



# The Case For A Queer Christianity

By Shingai N. Kagunda



When Binyavanga Wanaina passed away it felt like the ground on which we walk froze, paralyzed with grief. The sky turned grey, drizzling its tears down on us. When I heard the news, I called up a friend of mine, one who I knew would understand this loss intrinsically because he, like me, had been heavily impacted by Binyavanga in high school, when his memoir, *One Day I will Write About This Place* first found its way to bookshop shelves. We both talked about how devastated Kenya should be for this Binya-shaped hole that had been left behind. We mourned a man who had been fundamental to the contemporary literary space in our country. We talked about everything from his work to his family to his impact to the sickness that ravaged his wholeness. And somewhere in that conversation this friend said something to me that struck me, “You cannot love Binya if you do not love his queerness.”

Since then I have had a few conversations that have run my blood hot. Red. Fire. In the middle of the conversation, a pause in the room. The silent, accusatory question lingering in the air, “The one who was gay?” An “aha!” moment. A sense of justification. As if that explains his death, as it was what he deserved. He becomes a lesson, in this broken understanding of morality that guides us.

In the same week as Binyavanga’s death, the Kenyan judiciary upheld the penal code sections 162 and 165 that criminalize sexual conduct between two consenting adults of the same sex, both in public and in private. The court cited regulations from other countries in their decision, including sections of the penal code in Botswana, which has itself recently decriminalized homosexuality.

Other African countries that have revoked anti-homosexuality laws through penal code reform in recent years include Seychelles, Mozambique, Sao Tome and Principe, and Lesotho, but more than 30 other countries maintain the laws on their statute books.

In 2015, when then US president Barack Obama visited Kenya and addressed the issue with President Uhuru Kenyatta, the latter categorically shut the matter down with his (in)famous line, "...For Kenyans today, the issue of gay rights is really a non-issue... it is not... at the foremost minds of Kenyans and that is a fact."

I see this attitude fuelling a lot of Kenyans' arguments on the matter. As it simply does not affect them, it can only be considered a non-issue. Part of the collective trauma we have as a country is the inability to deal with anything we do not want to deal with. We simply sweep it under the carpet and pray to God a gust of wind does not come in and blow the dust around, because that will be messy. Messy means confronting our own beliefs and contradictions, and dealing with how that impacts the people we have hurt.

We have reached a point where it is clearly time for us to do some spring-cleaning. We can no longer wish or pray queer people away. Queerness is just as present in our society as heterosexuality. After being pushed and suppressed into the confines of our culture, after being labelled demonic, unnatural, attention-seeking, perverted, and sin, queerness is simply asking to be seen and to be heard. It is asking for conversation. This is not an absurd or unjust demand.

Many of the strident arguments that have been used to foreclose the possibility of queer acceptance, of freedom and love, have been religious ones. This article is my attempt at having this conversation. I will delve into Christian arguments against queerness because first, this is the religious tradition I am most familiar with, and second, because Kenya is a majority, or at least, normatively Christian society - it is our culture's immediate history, having been colonized by European Christians. I will attempt to have this conversation only being biased to the bend of freedom and love. These two will always guide the words I write.

### **Religion can be on the wrong side of history**

Throughout history, religion has been a tool of good, just as much as it has been a tool of harm and violence. As much as we are taught to defend our religion with every fibre of our being, sometimes it argues for the wrong things. And you cannot honestly defend what you believe in if you have never interrogated the belief itself. Christianity has been used to defend under-education, slavery, colonialism, patriarchy, and racism. To call the religion itself blameless is to counter facts and historical evidence that have proven otherwise. This does not mean that religion is evil. I am in no way invalidating the intention of faith at its core as something beautiful and whole. I am simply stating that when your religion becomes the be all, end all, when there is no room to think, to listen, to learn, or to grow from those outside your worldview, then there is incredible potential for harm.

