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TO HOLD AS T'WERE THE MIRROR UP TO HATE: TERRENCE MCNALLY'S RESPONSE TO THE CHRISTIAN RIGHT IN *CORPUS CHRISTI*

by

RICHARD KIMBERLY SISSON

Under the direction of Matthew C. Roudané

ABSTRACT

In 1998, the Manhattan Theatre Club's staging of Terrence McNally's play *Corpus Christi* ignited protest and virulent condemnation from various religious and politically conservative groups which eventually led to the cancellation of the play's production. This led to a barrage of criticism from the national theatre, gay, and civil rights communities and free speech advocates, including the ACLU and PEN, which issued a press releases about the cancellation that decried censorship and acquiescence by the theatre to neo-conservative religiously political groups. As swiftly as the cancellation, the Manhattan Theatre Club reversed its decision and the show resumed its rehearsal schedule. Although the critical reception of the play was mostly negative, the political controversy surrounding its production testifies to the fact that a contemporary play in America dealing with both religious and gay themes is still economically risky, radical politically, and worthy of critical rhetorical analysis.

This work aims to fill that gap by providing an in-depth investigation of the tangled rhetorical history of *Corpus Christi*. First providing an account of the controversy surrounding the 1998 production of *Corpus Christi*, this work then gives a historical and cultural analysis of McNally's career and corpus of work leading up to the play's

contentious staging. Second, a full account of the play's critical reception is given through a close analysis of the rhetorical responses to the work from the Christian Right and the more secular community that supported the play's production. Third, the American Christian Right's vitriolic rhetorical response to the play is indicted as homophobic hate speech. Fourth, how McNally's play repudiates the rhetorical violence perpetrated by the Right against gays is revealed. Finally, the last two chapters examine how the rhetoric of the play speaks directly to its queer audience. Chapter five reveals the rhetorical and meta-theatrical conversion strategies employed by McNally in *Corpus Christi* to proselytize his expansive message of Christ to his gay audience. Ending the work, chapter six examines McNally's rhetorical reclamation of the Christ figure from the Right as a means of sacralizing homosexuality as a religious identity and homosexual love and sex as a spiritual act.

INDEX WORDS: Terrence McNally, *Corpus Christi*, homophobia, hate speech, Christian Right, transgressive rhetoric, spiritual reclamation, gay spirituality

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Georgia State University

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RICHARD KIMBERLY SISSON

Major Professor: Matthew Roudané
Committee: George Pullman
Thomas McHaney

Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Studies
College of Arts and Sciences
Georgia State University
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To

Brenda Sisson

Scott Pluckhahn

Thomas McHaney

Stuart Noel

Ellen Barker

For your love, support, and encouragement

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Introduction

In October, 1998, the Manhattan Theatre Club's staging of Terrence McNally's play *Corpus Christi* ignited protest and virulent condemnation from various religious and politically conservative groups led by the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, a national organization dedicated to defending "the rights of Catholics to participate in American public life without defamation or discrimination" (Kroll 1). The controversy began when, months before its scheduled premiere, the play's postulation of a gay Christ-like character named Joshua and his gay disciples became public in the press. Never having read the script, the leader of the archly conservative Catholic League, William Donohue, proclaimed the play blasphemous and "offensive to Catholics and all Christians" (Bronski 1). After receiving anonymous violent threats to "fire bomb the theater, kill the staff, and 'exterminate' Terrence McNally'' (Bronski 1), the Manhattan Theatre Club and others involved in the production hastily cancelled the play. This led to a barrage of criticism from the national theatre, gay, and civil rights communities and free speech advocates, including the ACLU and PEN, which issued a press releases about the cancellation that decried censorship and acquiescence by the theatre to neo-conservative religious factions (Statement of Support1-3).

As swiftly as the cancellation, the Manhattan Theatre Club reversed its decision and the show resumed its rehearsal schedule. As opening night neared, protestors from both sides of the censorship issue took to the streets and the theatre cautiously rented metal detectors to counter the continuing threats of violence. After the first week of performance, most critics dismissed the play as "unworthy of serious consideration"

(Off-Broadway 1) and media interest about the play in the national press dwindled and quickly disappeared. Although the critical reception of the play was mostly negative, the political controversy surrounding its production testifies to the fact that a contemporary play in America dealing with both religious and gay themes is still economically risky, radical politically, and worthy of critical rhetorical analysis.

Ironically, *Corpus Christi* opened the same day Matthew Shepard was beaten, hung from a fence, and left to meet a slow, agonizing death in the Wyoming desert simply because he was gay. That Shepard's brutal murder was a hate crime is unfortunately not the last or latest reminder that homophobic bigotry kills in America. Racial, sexual, gender, and ethnic violence persist as institutionalized mechanisms of oppression. And for gay men, the prime source of animosity directed against them can be found in the voices of religious conservatives who speak about homosexuality from a standpoint of hate, violence, and intolerance rather than with the Christian message of love, compassion, and acceptance.

McNally's bold queering of Jesus persuasively identifies Christ as a historically marginalized victim of a hate crime and forces those of the religious Right to squarely confront the incongruity of their hate-filled messages. The blatant symbolism in *Corpus Christi* allows McNally to make his hermeneutical usurpation of a Christ figure and Biblical narrative an artistic seizure of spiritual property and cultural privilege heretonow having belonged to those institutionalized religious groups claiming sole authority to all interpretation and representation of Christ's messages.

Corpus Christi conforms to a traditional American genre of political theater in which the individual speech of the artist and artistic freedom are tested. The controversy

aroused as a result of its planned production seems quite similar to other efforts by American playwrights to challenge censorship by political, religious, or other groups acting to suppress any expression of art that does not conform to narrow standards. In McNally's case, the challenge exposed the religious Right in its ongoing political campaign to repress any artistic manifestation of gay society in America; but there is a substantial and very important difference in how this recent attack by the conservative press on *Corpus Christi* is rhetorically framed and articulated.

An examination of articles broadly selected from news sources revealed two rhetorical claims made about *Corpus Christi* that underscore the basic Christian fundamentalism and anti-gay beliefs of that segment of the media. Led by the Catholic League, many of the articles argued not only that Corpus Christi is offensive to Christians but that the play infringes on their rights as Christians to "participate in American public life without defamation or discrimination" (Bronski 2).

The opposing response from the ACLU and National Coalition Against Censorship contained the classic First Amendment arguments in favor of protected speech. These arguments address the Catholic League's claim of discrimination and defamation. By asserting that *Corpus Christi* does not just offend Catholics but is part of an organized political campaign to "defame and discriminate" against people who hold a certain religious belief, the conservative press has partially, but quite successfully, turned the tables on the First Amendment. This rhetorical strategy is made even more effective because almost all of the pro *Corpus Christi* statements by civil rights groups like the ACLU include some phrase or sentence conceding that religious beliefs and traditions have a right to "respect." The idea of respecting religious belief has to be kept in

perspective. The war being led by the Catholic League against *Corpus Christi* is not simply an attack on the first amendment, but is also an attack on religious freedom as well—the freedom to believe metaphorically in a different sort of Jesus, a sexual Jesus, a mortal Jesus, and even a gay Jesus.

Given the American protection of free speech, it seems wholly appropriate for an artist, like Terrence McNally, to freely make use of a universal symbol of love, such as Jesus Christ, to personify the mistreatment of gay men in America. Christ said that the greatest commandment, above all others, is to love the Lord and your neighbor as yourself. Simply, McNally's *Corpus Christi* is one story, of a thousand previous ones, that embraces this simple and powerful claim. It artistically re-interprets the gospel of Jesus Christ in a contemporary cultural and political context. McNally's unorthodox uses of a Christ narrative in his play illustrate the rhetorical strategies through which a traditional morality trope is deliberately usurped from a fundamentalist religious context, ideologically contested, and appropriated for a dramatic and politically renewed argument in favor of human rights and equality; a queer re-figuring of the Passion story.

A concise review of publications surrounding the work of McNally reveals much criticism regarding his canon but there is scarce analysis devoted solely to *Corpus Christi*. Only two scholarly articles deal with the play as a main subject: Raymond-Jean Frontain's "'All Men Are Divine': Religious Mystery and Homosexual Identity in *Corpus Christi"* and Martha Greene Eads' "Conversion Tactics in Terrence McNally's and Paul Rudnick's Gay Gospels," an essay that looks mostly at the failings of *Corpus Christi* to positively influence straight Christian evangelicals. Both of these essays examine McNally's work regarding how Christian tropes and themes might attempt to

appropriate the moral prestige of the Gospels in conservative American culture as a means to validate and dignify homosexual love. But nothing has been written examining *Corpus Christi* as an overtly political work revealing the confluence of the homophobic hate speech of the Christian Right, the societal violence against gays, and its attendant connections to the denial of sexually active gays' moral claim to a Christian spiritual life in America.

The dearth of critical attention regarding *Corpus Christi* may reflect its aesthetic merit, or lack thereof, but the play deserves greater critical attention because of the inherent cultural and political implications of freedom of speech, the evolution of American spirituality concerning human rights regarding gays, and most significantly, the oppression of queers by a minority religious political faction that, in worst case scenarios, lead to hate crimes being committed against gay, lesbian, and trans-gendered Americans.

As of this examination, no rhetorician has addressed these critical issues as delineated in McNally's play. This work aims to fill that gap, by seeking to further explore the theological implications of the work already discovered by the two earlier critics mentioned, while also providing an analysis of the play's aesthetic and political failings periodically throughout, along with an in-depth investigation of the tangled rhetorical history of *Corpus Christi*. Specifically, a closer look at the events surrounding the production of this play provides a unique situation to examine the rhetorical uses of Christological language and biblical narrative co-opted by both Terrence McNally in *Corpus Christi* and the Christian Right in its cultural campaigns for equally compelling yet diametrically opposed political and ideological aims.

First providing an account of the controversy surrounding the 1998 production of

Corpus Christi, this work then gives a historical and cultural analysis of McNally's career and corpus of work leading up to the play's contentious staging. Second, a full account of the play's critical reception is given through a close analysis of the rhetorical responses to the work from the Christian Right and the more secular community that supported the play's production. Third, the American Christian Right's vitriolic rhetorical response to the play is indicted as homophobic hate speech. Fourth, how McNally's play repudiates the rhetorical violence perpetrated by the Right against gays is revealed. Finally, the last two chapters examine how the rhetoric of the play speaks directly to its queer audience. Chapter five reveals the rhetorical and meta-theatrical conversion strategies employed by McNally in *Corpus Christi* to proselytize his expansive message of Christ to his gay audience. Ending the work, chapter six examines McNally's rhetorical reclamation of the Christ figure from the Right as a means of sacralizing homosexuality as a religious identity and homosexual love and sex as a spiritual act.

Chapter One: An Introduction—the Controversy Surrounding the Production of Terrence McNally's *Corpus Christi*

> *I have never written a play that is actively hostile to an audience, which if you're really angry is a temptation. It's a great responsibility to write and be truthful and people may not like what you write but they will respond to it at some level.*
>
> Terrence McNally

In early May, 1998, after the right-leaning *New York Post* published lurid tales about Terrence McNally's new play *Corpus Christi*, the Manhattan Theatre Club—which was slated to premiere the work—began receiving not only harsh criticism of the play but also anonymous phone calls threatening to burn down the theatre, kill the staff, and "exterminate" the playwright (McNulty 65). Simultaneously, the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights started a phone and letter writing campaign against the play, threatening to boycott and picket any theatre that produced it. Then the national airline carrier, TWA, threatened to pull $25,000 in funding from MTC if they produced the play. In spite of the controversy, *Corpus Christi* eventually opened towards the end of the year amidst violent protests, orchestrated by several militant groups besides the Catholic League representing various factions of the Christian Right. The play received mostly tepid reviews from the New York theater critics but attracted unwavering support from the gay community.

Corpus Christi struck a contemporaneously fractious cord in one of the most

contentious social and political battles roiling the nation's cultural and political climate: the growing influence of the Christian Right in American politics and the seemingly increasing "out and proud" presence of gays in the country, especially in the artistic world. Both sides, then as now, see the other's influence as damaging to their prospective agendas, and both thus greatly define themselves in their oppositional responses to the other. This dialectical synergy crystallized in *Corpus Christi*, a cultural artifact that was bound to ignite controversy. And while Terrence McNally has never publicly admitted that he intended to deliberately spark a controversy with *Corpus Christi*, he had to have been aware of the explosive potential of the work and the furor it was bound to ignite.

Until the premiere of *Corpus Christi*, McNally, as a mainstream commercial artist on the national stage, had managed to walk the precarious tightrope of artistic success as a gay playwright by portraying gay characters on stage while promoting a gay ideology of acceptance and inclusion simultaneously appealing to a broader heterosexual public. In an American culture that piously and publicly preaches a Christian message of love, tolerance, compassion, and respect for diversity for all, while privately tolerating, and in some extreme cases actually perpetrating a society filled with hatred, violence, and intolerance toward those gay Americans like him, McNally has always managed to bridge this chasm of political difference through a masterful weaving of characters and themes that have artfully assimilated the gay American experience into the larger dominant heterosexual culture. And although much has been written regarding his canon, quite remarkably the only published book dedicated to a scholarly examination of his work, *Terrence McNally: A Casebook*, does not contain a single collected essay devoted

solely to a political perspective on his writings.

Until *Corpus Christi*, McNally achieved and maintained his success, with only a few glancing blows from the religious Right, by advocating gay inclusion to audiences for the most part wholly sympathetic to his liberation message. But with the American premiere of his play centered on a queer Christ-like figure named Joshua, McNally daringly jumped into a cultural fray of his own making, a controversy without precedent stirring discord not only among those newly initiated to his work but even within his loyal audience base. So what created such controversy? The play is actually quite simple in its re-telling of the Gospels:

> The plot summoned into being by the agile company members, most of whom play multiple roles, is indeed familiar. The outline doesn't diverge much from basic biblical lore. The Nativity, the Sermon on the Mount, the Last Supper, all are duly represented here, with the inevitable relevancy-making substitutions. (Brantley 32)

The lead character Joshua is born in a cheap motel room, rather than a stable, and grows up in Corpus Christi, Texas. Obviously different because he is gay, he is ostracized and eventually persecuted by his high school teachers and fellow classmates. Fleeing the small town, he moves to a big city (never named but obviously New York City) and recruits a corps of disciples, including his best friend and love interest from high school, Judas. Joshua begins to perform the well-known miracles described in the Bible; he spreads the message of the Gospel preaching tolerance, love, and acceptance, summed up in the credo, "God loves us most when we love each other" (61). Betrayed by Judas, he returns to Corpus Christi jeered by "the fag haters in priest's robes" (65) to

be crucified (but not resurrected) at the play's end.

Joshua is on the stage during the entire production with all the action of *Corpus Christi* centered on him. The play ends with him ultimately being murdered by those in power in order to deny Him his spirituality. When he dares to "blasphemously" assert his divinity as a gay man, Joshua is made the victim of a deadly gay-bashing perpetuated by His fellow classmates, priest, and townspeople. He is condemned to death because of His sexuality and permanently denied a spiritual rebirth because of His homosexuality. The high school priest, his nun teacher, and Joshua's fellow male classmates, representing members of the Christian Right, are figuratively cast in the contemporary role of the biblical Pharisees, those members of the ancient Jewish sect whose strict interpretation and observance of Mosaic laws condemned Christ and brought about His crucifixion. Joshua, like Jesus Christ Himself, is executed by those in power not for sedition, a crime against the state, but for blasphemy, a crime against the established religion of the time.

McNally's artistic provocation was a deliberate rebuke to the Christian Right's hateful rhetoric toward gays. Simply choosing a Jesus Christ-like character to dramatize gay themes, he not only dared to push the accepted limits of free speech related to religion to its extreme edges, he defiantly queered Christ in a narrative that is paradoxically both tamely universal and wildly shocking in its metaphoric assertions. Although such a provocative literary character surely was brewing in the cultural ferment and bound to materialize sooner or later, the American public was not philosophically ready for a gay Christ then or now, even though, from Dostoevsky to Faulkner, unlikely images of Christ were already firmly ensconced in the literary canon, including Christ as racist, an idiot, a soldier, and even a murderer (Ziolkowski). In the new pantheon of sins for the Christian

Right to rail against, nothing, not a murderer or a madman, could be worse than a homosexual Jesus Christ. What created such a blatant hatred of gays for those on the American religious Right?

With the rise of AIDS among homosexual men in the early 1980's, American Christian fundamentalists began to frequently argue a disquieting and farcical claim: HIV/AIDS was God's punishment of gays who had sinned and not repented; they were therefore morally deserving of a deadly affliction as their fate. Morbidly ignoring both scientific knowledge and fundamental scriptural assertions, "Judge not, lest you be judged" and "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God," certain Christian groups—most notably the Southern Baptists and Catholic Church—ironically besieged by hundreds of child-molestation lawsuits against their pedophile priests—turned their increasingly obsessive focus on gay men into political agendas with frightening ethical and medical consequences.

The Reagan administration's criminally immoral disregard of the AIDS crisis as a political and national health issue has a direct link to the tens of thousands of American gay men dead from AIDS in the United States and around the world. What initially was only a bigoted public condemnation of gay men from the pulpit of a few prominent leaders of certain Christian denominations quickly became the impetus for the political and legislative neglect that authenticated, encouraged, and eventually legalized discrimination against both gays and AIDS sufferers. The conservative social agendas legislated into law regarding sexual practices and condom usage first perpetrated under the Reagan administration continue to have deadly consequences in America and abroad, three decades after they were enacted. Perverse in their blatant disregard for the health of

gays at the height of the homophobia, some church and political leaders advocated such draconian measures as the relocation of all HIV/AIDS patients to quarantined camps or their identification by tattoos reminiscent of Nazi Germany (Perry 107).

Confronted with this increasingly institutionalized bigotry and ignorance, McNally's earliest works to the present centered his dramatic focus on the nature of social problems related to homosexuality in American culture. A character in McNally's *Love! Valor! Compassion!* (1995), Buzz, after watching a gay-bashing on the television news, screams from the stage: "They fucking hate us. They've always hated us. It never ends, the fucking hatred" (48). The angst and frustration felt by Buzz at the fate of gay men in American culture is recognized in the play repeatedly, but no resolution is ever given.

In fact, McNally's work never overtly offers any solutions to the problems of prejudice and hatred but instead shows the root connection between the dynamics of homophobia (fear of homosexuals) and societal violence perpetrated against gay men. Within his canon, a single refrain is repeated: A humanizing plea to the American audience to accept his gay tribe through an artistic communion articulated across the floodlights of the theatre stage.

Alongside Tony Kushner and Larry Kramer, Terrence McNally holds the rather dubious distinction of being one of America's most famous living gay playwrights. And like Kushner, his name and work are not widely known outside of the insular world of gay male culture or the exalted experience of the hardcore New York theatre aficionado. McNally often defines himself specifically as a "gay" playwright, and much of his consciously politicized work—from his first quite scandalously successful *And Things That Go Bump in the Night* (1962) to *Corpus Christi* (1997)—has repeatedly examined

gay themes with forthright realism, yet always in fairly shocking ways for the times in which they were written and produced.

From his unrelenting satiric gaze into the homophobic and violent American conscience in *Lips Together, Teeth Apart* (1991) to the musical comedic farce *Love! Valor! Compassion!* (1995), McNally's work successfully deals with the problematic representation of gay characters that speak directly to the reality of gay American life, while paradoxically sometimes both reifying and dispelling negative gay stereotypes by creatively employing stock characters that defy simplification, while simultaneously having a broader popular appeal to heterosexual audiences. And although the spectacular economic success of McNally's four decade career attests to his broad appeal, much of the theatre establishment has repeatedly denied that his plays have this communal power (Rich C23).

Much of the criticism surrounding McNally's drama seems to rhetorically wonder: can his "gay" plays ever cross over and have mass-market appeal to a straight audience? Certainly a few such plays have had success. Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart* and Tony Kushner's monumentally successful epic *Angels in America* immediately come to mind. Yet the "problem" of gay representation on the American stage continues and hinges on a single fallacious claim: that gay plays cannot have popular appeal to a larger heterosexual audience because the characters and their experiences depicted on the stage are not readily accessible to the emotions of the straight playgoer.

Can the same be said about *A Raisin in the Sun* if most of its audience is not African-American? Or can only a guilty person relate to the characters in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*? Clearly McNally's four-decade career of artistic and economic successes has

proven this simplistic assertion not only wrong but ridiculous. Yet the supposition that straight audiences cannot accept a gay character or gay narrative as "universal" continues to plague his work, perhaps simply as veiled homophobia.

For example, regarding *The Lisbon Traviata* (1998), drama critic Sam Abel makes several complaints regarding the limited audience appeal apparent in the play's convoluted and obscure opera references that seemingly can be understood only by a very select audience of "opera buffs" (51), "opera buffs" being a not so veiled code word for gay men. Abel argues that in the first act Stephen's line, "I'm not butch; Risë Stevens is butch," is humorous only to those who know who Stevens is (51). Even gay critic John Clum, in *Acting Gay*, seems to agree when he states: "On one level, *The Lisbon Traviata* is a satire on opera queens filled with diva jokes that only opera queens would understand" (262). This observation recognizes McNally's play as appealing to gays but certainly not at the expense of attracting a more diverse audience to its message. Complaints of McNally's elitist esoteric language and hermetic imagery imply that anyone outside the culture of gay men can never have full access to the nuanced layers of his oeuvre. Drama critic Mimi Kramer in *The New Yorker* addressed this repeated concern more ambivalently; she finds that *The Lisbon Traviata* "… is only partly a play for opera buffs…. It has a governing conceit that raises it above the level of coterie entertainment" (75).

The considerable accusation that *The Lisbon Triviata* deals almost exclusively with a depiction of gay men at the expense of its accessibility to a straight audience never actually raises the specter of homophobia on the part of these critics. Yet in fact several critics have directly expressed their own homophobic fears and revulsion regarding the

gay content. *The New York Times'* Mel Gussow comments that the play's gay sexuality and its "frankness may offend some theatergoers" (21) and John Simon of *New York Magazine* writes with gleeful disdain: "Homosexual sex is graphically evoked, shocking at least two of my colleagues audibly" (67). These critics are not alone in their predictable homophobic responses to McNally's writing, and their comments microscopically mirror the larger American culture's often conflicted views of gay-themed drama. And yet in his defense, McNally's work has always played a mediating role between gay and straight culture, be it off Off-Broadway or with the undeniably artistic and financial successes of the film version of *Love! Valor! Compassion!*

The power of his work has always existed within the cultural tensions created between frank representations of gayness and trite gay clichés on the margins of the larger heterosexual culture. As cultural mediator, McNally has kept up with the transition and assimilation of gays into mainstream society over the past forty years; and as a playwright in the middle, McNally has seen the most sensible criticism of his work, be it positive or negative, directed as much toward the cultural and political circumstances of each play's production as to its aesthetic or literary merits.

Historically, the American public's attitudes concerning theatre in general have always been ambivalent, too often a target of its Puritanical beliefs. More often than not, strong animosity exists alongside ambivalence and sanctimonious contempt when the American public is confronted with an "immoral" gay play. Since the theatre has always been suspected—from the snidely acerbic mostly white straight male New York theater critics (Stark Young and John Lahr being a few known gay exceptions) to the more provincial middle-class American lay-public—as the domain of the *immoral* queer, McNally has

remained unbowed in defying the inevitable harsh judgments pronounced upon his gay-themed drama by proudly proclaiming his gay presence through his work, often at the possible expense of economic success and risk to personal fame.

Although McNally's career began with his first staged production in 1962 of the Stanley Award-winning *This Side of the Door,* he did not emerge until the 1990's as perhaps America's most important and prolific gay playwright following the spectacular career of Tennessee Williams. McNally has managed to write daring works dealing with uncomfortable, painful issues that offer no easy answers yet call attention to the prejudice directed against gays.

He has built his critical and personal reputation on his refusal to compromise his morality or censor his artistic voice, a voice that he has continued to sharpen in its scope and depth. Before *Corpus Christi,* he was most overtly political in a very successful quartet of plays—*The Lisbon Traviata; Lips Together, Teeth Apart; A Perfect Ganesh;* and *Love! Valor! Compassion!*—written in response to America's criminally neglectful response to the AIDS epidemic. When asked about his intent in the creation of *Love! Valor! Compassion!,* McNally said, "I think I wanted to write about what it's like to be a gay man at this particular moment in our history" (Clum, Where We Are Now 97).

Ironically, the plays that brought McNally's name to public acclaim prior to *The Lisbon Traviata*--*It's Only a Play* and *Frankie and Johnny in the Clair de Lune*--deal almost exclusively with straight characters. Thus he found his success with the larger American public as a closeted gay man in much the same manner as other successful gay American playwrights before him. Gay American playwrights had historically skirted the wrath of religious conservatives by portraying gay characters as damaged, sick, and

ultimately doomed figures on the stage, the most obvious example being found in the work of Williams, whose homosexual characters are inevitably tragic and mortally flawed—for example, Sebastian in *Suddenly Last Summer*, a young gay man who is murdered and eaten by a group of young Italian street hustlers he had previously seduced.

This negative portrayal of gays often reflected the playwright's own self-hatred and internalized homophobia indicative of the cultural climate in which he wrote. This was a time when psychiatry, as well as legal and moral codes, regarded homosexuality as a perverse illness in need of psychiatric treatment or a crime open to possible prosecution.

Influenced significantly by Puritanical Christian rhetoric that pathologically demonized gays (even the veiled and highly negative representations of homosexuality on the American stage), playwrights like Williams, like Edward Albee and William Inge, were often objects of scorn and homophobic derision by the critical establishment during the periods these writers were most popular and prolific. If they dared to write openly about homosexuality at all, they were breaking political and social taboos that were stringently policed by the theater establishment. For a gay playwright even to write a female character was to risk being accused of portraying himself through the subtext of the role.

Beginning in the 1960's, there was a turning point in, and a major cultural impetus for, American gay socio-political liberation. The tide turned slightly in favor of a few gay dramatists capable of writing openly about being a homosexual. This period, marked by the Stonewall riots—an event that occurred at the Stonewall Bar in the Chelsea section of Manhattan on the night of Judy Garland's funeral—when a police raid to harass the gay patrons sparked a riot in which drag queens fought back physically and barricaded

themselves in the bar to resist arrest. In this liberating moment of the gay rights movement, McNally, who began writing during this tumultuous time, became more assertive in his positive portrayals of gay characters on the American stage—more so than any other American writer that preceded him. In fact, McNally is one of a few playwrights who have repeatedly challenged the taboo against sympathetic gay characters, and for this reason, he is the most openly American gay playwright with the greatest longevity of financial and artistic success.

Viewed along a continuum of the history of gay drama, McNally's *Corpus Christi* can be seen as the apotheosis of queer work that most daringly defines the aim of gay drama as overt political expression. McNally courageously dared to do two things: first, address the homophobic rhetoric of the Christian Right by confronting them with a character they would find the most unsettling and threatening, a queer Christ; and second, speak didactically to his gay audience by metaphorically equating the sufferings of Christ with that of contemporary gay men. Modeling a role long played by gay artists the world over, McNally's characters in *Corpus Christi* fulfill a spiritual vision that speaks both to the marginalization and to the identification of this treatment with the persecution of Jesus Christ.

Usually denied representation in most media, the gay experience is valorized in McNally's plays in ways that go beyond the stereotypical to more complex and universalizing representations of gayness as just one aspect on the continuum of human existence: "Being an urban art form, what is left of the theatre in contemporary society depends on those people left in the city who have an investment in theatre as a cultural form and medium of political communication and cultural engagement"

(Clum, Acting Gay 95). Gay men are, and have always been, one of these predominantly urban groups greatly invested in theatre as a major part of their culture. They have continually looked to the stage as an artistic space in which their lives are represented honestly and respectfully. Just like McNally, who immediately after high school left Texas for New York, many young gay American males flock to urban areas across the country to escape the homophobia of small-town America and to find an accepting community. And in the late 1990's, this led to an explosion of drama written especially for gay men. Still denied much positive representation in television or film, the concerns and issues of the gay community do appear increasingly in live theatre. In fact, the stage continues to provide the most affirming and positive ratification of queerness.

So through his creation of a gay Christ in *Corpus Christi*, McNally is, in essence, preaching to the proverbial choir, offering his much maligned and repeatedly marginalized gay audience a poignant theology of validation, inclusion, acceptance, and compassion. And this may seem to be a rather simple message, but it is one with deeply philosophical implications for both the gay community and the homophobic Christian Right. As one supportive critic says, the work "provides a frequently fascinating experience…. It explores a quest for faith by a segment of the population—homosexuals—that has for centuries been excluded and condemned by the pious God-fearing" (Shewey, Jesus in Khakis 77). Since love, acceptance, and universal compassion are so in keeping with the basic tenets of Christ's core teachings, what then is so controversial about *Corpus Christi*? Is a metaphorical gay Christ really so shocking in the last decade of the 20th century?

McNally's major premise in the work is centered on the blatant paradox that what has

developed historically in Christianity—that what is most often espoused as orthodox teaching by the most dominant and righteous Christian sects in American culture, notably fundamentalist Christians—actually betrays the truly transcendent message of Christ and is ultimately a warped theology at odds with even the most basic tenets of His teachings.

The often facile piety of American Christianity, so vacuously exemplified in the late 1990's by the ubiquitous "What Would Jesus Do?" wristbands worn by American fundamentalists, aptly demonstrates the glaring contradictions between true religious convictions and the disrespectful mass-marketing and branding of Christ as a consumer good in American culture. Recently, an American television drama had a recurring Christ character that regularly "appeared" to discuss current events in the Volvo of an Episcopal priest addicted to Vicodin. Hip-hop rapper Kanye West provoked outrage in 2006 by appearing on the cover of Rolling Stone, bloodied, head bowed, and wearing a crown of thorns, while paradoxically an even bloodier Christ in Mel Gibson's *The Passion of Christ* seems to have energized evangelical Christians. As a literary character, Christ has shifted from the domain of the Sunday school classroom into the popular culture of American media—a much revised cultural foil for a variety of issues.

Secularized and personalized as a consumer commodity, Christ has recently been culturally divested of the heretofore sacred respect of His biblically accurate representation, and thus, logically, is—like the small-town booster, the traveling salesman, the posturing showman, the phony televangelist or the suburban housewife—more open to an artistic post-modern interpretation than ever before in the history of Christianity. For many on the Right, anger at these interpretations doubtless would appear to be a disrespectful and blasphemous re-figuring of American icons. But if a

figurative Christ is emerging in American popular culture as an acceptable foil to symbolize the insular concerns for maintenance and validation of the nation's most conservative heterodoxy, why should we be surprised that the image is crossing into its consumer and popular culture in other ways as well.

Paradoxically, the Christ of the Right is truly an American commodity created through the marketing genius of a few falsely pious leaders of the more conservative Protestant churches: this Christ's image disrespectfully appears bandied about on the t-shirts, bumper stickers, and crass memorabilia purchased in the foyers of fundamentalist mega-churches across the country. Fundamentalist Christians made Mel Gibson's profane and pornographically violent gore fest, *The Passion of Christ*, the most profitable movie in history to ever portray Christ as a dramatic figure. McNally's lead character in *Corpus Christi*, Joshua, as a Christ-figure, is simply wading into the artistic fray created by the Right's perhaps now regretful theological credentialing of Jesus Christ as popular icon open to political and artistic transfigurations other than their own.

