For the Love of Beauty: Queering Ascetic Teachings

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I don't know many of you well yet, but to give you a bit of information about my background: in my youth, I was part of the Eastern Orthodox Church. In the United States, Eastern Orthodox tradition is dominated by the Russian and Greek Orthodox churches. Consequentially, it's quite conservative. During that adventure in Orthodoxy, I joined a secret society of leftist, queer lay people and clergy who, among other things, provided mutual support, conducted clandestine same-sex union ceremonies, and continued the development of a modern queer liberation theology pertinent to eastern rite christians.

We did this by queering the texts that inform what the orthodox call Holy Tradition. When I say queering, I mean to say that we approached these texts while asking what lessons they might offer in opposing heterosexual institutions. This doesn't mean that we tried to reinterpret them or rewrite them, but it does mean that as we examined these texts we would try and dust away layers socially enforced gender roles, compulsive heterosexuality, and transmisogyny that have accumulated over the years. Once we had done so to the best of our ability, we would ask: what can we learn from this, specifically what can we as queer people learn from this?

Eastern Orthodoxy is a ritual heavy religion, those Rituals - the Holy Tradition of the church, however, are not a ends in themselves. They're specifically designed as a practice of mindfulness. In the same way that we might stay seated in silence to center ourselves and focus on one of our many sources of spiritual enlightenment, an eastern rite christian might cross themselves and prostrate to focus on a spiritual lesson.

The orthodox view scripture as a parable, a series of morally useful stories. But a moral story isn't all that practical in day to life, so they rely on a collection of ascetic monastic writings that offer an instruction on how a person might live out the values they find in these stories.

This collection of mystic texts is called the Philokalia. It's name translates literally to the "Love of Beauty." St. Maximos the Confessor - himself an advocate of a kind of Universalism - observed, "The beautiful is identical with the good, for all things seek the beautiful and good at every opportunity, and there is no being which does not participate in them. They extend to all that is, being what is truly admirable, sought for, desired, pleasing, chosen and loved. Observe how the divine force of love - the erotic power pre-existing in the good - has given birth to the same blessed force within us, through which we long for the beautiful and good."

If physical beauty is something perceived by the senses, the kind of beauty that the Philokalia calls one to show reverence to is a transcendent spiritual beauty perceived by the mind and contained in all living things. The calling of the ascetic then is to learn to recognize this beauty and amplify it in themselves and others.

As Metropolitan Anthony Bloom wrote: “Unless we look at a person and see the beauty there is in this person, we can contribute nothing to him. One does not help a person by discerning what is wrong, what is ugly, what is distorted. Christ looked at everyone he met, at the prostitute or the thief, and saw the beauty hidden there. Perhaps it was distorted, perhaps it was damaged, but it was beauty nonetheless, and what he did was to call out this beauty.”

This is all fine and well but it’s not particularly useful information. After all, what is beauty? If it is identical with the good, what is good? How might we discern it? The good, I’ve found, is best defined by what it is not. To understand what is beautiful and good we must first understand evil. In the west, that kind of a word conjures up specific imagery. Evil is a grand force. It is violence against the oppressed, it is war, it’s an infliction of pain on a monumental scale. We might then readily describe evil as Nazi Soldiers burning the library at Magnus Hirschfeld’s Institute for Sexual Science destroying decades of LGBT scholarship and history, as the order given to US soldiers to leave gay and trans people imprisoned when they liberated concentration camps in WWII, as the police raiding of LGBT spaces and the continued to brutalization of gender nonconforming folks, or as the murder of 49 people at pulse. There is no doubt that these are manifestations of evil, but to the orthodox ascetic evil is subtle, and violence just one of many of its manifestations.

If the soul is, as St. Maximos describes, naturally inclined towards the good, and the call of the ascetic is to hold a mirror and amplify that good in others as Metropolitan Anthony advocates, evil is then something that obscures what is good. Rather than calling out beauty, evil is its suppression. St. Maximos defines it “If by nature the good unifies and holds together what has been separated, evil clearly divides and corrupts what has been unified. For evil is by nature dispersive, unstable, multiform and divisive.” To put it simply: evil is hatred. We might then understand evil’s manifestations more subtly.

It is also then a family member or friend asking a queer person not to “act so gay” in public, implying that who they are is wrong. It is a parent telling their child to exhibit traditionally masculine/feminine traits, thereby reinforcing a heteropatriarchal gender hierarchy. It manifests itself when someone is defensive after they are corrected about their misuse of a trans person’s pronouns, implying that the trans person does not have the right to correct them. Evil is when a person of colour is asked where they came from, implying that they do not belong. It’s even when someone wonders what that last example had to do with queer liberation, not realizing that people of colour can be queer too.

Understanding what evil is gets us closer to an actionable solution, but fighting evil’s manifestations individually only does so much good. It’s like treating a symptom rather than a disease, leaving the disease to manifest additional symptoms. Let’s apply this lens to a contemporaneous problem: the president has moved to once again bar transgender people from being involved in the military. To be clear: this action has little to do with the military. It is a statement about the use of public funds to police individual bodies. It suggests that trans people

do not deserve acknowledgement in a state apparatus - an obfuscation of a trans person's inherent worth and an assault on their dignity.

