

**Letizia Tomassone**

## **The Queer Body of the Risen One**

“Either you will  
go through this door  
or you will not go through.

...

The door itself  
makes no promises.  
It is only a door.”

*Adrienne Rich*<sup>1</sup>

In which gaps or middle ground can efforts be located to restore a space and legitimacy to LGBTQ love in religious traditions? Perhaps they start in their private lives, the hidden relationships that refer to traditional contexts in their development. In this situation, the experience of LGBTQ life is already an experience of in-between, of margin and interstice.

I am writing in the South of Europe, in Italy where it seems that the rights and the very existence of LGBTQ people are always hidden, for religious reasons in particular. In Italy, Christianity has played the role of legitimizing the status quo and a traditional vision of heterosexual family which promote homophobia. Until recently, very few steps have been taken in the direction of developing an inclusive community of faith in which queer believers can find a home.<sup>2</sup> From this perspective, it is very interesting to discover a queer theology developing in other religions, such as Islam.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Adrienne Rich, “Prospective Immigrants Please Note,” in: *The Fact of a Door Frame: Poems Selected and New, 1950-84* (Norton: New York 1985).

<sup>2</sup> From 2010, the Waldensian Church and the Lutheran Church in Italy have created the possibility for liturgical blessings of same-sex couples. This was achieved thanks to the long commitment of LGBTQ people and their associations. As a minister of the Waldensian Church, I also participated in this process.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Jolanda Guardi and Anna Vanzan, *Che genere di Islam: Omosessuali, queer e transessuali tra shari'a e nuove interpretazioni* (Ediesse: Roma 2012).

Interestingly enough, the term “queer” was also introduced in Italy by Judith Butler and her discussion about a name that precedes and exceeds our existence. A name meaning a kind of “deviation”, now claimed to describe the legitimacy for multiples possibilities of love and gender identities which do not fit into the “norms”: not only “women”, gay, lesbian, but bisexuality, polyamory, intersection of gender, etc. According to Butler this is a term that represents our freedom while it conveys social offense.<sup>4</sup> In fact, queer believers are used to living under the double burden of judgement and offense of religious authority and, at the same time, of the promise and blessing by the divine. It is interesting to see how in every religion the lives of LGBTQ people increasingly attain visibility and how this leads to a transformation of the religious perception of the Divine and of the human capacity to love. Exploring a progressive Islamic perspective on same-sex relationships opens a new way for a Christian dialogue with Islam, and offers a transformative glance at queer Christian theology. Although there are some approaches to developing a queer Christian theology and important publications in this area, a sustained dialogue with other religions on these issues has not yet developed.<sup>5</sup>

In this paper, I wish to present the work done in this field by Ghazala Anwar, a Sufi Muslim scholar from Pakistan, who has introduced me to a progressive reading of the Qur’an. I will discuss the image of the divine in both Islamic and Christian theologies: how the uniqueness and otherness of G-d support or exclude the queer difference. I will introduce the critique of a stolid G-d without passions and endorse the representation of a passionate presence of the divine in our existence, through the praxis of Jesus who accepts being changed in the encounter with others.

### **Coming Out: Only for People in the West?**

Ghazala Anwar argues for the possibility of grounding the love of same-sex couples in the Divine.<sup>6</sup> She discusses Muslim lesbians who, in Indonesia, support each other reciprocally to the extent of setting up houses for women’s cohabitation which reproduce a feminine society as it is accepted and structured in Muslim

---

<sup>4</sup> Judith Butler, *Corpi che contano* (Feltrinelli: Milano 1996), 171.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. e.g. Gerard Loughlin, *Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body* (Blackwell: Oxford 2007); Marcella Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God* (Routledge: London 2003).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Ghazala Anwar, “Elements of a Samadiyyah Shariah,” in: Marvin M. Ellison and Judith Plaskow (eds), *Heterosexism in Contemporary World Religion. Problem and Prospect* (The Pilgrim Press: Cleveland 2007), 69-98.

society. This does not have to do with western stereotypes of women living together in the harem: rather this is about a practice that subaltern subjects often use, namely taking on patterns of a traditional lifestyle in order to render their divergent behavior more acceptable. With regard to feminine cohabitation, the poet and activist Samar Habib cautions the western world against a simplistic Orientalist projection which sees a possibility for Muslim women to live lesbian relationships in the paradigm of the harem and its associations of eroticism and seduction among women.<sup>7</sup> Habib asks herself if the need for a coming out and for visibility is felt only in the West, and should not be exported or imposed on Muslim women.<sup>8</sup> LGBTQ activists in the context of indigenous societies in Africa, where traditionally there is a place for sexual and loving relationships outside of the frameworks set up by western and Christian morality, often pose the same kind of critical, postcolonial question. Sometimes to give a name or label to a situation means to place people in danger of control and violence, who until then benefited from a situation of greater freedom in their interactions.

