# Good News for the Queer Community: Gay Liberation Theology and Homophobic Christian Violence.

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Religion 410: Religion and Violence (Senior Thesis)

Fall/Winter 2010

*Author’s Note: This was originally written in 2010. The author has come out at trans masculine nonbinary and converted to paganism from Christianity since then. No edits have been made to the original so some phrasing may be outdated.*

# RE: Interpreting the Gospel and Acting out Good News for the Queer Community

*“If you judge people, you have no time to love them.”*

– Mother Teresa of Calcutta

A Variation on Luke 10:30–37

A heteronormative Christian man in New York City was riding the subway from work to his home an hour away, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead and naked on the subway platform. Now by chance a priest was walking past; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Rabbi, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a gay man while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured hydrogen peroxide and water on them. Taking off his coat in the winter weather, he covered the man. Then he rode with him in a taxi cab across town, brought him to an emergency room, and waited to make sure he got out of urgent care. As morning broke, he took out his wallet and paid the receptionist the cost of the visit, saying, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend on his recovery.’ Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers? It was the person who showed the injured man mercy. Go and do likewise.

Christ’s call in the story of the Good Samaritan is simple: love your neighbor as yourself. Plain and simple, regardless of who s/he is and what others like her/him have done to you. And yet so many Christians are homophobic, speaking out in hatred and condemning the neighbors that God gave them; commonly thought of as saying “God made Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve.” This propensity for heteronormativity based on their interpretation of different scriptures leads to violence stemming from fear. What can be done in response to homophobic Christian violence and how can the teachings and practices of Jesus Christ become good news to the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual(hereafter, queer) community? Drawing on liberation theology, this paper written from the point of view of a practicing Christian seeks to set out a systematic, useable gay liberation theology for the queer community and the allies that stand in solidarity with them; as well as for the open-minded Christian community who is willing to investigate why some theologies condemn “homosexuality,” and with any hope will persuade them to take a second look at their beliefs. Gay liberation theologians must pair Robert Goss & Mona West’s scriptural reinterpretation of traditionally homophobic verses with Richard Cleaver’s loving action based out of Jesus Christ’s teachings and practices in order to, first, argue that Jesus Christ’s message is accessible to the queer community and, secondly, to successfully counteract and prevent violence by employing Slavoj Žižek’s critiques of the systemic, objective violence that perpetuates itself in homophobic Christians through language, habits of exclusion, and ignorance of the effects of homophobia.

# Historiography: (Gay) Liberation Theology

Gay liberation theology comes from a long line of theologies of liberation — Latin American, black, feminist, disabled, and queer to name a few. A family tree of the liberation, queer theologies, “might look something like this: **Early Liberation Theologies** (James Cone, Rosemary Ruether, Gustavo Gutiérrez) à **Early Gay and Lesbian Theologies** (Lisa Scanzoni, John McNeill, Robert Goss, Richard Cleaver, Mona West) à **Infusion of Queer Theory** (Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Judith Butler) à **Queer Theology** (Marcella Althausreid, Robert Goss, Mary Elise Lowe).”

The *early liberation theologies* take Jesus Christ and align him and his life story with the marginalized and oppressed persons that the theology is being used to liberate. For example, a Latin American liberation reading of scripture presents Jesus Christ as poor, a man who had, “nowhere to lay his head” who also preached, “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you shall be satisfied.” Liberation theology portrays Jesus as poor in order to raise the status of the poor to that of God on earth. In doing this, the poor are no longer stigmatized and they can use their new position to argue that they should not be treated in a dehumanizing way.

Early *Gay and Lesbian Theologies* build upon the ideas of liberation theology and apply them to the queer community. Some theologians like Robert Goss and Mona West focus on the reframing of scripture to be queer affirming while others like Richard Cleaver focus more on Jesus Christ’s message of love. Goss & West’s approach is primarily for those of the queer community, their allies, and Christians who have yet to form an opinion (or are willing to reconsider their opinion) on the topic of same-sex attraction and Christianity. Cleaver’s approach is for all, but is especially useful for homophobic Christians who would like to avoid unintentional, objective violence against the queer community while still holding their beliefs on same-sex attractions and “homosexuality.”

