
Queerness and Christianity

Jesus and Matthew: Monsters, Si[g]ns, and Wonders

Edward J. Ingebretsen¹

In the American New Right's outraged war against all things anti-family, -nation, and -civilization, the authority of Jesus, crucified yet triumphant, is held out as potent augury against all forces of evil. For many evangelical Christian groups, one "archenemy" in particular exemplifies the forces of Satan and civil distress. The resulting scene of Manichean conflict can only be called Gothic Verite: The suffering, broken body of Jesus, whose blood is piously read as atonement, rebukes the demonized and monstrous homosexual, whose blood, Gothically read, contains the taint of private immorality, public domestic threat, and world-ending civic collapse. This powerful clash of images, cosmic worldviews and mundane politics can be observed at the funeral of Matthew Shepard—beaten to death, most observers conclude, because his assailants thought he was gay. In the tense confrontation of Christians and homosexuals at his funeral, one sees a historic tension within the heart of Christianity threatening, at whatever cost, to reconcile. That is, at issue is the recognition, however dim, that the angel and the demon, the prayerful and depraved, mirror each other more than they differ.

KEY WORDS: Matthew Shepard; homosexuality; Christianity.

Io! See, above the rest,
a monster to behold,
Proceeding from a Christian brest,
to [o] monstrous to be tolde . . .

(Wilson, 1993, p. 43)

In this sign, conquer: On the strength of a dream/vision (accounts differ) in 312 CE (Common Era), Emperor Constantine reports that he swept to victory over an army invading Rome. Constantine's victory changed not only the course of Roman history, but Christian as well (Barnes, 1981; Creed, 1984). In addition, Constantine's vision has repercussions in areas far removed from history. For

¹Director, American Studies, Georgetown University, Washington, DC 20057; e-mail: ingebree@GUNET.Georgetown.edu.

instance, the horror genre parodies the Emperor's visionary moment, when, in late-Gothic texts such as Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) and in its many cinematic knock-offs, crossed sticks thrust in the vampire's face provide the *deus ex hex* by which the monster is vanquished and civility restored.

But we needn't go to the movies to see Constantine's powerful sign in operation. A version of this drama plays out in the millennial apocalypse of current American politics, where threatening monsters are faced down by the powerful hex of *Crux Triumphans*. In the New Right's outraged war against all things anti-family, -nation, and -civilization, the authority of Jesus, crucified yet triumphant, is held out as potent augury against all forces of evil. For many evangelical Christian groups, one "archenemy" (Bull and Gallagher, 1996, p. 3) in particular exemplifies, even distills, the forces of Satan and civil distress. The resulting scene of Manichean conflict could only be called *Gothic Verite*: The suffering, broken body of Jesus, whose blood is piously read as atonement, rebukes the demonized and monstrous homosexual, whose blood, Gothically read, contains the taint of private immorality, public domestic threat, and world-ending civic collapse.

This powerful clash of images, cosmic worldviews, and mundane politics can be seen at the funeral of a young man brutally beaten to death, most observers conclude, because his assailants thought he was gay.² Late on the evening of Oct. 6, 1998, a diminutive freshman at the University of Wyoming was lured out of a bar by two acquaintances who then drove Matthew Shepard to a deserted road outside of town. There, Shepard was tied to a fence and struck 18 times in the head with the butt of a .357 Magnum pistol. After the attack, he was abandoned, bound, and still conscious in freezing weather.³ The assailants took his shoes—so that he would not be able to escape, one said (Vaughan, 1999). During the subsequent five days, during Shepard's agonizing descent into death, numerous groups hastened to orchestrate the emotional upheaval around the brutal killing for their own purposes. Two groups, in particular, deserve note. Outside the church in which Shepard's funeral was being conducted, mourners (many, although not all, homosexuals) clad in white robes and calling themselves "Angel Action," used large wings made of sheets to block a congregation of Baptists who had gathered across the street to protest Matthew's homosexuality. Some of the signs carried by the Christians read "Matt in Hell"; "God hates fags"; "fags die—God laughs"; "No Tears for queers" (O'Driscoll, 1999, p. 6).

What looks like *de more* politics, however aggravated, was not what it seemed. Or rather, the confrontation staged in a literal fashion over Shepard's dead body

²In a letter written to a cellmate's wife, Aaron McKinney writes that when he learned Matthew Shepard was gay, he "flipped out and began to pistol whip the f— with my gun. . . ." (Vaughan, 1999).

³The two bicyclists who found Shepard thought he "was a scarecrow or mannequin because of the way he was sprawled on the fence." (CNN Interactive, 1998). <http://222.cnn.com/US/9810/10/gay.beating.ap/index.html>].

signified something else other than mere lack of respect and taste. It is not enough to say that homosexuals in angel-drag and demonizing Christians merely reverse the customary shoot-out scenario in which Christians are the good guys (angels) and homos are the bad (demons). To the contrary, in the engagement of unexpected demon and ironic angel, one sees a historic tension within the heart of Christianity threatening, at whatever cost, to reconcile. That is, at issue is the recognition, however dim, that the angel and the demon, the prayerful and depraved, mirror each other more than they differ. It is historically the case that aesthetic as well as literary discourses of the sublime—the holy as well as the horrible—share a common fount of images, metaphors, and even on occasion prompt similar emotional responses (Ingebretsen, 1996; Kristeva 1982; Marty, 1997; Mishra, 1994; Schwartz 1997). Indeed, as Julia Kristeva (1982) declares, the power of horror is precisely its relation, often unacknowledged, to the discourse of the sacred from which it originates (p. 207ff). Thus, it is not surprising to find an incestuous link between the two discourses, or to see that their agents can exchange faces, even roles. At Laramie, for example, the fags—traditionally monstrous—became angels, while the Christians—in contemporary practice bearers of civic piety and sentimentality—instead bring news of a certainly dreadful kind.

