

# Homoprejudice and Combating an Irrational Fear

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"This is a transcript of a presentation given during The Anti-homoprejudice Week at the University of the Western Cape, Cape Town, SA, 15 May, 2009. In this exploration, I am trying to make links between the anxiety of abandonment and intersex awareness in our communities and in our bodies-an unacknowledged insecurity. The topic I was asked to address was Homoprejudice and Combating an Irrational Fear. The audience was a mixed group of students and faculty."-Rev. PS

When white peoples begin to look at racism reflectively, at the heart of racial prejudice we find a rats nest of insecurities that ensnares individuals and communities alike. This leads us to the broader question of how we inculcate the value of worth within our cultures and religions. "To inculcate" is to instil by persistent instruction, and it is one of the characteristics of culture. The social code which binds most communities leads the individual to be guided by one thought: "If I am of value within this community, I will not be abandoned." I believe it is worth considering that the origins of homoprejudice stem from a deep seeded anxiety around abandonment.

In a study on homophobia conducted by psychologists at the University of Arkansas published by the American Psychological Society, the researchers suggested that homophobia is not an actual phobia. Instead of being triggered by an irrational fear, negative attitudes toward homosexuality are triggered by disgust mechanisms and an obsession with contamination. The distinction between fear and disgust is an important one. While fear causes a "get me away from that" reaction, disgust manifests as "get that away from me." These different emotional reactions can lead to very different behaviors, according to Jeffery Lohr, one of the researchers.

Lohr reminds us:"The same emotions that mediate attitude can mediate behavior," he said. "If fear mediates avoidance, other emotions may mediate attack. That distinction becomes very important when what a person intends to avoid or attack is not an animal or an inanimate object, but another human being." 1

In order to discuss homoprejudice and combating an irrational fear, we must look deeply into our disgust mechanism, a mechanism which is already at work toward human bodies well before a child begins to exhibit gender expression and sexual attraction. From centuries of practice of intersex babies (primarily those born with externally ambiguous genitals) being abandoned at birth to die from exposure, the pressure to physically conform to gendered expectations is something that permeates our collective primal psyche. We do not want to be abandoned by our community to die by exposure. There is an anxiety which resides in the cells of our being: "Is there something that I am which if discovered makes me worthy only of abandonment within my culture?" Lurking beneath the surface of homoprejudice is the secret fear that something within our own biology might betray us to abandonment if fully known by ourselves and others. Our disgust mechanism kicks in, and the feeling toward anyone displaying ambiguously gendered characteristics of any kind becomes one of "get that away from me." We become obsessed with avoiding contamination, even by association, with that which disgusts us, that which might lead us to lose any value to our community, that which would lead us to be cut-off from them forever. I believe that we cannot talk about homoprejudice, sex negativity, and perhaps even misogyny without addressing the disgust mechanism which exists unacknowledged in our communities toward intersex bodies and transgender expression. This disgust mechanism has been inculcated through our cultures and religions.

Hebrew and Christian scripture contain some of the oldest extant codes of community. Laws contained in the books of Deuteronomy and Leviticus are known as the Purity Code. This code contains laws for community behaviour that are based on the assumption of a universe of pure archetypal creatures and categories created by a pure Divinity. In other words, "fish gotta swim, birds gotta fly." Insects should look like this, mammals should look like this, and the animals that don't fit neatly into the categories are often classified as unclean. Eating only clean/pure animals and conforming our lives, including our sex lives and gendered roles, to purity categories are ways of being in accord in all areas of our lives with a pure, unambiguous God.

But what happens to that which is unavoidably anomalous or ambiguous, physically or behaviourally, in societies based on purity categories? According to the study we quoted earlier, irrational fears or phobias are pathological in nature, but the disgust mechanism is developed socially. Our community codes create our disgust responses. We are profoundly disgusted by that which would threaten our existence within our community's meta-narrative, especially the understanding of a creation organised in pure categories in unity with a pure Creator. All that fall within these categories are defined as natural, all that do not are defined as unnatural.

Anthropologist Mary Douglas, as quoted by Bernadette Brooten in the book *Love Between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism*, reminds us that in societies bound by sacred purity codes, there are four ways such communities usually deal with that which is anomalous or ambiguous:

- Reduce the ambiguity by deciding on one or another interpretation of the ambiguous phenomena or event
- Physically control the existence of the anomaly.
- Create a rule of avoiding anomalous things. This affirms and strengthens the definitions to which they do not belong.
- Define anomalous events as dangerous. Describing something or someone as both anomalous and dangerous helps to ensure conformity. [Thus even parents will abandon their children if this message is inculcated deeply enough.]<sup>2</sup>

We see each of these methods alive in our time, often with the support of our religious traditions. With disastrous results, same-gender loving, transgender and intersex people have born the brunt of culturally inculcated disgust mechanisms. By being defined as anomalous and dangerous within an ever narrowing construction of 'pure' sexual and gender categories within religious cultures, non-conforming people become exemplary of all that must be pushed away if one wants to remain within these cultures. Indeed, one of the best selling books in pop Christian publishing is one aimed at teenagers and their parents, 'The Purity Code: God's Plan for Sex and Your Body.'<sup>3</sup> But there is something odd in this type of thinking, even anomalous, when viewed through the lens of the Way of Christ.