*Queer Theology* applies queer theory through a gay liberation lens to scripture in order to argue that Christ did not only stand in solidarity with queer persons, but that “all persons are queer.” Robert Goss made an interesting switch partway through his career when he moved from gay liberation theology in his first book on the topic “Jesus Acted Up” and then transitioned to a queer theology in “Queering Christ: Beyond Jesus Acted Up” where he revises and embellishes upon his already important work. Queer Theology was considered for this paper, but gay liberation theology was chosen because it contends with Christian homophobic violence through reinterpreting scripture and calling for loving action instead of through a redefinition of all persons as queer which is harder for laypersons to understand.

# Methodology

In order to justify liberation, one needs oppression or violence from which to be liberated. In this paper, I will argue that aggressive and condemning rhetoric is inherently violent using Slavoj Žižek’s concepts and critiques of *subjective violence* and *systemic, objective violence.* Then, I will take Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boffs’ (hereafter “Boff”) framework of liberation theology and apply it to the oppressed queer community. Boff & Boff are well known throughout the world for their work on liberation theology. Boffs’ framework includes the categories of living commitment, seeing, judging, and acting. This paper merges Boffs’ framework with contemporary gay liberation theological arguments; including the reinterpretation by Goss & West of the ‘clobber passages,’ (the six most commonly cited passages to justify homophobia and queer condemnation in the church), a direct reading of the loving meaning of Jesus Christ’s teachings by Richard Cleaver,and the intentional, loving action that responds to systemic, objective violence. By applying Goss & West, Cleaver, and Žižek to Boffs’ systematic and clearly defined liberation theology, I will propose a theology of liberation that is reworked for the queer community.

# Not Featured on the 9 O’clock News: Defining Homophobia as Systemic, Objective Violence

The violence experienced by the queer community is not only the subjective, widely reported incidents; it needs to be redefined as systemic and objective as well. Systemic violence is a system that traps the oppressed through many smaller actions that may not be individually defined as violent. For example, just as the individual posts of a bird cage could not contain the bird by themselves but rather combine to oppress, each piece of systemic violence needs other pieces in order to be oppressive. Slavoj Žižek addresses systemic violence in his book *Violence*. There are two main forms of violence in Žižek’s framework: *subjective* and *objective*. Subjective violence is “experienced as such against a background of a non-violent zero.” Subjective violence is typically visible, physical violence — such as murder and assault. In other words, subjective violence is what makes the news.

Objective violence is “invisible since it sustains the very zero-level standard against which we perceive something as subjectively violent.” The zero level is the illusion of peace against which subjective violence stands out. It is systemic, objective violence that sustains relations of domination and oppression because the zero level of violence *seems* to be to the status quo. In regards to the queer community, objective violence tends to occur in three main areas: language, exclusion, and ignorance about the effects of Christian homophobia.Systemic, objective violence is the violence of homophobic Christians silently condemning the gay man or a lesbian woman next to them in the pews (exclusion and ignorance), the violence of asking suspected gay priests not to out themselves (language), the violence of a Christian organization banning queer members from leadership (exclusion), the violence of ex-gay ministries (ignorance) — the violence of ‘love’ that creates an *us* and a *them*(exclusion).

# Liberation! A Theology of the Poor (in Spirit)

Boff offers three crucial steps to put liberation theology into practice. The preliminary stage, living commitment, comes before the three steps. The purpose of this zero stage is to acquire “a direct knowledge of the reality of oppression/liberation through objective engagement in solidarity with the poor.” In order to do this, a person interested in practicing liberation theology would need to a) visit the community of persons that one wants to liberate, b) work in both scholarly and practical ways to learn more about the community while simultaneously helping to meet its immediate needs, and/or c) live permanently among the people. One does not need to do all of these things to learn about the poor — they are simply varying degrees of knowledge gathering.

The first step in the process of liberation theology is *socio-analytical mediation* which “operates in the sphere of the world of the oppressed.” Basically, it seeks to ‘see’ why the oppressed are oppressed. There are three explanations for why the poor are oppressed: empirical (“poverty as vice”) which is solved through aid; functional (“poverty as backwardness”) which is solved through reform; and dialectic (“poverty as oppression”) which is solved through revolution. The second and third explanations, backwardness and oppression, are what this paper responds to.

