

○ 'ON THE DOORSTEP OF THE WORK'

RICOEURIAN HERMENEUTICS, QUEER HERMENEUTICS, AND SCRIPTURE

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This article explores Ricoeur's rhetorical question, 'if I make believers scribes, will it be long before I make them literary critics?' by analysing Ricoeur's three-stage biblical hermeneutics through the perspective of queer theory and queer criticism of the Bible and the *Qur'an*. The article offers an overview of the state of queer theory in the context of scriptural criticism and an analysis of Ricoeur's hermeneutic system, before engaging with queer readings of scripture from scriptural scholars and theologians. Acknowledging the tension between queer theorists in the academy, activists and individuals, this article also draws on the scriptural hermeneutics of the queer activist organisations, QUIT, Queer Jihad and the Rainbow Sash movement, suggesting that their creative scriptural appropriations can enliven Ricoeurian hermeneutics.

In his article, 'Naming God' Paul Ricoeur (1979/1995a: 219) posed the rhetorical question '[i]f I make believers scribes, will it be long before I make them literary critics?' When he asked this, Ricoeur was not referring specifically to the emerging field of queer criticism, and yet this quote sets the stage remarkably well. For until very recently, openly gay and lesbian people, like other marginalised people, were not permitted to interpret the scripture for themselves. Instead, they encountered scripture second hand, through what Elizabeth Stuart et al (1997: 41) identify as 'the interpretive field of others'. If we read a text searching for meaning and coherence, then it is not surprising that such oppressive interpretive practices failed to give such meaning and coherence to people's lives. Thus, for too long, marginalised people remained – to redeploy an important Ricoeurian phrase – 'on the doorstep of the work' (Ricoeur 1985/1991: 402).

The task of this article is to navigate some of the currents of queer interpretations of the Bible and the *Qur'an*, utilising the lens of Ricoeur's hermeneutical approach. I will be showing where Ricoeurian hermeneutics and queer hermeneutics are compatible, as well as exploring some of the intersections where one approach can assist in remedying deficiencies in the other. Where the two hermeneutic approaches are compatible, this is largely a case of serendipity, because Ricoeur himself did not deal with queer issues, and queer theory had little to do with Ricoeur.¹ In attempting to partially remedy this, the focus of this article is on both conventional (that is, academic) biblical studies and theological approaches to queer criticism, such as the contributions to the collection *Queer Criticism and the Hebrew Bible* (Stone 2001a), and also explicitly activist hermeneutical approaches, such as those of the little-known organisations QUIT and Queer Jihad.

Firstly, though, I want to add a note on the contested use of the word 'queer' and the status of 'queer commentary' or criticism. 'Queer', as has been well documented, moved from being one of many terms of derision directed at gay men and lesbians, other sexual minorities and heterosexual-identifying men considered insufficiently masculine or otherwise socially and politically suspect; to emerge, in a significant way in the academy in the 1990s, as a term of political and cultural alliance for these marginalised identities and communities (Stone 2001b: 16–17; Jagose 1996: 72–75). At the same time, the term 'queer' embraces and analyses the differences within these communities and moves to the obvious end point of beginning to query

and ‘problematize established sexual categories such as “gay”, “lesbian” or “heterosexual”‘ (de Lauretis 1991: v).

