

# Feminist theo-ethical explorations: a hermeneutics of joy and justice

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## Abstract

Living with religious differences is a prime task that the world is not accomplishing very well. But if I want to claim that religion and justice ought to have something to do with one another, I must begin with a frank acknowledgement that often they do not. My goal is to change that for two reasons—a. most of us get our deepest values and ways of being from some semblance of religion whether confessional or secular, b. religion has the power to amplify positive actions or fanning the flames of negativity, and so it must be examined and taken seriously. The stakes are too high to indulge in the luxury of ignoring religion. A feminist and queer reading of this situation is in order because new perspectives are needed to cast light on complex situations.

**Keywords:** Feminism; Queer Theology; Joy; Justice

## Exploraciones teo-éticas feministas: una hermenéutica de la alegría e de la justicia

### Resumen

Vivir con diferencias religiosas es una tarea primordial que el mundo no está haciendo muy bien. Si yo quiero decir que la religión y la justicia tienen que ver una con la otra, empiezo con el reconocimiento honesto que muchas veces no son. Mi objetivo es cambiar eso por dos razones: a. la mayoría de nosotros encuentra sus valores y su forma de ser más profundo en la religión, ya sea confesional o secular; b. la religión tiene el poder para amplificar las acciones positivas o inflamar la negatividad, y necesita ser revisada y tomada en serio. Los riesgos son demasiado altos para caer en la lujuria de ignorar la religión. Una lectura feminista *queer* de esta situación es relevante porque se necesitan nuevas perspectivas para iluminar situaciones complejas

**Palabras-clave:** Feminismo; Teología Queer; Alegría; Justicia

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## Explorações teoéticas feministas: uma hermenêutica da alegria e da justiça

### Resumo

Viver com diferenças religiosas é uma tarefa primordial que o mundo não está realizando muito bem. Se eu quero afirmar que religião e justiça têm a ver uma com a outra, devo começar com o reconhecimento sincero de que muitas vezes elas não têm. Meu objetivo é modificar isso por duas razões: a. a maioria de nós encontra seus valores e modo de ser mais profundos na religião, seja confessional ou secular; b. a religião tem o poder de amplificar ações positivas ou de inflamar a negatividade, e isso precisa ser analisado e levado a sério. As apostas são muito altas para cairmos na luxúria de ignorarmos a religião. Uma leitura feminista *queer* dessa situação é relevante porque são necessárias novas perspectivas para iluminar situações complexas.

**Palavras-chave:** Feminismo; Teologia Queer; Alegria; Justiça

### Introduction

My feminist theological exploration is what I call a hermeneutics of joy and justice. I elaborate it a particularly vexed time in the history of religion. The current war in Israel/Palestine traces its roots to two religious traditions that have apparently not learned to do justice. For generations their differences have led to countless deaths. Many other such religious conflicts dot the 21<sup>st</sup> century with deep stains of blood. The war in Syria has religious implications, Sunni and Shiites battle one another for reasons as yet unclear (BURKE, 2014).

Living with religious differences is a prime task that the world is not accomplishing very well.

Such ethical low points hardly merit mention. But if I want to claim that religion and justice *ought* to have something to do with one another, I must begin with a frank acknowledgement that often they do not. My goal is to change that for two reasons—a. most of us get our deepest values and ways of acting from some semblance of religion whether confessional or secular; b. religion can be such a power for amplifying positive actions or fanning the flames of negativity that it needs to be examined and taken seriously. The stakes are too high to indulge in the luxury of ignoring religion. A feminist and queer reading of this situation is in order because new perspectives are needed to cast light on complex situations.

I approach the process in three steps: (1) the relationship between religion and justice; (2) queer and feminist approaches to religion, among many approaches in our time, shed light on efforts to do justice; (3) the question “can we do better?” with three examples of how we can if a hermeneutics of joy and justice is employed.