In the preface to *Corpus Christi*, McNally insightfully distinguishes between the disrespectful worship of a commoditized secular idol and the acknowledgment of an honestly revered religious deity; he observes:

> If divinity does not belong to all people, if He is not created in our image as much as we are created in His, then He is less a true divinity for all men to believe in than He is a particular religion's secular definition of what a divinity should be for the needs of its followers. Such a God is no God at all because He is exclusive to His members. (v)

McNally is reminding the reader of the universalizing quality of religion which should

encompass *all* aspects of the human condition; he recognizes that true Christianity should act as a buffer of belief in a spiritual realm beyond the ever increasing threat of existential angst that so often characterizes the profane aspects of modern American life. He turns the tables by showing that the accused irreverence for Christ is coming from the Right rather than from *Corpus Christi*.

McNally is certainly qualified as an artist to address the deceits of the Christian Right because he is one of their brethren by birthright. Born into a Catholic family in Florida in 1938, he later moved with his parents to Corpus Christi, Texas, an ultra-conservative Bible belt town, where he lived until graduation from a parochial Catholic high school at the end of the 1950's. The obvious exasperation and anger apparent in McNally's preface, and in the play, as will be discussed later—his most sarcastic and barbed humor—is in satirizing the priest and nun characters. His angry satire of the misology of the Christian Right can be traced to the cultural and political climate of the country of his youth in Corpus Christi, Texas.

McNally has discussed his Catholic upbringing in the conservative South and quipped in an interview that he had his suitcase packed for his move to New York at the age of twelve and that he went directly from his high school graduation to the Trailways bus station (Zinman 13). McNally headed north from Corpus Christi to Columbia University in New York City, majoring in journalism and making the metropolitan city his home ever since. Drawn to the world of Broadway, he eventually found his way into the life and career of a political playwright. He began to write for the theatre during the turbulent early 1960's, following a trajectory similar to his contemporaries: "his career is a chronicle of recent American theatrical action—starting off with some ill-fated Broadway

productions, removing them to phenomenally successful runs off-Broadway, and eventually into the mainstream of collegiate and regional theater in the United States" (Cohn 18-19).

His earliest plays, *And Things That Go Bump in the Night* (1962), *Next* (1967), *Tour* (1967), and *Botticelli* (1968), all deal with mildly political themes influenced by the Vietnam War. In the 1970's he experimented with satire in *Whiskey* (1973), *Bad Habits* (1974), and *The Ritz* (1975). In the 1980's he finally reached Broadway with works like *Frankie and Johnny in the Clair de Lune* (1987) and *The Lisbon Traviata* (1989). Much of his work presents unconventional characters who, beneath their charming exteriors, often scream profanities, strip off their clothes, and even engage in what most would consider deviant sexual behavior. Yet both plays and characters all tenuously skirt the possible displeasure of the audience by charming rather than offending it. Managing to appeal to a broad range of theater goers, though sometimes failing as all playwrights do, McNally repeatedly found his way back to the embrace of Broadway and even a television audience as in his most well-known work dating from the 1990's, the Emmy Award winning television special *Andre's Mother* (1990), and Tony Award winning works *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (1993), *Love! Valor! Compassion!* (1995), and *Master Class* (1996), all dealing with overtly gay themes quite controversially but still managing to present such universalizing themes and characters that they were appealing to most Broadway audiences.

His themes were the tensions created in interpersonal relationships that test, resist, and usually affirm the corresponding chords of love, bravery, and compassion needed for surviving the human condition. McNally revealed his understanding of the power and

responsibility the playwright holds when one of his characters in *Hidden Agendas* (1994), a one-act play written by McNally in response to the Robert Mapplethorpe art exhibition controversy, speaks about the: "expectation that the miracle of communication will take place. Words, sounds, gestures, feelings, thoughts! The things that connect us and make us human. The hope for that connection!" (17). McNally sees the experience of producing a play as a sort of communion between himself as the playwright and all those involved in the larger production of his work:

> I accept that theatre is a collaboration. Edward Albee called me the other day and said, 'You're such a goody-two-shoes. I just read some interview where you said theatre's a collaboration. Do you really believe that?' And I said, 'Yes, I do. And you really do too don't you?' And he said, 'No, I don't!' (Zinman 8)

Farcical, Realist, often Absurdist, and always humorous, before *Corpus Christi* McNally rarely created plays that threatened his audience, either aesthetically or politically, by arousing tension or anxiety. But as the language, images, and characters representing gay American life have become more and more an acceptable part of the larger cultural landscape, McNally managed to move the inclusion process a little further along in his creation of amusing and witty characters in satiric plays. The socially-acerbic commentary is often cutting, but never at the expense of failing to entertain or being too controversial. And yet all that changed with the premiere of his *Corpus Christi.*

The attacks leveled against the work, from both his usually supportive critics and his unabashed enemies, arose not from debate regarding the artistic merits or failings of the play but from the cultural tensions the play aroused. *Corpus Christi* is certainly not

without its flaws, but it is an important work in the career of Terrence McNally and the world of commercial American theatre in general—almost ten years of hindsight since its New York premiere attests to it deserving further theatrical production and a deeper critical exploration. It begs for a critical analysis that might free it from the mostly confused and heated controversy that doomed its original production and that continues to negate its transcendent quality as a valid liberation theology for gay Americans.

Chapter Two: From Secular Support on the Left to Fundamentalist Furor on the Right—the Cultural and Critical Reception of Terrence McNally's *Corpus Christi*

> *Very few Christians are willing to consider that their Lord and Savior was a real man with real appetites, especially sexual ones. To imagine that He was not only sexually active but a homosexual is gross blasphemy. And they would deny others the right to conceive of him as such. They do not understand that a good part of our humanity is expressed through our sexuality and not exclusive of it.*
>
> Terrence McNally

The critical history of Terrence McNally's *Corpus Christi* is a curious one. Months before its scheduled premiere, before anyone had even read a manuscript, erroneous word leaked out from an anonymous source that McNally's newest play postulated a queer Christ having sex with some of his disciples. This unsubstantiated news item quickly caught the attention of religious conservatives who immediately protested the production with threats of corporate boycotts and violence. This was soon followed by its cancellation and then a quick reversal of that decision with its premiere taking place as initially scheduled. Opening night occurred and the New York theatre critics *en masse* quickly dismissed *Corpus Christi* as a trifling play unworthy of serious consideration. The play as *cause celebre* suddenly faded into the background, branded as nothing more than a failed artistic attempt by the prolific playwright.

Theatre critics, for the most part, interpreted *Corpus Christi* as a rather bland and

simplistic gay *bildungsroman*: a play whose subject is the moral, psychological, spiritual, and intellectual development of McNally as a young gay man growing up in Corpus Christi, Texas. "McNally purposely tries to let his own life story and that of the historical Jesus coexist in time, so that references to Elvis Presley and Lucille Ball jostle Roman centurions and the garden of Gethsemane. On a conceptual level *Corpus Christi* has a lot of resonance, but the details often add up to a muddle" (Shewey, Out Front 2). This is in part true; often the anachronisms of the narrative are a distraction, but essentially the play is a metaphorical examination, through the character of Joshua, of the secular life of Christ, with its attendant joys and heartaches, through the template of McNally's own experience as a gay high school boy. It is a personal devotional for McNally—a loving exploration—of Jesus' story appropriated and applied to the often grim and unfair life experiences of many young men like him who have grown up gay in America and are often ostracized and sometimes brutalized because of it.

A Christian Rightist critic of the play, Paul Baumann, a writer for the Roman Catholic propagandist magazine *Commonweal*, admits McNally's persuasive tack in moving him at a visceral level in his identification with Joshua's torment:

> Despite *Corpus Christi*'s trivialization of the Gospel, I left the theatre struck by how resilient the Incarnation story remains as drama. Even twisted almost beyond recognition, the uncanny nature of Jesus' actions speak to us in *Corpus Christi*…. There is a physicality to the theatre that ups the ante, and Joshua's crucifixion is one of the play's more affecting moments. *Corpus Christi's* uncompromising focus on Jesus' maleness, the play's insistence on erotizing Joshua/Jesus' body, somehow made the

> crucifixion and the suffering more real. (14)

This type of praise for the work is rare. Instead, much of the critical response focuses on the furor surrounding the production rather than its artistic merits, but even critics who did discuss the actual play itself, instead of its controversy, gave it lukewarm reviews at best. Frank Rich, drama critic of *The New York Times,* said in reference to *Corpus Christi*: "Culture wars are almost never about culture, and are almost always more dramatic, more entertaining and more farcical than the supposedly incendiary art works that inspire them" (C23). *Variety's* Charles Isherwood remarked: "the overlaying of the gay material onto the new messiah's life doesn't illuminate anything new in the story of Christ. In fact, it begins to seem facile and hectoring…one sympathizes with the intent, but the execution is unhappily artless" (85). Along with most other critics, these writers agreed that the play's production demanded attention more for its place in the history of first amendment freedom of speech debates than as an important work of American political theatre.

A few reviewers did offer partial praise for the play's stage production merits. Linda Winer of *Newsday* called it:

> a beautifully staged, disarmingly performed, often witty, sometimes merely jokey, but ultimately earnest and predictable play with little beyond the obvious on its intellectual plate. As a drama, its biggest danger is being overly pious, overly reverent and tied to the inevitable outlines of the story. (26)

Vincent Canby, in the Sunday edition of *The New York Times,* gave it a similar backhanded compliment, offering the play credit as "a thoroughly professional

production [with] the teeth-grinding earnestness of an amateur theatrical put on by a neighborhood encounter group" (32).

Based on these lackluster reviews and the negative publicity fostered by the Christian Right, interest in *Corpus Christi* dwindled almost overnight and any publicity about its run disappeared entirely from the national media to be quickly replaced by Nicole Kidman's provocative nude scene in *The Blue Room* as the most gossipy tidbit in the New York theatre press. If any lesson could be gleamed from this occurrence, it is perhaps the awareness that the incestuous and often treacherous relationship between the corporate media and theatrical production companies is not always a partnership beneficial to artistic expression.

Much of Broadway today is dominated by large-scale spectacles designed to attract tourist dollars. In 1998, the year *Corpus Christi* premiered, the Tony Awards (Broadway's version of the Academy Awards for theatre) handed out its major trophies to two plays based on earlier successful films, *Cabaret* and *Ragtime* (Tony Awards). And the most financially successful show, *The Lion King*, was a musical with giant animal puppets produced by Disney. Rather than creating artistically challenging works, Broadway producers increasingly avoid courting the wrath of corporate sponsors and shy away from sponsoring anything focused on socially-critical themes. Anyone concerned with the development of serious stage work can easily recognize that the dependence on big business sponsorship, interested in only the bottom-line profits, is inimical to free thinking, especially radicalism and experimentation like McNally's work.

Conversely, McNally has been extremely fortunate to find an unusually supportive affiliation with the Manhattan Theatre Club (MTC), which has been his artistic and

spiritual home since 1974, when it produced his *It's Only a Play.* The MTC has grown in the three decades since it opened "from a prolific Off-Off Broadway showcase into one of the country's most acclaimed theatre organizations" (MTC). The MTC has been committed to bringing theatre to a diverse population through initiatives which enable it to move plays originally produced at the MTC's New York City Center stage with a seating capacity of 300 to larger Broadway venues such as the recently restored Biltmore Theatre with a 650-seat capacity for extended runs (MTC). Nurturing his writing, while simultaneously providing a safe refuge for his experimentation as an openly gay artist, the MTC under the leadership of Lynn Meadow, Artistic Director of Manhattan Theatre Club, has provided McNally with almost *carte blanc* permission to express his voice regardless of the financial success of his productions. And McNally readily gives the MTC due credit:

> I'm not like the hypothetical writer who's trying to write a play that he or she *thinks* the theatre wants to produce, I'm writing what I want to write, and I'm pleased when other people like it. But Lynn isn't making me feel I owe them a hit. So many people say they're committed to a writer, but what they really are is committed to a writer of a successful play, and when they read the next play, and they don't think it's going to be as successful as the last one, they say, well, we'll take a rain check (Zinman 10).

When asked about his three decade relationship with the MTC, McNally states: "I consider myself as fortunate as any playwright who's ever lived. They make such a commitment to me—they don't make me compete with myself, and they've gone out on

a limb so many times" (Zinman 10). He further adds: "I can't talk about my development as a writer without talking about the Manhattan Theatre Club—without that theatre, I wouldn't be here—I can't imagine my life" (Zinman 11). The MTC has produced ten of McNally's plays, the most recent being *A Perfect Ganesh,* staged in 2001.

McNally is not the only playwright to have found unswerving financial and artistic support from the MTC. Other fine artists, like Beth Henley (*Crimes of the Heart,* 1980), August Wilson (*The Piano Lesson,* 1990), David Auburn (*Proof,* 2001), and John Patrick Shanley (D*oubt,* 2005) have premiered their works at the MTC New York Center (MTC), but none have done as many as McNally.

McNally has also been fortunate in receiving personal and artistic inspiration and guidance from other American writers, most significantly from his former lover and mentor, fellow playwright Edward Albee. Several critics have noted similarities in themes and tropes when comparing the plays of both writers. For example, McNally's *And Things Go Bump in the Night* (1964), a play written in response to the possibility of nuclear holocaust, which Howard Stein describes as "surreal rather than realistic, his concerns the metaphysical rather than the physical and commonplace, his treatment more savage than civil, more nasty than ironic, more fierce than compassionate, and more confusing than clear" (19), could easily be a description of Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962) produced just two years before McNally's play.

Howard Stein sees a further recurring theme in the works of both of these writers suggesting that in their work the personal life of the characters creates significance for the larger social, political, and national issues examined in their plays (Stein 24). In *And Things That Go Bump in the Night,* Stein argues, the characters take an emotional journey

that “leads the audience to a deeply felt awareness of suppressed evil—not disagreement or dissension—but evil” (Stein 22). In the emotional explorations of traditional American family plays that predate the vanguard of such writers as Albee, Shepard, Mamet, and McNally, the feelings experienced by the characters are easy to understand, very recognizable, and thus the audience may not always be comfortable, but they intuitively understand what they are seeing at a conscious level. And as with all of the aforementioned writers, within much of McNally’s work anything can happen and usually does. The new wave of American theatre initiated in 1962 primarily by Albee, and soon joined by McNally, moves beyond realism or even expressionism, to put what used to be only subtext directly on stage.

Like the ancient Greek theatre, McNally’s plays expose what is strange, frightening, and threatening, “where what is presented attempts to touch us not where we live in our daily lives but where secrets and mysteries and dangerous impulses linger and hover beneath the stuff of daily life” (Stein 23). Essentially, the audience is forced to entertain certain repressed impulses that they have previously denied, and to experience a purgative healing—a ritualized expiation through the actions on the stage. Post-Freudian and post-modern, this theatre does not hide the author’s feelings or his life beneath the surface. As McNally writes in the preface to *Corpus Christi*, the play is a meta-theatrical acknowledgement of an emotional, psychological, and, ideally, spiritually awakening process:

> The play is more a religious ritual than a play. A play teaches us a new insight into the human condition. A ritual is an action we perform over and over and over because we have to. Otherwise, we are in danger of

> forgetting the meaning of that ritual, in this case that we must love one another or die. Christ died for all of our sins because He loved each and every one of us. When we do not remember His great sacrifice, we condemn ourselves to repeating its terrible consequences. (vii)

This statement reveals how *Corpus Christi* differs from all of McNally's previous work in a singular regard. All of his earlier work deals with politics and society, usually through satiric humor that addresses societal issues in general rather than specific terms. Ruby Cohn describes his plays as having "a degree of effectiveness, but in the final analysis, their effect is more in the realm of commentary and entertainment than offense or assault" (19-20).

While such critics as Cohn seem to be accusing McNally of being too safe, playing to the center—writing satire with a message but without controversy or bite, as in *Love! Valor! Compassion!* and *Kiss of the Spider Woman*— *Corpus Christi* should perhaps have been recognized as a pivotal moment in his career, one that signaled a shift from the commercially safe to the boldly confrontational. McNally stops speaking in vague generalities by choosing a specific target, the Christian Right, to blast with his acerbic satire in *Corpus Christi*. In the play's preface, he addresses them directly*:*

> They do not understand that a good part of our humanity is expressed *through* our sexuality and not exclusive of it. Such a concept is as alien to them as their notion of 'sin' and 'evil' is to me. In their self-defense, they tell us they hate the sin but love the sinner. Nonsense. The sinner *is* his sin and in their eyes it is an abominable one. Naturally they try to suppress *Corpus Christi* with threats of violence. Just as naturally, the

> New York Theater community said no to this attempt at artistic repression and the play went on as scheduled. I have never been prouder to be a part of that community. I owe them—we all owe them—big for this one. (vi)

Corpus Christi conforms to a traditional American genre of political theater in which the individual speech of the artist and artistic freedom both are put on the line but with many interesting precedents. Similar to Arthur Miller's *The Crucible,* a play that responded to Senator Eugene McCarthy's hysterical witch-hunt in search of American Communists, *Corpus Christi* can be seen as a gay Christian manifesto demanding justice and acceptance against dangerously powerful conservative religious institutions. And the controversy aroused as a result of its planned production seems quite similar to other efforts by the religious and conservative right in its ongoing "culture war" (Hunter 44) to repress any artistic manifestation of gay society in America. But there is a substantial and very important difference in how rhetorically framed and articulated McNally's attempt to answer the attack by the religiously conservative press on homosexuality is achieved. This difference hinges on McNally being the first gay artist to equate the marginalization and victimization of gay men in America directly with Jesus Christ.

By daring to preach against passive assimilation and any notion of a normative sexuality by making use of "their" text, McNally enraged those on the Right who believe they "own" the Christ narrative and any and all interpretations of Biblical stories. For those on the Queer Left, the preaching of the Right on issues of family values and heterosexual monogamy is simply a not so thinly veiled political strategy to deny gays and lesbians their social and civil rights (defined by the Right as "special rights") and to force queers back into the closet. The manner in which the Right has used its narrow and

exclusionary definitions of “normal” has frightening implications for queer Americans far beyond the mere philosophical debates concerning sexuality, because the religious Right’s political influence has allowed them to legally define any alternative categories beyond heterosexual as deviant, immoral, and, therefore, not worthy of equality. Their increasing political influence has led to the passage of state and national laws marginalizing and disenfranchising the gay electorate.

Far too long, gay American artists and secularists have so scorned the religious Right’s narrowness and prejudices that they have pulled away spiritually from the established church as well as its attendant documents and theology. In a sense, definitions of the American gay self are in fact often constructed in opposition to ostracism and oppression by fundamentalist Christianity. Historically, American gays have tended out of exasperation to give up on the Christian church as a community welcoming to them unless they are deeply closeted. They have done this, however, at a great moral, cultural, and political detriment. In this divided time in the nation’s cultural debates, defiantly maintaining a shallow understanding of religion—especially of the established mainstream Christian churches—is not a prudent or ethical strategy.

Moreover, it is intellectually irresponsible to politically and culturally define one’s self in opposition to something that is cursorily understood only through its frequently bizarre and narrow-minded constituents, most of them ignorant of their religion’s theology, documents, or history, and many of them merely exploiters of the weak-minded faithful. To be blind to the Biblical narratives employed by the religious Right to promulgate its political will dis-empowers moderate or liberal voices that might interject valid theological propositions regarding the contentiousness of many cultural debates

initiated and rhetorically controlled by the zealots of the American Christian Right in the past three decades.

Beginning in the Reagan presidency, American Christian fundamentalists began to exert their political influence in unprecedented ways upon the American public. Christian fundamentalism, while often synonymous with born-again evangelical Christianity, can, in laymen's terms, be distinguished as invariably a group of white male leaders who consider themselves superior to all other believers. Fundamentalists believe they have a special relationship with God. Often, they even claim to converse directly with God as did the prophets of the Old Testament, and thus, they claim their beliefs are inherently and unquestionably correct.

Anyone who disagrees with them is, first of all, wrong; second, inferior; and in the most extreme cases such as homosexuals, evil, subhuman, and deserving of sanctimonious pity and guidance but not the rights equal to "normal" heterosexual Christians. Any deviation from their own ordained truth is seen as a derogation of their responsibility to guide the ill-informed and sinful masses to Christ. So compromising or negotiating with others, or even considering the opinion of others that might be in any form different from their supposedly inerrant orthodoxy is a violation of their faith. Fundamentalism makes a great show of its rigidity; it exhibits proudly its superiority and exclusion as a badge of honor, always by citing the Bible. Ironically, after decades of civil rights activities, people seem to have forgotten how long Biblical arguments for the separation of the races were the laws of most American states, including legal bans on "interracial" marriage.

American fundamentalist Christian sects are notoriously exclusive and blatantly

critical of any and all who deviate from their beliefs. For example, in the summer of 1998, only a few months before *Corpus Christi* premiered in New York City, the Southern Baptist Convention held its national convocation in Salt Lake City, Utah, and publicly announced its members' intentions to proselytize the Mormons regarding the error of their ways and beliefs by teaching the "Truth" of the Baptist faith. Like the Southern Baptists, other fundamentalist sects reify their spiritual and cultural superiority by denigrating and diminishing the humanity of believers of other faiths. Because their spiritual identity is so heavily buoyed by their believing that they are the few chosen elect of God, members of these groups are driven not to love nonbelievers but to scapegoat them, often with devastating political, social, and even life-threatening consequences for anyone who dares to question the status quo.

As an "out" gay playwright, McNally, alongside a few brave others like Tony Kushner and Larry Kramer, repeatedly voices his opposition to the hypocrisy and deceit of the American Right. And as a result, he has felt their unwavering wrath more than most. Claiming Christ for the gay community by asserting in his preface to *Corpus Christi*: "Jesus Christ belongs to all of us because He is all of us" (v), McNally is committing the ultimate sin against those on the Right who claim to speak solely for the Lord on earth. He humorously acknowledges his perceived blasphemy:

> But it would be naïve of me to think that I could write a play about a young gay man who would become identified as a Christ figure without stirring up a protest as it would to think I could write a play about Jesus Christ himself in which He would come to be identified as a young gay man without a lot of noses getting bent out of joint. (v)

McNally wrote his play fully conscious of the Right's Bible-thumping self-righteousness, intolerance, and its leaders' lust for political power masquerading as religious knowledge and the love of God. Christian fundamentalists' obsession with homosexuality, gay marriage, and attendant political issues, is carried on at the risk of ignoring all other seemingly more important cultural topics for Christians such as hunger, the welfare of children, or the issue most often addressed by Christ in the Gospels, the plight of those living in abject poverty. In fact, the New Testament takes no demonstrably valid position on homosexuality. Referencing this glaring omission in Christian texts, theologian John Boswell states: "the source of antigay feelings among [fundamentalist] Christians must be sought elsewhere" (Boswell 22).

So then, why this seeming obsession with the sex lives of gay American men? And it seems even more a mystery when there is no New Testament hermeneutical evidence to support a homophobic Christianity. In the Gospels, Christ repeatedly offers a religion open to all and not just to a chosen few. "I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly," He explains and acts as the Good Shepherd who quickly abandons the obediently docile sheep of his flock to rescue the single lamb that has wandered astray (John 10:10).

The Christian Right's pathological fixation on homosexuality, gay men in particular, can be attributed to a number of factors, but one seems to dominate. After the fall of Communism in the late 1980's, a new enemy was needed by the Right to demonize, and homosexuals fit the bill perfectly. In American politics, and especially in the Machiavellian world of political fundraising, a scapegoat can always be counted on to help fill the coffers and rally the ideological devout to the ballot box. How convenient

for the Right to find a homegrown enemy to openly despise and dehumanize within the intolerant and judgmental morality of the dominant national religions' most rigid conservative theology concerning sexuality.

Regardless of their motives, it is clear that those leading the Right devote unprecedented amount of political and economic capital to the question of same-sex relationships. Their devotion to this issue often crosses the border between a directed political focus into the realm of absurdity and pathological obsession, and perhaps no other American fundamentalist personifies this bizarre fascination with the sex lives of gay men more than the founder of the Moral Majority, the Reverend Jerry Falwell. His singular role in the political formation of the Right in American politics along with his comically enduring fascination and strange personal fetish regarding gay people have made him an object of scorn and fearful loathing by secular Americans as well as gay activists. Most infamously, he accused the *Sesame Street* puppet roommates Bert and Ernie of portraying a homosexual relationship and he "outed" the Teletubby Tinky Winky by accusing it of being a gay role model because he/she carried a "purse" and had a triangle attached to his/her head that, according the Reverend Falwell, supposedly represented a "gay" symbol.

Many American cartoon characters are homosexual in Falwell's view. In 2004, Falwell claimed that Sponge Bob Square Pants was having a gay affair with his best friend, the obese pink starfish named Patrick in their underwater world of Bikini Bottom. While the ridiculousness of these claims makes them laughable, some of Falwell's wilder assertions about human affairs are not. He blamed the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001, on God's wrath directed towards a nation besieged by rampant homosexuality and

various other American vices like yoga and astrology.

Given the increasing prevalence of such absurdities, it takes very little imagination to understand why a gay dramatist like McNally might respond to the Falwells, Robertsons, and Wildmons, and the politicians who exploit them by parodying fundamentalist Christianity using irony, sarcasm, shock, and biting humor, re-interpreting the story of Christ to address the issue of gayness and spirituality.

McNally is not alone in challenging the smug morality of the Right with unorthodox work. In recent years, other controversial gay artists such as photographer Robert Mapplethorpe and NEA-funded performance artists Karen Finley and Holly Hughes have invited the wrath of fundamentalist Christians. But few American playwrights have caused as much contention as McNally has with *Corpus Christi*. The incitement of anonymous threats of violence and protests by religious zealots outside the Manhattan Theatre Club attest to the rhetorical power of his play's controversial message.

Gay artists in America are morally compelled to confront the Right because of the grave consequences of complacency while the rights of the gay community are quickly eroded because of the increasing influence Christian fundamentalists wield in the political arena. Gay artists in America are morally compelled to confront the Right because they know the consequences of sitting idly by while false prophets take to the airwaves to demonize them, Nazi Germany being a frightening model from the world's recent past. Acting as a voice for the larger American gay community, McNally understands the importance of speaking out. Not to react strongly—in the political climate just beginning to gain momentum at the time he wrote the play—would be to allow hard-won gay rights to erode further in the face of increasing Christian

fundamentalist political influence.

McNally's play about a gay Christ figure deliberately joined the national debate regarding the ever-tightening hold of the Right over the country. The issue of convoluted interpretations of religious texts, blurry State-Church borders, Christian hypocrisy, religious demagogues, and human-rights issues are among the universalizing themes of his work. In a recent speech regarding *Corpus Christi*, McNally gave courageous advice to playwrights regarding the more discordant themes in his own work. He told them: "write plays that matter…. It's time to reclaim the theater. We do that by speaking from the heart about the things that matter most to us. If a play isn't worth dying for, maybe it isn't worth writing" (Roger 72). Since at least one email cited in *The Advocate* ominously called for "death to the queer Jew Terrence McNally" (Shewey, Jesus in Khakis 77), the possibility of his suffering bodily harm for writing his play is a very real one.

While several instances could have provided the impetus for McNally to confront the Right directly through *Corpus Christi,* one single event seems to dominate. Only two years before *Corpus Christi* premiered, his eclectic style and daring choice of characters in another one of his plays had drawn political ire from the conservative Right because of the unconventional esthetic themes of the work; the controversial staging of his play dealing with bigotry, homophobia, and intolerance, *Teeth Together, Lips Apart,* during 1996 in Marietta, Georgia. This play created international attention and brought unprecedented public notice to McNally's work.

The politically conservative constituents of then Republican House Speaker Newt Gingrich loudly protested the production of the McNally play, which dealt with

homosexual themes they found morally objectionable. As a result of the highly public debate surrounding the county's homophobic bigotry, the Atlanta Olympic Committee refused to allow the Olympic Torch Run to take place in Cobb County, Georgia. Ultimately, the county relented when their censorious efforts were denounced internationally by protestors who cited homophobic intolerance and an obvious violation of free speech, and the Olympic Committee allowed the torch run to take place there.

The very same arguments for and against the production of *Lips Together, Teeth Apart* were repeated only two years later during the *Corpus Christi* controversy. From the beginning of the modern gay and lesbian movement, dramatic discourse has proven a potent political force in social change. Gay playwrights and queer theorists have long recognized the rhetorical power of live drama to enact political and social change by focusing attention on relevant social issues and the public's response to controversial work. As drama critic Martin Esslin posits:

> The theatre is the place where the nation thinks in public in front of itself. And in that context all sort of matters assume political importance, for, ultimately, there is a close link between the general beliefs of a society, its concepts of proper behavior and good manners, its view of sexual morals, and the political climate of the nation. Changes in manners and mores may ultimately change the very temper of politics. (1010)

Like other gay playwrights, McNally has always consciously understood this power and employed drama to challenge, chastise, and convert the American heterosexist hegemony, or at least to diminish its political authority. As a well-educated dramatist writing in a post-modern world, McNally demonstrates his acute knowledge of literary

criticism, cultural studies, queer theory, and politics—as demonstrated in a recent interview with a drama critic—a perspective not to be underestimated in his creative choice of a gay Christ-figure as a literary character (Zinman 3-15).

John M. Clum's book *Acting Gay* explores the changing characteristics of gay drama as it relates to political discourse, a critical task that has become more and more problematic. The distinction between "queer" and "gay" has been argued by theorists and political activists for some time. While "gay" signifies a man who desires to have sex with someone of his own gender, "queer" has a more complex connotation that is culturally and politically charged. *Queer* is a boisterous in-your-face celebration of difference in regard to the normative. According to Alexander Doty, "queer" means to be politically radical: to paradoxically demand recognition by straight culture while rejecting this culture. Ironically, part of what is being rejected here are attempts to contain people through labeling, so 'queer' is touted, again paradoxically, as an inclusive, not an exclusive category, unlike 'straight,' 'gay,' 'lesbian,' 'bisexual'" (Doty xiv). *Queer* is a worldview, an attitude, a methodology, and a style—not only in the insular world of critical literary theory but in politics, art, and living as well.

On another level, queer theory seeks to critically interrogate the historical, cultural, and political apparatuses and ideologies of heterosexuality and the societal practices wherein homosexual or sexual variance and its indirect expression in the context of power are suppressed. In her highly influential book, *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick suggests that queer theory moves from a "minoritizing'' interest in homosexuality to a "universalizing" interest in the rhetorical construction of sexuality and its relations with power (1-3). "Queer" shows both the failure and the power of

hegemonic discourse. It dares to delve into that which "dares not speak its name" because "queer" can and does act as an all-inclusive term for any kind of sexual deviation from the narrow and hegemonic heterosexual norm.

For Sedgwick, "queer" is a rhetorical act as well as a critical definition:

> But "gay" and "lesbian" still present themselves (however delusively) as objective, empirical categories governed by empirical rules of evidence (however contested). "Queer" seems to hinge much more radically and explicitly on a person's undertaking particular, performative acts of experimental self-perception and affiliation. (9)

This sort of queerness underlies *Corpus Christi* in ways that none of McNally's other works ever have. Although much of McNally's previous work and characters could be deemed as being "gay," even very gay, using Sedgwick's definition, none of his other characters meet the criteria for "queer" in the manner of Joshua in *Corpus Christi*. While much of McNally's work can be accurately defined as "gay," for several philosophical reasons explored later, *Corpus Christi* can correctly be labeled his first distinctly "queer" play. While all of his past work is undeniably gay, *Corpus Christi* is unabashedly queer. With Joshua, unlike any other literary figure, McNally has *queered* Christ in order to que(e)ry the very foundational symbol and narrative of Christian culture. And although many pervious artists have given Christ a sexual life, or at least hinted at it, no one has transgressed such a taboo subject in a popular work of art: the possibility of an actively homosexual Christ.