In fact, also in the West, relationships among women marked by affection, eros, and faithful bonds, are welcomed as characteristics of a feminine world that has to be able to express its “natural virtues” on its own terms and not only when confronted with men and their demands. In the past this meant using the gaps or interstices in the dominant social vision to create a living place, but today it seems clear to all that the life and love of same-sex couples need no longer remain locked in these interstices. Instead, these lives and loves may become the places in which to insert a wedge, forcing reality to open up and breaking the social construction of the heterosexual norm into thousands of pieces. As Habib argues, after offering a rich review of the Arabic literature about *Tharfa* (meaning wit, humour etc.), a term used in medieval Arabic sources to refer to homosexual women, and *grinders*<sup>9</sup> intercourse, coming out exposes women to a “clash between her and family and friends” and to the risk of losing the freedom achieved while “leading a double live: the life of the closet around parents and relatives and a life of sexual freedom away from them.”<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Samar Habib, “Reading the Familiarity of the Past: An Introduction to Medieval Arabic Literature on Female Homosexuality,” in: Samar Habib, *Arabo-Islamic Texts on Female Homosexuality, 850-1780 A.D.* (Teneo: New York 2009), 33-45.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Samar Habib, “A Lecture on Woman-Woman Love and Sexuality in the Arabo-Islamic Middle East,” in: Samar Habib, *Arabo-Islamic Texts*, 9-32.

<sup>9</sup> *Grinders*: urban slang for lesbians used by the poet Habib.

<sup>10</sup> Samar Habib, “A Lecture”, 11.

### **The *Samad* of God**

Ghazala Anwar develops the concept of the *Samad* (uniqueness) of G-d in a Muslim context. The Qur'an, like the Bible, risks being a powerful instrument in the hand of conservatives to sanction heterosexuality as a "natural" reality. The Qur'an speaks of duality and difference between men and women, while at the same time maintaining their fundamental equality before Allah. According to the Qur'an all things are created in couples. In fact, this is part of the partiality and limitedness of the human being and of all creation, as the only one to be created unique is Allah. A wonderful Sura (55), sometimes seen as similar to Psalm 104, describes the world as created in couples or dyads: the two seas, sky and earth, moon and sun, etc.

However, masculinity and femininity do not appear amongst these couples, and the prominent Muslim scholar Amina Wadud shows clearly that the Qur'an does not establish a complementary vision of masculinity and femininity. Through what she calls "the Tawhidic paradigm",<sup>11</sup> in Islam man and woman are equals before G-d, without the need of male mediation for the salvation of women that has marked Christian history. Thus, it is possible that an analogous difference exists between two persons of the same sex as well, according to Anwar, because they are "two" in a relationship of reciprocal interest and care.<sup>12</sup> The Qur'an in fact ascribes greater value to diversity than to uniformity and shows that the greatness of G-d can be discovered truly in the midst of the fragmentation of human experience. Even if a certain current in Sufism is trying to rebuild a holistic vision of reality,<sup>13</sup> the Qur'an shows that only G-d is One, while the human world rightfully is the place of partiality. It is partiality that leads toward dialogue with the other and respect of the other. Anwar develops her argument with the intention to show how much heterosexual and homosexual Muslims have in common, in so far as they all agree with the main points of Islam (Islam, Iman – faith, Ihsan – beauty, Ikhlan – sincerity or purity of intention). Anwar compares same-sex couples to the unique and unmatched G-d. Referring to Qur'an, Sura 112, she writes,

---

<sup>11</sup> Amina Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad. Women's Reform in Islam* (Oneworld: Oxford 2006), 24f.

<sup>12</sup> Ghazala Anwar, *Islam, Homosexuality and Migration*, Paper presented at Yoesuf Foundation Conference on Islam in the West and Homosexuality – Strategies for Action, Utrecht, the Netherlands, 5–6 October 2001.

<sup>13</sup> See for example, Ali Shari'ati, *On the Sociology of Islam*, translated from the Persian by Hamid Algar (Mizan Press: Berkeley 1984), 82-86.