Christianity, has in some ways, always been in a state of crisis as far as the Hebrew Purity Codes are concerned. We follow the teachings of Christ and his earliest apostles, and many of them moved from observant pharisaic Judaism to communities that were not culturally bound by Levitical law. Throughout the New Testament, we see a struggle to define the social practices that will bind these new syncretic communities together. Indeed, at the heart of this movement, there was a Jesus who was defining a new code based on grace and adherence to the best of the socially merciful aspects of the Levitical code. He, and later Paul, would strive to keep the best of the socially responsible and charitable portions of the Law, while summarily discarding physical perfection and external appearance as a criteria for acceptance, cleanliness, or purity. Indeed, Jesus may very well have had intersex people in mind when he said, 'There are some who are born eunuchs,' as part of a short saying [Mat. 19.11-12.] He mentions these babies with ambiguous genitals with absolutely no negative judgement whatsoever.

But a gospel of grace and freedom from the 'curse' of the Law of the Purity Code accomplished by a crucified Christ has continued to cause dis-ease, generation to generation, as the gospel of grace has come into conflict with community codes time and again, culture to culture. At the beginning of Christianity, we read the letters of Paul to the first churches. In most of these letters he is fire fighting. Communities are in conflict, most often, over what parts of the Purity Code gentiles are required to maintain. Paul states firmly that the Levitical Law has been fulfilled and superceded in Christ. Now, for believers of any culture, all things are lawful. But Paul offers this as a guiding moral question: 'but are all things beneficial/upbuilding to me?' The two or three clobber passages used against LGBT people from the New Testament are from such passages, where Paul and others are trying to work out what is beneficial or destructive to ourselves and our communities—lists of vices and virtues that change letter to letter, circumstance to circumstance. This crisis remains unresolved in scripture, leaving us in situ with communities still grappling to understand ambiguity as a new reality within spiritual cultures based on grace rather than purity categories.

From the Inquisition to the modern obsession by some Christians with being contaminated by homosexuals within supposedly 'pure' faith communities, disgust mechanisms remain dangerous socially and religiously constructed impulses. Homoprejudice is rational only within an irrational fear of abandonment by our communities and the God of grace, a God we continually confuse with the God of purity, especially around gender and sex categories. This is theologically unsound.

As blogger Sophia Seidlberg writes on the OII site: 'My Gd is called El Shaddai, that means "The Gd of the Strong and Breasted one" (And we are talking mammary glands here). I am not sure when Abraham when confronted with Gd would have been fussing about the political correctness of a large and scary vision of Gd booming "I am El Shaddai" while having a pair of breasts that would put Dolly Parton to shame. And no that is not blasphemy. That is what El Shaddai means. As for the presence of Gd, that goes around zapping various cities[saying] "My name is Shekinah!" How Girly is that?'

This is a God who says in the New Testament to Peter, 'Do not call anything unclean which I have made clean,' in a vision which was a major turning point toward embracing ambiguity in early Christianity. [Acts 10.15] This is a God of whom the Johannine community exhorted one another, 'God is love. Anyone who abides in love abides in God and God in them.' There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out all fear. Those who still fear God, have not been perfected in love. [1 John 4.16-19] This is the Christ in whom the earliest Christians were baptised with a liturgical formula saying to one another, 'There is no longer Jew or Greek, no longer slave or free, no longer male or female, for all are one in Christ Jesus.' [Gal. 3.28]

Too often, those of us on the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, significant others, friends and allies side of things stop short of pushing to the roots of the disgust mechanism supported by our faiths. Our own discomfort, our own disgust mechanisms, our own entrenched identities keep us from getting to the heart of our anxiety around abandonment. Somewhere within our DNA, within our gender expressions, within our communities, we have not only failed to address our discomfort with all things intersexed within ourselves, we have failed in having the courage to lift up a Christ and God for whom intersex bodies, whether externally or chromosomally identified, provide a powerful image of the spiritual truth of God abiding in all of us. If we have the courage to reflect alongside our intersex siblings, I believe we can begin to construct communities free from homophobia. Then, as we sometimes sing in contemporary Christian circles, "Where the Spirit of God is there [will be] freedom, free for all." Let us work and pray for such a reality.

1 University of Arkansas, Fayetteville- American Psychological Society Presentation 2002. As Sourced by newswise.com, 08 June 2002. See full article at <http://mentalhealth.about.com/gi/dynamic/offsite.htm?site=http://www.newswise.com>

2 Brooten, Bernadette J., *Love Between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism*. (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, USA. 1996.) pps.234-237.

3 Burns, Jim. *The Purity Code: God's Plan for Sex and Your Body*. Bethany House Publishing. 2008

4 Sophia Seidlberg as archived on the OII website. Copyright Organisation Internationale des Intersexues and Kindred Spirit Lakeside. For a fuller listing of Seidlberg's articles, go to <http://www.intersexualite.org/Seidlberg-articles.html>

5 "Cover the Earth: Lakewood Live" CD. Free for all. Hosanna Music. 2003

The Reverend Pressley Sutherland is the Pastor of Good Hope Metropolitan Community Church in Cape Town, SA. He received his Master of Divinity Degree from Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York in 1998 with an emphasis on Coming Out in Spiritual Contexts.. He has pastored within LGBTQI and genderqueer faith communities in New York, London and most recently Cape Town. He is also a human rights activist committed to transgender, intersex and genderqueer rights, equality, empowerment and solidarity.