For two millennia, Christians have rigorously maintained an image of an unmarried and therefore celibate Christ, and more recently contemporary fundamentalist Christians

make him the very model of compulsory heterosexuality. Quite literally, fundamentalist Christians equate all sexuality outside of the narrow confines of procreation and heterosexual marriage as being evil and sinful. They surround sex with so many prohibitions, regulations, and restrictions that any person who strays from their impoverished theology of sexuality is doomed to suffer under the label of pariah. To control the definition is to control the culture, but McNally's *Corpus Christi* challenges the Right's literary and cultural hegemony regarding this limited and exclusionary definition.

In his seminal book, *The History of Sexuality*, the father of queer theory, Michel Foucault, states that the notions of compulsory heterosexuality are neither natural nor universal, but constructed and enforced in conjunction with other relations of power, often to the detriment of any alternative sexual practices and identities (27). Traditionally, heterosexist American society has denied homosexuals power by maintaining what Sedgwick refers to as an "epistemological closet" (1), the practices whereby an oppressed homosexuality is only indirectly expressed within the confines of a heterosexual hegemony. Further, in his book *Communists, Cowboys, and Queers*, gay theorist David Savran suggests a historical relationship between the multivalent expressions of these two very distinct cultural ideas—oppressed homosexuality as it relates to a heterosexual hegemony—expressed repeatedly throughout the recent history of American drama.

Savran sees the hegemonic differences in patriarchal and cultural notions of gender and sexuality and political custom as a subtle and subversive theme in the works of the major American dramatists Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller (x). Further, he

suggests in an essay that "…both the American canon and the very principle of canonicity are centrally concerned with questions of male (homo)sexual definition and desire"(Ambivalence 226). Similarly, Kathy Ruby argues that the Christian Right seeks to maintain America's patriarchal structure (symbolically represented by Jesus Christ) through a heterosexist canon:

> By portraying gays and lesbians as outcasts from and outsiders to the family… the Christian Right shores up the idea that only those on the conservative side of these family-oriented issues are saved. Gay people have become the backdrop against which the traditional family, along with saved, Christian America, defines itself. (59)

Even more provocatively and defiantly than McNally, at least until the production of *Corpus Christi*, Larry Kramer and Tony Kushner—both of whom insist on being referred to as a "politically gay playwrights" (Vorlicky 190)—moved homosexuality to the center of the American stage by poignantly addressing such universally contentious societal issues as AIDS, racism, and homophobia in their work with the deliberate intention of bringing about socio-political change. During the repressive period for out homosexuals beginning after Stonewall, plays such as Kramer's groundbreaking and spiritually uplifting *The Normal Heart* (1986**)** helped to bring the discussion of AIDS into the national spotlight on the American stage, literally and figuratively, and this at a time when President Reagan, cowed by the power of the Right over his political office, had never uttered the word "AIDS" in a public forum. Further, Kushner's later monumental work, *Angels in America* (1992**)**, a two part epic play, deals with the problematic relationship between the catastrophic AIDS epidemic, predominantly in the gay

community, and the intolerant and judgmental neo-conservative political climate of the Reagan presidency in the late eighties. Kushner's political intentions are obvious. *Angels in America* overtly suggests the deadly consequences of a presumptive moral construct used to oppress a gay minority, to culturally define a nation, and to politically further the conservative ideological agenda of the Christian Right.

In 1998, when *Corpus Christi* premiered, ten years after the spectacular success of Kushner's epic work, the Right's oppression sadly had not lessened but dramatically increased. Though McNally's *Corpus Christi* represents a historical continuum began as a political refrain by earlier gay political playwrights like Kramer and Kushner, its direct challenge to the ruling interpretation of Jesus of Nazareth moves gay drama further by offering a dramatic interpretation of, and declaration for, the need for the acceptance of gays into the spiritual life of predominantly Christian America. Unlike Kushner—whose *Angels in America* deals with fantastical New Age spirituality, devoid of any particularly American Christian narrative, and has as its main character, Prior Walter, an ex-drag queen with AIDS, a gay figure who is still tragic because he is dying—McNally rhetorically goes for the jugular of the hegemony of the Right in his choice of a Christ figure.

Through McNally's use of biblical tropes, narratives, and Christological metaphor, *Corpus Christi* is contesting, by refutation and transgression, the dominant interpretations of queerness and spirituality through a sort of "counter-exegesis" that queries the most contentious religious debate in America: Are the Queer Left and Christian Right diametrically opposed to one another? Yes, with the exception of one onerously shared fallacious belief: *gay Christian* is an oxymoron. Can a gay man in America not aspire to

live a Christ-like life, even have middle-class goals (as do all of the disciples of Joshua in *Corpus Christi),* even lean towards conservatism politically and not be considered a traitor to the gay rights cause?

McNally is asking these very matter-of–fact, yet taboo, questions regarding gayness and spirituality in America, two worlds seemingly at odds in the hegemonic rhetoric dominated on one side by fundamentalist Christian orthodoxy, and on the other, by the opposing cultural paradigm of secular humanism which demands equality for all, regardless of personal history, race, sexuality or personal politics. And most provocatively of all, his play lays claim to the moral right to a spiritual life for American queers within the confines of a Christian culture, freed from the restraints of a particularly American theology too long dominated by a white, heterosexual, patriarchal, misogynistic, conservative ruling class.

Corpus Christi daringly emerged in an American political and cultural climate by defiantly contesting the prevailing homophobic theology of the Christian Right with a provocative challenge that could not go unanswered. *Corpus Christi* unapologetically indicted the Christian Right as an instigator of hate crimes against the queer American minority. In doing so, McNally blasted open a previously bolted ecclesiastical door regarding how Jesus Christ might be claimed literally and metaphorically as a champion for gay rights and rhetorically transfigured His life narrative in ways that reveal the political power of an artistic re-imagining of the Gospels from a queerly spiritual perspective. *Corpus Christi* dares its audience to hope for communion for all—gay, lesbian, trans-gendered, and straight.

Chapter 3: Religio-Conservative Hate Speech—the American Christian Right's Vitriolic Response to *Corpus Christi*

> *Would McNally dare to make a comedy about Auschwitz or a play about the sex life of Martin Luther King Jr.? If he did, that would be the end of the Tonys for Terry….*
>
> Patrick J. Buchanan

That which is a spiritual awakening to some is a blasphemy to others. *Corpus Christi* was simply described in its theatre season brochure: "From modern day Corpus Christi, Texas, to ancient Jerusalem, we follow a young gay man named Joshua on his spiritual journey and get to know the 12 disciples who choose to follow him. In this world premiere, Terrence McNally gives us his own unique view of 'the greatest story ever told'" (MTC). And yet this poignant narrative sparked pandemonium in the theater world. On May 22, 1998, the Manhattan Theatre Club acquiesced to the Christian Right's campaign and cancelled the production saying they could not produce it responsibly because of security risks. The firestorm of outrage from the Right that ensued against the supposed blasphemy and presumed intentional wickedness on the part of McNally became a dangerous mixture of legitimate political protest mixed with a frightening possibility of criminal violence and property damage.

Leaving the theatre officials in a no-win situation—they could either avoid potential violence allowing the Right to silence the production, or close the play to protect the public safety—the violent pre-production protests had decidedly strange results. In the

heat of the moment, no doubt fearful and confused by the outpouring of vitriol from the fanatical protestors, MTC artistic director Lynne Meadow hastily cancelled the show. Her decision led to an immediate display of passionate solidarity from the New York theatre community and free-speech advocacy groups who voiced their opposition to any and all forms of artistic censorship. Less than 72 hours after her cancellation, she reinstated the play after receiving assurances from New York police commissioner Howard Safir regarding safety measures. The New York police would ensure that the theatre could produce the play "responsibly and safely" (McNulty 65).

During the three day period of the production's cancellation, McNally, supported by a number of civil libertarian groups, including PEN, the National Coalition Against Censorship, and the ACLU spoke in force to the national media regarding the strife. After the MTC publicly reversed its decision to go ahead with the production, many of America's most well-known playwrights such as Tony Kushner, Edward Albee, Wendy Wasserstein, and South African Athol Fugard, jointly wrote a public letter of protest against the Right and in unified artistic support for the theatre:

> As poets, producers and playwrights in theatre and film, and participants in the Artists Network of Refuse and Resist!, we applaud the Manhattan Theatre Club's new resolve to produce the play. We stand with Terrence McNally and the other playwrights in the past who have courageously refused the blackmail from reactionary fanatics. This whole episode says a lot about how the people cannot and need not allow religious zealots or corporate interests or the government itself to ban art which runs up against their oppressive traditional family values. We reject the orders of

> the authorities which tell us what art we can create and where and how we can deliver it to the people who want it. We can in fact unite our many voices and help each other stand strong. People will support us if we draw the line in these dangerous days. And we must. How many more times can we bear to pick up the newspaper only to curse the latest terrible cruelty; an elderly immigrant fearful that new regulations will cut off his pension commits suicide, another mother loses her son to a police bullet. The death sentence is revived nationally and the state executes a man they know to be innocent… Who wants to live in that country? A culture of resistance can help create a climate which is essential to changing this place. We will fight for those voices. (Terrence McNally 1-2)

Corpus Christi was back in production but under the protection of a security team of guards armed with guns alongside theatre volunteers manning metal detectors at the auditorium entrance to protect the staff, patrons, and cast from possible harm. The play opened with a heated stand-off between First amendment activists and various Christian groups led by the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights. Although the protests outside the theatre were at times raucous, fortunately no acts of violence were committed during its New York run. After several weeks of heightened tensions and anxiety, civil libertarians and the playwrights seemed to have won the battle against the Christian Right's forces of intolerance and fanatical threats of violence in the name of religion, but hindsight would prove that this was only the first of many rhetorical battles to be fought over the play, with the end of the war nowhere in sight.

The virulent hate speech spewed from the Christian Right during its explosive

campaign against *Corpus Christi* at its initial opening, and in almost all its subsequent ones, continues to roil American cities by galvanizing on one side fundamentalist Christian groups which feverishly gather to protest any production across the country—be it liberal-leaning Manhattan or a Bible Belt hamlet—opposite leftist gay and free speech advocates and human rights activists who argue for its right to production as a freedom of artistic expression issue, regardless of its unpopular themes and subtexts.

The frenzied debate surrounding the play at first glance appears similar to other commotions in the ongoing culture wars instigated by the Christian Right over the increasing presence of gay voices on the national stage. In fact, since the opening of *Corpus Christi* in 1998, those articulating the conservative agenda of the Christian Right have aggressively stepped up their rhetorical tactics of exploiting the unpopularity of gay men living openly by in effect using them as social scapegoats to consolidate the far-right side of their more fanatical constituency. What better way to galvanize their religiously conservative voting block than to wage a campaign against all those tax dollars going to support "elitist" or rather, as their warped reasoning labels it, "illicit" art expressing the "evil" and "degenerate" values of the "non-believing" homosexual.

The *Corpus Christi* controversy is similar to many other cultural battles between gay artists and the Right: for example, the recent uproar of the Right's condemnation of NEA grants awarded to openly gay artists, such as Finley and Mapplethorpe. But there is a very significant and substantial difference in how this attack on the issue of gay human rights addressed in the play is being rhetorically framed and articulated. Following is a limited theoretical definition of "Christian Right," a look at the Right's claim of blasphemy in *Corpus Christi*, and an analysis of the two major arguments made by the

Right against the production of *Corpus Christi*.

What is the "Christian Right?" Gay theologian Bruce Bawer suggests that the term "Christian Right" was created by the mainstream media as a way to separate and identify more conservative political Christians from the more moderate or liberal ones (4). He further delineates these differences by making a categorical distinction between theological, as well as political, philosophies. Generally, conservative Christians tend to be politically conservative, and liberal Christians tend to be liberal politically. However, theologically there is a great distinction. These two groups of Christians have fundamentally divergent views about the essence of Christianity, the nature of God, the role of the church, and most importantly, literal or speculative Biblical interpretation. These are issues that divide American Christianity as a faith and the country as a whole.

Bawer uses the term "legalistic" to more accurately label conservative Christians (11). He suggests they are adherents of a distinctly modern American form of Christianity that has replaced the traditional emphases of Christian belief with bizarre, doctrinal strictures that have no legitimate basis in scripture; replaced the foundational Protestant trust in an individual's soulful competency to judge morally with a dictatorial system of absolutism; and ultimately replaced Christ's transcendent gospel message of love with harsh edicts from the *Penateuch*, the epistles of Paul, and an obsessive focus on the apocalyptic Book of Revelations (Bawer 11).

The twisted theology of American Christian fundamentalism, Bawer argues, has usurped Christ's spiritual challenge for the individual to capture his or her own experience of God through a personal relationship with Him and replaced it with a broken theology that is prescriptive, singular, and official as if the fundamentalists were not only

the state church but the *only* church. As Bruce Bawer observes, it is a doctrine that in essence attempts to coerce Christians to deny their own personal spiritual experiences and to blindly declare their unquestioning allegiance to a strict set of narrow propositions that run contrary to the true tenets of Christ's simple teachings of love, forgiveness, and acceptance; most certainly denial for any and all who do not swear alliance to their narrow definitions of the Christian faith (Bawer 60-1).

In *Our Endangered Values; America's Moral Crisis,* Jimmy Carter offers an explanation of the prevailing characteristics of American fundamentalism:

> Fundamentalists draw a clear distinction between themselves, as true believers, and others, convinced that they are right and that anyone who contradicts them is ignorant and possibly evil…. Fundamentalists tend to make their self-definition increasingly narrow and restricted, to demagogue emotional issues, and to view change, cooperation, negotiation, and other efforts to resolve differences as signs of weakness. To summarize, there are three words that characterize this brand of fundamentalism: rigidity, domination, and exclusion. (34-35)

Carter goes on the argue that the "leaders of the highly organized Christian Right have successfully elevated into America's political debate some of the most divisive social issues, the most vivid being sexual preference, which obviously has highly emotional and personal overtones" (39). Further, he states, "the public condemnation and ridicule of gays has been increasingly promoted by a few demagogic religious leaders, and the political acceptance of this treatment tends to authenticate and encourage discrimination" (66). Oddly, in the name of Christ, the Christian Right has warped the historically loving

message of Christianity; its theology has become a rhetoric of exclusion and hate used against homosexuals, a purpose wholly at odds with Christ's simple teachings of love and acceptance in the Bible. The Right, in fact, carries on a continual demonizing of homosexuality as a tool for promoting its own political and ideological aims, attempting to deny basic human rights to millions of gay American men, including the constitutional rights of equal protection under the law, same-sex marriage, or the right to adopt children, and naming intimacy with their partners "evil," "perverse," and a "sin." The Right has misused the sacred figure of the historically (or is it more accurately mythically) celibate heterosexual (assuming he had a sexuality) Christ to rhetorically bash queers and to promote all kinds of hegemonic discrimination and its attendant implications against others with sexualities not heterosexual. These are the issues that inspired Terrence McNally's *Corpus Christi*.

A political mouth-piece of the Christian Right, the conservative columnist and Protestant Pat Buchanan echoed the sentiment expressed by the majority of the conservative press when he termed *Corpus Christi* "nothing less than a hate crime of modernity directed against Christians, the moral equivalent of Nazis marching through Skokie" (Applebome 2). Expressing a similar view, William Donohue, the fanatical leader of the Catholic League, said "The need to offend Catholics is so sick it can only be described as pathological" (Applebome 2). He denounced the play as "deliberate blasphemy" (McNulty 64), saying that it represented hate speech against Catholics that the liberal New York community was too hypocritical to recognize and admit. These examples vividly represent the virulent hatred and fanatical opposition those on the Right have, both Catholic and Protestant, for any artistic expression of a queer sensibility and

especially, a gay spirituality as expressed in *Corpus Christi*. For the Right, gay sexuality coupled with gay spirituality equals disrespect, defamation of religion, and must therefore, be repudiated and silenced.

Yet, is *Corpus Christi* really in any way the gleeful "Catholic bashing" (Brantley 22) it was accused of being even before its New York production? Can its contents be labeled "hate speech" (Anonymous 92)? Blasphemy, is the claim history reminds us, most commonly made against any artist or scientist who dares to challenge society's notions of God beyond the accepted cultural myths. As it happens, no legitimate Christian theologian said *Corpus Christi* is truly blasphemous and Joseph Cunneen, a writer for the *National Catholic Reporter*, judiciously observes:

> Although the notion of presenting Jesus as gay is at first disturbing to many—including a straight type like me—McNally deserves the benefit of the doubt. As the author of "Love! Valor! Compassion!" along with "Master Class" and my personal favorite, "The Perfect Ganesh," there is no reason to believe his motive was exploitive. If he was trying to be offensive, it was primarily to force people like myself to seriously consider his metaphor: Jesus the Queer. …. Only theological thuggery would pronounce the play blasphemous. For members of the Christian Coalition, with their loathing for homosexuals and their assumptions that gays are inherently evil, presenting Jesus as homosexual is contemptuous. For a homosexual playwright such as McNally, however, to do so would seem an effort to offer praise and to claim identity with him. (13)

As the history of Christian culture demonstrates, art and literature figure significantly

in the interpretation and dissemination of religious images and ideas, often seeking to give concrete or symbolic expression to the church's mysteries and their relationship to human existence. The age-old struggle to make sense of our place and purpose is as much the mission of art as it is the mission of organized religion, and a survey of the images found in churches of different Christian sects turns up a great deal of conflicting interpretations. As Patrick McCormick notes:

> Successive generations of writers and artists have uncovered and recovered the raw edge of the mysteries religion grapples with, have forced us again and again to wrestle anew with the meanings of suffering, death, compassion, cruelty, redemption, and grace. Great literature and drama have brought us—often unflinchingly and usually uncomfortably—face to face with the triumphs and tragedies of our blessed, broken, and engraced humanity, making us sit with the questions before rushing to pat answers. And like the Book of Job, they have forced us to ask critical questions about our sanitized, self-serving pictures of God. So if the artistic spirit, like the charismatic spirit, has sometimes been a bit unwieldy and at odds with organized religion, it has not usually been unfriendly to our ultimate purpose, nor has it so often been wrong. (47)

Cultural resistance to the stories told by artists is an age-old notion. Plato suggests in *The Republic*: "Control the storytellers. Whatever noble story they compose we shall select, but a bad one we must reject. Then we shall persuade nurses and mothers to tell their children those we have selected and by those stories to fashion their minds far more than they can shape their bodies by handling them. The majority of stories told must be

thrown out" (81). But how to know which ones enrich humanity and to recognize those that truly degrade the human spirit? And who is to decide which?

The protestors against *Corpus Christi* argued that McNally's portrayal of Christ as a homosexual was blasphemy and a placard held by a protestor outside the Manhattan Theatre Club bore the slogan "Blasphemous Filth Is Not Art" (Anonymous 992). But the diversity of world religious culture and practice should remind us that for those on the Right, Christ has become an unchanging symbol peculiar to them, for as any cursory review of history reveals, Jesus has been constantly re-interpreted for various political reasons and under many guises—from the Pharisees and the Romans to the Nazis who made this Semite into an Aryan. So, for the Christian Right, not only has McNally infringed upon their symbol, but his queer transformation is a political "misuse," by which they mean morally wrong and reprehensible because of their homophobia.

An examination of various articles broadly selected from religiously conservative media sources reveal two major rhetorical claims made about *Corpus Christi* that underscore the basic homophobia of Christian fundamentalism and the inquisitorial beliefs of the media under their control. Forty nine organizations, representing the four major religions of the United States, signed a formal letter protesting the production of the play. These groups include such national organizations as the American Catholic Lawyers Association, the Brotherhood of Catholic Laymen, the Interfaith Alliance, the Family Research Council, Jews for Morality, the Knights of the Holy Sepulcher, the Christian Coalition, the Family Defense Council, the Media Research Center, the Southern Baptist Convention (Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission), and the Islamic Center of America among scores of other conservative religious organizations. The letter

they signed read in part as follows:

> The Manhattan Theatre Club has a legal right to offend Christians, but has no moral right to do so. Hate speech is hate speech; it does not become something less if dressed in artistic clothing. Moreover, to flagrantly offend the sensibilities of any religious group is outrageous and can only fan the flames of bigotry. History has shown that an attack on one religion may open the door to attacks on other religions, and that is why we call upon the goodwill of all Americans to join us in condemning this blasphemy. (Catalyst 27)

Opponents of the play argued that McNally's *Corpus Christi* is "offensive" hate speech to *all* Christians, and that the play somehow infringes on the rights of Christians to "participate in American public life without defamation or discrimination" (Bronski 2). The flaw of this rhetoric is the attempt to convince society first that dramatizing the fate of a young gay man called Joshua in terms similar to the last days of the Biblical Jesus is "blasphemy" and that blasphemy and "hate speech" are one in the same. The falsity of these claims should be self-evident and they were made without reading or seeing McNally's play actually performed.

If one examines this rhetoric, what is revealed? Where is the hate so passionately espoused by the play's critics? If McNally's character Joshua is gay, does that mean McNally despises gays? Or is a gay Jesus, for him, a hateful portrait? Of course not. The charge is defined by those on the Right who—by their own hard word—hate gays. Remove *their* hatred, which has no other basis than ignorance and prejudice, and the charges of blasphemy are wholly dismissed. The controversy is over. Obviously

McNally's detractors never noticed that William Faulkner used a 33-year-old "idiot" and his two brothers—a suicide and a vicious anti-Semite and thief—as characters based on the Biblical Jesus. With this in mind, it might be argued that the Right, not the playwright, has engaged in a campaign of hate speech against Terrence McNally and his play. How would those on the Right react to a distinctly "black" Jesus? How, in fact, do anti-Semites deal with a Jewish Jesus or Jesus as a criminal executed for crimes against the state?

The charge that the play defames Christians implies that Christians can't go out in public or practice their religion freely without fear of ridicule because of McNally's play. Why? Are people on the street pointing at them saying: "Your Jesus is gay—ha ha ha!" Ridiculous. This is simply a charge without any plausible basis. McNally, a gay non-combatant man and writer, has as much a right to entertain the idea that Jesus was like him as William Faulkner, a veteran of World War I has the right to imagine Jesus a French soldier trying to stop the horrific atrocities of trench warfare and ending up in the tomb of the unknown soldier in Paris (A Fable).

The murder of Matthew Shepard was a hate crime. The holocaust was a hate crime committed on a multi-national scale based on false genetics, false economics, and false religious ideas, a cultural and political lie imposed upon and adopted by a whole culture. In their homophobic zeal, Buchanan and Donahue pretend that exposure to any and all contrary expressions of Christ's life infringes upon their protected rights of free speech and threatens their beliefs and religious practices. The speciousness of their first complaints about *Corpus Christi* is magnified when one learns that all of the claims made by those on the Right occurred before the production was actually staged and before a

manuscript of the work was ever made available to the press. Never having read the play or seen a staged production, why did so many conservative religious organizations raise such a vitriolic response to *Corpus Christi*? According to the Catholic League, the play was "insulting to Christians" (Catalyst 25), but can this claim regarding the disrespectful nature of the play be given credence? When compared to the ribald and truly sacrilegious Monty Python movie *The Life of Brian* or even Martin Scorcese's provocative *The Last Temptation of Christ*, *Corpus Christi* is rather tame. McNally's message is straightforward, a modern re-telling of Christ's passion story in terms of a contemporary human rights story.

Ironically, critics of the play from the Christian Right assert free speech rights to condemn homosexuality as a part of their narrow and ill-informed religious theology. Perhaps they have a legal right in America to do so, but such an argument introduces a curious dilemma for Christian fundamentalists: the claim that they want religious opinions to be treated similar to all other speech, as just another viewpoint in the marketplace of ideas allows those religious views to be challenged, attacked, ridiculed, and even repudiated just like any other idea. We have no state church and no infallible religious authority in the United States. The very people who wax poetic about defending the speech liberties of bigoted fundamentalist Christians become very vexed when confronted with the "wrong" kinds of speech about religion exemplified by McNally's gay Christ. Just as Christian conservatives currently position their demands for prayer in public schools within the 'liberal" language of free speech, their simultaneous attempts to squelch what they call "sacrilege" and "blasphemy" may now be identified. We do not live in a monolithic theocracy but in a democracy that was

founded principally upon the separation of church and state. Bigotry, repression, and hate-speech may come from a church but that fact lends in no legal authority. For example, Patrick Buchanan's diatribe against *Corpus Christi* entitled "Hate Crimes of a Cultural Elite" claims that:

> McNally's purpose is to insult, offend, outrage and wound Catholics and all Christians by blaspheming their Savior and mocking their moral code. While the elite would never be so gauche as to say "Good for Terry for giving those (expletive) Christian homophobes what they deserve," it defends his bigotry on First Amendment grounds. But behind the customary claptrap about no censorship our elite shares McNally's hatred of Christianity, especially its teachings on sexual morality. Thus, it will reflexively rise to the defense of any Catholic-basher or Christian-baiter who cloaks his hatred in "art." (2-3)

Here again we hear the special pleading of a clever but illogical rhetoric: Buchanan creates an "elite" that supposedly hates Christianity, "especially its teachings on sexual morality." Where are these teachings to be found? And of what do they consist? And how consistent is this "sexual morality" among those Buchanan represents, by whatever vague standards he pretends to refer to? Narrow Christian apologists use a phrase or two lifted from the Old Testament—not the Gospels—to rule that the male holds dominion over female and their spurious judgments go no farther than that. Many of the same thinkers still oppose the irrefutable scientific evidence of the evolution of species, the geological proof of the origins and age of our planet and the cosmological evidence of the origins of the universe. Though they no longer engage with the geocentric error that was

deadly to challenge throughout more than three-quarters of the Christian era, their human and natural science is still locked in the ancient mindset of the once all-powerful church. Without any irony regarding his own views, Patrick Buchanan sarcastically equates the message of *Corpus Christi* to that of Nazis and Klansmen:

> Ask yourself: Would McNally dare to make a comedy about Auschwitz or a play about the sex life of Martin Luther King Jr.? If he did that would be the end of the Tonys for Terry. Would our cultural elite sit still for a play making sport of AIDS patients? If a public school began issuing "little Black Sambo " as a second-grade reader, would the elite defend it as "academic freedom"? …. McNally's play is but part of the daily sewage of modernity. Of far greater interest is what it says about who holds moral power in society today and whom it is permissible to mock and hate. (3)

Since he doesn't say "alleged," Buchanan's critique is clearly a sly dig at rumors regarding the African-American civil rights leader's philandering and probably a political jab at such Jewish writers as Elie Wiesel who pre-empted the term Holocaust for their cause. Both activist Blacks and Jews, in the arch-conservative Buchanan's ideology, are doubtless corrupt constituents of the "elite" that have sympathy for gay rights but none for an arch-conservative's feelings. He tips his hand by lamenting that people outside his coterie hold more "moral power in society today," an observation if true, that might cause a reasonable thinker to examine his or her premises.

Anther fascinating paradox is the Right's idea of what constitutes offense and disrespect: for more clearly persecuted groups such as African Americans, Jews, or gays, Buchanan's remarks would be an intentional insult through the use of disparaging

stereotypes and unflattering representations. Buchanan's predictably conservative assessment of what constitutes valid artistic entertainment pines for the days when popular artists were those who reified the status quo rather than questioned it—a time when the Catholic Church's "index" forbade many books and its organized letter-writing campaigns damaged the literary careers of many writers and film-makers. He goes on to write:

> In the 1950's, Hollywood and Broadway were in tune with the country. In films and plays, priests and ministers were depicted in friendly respectful ways. Comic greats like Sid Caesar, Steve Allen, Milton Berle and Jackie Gleason entertained without insulting the core beliefs of a predominantly Christian country. Lenny Bruce was the underground comedian. Now, the dirty words are on the air, and it is Christian moral teachings that rile our elites. What Christ warned his disciples of has come to pass in America: "If the world hates you, know that it hated me before it hated you." (4)

Ironically, Buchanan's last words would sit well in the mouth of McNally's fantasized Christ Joshua. Buchanan pretends that his Christian brethren are so ignorant and unsure of their faith that any serious representation of their Savior's life and teachings—beyond the vapid norm of Western ethnocentric Aryan portraits on the walls of bingo centers—is a threat to faith. He implies that followers need to be "protected" from any ideas or discussions antithetical to their institution's teachings and interpretations, apparently closing his eyes and ears to the Catholic Liberation theology and the mixed messages regarding predatory sexuality among the frustrated "celibate" Catholic clergy.

In his fiery speech protesting McNally's play on the day it opened, Donahue, the fanatical leader of the Catholic League said many of the same things as Buchanan. Variously calling the play: "hate speech," "bigotry," and, of course, "blasphemy" (Baumann 13), he also argued that a similar depiction of a secular black or Jewish religious figure would be condemned without question or controversy (Bauman 13). Obviously he had not seen O'Neil's *The Emperor Jones* or read Faulkner's novel about a confused violent mixed race character named Joe Christmas. Holding a bullhorn and dressed in a parka emblazoned with a cross, he angrily ranted toward the opposing protestors barricaded across the street by New York police: "You are the real authoritarians at heart" he said. "We're the ones that believe in tolerance, not you phonies" (Pogrebin 2). "The play is saying that the Catholic religion is a joke," one demonstrator said (McNulty 65). "It's ridiculous to claim that Jesus Christ is a homosexual. There is no respect involved" (McNulty 65). Casting McNally's play as an "insult" to their notion of Christ, rather than an argument for Christ's love and sympathy in an uncomprehending world, Donahue gives away the prejudice of his motives by adding: "Keep it clean when you deal with *our* religion, or get out of town" (McNulty 65), an ironic position from a church in which closeted and thus repressed gays act out as abusive pedophiles.

Many of Donohue's fellow League members carried crosses and American flags and one elderly Catholic woman, Mary Trainor, called the play she had never seen "a hate crime parading as art" (Pogrebin 2). That the protestors carried American flags reveals the wide-spread, carefully planned, and unapologetic link between the fundamentalist Christians and the conservative or opportunistic political Right in the Republican Party.

The ideological influence imposed by religious conservatives on politics in the last three decades takes many forms, and would take the form of artistic censorship if the Right gained anymore political power. Efforts to suppress opposing viewpoints regarding sexuality, by maintaining the "closet" have been central to their own political agendas. *Corpus Christi* is only a more recent example. The hegemonic rhetoric of the Christian Right asserts an ideology of repression of sexuality as a moral constraint, an assertion of power with compulsory heterosexuality and unprotected sex, amidst the pandemic of global AIDS, being the only option.

McNally's *Corpus Christi* is a direct challenge to this hegemony. In it, Christ has sexuality and it is a homosexuality. It is a Jesus Christ free from the ideological bounds of the Right—a Christ who is sexual, mortal, sinful, and yes, queer. But more significantly, it is also about what happens to such a man in a world where bigoted religious rhetoric condemns, even inspires violence against him. The Right's opposition to *Corpus Christi*, led by such groups as the Catholic League, is only partially about who may culturally define a story of Christ, a question still unsettled for more than three centuries after the Protestant Reformation. In an open religious society, the story of Jesus has been the boilerplate basis not only for novels but also for musicals, cartoons, comic books, and movie epics. Hollywood's *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965), Pier Paolo Passolini's starkly gorgeous and communistic *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (1964), and *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1971) have used the story of Christ as a moral template to interrogate various cultural, social, political, and emotional dimensions of a familiar story. Any depiction of Christ's life that dared to swerve from the narrow dogma of prevailing church theology has, however, found itself contested by the church. Jules

Renan's now iconic *Jesus* (1863) was publicly ridiculed by his contemporaries when it was published in the 19th century just as Nikos Kazantakis's brilliant *The Last Temptation of Christ* was in the 1950's.