In responding, it's very easy to fall into a rhetorical trap. It's natural in a way to respond that Trans people are capable soldiers, that they do not impede the military, and therefore deserve acknowledgement. In doing so, we have addressed an immediate evil, but ignored its machinations. What we really have advocated for is the assimilation of Trans people into an apparatus of oppression. We have implied that Trans people are valuable to the state because they are just as capable of killing people - implicitly brown people in foreign countries. Moreover, we have suggested that a Trans person has worth only insofar as they are useful to a violent, male-dominated, imperialist system. Instead of calling out the beauty in trans people, we have again obscured it through qualification and have implicitly condoned other forms of oppression.

This kind of assimilationist rhetoric isn't new: the same argument was made in the context of miliary bans against gays and lesbians and it's existed in response to trans bans, although the latter was less prevalent in public dialogue - in part because the majority-group public is more vitrolic towards trans people and in part because of the cruel indifference of cisgendered gay and lesbian activists (that is to say activists whose gender identity matches the one assigned to them at birth). In identifying one evil, we have been inattentive to our own relationship to hate; we've failed to identify and respond to transphobia; in fact we've recreated it in a new way.

St Isaiah the Solitary provided a useful lens in evaluating this inattention "If you find yourself hating your fellow men and resist this hatred, and you see that it grows weak and withdraws, do not rejoice in your heart; for this withdrawal is a trick of the evil spirits. They are preparing a second attack worse than the first; they have left their troops behind the city and ordered them to remain there. If you go out to attack them, they will flee before you in weakness. But if your heart is then elated because you have driven them away, and you leave the city, some of them will attack you from the rear while the rest will stand their ground in front of you; and your wretched soul will be caught between them with no means of escape."

Contained in the Philokalia is a philosophical principle useful in crafting an effective, intersectional response to oppression: Evil is hatred made manifest by inattention. Instead of thinking of the machinations of evil as actions of a nefarious other, the Philokalia implores us to consider our own role in resisting hatred. We are all a part of a larger system. In turn, that system is a reflection of the way that we move within it.

Going back to our military example, we can explore how this system has broken down. The rhetoric of assimilation is deeply rooted in inattention. A founding principal of queer nationalism is that queer people are oppressed in a social context where the majority is heterosexual/cisgendered precisely because that society is inherently heteronormative and cisnormative. We are socialized to accept a certain way of moving through society as the norm. In the context of queer people this means that cis men meeting up with cis women is the "norm"

to which they are compared. Inherent in this comparison is a sentiment of superiority. Because a cisgendered, heterosexual norm is ubiquitous in society, that socialization is continually reinforced. The natural consequence is that we are internally inclined towards the same delusions of superiority. In queer people that might mean internalized hatred, or at the very least some ideation that cisgendered heterosexuals have a significant social role. In allies, this might manifest as a desire for special recognition when self-identifying as an ally - viewing their own actions to participate in LGBTQ* rights movements as exceptional deed rather than as a moral directive.

This systemic superiority complex is not something that as individuals we can escape and leave behind. We may, as St Issah might say, feel our hatred for others grow weak. We might start to disentangle ourselves from these systems. As queer people, we might start to tear away those layers of self hate. As allies, we might start to evaluate how hatred impacts marginalized groups. We may even then, in our elation, confidently leave the city walls. We may decide “I am not homophobic or transphobic,” and confidently enter battle against that nepharious other who we have ascribed as not yet being enlightened enough.

In doing so, we’ve allowed that socialized superiority complex an opportunity to creep into our own being. We have left the city - we have forgotten that we, too, are a part of our oppressive society. We can see evidence of this in the assimilationist response to military bans against queer people. In these responses, queer people are compared to cisgendered heterosexuals. They are “just as capable,” in other words: cisgendered heterosexuals are the standard to which they should aspire. Their humanity isn’t affirmed so much as it’s made useful to groups already in power. Inherent in this line of rhetoric is a pedestal on which the cisgendered heterosexual is placed. That pedestal is hatred, resistance to it the city we have left behind.

Oppression is not a policy, a president in the white house, or some church down the road. Oppression is right here. It’s happening right now, in this space. And it’s our moral imperative to take up that battle within ourselves. To borrow from St. Maximos: “The mind of a man who enjoys the beautiful does not fight against things or against conceptual images of them. It battles against the passions which are linked with these images. It does not, for example, fight against a woman, or against a man who has offended it, or even against the images it forms of them: but it fights against the passions which are linked with the images.”

Queer people possess a transcendent beauty. Queer Nation’s manifesto describes it better than I can “Every one of us is a world of infinite possibility. We are an army because we have to be. We are an army because we are so powerful. And we are an army of lovers because it is we who know what love is. Desire and lust, too. We invented them. We come out of the closet, face the rejection of society, face firing squads, just to love each other!”