The starting point of this return of the repressed must be the central image of Christian devotion itself, the crucifix—that fetish of pain central to Christian devotional usage. In this a primal religious scene, a near naked man is bound and blooded; his flesh bears its scars and our voyeuristic gaze to the transcendent. In its stark iconography, we have all the elements of what John Updike (1993), perhaps with St. Paul's "stumbling block" in mind, called the scandal of the Incarnation. Yet the image of the crucified Jesus is complicated for other reasons as well, and Shepard's association only adds to the confusion. That is, Jesus's body in pain—its avowed scandal in early Church history, its monstrosity in theological history—has explicit parallels in the monstrosity and visible scandal of the symbolic homosexual body arrayed against it (witness the current political scene where bewinged homos face-down hate-spitting Christians). Matthew Shepard was identified as gay largely in hindsight, it seems; yet offered up as another Jesus Christ, his gay-identity accrues an additional ironic burden of scandal and offense unrelated to his sexuality.

In many conservative Catholic venues, crucifixes are a potent reminder of a now-past era of Catholic hegemony. Nostalgic Catholic forces in churches, schools, and other public places seem anxious to keep the startlingly abject body of Jesus ever visible—not as sign of religious defeat, which it represents, but, remembering Constantine, as sign of civil victory and authority (Hickey, 1997; Neuhaus, 1997). Still, representations of the cross, however attenuated or distanced from religious origins, are never univocal in meaning. Whether the cross or crucifix appears as backdrop (on a moldering grave in the opening scenes of *Frankenstein*, for

example), or whether it hangs above the altar in a Christian church or, thirdly, is taken to the streets in a protest march—in any of these instances, the sign (and the power it represents) can no longer be considered private preserve to believers. That is, one can argue that since Constantine's Edict of Milan (313 CE), this Christian emblem can neither be cordoned off within a specific disciplinary practice, nor can its representations be limited to religious discourse. To the contrary, the cross is a conflicted transcultural sign, pilloried as oppressive by as many who would applaud it as liberational. Sedimented in often contradictory forms of secular governance, in current practice the cross serves as many functions in Western culture as there are people to wear it, pray to it, institutionalize it, mock it, and, of course, sell it. All this merely suggests that the meaning of the cross is as multiple and ambiguous today as it was to St. Paul and other early apologists for the Christian sect. In that ambiguity lies the problem.

There is a certain irony in the way this representation of a defeated body is set off against the another defeated public body whose sign, in Christian discourse, is also scandal and offense. That is, like the powerful sign of the abject Christ, within Christian discourse homosexuals have their own well-defined narrative, within which they, too, are raised to symbolic contemplation. This makes possible an occasional—and uncomfortable—overlap in representation: in sentimental, erotophobic Christianity, the lacerated and beaten Christ, held high in visible abjection, is uncomfortably close, imagistically speaking, to the likewise abjected bodies of homosexuals in a variety of Christian disciplines. Further, one can argue that it is the closeness of subject, metaphor, meaning, even representative treatment of these two bodies, rather than explicit difference between them, that sparks semantic crisis. Shepard's death underscored the association. Matthew and Christ *are* linked, even if for reasons completely different than the liberality that would join them in victimhood.

Shepard's apotheosis is instructive. David Skal (1993) remarks that in the history of Gothic representations monsters often "proved themselves serviceable Christ-substitutes" (p. 313). So, indeed, they did in Wyoming. When news of the beating broke, within a matter of days, Matthew, the homosexual, was transfigured by media and political representation into a faux-Christ. This was a problematic makeover, as we shall see. Nonetheless, the exchange asks us to consider, in Skal's apt parallel, just how is the monster a Christ-substitute? Further, speaking to a context much wider than Shepard's death, how does the homosexual—historically bearer of stigma—provide legitimacy to while underwriting Christian doctrine? To understand these questions we need to revisit the very beginning of the Christian era.

