

The background of the cover features several red tulips with green stems and leaves. A large, semi-transparent yellow circle is centered on the page, containing the title and author information.

The Erotic Contemplative

*Reflections on the Spiritual Journey of
the Gay/Lesbian Christian*

Michael Bernard Kelly PhD

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The Erotic Contemplative



Reflections on the Spiritual Journey
of the Gay/Lesbian Christian*

A six-volume lecture series for living, loving, and prayer

MICHAEL BERNARD KELLY PhD

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The video lecture series 'The Erotic Contemplative' has been digitised and re-released on the 25th Anniversary of the original recording. The EroticContemplative YouTube Channel:

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC6whUXSbW2v22D_WxPZpCPQ

Or search 'The EroticContemplative' on YouTube.

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Introduction

Welcome to *The Erotic Contemplative* lecture series. It is a pleasure and a privilege to be able to offer this newly digitised version of this series of lectures, and to make it freely available online.

In 1994 Dr Joseph Kramer of Erospirit Research Institute in California asked me if I would record some reflections that might support and encourage gay and lesbian Christians in reclaiming and re-imagining their spiritual lives (see ‘A Note on Language’ below). I was honoured by the invitation and excited by the project. These six lectures were my response to that invitation. They were recorded live in Oakland, California, in September and October, 1994, and published in both video and audiotape formats the next year.

The series was well-received, and for many years it circulated in these formats and was viewed and reflected upon by people all around the world. Over the decades, as often happens, the series gradually faded from view as new theologies, new voices and new technologies emerged, bringing both new insights and new forms of information sharing. Every so often, however, someone would contact me asking about *The Erotic Contemplative*, and inquiring about how they could access a copy of the series. As time went on such access became more and more problematic, as both video and audiotape formats became obsolete.

Eventually I realised that I was faced with a choice: I could allow the series to become increasingly inaccessible, or I could explore options for digitising the lectures. With the kind encouragement of Dr Joseph Kramer, who still had the original master copies of the tapes, the financial assistance of Mr Sean Crellin, and the technical help of Dr John Rolley, I decided to have the lectures professionally digitised and make them freely available online.

Questions and Concerns

In re-releasing these lectures I have faced a number of issues.

Twenty five years have passed since the initial recordings. Are they still relevant? Have developments in society, in the church, in theology, spirituality and biblical studies, and in LGBTIQ+ experience, moved on so far and so fast that these lectures no longer have much to offer? Are they talking about a time that has, thankfully, given way to a more enlightened and liberated present?

In personally revisiting and reviewing each of these lectures I have discovered several things. Firstly, many ideas and insights that were, arguably, groundbreaking and visionary 25 years ago are now relatively commonplace and unremarkable. In 1994, for example, it was still somewhat daring to suggest that gay relationships could not only be ‘ok’, but holy, filled with grace, sacraments of divine love, and gifts to the church and the world. Such an idea is now, thankfully, unremarkable in many church circles and communities—though it is very far from being universally accepted. The clearest manifestation of this kind of change is the fact that today same-sex marriage is legal in many countries, and these relationships are being blessed publicly by more and more churches. This was virtually unimaginable in 1994. *Coming Out* in 1994, to use another example, was far more challenging and potentially problematic than it is in 2019, at least in most progressive democratic countries.

At the same time, much in these lectures remains relevant and even, I hope, important. It surprises me, for example, that 25 years on, no-one else has really attempted to do what I aim to do in these tapes—which is to reframe and reimagine the traditional Christian mystical path in the context of the lives of self-affirming, fully open, sexually expressive queer people of faith.

In 2015 I graduated from a doctoral program at Monash University in Melbourne, Australia. During my studies I surveyed, in depth, the developments in queer theology, gay spirituality and

allied fields (such as gender and religion) over the past forty years. I also considered emerging thought in the fields of Christian mysticism, faith development theory, and spiritual direction. While there has been a good deal of brilliant, visionary and even paradigm-shifting work in these fields, still no one has attempted the task I set myself back in 1994, when I was asked to record a few talks.**

These lectures, then, still have some relevance and, I trust, they may still be of help to people who are seeking to integrate their lived sexuality with their call to mystical prayer and inner transformation. Of course, some parts of this eight-hour long course are somewhat dated—for example, there are some quite specific references to social and political events and issues that were clearly pressing at the time, but that are now simply part of twentieth century history. Most significantly, the lectures were developed during a period when HIV/AIDS was still devastating the queer community. At the time there were few medications but there was a great deal of fear, rejection and prejudice; life expectancy for most people who contracted the virus was relatively short. The talks were recorded in the San Francisco Bay Area, where I had been living for four years, and so, like the groundbreaking work of Dr Joseph Kramer, they emerged from a city and a community that were living through deep trauma that challenged every hope, every dream, every possibility, every relationship, every individual and every community of faith. This was also a time when many churches were still refusing not only to minister to people living with HIV, but even to bury the bodies of the dead. We now know that there were many priests and ministers of religion whose death certificates were altered so that AIDS was not mentioned, such was the shame, such was the rejection. There were some shining examples of true Christian love, like the ministry at Most Holy Redeemer, a Catholic parish in the Castro, but these were fairly rare.