“Like Allah the Samad, same-sex couples do not procreate, but they love, they create, and they nurture relationships that are tied together not by an earthly womb but by the Divine Compassion.”<sup>14</sup> Anwar therefore suggests that we honor same-sex love as “associate with the Samaddiyyah quality of God”, “extending Muslim ethics and law to include Samaddiyyah relations.”<sup>15</sup>

She calls for a Muslim individual or community “that does not participate in the reproductive assumptions of heterosexuality to associate with the Samaddiyyah quality of God and name itself Samaddiyyah.”<sup>16</sup> Such relationships are a reflection of the Love for Allah as *Samad* and are a space in which to perform the precepts of Islam, but at the same time they are hidden and produce deep social conflicts. In spite of the fact that the author shows the life of lesbians as individuals and as couples as fulfilling the precepts of religion, she cannot avoid speaking about the concealment in which they live.

### **Families’ Rejection of Lesbian Daughters and the Foundation of Queer Identity in G-d**

Anwar tells of the rejection of Samaddiyyah girls by their families, who are convinced that the estrangement from heterosexual norms means an estrangement from Islam. But, she writes, “they [the Samaddiyyah girls] continue to deserve Islam as before.”<sup>17</sup> In the same situation, Christian queer people look beyond the condemnation by religious institution towards the mercy of G-d. A verse from Isaiah often provides an anchor for LGBTQ Christians: a lesbian Christian girl confronting her family’s rejection can be touched in her despair by the promise of G-d, “Will a woman give up the child at her breast, will she be without pity for the fruit of her body? Yes, these may, but I will not let you go out of my memory” (Isaiah 49:15). The divine presence and unconditioned love is a sort of rock, it provides continuity in a life that is now fragmented and in need of re-composition. This is a G-d who lives in the interstices of our lives, of our society.

Similarly, the Samad G-d provides a foundation for Muslims while everything around them has to be reconstructed. Anwar speaks of a “tacit Shari’ah” informing the daily life and relationships in the lesbian Muslim community in Jakarta she studied.<sup>18</sup> It is opposed to the “formal Shari’ah”: “Even though

---

<sup>14</sup> Anwar, “Elements”, 71.

<sup>15</sup> Anwar, “Elements”, 71.

<sup>16</sup> Anwar, “Elements”, 71.

<sup>17</sup> Anwar, “Elements”, 72.

<sup>18</sup> Anwar, “Elements”, 71.

the formal Shari'ah criminalized its residents and the wider Muslim community shunned them, the women had not lost their sense of self-worth and had not abandoned the Shari'ah".<sup>19</sup> The question to pose here is: "Shari'ah according to whom?". This seems to be the same consideration as Letty Russel's when she uses the metaphor of the "touch of Midas": according to her, feminist exegesis transforms all its objects into the question of the authority of the interpreter.<sup>20</sup> Women have to be counted in Islam among the authorities who interpret and formulate the Sahri'ah, as in Christian theology they have to be counted among the authorities with regard to the interpretation of the Bible and the edification of the church.

### **Khalifa – Agency**

As Amina Wadud affirms, women too are part of the process of interpreting the Qur'an and transforming religion and society in the direction of justice.<sup>21</sup> When lesbians too are viewed as subjects of *Khalifa* (agency) in Islam as in any religion, the centrality of heterosexual norms is decentered and eventually disintegrated. How can such disintegration be brought about and work, however, if the *Samaddiyyah* people are invisible even within other social movements critical of the status quo? With regard to the conflicts about the Law occasioned by the experience of Samadiyyah, Anwar emphasizes the Islamic value *Adab* (= etiquette, respect), an attitude of respecting others and avoiding personal judgment.<sup>22</sup> Once again Anwar uses traditional categories in the effort to integrate the new and disruptive experience of Samaddiyyah individuals and free couples. A new ethic which includes lesbians within the Shari'ah family law would be the result of this mutual respect enacted through the Islamic *Adab*. According to Anwar, it would be possible to integrate new life experiences in the ethical framework of Islam without necessarily crushing the essentials of the tradition.

### **Interaction Without a Center**

Can there be harmony when the heterosexual norm is challenged and other criteria take its place? Recent insights in physics can help us with their models

---

<sup>19</sup> Anwar, "Elements", 72.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Letty Russell, *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville 1993).

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 32.

<sup>22</sup> Anwar, "Elements", 74.

of complexity: both fractal systems and quantum theory show a reality in which different norms are valid at the same time and do not conflict even when there is no normative center. This means, more in general, that there is neither center nor margin, and that even interstices can have an effect on the entire system; it means thinking of G-d as a moving dynamic of diversity.

