Is it meaningful to speak of ‘queer spirituality’?
An examination of queer and LGBT imagery and themes in contemporary Paganism and Christianity

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Introduction
Is there a distinctly queer spirituality? Various people have sought to define queer in a variety of ways — as “resisting normativity” and as a verb meaning “to spoil or interfere”, and as a tool for liberation (Goss, 1999: 45-46). Irshad Manji (Summerskill, 2006: 62) defines queer as 'being unpredictable', rather than 'rigid
and absolute, and frankly dull’. Queerness is a metacategory which includes various non-normative sexual identities. ‘Queer’ is also a very different term from ‘gay’. Being gay or lesbian has meant fitting into a specific identity:

“Gay identity can be as confining as ‘closetedness’ in its minoritization and elision of the social-cultural differences of same-sex desire.” (Goss, 1999: 45)

The concept of queer defies categorisation and resists normativity:

Queer is often understood as critically non-heterosexual, transgressive of all heteronormativities and, I would add, gay normativities. ‘Queer’ turns upside down, inside out, and defies heteronormative and gay normative theologies. (Goss, 1999: 45).

Some LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and transsexual) people contest the appropriateness of the term ‘queer’ (Hawley Gorsline, 1996: 136); transsexual people say that a lot of their experience does not fit into the queer paradigm (Prosser, 1998: 59); others have complained that trying to define a specific LGBT or queer spirituality is essentialist (Ali et al, 2006: 30) — in this context, the idea that gay people are more, or differently, spiritual than others because of their liminal status (Stemmeler, 1996: 100), either as marginalised people, or as “intermediates” (Owen, 2004: 109).

Charges of essentialism notwithstanding, because of the marginalisation of LGBT people, a separate culture has developed to a certain extent in the enclaves and safe spaces created by LGBT people. This essay will examine this marginalised culture and its spirituality, and ask whether it can be described as a distinct spirituality. The use of the term ‘queer spirituality’ (as distinct from talk of
gay or lesbian spirituality) is a post-AIDS phenomenon; male gay theologies drew on liberation theologies, and lesbian feminist theology emphasized friendship or the erotic as models of divine love; but they failed in the face of the AIDS crisis, and their failure to address the issues of life and death, and life beyond death, led to the emergence of queer theology, which subverts traditional sexual identities (Berry, 2004: 255). Therefore queer, lesbian and gay spirituality must be regarded as distinct but overlapping domains.

In order to determine whether this is a distinct phenomenon (rather than part of the general turn towards individual spirituality), we need to examine how much of it is different from the 'mainstream' of religious culture.

**Theoretical background**

Women and non-heterosexuals have often been “invisible” in religions, theology, and religious studies in the past (Schüssler Fiorenza, 1992: 45-47). They were either subsumed in the supposedly gender-blind category of believers (Gross, 2004: 17), or repressed and silenced (Gill, 2004: 201). Their hidden histories and mythologies have had to be recovered and sometimes reinvented (Reid-Bowen, 2007: 33-34).

Various authors have conducted an examination of Biblical texts to demonstrate that a homophobic interpretation of them is unjustified (McNeil, 1993 [1976]); others have shown how Christianity can be interpreted as queer (Moore,
2001). These strategies are similar to feminist strategies of reinterpretation, in that they seek to develop ‘transformative critical theory and praxis’ (Gill, 2004: 209).

Because of the marginalisation of women and LGBT people, many people have concluded that they need a separate form of spiritual expression from the patriarchal and heteronormative mainstream (Conner et al., 1997: 173). Some of these people have also assumed that there is something different about the spirituality of women or gay men that necessitates this separatism (Conner et al., 1997: 105).

Feminist and queer theologies read ‘against the grain’ of texts, images and mythologies. For example, Moore (2001: 21-89) examines the allegorical readings of *The Song of Songs* and finds a lot of gender-bending and same-sex love in it; and Sawyer (2004: 166-170) re-reads the story of Abraham through the lens of gender and discovers that in the face of the supreme authority of God, Abraham’s masculinity is undermined, and that the women in the story consistently take control of the situation.

Strategies within contemporary Christianity are different than those in contemporary Paganism. In Christianity, feminist, queer, gay and lesbian strategies have generally centred around re-reading or reinterpreting the texts (see examples above); in Paganism, strategies have partly involved mining ancient mythologies for feminist, LGBT and queer imagery, and partly around simply creating new mythology (Reid-Bowen, 2007: 33-34). The reason I have chosen to explore
these traditions is that early Christianity arose in the pagan context of the Roman Empire, and much of its theology is based on Pagan philosophy (for example the use of the concept of Platonic forms), and contemporary Paganism arose in a Christian context, and is either reacting against Christian thinking much of the time, or adopting Christian discourse without being aware of it. Each of them has used the other as a rhetorical device to demarcate the boundaries of their respective traditions (Hutton, 1999: 11), particularly in the contested areas of gender and sexuality (Duncan, 2007).

Therefore, it is interesting to examine where strategies for queering them converge or diverge; this will also help to determine whether there is a distinct queer spirituality, since if there are common themes across the traditions, it would suggest that there is. It may also imply that there is a fluidity or an openness between the traditions in the area of queer spirituality, and that queer spirituality transcends, transgresses or defies the categories of specific traditions.

The spiritual identity of Hawley Gorsline (1996: 128) certainly seems to defy categorisation and reflect an openness between traditions:

“While retaining considerable emotional and theological connection with the Episcopal Church, I also find a denominational home in Unitarian Universalism. The Radical Faeries... comprise my community of spiritual activism. I now position myself as an Anglican Unitarian Universalist Radical Faerie and companion of Jesus.”