After *socio-analytical mediation*, the seeing step, one would move on towards *hermeneutical mediation,* which “operates in the sphere of God’s world. It tries to discern what God’s plan is for the poor.” The first formally theological step, one must judge what God’s will is by going to the scriptures, “bearing the whole weight of the problems, sorrows, and hopes of the poor, seeking light and inspiration from the divine word.”The books “most appreciated by liberation theology” are Exodus, the prophets, the four Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, and Revelation. The theologian reads these texts in addition to whichever texts they are led to read by the Holy Spirit in order to discern God’s will for the situation.

The third and final step of applying liberation theology is p*ractical mediation* which “operates in the sphere of action. It tries to discover the courses of action that need to be followed so as to overcome oppression in accordance with God’s plan,” as previously discerned in the second, judging stage. This is the stage of action, which moves the theologian from understanding and discernment to wise, God centered deeds. Decisive actions taken range greatly from discerning what has worked in the past and repeating it, to strategizing non-violent methods (and only turning to violent tactics as a last resort, if at all), to micro-actions within the macro-organization that transforms the orientation of the system, to creating a blueprint for action which encourages and shows the masses ways to struggle effectively (and hopefully nonviolently). This is certainly the most flexible stage of them all, as history, circumstance, and experience impact and influence the decisions made and actions taken. We will revisit this framework of *seeing*, *judging*, and *acting* in the “Taking Back the Word” section.

# Gay Liberation Theology: and Adaptation of Liberation Theology

Liberation theology has been applied to the queer community to create a gay liberation theology which responds to violence. Following in the footsteps of affirming “God’s preferential care for the oppressed,” gay liberation theology “expose(s) the sins of heterosexism and homophobia.” By exposing these sins, gay liberation theology brings the systemic violence to awareness in the community for members to consider and challenge.

There are, in fact, multiple gay liberation theologies. Many gay liberation theologians, such as Robert Goss and Mona West, call for a reinterpretation of the scriptures in order to make Christianity more approachable to the queer community. Conversely, Richard Cleaver calls for “an equally direct reading of the gospel of love.” In other words, Richard Cleaver argues that gay liberation theologians do not need an elaborate defense — they need a direct reading of Jesus Christ’s teachings and actions as recorded in the four gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. In order to achieve the Boff framework of seeing, judging, and acting, we need to use both the Goss & West approach of reinterpretation and the Cleaver approach of Jesus Christ’s teaching and practice of love above all else.

# Taking Back the Word

This gay liberation theology will be informed by scripture in two main ways; first, it uses Goss & West to reinterpret the “clobber passages” of scripture for the queer community, its allies, and undecided Christians, and second, it uses Cleaver to call for actions of love that come from all Christians — regardless of their opinions of ‘homosexuality.’ This method requires Boffs’ living commitment, seeing, judging, and action steps — they are simply re-categorized into an informed reinterpretation of scripture which then leads a person to act in love.

The *desire* to reinterpret the Bible fulfills the preliminary step of Boffs’ framework — living commitment. Thinking about gender issues, especially when it comes to gay and lesbian Christians, usually happens when a person is either queer or knows one. For example, in the book *What the Bible* Really *Says About Homosexuality*, Dr. Daniel A. Helminiak dedicates his work “to lesbian women and gay men who believe in a good God and reverence the Bible and who also want to be able to believe in themselves.” Dr. Helminiak clearly has compassion for the queer community and took up his work because he wants reconciliation — this is his living commitment.

After a person has a heart for bringing together Christianity and the queer community, Boff suggests one must begin to see why there is a divide between these groups. Queer folks are often driven out of churches because of their sexual orientation. They are considered sinners and are sometimes condemned to Hell for being an ‘abomination’ in God’s eyes. In response, many people in the queer community do not go to church, or stop believing in their religion all together. Years pass and neither the Church nor the cast out queer churchgoers try to reconcile. After examining the violence between queer persons and the homophobic Christian community, one can see the second and third explanations that Boff suggests — functional and dialectic. When applied to the queer community, the functional explanation of poor as backwards becomes the explanation of queer as wrong. By reinterpreting the scriptures, an act of reform occurs where queerness is allowed to be in the Christian worldview, which validates the queer people’s existence as a child of God. Similarly, when the dialectic explanation is applied to the queer community, poverty becomes a poorness of spirit that stems from condemning language, being excluded from the Christian community and the chance to partake in corporate learning and worship, and heteronormative ignorance of the queer position. According to Boff, this dialectic poorness of spirit must be addressed by revolution.