However, as is no doubt apparent to those working or reading in this area, this bullish 1990s optimism – the belief that we were all somehow marching into a bold, queer new world – seems head-shakingly naïve these days. With the admittedly worthy goal of queer theory to allow abidingly affluent white westerners to somehow theorise beyond themselves – if not beyond their privileges – having at best a turgid relationship with actual existing diversity, and the reluctance of individuals outside academia to embrace personal queer identities (Waites 2005), queer theory is in rather poor shape to deal with the current state of sexual politics, and specifically, the return of assimilation as the abiding strategy for political mobilisation. This contemporary sexual assimilation has taken a rather (neo-)conservative turn, led by individuals such as the Catholic conservative Andrew Sullivan (1995), with the recognition being made that a small gay and lesbian elite have far more in common with affluent, conservative western heterosexuals than anyone else, and a definite interest in maintaining their privileges (Duggan 2002). Ultimately one can view this as a failure of the queer theorists’ notions that a new political epistemology, a queer political identity, would emerge to eclipse old-fashioned class. In keeping with the neo-conservative tones of the new debate, however, race and religion are very much central to what Duggan (2002) and others are labelling ‘homonormativity’, with Muslims in particular emerging as the demonised – though ironically also thoroughly queered – Other, against which western liberal capitalism can define itself (Puar and Amit 2002; Arondekar 2005; Puar 2006). This is where continuing discourse of queer scriptural criticism emerges as a necessary, albeit limited, counterpoint to conservative sexual politics of our day. For although queer scriptural criticism is as guilty of maintaining the textual, rather than social, focus of queer theory as any of the most obscure works of queer literary criticism, and it is still slowly finding its way out of the arrogant western exceptionalism of the field (see Burns 2002), it can nevertheless critically engage with the pervasive scripturally based political myths of our day. Although it is beyond the ambit of this article to analyse the tensions between academic and political queer criticism, the differences will appear apparent.

Moving on, we can see that the academic shift away from the identities ‘gay and lesbian’ to the more confrontational ‘queer’, coincides with the move away from explicitly *apologetic* theology and scriptural interpretation, to an explicitly *queer* theology and queer commentary. The first gay and lesbian (as they were called then) theologies and biblical commentaries were produced in the early 1970s and were addressed abidingly to heterosexuals, arguing the reasonableness of including sexual minorities within the life of the church (Stuart 2002: 15). One can observe that the apologetic approach is essentially the strategy being taken by most queer Muslim commentators and organisations today. Queer Muslim networks such as *al-Fatiha* in the United States,² *Imaan* in the United Kingdom, *Salaam* in Canada, The Inner Circle in South Africa and the *Yosef* Foundation in the Netherlands, are all advocating the reasonableness of the inclusion of openly queer people in the life of the *umma*. In his otherwise impressive study of (as the author admittedly problematically refers to them) ‘non-heterosexual’ Christians and Muslims in the UK, Andrew Yip erroneously, in my opinion, opines that the absence of ‘creative’ appropriations of scripture by queer Muslims reflects the ‘significant discrepancy in theological and cultural resources between them and their Christian counterparts’ (Yip 2005: 57). Yip’s approach, like many liberal

attempts at interfaith dialogue or comparison, treats Christianity as normative, and subtly – or even unconsciously – admonishes Islam for its backwardness, without taking into account, for example, the rich traditions of same-sex eroticism in Muslim thought,³ nor the differing literary structure of Christian and Islamic scriptures, which we shall see, limits the scriptural interpretations that can be made.

Nevertheless, what one may consider a queer approach to scripture and sexuality differs from an apologetic approach. Informed partly by the emerging diffusion of liberation theologies, gay and lesbian biblical scholars began to see that what was clearly needed, as we shall see in the discussion of the anti-historicism present in both Ricoeurian and queer hermeneutics, was

to turn from a hermeneutics informed by an apologetic stance that tries to justify [queer people's] place in the church to engage in the reconstructive task of hermeneutics that enlists the Bible as a resource for [queer] liberation and challenges those who seek to exclude and oppress (Spencer 2001: 195).

In other words, only a biblical – or, for that matter *Qur'anic* – hermeneutics that takes the lives of, for our purposes, queer people just as seriously as it does the scriptural text and the world behind it, will allow marginalised people to move beyond the doorstep of scripture so that 'the "world" of the *text*,' properly understood, may finally, 'explode the world of the *author*' (Ricoeur 1973/1991: 83).

