



# SPIRITUALITY: ALTARING SENSATIONS

## Religious Concerns in the Gay and Lesbian Community

BY RODGER LARSON

**T**hank God I was born and raised an atheist," a gay friend said jokingly during a recent discussion in which the issue of homosexuality and organized religion came up. I thought the point was well taken. Lesbians and gay men are so often denounced and condemned in the name of religion that it's easy enough for us to conclude that religion itself is an enemy. The thought of being without religion altogether seems attractive, especially around the holiday season with all its commercialized and empty religiosity. For some gays and lesbians, though, thinking away their religious impulses and beliefs would be as difficult as thinking away their homosexuality. For others, intellectual commitments dictate that they seek and worship God. For still others, religious observances are strongly intertwined with family ties, childhood memories, and ethnic identity. Such people often face a dilemma because homosexuality does not mix well with some of the most vocal forms of organized religion. Fortunately, there are some options currently available, and there are many people engaged in the effort to open up new ones.

If we restrict ourselves to Catholic and Protestant denominations we can say that, broadly speaking, churches fall into three categories with regard to their attitude towards homosexuality. Some denominations such as Catholics, Mormons, and many Evangelical Protestants

officially reject homosexuality and condemn homosexual activity. Others such as the Friends (or Quakers) and the Unitarian Universalists, accept homosexuality and welcome gays and lesbians. Still others, most prominently the Metropolitan Community Church, minister directly to the lesbian and gay community.

The churches' attitude towards homosexuals is, of course, only half the story; the attitude of homosexuals towards the churches is the other half. Just because a church rejects gays and lesbians doesn't mean that gays and lesbians have to reject the church. Homosexual Catholics, Mormons, and Seventh Day Adventists have refused to accept their churches' rejection; they have refused to go away. Instead, they have organized groups for mutual support, recognition, and fellowship. They also strongly lobby their denominations for recognition and acceptance.

Unfortunately, they are not always successful, and in one notorious instance may have helped provoke an anti-gay backlash. That group is Dignity, a Catholic organization for gays and lesbians and their friends. The historic position of the Catholic Church always has been hostility towards homosexuality. However, the Church is a vast organization and the way Catholicism is practiced varies from place to place. In the Pacific Northwest, Dignity has been relatively successful in finding at least *de facto* acceptance, much to the displeasure of higher officials in the Church. Archbishop Hunthausen of Seattle was recently reprimanded

in part for allowing priests to say Mass for Dignity. No doubt it was also the growing visibility of Dignity that prompted the Vatican to write a letter to the American bishops describing homosexuality as a disorder, asserting that no one has any conceivable right to engage in homosexual behavior, and suggesting that homosexuals invite violent reactions by demanding civil rights. Of course, Dignity is not to blame for the hateful response it has provoked, and perhaps it is a consolation that at least they've gotten the Pope's attention.

The situation is quite different in churches that officially accept gays and lesbians as members. Here the difference between the official church position and the way the religion is practiced in different areas may work against the interests of gay and lesbian members. The denomination may be tolerant but the individual congregation may remain homophobic. I know a Unitarian who came out as a gay man in his thirties after having been married and having a child. As a family man he was well accepted in the church community, but as a gay man he was virtually shunned. Thus, even within gay-supportive churches there has been a need for gay and lesbian caucuses and organizations. For instance, the local Unitarian Church has a chapter of Unitarian Universalists for Lesbian and Gay Concerns.

A few months ago I was talking with the minister of a liberal, gay-tolerant church. I happened to mention the Metropolitan Community Church. A pained but puzzled smile came to my

companion's face as he said, "Oh, that's the homosexual church. You know, I've never understood why people would want to base a church on their sexuality." MCC would say that my friend had made two mistakes. First of all, it is the mainstream churches which declare that homosexuals cannot be saved that are basing their religion on their sexuality. MCC is open to everyone regardless of their sexuality. Secondly, MCC would urge that they are not a homosexual church but rather they are a scripturally centered Christian church with a special outreach to the lesbian and gay community. For people who want a traditional approach to Christianity in a homosexual-supportive context, MCC may be just the place to go.

There are many options for religiously oriented gays and lesbians. This brief article has mentioned only some. We have omitted, for instance, Judaism: the attitudes of Jews towards homosexuality vary from congregation to congregation, and some are very supportive. No doubt attitudes vary also within religions that come from non-Western traditions. In addition, gays and lesbians are exploring alternatives that would have seemed unthinkable a generation ago. There are now, in Portland, several Pagan spiritual groups which invite the participation of all people whatever their sexuality. Atheism, of course, is available to people whose prior experience has turned them off to religion altogether, but for those gays and lesbians who have religious needs, our community offers many opportunities to fulfill them. ●