Similarly, Sister Mary Timothy Simplicity (2007) of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence says that his spirituality is a mixture of “Judeo-Christian, Hindu,
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Buddhist, and Wicca-Faerie traditions”.

In looking for evidence of a distinctive queer spirituality, I have cruised the web in search of contemporary writings about it, as a form of online ethnomethodology. Ethnomethodology sees “ethnographic research as itself participating in the construction of the social world” and is more interpretive than traditional ethnography (Walsh, 2006: 227). I have also looked at popular artwork and writings by and for queer people, because ethnomethodology sees culture as a system of signs, and is similar to semiotics. Ethnography also studies people in their accustomed settings (Walsh, 2006: 228); in this study, I am examining the literary and artistic products of LGBT people, rather than interviewing them; which according to Fontana (2002: 162-3) is in some ways a more artificial situation (cited in Seale, 2006: 110).

In terms of my position on the spectrum from observer to participant, outsider to insider, I am an insider in terms of being a bisexual Pagan; but an outsider when it comes to Christianity, especially queer and LGBT Christianity, the extent and depth of which I have only recently begun to realise. I was brought up as a Christian and ceased to be one in 1983, in part because of Christian homophobia. I am probably what has been called a ‘marginal native’ - one who is inside a tradition but able to view it as if from the outside (Walsh, 2006: 233). I have used the internet as the locus of my investigation because of the geographically scattered nature of the field, and because online communities are just as interesting as
geographically situated ones.

Odih (2006: 286) sounds a note of caution about internet ethnography; whilst the ‘rhizomatic architecture’ of the internet releases the ethnographer from the traditional reliance on physical locations, researchers need to be mindful that online and offline realities may not be congruent; people may feel less constrained on the internet than in real life.

**Historical background**

The first wave of feminism included women who sought a non-sexist version of Christianity. Some first-wave feminists sought to justify their demands for equality, or at least rights, on the basis of religious teachings (Francis-Dehqani, 2004: 128), or to point out the patriarchal bias in the Bible (Sawyer, 2004: 162). However, it is difficult to subsume first-wave feminisms into a single homogeneous group, as they had widely varying concerns and agendas (Francis-Dehqani, 2004: 128).

The second wave of feminists began to look beyond mainstream Christianity for alternative forms of religion. Some, such as Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1992), chose to look for alternative interpretations of the Bible; others, such as Mary Daly, declared themselves post-Christian, and embraced Goddess feminism (Juschka, 2001: 15). Still others, such as Starhawk, chose witchcraft, borrowing extensively from the ideas of Daly and others (Hutton, 1999: 348) to create a heady mix of Wicca, environmentalism and feminism.
Many queer and LGBT people have also found a spiritual home in Paganism, and there are specific groups catering for their interests, such as the Radical Faeries, the Modern Gallae, and so on. However, not everything in the Pagan garden is rosy. Some Pagans are homophobic, and many are at the very least heterocentric. I recently attended a public Beltane ceremony where all the references to love were couched in heterosexual terms; this was all the more noticeable since our coven ritual the previous night was inclusive and gender-bending.

There are also queer and LGBT-friendly spaces within Christianity - the Metropolitan Community Church, the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement, and many others. Nevertheless, debate still rages among Christians as to whether homosexuality is permitted by the Bible.

There have been a number of martyrs to homophobia, whose stories, whilst tragic, also resonate in a mythical way: Oscar Wilde, Matthew Shepard (Duncan, 2007; Stuffed Animal, 2006); Robert Lentz painted an icon of Shepard, who was crucified on a hillside in Wyoming by a homophobic mob. The victims of AIDS have also been described as ‘holy martyrs’ (Starhawk et al, 1997: 200).

The heroes of queer and LGBT spiritualities are those who have struggled for gay liberation by being out (openly gay), acting up (engaging in political activism, particularly around the issue of AIDS), and exploring new possibilities for political and spiritual identities. Such heroes are celebrated on the LGBT Religious Archives
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Network website, for example. They include Harry Hay (founder of both the Mattachine Society and the Radical Faeries); the eight founders of the Daughters of Bilitis; Edward Carpenter; the founders and ministers of the Metropolitan Community Church; Christians who contend against the homophobia of the Church; and many others. These heroes are still remembered today for their pioneering struggle for liberation. They are both shapers of queer and LGBT spiritualities, and a distinctive feature of them.

The experience of AIDS has heightened the sense of community and spirituality among gay men (Stemmeler, 1996: 105) as they care for each other, and devise new spiritual strategies for coping with the trauma of the untimely deaths of friends and lovers, such as the memorial AIDS quilt, and numerous caring organisations and activities. The experience of having AIDS oneself has been likened to alchemy by Robert Arpin:

“Pain and suffering and sickness is like fire. It can refine people into gold or reduce them to ash. In the AIDS epidemic, gay people have begun refining their lives into gold… It refines them into beautiful examples of the meaning of life… and love.” (cited in Conner et al., 1997: 45)

The spiritual practices that have arisen in response to AIDS include: healing techniques drawn from a variety of religious traditions; the role of the psychopomp (a being who assists a dying person to make the transition from life to death); celebratory and upbeat funerals; making altars for the dead; the search for inner peace, coming to terms with death; and an outpouring of art, poetry and drama (Conner et al., 1997: 46).
Arguably the impact of AIDS has also led to less radical sexual practices in the gay community, and more conformity to heterosexual norms. Some queer-identified thinkers are critical of the introduction of civil partnerships, in that they see it as just taking on the trappings of heterosexual marriage and the norms of monogamy (Tatchell, 2001), though most LGBT people feel that it is a very positive development (Summerskill, 2006).

