

**Friends Act Friendly**  
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“Friend Act Friendly” is a tautology of sorts. I was inspired to think about it by the work of the late great feminist theologian Mary Daly who regularly encouraged her friends to “throw your life as far as it will go.” As part of that process, Mary Daly urged Courage. She wrote: “ Courage is like -- it’s a habitus, a habit, a virtue: you get it by courageous acts. It’s like you learn to swim by swimming. You learn courage by couraging.”<sup>i</sup> So I think we learn to be friends by acting in friendly ways. It sounds simple, obvious, and perhaps a bit naïve. But I will try to illustrate what I mean.

Let me summarize my thinking on friendship before looking at how to act in a friendly way.

Friendship not marriage is the most foundational adult human relationship. Insofar as we have structured western societies on the basis of marriage and not friendship we have reaped what we have sown, namely, many fractured families and a lack of a social safety net for people who are vulnerable, especially children, the elderly, infirm, and mentally ill. Now that same-sex marriage is legal in many countries there is greater justice but not necessarily more friendship if same-sex loving people take on the same model of relationship as heterosexual people. Laws in many countries tie benefits to couples, thus reinforcing rather than opening up the marriage paradigm.

Friendship is not simply a personal, feel good emotional, soft touch experience, but part of what it means to live in solidarity in an increasingly unjust world.

I want to focus on the *actions of being friendly* as they emerge from religious justice. I want to practice, as Mary Daly suggested about courage, being friendly. To do so I will look briefly at:

1. The relationship between religion and justice
2. What feminist and queer perspectives bring to the discussion
3. How a focus on friendship can change some social dynamics
4. Friendship can be a useful metaphor for thinking of the Divine/Human relationship. It is not the only metaphor, nor necessarily the best one, but it is one that can spark imagination and prompt familiar feelings. Imagine if we think of ourselves as “friends of Earth” rather than those who simply use it.<sup>ii</sup>

### **1. Religion and Justice**

The claims of the major traditions, for example, Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, for ethical living are part of the social fabric in the West. The Greek-based “do no harm,” or the Muslim search for “good character,” among others are efforts to adjudicate everyday life situations so that fairness and impartiality triumph.

It is hard to know where to begin in the religion-justice discussion because there are so many moving parts—so many people, circumstances, structures, and forms of oppression in operation. The task of contemporary life is not simply to act well toward one another; to do so is obvious. Rather, it is to find ways to change the material givens and structures of this world so that acting well is facilitated, made easier especially when those who are in possession of power will have to give it up in order for those who are

without to survive. As Marx and others have made clear, this is not done without struggle. Nonetheless, each of us is shaped by some sort of ethical tradition, whether secular or religious, and, each of us, whether we realize it or not, carries on a tradition by the acts we perform.

I come from the social justice tradition of the Roman Catholic Church, which I use as my primary reference for religious ethics. It is simply one tradition—another would serve as well as an example—that illustrates the process I want to describe, namely, how we become agents of our own morality, how we set our own moral compasses. Tradition is something we inherit, but acting ethically is something we do so that others will have something to inherit. This is fundamentally a friendly way of proceeding, one that assumes that the welfare of the other is equivalent to my own. While it is more common in Sweden, I can report that in the U.S. and many other countries it is not common at all.

My foundational ethical beliefs are rooted in a community that claims that human beings are fundamentally equal, beloved of their creator, and obliged to share the earth's goods with the earth's people. The so-called Catholic Social Encyclicals beginning with *Rerum Novarum* ("Of New Things") in 1891 (Leo XIII); *Pacem en Terris* ("Peace on Earth") in 1963 (John XXIII) and *Gaudium et Spes* ("Hope and Joy") in 1965 (Paul VI) are good examples of that work.

