D. Jordan, *Telling Truths in Church: Scandal, Flesh, and Christian Speech* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003); Donald L. Boisvert and Robert E. Goss, eds., *Gay Catholic Priests and Clerical Sexual Misconduct* (Binghamton NY: Harrington Park Press, 2005).
- 20** Hunt, “New Feminist Catholics,” 270.
- 21** Eunai Shrake, “Homosexuality and Korean Immigrant Protestant Churches,” in *Embodying Asian/American Sexualities*, ed. Gina Masequesmay and Sean Metzger (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009), 145–56.
- 22** Michael Kim, “Out and About: Coming of Age in a Straight White World,” in *Asian American X: An Intersection of 21st Century Asian American Voices*, ed. Arar Han and John Hsu (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2004), 139–48.
- 23** Kim, “Out and About,” 146.
- 24** Kenji Yoshino, *Covering: The Hidden Assault on Our Civil Rights* (New York: Random House, 2006).

- [25](#) John J. McNeill, *Freedom, Glorious Freedom: The Spiritual Journey to the Fullness of Life for Gays, Lesbians, and Everybody Else* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 61, 65.
- [26](#) Helminiak, *Sex and the Sacred*, 55 (“Sexual Self-Acceptance and Spiritual Growth”).
- [27](#) James L. Empereur, *Spiritual Direction and the Gay Person* (New York: Continuum Publishing, 1998), 119–21.
- [28](#) See generally White, *Stranger at the Gate*.
- [29](#) Tanis, *Trans-Gendered*, 122.
- [30](#) Metropolitan Community Church Transgender Ministries, *MCC TRANSFormative Church Ministry Program*, available through MCCTM@MCCChurch.net.
- [31](#) Wei Ming Dariotis, “On Becoming a Bi Bi Grrl,” in *Restoried Selves: Autobiographies of Queer Asian/Pacific American Activists*, ed. Kevin K. Kumashiro (Binghamton, NY: Harrington Park Press, 2004), 46.