All mystical claims that G-d be “above and beyond what is predicated of Him” (Qur’an 6:100) transcend human pretensions of a unified order with a unique and exclusive center. Anwar claims that G-d’s guidance is based on “the book that is living, dynamic and interactive”.<sup>23</sup> This implies that the Qur’an, too, the place where the Revelation is embodied and fixed, is a living and transforming reality.

In a Christian context, we could say the same about the dynamic of the Holy Spirit who is at the same time within the innermost core of the single believer and in the energy that moves all. But a holistic vision of the Holy Spirit does not leave place for contradictions and interstices whose existence is necessary for transformation. To an extent, we could affirm that we grow thanks to the interstices we inhabit, when we let them become visible. It is through the coming out of LGBTQ persons that we can overcome the homophobic condemnations found in the Bible, understanding that these verses can no longer be used to condemn homosexuality as a sin.

### **The Uniqueness of G-d**

While Ghazala Anwar explores the uniqueness of G-d to give foundation to *Samaddyah* relationships, such a possibility is not available for Christian queer theologians. In Christian theology, the uniqueness of the divine serves instead as the rationale for a solitary G-d who does not care for his people, marked by indifference and apathy. The queer theologians Malcolm Edwards and Elizabeth Stuart attribute this image of G-d to liberalism.<sup>24</sup> I suggest that such an image of G-d is also characteristic of Barthian theology, highly influential in Protestantism, and criticized for proposing an impassive G-d by Jürgen Moltmann.<sup>25</sup> In another text, Elizabeth Stuart contrasts the apathy of a G-d who does not care about justice with the description of Jesus/Joshua who performs transgressive practices and resists established powers in incarnating and

---

<sup>23</sup> Anwar, “Elements”, 76.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Malcom Edwards, “God,” in Elizabeth Stuart (ed.), *Religion is a Queer Thing* (The Pilgrim Press: Cleveland 1997), 71.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Jürgen Moltmann, *Il Dio crocifisso* (Queriniana: Brescia 1982), 314-315.

sharing the existence of subjugated subjects and exceeding fixed schemes of identity.<sup>26</sup> Elizabeth Stuart argues that this is part of the eschatological horizon of the Christian message. With the Christ of Revelation 5, his body is out of place, it is an unstable body which does not remain within the usual categories of gender, as it blurs the borders between human and non-human as well as those between matter and spirit. Graham Ward writes of “Jesus, the gendered Jew”, whose body is displaced and has “become multi-gendered” at the Ascension.<sup>27</sup>

### **Lies and Masquerades Do Not Transform the World**

However, the need to hide is still part of the experiences of love that are made in the interstices of a pretended (hetero-)normality. But if there is no need to become visible, if it is possible to live in the invisibility of the interstices, where can the courage to speak about oneself come from? The Palestinian poet Habib exalts the courage of those lesbians who make their reality visible. They are transforming the world.<sup>28</sup>

To tell about oneself, to live authentically, is something deeply destabilizing both for a lesbian woman and for the world. Our reality is made up of lies and concealment, as Adrienne Rich argues:

Women have been driven mad, ‘gaslighted’, for centuries by the refutation of our experience and our instincts in a culture which validates only male experience. The truth of our bodies and our minds has been mystified to us. We therefore have a primary obligation to each other: not to undermine each others’ sense of reality for the sake of expediency; not to gaslight each other. Women have often felt insane when cleaving to the truth of our experience. Our future depends on the sanity of each of us, and we have a profound stake, beyond the personal, in the project of describing our reality as candidly and fully as we can to each other.<sup>29</sup>

Eventually, the lie becomes the “uniform” we wear in private life, too, even with ourselves. The story goes that in the 1970s and 1980s, when people came to the “Agape Ecumenical Centre” – an international academy of the Waldensian

---

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Stéphane Lavignotte, *Au-delà du lesbien et du male: La subversion des identités dans la théologie ‘queer’ d’Elizabeth Stuart* (Van Dieren: Paris 2008), 69.

<sup>27</sup> Graham Ward, “Bodies, the Displaced Body of Jesus Christ,” in John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward (eds), *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (Routledge: London; New York 1999), 163-181, here 163.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Samar Habib, “A Lecture”, 10.

<sup>29</sup> Adrienne Rich, *Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying*, available online: <http://hagocrat.files.wordpress.com/2012/06/adrienne-rich-women-and-honor.pdf> (21 February 2013).