The Catholic League's battle against *Corpus Christi* is just the latest chapter in a long history. But this play strikes at the very heart a conservative Christian ideology that has gone out of control in its efforts to subvert separation of church and state in America. The American Christian Right is not the first nor the last group to claim they "own" the "correct" interpretation of Jesus, but that they use their claim in a blatant anti-gay social and political agenda is what inspired McNally's theatrical challenge.

While a variety of Christian fundamentalist groups took part in the protests against the production of *Corpus Christi,* the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, a lay organization dedicated to defending "the rights of Catholics to participate in American public life without defamation or discrimination," garnered the most press with its attacks on the play. The organization presents itself as a non-partisan (i.e. supposedly non-political) church group whose mission is to defend the Catholic Church against defamatory attacks (Catalyst), not unlike the Jewish Anti-Defamation League, yet look at its webpage reveals the true purpose of the group's existence. Founded in 1973 by a Jesuit priest, the League, ostensibly dedicated to maintaining the "religious freedom rights and free speech rights of Catholics whenever and wherever they are threatened" (Catalyst 24), actually did very little until 1988 when it gained some exposure by spearheading a protest from other conservative Christian groups against Martin Scorsese's acclaimed film version of Nikos Kazantzakis's novel *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988).

After garnering some press, the League went quiet again until Donahue took the helm in 1993. He organized chapters across the United States and increased its membership from a few thousand to 350,000 today (Catalyst 3). Donahue had began his career working for the right-wing Heritage Foundation when he was a political consultant for the first Bush administration, and he was instrumental in augmenting G.H.W. Bush's pandering to the Right in his boisterous campaign attacks against the ACLU during his presidential run (Bronski 4). Since taking over the Catholic League, Donahue has relied on high-profile cases to promote the organization and its conservative political agenda, a lesson in "energizing" a susceptible base of very conservative voters. In 2005, the Catholic League instigated and funded anti-condom subway poster campaigns in New York and Boston and a national promotion of school voucher programs for Catholic secondary educational institutions (Bronski 5). Most frequently, however, the issues raised by the Catholic League concern "negative" representations of Catholic clergy or legal attempts to inhibit the church's political activities or to impede funds for their causes in the public sphere (Catalyst). The repeated label given to any group or issue at odds with the League's political objective is "anti-Catholic," including any artistic work that challenges or questions the church.

In response to the highly publicized pre-production assault on *Corpus Christi*, Tony Kushner challenged the Catholic League's use of the term "hate speech," which he sees as another instance from the Right of "the Reaganite tactic of co-opting the language of genuinely endangered minorities to further their own oppressive agendas" (McNulty 65). A respected academic supporter of *Corpus Christi*, the designer Ming Cho Le, who invited his students from both Yale and Columbia to join him in the protest against the

cancellation of the play, explained his position: “We are at a crossroads now. This is no time to bicker among ourselves. We deal with ambiguity—they deal with fundamentalism. The other side is not timid at all—we have to defend every single inch of our freedoms” (Feingold 175).

For certain groups to believe that homosexuality is “sinful” is their misguided option, but seeking to limit or censure outright the speech of those with differing views is a blatant violation of well-established American values. For religious groups violating these values to make the claim that the dissent of others makes them victims of discrimination is simply a rhetorical trick based on fallacies that diminish the claims of those persecuted groups who truly are victimized. Quite remarkably, a lone member of the Catholic press publicly addressed these fallacious claims by offering a partial defense of the play. The Rev. James Martin, a Jesuit deacon and associate editor of *America*, said in response to the Catholic League,

> There is some anti-Catholic sentiment that runs deep in the culture. You can’t compare it to virulent racism or anti-Semitism. I think it trivializes your argument when you try to put everyone on the same level. The problem with the Catholic League is that they cry wolf too frequently. I don’t think every criticism of the church is de facto anti-Catholicism. (Applebome 2)

Unfortunately unlike Martin’s comment, the primary response to the Right’s attack upon McNally which came from such groups as the ACLU and the National Coalition Against Censorship, contains only the classic First Amendment arguments in favor of protected speech. These are ultimately ineffectual, because none of the supporting statements for

such an approach address the notion of "discrimination" against McNally's work. The most persuasive statement issued in support of *Corpus Christi* came from PEN/the American Center for Freedom to Write (signed by such notable artists as Paul Auster, Judy Blume, Tony Kushner, Arthur Miller, and Susan Sontag):

> *Corpus Christi* reportedly portrays a gay Christ-like figure, and some critics object that this characterization is offensive to their religious beliefs. Arts organizations are frequently under attack because of the content of the art they support, including art with gay and lesbian themes. The rights of free expression include the right to express unconventional and nonconformist ideas, even if offensive to some, or many. To safeguard this artistic freedom, we must tolerate and support arts organizations, even when they present works that may challenge our most heartfelt beliefs. Otherwise, we may risk the right to see *The Merchant of Venice* or to read *Huckleberry Finn.* The arts should reflect and serve the entire community, and no one sensibility should dictate what we all see.
>
> To many artists and patrons, the arts are at their best when they challenge conventional wisdom and mores, provoke and stimulate dissent and debate, and force the world to confront a different moral vision. The effort to re-imagine religion in a way that makes it more inclusive of gays and lesbians is offensive to some, but is surely welcome to others. Those who object to certain messages in artistic expression have an easy choice: they don't have to see anything they don't like.
>
> Freedom of expression must be protected because of its central

> importance to democratic values, institutions of civil society and the creative spirit. Indeed the right that the critics of *Corpus Christi* enjoy to protest publicly depends on neutral enforcement of First Amendment principles, rather than on the popularity of their views. Their rights are inherently parallel with the rights of other speakers with whom they disagree. While no federal funds have been spent on *Corpus Christi,* it would not matter if they had been. The Supreme Court has repeatedly said that the government may not use funding decisions to penalize or suppress disfavored viewpoints or ideas. We would hardly need the First Amendment if it required less. Our nation's free speech principles were designed to protect not the mainstream but the unconventional and unpopular in relation to religion no less than politics.
>
> We deplore the efforts to silence Terrence McNally and to intimidate the Manhattan Theatre Club through threats of violence. We are gratified that these crude tactics did not work, and that the MTC has had the courage to support our right to see, or to choose not to see, *Corpus Christi.*
>
> (Statement of Support)

These arguments, essentially correct in reasoning, do address the issue of "offensive" speech but are finally a failed response because they never sufficiently address the Right's second claim of "defamation" and are entirely silent on the real issue, homophobia. Failing to address the anti-gay prejudices of fundamentalist Christian political factions, the mostly liberal response, by default, allows the Right to rhetorically cover up its true political agenda, its real prejudices. The claim made by the Right

against *Corpus Christi*, it is offensive to their beliefs, is easily defended. The play does not deny their beliefs, but if religious conservative Christians say they are offended, so be it, they are offended. But by asserting that *Corpus Christi* is not only offensive to them because it borrows and parodies their key religious story but that it is a part of an organized gay agenda to "defame and discriminate against" (Catalyst) those who hold a particular religious belief is simply false. The Right has deftly turned the arguments away from their own institutionalized prejudices using the First Amendment most commonly employed by the secular Left to their own defense. This very successful, rhetorical strategy is made even more effective when almost all of the pro *Corpus Christi* statements concede that religious beliefs and traditions have a moral right to respect. Would this be true if the church started a new Inquisition or cooperated in a new version of Hitler's final solution? Reverence and deference to cultural traditions regarding American Christianity must be kept in perspective and inflammatory hate speech sponsoring prejudice, and, in the worst case scenarios, often leading to violence against other Americans should not be allowed or condoned.

One is reminded that slavery was once an American tradition condoned for over 150 years by Christians who found Biblical passages to support the heinous institution and regarded anyone who tried to escape slavery, or, even after escape, who dared to write about it, as an enemy of the people and as an escaped property. Writers such as Frederick Douglass were condemned, accused of deceit, and even pursued by vigilantes who wanted him back in bondage. Would anyone now dare to argue that slavery should currently be guaranteed respect simply because it was once espoused by some as morally correct? The claims being made by the Right regarding McNally and his supporters are

not just an attack on the First Amendment, but more shockingly, an attack on religious freedoms, personal conscience and human freedoms as well.

Who owns the right to interpret the story of Jesus Christ? This has been debated and fought over for two millennia and the struggle will no doubt continue for two more. The meaning of scripture is constantly disputed among theologians themselves, both liberal and fundamentalist. It is debated and often misused regarding a host of issues: education, entertainment, marriage, politics, history, and sexuality. Artists have used the Christian story to question moral, cultural, scientific, and ideological rigidities, and various orthodoxies have used Christ as a symbol to carry out the Crusades, wars, East European pogroms, the Spanish Inquisition, and Colonial American witch-burning. For the Christian Right to sanctimoniously make the ridiculous assertion that they "own" the "correct" interpretation of Christ's message or life narrative is a challenge made almost every year in many ways.

The Catholic League's website reveals that it is they who are in fact promoting defamatory and discriminatory views about American minorities, not just gays, but most notably, the American Jewish community. Much of what is on the webpage has a distinct odor of anti-Semitism. For example, in its earliest campaign as a organized political faction of the Right, they accused the Jewish producers of the film version of *The Last Temptation of Christ*, which depicted Jesus as imagining a married life with Mary Magdalene while He was dying upon the cross, of being the instigators behind the "blasphemous" film (while no mention was made of the fact that the book's writer, Kazantzakis, was a Greek Orthodox Catholic or that the film's director, Scorsese, was an Italian Catholic.) Similarly, a group calling itself the National Security Movement of

America made felonious phone threats against the "Jew guilty homosexual Terrence McNally" (Feingold 133), then proceeded to proclaim, "Death to Jews worldwide" (Feingold 133). Terrence McNally is not Jewish, but as his play symbolizes, he grew up Catholic in a narrow-mined Texas community. Similar threatening remarks have greeted the work of David Rabe who also had a Catholic upbringing. These ominous threats, although frightening, are morbidly humorous in that their ignorance is so apparent. Beyond not being the most Christian manner in which to discourage the supposed "Catholic bashing," they are especially absurd in their suggestion that Terrence McNally, a Catholic Texan with Irish and Italian ancestry, is somehow an agent of a Jewish conspiracy to destroy Catholicism. Perhaps they confuse him with the other famously queer, Socialist, and Jewish political playwright Tony Kushner.

That the attacks directed against McNally and those involved in the production of *Corpus Christi* constitute a form of hate speech is supported by many shocking examples. An almost unbelievable event coincided with the 1998 New York opening of *Corpus Christi*; a young college student, Matthew Shepard, was viciously murdered in Laramie, Wyoming, by two young men simply because he was gay. Lured from a college pool bar and driven miles from the city, he was bludgeoned unconscious, tied to a split-rail fence along a deserted gravel logging road, legs and arms splayed akimbo as if crucified, and left to die of hypothermia in the frigid desert night. *Corpus Christi* thus will forever be linked historically and culturally to one the most heinous hate crimes ever committed against a gay American. Although the play was already long written, and only a day away from production before Shepard's horrific murder occurred, the strange coincidence of his murder and what happens to the gay Texas high school senior, Joshua, the Christ

character in the play is alarmingly illustrative of the consequences of homophobia. Some audience members may have felt the odd sensation of witnessing McNally's prescient understanding of a cultural condition they could never imagine. For gay men in the audience, Shepard's murder no doubt appeared as a tragic coincidence, but not an unusual or unexpected one. Many probably had experienced out-right hatred and violence towards themselves because of their homosexuality in their own lives and recognized the violence always lurking under small-town homophobia. Gay audiences find immediate identification with the circumstances of the play, saddened and intrigued by the bizarre similarities to the Shepard murder, but only momentarily shocked. In the first printed edition of *Corpus Christi*, published a year after the play's opening, McNally writes: "Jesus Christ did not die in vain because his disciples live to spread his story. It is this generation's duty to make certain Matthew Shepard did not die in vain. We forget his story at the peril of our very lives" (vi).

The recorded threats against the playwright and his cast mentioned earlier, and held as evidence by the New York police, include the following: "Because of you [McNally], we will exterminate every member of the theater and burn the place to the ground" (Feingold 133). The Catholic League's vow to "wage a war that no one will ever forget" (Catalyst 7) against any effort to produce the play vividly attests to how repeated threats of violence are part and parcel of the rhetoric often employed by public organizations representing the Right. This is not mere disagreement or opposition but an attempt to intimidate and coerce anyone speaking counter to their beliefs. For gay Americans like McNally, the link between Shepard's vicious murder and the homophobic hate speech of the religious and political Right is the obvious issue regarding the need for a courageous

response. And the lack of one guarantees frightening certainty of the continued persecution and murder of homosexual men and women.

In the opposition to *Corpus Christi,* the objection really isn't about McNally's choice of Jesus as a character to depict in contemporary terms, but rather his queering of Him. Sex, especially "homosex," is what threatened and riled the Right. Off-Broadway has presented smutty-mouthed nuns, wayward priests, and even a rock-star hippie Jesus in the past with nary a word from these groups. The Catholic League made no protest against a mute, cello-playing Jesus and the various parodies of the crucifixion in Steve Tesich's *On the Open Road* (1992), nor did it issue public condemnations about the truly disturbing and sexually perverse relations between the Marquis de Sade and the Abbe Coulmier in Doug Wright's controversial *Quills* (2000).

Just as with anti-Semitism, anti-feminism, and white racism, the role of conservative Christians in American politics is inextricably linked to its role in the politics of identity and the construction of difference, and in particular, with the social and political definitions of homosexuality. Who exactly owns the body politic? As gay men and women have come out and begun to demand equal rights—in all spheres of public life—something that Catholics themselves had to do in the not so distant American past—similar forms of casual and organized resistance has also, so to speak, left the closet to air its prejudices, fears, and hatreds in public.

Analogously, suspicion and hatred of Jews has a long history in the United States, including openly harsh statements from the mouths of Americans, including politicians and clergy, at various times, expressing fear of, and opposition to, their political and social equality. Even in quite recent history, such violent acts as the desecration of

Jewish cemeteries and the bombing of temples have occurred. Likewise, women suffragettes' demand for the vote was met with jail time and acts of terror by the establishment. African American men were required to be "closeted" in the white community, were prejudged of a proclivity for sexual crimes, lynched upon rumor, repeatedly denied the most basic of human rights, and reviled by conservative demagogues, all to the silence—and sometimes with the pious acquiescence of Christian churches, whose documents were used to justify slavery, racism, and disenfranchisement in political, economic, educational, social, and spiritual life.

What is surprising then, in the wake of some progress, and a great deal of admitted shame and reconciliation on the part of the Christian church regarding these historical injustices is that gay men, especially, can be objects of so much similar abuse, threat, myth, and violence without a large public outcry from Christians against such hatred and insanity. Convictions about this moral ambivalence, or indifference, on the part of a large segment of the American public are what drove McNally to write *Corpus Christi.* The Matthew Shepard murder proved his point. And still, religious and political leaders influenced by the homophobic ideology of the Christian Right hurled inflammatory rhetoric at his work and constructed false and dishonest arguments to prevent his dramatization of a terrible American social dilemma.

The Catholic League's political agenda—and its concordant successes at gaining much media attention for it—are proof of the still widely held and deeply reactionary national beliefs against any social and legal liberation for gay Americans. Savvy use of "religious belief" as a homophobic political tool appears in the rhetoric of other similarly successful Christian Right political factions like the Christian Coalition, the Moral

Majority, and the Family Research Council. Then, with an illogical semantic shift, such groups claim to be the "victim" of religious persecution and discrimination when any one dares to question the moral fallacies of expressed homophobia..

Playing upon prejudice and ignorance, these groups have successfully mobilized large factions of voters and filled even larger campaign coffers of the Religious Right. Their recent attempts to introduce Christian theocracy into the law with the passage of a "religious freedom" bill in Congress (a bill designed to "exempt" churches from local or national anti-discrimination legislation regarding homosexuals because such laws run counter to its beliefs against homosexuality), their thwarting of condom distribution programs in AIDS-ravaged Sub-Sahara Africa, and billions of dollars of foreign aid money to the nation of Israel—a place, in the apocalyptic world-view of fundamentalist Christians, in which will occur the battle of Armageddon and the Second Coming of Christ bringing the Last Judgment, after which the Rapture will occur and all believers will ascend to heaven—all these successes have allowed them to influence not only American politics, but also politics internationally in unprecedented ways. Nationally, these groups have focused their attentions on blocking any political gains by gay rights organizations concerning such important issues as gay adoption and same-sex marriage, and through their horribly misguided support of such "ex-gay" ministries like Exodus International, a group dedicated to "saving" homosexuals by helping them turn straight, they have perpetrated the spiritual, certainly psychological, and sometimes physical abuse of their own gay children.

By explicitly claiming that there is a "gay agenda" devoted to overthrowing Christianity, destroying the family, and "recruiting" straights into a gay lifestyle, the

Christian Right has built and garnered unprecedented support for its political factions by promoting a highly specific limited set of religious belief as a form of "identity politics"—ironically at a time when many on the progressive Left are actively seeking to find alternatives to an identity politic for American culture. Fundamentalist Christianity has become not only a vigorous force in the nation's secular politics but perhaps its driving one.

The Catholic League's attack on McNally's *Corpus Christi* is only one of many examples of the (mis)use of religion and Christian fundamentalist ideology by the Right to undermine any challenges to their tight cultural and political grip on progressive social trends. By claiming their implicit "right" to prescribe dogma and market it as the only legitimate Christian theology. By screaming "discrimination" and "religious intolerance," the Christian Right has cleverly sought to gain the upper-hand in the rhetorical battle against secular Leftists and moderate Christians.

At the same time these religious zealots lay claim to fallacious and simplistic First Amendments arguments and call for tolerance for themselves, simultaneously continuing the hate-filled attacks on gays, with hardly a dissenting voice to their dangerous speech, and without any legal reprisals for their implied promotion of violence against all who speak out or act outside of the narrow confines of their increasingly institutionalization of a fundamentalist Christian theocratic America. In the mouths of those on the Christian Right, religious tolerance becomes a euphemism for permission to continue promoting hatred for, and violence against, gays in ways that are anathema to the basic teachings of Jesus Christ. Though as reviled as loudly as was Jesus Himself during his short ministry, McNally's *Corpus Christi* is not an attack on the ministry and passion of Christ but a

rhetorical attempt to “take back the Word” from the conservative Right, as the following chapters demonstrate.

Chapter Four: Reclaiming the Gospel Truth: How *Corpus Christi* Repudiates the American Christian Right's Homophobic Rhetorical Violence against Gays

> *We have been programmed to respond to human differences between us with fear and loathing and to handle that difference in one of three ways; ignore it, and if that is not possible, copy it if we think it is dominant, or destroy it if we think it is subordinate.*
>
> Audre Lorde

In *Corpus Christi*, Terrence McNally responds to the Christian Right's homophobic demonizing of gays when his God character asserts to His gay son Joshua that "all men are divine" (20). McNally is expanding the very basic tenet of Jesus Christ's message recorded in the New Testament to include gay men as part of the oppressed Christ came to liberate. Christ's concern for the outcasts of society like children (Matt. 18:4; Mark 10:15), the despised (Matt. 21:31), and the poor (Luke 6:20), as the Gospels affirm, announces Christ's identification with those marginalized by society. He came into the world to speak for the liberation and acceptance of the oppressed. Then as now, Christ's message is socially provocative and politically charged.

While Jesus Christ never spoke a parable about gays specifically (or ever even mentioned homosexuality for that matter), all of His statements in the gospels regarding the oppressed speak indirectly to how He would have lovingly and compassionately welcomed them into His flock as well. For McNally's modern-day parable, *Corpus Christi*, with its queer Christ, is a metaphorical re-statement of the principle that

Christianity is a totally open faith defined simply by the assertion that all humans are brothers and sisters and that Christ brings directly from the Father a *new* commandment—the *Mandatum Novum* celebrated on the Thursday of the Passion Week, Maundy Thursday, a day when kings in Christian nations washed the feet of the poor and the outcast. The Biblical passage in John 13:34 is: "A new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another." This reference is not simply to the Apostles; as John 7:37-39 explains: "If *any* man thirst, let him come unto Me, and drink. He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said out of his belly shall flow rivers of the living water."

In the Hebrew Scriptures, God is not only partial to the poor, the powerless, and the socially undesirable, He comes to champion them. In McNally's *Corpus Christi*, the oppressed now include the sexually oppressed as well, those whose rights have been denied, love repressed, and lives destroyed simply because of their sexual orientation and identity. McNally is reclaiming through Joshua Christ's openness to all, especially the outcasts oppressed by a homophobic American society. His play speaks directly to many gay men who have suffered assaults, virulent hate crimes, murders, police abuse, social discrimination, harassment, the denial of HIV-related healthcare, ordination of the priesthood, the sacrament of marriage, and the denial of thousands of other social and civil rights guaranteed all other Americans who take them for granted as God given. Jesus Christ belongs to the gay rights struggle as a symbol of liberation that can be dramatically employed to confront these injustices.

The following examination reveals how McNally uses the life of Joshua as a metaphorical template—a rhetorical matrix—for repudiating the queer-bashing rhetoric

of the Right by reinterpreting the death of Jesus, and the events of the Gospel preceding it, in a non-homophobic, non-heterosexist and non-oppressive artistic context. First, through comparison, the historically transgressive life of Christ in the Gospels is queried in relation to McNally's message of a queer liberative practice in *Corpus Christi*. Second, an examination of how McNally incorporates in the play reflections on his Catholic upbringing and schooling in Corpus Christi, Texas, provides an understanding of cultural, social, and political homophobic/heterosexist power at it spiritually repressive fullest. Third, the complex ways in which the Bible, misinterpreted, has been rhetorically misused by fundamentalist Christian moralism to promote a textual and cultural homophobic violence against homosexuals, gay men in particular, is revealed. Fourth, Michel Foucault's notion of reverse discourse is employed as a template to examine the rhetorical strategies through which McNally reclaims the message of the Gospels from the Christian Right as a Christian validation of gay rights and as a repudiation of the fundamentalist Christian homophobia and its often attendant violence against gays; prejudice and hatred that has been repeatedly promoted immorally in the name of Jesus Christ: Joshua is shown to be the victim of a hate crime. Lastly, how the terror of internalized homophobia leads to the closeted invisibility of gay and lesbian Christians is symbolized through an analysis of Joshua's betrayal by his disciples Judas and Peter.

Contrary to the exclusive and guarded orthodoxy of most historical Christianity, McNally's *Corpus Christi* expands Christianity to its original inclusive nature—allowing all to lay claim to their spiritual birthright, and not just a chosen few; the play righteously reclaims divinity for all. Joshua proclaims: "All men are divine" (17). His liberation message is focused upon the vast paradoxical divide between American Christian

fundamentalist orthodoxy and the true essence of Christ's teachings. While the very public outcry directed against McNally's perceived blasphemy in *Corpus Christi* created fodder for provocative headlines, one has to wonder at American Christians' shock regarding Christ being portrayed as a caring but persecuted homosexual while they ignored the obvious blasphemies of an American culture so at odds with Christ's ministry.

The historical Jesus sided with the humiliated and oppressed in Jewish culture and His social praxis was deliberately transgressive in its shock value and political provocation, as His parables repeatedly prove: the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32), the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37), the vineyard workers (Matthew 20:1-16). The New Testament records His extremely unusual relationship with an un-married woman, Mary Magdalene, and His close homo-social bond with the Beloved Disciple, "Now there was leaning on Jesus's bosom one of His disciples, whom Jesus loved" (John 13:23). For the historical Jesus, an un-married man, to be seen in close contact with a woman in public was as unconventional then as it is now in a middle-eastern culture. Christ's close friendship with John has been debated for two millennia as to the true nature of the connection because of their physical intimacy at the Last Supper. The image of John leaning on Christ in DaVinci's *The Last Supper* has played on the homoerotic imaginations of Christians throughout the centuries. In first century Palestine, the Samaritan was more of an outcast than an AIDS sufferer today. The stereotype of the father in a culture centered on patriarchy is shattered in Christ's parable of the prodigal son by the surprising manner in which both sons are treated. In the parable of the vineyard workers, as most of the parables in general, Christ's egalitarian moral undermines the very notions of social

hierarchy and privilege of the dominant ruling class.

In contrast, historical Christianity has always preached exclusion of certain minorities in direct opposition to the teachings of Christ who repeatedly called for the unconditional acceptance of all humanity. Just as Paul's writings are routinely cited in support of slavery, the submission of women to men, and the claim that homosexuality is sinful, American Christian fundamentalists are simply continuing the age-old debate began by the evangelical Paul. Although they have conceded that Paul may have been wrong regarding the issue of slavery, they still insist that wives submit to their husbands and erroneously suggest that being gay is "unnatural" and "inconsistent" with the teachings of Christ. Saul the Pharisee, the defender of the Law, who despised all things carnal, insisting even that true Christians would never marry and should remain celibate, stands in direct opposition to Paul the Apostle. For the Apostle, love is higher than the law and the spirit is not hostile to the flesh.

But Paul, whose proverbial "thorn in his side" has been suggested to be homosexuality (Goss, Jesus Acted Up 123), was never focused on just the true tenets of Christ's message when he wrote to groups of Roman outcasts forced to worship Jesus in secret. And from the very beginnings of the early churches to the present ones, with appalling un-Christ-like consistency, groups of Christians have continually brought charges of heresy, blasphemy, and condemnation on others to separate them from the inclusive love of God. Like the Jewish Pharisees, the earliest church fathers, including Paul himself, declared others heretics and blasphemers, generally on the basis of obtuse disagreements regarding doctrinal points that are semantic in nature, like the scripture most often quoted by those on the Christian Right to condemn homosexuality. In *Corpus Christi,* McNally

exemplifies Christian fundamentalist exclusion and homophobia, not in having his characters quote Biblical scripture condemning homosexuality but rather through the bigoted actions of the play's characters.

McNally's memories from his Catholic parochial schooling in Corpus Christi, Texas, figure prominently in the play. Much of the action takes place in a school setting which acts as a microcosm of the larger American societal hierarchy in which gender roles are in essence "taught;"—assigned and substantiated through cultural and church influences. The bigoted Catholic high school boys in the play—who harass, abuse, and eventually crucify Joshua—symbolize those in the laity sometimes negatively influenced by Catholic Church teachings. By casting the play's judge, priest, and vicious high school boys in the role of the modern condemning Pharisees, McNally has them speak and act out the homophobia of American fundamentalism. These characters could as well symbolize the protestant television evangelists, the pope, cardinals and bishops, and other hierarchs who have aggressively pushed their ecclesial hate speech into the city councils, state legislatures, and Congress to prevent passage of legislation designed to protect gays or expands gay rights. As symbolized by the profane priest in the play, the Catholic Church's deeply embedded homophobic ecclesiastical structure implicitly promotes violence against homosexuals through its re-casting of the compassionate and non-judgmental Jesus of the Gospels to reflect their own intolerant patriarchal hierarchy.

In *Corpus Christi*, heterosexual masculinity is repeatedly defined by the community. When Mary gives birth to Joshua, the hotel manager exclaims: "I like boys. Boys are the best" (12). Even from Joshua's birth, His socially defined role as a conventional heterosexual male competitively playing football is assigned. Seeing him for the first

time, Joseph shouts at Mary: "It's a boy. Hey, little fella. You gonna grow up and be an All-American halfback?" (14). Later in the play, Joshua's high school priest/coach criticizes his lack of interest in football:

> MATTHEW/PRIEST:
>
> Why aren't you playing football?
>
> JOSHUA:
>
> I don't want to.
>
> PRIEST:
>
> What kind of answer is that, boy? Sure you do! Every boy in Corpus Christi plays football (21).

Joshua's questionable sexual prowess with girls is intertwined with His limited athletic abilities on the football field by a link to a heterosexuality, once again from the warped perspective of a very profane priest:

> PRIEST:
>
> That's not how you throw a football. This is how you throw a football. Are you gonna cry on me?
>
> JOSHUA:
>
> No, sir.
>
> PRIEST:
>
> You like scouts?
>
> JOSHUA:
>
> Yes, sir.

PRIEST:

Good, we'll make a football player out of You. You like pussy? Pussy is girls. You like girls?

JOSHUA:

Yes, sir. (21-22)

The hostile and misogynistic priest, as a representative of Christ on earth, should be a loving and pious role-model to Joshua who is a shy and introverted student who prefers singing Broadway musicals and reciting Shakespearean sonnets to playing football with the other boys. Instead, the representative of the Church ridicules him on the football field and openly questions his heterosexuality, his masculinity, and therefore, his humanity:

PRIEST:

You got a girlfriend?

JOSHUA:

No, sir.

PRIEST:

Well then maybe You don't like girls. (22)

Oddly, a celibate, the priest is indoctrinating Joshua into the aggressively competitive world of small-town American life where young males pursue sex with girls and compete on the sports field to prove their manhood with equal vigor; thus, their dominance of those of lesser social power is an essential element in the cultural construction of their masculinity.

Because homosexuality is a direct challenge to the fundamental societal and cultural expectations of what it is "to be a man," it is therefore assigned an inferior status in the gender hierarchy of Christian theology centered on patriarchy. To question the "natural" institutionalized norm of male heterosexual behavior repeatedly affirmed by the church, American media, legislation, and law is seen as radical and in need of immediate and harsh censure on the part of the moralizing Right. At the basest level of the social order, gay-bashing serves as a very effective violent mechanism of social control; it is culturally sanctioned brutality used as a tool of subordination intended to keep homosexual men in positions of powerlessness. As Tim Carrigan notes:

> The history of homosexuality obliges us to think of masculinity not as a single object with its own history but as being constantly constructed within the history of an evolving social structure, a structure of sexual power relations. It obliges us to see this construction as a social struggle going on in a complex ideological and political field in which there is a continuing process of mobilization, marginalization, contestation, resistance, and subordination. It forces us to recognize the importance of violence, not as an expression of subjective values or of a type of masculinity, but as constitutive practice that helps to make all kinds of masculinity. (89)

Ironically, it is not "manly" virtue or mature Christian charity, but the subjugation of weak males and females through emotional and physical dominance that is the easiest and most commonly accepted way to demonstrate masculinity. At the school prom, when Joshua is being voted by his fellow classmates, "Most Likely to Take It Up the

Hershey Highway" (30), the nun and priest, symbols of the church, both laugh, giving their tacit permission to spoken hate. By feminizing Joshua as passive sexually, the brief scene humorously exemplifies how the Catholic Church manifests the patriarchal misogynistic culture of Jewish Palestine that the earliest leaders legitimized through the Judaic myths of an earlier time, a period that predated the egalitarian preaching of Christ, and that they have ritualistically promoted ever since.

As an American Catholic, McNally is aware that most fundamentalist Christian theology is the product of males in possession of privilege, influence, and wealth whose very cultural and political status is dictated by the oppression and spiritual exclusion of those in lesser positions of power. And sectarian Christianity has, from its very beginning, paradoxically asserted its moral authority by claiming exclusive rights to Christ's symbolic power, and conversely, maintained this authority through making scapegoats of all nonmembers, especially those who dare to defy cultural expectations. Although as a living disciple of the Living God, Saint Paul preached inclusion: "neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom.8:35-39), Paul also paradoxically calls for the exclusion of certain minorities. His legalistic Epistles to the earliest churches repeatedly seek to exclude others of the faith and are not always consistent with the teachings found in the Gospels (Rom.1:26-27, I Cor. 6:9).

