Coming Out:
A Theological Dialogue of Queerness and Ability

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Jesus Comes Out

Queer people are often familiar with the concept and processes of coming out. Figuring out that you are queer, then finding others who are also queer and then telling them you think you might be queer and eventually telling some of those around you that you are queer. Even when coming out is not so much of a thing as just a lived reality, the stages of identity formation around queerness still take place. In this paper, we offer two first-person theological reflections on coming out, both as queer and as disabled. First, we hear from Jessica A. Harren, who speaks to her ongoing lived experiences.

Coming out is rarely easy, and it often makes life a lot more complicated before it brings liberation. As someone who needs to come out repeatedly as both queer and disabled, I find much resonance with the Resurrection story of Jesus. He, too, comes out on Resurrection Day. He comes out of the tomb, and then must come out to the world, to his disciples, and to his friends as someone who has come back to life. In each of the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus, there are attributes that are both wonderfully queer and disabled about Jesus. How people identify themselves matters.

I wonder what words Jesus used for himself after his resurrection. Jesus does not tell us who he knew himself to be in the recorded Bible, but certainly, there was concern among the disciples that Jesus was a ghost, for example, Luke 24:36-42:

> Jesus himself stood among them...They were startled and terrified and thought that they were seeing a ghost... [Jesus said] "Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have. And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet...They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence.

Jesus asks both his disciples and us to refer to him as alive, and not to call him a ghost. He even eats and shows his scars to prove he is not a ghost.

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That is often how coming out works. Once a person comes out—as resurrected, as queer, as disabled—there is a lot of proving that must go on. There are a lot of people who think they know what is happening, but really do not; people who try to define the reality of others. We are here as Christians today because those first disciples believed Jesus when he came out as resurrected. They acknowledged him as alive.

As someone who lives with a rare genetic syndrome and as someone who does ministry in a public body, I constantly must come out as disabled, partly because it affects so much of my everyday life, and partly because I use my body to do ministry. My Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome affects multiple systems of my body, but most of all the stability of my joints--I easily sprain my joints and am on crutches several times each year. I have lived in chronic pain since I was 13 years old. Often, the first response to me coming out as disabled is for others to blow off the pain. "Oh, you do not look sick." "You are too young for that much pain." "It can't hurt that bad." "Suck it up and deal with it." "I'm 80 and I can stand through an entire church service, why can't you?" No matter how many times I share that I am not a ghost; I am a real live person

with a complicated disability, and coming out is hard. I wonder how Jesus, a real live human with bones and skin, responded internally to the questions of his disciples after coming out.

Jesus is queer after coming out: Jesus no longer fits into a box. Is he undead, resurrected, or fully alive? It has taken centuries and many church councils to define post-resurrection Jesus, and there are still debates about that today. Being queer is to resist easy definitions and the checking of boxes.

Coming out queer was hard, too, as people wanted to know why I decided to come out as queer at all. People wanted my sexuality to stay ghost-like, to stay dead and buried. I came out for similar reasons that Jesus came out to claim resurrection. What would have happened if Jesus had stayed dead, or even resurrected, but did not share with his disciples his new life and resurrected body? Christianity would not exist.

Coming out does not remove the pain and scars from before, though. It does not solve all the problems. "In the resurrected Jesus Christ, they saw not the suffering servant for whom the last and most important word was tragedy and sin, but the disabled God who embodied both impaired hands and feet and pierced side and the imago Dei."[1]

I exist as more fully myself as someone who is out in the world, and I can show others that the *imago dei* can exist in an alive person with flesh and bones. My life can proclaim that Jesus is for me, too, and that I can find resonance in the ways Jesus is both queer and disabled/scared after his coming out as resurrected.

When I can be honest about my stories in life, people see me as a real person with flesh and bones. When ableism and homophobia come out of others, they can see a real person they are hurting. The joy of being out, of knowing that I am living in the world as God created me to be, is worth it. Even if others do not get it, even if others do not see the resurrection in me, I know it deep in my bones.

