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Michael Thorn

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Confessing Our Selves: Truth and Identity Politics in the Christian Ex-gay Movement

Michael Thorn, York and Ryerson Universities, Ontario, Canada

Abstract: This paper will analyze “queer” confessional practices in the Ex-gay Movement using a governmental perspective. The Ex-gay Movement is a loosely organized phenomenon that mixes ancient spiritual practices rooted in confession, prayer, and Bible study with modern psychological techniques rooted in psychotherapy and psychoanalysis. It claims to “heal” homosexuality. Although the movement accepts a queer definition of sexual fluidity, it still encourages LGBTQ people to turn towards the “truth” and change their sexual and religious orientations so as to live good “straight” Christian lives. For ex-gays living within a religiously ordained heteronormative context, the fluidity of sexuality is not a spectrum that opens up new possibilities—it is a situation that must be struggled against and corrected through religious and psychological work. The primary technique through which the self-deprecating “queerness” of this movement will be critiqued in this paper is the ancient practice of confession. This requires an examination of correspondences between aspects of this movement and aspects of the historical research of Michel Foucault, whose research into both modern and ancient forms of governmentality provides the basis for this paper’s theoretical approach.

Keywords: Ex-gay Movement, Confession, Foucault, Governmentality, Truth, Queer Theory, Christianity, Homosexuality, Identity Politics

Introduction: The Ex-gay Movement and Queer Theory

WHILE THE CHRISTIAN Ex-gay Movement may seem peculiar and odd, it probably does not seem queer, at least if by “queer” the reference is to Queer Theory. Ex-gay sexual orientation conversions do not break down the binary opposition between homosexual and heterosexual, nor do ex-gay proponents conceive of sexual identity in terms of historical and cultural contingency. Yet, in her ethnographic study *Straight to Jesus: Sexual and Christian Conversions in the Ex-gay Movement* (2006), Tanya Erzen argues that ex-gay conversion is indeed a “queer conversion” (14). This is because the movement now claims that what it once defined as a cure is more accurately defined as a healing process that seldom results in complete heterosexuality. Furthermore, ex-gay ministries have always rejected essentialist notions of sexuality in favor of a certain kind of sexual fluidity that can be manipulated by the self working on the self to change the self. Thus, despite her awareness that ex-gay political goals are radically different from those of Queer Theory, Erzen argues that both share a belief that we do not need to be oppressively defined by our sexuality (13-15, 218-21). However, if she is correct, this argument does not justify the movement. Rather, it gives queer theorists an opportunity to critique it more effectively than those seeking to do so already: namely, the majority in psychiatry and psychology, gay rights activists, pro-gay Christianity, and even commercial popular culture.

The Ex-gay Movement is a loosely organized phenomenon mixing ancient spiritual practices rooted in confession, prayer, and Bible study with modern psychological techniques

rooted in psychotherapy and psychoanalysis (Besen; Erzen; Wolkomir). It claims to help LGBTQ people turn towards the “truth” and change their sexual and religious orientations so as to live good “straight” Christian lives (Erzen: 13-15). The movement began in 1973, shortly after the American Psychological Association (APA) declassified homosexuality as a mental illness, but it did not enter the public consciousness until 1998 when it began an aggressive mass media advertising campaign (Besen: 201-204; Erzen: 183-86; see also Fetner; Stewart). Subsequently, it established itself on the internet and became an object of contempt in satirical film, television and literature.¹ But can this movement really be considered queer, and if so, given Queer Theory’s roots in the scholarship of Michel Foucault, what does this mean in relation to subjectivity and power in a Foucauldian sense? This paper will explore and critique ex-gay practices as they play out in a movement that rejects sexuality as biologically fixed or innate but also rejects any positivity that might be associated with this rejection. For ex-gays living within a religiously ordained heteronormative context, the fluidity of sexuality is not a spectrum that opens up new possibilities—it is a situation that must be struggled against and corrected through religious and psychological work.

