

Religion, Television, and Queerness

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Introduction: Defining Queerness

Hello, this is my first text post. Before I delve into television, I'd like to start by defining queerness, as it is a heavily debated word. For most of the 20th century, queer was used as a derogatory term to refer to homosexuals. However, in the 21st century, it has been reclaimed by the LGBT+ community. According to PFLAG's website, "queer" can be used an umbrella term for anyone who does not adhere to the norms of gender or sexuality. In other words, queer can apply to gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, nonbinary, asexual, pansexual, and agender people, among other identities. Though it may seem vague, it is an intentionally broad and liberating term for those who do not abide by society's binary. So, in the context of this blog, think of "queer" as anything other than straight and cisgender (in which one's gender corresponds to their biological sex).

In recent years, television has proven to be a progressive, efficient medium in which to showcase queer narratives. I hope to analyze some of these narratives, as well as trace their histories within different religions.

DISCLAIMER: I cannot cover all identities (sexual and/or gender) and religions, unfortunately, as television has only recently begun to delve into intersectionality within the past few decades. So, I will begin by covering Abrahamic religions, as Christianity, Judaism, and Islam (to a much lesser extent) get the bulk of this interaction with queerness.

Transparent & Judaism

Transparent, a Golden Globe-winning Amazon series, tells the story of the Pfeffermans: a Jewish family that has three queer relatives. Maura (formerly known as Mort) reveals to her ex-wife and children that she is a trans woman. Sarah, the oldest sibling, identifies as a lesbian while youngest daughter Ali describes herself as fluid, as she dates men, women, and trans men throughout the show's two seasons.

Transparent utilizes Judaism as a vehicle to unite the Pfeffermans: from break the fast meals during Yom Kippur to minyans. Though the show does not focus on religion specifically, there is an emphasis on the cultural impact Judaism has on each character. For example, in the season one finale "Why Do We Cover the Mirrors?" the episode's title relates to the tradition during shiva of covering mirrors, so as to eliminate vanity during the mourning process. Though the family had recently lost a member, the covering of the mirrors is thematically symbolic as each character is struggling with their identity; Maura is navigating her new life as a woman, Sarah has left her husband for another woman, and Ali finds herself sexually confused.



However, season two is more blatant in displaying the intersection between religion and sexuality, as there is a flashback storyline involving Gittel, a Pfefferman and transwoman who lived in Berlin in the 1930's. She resided at the Magnus Hirschfeld Institute, which was a private sexology institute that promoted tolerance and gay rights in Germany. Despite the political climate following the Weimer era, the institute provided refuge for Jewish queer people at the time. In *Transparent's* poignant finale, though, we see Gittel being taken away by Nazi soldiers.



In the Old Testament, homosexuality is explicitly condemned. Leviticus 20:13 states that “If a man lies with a man as one lies with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall surely be put to death; their blood shall be upon them.” However, this verse solely relates to male homosexuality, and not once is lesbianism mentioned in the Bible. This distinction might imply that lesbianism is not as egregious as male homosexuality, though it still remains sinful.

But more recently, Reform, Reconstructionist and even some Conservative congregations are LGBT friendly and do not discriminate based on gender or sexual orientation. Even Humanistic Judaism, a relatively new denomination, is predicated on ethics, morality, and pluralism in its acceptance of all kinds of people. Even the most purist, religious Jews are treading into more progressive territory. In 2012, the Orthodox movement openly condemned the practice of “reparative therapy.”

Unlike other religions, Judaism and queerness have their fair share of similarities, as both groups have been historically marginalized and scapegoated. Writer Susan Sontag

compared the two in her seminal essay “Notes on Camp.” In it, Sontag writes “Jews and homosexuals are the outstanding creative minorities in contemporary urban culture. Creative, that is, in the truest sense: they are creators of sensibilities. The two pioneering forces of modern sensibility are Jewish moral seriousness and homosexual aestheticism and irony.” Thus, it is no surprise that *Transparent*’s intersectionality has resonated with so many.

Six Feet Under & Christianity

In HBO’s critically acclaimed drama *Six Feet Under*, Michael C. Hall plays a mortician named David Fisher. In the pilot, we learn that David is closeted though he is in a secret relationship with a man named Keith, whom David had met at a gay-friendly church in Los Angeles. Later in the season, David becomes a deacon at his family’s Episcopalian Church, but is forced to resign after he comes out to his family.