Ricoeur's hermeneutical strategy has attracted many subtle, and subtly incompatible interpreters, and the disagreements begin with what to label each of the steps in his three-step approach. Lewis Mudge (1980: 18–27), for example, speaks of 'testimony in the making', the 'critical moment' and the 'post-critical moment', while David Tracy (1981: 124, 151–152) prefers 'understanding-explanation-understanding'. Perhaps Gustavo Gutiérrez' (1983: 91) biting comment about theologians lusting after a theology they can call their own, just as the petite bourgeoisie pursue their dream of owning their own house holds true for commentators as well, for ultimately the distinctions are a matter of mere pedagogical geometry. Are we dealing with a hermeneutical circle, as Tracy prefers, or Mudge's arch? It is a question of whether or not one sees enough daylight between the first point and last point for it to constitute something not quite circular. Ricoeur himself wades into this geometric debate and refers to a hermeneutical arc or arch (Ricoeur 1970/1991: 63), which is the understanding that I will be persisting with. For, as we shall see, where we end up at the 'end' of Ricoeur's arc can be far from where we begin.

Ricoeur's hermeneutic strategy is based around his recognition of the problems and possibilities inherent in his abiding theme, 'distanciation' – the distancing of a text from its author and thus authority. Ricoeur (1976: 43) notes that distanciation will exist whenever *writing* is subject to its 'complementary pole', *reading*. Writing is always already distanciated and shatters our belief that 'we participate in the historical reality that we claim to construct as an object' (Ricoeur 1976: 75). Tangentially, the eleventh century *Qur'anic* scholar of Cordova, Ibn Hazm, renowned by lovers for his evocative treatise on love (and sex), *The Ring of the Dove* and also by fighters for allegedly prefiguring *Wahhabist* fundamentalism, argued that although the *Qur'an* may speak of historical events, it is not merely historical, but may allow for the longed-for textual reclamation and repetition of the past (Said 1983/1991: 37–38). And it is in this longing that distanciation produces what Ricoeur poetically calls the 'mourning of the immediate' (cited in Reagan 1996:

100). Distanciation forces upon us the realisation that our relationship to reality is partial and problematic. Distanciation nevertheless liberates the text for new contextualisations and understandings, as if recognising ‘our need... to overcome cultural estrangement’ (Ricoeur 1976: 43). Thus, contemporary reinterpretation and understanding requires that we seek after ‘not the fleeting event,’ Ricoeur warns us (1976: 78), ‘but rather the meaning that endures.’ As Ricoeur (1976: 44) notes, ‘interpretation, philosophically understood is nothing else than an attempt to make estrangement and distanciation productive,’ and this is best achieved – certainly for queer hermeneutics – ‘by the reader seeking “to apply” the text to life’ (Ricoeur 1981/1995: 146).

While in the context of this essay, we will be taking ‘the reader’ to be a queer person or community, seeking to use the Bible and the *Qur’an* as a source for liberation, as Daniel Spencer (2001) suggests above, it is essential to note that an important element of a text’s distanciation is that its reader can be ‘anyone who can read’ (Ricoeur 1973/1991: 83-4; Tracy 1975: 75). This is certainly the case for queer theory, which, as we shall see, is not merely of interest or application to the lives of sexual minorities. However the emergence of hermeneutics to enlist scripture as a source for liberation has been essential for queer people and communities as well as to all marginalised people, as the biblical text was not always directed towards them. Too often queer and other marginalised people were simply the objects of biblical discourse, yet a more complete understanding of the opportunities made available to them by distanciation has helped them become the *subjects* of biblical interpretation. The same thing must be said of the *Qur’an*. While it is distinct amongst religious texts in specifically addressing women in places, I would argue that the acknowledgement of *Qur’an*’ic distanciation – something thoroughly engrained in Islamic culture through the abiding necessity to re-establish and re-examine *Qur’anic* authority – is required before, in the liberating moment of distanciation, queer Muslims will properly see themselves in the text. Thus, distanciation is ultimately about belonging (Lawlor 1992: 54). As Sulayman X, the founder of the Queer Jihad movement asks of queer belonging, ‘if not Islam, then where?’ (Sulayman X 1999). In this way, a communicative event begins by belonging to the author, becomes distanciated from them, and ends up, ultimately, as meaning created by and belonging to a quite possibly entirely unintended or even inconceivable individual or community.