Part of being queer and disabled and living a public life is that people frequently talk about my body. They want to know things about it they would never want to know about someone without my identities. The church taught me to subjugate my body for my soul. The church separated me from a liberating relationship with myself as a real person with skin and bones. We must locate Jesus' coming out after the Resurrection in his physical body and in our bodies. It is the fully divine Christ who suffers, and the fully divine Christ who is resurrected with scars. "One has to be constantly reminded of the fact that the resurrected body carries with it the scars of the cross."[2]

It was revelatory and healing for me to learn that Jesus had a body, both pre- and post-resurrection. My queer disabled body is constantly being told by the world to be as ghost-like as possible—not to advocate for myself and to stop sharing about my experiences. People often cannot handle the fullness of my reality, for example, they might say to me, "I can handle you as queer, or as disabled, but please keep one of those as ghost-like as possible. Do not ask for what your body needs to be real in this world."

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Jesus absolutely rejects all that with his scandalous coming out. "Recognizing that Jesus had a real body that felt real pain would have been quite scandalous for a Greco-Roman world where mind and body were separate. That was a world where, because Jesus was God, Jesus could not have suffered. In fact, this idea is still so scandalous, that some people try to avoid it altogether. We need to deal with the scandal and take the message of Jesus having a body seriously."[3]

Jesus comes out as resurrected in his scarred and queer and disabled body. If we are, as Christians, to follow the example of Christ, we get to be part of making a world where it is okay for anyone made in the *imago dei* to come out. How many of us hide parts of who we are in our church institutions because of fear of rejection? How many of us are queer or disabled, and because the world is closed to us in many ways, we hide it in ways that destroy us? Even as Christ liberates us to know that we are in good company if we come out and are offered resurrection, it does not mean the world will be kind to us or reward the coming out.

I dream of a church where people are in relationship based on what they need, where the default is not cis, straight, and abled so that coming out is not even necessary. A church where people can say who they are, who they love, and what they need—*and* have their scars and need for liberation taken seriously. I often hear that I am too much work for a church.

I wonder if the resurrected Jesus was too much work for his disciples. I wonder if he shocked them by asking them to add a new, not well-defined category to their categories of people: Resurrected. Coming out as queer, disabled, trans, non-binary—those all ask people to make new categories for the breadth of human creation. When Jesus came out as resurrected, I wonder if his scars still hurt, or if he felt pain when people looked at them or touched them. I wonder if it was too much work to provide Jesus

1. Nancy Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Libratory Theology of Disability.* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 99.

2. Vítor Westhelle, *The Scandalous God: The Use and Abuse of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 59.

3. Jessica Harren, "Bones and Bread: Knowing God in Our Bodies Through the Communion Table," *Journal of Religion, Disability & Health* 13, no. 3 (2009): 279.

a place to sit or to hear about the queer things that were happening to him. I wonder if people appreciated his coming out.

After Jesus comes out as resurrected, we get to ask the question most deeply rooted in human curiosity: What does it mean? Rooted in the traditions and theology of the Metropolitan Community Churches, River Cook Needham offers her perspective both on coming out as queer and crip, and what this might mean theologically.

Keep On Coming Out

Even before Jesus came out as resurrected, God came out in the person of Jesus—a flesh and blood human. The Jesus experience was an ongoing process of coming out by God, both as human, and then as resurrected. As Harren discussed above, there are significant overlaps between coming out as queer and coming out as disabled or crip.[4] Process theology provides a system that emphasizes the ways that humans, God, and all beings interact and grow in relationship with each other. As a queer person, this system speaks to me particularly because it exemplifies the ways coming out progressed in new and different ways. First, I came out as a cisgender gay man, then as a straight transgender woman, and even later as a bisexual transgender woman. Similarly, when becoming disabled, coming out became more complex and accurate as time progressed. First, mental illness and saneism pushed me to come out with bipolar disorder, and later as my fat, arthritic body stopped being able to carry me, my crippled self came out—first by limited mobility, then by using a cane, and later by using a wheelchair. Each level of coming out changed the ways that I interact with the world and the ways the world interacts with me.

Process philosopher Alfred North Whitehead wrote:

> [t]he true method of discovery is like the flight of an aeroplane. It starts from the ground of particular observation; it makes a flight in the thin air of imaginative generalization; and it again lands for renewed observation rendered acute by rational interpretation.[5]

This points to the ways that coming out and self-discovery continually change my lived experiences as queer and crip. Monica A. Coleman expands on this description of process thought when she writes: "[…] a postmodern theological framework based on Whitehead's philosophy can be used to discuss various religious traditions, as well as their relation to one another within the world and the divine."[6] Like the aeroplane taking off and landing in new

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locations, throughout my life I(RCN) am taking off and coming out just to discover new words and experiences that describe me. As my lived experiences changed and my experience of the world changed, the words used to describe me also changed. My coming out as queer and crip were offset by nearly a decade, and so I have never known disability outside of queerness. These interactions—these relationships—continually shape my personhood and my experiences of the world.