Church in Italy of which I was the director in the 1990s, hosting, among other conferences, also meetings of LGBT Christians –, they arrived dressed in suit and tie, as in a masquerade of respectability, and then changed and reappeared in the bright and joyful colors of their gay lives for the week of meeting. This change of clothes, which was repeated at the end of the week, clearly expresses the need for concealment in Italy at that time, especially for gays. But getting used to freedom makes freedom grow, and these weeks of freedom began to affect the ways of life of gays and lesbians outside of the Agape Centre. Is not the church's vocation to be the place of freedom? The site of a banquet so well prepared that crumbs of freedom could fall even for those who are hiding under the tables for fear of being persecuted?<sup>30</sup> To tell about oneself is one of the many ways towards a world of greater authenticity and truth. But if the interstices and gaps are widening, the whole building is in danger of cracking. And in fact, this is what we really want: that this building of hetero-normativity should crack, because it is a building which conceals and delegitimizes every other experience of the self and the world.

### **The Skin**

Here, I want to introduce another metaphor, cherished by the poet and theologian Dorothee Sölle: the skin.<sup>31</sup> The skin with its sensitivity puts us in contact with the world and at the same time it separates us from it. With its porosity, the skin lets in the air and all that is necessary for life, protecting the body from all that could menace and hurt it. With its elasticity it acts as a dynamic and reactive force against dangerous impacts, it is able to regenerate and be reconstituted by new cells. The skin is the window of vulnerability through which I know the world, its threats and its tenderness. The skin also expresses the need to be touched, it is the necessary medium which desires and produces love. But the skin is a threats, a dividing veil. It is a threshold that makes life possible, an in-between which we cannot live without. As we will see later, skin that is ripped open makes violence visible, testifying to the attempt to eliminate the difference of the other. The skin does not demand any theory, but the sensation of touch that empowers with the intensity of love, or hurts with the violence of a beating. At the beginning of the reflection on gender difference, the philosopher Luce Irigaray posited the necessity of an in-between

---

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Mt. 15:25-28.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Dorothee Sölle, *The Window of Vulnerability: A Political Spirituality* (Fortress Press: Minneapolis 1991).

to communicate between “Me to You”. First, she represented this in-between as the placenta, which permits nutrition and growth avoiding the expulsion of a strange body from the body of the mother. Then, she used the metaphor of the air between the two: the air that flows in and out, out and in, avoiding the western habit of loving in the form of appropriation.<sup>32</sup> The skin, the air, the in-between, all are metaphors of a non-violent communication which works without robbing the other of her/his difference, and which finds pleasure precisely in this being different.

### **Borders into Bridges**

The experience of “women”, or lesbians, or queer people, is that they diverge from the norms that constitute society and religion. But they are not only excluded or marginalized, they also foreshadow transformed scenarios. Similarly, with their dynamics of both division and communication, so-called heresies are transforming former borders into bridges. See, for example, the formulation of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification between the Catholic and Lutheran Churches, which states that the reciprocal condemnations of the 16th century are no longer applicable to the positions of the churches and their theologies today.<sup>33</sup> In the same vein, the Concordia of Leuenberg is based on the shared fundamentals of Protestant ecclesiology between the Lutheran and the Reformed tradition, focusing on “the preaching of the Gospel ‘in its truth and purity’ and the *right* administration of the sacraments.”<sup>34</sup> Everything else, such as liturgies or ethical principles, are contextual and subject to historical and cultural transformations. However, I would question the use of the adjective “right”, because it seems to define a center that never changes, a normative interpretation repeating itself in different contexts. Instead, I see preaching and practice, geographical contexts and time, as places generating transformative experiences. Feminist theologies

---

<sup>32</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Tra Oriente e Occidente. Dalla singolarità alla comunità* (Manifestolibri: Roma 2011), 115.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, by the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church (1999), available online: [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc\\_pc\\_chrstuni\\_doc\\_31101999\\_cath-luth-joint-declaration\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_31101999_cath-luth-joint-declaration_en.html) (10 February 2013).