I have just mentioned that queer and other marginalised people are becoming the subjects, not just objects, of scriptural interpretation. It is in this similar vein that queer hermeneutics shies away from an over-reliance on historicist and critical-historical interpretation of scripture, as does Ricoeur’s hermeneutics. For Ricoeur (1979/1995b: 68), the process of *over*-analysing the biblical text in the historicist manner has the result of rendering it sacred only to scholars. Equally, by dwelling solely on the historical context of the production of the text, we end up looking for nothing but a psychological understanding of the author’s intentions. Ricoeur (1976: 90) argues that the phenomenological intervention took meaning away from an idea in a single person’s brain, to ‘an ideal object that can be identified and reidentified by different individuals at different times.’ Nowadays, therefore, Ricoeur insists that ‘to seek meaning is no longer to spell out the consciousness of meaning, but to decipher its expressions’ (Ricoeur 1970: 33).

An example of the failings of the purely historicist approach seeking the author’s intention is the inability of historicism to properly deal with the phenomenon of intertextuality. In seeking only the author’s intent, narrow historicism misses the double-meanings of texts, or the multiple, perhaps schizoid sources that developed that first meaning, forgetting the meaning’s ‘anchorage in another narration’ (Ricoeur 1976: 150). This is further complicated when the meaning(s) of

a text derive primarily from intertextuality, such as in the story of the destruction of Sodom in the Hebrew Bible and the *Qur'an*. As Michael Carden (2001) argues, since the Sodom narrative never interprets itself, its meaning can only come from readings of other texts, sacred and otherwise. This is equally the case in the *Qur'an*, with all but one if its *possible* references to homosexuality relating to the Sodom narrative.⁴ Interpretations of these passages also rest on intertextuality, specifically the Jewish and Christian interpretations of what will remain an ambiguous narrative.

Now, there are many new readings of scripture to be undertaken and a significant result of the process of distanciation is the liberation of the text to allow multiple interpretations, so that a text becomes 'inexhaustible in terms of reading' (Ricoeur 1985/1991: 401). And what we shall see, as we develop Ricoeur's three-stage hermeneutical arc is that for the desired combination of respecting the text's production while allowing free play (Ricoeur 1981/1995: 146)⁵ then what is required is for the text to be opened up through entering into dialogue and dialectic with the life of the reader. Ricoeur (1970/1991: 57) tells us 'to read is... to conjoin a new discourse to the discourse of the text.' This is exactly the hermeneutical task undertaken in queer scriptural hermeneutics, where dialogue with the text is informed by life experience (Comstock 1993: 4, 11).

In analysing Ricoeur's hermeneutical arc it is important to note that each of the three stages presupposes the other two. This is especially the case for the first stage in the arc which must take the form of a guess to illustrate to the reader that the text no longer speaks in a present voice (Ricoeur 1976: 75). Once the text's distanciation is recognised, then the fact that the text has multiple interpretations necessarily follows, after an initial moment of crisis when the reader discovers that he or she is alone with the text and that, as Ricoeur (1976: 76) says, 'the problem of the correct understanding can no longer be solved by a simple return to the alleged situation of the author' (as the Taliban found out). Thus, any interpretive theory 'which at the outset runs straight to the moment of decision moves too fast' Ricoeur (1968/1980: 68) cautions, for it fails to allow – especially in the context of queer hermeneutics – adequate time for the sense of freedom (and responsibility) to ferment, so that one may decide to view scripture as an equal, not as a parental authority, as Comstock (1993: 12) argues. Equally, Muslim scholar Ghazala Anwar encourages queer Muslims to 'practice suspicion without giving up on [the *Qur'an* and *Hadith*]. [To] read them seriously; learn from them; but also teach them something' (cited in Crew 1999).