Many centuries ago, Copernicus discovered that the sun, and not the earth, was the centre of our solar system. The clergy of the day used Scripture to condemn this 'outrageous' argument. Even the Protestant radicals, who were breaking away from the orthodoxy of the Catholic church in other ways, opposed him. Martin Luther called him a fool, John Calvin implied it was blasphemy, and Melanchthon, a theologian of the Protestant Reformation, quoted Ecclesiastes 1:4-5 suggesting that, "severe measures be taken to silence" all those who agreed with Copernicus in order to "preserve the truth as revealed by God." Obviously since then, science and evidence to the contrary have proved Copernicus right.

For many early Europeans - and even for many Christians today - the Bible was infallible. Yet,

somehow, every interpretation always directly or indirectly privileged them. I find this very curious. The fact that slavery existed in the Bible was reason enough to have slaves. The fact that Africans were assumed to be descendants of Ham, the cursed son of Abraham - referring to a passage in Genesis 9 - was used as a further justification to enslave Africans, supposedly because this was their destiny and proper station in life. In fact, slavery was supposed to be a favour to the Africans, rescuing them from their heathen ways. This argument was later modified and repurposed in the interest of colonization, not only in Africa but in the Americas, New Zealand, and Australia where Native Americans, Maoris, and Aborigines were massacred, ran out, and for the longest time, by law, considered less human.

Examples from history have proven that religion in the hands of the oppressor has been used as a tool to validate the oppression. In Germany, church leaders and theologians provided arguments and preached sermons in support of Hitler, in so doing aiding and abetting the Holocaust. In the Jim Crow era of the US, white families would picnic after church on Sundays to watch lynched black bodies hanging from trees. During the women's rights movement, patriarchy justified denying women the right to vote because men, in all situations were meant to be the heads.

Still, in all these scenarios, the courage of the oppressed to fight back has proven the 'sensible' and 'infallible' arguments that were supposedly supported by the religion itself, wrong. Acknowledging these aspects of religion that have been heavily problematic in history can open us up to the possibility that the today's general accepted interpretation of Scripture may not always be the right, or the moral one. Ask Jesus about the multiple times he questioned the Pharisees, who were the custodians of the law, and the moral compasses of the time.

### **Scripture is not literal**

Texts are written for a specific audience, time period, purpose, and context. As much as its wisdom can and has spoken throughout generations to guide and inspire hearts and minds, Scripture is still a text. That means it is injustice to not read Scripture without understanding its original intention. Reading the background and the whole context - whether it is poetry or song or theory or parable or history - informs your ability to interpret it as intended. There are several scriptures that we do not read or apply literally now, yet they are in the Bible! Kathy Vestal in her brilliant article, [Sexual Orientation: It's not a Sin](#) shares several examples.

Exodus 13:14-15. Whoever desecrates the Sabbath day by doing any work on it must be put to death. (Harsh... also remember that time Jesus healed a man during the Sabbath and broke this rule?)

Leviticus 3:17, 11:6-7. Do not eat fat or blood or pig. (So bacon and sausages are technically a sin).

Leviticus 15:19-26. When a woman has a monthly period she is unclean for seven days. Anyone who touches her is also unclean. Everything she touches is also unclean. (I guess women can't be touched for around seven days every month.)

Deuteronomy 21:18-21. If you have a son who is rebellious and stubborn, take him to the elders of the town and have him stoned to death. (Dear parents, here is a solution to your rebellious teenager.)

Leviticus 24:20. A fracture for a fracture, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. (Jesus later contradicted this with his "turn the other cheek" sermon)

These are just a few of the verses that exemplify how context, audience, and purpose are essential to interpretation of Scripture. During this time when the Israelites had no centralized government and were wandering around the wilderness with no written direction, God gave them laws. These laws

were not merely a moral compass but also civil laws to guide the Israelites as an autonomous nation and to give them their own specific identity, setting them apart from the nations around them. They were extremely specific, covering everything from food to hygiene to idolatry and cleanliness.