Going with the flow

Some aspects of queer and LGBT spiritualities are similar to the orthodox expression of their chosen traditions; others are radically different, and born out of the experience of being LGBT and/or queer in the context of Western culture. We will first examine those which seem similar to the traditions in which they are situated.

The tribe - a Pagan theme

Some gay people, particularly the Radical Faeries, see the gay community as a tribe (Rodgers, 1995). This is partly because they draw inspiration from Native American concepts such as ‘two-spirit’ (Conner et al., 1997: 172). The idea of a gay tribe seems to be unique to gay Pagans.

Christopher Penczak entitled one of his books Gay Witchcraft: Empowering the Tribe, clearly referencing this tradition.
The concept of the tribe is quite popular among other Pagans, especially druids (many British druid groves are named after ancient Celtic tribal groupings and lands), so in this respect queer spirituality could be seen as similar to the ‘mainstream’ of Paganism.

However, Irshad Manji, a queer Muslim, criticises tribalism (Summerskill, 2006: 70-71), as it can lead to conformism, reductionism, and a form of fundamentalism. She suggests that instead, people should focus on shared values and individual integrity. She recounts how she met a white gay man who complained that she wasn’t lesbian enough, implying that she should conform to the way other lesbians were, otherwise she was a ‘sell-out’. She therefore identifies herself as queer, to emphasise the multiplicity of her identities. The queer rejection of standard models of gender and sexual identities undermines the idea of a group identity (Goss, 1999: 48).

**Justice and Liberation - a Christian theme**

In a study of LGBT Christians’ beliefs, Yip (2003: 143) found that the majority of his sample were critical of the church’s stance on homosexuality, and argued for “Christian sexual ethics that do not demarcate sexual orientation and sexual practice”. Their view on the nature of God was also distinct; they regarded God as genderless, the personification of love, concerned with social justice, and immanent in the world. They were also not particularly keen on the idea that God’s will is an
immutable law, and only 67.4% regarded God as a father. Justice and liberation were important to them precisely because of their position vis-à-vis the Church:

This ‘love and justice’ theme constitutes an important attribute in the respondents’ beliefs about God. This is indicative of the relationship between their social circumstances and their belief that God is loving and accepting of people of all sexualities. Further, God is concerned with the social injustice inflicted upon them, despite their being God’s creation. (Yip, 2003: 145)

These LGBT Christians’ view of God is about immanence, caring, and interacting with people (rather than being judgmental and remote).

Only 47.6% of the respondents believed in Jesus Christ being the exclusive means of salvation; and only 40.2% believed in the ‘rapture’. Most of them believed in the dual human and divine nature of Christ, but also placed greater emphasis on him being a person who associated with marginalised people, and a role model, particularly in the area of social justice. 94.9% of the sample believed that the Bible cannot always be taken literally, but most felt that it is still inspiring and relevant, alongside lived experience. There was a marked theme of love and justice in their responses, which is consistent with queer theology (Yip, 2003: 148) and with Christian theology in general; however, there seems to be a greater emphasis on it in queer theology, which is derived in part from liberation theology.

**Reading against the grain**

There are many aspects of queer and LGBT spiritualities that are different from the ‘mainstream’ of their traditions.
**Coming Out and Acting Up**

Coming out, it has been suggested, is an act of resistance to the surrounding heteronormative culture, and a radical affirmation of the gay self (Stemmeler, 1996: 98-99). It is also an act of honesty and clarity:

> When I come out, to any degree I do so to make a relationship more real not in order to talk about my sex life. It may be painful yes, maybe a relief, maybe at the risk of violence but coming out shines a very intense light on our relationships. The person I am talking with has a chance to get to know who I am." (Foster, undated)

Coming out is also an experience of self-actualisation; according to Boisvert (1999: 58):

> “self-actualisation… is the predominant theme in most gay spiritual writing… coming out - the defining life experience for gay men - is the very epitome of self-actualisation.”

According to Saadaya (undated), coming out allows self-expression, and should be celebrated as a rite of passage, which initiates the quest for love, spirit and self. It releases “archetypal potential” and can be experienced joyfully. It is a declaration of independence and individuality.

Some Pagans, fearing discrimination, remain closeted about their religion; revealing it is known as ‘coming out of the broom closet’, a reference to the gay experience. Similarly, Pagan Pride events were inspired by Gay Pride events (Dewr, 1998). The experience of being closeted and the potential consequences of being out, as well as the sense of relief when one no longer has to avoid mentioning a significant part of one’s life, are similar to the LGBT experience.
Wahba (1989) says, however, that coming out is not a single act, but a process, a gradual revelation (cited in Stemmeler, 1996: 99). The LGBT person has to come out in each new social situation; unless we choose to make our sexual identity obvious by ‘acting up’.

Acting up is a radical assertion of sexual identity, being so out of the closet that no-one needs to ask; it is getting involved in political activism (Hawley Gorsline, 1996: 136) and refusing to accept heteropatriarchal norms. Goss (1993) draws a parallel between Jesus overturning the tables of the moneychangers in the temple, and the protests of the organisation ACT UP against the homophobia of the Church (cited in Hawley Gorsline, 1996: 136). Acting up is an expression of righteous and transforming anger against injustice. It is saying, “We’re here. We’re queer. Get used to it.” (Stemmeler, 1996: 97)

Given that ‘mainstream’ Christianity is homophobic, and ‘mainstream’ Paganism is heteronormative, coming out and acting up, as radical affirmations of the gay self, are clearly different from the ‘mainstream’; although declaring oneself to be Pagan in a generally hostile context is similar in some ways to the experience of coming out for LGBT and queer people, the queer or LGBT Pagan has to come out as both queer or LGBT and Pagan, thereby increasing his or her sense of difference.