In such a climate, it is not surprising that most gay/queer theology or spirituality of the period was developed against the

backdrop of repression, exclusion and condemnation. New approaches to scripture, moral theology, and church history were being explored, but overwhelmingly these were shaped as an argument against the oppression of queer people. Such arguments were, and sadly still are, essential. However, arguing that queer people can live fully self-affirming, sexually expressive lives as Christians is not the same as exploring how such lives might be lived—or, indeed, how they actually are being lived. Nor do such arguments offer wisdom around the spiritual patterns and movements that might emerge in such lives, and how these might be understood in light of the rich history of Christian spirituality and mysticism. Beyond even this lies the question of how such lives might challenge and potentially transform the spiritual and mystical tradition itself.

This was what I set out to explore in these lectures: what would it look like for a fully open, self-affirming, sexually alive gay person to live the full Christian mystical path into union with God? How might such a journey transform both our understanding of gay lives and queer sexuality, and of the mystical path itself? How might the wisdom and heritage of Christian mysticism be reclaimed and re-imagined for contemporary people, through the lived experience of gay and queer people? I set out to consider this in a structured way, drawing on the classical stages and themes of Christian mysticism. To my knowledge, and twenty-five years on, no one else has attempted to do this. My recent doctoral work, which takes this exploration to a new level and brings it into academic theological discourse, is significant precisely because of this persistent lack within the overall fields of both queer theology and Christian spirituality.**

It is in this context that I decided to consider re-releasing these video-lectures, despite the fact that they are, perhaps, somewhat dated. I was also persuaded by friends and colleagues who insisted that the material remains important, and that the approach taken in these talks, which is conversational and informal rather than

academic and formal, makes them accessible and engaging. My hope is that these lectures will genuinely be, as the original flyer for the series suggested, a ‘stimulus for living, loving and prayer’.

Welcome, friend, to *The Erotic Contemplative*.

Michael Bernard Kelly PhD

August 6, 2019. Feast of the Transfiguration. Melbourne, Australia



** A Note on Language*

I have kept the original title of the series as it appears on each video-lecture. In 1994 it was fairly bold to include ‘gay and lesbian’ in a title like this. In the early 1990s the term queer was just beginning to be reclaimed and used as a daring and confronting term that included all genders—but this was by no means universally accepted. For many people who identified as gay or lesbian, the word ‘queer’ was still a slur, still offensive. Later terms like LGBTIQ+ were quite unknown at the time these lectures were developed. Terms such as ‘cis-gender’ were still far in the future. Were I recording these lectures today, in 2019, I would have included such terms, and I offer my sincere apology to any listeners who may feel excluded or alienated by my use of ‘gay and lesbian’. My clear intention in the lectures was to use language that was as inclusive as possible—but, like everyone else, I was a person of my times.

In the lectures I also make it clear that I am speaking as a ‘man’ (we would now say a ‘cis-gender man’) who identifies as ‘gay’, and that I can only credibly speak from my own perspective and experience. I was initially reluctant, therefore, to include ‘lesbian’ in the title. However, in reviewing and editing the series Dr Kramer stressed that he felt my language throughout was so inclusive, and that the material itself was so broadly helpful, that we should make the title as inclusive as possible.

** Since publication of *The Erotic Contemplative* I have had two books published:

Seduced by Grace: Contemporary Spirituality, Gay Experience and Christian Faith. Published by Clouds of Magellan Press, Melbourne, Australia, in 2007.

<https://cloudsofmagellanpress.net/michael-bernard-kelly>

Christian Mysticism's Queer Flame: Spirituality in the Lives of Contemporary Gay Men. Published in hard-cover and e-book formats by Routledge, UK, in 2018. <https://www.routledge.com/Christian-Mysticisms-Queer-Flame-Spirituality-in-the-Lives-of-Contemporary/Kelly/p/book/9781138562127>

My doctoral thesis was entitled *Queer Flame of Love: Re-imagining the Christian Mystical Tradition in Light of the Experience of Contemporary Gay Men*.

It can be found online at:

https://monash.figshare.com/articles/Queer_flame_of_love_re-imagining_the_Christian_mystical_tradition_in_light_of_the_experience_of_contemporary_gay_men/4696975

General Introduction to the Series (1994)

Dear Friend,

The Erotic Contemplative is a lecture course intended for study, challenge and reflection. As such, it is meant to be a stimulus for your own living, loving and prayer. Resources such as this are still relatively rare for gay and lesbian Christians, and so I would suggest that this course deserves reflection, discussion and prayerful attention. In many ways it is simply an exploration, an attempt to ask questions and to offer possible directions for wondering, for thinking, for seeing with new vision. It is deliberately informal and personal in its style of presentation, rather than offering an academic treatise, or fixed and final theological positions.

These six lectures are only half the course. The other half is the lived experience and reflection that you bring to this gay/lesbian wisdom school. I warmly encourage you to work through the course gradually and thoughtfully.

I once heard the feminist theologian Carter Heyward say that ‘only theology forged in the crucible of experience is any good!’ I’d like to add, ‘and that goes double for spirituality!’

Studies of the spiritual life that ignore people’s actual experience are pointless. Now, when was the last time you read a study of Christian spirituality that took seriously the lived experience of gay and lesbian Christians? Denied and rejected by the church because we are gay; marginalised and criticised by gay ‘culture’ because we are Christian ... What is the Good News for us?

