

**A JOURNEY OF FAITH  
CHURCH AND HOMOSEXUALITY**

**Winnie Varghese**

**BTESSC**

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## **Church and Homosexuality**

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ISBN: 978-93-83002-07-8

Published by  
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Typeset and Printed at  
National Printing Press Phone: 080-25710658

## **Foreword**

The Board of Theological Education of the Senate of Serampore College is always sensitive to the issues affecting the people especially the people who are in the margins. One of the issues BTESSC is confronted with is the discrimination against People with Different Sexual Orientation (PDSO). In general, churches and theological institutions have different perceptions on the PDSOs, and they justify their stand with their biased biblical and theological perspective. This concern has come up in the wake of judicial intervention in recognising the PDSOs.

In recent times, attempts have been made to review the controversial Sec. 377 of the Indian Penal Code, and the Delhi High Court has directed the release of all those arrested under the section which gave a relief to the PDSOs.

Religions play a key role in the minds of the Indian people. Unfortunately all the religious traditions and practices justify the dominant notions of morality. Homophobia makes sexual minorities as immoral based on hetero-normativity. So homosexuals and transgenders are discriminated and not considered as human beings by the faith-based communities. The faith communities practice homophobia against the

PDSOs and keep them away from all religious and social life. The Senate of Serampore was sensitive to this and introduced in the new curriculum the subject Human Sexuality for BD studies.

Having a concern for this, BTESSC organised different programmes where Rev. Winnie Varghese an Indian-American priest serving the Episcopal Church in the United States spoke to the theological fraternity and civil society groups. She was very authentic in her presentations since she herself is a lesbian living with her partner for several years. As a minister of the Church, Winnie Varghese challenged pastors and theological students to take their mission and ministry very seriously. She also reminded the Pastors to educate the congregations with the right understanding of the Bible concerning PDSOs.

BTESSC felt the need to educate the theological fraternity and the churches at large, so with that motive it brings this booklet in a question and answer format to help the readers to understand the PDSOs easily. Our appeal to the pastors, theological educators and students is to use this booklet as widely as possible to sensitise the congregations and make them to commit to eradicate homophobia and the practice of exclusion of PDSOs from Church and society.

I thank Rev. Winnie Varghese for her contribution and also appreciate her commitment to her call. Thanks also to Dr. George Zachariah, associate professor of Christian Social Ethics at the United Theological College, Bangalore for the support he extended to BTESSC in addressing this concern, and also for writing the Introduction. I hope and pray that

this book will help us in our commitment to transform our congregations and theological institutions into inclusive communities that welcome people who are different from us.

**P. Mohan Larbeer**  
Secretary, BTESSC



## Introduction

Asking questions and talking back are not virtuous practices in religious communities. When the questions become “indecent,” disrupting the time-honoured beliefs and moral codes of the community, the moral policemen of the community intervene and re-enforce the culture of silence to protect and preserve the unjust and irrelevant traditions and beliefs. There are various institutions and programmes to indoctrinate the young generation so that they internalise these abusive doctrinal, scriptural and moral teachings of the community. In spite of all these efforts, heretics emerge, disrupting the “peace” prevailing in the community. They tear the holy veil of silence and expose the untruth that is proclaimed as divinely revealed truth and norm for all. This small book belongs to that heterodox tradition of disruptive theological praxis of raising foundational questions on an “indecent” topic to listen to the voices of the “sinned against” in the homophobic church and society with the vision to create an inclusive world.

Though homosexuality has been practiced in India from time immemorial, it was never condemned or criminalised till the arrival of the British. The sodomy laws enforced by the colonial administration canonised heterosexuality as the normative sexual practice. Section 377 of the Indian

Penal Code thus came into being in 1860, criminalising deviant sexual behaviors. It is important to remember that the colonial jurisprudence of homophobia was significantly influenced and informed by Judeo-Christian doctrines and Victorian morality. Christianity bears a huge burden of guilt for homophobia. Our “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” approach to open discussions on human sexuality in Churches and Christian communities and families continues to propagate heteronormativity as the divinely given natural order for all human beings to follow faithfully.

