



Ending the **Holy** War

by Scott Dagostino



When I look back on my years attending Sacred Heart of Jesus Elementary School in Hamilton, Ontario, I still count myself lucky that my grade seven teacher was quite terrible. As the educator responsible for preparing my class for our first Holy Communion, he was stuck explaining the Catholic mystery of “transubstantiation” to a roomful of doubting 13-year-olds.

He explained how the priest transforms the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ, who suffered and died on mankind’s behalf, and about a dozen hands popped up all through the room.

“It’s symbolic, right?” asked one boy, “The bread and wine represents the sacrifice?”

“No, no,” the teacher insisted, “They **BECOME** the body and blood.” More hands shot up.

“But it’s still bread, yes?” asked a girl at the back, “It’s not, like.....human flesh or anything.”

“Well, yes,” the teacher sputtered, “It is the **BODY** of Christ!” Some hands went up, others down, in a roomful of increasingly

nervous children.

“But it would be like...two-thousand-year old skin,” said another boy, “That’s creepy!”

The flustered teacher insisted we all put our hands down and yelled, “The priest transforms the bread and wine into the actual body and blood of Christ! If you don’t believe that, you cannot be a Catholic!”

And that’s the story of how I became an atheist at the age of 13. I was a logical kid and the teacher had drawn a line in the sand I simply couldn’t cross. Yes, I consider myself very lucky. Years later, when it became clear that I just wasn’t ever going to date girls, I didn’t feel any religious guilt or pressure about it, not like the gay men I’d met in years to come who joked about escaping their families and who wore T-shirts that read **RECOVERING CATHOLIC**. For so many queer people, religion has always been something you must escape from in order to be free.

“Run away!” laughs Kamal Al-Solaylee, journalist and theatre critic, “It was an option I’ve recommended to many other people:



Kamal Al-Solaylee (Photo by Peter Bregg)

“There comes a point you have to cut ties with something that doesn’t respect who you are.”

run for your life!” Born in Yemen, raised in Beirut and Cairo, he says leaving his family in the Middle East to go to university in England saved him.

Though Islam and Christianity are often pitched as opposites, his path away from his faith was no different than mine or others. “If being in that religion means denying who you are or accepting the denigration and hate that you hear, it’s just not worth it,” Al-Solaylee says, “There comes a point you have to cut ties with something that doesn’t respect who you are.”

In 2012, however—a year supposedly pivotal to human transformation or renewal, according to another ancient faith—we’ve seen a tipping point in the musty “gays vs. God” story. Simply put: we’re starting to win.

In a recent Pew Research Center survey, 68% of young Americans said they never doubt God’s existence. A faithful majority, yes, but a sharp drop from 2007, when 83% of these American “millennials” said they never doubted God’s existence. In that same study, 63% of young adults under 30 said that “homosexuality should be accepted by society.”

Meanwhile, despite this being the year of Mitt Romney, the Mormon Church has suffered severe fallout from its financial backing of California’s Proposition 8 to ban gay marriage a few years back. Over 3,000 ex-Mormons were interviewed about leaving the church and 48% of them cited “Church’s stance on homosexuals / Prop 8” as a major factor in their decision.

The backlash is real, but also represents an opportunity, as

79-year-old former Mormon church researcher Ray Briscoe told Reuters. Just as this once-racist church “had to grow up enough to accept” black priests, Briscoe believes the church will similarly come around on queer people too, saying, “it will get there, in my judgment.”

But if religious institutions are slowly dwindling in power, like with the rows of empty pews in Ireland, some are going out kicking and screaming. This year, the gap between the faithful and the fabulous has seemed wider than ever with fighting over marriage rights, school bullying and weirdly, chicken sandwiches. But within that gap, the transformation of religion into something new and more meaningful, by a growing diversity of people working within it, is finally taking root. Can religion be rescued?

Maybe, says Al-Solaylee, but not for him. He had to make a clean break: “It was a double rejection,” he says. “It’s very difficult to separate Islam from Arabic culture. They’re so interconnected. I had to reject not just the religion but the culture that goes with it... the Arabic language, the Arabic customs.” It was challenging, he says, but ultimately freeing. “There are so many taboos in Arabic culture,” he says, “In its strictest form, you’re not supposed to listen to music because it’s the work of the devil.”