<sup>34</sup> Fulvio Ferrario, *La chiesa di Gesù Cristo: Il contributo delle Chiese della Riforma al dialogo ecumenico sull'unità della Chiesa. La Concordia di Leuenberg* (Claudiana: Torino 1996), 36 (my translation; my emphasis). The text is available online in English, French and German: <http://www.leuenberg.net/node/1497> (10 February 2013).

affirm that women's experiences of life is a major source of our comprehension of the divine. Thus, the center of significance, which gives light to our communal life, is shifting from a supposed normative meaning to the interstices of our differences, from dogma to experience: this could indicate that only difference matters. The focus on what is essential that opened a new and rich season of ecumenical dialogues is already overwhelmed by an enormous wealth of contradictions, simply because it is centered on supposed theological principles instead of on the life of believers in the churches. A corrective could be found in the narrative biblical paradigm, by its nature impossible to force in a universal mold.

### **The Shadow of Grace**

Are we moving towards a situation when individual paths never meet one another? I don't think so – if we are able to live with different narratives. The interstices are still places in which suffering is mixed with the joyous emergence of new visions of life. This “suffering of the new” cannot be avoided and, perhaps, can also lead toward a positive outcome. It is as if the sentence pronounced in Genesis 3:16f about the labor of giving birth was the only possibility for the Divine to be present in the midst of human life. Suffering with endurance, hope for the new that anticipates joy, deception and false illusions – all this is experienced in the interstices. There are only flashes of light, not the full light. But these flashes allow us to also see the shadows and the nuances that a full light doesn't reveal.

In a painting by Hildegard of Bingen we can see the fall of Adam and the shadow of Mary, represented by the stars in the womb of Eve,<sup>35</sup> showing the path toward salvation in a situation where there seems to be no way out. This is also the vision that motivates womanist theologians to attribute value to the experiences of slave women in America as sources of hope.<sup>36</sup> Like Hagar

---

<sup>35</sup> Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias seu Visiones* (1141–51). “In a highly compressed and allegorical form this vision depicts the fall of Lucifer and his angels (represented as ‘living lamps’ or stars) and the subsequent fall of Adam and Eve. The iconography is unusual and full of arcane significance. Eve, for instance, appears as a shining cloud full of stars because she is the ‘mother of all living’, and her unborn children are meant to replace the fallen angels. Hildegard’s commentary on the Genesis narrative largely exonerates Eve and lays the greatest burden of blame on Satan, breaking with the usual tendency to interpret this text in a misogynist vein.” (<http://www.oxfordgirlschoir.co.uk/hildegard/scivias1synopsis.html>, where the image is also reproduced).

<sup>36</sup> Weems, Renita J. *Just a Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women's Relationship in the Bible* (LuraMedia: San Diego, California 1988).

(Genesis 16), they were in a desert where there was no way out, but their encounter with the Divine presence became a source of water to share and a source of life. The experience of Hagar shows us that there is an exit even where we cannot see it.<sup>37</sup> Interstices are not without exit; on the contrary, we need to live in them, to insert the dynamics of transformation in our normative models, in our ethics and our theological constructions. In the end, the interstices we inhabit are the blessings of our lives.

### A Queer Body

I can only consider the experience of the hidden existence of queer people from a western and Christian perspective. I would like to take advantage of the Islamic lesson about *Samaddyah* couples discussed earlier to rethink the symbols and language the Bible offers us. I note that the risen body of Christ in the Gospels and in the Book of Revelation is an open body. As Graham Wards writes, “The body of Jesus Christ, the body of God, is permeable, transcorporeal, transpositional. Within it all other bodies are situated and given their significance. We are all permeable, transcorporeal and transpositional”.<sup>38</sup>

Moreover, in Rev 5:6 and 22, the risen Christ shifts from a human body to the body of a lamb. This directs our understanding towards immolation, but the lamb is also defined as the “Lion of Judah” (Rev. 5:5). Images of victory and power are mixed with images of weakness and humiliation. The risen body of Christ is not a fixed model but a transpositional body. His skin is injured, opened, also in the Gospel, when the apostle reaches out to touch his injuries (John 20:27). His body of light is not perfectly closed, but broken and torn by the suffering and violence that pervade human relations. This violence is made visible in his lacerated skin. This is what Christianity has called sin. This is, in fact, one of the possible dimensions of visibility: to make explicit the violence in social relationships, the violence caused by a univocal way of thinking about family, sexuality and affections.<sup>39</sup> In a world in which LGBTQ difference has no place, it can surface only as a wound and a denunciation. To leave behind the clichés we have become so fond of, which are denounced by Jeannette Winterson as an old sagging armchair in

---

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-talk* (Orbis Books: Maryknoll 1993).

<sup>38</sup> Ward, “Bodies”, 163.