It is common knowledge that homosexuality is sinful within Christianity. According to Corinthians, “the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God...Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, shall inherit the kingdom of God.” In this passage, homosexuality is akin to criminal activity. This belief is not unlike the ones held in Jewish scripture, as the Old and New Testaments draw heavily from the Hebrew Bible.

Though *Six Feet Under* primarily focuses on spirituality, death, and the afterlife, it is noteworthy how Christianity is depicted as a bit of a dichotomy. On one hand, you have angry church members who abhor the fact that an openly gay man is part of their clergy. Yet, on the other hand, David and Keith met a gay-friendly Church in West Hollywood. There is a melding of old and new: antiquated, strict interpretations of the bible versus more modern, open-minded thinking.



Thanks to the Internet, there is even a resource to find local gay-friendly churches. On *GayChurch.org*, you can enter your location and find these churches within a provided radius. These churches are known as “affirming”, in that they offer inclusivity to not just homosexuals, but all who fall in the queer spectrum.

Unfortunately, not all Christian denominations have accepted LGBT+ as congregants. The Westboro Baptist Church, one of the most infamous conservative congregations, is known for its racism, homophobia, transphobia, and anti-Semitism. For example, following the Supreme Court ruling on gay marriage, the Church unleashed their wrath on social media and picketed in person, holding up signs like “GOD HATES F*GS” and “The world is doomed.” But, to quote 12:31, what ever happened to “Love thy neighbor?”

British Television & Islam

Gay Muslims

In 2006, the U.K.’s Channel 4 premiered a documentary series called *Gay Muslims*, following the lives of five gay and lesbian Muslims living in England. Their stories, poignant and very emotional, highlight their mistreatment after coming out to their families. Razeem is not allowed to visit his children because of his sexual orientation, though his wife left him for another man. Shakir believes that his parents accept lesbianism more willingly than male homosexuality. Farah considers lying about her lesbianism in order to get along with her parents again.



While documentaries are instrumental in shedding light on prevalent issues, it is equally important to feature queer voices in fictional narrative spaces. Currently, American television has no openly gay Muslim men in leading roles. This year, a small storyline on *Scandal* featured a closeted gay man who sought asylum from a fictional Middle Eastern country. His culture's views on sexuality were glazed over, and offered no concrete examination into Islam's stance on homosexuality.

According to the Qur'an, homosexual activity did not appear until just before the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, hence the term "sodomite." Thus, homosexuality became synonymous with destruction. The hadith, which is comprised of the actual words of Muhammad, states that "when a man mounts another man, the throne of God shakes." The hadith also acknowledges lesbianism, unlike the Christian and Hebrew bibles. "Sihag", or lesbianism, is known as "zina", or illegitimate sex.



Though there is double the amount of Muslims living in the United States compared to the United Kingdom, British television has been successful in showcasing more

substantial Muslim queer narratives. For example, on *Shameless*, a character named Kash Karib, who is married to a woman and has two children, engages in a sexual relationship with his male employee. On the British soap *EastEnders*, Pakistani character Syed Masood comes out as gay. On the popular teen drama *Skins*, Anwar must struggle with having a gay best friend, named Maxxie, and being a practicing Muslim. Anwar's father, whom Anwar had been afraid of introducing to Maxxie, reveals that though he does not understand homosexuality, his faith has taught him to never discriminate.

Sharia law, which is a religious legal system, is practiced in countries like Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, and others. Under sharia law, women cannot drive cars, speak to men who are not their husbands or relatives, or testify against their rapist. But, on a more brutal level, sharia dictates that homosexuality is punishable by death. In 1998, the Taliban ordered the execution of three men convicted of sodomy.

“They were ordered to be buried alive under a pile of stones and a wall was pushed on top of them by a tank. Their lives were to be spared if they survived for 30 minutes and were still alive when the stones were removed” (*Answering-Islam.org*).

Teen Wolf & Buddhism



On MTV's highly successful *Teen Wolf*, the character of Brett Talbot is a bisexual Buddhist werewolf. Satomi, Brett's pack leader, is a Japanese American who runs the pack while maintaining her Buddhist traditions. Brett, along with other members, would often recite the Buddhist mantra “*Three things that cannot be hidden for long, the sun, the moon, and the truth.*” Also, Satomi's pack resides in Beacon Point, the Eastern point of town that parallels Buddha sitting beneath the Bodhi tree as he looked toward the East for enlightenment. Though Brett is open about his sexuality, his fellow Buddhist pack members support him.