Let’s imagine what it might mean then to honor that beauty by taking up St. Maximos’ call: to fight the oppression of queer people by waging war against the passions that oppress

us; by taking up the mantle of dismantling heteropatriarchy quite literally from within - rooted in St. Isaiah's city. “The city is mindfulness. Resistance is rebuttal through the good. The foundation is incisive power.” writes St. Isaiah. We are the key to our own liberation. “An intellect dominated by the passions thinks base thoughts; words and actions bring these thoughts into the open,” posits St Thalassios. Separating ourselves from the passion of heteronormative hate is the first step in our rebuttal.

For queer people and allies, this means that we must carefully contemplate how our privilege shapes our thoughts and how that privilege moves in our shared space. It means that we must ask difficult questions of ourselves and answer them honestly. We have to ask: How do things like maleness, straightness, whiteness, and cisgenderism inform my thoughts? How do they shape my perception of myself? Of others? How might those thoughts manifest themselves socially? Am I viewing myself in the context of these oppressive power structures or am I viewing myself independently? In whose light am I holding others?

These aren’t just questions to ask once. They are questions to ask again and again. To assess our own change. To stay within the city. To work against our own privilege and to disentangle ourselves from the norms of heteropatriarchy. In the words of St. Maximos “Shun evil and do good, that is to say, fight the enemy in order to diminish the passions, and then be vigilant lest they increase once more. Again, fight to acquire the virtues and then be vigilant in order to keep them. This is the meaning of "cultivating' and 'keeping.'”

This need for mindfulness is met in the philokalia with an urgent call to action. St. Maximos described it “Silence the man who utters slander in your hearing. Otherwise you sin twice over: first, you accustom yourself to this deadly passion and, second you fail to prevent him from gossiping against his neighbor.” He goes on to describe the consequence of inaction when another’s beauty is obscured, “The Lord will be angry with your conduct and will obliterate you from the land of the living.”

In the context of queer liberation, we as queer people face a threat that obscures our beauty. The philokalia provides us with additional philosophical context: our beauty being obscured is an urgent evil, and it’s imperative that those of us who are queer and our allies respond. What St. Maximos is suggesting in his 6th century monastic language is that if `we catch ourselves or others engaging in problematic behavior, it is our moral imperative to interrupt it.

Queer people have already established a model for doing this: we identify as queer. That word means a lot of different things to a lot of different people, but it’s modern use by queer people can be traced to the Queer Nationalist movement that sprung up from radical organizers in Act Up, and later on in Queer Nation. A pamphlet passed out at the 1990 NYC Pride Parade read: “Being queer is not about a right to privacy; it is about the freedom to be public, to be just who we are. It means everyday fighting oppression; homophobia, racism, misogyny, the bigotry of religious hypocrites and our own self hatred. (We have been carefully taught to hate

ourselves.) And now of course it means fighting a virus as well, and all those homo-haters who are using AIDS to wipe us off the face of the earth. Being queer means leading a different sort of life. It's not about the mainstream, profit margins, patriotism, patriarchy, or being assimilated. It's not about executive directors, privilege and elitism. It's about being on the margins, defining ourselves; it's about gender-bending and secrets, what's beneath the belt and deep inside the heart."

If queer people are assimilated into a system of oppression by being placed in the context of a heterosexist world, identifying as queer is a rejection of that assimilation. If mainstream LGBT organizing can be described as finding a place for LGBT folks within a dominant society that bashes queer people, queers can be described as bashing back. Queer identification is an affirmation of our beauty on its own terms, for its own worth.

Bringing us back to the military example, what might a queer response to a military ban look like? Most importantly a queer response starts before a military ban is brought into the spotlight. It starts with a rejection of the trappings of straightness and cisgenderism. It calls us to a mindfulness necessary to respond to structural evils. It's battle is one against the passion of hate, not one against any specific person, policy, or way of being. So a queer response to a military ban is a response that lifts up queer people on their own terms. The rhetoric is simultaneously more simple and complex: It's a response that says "Queer people have value, and we won't entertain the deprivation of their inherent worth." The response might then lead us to question the military's purpose as an organization built on violence, to a criticism of that organization's status as a tool for imperialism, a rejection of a liberal effort to suggest that queer people ought to participate on it, and a condemnation of the right's malicious attack on queer personhood.

Perhaps we ought to then see Queerness as a mindfulness practice. It's an identification that reminds queer people of who we are and calls us into an unremittingly intersectional approach to justice. It teaches us not to compromise the beauty we find in ourselves or others and demands that our allies do the same. Rather than rushing into a quick fight for acceptance in a transmisogynistic society, queerness implores us to take up a longer battle: to dissolve the very forces that oppress us. St Thalassios writes "Perseverance in the face of adversity dissolves evil, while unremitting patience destroys it utterly." Queerness is both perseverance in the face of a heterocratic order and the unremitting patience that will destroy it.

Orthodox Holy Tradition teaches that one sign of sainthood is that a saint, upon meeting a new person, is so acutely aware of the transcendent beauty that radiates from that individual that they are overcome by it and prostrate before them. As UU's we do not have a Holy Tradition, but we do have a Living One. We don't have saints, but we do honor the words and deeds of prophetic people. We have theologically accepted a charge to challenge oppressive power structures. It's my hope that we are able to do so by bathing others in the light of their own beauty: may we as UU's learn to queer our own traditions.