**Gender-bending and Androgyny**

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The third wave of feminism was characterised by a decrease in emphasis upon separatist strategies and by an increased awareness of women-loving women and women of colour and the problematisation of the concept of gender (Juschka, 2001: 568). This development was reflected in theology and the study of religions by feminist scholars engaging with queer theory.

Queer theory offers a critique of gender, regarding it as a performance or a political formulation, and a product of discourse (Sawyer, 2004: 163-164). Gender is firmly entrenched in Christian discourse (Sawyer, 2004: 164) and Pagan discourse (Hart, 2005).


Queer Christians have deconstructed and queered the gender roles in the Bible (Moore, 2001: 151-154), and criticised the homophobia of the church (Standing, 2004: 65).

Queer and LGBT Pagans have criticised Pagan ideas of ‘polarity’ (the notion that the primary dynamic of the universe consists of ‘the masculine principle’ and ‘the feminine principle’) on the grounds that it does not include their experience of gender and sexuality (Hine, 1989).

There are three possible models of gender and sex (Matthieu, 1996: 44): the idea that sex and gender are both biological givens; the idea that sex is a biological
given but gender is cultural; and Butler’s (1990: 136) idea that gender is a product of discourse and sex is ‘inscribed on the surface of bodies’ (cited in Sawyer, 2004: 164).

Another problem encountered by both queer and LGBT Pagans and queer and LGBT Christians is the gender and sexuality of the divine.

There are two ways to confront the problem of non-inclusive models of deity: to decide that there are both masculine and feminine forms; or to decide that the divine transcends gender categories (which can be problematic for feminists if the masculine pronoun continues to be used to refer to the divine). Pagans have generally opted for the former choice, Christians for the latter.

Whilst it seems logical for feminists to honour the divine feminine, a goddess, or goddesses, this can be problematic if there is assumed to be one God and one Goddess (as is often the case with popular books on Wicca). A single divine essence without gender, or including all possible genders and sexualities, or an assumption that there are many deities, some of whom might be queer, is relatively unproblematic from a queer perspective; but the idea that there is one God and one Goddess excludes the possibility of their being queer, can lead to heteronormativity, and is sometimes used to justify homophobia (MacThearlaich, 2000).

However, there is far more at stake in both feminist and queer theology than the gender of the divine. Religions have generally sought to impose gender roles. They have assumed that both sex and gender are biological givens or
divinely decreed, along with heterosexuality, and that anyone who deviates from them is dangerous, heretical and sinful (Juschka, 2005: 237). Whilst having a deity or deities that include the female gender is helpful in some ways, it does not necessarily follow that this will lead to greater gender equality in society, as women are still regarded as the source of corruption in Hinduism (Seneviratne and Curry, 2001: 206), even though it has goddesses. Will it therefore be helpful to find queer deities?

The Christian circumscription of people’s sexual behaviour, restricting it to heterosexual sex within marriage — and in some cases, further restricting it to sex that is likely to result in procreation (Lamond, 1997: 33) — has also meant the proscription of same-sex relationships, and a silence concerning them (Blackwood and Wieringa, 2001: 456-7). However, Christian women and LGBT people have responded to the restrictions upon them by engaging in biblical exegesis and other forms of activism. There are several Christian feminist and LGBT groups.

The contemporary Pagan experience has been different. Many people choose a Pagan path because of issues around gender (Hutton, 1999: 341-344) and sexuality. Either they are looking for a more inclusive image of the divine, or for a religion that celebrates sexuality in all its forms, and honours both genders. They find in contemporary Paganism some helpful aspects (such as the role of priestess and the honouring of goddesses and women) and some unhelpful ones (such as the widely prevailing essentialist view of gender among Pagans, and the existence
of homophobic Pagans). Ford (2005: 42) says that “Gay men have frequently been left out of Wiccan thought because we don’t seem to fit neatly into the notions of male-female polarity” and that he frequently encountered homophobic Wiccans (Ford, 2005: 43). However, there is a tradition of the Divine Androgyne (inherited from the Western Mystery Tradition), a being who includes both genders, perhaps even transcending gender.

Occultists at the end of the nineteenth century regarded psychological androgyny as the ultimate aim of the Adept (Owen, 2004: 212), partly because of a belief that humans were androgynous before the Fall, and partly because of a belief in the androgyne of the divine (Owen, 2004: 110). As Wicca draws in part on the Western Mystery Tradition, it has inherited these ideas, which are expressed in the Dryghtyn Prayer, which is addressed to an entity that is “male and female, the original source of all things” (Bourne, 1979).

The Radical Faeries also place great importance on androgyny (Rodgers, undated):

The concept of androgyny was taken on by the Faeries and given a distinctly spiritual bent. Rather than referring to an asexual or omni-sexual state, androgyny for the Faeries means radically juxtaposing elements of the masculine and feminine in psychological as well as physical formulations. The relationship of the archetype of the Androgyne to figures in myth and history has become a spiritual imperative for many Radical Faeries seeking a tradition to reclaim.

He goes on to quote Thompson (1987: 52):

The role of the fool, the trickster, the contrary one capable of turning a situation inside out, is one of the most enduring of all archetypes. Often cross dressed or adorned with both masculine and feminine symbols,
these merry pranksters chase through history, holding up a looking glass to human folly. (cited in Rodgers, 1995).