There might actually be something to that because, in his new memoir *Intolerable*, Al-Solaylee writes of seeing the Olivia Newton-John movie *Xanadu* as a youth and being struck gay. He was lucky, he says, in that he grew up with “a moderate version of Islam,” but this changed in the ‘80s. “Islam and Christianity aren’t as far apart

as we like to think," he says. "The hard line of both rose about the same time." It's interesting to note that the fundamentalist Islamic revolution that began in Iran in 1979 occurred just as Jerry Falwell was founding his "Moral Majority" in the US, a fundamentalist Christian strain that would become a major (if not now defining) part of the Republican party. But even so, says Al-Solaylee, "the West offered human rights and the separation of church and state but the magnet that was pulling me was gay liberation."

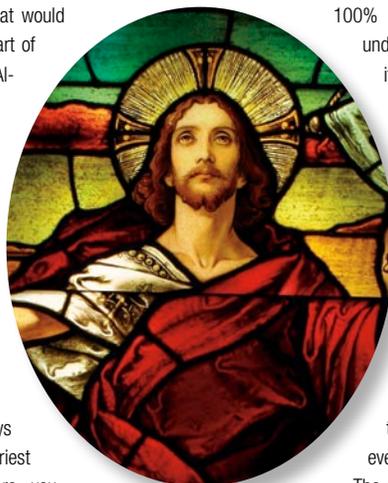
Happily living as an out gay man in Toronto, Al-Solaylee got out but, he says, "no matter how often you run away from the Middle East, it has a way of tracking you down." No one can ever truly escape the religion of their family when the ties are still there.

That's what queer people must always contend with, insists out Anglican priest Daniel Brereton: "Regardless of where you stand personally, the reality is that religion isn't going away anytime soon as a force within our culture and within every culture. To completely disengage with that is to disengage with a whole lot of other people in your community, to not understand what motivates them and to lose the ability to speak with them in that language. It's like losing your high-school French," he says, "because you never use it, but then find yourself wanting to speak

French. It's not that people need to *be* religious, but to completely say you have no interest in understanding where religious people are coming from, you're really disenfranchising yourself."

"When your experience with religion has been 100% negative and you're oppressed by it, it's understandable to want a community without it," Brereton acknowledges, "but religion is much more nuanced than being a crutch or a weapon. The discourse around religion gets too simplistic, too black-and-white. It doesn't recognize how nuanced an individual's faith can be and also how multi-faceted a community's engagement with their faith can be. Even fundamentalists will vary in how they approach their faith. I know people who consider themselves evangelical fundamentalists, but they're the most socially liberal evangelicals I've ever met."

The story of Al-Solaylee's family, says Brereton, "is the struggle to bridge different cultures. Your religion is either something that helps you navigate and relate to the wider secular world, or it becomes an alternative culture. Take any religious group and you'll see the liberal moderates in one camp and the fundamentalists in the other. And the more disenfranchised you feel within the dominant secular culture, the more attractive that alternative fundamentalist culture becomes."



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Rev. Daniel Brereton (Photo by James Anok)

“Religion becomes identified with adopting particular stances on social issues and there’s no longer room within the religion for a diversity of opinion and discussion.”



Chris Stedman (Photo by Alex Dakoulas)

Queer people have always understood that, having spent decades turning political oppression into cultural splendor, but weirdly, it’s the religious majority now forming the Pride parades. Witness the bizarre spectacle of thousands of people lining up around the block for fast food this summer when U.S. fried chicken chain Chick-Fil-A became a right-wing cause célèbre. The founder had donated \$5 million dollars to anti-gay hate groups and when gay activists and their Democrat allies declared a boycott, Christians across America rallied in support. It was nauseating to witness millions still ignoring the ongoing crisis with queer youth suicide in favour of supporting a \$3-billion-a-year fast-food outlet.

Supporters, however, insisted that Christians weren’t necessarily turning out in droves as some “fuck you, gays” gesture, as we assumed, but as a show of support for their “tribe,” what evangelist Billy Graham called a “strong stand for the Christian faith.”

“It’s not an act. They actually feel oppressed,” says an amazed Rev. Brereton, marvelling at how those blocking human rights for gay people cry persecution. “It’s an old trick, to take your enemy’s language and use it against them. As a progressive religious person, I find it really frustrating. Religion becomes identified with adopting particular stances on social issues and there’s no longer room within the religion for

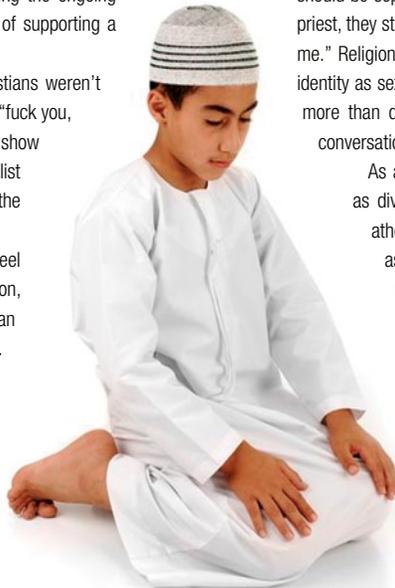
a diversity of opinion and discussion. And you’ll notice that the things Jesus taught don’t even come into it!”

