



Spirituality

by George Klawitter

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The flowering of spirituality within people who experience same-sex attraction and love is not a modern phenomenon. Indeed, today's glbtq spirituality movements must be seen as part of a long history in which gender-special people were considered sacred to their tribe or family because of their obvious spiritual gifts of healing and nurturing across blood lines.

The Native American berdache is only the best known example of this cultural phenomenon. Indeed, in a wide range of cultures and spiritual traditions, in both the West and the East, archetypes of those who do not conform to gender and sexual norms abound. Myths often attempt to convey spiritual meaning by using literary or folkloric characters who transcend gender or who incorporate diverse genders as they participate in the creation of a new spirituality.

Moreover, there is some evidence that even today a disproportionate number of individuals who identify as gay or lesbian enter priesthoods and ministries. For example, the percentage of Roman Catholic priests who are gay has been estimated as from 30 to more than 50 per cent.

Environment

Spirituality may be defined as the individual's inner communion with something beyond him or herself. It is generally rooted in the human desire to escape from the radical loneliness that separation from a deity or higher power entails. Spirituality often leads to a quest to discover a source of support in dealing with the crises and changes of life and an understanding of the meaning of human existence in general and of the individual's life in particular.

While spirituality may be furthered by religion and religious organizations and practices, religion and spirituality are not the same. Indeed, organized religion may divert some individuals from the pursuit of spirituality. Considering the homophobia frequently associated with many of the world's religions, including Christianity and Islam, it is not surprising that many glbtq individuals feel rejected by organized religion and have sought other spiritual paths.

Spirituality is inevitably shaped by the culture in which one lives. Thus, when homosexuals live in a homophobic society, they tend to seek out each other for support and comfort. The bonding that results is often a bonding of the spirit, based on the shared experience of rejection and discrimination by the majority society. Hence, glbtq communities are often held together as much by spiritual bonds as by geography or politics or even sexual attraction.



Buddha Daibutsu, Kamakura, Japan. Buddhism is one of many religious traditions that inspire contemporary glbtq spirituality. Photograph by Dirk Beyer.

promotion

Gay writer Aaron Anson was raised a black devout Christian in the American South. In *Mind Your Own Life*, Anson recounts a journey to love, self-acceptance, and a new experience of spirituality.

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It is also not surprising that when a disease disproportionately attacks homosexuals, members of the glbtq community, already bonded to a high degree by a hostile environment, would demonstrate a high degree of care for their afflicted brothers. Thus, in the AIDS epidemic, gay men and lesbians have responded to those stricken with an unusual degree of empathy, one fostered by years of community bonding and struggle.

The intense concern manifested in the glbtq community for those suffering from AIDS at the height of the epidemic is an example of the altruistic love that the ancient Greeks called *agape* and that the early Christians appropriated for the selfless love of God for humans and of humans for each other.

In addition to this altruistic love, gay spirituality also typically includes characteristics that are endemic to gay culture, including gentleness and non-judgmentalism. For example, studies have indicated that neighborhoods with a high proportion of homosexuals have a low level of violent crime. Similarly documented is a high level of tolerance in gay men and lesbians. According to studies in the United States and other Western countries, homosexuals tend to have a lower level of racial, economic, ethnic, and religious bias than do heterosexuals.

Gay spirituality, thus, often exhibits high tolerance for diversity and low tolerance for prejudice and violence. These characteristics may be seen in organizations such as Gentle Men of Westchester, New York, which, at its bi-monthly meetings for the Lower Hudson Valley's gay community, stresses emotional contact and simple non-sexual touching. Similar aspects of glbtq spirituality are expressed in Holly Near's gay liberation anthem "Singing for Our Lives," in which she declares, "We are a gentle, loving people."

This kind of gay spirituality was also manifest at the turn of the twenty-first century when a group of gay men and lesbians donned huge angel wings and stood in front of rabidly anti-gay hecklers at the funerals of those who died of AIDS complications or who were victims of homophobic violence such as was Matthew Shepard. Whereas the hecklers carried signs proclaiming that "God Hates Fags," the gay men and lesbians in angel wings witnessed to a deeper and truer spirituality.

Since homosexuals are often denied the support of state-recognized and church-approved marriage, many glbtq people have investigated alternative avenues of familial support systems to nurture their spirituality. Some create "families of choice" that may include many combinations of sexual and non-sexual support structures. Some couples have widened gay relationships to move beyond traditional monogamy, resulting in a sense of common brotherhood and sisterhood that in mainstream society is sometimes stifled by rigorous societal prohibitions.