Many of the ethical heroines and heroes to whom I look for inspiration come from my tradition. We all get our some of our sense to how to behave by looking at others, especially our friends. I think of Dorothy Day who founded the Catholic Worker Movement; Frances Kissling, longtime president of Catholics for a Free Choice; the women of NETWORK, the social justice lobby, now known as the "nuns on the bus."

Problems arise when new issues emerge for which our ethical exemplars are not equipped and we have to become moral agents – often against great odds. So it was when the global women's movements and the international lesbian and gay, later bisexual, transgender, intersexed, and queer movements emerged, and the Roman Catholic Church simply could not cope. More to the point, the institutional Roman Catholic Church distinguished itself as an obstacle to both women and queers, gilding its statements with references to eternal damnation, God's will, intrinsic moral disorder, and women's 'natural' inferiority. Catholics like myself took on the issues and demonstrated that the Vatican is just one brand or branch of Catholicism, that we are also and fully Catholic. It seems that Pope Francis may indeed be catching up with us. But the point is not whether he is or isn't, but that we are moving forward because of not in spite of our religious commitments.

## **2. What feminist and queer perspectives bring to the discussion**

Both the women's and queer movements have long and intertwining histories: the women's movements rooted in suffrage for white women, what is known as feminism; survival for black women, what is known as womanism; community building for Latina women, what is known as *mujerista* or feminist work. One result of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century movements for women's equality around the world is that Joyce Banda is president of Malawi in Africa; Angela Merkel is Germany's Chancellor. These are realities that I, not to mention my mother or grandmother, could not have imagined decades ago. The new Archbishop of Sweden, Antje Jackelen, joins the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal

Church USA, Katharine Jefferts Schori, and the newly elected the Rev. Elizabeth A. Eaton the presiding Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, in what can only be called the “feministization” of western Christianity.

All of this has happened without the support of and with a lot of opposition from my primary theo-ethical tradition, Catholicism, except insofar as I and other queer feminist Catholics have claimed our place in the discussion. We have become the agents of our own tradition. I report this not to take credit for it—movements, not individuals, make change—but to illustrate the dynamics involved.

Feminism is the analysis of and commitment to change society so that equality and justice are obtained for all of creation. It began with the 19<sup>th</sup> century suffrage movements, and then picked up speed in the 1960s when contraception became widely accessible such that women could exercise more autonomy in their lives. Part of that autonomy was freedom not to marry, indeed freedom to make friends and generate life in many forms.

What were initially white women’s struggles for the vote quickly became all women’s struggles for justice on their own terms. Today feminism is not a gender-based effort to expand white women’s opportunities but a multi-issued coalition of justice-seekers. We understand how racism works, what makes people poor, how colonialism kills, how the environment is shaped by human greed, what wars do to people and lands, why heterosexism is wrong, what needs to happen to make our society accessible to all regardless of physical ability. This is today’s feminism worldwide, built a gender-based analysis but meaning far more than rights for women. Feminism is not the new f-word as Wall Street might have it, but the new name for the kind of coalition work among justice-seeking friends that literally makes a world of difference.

Among the most vociferous, though increasingly less effective, opponents of feminism is the institutional Roman Catholic Church. So it has been incumbent on my Catholic feminist colleagues and me to present other views consistent with our tradition. If I were a Unitarian for choice or an atheist lesbian, it would not be nearly as interesting as being a Catholic on both scores.

For example, the current battle in the U.S. over how to implement the Affordable Health Care Act when it comes to covering contraception finds the Roman Catholic Church leading the charge against employers offering birth control as part of health care plans. Even a compromise that would have insurance companies and not employers offer the coverage if employers felt to do so violated their ethics was rejected. This remains to be worked out. But the leadership of the powerful group Catholics for Choice and the grassroots support of theologians and ethicists prove that there are many ways to be Catholic. What remains a mystery is why the single largest and most powerful religious institution in the U.S. spends its real and symbolic capital on reproductive choice. Does anyone really care what it thinks about economics, war, the environment, and the like?

