

## **A Call for Reformation in Indian Ecclesial Context by Affirming Belongingness of People with Same-Sex Orientation Re-Interpreting Leviticus 18:22 & 20:13**

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The commemoration of 500<sup>th</sup> year of protestant reformation in the year 2017 is not only a call of mere remembrance of the event of reformation but a call to participate in the process of reformation of church embracing our own grassroots, hearing the voices that are unheard, standing for the so called human-made odds by affirming belongingness for all in the ecclesia that influence both the church and the society. In this juncture, this paper attempts at discussing the issue of homosexuality which is being stigmatized by the church and society and calls for reformation that would affirm the belongingness of the people of same sex orientation in Indian church, by re-interpreting the biblical texts of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 that are used to condemn homosexuality.

On Sunday, 26<sup>th</sup> of June 2016, in Vatican City, Pope Francis said, “the Church should seek forgiveness from homosexuals for the way they had treated them.” He recalled the Church’s teachings: “homosexuals should not be discriminated against. They should be respected, accompanied pastorally.” He added, “I think that the Church not only should apologize ... to a gay/lesbian person whom it offended but it must also apologize to the poor as well, to the women who have been exploited, to children who have been exploited by (being forced to) work.” He is of the view, “if a person who has that condition, who has good will, and who looks for God, who are we to judge?”<sup>1</sup>

This statement of Pope Francis has challenged the church and institutions in a global context as church has been generally homophobic and unsteady to affirm the belongingness of the people with same-sex orientations. As the church has become a model of wider social context, her foremost task is to understand that belongingness<sup>2</sup> is a fundamental aspect of what it is to be human.<sup>3</sup> But in global context it has been usually observed that the church inhabits the aspects of homophobia by excluding and marginalizing the people with same-sex orientation. The sixteenth century ‘*ecclesia reformata*’: the church that experiences of ‘having been reformed’ was highly significant for its historic identity that it should be

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<sup>1</sup> Ganesh Kumar Radha Udayakumar, “Pope Francis, most liberal Catholic leader ever?” *The Times of India*, 27<sup>th</sup> June 2017.

<sup>2</sup> The notion of belonging, or social identity, is a central aspect of how we define who we are. We consider ourselves to be individuals but it is our inclusiveness of particular community which is one of the most important aspects of life.

<sup>3</sup> The Social Issues Research Centre -2007 <http://www.sirc.org/publik/Belonging.pdf>, accessed on 27<sup>th</sup> July 2017.

*'semper reformanda'*: ever open to further reform.<sup>4</sup> Therefore there is a need for the church to understand the scriptural basis with its proper contextual derivations which are often ambiguous and sometimes veiled to the outer world. Especially in the Old Testament in the Holiness Code prescribed in the book of Leviticus which deals about the sexual orientation of homosexuals in chapter 18 and chapter 20 which have been always used as the key verses to consider homosexuality as sin and thus needs to be averted. However with the emergence of hermeneutical approaches during the past decades provided avenues to understand the scriptural basis on homosexuality in a broader way. This study aims at investigating the law codes regarding homosexuality from the aforesaid portions of the book of Leviticus in order to understand the nature of homosexual orientation and to seek a space for the people of same-sex orientation to affirm their belongingness in Indian Church at the larger inclusive community, steeping towards reformation.

### ***Sola Scriptura: A Challenge to Re-Interpret Biblical Texts***

Jerry Pillay, the president of World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) in his address at the General Council 2017 held at Leipzig, Germany, stress on the following<sup>5</sup>: At the heart of the Reformation was the quest to return to the Bible. The Reformation saw a new importance being attached to Scripture or the importance of Scripture being recovered. The idea of *sola scriptura*, “by Scripture alone,” became one of the great slogans of the Reformers. The Reformers enthroned the Scripture by dethroning the dogmas of the church. The difference between the Reformers and medieval theology at this point concerns how Scripture is *re-defined* and *re-interpreted*, rather than the *status* that it is given. It is this interpretation of Scripture in a changing world that becomes a crucial element for renewal and transformation. It is a stark reminder that the Reformation cannot only be discussed in terms of its ecclesial meaning but also in its relation to culture as a whole. The issue of context and biblical interpretation and re-interpretation becomes a serious matter of importance. The above points establish the need for Reformed theology to seek renewal and transformation in the area of further understanding *sola scriptura*, the focus is not only on what the interpretation is but, more significantly, on “who” is interpreting, by protecting the texts from being co-opted by the powerful and elite by giving expression to the voices of marginalized, neglected and stigmatized.