In McNally's *Corpus Christi* for example, when Joshua is about to perform a same-sex marriage, His disciple Bartholomew warns Him He is going against the scriptures: "They said it was against the law and the priests said it was forbidden…" (61). And the

disciple James quotes scripture from the Old Testament: “If a man lies with a man as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death, their blood is upon them” (61). Found in the Book of Leviticus, the passage: “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination” (18:22), along with the infamous story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in the book of Genesis, are the two most often-cited biblical mis-readings employed by those on the Right as specific biblical condemnations of homosexuality. But are these historical-critical readings correct or rather later erroneous interpretations used to denigrate homosexuals for reasons other than those signifying the displeasures of God? Curiously, lesbianism is never mentioned or even alluded to in the Bible, so for religious conservatives who demand literalism in all biblical interpretation, same-sex relations among women therefore must not be a sin. McNally goes on to repudiate the scripture used most often in the arguments against same-sex marriage when Joshua responds to His disciples:

> JOSHUA:
>
> Why would you memorize such a terrible passage? “And God saw everything that He had made, and behold it was very good.” I can quote Scripture as well as the next man, God loves us most when we love each other. We accept you and bless you. Who’s got the ring? (61)

According to *What the Bible Really Says About Homosexuality* by Daniel A. Helminiak, a respected gay theologian and Roman Catholic priest, the word *abomination* in the Hebrew Scriptures is used to refer to many things, usually Judaic purity codes, but never male-male sex directly (48): Helminiak’s close readings of Hebrew reveal that the word generally refers to Jerusalem’s idolatry or rather Israel’s infidelity to God (48) and

of being ritually unclean rather than a particular sex act. As for Sodom and Gomorrah, the true meaning of the Genesis story has been misinterpreted for so long as to almost defy clarification. The story of Sodom is the one most often purported to condemn homosexuality. In the book of Genesis, chapter 19, verses 1 to 11 we read:

> The two angels came to Sodom in the evening; and Lot was sitting in the gateway of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to meet them, and bowed down with his face to the ground. He said, "Please, my lords, turn aside to your servant's house and spend the night, and wash your feet; then you can rise early and go on your way. They said, "No, we will spend the night in the square." But he urged them strongly; so they turned aside to him and entered the house; and he made them a feast, and baked unleavened bread, and they ate. But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house; and they called to Lot, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us so that we may know them." Lot went out of the door to the men, shut the door after them, and said, "I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. Look, I have two daughters who have not known a man; let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please; only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof." But they replied, "Stand back!" And they said, "This fellow came here as an alien [Lot was not native to Sodom], and he would play the judge! Now we will deal worse with you than with them." Then they pressed hard against the man Lot, and came near the door to break it

> down. But the men inside reached out their hands and brought Lot into the house with them, and shut the door. And they struck with blindness the men who were at the door of the house, both great and small, so that they were unable to find the door.

These visitors were in fact angels of God, who then warned Lot to escape the town because God was soon to bring destruction through fire and brimstone upon the wickedness of the town. As every Sunday school child knows, Lot's wife disobeyed God's command to not look back upon the destruction and as punishment was turned into a pillar of salt. Sodom and Gomorrah was indeed destroyed in a maelstrom of fire and blast: "and lo, the smoke of the land went up like the smoke in a furnace" (Gen.19:28). According to Helminiak, since the 12th century, the story has been commonly taken to condemn homosexuality (44). The very word "sodomite" has since been interpreted as someone who engages in anal sex—the "sin" of Sodom became any male homogenital sex act. So supposedly God punished the wicked citizens of Sodom because they engaged in homogential activity. But what does the story actually mean?

Clearly, there are sexual references signaling impropriety contained within the narrative: Lot willingly offers his virginal daughters as sexual objects to the men of the village. To the modern reader, this seems horrifying, but in the context of the period, Lot "owned" his daughters and could do with them however he saw fit. If his daughters were indeed raped, no on would want to marry them and this would in turn make them a financial burden upon Lot. So it is of particular relevance that Lot would rather have allowed his daughters to be raped than to have his visitors abused by the townspeople.

The men said they wanted "to know" the visitors. And while this phrase could be interpreted to mean, "to understand" the alien visitors' reasons for being in the town, most scholars do in fact believe they meant to rape them (Helminiak 46). So why would Lot allow his daughters to be raped instead? According to the scriptures, Lot was "a righteous man" (Peter 2:7-9), a good man who did what was expected of him at the time: he was following a cultural rule of both Semitic and Arabic cultures mandating unquestioned hospitality to strangers. Rather than violate the sacred rule of hospitality, Lot was willing to sacrifice his own female children to sexual abuse. So truly, the "sin of Sodom," according to Helminiak is: "Abuse and offense against strangers. Insult to travelers. Inhospitality to the needy. That is the point of the story as understood in its own historical context" (46).

McNally's Joshua is repeatedly faced with a violent and domineering society inhospitable to anyone different. Hatred and wickedness is the exact sin the populace of Sodom was guilty of—cruelty that the Bible condemns with such consistency and vehemence, that it barely needs mention. So in America, who are the "sodomites," as the Bible defines them? It is the Christian Right, who came be linked to the spiritual inhospitality and ethical mistreatment of gays. Several other scriptures in the Bible, dealing with the Sodom story, persuasively collaborate Helminiak's interpretation.

The Book of Ezekiel reads: "This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, surfeit of food and prosperous ease; but did not aid the poor and the needy" (16:48-49). Clearly, the sinful infractions of the Sodomites involved their refusal to take in and give aid to the needy. According to Wisdom 19:13, the sin of Sodom was a "bitter hatred of strangers" and "making slaves of guests who were benefactors."

Keep in mind that the guests in reference were angels, messengers of God. While the reference could mean to make sexual use of the guests—masters had every moral and cultural right to sexually abuse their own slaves in that time—the offense was not in owning slaves or having sex with them but instead, the debasement and abuse of strangers. Even Jesus Himself makes reference to the story of Sodom in the Book of Matthew:

> The twelve men Jesus sent out with the following instructions: "…Whatever town or village you enter, find out in it who is worthy, and stay there until you leave…. If any one will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town. (10:5-15)

Jesus, God made flesh on earth, understood the sin of Sodom to be inhospitality, oppression of the weak and needy, injustice, and the encouragement of evil, but never homosexual relations. And many other passages in the Bible say essentially the same thing (Isaiah 1:10-17 and 3:9; Jeremiah 23:14; and Zephaniah 2:8-11). Yet the Christian Right, supposedly those believing in following the teachings of the Bible, infallible in its literalism, continue to use the story of Sodom to rhetorically bash queers and promote discrimination and violence against them. While McNally has never publicly addressed these issues in relation to his work, according to Mona West, the Bible has always been used for the "textual harassment" (West vii) of marginalized groups; the subordination and victimization of whom might be undercut, destabilized, or even completely erased through a creative strategy of reading and interpretation.

McNally seems to intuit how the American Right's homophobic discourse and political ideology relates to the social and legal discrimination of homosexuals. But can his indictment of its rhetoric as a promulgation of violence against gays be justifiably found? Yes, in deed and in action. Fundamentalist leaders' rhetoric directed against gays can be both implicitly, and in certain extreme cases, explicitly indicted in the conditioning and justification of a social environment for the commitment of hate crimes by those who feel morally justified in their actions. And in the preface to the printed edition of the play, McNally is direct in his associations of guilt and blame:

> All *Corpus Christi* asks of you is to 'look at what they did to Him. Look what they did to Him.' At the same time it asks you to look at what they did to Joshua, it asks that we look at what they did one cold October night to a young man in Wyoming as well. Jesus Christ died again when Matthew Shepard did. Look. Remember. Weep, if you will, but learn. And don't let it happen again. This time, I hope, I am sounding like a human being. (vii)

Interpreting his own play, McNally is not only linking the homophobia of the Right with gay-bashing. He is also asserting that if you deny the importance of Shepard's death, you are denying the meaning of Christ's message of tolerance and love. And perhaps more provocatively, if you deny the confluence of the political importance of both their deaths, you are implicitly guilty of promoting and condoning hatred. McNally says of Joshua, "he was about loving mankind not redeeming it" (81). When he suggests in the preface to the play that Matthew Shepard's death was just as important as that of Christ's, he is

courting the opposition of those who believe such an idea undermines the sacrificial and salvic singularity of Christ's death.

For McNally, the homophobic brute who bludgeons a gay man to death with a pistol because of intolerance and ignorance is not the only perpetrator of a hate crime. To blasphemously condone such an act in the sacred name of Christ, while knowing that it is morally reprehensible, is to commit an even greater evil. McNally's preface speaks volumes to gays who might be sub-consciously harboring internalized homophobia. Writing a year after the mounting of the original New York production in the preface, McNally is admitting his overt political intentions not only by linking hate crimes committed against homosexuals directly with the hate-filled homophobic rhetoric of the Christian Right but also by essentially saying that *Corpus Christi* demands spiritual recognition and validation for Joshua based on his proudly *claiming* his gayness as the cause for His brutal murder. McNally understands the huge political influence fundamentalist Christians exert on the actions of the United States government. Relevant social issues like universal health care, effective education for all, eliminating poverty, or protection of the endangered global environment take second place to the social oppression and spiritual demonizing of homosexuals.

In contrast, McNally's queer theology in *Corpus Christi* frees Christ from the hermeneutical context of being an Oppressor of gays, and Christ becomes instead, a queer Liberator. *Corpus Christi* presents the suffering of Joshua as a queer Christ to assert that God identifies with all homosexuals and their experiences of injustice brought about by the political culture controlled by the Christian Right. Under this influence, local, state, and national governments promote homophobic discriminatory laws and

foster false cultural beliefs that facilitate and legitimatize a negative politics of difference wherein gays are labeled “dangerous,” “deviant,” “inferior,” and, in the dialectical formation of fundamentalist Christian’s biblical misreading, “evil.” These dangerous labels are legitimized in large part by the repeated rhetoric of the Right.

For criminologist Iris Marion Young, such simplistic morality “always implies a good/bad opposition; it is always a devaluation, the naming of an inferiority in relation to a superior standard of humanity” (Perry 180). For several critics, hate crime is more than just “mean-spirited bigots or the actions of misguided do-gooders”` (Young 23), it is “embedded in the structural and cultural context within which [all social] groups interact” (Kelly 180). Nor does hate crime occur in a social or cultural vacuum; rather, “it is a socially situated, dynamic process, involving context and actors, structure, and agency” (Perry 1). All of these variables are can be examined through a genealogical criticism to deconstruct the ways in which American fundamentalist Christology provides a moral foundation upon which much of the historical and cultural contexts that inform these various actors, audiences, and the implied meanings of their actions, can be found.

First, gay-bashing provides young men with a very useful resource for “doing gender,” especially in the formulation and cultural accomplishment of hegemonic masculinity. Paradoxically, while masculinity appears to be such a “natural” state of being, in fact, it is simultaneously a very fragile and quickly shifting notion “that one must always guard against losing” (Hopkins 78). If gay–bashing is a situation in which “proof” of manhood can be demonstrated, especially for young males, who are constantly having to show their virility, then perpetrating a violent act against another male reveals that they are unafraid to fight (as all real men are), and secondly, that they will engage in

unlawful acts to do so—again criminality being manly as well. Like all social actors, the gay-bashing male acts with an eye directed towards his fellow audience; it is to them that he must prove his unquestionably straight sexuality—and what better way to provide this proof than to physically assault a queer male? Violence against gay men acts as a verification of the perpetrators' own "bravery" and inflated machismo, and also serves as a blatant and irrefutable disclaimer of their own possible homosexuality.

In *Corpus Christi,* one of Joshua's classmates, Spider Sloan, helps another boy Billy humiliate Joshua in the boy's bathroom:

> BILLY:
>
> That's the God's honest truth. [*On the other side of Joshua now]:* But you know what's worse than a guy yakking at you while you try to take a piss? It's a guy looking at your dick while you try to take a piss. I hate it when a guy does that. I hate it a lot.
>
> JOHN:
>
> What do you do to someone like that Billy?
>
> BILLY:
>
> Well the last guy who did that to me I beat the shit out of him and then I stuck his head in the toilet until he said he wasn't gonna look at anyone's dick while they were trying to take a piss ever again in his whole fucked-up fairy queer life.
>
> [*Billy and Spider try to duck Joshua's head in the urinal yelling "Flush it, flush it."*] (32)

Later in the play, the bullying Spider reveals he has had sex with another man, but

doesn't admit to being homosexual:

> I was in the service, really drunk one night, and I let this queer blow me. He was down there doing it and I said, "Do you know Joshua?" I thought they all knew one another. I said, "From up here you look like Joshua." I don't know what that makes me—it was one blow job for Christ's sake—but it doesn't make me one of them. Not a cocksucker but a cocksuckee, I guess.

As a rhetor, for Spider the terms "one of them," a queer "cocksucker," represent an "other" so despicable that he can find no personal identification, even though he has engaged in a homosexual act. Spider symbolizes those on the Christian Right who have systematically reconstructed gay men as social minorities in such threatening and dehumanizing terms so that violence, no matter how vile, eventually loses its malevolent connotations. After being repeatedly presented as unworthy of respect or human dignity, homosexuals are eventually assigned a status of "other." The denial to gays of such basic human rights as marriage becomes morally justified when in reality it is a cruel and bigoted institutionalized slight. Like the long upheld ban on interracial marriages in the United States, it is an act of legalized discrimination based upon acculturated bigotry and ignorance.

On an even more frightening level, this essentialist and dichotomized construction of American cultural boundaries influences and undergirds not only subsequent discourses about race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation, but in particular, determines how the interactions in and between these American co-cultures influence violent hate crimes. In this context, hate speech and hate acts construct a hierarchy of identities in which the

hegemonic form is morally and legally confirmed, appearing to morally justify marginalization and victimization within the narrowly defined constraints of a prevailing "Christian" status quo. Homophobic violence, like racist violence, can be understood only within this kind of context for no other explanation seems sufficient or rational to explain such inhumanity.

As noted by Perry, "to understand hate crime, one must put it in its socio-cultural context. In particular, hate crime [like rape or murder] must be understood as one among an array of mechanisms by which deeply ingrained sets of power relationships are maintained; it is, in short, constituted of and by difference" (46). The queer Left and the Christian Right, both arbitrarily constructed categories, define themselves dialectically with their opposition to each other being the main distinction of their difference. Queer political activists, like McNally, buoyed by sympathetic social theorists, resist the false alternative of conformity or cultural and social assimilation and instead argue to expand the definition of "normative," refusing to adhere to hetero-normative notions of gender or sexual identity.

Thus, McNally intends *Corpus Christi* to be an artistically hermeneutical argument, dialectical in nature, that will challenge the dominant hierarchy of the fundamentalist American church in order to resist its oppression. The play speaks to what homophobic ignorance and hatred is based on, namely historical and political misinterpretations of the Bible. Sadly, the irony of the Sodom story, when understood within its cultural and historical context, actually speaks against the abuse and inhospitality toward gays by those who would be godly. McNally's Joshua is made to feel an outsider in His own family and by teachers and schoolmates because He is seen as different. Queers know

they don't "fit in."

Homosexuals are different and their differences are used repeatedly against them by society to make them feel like outsiders: they are often disowned by their families, denied access to visit their own children, fired from their jobs, vilified in public, cursed from the pulpits, and beaten to death in dark urban alleys or small town streets across they nation because they are the despised foreigners in a straight world. Their ostracism and murder is done if not it the name of religion, at least with a sense of tacit approval of conservative Christianity. It is almost inconceivable that any conscientious person who has taken a cursory look at the history of Christianity's use of the Bible to promote regimes of violence and death would not feel morally compelled to speak out against the complicity of Christ's followers in committing atrocities committed against gay men such as those in McNally's play. The final scene of *Corpus Christi*, when Joshua is murdered, is quite horrifying, but it is morally powerful in its implications for the audience. The audience is indirectly indicted in the death of Joshua. How? Being a passive witness to a vicious hate crime is a vivid reminder America's complacency regarding the growing influence of Christian fundamentalism and morally-sanctioned homophobic violence committed against gays.

To remind the world of this fact, McNally applies the Christian story to his memories of growing up as a gay Catholic in Corpus Christi, Texas, where homophobia is ingrained the culture and in the Catholic Church. He projects his own sense of ostracism on an ironic parody of the story of Christ's passion. For example, note the reason the central character isn't named Jesus in the play though the modern parents have the expected biblical names:

JOSEPH:

What are you gonna call him?

MARY:

I told you Jesus.

JOSEPH:

I told you no. This is Texas. It sounds like a Mexican. (14-15)

Despite its sacred name, Corpus Christi, Texas, represents small-town life and narrow-minded American culture where sexuality and spirituality are both conventional. Joshua derisively refers to his hometown as "the armpit of Western civilization" (26), and local Christians, whose faith requires them to love one another, instead, mistreat, threaten, and ultimately crucify Joshua, the embodiment of Christ, as the "King of the Queers" (102-104). It bears repeating that, *Corpus Christi* opened in New York the same week a young gay college student, Mathew Sheppard, was tied to a split rail fence, brutally beaten and left hanging, as if crucified, in the desert outside Laramie, Wyoming, a culture eerily similar to McNally's Bible-belt hamlet of Corpus Christi, Texas, thus, proving that McNally's transfiguration is not that out of line.

The play represents the often sexually violent subtext of repression lurking beneath the pious façade of Puritanical America. On the eve of Joshua's birth, set in a seedy motel rather than a barn, the audience hears off-stage the "sounds of a couple making mild, uninhibited love in the room next door" (14):

WOMAN NEXT DOOR/JAMES:

Fuck me, fuck me, fuck me.

MAN NEXT DOOR/ANDREW:

> That's what I'm doing, you damn woman. I'm fucking you, I'm fucking you, I'm fucking you.
>
> [*Phillip gets up from his place on the bench and comes into the motel room. He is Joshua's father, Joseph.*]
>
> PHILIP/JOESPH:
>
> Sounds like somebody's having fun next door. Is that? So soon? It's big. I didn't think it would be so big. Can I hold it? Thank you. It's a boy. Hey, little fella. You gonna grow up and be an All-American halfback? Are you huh? (14)

Framing Joshua's birth is a dialogue cautioning the audience that love should be more than carnal gratification and that paternal expectations should be more than gender sterotypes. To truly be spiritual, the act of love-making as sacrament must be between two people in love. But for fundamentalist Christians, all sex, be it in the confines of marriage or otherwise, is considered a sinful aspect of the human condition to be tolerated but certainly not celebrated. Joshua is born gay into a world already discriminating against his god-given nature.

Jesus, who was God in a human body and Joshua human in a gay body, were ironically, both equally reviled and persecuted for their differences, though both dared to frankly express a gospel of peace, love, reconciliation, and openness to all. By questioning how anti-gay Christians can claim to act according to the dictates of Christ's teachings regarding "love, valor, and compassion," *Corpus Christi*, like most of McNally's theatre highlights the paradoxes of homophobia. He has made use of the abundant potential of drama to bring together discordant individuals and groups to

witness an examination of the moral issues related to homophobia in society experienced by the actors and audience together during the performance of a particular work. Believing in the transformative power of drama to enact social change, McNally has constantly confronted prejudices, societal contradictions, and moral fallacies that promote exclusion rather than engender reconciliation and communion. He has done this in many other voices. For example, speaking through the character of Maria Callas in *Master Class*, McNally writes: "The world can go on without us but I have to think that we have made this world a better place. That we have left it richer, wiser than had we not chosen the way of art" (61-62). The speech clearly applies to gay men and women, whether they are artists or not, but it is also acknowledges that art and artists are frequently marginalized and punished for the inconvenient truths or societal forces they portray. Through his character, McNally argues that art enlarges human lives by recognizing human differences as one facet of the divine aspects of us all. The Christian Right uses homosexuality as a distinction that negates all of the humanity of gays. This analogy is all the more apt when we realize that the arts are, and always have been, populated by many visible and invisible gays.

In *Corpus Christi*, McNally, like the ministry of Christ, promotes a spiritual moment in which one experiences acceptance of oneself and others, through the redemptive act of communion. When Joshua is being led to His crucifixion, remembering the miracle of the fishes (symbolic of the expansiveness of God's love), He explains the spiritual act of opening one's heart to love and experiencing empathy and compassion for all. In a re-enactment of the feeding of the multitudes, Joshua says to Peter:

> I asked and they were given. You could have given her five hundred fish.

> You said so yourself: they'll only spoil. Who were you saving them for? You have a big heart Simon Peter. You opened it to Me. Open it to everyone. There's room in there for all of us. Listen with this…
>
> [*Joshua puts his hand on Peter's heart*.]
>
> --not with what others have told you you must do. When we don't love one another, we don't love God.
>
> [*Peter puts his hand on Joshua's heart.*]
>
> Do you hear Him?
>
> PETER:
>
> I hear your heart beating.
>
> JOSHUA:
>
> Then you hear God.
>
> PETER:
>
> I'm trembling.
>
> JOSHUA:
>
> Me too. You are My brother. If you are wretched, I am wretched, I am wretched too.
>
> [*They embrace.*] (49)

And at that moment, Peter experiences the personal epiphany of Joshua's message and addresses the audience from the stage:

> Was it really like this, are you wondering? Yes, it was. I think it always is when Joshua or whatever you want to call Him is revealed to you. The false images fall away. In your heart there is a sudden burning sensation, a

fire" (49).

At the heart of McNally's work one finds the notion of community over alienation, understanding rather than misunderstanding, closeness and inclusion rather than their opposites. Unlike many of his contemporaries—Beckett or Albee for instance—McNally, rather than highlighting solipsism, the irremediable, or the absurd, seeks to bring audiences to a point of connection while they are in the theatre. McNally's message may seem purely humanistic, it is equally and most sincerely religious in a way rarely applied by more secular artists. McNally queries several challenging spiritual dilemmas in *Corpus Christi*: Is Christ a metaphor of love or the enforcer of laws? Should Christians obey the law at the expense of love? Joshua declares, "We will go where God the father takes us. We will teach His word. Make it new again. Will you come with Me?" (49), Joshua asks His disciples. McNally attacks the stark paradox of exclusion in Christian fundamentalism by creating a queer theology that extends Christ's liberation message to include gay men. In fact, there is nothing more un-Christian than to say to another that some are loved and others are not: yet this is an essentialist aspect of American Christian fundamentalism regarding gays.

McNally's rhetorical basis for a move towards a social and political liberation for gays through a Christian validation effectively demonstrates Michel Foucault's notion of "reverse discourse" (The History of Sexuality 100). Historically, although the languages of the church, the law, and medical science made possible social and political control of homosexuals, Foucault explains, "it also makes possible the formation of a 'reverse discourse': homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or 'naturality' be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories

by which it was disqualified" (The History of Sexuality 101). Thus, in his essay *Nietzsche: Genealogy, History*, Foucault argues for the transgression of social rules of oppression; and promotes a genealogical strategy of turning social rules against themselves and their rulers:

> Rules are empty in themselves, violent and un-finalized: they are impersonal and can be bent to any purpose. The successes of history belong to those who are capable of seizing these rules, to replace those who have used them, to disguise themselves so as to pervert them, invert their meaning, and redirect them against those who had initially imposed them: controlling this complex mechanism, they will make it function so as to overcome the rulers through their own rules. (133)

Thus, we observe how fundamentalist Christians have so thoroughly aligned themselves politically against any social or political rights for gay Americans, that their very notions of Christian identity cannot be entirely separated from the issue. In much the same way that neo-Nazi skin heads cannot be separated from anti-Semitism, the Christian Right cannot be ideologically separated from their discrimination and hate rhetoric directed against gays. Their irrational and un-Christian rhetoric provoke, empower, unify and make more vocal, the gay community as a whole. The increasingly harsh homophobic rhetoric of the Right could be said to have hastened McNally's creation of *Corpus Christi* and its dramatic history on the American stage.

As Ernesto Gramsci posits, it is only when subaltern groups achieve an awareness of how they are repressed hegemonically that they can react to repressive representations by constructing their own systems of ideas contrary to the prevailing ones (Adamson 72).

Viewing this dialectic, a Gramscian framework to examine the role of Christian fundamentalist political influence in facilitating the creation of and cultural tendencies towards violence can be established. While McNally has never publicly stated what provoked him to write *Corpus Christi,* ultimately one of its most powerful tropes is the irrefutable connection between Christian homophobia and hate crimes committed against gay men. Joshua is killed—bludgeoned unconscious and crucified by queer-hating Texan rednecks—for one reason: he is condemned to death simply for being an unrepentantly proud queer male:

> PHILIP/PILATE:
>
> What are the charges against him?
>
> ANDREW/PILATE'S WIFE:
>
> Have nothing to do with this man, husband. I had a dream of Him last night. He is innocent.
>
> PILATE:
>
> Art thou a queer then?
>
> JOSHUA:
>
> Thou sayest I am.
>
> PILATE:
>
> What do you say?
>
> JOSHUA:
>
> To this end I was born and for this cause I came into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth.

Clearly this scene is repudiating the connections between spoken hate on the part of

those in power and acts of violence committed because of it but it is also a call to all queers to courageously demand spiritual recognition that does not deny but include their sexuality. Jesus did not passively accept the political legitimacy of the Romans, and he was crucified for being, as the sarcastic sign hung above His head read, "King of the Jews," something He was not nor ever claimed to be. Similarly, Joshua is killed for being "King of the Queers" (75), and for his pride of being queer—the poignant irony being that Joshua is neither on two counts: he is no king of anything, though his existence threatens the insecure heterosexual society in which he lives. As for his being queer, his state of being is a matter of his god-given nature, not a rebellious role he has chosen.

Jewish religious leaders, the Pharisees, governed by their Roman rulers, executed Jesus because they decided He was a political insurgent, a cultural rebel whose message threatened the stability of Jewish Palestine. Against a frightening political symbol, crucifixion served as a double-edged deterrent: first, it demonstrated a brutal technique of torture and execution for the Roman landowners to control wayward slaves; and second, for the Jewish leaders, it served as a gruesome practice adopted from the Romans to control their own native population through fear, a reprisal for any serious violation. In *Corpus Christi*, the political death of Jesus/Joshua provocatively reveals American homophobic/heterosexist hegemony in its cruelest context; it symbolizes the brutal silencing of gay protest against the hate crimes and the systematic violence perpetrated against queers.

McNally's play is not as extreme in its portrayal of anti-gay behavior as some might think. Specific examples of violence related to Christian Rightist rhetoric directed towards gay Americans are numerous and thousands of instances of hate acts can be

directly attributed to its instigation and moral validation of such violence. For example, during a campaign for a gay rights referendum in Indiana, a leader of one gay rights group was subjected to weeks of hate mail and telephone harassment culminating in his brutal beating and bizarrely became a victim of a sexual assault by a fundamentalist Christian man claiming to be: "…acting for God: that what he was doing was God's revenge on the victim because he was 'a queer,' and that getting rid of the queer would save children and put an end to the gay movement in Indiana" (Perry 114). For certain individuals, like this homophobic criminal, gay-bashing provides simultaneous proof of manhood *and* of Christian identity.

With this understanding in mind, McNally's allegorical rendering of Joshua's crucifixion scene has a particularly shocking revelatory message for a modern American audience, gay or straight. According to Robert E. Goss, for gays:

> The political death of Jesus reveals homophobic/heterosexist power at its fullest. The cross symbolizes the political infrastructure of homophobic violence and oppression. It symbolizes the terror of institutionalized homophobia that has led to the closeted invisibility of gays and lesbian people. It indicates the brutal silencing, the hate crimes, the systematic violence perpetrated against us. The cross now belongs to us. We have been crucified. We have been martyred. We have been nailed to the cross by most of the Christian churches. They continue to legitimize, bless, and activate violence against us. (166-67)

McNally's *Corpus Christi* poignantly shows the de-humanizing quality and lack of spiritual courage that exists when internalized homophobia keeps gay men in the closet.

For example, Christ's betrayal by Peter takes on an even sharper resonance in the play when McNally's Peter turns on Joshua out of fear of his own possible bashing: "I had no choice! They would have killed us all" (77). Peter is a closeted gay man who allows Joshua to be victimized and murdered rather than come out publicly as a queer himself in support of his friend and mentor. Homophobia kills and living politically passive in the closet does as well. Joshua is murdered because he dares to claim His queerness before the world. After the high priest pays off Judas, Joshua's lover who has betrayed Him to the homophobes, Judas asks the priest:

> What is His crime?
>
> HIGH PRIEST:
>
> Blasphemy.
>
> JUDAS:
>
> Because he says He's the son of God?
>
> HIGH PRIEST:
>
> No, because He says you're the son of God as well.
>
> JUDAS:
>
> We're all the son of God.
>
> HIGH PRIEST:
>
> Unless you're looking for trouble, I would keep that to myself. The son of God a cocksucker? I don't think so. We need sinners. (65)

What is the metaphoric significance that Joshua is ultimately betrayed by a former friend, disciple, and lover? How is McNally indicting not only the Christian Right, but also the closeted, self-hating homosexual? By whom should the audience be more

outraged—the self-righteous high priest, the fag-baiters disguised as Roman centurions, or insecure homosexuals like the traitor Judas, willing to sacrifice one of his own in order to hide his inner homosexual being?

A high priest of the Christian Right, the Reverend Ted Haggard, a leading anti-gay pastor of a 14,000 member mega-church in Colorado, recently resigned from his church and as president of the National Association of Evangelicals after it was revealed that he had been having sexual encounters fueled by crystal methamphetamine with a male prostitute for several years. After a month of "counseling," and intense prayer, Haggard announced to his church congregation that he had been healed and was no longer homosexual. The irony of this scandal seems almost too preposterous to believe. One can clearly see *Corpus Christi* as McNally's forcing gays and straights to confront the hypocrisies and prejudices inflicted upon queers by the sanctimonious fundamentalist leaders and the untruths of their organized religion. McNally provocatively does so with their own sacred symbols, possibly for the audience to recognize and analyze their own homophobic motives based on the repeated lies and spiritual deceptions about the issue of gay spirituality and the repeated injustices perpetrated against gays in the mane of Christ.

McNally's queering of the Gospels is his attempt to reveal the damaged humanity, both straight and gay, cowering beneath the often spiritually denigrating political rhetoric of the Christian Right, people too fearful and self-hating to stand up for basic universal human rights. Jesus has been appropriated for all sorts of ideological motives: waging war, killing innocents, pacifism, communism, entertainment pabulum, and disastrous ideology. So why then not gay rights? Perhaps a better query would be: "Why has the American public not encountered a queer Christ before McNally's transfigured Joshua?"

"Transfiguration," as a theological term, is a useful and easily recognizable cognate of "post-figuration"—but more specifically, it is a word most closely associated with the cultural figure of Jesus. In *Corpus Christi*, McNally has done with Jesus exactly what scores of other artists have done with similar cultural myths:

> …viewing Jesus' life as a pattern of action that can be divorced or abstracted from any meaning it may once have embodied, he has taken this pattern as an entirely modern plot. In all cases—the transfigurations of Jesus as well as the post-figurations of other myths—structure of action establishes the parallel between the original source and the modern counterpart: the meaning can range from a serious reinterpretation to the most blatant parody. (Ziolkowski 276)

Corpus Christi is both; it is a serious parody and the work never intends to suggest, as the Christian Right erroneously claims, that the historical Christ of the Bible was literally a homosexual Jewish male. But even if McNally had done so, the Bible makes no demonstrative claims regarding this as wrong. Instead, McNally seeks to highlight for the audience the one "perfect moment, a defining one" (68) when the mystery of Joshua's Christ-like life may be expressed through the actions of the play. The epiphany he hopes to engender is a rather simple revelation: Gays can be sexual and Christian. And like all humankind, gay men are deserving of dignity and love, not paradoxically, but rather blessedly, both ordinary and divine.