## Religion and justice

The claims of the major traditions, for example, Judaism and Christianity, for ethical living are part of the social fabric in the West. The Greek-based “do no harm,” or the Muslim search for “good character,” among others, are efforts to adjudicate everyday life situations so that fairness and impartiality triumph.

There are so many moving parts—so many people, circumstances, structures, and forms of oppression in operation—in the religion/justice conversation. The task of contemporary life is not simply to act well toward one another; to do so is obvious. Rather, it is to find ways to change the material givens and structures of this world so that acting well is facilitated, made easier especially when those who are in possession of power will have to give it up in order for those who are without to survive. As Marx and others have made clear, this is not done without struggle. Nonetheless, each of us is shaped by some sort of ethical tradition, whether secular or religious, and, each of us, whether we realize it or not, carries on a tradition by the acts we perform.

I come from the social justice tradition of the Catholic Church, which I use as my primary reference for religious ethics. It is simply one tradition that illustrates the process of how we become agents of our own morality, how we set our own moral compasses. Tradition is something we inherit, but acting ethically is something we do so that others will have something to inherit.

My foundational ethical beliefs are rooted in a community that claims that human beings are fundamentally equal, beloved of their Creator, and obliged to share the earth’s goods with the earth’s people. The so-called Catholic Social Encyclicals beginning with *Rerum Novarum* (Of New Things) in 1891 (Leo XIII); *Pacem en Terris* (Peace on Earth) in 1963 (John XXIII), and *Gaudium et Spes* (Hope and Joy) in 1965 (Paul VI) are good examples of that work.

Many of the ethical heroines and heroes to whom I look for inspiration come from my tradition. We all get some of our sense oh to how to behave by looking at others. I think of Dorothy Day who founded the Catholic Worker Movement; the women of Catholics for Choice all over Latin America; those in the rain forest who seek to keep it from developers. They embody a hermeneutics of joy and justice, living in communities of resistance but always putting the daily needs of those who are poor at the center of their work.

Problems arise when new issues emerge for which our ethical exemplars are not equipped and we, their successors, have to step up to the plate. So it was when the global women’s movements and the international lesbian and

gay, later bisexual, transgender, intersexed, and queer movements emerged, and the Roman Catholic Church simply could not cope. More to the point, the institutional Roman Catholic Church distinguished itself as an obstacle to both women and queers, gilding its statements with references to eternal damnation, God's will, intrinsic moral disorder, and women's 'natural' inferiority. Catholics like myself took on the issues and demonstrated that the Vatican is just one brand or branch of Catholicism, that we are also fully Catholic. This is a feminist and queer reading of the situation.

### **How both queer and feminist approaches to religion, among many in our time, shed light on efforts to do justice**

Both movements have long and intertwining histories: the women's movements rooted in suffrage for white women, what is known as feminism; the survival for black women, what is known as womanism; the community building for Latin women, what is known as *mujerista* or *feminista* work. The result of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century movements for women's equality around the world is that Hillary Clinton is a prime player on the world stage, Joyce Banda is the president of Malawi in Africa, not to mention Dilma Rousseff who made clear to President Obama that spying on Brazilians is unacceptable. These are women leaders that I, not to mention my mother or grandmother, could not have imagined decades ago. And in the 21<sup>st</sup> century we can expect even more work from women in the public arena.

Likewise, queer scholars and activists have resisted the usual binary notions of man-woman, male-female, straight-gay. We have introduced into the culture and indeed into religious reflection many other ways of thinking about human life that for millennia no one thought twice about. Trans people have been especially helpful, despite the pain and oppression most have suffered. This shift is not simply a charitable way to let a few more people in; it is an exercise in joyful justice that corrects past abuses and makes a new way for everyone. It is not simply that there is room for trans people, but that all of us are invited to a new self-understanding of the fluidity and diversity of sexual orientation and gender identity. The theo-ethical importance of this cannot be overestimated.