While my general research includes discursive, critical, empirical, and psychological and psychiatric sources from both within and outside the movement, this paper draws primarily on three ethnographic studies: Tanya Erzen’s *Straight to Jesus* (see above), Michelle Wolkomir’s *Be Not Deceived: The Sacred and Sexual Struggles of Gay and Ex-gay Christian Men* (2006), and Dawne Moon’s “Discourse, Interaction, and Testimony: The Making of Selves in the U.S. Protestant Dispute Over Homosexuality” (2005). The primary technique through which I will explore and critique the self-deprecating “queerness” of the Ex-gay Movement is the ancient practice of confession. Understanding how confession operates in ex-gay therapy, and how it organizes subjectivity and power relations as a whole, requires that I examine correspondences between aspects of the Ex-gay Movement and aspects of Michel Foucault’s historical research. His publication, *The History of Sexuality, Vol I* (1990, originally published in French in 1976), both sits at the foundation of Queer Theory and argues that “Western [humanity] has become a confessing animal” (59). Foucault writes, “next to the testing rituals, next to the testimony of witnesses, and the learned methods of observation and demonstration, the confession became one of the West’s most highly valued techniques for producing truth. We have since become a singularly confessing society” (59).

Part I: Foucault, Queer Theory, and Psychoanalysis

It is not just Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality, Vol I* (hereafter referred to as *HoS I*) and his analysis of confession that applies to this topic, but research spanning his entire career. Foucault’s first major publication, *History of Madness* (2006a, originally published in French in 1961), lays the foundation for his later research into how certain forms of sexual behaviour became pathologized as psychologically abnormal. More specifically, *History of Madness* offers an account of how an objective division in Western society between reason and unreason in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was rejected in the nineteenth century for an internalized, subjectivized psychology of human desire. It is also a historicizing critique of psychology and psychoanalysis. In *Mad For Foucault: Rethinking the Foundations of Queer Theory* (2010), Lynn Huffer argues that now is the time for Queer Theory to recognize

¹ To my knowledge, there is currently no academic literature exploring ex-gay depictions in popular culture. Given this, I have been compiling a list of these depictions for analysis in a future paper.

the relevance of *History of Madness* to the Queer project. She argues Queer Theory's engagement with Foucault is focused almost exclusively on *HoS I* at the expense of his earlier and later research, resulting in an over-emphasis on "sexual acts versus sexual identity" and an under-emphasis on Foucault's critique of psychoanalysis (44-49; 67-80). This has resulted in some queer theorists working to reconcile Foucault with psychoanalysis so as to account for sexual identity in terms of psychic development.² However, if we look at Foucault's entire career we can see he is far more critical of psychoanalysis than many scholars acknowledge. While he certainly recognizes it as an improvement over the disciplinary psychiatric practices that preceded it (Foucault 1990:150), his research still suggests psychoanalysis bears much of the responsibility for Western society's continued reliance on intrusive confessional practices as a means of deciphering subjective truth.

Foucault's critique is important, not only because of Queer Theory's usage of psychoanalytic theory, but because the primary psychological tool the Ex-gay Movement uses is something called reparative therapy, a technique rooted in psychoanalysis (Besen: 119-92; Erzen: 126-59; see also Nicolosi). Although the APA officially repudiated reparative therapy in 2009 (APA Task Force), today it is still championed by a minority of pro-ex-gay mental health professionals working for the arguably secular National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality (NARTH). The therapy was developed in the 1950s and 60s by the American psychoanalysts Irving Bieber and Charles Socarides and the medical practices of NARTH are consciously indebted to their work. While it is true NARTH tends to avoid commonly known Freudian terms, the theories underlying this therapy are indeed theories of unresolved Oedipal conflict (Besen: 124-59; Erzen: 132-148; see also Bieber; Nicolosi; Socarides). To summarize NARTH's position in relatively simple language, if a child grows up in a household with a strong mother and a weak father, that child is far more likely to become homosexual (Besen: 152-54; Erzen: 155-59). In more specific language (taken from the NARTH website):

[C]hildren look first to their same-sex parent and then to same-sex peers to form their own identity...: When children do not form healthy same-sex bonds and their needs for same-sex connection go unmet, these needs do not go away; they simply intensify or take on another form. Typically, near puberty, these unmet needs take on a sexual form, the emotional needs become sexualized. (Harren)

Notwithstanding the addition of "peers" to this theory, reducing same-sex desire to unresolved emotional needs from early childhood still pathologizes homosexuality as a form of arrested development rooted in an Oedipal understanding of family dynamics. Reparative therapy seeks to overcome this condition by encouraging subjects to confess their family dynamics as a psychological problem that can only be corrected by identifying with strong gender appropriate role models. The question of whether this therapy is effective, however, is extremely contested (APA Task Force; Drescher and Zucker; Jones and Yarhouse). The general consensus among most mental health professionals is that its effectiveness is highly suspect. Only a minority of participants claim success and there is evidence it may contribute to depression, extreme anxiety, and even suicide (APA Task Force; Besen; Erzen). Unfortunately

² For example, see "Subjection, Resistance, Resignification: Between Freud and Foucault" in *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* by Judith Butler (1997: 83-105).

