

Claiming Marginal Sexual Identity within Mainstream Religious Culture:

Soulforce Q Equality Ride Case Study

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There are over two hundred schools, colleges and universities in the United States of America which bar lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) students, faculty and staff from equal participation and/or terminate their enrollment or contract if their sexual identity is disclosed or discovered. All these academic institutions operate under direct Christian denominational patronage or within their religious heritage and base policies in question on their interpretation of Scriptural prescriptions for human sexuality. Under the Constitutional guarantee of religious freedom, they not only establish sexual orientation and gender identity as qualifiers for access to education and employment, but assign negative moral and social value to marginal sexual identity (any variation from sysgendered heterosexuality). Since 2006, the annual Soulforce Q Equality Ride (SQER) engages these communities in dialogue about theological and practical implications of affirmation or rejection of LGBT people. In this process of re/claiming, discourse and interactions focus on physical and symbolic use of space and text.

Soulforce is a non-profit organization whose mission is freedom for LGBT people from religious and political oppression through the practice of relentless nonviolent resistance. Since 1998 it consistently attempts to inform the general public of the connection between religious fundamentalism, homophobia/transphobia and the attacks on the lives and civil liberties of LGBT people. By engaging directly with what/whoever it identifies as the source of misinformation, Soulforce intends to hold religious institutions and leaders accountable for their rhetoric and practices while seeking opportunities for dialogue and reconciliation at the

intersection of faith, sexuality, gender identity and social justice. To date, it has primarily engaged the issue within the Judeo-Christian context which is most prevalent in the USA. Soulforce Q is the young adult division of Soulforce operating since 2006.

According to SQER's co-founder Jacob Reitan, the project originated in 2005 as a response to an encounter in a bar with a gay student from Wheaton College, a conservative Evangelical school outside of Chicago. When asked what it was like to be gay there, the student revealed that his sexual identity was not known to his peers and mentors as it violated Wheaton policy. After Reitan, who identifies as a gay Lutheran, expressed surprise and disapproval, the student defended such policy confirming his own belief that homosexuality was sinful and had no place on campus. This instance suggested to Reitan that the compartmentalization of LGBT identity as demanded by confluence of spaces (chapel-dormitory-bar) and texts (Scripture–institutional policy–private thought) needed to be renegotiated into a more holistic worldview. The first SQER took place in March-April of 2006.

SQER claims marginal sexual identity within mainstream religious culture in the following format. Each year Soulforce Q identifies a list of institutions on the basis of their explicit policies regarding sexual orientation, gender identity, and/or expressions thereof as well as implicit campus culture surrounding these issues as evidenced by documented instances of verbal and/or physical abuse perpetuated by and/or against members of these institutions. The administration of those schools is contacted several months in advance with an offer to host a SQER visit to hold a conference-style series of events including academic presentations, panels, film screenings, thematic exhibitions and informal gatherings. While the range of SQER topics and concerns as well as organizational language and participant pool include those who identify

as transgender, genderqueer and otherwise gender-nonconforming, the SQER conversational focus to date has been on gay, lesbian and bisexual identity.

Initial school responses vary from affirmative to negative to silent. In the meantime, SQER participants (ages 18-30), known as Equality Riders, are selected in open competition and trained in philosophy and methodology of nonviolence, Scripture studies, antiracism, grassroots organizing and other relevant topics. Equality Riders represent diverse socio-economic, educational and faith backgrounds (including atheism) and a wide spectrum of identities in terms of race, ethnicity, nationality, sex, gender, sexuality, and physical ability. Soulforce Q leadership in collaboration with the Equality Riders selects schools for the final route. The second round of communication with the school administration opens. Then the SQER travels by bus on a predetermined and made public schedule over the course of six to eight weeks. Soulforce claims obligation to bring the conversation about spiritual and social equality onto each campus thus engaging both physical and symbolic space and text whether in peaceful dialogue or in acts of nonviolent civil disobedience, depending on an institution's stance.

SQER engagement with text occurs within political space of communal, organizational, and public policies, within theological space of Scripture studies and evolution of denominational creed, within academic space of discourse on curriculum, theories of gender/sexuality, family and social change, and within private space of individuals' narratives.