<sup>39</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Christianity and the Making of the Modern Family* (Beacon Press: Boston 2000).

which we accommodate ourselves with satisfaction, generation after generation, means exiting from a homogeneous world and discovering that “oranges are not the only fruit”.<sup>40</sup>

### **Partialities and Interconnections**

The uniqueness of G-d is a prerogative of the divine; we, instead, are constructed of partialities, multiplicities, inter-connections. We cannot take for granted the existence of one single worldview including and measuring all the others; this is the white western, male, heterosexual view. And we always have to ask ourselves if we are not thinking in a white western and heteronormative way. Queer theology helps by driving us to move away from labels that separate people and push some to live hidden existences and others to determine what is the norm for visibility.

Interstices are injuries that show a world without justice, that recall the desire for a world without concealment and lies. Under the table of the kingdom the dogs that eat the crumbs falling from the table are hidden. Without the woman of Canaan who dared to speak of them, Jesus would not have noticed them.<sup>41</sup> When he is able to see them, everything changes: he changes his messianic practice, he crosses through pagan territories with an open mind, his liberation message become liberation also for those who were not considered part of the people of G-d. For this process of inclusion and transformation to happen, it is necessary that someone is able to speak up, to tell how life is from the perspective of “the dogs”.

This is why every word, every reflection that mixes G-d with the human capacity to love, opens wide the world in which we live, and makes space for more life. This experience can create the courage necessary to give rise to hope, as Paul writes,<sup>42</sup> and such hope may transform the world in where we live into a place of justice.

Transformative theologies emerge mainly (might we say: only?) from those interstices in which theologians fall only by chance, starting from a personal life not fully molded according to the norms of heterosexuality and middle

---

<sup>40</sup> This is the title of a Jeannette Winterson novel (*Oranges Are not the Only Fruit* [Pandora Press: London 1985]), while the image of the cliché as a sagging armchair can be found in Jeannette Winterson, *Written on the Body* (Vintage: New York 1994).

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Mt 15:25-28.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Rom 5:3-5.

class values.<sup>43</sup> Queering means moving out of such molds, out of overly stable definitions, as life is never fixed but always transforming itself and creating new shapes.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the concept of agency/*Khalifa*, is very important both in the Islamic religion and in Christian theology. But what is more important is the acknowledgement that every queer experience, even hidden experiences, is already transforming the world. The courage of coming out, as experienced in western society, is not necessarily the only way to achieve such transformation. The experience itself speaks out loud, as the body of Christ ripped open shows the violence of the Empire that oppresses the people with its crosses and political condemnation. It seems to me that it is necessary to pay attention to this experience of violence, while it is not needed to force queer people to expose themselves to further violence. The Islamic scholars discussed here show how to integrate queer experiences into the Shari'ah, transforming it beyond its limits but in accordance with the justice of G-d testified to in the Qur'an. The dynamic of the Divine is pushed forward by our living in the in-between.

In Christian theology there is the powerful image of the Holy Spirit, love's dynamics, power of eros, energy that allows communication not only through words but in embodied experiences. All the love that brings bodies and emotions in contact is the vibrant field of the Holy Spirit. S/he translates these deeply human experiences into a divine language, "groans that words cannot express" (Rom 8:26).

¿Cuáles son las rendijas a través de las que se puede recuperar el espacio y la legitimidad del amor LGBTQ en tradiciones religiosas tales como el islam y el cristianismo? Las teologías feministas afirman que las experiencias de vida de las mujeres son una fuente importante de comprensión de lo divino. Por lo tanto, nuestra experiencia común se centra en el pasar de los modelos normativos a reconocer nuestras diferencias, en el pasar de los dogmas de la vida. La experiencia de las personas LGBT es una experiencia de lo intermedio, de los márgenes y de las brechas. En este artículo se muestra cómo, según algunas pensadoras musulmanas progresistas, es posible encontrar los recursos para la libertad y la autenticidad de las fuentes sagradas del Islam. Las mujeres también tienen que ser integradas entre las autoridades que interpretan el Corán y formulan la Sahri'ah, transformando, así, la religión y la sociedad hacia una mayor justicia. Cuando las lesbianas también son

---

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*.

vistas como Khalifa (agentes) en la religión, el centro ubicado en las normas heterosexuales se descentra y eventualmente se desintegra. Del mismo modo que en el diálogo ecuménico entre las Iglesias cristianas se ha podido ver la diversidad creando un nuevo mundo en el que las diferencias y las brechas son realmente importantes. Sostengo en este artículo que las brechas o rendijas en las que habitamos son las bendiciones para nuestras vidas. Pero estas rendijas son también heridas, lesiones y denuncian un mundo sin justicia y nos recuerda el deseo de un mundo sin tapujos ni mentiras. El “entre” es también un diálogo que puede establecerse entre teologías islámicas y cristianas homosexuales, donde se toma ‘queer’ en el sentido de la experiencia de las personas que no encajan y no se sienten cómodos en la norma heterosexual. La experiencia ‘queer’ cuestiona todas las religiones. Necesitamos esas experiencias incómodas y poco convencionales para poder ver las religiones con ojos nuevos.

