

# A new breed of Gentiles?

## Reflections on spiritual beings who inhabit contested spaces

Illya Nimoy Johnson

**A**n article on issues of body and embodiment that concern the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, asexual (LGBTQIA) and same-gender-loving (SGL)<sup>1</sup> community and its relationship with the church could address a wide range of issues, including the church's perception of same-gender-loving and gender-variant people, same-gender love as an expression of the ambiguity of God, and the church's focus on sexual behavior rather than spiritual intimacy.

This brief article cannot address these issues thoroughly; that would require volumes. Instead, I will focus on experiential

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evidence and theological perspectives on the subject of spiritual beings who inhabit contested spaces. Those spaces include our own bodies. I will also give attention to the church's traditional representation of "normative" human sexuality in its interpretation of scripture. Then I will offer my perspectives on what it means to be created in God's image and explore implications of notions of human transcendence. I will recount something of my evolving self-awareness and consider a

related notion of the progressive revelation of the Divine. Finally, I will suggest that seeing people who are part of the sexually variant community as a new breed of Gentiles could help Christians find a way forward together.

I hope my reflections can help enlarge the comprehension of human sexuality, gender roles, expressions, and identity. My hope is that readers will be willing to consider other perspectives. My goal is to explore God's merciful love and use it as a guide to shape our thinking and behaviors toward those on the margins whose sexual expressions are unconventional.

*He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.  
And what does the LORD require of you?  
To act justly and to love mercy  
and to walk humbly with your God.—Micah 6:8, NIV*

## **The divine image**

*Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image,  
after our likeness, so they may rule over the fish of the sea  
and the birds of the air, over the cattle, and over all the  
earth, and over all the creatures that move on the earth.”  
God created humankind in his own image, in the image of  
God he created them, male and female he created  
them.—Genesis 1:26–27, NET*

I am a believer in the divine presence and a follower of Jesus the Christ, and I believe that all human beings are embodiments of God’s image and likeness. I wonder what it means to be an image bearer, to manifest the essence of God our creator, and to experience other human beings as manifesting this same inherent nature.

If human beings are the reflection of God, won’t our actions and behaviors toward each other reflect back on us?

*Don’t be misled: No one makes a fool of God. What a person plants, he will harvest. The person who plants selfishness, ignoring the needs of others—ignoring God!—harvests a crop of weeds. All he’ll have to show for his life is weeds! But the one who plants in response to God, letting God’s Spirit do the growth work in them, harvests a crop of real life, eternal life.—Galatians 6:7–8, The Message*

Scripture never specifies that only Christians can be image bearers, and Jesus says there is no higher command than to love God with heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love our neighbor without distinction (Mark 12:30–31; see Luke 10:25–28). This is a sensitive and heart-wrenching topic for many of us in the SGL/LGBTQIA community. Many of us often feel that religious and societal assumptions about what it means to bear God’s image lead others to see us as not being fully in the image of God. Especially hurtful are discussions of “gender complementarity”:

according to some, what it means to be in the image of God is that male and female in complementary relationship complete each other. The argument then is that this complementarity can only exist in opposite-sex unions.

In the biblical creation story as it is traditionally told, Adam was God's first human creation. In some rabbinical traditions, *Adam* is rendered "earthling" or "human being" and is understood either to have no gender or to possess both male and female

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characteristics. In this theological interpretation, complementarity has to do not with opposite sexes but with the oneness of the Divine within each individual. Masculine and feminine traits exist in each individual, a fact that science confirms. Male and female hormones exist in each human being. In the early stages of development, human fetuses display no distinction of genital structure. And some people are born with intersex ambiguity, chromosomal and/or genital. In light of all this, I believe that the Genesis story explains the true meaning of comple-

mentarity, with human beings *Adam* and *Eve* each created as full reflections of the image of God. As human beings we are drawn together not only because we see our humanity reflected in others but because we recognize that they share in our embodiment of the Divine: we are all bearers of the divine image.

## Transcendence

*All religions believe that there is something eternal about the human condition and that stamped within our DNA—our evolutionary process—is this absolute conviction that I am more than just my body, that there is something else within me that is eternal, that continues, that connects to the thing that is eternal in everything else.—Reza Aslan<sup>2</sup>*

A unique quality of divine mystery has been given only to the transgender community. This community reminds humanity that we are more than just our bodies. We are eternal beings who can

defy our habitation in the earthly houses in which our spirit person dwells. Not only can we be transformed inwardly, but we can also transcend our physical bodies.