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<sup>4</sup> David Write, “The Homosexuality Debate and the Reform of the Church,” in *An Anglican Evangelical Journal for Theology and Mission*, 15/1 (1998), 22-33.

<sup>5</sup> Jerry Pillay, “Introduction,” in *Exploring the General Council Theme*, (Germany: WCRC, 2017), 1.

Accordingly, the study of the Leviticus texts is focused on the sociological approach of the holiness code regarding homosexuality in understanding the texts of Leviticus 18:20, 20:13. The sociological approach seeks to understand the forces through which the communities and societies order their lives through arrangements of power and symbols in the society. Biblical interpretation is significantly rooted in the reading of the ancient texts and ancient texts were inherently related with ancient society.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the social units of life supply an indispensable ground for biblical studies.<sup>7</sup> It is the sociological approach that makes the people active to get the fresh meaning of the texts with a greater clarity and that makes the biblical world alive.<sup>8</sup> Brueggemann's social reading of the text takes place into consideration every aspect of the social dimension of the text.<sup>9</sup> Moreover the major interest of the biblical scholars is to make known the social structure and social-cultural life of ancient Israel.<sup>10</sup> Hence, in this essay, the sociological approach has been applied to have a broader understanding of the selected texts in relation to homosexuality to bring out the connection between the biblical texts and the present day context.

### **General Understanding of Homosexuality in Ancient Israel**

The message of the Hebrew Bible on homosexuality is neither clear nor conclusive, hence the biblical passages on homosexuality is always been debated historically. The Bible was written over a long period of time in the ancient Israelite world in the context of the Canaanite, Babylonian, Greek, and Roman worlds that surrounded the Israelites. Moreover, the development of biblical ideas on homosexuality evolved through a number of stages in Israelite and Christian history.<sup>11</sup> Heterosexual orientation was given prominence in the biblical world for natural order of procreation and it has become a norm for the church and society to understand sexuality and thus the concept of homosexuality was condemned and not accepted widely. As the Bible is written and shaped by the narratives and traditions of the

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<sup>6</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 49.

<sup>7</sup> N. K. Gottwald, *Hebrew Bible: A Socio-Literary Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), 26.

<sup>8</sup> Daniel Jones Muthunayagam, "Contemporary Approaches to the Old Testament Interpretation" in *Methodological Issues in Theological Research an Exploration* edited by H. Vanlalauva, West Bengal: SATHRI, 2013), 141.

<sup>9</sup> Patrick D. Miller, "Introduction to Walter Brueggemann," in *A Social Rewording of the Old Testament: Prophet's Approaches to Israel's Communal Life*, edited by P.D. Miller, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 1-2.

<sup>10</sup> G. A. Harion, "The Role of Historical Narrative in Biblical Thought: The Tendency Underlying the Old Testament Historiography," *JSOT*, 21 (1981), 25-57.

<sup>11</sup> Each stage reflected the outlook of its own cultural moment in history. Each such moment bears the influence of important cultural forces and notions from outside the Bible itself. J. Harold Ellens, *Sex in the Bible: A New Consideration* (London: Praeger Publishers, 2006), 103.

cultures,<sup>12</sup> a good, honest, and complete evaluation of what the Bible has to say about homosexuality clearly requires interpreting the biblical texts in terms of what they were originally intended to say to their ancient audiences. Doing that requires an understanding of what was the cultural and social perspective and authentic theological picture of how those ancient words to that ancient audience speak to our world today.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the biblical passages and interpretation that have been used to sustain the heterosexist and other oppressive conclusions must be examined critically to reveal the social factors and power interests both in their original formulation of texts as well as in their subsequent interpretations<sup>14</sup> in the context of the church.