Before reformative and revolutionary action can take place, however, one must first judge — discern what God wants to happen to the oppressed. In order to do this, many gay liberation theologians such as Goss & West turn to the scriptures and work to reinterpret the Bible from a traditional, heterosexual lens to one that is queer friendly. First, let us make a list of and shortly examine the *clobber passages*: Genesis 19:1–28, Leviticus 18:22, Leviticus 20:13, Romans 1:26–28, 1 Corinthians 6:9–10, and 1 Timothy 1:10. We will first examine the passages with a homophobic Christian lens, and then we will reexamine them with a gay liberation lens.

…the LORD rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulfur and fire from the LORD out of heaven.

To many homophobic Christians, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19:1–28 is about how those “going after strange flesh (homosexuality), are set forth for an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire.” In other words, God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah because it was full of homosexuals. The men of Sodom and Gomorrah are ‘proven’ to be strictly homosexual because when they are offered sexual access to Lot’s daughters instead of Lot’s male guests the Sodomites reject them. Conversely, Jewish traditions around the story of Sodom and Gomorrah focus on “the evils of hostility towards outsiders and unwillingness to share resources compounded with a cruelty towards the poor” as the reason for the towns’ destruction. The men of Sodom were not overcome with same-sex desire; they were trying to assault and humiliate Lot’s guests — this is understood as “threatening sexual violence and rape… designed to serve as a warning to all outsiders to stay away from the Cities of the Plain.” Jesus Christ himself interprets the story of Sodom and Gomorrah as an issue of inhospitality, “But when you enter a town and are not welcomed, go into its streets and say, ‘Even the dust of your town we wipe from our feet as a warning to you. Yet be sure of this: The kingdom of God has come near.’ I tell you, it will be more bearable on that day for Sodom than for that town.” According to Jesus, the inhospitable shall be punished in due time. This is only one of many internal references in the Bible of the story of Sodom and Gomorrah being interpreted as an issue of inhospitality. By viewing the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah as punishment for poor hospitality and discriminative violence towards outsiders, the gay liberation theologian argues that the Cities of the Plain were not condemned for homosexuality.

Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind: it is abomination…. If a man also lie with mankind, as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination: they shall surely be put to death; their blood shall be upon them.

Leviticus 18:22 and Leviticus 20:13 are the sources of the ‘abomination’ rhetoric commonly used by homophobic Christians. In the documentary *For the Bible Tells Me So* every Christian who was or still is homophobic cites these passages as one of the main reasons for condemning their queer loved one. For them, *abomination* means unforgivably sinful and damnation. A gay liberation theologian will not accept this interpretation. The theologian might point out, as Reverend Steven Kindle of Clergy United does, that Moses also just said that it is an abomination to eat shrimp, or to plant two seeds in the same hole, or to eat a rabbit, or to wear linen and wool together. Furthermore, “when the term abomination is used in the Bible, it is *always* used to address a ritual wrong. It never is used to refer to something innately immoral.” Therefore abomination meant against their tradition or against ritual — it was a holiness code, not a damning condition but an impurity for attending Jewish ritual.

Another argument on this verse is about biblical literalism. The homophobic Christian condemns queerness because “it is an abomination,” without stopping to think about what abomination means. Reverend Dr. Laurence C. Keene of the Disciples of Christ has some insight on biblical literalism; “When someone says to me ‘This is what the Bible says.’ My response to them is, ‘No, that is what the Bible reads.’ It is the struggle to understand context and language and culture and custom that helps us to understand the meaning, or what it is saying.” In other words, biblical literalism is a modern invention that does not get to the heart of what Christ was saying. What about taking all you have and giving it to the poor? Why do Christians not take that literally if they take this literally?

For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error. And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done.