Most current discussions about Gay Christians concern our place in the institutional life of the Church. This is important. However, our call goes much deeper—indeed, into the Death and Resurrection of Christ, to liberation in Divine Union, to the fullness of Christian spiritual life! Gay and Lesbian Christians need to be able to recognise ourselves and our call in the spiritual wisdom of the People of God. We must be able to receive, reclaim and re-embody this wisdom free of homophobia, misogyny and

erotophobia. We need to experience this wisdom as liberation, not as condemnation, exclusion, or grudging acceptance.

We also need to share our stories with one another and with the whole Church, for our living and loving on the margins opens us to Incarnation and give us a unique perspective on the mystery of the Cross and the Resurrection. And these stories that we share and reflect upon must be the stories of our actual lives, including our sexual lives—our desires, dreams and experiences, our struggle to open to Grace in the midst of human life as it really is, not as some theology or theory of spiritual would have it be.

So, in this lecture course I set to explore the interface between the great traditional themes of Christian Spirituality and mysticism and the lived experience of Gay and Lesbian people today.

I sought to draw upon modern Scripture Scholarship, Liberation Theology, Creation Spirituality, the classic themes of Christian Spirituality (e.g. the Apophatic and Cataphatic Ways, Exodus, the Desert, Contemplative Darkness, Divine Union), and the real lives of Gay and Lesbian people reflected in works by our modern authors and in concrete personal experiences.

Some key considerations were:

- The Death and Resurrection of Christ is the great paradigm of Christian life. How is this incarnate in the lives of Gay and Lesbian Christians today?
- How can Christians listen authentically to the Holy Spirit in our sexuality, our desire and our loving?
- Can Scripture and the Christian Spiritual Tradition bring liberation and holiness to Gay and Lesbian Christians?
- What unique gifts do Gay and Lesbian Christians offer the Church?

I tried not to shrink from the difficult questions—both the challenge that our sexual loving presents to traditional concepts of

morality and ‘holiness’, and the challenge that the Cross of Jesus present to what passes for ‘Gay Culture’

Have I been successful in this unlikely venture? Initial responses from both Australia and the United States have been most encouraging. The audience has included Trappist monks, gay and feminist theologians, sex workers, gay activists, academics, priests and ministers from many denominations, men and women both straight and gay/lesbian, and people both inside and outside the Christian tradition.

For myself, I see this series as a beginning—but a beginning that I trust is the work of the Holy Spirit. For I do not want to consider simply whether I can belong within the church institution—I want to die and rise with Christ. I long to experience, in my actual, human, sexual, gay life that ‘I live now; not I, but Christ lives in me!’

We are all invited onto this journey. Perhaps this lecture series can be a help.

Thank you for the chance to share this conversation with you. May Holy Wisdom be with us all in our speaking and in our listening, in our learning and in our loving, ever ‘at play in God’s presence’.



Reviews and Endorsements (1995)

'The Erotic Contemplative is the most powerful and insightful study of Gay Spirituality that I know of. I have watched The Road from Emmaus (lecture 6) three times, and still find new riches!'

—John J. McNeill, PhD. Author of *The Church and the Homosexual*.

'In my theology classes, both gay and straight seminarians benefit from Kelly's integration of sexuality with Christian mysticism.'

—Robert Shore-Goss, PhD. Author of *Jesus Acted Up: A Gay and Lesbian Manifesto*

'An excellent resource ... a worthwhile investment'

—Bondings—a publication of New Ways Ministry

'The Erotic Contemplative lecture course has helped Gay Men and Lesbian who grew up as Christians move towards healing the wounds of the past.'

—Joseph Kramer PhD. Director, Erospirit Research Institute.

Lecture 1

The Truth of Our Experience

Summary of Topics and Issues

This session offers a general introduction to the course, and includes some notes and suggestions for spiritual directors. Areas considered include:

Our spiritual journey as one of Liberation, requiring a true theology of liberation which calls us:

- To see our actual situation
- To believe that things could be different, as we analyse the causes of oppression and consider strategies for change and transformation
- To reclaim and re-imagine Scripture and Tradition as our Story
- To form communities of resistance and support

The role of the Spiritual Director or Spiritual Companion:

- Education and formation, including the central role of personal experience
- Patience, quiet and faithful accompaniment, deep listening
- Being ready to be challenged, stretched, surprised and transformed
- Trusting in God's initiative as this emerges in real life and in patterns and lessons that only take form over a lifetime

The central importance of owning the deep truths of our own experience—our 'spiritual' and 'historical' lives are not separate. We live one life.

The God of Surprises; the ‘promiscuity of grace’; the freedom of the Holy Spirit.

Moral decision making and discerning the ‘law written on the heart’.

The ‘School of Love’ for gay and lesbian people.

The need for true elders, mentors, guides, models.

The ‘Affirmative’ (or Cataphatic) Way, and the ‘Negative’ (or Apophatic) Way, of spiritual and mystical growth.

The core importance of Celebration and Hope.