### **An Analysis of Leviticus Texts on Homosexuality**

Among the chapters of holiness code,<sup>15</sup> 18-20 chapters are concerned about the various sexual intercourses. Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 read:

*“You shall not lie with a male as one lies with a female. It is an abomination.”*

*“A man who sleeps with another man is an abomination and should be executed.”<sup>16</sup>*

The most significant scholar in the Pentateuchal sources J. Wellhausen opines that these chapters i.e. Leviticus 17-26, are from priestly writers who lived in the last years of exile, and moreover occupied with sacrifice and ritual.<sup>17</sup> Historically and till now selected verses of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 have been used as primary justification for the exclusion and repression of the community who expressed homoerotic affection. But the same community is always hopeful of the biblical message and feels that they have a call from a God who sides the marginalized and the excluded ones who are judged out of their sexual orientations. Coming up with the critical hermeneutics to root out the sources of oppression, they re-claim the authoritative biblical sources of power and liberation.<sup>18</sup> Thus, the homosexual belongingness is always controlled by the heterosexual community of the society. These two verses, Leviticus 18:22 and Leviticus 20: 13 that are used to condemn homosexual orientations have become the base of controversy throughout the debates on homosexuality

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<sup>12</sup> Ian S. Markham, *A Theology of Engagement* (Carlton: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 8.

<sup>13</sup> J. Harold Ellens, *Sex in the Bible: A New Consideration*, 104.

<sup>14</sup> Daniel T. Spencer, *Gay and Gaia: Ethics, Ecology, and the Erotic* (Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 1996), 31-32.

<sup>15</sup> In the book of Leviticus chapters 17-26 are concerned with ‘holiness’ and these chapters are often called the ‘Holiness Code’. They give evidence of having existed as a separate legal code long before the Torah was compiled into its final form. This collection begins with sacrificial law in chapter 17, continues with moral and ethical instruction (18-22), holy days and other holy occasions (23, 25), and ends with a section of blessings and curses in chapter 26.

<sup>16</sup> N. H. Snaith, *Leviticus and Numbers* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd, 1967), 126-139.

<sup>17</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, “The Book of Leviticus, Introduction, Commentary and Reflection,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible* edited by Lender E. Keck et.al, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 993.

<sup>18</sup> Daniel T. Spencer, *Gay and Gaia: Ethics, Ecology, and the Erotic*, 31-32.

and have been used as a proof-text by those attempting to prove homosexuality is an abomination. But it is quite clear that the Hebrews condemned homosexuality but not clearly mentioned why?<sup>19</sup>

Leviticus 18 is a veritable catalogue of Egyptian and Canaanite ritual practices involving behaviour. In terms of Yahweh's religious prescriptions for Israel's distinctive life and worship, those were the perversion of the worship liturgies devoted to Yahweh. Chapter 18 of Leviticus opens with a repetitious declaration to Israel that she shall not walk in the statutes (regulations) of the Canaanites but in the statutes of the Yahweh. There follows the list of practices that the Egyptians and Canaanites employed in their worship liturgies and other related cultic activity: sexually consorting with relatives, sexually consorting with women during their "menstrual uncleanness," adultery, child sacrifice, homosexual behaviour, and bestiality.<sup>20</sup> In Leviticus 20 we have virtual repetitions of Leviticus 18 and add that all the forbidden behaviour is described metaphorically as whoredom with Molech,<sup>21</sup> specifically with that Canaanite form of religious worship. The death penalty is added to all of the forbidden conduct including homosexual behaviour. Leviticus 20, therefore, contributes to reinforce the link between homosexual behaviour and worship misbehaviour. Worshipping false gods or worshipping Yahweh in a false way is whoredom, according to these ancient scriptures and they were put to death.<sup>22</sup> In Mesopotamian scene homosexual practice was widely known. This practice was done without violence and without compulsion. Moreover, Sex between men in that worldview would thus violate male privilege and disrupt the patriarchal ordering of society."<sup>23</sup>

The concept of abomination was predominant in the texts of Leviticus and thus the Hebrew word for abomination, תועבה (*toevah*) is crucially significant here. It is a word derived from the sphere of the religious rituals of the cultures of the Ancient West Asia. It means "to abhor" something for religious reasons. Idolatry is the chief reference to such abomination in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>24</sup> Usually the verb *toevah* has to do with the idolatrous actions, sexual prohibition, and food and diet restriction; and false weights and measures. It

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<sup>19</sup> Shakuntala Devi, *The World of Homosexuals* (NewDelhi: Vikas Publishing House Pvt Ltd, 1977), 43.

<sup>20</sup> J. Harold Ellens, *Sex in the Bible: A New Consideration*, 108.

<sup>21</sup> The Canaanite Deity resembling the heathen worship practice.