In the first place, we have a religious system whose elite dogmas as well as popular narratives are suffused and energized by stigma and offense. Christianity's doctrinal basis (the Incarnation) proposes a hybrid *blending* of two persons, Divine and human, in Jesus. Such a formulation has been regularly perceived (by

theologians and philosophers alike) to be monstrous and, in a literal sense, logically incredible. An early formula enjoined belief in Christ precisely on such grounds: *Credo quare incredibile est*. Such perceptions still exist. Only recently, for instance, Garry Wills (1994) observed that the “idea of the Incarnation may be monstrous” (p. 6). John Updike (1983), an astute theologian in his own right, thus echoes an observation as old as St. Paul and as recent as Kierkegaard when he writes, “Orthodox doctrine bridges matter and spirit with a scandalous Incarnation, Jesus Christ” (pp. 76–77). Throughout its history, Christian apologetics has struggled to accommodate the incoherency demanded by its belief in the nature of the God-man. Such accommodation succeeded, of course, only partially; evidence of its failure can be read in the splintered traditions of Christian theology, literature, and even in Post-Reformation debates about political and secular governance. Yet despite the attempts of apologists to erase the offense, the various stigmata of what might be termed, in modern parlance, “spoiled identity” (Goffman, 1963), around Jesus constantly edges him into an epistemology of the monstrous. This is true in both of the word’s senses, as marvelous as well as horrible. Christ, the transcendent sign, is irretrievably a monstrous sign of contradiction, as Paul suggested—even to those who would stake their lives upon his name.

In terms of its theology, the Incarnation, construed as monstrous, was a matter of record through the medieval ages. In 1412, for instance, Hoccleve asks, “Was it not eek a monster as in nature yat god i-bore was of a virgine?” (De. Reg. Princ. 344, OED, Vol. 6, p. 1036). David Williams (1996) discusses this point in connection with a medieval conflation of the Oedipus and Christ stories:

Just as the Greek myth recognized the basic monstrosity of human beings and expressed it through the image of paradox and enigma, the Christian mediaeval text extends this perception to God Himself and so makes of the human monster a reflection of the ultimate monster, God. (p. 266).

Moving beyond philosophical categories and theological debate to the study of Jesus’s life itself, the ambiguity of the sign remains. As Scripture attests, Jesus’s short life was marked by scandal, beginning with a shame-filled birth out of wedlock, among stabled animals, and ending with his ignominious death as a public criminal. Testamental writers draw attention to the singularity of the events, even to the point of marking these events as monstrous in order to underscore the potential each held for civic distress. In Matthew’s account, for instance, the birth of Jesus “troubled all of Jerusalem.” One consequence of course of this civic distress was the slaughter, as Matthew notes, of all children under two years of age. On the other hand, Jesus’s criminal death likewise so distorted the natural order that, in John’s telling, “the ground rocked and the dead walked.” The monstrousness of each case is demonstrated in the disruption of civic as well as natural order.

While implications of deviancy and public shame circulate around Jesus’s life, they achieve particular pointedness in the manner of his death. In every age

since the earliest revision of the life of Jesus, the sign of the cross reprises a haunted memory, a *memento mori* of shameful death. If the scandal of Jesus's birth needed narrative managing, even more so did the public affront of his tainted death. Death by crucifixion was a *mors supplicium* (Spivey, 1999)—the “utmost” death, reserved for outcasts and those whose crimes were thought singularly disgraceful. In *A Marginal Jew*, Paul Meier (1991) notes:

In Roman eyes, Jesus died the ghastly death of slaves and rebels; in Jewish eyes he fell under the stricture of Deut. 21:23: “The one hanged [on a tree] is accursed by God.” To both groups Jesus' trial and execution made him marginal in a terrifying and disgusting way” (p. 8).

To Paul, the death was doubly offensive. James Walsh, SJ (1987) argues that for Paul, the cross symbolizes Jesus's “identification with those . . . under a curse” (p. 161ff). Himself a Pharisee, and always mindful of his elite tradition as well as his Jewish readership, Paul went to great lengths to rewrite the crucifixion in ways that removed the taint of its criminality. Extensive puns throughout Pauline Scripture align the rock of Christ as “foundation” and the “stone of stumbling and a rock of offense” (see, for example, 1 Peter 2:8). Thus, while Paul in Corinthians seems to celebrate this scandal, he does so only in the interests of controlling its stigma and effects. His conventionally traditional, not to say pharisaical habits leave him uncomfortable with the implications of this socially shameful death. Over time, however, with the growing institutional success, as well as civic security of the initially proscribed sect, the offense of Jesus's death became secondary to those who were eager to recoup the death as spiritual triumph.⁴

Early Christian writers managed the epistemological and social crisis implied by the crucifixion by borrowing Paul's strategy. That is, Paul undertook to resituate the criminality and scandal of *mors turpissima crucis* (the most degraded of deaths) as a sign of affirmation. Similarly, theologians argued that the atonement of the human race was accomplished by virtue of the monstrous paradox inherent in the Incarnation itself. That is, only a transgressive body—one that violates categories, and is by definition unnatural and thus monstrous—could overcome the transgression wrought in human nature by the unnaturality of sin. Again, Williams writes: “Such a redemption of the natural relations of things is possible only through a figure who ‘unnaturally’ resolves within the monstrous paradox of his own double nature, man and God, the opposition of spirit and matter” (1996, p. 9). In similar manner, managing the stigma of this troublesome death became the task of Christian apologists and theologians from St Paul through Jerome, Augustine, Origin, Luther, through the Reformation and beyond, to moderns like Barth, Bonhoffer, and others (McCracken, 1994; Smith, 1997; Twitchell, 1989).