Regarding the complex issues around terms like ‘gay’, ‘lesbian’, ‘queer’ and ‘LGBTIQ+’, please see the extended Note on Language in the General Introduction to this new release of the series. The series was recorded in 1994, and generally follows the accepted conventions of the time.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What story or passage from Scripture has been most helpful and enriching for you as an LGBTIQ+ person?
2. What is the most difficult challenge we face in reclaiming Scripture and Tradition for LGBTIQ+ people? How could we work creatively with this?
3. Liberation? Consider the actual situation we face as LGBTIQ+ Christians, as you see it today. What does 'Liberation' mean to you? How committed are you (as an individual or as a group) to this journey of Liberation? What would it be like, feel like, look like?
4. Consider the reality of what we sometimes call the 'queer community', or the 'gay community', or the 'LGBTIQ+ community'? What kind of community do LGBTIQ+ Christians truly need? Be daring in your vision! How could you help to nurture such community?
5. Who have been your spiritual guides, mentors, and models? Who inspired and/or supported you during your 'coming out'? Who do you look to for guidance and inspiration as you mature in life as an LGBTIQ+ person of faith? Could you imagine becoming such a mentor, guide or model for others?
6. 'Coming Out'—both within yourself and externally in family, church, society and world—where you are personally on this journey? How do you understand God's call in this area? What is helping you, or hindering you in responding fully and freely to this call?
7. 'The God of Surprises' and the 'Promiscuity of Grace'. What do these terms mean to you? How have you experienced this in your

own life, or how have you seen this emerging in the lives of others? How do you handle giving up control in these deeper areas of your life?

8. Has your own ‘inner sense’ conflicted with ‘Religious Authority’? How have you tended to handle and/or resolve this conflict? How do you feel the Holy Spirit is calling you to deal with this conflict—both today, and over your lifetime?

9. The ‘School of Love’ is that which teaches us daily self-giving. What is this school of love for you in your personal life, and in your communal life? Do you think that living authentically as an LGBTQ+ person of faith can become a school of love for you?

10. Celebration. What is the difference between true celebration and ‘partying’? In your own life, what draws you into a spirit of deep celebration? Are there ways in which you block this? How can you and your community bring more ‘rituals of joy’ into your life?



Lecture 2

Re-visioning Sexuality and Spirituality

Summary of Topics and Issues

This lecture considers the questions and struggles we face in seeking to integrate our sexuality with authentic Christian spirituality, and explores new models for understanding the interweaving of these energies in our lives:

- What are the conversations we are afraid to have regarding sex?
- Is sex ‘good’? Does it need to be ‘justified’? The importance of ‘suspecting grace’.
- The integration of sexuality and spirituality—are they the same energy?
- ‘Tasting the Water’ in sexuality and spirituality:
 - The first taste;
 - The mystery that shows itself and at the same time withdraws;
 - The heart’s desire: being drawn ‘upstream’;
 - The Desire is One; the Water is One;
 - Going ‘underground’ towards the Source.
- Qualities of deep sexual experience mirroring qualities of deep spiritual experience.
- Pleasure—its power, our fear.
- We come alive, long to go deeper, become open:
 - Deep sexual experience begins to merge with the spiritual
 - Deep spiritual experience begins to merge with the sexual

- The dark night of the soul; the dark night of sex?
- The One life of God

Yet, it is not so simple. What else may be going on in sexual desire/activity?

- Seeking depth but mistaking context for substance
- Coming to know myself
- Coming to know my body
- Filling the 'hole' within myself
- Avoiding love, commitment, growth
- Mindless pleasure versus mindful, heartfelt pleasure.
- Does 'promiscuous' sexual activity 'dehumanise' us?
- Sex as teacher: the fear of losing control; self-knowledge
- What will take us into the depths? The Contemplative Heart.
- Living the experience: the part longs to become the whole
- Multiple partners and long-term monogamous relationship—
could there be a place for both in spiritual development over a lifetime?

Discernment: towards the new model.

*

Various quotes in this lecture about the powerful spiritual energies and transcendent experiences that may be present in sexual ecstasy and orgasm come from an essay by Mary D. Pellauer: 'The Moral Significance of Female Orgasm: Toward Sexual Ethics That Celebrates Women's Sexuality' in the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, Vol. 9. No. 1/2 (Spring–Fall 1993), pp. 161-182.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What is the conversation about sexuality that you, as an LGBTIQ+ Christian, most feel the need for?
2. Is sex ‘good’? What qualifications or criteria for discernment would you like to add? Do you feel at ease with the idea of sex as inherently good, not needing justification? Why or why not?
3. ‘The Mystery that shows itself and at the same time withdraws’. When have you experienced this in your own life?
4. Have you ever experienced sexual desire or sexual relating as deeply spiritual? Did this affect your prayer life and your relationship with and understanding of God?
5. How do you see the Church’s attitude to sexuality? Why do you think that Christianity has had such a difficult time with sex? How has this affected you personally? Does it still affect you?
6. ‘If I’m enjoying myself, it must be wrong’. Do you ever feel guilty about pleasure? Do you feel that you must limit the amount of pleasure you let into your life? Where do these feelings and ideas come from? What might liberate you to delight more fully and freely in your God-given body and your capacity for sensual pleasure?
7. ‘Sex, including our sexual desires and fantasies, can be a great teacher’. What has sex and sexual desire taught you about yourself? About life? About God? About authentic spirituality?
8. How does a person ‘deepen’ their sexual experience? How does a person ‘deepen’ their spiritual experience? How do you?

9. Multiple partners and spirituality: what do you think about this issue? What do you feel about it? How have these thoughts and feelings been formed? How do you feel about being open to new questions and explorations in this whole area?

10. In re-visioning sexuality, especially from the perspective of spiritual growth, what discernment points would you consider important? How does one discern that which leads to authentic growth, and that which hinders it?