The homophobic Christian position often cites Romans 1:26–28 without explaining it, relying on the translation to speak for itself. Westboro Baptist Church, for example, has a collection of verses without any interpretation except for the title splashed across the top of the document: *“God loves everyone” the greatest lie ever told — 701 passages proving God’s hate & wrath for most of mankind*. Westboro Baptist Church interprets Romans 1:26–28 as “homosexual” intercourse followed by God’s wrathful response. A converse observation is that Romans 1:26 is the main (arguably, the only) reference to ‘unnatural’ female intercourse. Theologians have argued since Plato that “all sexual acts that were non-procreative were categorized as ‘unnatural.’ This means that the scripture could be talking about many forms of sex, such as anal or oral sex, and were not discussing lesbianism. Furthermore, the text does not speak of women changing male partners for female ones,furthering the point that the warning was against unnatural heterosexual acts. As for the men in Romans 1:26–28, a gay liberation theologian would argue that, since the main expression of male-male sex was “exploitative pederasty” (a grown, adult male penetrating a boy, likely a slave or a young male call boy), this must be what is condemned by the early Jewish and Christian writers of the Bible, including Paul.Romans 1:26–28 is about reproving men who were abusing their power to exploit younger men and boys. This verse is about having sex for procreation instead of the alternative forms that are solely pleasure and power based, and is therefore not about homosexuality.

Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, [nor men who practice homosexuality], nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.

The English Standard Version (ESV) of 1 Corinthians 6:9–10 includes the word “homosexuality,” (a word that was not coined until 1892) although not all translations do. The ESV translation is in and of itself oppressing the gay men. A closer look is necessary to offer a more accurate translation. The text being translated between the brackets above are the Greek phrases “to malakoi” and “to arsenokoitai.” Malakoi means literally ‘soft’ and is used to talk about clothing elsewhere in Matthew 11:8 and Luke 7:25; in moral discussions it means “morally weak” or decadence. The Greek word arsenokoitai made its debut in the Bible, and therefore is not extant before this text, making its translation harder to define. Dale Martin in *the Queer Bible Commentary* observes that it is used elsewhere in scripture to talk about economic exploitation, suggesting pimping or prostitution. In light of the other items in the list such as greed and thievery, these vices “can be seen to revolve specifically around behaviors that involve excess and exploitation,” and are at odds with God’s relationship to humankind. God is therefore against decadence, pimping, or sexual exploitation — not the queer community.

…the sexually immoral, [men who practice homosexuality,] enslavers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine…

Also the English Standard Version, this translation of 1 Timothy 1:10 includes the word “homosexuality” in the place of the Greek to arsenokoitai. Like the 1 Corinthians verse, a gay liberation theologian would argue that the word is mistranslated and ought to be more along the lines of a person who exploits sex for financial gain, like a pimp.

To conclude this section, gay liberation theologian Daniel Helminiak offers that “only five texts surely refer to male-to-male sex… All these texts are concerned with something other than homogenital activity (they are concerned with sexual violence)… So the Bible takes no direct stand on the morality of homogenital actions nor on the morality of gay and lesbian relationships” By reading the scriptures through this lens, the queer community is able to see that the Bible does not condemn the contemporary gay and lesbian experience — a loving, committed same-sex relationship — but rather exploitation and sexual violence. This is important to the queer community in order to most importantly defend their existence to themselves and then to be able to have academic, informed discussions with others.

# All We Need is Love?

Reinterpretations of the ‘clobber passages’ are not the only way to apply gay liberation theology; some theologians prefer to call attention to solidarity and love based on biblical examples of community and overcoming oppression. This does not mean we ought to abandon Goss & West’s reinterpretations through Boffs’ call for discernment but rather it is an additional tactic for defending the queer community from Christian homophobic violence by elevating the discussion from divisive topics to a call for love that all Christians ought to agree upon. This approach is best used with homophobic Christians who will not change their minds in order to prevent their homophobia from committing systemic, objective violence through their language, habits of exclusion, and ignorance.