But although the battle lines are clear, Brereton says, it’s vital for both camps to keep trying for respectful discussion. Religious conservatives, he says, “want to put sexuality in a box and treat it as a separate thing to be dealt with, rather than a fundamental part of who I am that weaves through everything, but atheists and non-religious people tend to see religion in the same way.

They treat religion as a series of ridiculous practices that should be separated out. When gay men find out I’m a priest, they start making all kinds of assumptions about me.” Religion, he says, is equally intrinsic to people’s identity as sexuality. The religious can’t be “cured” any more than queer people can. “They have to be in conversation with each other.”

As a Christian, Brereton says, he often feels as divorced from this “tribe” as much as any atheist, but activist Chris Stedman sees this as an opportunity. His upcoming book is called *Faithist: How an Atheist Found Common Ground with the Religious* and it’s a manifesto for cooperation from someone who’s been on both sides.

A former Christian evangelical, Stedman came out as gay and subsequently left the faith. What’s new, however, is that he now works as an atheist interfaith activist, trying to build bridges between



Christianity and Islam and heal some of the vicious bigotry that sparked the horrific massacre of Sikhs in a temple this summer, in Oak Creek, Wisconsin.

"None of us were surprised," Stedman says. "We'd been dreading this. The number of hate groups targeting Muslims has exploded." As an activist, Stedman says he's used the gay communities' approach and success as a model. "We demystified ourselves to straight people and I've seen this approach be the most effective," he says, "I go to Muslim communities, express solidarity and offer to help. I don't lead with being an atheist or being queer but, more often than not, they become curious and want to return the favour." And that, he insists, is how dialogue begins.

Brereton agrees that this represents a way forward for every group. "There will always be tribes," he says, "but if people within them can find a way to represent the tribe while still engaging with those in other tribes, we can find a way to create a bigger community."

When he started doing interfaith work, Stedman says, "LGBT issues were off the table and every day, I'm like, 'Why am I even doing this?' but I believe in the long-term approach." He's been working with Eboo Patel, one of two Muslims on President Obama's Advisory Council on Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, and proudly points to a speech Patel gave in which he mentioned the support of Stedman as a gay atheist. "I could hear the audience's discomfort," Stedman says, "but this is the

most visible, prominent Muslim leader in the US—that's huge. I've seen the dividends in building these kinds of relationships as we work to move our culture away from polarization."

Brereton agrees, but finds it difficult within a homophobic institution as he struggles to be out and represent the Anglican church. "It's not that I'm not out, but I have to be selective in where and when and how I bring it up...It puts a huge block between me and the people. I can't fully accept them because they won't fully accept me."

He admires writer Irshad Manji as someone who's "found a way of engaging her identity as a Muslim in a way that creates a space for her to be a lesbian and an academic and the person that she is. He'd like the same. "If I left the church tomorrow," Brereton says, "I'd still be a Christian and there are days when I don't know if I can continue to wear a collar and be active in my ministry on behalf of an institution I'm so angry at much of the time. It's an everyday struggle, but the reason I ultimately decide to stay is that I have found something within that faith that I find good and life-giving and I don't want to abandon it to those who would make it into something else. Just my presence forces that conversation to continue."

Kamal Al-Solaylee gets just as frustrated with Islam in Canada. "The Muslim community that lives in the West should've accommodated the gay and lesbian members of their community a long time ago. The Canadian Muslim Congress is more progressive and very welcoming, but it's not a place of worship, it's an office," he laughs. "The rest of the community thinks of them as heretics, unfortunately." He admires the diversity in the Christian churches, ranging from the viciously homophobic Catholic Church to the gay-positive Metropolitan Community Church, and praises the Unitarian church on St. Clair for its rainbow flag. "A mosque with a rainbow flag? We're still generations away from that moment."

But it's inevitable, Brereton says. "At one point, Christians maintained strict gender roles and were okay with slavery. At every point in Christian history, there's been something we've shifted away from and I know, in the grand scheme of things, we will get beyond sexuality. I see Jesus trying to break through those barriers we create and saying, 'We are all one tribe.'"

Scott Dagostino is a Toronto writer and editor who's been told by religious people that if there is no God, the universe would be nothing but random chaos and coincidence. Being a jazz fan, he thinks that sounds rather wondrous.