All of this social change, indeed deep anthropological shifting, has happened without the support of and with a lot of opposition from Catholicism, except insofar as I and other queer feminist Catholics have claimed our place in the discussion. We have become the agents of our own tradition over against enormous odds. I report this not to take credit for it—movements, not individuals, make change—but to illustrate the dynamics involved in this world-shaping work. Pope Francis' famed news conference after his visit to

Brasil and his interview with the Jesuit press makes clear that he is finally seeing some of what we have been saying for decades.

But Catholicism is just one example of a tradition where women have been involved in major religious changes. Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, and other feminists have taken on their traditions, changing everything from language about the divine to moral teachings on abortion, from who will minister and how, to ways in which the tradition will be represented at international meetings such as the United Nations, where major conversations about global culture take place. These matters show that religious imagery and symbolism are not simply for those within a tradition, but in fact for the world at large. This adds urgency to the work of feminist and queer theologies.

Feminism is the analysis of and commitment to change society so that equality and justice are obtained for all of creation. It began with the 19<sup>th</sup> century suffrage movements, then picked up speed in the 1960s when contraception became widely accessible so that women could exercise more autonomy in their lives. What was initially white women's struggles for the vote quickly became all women's struggles for justice on their own terms. Today, feminism is not a gender-based effort to expand white women's opportunities, but a multi-issued coalition of justice-seekers who include the wellbeing of women and children in their work. We understand how racism works, what makes people poor, how colonialism kills, how the environment is shaped by human greed, what wars do to people and lands, why heterosexism is wrong, what needs to happen to make our society accessible to all regardless of physical ability. This is today's feminism worldwide, built on the gender-based analysis but meaning far more than rights for women.

For example, the Roman Catholic Church has led the charge against employers offering birth control as part of health care plans in the U.S. struggle over how to implement the Affordable Health Care Act. Even a compromise that would have insurance companies offer the coverage, and not employers—if employers felt to do so violated their ethics—was rejected. This remains to be worked out. But the leadership of the powerful group Catholics for Choice and the grassroots support of theologians and ethicists prove that there are many ways to be Catholic.

Likewise, the highly organized and well-funded opposition to same-sex marriage comes from the Catholic Church (in the U.S. under the leadership of Archbishop Salvatore Cordileone of San Francisco, with major money provided by the Knights of Columbus). These people partnered with the Mormon Church to successfully overturn same-sex marriage in California (Proposition 8) in 2008. And I am happy to report, that they tried, but failed in their attempts in 2012. Despite spending millions of Catholic dollars that

could have gone to help the poor, they lost not only in Maine, Maryland, and the state of Washington, where same-sex marriage is now legal, but also in Minnesota where they tried to pass a marriage-is-for-heterosexuals-only law without success. Catholic feminists like me led lots of the opposition to their efforts.

We who speak the language of a particular faith tradition, in this case I speak Catholic, have a special opportunity—I would say a special responsibility—to engage as effective agents of change. By doing so, we not only bring about social progress, but we also add to the wealth of our tradition, wrenching it, as Mary Daly would say, out of its patriarchal/kyriarchal context. I like to think that I am what Catholic looks like.

You might wonder why those who oppose their tradition's teachings do not simply go elsewhere. If I do not like the Catholic approach maybe I should become a Unitarian. But Catholic moral theologian Daniel C. Maguire says it best when he insists on “the renewable moral energy” of religions. Dr. Maguire is the author and editor of many important ethical works and the architect of a very effective—in my view the gold standard—theo-ethical approach.

He gathers groups of a dozen or so scholar activists from around the world—people of various religions, disciplines, and perspectives—to look at an issue like abortion, what men owe women, population and development, and the like. They each bring the wisdom from their own perspectives and place it in conversation with the rest. The result is a rich discussion that shows how we can bring the emerging wisdoms of many traditions to bear on social problems we share. Then the “renewable moral energy” of religion can be harnessed for peaceful purposes. That works within as well as among traditions where we try to renew a culture as members of a faith community.