One loses sight of loving their neighbors as themselves when they solely fixate on controversial interpretations. Richard Cleaver — a self identified gay, white, Roman Catholic, male — is one of the first people to write a gay liberation theology. Cleaver calls for solidarity and love instead of reinterpretation of scripture; “To reach those for whom “the plain meaning of God’s Word” is hatred of homosexuality, we must offer not elaborate analyses in form criticism … but an equally direct reading of “the plain meaning” of the gospel of love.” The analysis of scripture is necessary for the queer community to find their voice and justification for their place in the kingdom of heaven, for them to see and judge the situation for themselves. Cleaver uses a “hermeneutic circle” framework, drawing on experience and suspicion, and then searches the scriptures in order to interpret the reality experienced. Cleaver finds that one ought to focus on love over goodness; Jesus himself states that “no one, not even himself, is good. In place of goodness (an abstract quality), Jesus puts love of neighbor (concrete acts).” *Actions* are what are needed of a follower of Christ, not good intentions.

Cleaver has two tasks that lead to his radical theology of loving action. First, “I want to help gay men… develop the tools for doing theology for ourselves and our communities.” By helping gay men, Cleaver is employing the seeing and judging steps within Boffs’ framework. Secondly, Cleaver wants to “provide some of the information that has been missing in the debate in the churches: stories about what the lives of gay men are like and about how we reflect on them.” This task also informs seeing and judging by helping the church to witness and reanalyze its position. Cleaver’s goals are achieved through a fearless self-examination in combination with a close reading of oppressed persons in the Bible, including Moses, Esther, and Rahab.

Liberation requires naming one’s group identity and joining others in solidarity — solidarity which leads ever-expanding loving action. Naming can mean owning up to one’s true identity. Moses passed as an Egyptian, but the freedom of the Israelites only happened when he ‘came out’ and lead the people. In Exodus, coming out means “moving out of a situation of bondage — the bonds in our case being secrecy and silence — into freedom.” Israel had to physically leave Egypt in order to worship God instead of the idols of Egypt; they had to leave so that they could think like free persons instead of like slaves. Struggling and naming is how one gains power, “we learn to name our oppression by struggling with it.” Take the story of Jacob wrestling with God — when dawn breaks and Jacob has not given up, the divine figure injures his hip and blesses him, naming him Israel. In the process of coming out, “we name ourselves to ourselves, so that we can know whom God is calling when the wrestler comes. God then names us to others’ this is how Jacob got power.” By struggling and claiming a name, the queer community can rally behind a collective identity. Solidarity begins to form through building “consciousness of ourselves as a class… across the lines of gender, race, religion, and class that divides us now.” Wealth and charismatic leaders can lure people away from this non-discriminating solidarity by making the symptoms of oppression go away instead of calling the community to make change ourselves. Once the queer community has assembled, it must build ties with “the political movements of other oppressed and exploited people.” In this way, greater solidarity is achieved. Through solidarity, loving action can take place and have a greater effect.

Cleaver finally argues that “Love is the grounds for our oppression, for our love is, in the words of the teaching church speaking on behalf of society’s prejudice, disordered. Love, then, must be the ground on which our theology is built.” Love is the foundation, not goodness or fancy arguments about scripture. For Cleaver, “solidarity is love made public, collective and political.” This public display shows that the oppressed people are not scared and are not defenseless. It in fact aligns the queer community and the whole church that backs it up with exile status — the blessed position of Moses and the Israelites in the desert for 40 years. Since “our oppression is relational, as our creation was, as our resurrection is… our liberation will be.”The relations that tie the queer community together in solidarity are the ones that will fight for and ultimately gain liberation. By calling for loving solidarity, Cleaver mobilizes the queer community to action and sets it up to be known by the world — gaining a legitimate place in the world and the church through unity. Having a systematic theology is useless unless it is applied through loving action — challenging homophobic Christian violence.

# Case presentation: Westboro Baptist Church

Westboro Baptist Church is a prime example of *subjective*violence — it is one of the most infamous groups of homophobic Christians in the United States today because their hateful, violent rhetoric and actions are so widely publicized by the media. (Recall that subjective violence is “violence enacted by social agents, evil individuals, disciplined repressive apparatuses, fanatical crowds…” and that subjective violence is the most visible form of violence). The Westboro Baptist Church’s website — [godhatesfags.com](http://godhatesfags.com/) — features music, protest updates and schedules, videos, and many documents that detail their condemning stance against “fags.” According to their website documents, they believe that “God does NOT love everyone and it IS NOT okay to be gay or to fornicate with anyone or thing you please.” Their aggressive rhetoric denies God’s love for all and condemns the queer community in very brash, straightforward language.