Lecture 3

Exodus and Awakening

Summary of Topics and Issues

Discernment and courage in following God's call is the central challenge in our lives as Christians. God's call to Abraham and Sarah speaks to us as gay and lesbian people: 'Leave your homeland for the land I will show you!' We begin our journey with no map but with trust in God's promise, for always the Spirit leads us towards deeper awakening and more authentic liberation. Areas explored in this lecture include:

Christian life is always seen in the light of the death and resurrection of Jesus, and of the great stories of the People of God.

The great traditional themes of Scripture and of Christian spirituality have to take flesh in our own lives, and therefore we find our inspiration in the stories of Abraham and Sarah, of Exodus, of Jesus, of the desert monks and nuns.

God's call: 'Leave your homeland for the land I will show you!'

- The call to go out in trust with no clear maps, markers or destination
- The promise of God accompanies the call. This is our only assurance.

In the Exodus God says: 'Let my people go!' This is addressed to the gods of Egypt, to the gods of our culture, and to the gods within ourselves. We must name the slavery we have endured and even become accustomed to accept ("conscientisation").

The Call, the Promise, is always about the movement from slavery to freedom. This promise calls us to face our fear of the unknown and of the cost of freedom, and to move forward in trust.

Following God's call is at the heart of spiritual life for LGBTIQ+ people of faith. We follow in the midst of struggle, impelled forward by both the promise of freedom and the 'death' of our imagined future in the Church as we had known it.

We experience this call through Awakening on several levels. In particular:

- Discovering that our sexual desires are good and that we have a right to be fully sexual beings
- Discovering that our sexual relating can be truly holy and graced.

Awakening exposes us to the pain of the oppressive lies imposed upon us, and to the knowledge that we cannot go back to the old life, despite the security and the rewards it may seem to offer.

Awakening is profoundly threatening to the status quo:

- We now see and taste and name the oppression
- We now see and taste New Life from the Source within.
- This is a journey of 'Coming Out' in society and in the church, but also, most deeply and personally, coming out within oneself. It is a continual challenge. The need to respect God's movement in relation to timing.
- Community is vital in this process:
 - We encounter the 'wilderness' very quickly
 - We have no 'natural' family or community
 - We have been cut off from our sources of wisdom

- We will face hostility from society, church and some gay people.

The call for LGBTIQ+ mentors, elders and guides to tell their stories.

The crucial importance of ongoing discernment.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

1. Consider the times in your life and loving when you have felt the pain of 'death' and the surprising joy of 'resurrection'. How has the story, the message, and the presence of Jesus inspired and encouraged you in those experiences?
2. Have you personally experienced life situations when the call to 'Leave your homeland' was urgent and seemed the only way forward? How did you respond?
3. How do you experience and understand the 'slavery' to which LGBTIQ+ people have been subjected? Is your God the God of the slaves and the outcasts, or the God of the enslavers? How would you tell the difference?
4. What are the 'gods' within you that do not want to allow your journey towards freedom to take place? How do these 'gods' maintain their influence over you?
5. What is the 'cost of freedom' for LGBTIQ+ people in our culture and in the church? What has the cost been, and what might it still be, for you personally? Is this freedom worth the cost involved?
6. Consider your own story of 'Awakening'. When did you first experience your 'forbidden' sexual desires as good? Have you ever experienced sex as holy, graced, and sacred? Have you become aware of this experience of grace among other LGBTIQ+ people? How has this changed you, your understanding of God, your relationship with the church, and your relationship with your own body?

7. What does it mean to ‘come out within yourself’? How important is this? How does it relate to the various stages of coming out, and especially coming out publicly? Where are you on this journey towards full and free coming out?

8. The God of Jesus Christ always calls us to deeper freedom and fullness of life. What might this mean for LGBTIQ+ people? What might this mean for you personally—for your relationships, your career, your place in the church, your future, your sense of who you are and who you are called to be?

9. How might LGBTIQ+ Christians explore and express the communal dimensions of our faith? Have you ever experienced deep Christian community as an LGBTIQ+ person of faith? How might you personally nurture such community for yourself and others?

10. Who has mentored or inspired you as an LGBTIQ+ Christian? Who first encouraged you to begin to accept and embrace your sexuality and your spiritual call? As you look ahead, what kind of mentorship do you feel you need, and where might you look for models and inspiration as you continue to move towards justice, freedom and dignity?



Lecture 4

The Desert and the Dark

Summary of Topics and Issues

As we move ahead on our journey of spiritual and sexual integration and liberation, and if we are open enough, we soon begin to experience the reality of exile, rejection, stigma, and radical vulnerability. The ‘desert’ or the ‘wilderness’ is a place of growth, purification, testing and searing self-knowledge. If we remain faithful, our old ideas of God and of goodness will be hollowed out and broken apart. ‘God’ may seem to disappear. We know only a painful sense of failure, absence and emptiness. Over time we may come to find ourselves at home in the ‘darkness’ and the ‘un-knowing’.

Part One: The Desert

After the new joy and freedom of Exodus and Awakening we very soon enter the ‘Desert’, where we begin to taste the reality of exile, rejection, and vulnerability in the midst of our concrete, daily life.

The ‘Desert’ can be a place of growth, purification, testing and self-knowledge. We see this in the story of God’s people wandering in the wilderness, in the temptations faced by Jesus in the desert, and in the experience of the desert monks. Why is the actual experience of the desert, and the desert as spiritual metaphor, so important?