A queer perspective comes from the decades of organized efforts to bring previously taboo sexual practices into the mainstream. It refers not only to transgressive sexual behavior—whether same-sex love, polyamory, transsexual choices, and the like—but also to the many ways in which it is important, I would argue necessary, to move beyond expected boundaries. Queer theory “ builds both upon feminist challenges to the idea that gender is part of the essential self and upon gay/lesbian studies’ close examination of the socially constructed nature of sexual acts and identities.”

([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Queer\\_theory](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Queer_theory)). It assumes a certain deviation from the accepted norms. In that sense, it is very helpful for looking at many issues including and moving well beyond sexuality.

Same-sex marriage is opposed by highly organized and well-funded institutional Catholic opposition in the United States. The bishops partnered with the Mormon Church to successfully overturn same-sex marriage in California (Proposition 8) in 2008. They tried, and I am happy to report failed in their attempts in 2012, despite spending millions of Catholic dollars that could have gone to help the poor.

We who speak the language of a particular faith tradition, in this case, I speak Catholic, have a special opportunity, I would say a special responsibility, to engage as effective agents of change. By doing so, we not only bring about social progress, but we also add to the wealth of our tradition, wrenching it, as Mary Daly would say, out of its patriarchal/kyriarchal context. I like to think that I am what Catholic looks like. You might wonder why those who oppose their tradition's teachings do not simply go elsewhere. But as with friends with whom we disagree, we stay to make things better, to improve the lot for the whole community.

Catholic moral theologian Daniel C. Maguire says it best when he insists on “the renewable moral energy” of religions, all of them. Dr. Maguire is the author and editor of many important ethical works, and the architect of a very effective—in my view the gold standard—theo-ethical approach. He gathered groups of a dozen or so scholar/activists from around the world—people of various religions, disciplines, and perspectives—to look at an issue like abortion, what men owe women, population and development, and the like. They each bring the wisdom from their own perspectives and place it in conversation with the rest. The result is a rich discussion that shows how we can bring the emerging wisdoms of many traditions to bear on social problems we share. Then the “renewable moral energy” of religion can be harnessed for peaceful purposes. That works within as well as among traditions where we try to renew a culture as members of a faith community. It also is conducive of deep friendship among collaborators from different religious faiths.

This is what Professor Maguire and a group of us did not on homosexuality, which has been studied to death and is of no more moral interest than heterosexuality, but on heterosexism. Heterosexism, like its cousins racism and sexism, is the social convention and structure that makes heterosexuality normative to the exclusion and detriment of same-sex love. We collectively “queered” the topic showing how Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and other traditions have within them the resources to change what have been oppressive practices into liberating ones. The volume is entitled *Heterosexism in Contemporary World Religion* (edited by Marvin Ellison and Judith Plaskow, 2007, Pilgrim Press). It is queer theory albeit quite conventional scholarship.

Both feminist and queer approaches to religion are multi-valiant. Race and nation, class, and ability shape them. That I am a white, Irish American, temporarily able bodied, professional, U.S. citizen, feminist guarantees that what liberation I can imagine will still be confined to certain a certain imperialist framework. But when put in conversation with colleagues from other starting points, there is a chance that even I and people like me may be part of liberating struggles as we are challenged and stretched beyond our comfort zones in justice-seeking coalitions. But does it work? It only works if you have friends who can hold you accountable, ask hard questions, and provide support.

Put concretely, does using a friendship model make the common good any better, or is it simply a rhetorical device? If so, my analysis is moving in the direction of more inclusion, greater equality, and a larger measure of justice. I will offer a few examples for consideration.

### **3. How a focus on friendship can change some social dynamics**

Given the complexity of the world—the U.S. spying on everyone, wars raging in several countries, a recessive economy that makes the future uncertain, why should we bother to do more? Why not simply enjoy what we have with our friends and be done with it?