Chapter Five: Strategies of Conversion—McNally's Proselytizing a Queer Christian Message to His Audiences in *Corpus Christi*

> *Historically, obscene Christs have appeared when people want to uncover the graceful pretenses of current Christologies. The Christ of Black theology was obscene because it uncovered racism under the guise of the white Jesus….The Christa is another example of obscenity. It undresses the masculinity of god and produces feelings and questionings which were suppressed by centuries of identifactory masculine processes with God.*
>
> Marcella Maria Althaus-Reid

The transcendent myth of Jesus' compassion and love is expansive enough to envelop the spiritual needs of every sort of believer: white, black, Protestant, Catholic, female, straight and gay. And yet for homosexuals, they seem the last in the continuum of American spiritual inclusion still culturally denied access to a Christian identity and to Christian institutions and marriage rites. Sadly, having themselves been indoctrinated by the homophobic exclusionary rhetoric of fundamentalist Christianity, many queer Americans still question their right to make such a claim as children of Christ or they reject the Christian church in hurt, fear and anger. Emboldened by the glaring divide between true Christianity and that practiced by many church and political constituencies on the political Right, in *Corpus Christi* Terrence McNally is simply asserting his legitimate right to Christ's story as a provocative tool of validation for a queer

spirituality. Beyond *Corpus Christi's* function as an angry comparison of the suffering of gay men caused by societal bigotry and indifference, in the present, to Christ's own suffering as related in the New Testament, it is also a work that tenderly, and sometimes humorously, tells Christ's story while implicitly praising and appropriating His simple teachings of compassion, tolerance, and boundless love for humankind, even for homosexuals. It is an earnest and impassioned endeavor by McNally to reinterpret the story of Jesus Christ from a contemporary gay sensibility by queering religion.

In the closing scene of the play, the playwright openly admits his didactic intentions to the audience: for the mostly sympathetic straight playgoer, McNally acknowledges the provocative themes of his work, and to his core gay audience he re-asserts his remarkably un-controversial artistic and political intentions in the creation of a gay Christ:

> THE ACTOR PLAYING THADDEUS:
>
> Maybe other people have told His story better. Other actors. This was our way.
>
> THE ACTOR PLAYIN SIMON:
>
> If we have offended, so be it.
>
> THE ACTOR PLAYING BARTHOLOMEW:
>
> He loved every one of us. That's all He was about.
>
> THE ACTOR PLAYING JAMES THE LESS:
>
> Look what they did to Him.
>
> (to us) Peace be with you.
>
> THE ACTOR PLAYING PHILIP:
>
> (to us) Good-bye. Thank you. (81)

McNally is ending the work with a tacit yet unrepentant admission of his perceived blasphemy, “If we have offended, so be it,” yet thereby acknowledges his own sense of righteousness in the proselytizing of a queer theology. He also offers a blessing upon those in the audience who have understood and perhaps accepted his new queer interpretation of the Gospels: “Peace be upon you.” He acknowledges how others have told and re-told Christ’s story and used the Bible for their own purposes and claims his own moral right to an appropriation of the story for use in his play from his own particularly gay perspective: In essence, McNally is creating a queer morality tale for his various audiences.

As a kind of unorthodox altar call for the re-consideration of a queer spirituality, McNally’s *Corpus Christi* has sought to expand the acceptance of granting understanding and compassion towards all of all humanity through a moral template promoting the comprehension and rejection of the minoritization of gay men in particular. With that in mind, one might just as easily label the Christ-figure of Joshua in *Corpus Christi* as much a humanistic savior as a queer one. While McNally certainly intends his queer transgressive theology to speak directly to the identification of gay men in his audience in particular, he is also using “queer” as a means of theological deconstruction for the larger audience as well. Michel Foucault believed that to transgress, to resist, is not simply a negation of the dominant culture but a creative process as well—it becomes a liberative action driven by all kinds of alternate possibilities, hopes, and dreams. And as with McNally’s dream of queer acceptance voiced through Joshua, it can be a liberative theology as well. If viewed in the traditional language of theology, queering has a definitive prophetic edge. According to Chopp and Taylor:

> Theology in the United States, therefore, has undergone a shift from using a melting pot model, in which theology as officially understood sought a dominant or common human experience, to a model that values the collage of different faces, voices, styles, questions, and constructs. Black theologies, Asian-American theologies, feminist theologies, womanist theologies, theologies from gay and lesbian women, and theologies offered from the perspective of the disabled are all present on the scene today. Where once such differences were either ignored or belittled as "special interests," theology today is increasingly understood as having its vitality only insofar as its traditional sources embrace new voices and their differences. (4).

For McNally, Joshua is as much a queer prophet as a savior. And why name his character Joshua and not Jesus? The prophet Joshua of the Bible was appointed leader of the Jews in exile by Moses. One of the great mysteries of the Old Testament is why God denied Moses passage into the Promised Land; He led him to the mountain top but then denied Moses entry. Joshua, not Moses, led the Israelites into the Land of Canaan. Joshua as a prophet of queer Christian transgression perfectly symbolizes McNally's artistic intent in *Corpus Christi*. His Joshua comes to challenge the old modes of spiritual discourse. Joshua as a sexual being erases the traditional boundaries of what can be discussed as spiritual. By naming his Christ Joshua, the author is metaphorically asking: Who is allowed entry to the Promised Land? Who is denied access? Will the successor of the old prophets lead us to a new way of seeing the world? As queers, who will speak for us? Who will advance our cause?

As Tim Miller and David Romàn suggest in "Preaching to the Converted," while queer artists, like McNally, are sometimes didactic in their intentions, they are not simply addressing static audiences, but are in fact using their creations to promote ideologies that will hopefully lead to progressive social and political action on the part of queers as well as sympathetic straights. Thus, not only does McNally's theatre mirror the hatred of the Right, it is also a clarion call to those queers in the audience to work for spiritual change in themselves and in their culture. Raymond-Jean Frontain has rightly labeled the playgoer to *Corpus Christi* as an "evangelist" (251). The following examination looks at the "evangelist potential" (Eads 163) of the play for these two audiences and reveals how what might be considered as a failing of the work in positively influencing fundamentalist Christians is actually a successful tactic employed to promote and sustain conversion for audiences more ideologically open to its humanistic message. As a ritual, *Corpus Christi* can be viewed as a liturgical drama with specific ideological aims.

Like all of McNally's previous work, *Corpus Christi* too, is centered upon bridging the gap of misunderstanding between minority gays and the often persecuting larger dominant American culture. McNally's popular appeal gives him, an opportunity to convert fundamentalist Christians whose homophobic beliefs regarding gays and spirituality might be changed after viewing the metaphor of *Corpus Christi*. But for those on the Right, his perceived blasphemy negated any impact the play might have had on this group simply by its members' refusal actually to see the work performed. But if drama's function is as provocation, then *Corpus Christi* as metaphor to equate the joys and inequities of gay life with religious art fulfills its purpose resoundingly for those willing to consider the theological and social implications of such an un-orthodox work.

Thus, *Corpus Christi* is actually centered on two groups theoretically open to his work. First, McNally has a particular opportunity to "convert" a mainstream audience, both straight and gay, ideologically open to queer-friendly artistic and political themes—an audience that might be challenged by his validation of a homosexual spiritual identity and call for equal rights for gay Americans from a Christian perspective. Second, and perhaps most significantly, he has the opportunity to present an unexpected religious perspective to his loyal gay audience, whose historical mistreatment by Christians makes them extremely curious about a gay playwright's use of a Christ narrative in his examination of the mistreatment of gay Americans. He confronts them with the revolutionary challenge to see themselves reflected in the Christian story as religious beings in a spiritual quest that insists they resist exclusion from the faith and insist on gay rights.

As examined earlier, *Corpus Christi,* chastising the failings of some fundamentalist Christians in relation to their promotion of homophobia under the guise of a false interpretation of the Bible's message regarding the "sin" of homosexuality, McNally is also symbolically offering up the play as an ideological challenge for them to live up to the true dictates of Christ's message of acceptance and compassion. But does anyone believe the anti-gay fundamentalists are capable of changing their minds especially on the premise that they will see a single play by a politically active gay playwright?

According to one critic, Martha Greene Eads, *Corpus Christi* is, in fact, a failed artistic attempt by McNally to convert a straight fundamentalist Christian audience (166). And she is correct if one is to assume that McNally intended his play to actually change the opinions of this segment of the population doubtless not inclined to come to the

theater to see such a provocative play. She goes on to offer up Paul Rudnick's *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, produced the same year as *Corpus Christi*, as an example of a gay-themed work more palatable to fundamentalist Christians because "it focuses on the Hebrew scriptures, or the Christian Old Testament, rather than the New Testament, and does not deal specifically with Christ" (172). This criticism is valid but mostly unwarranted. One doubts that McNally expected busloads of fundamentalist Christians to trek to the Manhattan Theatre Club for the play. Indeed, one might argue that McNally is instead contemptuous of them. Rather than seeking acceptance or reconciliation with fundamentalists, McNally instead takes aim at these Christians' erroneous beliefs regarding homosexuals in several ironic ways that a gay-friendly audience would knowingly find humorously sardonic and provocative.

For example, many fundamentalist Christians accuse gays and lesbians of having a "gay agenda" and of trying actively to "recruit" straights into their "deviant lifestyle," as if queers have sponsored missionaries actively proselytizing heterosexuals about the joys of homosexuality, as a Mormon missionary might promote the benefits of joining the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. Theatrically, McNally humorously satirizes the Right's erroneous beliefs about the cultural "recruitment" of heterosexuals by American homosexuals.

He appropriates the ritual of religious conversion as a way to introduce the play's characters, when in its opening moments, after all of the actors have reached the stage and changed into their costumes, the actor playing John fills his hands with water and tenderly "baptizes" each of the actors in the cast. The play notes for *Corpus Christi* describe the action:

> The actor playing JOHN cups his hands together while the actor playing PETER fills them with water from a pitcher. One by one, the other actors will pass in front of the actor playing JOHN who raises his cupped hands over them and lets the water run down their bared heads (1).

Thus, the actor playing John "baptizes" the other actors using their real names and then assigns the biblical roles they will play for the evening:

> JOHN:
>
> I bless you, (full name of the actor playing ANDREW). I baptize you and Recognize your divinity as a human being. I adore you, (first name of the Actor playing ANDREW). I christen you Andrew (2).

The Brechtian technique of introducing the characters in this manner highlights for the audience, at several theological levels, the varied religious parallels with the multifaceted political themes of the play. McNally's message demands the recognition of the divine within, of paradoxically seeing the "ordinariness" of all as the *very* signification for their divinity.

This demand for social acceptance and spiritual recognition is operating on two levels: for the straight audience. The actors, variously portraying a hairdresser, architect, lawyer, doctor, etc., portray professions whose familiarity and ordinariness keep the audience and the actors themselves from recognizing their inner divine natures. For the gay viewer or actor, this ritualistic recognition has an even more powerful suggestion, because many gay men simply do not know how to love themselves as homosexuals per say. Irrationally despised and ridiculed by fundamentalist Christians, many gay men have accepted fallaciously damaging labels of inferiority, abnormality, and evil, and have

internalized these traits as truth, leading not only to self-hatred but loathing of their fellow gay brothers as well. Joshua offers a new way of believing as he literally invites his disciples into an accepting and tolerant community of followers. And metaphorically, the audience is invited into this community as well.

Thus, as each of the actors is baptized into the production as a player, he is also literally admitted into the radical community of Joshua's followers as queer Christians. The opportunity for self-identification on the part of the play's audience is overt. By leaving the metaphorical closet, escaping the furtive, secretive, and shameful life to "join" the open community of queers, the actors are "becoming" their true selves spiritually connected to all of humanity, and loved by the prophet John the Baptist who blesses them all, including Joshua, asking each one as new members to "recognize your divinity as a human being" (2-8).

In the New York production of *Corpus Christi*, the actual beginning of the play was blurred for the viewer, making the shift from the reality of the world outside the theatre into McNally's alternative queer one visible. The actors, some seated in the audience while others appeared from the sides of the stage, were "called" into the production by the actor playing John, creating the effect that actual attendees of the play were being pulled into the play's narrative. McNally further highlights the liturgical nature of *Corpus Christi* in the opening moments of the play when the actors, after walking through the theatre's auditorium as if they were part of the audience suddenly choosing to participate in the play. It is as if they are responding to an altar call in a protestant church service. Each actor ascends the stage dressed in street clothes, and disrobes to change into costumes in full sight of the audience. Eventually, they are all dressed the same in

T-shirts and khakis, and each, as they explain, are native Texans from Corpus Christi plying a local profession. One, James, is the architect who designed the Roman cross. Another, Thaddeus, is a hairdresser. Others work as lawyers, teachers or doctors, as in any small American town. The biblical stories enacted by these campy characters who bear the names of the twelve disciples, have not been wholly expropriated, but the plot's resemblance to the New Testament and the humorously contemporary parallels are easily apparent to the audience. The immediate identification for gays in the audience is made explicit when all the handsome young men come forward to introduce themselves to the audience.

For gays in the audience, the forth wall is erased before a single word of the play's dialogue is uttered. The boundary between the audience and the actors dissolves. First, there is McNally's history as a playwright. There was a public furor over the play, and now there are 13 handsome gay men with double identities coming forward to introduce themselves. The theatre, like the metaphysical space of a church, allows the audience to be more spiritually open, perhaps accepting of a message more esoteric and challenging in the mediated venue of a theatre, a place more sympathetic than one is likely to encounter in everyday life. In essence, the actors are McNally's witnesses, liturgical players in service to the play's agenda. They come out in several ways, not only drawing the audience to the stage, and to the play's message, but exposing their bodies and then donning their religious identities as Jesus and His closest disciples, the men from among whom would come those who traveled to convert more by telling the story, the "good news" that they believed freed humankind from the sins of the world; to free other brothers from their false definition of homosexuality as sinful. While aiming to free all

humankind from the false perceptions of homosexuality, McNally may be most effective in assuring gay men in particular that they are outcasts and sinners only in the eyes of the bigoted, ignorant and vicious.

McNally has created an intentionally campy, stereotypical, and melodramatic presentation of gay life in the play, something quite akin to a gay version of *Jesus Christ Superstar*. It should be clear, even for a neophyte playgoer, that *Corpus Christi* is a queer parody in which humor serves the rhetorical function of subversive critique. As Elizabeth Stuart notes:

> The Hebrew and Christian Scriptures are often used as texts of terror by conservative religious denominations. Too often, queers have allowed themselves to be wounded by particular passages used by mainline and fundamentalist churches. Laughing at these texts is a strategy that subverts their efforts of destructiveness and distances us from the pain of being the target. (Stuart 23).

McNally's burlesque of the authority of fundamentalist Christians in the play allows the audience to question their power over sacred cultural matters. By laughing at those who abuse or humiliate them, queers have used camp as a strategy of maintaining their spiritual power in the face of discrimination, humiliation, and violence. McNally's campy humor confronts the ridiculousness of homophobia and misogyny by subverting what would normally be too painful to witness. For example, the Virgin Mary gives birth to the Christ child, not in a stable, but in a cheap motel room. The royal Magi provide her with room service rather than gold, frankincense, and mer. Her son Jesus, named Joshua because His racist father thinks Jesus "sounds like a Mexican" (17), celebrates His

thirteenth birthday harassed by a repressed homosexual priest who wonders why He doesn't "like pussy" (26). Joshua, stereotypically gay, is more interested in singing songs from Broadway musicals. In one hilarious moment, He even sings "I'm in Love with a Wonderful Guy" from South Pacific with His music teacher, a lesbian nun named Sister Joseph. McNally's farcical reconstruction of the Gospels to create a queer American Christ can be viewed as an parabolic idealization of Dorothee Soelle's notion of *phantasie;* it is a "creative imagining, [an] active imaging of faithful possibilities" (133) as a supplement to previous cultural or historical readings or, more accurately, a deliberate (mis)readings of the Bible to condemn or ostracize other human beings.

Similarly, *Corpus Christi* is an imagined queer American allegory that allows McNally not only to equate the struggles of gay men against homohatred in American culture with the Nazarene's plight against the Pharisees of Jewish Palestine but his use of creative imagining to create a community of gay men in pursuit of queer liberation and freedom is strikingly similar to Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's "hermeneutics of creative actualization" (21) in which she seeks to reclaim the voices of marginalized women within the scriptures. As she explains:

> a hermeneutics of liberative vision and imagination seeks to actualize and dramatize biblical texts differently. The social function of imagination and fantasy is to introduce possibilities, for we can work toward actualizing only that which we have first imagined. Creative re-imagination employs all our creative powers to celebrate and make present the suffering, struggles, and victories of our biblical foresisters and [forebrothers]. (28)

Although McNally's play does not attempt a new reading of the Gospels as a truly systematic theology, *Corpus Christi* does interrogate several of the abiding dilemmas of all religious scholars—paradoxical questions theologians have grappled with for centuries: How can God allow any of His children to be oppressed? Why does evil exist in the face of goodness? How does the human potential and drive for complete freedom reflect our divine purpose? McNally denies his role as theologian in the preface but he is undeniably preaching a message.

Beyond the overt allusions of the title to McNally's home town in Texas, at a more abstract level of signification the title has broad religious associations in its implication for McNally's meta-theatrical intentions for those witnessing the staged production. Like the "Corpus Christi" cycle plays of medieval Europe, which were essentially populist vehicles for the church to proselytize the illiterate masses through a combination of accepted church doctrine, social satire, and comedic farce based on religious stories. McNally's queer theatre functions in much the same fashion as did the mystery plays with broad characters and parody that altered the identities of Biblical characters and added non-canonical scenes and players. For example, for a medieval English audience, the mystery plays were written by church clerics who enabled receptive viewers to simultaneously substantiate their beliefs while making highly esoteric doctrine and theology more accessible to the laity in a vernacular language more easily grasped by the mostly illiterate populace than through the mysterious nuances of the Latinate mass. Alluding to a similar intent, McNally makes direct reference to his didactic intentions in the preface to the printed text of the play:

> A play teaches us a new insight into the human condition. A ritual is an

> action we perform over and over because we have to. Otherwise, we are in danger of forgetting the meaning of that ritual, in this case that we must love one another or die. Christ died for all of our sins because he loved each and everyone of us. When we do not remember His greatest sacrifice, we condemn ourselves to repeating its terrible consequences. (vii).

As just mentioned, McNally has says in the preface to the work, "I'm a playwright, not a theologian" (v), and then goes on to state:

> But it would have been just as naïve of me to think that I could write a play about a young gay man who would come to be identified as a Christ figure without stirring up a protest as it would to think I could write a play about Jesus Christ Himself in which He would come to be identified as a young gay man without a lot of noses getting bent out of shape. (v)

McNally reveals that he expected the reaction he would surely get from the Right by attempting to create a modern queer mystery play:

> I was not mistaken. The level of dislike of gay men and the vehemence of denial of any claim they might make for spiritual parity with their Christian "brothers' that *Corpus Christi* revealed was disheartening. Gay has never seemed less "good." Once again, we had not come a long way at all, baby. Now I'm sounding like a homosexual. (v).

Further on, McNally states his overt intentions in the creation of the work—creating a dramatic ritual by which the audience may communally experience the transforming moment of grace experienced through Christ's sacrifice and the collective human

redemption of His death,

> *Corpus Christi* is a passion play. The life of Joshua, a young man from south Texas, is told in the theatrical tradition of medieval morality plays. Men play all the roles. There is no suspense. There is no scenery. The purpose of the play is that again we begin the familiar dialogue with ourselves: Do I love my neighbor? Am I contributing good to the society in which I operate or nil? Do I, in fact, matter? Nothing more, nothing less. The play is more religious ritual than a play. A play teaches us a new insight into the human condition. A ritual is an action we perform over and over because we *have* to. Otherwise, we are in danger of forgetting the meaning of that ritual, in this case that we must love one another or die. (vii)

Clearly it is McNally's intention that *Corpus Christi* be experienced as a post-modern Eucharist in a theatre in much the same way as a medieval audience would have experienced the ritual in a market square through the original mystery plays—theatre with similarly shrewd didactic intentions.

Full of humor, vitality, and physical action, much like the medieval mystery plays, *Corpus Christi* represents an intriguing balance between the spiritual and the profane. Cathartic in its send up of those in power, the play spoofs the fundamentalist notion of "love the sinner but hate the sin" with "hate" being the operative word. As revealed earlier, much of the criticism directed against the play focuses on those scenes combining frank sexuality and humor as the parts most profaning of the Christian story. But *Corpus Christi* is, as one scholar notes, just like the mystery cycle plays of the middle ages:

> Intended to divert as well as edify and instruct the laity, vernacular religious drama adopted many techniques associated with profane theatre in order to win acceptance for its doctrinal content. Characterization had to be broad and attesting, dialogue racy, earthy and often declamatory, comedy prominent and often scabrous, though its didactic purpose and potential was often recognized and exploited. (Tydeman 20)

During the medieval period in France, The Feast of Fools, widely celebrated throughout the country, was a festival of outrageous buffoonery in which members of the lower church hierarchy mocked and ridiculed the higher clergy by dressing as animals and women in ecclesiastical garb, running around the churchyards, making animal noises and simply acting in outrageous ways to transgress the liturgy (Chambers 77).

> Similarly, a complicated dialectic between the sacred and profane was ritually enacted on the stage of English and German medieval towns during the Feast of Corpus Christi. The beaten and naked body of Christ was paraded in elaborate public processions as a visual didactic intended for the illiterate masses who might view the spectacle as a reminder of how they are pawns in the conflict between good and evil in the fallen world. As William Tydeman suggests, the passion plays were "vehicles designed to bring home to the people their spiritual potentialities and responsibilities" (20).

Corpus Christi meets all of the criteria for being a modern queer mystery play in its appeal to the gay audience.

In the work, the audience witnesses the beginning of an epistemological conversion in the opening moments, a process that continues throughout the play's actions. The audience is repeatedly confounded by its continuing paradoxes. In the final scene, Joshua is crucified but *not* resurrected. He is, after all, a human imitation of Christ, a tragic victim nonetheless, especially in a Christian culture. The moral is clear, but there is a paradox in that the transformed actor who plays Joshua may resume his identity, still gay and sexual, and re-enter the world with the audience's applause, having boldly acted out in his culture's most sacred story, claiming it for his own**.**

Poignantly, *Corpus Christi* and the rhetoric of the Christian Right are essentially concerned with the same issue: the paradox dividing of how sexuality and spiritually can co-exist in American society. While the Right views any connections between spirituality and sexuality outside of marriage as anathema to Christ's gospels, McNally's queer theology argues the opposite quite successfully. And as one would hope, conversion potential is not only for sympathetic gays. Not all Christians are fundamentalists or have an aversion to accepting gays into the community of Christ's followers.

In fact, one of the most highly lauded and economically successful plays in decades, Kushner's *Angels in America: The Millennium Approaches*, has the subtitle "A Gay Fantasia on American Themes." This play attests to the country's possible openness to art dealing with both spirituality and gayness, two qualities that are not incompatible. American Christianity has a long though ambiguous history of involvement with progressive social action: abolition and the civil rights movement for African Americans were born and nurtured in the church, as were liberation theology in oppressive societies

and Quaker activism for peace. But the onslaught of arch-conservative Christian rhetoric against gay and lesbian rights makes it is easy to forget that most American Christians are not fanatical zealots.

Plenty of intellectuals, pacifists, environmentalists, feminists, and human rights and peace activists and gays are practicing Christians devoted to Christ's mission on earth. But in many communities, because of the seemingly irreparable divide between these defining identities, as one scholar notes,

> To be queer and religious…means putting yourself on the margins of an already marginalized society: as many lesbian and gay Christians have said, the one thing harder that coming out as queer in Church is coming out as religious to your fellow queers. Their response is, as best, incomprehension, sometimes hostility: you are viewed as a traitor…these two identities are simply not supposed to exist in the same person—they should cancel each other out. (Sweasy 5)

As the lesbian Reverend Doctor Mona West suggests: "As gay and lesbian Christians, we are kind of in this Catch-22 situation in terms of the way the religious Right responds to us but also the ways in which non-Christians folks from our own community respond to us" (Hendershot 150). Queer activists and theorists tend to preach against normative Christian religious practice as representing a rhetorical sleight of hand that really means assimilation, and to assimilate is to go back into the closet. For many radical gay activists, gay and lesbian Christians are viewed as hopelessly conservative accommodationists, Uncle Toms who are traitors to the cause of queer justice.

As for those of the Christian Right who believe that some ill-defined married, single, or celibate heterosexuality is the only acceptable category and who preach heterosexual monogamy as a standard of a family values, they believe they have absolute moral authority not only to deny gays and lesbians their rights, which they erroneously describe as "special rights," but to inspire, and even act out, physical attacks on gay people and gay-rights activists. For them, simply, gay Christians are contemptible, nothing more than deluded sinners, an affront to the church and "an abomination" before a righteous god.

Corpus Christi came into being to demonstrate that "gay Christian" is not oxymoronic. It offers how a minority community of gay American Christians, ostracized not only by the Right but by their fellow gays as well, might find spiritual solace in its reading of the Bible as a provocative narration of the gay Christian coming-out story. Above and beyond McNally's dramatization that gay and Christian can indeed be co-existing identities, *Corpus Christi* also stands as an historical artifact of the cultural negotiations between oppositional groups in present American culture. And politically, it offers invaluable insight into how the gay Left may begin to reclaim and embrace Christian ethics and values in order to assert its own cultural power in fulfilling the human rights agenda it has long promoted.

As a secularly appealing drama, *Corpus Christi* defines gay spirituality against the Christian Right while provocatively incorporating elements of that culture into itself. Similarly, fundamentalists who reject popular secular American culture have created their own counterculture of music, film, drama, and fiction that mimics the very media they seek to separate themselves from: neither co-culture can nor does ever fully separate from the other. McNally, a queer Texan and lapsed Catholic, still preaches a Good News

sermon of inclusive humanism in his play of Christ's earthy love and compassion. And it is this very humanism in his play, among the theological liberties he employed, that the Right found most egregious and which led to such violent opposition and sanctimonious outrage.

But if communion is to occur between the gay Christian Left and the Christian fundamentalist Right, ideally it will occur in the quieted halls of a church sanctuary and not across a police barricade dividing screaming religious fanatics from queer activists. Choosing Christ as a character, McNally intuitively understands that for gays to find acceptance into the spiritual life of American Christianity, they must work from inside Christian culture rather than outside it. Jim Crow laws were struck down within the same legal system that made them possible. McNally, a gay man coming out of a fundamentalist Catholic background, defines himself spiritually against the misology of the Catholic Church's anti-gay rhetoric, but paradoxically, he is obviously drawn to the rhetorical power of Christ's life narrative. He reveres the power of Christ's story as a tool of validation for spirituality and confronts the Right with its own favorite weapon, the Bible.

As a gay playwright, McNally is not only appropriating Christ as a political argument for the specific rights of homosexuality as a means of expressing love, but also for the universal right to be gay and accepted free from discrimination. Joshua offers such a simple message of reconciliation saying: "all men are divine, that's the secret" (63). He offers a humanistic theology: "I'm just a guy like you. We're each special, we're each ordinary, we're each divine" (63). Humanism, often called "godless humanism," as a theology is as evil to the Right as a queer Christ-figure, and yet,

Christian humanism is the very crux of McNally's message. Liberal and more moderate Christians, with views particularly un-conventional in comparison to fundamentalists, doubtless would be sympathetic to McNally's human *and* queer Christ.

For fundamentalists, McNally's strategy of emphasizing Christ's humanity would be seen as actually undermining His divinity, reviving an ancient quarrel in the church itself: *homoousia* versus *homoiousia*—the so-called Arian Heresy that centered on whether the divine Christ was "man" or "manlike." Christianity has a long history of debating the mysterious paradox that Jesus Christ was both fully human and divine, McNally's Joshua, as a fully sexually active homosexual is too human for those of the Right to ponder. John Dominic Crossan provides a carefully delineated study of the conflicts faced by Christians regarding Christ being both human and god-like in *The Birth of Christianity*. Crossan explains that among early Christians were many converts from older religions with gods who regularly appeared on the earthly plain in flesh to have sex with humans:

> The irrelevance of human flesh, on the one hand, and the unreality of divine flesh, on the other, presented earliest Christianity with a serious and profound problem concerning Jesus. Those believers were poised on the fault line in the ancient world, a fault line that involved the whole material world and all humans in it but was now focused on Jesus. We might think to ourselves, of course Jesus was human, but was he divine? They had the opposite problem. If they believed that Jesus was divine, the questions became, how could he be human? How could this body be real rather than apparitional or illusional? If Jesus was divine, was his body real and

> incarnational, only seemingly en-fleshed, a docetic body (from the Greek dokein, "to seem")? One way of describing that clash of interpretation is to speak of incarnational against docetic Christianity (37).

McNally, one of the moderns Crossan is describing, whose notion of Joshua as truly human and having a sexual appetite that He acts upon in the play, offends fundamentalist Christians who believe that Christ's freedom from all sin, especially of the flesh, allows His death and resurrection to absolve all sinners from the Fall; they believe that while Christ was indeed capable of having sex, He resisted it for the salvation of humanity. And even more deeply offensive to fundamentalist Christians than Joshua's active sexuality, is the manner in which McNally daringly questions Christ's unique divinity. McNally sacrifices Joshua but does *not* resurrect Him. His ministry of love and compassion on earth is enough. Joshua tells His followers that He is not unique, no different from anyone else:

> God is our leader. I'm a guy just like you. No better, no worse. I can't gut fish, Peter, and I don't think I ever want to. I couldn't begin to cut someone's hair, Thaddeus. God knows I can't sing. You've all heard Me. But when you do, Simon, you're singing for Me, saying things I can't. John writes down everything I say, which is good, because I don't remember half of the time. We're each special. We're each ordinary. We're each divine. (50)

McNally's humanist interpretation of Christ's message in *Corpus Christi*: "Jesus Christ belongs to all of us because He is all of us" (v), provokes accusations of blasphemy because it appears to argue that Joshua as a perfect example of compassion

and love for all human beings, is worthy of emulation and respect but not worship or immortal divinity. Perhaps one of their mistakes is to ignore Joshua's modeling the *imitatio Christi* practices through time by many, from kings to popes to paupers. McNally's humanistic interpretation of Christ is not new. Many Christian theologians have long focused solely on the merits, sources and transmissions of Christ's teaching while also questioning His divinity.