- Immediate and intense intimacy with nature
- Our basic human needs become sharp, clear, and unavoidable
- We discover our fragility, our interdependence, our vulnerability

- We encounter our own inner ‘demons’—the deep inner motivations and fears that we have never truly faced
- We encounter the awesome beauty and vastness of the universe, and our place within it
- We are inevitably ‘stripped’ and begin to discover our true values and beliefs.

The ‘temptations of Jesus’ for LGBTIQ+ Christians:

- To believe that the messages of Church and society must be ‘bread’ for us, and if they are not then it is our fault
- To bow before the gods of the culture—whether mainstream or queer
- To reject the ordinary, daily, hidden life of faith, hope and love.

The ‘temptations of the People of Israel’ for LGBTIQ+ Christians:

- To despair, to want to go back to the safety and comfort of the ‘closet’
- To dance around the ‘golden calf’ of gay/queer subculture.
- The issue of stigma: the ways stigmatised people cope:
 - Concealment
 - Militancy
 - Denigrating mainstream society
 - Boosting ourselves as a stigmatised group
 - Splitting our own community
 - Migration.

The alternative: to accept the reality of exile, to embrace the desert experience and learn its lessons of self-knowledge, justice, solidarity with other exiled people, and freedom from the gods of the culture; to become open to discovering a whole new way of being. We encounter life, love, ourselves, and God, beyond the structures, dictates and expectations of society and church—here, in the desert.

Part Two: The Dark

If we walk the desert roads with fidelity and trust, we are led even deeper—into the Dark.

God, and deep encounter/union with God, are beyond all words, feelings, and concepts.

Growth towards this encounter/union is deeply ‘dark’, often painful and confusing. Our most foundational structures of meaning, of ‘self’, and of God are gradually, sometimes ruthlessly, deconstructed. Tentatively, over time, our ‘true self’ may begin to emerge.

‘There are two atheisms, of which one is a purification of the notion of God’.

This inner growth seems contrary to what many of us expect. We feel radically disoriented as we are emptied of our reliance on structures of society, church, family, career, morality, sense of purpose, and sense of self.

Religious rituals, symbols, and languages become empty and meaningless. This is often profoundly painful. We feel we are going backwards.

We see our own weakness, compulsions, powerlessness. We feel as if we are losing control of our life.

‘God’ disappears—we know only a sense of dark and painful absence.

We feel excluded from life, as if life is over for us, and everything becomes pervaded by a sense of meaninglessness and hopelessness.

Despite all this, something in us continues on, seemingly blind and without purpose or direction, yet somehow sensing that this is the only way forward.

In all of this, through God's hidden and silent initiative, the true self is gradually emerging.

Many LGBTIQ+ people experience a very similar process because of the call to embrace our sexuality fully and freely. Living the truth of who we are with depth, reflection, and integrity can become a clear way into this level of profound spiritual growth.

Sex as teacher: being honest and reflective as we explore our sexuality can foster self-knowledge, unravel old structures, nurture receptivity and active passivity, confront us with the edge of losing control, and lead us towards self-acceptance and inner balance.

This journey leads to profound surrender and utter trust, as we let go of our lives, come to be at home in the dark and the not-knowing, and as our deep, hidden, inner centre gradually begins to draw our entire being towards wholeness.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

1. Consider your own ‘desert’ experiences as you have moved towards fully accepting yourself as an LGBTIQ+ person. How has it been for you? Think of one important story or experience of ‘exile’ in your life as an LGBTIQ+ person of faith. How did you handle this? What did you learn from it? How did it change you? Would you do anything differently now?

2. ‘Learning to embrace the exile’. What does this mean to you? How do you react to this idea? Is it possible? Is it necessary? What are the potential gifts and lessons, and also the potential pitfalls, of this kind of approach to experiencing ‘exile’?

3. How have you experienced, and how have you reacted to, the stigma that is often imposed on LGBTIQ+ people? Consider your inner feelings, but also your actions. How do you deal with stigma? How have you seen other LGBTIQ+ people deal with it? What has inspired you? What has concerned you?

4. Have you ever experienced the unique gifts that can come from being on the margins—in society as a whole, and also in your family, community and church? Have you been able to embrace these gifts? Have you seen others doing this, and what have you learned from them?

5. Who has offered you ‘hospitality in the desert’? Who has given you support, encouragement, and strength as you have struggled with times of feeling excluded, rejected, or condemned? Have you offered this kind of hospitality to other LGBTIQ+ people?

6. In what areas of your life do you find yourself still trying to ‘fit in’, to be invisible, or to ‘pass’? What motivates you to do this—not just on a practical level, but more deeply, in your heart and soul?

7. What are some of the ‘old skins’, the old self-identities you have left behind? Did you let go of them readily and gracefully, or was it a real struggle? Has it been worth it? What ‘skins’ or ‘identities’ still remain that you may be called to let go of? How do you feel about this kind of ongoing stripping and surrender?

8. How has your journey through the desert and the darkness affected your relationship with God, and with the church, and how has it changed your understanding of the spiritual life?

9. What have your sexual desires, experiences, fantasies and joys taught you about yourself? Are there still areas within you where you are reluctant to look? Could the Holy Spirit be gently calling you to explore those areas?