<sup>22</sup> J. Harold Ellens, *Sex in the Bible: A New Consideration*, 111.

<sup>23</sup> Jack Rogers, *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church*, Revised ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 68-69. Cited by John Emerson Johnson in [http://www.clgs.org/files\\_clgs/Biblical%20Sexuality%20and%20Gender.pdf](http://www.clgs.org/files_clgs/Biblical%20Sexuality%20and%20Gender.pdf) (accessed on 29-06-2017)

<sup>24</sup> J. Harold Ellens, *Sex in the Bible: A New Consideration...* 109.

also connotes an offence in the sense of being an offence against both God and humankind.<sup>25</sup> Alex Markels remarks upon the meaning of this key word, *toevah*, in the Hebrew Bible. He points out that *toevah* includes the rules of dietary regulations, planting seeds discreetly in a field, trimming human beards, and various kinds of prohibited sex. Incest and sex during menstruation both common fertility rites among Canaanites of the time are prohibited. And before homosexual intercourse, *toevah* proscribes offering one's children to Molech, a Canaanite/ Ammonite deity.<sup>26</sup> The term *toevah* had also connected with the concept of "holiness" and thus the most of the texts in the Leviticus could be found with the notion of purity and pollution.

Samuel E. Balentine argues that the priestly emphasis on holiness exemplifies on the moral and social aspects of life, not only responds to the prophetic concern of social justice but also it offers concrete measures to resolve them. The use of the term *toevah* throughout the Leviticus passages is the clue to the essentially cultic nature of their forbidding homosexual behaviour.<sup>27</sup> A person might enter the sanctuary to worship Yahweh only in a state of ritual purity. A person might become unclean for a day, a week, a span of some weeks, or an indefinite period, depending upon the intensity of the uncleanness. Contact with an unclean animal's carcass and normal sexual bodily emissions and other sexual orientations including homosexuality were regarded as impure. Whenever a person became unclean in the course of daily routine, that person had to pursue the prescribed rituals for becoming clean in order to continue to live in the camp.<sup>28</sup>

In the entire Leviticus texts, cult played an important role. The entire thrust of Leviticus is the emphasis upon Israel's cultic or religious worship and cultural distinctiveness. Though these verses do not connect directly with pagan worship but simply refer to Canaanite pagan practices.<sup>29</sup> In such a context, "homosexual' intercourse was just one of a list of cultic practices that should not be imitated," says Rabbi Gershon Steinberg-Caudill, who has searched the Babylonian Talmud for how the ancient rabbis viewed homosexual practice. He says that, "The point wasn't narrowly about condemning homosexuality but rather about not engaging in the practices of other religions, which were

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<sup>25</sup> N. H. Snaith, *Leviticus and Numbers...* 126-139.

<sup>26</sup> This statement forbidding homosexuality as an abomination intends to convey the meaning that such behaviour, when practiced as the Canaanites practiced it, namely by heterosexual persons in worship liturgies, was, like idolatry, a bad mode of worship, which is an abomination.

<sup>27</sup> Samuel E. Balentine, *Interpretation Leviticus* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2002), 142.

<sup>28</sup> Hartley, J. E. "Leviticus," *Word Biblical Commentary*, Vol. 4, (Dallas: Word, 2002),

<sup>29</sup> Allen P. Ross, *Holiness to the Lord A Guide to the Exposition of the Book of Leviticus* (Michigan: Baker Academic, 2002), 347.

considered ritually unclean.”<sup>30</sup> Scholars like, Keil and Delitzsch relate the passages to the Egyptian goat cult. Canaanite literature has a Baal priest enacting Baal’s ritual of intercourse with a heifer. Primitive temple prostitution of both sexes was common in the Ancient West Asia. Leviticus 18 and 20 are against every form of behaviour that represents a loss of cultic identity in Israel, as distinctive in the worship of Yahweh, resulting from emulating or copying pagan worship behaviour.<sup>31</sup> Thus these verses addressed in Leviticus are the forbidden nature of cultic or religious sexual behaviour in worship.