Among some glbtq people, intimacy tends to diffuse, affecting more members of the human family than traditional monogamy permits. Such diffusion tends to create bonds between glbtq people across social and national boundaries. This bonding is often emotion-based rather than activity-based, demonstrating a spirituality more at home with friendships and conversation than with, for example, athletic activities. Thus, glbtq spirituality often results in deep, long-lasting friendships; in contrast, heterosexual men are often uncomfortable being intimate, even non-sexually, with anyone other than their own spouses. Moreover, the extra-familial relationships nurtured by gay spirituality are often stronger for being self-generated rather than the result of blood or legal ties.

Institutions

In 1968 a church designed for gay men and lesbians was begun in Los Angeles by Troy Perry, a minister who had been defrocked by the evangelical Church of God for being gay. His new Metropolitan Community Church became a safe haven for homosexuals seeking a spiritual experience more organized than they could find on their own. In the final decades of the twentieth century, this sacred space for glbtq people proliferated into a rapidly growing fellowship of new churches, with the denomination retaining a loose base in Protestant spirituality and theology.

Other churches and synagogues, some mainstream and some outside the mainstream, have also reached out to glbtq people, adapting their liturgies and theology to the special needs of gay men and lesbians and others who feel abandoned by traditional religions. For example, some independent Catholic parishes reject the Roman Catholic Church's official anti-gay stance and welcome Catholics uncomfortable in the traditional church.

Other Christian denominations, such as the United Church of Christ and the Unitarian Universalists, have been in the forefront of the movement to achieve full equality for glbtq people within their communities and in the society at large. In addition, dozens of nondenominational evangelical churches, and individual congregations affiliated with denominations that are not themselves especially supportive, minister particularly to glbtq communities, as do several gay-specific synagogues.

Because they often do not feel welcome in the established religions, some glbtq people leave churches, synagogues, and mosques altogether or find solace in those religions that reach out to them. Others, however, opt to stay within established denominations as a means of exploring their spirituality. These individuals often seek solace from satellite organizations, such as Dignity, which appeals specifically to Roman Catholics, or Integrity, which serves Episcopalians, or Affirmation, which ministers to Methodists. Some satellite organizations are designed especially for women, such as the Conference for Catholic Lesbians founded in 1981 at a New Ways Ministry retreat.

New Ways Ministry was founded in 1977 by Sister Jeannine Gramick and Father Robert Nugent as a gay-positive ministry of advocacy and justice for lesbian and gay Catholics.

For homosexuals addicted to alcohol, a kind of spiritual peace has come from faithful adherence to the principles of Alcoholics Anonymous and its attendant soul-sharing weekly meetings, sometimes adapted for the particular needs of gay men and lesbians. A central tenet of the group is the acknowledgment of a higher power that may be interpreted according to a wide variety of spiritual and religious traditions.

Beyond Institutions

Some glbtq people develop their spirituality apart from mainstream religions, which they have found of little help in understanding themselves. But rather than seeing themselves as radical outsiders, these people frequently see themselves as spiritual pioneers, often joining with like-minded individuals on a quest much like their own.

Such spiritual camaraderie builds strong bonds of affirmation that lead to peace and sound mental health. Rather than adapting themselves to traditional methods of finding the spirit, these glbtq people nurture a courage to investigate a spirituality within that may or may not bear resemblance to an institutionalized spirituality.

Some find their spirituality by cultivating a relationship with nature. Beyond expressing a simple concern for the environment, these individuals meditate on their oneness with life around them in all its animal and mineral forms.

Others turn to yoga for guidance in meditation and understanding of the self. Some have found the teachings and practices of Eastern mystics of aid in discovering a universal spirit or consciousness dwelling within themselves. Still others have turned to the Western practice of psychotherapy and twelve-step programs to find self-understanding and serenity.

Meditation

Like many others, some glbtq individuals seek to discover spirituality by following a meditative pattern. They seek to find a quiet spot inside themselves, often connecting with nature or God or an indwelling

spirit through repeated meditation, possibly with the use of a mantra. They may seek out a veteran spiritual guide, but often they explore spirituality with a friend or lover with whom they share a similar spiritual disposition.

They reach out and practice, alone or together, whatever methods they have discovered that speak to themselves and others as a rewarding path to peace and understanding. At some point they may make a conscious withdrawal from work or home to attend a retreat, sometimes organized by an established group or sometimes arranged simply as a time to be alone in a natural setting conducive to meditation. Those who choose the former may opt to go to a Christian or Buddhist monastery for a retreat under the direction of an established master.