10. Consider one of the darkest times or experiences of your life. How has it changed you? How did life look to you before and after undergoing this experience? How has it changed your understanding of God?

11. How have your images, ideas and concepts of God changed over the years? Have you ever experienced emptiness, dryness and a sense of pointlessness in your prayer and your spiritual life? How did you respond in those times, and how have you moved forward, over time?

12. Do LGBTIQ+ Christians have any real ways of avoiding this deep journey through the desert and the dark? What would they look like? How have you avoided this journey? How have you embraced it? Where have you found the hope and trust to keep walking along this road of emptiness and unknowing?



Lecture 5

Liberation and Union

Summary of Topics and Issues

Gradually and, at first, imperceptibly, a turning point is reached. The journey now becomes about opening ever more fully to the graced movement of the Spirit in oneself, whilst also heeding the call to build the 'reign of God', the reign of justice, peace, freedom, and love, in the world. We discover that we are called to make love to God. Thus, the one forbidden to love is now asked by God to become the lover.

The entire journey is undertaken for the building of the 'kingdom of God': the reign of justice, peace, freedom, and love in oneself and in the world. This has both personal and political dimensions.

The 'now and not yet' of the Reign of God. The Resurrection must come alive in individuals and communities.

Coming out of the Dark. Where there was pain, now there is peace.

Touching the 'Core'. The 'Centre' must embrace our sexuality, and also the most rejected parts of ourselves.

The Exile finds Home—expressed as Solidarity; the Broken One becomes Whole—expressed as Commitment to Justice; the Slave becomes Free—expressed as personal and political Freedom.

In the mist of pain, struggle, isolation, and sometimes hostility, the deep centre within the person 'holds' and becomes a sure abiding presence that is dim and obscure, yet somehow also clear.

The person becomes deeply receptive, even 'passive', and longs only to be more open to God. This has a physical dimension.

In some way a turning point is reached. The person is now asked to make love to God. Thus, the one forbidden to love is now called, invited, by God to become the Lover.

The One we are asked to make love to is the Crucified Christ.

Reclaiming the sexual and erotic power of the spiritual metaphor of 'love-making'.

Communion of Love in the place of deepest shame and rejection.

Waiting for and opening to the Living Flame of Love. 'I live now, not I but Christ lives in me!'

The Communion of Love within the Trinity. Love is its own end.

The silence in the soul. The silent ground of the Godhead.

How are sex and sexuality experienced in this phase?

Towards a theology of gay/lesbian loving: the Communion within the Trinity.

The holy meal of St Francis and St Clare.

'The stone rejected by the builders has become the cornerstone'.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

1. Are there individuals or communities in which you have encountered the 'Resurrection', true spiritual maturity, the 'New Life' in Christ? Have you experienced this, even momentarily, in yourself?
2. 'The Exile finds Home. The Broken One becomes Whole. The Slave becomes Free'. Which image touches you most deeply, and why? Where are in your own growth towards 'home', 'wholeness', and 'freedom'?
3. Consider the areas of your life and your inner self that you find most 'shameful', 'ugly' and 'maimed'. What is the Word and the Will of God for you in these areas? Can you imagine, allow, embrace the idea of Divine Love waiting for you in precisely these areas within you?
4. Have you experienced the sense of being forbidden to love? Who forbade this? How deeply did you take this in? Can you believe that this is the very love that God asks of you as you mature in your life as an LGBTIQ+ Christian?
5. Consider your thoughts and feelings regarding the sexual imagery of making love to Christ. What is the deepest image for you personally of full spiritual union with God? What other physical/sexual/erotic imagery might be powerful or helpful for you?
6. If you are a lesbian woman, whether transgender or cis, how have you related to the traditional images of union with Christ? What images of Divine Love touch you most deeply? Does the image of making love with Sophia—Holy Wisdom, or with the Holy Spirit, hold any power for you?

7. ‘Loving the Crucified Christ’. Where, in our societies and in our churches, do you see Love’s crucified image? In what part of yourself? What might it mean for you to ‘make love’ to Christ in these people, these situations and these aspects of your hidden self? What feelings arise in you as you consider this invitation?

8. ‘We need our mentors, guides, our LGBTIQ+ saints’. Do you agree? Do you know any? How would you recognise them? What qualities would they have? How would they differ from traditional, canonised saints?

9. What is your own deepest spiritual call as an LGBTIQ+ person of faith, as you perceive it, at this stage in your life? How are you handling it? How do you imagine this unfolding in your life as you look ahead?

10. Why is the status quo in church and society threatened by the spiritual journeys of LGBTIQ+ people? How are we called to build the ‘Reign of God’—the reign of justice, peace, freedom, and love? How are you being called here, now, today?



Lecture 6

The Road From Emmaus

Summary of Topics and Issues

We are called to go forward on our journey with trust, honesty and openness, even when it seems to take us along unknown roads. We do not walk alone. As we enter deeply and vulnerably into the truth of our lives and our loving, and open to the presence of Christ within and among us, we discover a new fire and a new call. The Holy Spirit impels us to return, in some way, to the faith communities we have walked away from in despair, and to tell our story of how we have recognised Christ in our lives and our loves, in the journey away from the community, in the deep truth of our experience. Only then can the Risen Christ become fully alive and present in the whole community.

The importance of the Gospels in coming to understand Christian life for gay and lesbian Christians. The need for sound study and learning as well as reflective reading and creative interpretation.