Since the 'guess' produced in stage one of the hermeneutical arc is not at all methodologically innocent (Wallace 1990: 60) it opens the way for textual examination of both the historically-oriented and critical theory-oriented variety in the second stage. Structural analysis is important here, because as stage two already prefigures the coming of stage three, it is charged with broadening out the text to best elucidate the sort of questions that the text will ask, to be answered in stage three. 'The limits of the question imply also the limitation of the answer', Ricoeur argues (cited in Reagan 1996: 104), which is to say that form limits content and content is mediated through narrative form and genre (Ricoeur 1986/1991: 90). What this means for hermeneutics is that one cannot ignore the structure and the production of the text. In this sense, I find the Ricoeurian hermeneutical strategy to be rather appropriate for queer biblical hermeneutics, insofar as it avoids both the weight of history and feigned objectivity of the historical-critical criticism, as well as postmodern criticism that tends, in the words of Mark Wallace (1990: 51), to 'cut the

nerve cord between the Bible's internal literary environment and the extralinguistic world of meaning outside the text.' I find this essential for queer hermeneutics, because it should not be so easy to escape the binds of scriptural structure, without dealing with the dangerous texts that have been – and still are – used to exclude and oppress. Queer hermeneutics should not remain caught in an apologetic battle – what Timothy Koch (2001: 170–72) quite rightly labels a pissing contest – but ought instead seek to deconstruct exclusionary or violent texts and engage in a necessarily materialist approach to the production of that text, rather than seeking refuge in a false naïveté (as opposed to a second naïveté, which we shall come to). Ricoeur's hermeneutical strategy seeks to take seriously scripture's internal methods of persuasion (Wallace 1990: 235) as a necessary limitation on scriptural meaning, and queer hermeneutics should take this seriously too, for a deconstructive reading must show where these strategies of persuasion and containment fail and fall into incoherence. An example may be found in the case of the *Qur'an*, a text that may condemn homosexuality – depending on interpretation – and yet promises (at 78:19-20 and 52:24) that in Paradise the faithful will be attended by eternally youthful boys, whose beauty is likened to pearls. Those who look upon that scene, *sura* 76 continues, are promised such a blissful sight – that is also perhaps just a wee bit queer.

Here at stage two, queer hermeneutics ought to be examining scriptural structures and forms to open up the text as wide as possible, while at the same time dismantling the 'texts of terror' and bringing scripture into dialogue with the life of the reader, as Elisabeth Stuart et al (1997: 43) suggest. A good example of this is what Faris Malik (1999), who is Sulayman X's intellectual internet heir in the Queer Jihad, does with the *Qur'an* and *Hadith*. The *Qur'an*, in *sura* 42, refers to people who are sexually 'ineffectual' and who are, therefore, neither male nor female from the perspective of the gender roles and hierarchy of the time. In what corresponds to the second stage of Ricoeur's hermeneutic, Malik argues (admittedly rather uniquely), that this passage is actually about the God-given diversity of sexual desires and orientations, rather than about the birth of children and infertility. Malik also refers to several stories in the *Hadith* concerning effeminate men (*mukhannath*) and eunuchs (*khasiyy*). In one story a supposed *mukhannath* who was allowed to wait upon Muhammad's wife, Ayesha and other women, kept in *pardah* from the other men of the community, was fired from his role for making some suggestive comments about a woman which lead to suspicion that he may have just been pretending to be *mukhannath* to get close to the women. Thus, Malik not only opens up scripture to multiple interpretations, perspectives and considerations, but also introduces us to another pioneering achievement of Islamic civilisation – the metrosexual.