### **Scholars’ View of the Leviticus Texts on Homosexuality**

B. S. Childs offers a prophetic criticism against Israel’s cult. The prophetic messages emerge as the proclamation of sovereignty of Yahweh and subordination of all human institutions to the exercise of Yahweh’s Justice (Isa.1:10). Thus Isaiah condemns an excessive cultic activity which combines iniquity and solemn assemblies and calls for Israel to seek justice and to correct oppression. (Isa. 58:6) and again Amos testifies that Yahweh hates sacrifices which do not do justice. (Amos: 5:21). These ritual and purity laws which were practised excessively during the post exilic period receive a criticism those are devoid of justice.<sup>32</sup> Scholars like Knohl and Milgrom argue for Holiness school which is evidently comes from 8th century and persistence concern was social justice (Isa. 1:10-17; Amos 2:6-16; Mic. 3:9-12).<sup>33</sup> Bernard S. Jackson is of the view that “Irrespective of the origins of the legal materials, the biblical authors have provided us with a wealth of material which informs us of their views about law and legal administration.”<sup>34</sup> It can be apprehended to a larger extent of their character by comparing with the surrounding materials. Richard B. Hays opines that, quoting a law from Leviticus, does not necessarily settle the question of social ethics. Since the first century, the prohibitions and commandments that have ever generally been disregarded or deemed absolutely by the church, mostly the laws concerning the holiness code. Some scholars argue that the prohibition of homosexuality is similarly superseded for Christians and thus the laws regarding ritual purity rules becomes morally

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<sup>30</sup> J. Harold Ellens, *Sex in the Bible: A New Consideration...* 110.

<sup>31</sup> Kosnik, respectively makes the telling point that, it is an “abomination” because of its connection with the fertility rites of the Canaanites. The condemnation of homosexual activity in Leviticus is not an ethical judgment quoting from Noth (1965, p. 16 and 1967, p. 49), Snaith (1967, p. 126), Schoeps (1962, p. 371), and Cole (1959, pp. 350-351).

<sup>32</sup> B. S. Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (London: SCM Press, 1985), 90.

<sup>33</sup> Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 17-22* (London: Doubleday, 2004), 197.

<sup>34</sup> Bernard S. Jackson, “Ideas of law and legal administration: a semiotic approach,” in *The World of Ancient Israel* edited by R. E. Clements (New York: Cambridge University, 1991), 185.

irrelevant today.<sup>35</sup> By and large we need to see this prohibition of homosexuality is not a real concern to the contemporary context when we understand the social setting of text.<sup>36</sup> All these arguments offer enough ground to re-interpret the texts from a perspective of present contexts of struggles of people with homosexual orientations that would reform the church as a whole to embrace them with dignity and justice.

### **Homosexuality in and through the Indian Context**

When we take a look at this issue in the Indian context, we can see how India's ancient time was much evident of homosexuality. The ancient literature on sex, Vatsyayana's *Kama Sutra* has one whole chapter '*Auparishtaka*' dedicated to homosexual relationships.<sup>37</sup> India is that place where homosexuality has often been sanctioned and accepted by literature and religion, yet in other instances been condemned with utter distaste. The Ramayana and the Mahabharata also make mention of women loving women.<sup>38</sup> Numerous temples all over the country are seen having similar themes depicting homosexuality on their walls. Still there are discriminative views on homosexuality like: In their book *Same- Sex Love in India*, Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai state that homosexuality is perceived as a sinful, it is a phenomenon of the West.<sup>39</sup>

Legal discrimination against sexuality minorities operates through the criminal and civil law system. Legal discrimination against the sexuality minorities takes many forms, the most notorious being section 377 of Indian Penal Code. According to Section 377, whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of with any man, woman, or animal, shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to 10 years and also be liable to fine. Though the homosexual has been practiced in India from time immemorial, it was never condemned or criminalized till the arrival of the British. The sodomy laws enforced by the colonial administration canonized heterosexuality as the normative sexual practice. Section 377 of Indian Penal Code thus came into being in 1860,

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<sup>35</sup> Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics*, (New York: Harper-San Francisco, 1996), 382.

<sup>36</sup> Derek Tidball, *The Message of Leviticus* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2007), 226-227.

<sup>37</sup> Vatsyayana, *Kama Sutra: Completed and Unexpurgated*, (New Delhi: Asia Press, 1967), xiv. Cited in- Jeyasingh D. "A Christian Theological Response to Homosexuals: In the Light of the Delhi High Court Verdict on Section 377 of the IPC, (B.D. Thesis, United Theological College, 2011), 1.

<sup>38</sup> Biju George, *Gay Indian Christian Reflections on Sexuality: An Ethical Perspective*, (B.D. Thesis, United Theological College, 2002), 13.