Another interesting example of Pagan gender-bending is the contemporary practice of _seiðr_. This is a revived form of an ancient “shamanic” practice. In heathen myths, male _seiðr_-workers were referred to as _ergi_ (a term which may mean the receptive partner in a relationship between two men). Many contemporary _seiðr_-workers are gay men, and heterosexual male practitioners have found that they need to adjust their gender performance to accommodate this practice, because it involves an openness to being entered by spirits (Wallis, 2003: 230-233). Many conservative Heathens reject the practice of _seiðr_ because of these associations (Blain, 2002: 122).

The celebration of androgyny is not unique to queer spirituality, but the emphasis upon it is far greater within queer spiritual groups than in other groups. There are a number of queer Pagan groups which specifically celebrate the divine androgyne, such as the Modern Gallae, the Brotherhood of the Phoenix, and the Radical Faeries.

The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence (2007) defy classification as any one tradition, as they profess many different traditions, but they too are interested in gender-bending, and spreading joy and beauty whilst dispelling guilt and shame.

*Darkness, Nature and Vulnerability*

Further common themes across expressions of queer and LGBT spiritualities.
are the concepts of darkness, nature and vulnerability. Darkness and Nature are seen as refuges from homophobic society. In *De Profundis*, Wilde (1996 [1905]: 90) speaks of the nurturing and non-judgmental qualities of Nature:

Society, as we have constituted it, will have no place for me, has none to offer; but Nature, whose sweet rains fall on just and unjust alike, will have clefts in the rock where I may hide, and secret valleys in whose silence I may weep undisturbed. She will hang the night with stars so that I may walk abroad in the darkness without stumbling, and send the wind over my footprints so that none may track me to my hurt: she will cleanse me in great waters, and with bitter herbs make me whole.

Edward Carpenter was an enthusiastic advocate of Nature as a place of freedom (Hutton, 1999: 27), and following him, his friend E. M. Forster made the hero of his novel *Maurice* feel “at one with the forests and the night” as soon as he had made the decision to adopt an actively gay lifestyle (Hutton, 1999: 50). Harry Hay, founder of the Radical Faeries, who was a Carpenter enthusiast, also stressed the importance of communing with Nature (Conner et al., 1997: 173).

Foster (undated), a gay Anglican priest, writing more recently, draws parallels between the darkness of the church at Advent, the darkness of the night, where it is safe for same-sex relationships to flourish, and the vulnerability of being penetrated:

In the light two men cannot come together, they need the dark for protection. Two men cannot embrace and still be thought to be real men. You can only hope to become a man if you are separate not if you are connected to each other, certainly not if you are coupled or copulating. Nothing must go into a man's body in the light because then we would all see that we all have holes. That there are holes in the bodies of boys and men, that we can receive and be vulnerable.

Hawley-Gorsline (2003: 58), suggests that darkness is generally seen as
a negative cultural meme – dark sexuality, dark continents, dark people – and that Christian spirituality is focused on the light. This negative view of darkness increases its power as a meme; darkness is equated with exotica, especially sexual difference. Blacks and blackness are associated with sexuality and sensuality; and ‘deviant’ sexuality is kept hidden, in the dark. An African American transgendered activist, Miss Lorrainne Sade Baskerville, said to Saadaya (undated):

> Why is black the color of evil? Why is the color black bad and impure and why does white represent light, wisdom and purity? … Black is [a] mysterious color, a beautiful color! It represents mystery!

The celebration of darkness, which we have been told is the realm of evil, allows us to transcend boundaries:

> Darkness requires performance and each of us is called upon to perform, to play across the boundaries of those worlds we have been told are dark and therefore evil or bad or alien. (Hawley Gorsline, 2003: 71)

> It also allows us to escape the hierarchical view of the cosmos which is associated with the exclusive honouring of the light:

> Baldwin and Lorde, each in their distinctive ways, show us that turning to the dark, celebrating darkness, and turning away from dichotomous thinking in which light and dark are opposed—with light as a positive force for conquering the negative dark—offer hope for saving humanity from destructive hierarchies based on supremacies of race, sex and gender. (Hawley Gorsline, 2003: 71)

> The theme of reclaiming darkness as a positive concept is one that is also espoused by most Pagans, but there does not seem to be any additional emphasis upon it among LGBT Pagans, or if there is, it is not discernible from that of other Pagans. It is, however, unusual for Christians to talk about darkness in a positive
way, so queer and LGBT Christians are innovative in this regard, and once again transcend standard categories.

**Finding the Queer in the Divine**

Despite the reluctance of many heterosexual commentators to include queer and LGBT material in their work (Conner et al, 1997: ix), much of it has been recovered by returning to the original mythological material. A similar process has occurred within Christianity, where queer commentators such as Moore (2001) have re-examined the Bible.

The Queer Jesus is currently part of a “global revelation”. There are paintings, sculptures, photos, a play, and a novel, “*Jesus in Love*”; and queer theologians have suggested that Jesus may have had a gay relationship (Cherry, 2006: 25).

Gay artists have also contributed numerous images of the queer divine. The French photographers Pierre et Gilles have produced numerous images of Christian saints, Hindu deities, and classical deities (Marcadé and Cameron, 1997: 197-223), and many of them are gay icons in one way or another (Vallet, 2006). The series of photographs of saints begins in 1987 with an image of Saint Sebastian, looking remarkably calm as he is transfixed with arrows, lashed to a tree-stump with garlands of roses. Sebastian has been a symbol of same-sex love at least since the Renaissance (Conner et al, 1997: 297), hence Derek Jarman’s remarkable film of the same name, and Pierre et Gilles created two more images of him in 1994.
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(Sébastien de la Mer) and 1996 (Le martyre de Saint Sébastien). Pierre et Gilles also depicted Joan of Arc (1988 and 1997), presumably chosen for her gender-bending activities and possible lesbianism (Conner et al, 1997: 190). They also produced an image of Sainte Affligée, known in English as Uncumber or Wilgefortis, a legendary figure who grew a beard to avoid marriage (Becker-Huberti, undated). There are numerous other saint pictures, some of which seem to have homoerotic connotations, but mostly seem somewhat randomly selected. However, a lot of their models are LGBT people, so perhaps the artists are making a statement by portraying them as saints.