(in spite of decades of studies) it cannot be stated *definitively* whether or not reparative therapy is helpful or harmful, but the evidence certainly suggests harmful (APA Task Force). Given this, the APA acknowledges as potentially effective for some religious persons distressed over their same-sex attractions something called “affirmative multiculturally competent treatment,” which seeks to address sexual orientation *identity* (as opposed to sexual orientation) by focusing on “acceptance, support, and recognition of important values and concerns” without prioritizing any particular outcome (APA Task Force: 86). Christian psychotherapists Warren Throckmorton and Mark Yarhouse have since developed a therapy called sexual-identity therapy (SIT) that they claim conforms to this treatment (Swartz; Throckmorton and Yarhouse). Some, however, are convinced that SIT “is just another way of encouraging repression” (Swartz, paraphrasing Besen). This is interesting because repression is a psychoanalytic concept called into question by Foucault in *HoSI* (17-49); but this objection indicates just how pervasive psychoanalytic thought is to the ex-gay debate.

Of course, in Queer Theory psychoanalysis is not used to justify either an Oedipal understanding of psychic development or to account for psychic processes in terms of repression; rather, it is rooted in a reluctance to reject the universality of something akin to a Freudian unconscious (Huffer: 129; see also Butler). The unconscious is something many psychologists accept as a given today, even if some re-imagine it outside its Freudian heritage (see Bargh; Bargh and Morsella; Cúellar; Kihlstrom et al; Loftus and Klinger). But Queer Theory draws more on the work of Jacques Lacan than Freud, because Lacan roots the unconscious in language rather than biology. This allows for constructionist modifications to psychoanalytic theory that avoid some problems with certain Freudian concepts. However, Foucault’s research subverts even Lacanian psychoanalysis.³ This is because, as a talking cure, psychoanalysis relies on the practice of confession; and questioning the role of confession in Western thought is key to Foucault’s shift from analyzing power in the 1970s to his engagement with ethics in the 1980s.

Part II: Foucault, Governmentality, and Ex-gay Confession

In a two part lecture series Foucault delivered in 1980 called “About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self” (1993) he inaugurated a major theoretical shift.⁴ Having spent most of the 1970s analyzing technologies of power in terms of knowledge, discipline, and biopolitics, he addressed in these lectures a new concern with the relationship between confession and “technologies of the self.” When I used the phrase “the self working on the self to change the self” in my introduction, I was not paraphrasing Erzen, but Foucault. The two key concepts for understanding this new concern with an ethics of the self are “confession” and “governmentality”: confession, because this is what leads Foucault from analyzing power and subjugation to considering ethics as a form of subjective power; and governmentality because Foucault makes it clear in these and other lectures that governmentality involves both technologies of power *and* technologies of the self. According to Foucault, the government of self and others is both political and subjective (1993; 2000a; 2000b; 2010; 2011).

³ I will address the specifics of his critique and its application to ex-gay practices in more detail in future research.

⁴ These lectures are also published in *The Politics of Truth* (2007a) as “Subjectivity and Truth” (147-67) and “Christianity and Confession” (169-91). They build on a longer, as of yet unpublished lecture series Foucault delivered earlier in 1980 at the Collège de France called “On the Government of the Living” (see the course summary in Foucault’s *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth* (1997a): 81-85).

Foucault first developed governmentality as a socio-economic concept in the late 1970s when he defined it in relation to classical political economy, the administrative state that emerged in Europe following the Middle Ages, and the modern concern with managing populations (2007b: 108-9).⁵ He initially historicized governmentality as having emerged out of the Christian pastoral and then followed its progression in modern liberal thought directly into 20th century neoliberal theory (2007b; 2008); however, in 1980 he expanded his definition of the concept to include government in general and technologies of the self in particular. He argues, “Governing people, in the broad meaning of the word ... is always a versatile equilibrium, with complementarity and conflicts between techniques which impose coercion and processes through which the self is constructed or modified by the self” (1993: 203-4). As for religious and psychiatric confession, Foucault’s interest in these was initiated with two lecture series he delivered at the Collège de France in the mid 1970s, published as *Psychiatric Power* (2006b) and *Abnormal* (2003). In *Psychiatric Power*, he analyzes a forced confession used by a nineteenth century psychiatrist to extract statements of “truth” from a patient (157-59).⁶ In *Abnormal*, he lays the groundwork for his argument in *HoS I* that confession was considerably transformed when it was transmitted from the Christian pastoral into psychiatry and psychoanalysis in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (2003: 167-99, 150-1; 1990: 58-67). However, it is not until after *HoS I* that Foucault traces confession back through the Middle Ages to its origins in antiquity. Indeed, the as of yet unpublished fourth volume of *The History of Sexuality* is subtitled “Confessions of the Flesh” (Huffer: 11) and his unpublished lecture series “On the Government of the Living” is largely devoted to early Christian confessional practices (1997a: 81-85). In other words, it is these two concepts, confession and governmentality, that first weave technologies of power and technologies of the self together in Foucault’s thought, thus bridging the gap between (what some argue are) the two most irreconcilable periods of his career—his 1970s genealogy of power and his 1980s genealogy of the subject.⁷