⁴Indeed, coming to terms with the scandal of the Cross and Christ's mortality precipitated a crisis of management as old as the Council of Chalcedon (Twitchell, 1989, p. 28ff). It was the Trullan Synod in Constantinople (692 CE) that finally lifted the ban on representations of Christ's body. Until then, representations of Jesus's death had tacitly ignored the body by substituting a lamb, a dove, or other symbol.

“Scandal,” “monstrous,” “offense,” these words thus have a deeply Christian resonance (Guhrt, 1975–78). The offensiveness of Matthew Shepard’s funeral was partially the way it recalled the primary offenses *contained within* Christianity itself—multiple sites of offense that rupture Christian history as well as theology. One could legitimately argue that the crisis of how talk about Jesus’s monstrous body—his birth, death, and how to depict it (as well as the pain undergone by Jesus)—leads directly to the Reformation and thus, as Auerbach (1953) and others argue, to the divide, in aesthetics, between mimesis and allegory.

Refiguring Matthew in a mode of victim associated with Jesus Christ drew attention backwards to the various scandals and offensives located in Jesus Christ himself. Building upon this point, however, Shepard’s funeral accrues added ironic depth in the way that it affirms still yet another link, suggested earlier: one of representation. That is, representations of Jesus (in life as well as in death, in pain as well as in resurrection) have explicit parallels to the homosexual body symbolically arrayed against it in contemporary Christian politics. Indeed, one might argue that the visibility of both signifying bodies, precisely as *sign*, depends, to a large extent, upon the discourses of trauma and scandal through which each signifies—the one as awe-ful, and the other, inversely, as aw-ful. From either direction, conditions of taboo and unspeakability inhere in both. Consider that in discourses of law, medicine, and religion, homosexuality is characterized by monstrosity and civic offense, and as often as not situated within a discourse of criminality and exemplary pain—not unlike the sacred body of Jesus, which, as we have seen, likewise signifies within a history of monstrosity, offense, and exemplary pain.⁵ Both bodies inhabit similar symbolic spaces in which they are carriers, as it were, of social opprobrium. One is the bearer of a criminality willfully overlooked and a monstrosity pointedly ignored; the other carries a criminality never forgotten and a monstrosity repeatedly produced. This was the potential reconciliation poised over Matthew Shepard’s dead body: The holy and the horrible—in Christian theological discourse the authority of Christ’s redemptive body and its abjected counterpart in Christian popular discourse, the demonized homosexual—set out to repudiate the other. Instead, each brought the other to closure.

Numerous critics note that homosexuality marks a site of rupture in institutional Christian discourse, a place where its repressive energy is most pronounced. It can be argued that homosexuality is too “monstrous to be tolde” because its categories, definitions, meanings, and social usages “proceeded from the christian brest.” The entangled discourses of Christian governance, ideology, doctrine, as well as culture show how this management works. Indeed, as Boswell (1980) and others argue, anxiety of the homosexual—what Jordan (2000) calls the “Silence of Sodom”—circulates as a persistent affect through Christian discourse. One could

⁵The body in pain has a long history of double-representation in Christian theology first as a sign of sin, but in addition, as a sign of grace. The leper and the syphilitic, in particular, were thus ambiguously designated, as AIDS discourses were likewise. See Brody, 1974; Gilman, 1988; Quetal, 1990.

argue, however, that the transgressive force of homosexuality derives ultimately from the social-theological codes of Judaism from which Christianity takes its origins. Clark (1990), for example, makes what appears to be such an argument. He observes that “the inordinate valuing of heterosexual men and male sexuality entered western consciousness simultaneously with the earliest beginnings of Judaeo-Christianity” (p. 51).

Within Christian discourse, homosexuals have their own repudiating narrative of stigma and offense, the singularity of which parallels that of Christ’s symbolic body. That is, homosexual men and women (men, more often) serve as *exemplars*, signs that secure the binary of the “unnatural”—a point explored by Jonathan Dollimore (1991) in *Sexual Dissidence*. Thus positioned, the homosexual body holds in place the discourses of sin and transgression that the Christic body, in its turn, sanctifies and atones. The power they wield by virtue of their unnaturality, then, is as powerful a sign as that of Christ’s epiphanic, exemplary, although *equally* “unnatural” body. The return of this repressed energy was dramatically played out in the uncompromising wastefulness of Matthew’s death—especially as the death was allegorically collapsed, for political gain, into a primal religious scene of abjection: the crucifixion. Further, this confusion of sign and memory reawakens long-standing moments of crisis in Christianity—as noted above, traumas that are to some extent foundational to it (anxieties that center on the nature of God, the meaning of Jesus’s death, and ultimately the nature and scope of the sacred). Surveying the stand-off at the funeral, however, one is led to ask, *which* is the monster and which is the hex—the angelic homosexuals or the demonic Christians? Who is scandalized? Where, finally, does the scandal lie—in the homosexual or in Christ? On the cross or in the violence done in the cross’s name? How, finally, is Matthew—homosexual and thus, to many, monstrous—for this very reason a bearer of sacred memory?

INTERLUDE: THE HERETIC AND THE SAINT

“You need to be saved, that’s what you need,” one woman told a Gay man. “You’re going straight to hell, all of you. . . . God’s word is that you be put to death” (Campbell, 1993a, p. 8).