Pagan deities that they have depicted include Adonis (1992), Amphytrite (1989), Bacchus (1991), Medusa (1990), Orpheus (1990), Venus (1991, 1992 and 2000), Adonis (1992 and 1999), Eros (2003), Mercury (2001), Ganymede (2001), and Diana (1997). Medusa is sometimes seen as a lesbian icon (Conner et al, 1997: 229). Orpheus chose male lovers after failing to retrieve Eurydice from the underworld, and it was for this that the Maenads tore him apart; legend has it that his friend Sappho buried his head (Conner et al, 1997: 258). Adonis was the eromenos of Dionysos (Conner et al, 1997: 43). Eros was also a symbol of same-sex love in ancient Greece (Conner et al, 1997: 132), among the Lacedaemonians and the Athenians for example. In alchemical texts, Mercury was frequently depicted as an androgyne; in Pierre et Gilles’ 2001 work, he appears as a graceful and muscular youth. Ganymede is well-known as the eromenos of Zeus (Conner
et al, 1997: 155), and according to mythology, Diana shunned the company of men and preferred the company of women. It would seem from this brief survey that the association of the deity or saint with same-sex love or gender-bending may be a factor in their selection by Pierre et Gilles as a subject.

Various other artists have portrayed religious subjects from LGBT and queer perspectives, including Jesus as a gay man in a modern setting, Jesus as Sophia, and even Jesus as a horned god (Cherry, 2007). According to Cherry (2007: 7), the images ‘embody and empower people who are left out when Jesus is shown as a straight man. They can free the minds of everyone who sees them.’ Many of the images compare the persecution of Jesus to the persecution of queer and LGBT people (Cherry, 2007: 29).

Ford (2005) has created a series of short stories about the encounters of the Green Man (the symbol of his tradition) with various deities, including a sexual encounter with Pan. For others, the recovery of ancient myths of same-sex love seems as important as the discovery of new queer and LGBT aspects of the divine.

Many lesbian Pagans find the idea of a single Goddess attractive, sometimes because they have been molested by men (Foltz, 2000), sometimes because they do not feel the need for ‘balance’ (Rose, undated). Other lesbian Pagans try to work within existing models, but often find that they perceive them differently from the way heterosexuals do (Landstreet, 1999 [1993]).

Cherry (2006: 13-14), a lesbian Christian, explains why she feels the revelation
of the queer Jesus is important:

The queer Christ comes at a time when Christian rhetoric is used as an anti-gay political weapon. He is a beacon of hope in a world where Christians and gays seem to be at war. He mends the split between body and spirit that has led to violence, poverty, and ecological destruction. Like the Jesus of first-century Palestine, the queer Christ images have come to teach, heal and free anyone who accepts the challenge.

The emphasis on finding the queer in the divine seems to be unique to queer spirituality and theology, though the urge to perceive the divine in one’s own image seems fairly widespread – numerous writers have criticised the portrayal of Jesus as a Northern European person (Hawley-Gorsline, 1996: 142). Some queer theologians would argue, however, that queering the divine is not a process of perceiving the divine in one’s own image, but rather a process of God's coming out, because s/he has been closeted by heteronormative theology (Althaus-Reid, 2003: 4). Indeed, if the divine embodies every possible identity, sexuality, and gender, then it must include queerness. The idea of God coming out, rather than being queered, is echoed by Cherry (2006: 11):

I wrote about a sexual Jesus because human beings are sexual, and he is bisexual-transgender because I did not want to limit Christ’s sexuality to a single approach. I don’t feel that I “made” Jesus queer when I wrote Jesus in Love. During the writing process, Christ seemed to reveal this aspect of his all-encompassing self to me, not as a historical fact, but as a spiritual truth.

*Finding the Divine in the Queer*

The idea of finding the divine in the context of places formerly deemed to be outside the sacred, and the idea that God may be in the closet and be in need of
outing, are fairly radical in Christianity.

Althaus-Reid (2003: 4) says:

Our task and our joy is to find or simply recognise God sitting amongst us, at any time, in any gay bar or in the home of a camp friend who decorates her living room as a chapel and doesn't leave her rosary at home when going to a salsa bar.

The idea of the divine being immanent in everything is fairly widespread in Paganism, but there is less awareness of queer deities. Queer and LGBT Wiccans in particular have had to struggle with the notion that the primary polarity of the universe is male and female in a heterosexual embrace. My personal solution to this problem (and one that may have been adopted by others) is to regard the primary polarity as being the interaction of self and other, lover and beloved. Lynna Landstreet (1999 [1993]) sees the first touch of lightning on the primordial waters as being the “true Great Rite, of which all other enactments, sexual or not, are merely symbolic”. (The ‘orthodox’ definition of the Great Rite is the enactment of the union of the masculine and feminine polarities in Wicca.)

The idea that the divine may manifest in queer and LGBT people and places has been enthusiastically embraced by queer and LGBT Pagans and Christians alike. This is radically different from the heteronormative and sometimes homophobic mainstream.

It has been suggested by some thinkers that LGBT and queer people have a special role to play in the spiritual world, by virtue of our androgynous qualities or ‘higher vibrations’:
Any person who is at this link between this world and the other world experiences a state of vibrational consciousness which is far higher, and far different, from the one that a normal person would experience. This is what makes a gay person gay. (Hoff, 1993).