Buddhism especially has spoken effectively to Western homosexuals seeking to define their own spirituality apart from the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Its gentle regard for all living things seems particularly conducive to the quiet peace that many homosexuals appreciate. Contemporary Buddhists such as Joanna Macy of the United States and Thich Nhat Hahn of Vietnam have attempted to link Buddhist spiritual practices to social and political commitments.

Other Paths

Journeying takes many forms. The emergence of "New Age" movements and practices in the last decades of the twentieth century expressed a hope that the old order of coercion and violence would give way to a New Age of harmony and well-being. New Age practices such as Tarot readings, channeling, and astrology have been popular among gay men and lesbians seeking a Post-Christian spirituality.

New Age retreats offer glbtq people practice in everything from personality research tools like the enneagram (a means of discovering one's personality type) to the ancient Chinese practice of feng shui, which investigates one's relationship with the cosmos.

Some gatherings are nationally organized. Body Electric, for example, an organization founded in Oakland, California in 1985, meets on weekends around the United States, under the direction of a licensed psychotherapist, offering workshops to heal the rift between one's sexuality and one's spirituality. Working from the belief that sexual expression offers the ultimate path to experiencing spirituality, directors of Body Electric help homosexuals overcome the guilt and tensions that can prevent the use of sex in attaining spiritual consciousness.

Much credit for interest in spirituality among lesbians can be attributed to the women's liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Although initially concerned with political matters, the movement helped to lead lesbians into an awareness of how women's spirituality had been distorted by patriarchy. Post-Christian lesbian spirituality owes much of its vitality to the work of Mary Daly, who began her woman-affirming writing in the early 1970s.

The Radical Faeries, a movement that emerged in the 1970s, identifies homosexuals with the gender variant outsider that recurs in human history. They host gatherings throughout the year, generally in wooded areas, and emphasize rustic and informal approaches to spirituality. Some Radical Faeries practice Wicca and find healing in rituals based on myth and folklore.

The Manifest Love movement, spearheaded by author David Nimmons, emphasizes the radical cultural transformations that glbtq people have made, often without receiving any credit either from the mainstream community or the glbtq community. The movement aspires to create a humane and loving gay community.

Manifest Love recognizes that in spite of the altruism and care-giving inherent in most gay men, there also exists a concomitant tendency toward selfishness and cynicism that must be countered within the self. In

meetings that focus on ways to enhance virtue, members of Manifest Love utilize communal sharing to extend their commitments to each other through acts of generosity in local communities. Such episodes of affection (called Loving Disturbances) are designed to affirm the possibilities of human goodness and are the expression of a gay spirituality based on altruistic volunteerism.

Participants in the Radical Faeries and in the Manifest Love moment are predominantly gay men. Many lesbians, on the other hand, have been particularly attracted to goddess religions. These religions, based on non-patriarchal belief systems that emphasize feminine principles of inclusion and interconnectedness, have ancient roots, but witnessed a revival in the last decades of the twentieth century. These goddess religions include neo-paganism, Wicca, and animism, and often stress the relationship between femininity and nature.

Some movements today attempt to recreate the rituals of ancient cultures, employing some of the practices found in past centuries to be essential in bringing the gender-special spirit into mainstream society. For example, the weekend intensive workshops of a recently formed group known as Gay Soul Making, with headquarters at the Omega Institute of Rhinebeck, New York, use various psychotherapeutic techniques such as sand painting to foster entrance into an inner realm where healing and self-acceptance can occur.

Conclusion

Homospiritality has many of the same goals that traditional spiritualities have, especially the achievement of an inner sense of well-being and self-worth, a love that leads to altruism, and a conscious sense of oneness with the universe. But the hostile environment in which many homosexuals live and their consciousness of difference have often helped to create a spiritual awareness within them that differs from that of heterosexuals and differs, in fact, from that of non-gay minorities.

By turning within, glbtq people can build a solid spiritual foundation that will enrich their interactions with fellow human beings. Bolstered by a sense of their own value, and healed from the pain of rejection and disdain that they may have felt from the larger society, glbtq people often discover that by cultivating a deep sense of their own spirituality, they can face the challenge of a homophobic society and learn ways of coping, even as they also bond with other glbtq people of similar spiritual dispositions.

By exchanging insights and emotions with each other, gender-special people can become more and more rooted in a productive spirituality that explains their own purpose in life and helps them reach out to others to share the inner gifts they have cultivated through meditation and/or communal spiritual experiences.

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