Sami Schalk writes about coalitional theories and says, "[b]y coalitional theory, I mean theories which are inclusive of multiple minority groups without being limited to only those people who occupy multiple minoritized positions."[7] She speaks of crip holding the universes of disability and queerness, both theoretically and in one person. While she opens the door to non-disabled people doing disability theory and theology, this paper speaks to the ways that queer and disability coexist in individual persons, individual lived experience. Yet, even so, I have not always been disabled, and my experiences in becoming crip informs my understanding of coming out as crip and queer.

For a while my disability was strictly related to my sanity, and even as my disability became physical, the term disabled or crip felt too permanent to form an identity. Process theology, particularly as articulated by Whitehead and Coleman above lets me claim these terms and rest in them, even as I hope that maybe one day my arthritic body will not be crip, that maybe the world will come out as accessible. In her book *Feminist, Queer, Crip,* Alison Kafer writes about "complicity in compulsory able-bodiedness/able-mindedness, and marginalization of disabled people."[8] Crip awareness acknowledges this sentiment as part of the system of ableism. Yet also, process thought encourages an ongoing coming out or claiming of the identities that most fully represent us and

4. I prefer the term crip as distinct from disabled, because crip more fully represents my experiences of the world as someone who must use mobility aids to get around. I was first called crippled in college, and while people have become more polite the appeal of reclaiming this slur has never left me.

5. Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, Kindle Corrected (New York: The Free Press, 1978), 5.

6. Monica A. Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way*, Kindle (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), secs. 1272–1273.

7. Sami Schalk, "Coming to Claim Crip: Disidentification with/in Disability Studies," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 33, no. 2 (March 27, 2013), https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v33i2.3705.

8. Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 153.

our needs.

In the book *Coming Out as Sacrament*, Glazer notes that some religious traditions forbid depictions of God.[9] Yet, in the person of Jesus and the Christian theological tradition, God comes out. That is, Jesus comes out in the stories of Christmas by becoming human while divine. Queer theologian Axel Schwaigert elaborates, "[i]n the incarnation Jesus Christ became radically available for humankind. This availability was proclaimed by the heavenly hosts to the poor, and in praising God peace was declared to all, not only to a particular group."[10] Here, we see that God comes not just to those in the cisgender, heterosexual mainstream,[11] nor just to those who are temporarily able-bodied, but to the whole of creation. With Catherine Keller, we can see that "[o]ne can only read […] a process of cosmic collaboration."[12] That is, God joins the cosmic collaboration of creation in the person of Jesus, as God comes out in the most human way, joining humanity as a person filled with the experiences of humanness in the first century CE. God joins humanity as a complexifying divine-human.

In the Eucharistic liturgy, we see that God has a body and that body is broken on the cross and at the altar for the whole of humankind. In the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC), the tradition in which I rooted my theological education, the statement of faith reads: "'[c]ome, taste, and see.' Jesus Christ, You invite all people to Your open table," and again: "[w]e know You by many names, Triune God, beyond comprehension, revealed to us in Jesus Christ, who invites us to the feast."[13] The companion guide elaborates with these words, "the invitation to taste and see reminds of our embodiment—a gift of God that many within our tradition are still in the process of reclaiming."[14] The Bylaws draw an even stronger connection between the Eucharist and bodies when it says that Eucharist is partaking of elements that are Jesus' body and blood.[15] Harren writes: that "Jesus' body, broken open in the communion ritual, allows me to be part of his story—His story of being whole, but with scars."[16] In the MCC, and in many traditions, the connection between both the communion elements

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and the real presence of Jesus within the elements and also in the gathered community, point to the body of Christ being both queer and disabled. The body of Christ resists categorization in our liturgy and in our communities in the same ways that queer and crip theories resist categorization.