While Shepard’s death saw the collapse of gothic demonizing and religious discourse, an incident some years earlier had worked hard to separate the two. In 1992, a noisy group marched outside the Arlington County Library in Virginia to protest its decision to carry *The Washington Blade*, a gay and lesbian weekly newspaper. This fundamentalist Christian group carried signs and placards, one of which read, “Save my child from the sexual monster” (Campbell, 1993b, p. 1). The provocative doubleness of this word was unrecognized at the time by the marchers. Indeed, the sign-carrying Christians would have been scandalized—offended in the word’s deepest sense—to discover that, far from being alien,

monsters are their born-again kin. For despite its cartoon dress in its linguistic histories as well as in material practices, the monster functions as a *metaphysical* signifier. That is, bearing an authority from somewhere outside and beyond the normal maps of civil life, it is an omen or remonstrance that all is not well with the community in which it appears (Cohen, 1996; Ingebretsen 2001; Wilson, 1993).

For the marchers outside the library and the Christian protesters at Shepard's funeral, the alienating charge of monstrosity was intended not to *link* the homosexual to religion, but rather, in the name of Christ's authority to disavow it. Nonetheless, the attempt to cast it away only made evident how tightly the two are entwined. In the *Production Journal for Stoker's Dracula*, director Francis Ford Coppola observes that Dracula's repudiation of Christianity indicates that "the highest angel can turn into the most base devil by a simple act of renouncement" (cited in Ingebretsen, 1996, p. xxvi). In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud (1961) puts a similar insight into slightly different words and context, showing how the psychic dynamics of repression, via projection, can give rise to what he calls the "Narcissism of minor difference" (p. 114). For a complicated mix of reasons, such aggression is an enduring feature of the Christian world-view. A need to draw lines and separate out, to exclude and disassociate, is central to its rubrical, doctrinal, and institutional habits.

To the extent that the marchers remained unaware of the history of the word "monster," the rebuke they intended for the homosexual missed its target. The same can be said for those who transformed Matthew into Christ, thereby exploiting religious imagery for a dubious mix of private altruism and political gain. That is, the marchers (as well as the more liberally positioned observers of the funeral) forgot that the power of the word "monster" is not unlike the metonymic magic of the cross in Gothic lore—indeed both derive from a common source. This is an obvious though forgotten reason why in formula horror, for example, the cross is ultimate antidote to the monster's depredations. *In hoc signo vinces*: the odd homeopathy of horror in which awe-fullness vanquishes the awful. In the exchange, the repressed returns, simultaneously, as rupture as well as seal.

The monster's age-old function as an omen of transcendent judgment upon the community underscores the crucifixion's status, likewise, as *the monstrum* of divine judgment. The hybrid God-Man is monstrous in meaning as well as in category; it was the ultimately monstrous body and, further, monstrously ambiguous in the mix of shame and triumph that it portended and demonstrated. The logic of these metonymic identifications complicates any reading of Matthew Shepard as Christ. As Christ, further, Matthew becomes a different kind of *Monstrum*, a remonstrance of a different order entirely. In the truest sense of the word, he becomes angelic and thus ominous—his disgrace making him a bearer of grace as well as an agent of dread.

READING THE MONSTROUS BODY

Mourners arriving for a memorial service in honor of Matthew Shepard were greeted by an tableaux—“crude tree limbs roped together”—intended to recall the scene of Matthew’s death as well as the crucifixion of Jesus. The representation drew a “horrified gasp” from viewers at the Cathedral of Hope Metropolitan Community Church, who were thereby forcibly put in mind of Shepard’s lashed and broken body hanging on a fence in sub-freezing weather (*Dallas Morning News*, 1998). Elsewhere, at the funeral proper, the Rev. Anne Kitch (Shepard’s cousin) made the jarring allegory explicit. Wrote one observer, Rev. Kitch “evok[ed] the image of Jesus as another man whose body was broken, torn and abandoned on a wooden cross” (Cornelius, 1998). Shepard’s death touched widespread chords of outrage and sympathy. Liberal persons, religious as well as secular, eager to mean well by the plight of homosexuals, quickly read Matthew as an image of Christ. Writing in *The New Republic* little more than a month later, theater critic Robert Brustein (1998), reviewing Terrence McNally’s new play, “Corpus Christi,” recalled in this strange context Shepard’s death, noting that it bore “uncanny resemblance to a crucifixion” (p. 34). Politically-minded persons found in the starkly moralized dichotomy of the scene a chance to advance hate-crime legislation, then under interminable discussion in the Senate. The image of the scarecrow on the fence became part of a fraternity float in a homecoming parade a few blocks from where Shepard lay near death in a Fort Collins hospital. The straw-haired scarecrow on the float was labeled, in black spray paint, “I’m Gay.” On the manikin’s back was painted, “Up My Ass.” Fraternity officials suspended seven members, saying they acted “independently” (People For the American Way, 1999, pp. 99–100).⁶

Some, like *Vanity Fair*, saw in Shepard a potential for economic exploitation. Indeed, like other scandalous queers in recent memory, Shepard warranted a cover story, this one redolently religious: “The Crucifixion of Matthew Shepard” (Thernstrom, 1999). *Vanity Fair*’s religion of course was commodity window dressing. Nonetheless, what even the most lucre-driven of these asides to Christ intended was broader than any specific religious meaning. Jesus’s painful death was thought to sanctify Matthew’s death by serving as its anti-type or original. Some of the references, however, intended a more narrowly doctrinal reading; in true Christian redemptive abjection, Christ’s death was thought to redeem or atone for Shepard’s appallingly useless death. Nonetheless, the equation of Matthew and Christ and the one-to-one correspondence of their deaths raised more issues than it settled, particularly unacknowledged, or forgotten, implications of the original crucifixion.