Which are the interstices in which the effort to restore space and legitimacy to LGBTQ love in the religious traditions of Islam and Christianity can be located? Feminist theologies affirm that women’s life experiences are a major source of comprehension of the Divine. Thus, the center of significance of our common ground shifts from supposedly normative models to our differences, from dogma to life. The experience of LGBTQ people is an experience of the in-between, of margins and gaps. This article shows how, according to some progressive Muslim scholars, it is possible to find resources for freedom and authenticity in the sacred sources of Islam. Women, too, have to be integrated amongst the authorities who interpret the Qur’an and formulate the Shari’ah, transforming religion and society toward greater justice. When lesbians too are viewed as subjects of *Khalifa* (agency) in religion, the center located in heterosexual norms is decentered and eventually disintegrated. Similarly in the ecumenical dialogue among Christian Churches it has been possible to see diversity at work creating a new world in which differences and gaps really matter. I argue in this paper that the gaps or interstices we inhabit are the blessings of our lives. But the interstices are injuries too, and denounce a world without justice, recalling the desire for a world without concealment and lies. The “in-between” is also a dialogue that can be established between queer Islamic and Christian theologies, where “queer” is taken to mean the experience of people who do not fit and do not feel comfortable with the heterosexual norm. Queer experience questions all religions. We need such uncomfortable and unconventional experiences to be able to see religions with a new eye.

Welche sind die Zwischenräume, in denen die Bemühungen lokalisiert werden können, der Liebe zwischen LGBTQ-Menschen in den religiösen Traditionen des Islam und Christentums einen Ort und Legitimation zuzuerkennen? Feministische Theologien bekräftigen, dass die Erfahrungen von Frauen eine wichtige Quelle für das Verständnis des Göttlichen sind. Daher verschiebt sich das gemeinsame Bedeutungszentrum von angeblich normativen Modellen zu den Unterschieden zwischen

uns, vom Dogma zum Leben. Die Erfahrung von LGBTQ-Menschen ist die Erfahrung des Dazwischen, der Ränder und Zwischenräume.

Dieser Artikel zeigt, wie es nach einigen progressiven muslimischen Wissenschaftler/innen möglich ist, Ressourcen für Freiheit und Authentizität in den heiligen Quellen des Islam zu finden. Frauen müssen ebenfalls unter die Autoritäten integriert werden, die den Qu'ran interpretieren und Schari'ah formulieren, damit Religion und Gesellschaft gerechter werden. Wenn auch Lesben als Subjekte von *Khalifa* (agency) in der Religion gesehen werden, wird das Zentrum, das bisher in heterosexuellen Normen lag, dezentriert und schließlich aufgelöst. Ähnlich war es im ökumenischen Dialog zwischen christlichen Kirchen möglich, die Wirkung von Diversität in der Erschaffung einer neuen Welt, in der Unterschiede und Zwischenräume wirklich etwas bedeuten, zu sehen. Mein Argument in diesem Beitrag ist, dass die Zwischenräume, die wir bewohnen, der Segen unseres Lebens sind. Aber Zwischenräume sind auch Verletzungen und sie denunzieren eine Welt ohne Gerechtigkeit und erinnern an den Wunsch nach einer Welt ohne Verstecke und Lügen. Das Dazwischen ist auch ein Dialog zwischen queeren islamischen und christlichen Theologien, bei dem „queer“ die Erfahrung von Menschen bezeichnet, die nicht in die heterosexuelle Norm passen und sich dort nicht wohlfühlen. Queere Erfahrung stellt alle Religionen in Frage. Wir brauchen solche unbequemen und unkonventionellen Erfahrungen, um Religionen mit neuen Augen sehen zu können.

**Letizia Tomassone** is a minister in the Waldensian Church, and the vice-president of the Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy; she is committed to ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. Since 2009 she has been teaching “Feminist and Gender Studies” at the Facoltà Valdese di Teologia, Rome, Italy. She is one of the founding members of the “Coordinamento Teologhe Italiane”.