<sup>39</sup> Vanitha, Ruth and SamleemKidwai, eds. "Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History." New York: St. Martins Press, 2000

criminalizing deviant sexual behaviors.<sup>40</sup> It is important to remember that the colonial jurisprudence of homophobia was significantly influenced and inform by Judeo-Christian doctrines. Conservative networks such as Christians against Homosexuality celebrated the recent (12<sup>th</sup> December, 2013) Supreme Court verdict re-criminalizing homosexuality as the victory of God over sin and evil.<sup>41</sup> In such context, Sonali, a lesbian Indian poet says that, “Divided by abusive demons but multiplied by a will to survive sums me up.”<sup>42</sup> Thus it is seen that the belongingness of the homosexuals in the Indian society and culture has been challenging for the sexual minority communities in India.

### **A Call for Reformation in Indian Homophobic Church**

Under such circumstances of Indian Social contexts, the Indian church needs to be under ‘*semper reformanda*’ where reformation stands against the homophobic nature of the Church. The literal meaning of *homophobia* “fear of sameness” is an ill-fitting term for the prejudice, discrimination, and violence against the same sex orients. Queer community as sexual minorities are oppressed by the heterosexuals, but if we place heterosexism with other models of oppression like classism, racism and sexism, we find out that the homophobia is ruled by the dominant culture.<sup>43</sup> There are three common and phobic attitudes in our churches today. They are “1. *Repulsion*: Homosexuality is perceived as a crime against nature. They are sick, crazy, immoral, sinful and wicked. All attempts to change or cure them, irrespective of the means used (imprisonment, shock therapy, and hospitalization) are hence justifiable. 2. *Pity*: Heterosexuality is natural and more mature, and hence normative. Any possibility to become normal straight should be reinforced. Those who seem to be born that way should be treated with pity. 3. *Tolerance*: Homosexuality is just an adolescent phase and hence it is possible to grow out of it. They are less mature and hence they need our help and tolerance is needed to help them gradually get out of it.”<sup>44</sup> Thus the spiritual, social and pastoral problem of our churches and society is not that the divine life is not treated seriously and thus the church is failed to discern the continuous presence of the spirit of love and

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<sup>40</sup> George Zachariah, “Church and Homophobia: Envisioning and Inclusive Church,” In *Journal on NCC Review*, (June- 2015), 11.

<sup>41</sup> Winnie Varghese, *A Journey of Faith Church and Homosexuality* (Bangalore: BTESSC, 2014), vii-viii.

<sup>42</sup> Arvind Narrain and Gautam Bhan, eds., *Because I Have a Voice: Queer Politics in India* (New Delhi: Yoda Press, 2005), 26.

<sup>43</sup> Miguel A. De La Torre, *A Lily among the Thorns: Imagining a New Christian Sexuality* (San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, 2007), 155.

<sup>44</sup> George Zachariah, “Church and Homophobia: Envisioning and Inclusive Church,” in *Journal on NCC Review*, (June- 2015), 11.

justice<sup>45</sup> amidst struggles for belongingness and acceptance in a wider cultural context for the people with same-sex orientation.

On 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2016, in the daily news paper, *Times of India*, an article “Yes they are Gay and Pious too”<sup>46</sup> it is reported that after the announcement of Pope Benedict regarding asking forgiveness to the homosexual communities by the church, the Protestant churches in India did one better, and a lot earlier. Since Delhi high court’s 2009 verdict decriminalized Section 377 - the ban was reinstated in 2013 – they’ve been organizing interfaith workshops and conferences with a view to re-evaluate scripture and build a new queer-friendly Biblical interpretation. In other words, they’re bringing the sheep back to the fold (although it should be pointed out that the sheep themselves didn’t stray, but were chased away from the flock, their sexual conduct considered deviant and sinful).