⁶The Hate Crimes Prevention Act, proposed a year earlier by President Clinton, was just then moving through the Senate, coming to a vote the day of Shepard’s funeral. The act failed to pass.

The comparison had the unsettling effect of turning a kleig light onto the various scandals associated with Jesus, which I proposed earlier—some of which were more basic than the torturous nature of his death. First, there is the submerged and rarely referenced scandal of God’s surely sadistic abandonment of “his son” to a criminal’s death. This problem circulates in Christian discourse and surely undercuts the sentimental construction of family values (Moore, 1996; Schwartz, 1997). In the second place, the play of ironies about this scene necessarily recalls the use Jesus himself made of scandal. Scriptures attest that Jesus instigated offense purposely, employing what we might now call “act up” politics as a form of pedagogy, attempting thereby to move his auditors to conversion of heart (McCracken, 1994; Crossan, 1980; Goss, 1993; Yoder, 1972). In the third place, the scene unexpectedly reverses scandalized and scandalizer—a haunting memory of the stigmatization born by the early proto-Christians. Although Jewish themselves, these “quintessential outsiders” (Cameron, 1991, p. 14) were ejected from the synagogue, hounded, and pursued by religious and Roman authority alike; now, in turn, their children reenact the stigma of that exclusion on yet another group of outcasts (Goffman, 1963). The last and perhaps greatest scandal builds on these: In every age since, the crucifixion memorial offers a scene drenched with violence, blood, and horror—actual as well as symbolic. Thus, in the context of Shepard’s funeral, an image that is violent in origin monstrously reduplicates itself, first in the violence required *in* its name, and second, in the violence authorized *by* its model. Examples are numerous—take a recent attack on two gay men in California. “I’m guilty of obeying the laws of the creator,” remarks a white supremacist when he admitted to killing a gay couple in their sleep. The director of the Center on Hate and Extremism comments, “Many of these people are influenced by Bible passages that they perceive to give them complete license to murder gays because it’s a sin. . . .” (Delsohn and Stanton, 1999). *In hoc signo*—still a powerful intoxicant.

The intended effect of the Jesus/Matthew overlay is, finally, to read Matthew as *martyr* (the Greek word means witness). In attempt to sanctify it, Matthew’s appalling death was piggybacked onto the transfiguring death of Christ. Sometimes the eye falters, however, and the meditative gaze becomes a stare, as compassion washes out in the glare of horror. Instead of Jesus’s death redeeming the viciousness of Matthew’s death, the *reverse* happened. That is, the representational juxtaposition of Jesus’s cross and the fence onto which Matthew was tied instead obscured Matthew with the *scandal* of the original—distant and forgotten—rather than adding a clarifying gloss to a contemporary meditation upon a similar death. In other words, the *offensiveness* of Jesus’s death, rather than its atoning action, is what the viewer is also put in mind of when considering the scene in Laramie. This, finally, has a two-fold effect; it undercuts Fred Phelps’s Baptist congregation, who used Christ’s authority to demonize Shepard’s homosexuality, while at the same time it renders the homosexual Matthew—and, by extension, all other homosexuals—as worthy of sympathy.

As a consequence, the comparison to Christ reactivates deep scandals even as attempts are made 1) to erase the scandal of Christ as well as 2) to underplay Shepard's homosexual taint. One such attempt—in effect a secular form of hagiography—underscores the sentimentalized cult of suffering that was activated in his name. The romantic narrative of victim into which Shepard was scripted employed well-established models for its effect. In the first place, the young man was regendered, presented in the accustomed manner of a young woman rather than young man. Media coverage focused upon Shepard's naïf, virginal, and innocent quality. He was, in the words of an *Advocate* (1999) reprise, “a gentle young man with a loving family and close friends . . .” (p. 37). Another source memorializes him as a “gentle spirit” (Black, 1998). Meanwhile, a contrasting hagiographic frame invested Matthew with almost preternatural sanctity. The saint or holy one becomes the “exemplar,” whose suffering is morally instructive (Brown, 1983). This had the effect of further emphasizing the formulaic (and feminine) innocence of representations of Matt the ingenue. As a consequence, Matthew was representationally split; thus doubled, in a manner of speaking, Matthew became the embodiment of a monstrous hybridity—a metaphysical duplicity not unlike the Christ to which he was compared.