This is what Professor Maguire and a group of us did not on homosexuality, which has been studied to death and is of no more moral interest than heterosexuality, but on heterosexism. Heterosexism, like its cousins racism and sexism, is the social convention and structure that makes heterosexuality normative to the exclusion and detriment of same-sex love. We collectively queered the topic showing how Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and other traditions have within them the resources to change what have been oppressive practices into liberating ones. The volume is entitled *Heterosexism in Contemporary World Religion* (ELLISON; PLASKOW, 2007). This change in topic, this new focus, this new way of doing theo-ethical work is what a feminist and queer hermeneutics demands. Some will remember the volume entitled *Good Sex: Feminist Perspectives from the World's Religions*. That was another example of bringing new perspectives to bear on topics long since settled for many people.

Both feminist and queer approaches to religion are multi-valiant. Yet race and nation, class, and ability also shape them. That I am a white, Irish, temporarily able-bodied, professional, U.S. citizen feminist guarantees that what liberation I can imagine will still be confined to a certain imperialist framework. But when put in conversation with colleagues from other starting points, there is a chance that even I and people like me may be part of liberating struggles as we are challenged and stretched beyond our comfort zones in justice-seeking coalitions. But does it work?

The value of queer feminist starting point, in my view, is whether it can help us to do better in the religious effort to act justly. If so, my analysis is moving in the direction of more inclusion, greater equality, a larger measure of justice. I will offer a few examples for your consideration by asking “can we do better?” I am not satisfied from a feminist queer perspective that achieving our modest goals is all there is. I think we can find more joy and justice in creating new ways of living.

### **Can we do better?**

Better than what?, you might ask. To which I reply: better than our parents’ best efforts to love well and do justice. You might counter: with so much on our plates and a recessive economy that makes the future uncertain, why should we bother to do more? My answer is: because I want to change an often-unjust world into the beautiful, harmonious place that theo-ethicists Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Parker wrote about in their landmark book, *Saving Paradise* (2009).

They claim that beauty, not suffering, is the quest for which at least one religion—in their case, Christianity—is aimed. They write about paradise here and now, and how religious claims ground daily living not eternal life. My question is, can we do even better than what we think we need to do? Can we do better than same-sex marriage, better than murdering Osama bin Laden, better than adding LGBTIQ people to the militaries around the world?

There is an old expression: “If your dreams don’t scare you they are not big enough.” Well, I am afraid to think what it would mean to be better than what we have envisioned since we live so far from our dreams as it is. Nonetheless, I want to explore my spiritual intuition that trying to do better is a religious quest that resounds in the deepest reaches of our beings even when we think we are working flat out just to survive, or to change laws, or to create a more just society. It is as if the Divine is saying, “Wait, there’s more.”

The received wisdom of our traditions has been woefully inadequate to our needs. For example, that women are inferior and therefore subordinate to men was something feminists questioned without much help (and a lot

of opposition) from religions, especially Christian denominations. Likewise, that gay is good, that lesbian, bi, trans, intersexed, queer are great, and that sexual variety and fluidity are real, are all issues that religions have been less than helpful in figuring out. Nonetheless, some of the most insightful people thinking about how the world could work to maximize thriving and minimize oppression have come from religious backgrounds like the great Quaker gay civil rights champion Bayard Rustin and the marvelous Methodist lesbian Charlotte Bunch, to name just a few.

Let us look at three areas where I think we can do better, where a feminist queer hermeneutics adds to what is already in motion. My example are same-sex marriage, killing even the world's most heinous criminals, and making the military welcoming for same-sex loving people. Let us see how we can do better in each instance thanks to queer feminist religious thought.

At least 16 countries including Brasil, Argentina and Uruguay have same-sex marriage. Same-sex marriage is now the law of land in 13 states and the District of Columbia in the United States where the Internal Revenue Service just decided that at the federal level married people all need to file joint tax returns. So it is clear which way this is going and that marriage will be reality throughout the country soon. My own view is that it will take some more doing, but I agree that the trajectory is set, the arc of justice is tending toward us for a change, and it is only the most recalcitrant who stand in the way. History shows they do not stand too long. Even the Catholic Archdiocese of New York toned down its horrible rhetoric toward the end of that state's struggle, chastened, I imagine, by the fact that they were on the wrong side of history and some of the gay priests there know it.