My answer is because I want to change an often-unjust world into the beautiful, harmonious place that theo-ethicists Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Parker write about in their landmark book, *Saving Paradise*.<sup>iii</sup> They claim that beauty, not suffering, is the quest for which at least one religion, in their case, Christianity, is aimed. They write about paradise here and now, and how religious claims ground daily living not eternal life. I suspect that they would claim friends as the relational model for their paradise.

My question is not what would Jesus do but what would friends do? Can friends do better? Do our efforts to live well/justly among us as friends make a real difference in the world? Can we do better than same-sex marriage, better than murdering Osama bin Laden? There is an old expression: “If your dreams don’t scare you they are not big enough.” Well, I am afraid to think what it would mean to “go and make friends in all nations” (Matt. 28:19) since we live so far from our dreams as it is. Nonetheless, I want to explore my spiritual intuition that making friends is a religious quest that resounds in the deepest reaches of our beings even when we think we are working flat out just to survive, or to change laws, or to create a more just society. It is as if the Divine is saying, “Wait, there’s more.”

The received wisdom of our traditions has been woefully inadequate to our needs. For example, that women are inferior and therefore subordinate to men was something feminists questioned without much help (and a lot of opposition) from religions, especially Christian denominations. Likewise, that gay is good, that lesbian, bi, trans, intersexed, queer are great, and that sexual variety and fluidity are real, are all issues that religions have been less than helpful in figuring out. Nonetheless, some of the most insightful people thinking about how the world could work to maximize thriving and minimize oppression have come from religious backgrounds like the great Quaker gay African American civil rights champion Bayard Rustin, and the marvelous Methodist lesbian human rights activist Charlotte Bunch, to name just a few.

Same sex-marriage, and killing even the world’s most heinous criminals are two areas where I think we can do better. A friendly approach would differ from what has happened.

Same-sex marriage is now the law of land in fifteen countries and parts of several others, including 14 states in the United States. My own view is that it will take some more doing, but the trajectory is set, the arc of justice is tending toward inclusion, and it is only the most recalcitrant who stand in its way. History shows they do not stand very long.

Now that the celebrations have died down what are we to make of the victory of same-sex marriage in many places? On the one hand, it shows that we can and will

eventually develop societies in which people of all sexualities can commit, make a contract, and in fact break their commitments and contracts with the best of them as inevitably gay divorce takes its place on the horizon. I guess this is a good thing. But I think we can do more, better.

I think we can affirm that same-sex marriage is good, or of God if you are religious, just as opposite sex marriage is good (or of God) because love is good (of God). But once having established that, I suggest we go on to think about what else is good (of God). I suggest health care, jobs, housing, inheritance, pensions, adoption, all the things that we need because we are alive, not because we are lucky in love.

I contend that marriage is not a right but a privilege—it privileges those who are lucky in love to make them lucky under the law. Put another way, when you are married you are one person away from being single so why not provide for everyone? Why not get health care for everyone and not just for those who have a partner with a job? Sweden knows this but most of the world needs to learn it. Why not make sure that everyone has a health care proxy and someone to visit them in the hospital rather than simply grant visitation rights to a few more married people when their partners are ill? Why not provide social benefits for everyone and not just to those who are lucky enough to share their lives with someone along the way? Sweden can teach these things to the rest of the world.

There is much to discuss about same-sex marriage. It is not clear that same-sex marriage will lead to all good things. My point is simply that we can do better. We cannot afford to buy into the wedding industrial complex and outdo our heterosexual friends with the lavishness of our nuptials. Nor can we afford to be naïve about the fact that the right to marry quickly becomes the need to marry in some cases. Domestic partnership benefits can be withdrawn in some cases now that same-sex marriage is legal. It was finally business interests that teamed with the Governor to get same-sex marriage done in New York, dollar signs in their eyes and a conservative social agenda on their minds. We can do better, and justice demands that we do better. More to the point, making friends, teaching young people how to be friends not simply on the look out for a mate, holding up friendship as a moral highlight are tasks few societies have yet taken on.