In general, their daily protests and demonstrations against “the homosexual lifestyle of soul-damning, nation-destroying filth” are hateful and painful for the queer community.

One of the most infamous protests of Reverend Fred Phelps and Westboro Baptist Church was at the funeral of Matthew Shepard, a queer teen who was beaten to death by a group of homophobic guys. Members of the Westboro Baptist Church appeared at the service holding signs saying such things as “Fags Die, God Laughs.” The queer community refused to accept the protests of the Westboro Baptist Church and acted. The protestors were blocked from the view of the media and the mourning family by “angel action” — several counter-activists in angel costumes with seven-foot-high wings. In this instance, actions spoke louder than words and counteracted the violence. The counter-activists reached out in love, as Cleaver and Boff would have them do, and with their actions physically blocked out the hateful words on those signs, silencing the violent rhetoric of the Westboro Baptist Church.

# Theorists’ Response: Žižek and Boff

We will now examine this case through the lenses of our various theorists. Žižek would argue that although challenging the Westboro Baptist Church is an important task, critiquing violence directly does not solve the problem because it obscures the systemic, objective violence of homophobia by concentrating exclusively on subjective violence. “To chastise violence outright… [is] a mystification which collaborates in rendering invisible the fundamental forms of social violence.”For Žižek, there is certain hypocrisy to those who, “while combating *subjective violence*, commit *systemic* [objective] *violence,* that generates the very phenomena they abhor.” In other words, one cannot only look at instances of violence that happen on the news, one must *also* challenge the deeper, daily, behind the scenes forms of violence that affect the queer community. This response is beneficial because one can look beyond the subjective violence towards the objective violence that creates the systems of oppression. The potential disadvantage of Žižek’s position lies in his call for non-actionbecause it does not defend the weak or oppressed — it merely recognizes that they exist and sees how they are oppressed.

Boff would approve of the “angel action” taken by the counter-activists in the Matthew Shepard case. The counter-activists saw that the queer community was hurting because of the hate crime and death of Shepard. The counter-activists may have judged and discerned that God’s will was to “uphold the cause of the poor and the oppressed,” meaning that they ought to step in for Shepard’s memory and family. The counter-activists then took “angel *action*.” The benefits of this framework are the tangible experiences and actions taken on behalf of the queer community. Unfortunately, action can sometimes be held in a higher regard than the discerning stage and action that is not in accord with “God’s will” may happen.

# An Aside on Žižek’s Non-Action versus Boffs’ Action

Žižek brings an important and yet unexamined critique on Boff. While Boff is calling for action, Žižek is calling for studying, “we need to ‘learn, learn, and learn’ what causes this violence.” Furthermore, Žižek calls for non-action, because “we cannot take away from a given system without *raising* that system’s energy.” By removing oneself and one’s energy from the system, one takes away their acknowledgement of the violence, thus the violence looses power. For Žižek, this is the best way to counteract violence: “If one means by violence a radical upheaval of the basic social relations…. [then] sometimes *doing nothing* is the most violent thing to do.” Non-action is thus the most aggressive response to violence for Žižek.

Non-action is something Jesus calls his disciples to in response to violence against themselves, “But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also.” However, when Christ is giving his Sermon on the Mount, he is primarily addressing his white, male followers who have as much social power as is available to a layperson. As mentioned above, the Bible also calls its followers to “defend the weak and the fatherless; uphold the cause of the poor and the oppressed” through the Psalms. So, when people are being oppressed who do not have social power, Christ followers are called to defend, but when a personal offense has been committed, a Christ follower is called to not act.

This takes Žižek’s stance of non-action and complicates it through divine discernment of social position. As an atheist, Žižek does not believe in the power of God in the second step of Boffs’ framework — judging and discerning God’s will through scripture. But as this is a theology of liberation, it assumes that those applying it would be followers of Christ who *do* believe in the ability of God to help in discerning the best path of liberation. After all, Christ promised a Counselor to be with his followers after his ascension: “And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever — the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.” The Counselor, the Spirit of truth, is the divine assistance given to those who consult the Bible to liberate God’s people. Boffs’ process of discernment is further complicated and disadvantaged by differentiating between actual divine interaction and personal passions — that is why it is so important to read the scriptures instead of simply praying. Always studying or always acting falls short of the best solution; neither is always the best answer. One must turn to the divine through scripture for discernment and wisdom on matters of liberation to know the best course of action — to study or to act.