An example from the New Testament is worth examining, too, relating to the notion of passivity. The idea of a man being passive in Roman and other cultures – including, I would argue, our own, but I'll get to that later – is thoroughly distasteful, especially (but not exhaustively) in terms of sex. It was most distasteful to be the passive party in same sex intercourse, but no shame or hint of queerness attached to the *active* participant (Frillingos 2003). Equally, in other spheres, passivity or supposed cowardice or weakness was considered thoroughly un-masculine. At this second stage of the Ricoeurian hermeneutical arc, I want to use biblical scholarship to open up biblical themes. In Matthew 5:39, Jesus tells anyone struck on the right cheek to, as we all know, turn the other cheek. As Robert Funk (1996: 155) points out, a left-handed slap to the right cheek was not intended to injure; it was rather a common place insult meant to humiliate and sure up hierarchies: rich slaps poor, Roman slaps Jew, man slaps woman. 'Subject verb object'

as Catherine McKinnon (1982: 541) would say. What, then, of the display of passivity *above and beyond* that turning the other cheek to enjoin something else entirely representing a possible act of passive resistance? Let's leave that hanging for a moment because the implications of this and the other readings are what stage three of the hermeneutical arc intends to draw out.

Here, the insight gained from the critical and structural analysis of the scripture in stage two implores the reader to appropriate the text for his or her own life. Following the new critical and structural knowledge we have gained, about the origins of metrosexuality and other matters, we are left in somewhat of a quandary. We can retreat into a sort of hermeneutical nihilism, or move forward to creative appropriation: 'we may either remain in a kind of state of suspense as regards any kind of referred reality' Ricoeur (1976: 81) tempts us, 'or we may imaginatively actualise... the text in a new situation, that of the reader.' To appropriate the biblical text, is to make what was once alien – what we once stood on the doorstep of – familiar (Ricoeur 1972/1991: 89). It is the act of turning the scripture from an adversary into a friend and of turning queer people and communities from objects of scriptural injunction, to participants in scriptural (re)interpretation (Stuart et al 1997: 44–45).

The world proposed by the text offers 'the disclosure of a possible way of looking at things' (Ricoeur 1976: 92) or, more particularly, what is 'unfolded *in front* of the text' as opposed to the author's world *behind* the text (Ricoeur 1973/1991: 86). So the act of understanding the text, ultimately, is to understand oneself and the world one is living in, while seeking the 'proposed way of existing that most appropriately responds to the proposed world [offered by] the text' (Ricoeur 1976/1980: 108). It is when the world of the reader and the poetically imagined world of the text are held in dialectic that the ethical and subversive power of the Ricoeurian hermeneutic is best revealed (Ricoeur 1981/1991: 300). But towards the end Ricoeur equivocates over the explicitly political implications of his hermeneutic, which is where the (hopefully) more politically-engaged nature of queer criticism may work to remedy Ricoeurian hermeneutics.

For the primary function of Ricoeurian hermeneutics is not to change the world; or at least not before it has changed the individual through the act of 'divesting oneself of the earlier "me" in order to receive, as in play, the self conferred by the work itself' (Ricoeur 1972/1991: 94). But the self is not always one's own to give away, and in any case, it is never given complete or unfragmented. Rather, the text – especially religious texts – play an important role in creating and recreating the self and communities (Ricoeur 1979/1995b: 68–70). As Stone (1997: 147) argues, 'the subject of biblical interpretation does not only precede but is also formed, in part, through practices of reading. And this is where we return to the Queer Jihad.'

I mentioned that Faris Malik's (1999) queer *Qur'anic* interpretation is focussed on the figures of the effeminate men (*mukhannath*) and eunuchs (*kbasiyy*). In the *hadith* story I mentioned earlier, it is the Prophet's recognition that the supposed *Mukhannath* viewed women – in Malik's words – 'as sexual objects' that got him fired. This raises two points for queer criticism at this third stage. Firstly, this is obviously an affirmative reading, arguing that there are examples of queer sexuality in the sacred texts; and, therefore, if there was room for queer people in the *umma* at the time of the Prophet, then there is room for queer people in Islam today – again, one recalls Sulayman X's (1999) plaintive question, 'if not in Islam, then where?' Secondly, this reading of the *Mukhannath hadith* is similar to what Gary Comstock (1993: 142) does in his readings of the Bible, when he looks for characters who exhibit 'qualities toward which [he] desires gay male readers to aspire.' A *Mukhannath* was allowed into the Prophet's wife's inner circle