Confession and governmentality are also at work in the Ex-gay Movement. In *Straight to Jesus* Erzen writes, “Ex-Gays are accustomed to continually sharing testimony about the most private and harrowing aspects of their lives in public group settings. Continuous testimony in small groups and at church is the centerpiece of the ex-gay residential program” (12). Drawing explicitly on Foucault’s analysis of confession in *HoS I*, she documents several examples of confession in support groups, to ex-gay counselors, and sometimes to entire church congregations (160-82). She even documents how a married participant struggling with “pornography addiction” publicly shamed himself by delivering the following letter to several nearby video stores: “My name is Darren _____, and my wife is Trisha _____. Our phone number is _____. If you see me in here renting pornography

⁵ The lecture of February 1st 1978 in *Security, Territory, Population* (2007b) from which this definition is drawn is also published as “Governmentality” in *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality* (1991), pgs 87-104.

⁶ This specific forced confession is also described in “About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self” (200).

⁷ The importance of governmentality and confession to Foucault’s larger project is made clear by Frédéric Gros in his contextualization of Foucault’s final lecture series, *The Courage of Truth*: “[Foucault’s project is] a study of modes of veridiction (rather than an epistemology of Truth); an analysis of forms of governmentality (rather than a theory of Power); a description of techniques of subjectivation (rather than a deduction of the Subject)—the stakes consisting in taking a determinate cultural nucleus (confession, care of self, etcetera) as the object to be studied, which acquires its volume precisely from the intersection of these three dimensions” (344).

please call my wife” (170). Michelle Wolkomir’s study, *Be Not Deceived*, confirms Erzen’s observations. She summarizes a series of ex-gay confessions as follows:

A group member would stand up and share his story of his childhood, his sinful behaviour... and discovery that his homosexuality was a result of psychic or physical abuse, and his progress since he put his faith in God’s healing power... [T]he speaker often described his feelings of fear and shame at his initial behavior, his anger at those who caused his homosexuality, and his joy and relief at learning about and pursuing a cure. (129)⁸

This model of confession also extends outside the group. Ex-gay counselor Joe Dallas begins his self-help book, *Desires In Conflict: Hope for Men Who Struggle with Sexual Identity* (1991), with an introduction that follows a similar paradigm. In the course of his seven page confession he describes himself in terms of “three distinct and irreconcilable lives: a wildly promiscuous kid, a rigidly pious young minister, then a compromised adult who had tried—and failed—to mix Christianity with sexual sin, hoping against hope it would all work out” (7). Dallas testifies to being sexually molested as a child, to having a pornography addiction as a teenager, and to finding Christ in early adulthood only to fall back into promiscuity by the time he was twenty-three. His testimony includes an attempted religious reconciliation through the pro-gay Metropolitan Community Churches and finally a private confession to God: “weeping but relieved, I confessed to God what He had known all along. I had been wrong, and I had to change” (14). In all these confessions, individuals work on themselves to change themselves within a context controlled by others. In terms of governmentality, their confessions operate as technologies of the self but within ritualized settings organized as technologies of power. Even Dallas, who appears to operate autonomously by writing his book outside the ritualized settings of his church, still had to move through the movement first; and even though his primary confession is in private prayer, he publicly atones for his “sinful” past by publicizing his testimony in a common commercialized confessional form: the autobiographical self-help book.