These views on sexuality and spirituality have been enthusiastically adopted by many gay people, and are similar to those put forward by Harry Hay and Edward Carpenter.

Christian de la Huerta (founder of Q-Spirit) has suggested that queer people fulfil ten spiritual roles (Moon, 2005). These are: catalytic transformers; outsiders and mirrors of society; consciousness scouts; sacred clowns and eternal youth; keepers of beauty; caregivers; mediators or in-between people; shamans, priests and sacred functionaries; the divine androgyne (drawing on Carpenter's ideas); and gatekeepers. Some of these draw on ideas about gay people being essentially a particular type of person - more caring, more instinctual, more spiritual, having a better sense of humour, and so on. Some of them are predicated on the idea that because gay people are ‘neither male nor female’ in terms of gender role, then they are also good intermediaries between the material and spiritual worlds (which in turn is based on an assumption that the material and spiritual worlds are separate). However, if we lived in a society where gender roles were less fixed, and the category of biological sex was not so important, these ideas might have been irrelevant, as everyone would be free to play whatever role they desired without having it assigned to a particular gender category (Juschka, 2005: 238). LGBT people flourish in environments where gender categories are more fluid:
It is not an accident that music and the arts were always a tolerant environment for gay men. It was a world where appreciation for the ‘feminine’ was not seen as a weakness, and where strength did not have to manifest itself in violence and coarseness. … It was the perfect place in which to indulge a sense of the extravagant and exuberant, as well as offering ideal camouflage. A mask, a costume, an affecting melody, a graceful leap were all perfect alibis for those whose affections danced to a different tune. (Summerskill, 2006: 210)

These ideas of the divine permeating everywhere, including gay bars, are fairly ‘mainstream’ in Paganism, but radical among Western Christians. The ideas about spiritual roles echo ideas about archetypes, especially the trickster, that are popular among Pagans; but the focus on queer people having a special status is different from ‘mainstream’ Paganism.

**Subject-SUBJECT consciousness**

Harry Hay suggested that a defining feature of gay men is Subject-SUBJECT consciousness (Conner et al, 1997: 172), and this idea was enthusiastically adopted by the Radical Faeries (Rodgers, 1995). It is the idea that heteropatriarchal relationships are characterised by the man regarding himself as a subject and women as objects, whereas gay men regard their partners as fellow subjects. Pemberton (2004: 252) says that:

> Of course the subject is always subject in her own eyes when not objectified and displaced by the gaze and the analytical grid of the other. Subjects speak, think, act, love, cry, scream, ululate, make love, feel fear, carry history, dream dreams. They do this best in a radical inter-subjectivity[.]

This radical inter-subjectivity seems similar to Hay’s subject-SUBJECT
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consciousness. Clearly, in order to move away from the hierarchical and exploitative nature of the current heteropatriarchal paradigm, there needs to be a radical shift towards an awareness of the subjectivity of everyone; this is similar to the ideas of queer theory, which argues that identity is fluid and shifting, and that each of us is

a subject whose gender identity is purely performative, the product of a compulsory set of rituals and conventions, which conspire to engender retroactively the illusion” that our gender is “natural and innate (Moore, 2001: 177-178).

Such ideas about gender and gender roles are not widely accepted in either Christianity or Paganism, both of which tend to regard gender as something innate and fore-ordained.

**Queer theology**

Queer theology is an extension of liberation theology (Althaus-Reid, 2003: 2), and as such, concerns itself with love, justice, and lived experience (Yip, 2003: 148). It looks at theology through a queer lens, highlighting the diversity of people who do not fit into heteronormative categories. Goss (1999: 44) criticised gay and lesbian theologies as perpetuating the notion of a monolithic gay or lesbian grouping with only one voice, and failing to be inclusive of queers of colour, bisexuals, trans people, and intersex people. He goes on to say:

Queer studies thus represent a paradigm or discursive shift in the way some scholars view sexual identity. Queer studies attempt not to abandon identity as a site for knowledge and politics but certainly problematize fixed and hegemonic notions of identity. Queer theorists argue that identities are always multiple, hybrid, provisional or composite in which an infinite number of identity markers can combine to form
new sites of knowledge. For queer theorist Michael Warner queer is a transgressive paradigm, representing ‘a more thorough resistance to the regimes of the normal’ (Goss, 199: 45)

In arguing for a queer theology, Goss states that he is excluded by heteronormative theology except in its category of ‘abomination’, but is also excluded by gay theology in its ‘apologetic attempts to assimilate into mainstream culture’. Goss (1999: 46) argues that queer theology should be a radical critique of normativity. In this sense, queer theology is by definition different from the ‘mainstream’ of the Christian tradition, and different from gay and lesbian theology.

Standing (2004: 65) posits the theory that homophobia in the Church is due to the uncertainty of the postmodern condition. Fundamentalists are especially concerned about LGBT Christians, because they challenge their categories. Gill (2004: 205) concurs, suggesting that the homophobia of some sections of the church is because homosexuality transgresses gender boundaries (Gill, 2004: 205). A queer theology, writes Standing (2004: 65), would allow us to embrace ‘the indeterminacy of postmodern existence, rather than seeking to negate it’, and would offer a way in which people could be both religious and open to changes in society.