# Theorists’ Response: Goss & West and Cleaver

Goss & West’s response would directly address the Westboro Baptist Church’s opinion that “the homosexual lifestyle of soul-damning, nation-destroying filth” by first pointing out that nowhere in the Bible does it say that “to malakoi” and “to arsenokoitai” was a damning act for the soul. They would then bring up the hospitality counter-response used in the Sodom and Gomorrah analysis above. This response is beneficial because it greatly assists a queer person in defending her/himself both to themselves and to others on an academic level. The disadvantage in this approach is the difficulty of understanding Greek translations and historical context — most laypersons do not or cannot engage with this body of scholarly work without some sort of formal training.

Cleaver would critique the Westboro Baptist Church for their insensitivity to a mourning family by picketing with aggressive signs directed towards their dearly departed. He would support the angel action because the counter-activists were standing in loving solidarity explicitly hateful messages. The benefits of Cleaver’s response are in its simplicity — it is easy to feel moved by love to defend a mourning family from those that would assault them with their violent rhetoric. The disadvantage is that the loving action is not based on a position of queers as scripturally supported but rather as God loves everyone which leads to an unsupported value debate that does not respond to the deeper objective, systemic violence.

# An Aside on Complex Interpretation vs. Simple Love

Goss & West’s position is crucial because the critical minds in the discussion around queerness and Christianity need academic arguments to defend and protect the queer community. This scholarly approach is especially important since a person applying a theology is likely either a leader of the church (and therefore not a layperson) or a person with religious studies and/or gender studies in their academic background. Conversely, Cleaver is also an important addition because laypersons can easily understand Jesus Christ’s message of love, therefore no formal training is required. Both Goss & West *and* Cleaver are important for this theology as they serve different audiences thus helping the theology to reach a wider audience.

# My Response: Suggestions of a Combined Theology

To solely focus on the Westboro Baptist Church would miss the greater goal of wrestling with systemic, objective violence — in which all persons who misuse language, exclude queer people, and are ignorant about the effects of Christian homophobia are no better than Reverend Fred Phelps and his congregation. This theology asks one to use Boffs’ frame work to 1) *see* the objective, systemic violence committed against the queer community — specifically the three areas that I identify as highly objective: language, habits of exclusion, and ignorance of the effects of homophobia; 2) to *judge* and discern God’s will by using Goss & West’s queer reinterpretation of the Bible; and 3) to *apply* the theology through Cleaver’s loving action through solidarity. The disadvantages of this position spawn from the nature of working with several scholars — the theology uses multiple arguments that have previously been posited as in conflict (Žižek’s non-action and Boff’s action, Goss & West’s intricate interpretation and Cleavers call for a basic interpretation of love) and blends them to create a complex theology. This advantage and benefit of this position is also that it uses the academic work of many scholars (Žižek, Boff, Goss & West, and Cleaver) to create an applicable theology for the queer community and its allies. Furthermore, by existing, this paper accomplishes Boffs’ entire framework systematically and gives any queer or allied person a beginning place for their own process of seeing, discerning, and acting.

# Further Questions and Conclusions: Heralds of the Good News

This exploration of violence and the queer community lacks the space to examine transgendered and/or transsexual liberation theology. There are different scriptures used to support this liminal, in between group, and a theology defending their right to exist and affirming them also as God’s children is greatly needed — especially since they experience the effects of multiple marginalization within the queer communities they are a part of. Furthermore, if the page lengths allowed I would have a three more sections dealing with language, habits of exclusion, and ignorance.

Through identification of objective, systemic violence by looking for patterns of language, habits of exclusion, and ignorance (seeing); an academic reinterpretation of the clobber passages (judging/discerning); and solidarity in the queer community by acting through love (action); the teachings and practices of Jesus Christ can be made approachable to the queer community and also identify and combat homophobic Christian violence — and *that* is Good News.

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