Given that ex-gay testimonies and confessions are very well documented,⁹ I feel justified to include here an anecdotal example that emphasizes the humiliation frequently operating within ex-gay confession. A friend of mine who was ex-gay for ten years told me of the confession he had to give, without warning, to his entire church congregation.¹⁰ One Sunday morning it was announced that a new group for sexual deviants had been established and the congregation needed to pray for the group. My friend and three others, a bisexual, a person with a foot fetish, and a chronic masturbator, were asked to come forward and confess their deviancies, which they did, albeit extremely reluctantly. This event stands out for my

⁸ Ex-gay psychology sometimes attributes the cause of homosexuality to sexual abuse rather than dysfunctional (i.e. Oedipal) family dynamics, which is not surprising given Foucault’s account of the double role of ‘fear of incest’ in the development of abnormal psychology in the 19th century, i.e. incest understood as real in proletarian families but as childhood fantasy in bourgeois families (2003: 266-73). Either way, in ex-gay psychology it is through confession that a specific cause for homosexuality can be discovered, and this is key to how reparative therapy operates.

⁹ See also Moon’s “Discourse, Interaction, and Testimony”; the ex-gay testimonies published on Exodus International’s website (<http://exodusinternational.org/resources/real-stories/>); and the ex-gay self-help/autobiographies listed in the References section of this paper by Alan Chambers, Richard Cohen, and John and Anne Paulk.

¹⁰ My friend has given me permission to document this story.

friend as one of the most humiliating experiences of his life. Of course—notwithstanding the viral Youtube video from 2009 of a 16-year-old boy being exorcised of his “homosexual demons” in a very public church ceremony (CNN News)—this kind of “surprise” public confession is not the norm. Confessions are usually contained within the semi-privacy of support groups, but when they extend outside these groups—for example, to entire church congregations (or to the employees of local video stores!)—they are almost always prepared and voluntary. As Erzen documents, subjects are accustomed to confessing the most private aspects of their lives and of their sinful desires precisely because so much of the movement is ritually organized around these confessions: “and reluctance or refusal to give testimony is [considered] a liability” (12). In other words, the humiliation of confessing “shameful” desires operates as a partly self-motivated governmental tactic to facilitate the purgation of these same desires, precisely so as to change oneself.

Part III: Ubiquitous Western Confession and Sexual Identity

In her study, Wolkomir compares ex-gay Christian testimonials to pro-gay Christian testimonials. Her data demonstrates that while in each group confession and testimony operate differently, they are still central practices for each. Although the pro-gay support group does not confess desire to purge it, but to reconcile it, this group’s use of confession still supports Foucault’s argument that as a practice of deciphering the self, confession permeates our entire society. Even before *HoS I*, Foucault argues that if we in the West confess our desires and our “selves” psychologically, we do so “precisely to the extent that all kinds of mechanisms everywhere—in advertising, books, novels, films, and widespread pornography—invite the individual to pass from this daily expression of sexuality to the institutional and expensive confession of his sexuality to the psychiatrist, psychoanalyst, or sexologist” (2003: 170). That is to say, confession is a culturally ubiquitous form of governmentality that is both a technology of power and a technology of the self, and the discourse surrounding the Ex-gay Movement exemplifies this duality. Yet, it is important to remember that Foucault’s research demonstrates that confession was transformed when it moved from the Christian pastoral into psychiatry and psychology in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: it became medicalized, “it gradually lost its ritualistic and exclusive localization; it spread; it has been employed in a whole series of relationships: children and parents, students and educators, patients and psychiatrists, delinquents and experts” (1990: 63). In the Ex-gay Movement, however, it retains its religious localization while simultaneously being employed in this series of non-religious relationships, which are ironically mirrored in several other discourses seeking to discredit it. Following Foucault, I would argue that all the factions involved in the contemporary ex-gay debate, including those opposed to the movement (psychiatry and psychology, gay-rights activists, pro-gay Christianity, and commercial popular culture), share faith in the common practice of confession: whether confessing sex and desire as sin and repentance, as psychological therapy, as a natural gift from God, as a “coming out” act of liberation, or as a form of commercialized cultural identity.¹¹ But what is it being confessed, apparently by everyone, gay, straight, and ex-gay?

According to Queer Theory, it is identity; but as discussed above, one of Huffer’s arguments in *Mad For Foucault* is that by focusing only on *HoS I*, Queer Theory overemphasizes a

¹¹ I will explore this thesis in more detail in future research.

distinction between sexual acts and sexual identity. In Queer Theory's understanding of Foucault, sexuality as a form of identity is entirely an effect of psychiatry's pathologization of so-called "abnormal" sexualities. In this view, homosexuality as we understand it today did not exist prior to the nineteenth century, prior to the rise of psychiatry. Obviously same-sex activity existed, but no one understood it as key to identity. But Huffer calls this acts/identity dichotomy into question: first, she references a certain "homosexual lyricism" that Foucault argues (in *History of Madness*) existed in the Middle Ages but disappeared before the rise of psychiatry in the nineteenth century (Huffer: 20-21, 61-67; referring to Foucault 2006a: 87-99); and second, she notes a strong sense of irony related to this dichotomy in the French publication of *HoS I* that is lost in the English translation (Huffer: 20-21, 67-80). So it seems even Foucault recognizes a certain kind of subjective homoerotic experience prior to what we understand, and the distinction between sexual acts and sexual identity that Foucault seems to stress in *HoS I*, while not unimportant, may be far less rigid than many scholars realize.