Introducing the Gospel of Luke, and the community he wrote for.

A gay and lesbian ‘hermeneutic’—or ‘principle of interpretation’. We can, and we must, reclaim these scriptures for our time and our communities, and for our personal journey of faith.

‘The Road to/from Emmaus’ is very much our story. Imagine the two disciples as two gay men or two lesbian women, or two people who are transgender*:

- The importance of honest and supportive companionship
- Being reflective, open to God’s initiative, open to the stranger

- The journey away from the community, as a group where the resurrection has been proclaimed but not truly received
- Honesty in leaving, walking our own roads openly, vulnerably sharing our stories with one another, owning our sadness, grief, and deep spiritual disappointment
- And yet, remaining open to surprise as we walk
- Open to women, strangers, those whose witness is said to count for nothing
- Ready to speak and listen to the truth, regardless of status or structures or our own expectations
- Suffering and rejection as the road to Risen Life—the cross is the only way. Our hearts burn: we know this place. We know the lessons of the rejected ones. We hear the truth of our experience named.

Such is the potency of this encounter that we invite the ‘stranger’ in to share our table, our lives, our actual experience. It is our bread, our real lives and our loves that the stranger takes up, blesses and breaks open. In this, our eyes are opened and we see the One who has been with us on the difficult road we have been walking. Here, the Risen One is sharing Eucharist with his people.

In response, first, we reflect together and acknowledge our shared experience and shared revelation.

Together, we know the almost irresistible call to return and proclaim what we have experienced, especially to our still fearful and confused and grieving community. The hardships of the road and the dark of night do not deter us, such is the ‘fire’ within our hearts that this encounter and revelation have kindled

We return and tell our story—of the road, of the stranger who accompanied us, and of the revelation/recognition we shared. How will we be received?

In Luke's account: 'The Lord has risen and has appeared to Peter'. They then tell their story. Thus the witness of Peter, the 'rock' of the church, and of these two 'outsiders' come together. Jesus has not yet appeared to the whole community.

Jesus appears to the whole community, breathes peace upon them. Jesus opens the minds and hearts of the whole community as he had already done for the two disciples in their journey away from the community.

He commissions the community—but tells them to 'wait in the city'—timing is important; empowerment is important

This is how it is with us. We are called, in different ways, to 'return' and tell our story of our encounters with the Risen One—on the road, and in our own most intimate moments at 'table' with those we love

Only when the witness of the 'outsiders' and 'Peter' come together in our time can the Christian community truly be filled with the power and joy of the Risen Christ. Our witness is essential, no matter how we may or may not be received.

We can only share our stories if we have responded to the call to walk on our own journeys, even when these seem to take us away from the official church community

We need to walk in company, supporting and reflecting with one another. The need for genuine communities of faith for LGBTIQ+ people

Final reflections on this series of six lectures.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

1. How and when have you ‘gone away sad’ from your church community? In what ways were your ‘hopes dashed’? Are there different levels and various ways in which people ‘go away’—perhaps even while still seeming to remain within the community? Are we called by God to ‘leave’? How have you personally experienced this? How have you responded, over time?
2. How and when has the church led you deeper into the ‘Risen Life’ of Christ? How and when has the church failed you in this?
3. Do you really believe that the ‘Cross’, the road of suffering and death to self, is the only true way to life? Do you truly believe that the ‘poor’ are ‘blessed’? How have you experienced this in your own life? Where are you still resisting this teaching?
4. Have you ever sensed the presence of God, or Christ, accompanying you on your journey, especially as an LGBTIQ+ person? Have there been ‘strangers’ who have walked alongside you, and who have been ‘Christ’ for you?
5. When have you experienced true Eucharist—the Holy Meal of Life and Love, not just ‘mass’—as an LGBTIQ+ person? What was it about these moments that made them truly eucharistic for you? Have there been moments when you suddenly realised that Christ was truly present for you, especially in situations and experiences where you thought you had lost sight of God’s love? How did this change you?
6. Are there areas in your life which you are holding back from Christ, not truly inviting him in to share your ‘table’ as it really is? Why are you keeping these areas from Christ’s love? How might you grow beyond this resistance and gradually become fully open to Divine Love?

7. How do you feel about the call to ‘return’ and ‘tell our Story’? Does the church want to hear us, to hear you? How can we live and ‘tell our Story’ creatively and not just in words? How can we work towards a greater dialogue within the church, not just for us but for all whose journeys, lives and stories have been marginalised, silenced or excluded by religious authorities and ‘mainstream’ Christians?
8. In the Emmaus Story there are two disciples, waking together. Have you had such a companion (or companions) on your path? How important is it to walk these roads in company with supportive companions?
9. How do you feel about reflecting on Scripture in the way it is done in this lecture? Have you studied and worked with the Scriptures in this way? Which stories and passages have been particularly important for you?
10. Which other stories or passages from the Bible would you most like to see reclaimed and reinterpreted for your own life and the lives of other LGBTIQ+ people of faith?
11. Which parts of this six-lecture course have touched your life most deeply? Why? How might you bring the lessons you have learned and the insights you have gained into your daily life as an LGBTIQ+ Christian?
12. What now? How can you and your community nurture and deepen your spiritual journeys and share your wisdom and insight with other LGBTIQ+ people and other churches and communities?