because a *Mukhannath* could be trusted, Malik argues, not to view women as sexual objects, and this is unquestionably something admirable. It also happens to have less to do with where one's sexual preferences lie – homo, hetero, or metro – than it does with solidarity. Women expect, to a degree, to be sexualised and objectified by men, and this can lead to the preference for modesty, partly through an internalised guilt. The response of the character Rebaya in Michael Muhammad Knight's Muslim punk novel, *The Taqwacores* to men is appropriately succinct: 'Fuck that, where's your self-accountability?' (Knight 2004: 71). In the context of Malik's reading, queer sexuality can presuppose solidarity and be radically humanising and de-objectifying – something for everybody to aspire to.

I want to analyse another third stage interpretation here, and this is where, as I promised earlier, I will get Edward Said back on side. This text is a reading of the Exodus narrative by an activist organisation called QUIT, and it is a good illustration of the sort of imaginative readings that develop at this third stage of Ricoeur's hermeneutical process. QUIT ought not to be mistaken for the anti-smoking advocates. Rather, the acronym stands for 'Queers Undermining Israeli Terrorism'; they are a San Francisco-based network, advocating Palestinian rights. The following passage is extracted from one of their flyers, called 'Queer Nation Berkeley'. We are told the passage comes from '*The Book of Reclamations and Reality*, version 4.0':

And the Lord saw that the queer people were harried in this land. And the Lord spake unto the prophet Harvey,⁶ "You will lead your people across the wide waters unto a new land... And this land will be called Berkeley. I say, Lo, I have promised the land of Berkeley to the lesbians and to the gays, and to the bisexuals and to the transgenders... And this land shall be blessed with fruits and nuts, unto 50 generations" (QUIT 2003).

Clearly this is an ironic appropriation by queer activists of the Exodus narrative. The biblical narrative has, however, been quite deliberately read through the lens of Zionist discourse which is itself, at times, a third stage reading of the Exodus story. In their unique contribution to biblical scholarship and the Israeli-Palestinian war of ideas, QUIT mock the infamous Zionist slogan that Palestine is, 'a land without people, for a people without a land' claiming Berkeley as 'a city without people, for a people without a city' (QUIT 2003). They then ask at the end of this pamphlet, 'If this doesn't make sense in Berkeley, how can it make sense in Palestine?' Thus we have a satirical queer appropriation of the conservative-nationalist Zionist third-stage appropriation of a biblical text in what is now the 'post-critical moment' (Mudge 1980: 27); 'a second naïveté' (Ricoeur 1970: 28).

In the name of tying up loose ends, I now want to suggest a similar reading of the 'turn the other cheek' saying mentioned earlier. If we knew at the second stage that a slap on the right cheek was an act of domination and humiliation, and turning the other cheek to allow another blow is an explicitly passive and un-manly act of resistance to domination, the question then arises as to what to do with this knowledge in the third stage. I suggest a reading both insistent on the abiding use of non-violence and subversive mockery in the text. Knowing you will lose, that you will get knocked down; but doing it anyway. Consider the Rainbow Sash movement of queer and queer-friendly Catholics. Members and supporters of this network don rainbow sashes when requesting communion in mass. They are refused. They *know* they will be refused. If they

did *not* wear the sash, then in all likelihood – leaving aside the question of clerical ‘gaydar’ – they would receive communion with everybody else, but at the expense of denying their identities as queer Catholics, or queer-friendly Catholics, opting to side with the marginal and excluded. Members of the movement suffer not only the everyday, internalised humiliation of official church teaching, being the first slap, by they also take the next step of turning the other cheek by making the public request, over and over, in some cases. Since they know that this is going to happen, they can see the blow coming, it strikes me as a rather remarkable appropriation of the turn the other cheek narrative.