The parallels between coming out and the Eucharistic liturgy, are then most notable. For Alexander Schmemann, liturgy is the work of a community to prepare the way for God's presence, a journey of the church into the kingdom of the risen Christ and separation from the world.[17] In the distinct queer and crip spaces, I am freed to rest in my mobility aids and my queer experience of the world. In the Eucharist, we hear that in the Eastern tradition we are raised to God and God's realm,[18] while in the Western tradition we hear again from Schwaigert that "[t]o celebrate Holy Communion […] is one step toward living the accessibility of the newborn Christ of Christmas in the world and the availability of the ministering Christ before and even after Easter."[19] Both of these traditions speak to parts of the coming out experience—finding people with shared experiences, and then proclaiming our identification with those experiences. As a queer crip, learning that there were queer people who were disabled, provided a relief to permit me to explore and discover my crip identity, and open the doors to understanding the ways my queerness and cripness interact.

Schmemann writes in *For the Life of the World* that "[…]from its very beginning Christianity has been the proclamation of joy, of the only possible joy on earth."[20] Coming out, while a deeply complicated process, mimics this eucharistic process of finding oneself, and finding community within which you can accomplish the world as it could be. Said another way, with Christianity's proclamation of joy, we can hear the joy of liberation that comes after coming out. Coming out as a process of separation from the world as it is, called into the world as it could be, fed from the

9. Chris Glaser, *Coming Out as Sacrament*, First (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 79.

10. Axel Schwaigert, "Towards a Church of Radical Christmas: The Open Communion in MCC and Its Ecclesiological Consequences," in *Queering Christianity: Finding a Place at the Table for LGBTQI Christians* (Santa Barbara, California: Prager, 2012), 180.

11. This language is adapted from Generous Space Ministries: https://www.generousspace.ca/

12. Catherine Keller, *On the Mystery: Discerning Divinity in Process*, Kindle (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 62.

13. Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches, "Companion Guide to the MCC Statement of Faith," July 5, 2016, https://mccchurch.org/files/2016/08/Companion-Guide-to-the-2016-MCC-Statement-of-Faith-1.pdf.

14. Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches, "Companion Guide," 12.

15. General Conference XXVI, "Bylaws of The Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches," July 5, 2016, sec. 3.A.II, https://www.mccchurch.org/bylaws-of-the-universal-fellowship-of-metropolitan-community-churches/.

16. Harren, "Bones and Bread," 285.

17. Alexander Schmemann, *For the Life of the World*, Kindle, Second Revised and Expanded. (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2000), sec. 301.

18. Schmemann, *For the Life of the World*, sec. 309.

19. Schwaigert, "Church of Radical Christmas," 182.

20. Schmemann, *For the Life of the World*, sec. 267.

feast of Christ's Body.

Brought together, we see the importance of bodies in both queer and disability (or crip) theology. Process theology provides safe ways to engage with queer thought, disability/crip thought, identity, and experiences without the fear of lifelong commitment—it offers freedom to experiment and learn more about identities without endless commitment and yet offering the opportunity to continually choose an identity over time. In the book *Crip Theory*, author Robert McRuer writes "[…]the practices of coming out crip it makes possible—nonetheless will or should exist in productive tension with the more properly academic project of disability studies." Here, he speaks of the ways that disability and crip identity interplay between each other. As Alison Kafer writes: [c]laiming crip, then, can be a way of acknowledging that we all have bodies and minds with shifting abilities, and wrestling with the political meanings and histories of such shifts.[21] With process philosophy and theology, Kafer argues that cripness and queerness are not static essences but rather ongoing relational experiences. Whitehead writes: "'position' is relative status in a nexus of actual entities."[22] That is, relationality continues to open up the doors to changes relative to each other.

Theologically, the importance of coming out queer and crip cannot be overstated. Glaser writes: [c]hristians celebrate Holy Communion or the Eucharist (from the Greek word for "thanksgiving") to commemorate God's presence in Jesus Christ liberating, delivering, and saving us[…]."[23] By this identification with the embodiment of God and with Jesus coming to humans in the ordinary elements of bread and wine, we can see that God is with us—with us in our diverse bodies and in our queer genders and attractions.

God has come out to be with us in our historically minoritized identities and with all of creation. God calls us good with God's perfect, resurrected body covered in wounds of crucifixion.

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21. Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 13.
22. Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 35.
23. Glaser, *Coming Out as Sacrament*, 6.