To conservatives, what is provocative is the notion that since all are capable of following the teachings and open ministry of Christ, his death and resurrection were not necessary for the salvation of humanity. Following His example, however, *is* necessary to the society of brothers that he advocated. This assertion threatens Christian orthodoxy in a manner like no other in the play. Most egregiously, for those on the Right, McNally's repeated stress on Joshua's humanity seems to also be undermining the divinity of Jesus. But Joshua is *not* Jesus, but a man modeled on Christ, a man whose philosophy is modeled on that of Jesus. McNally's intentional denial of his resurrection is pivotal to the message in the play. Because McNally's anthropomorphizing of God gives Joshua, both human and contemporary, permission to be sexual in a metaphorical way that frees him from orthodox Christianity's 2,000 year old portrayal of Jesus as a god with the *potential* for having sex but still dying as virginal as His mother. This of course leaves out the paradox of Jesus's brothers and sisters, a mythology McNally does not address. In the context of Christ's life, all sexuality and not just homosexuality is offensive to the Right, thus, the less strident or violent controversy over *The DaVinci Code*, which repeats the claim of Jesus's marriage to Mary Magdelene and the siring of children

Though the extreme Right rejected *Corpus Christi* without a hearing, what of McNally's conversion potential for effectively addressing more moderate straight and gay audiences regarding sexuality as a praxis for spiritual identity? As noted earlier, McNally has been extremely successful, as an openly gay playwright, at negotiating between the gay and straight culture in America through the themes of his work. He has managed to assimilate gay characters and gay themes into work appealing to mainstream audiences around the world, no easy feat for any playwright. His previous successes are tangible proof that straight Americans are open to, perhaps avidly curious about, works with gay themes, and as for *Corpus Christi*, even spiritually gay ones. Its message is a simple one: One can recognize and relate to the universal themes of the human experience found in the message of Christ that rises above limiting notions of sexuality.

Much of McNally's corpus of work promotes a theology of acceptance and peaceful co-existence among the sexually diverse, from *Love! Valor! Compassion!* to *A Perfect Ganesh* and *Corpus Christi.* Having experienced his work, audiences hopefully leave the theatre as missionaries bringing forth a message of tolerance and acceptance of difference. For example, the common image of Ganesh, the Indian god manifest as an elephant, addresses the paradox of divine power. His traditional representation as riding comfortably on the back of a tiny mouse, McNally has explained,

> demonstrates the concept—so important to me!—that opposites—an elephant and a mouse—can live together happily…. In fact, I prove that the world is full of opposites which exist peacefully side by side. (*A Perfect Ganesh* 69)

This image of Ganesh could be read as a visual parable of how the concept of omnipotence and immorality rides upon the imagination and belief of the shy and humble who believe in something far greater than themselves.

Creating the "evangelical" potential of his play for gays in the audience (who justifiably may be leery of a queer drama based on a story from the Bible), McNally plays upon the notion of religious conversion using theatre as a social space in which this might occur, adding another nuanced later of secularization. The play's recognition of individual divinity in *each* of the gay characters simultaneously posits a human identity for each beyond their gayness as well as a spiritual affinity with all the disciples, joining them ritualistically as a group mutually supportive of their spiritual identities, recognition so rarely given by straight friends and family. Unlike the biological or cultural families of heterosexuals, who normally provide such recognition and affirmation, the families of gay men have not always provided spiritual and emotional support, so that gay men have had to form "families" of their own to provide this sustenance.

When considered in relationship to gays, the message of Christ to leave your family and follow Him, is not so strange. Christ espoused in His ministry the casting off of old societal mores of misogyny and patriarchy. Men and women, rich and poor, the educated and the ignorant, were all joined together in the family of Christ. McNally highlights this notion in the play's Last Supper, a mildly camp parody of a typical gay dinner party:

> JOSHUA:
>
> We need a room to celebrate Passover.
>
> PHILLIP:
>
> It is prepared for You, master. Everything is just as it should be.

JOHN:

The supper. We did not know it would be the one.

The stage picture should look like a DaVinci's [Last Supper]

THADDEUS:

We were in the part of Corpus Christi called Gethsemane. The meal that night was delicious. Peter and James outdid themselves on the lamb.

PETER:

The secret is in the marinade.

JAMES:

And slow roasting. Slow, slow, slow.

THOMAS:

Josh, there's a woman outside who says she is Your mother.

JOSHUA:

Tell her I have no mother. You are My mother and father and brothers and sisters. You are My family now. We are all mother, father, brothers, and sisters, to each other. Now do you understand?

ANDREW:

We looked at each other and we did.

PHILIP:

It was breathtaking.

JAMES THE LESS:

A perfect moment.

BARTHOLOMEW:

A defining moment. (67-68)

The "perfect moment" however is not the chatter about the lamb marinade but the epiphanic announcement of the passing of all they have known previously: with Joshua's love the world has been transformed. Unprejudiced love is the divine mystery become flesh among men. Recognize your divinity! We are all equal in the eyes of God, he is preaching. The men's lives have been irreplaceably transformed by His presence; it is the very upheaval of society and yet Joshua's disciples do not see or believe it. What Joshua, like Christ, signifies is more outrageous to contemporary society than any of them can imagine, and McNally wishes the audience to be mindful of their confusion—to see them as confounded by Joshua's actions as Jesus' followers were initially by His. Although like Joshua, the disciples are gay men, they live ambiguously in an often uncomprehending world and they seem to find it difficult to accept his message of liberation. Then, after Joshua reveals at the last Supper that one of them will even betray Him, the confusion among the disciples only grows:

JUDAS:

Is it I Lord?

JOSHUA:

Judas, you have said it. I have counted every hair on your head.

JUDAS:

You are drunk, Josh. Who would betray the son of God and be damned for eternity? He's drunk guys it's the wine talking.

JOSHUA:

When I am gone I will always be with you.

THOMAS:

That doesn't make sense. How can you be with us when You are gone?

JOSHUA:

Take this bread and eat it in remembrance of Me. This bread is My body.

Take this wine and drink it. It is My blood. (70)

Even as Joshua suggests He will always be with them through the message he has given and thus an eternal communion of Spirit, none understand His message. Rather than copying the confusion and doubt of the apostles in the New Testament story, McNally is presenting these disciples of Christ as so indoctrinated by the oppositional world in which they live that they cannot easily conceive a more open alternative within modern Christianity. Joshua is proselytizing to them: Recognize your homosexuality as god given. It is not separate from your humanity but integral to it. And most importantly, ignore those fundamentalists, or those mislead by them, who would betray you and deny you God's grace because of your unique humanity.

McNally's revision of the Biblical story of Jesus is not unique to the annals of American history. Two centuries ago, the deist Thomas Jefferson took a knife to the King James Bible, in an attempt to restore Christianity to the original praxis of Christ's humanistic earthy ministry by, systematically cutting out the virgin birth, the miracle of the fishes and the loaves, excising all of the miracles, including the seemingly most important one, the Resurrection, Jefferson's drastically simplified text, he pasted together and renamed *The Philosophy of Jesus of Nazareth.* Like McNally, he believed that an

authentic Christianity had long been replaced in American society by something quite un-Christian. Jefferson would no doubt agree with Tolstoy, who claimed that the church had supplanted Christ's Sermon on the Mount message of transcendent love and compassion by replacing it with the Nicene Creed, a system of belief so at odds with Christ's original intent as to be unrecognizable to Him if he were to suddenly reappear on earth (Ziolkowski 156). In *The Brothers Karamazov,* Dostoevsky did much the same in the parable of "The Grand inquisition." Ralph Waldo Emerson left the pulpit for which he had trained because the literalist belief in the transubstantiation obscured the philosophical and metaphoric utility of what really mattered, the change of the human heart. And Faulkner, does not resurrect his Jesus, who came as a French corporal of a 12-man squad who sought to stop World War I, but was killed, by the generals on both sides, his body ironically entombed as The Unknown Soldier in a Paris Monument. All of these writers ask, would Christ recognize His own words today when they are mouthed by the hate-filled homophobic extremists? As McNally, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Emerson and Faulkner knew, Christ aligned Himself with the oppressed and in today's America would declare Himself metaphorically queer in allegiance, just as the Jewish convert to Catholicism Henri Bergsen, a great modernist philosopher, re-declared himself a Jew when the Nazis invaded Paris.

Gay Episcopal priest, educator, and writer Father Malcolm Boyd persuasively argues that for gays and lesbians to truly have a personal spiritual relationship with Jesus Christ, they must be able to see Him, as Boyd himself does, metaphorically as also gay:

> Gay spirit, as we have come to understand it, fits Jesus easily. He appears to us as an androgynous man. Jesus shared his feelings, empathized with

> others, and was not afraid of intimacy. He was sensitive and vulnerable, consented to his own needs, he knew how to receive as well as give to another. Jesus exalts the spiritual dimension inherent in a truly liberated expression of sexuality. (Goss, Jesus Acted Up 81)

This description could easily be inserted into the play notes for *Corpus Christi* as a study guide for understanding the character of Joshua within the context of the play's actions. Missing the metaphorical power of the play, Martha Greene Eads suggests that McNally's demand for a spiritual validation of gayness is too particular in its focus and "largely limits his play's appeal to queer-friendly insiders, while his treatment of Christ further antagonizes outsiders who subscribe to traditional Christian views" (71); of how strict traditionalists would react, she is partially correct in her assessment. But she complete misses McNally's political intentions of revealing the confluence between gay-bashing and un-Christ-like religious intolerance. One might persuasively conclude that this is the major goal of the work.

Spiritual validation for one's queerness is McNally's message but validation of all human difference and uniqueness is the root message. Yet even gay drama critic and scholar, John Clum, in *Still Acting Gay* claims that McNally is being too exclusionary in simply seeking spiritual validation for Joshua's queerness:

> I have no doubt McNally is aiming for a personal statement here, but the play raises serious questions about the youth worship, narcissism, and single issue politics that are rife in the gay community. After a matinee of *Corpus Christi*, I overheard two elderly Jewish women in the ladies' room line complaining that the play did not speak to them. But who does

> *Corpus Christi* speak to beyond beautiful young gay men and their older admirers? (280)

Like Eads, Clum, also misses the point entirely, as did the two Jewish women discussed earlier who viewed the New York production. McNally is writing only about a "single issue,"—gay-bashing and its undeniable link to the homophobic rhetoric of the Christian Right, but also about homosexuality as another facet of the divine in human nature; a state of being that is a simple fact of existence rather than a difference that merits exclusion. Joshua is murdered by those in positions of political and moral power for no other reason than his being defiantly open about his homosexuality, and yet Clum misunderstands, writing:

> Even I, a secular humanist, was bothered by the notion that Christ was crucified primarily because he was gay and that the most revolutionary thing he did was perform a gay marriage ceremony. This is an extreme example of self-righteousness and self-congratulation that is leading gay critics to turn their backs on gay culture. There is no social, economic or political issues here beyond gayness. (Still Acting Gay 282)

Joshua, like Christ, is murdered because he is gay and un-repentantly a sexual being. Put to death because he accepts his own human nature with humility and recognizes it as a god-given gift, Joshua preaches an open society against those who define humanity on their own narrow terms and incite violence among an ignorant populace to keep themselves in power Unfortunately, when viewing the current state of gay rights within the context of ever-growing political influence of the Christian Right, McNally's demands are still indeed considered radical and revolutionary. And how dishearteningly

sad for the nation that it is a gay playwright who makes these demands rather than a political leader or the pastor of a church. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and President John F. Kennedy were assassinated under similar circumstances. Is queering Christ merely a means of validation for McNally himself, merely queer self-righteousness, as Clum suggests? Is Gandhi's appropriation of a poor holy man's clothing self-dramatization? Was Dr. King's appropriation of the persona of Moses on the mountaintop a sacrilege?

In our times, the gay and lesbian reclamation of Jesus Christ as an embodiment of a spiritual being overcoming oppression *demands* that He be queered. McNally's Joshua dares to restore Christ's liberation praxis as a challenge to the culturally and morally sanctioned American status quo of oppression, domination, exploitation, and sometimes violent murder of gays. McNally's metaphoric usurpation of Christ from the Right is a bold restoration of His life narrative and death in the context of a non-homophobic, non-heterosexist, and non-oppressive sexual theology. It is spiritually necessary for gays to hear this message but is also significant for all Christians living in shame, denial, guilt, or poverty (considered a moral "failure" by fundamentalist Christians who see economic success as proof of being "blessed") to become liberated.

For McNally's gay audience, curious and perhaps open spiritually to an artistic work that uses of biblical material in a manner sympathetic to gay rights. *Corpus Christi* is rich with conversion potential—conversion to a Christian liberation theology—for a gay man, the repression of sexuality equals societal renunciation of one's identity as a queer. McNally makes Joshua's being openly and unashamedly gay the basis of his spiritual identity. Joshua's life is enough to merit respect and emulation. A miraculous resurrection would not free anyone else from the repression of guilt or shame. Joshua is a

human with the capacity to recognize his own divinity as a child of God. His ministry is in showing His fellow gay brethren how to recognize their birthright as well. McNally is returning the focus of Christ's life to His actions on earth not His assumption into heaven; it is a reminder that Christ was made manifest in human form in order to promote among humans the doctrine, "to do unto others as you would have others do unto you." American fundamentalist Christian theology has long ago replaced this humanistic mandate to the community and replaced it with a particularly American emphasis on the salvation of the "born-again" believer only made possible by Christ's resurrection. Rather than using this status of conversion as a means of becoming more Christ-like in actions here on earth, for many, it is just a first-class ticket of validation to superiority over others.

McNally, by contrast, celebrates the inclusiveness of the New Testament's *mandatum novum*, the new commandment of unprejudiced, unconditional, and unlimited love and compassion for all human kind. McNally calls Joshua, his divine incarnate, by a name other than Jesus to emphasize his humanistic point, but He is the same God nevertheless: "That was our name for Him" (8), the disciple Andrew says. McNally has never discussed his reasoning for naming his lead character something other than Jesus, but what better way to lessen the transgressive nature of the work and at the same time allow a clearer and more immediate access to the metaphor. It was for the Biblical Joshua that, as the hymn goes, the walls came tumbling down.

If feminists can locate their spirituality in a female god Christa, and if African Americans can find spiritual substance and identification in a black Jesus (a more racially accurate representation than the blond, blue-eyed Christ so often depicted in Protestant

iconography), why can't gay men see the "queerness" of a Christ named Joshua as representative of themselves? In the opening moments of the play, the character of Judas addresses the audience:

> No one has ever told this story right. Even when they do they get the facts right, the feeling is wrong. One and one are two. So what? What does that tell you about anything. This is what matters.
>
> [*JUDAS hits his right hand into his chest.*]
>
> The only thing. Nothing else.
>
> [*More razzes, Judas continues speaking over them.*]
>
> People can't stand the truth. They want their Joshua, seen through their eyes, told through their lies. Truth is brutal. It scalds, it stings. (8-9).

McNally recognizes that his queering Christ is a distortion, a partial failure, like every other historical interpretation of Christ's life. But beneath or behind these distortions is the transcendent truth of Jesus's humanizing message. McNally's queering of Joshua establishes an identity between the character and a queer audience, but McNally's queering of the Gospels in the larger sense is a theological argument that Christ is not the possession of a narrow sect or of any gender, or race, or interpreter. His message is the opposite of judgmental exclusion or self-righteousness. Both the abolitionist movement against slavery 150 years ago and the Civil Rights struggle in the second half of the 20th century exposed contradictions in American Christianity, with some churches splitting off into Northern and Southern sub-groups, and many main-line Protestant churches using the pre-Christian texts of the Old Testament to justify social, political, economic, and educational injustices against African-American Americans. Not since those

contentious racial divisions has the debate been as intense as the one currently being caused by the confluence of homosexuality and spirituality. While some American churches long since resolved the moral issues of slavery, still too few congregations are racially integrated at the start of the 21st century. Regarding gays, most churches seem to be in accord nationally. The question of openly accepting gays into the church is theologically settled—gays are unrepentant sinners and are not deserving of the body of Christ—Corpus Christi—or allowed to lay spiritual claim to or gain sustenance from His radical ministry. Many queer Christians, sit in church sanctuaries accepting partial inclusion, closeting their erotic lives, forgoing rights to have the blessing of the congregation upon their same-sex unions and accepting the denial of ordination to the priesthood. McNally's proselytizing of a queer theology in *Corpus Christi*, in stark contrast, is grounded in pride, self-acceptance, strength, and brotherhood, not in accommodation, apology, or shame for being a "sinful" homosexual.

As a queer play, *Corpus Christi* is an imaginative reconstruction that defiantly interrogates and disrupts the narrative of Christ as a means of claiming Him for homosexuals. The spiritual claims of queers have become increasingly demanding of the American Christian church's acceptance. Rather than assimilate, McNally is suggesting instead that queers create their own Christianity that negates and escapes the homophobic and erotophobic church of the past 2,000 years. Just as queer political activists have rhetorically reclaimed the epithet "queer" from the hateful and bigoted as a badge of honorable self-identification, McNally's *Corpus Christi* is a post-modern parable for queer liberation that brands queer sexuality and passion not only as a form as political dissidence but also of spiritual freedom.

While denying any credentials as a theologian, McNally describes *Corpus Christi* as "more religious ritual than play" (vii), by which he perhaps means that he has created a liturgy for gay men, recognizing that for many of them, coming out of the closet and undergoing religious conversion have many striking parallels. For the queers in the audience this does not seem to be a great leap of faith. But for fundamentalist Christians, McNally's claim that all persons are divine, and that gays and lesbians included in Jesus's commandment that we must love one another remains curiously problematic. Richness of diversity in humankind, in McNally's case including sexuality, is a manifestation of God's divinity—is a paradox easily resolved.

McNally's point is that in America, there is room for more than one message in the wilderness. Terrence McNally's prophetic voice has shouted above the din of pious hypocrisy and empty sanctimoniousness for the last four decades: As playwright and theatre activist, he has continually insisted upon equality, calling for compassion, love, and acceptance for his millions of gay American brothers and sisters. While American queers have rarely found themselves portrayed in affirming and validating ways in the larger culture, the theatre has and will continue to act as their gay church, a heaven-sent venue, in which they may hear the messages of their own unapologetic and unbowed gay prophets—finding communion across the floodlights of the stage with those sympathetic to their gay lives. For many gays, never having been acknowledged in the churches of their hometowns, their first "religious experience" occurred in the cataclysmic moments of seeing themselves onstage portrayed as fully evolved human beings, deserving of love, compassion, and respect—valorized by the characters in *The Normal Heart, Love! Valor! Compassion!, Angels in America,* or *Corpus Christi.*

Sounding a spiritual revival through the powerful reclamation of Christ's story, hundreds of performances of *Corpus Christi* across the country since its controversial opening in 1998, as well as the many other productions doubtless to come, stand as living proof that American gays will no longer accept being physically abused, politically ignored, or artistically silenced. A puritanical culture cannot successfully demand they make a choice between living honest and open lives as homosexuals or remain closeted and spiritually repressed if they wish to live openly as Christians. One of the Gospels records that:

> In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judea saying, Repent, for the dominion of Heaven is at hand….For this is the one that was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, saying the voice of one shouting in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. (Matthew 3:1-4)

McNally's prophetic call in *Corpus Christi* moves beyond the demand for Christian validation of gay rights. It also stands as a powerful message of how homosexuality might be used as a praxis for spiritual identity. So what of the gay Christians who come to see *Corpus Christi***?** And certainly there are many. As Miller and Román suggest, queers often bond socially in ways similar to an on-going religious commitment. They provocatively define the "converted," audiences drawn to gay work, as an "identifiable critical mass of queers who together compose a congregation of people converted into believing in the necessity of queer identities and communities, culture and politics" (177-178).

Gay Christians come to see *Corpus Christi* as believers already, but in this country as Christians, needing their intuitions about their spiritual selves validated. Admittedly, gays long ostracized and spiritually diminished by fundamentalist Christianity, there may be some complacency regarding this occurrence. McNally obviously appears to think, his Christian play, with its gay cast of characters, not simply masked and conforming gay actors in a straight play, opens the door wide into a proverbial gay Christian church—one, however, not exclusive, or segregated but nonetheless safe and queerly affirming. Thus, in this view, McNally's queer theatre functions for gay Christians in much the same way as religious drama has done in the past, explaining, creating, and sustaining the belief systems of those already committed to Christ. Lacking other supportive venues, gays find the attendance at queer-themed plays continually re-affirms, motivates, and reinforces identity in the same manner as Sunday church services do for Christians, much perhaps as people oppressed beneath the hierarchies of church and state in the Middle Ages could see themselves in the carnivalesque portrayals of ordinary Josephs, Marys, and Noahs of the pageants and miracle plays ritually enacted year after year in the city streets by the guilds of common workers.

Chapter Six: Salvation through Sex--McNally's Homosexual Identification with Christ in *Corpus Christi*

> *We speak of God as love but are afraid to call God lover. But a God who relates to all that is, not distantly and bloodlessly, but intimately and passionately, is appropriately called lover.*
>
> Sallie McFague

Joshua, McNally's sexually active gay messiah, reveals not only homosexual suffering and identity but also homosexual love and homosexual sex as just other facets of the truth of Christ's teachings of unconditional love, compassion, and acceptance. Christ said that the greatest commandment, above all others, is to love the Lord and your neighbor as yourself; to do unto others as you would have them do unto you. For gay men, who live in solidarity and in union with each other, how is this commandment to be obeyed devoid of their sexuality? Simply, *Corpus Christi* is one story, of scores of previous ones, that interprets the gospel of Jesus Christ in a contemporaneous cultural and political context of the American gay rights movement. But the play exists with one major distinction, its lead character Joshua, is the first *gay* Christ in the long continuum of other literary Christ figures in the canon of literature proceeding Him. And he brings about salvation and imparts grace through his sexuality.

While McNally's harshest fundamentalist Christian critics wrongly accuse *Corpus Christi* of being blasphemous because of his perceived subversion or deliberately profane misinterpretation of the Bible by giving Christ a homosexuality, his intentions are simply

to give a homoerotic reading to the story of Jesus as a sexual being in a manner that gay men could most closely embrace for spiritual identification and sustenance. For McNally, sexuality cannot, and should not, be separated from spirituality. McNally's symbol of Christ is not only an apt and timely theological message that demands human rights for gays in American society but this usurped analogy, as a sexual liberation myth too, exists on several other levels in its transformative and appropriative strengths. It moves beyond the political; it is ideological, theatrical, and it is sexual, an example, as David Bergman defines it, of:

> the genealogy of transformation that occurs as successive generations of gay writers work through each others' material, transfiguring a homophobic trope into a somewhat celebratory one. [Such a process] …is dialectical, the product of the interaction between the dominant society and the gay subculture. The end result is not a pure gay discourse (no such thing can exist) but a discourse made more sympathetic to the lives of gay men. (22)

Expanding upon McNally's conversion tactics as analyzed in the previous chapter, the following analysis seeks to investigate how McNally's fantastical queer usurpation of the Christ symbol in the creation of *Corpus Christi* allows him to seize the moral themes of Christ's story and use Biblical authority and Christological language to sanctify, reify, and celebrate homosexual love, and by extension homosexual sex, by satirically revealing the paradoxical differences between true Christianity and superficial piety regarding sexual expression.

McNally has created a defiantly political work that not only provides a biblical basis

for a gay theology, but also produces a metaphorical character in Joshua who is dignifying and sacralizing of homosexual love *and* homosexual sex as a spiritual act. Raymond-Jean Frontain speaks of Joshua's open sexuality in the play as "fellatio as salvation" (All Men Are Divine 233). But beyond Joshua's symbolism as a defiantly out-and-proud queer demanding equal human rights, his sexual practices and teachings are at the heart of McNally's vision as Joshua offers his body and blood for the salvation of humankind. His ministry reveals gay sex as another option in the spectrum of the human experience to "the way of love and generosity and self-peace" (*Corpus Christi* 19).

In *Corpus Christi*, McNally explores how the transcendent themes of love, sacrifice, and compassion, as well as the acts of denial, hatred, and rejection, all found in the passion of Christ, promote a new queer theology of inclusion for sexually active gay men. McNally's queer imagining of Joshua provides a creative means of counter-reading the canonical gospels; it is freed from the limiting presumptions of historically heteronormative hermeneutics allowing a message that artistically releases the playwright from the desire, or even the need, to provide a "credible" reading of the biblical text.

As drama, *Corpus Christi's* mimetic action is imitative of the contemporary cruel persecution of gays while the implied message is indeed politically persuasive regarding the compassionate manner in which this oppressed group should be treated, and also, as a validation of homosexual love and sex. It is a political play about an oppressed gay male that implicitly argues in a deliberate manner for love and tolerance by society for all gays, simultaneously condemning the homophobic conservative misology of the Right while valorizing the homosocial, and in several instances, the sexual relationships between and among Joshua and His disciples as a means of spiritual communion.

By queerly re-imaging the Christ myth, McNally created a polemic in defense of a gay sexuality within the context of love and tolerance. At least one voice of dissent in the Catholic media heard McNally's message: John McCormick in *US Catholic* offered rare Christian support for McNally's interpretation of the Christ story in *Corpus Christi* and an insightful Christian understanding of McNally's artistic intent:

> Sometimes Christians use the central narrative of the gospel as a critique of the misshapen stories our culture tells us, and sometimes artists offer religious believers fresh and startling accounts of the mysteries of our God and God's creatures, accounts that awaken us to the full power of the Good News. Not all of these efforts have been helpful or well received, but not everyone who throws cold water in your face is your enemy. (McCormick 49)

McNally's *Corpus Christi* is certainly viewed by some as "the performance of radical religious unorthodoxy" (All Men Are Divine 231), but many orthodoxies have been challenged and changed. Previously held ideas about the nature of the universe and the origins of man once considered blasphemous and punishable by death have become accepted. Likewise, as societal mores change, with a better understanding of the role of genetics in the determination of sexual orientation, and the lessening power of religious conservatives in American politics, and with playwrights like McNally calling for compassion, homosexuality will become less of a moral issue.

By analyzing McNally's simple yet multi-faceted choice of title for the play, the following analysis investigates the third and final signification of McNally's simple yet multi-faceted choice of title for his work. As revealed earlier, at the most literal level, the

title obviously refers to the town of Corpus Christi, Texas, where Joshua is enrolled in high school, an intolerant place peopled with mostly racist, misogynistic, and homophobic characters. For McNally, Corpus Christi, Texas exemplifies the small-minded beliefs held by fundamentalist Christians that have no understanding of how sexuality fits into the divine nature of the human experience. Two diametrically opposed value systems are symbolized in the play. On one side, a fundamentalist Christian ideology, perverted by the small-minded townspeople who deny Joshua His spiritual worth as a sexually active gay man; and on the opposite, Joshua (and his followers), who figuratively represent a pure ethic of unconditional love and compassion expressed through close homosocial and sexual relationships between gay men. Beyond these obvious allusions to McNally's hometown, the title *Corpus Christi* also is a direct referent of the mystery plays in the Middle Ages of the same name (which none of the play's myriad critics in the popular media seem to have noticed), as discussed in the previous chapter. Finally, completing the trinity of meaning is how the title references the conflicting prevailing moral themes in relation to overt human sexuality in the drama.

First, in Latin, *Corpus Christi* literally means "the body of Christ" and signifies the human embodiment of Christ on earth; and second, it signifies the figurative body of Christian doctrine and its multiple theological and cultural adherences dismissive of queer sexuality that McNally secularizes in the play, revealing a message universally apart from that of the fundamentalist Christian sects and their narrow moral ideology as it relates to sexually active homosexuals. Joshua is Christ as human incarnate on earth. He is a symbol of the redemptive potential of human sexuality as a means of salvation; sex as a form of grace. McNally is creating an imagined sexualized Gospel story. As noted

earlier, “No one has ever told this story right” (8), Judas proclaims at the beginning of the play. Judas even dismisses the canonical Gospels: “even when they get the facts right, the feeling is wrong” (8). While McNally is acknowledging the transcendent power of the Gospels, he is also recognizing them as myth—as a transforming spiritual tool of identification for even the most marginalized of social groups. McNally states, “Jesus Christ belongs to all of us because He is all of us. Unfortunately, not everyone believes that” (v). Just as Christ did repeatedly in His ministry, McNally’s play is suggesting that Joshua’s disciples’ devotion and allegiance to Him is enough to inspire compassion and love among the other followers. Referring to the true Christ, he argues:

> He is not created in our image as much as we are created in His, then He is less a true divinity for all men to believe in than He is a particular religion’s secular definition of what a divinity should be for the needs of His followers. Such a God is no God at all because He is exclusive to His members. He is a Roman Catholic at best and a very narrow-minded one at that. (v)

Joshua is an obviously fantasized Christ that reflects the image that gay men “are created in.” Gays need to find their sexuality in Christ and McNally unmasks the partisan bias of Christianity that accents the negative importance of sexual desire in order to exclude it from social practice. For most Christians, the two millennia of depoliticized, spiritualized, and ecclesialized history of Christ has diminished any notions of His human sexuality to such an extent that He is only imagined as a celibate asexual being.

But is it so preposterous or blasphemous for McNally to query the historical possibility of Jesus’s literal homosexuality? Many critics have previously examined how

biblical readings of traditional narratives might engender a homoerotic interpretation. For example, the same-sex relationships between David and Jonathan (Cleaver 116) or Ruth and Naomi (Alpert 91-96), and as noted earlier, a few have questioned the homosocial relationship of Jesus with John the Beloved Disciple suggesting that Christ could have in fact been truly queer (Goss, Queering Christ 113). McNally, not unlike many other gay writers and theorists, sees much evidence in the Gospels of the possible literal homosexuality of Jesus. While the evidence of Christ having any kind of human sexuality is scant to non-existent, the inferences, viewed with a critically queer eye regarding the somewhat alternative lifestyle led by Jesus of Nazareth and His male companions are extremely unusual for an un-married man of the period.

From the earliest Christianity, Jesus has been portrayed as remaining unmarried, but the historical record provides much identification fodder for gay men: He spent most of His time in homosocial relationships with a group of other males, had close friendships with women rather than physically intimate ones, rejected the orthodoxy of the dominant culture, lived and ministered among the outcasts and the despised. Stereotypically gay, He had a distant father and a very close relationship with His mother. The Bible itself invites a queer reading of Christ, and Christian fundamentalists, unable to find there obsessive moral outrage at same-sex relations reified in the Gospels, must instead look for other scriptures, specifically in the writings of Paul, to authenticate their bigotry. McNally's is extending the metaphor in *Corpus Christi* of the salvic nature of His physicality already prevalent among Catholics to include the sharing of His body sexually as a form of sacrament as well.

The Roman Catholic holiday of Corpus Christi is a calendar feast day in which the

physical manifestation of God on earth is celebrated. The very basis of the Catholic mass is centered on the esoteric belief in the transubstantiation of the Eucharist bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. Just as Jesus served His disciples at the Last Supper, and said: "Eat this in remembrance of Me," both Catholics and Protestants ritually consume the sacrament as an act of faith and as a renewed belief in Christ's sacrificing His body and blood to redeem humankind from original sin. While Protestants see the Eucharist as only a symbolic ritual, Catholics literally see the bread and wine as being miraculously turned into the actual flesh and blood of the living Christ, believing as communicants that they are literally consuming the Savior's physical presence at the altar.

McNally offers the somewhat less primitive view that redemption can occur through the physical communion of two men. As McNally notes in the preface to the written work, referring to gay men "…our humanity is expressed through our sexuality and is not exclusive of it" (v). When Joshua metaphorically offers up His body and blood (literally within the fiction on stage and metaphorically to the audience) for the redemption of mankind, he is revealing "another way" of sex, "the way of love and generosity and self-peace" (19). Furthering the mysterious communion between Christ and the world, *Corpus Christi* ritually celebrates the salvic sharing of Christ's body with all of humankind, symbolized through Joshua's literal sharing of his body, flesh, and even body fluids with His disciples Judas and Philip. Philip is redeemed by the act while Judas is condemned.