Christians claim to be people of the spirit, but people who make up the trans community can challenge the consistency with which we live out that conviction. Gospel music artist Donald Lawrence wrote a song called “Spiritual.” He sings: “You’re not a natural being / Having a spiritual experience / But you’re a spiritual being / Living this natural experience.” Transgender people have taught us that we are more than flesh and blood; we are spiritual beings living in houses that can either be inhabited as they are or renovated and reconstructed to become what we know in our souls they ought to be. A theological understanding of our human being as transcendent and eternal can make space for the recasting of bodies to correspond to an identity the spirit knows to be true.

As a gay man who believes in God, believes in the truth of Christ, and is part of the fellowship of believers, I have found it most difficult to convey this understanding of my present reality to those whose way of thinking is traditional and tends to be exclusionary. Why is it that we who call ourselves people of the

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Spirit and followers of Jesus put more emphasis on the physical and the material than on the spiritual? Though Christians speak of transformation of the heart, of the mind, and of the soul, we seem in fact to focus mainly on behaviors and actions related to what we do with our bodies. Our focus should be on the spirit of a person and that person’s relationship with God and others.

We in the sexually variant community often find ourselves treated as castaways and generational curse bearers not only by mainstream society but even more by Christians, those who are supposed to represent the merciful love of God. I have not found my sexual orientation a hindrance in my ever-evolving relationship with Christ, but others have internalized as self-hatred the attitudes perpetuated through religious institutions’ misuse of scriptural references dealing with human sexuality and gender roles and gender identity.

*Dear friend, when you extend hospitality to Christian brothers and sisters, even when they are strangers, you make the faith visible. They've made a full report back to the church here, a message about your love. It's good work you're doing, helping these travelers on their way, hospitality worthy of God himself! They set out under the banner of the Name, and get no help from unbelievers. So they deserve any support we can give them. In providing meals and a bed, we become their companions in spreading the Truth.—3 John 1:5–8, The Message*

### **Evolving self-awareness**

*Don't surrender all your joy for an idea you used to have about yourself that isn't true anymore.—Cheryl Strayed<sup>3</sup>*

I don't have a personal story of a dramatic spiritual transformation of the kind often referred to as a salvation story or a Damascus road experience. For as long as I can remember I have had an awareness of the presence of God in my life. I was five years old the first time I publically voiced the conviction that Jesus was the incarnation of God.

As a child I had vivid dreams and clear premonitions. One particular dream stands out. In this dream I had died and gone to heaven. I saw the great white throne of God. I was unable to see God's face, and I saw no defining visual image of God—certainly not a white man. The only visible object was an enormous throne and an incomprehensible light that illuminated everything. There was only a sense of the presence of God, and peace consumed me. Not only did I feel God's presence but I also heard the voice of God. This audible voice said to me: "It is not your time; I have a great work for you to do on earth, and I am sending you to the world to tell my message of good news to all who will hear."

I was only five years old, and I didn't understand the meaning of this dream. I still do not completely understand the fullness of God's message of good news. Most of my life I have been part of a church, and I have committed myself to practices of prayer, fasting, and meditation. I know nothing else. My connection to the presence of God is all that I have ever known.

But yes, there was a turning point in my life, one I did not see coming. There was a period in my life when I experienced greater enlightenment. It was not a matter of drawing closer to God. I already had a strong relationship with God. *It was a time of deeper revelation of who I am and who I was created to become.* When the revelation came that I had homosexual desires, I was twenty years old, three years into being licensed into the gospel ministry. During this discovery, a number of things happened. I had my first sexual encounter, and it was with a man. My mother confronted me after eavesdropping on a phone conversation. I stepped down from ministry and I began to separate myself from the church, the so-called representation of God on earth. But I never separated myself from God.

I share this story to convey the message that we must be careful about how we perceive others. Some of us have transitioned from one sex to another. That physical experience is a transformation that is in some ways similar to a spiritual transformation. My personal transformation wasn't physical in the sense of involving a physiological change. It was a revelation to me of my sexual orientation and a spiritual enlightenment in which I developed a new awareness of my evolving soul.