In Buddhist teachings, Siddharta Gautama never explicitly mentions sexual orientation. However, according to *HRC.org*, the Vinyana, which is the guiding text for monks, forbids fornication between members of the same sex. But, as monks must remain

celibate, this condemnation stems more from the shame of lewd sexual behavior as opposed to being overtly homophobic. Also, the Vinyana mentions pandakas, or lustful people who have sex often. The pandaka, then, is a sort of sexual identity that contradicts the Buddhist tradition of abstaining from pleasure.

In terms of Tibetan Buddhism specifically, the Dalai Lama has been reported to have once said that “if the two people have taken no vows [of chastity] and neither is harmed why should it not be acceptable” regarding homosexuality. He has also met with numerous LGBT+ groups and condemns homophobia.



In 2015, *Star Trek*'s George Takei wrote an op-ed for *LionsRoar.com* on being a gay Buddhist. He explains that in 2008, when California ruled in favor of marriage equality, he and his partner held a Buddhist wedding. The minister who officiated the ceremony was a Mexican American Buddhist, a fact in which Takei sees as a testament to Buddhism's diversity.

Another television program with a queer Buddhist character is *Warehouse 13*, a science fiction drama on the Syfy network about secret service agents who inspect supernatural artifacts in South Dakota. In it, Agent Steven Jinks (played by *Smallville*'s Aaron Ashmore) is a gay Buddhist. However, he mentions these two facts in passing, and his religion's influence on him and his sexuality is never explored. His being Buddhist seems like an arbitrary, gratuitous fact to lend the character some depth.



Like *Teen Wolf*, the sole bisexual Buddhist character in *Warehouse 13* is played by a white male. While having queer, Buddhist narratives sets a precedence on television, the whitewashing of predominately Eastern Asian traditions is highly problematic. It's almost as if because Buddhism is rarely shown in Western media, casting white actors in these roles makes it more palatable and easier to understand. But, the traditions of Buddhism, in its 2500 years of existence, should not be watered down nor should people of color (who might actually be Buddhist in real life) be denied intersectionality on television.

Buffy & Wicca



Buffy the Vampire Slayer, aside from its Emmy and Golden Globe recognition, is celebrated in the LGBT+ community in its portrayal of strong, well-written queer characters. Willow Rosenberg (who is Jewish), along with her girlfriend Tara Maclay, were one of the first lesbian couples on primetime television. Willow and Tara first met in college, at a meeting for a Wicca club called the Daughters of Gaia.

Around the time of World War II, a religious movement in England emerged, believing that witchcraft was the true religion of Britain. Though two men started the movement, women started to become interested in wicca following the publishing of *The White Goddess*. This book described a myth entailing a mother goddess dating back centuries. Eventually, wicca spread to America, and resulted in the emergence of covens around the world (A Concise Introduction to World Religions). Feminism played a large role in the inclusion of women in wicca, as it fostered female empowerment in its priestess roles, unlike many organized religions.

Because wicca deviates from the patriarchal oppression of Judaism and Christianity, wiccans tend to condemn these religions for repressing innate human sexual desires. Also Paganism, as a whole, is far more accepting of queer culture than any Abrahamic religion.



Eventually, Willow quit the Wicca club because of exchanges like this:

Willow: "I was actually talking more about real spells. You know: conjuring, transmutation..."

Cheryl: "Oh yeah, and then we can all ride around on our broomsticks!"

And...

"We come together, the Daughters of Gaia, sisters to the moon. We walk with the darkness, the wolf is at our side. Through the waterfall of power, to the blackest heart of Eternity. I think we should have a bake sale."

Though wicca was often presented as the butt of a joke within the show, the Daughters of Gaia observed some wiccan practices like holding their orientation during the full moon, as the lunar cycles are an important component to the religion. Also, in a club meeting, Willow proposes a Bacchanalia, which was a Roman festival that allowed free sexual expression, or an orgy in honor of Bacchus (Dionysus, the Greek god of wine and social gatherings).