Ever since the 2009 verdict of the Delhi High Court repealing Section 377 of the IPC, there have been campaigns by Christian organisations to re-criminalise homosexuality. Conservative networks such as Christians against Homosexuality celebrated the recent (12 December 2013) Supreme Court verdict re-criminalising homosexuality as the victory of God over sin and evil. The Senate of Serampore College (University) was also not sufficiently proactive in enabling the students to engage theologically with human sexuality. The recent BD Curriculum Revision process has identified this problem, and the Senate has introduced a new curriculum for BD studies on Human Sexuality, addressing different issues including homophobia. This is a bold step from the part of the Senate of Serampore College (University), and the support of the National Council of Churches in India in developing that syllabus deserves our appreciation. This is the context in which the idea about this book emerged to question courageously the dominant answers of certainty, and to search for new answers, privileging the perspectives of people who have the nerve to transgress heteronormativity. Thanks to Rev. Dr. P. Mohan Larbeer, the Secretary of the

Board of Theological Education of the Senate of Serampore College (University), for this timely initiative.

The Reverend Winnie Varghese is a comrade who accompanied the Indian Christian communities in their campaign against homophobia since the Delhi High Court verdict in 2009 to de-criminalise homosexuality. She is an Indian-American priest serving the Episcopal Church in the United States. As a lesbian living with her partner in a committed relationship for the last several years, she is an active presence in her church and the Anglican Communion striving courageously to transform the Church and society into hospitable and welcoming communities for people with different sexual orientations. Winnie Varghese has attended several theological consultations in India on human sexuality, organised by ecumenical and progressive organisations including the National Council of Churches in India and the Board of Theological Education of the Senate of Serampore College. She has also visited theological colleges and addressed the communities. Both *Frontline* and *Outlook India* published her interviews in their special issues on Sec 377. Thank you Winnie for your courage, commitment and solidarity!

The question answer format of this booklet is reader-friendly, and the author's sharp, crisp, unapologetic, and experiential responses are informative, convincing, and transformative. The book categorically dismantles the assumption that homophobia is normal and natural, and instead it convincingly presents homophobia as a social construct and generated ideology. The book affirms the UN position that discriminatory practices based on homophobia are human

rights violations and calls for repealing discriminatory laws and social and ecclesial practices. As a minister of the Church, the author affirms the agency of the Church in spearheading the campaign against homophobia. She further challenges Indian Christian communities to critically engage with the resources of our heritage, and contextually reformulate doctrines and faith practices to transform our communities into welcoming and hospitable communities.

Reflecting upon her own experience of coming out, the author observes that, “I think it is a profound truth of the human experience that there are things we know of ourselves. Whether we like them or not, we know things about ourselves. The arrogance of religious and political leaders to tell us that things that are foundational are untrue or perverse is outrageous.” This autobiographical reflection provides us radical insights as we accompany our sisters and brothers with different sexual orientation.

As a minister of the Church, Winnie Varghese challenges pastors and theological students to take their vocation seriously. As she puts it, “The life of faith is risk taking on behalf of people, not dogma or principles; risking our lives, our reputations, our respectability for the dignity of our marginalised brothers and sisters. This is the work of faith; the work that makes us worthy to stand before the altar.” She further observes that it is the responsibility of clergy to teach and preach what they discern to be true. “To do less is to take the work of faith too lightly. Appeasing members is insulting to their faith. That does not mean that there cannot be diversity of opinion in a congregation, but fundamentally, respecting the dignity of every human being, which in general

means, getting out of the business of telling others what to do is imperative to a Christian community. If we cannot preach and teach this boldly, the communities we have will not be Christian. They might be nice people who pay us, but not in the service of the Gospel.” What a profound challenge to the ministers of the body of Christ!

The book further provides us new hermeneutical keys to engage with scripture and tradition. It presents “disturbing” perspectives on marriage and family. It does not valorise homosexuals; rather it challenges us to introspect our homophobic theologies and ethics and church practices, and to create alternative manifestations of ekklesia by loving and welcoming the stranger and the outcaste unconditionally. As Winnie Varghese observed elsewhere, “a church that cannot imagine disrupting the social order is probably not the church. Christianity is essentially disruptive.” The purpose of this book is to create that blessed unrest in all of us to become disruptive so that through us the Church will become a disruptive presence in the society to annihilate homophobia and ideologies and practices of exclusion. It is our commitment to become disruptive that makes this book relevant.

**George Zachariah**