When the NCCI issued a statement in support of the queer community in 2009, several member churches threatened to exit the umbrella. But unlike a decade ago, when the conservative voice was shrill and majoritarian, now there’s wider progressive push-back. For groups like the ‘Christians against Homosexuality’ which exhort queer people to ‘Come to Jesus to get corrected’, there is a counter-movement such as “Christians against Homophobia” in Chennai. Mythologist Devdutt Pattanaik says, “It is colonialism and later, politics that interpreted homosexuality as aberrant,” he says. “Just as consecutive translations of the Bible were interpreted with the translators’ own prejudices and social mores cast into the original text. But here’s the question to ask: Is religion responding to society or society to religion?” The LGBTIQA faithful are ahead of the curve on this one. Several faith-based gay groups have started to gather privately in safe fellowship and prayer. One of these groups in India, tentatively called Queer in Christ, was established in Bengaluru three weeks ago by Romal Laisram, a gay activist and son of a pastor. Most queer faithful - particularly when they are raised religious - are beset with guilt when they become aware of their sexuality. But Laisram felt a closer kinship with Christ, he says. “My personal faith in Christ helped me come out and feel accepted for who I was.” In the same Newspaper article George Zachariah opines, “More people from theological institutions and queer groups are reviewing homosexuality’s place in religion.” This statement of him seems appropriate somehow in the theological and intellectual circles but when an issue arises in the church regarding the acceptance of the of the homosexuals in the church regarding their membership, participation

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<sup>45</sup> Daniel T. Spencer, *Gay and Gaia: Ethics, Ecology, and the Erotic* (Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 1996), 20.

<sup>46</sup> “Yes they are Gay and Pious too”, *Times of India*, (Pune edition), 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2016.

in sacraments like baptism, communion and marriage the churches it becomes difficult to deal with this issue. To affirm their belongingness seems a challenge as churches are pre-occupied with the stigmatized notion and condemn homosexuality in both narrower and larger contexts. In this context, the question that challenges the scenario, is the church open to reform?

## To Conclude

Reformation in 21<sup>st</sup> century demands transformation against sexual hierarchy and discriminations. Today's society and church supports and privileges "the normal and good" forms of sexuality and aims to punish the abnormal, odds and bad ones through violence, ridicule or stigma. This sexual hierarchy creates a series of outsider sexualities. Gayle Rubin opines that all societies and within the churches create sexual hierarchies that establish boundaries between good and bad or legitimate or illicit sexualities. Society values specific desires, acts and identities as normal, respectable, good, healthy and moral. Other forms of sexuality are classified as unhealthy, abnormal, sinful, and immoral.<sup>47</sup> Gays and lesbians are defined as people outside of the culture including culture who are deserving of all the rights and privileges that come with heterosexuality and they are termed as 'others' and not the part of 'us' or 'all.'<sup>48</sup> Affirming belongingness in the Indian church for the homosexual community is the need of the hour. Our calling as Christian Church is for reforming ourselves by not excluding but to practice the spirit of love and peace for all including the sexual minorities. Inclusiveness is not a choice but the church ought to make inclusiveness as the basic characteristic of the church. Thus the homophobic nature is a sin against God and a homophobic church is a betrayal of calling of the church as body of Christ.<sup>49</sup> Russell Chandran writes that "if a person has in-born homosexual tendencies and homosexuality is the only meaningful basis for sexual relationship, it is not right to condemn the person."<sup>50</sup> Hence, church's doctrines and dogmas which are based on the scriptural standpoints need to be reformed with a proper hermeneutical approach so that the context to avoid the misinterpretation that causes exclusion, violence and division especially in the context of

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<sup>47</sup> Steven Seidman, "Sex as a social Fact: Theoretical Perspectives" *Handbook of the New Sexuality Studies* eds. Steven Seidman, Nancy Fischer, Chet Meeks, (London: Routledge, 2015), 8.

<sup>48</sup> Interview with Mimi Schippers, "Sex and Rock n Roll" in *Handbook of the New Sexuality Studies* eds. Steven Seidman, Nancy Fischer, Chet Meeks, (London: Routledge, 2015), 297.

<sup>49</sup> Zachariah, George "Church and homophobia: Envisioning an Inclusive Church," 11.

<sup>50</sup> K. C. Abraham & Ajith K. Abraham, "Homosexuality: Some reflections from India" in *The Ecumenical Review*, 22-29.

homosexuals. Thus a reformation in Indian church would strive for an approach toward the homo-sexual orients by re-imagining and re-reading the stated scriptural texts and at the same time church has to come out of the notion of stigmatization of the people with homosexual orientations. Thus in this regard, reformation in Indian church is essential, as Martin Luther says: “I cannot choose but adhere to the word of God which has possession of my conscience, since it is neither safe nor honest to act contrary to conscience! Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise, so help me God! Amen.”

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