Some of the laws such as the laws on cleanliness were for the specific purpose of good hygiene in a world before indoor plumbing and the scientific germ theory of disease. These were God's rules for Israel, in the land of Palestine, at a particular time in history. Furthermore, the Jewish rabbis themselves have always tried to interpret the Torah for the day and age they were living in. They were sometimes actually unwilling to implement the laws that they read in the Torah, putting up technical and procedural barriers to their implementation without necessarily rejecting the Torah in principle. For example, laws that called for a death penalty could go years without ever being implemented - one passage in the Talmudic literature said that if the governing council of the rabbis (the Sanhedrin) went seventy years without implementing a death penalty, then that was a good Sanhedrin. It was obvious to them that killing every rebellious son, for example, would lead to a breakdown in society, and forecloses the possibility of reform, repentance, and even growth. Teenagers are not teenagers forever.

Trying to apply some of these laws in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is ridiculous to say the least. And in an evolving time, it is impossible to not have an understanding of Scripture that is willing to evolve as well. With this understanding, we can then delve into what Scripture says about sexuality with the willingness to unlearn, question, and reimagine.

### **Scripture on homosexuality**

First, it might be important to note that the word homosexuality did not even show up in English translations of the Bible until 1946. Secondly, there are six portions of Scripture that refer to same-sex relationships directly in the whole Bible. Let that sink in. Only six places in the whole of Scripture. And yet, today's Christianity makes it seem as if the conversation on sexuality and gender is the biggest evil in the Christian church that there has ever been. Furthermore, the Bible has over 2,000 references to the relationships between the rich and the poor, the inequity that accompanies marginalization and the call to justice. Six against 2,000. This statistic alone should be a compelling argument to re-evaluate the priorities of the gospel in today's faith spaces. Still it is necessary to analyse the Scriptures in question in the entirety of their context.

*Genesis 19. The story of Sodom and Gomorrah.* The history of this story has been so often used as an argument against homosexuality that the term "sodomy" was drawn from the destruction of this city. If we read the whole story we see the unfolding of an interesting string of events. Lot hosts two messengers of the Lord (often referred to as angels). Some men in the city, upon seeing the foreigners, knock on Lot's front door wanting to rape them. Lot, being reasonable, obviously tells them no. He then offers them his two virgin daughters to be gang raped instead (in my view, the mortal sin committed in the story is the intention to rape, but let us continue.) God, understandably, gets angry at the whole situation and tells the messengers that the whole city will be destroyed the following day.

This is not the end to the referencing to Sodom and Gomorrah. Several other points in Scripture describe it as a city with no morals, full of decay, injustice, and oppression - vices that have nothing to do with homosexuality. As is very clearly stated in Ezekiel 16:49-50 "Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy. <sup>50</sup>They were haughty and did detestable things before me. Therefore I did away with them as you have seen."

*Leviticus 18:22 & 20:13. The Exodus laws.* These are verses that state very clearly, "If a man lies

with a man as he does with a woman, both of them shall be put to death. It is an abomination." My argument here relies on the unattainable Leviticus scriptures used as references above. Specifically, as the article [Leviticus and the Holiness Code](#) shares, for many centuries before Israel entered the land of Palestine, ancient Canaanite fertility cults used same-sex rituals to worship their gods. God prohibited Israel from adopting the cultic sexual fertility goddess worship of Egypt and Canaan. God's biggest problem here seemed to be the correlation between same-sex ceremonies and shrine prostitution in relation to pagan worship of 'false' gods, which was a very specific situation.

If we choose to believe this law applies today then we must choose to believe that any person who touches a woman on her period is unclean and any man who shaves his side burns has committed a sin and anyone who has tattoos is heading for damnation (I say as I have three tattoos) and anyone who wears fabric of two different materials has committed an abomination and everyone who cheats must be put to death and rebellious sons must be stoned to death and... you get the point. We can't pick and choose which rules from Leviticus to follow and which ones to leave behind - if we do, then surely the 2,000 verses against economic exploitation and social injustice should be the ones we fall on. Ultimately, to do justice to the Scripture is to understand that these rules were written in a specific time for a specific people in a specific context.

*Romans 1:24-32. Paul's two cents.* Many Christians use this portion of the New Testament where Paul talks about a specific group of the church that have fallen into wickedness and immorality as a case against homosexuality. Paul says specifically, "Because of this God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even the women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones... men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves due penalty for their error." The text then goes on to talk about the other things that this group of people were doing wrong, "They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, <sup>30</sup> slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; <sup>31</sup> they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy."