We have seen that the Ricoeurian hermeneutic arc offers multiple interpretations of texts, all situated in the life of the reader and his or her community. I suggest that this makes it particularly amenable to queer scriptural commentary and hermeneutics. However, when Ricoeur (1976: 79) insists that ‘if it is true that there is always more than one way of construing a text, it is not true that all interpretations are equal’ it is clear that we are going to need some way to decide between interpretations, since every act of interpretation alters reality, be it for good or ill (Bruns 1993: 37). We need to take a stand in the Ricoeurian system. Ricoeur tells us that ‘it is not possible to live and work according to too many theories at once’ (cited in Harrisville and Sundberg 2002: 282), the *Qur’an* tells us (at 33:4) that Allah never made two hearts for one man, and since the worlds proposed by texts are never ethically (or politically) neutral, ‘it belongs to the reader, henceforth as *agent*... to choose between the multiple propositions of ethical rightness bodied forth in reading’ (Ricoeur, cited in Vanhoozer 1990:104). Ricoeur acknowledges that the text compels action, that it creates in the reader an ‘imperative to restructure’ (Clark 1990: 104) and that reading must ultimately end in the world of praxis (Reagan 1996: 108) and yet he offers little by way of criteria for judgement. Indeed, the overall impression is that Ricoeur is perhaps more interested in a particular interpretation being methodologically sound, than liberating, compassionate, or politically progressive. Clearly then, one of the things that queer criticism and hermeneutics can offer the Ricoeurian hermeneutical system is that ethical compass, acknowledging that a methodology is only as good as the interpretations that emerge from it. In other words, scriptural hermeneutics, whether explicitly queer or not, can and should do what QUIT, Queer Jihad and the Rainbow Sash movements do, produce subversively wise readings of scripture, while at the same time critiquing rival interpretations that seek to exclude and dominate.

As Ricoeur (1987/1995: 309) says, ‘the book ends, but life is open-ended’, and no doubt the Ricoeurian hermeneutical arch will continue to be redeployed and reinterpreted in light of the ever-shifting world in front of it. This is one of the first deployments of Ricoeur into the world of queer theory, and one of the first to look at the *Qur’an* Ricoeurically. Thus finally, it must be said that while the Ricoeurian hermeneutical arc has much to offer queer hermeneutics at each of its three stages, it must be firmly embedded in a meta-hermeneutic that seeks, as Spencer (2001: 195) suggests, to ‘enlist [scripture] as a resource for liberation’. This must be but one part of a greater ‘hermeneutics of solidarity’ (Goss 1993: 105) that seeks to incorporate as equal participants in the act of scriptural interpretation all marginalised people who remain ‘on the doorstep of the work’ (Ricoeur 1985/1991: 402).

ENDNOTES

- 1 Several partial exceptions being Althaus-Reid (2000; 2004), in the field of Christian liberation theology, and, more generally, Fraser (1999) and O'Connell (2004).
- 2 Analysis of *al Fatiha* can be found in Minwalla et al. (2005) and also Massad (2002), a controversial article that, in part, accuses *al Fatiha* of complicity with neo-conservative imperialistic meddling in the Middle East.
- 3 See, for example, Rowson (1995); Roscoe and Murray (1998); el Rouayheb (2005).
- 4 7:80-84; 26:165-173; 27:54-58; 29:29-30; and arguably 11:77-83 and 54:33-39. See also 4:15-18. On the story of Lot in the *Qur'an*, see Jamal (2001).
- 5 Or 'musical chairs' as Said (1983/1991: 34) labels Ricoeur's hermeneutical system, not entirely generously. (I shall get Edward back on side further on, however).
- 6 San Francisco gay activist and politician Harvey Milk, assassinated in 1978.

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