Joshua instructs the difference between love and lust. Sex within the context of love can be a form of spiritual healing, while lust leads to nothing more than prurient

gratification at the expense of the spirit. In the play, a meaningless one-night stand leads to the transmission of HIV (37). Earlier in the play, Joshua recites a Shakespearean sonnet in his English class, it is Sonnet CXXIX, "The expense of spirit" (27), a devotional that reveals the psychological and physical debasements caused by one's giving in to lust:

> Th' expense of spirit is a waste of shame
> Is lust in action; and till action, lust
> Is perjur'd, murd'rous, bloody, full of blame,
> Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust;
> Enjoy'd no sooner but despised straight;
> Past reason hunted; and, no sooner had,
> Past reason hated, as a swallow'd bait,
> On purpose laid to make the taker mad:
> Mad in pursuit, and in possession so;
> Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme
> A bliss in proof, and prov'd, a very woe;
> Before, a joy propos'd; behind, a dream.
> All this the world knows; yet none knows well
> To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell. (22)

The meaning of the first line becomes clearer if "lust in action" is regarded as the subject, spending or expenditure by implication of lust can be regarded as "ejaculation." The sharing of one's body is wasteful if not done in a loving way. McNally's choice of this sonnet for Joshua's recitation speaks to the spiritual dimension of sex in a loving

committed relationship. Sex is a sacramental as when Joshua unites two men in the blessing of a same-sex marriage (61-62), but is simply meaningless and devoid of the spiritual if based on the libido only; as when Joshua is sexually harassed by Judas.

In contrast to the love and sex found in a committed same-sex relationship, Joshua says to Judas after their lustful encounter: "You can come no closer to Me than My body. Everything else is hidden from you" (37). Joshua is being rather conservative in His suggestions to the sexually-aggressive Judas; he tells him that gay relationships, like all kinds, must involve "kindness, I hope. Love. Respect for others" (37). McNally has ordained Joshua a messenger to declare the sacramental nature of human sexuality as a point of communion between God and man. Joshua is telling the sexually promiscuous Judas that gay relationships, like all relationships, must be predicated upon love, compassion, and respect for those involved.

When those in love abide by these tenets of a healthy relationship, compassion and respect co-exist, which brings about healing. The highly erotized body of Joshua is employed in relation to the possibility of sexuality as a means of shared sacrament to bring redemption and healing, both spiritual and physical, as when Joshua heals a street hustler, Philip. In one of the most powerful scenes in the play, Joshua explains this to His soon to be disciple who is infected with the HIV virus:

> JOSHUA:
>
> They told Me you were a hustler.
>
> PHILIP:
>
> I am. They all want me, that's why they hate me. I know who likes it rough, who likes it sweet, who likes it fast, who likes it slow. I bet You I

know How you like it, Joshua.

PETER:

Get away from us, you little disease-ridden, filthy whore! You're talking to the son of God.

JOSHUA:

And He is listening. Why are you so quick to judge others? All of you.

PHILIP:

It's all right. I don't hear them anymore. You want me, don't you, Joshua?

JOSHUA:

I don't have any money.

PHILIP:

What can you pay me with?

JOSHUA:

My life. I have nothing else to give you.

PHILIP:

I could take that from You. It wouldn't be the first time.

OTHERS:

Don't go with him. He's dangerous! He's sick!

[*Joshua and Philip disappear through the others. The disco music stops.]*

PHILIP:

Get undressed. You got five minutes. Did you hear what I said?

JOSHUA:

I love you.

PHILIP:

Say what?

JOSHUA:

I love you, Philip.

PHILIP:

I love you too, Charlie, I hope. You have rubbers. I'm positive.

JOSHUA:

I love you.

PHILIP:

Hey! Don't fuck with me. You love the idea of telling someone like me You love them. It makes You feel good. Love this.

JOSHUA:

I think I can heal you. I think I can make you well.

PHILIP:

I think You can suck my dick now faggot.

[*Joshua goes to Philip and takes him by both arms and looks directly into his eyes.*]

JOSHUA:

Father, heal this man.

PHILIP:

Fuck You.

JOSHUA:

Let these hands make him well. Give him back his life.

PHILIP:

Fuck You, I said.

JOSHUA:

You are healed.

PHILIP:

I wish I could believe that.

JOSHUA:

Then do. As you believe, so shall you be. You are healed, I say.

[*Philip kneels before Joshua. His head is bowed.*]

Salving the wounds of rejection, self-hatred, and humiliation felt by gay men if it is experienced within the boundaries of a loving relationship with another man, rather than one predicated on lust, Joshua physically heals Philip, a modern day "leper" (as a gay man infected with HIV), by refusing to let Philip disrespectfully treat Him as a sexual object, a "faggot" who wants to "suck my dick" (55). Not only does Joshua restore him to physical health, he provides spiritual sustenance and nurturing as well. As Philip humbles himself at his Savior's feet, he confesses:

I was going to beat the shit out of You and take Your wallet.

JOSHUA:

There wasn't anything in it.

PHILIP:

I'm not worthy to kiss your feet.

PETER:

None of us are.

PHILIP:

And from the moment these lips kissed His feet, Philip was happy. It didn't matter who he'd been. He was well again, body and soul. (55)

The salvic potential for Joshua's offering up of His body and blood to His disciples is predicated on the notion that sexual pleasure is joyful, spiritual, and healing; it should not be denied if done in a loving way between committed same-sex partners as in a traditional marriage. In fact, Christ as a husband to the faithful is an age-old metaphor for Christian devotion, but by introducing Christ as lover, McNally is offering up Joshua's body not only as sacrifice but also as an object of homoerotic devotion. The worship of His male beauty becomes a spiritual as well as sexualized act of affection for the gay audience; just as the naked crucified body of Christ is found represented above altars the world over, McNally puts the male actors' bodies on display, including Joshua, who is almost stripped naked during His crucifixion.

Throughout *Corpus Christi*, as he does in many of his other works, McNally reveals the humanity of his characters in the most primal and elemental way possible, often by showing them naked, striped of all cultural or historical artifacts symbolized by costumes. In *Love! Valor! Compassion!* all of the actors appear completely nude at some point in the play. Similarly, the *Corpus Christi* actors strip from their "civilian" clothes, down to their underwear and into the "uniform" of the production—white t-shirts and khaki pants. And on the cover of the printed edition of the play is a highly homo-erotized Robert Mapplethorpe-like black and white photograph of an actor portraying Joshua, hung on a crucifix clothed only in white cotton briefs looking directly into the eye of the viewer. The book is offering masculine beauty to the reader in much the same way McNally does

to the audience with the young Joshua on the stage.

The sexually-charged atmosphere of the play is explicit in its celebration of sexual desire, desire being limited only by the imagination and socialization of the desirer. Queer drama works for the liberal expression of desire and provides a creative context in which sexual liberation can occur. Homosexual desire, linked to the visual objectification of male physical beauty, is shown repeatedly in various tableau throughout *Corpus Christi*: Philip as a go-go boy dances suggestively across the stage like a male Salome in the bar scene (53-55); Judas and Joshua take off their shirts and undo their trousers in a heated make-out scene (37); and in the final scene of the play, Joshua is stripped to His briefs, and is pushed towards the front of the stage as if being given to the audience as a kind of homoerotic offering.

The play notes describe the sexually charged sadomasochistic scene linking sexual desire and pleasure with pain and humiliation: "During the following, Joshua is stripped, bound, and scourged. It is theatricalized/stylized but it's never pretty. We should feel His passion" (76). Rather than accept the politics of sexual shame that has dominated conservative Christianity, McNally's play celebrates the spiritual in the erotic, where the unexpected hopes, freedoms, and dreams of queers can finally feel liberated from homophobia, heterosexism, and erotophobia. His re-envisioning of queer spirituality allows the audience to ritually experience the redefinition of the divine to include the erotic dimensions of queer love and self-identity. Joshua is a liberated savior who embodies the freeing of queer sexuality from the heterosexist and also frees God from the fundamentalist anti-sexual and homophobic theological constructs used to deny queers any spiritual claim.

As liberation theology, this acts as a template through which the third and final signification of the title of the play is revealed. *Corpus Christi* represents philosophically the body of Christian doctrine, the church, the body of believers, and by implication, even the malformed body of the Christian Right. Essentially, McNally seeks to ground his argument for social liberation for gays in a religious validation with his queer depictions of Christ, His suffering and death at the hands of the intolerant because of his open sexuality. The title suggests the embodied identification with the oppressed through Joshua's bodily mistreatment, as well as the multiple doctrinal bodies of denominations on the Right, representing the ideologically misguided Christians, the tension between both groups providing the pivotal themes upon which all the play's action and violent resolution revolves.

McNally's work not only dramatizes violence at it basest level as un-Christian, but violence and hatred manifested through the use of Christ's symbol as both blasphemous and a sacrilege. *Corpus Christi* relates the message that what is most dangerous to Christianity is not intolerance of one particular segment of humanity but its blind refusal to accept all of human sexuality as being divine and worthy of respect and awe as the worst of all possible offenses made in the name of Christ. Indeed, the crucifixion scene at the end of the play most poignantly drives home the political message of the play when Joshua, condemned for being "queer" (75), dies naked, never to resurrect on the cross, wearing smeared lipstick and a crown of thorns that looks like a tiara. With this poignant tableau, McNally explicitly asserts that not only is the violence against Joshua symbolic of the attack against the body of church doctrine philosophically, it is also a physical and ideologically assault on the Creator Himself, and a rejection of the divine manifest in all

of humankind.

Earlier in the play's second half when the action turns serious, Joshua awkwardly tries to make out with someone of the opposite sex on the Texan seashore—Patricia, a high school girl who has befriended Him. During the failed encounter, Joshua ominously hears loud hammering. In fact, he hears faint hammering offstage throughout the play. Judas interrupts their furtive petting on the beach by leading Joshua away from the girl into his arms. Only with him does Joshua find sexual, though not emotional, fulfillment. Just before their lovemaking, Joshua warns his high school friend, "You can come no closer to Me than My body. Everything else you will never touch. Everything important is hidden from you" (47). McNally is promoting the potential spiritual connections between sex and redemption, but denies this communion to Judas because his lust for Joshua has caused his betrayal of Him rather than love, the love which would have given him his salvation. After his sexual struggle with Judas, Joshua leaves Corpus Christi and begins to perform miracles at the direction of His Father:

> GOD:
>
> Joshua, the time has come to leave Corpus Christi and begin Your life as the Son of Man
>
> JOSHUA:
>
> What does it look like I'm doing? I'm way ahead of You.
>
> GOD:
>
> I'm sending You, a messenger. (40)

In the next few scenes, he exorcises a demon, multiples the fishes, and he cures a truck driver of leprosy. For gay men, McNally boldly suggests all must find Christ in

themselves—their whole selves, in physicality, and sexuality, as well as in spirit. But at this point in the play, Joshua is still not fully awakened to his purpose, he himself questions his own divinity because of his homosexuality when he is with a blind truck driver also afflicted with leprosy. They both hear God's voice say over the truck radio, "This is My son in Whom I am well pleased" (42).

TRUCK DRIVER #3:

What did I tell You? Sounds like He's trying to tell You something.

[*Joshua turns off the radio*]

This ain't gonna make His voice go away.

JOSHUA:

All my life I've heard it. I don't know what it means.

TRUCK DRIVER #3:

He's saying He's well pleased with you.

JOSHUA:

How can He be pleased with ME when I am so displeased with Myself?

TRUCK DRIVER #3:

He has given you the gift of healing. Touch me.

JOSHUA:

I don't want to touch you.

TRUCK DRIVER #3:

Touch me!

[*TRUCK DRIVER #3 takes JOSHUA'S hands and puts them on his eyes.*]

Thank you, Lord! I can see. My skin is smooth. The air is sweet. I am

> healed of all affliction. He has given You the greatest gift of all, son of God.
>
> JOSHUA:
>
> Don't call Me that! I'm not worthy.
>
> TRUCK DRIVER #3:
>
> Then become worthy. Now get out. The world is waiting for You. Get out I said! (42)

After this scene, the language becomes less humorous and more formal, the action more hieratic. Next, he marries His disciples, James and Bartholomew, at the Marriage of Cana, thus giving biblical sanction to gay marriage. Joshua says, "We will marry you in broad daylight under the canopy of Heaven in the eyes of God and for all men to see" (79) as he excoriates the homophobic clergy whom He refers to as "all the fag-haters in the priests' robes" (84). The scene vividly demonstrates the perceptions of blasphemy by orthodox Christians in gays' claims to sanctified unions as a holy sacrament. Joshua refutes these claims by speaking to the grooms at the wedding party:

> It is good when two men love as James and Bartholomew do and we recognize their union. No giggles back there! Now, take each other's hands. Love each other in sickness and in health. Respect the divinity of your partner, Bartholomew. Cherish the little things in him, James, exalt in the great. May the first face you see each morning at the last at night always be his. I bless this marriage in Your name, Father. Amen. Now let's all get very, very drunk. (63)

Ironically, in the mind of fundamentalist Christians, gays are sinful because they have

sexual relations outside of marriage, while they deny them the sacrament of holy marriage. Earlier, McNally voices through his new Christ an assertion of the Right's perverted misuse of the Bible to deny gay men this sacred civil ceremony:

> JOSHUA:
>
> Have you come to bless this marriage, too, father?
>
> HIGH PRIEST:
>
> It is one thing to preach your perversions to ignorant and sentimental men and women such as yourselves but such travesties of God's natural order will never be blessed in the House of the Lord by one of his ordained priests.
>
> JOSHUA:
>
> This is the house of the Lord. I ordain Myself.
>
> HIGH PRIEST:
>
> You have broken every commandment.
>
> JOSHUA:
>
> You are hypocrites. You are liars. You have perverted My Father's words to make them serve your ends. I despise you. (80)

Joshua's remarks to the High Priest are in reference to marriage, but are undoubtedly McNally's way of addressing all of the political and moral arguments between those on the conservative Right and the gay community. After the marriage ceremony, Joshua preaches the Sermon on the Mount.

Joshua preaches here, as he did throughout the play, to His band of queer brothers, many still questioning futilely and uncertain of their spiritual rights to make claims upon

a religiously conservative society as children of God seeking recognition of their divine birthright to salvation. Not only queering the gospels for gay men unable or unwilling to recognize the manifest sanctity of their God-given sexuality, McNally's play preaches that *all* are the embodiment of Christ's divine nature, not just heterosexuals, or Christians, or Americans, but all of humanity: "We're each special. We're each ordinary. We're each divine" (50). This simple refrain solves the mystery of *Corpus Christi*—the body of Christ is God's power of embodied solidarity, compassion, love, and the service of transcendent justice for all the world's oppressed, even for gays. In the closing scene of the play, Joshua, having been betrayed by His lover Judas, is brought before Pontius Pilate, who asks Him:

> PILATE:
>
> Art thou a queer?
>
> JOSHUA:
>
> Thou sayest I am.
>
> PILATE:
>
> What did you say?
>
> JOSHUA:
>
> To this end I was born and for this cause: I came into the world,
>
> that I should bear witness to the truth. (95)

Convicted, Joshua is then stripped, bound, and scourged. After he is nailed to the cross, the play notes describe the scene, "The cross is raised. For the first time we see how horribly Joshua has been battered. Blood runs down His face and body. His eyes are half-swollen shut. It should be hard to look at Him" (79). Surrounded by all his

disciples, Judas asks him, “Are you suffering, Joshua?

JOSHUA:

Horribly, horribly.

[*JOSHUA lets out a cry of agony*]

Eloi, Eloi, lama sabbacthani!

JUDAS:

Which is Hebrew and which means, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?”

JOSHUA:

Father, into Thy hands I commend My spirit.

[*JOSHUA dies. We hear three loud knocks. JUDAS takes up a piece of rope and looks at it. Gradually, the other ACTORS return to center stage.*]

THE ACTOR PLAYING JOHN:

Our play is over but the end is still to come. All these things you have seen and heard are just the first birth pangs of the new age. Hold yourselves ready, therefore, because the son of man will come at the time when you least expect Him.

McNally does not give us a *risen* Christ at the play’s climax. For the monstrous cruelties and horrible deaths of persecuted homosexuals continue, and American queers still await the justice of a Stonewall Easter for their resurrected Christ to occur. The actor playing Matthew says directly to the audience, “Peace be with you” (81). The actor playing Philip says, “Good bye. Thank you” (75), and the play is over.

Conclusion

While the political equivalence between the life of Jesus and that of contemporary gay men seems an apt and compelling metaphor for dramatic interpretation on the American stage, for many political conservatives, especially those of the Christian Right, the play is seen as a deliberately contemptuous distortion of the Gospels, simply because McNally has dared to seize the moral themes of Christ's story and use the biblical narrative as a tool of authority to sanctify homosexuality and to locate spirituality in sexuality. He relies on an implicit rhetorical strategy in making his political views apparent in *Corpus Christi*. By overtly basing the play on a narrative from the Bible, a text that heretofore has been used to promote the reactionary and homophobic orthodoxy of Christian fundamentalism, McNally has shaped its rhetoric of oppression to suit his own political views. Most provocatively, McNally's metaphoric use of the Gospels in *Corpus Christi* to support gays rather than condemn them is a bold theology of inversion that names the homophobic rhetoric of the Right for what it truly is: an un-Christian gospel of hate used to authenticate, promote the exclusion, and un-Christian condemnation of gay men—terrible promotions of bigotry and deadly violence heretically voiced in the sacred name of Jesus Christ Himself. How does he accomplish this?

As the rhetorician Martin Esslin posits in *An Anatomy of Drama*, the civic role of theater and drama can be used as "a powerful political weapon" (95). *Corpus Christi* makes use of this rhetorical power and political impact by using Christ as a dramatic figure in an American cultural battle between the conservative right and the more secular gay community he is perceived by those on the Right to represent.

Virtually every socio-political movement in America, from slave emancipation in the

Civil War to female suffrage in the early 1900's, has either implicitly or explicitly evoked an analogy of Christ's struggles to its cause in an effort to rally supporters and appeal to the public. Reflecting the 1990's political furor between gay and lesbian groups and the Christian Right over the gay rights movement in America, *Corpus Christi* deliberately invokes a comparison between gay men and Christ that seeks to borrow, rhetorically reconfigure, and re-employ the moral force of those fundamentalist arguments against homosexuality done in the sacred name of Christ.

McNally perceives that the allegorical story of Christ is both a rhetorical instrument and product. Fundamentalist Christians view the biblical story of Christ's life as instrumental in the promotion and affiliation of their ideology, generating power collectively through its inspirational and moral symbolism. Despite the Christian Right's appearance politically as a collective whole, as Bruce Bawer suggests in *Stealing Jesus, How Fundamentalism Betrays Christianity*, the Christian Right is itself a product constructed through a rhetorical action based on a politically misguided interpretation of the biblical Christ (9), and the actions of those on the Christian Right reveal, when assessed against the actual teachings of Chris Himself, they are certainly not "Christian" by many definitions of the name. Just as McNally has literally shown the evilness in their demonizing of their fellow gay Americans in *Corpus Christi*, the metaphoric assertions of his message can be extended into greater moral realms regarding the Christian Right's damaging influences in and upon American's spiritual culture beyond the realm of gay men particularly; this is the transfiguring power of myth and drama.

Even as the shibboleth of their motto, "What Would Jesus Do?" betrays them as outsiders to Christ's true teachings; American society is constantly harangued by the

Right that what they promote ideologically is the same as the goals of Christ's ministry. But can anyone, let alone those in positions of cultural influence and power, truly aspire to do what Jesus did? For as Christ tells us to imitate Him, to act as if we indeed are divine like Him, gods ourselves, paradoxically, this is the very thing He forbids. He tells us to act as the first, to identify with the least of us and not the greatest. McNally's metaphor of equating the Pharisees in the play with those on the Christian Right exposes this crucial divide between American fundamentalist Christianity and true Christian action. *Corpus Christi* boldly queries the identity of American Christianity as it relates to the societal oppression of gay men: how can one claim to be Christian and to love and act as Christ when one condones hatred, discrimination, and violence against God's gay children? This provocative question as metaphor is open-ended and promotes a further inquiry into the multiple discrepancies between what those on the Christian Right profess and what they actually practice.

For example, would the pastor of a fundamentalist church praise a twelve-year old child who runs away from this parents (Luke. 2:48). For fundamentalist Christians who place a very high value on personal property, if they are to cast out demons, would they send them into a herd of swine, killing thousands? (Mark 5:13). Or for the Christian Right, who place great emphasis on "family values," would they, like Christ, forbid a man from attending his own father's funeral? (Matthew 8:22). Most egregiously, should they storm the foyer of some suburban mega-church with ATMs installed in the sacristy and whip the deacons with their collection plates held out, shouting: "Make not my Father's house a trader's mart" (John 2:16). The examples of hypocrisy are endless. McNally's paralleling of the Christian Right with those of the blasphemers and adulterers

of Christ's preaching in the play needs little defense in asserting its honesty as an artistic or valid theological interpretation.

The very nature of the Christian Right is fundamentally rhetorical, a set of ideas; they are a cultural and historical group that is sustained through its members' adherence to strict doctrine and a shared public political goal to impose these narrow doctrines on the entire country, regardless of differences in belief. As Bawer argues, the Christian Right has forced its members to deny their individual assumptions regarding Christ's intrinsic teachings and instead to rely on a damaged "theology that is prescriptive and official; a theology that forces Christians to deny their own experience of God and to declare their allegiance to a set of propositions that may run contrary to that experience of true spirituality" (60). In sum, the Christian Right wishes to do the same to every American not already aligned with them politically, even regardless of those already self-identified also as Christian, but too liberal or moderate politically for the Right. These "Christians" have turned Christ's valorizing message of love, compassion, and acceptance for all of humankind into a restrictive spiritual doctrine more focused on the achievement and maintenance of political power rather than the fulfillment of Christ's ultimate mission on earth.

In that sense, an act of rhetorical transgression has been committed by those on the Right in misrepresenting the true precepts of the Gospels. It is the Christian Right who has wrongly appropriated the Bible to fulfill a political agenda, to vehemently oppress and wrongly silence any and all, like lesbian and gay Americans, and especially those artists, who question the homophobia and narrow morality of their teachings, as McNally does so blatantly in *Corpus Christi*. McNally's rhetorical usurpation of biblical and

Christological language, as well as Gospel narrative traditionally appropriated by the rhetoric of the Christian Right, becomes powerful and artistically inventive rhetorical ammunition against the repressive ideological claims made by the Right in its war against the "sin" (Bergman 19) of homosexuality.

Gay biblical scholar Raymond-Jean Frontain has described the Bible as "both a weapon of condemnation and a tool of validation" (The Bible 92) for fundamentalist American Christians. McNally's *Corpus Christi* has attempted to wrest a claim to this dual rhetorical power from them and to artistically turn the moral might of the Bible metaphorically to suit his own political motives. In doing so, the play seeks to bridge the divide between the prejudiced and judgmental, who would deny gays any claim to a spiritual life, who often place much of their self-identity and self-worth within the realm of their sexuality. For them to be denied a spiritual life based on such an important factor for identification often has devastating consequences from within the spirit. This demand for acceptance in a Puritanical Christian society creates continued conflict and confusion that ultimately must be resolved and made clear by queers for themselves—as The Actor Playing John says at the end of *Corpus Christi* in reference to its message: "All these things you have seen and heard are the first pangs of the new age" (80).

Ideologically, McNally offers a view of how gay men are treated by those professing Christian ideals. Implicit in the play is a plea for the audience to consider two moral ideologies: either a claim based on secular humanism, tolerance, and a willingness to accept difference or the theologically-based tyranny of those who would impose their limited moral and cultural codes on all American citizens. Culturally, ideologies motivate and are the guiding forces behind political rhetoric.

At its roots, the attack against the production of *Corpus Christi* is simply a not so veiled attack on the freedom of gay men to assert their spiritual and human rights. By doing so under the guise of being a victim of "religious discrimination," contemporary Christian conservatives are thereby cleverly employing a rhetorical strategy of cloaking themselves beneath the powerful American political language and tropes of religious freedom, free speech, and anti-discrimination arguments to actually promote a relentless assault on gay men (their opposition to gay women is subtler but exists). In the name of religion, they have demanded that all Americans deny human rights speech, and instead, heap scorn upon gays instead. Demands on the part of religious conservatives to accommodate their religious sensitivities, regardless of their social or political impact, have become very much a part of American cultural background noise. In fact, this has become the basis for one of the most often used arguments from the Right regarding any issue they are involved in politically.

The rhetorical appeals made by both "sides" of the controversial situation surrounding *Corpus Christi* are essentially concerned with the broader political and spiritual implications of an alternative cultural ideology defined by a non-conforming homosexuality. Rhetorician Kenneth Burke argues in his book *A Grammar of Motives* that any situation may be understood, in terms of critical inquiry and ideological motive, by describing it through five terms taken from the vocabulary of drama: scene, act, agent, agency, and purpose (Burke 3-20). These elements, forming the Burkean Pentad, are useful in a final analysis of the artistic merits and controversy surrounding McNally's *Corpus Christi*. Any controversy may be broadly defined as a situation in which confusion, disorientation, and incompatible goals between two or more groups exist; and

in a free society, rhetoric is employed to find resolution. A Burkean analysis is a helpful template for deconstructing both the ideological system and motivational beliefs of the Right and McNally's artistic and political purpose in writing a play about Christ in a contemporary American setting.

In the *Corpus Christi* debate about free speech and religious intolerance, the nature of the controversy can be defined in terms of the confusion of those on the Right regarding McNally's aim in creating a gay Christ-like character and his thematic appropriation of a Christ narrative. In Burkean terms, since the controlling and theologically narrow-minded on the Christian Right view the exigent usurpation of its defining symbol as the nature of the controversy, its assumption regarding McNally's artistic intent is wrongly interpreted.

McNally never intended to blaspheme the sacred figure of Christ as a symbol of compassion and justice. Rather, *Corpus Christi* is concerned with the ideological implications of using a Christ narrative metaphorically to resist the societal abuse of gay men and to create an argument of validation and self-recognition on the part of gay men, in particular to recognize and live up to their spiritual entitlements as children of a loving God, embodied in the mythic figure of the living God, Christ. Thus, the situation, defined by those in support of McNally's right to free speech and expression, is in terms of an artistic scene, while the Right views the controversy in terms of purpose.

Wrongly believing that McNally seeks to profane the image of Christ, instead of perceiving his true intent, which is to praise the message of Christ and honor His life and death metaphorically, the Right seeks to silence his perceived "blasphemy." As noted earlier, the fearful disposition of the Christian Right is to control and define any and all

interpretations of Christ; fundamentally, this is the ideological core of its politic. Inversely, McNally speaks through his drama from an artistic and ideological perspective that gives him literary license to alter and appropriate the story of Christ and His disciples as characters in a play offering broader humanistic interpretation of Jesus and His message as one of liberation and inclusion for gays.

Both sides of the disagreement are anchored in two diametrical ideologies. “What does it mean to be Christian?” each side asks, tenaciously stressing opposite views. McNally symbolically switches the roles of the players by altering the expectations of the audience: the self-righteous and narrow-minded become the blasphemers and disparagers of Christ while those traditionally marginalized and perceived as being religiously unorthodox are the ones truly blessed. The paradox works on an even deeper level when considering Christ’s actual teachings in the Bible whish are unvarying inclusive, a message so contrary to the actions taken by those of the Right professing to live by the dictates of Christ’s ministry.

In Burkean terms, the ratio between agent and act becomes the controversy. The liberation ideology of the gay rights movement expressed metaphorically in *Corpus Christi* demands that people be accepted as they are born and implicitly suggests that as individuals, gays must be treated fairly with love and compassion. Conversely, the strict and judgmental ideology of the Christian Right focuses on the idea that gay people are defined based on their “choice” of actions and relationships with others, specifically that homosexuality is a chosen act instead of a natural state of agency. McNally’s assertion in *Corpus Christi* proclaims homosexuals as divine beings created in the image of God; they are born gay as surely as one is born female, black, or blind.

The play's simple narrative carries a transcendent message that demands love, respect, and compassion for all regardless of their minority status in the world. *Corpus Christi* espouses a liberation ideology dominated by the agent that morally requires individuals be taken on their own terms. One's humanity should not be diminished or denied by discrimination or violence based on prejudiced notions. One can not be "held accountable" because he or she happens to be black or old or homosexual. All of these are simply states of being, variations in humanity. In sum, *Corpus Christi* is a play that argues ideologically for human rights and all that entails.

While McNally certainly shows how gay audiences, and by implication those of any sexuality, might find meaning and validation in their sexuality as it relates to their spirituality; the play never demands the audience to "accept" homosexuality, but rather, asks quite poignantly that gays be granted the same basic human rights afforded all other Americans, especially protection from harassment and violence, the right to marriage, to love their partners openly free from censure, and, apparently for some, the most blasphemous request of all, to be given cultural access to live fully as practicing gays, and if desired as gay Christians.

The Christian Right, with its pathologically vehement loathing for homosexuals and its conservative members' misguided assumption that gays are inherently evil, absurdly argue that individuals are not born gay, but are, instead, "recruited" by other homosexuals to join their ranks. Every gay person knows for a fact that he was born homosexual. Sexual orientation is just that, not a "preference," or "lifestyle," the ridiculous claim made repeatedly by those on the Right. Who in their right mind would deliberately "choose" to live a life similar to Joshua, and by extension, Matthew Shepard or any gay

man in America plagued by anguish, discrimination, violence, and a million daily humiliations inflicted upon them from their birth to death? Sadly, by making gays the despised Other in their political campaigns for "family values," the American Christian Right has artfully used the extensive cultural mythology surrounding homosexuality (i.e. it is wicked, shameful, and unnatural) to facilitate anti-gay attitudes that not only deny them social and financial equality but, in the worst case scenarios, as with Matthew Shepard, also their personal safety and lives. McNally's artistic metaphor in *Corpus Christi* presents Joshua's Passion as a viscerally enacted hate-crime presented in full view of the audience, who are figuratively unable to halt its occurrence on stage, and by implication, are being chastised for their lack of political action to halt gay-bashings in reality. The man who repeatedly said that the greatest commandment of God was to "love one another" is being ritually crucified every night of the production, symbolizing those un-named men across the globe being beaten and murdered for being gay—often in front of their own gay friends and lovers or simply their fellow citizens who are afraid to fight back for fear of their own safety and lives.

Corpus Christi stands as a historical marker of Shepard's brutal assassination by homophobic bigots. As a watershed moment for the gay rights movement in America, his death signaled an alarm to the gay community that hate crimes committed against those given moral license by the Christian Right to commit murder under the blasphemous guise of doing God's will must no longer be tolerated, that the issue must be addressed openly through the continued political demand not only of human rights but also of the reclamation of the spiritual rights of queers to live freely and openly as Christians in the nation.

From the perspective of homosexuality as a lifestyle, defined by an act, fundamentalist Christianity opposes the character Joshua's secular humanistic argument for fair treatment and instead insists on making gay rights an issue of morality, basing much of its argument on the erroneous belief that individuals are not born gay but become homosexual because they joined the gay community as someone might join a church. Regardless of which element one emphasizes, acts or agents, what must be considered in the *Corpus Christi* debate is the spiritual implications for both sides of the argument: For Terrence McNally, it is an argument not only for cultural tolerance, spiritual inclusion, and American pluralism, but also for a willingness to acceptance, celebration, and recognition of one's sexuality as a sacramental blessing from God. For the Christian Right, the issue is a restrictive moralist ideology moving towards a theocracy controlled by the tyranny of an American political minority temporarily in control of the nation's government, but by the benevolent grace of a loving God, thankfully not its transcendent freedom of spirit. For everything there is a time, and it is possible that McNally's play appeared when it did and generated such an irrational response exactly when the virulence of anti-gay bigotry and intolerance espoused by the Christian Right outreached itself, and both the play and the horror of their vitriol set into motion a cultural recoil that might finally lead to the spiritual acceptance of gays into the realm of American Christian life. Time, indeed, will tell.

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