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**Coming Out Christian  
(January 2000)**

*“I believe in God,... creator of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible....”  
-from the Nicene Creed*

Little less than a year ago, I sat in a tea shop across the street from the chapel of King's College, Cambridge, poured a cup of tea, and spoke with the most openly gay person I knew there. “Joe, why are you out? What's the advantage as compared to the closet?” It was my first and last step in a long period of coming to terms with being gay, an experience that largely compelled a parallel spiritual pilgrimage. I was tired and eager and ready to decide whether or not to be gay finally and irrevocably.

I grew up in a melange of Protestant Christianity, and those who raised me in the faith have not exclusively been my parents. My family attended a Free Methodist church, which is a small, evangelical, sometimes fundamentalist denomination. My parents sent my brother and me to the local Southern Baptist private school less for religious reasons and more because, as my schoolteacher mother put it, they wanted a better education than the public school provided and they didn't want their six-year-old learning four-letter words. In junior high, I went to a school run by the Christian Reformed Church – American descendants of Dutch Calvinists.

I haven't always known that I am queer. It didn't really begin to occur to me until late in adolescence and early in adulthood. I didn't have the conceptual vocabulary in the first place. And I didn't really become interested in anyone – male or female – until around the time I was eighteen. Homosexuality was not something Christians of my variety discussed or really acknowledged. Since my context until the age of fifteen was within the church, it was almost

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impossible to exist out of that or even to see outside of it. Resultantly, I described and articulated what I would later come to see as my queer part in a different way.

*“Wherever I look, words have been used up. Gone. They don't mean anything. ‘God.’ ‘Light.’ ‘Sex.’ And the most powerful word has got to be ‘love,’ but the fight is on for that one.”*  
- Bono

The Church taught me about love. From the beginning, we learned love. We learned about God’s love for his creation and his people, the grace he offered out of that love, the gift he gave because of that love. His greatest commandments regarded love. We were to love him completely and to “love one another that your joy may be full.” Love was the gift of God, and when we demonstrated that love of God to others, we could know God. God *is* love.

Understanding love and its varieties may be the greatest gift my religious background has provided me. As I grew older, I learned about three types of love: *eros*, *agape*, and *philos*. *Agape* was easy to grasp and hard to practice – it is God’s love. It is unconditional, all-encompassing, and beyond understanding. It was mysterious because it meant showing love for all people – just as God did – and we could only do it with God’s help. It seemed impossible, and I never really believed it existed until I later learned that *agape* was an action and not a feeling. It meant all people, no matter what, deserved human respect, dignity, and kindness. There was also *eros* – the physical, attractive feelings expressed between a man and a woman, most properly between those who were married or moving toward marriage. There were many lessons about finding good Christian women to date and marry and religious sex ed focusing on abstinence and STDs. Our teachers knew we were growing up to be erotic beings, and they tried to channel us into “moral”, “Christian” pathways.

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Then there was *philos* – the love between friends. Essayist Andrew Sullivan has called it the most common and natural of all human relationships. “It is a relationship available to and availed by all of us. It is at once the most particular and the most universal relationship there is.” *Philos* was sandwiched in between discussions of *eros* and *agape*. As I was taught about it, *philos* could be deep, abiding, life-affecting, and as powerful as the other loves, but we were implicitly and explicitly told that truly deep friendships were rarer than other relationships. It was, however hardly discussed.

I poured myself into *philos*. For how else to explain the depth of feeling I had for some friends? *Philos* helped rationalize the intensity of my feelings, the desire to give all that I could of myself, the pain I felt when they didn’t reciprocate, the longing to be held. *Philos* did not do so well as a way of figuring out a certain jealous possessiveness I felt or of that desire to be held. *Philos* does not really explain why I wanted to tell my best friend I loved him but could only do so in a letter or in the dark while he was asleep.

Besides an appreciation for the beauty of much of the Bible, theologically and literarily, my early years and religious upbringing gave me a gift that saved me both as I figured who I was and as I came out. I learned to think for myself, even in matters related to God. The person who best demonstrated this was my sixth-grade Sunday School teacher. She told us over and over (almost every week) that we had to examine what the Bible said for ourselves. We should never believe her or our parents or even the pastor until we had checked out what they had to say, for they might all be wrong. I once thanked her for that lesson, as it has guided the spiritual part of my coming out and all of my spiritual searching. I doubt she knows that the principle she taught

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me was one that helped give me the courage to say, “I am queer, I am Christian, and no one can take either of those away from me.”