Conclusion

It would seem that there are a number of features of queer and LGBT spiritualities that arise from their position as discourses of the marginalised. These include radical resistance to normativity; an emphasis on androgyny and gender-
bending; an interest in darkness and nature (unusual within Christian discourse) and vulnerability (unusual in both Christian and Pagan discourse); the initiatory experience of coming out; the radical celebration of difference in the practice of acting up; the interest in finding the queer in the divine, and finding the divine in the queer, which may have echoes in ‘mainstream’ thinking, but in the sense of celebrating queerness, are unique to queer spirituality; and queer theology, which is different from the mainstream by definition, since it seeks to challenge normativity at every turn.

These unique features arise from the discourses surrounding the phenomena of same-sex love and queerness, and the experience of being seen as different, rather than any essential or innate quality. Queer theorists have long been at pains to point out that whilst there are numerous examples of same-sex love and transgression of the boundaries of gender in the past, they cannot simply be labelled ‘gay’, since this term is associated with a particular historical and cultural construct (Foucault, 1978: 43). Different societies have understood both gender and sexual identity according to different models. Horrocks (1997: 151-152) identifies occupation, clothing, sexual object choice, sexual organ used, sexual role, anatomical state, generation, and status as possible factors in constructing models of sexual roles in various different societies.

Queer theory has been criticised for failing to include the experience of transsexuals, who desire to pass as the other gender, and whose experience of
gender is rooted in the body (Prosser, 1998: 59). It has also been criticised for failing to include 'straight' thinkers; however, it does not exclude all heterosexuals, only heteronormative ones (Duncan, 2007).

Queer theory and theology position themselves as radically resistant to normativity (both gay and straight), and so it would seem that you do not have to be lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender to be queer, as long as you are resistant to normativity. Queer spirituality is, however, a discourse with its roots in earlier discourses celebrating same-sex love.

There is a strong sense in the discourse of queer spirituality and queer theology that Christianity is broken and in need of healing, because the queer component has been suppressed (Cherry, 2006: 26). The same could be said of Pagan traditions, since the queer element is mostly ignored. I would argue that Wicca, for example, is inherently queer, but most practitioners are unaware of this. The word *wicca* (Anglo-Saxon for a male witch) apparently derives from an Indo-European root meaning to bend or to shape - and the actions of bending and creativity are both frequently associated with same-sex love. The emphasis on the need to become psychologically androgynous (frequently couched in terms of developing one’s inner feminine or inner masculine) and the use of the *Dryghtyn Prayer* add to the feeling of queerness at the heart of the tradition. In addition to this, the figure of the witch, derived in part from the spae-wives and *seiðr*-workers of Northern Europe (Blain, 2002: 89-110), is often associated with sexual and gender
transgression. These ideas may not be very current in Wicca generally, but they are part of the historical discourse about witchcraft.

I would argue, then, that it is meaningful to speak of queer and LGBT spiritualities, because they are distinguishable as separate discourses from the ‘mainstream’ of their traditions, incorporating unique theology, theory, practice, art, poetry and ritual. Whilst they have connections to the wider realm of spirituality and religion, they include an unique perspective on spirituality which stems from the experience of being LGBT and/or queer.
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Bibliography


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Is it meaningful to speak of a queer spirituality?

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Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence (2007), Meet The Sisters. [online] available from:
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Appendix 1: Pierre et Gilles images

Deities (classical and Hindu)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Deities</th>
<th>Artist</th>
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<tbody>
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<tr>
<td>Amphytrite</td>
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<td>Bacchus</td>
<td>Salvatore</td>
<td>1981</td>
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<tr>
<td>Diane</td>
<td>Naomi Campbell</td>
<td>2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kali - Nina Hagen</td>
<td>Krishna - Tao - 2000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mercure - Enzo - 2001</td>
<td>Neptune - Karim, 1989</td>
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Other deity pictures by Pierre et Gilles:
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Krishna - Boy George, 1989
Asian Vénus - Momoko Kikuchi, 1991
Leda - Isis, 1988

**Saints**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Image 1</th>
<th>Image 2</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leda - Isis, 1988</td>
<td>Sainte Affligée - Pascal Borel, 1991</td>
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<tr>
<th>Image 3</th>
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<tr>
<td>Jésus d'Amour - Franck Chevalier, 1989</td>
<td>Jésus Christ - Philippe Bialobos, 1988</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Image 1</th>
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<tr>
<td>Sainte Viviane - Muriel Moreno, 1990</td>
<td>Saint Georges - Sioux, 1988</td>
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<td>La Sainte Vierge - Isabelle Weingarten, 1988</td>
<td>Saint Pascal Baylon - Lola, 1990</td>
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Saint Gilles - Gilles, 1989
Saint Jean-Baptiste - Mickaël, 1998
Saint Sébastien - Bouabdallah Benkamla, 1987
Sébastien de la mer - Laurent Combes, 1994
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<td>Name</td>
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<td>Alain Magallon</td>
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<tr>
<td>Saint Martin</td>
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<td>Pierre</td>
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<td>Saint Pierre Marie Chanel</td>
<td>Pascal Mounet et Christian</td>
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<td>Saint Roch</td>
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<td>Saint Yves de Tréguier</td>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Other saint pictures by Pierre et Gilles:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sainte Thérèse de Lisieux</td>
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<td>Sainte Lucie</td>
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<td>Saint François Xavier</td>
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<td>Saint Pierre Borie</td>
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<td>Saint Martin de Porres</td>
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Saint Etienne
## Appendix 2 - other queer religious & spiritual images

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Image 1</th>
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<td><a href="#">Saints Sergius and Bacchus, Robert Lentz, 1994.</a></td>
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*Note: Images are not visible in this text representation.*
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Saints Perpetua and Felicity, Robert Lentz, 1996</th>
<th>The Passion of Matthew Shepard, Fr William Hart McNichols</th>
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