Now that the election celebrations have died down what are we to make of this marriage victory? On the one hand, it shows that we can and will eventually develop a society in which people of all sexualities can commit, make a contract, and in fact break their commitments and contracts with the best of them as inevitably gay divorce takes its place on the horizon. I guess this is a good thing. But I think we can do more, better. I think we can affirm that same-sex marriage is good, or of God if you are religious, just as opposite sex marriage is good (or of God) because love is good (of God). But once having established that, I suggest we go on to think about what else is good (of God). I've got some ideas: health care, jobs, housing, inheritance, pensions, adoption, all the things that we need because we are alive, not because we are lucky in love.

I contend that marriage is not a right but a privilege—it privileges those who are lucky in love to make them lucky under the law. Put another way, when you are married you are one person away from being single so why not

provide for everyone? Why not get health care for everyone and not just for those who have a partner with a job? Why not make sure that everyone has a health care proxy and someone to visit them in the hospital rather than simply grant visitation rights to a few more people when their partners are ill? Why not provide Social Security benefits for everyone and not just to those who are lucky enough to share their lives with someone along the way?

There is much to discuss about same-sex marriage. It is not clear that same-sex marriage will lead to all good things. My point is simply that we can do better. We cannot afford to buy into the wedding industrial complex and outdo our heterosexual friends with the lavishness of our nuptials. Nor can we afford to be naïve about the fact that the right to marry quickly becomes the need to marry because domestic partnership benefits are withdrawn now that same-sex marriage is legal, as happened in Massachusetts. Do not miss the fact that it was finally business interests that teamed with the Governor to get same-sex marriage done in New York, dollar signs in their eyes and a conservative social agenda on their minds. We can do better, and justice demands that we do better.

A hermeneutics of joy and justice weighs the good accomplished by making marriage available for all with the culturally conservatizing result. More and more people and relationships are now governed by law. This makes it harder for people to live justly—with benefits—when they are not married. What about people who wish to make a covenant of three people? Or what about those who do not wish to partner at all? The question is not as simple as “Will you marry me?”

The same complexity, in my view, for such a complex moral matter as the killing of Osama bin Laden. The guy is good and dead, his body consigned to the depths of the sea after a U.S. attack on his hide-away in plain sight in the city of Abbottabad, Pakistan. Military operatives referred to his burial as “Fed Ex” having “shipped the package.” What President Obama called a “targeted operation” left Al Qaeda without their titular head, though seemingly still very much in business. What are we to make of this event? Can we do better? What if he were your dad? Does religion do justice?

I want to file a feminist, queer moral minority report by saying that Osama bin Laden was murdered, and to this day I live with the deep conviction that killing him was immoral. There are many issues to discuss—how many people he killed, what terrorism does to a country, not to mention to an entire planet, how carefully the murder was plotted, the heroics of the SEALs—all of which have been rehearsed, defended, and/or taken for granted by U.S. society though not necessarily the world at large. His murder was celebrated by those crass enough not to recognize any glimmer of

humanity in Mr. bin Laden, and the most minimal right of a human being in a family with a wife (ok, several wives) and children to be treated with respect no matter heinous their crimes. There is no global consensus that his death was justified, though there seems to be an American one.

I live, perhaps in hopeless naiveté, with the fact that we can and should do better. That to those to whom so much has been given even more is expected. Here is the limit case —the Hitler of our day— and I say we should have brought him to justice instead of outright killing him. After the initial euphoria, as more and more evidence of the killing came to light, it is clear that there were options, had the SEALS been instructed differently. The World Court, the International Criminal Court with its headquarters in the Hague, is a place where civilized people adjudicate such cases. But most Americans have never heard about it much less imagined that our problems could be handled there.