Reading into the context of this time, as with Leviticus, expounds on the message of Paul. During this period there was a flood of Roman fertility cults and shrine prostitution. This was influenced by popular religions at the time that were devout to the god Apollo and the goddesses Aphrodite and Cybele. According to a historical [article](#) by St. John's Metropolitan Community Church, "One of the many practices of both of these cults was drunken, frenzied revelry that involved wanton sexual abandon. The temple of Aphrodite employed free (non-slave) boys and girls from the ages of about 9 to age 13 whose job was to be used in sexually servicing the men and women who came to the temple. The cult of Apollo hired boys from the age of 11 to 15 for the entertainment and pleasure of older men."

These were the stories and the actual events that Paul was addressing in his letter to the Roman church. He was boycotting a religion and space that made it acceptable for little boys to be prostituted to older men and little girls to older more powerful men and women. Same-sex relationships in that context had been attached to something more exploitive and dark. It is also good to note that the verse addressed several other problematic tendencies of the time, including corruption, deceit, idolatry, greed, and hate. When you read this Scripture from this perspective, it is honestly hard to find any correlation to a whole loving relationship between two consensual adults.

*1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 6:9; 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy 1:10 Lost in translation?* I consider these verses together because they use the same Greek word, *arsenokoitai*. Paul includes the *arsenokoitai* when referring to a group of sinners and those who won't enter the Kingdom of God. The interesting thing about this word is that it so rarely appears in ancient text, that the correct translation has been debated for centuries. As Justin Lee points out in his side of [the great debate](#), The NIV translation could not even

decide on one definition so they used two. In 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians it is translated as 'homosexual offenders' and in 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy it is translated as 'perverts.'

And yet, as Adam Nicholas Phillips argues in [this article](#), when *arsenokoitai* is used elsewhere in ancient Greek literature, it references the abuse of the poor (an example being the Sibylline Oracles) or economic exploitation and power abuses (such as a 2nd century text called the Acts of John).

Linking the two interpretations of the word – that is, homosexual offenders and exploitation – brings about an interesting theory. As Justin Lee argues, “The extramarital relationships of men with boys in ancient Greece are infamous even today. Archaeological and literary evidence prove that these relationships were common for centuries in Greece, though they were frowned upon by many even while they were publicly practised... The most likely explanation then for this text in context would be that Paul was referring to a practice that was fairly common in the Greek culture of his day – married men who had sex with male youths on the side.” Paul’s letters would then be interpreted as condemnation of sexual exploitation, which again does not correlate to a whole healthy loving relationship between two consensual adults.

### **Where does that leave us?**

After going through these Scriptures, there is a lot that is still left up in the air. There is a lot that can be and has been debated. As with so much else in life we simply pray for guidance and wisdom to understand wholly and interpret honestly. But for me it simply comes down to what I believe about God. I believe God exudes, exists in, and embodies love. I believe where there is no love there is no God and that God does not create any of us to live in a constant state of shame or fear, because that is the opposite of love.

I have had enough friends from conservative Christian evangelical backgrounds coming to me broken from beating themselves up as abomination and afraid because coming out as gay means experiencing rejection, discrimination, judgement, and condemnation. Hearing these journeys make you want to weep. The call of the church is to fight for freedom, love, and justice. I fall back on this Scripture in Micah 6:8, “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.”

If, as a religion, we are not speaking to these spaces that then we need to rethink the religion. If as a country we are not even attempting to reflect on these principles then there is something deeply wrong with the state in which we are existing. Revolution is love, and love is love.

### **Further Resources**

[Romans and Shrine Prostitution](#)

[Roman Cult Practices](#)

[The Great Debate: Justin’s View](#)

[The Bible Does not condemn Homosexuality... Seriously it doesn't](#)

[Candice Czubernat’s Blog on being Queer and Christian](#)

James Brownson — *Bible, Gender, Sexuality: Reframing the Church’s Debate on Same-Sex Relationships*

Justin Lee, *Torn: Rescuing the Gospel from the Gays-vs.-Christians Debate*

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