Thus, a double forgetting of monstrosity and scandal gives the “sign” of Shepard's death its ambiguity, even as instability inheres in the analogue of the Crucifixion. Observing Shepard's funeral, one can argue that some contemporary Christians follow St. Paul's lead. That is to say, for motives of class sensitivity, modern believers erase, forget, or else ignore the taint of Jesus's crucifixion that occludes its representation. The late comedian Lennie Bruce quipped that wearing the crucifix is akin to wearing an electric chair around one's neck; the nervous, shocked laughter of his audience makes the point well enough. For this audience to *think* about what the cross *means* is under as severe a taboo as *speaking* about it or representing in public places.

Armed with the authority of the cross as hex, the hellish Christians waving signs and the bewinged homosexuals thereby cemented *in death* the identification of the holy and the horrible that Shepard's homosexual life (horrible at least in the eyes of evangelical Christians) had split apart. To thoughtful observers, the only conclusion to be read from this religio-Gothic drama was the (historically) accurate one that, indeed, Christ *was* the bearer of taint, and that further, monsters *do* make good Christ-substitutes. Thus, the scene at Shepard's funeral, both hysterically symptomatic as it was, as well as offensive to “liberal” eyes, was, indeed, dreadful in a most original sense. As the ancient tellings of angelic visitations remind us, encounters with the Divine prompt epiphany, change of heart, and grace. Considering the omnipresence of scandal and offense to Jesus's life and death, as well as to his preaching and mission, perhaps the most significant question to understanding the Crucifixion is also central to understanding Shepard's funeral. Such a question, however, was never asked. That is, how is it that offense and

scandal are in fact preparatory moments for epiphany, grace, and the holy? Jesus's own blend of provocation and offense as pedagogical method seems to affirm this. In Laramie, therefore, what epiphany did the scandal of Mathew's death prepare us for?

In conclusion, we are left with a dense figuring, a knotted place, a vexed crossing. Sentimental Christianity's fretting at these twinned male bodies framed in pain uncovers the scandalous double-bind contained deep within Christianity itself, since similar energies have destabilized Christian practice since its earliest days. As Robert Dreyfuss (1999) observes, "The Christian right succeeds by tapping into the ambivalence deeply wrought within Christianity itself regarding bodies and the various systems in place for controlling their pleasures, as well as for interpreting their pains" (p. 38).

This is the bind that a politically astute, erotophobic political fundamentalism, passed off as Christianity, is always trying to undo. This is the cross it is desperate to uncross and separate and so is always redoing: the linkage of transcendence and transgression—the crossing of the man who (for religion) died a monstrous death and the people who (in religious discourse) live and die, often, crossed as monsters. From both directions, a ritual dying seems necessary to redress, maybe even rescript, that religious authority. This moment is of such ominous civic moment that language fails, as it failed for Constantine, leaving only a *signum*, a sign, to mark its presence. This melodrama of obsessive gesturing presumes a language so violent that words are no longer competent. A multifaceted religious image, stripped of its complexity as *marturon* (Gr. "witness"), morphs into the comic-book sketch of the monster, uncannily similar. We are soul-deep in the Gothic, and Matthew, once dead, now assumes a life traditionally accorded those creatures we call undead—reminding ourselves, too, of *their* religious origin. We are never rid of the monsters we need—for our own good, if not theirs.

REFERENCES

- Advocate, The*. (1999). "Matthew Shepard one year later." 12 October 1999, p. 37.
- Anonymous. (1998). "Anti-gay group plans to protest funeral." <[Http://www.trib.com/HOMENEWS/WYO/FuneralPicket.html](http://www.trib.com/HOMENEWS/WYO/FuneralPicket.html)>.
- Auerbach, E. (1953). *Mimesis: The representation of reality in western literature*. Trans. W. R. Trask. Princeton: University of Princeton Press.
- Barnes, T. D. (1981). *Constantine and Eusebius*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Univ. Press.
- Black, R. (1998). "Shepard remembered as 'gentle spirit.'" *Boston Globe Online*. (10/16).
- Boswell, J. (1980). *Christianity, social tolerance, and homosexuality: Gay people in Western Europe from the beginning of the Christian era to the fourteenth century*. Chicago: University of Chicago.
- Brody, S. (1974). *The diseases of the soul: Leprosy in medieval literature*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Brown, P. (1983). The saint as exemplar, *Representations*, 1: 1–25.
- Brustein, R. (1998). McNally on the cross. *New Republic*, 30 November: 34–35.
- Bull, C., and Gallagher, J. (1996). *Perfect enemies: The religious right, the gay movement, and the politics of the 1990s*. New York: Crown Publishers, Inc.