In other words, a certain dichotomy between essentialist and constructionist notions of sexuality justified using Foucault's research—between sexuality as fixed, given, and innate, and sexuality as fluid, culturally constituted, and malleable—is probably over-stated. In addition to Huffer's critique, I would add that Foucault both uses and praises the scholarship of John Boswell, author of *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (1980). Boswell, who is frequently labeled an essentialist (Soble: 1027), argues there is indeed a history of gay people that can be traced back to antiquity. Yet, even though Foucault is often labeled a constructionist, he acknowledges the importance of Boswell's work to his own and accepts Boswell's nuanced use of the term "gay" to describe a certain historically traceable experience of same-sex desire that may be transhistorical. This is because Boswell is very careful to define what he means by "gay". Contrasting it with both the more recent term "homosexual" and the more ancient terms "sodomite" and "pederast," Boswell uses "gay" to "describe persons who are conscious of erotic preference for their own gender" (43); however, he does so stressing that the word "straight" is historically meaningless in reference to "gay" (45). What Foucault says about this is revealing:

[T]he rejection by Boswell of the categorical opposition between homosexual and heterosexual, which plays such a significant role in the way our culture conceives of homosexuality, represents an advance not only in scholarship but in cultural criticism as well. His introduction of the concept "gay" (in the way he defines it) provides us both with a useful instrument of research and, at the same time, a better comprehension of how people actually conceive of themselves and their sexual behaviour." (1997b:141)

Therefore, I would argue neither Foucault nor Boswell are strictly constructionist or essentialist and the dichotomy between sexual acts and sexual identity in Queer Theory may be just as problematic as the dichotomy between heterosexual and homosexual that Queer Theory seeks to deconstruct. This understanding is important because Boswell's research is central to most pro-gay Christian attempts to reconcile Christian belief with same-sex desire. In fact, pro-gay Christianity often uses his research to argue for readings of scripture that sometimes result in an equally essentialist position: that confessing God's will, confessing homosexuality as a "gift from God," is necessary to reconcile homosexuality with Christianity (see Brentlinger; Moon; Wolkomir). However, it would seem that pro-gay Christianity

misuses Boswell's research in this regard.¹² While Boswell (who was both openly gay and a practicing Catholic) certainly reinterprets supposedly anti-gay scriptures using historical and cultural context, at no point does he suggest that homosexuality is a gift from God, and at no point does he suggest that people who experience same-sex desire should exclusively identify as gay. Thus, there is good reason for Queer Theory to pay more attention to his research. Boswell's particular use of the word "gay" can help formulate a queer theology over and against both an essentialist liberal theology, which forecloses sexualities outside the gay/straight dichotomy, and a constructionist ex-gay theology, which allows for sexual fluidity *theoretically* but forecloses any positive understanding of this fluidity outside a heteronormative framework. As Moon writes, "[i]n contrast to the liberal line of thought, which often rests on the view that homosexuality is a distinct type of personhood, innate and scientifically verifiable (the view Foucault and others so convincingly challenge), the queer movement in theology posits that homosexuality is good precisely because it challenges conventional family patterns and the assumption that heterosexuality is a Godly or natural phenomenon" (556).

Part IV: Confession, Courageous Speech, and the Bible as Literal Truth

There is another technology of the self that Foucault analyzes connecting his research to the Ex-gay Movement. Beginning in 1982, he began a genealogy of an ancient Greek practice of the self called *parrhesia* [παρρησία]—frank, truthful, and courageous speech—which eventually came to operate within Christianity in a confessional mode (Foucault 2010: 131-47, 345-47). In Greco-Roman times it was a practice of courageously speaking objective truth in the face of danger (2001; 2005; 2010; 2011): often political danger, or the danger of risking one's life in the face of anger, but frequently ethical or personal danger as well, such as the risk of severing close relationships (2011: 11-12). For Foucault, this practice, which also connects technologies of the self with technologies of power, is essential for understanding ancient forms of subjectivity:

[W]ith *parrhesia* we have a notion which is situated at the meeting point of the obligation to speak the truth, procedures and techniques of governmentality, and the constitution of the relationship to self. Truth-telling by the other, as an essential component of how he governs us, is one of the essential conditions for us to be able to form the right kind of relationship to ourselves that will give us virtue and happiness." (2010: 45)

As it was practiced in ancient Greece and Rome, *parrhesia* was not a confessional practice as such, although there were aspects of it that coincided with confession. According to Foucault, it did not become a confessional practice until after "the development of structures of authority in Christianity" (2011: 333) when it became associated with the Christian pastoral and was practiced in third century monastic communities (2010: 348). At that point, Christian truth-telling rooted in courage and self-confidence became distrusted; it became a fearful practice through which one told the truth about the self so that the self could be purged in relation to fear of God and the truth of scripture. *Parrhesia* came to appear on the

¹² The problem here, of course, is that homosexuality understood as a "gift from God" can be used oppressively to define individuals as homosexual who may not understand themselves as such.

one hand “as blameworthy behaviour of presumption, familiarity, and arrogant self-confidence” (2011: 334), and on the other as “an obligation to speak of oneself, to tell the truth about oneself, to tell everything about oneself, and to do so in order to be cured” (2010: 359). Clearly, the Ex-gay Movement deploys truth-telling in precisely this way. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that in the New Testament *parrhesia* largely retains its Greco-Roman definition, operating as a practice of courageously speaking objective truth even in the face of punishment or death. Jesus and the Apostles engage in it, not as a form of confession, but as a prophetic, revelatory act of bold, truthful assertion, what Foucault calls “apostolic virtue par excellence” (2011: 330; see also Brown; Fredrickson; Klassen; Mitchell; Winter). For example, the word appears in Acts 4:13: “Now when they saw the boldness [τὴν παρρησίαν] of Peter and John and realized that they were uneducated and ordinary men, they were amazed and recognized them as companions of Jesus” (NRSV). Still, in the Christian sense, *parrhesia* is truth derived specifically from God. It encourages “trust in God, that confidence which every Christian can and should have in God’s love” (Foucault 2011: 329). For ex-gays, however, truth-telling as the bold courage to speak the truth of God and truth-telling as the confessional, mistrustful need to purge the self of sinful desire have become intertwined with a belief in the truth of the Bible as the absolute, *literal* word of God.

Although it is unlikely that prior to the Enlightenment anyone understood biblical scripture in anything approaching the same literal sense it is understood by some today (see Borg; Gomes; Lewis), in contemporary fundamentalist and evangelical circles the Bible is the explicit, historical truth of God and it is the standard by which Christians must judge all other truth. Therefore, in an ex-gay context, *parrhesia*, truth-telling, can only be understood in direct relationship to the Bible interpreted unambiguously as “factual,” regardless of whether or not it can be separated from confession as a practice of self-mistrust and self-purgation. Still, it is important to know that there are fewer than ten passages in the Bible that refer to same-sex behaviour in a negative context (for example, Genesis 19:1-26, Leviticus 18:22, and Romans 1:26-7, just to name three). These are the passages some Christians use to condemn homosexuality, arguing that if the Bible says it, it must be true; however, several scholars have argued that these passages refer only to abusive same-sex behaviour and they do so within a context in which no one conceived of same-sex erotics as we understand them today (see Bailey; Boswell; Helminiak; McNeil; Scroggs). Even some evangelical scholars have come to recognize this research as relevant because a minority are starting to question the “sinfulness” of homosexuality (see Brentlinger; Thelos). But for those in the Ex-gay Movement, there is no ambiguity. As Erzen notes, “[m]ost of the men at New Hope read these biblical verses as the inspired word of God and refused to acknowledge cultural or historical context” (62-3). For ex-gays, the literal truth of the Bible grounds their confessions in both shameful self-disgust and what they believe to be transhistorical Truth. Thus, Erzen and Wolkomir place more emphasis on Bible study than confession in their studies; but Moon writes, “[a]lthough Bible study figures as another key component, to be involved in ex-gay counseling and support is to expose oneself to a nearly constant stream of life story testimony” (558). As important as Bible study is to ex-gay conversion, I would argue that confession is more important, because with ex-gays the practice is doubled. By doubled, I mean confession operates both in its ancient Christian form, through testimony and repentance (rooted in scripture and self-denial), and in its modern psychoanalytic form, through reparative therapy (rooted in an Oedipal understanding of early psychic development).

Through this doubling, the “truth-telling” of ex-gay confession is largely removed from the bold, frank, courage of *parrhesia* as it is depicted in the New Testament.