### **An evolving understanding of God**

My sense of myself as an evolving soul connects to an understanding of the nature of God. Consider the story of Moses's initial encounter with the God of Israel (Gen. 3–4). Moses was in the desert, and the Lord appeared to him in a blazing bush. In this encounter Moses received the eternal divine name of God: "I AM WHO I AM." Some rabbinic studies say this name reveals that our experience of God is eternally evolving. In God's essence God does not change, so we say that God is the same yesterday, today and forever. But these Jewish scholars suggest that the relationship that God has with humankind is organically evolving and metamorphosing throughout time.

This explanation clarifies scriptural accounts of humankind's encounter with God through the ages. The theological concept of progressive revelation refers to the process of God's continuing self-revelation to humanity in history through nature, preservation of the universe, miracles, direct communication, Jesus Christ, and

scripture. This idea enables us to say more definitively that just as languages, cultures, scientific understanding, and humankind's conception of truth develop through time, relationships, and experiences, so humanity's dealings with God also evolve through time.

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*Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God. For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, so that the promises made to the patriarchs might be confirmed and, moreover, that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written: "Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles; I will sing the praises of your name." Again, it says, "Rejoice, you Gentiles, with his people." And again, "Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles; let all the peoples extol him." And again, Isaiah says, "The Root of Jesse will spring up, one who will arise to rule over the nations; in him the Gentiles will hope." May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.—Romans 15:7–13, NIV*

In the New Testament the term *Gentile* refers to uncircumcised Greeks. In line with the concept of progressive revelation, in making reference to Gentiles today we expand that understanding to include all who are not Jewish, but mainly Christians. I would contend that those in sexually variant communities, especially those who consider themselves believers—Christians—should be eligible to receive the Gentile classification. The term *Gentile* makes no distinction with respect to gender roles, sexual orientation, or ethnic or gender identity. Perhaps mainstream Christianity may find it more acceptable to refer to the community of misfits that live on the margins of society as a new breed of *Gentile*.

I'm not trying to convince anyone to subscribe to my way of thinking or adhere to my belief system. Nor am I trying to prolong the debate around sexuality, sexual expression, and behavior. My purpose is only to shed light on a relevant viewpoint, to open up

dialogue for those who may feel that their voices have been silenced, and to remind the church of its original and intended mission. In an effort to exemplify the merciful love of God manifested through Christ and his representatives (those who are the incarnation of the living Christ), I have sought in this article to address issues of perception—one's own perception of oneself and the churches' perception of others, mainly those of the sexually variant community.

Christians have become distracted and preoccupied with being a bounded group with a strict set of rules and regulations that all

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must follow who want to be members of their exclusive society. Christ died so that pharisaic practices would not continue to divide people and render them powerless and hopeless. But in my investigation of scripture I see God's undeniable, merciful love manifested and dispersed to all humankind regardless of social status; socioeconomic situation; sexual orientation; gender, ethnic, and cultural perspective; or gender role and identity. The merciful love of God is available to all human beings. If it were not, then many biblical heroes would not have that status in the scriptural record.

I invite you to consider the possibility that sexually variant people could find their place in the progressive revelation of God in our time. If Rahab the prostitute, David and Solomon (whoremongers and womanizers), Peter the liar, Judas the betrayer, Paul the religious zealot and persecutor of Christ followers—and many more who could be mentioned who were outcasts and misfits of their society—could be conduits of God's mercy and grace, then why not homosexual, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, and asexual people who also find hope in the merciful love of God? My plea is that we explore this possibility instead of blindly rejecting a community of people who may be conduits of God's merciful love being manifested in our world.

*The path to God is an internal path, not an external one.—Reza Aslan*



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Same-gender loving* (SGL) is a term invented in the early 1990s by activist Cleo Manago as a description for homosexual and bisexual people, particularly in the African American community. Manago sought to culturally affirm African American homosexual identity.

<sup>2</sup> Reza Aslan, in an interview with Oprah Winfrey on SuperSoul Sunday, April 17, 2016; <http://www.supersoul.tv/supersoul-sunday/oprah-sits-down-with-religious-scholar-reza-aslan>.

<sup>3</sup> Cheryl Strayed, *Tiny Beautiful Things: Advice on Love and Life from Dear Sugar* (New York: Vintage Books, 2012), 287.

## About the author

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