The same holds true, in my view, for such a complex moral matter as the killing of Osama bin Laden. The man is good and dead, his body consigned to the depths of the sea after a U.S. attack on his hide-away in plain sight in the city of Abbottabad, Pakistan. Military operatives cynically referred to his burial as “Fed Ex,” having “shipped the package.” What President Obama called a “targeted operation” left Al Qaeda without their titular head though seemingly still very much in business. What are we to make of this event? Can we do better? What if he were your dad? What if he were your friend? How does religion do justice in his case? What do friends say?

I want to file what in my country is a minority report by saying that Osama bin Laden was murdered, and to this day I live with the deep conviction that killing him was immoral. There are many issues to discuss—how many people he killed, what terrorism does to a country, not to mention to an entire planet, how carefully the murder was plotted, the heroics of the SEALs—all of which have been rehearsed, defended, and/or taken for granted by U.S. society though not necessarily the world at large. His murder was celebrated by those crass enough not to recognize any glimmer of humanity in Mr. bin Laden, and the most minimal right of a human being with friends who lives in a

family with a wife (ok, several wives) and children to be treated with respect no matter heinous their crimes.

There is no global consensus that his death was justified though there is general agreement in my country that those who killed him were the heroes. One way that I oppose such consensus is by having friends around the world who make clear that this is not a moral good. I live, perhaps in hopeless naiveté, with the fact that we can and should do better. Here is the limit case—the Hitler of our day—and I say we should have brought him to justice instead of outright killing him, the most unfriendly thing imaginable. After the initial euphoria, as more and more evidence of the killing came to light, it is clear that there were options had the U.S. SEALs been instructed differently. The World Court, the International Criminal Court with its headquarters in The Hague, is a place where civilized people adjudicate such cases. But most Americans have never heard about it much less imagined that global problems could be handled there.

Peace activist, Colman McCarthy, wrote: “Before the mythologization gets out of hand, the killing of bin Laden and the others should be defined accurately: an extralegal, cold-blooded execution that needed due process and continues the Bush-Obama delusion that the nation’s violent foreign policy is accountable to no one.”<sup>iv</sup>

If we bring what we have learned from feminist and queer approaches to the table I think we can do better. We have learned that full inclusion is just that, and that those on the margins, however different, have every human right the rest of us enjoy. Even Osama bin Laden. His friends will thank us even though most Americans at least cannot think of “bin Laden” and “friends” in the same sentence.

## Conclusion

In this analysis of religion that does justice I have extended the metaphor of friendship perhaps beyond where it normally goes. I do so because I think feminism has enhanced the Catholic social justice tradition that I inherited, even if the institutional church is still kicking and screaming into the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Similarly, I think a queer analysis not only disrupts sex and gender categories, but it also gives permission to and practice at disrupting many of the sacred cows of culture, such as the normativity of marriage and that state-sanctioned murder can be justified as in the death penalty Osama bin Laden received.

So if religions do justice informed by feminist and queer critiques, the movements are led by people who are willing to live out—vote for, teach, write about, protest, and take adult responsibility for being agents of their own morality—different approaches. Those people are the ones with whom I want to be friends. I want them to ask me, with the American poet Mary Oliver, “Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”<sup>v</sup> And I want to be able to answer that I have used it to act in many friendly ways.

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<sup>i</sup> Daly, Mary. *Gyn/ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*. Boston: Beacon, 1978.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup> Brock, Rita Nakashima, and Rebecca Ann Parker. *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire*. Boston: Beacon, 2009.

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<sup>iv</sup> McCarthy, Colman, "Little Has Changed after Killing Bin Laden." *National Catholic Reporter*, p. 25. 22 June 2011.

<sup>v</sup> Mary Oliver, "The Summer Day," from *New and Selected Poems*, Beacon Press: Boston, MA, 1992.