Yes, I am saying with the great peace activist Coleman McCarthy who wrote: “Before the mythologization gets out of hand, the killing of bin Laden and the others should be defined accurately: an extralegal, cold-blooded execution that needed due process and continues the Bush-Obama delusion that the nation’s violent foreign policy is accountable to no one” (2011). Let us think about how we can do better if we bring what we have learned from feminist and queer approaches to the table. We have learned that full inclusion is just that and that those on the margins, however different, have every human right the rest of us enjoy. Even Osama bin Laden.

This analysis has deep echo in the case of Syria where the U.S. is again poised to do great harm. The women of Code Pink are leading the peace efforts. Feminist and queer colleagues are vocal in their dissent from what was almost a cruise missile attack on a country struggling to survive. There is joy and justice in stopping the war’s progress at least for now, in relying on more diplomacy just as we rely on more input for doing our theological work when we bring queer and feminist resources to the table.

One more example is opening the military to LGBTIQ people. In the U.S. it meant overturning the old policy “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.” But even as I rejoice in the end of one form of injustice, I cannot help but push for more. What would ‘better’ look like in this case? Just as same-sex marriage means the dubious proposition of putting more human relationships under the law, so, too, the repeal of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” opens the military to more of our children. To the naked eye this is an unmitigated good, especially when it means the possibility of training, education, and employment for people who will have a hard time finding any in a recessive economy. But to the more discerning of us, or at least to this Catholic lesbian feminist, it is

the nature of the military and not simply its composition that comes under our moral microscope.

Even as this open military becomes an equal military with the lifting of the Defense of Marriage Act when queer people will eventually get full rights and benefits, I am not persuaded that it will change the military's fundamental mission that plays out in war. Is it simply pie-eyed paradise thinking that leads me to hope for a peace force not a war force? Maybe, but in the case of bin Laden there is much to discuss. President Obama appointed Capt. Sue Fulton (retired), an open lesbian, to the Board of Visitors of West Point, a civilian panel made up of Congressional members and six presidential appointees, that advises the government on matters related to West Point. I have prevailed upon Sue Fulton to think big on this one, to get beyond same-sex living people in the military that she engineered with such finesse, to deep thinking about the nature of the military itself. How about starting by cutting its budget, making do with less pomp and fewer people, stopping the sexist, heterosexist training, giving medals for saving lives not taking them? I have every confidence that she will bring such matters to that table though I doubt either of us will live to see much change there. She will do it because she too has a queer feminist set of values and religious commitments.

You can tell from my examples that I am what in financial terms is referred to as a "contrarian investor." I always look for another way to see things, assuming that the common wisdom is usually wrong. I remember talking with a representative of a large mutual funds company about the importance of socially responsible investments. Oh, he assured me, his company would never go in that direction because it was not sufficiently lucrative. I felt like asking him how he slept at night knowing that he was making money off of investments that do harm (for example, guns, tobacco, etc.). Sure enough, several years later his company teamed with a company to sponsor socially responsible investments that are doing well and doing good. Yes, we can do better, and do well enough too.

## Conclusion

In this analysis of religion that does justice I have tried to show feminist and queer values of inclusivity, diversity, fairness, creativity and realism at work in the world. Rather than reply on new readings of scripture or simply on academic tests, all of which are important of course, I have tried to show how in concrete cases feminist and queer values play out in the real work. I do so because I think feminism has enhanced the Catholic social justice tradition that I inherited, even if the church is still kicking and screaming into

the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Similarly, I think a queer analysis disrupts not only sex and gender categories, but it also gives permission to and practice at disrupting many of the sacred cows of culture, such as killing being justified as in the death penalty Osama bin Laden received.

So if religions do justice informed by feminist and queer critiques, and led by people who are willing to live out—vote for, teach, write about, protest, and take adult responsibility for being agents of their own morality—I am confident that joy will increase and justice will reign. At least that is my goal.

Thank you. Time for 1-1 then Q+A.

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