School policies reveal a complex view of homosexuality. It is often placed alongside other conceptually and logistically diverse transgressions including rape, bestiality, theft, pornography, witchcraft, feminism, etc. The axis of the struggle rests in the assertion of homosexuality either as a holistic personal identity or a set of behavioral lifestyle choices. In

fact, majority of schools visited by SQER claim it is not homosexual identity itself but homosexual behavior that constitutes punishable violation. What exactly constitutes homosexual behavior outside of explicit sexual activity is less evident and leaves room for biased interpretation. In practice, SQER has documented cases of students encountering consequences for revealing their identity on social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook, possession of non-pornographic films and literature with LGBT content, attending a local Pride event, being witnessed holding hands with someone of the same sex. The student-suspects are investigated, intimidated and often made attend psychological counseling as condition to avoid expulsion and/or outing to family members and their peer group.

Part of the ability to voluntarily claim marginal sexual identity is opportunity to question the practice of its involuntary assignment by the authorities. In some cases, the policy violators were sysgendered heterosexual students. Some schools go so far as to prohibit “advocacy of the homosexual lifestyle” giving way to more institutional discretion in asserting gender conformity and heteronormativity. Examination of these policies raises a concern that any LGBT person facing harassment and/or violence at school is unlikely to seek protection from campus security and administration if the response is likely to shift focus from their immediate predicament to their true identity. Such open-ended policies and history of abusive practices in their enforcement create atmosphere of fear, isolation and desperation. In this regard, arguably the harshest campus climate for LGBT students is at a Latter Day Saints institution Brigham Young University (BYU) in Provo, Utah, which is notorious for its high suicide rates. SQER highlights the direct relationship between text, space and self in this context.

As, inevitably, attention is drawn to sacred texts, SQER inspires dialogue on the authority and history of Scripture and value of exegesis. The Christian discourse about the LGBT identity

and its expressions centers on several Biblical references collectively often referred to as the Clobber Passages. They span from the Genesis creation narratives, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, and the Leviticus holiness code in the Old Testament to the Pauline texts in the New Testament. The process of re/claiming marginal sexual identity within Scripture is centuries old and ongoing. While definitely contributing to it, SQER does not intend to nor breaks any new theological ground regarding Biblical texts but utilizes existing theological, historical, and linguistic scholarship on the matter.

To date, SQER has visited fifty eight campuses and has begun to see changes in the text. Samford University, a Baptist institution in Birmingham, Alabama, removed several references to homosexuality from its post-SQER policy. It now provides parity for heterosexual and non-heterosexual students with general requirement of abstinence. In 2007, after two consecutive SQER visits, BYU also amended its honor code. Behaviors that “indicate homosexual conduct” are still forbidden. However, one’s stated or perceived sexual orientation is no longer grounds for investigation. On April 30, 2007, *Newsweek* magazine attributed this shift to SQER and the subsequent work of students and community members. Another dimension of text-based work comes into focus here. Personal testimonies of participants, members of the school community who are not open about their sexual identity and experiences of the alumni and former faculty and staff are solicited, recorded, shared with the media, vocalized on campus and/or delivered to authorities in the form of petitions, lists of grievances or sometimes in a box full of letters. In majority of situations SQER is the first and the only voice of affirmation for current LGBT people on campus and validation of past LGBT histories.

This invites the analysis of the discourse and interactions involving logistical and symbolic uses of space in the context of SQER. Equality Riders are unwavering in their

commitment to bring the dialogue onto physical campus largely due to the public meaning of such an event occurring openly in a space where it is normally forbidden. They insist on bringing LGBT identity from the margins to center stage, even if temporarily, as a symbol of future attainable equality. Media coverage of SQER visits expands the discourse incalculably. Understanding this context, schools that welcome this conversation on their campus seek to dictate the format. The plans range from Equality Riders having full day access to student center, library, select classrooms, and informal public spaces including cafeterias for meals to invitation-only one-room-only one-hour-only single event offers. In most cases, the school requires any presentation by the Equality Riders to be followed by a statement from the administration stating its non-endorsement of the SQER views. More often than not, the schools assign student and/or faculty hosts to each Equality Rider which both allows for in-depth one-on-one conversations between them and easy security tracking. The desire to control the message and access to it in terms of both content (text) and means of dissemination (space) is the basis of these negotiations.