It’s not that my religious background didn’t have an effect on my coming to know myself and coming out of the closet. Incidents stand out in my memory, times and experiences that told me that who I was was wrong. In the seventh grade, my class went to hear the fundamentalist author Josh McDowell give a speech based on his new book about sex and love. There, as I sat on the local Christian high school’s gym bleachers a few rows away as he spoke, McDowell told us how AIDS and other diseases were God’s method for ensuring that we followed His sexual purity laws and waited until marriage. This was 1987, and even at the age of twelve, I knew who it was who got AIDS: homosexuals, drug users, and other bad people. I got the subtext – don’t be gay or a druggie or impure and you’ll be OK. Throughout school, we memorized passages of the Bible as part of our religious education. In large measure, I’m presently grateful for this. One passage that I learned as a fifteen-year-old, however, particularly troubled me. In Paul’s letter to Romans, he discussed how abandoning God caused “men to abandon natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion.” As I lay on the carpet of my house and stared at the popcorn ceiling, I believed that on some level that passage meant me. I tried to convince myself otherwise, and I had no evidence besides the fact that – like other queer folk I’ve talked to – something about men and their bodies and their whole way of being was more...interesting than those of a vast majority of the women I knew.

But that couldn’t really mean that I was gay, right? I mean, it was clear that God regarded homosexuality as sin, and sin had to be something chosen, and therefore you had to choose to be

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homosexual. I wouldn't choose such a thing, and so I couldn't be a homosexual. So what I thought and felt must be something else, like friendship or affection. Thus went my adolescent logic.

I contented myself with that. Little more came of it, even in high school when all teenagers are supposed to be going wild. I hung out with kids who took honors classes, did student government and debate, and who did their homework on time – the nerds, in other words. So dating and crushes and the like didn't occur much. Besides, I had occasionally found girls interesting, and I told myself that I just hadn't found the right one yet. As regarded guys to whom I was drawn, I told myself I admired or envied them for some ability or quirk of personality.

By the time I reached my eighteenth birthday, except for a few concerns brought on by seeing men in the semi-erotic activities of gym class and popular advertising, I had little real indication of my queerness.

Then I went off to college.

*"The atrocious crime of being a young man...I shall neither attempt to palliate nor deny."*  
- Unknown

I kept a journal during my freshman year of college. Parts of it are still embarrassing to read, even after seven years and lots of change. It's what I imagine the typical college freshman journal is like: a melange of bad poetry, worries about class and homework, pondering about relationships, and complaints about dining commons food. But two themes crop up more and more frequently over the course of that year – my relationship to God and my sexuality.

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I fell in love with two people that year: the young man who was my closest friend and my female resident advisor. With her the problem with falling in love was clear. I liked her, but nothing could happen because I thought I'd end up doing something wrong, impure, or bad. I was afraid of her because I recognized vast differences in our sexual ethics. As far as I could tell, she was the person my teachers and mentors had warned me about. I ran from her, as I'd been taught.

He was another matter. I've known and admitted for some time now that I was in love with him, but a recent return to my diary reminds me how much that was true. I followed him like a puppy dog, fretted and worried when he didn't spend time with me, and grew depressed when he fell in love with the aforementioned woman. Through the whole experience, I saw everything as a manifestation of friendship; I'd lie if I said that friendship was not a great element of our relationship. But there was something besides friendship there, and it was that extra something that scared me.

Throughout my journal, there are questions about my heterosexuality and statements like "I don't really think I am gay or bi..." followed by other explanations of my actions. There are pleas to God to help me understand my life and friends, requests to help me become better friends with him, and thanks for giving me friends like him and the capacity to feel deeply for them. There are dark entries of deep depression. The journal records a time that he and she and I were talking and he said that he wanted to hold her hand – and mine also. People in our dorm commented upon the fact that he and I seemed joined at the hip. I even recorded the time when we did hold hands and risked an intensity of feeling that set off alarm bells throughout my life.

Two statements I wrote then stand out to me. The first is an admission that I wanted a deep intimacy, physical and emotional, with him. I asked whether it would even be possible, and I left it at that. There's nothing more I can say to amplify this. Everything that it would take me three or four more years to come to terms with is right there. The second remark came just a few weeks earlier when I spent some serious time considering whether or not I was gay but rejected the idea because it would cut me off from my faith. I couldn't be gay and Christian, and that was that.

There's a lot of doubt expressed in my journal about whether God had left me, and whether he really cared about me. I didn't abandon the idea of His existence, but I largely abandoned the Church for most of college. I left because I couldn't find God in the congregations I knew, and that was only partly because my sexuality made me feel out of place. Even so, although largely convinced that I was not gay, I did not like the attitudes, jokes, and comments that some of my fellow church members made about gay people and others; this certainly couldn't be Christ's attitude, I thought. I left because my pastors and leaders rarely addressed the general emptiness I felt, instead repeating the strictures and principles I heard many times in my youth. I left because I could not fulfill a spiritual need to know and meet God. On one occasion, when I went to talk to a pastor about my freshman experience with my friend, he reassured me while I cried – as I wanted to hear – that none of what occurred meant I was gay. I had probably become confused, he offered, and crossed odd lines in a friendship. However, even then I knew that I was sobbing because I did not want to be queer, to be who I was and who I am. If I were the person I feared, I would have to leave the Church, to leave God, to be alone. Asked

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to make a choice between my sexuality and my faith, I chose to take claim of neither so that I could somehow keep them both.

*“Sex is a mystery, like faith, or love, and deserves to have the glow of silence around it.”*  
- Kathleen Norris

So what changed? Why did I decide to lay claim to both, to live the more honest life I have now? Oddly enough, it was a job in the library.