Conclusion: A Queer Critique of the Ex-gay Movement

Given the heteronormative framework within which the Ex-gay Movement operates, can it really be considered “queer” as Erzen argues? If so, what does this mean in relation to subjectivity and power in a Foucauldian sense? If it is queer, it is certainly not queer in a political sense (which Erzen acknowledges). That is, while it is true the movement only makes sense within a context of sexual fluidity (because, psychologically speaking, conversion can only occur as a process of this fluidity), the ultimate goal of this conversion is still heterosexuality, regardless of the movement’s admission that complete heterosexuality is seldom possible; therefore heterosexuality defined as the ideal maintains the gay/straight dichotomy politically even if it does not do so operationally. Moreover, because the movement roots its psychology in Oedipal family dynamics, it maintains an exceptionally strong dichotomy between male and female, both politically and operationally. Identifying with one’s “correct” gender is key to any “cure” or “healing” this movement can offer. From a Foucauldian perspective, this means a discourse of gender specificity operates within the movement as a technology of power, organizing rigid and structuring modes of thought and behaviour (just as it does outside the movement, albeit not quite as restrictively). Considering ex-gays enter the movement precisely because they feel marginalized by this discourse, they do so with the self-conscious intent of working on themselves to change themselves in order to reconcile themselves to a discourse that has apparently failed to “properly” organize them. Thus, the movement operates governmentally, as Foucault would say, “between techniques which impose coercion and processes through which the self is constructed or modified by the self” (1993: 203–4).

As I have argued, the key technique in the Ex-gay Movement, which both imposes coercion and requires the self to modify the self to change the self, is the ancient practice of confession. Given its long history in Western society—and its pervasion of (and perversion of) both Christian and psychological thought—it should come as no surprise that confession permeates this movement; however, we must remember that confession is not unique to ex-gays. The only reason it is able to operate as it does in this context is because of its long history, because it permeates so many other Western discourses and practices, including those that seek to discredit ex-gay therapy. Given this history, Queer Theory can indeed work to critique the movement more effectively than those already seeking to do so. If we follow Foucault and Huffer (rather than Freud and Lacan), Queer Theory can add two more dichotomies to its list of oppositions in need of deconstruction: sexual identity versus sexual acts, and constructionism versus essentialism. These dichotomies only make sense in a post-eighteenth century milieu controlled by medicalized psychological discourses and are therefore governmentally linked to modern systems of power and subjectivity rooted in confession. The lack of *definitively* reliable quantitative data concerning claims about the effectiveness and/or harmfulness of reparative therapy, despite decades worth of studies, also supports the need to reconsider these dichotomies. Because confession did not permeate Western society until after it was transferred from a relatively contained religious discourse of self-denial to a largely unrestricted psychological discourse of sexual identity, it is possible that psychology’s inability to adequately address the issue of sexual orientation conversion is symptomatic of

Western society's inability to separate "sexual identity" from ancient religious confessional practices rooted in a very recent psychology of human desire.

Finally, Queer Theory can add to its critique Foucault's analysis of *parrhesia* and how it was modified within Christianity from a New Testament practice of bold, courageous, and truthful speech rooted in God's love ("apostolic virtue par excellence") to a post-institutionalized confessional practice of self-mistrust rooted in fear of God and fear of self-righteous arrogance. Because the Ex-gay Movement seeks its truth in the *literal* words of biblical scripture, perhaps an analysis of *parrhesia* rooted in Saint Paul's bold assertion, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, *there is no longer male and female*; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus," might be effective (Galatians 3:28 NRSV, my italics). Given the importance the APA places on not disrupting belief systems in the treatment of religious persons distressed by their same-sex desire, this could lay the foundation for a treatment that uses current (albeit modified) pro-gay biblical exegesis to highlight both the lack of confessional self-sacrifice and the lack of gender and sexual orientation dichotomies in much New Testament thought. If Queer Theory can effectively deconstruct the dichotomies between male and female and gay and straight in contemporary Christian thought, as well as the sacrificial emphasis on confession as self-denial, not only might it render the Ex-gay Movement pointless, it might take an important step towards deconstructing confession as a practice underlying all Western identity politics.

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About the Author

Michael Thorn

Michael Thorn is a PhD candidate in the joint York/Ryerson program in Communication and Culture and is currently writing his dissertation. His research into the discourse surrounding the Ex-gay Movement will use a Foucauldian governmental approach rooted in Foucault's so-called "late" period, a period characterized by an increased concern with subjectivity, ethics, and truth.

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