Schools that choose to officially not welcome SQER onto campus exercise their right to do so as private institutions and property owners. When all negotiation breaks down, engaging campus as both physical and symbolic space reveals complex boundaries between private and public spheres when it comes to faith-sexuality/gender-justice continuums. Most often, Equality Riders and their supporters are arrested as they nonviolently trespass onto school property in an effort to either engage someone particular in dialogue and/or deliver a symbolic object to either administration or specific public location on campus such as a chapel, a memorial, a popular gathering spot. In the past these handmade objects included prayer shawls, memory tapestries, childhood photos, art pieces, flower wreaths and books. In one instance, Equality Riders staged a die-in at BYU during which 20+ students and community members lay down one by one on the

lawn by the campus entrance symbolizing those LGBT members of the Latter Day Saints community who have taken their lives unable to reconcile with peers, family and the church. When they were taken away by police, they left white lilies and obituaries in front of hundreds of spectators and media. It was the most widely covered and discussed SQER action in 2006.

Often, there occurs a literal convergence of text and space when Equality Riders, students and supporters chalk welcoming and affirming messages on campus property which results in arrest for vandalism, a charge that has never been upheld in court. SQER participants who engage in civil disobedience usually plead guilty to trespassing, pay fines and/or do community service. Civil disobedience, due to its controversial nature, attracts additional attention to the issues, raises awareness of SQER visits and advances the dialogue beyond campus. Most evidently the text-space-self trajectory is present in the SQER encouragement of schools, students and faculty to establish the so-called Safe Space programs and/or formal gay-straight alliances (GSA) as well as LGBT Alumni Associations. In majority of visits, the continuation of the SQER work is carried out locally by one of those initiatives.

Sometimes the text-space-self paradigm manifests itself on a macro level in unexpected ways. In April 2007, the city government of New York and Seattle issued decrees in support of SQER and pronouncing the dates of its visit as official “Equality Ride Days” in each respective location. Such proclamations send a signal to LGBT people in New York and Seattle as well as elsewhere about the type of socio-cultural climate they can expect to find there. Not surprisingly, these two cities consistently rank among the most LGBT-friendly places in the world.

Discourse and interaction within and surrounding SQER occur simultaneously on several levels for all persons involved: intrapersonal, interpersonal, communal within the activist group

and between it and welcoming/opposing communities, multi/institutional (within and between campus, accrediting bodies such as Council of Christian Colleges and Universities and State Boards of Education, the related denomination), and the media. SQER is part of the American national discourse on marginal sexual identity within mainstream secular culture as well.

In summary, SQER follows the text-space-self progression in claiming marginal sexual identity within mainstream religious culture. It answers a call for defense and liberation articulated by LGBT people affected by specific school policies. Discussion of policy leads to engagement with sacred texts on which it is based. That leads to evaluation of implications of both policy and religious doctrine for the well-being of individuals and communities involved. It manifests itself in vocalized and embodied affirmation of LGBT identity through sanctioned dialogue or nonviolent civil disobedience. That, in turn, points out the need for continued refinement of the text-space-self relationship within the faith-gender/sexuality-justice context even in the most conservative and seemingly unresponsive communities. As insular as many religious communities may appear and/or aspire to be, they as entities and their members as individuals still function within a complex web of influences in need of reconciliation.

As a uniquely American project, SQER draws on the US history of open socio-political discourse as well as 20th century precedents of other successful identity movements, mainly the suffrage movement and the African-American civil rights movement which was deeply rooted in and played out across the spectrum of Christianity in the USA. In fact, SQER's very format is inspired by the Freedom Rides of the 1960s which advanced desegregation in the American South. It remains to be seen if this model of claiming marginal sexual identity within mainstream religious (and secular) culture can be adapted successfully elsewhere in the world.