By the beginning of my senior year of college, I’d come to a point where I could look myself in the bathroom mirror and quietly say, “I’m gay,” or “I’m bi,” without glancing away from my gaze (most of the time). I still couldn’t tell anyone else, and I didn’t know how this realization was going to square with God, though I thought perhaps if I kept relatively silent and didn’t “act on it,” I’d be all right.

As I returned to university from a summer in London, I began a new job, working as a research assistant. My professor was in the midst of a project on the political repression and persecution of “invisible minorities” – groups where no one can tell whether a person is a member unless that person self-identifies.

For him, I studied the Mormons that term. More importantly, on the way to the call numbers BX 8600-BX 8699 (Mormon history), I often passed the books on Christianity and homosexuality. Surreptitiously pulling these off the shelf and hoping no one would see me, I read all sorts of theology about sexuality, modes of Scriptural interpretation, and about churches that welcomed gay people. Quickly the pieces fell into place, and the monolith of Christian opposition to queer people cracked. There would be *some* place for me when I chose to go back. But I wasn’t sure where that would be.



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Fear of what others – friends, family, strangers – would do if they knew I was gay kept me completely in the closet for another few months. A couple of weeks after my college graduation, however, I told some of my closest friends, and a domino chain started. A year later, when I went to Cambridge, England to study, I gave up caring about the fear of others' reactions and grew too weary of pretending in part to be someone else. I met my friend in the tea shop, and I began coming out to all sorts of people. I was finally able to lose track of who knew I am gay and who didn't, and I felt the peculiar liberation of having no control over that information.

About the time that I began slowly to open up to my friends, I returned to the Church. My doubt of God's presence had come to a head, and I wanted to begin looking again for a place to seek Him and the part of Him within each person. I felt I'd been spiritually and intellectually lazy, but I knew that the churches of my youth would be insufficient for the needs of my soul. The Protestant Reformation had been based upon twin appeals to conscience and Scripture. Somehow, the Protestantism in which I'd grown up had asked me to surrender conscience and thought to its constrained and limited view of the world. It had robbed me of beauty as a method of reaching toward God, and the sense that worship was part of an endeavor that stretched across the centuries did not exist. So one hot July morning, I showed up at the local Episcopal church with the vague idea it was something akin to what I was looking for. I juggled bulletin, prayer book, and hymnal for an hour and a half. I liked the fact that the minister was a woman, I liked the music, I liked the genuine friendliness of the people, and I loved the central place of the Eucharist in the service. When after three weeks I was still showing up, the head greeter suggested it was perhaps time I sign up for a nametag. Feeling at home, I did.

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I became an Anglican. I must admit that the fact much of the Episcopal church is generally accepting of queer people as members of the body of Christ supported my decision to become one. More importantly, I felt at home in my faith – perhaps for the first time ever – in the practice of the liturgy, in the celebration of communion, and in the respect for my humanity in all its components.

I'm seeing the practice of *agape* more fully than ever. My current congregation contains gay people of all stripes. It also has straight people, racial and ethnic minorities, academics, professionals, manual workers, the elderly, Generation Xers, the occasional homeless person, Democrats, a few Republicans, and almost any other category you can imagine. Many parishioners are lifelong Episcopalians, and others are, like me, converts from other denominations. What I like, however, is that these people cut such a broad swath across the differences of creation. Though imperfect to our core, we can still participate in unity in the acts of worshipping God, loving Him and each other.

*"I do not feel obliged to believe that the same God who has endowed us with sense, reason, and intellect has intended us to forgo their use."*

*- Galileo Galilei*

I don't know where my journey goes from here. I have come out to my parents and brother but not the rest of my family. Many of my hometown acquaintances and faded friends are evangelical or fundamentalist Christians, and I fear to tell them for what they may think about me or my family: "He's been led astray...He's fallen into Sin and Error...His parents must have messed up in raising him...He'll not be able to go to heaven...He could be fixed if he'd only try hard and trust in God...I will not associate myself with this sinful person..."

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I do not really know that these are what they would say or think because I have not told them. But all these might have gone through my mind a few years ago if someone had come out to me.

As I was talking with the LGB coordinator on campus a few days ago, he observed, “Dealing with those people is still very raw for you.” Without questioning his meaning or asking for clarification (as is my norm), I quickly replied, “Yeah, it is raw.” I meant it. Because I am still wide open to the shredding pain that they can inflict and to the small doubt that maybe I can’t really be queer *and* Christian. I can give neither of these up, however, because they are large and integral pieces of who I am.

I believe that God, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen, has given each person a conscience, a combination of inner direction, reason, and experience that helps inform how our faith fits in our lives. One essence of Martin Luther’s Reformationary revolution was that the individual believer – though engaged communally with others – has conscience and Scripture to guide him or her through life. When Luther appeared before the Diet of Worms in 1521, he responded to charges of heresy by refusing to recant anything and saying that he had to act as he had done. “My conscience compels it. Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me.”

I am queer, and I am Christian. I believe in the leading of my conscience and the direction of Scripture. I believe in God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and I believe in myself.

Here I stand. I can do no other.