- Campbell, K. (1993a). In spite of opposition, the *Blade* will remain in Fairfax libraries. *Washington Blade*, Vol. 24, #13 (26 March): 1, 8.
- Campbell, K. (1993b). Fairfax opts to eliminate *Blade* or the library board. *Washington Blade*, Vol. 24, #42 (Oct. 1): 1, 14.
- Cameron, A. (1991). *Christianity and the rhetoric of empire*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Clark, M. J. (1990). Patriarchy, dualism, and homophobia: Marginalization as spiritual challenge. *Homophobia and the Judaeo-Christian tradition*. M. L. Stemmeler and J. M. Clark (Eds.), Dallas: Monument Press.
- CNN Interactive. (1998b). "Gay student clings to life after savage beating," <<http://www.cnn.com/US/9810/10/gay.beating.ap/index.html>>.
- Cohen, J. J. (Ed.). (1996). *Monster theory: Reading culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Coleman, C. (1998). In face of hate, a call for peace. *Denver Post Online*, 17 October. <http://www.denverpost.com>.
- Creed, J. L. (Ed.). (1984). *De mortibus persecutorum*. Trans. Lactantius. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Crossan, J. D. (1980). *Cliffs of fall: Paradox and polyvalence in the parables of Jesus*. New York: Seabury.
- Dallas Morning News*. (1998). Service memorializes slain gay student. October 19, p. 15a.
- Delsohn, G., and Stanton, S. (1999). I'm guilty of obeying the laws of the creator. *Salon.com*. <<http://www.salon.com/news/feature/1999/11/08/hate/print.html>>
- Dollimore, J. (1991). *Sexual dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault*. Oxford, NY: Clarendon Press.
- Dreyfuss, R. (1999). The holy war on gays. *Rolling Stone*, Issue #808, (18 March): pp. 3–41.
- Freud, S. (1961). *Civilization and its discontents*. Standard Edition, J. Strachey (Ed.), London: The Hogarth Press.
- Gilman, S. L. (1988). AIDS and syphilis: The iconography of disease. In D. Crimp (Ed.), *AIDS: Cultural analysis/cultural activism*. Cambridge: MIT Press. pp. 87–107.
- Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Goss, R. (1993). *Jesus acted up: A gay and lesbian manifesto*. San Francisco: Harpercollins.
- Guhrt, J. (1975–78). Offence, scandal, stumbling block. In C. Brown (Ed.), *The new international dictionary of new testament theology*. 4 Vols. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
- Hanson, E. (1991). In D. Fuss (Ed.), *Inside/out: Lesbian theories, gay theories*. New York: Routledge.
- Hickey, J. Cardinal. (1997). Editorial. *The Washington Catholic Standard*. November. p. 5.
- Ingebretsen, E. J. (1996). *Maps of heaven, maps of hell: Religious terror as memory from the Puritans to Stephen King*. M. E. Sharpe.
- Ingebretsen, E. J. (2001, In Press). *At stake: Monsters and the rhetoric of fear in public culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Jordan, M. (2000). *The silence of Sodom: Homosexuality in modern Catholicism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Kristeva, J. (1982). *Powers of horror: An essay in abjection*. Trans. L. S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press.
- McCracken, D. (1994). *The scandal of the Gospels: Jesus, story, and offense*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Marty, M. E. (1997). Beauty and terror: Rapture in art and the sacred. *Image: A Journal of the Arts and Religion*, 17. 72–83.
- Meier, J. P. (1991). *A marginal Jew: Rethinking the historical Jesus*. Vol. One: *The roots of the problem and the person*. New York: Doubleday.
- Mishra, V. (1994). *The gothic sublime*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Moore, S. D. (1996). *God's gym: Divine male bodies of the Bible*. New York: Routledge.
- Neuhaas, R. J. (1997). Love, no matter what. *First Things*, 76. October. 81–85.
- O'Driscoll, P. (1999). Emotions still high in Shepard case. *USA Today*. April 5, p. 6
- People for the American Way. (1999). *Hostile climate: Report on anti-gay activity*. Washington, DC: PFAW Foundation.
- Quetal, C. (1990). *The history of syphilis*, Trans. J. Braddock and B. Pike. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.

- Schwartz, R. (1997). *The curse of Cain: The violent legacy of monotheism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Skal, D. J. (1993). *The monster show: A cultural history of horror*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co.
- Smith, L. B. (1997). *Fools, martyrs, traitors: The story of martyrdom in the western world*. Alfred A. Knopf.
- Spivey, N. (1999). Christ and the art of agony. *History Today* (August): on-line www.britannica.com.
- Stoker, B. (1897, 1996). *Dracula*. Introduction and notes by M. Ellman. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Thernstrom, M. (1999). The crucifixion of Matthew Shepard. *Vanity Fair*, March. 209–14, 267–275.
- Twitchell, J. (1989). *Preposterous violence: Fables of aggression in modern culture*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Updike, J. (1983). Hawthorne's Creed. *Hugging the shore: Essays and criticism*. New York: Alfred Knopf.
- Vaughan, K. (1999). "Suspect 'flipped out,' beat Shepard, letters say." *Denver Rocky Mountain News*. April 7. (<http://insidedenver.com/news/0407shep2.shtml>).
- Walsh, J. P. M., SJ. (1987). *The mighty from their thrones: Power in the biblical tradition*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
- Williams, D. (1996). *Deformed discourse: The function of the monster in mediaeval thought and literature*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill–Queen's University Press.
- Wills, G. (1994). The tragic pope. *The New York Review of Books*, Vol. XLI, no. 21. December 22. pp. 4–7.
- Wilson, D. (1993). *Signs and portents: Monstrous births from the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment*. New York: Routledge.
- Yoder, J. H. (1972). *The politics of Jesus*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.