

Where Two Worlds Coincide. David Berger on Repression, Transgression, and the Roman Catholic Church

David Berger and Dirk Schulz in Conversation, Cologne, Germany July/August
2011

Abstract:

Der heilige Schein is not so much a continuation of an ongoing and - some may say – muted debate, in which a conservative Catholicism is set off against an enlightened way of thinking. Berger's book in fact undermines reiterated concepts of power and discrimination as well as clear-cut positionings of perpetrator and victim. On the one hand homosexuality generally figures as the repressed and marginalised desire in oppressive, heteronormative cultural systems. But the apparent fear of its disruptive potential and its assumed opposition to "the norm" on the other hand has endowed it with a highly mythologised status. Within the realms of the Roman Catholic Church, the power mechanisms in relation to same sex desire are even more complex. Because while as an institution the Church strongly promotes the repression of homosexuality since it "hates the sin and not the sinner", it is built upon the support of gay men and even provides a welcome setting for its pursuit. It is the transgression and blurring of boundaries in terms of communities and obligations, its foregrounding of the ambiguous interplay of repression and oppression which renders the text so uncanny.

1 In *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault states that sex is "the point of weakness where evil portents reach through to us; the fragment of darkness that we each carry within us: a general signification, a universal secret, an omnipresent cause, a fear that never ends." (69) Foucault's general surmise finds an almost literal correspondence in the rhetorics of many figureheads of the Roman Catholic Church, who cannot admit sexuality as an intrinsic and vital aspect to individuals affiliated with the church's apparatus. Instead, within the realms of institutionalised Christianity, sexuality as a source of pleasure and desire beyond reproduction figures as a subversive threat haunting its order, "a fear that never ends". The apparent "backwardness" of the Roman Catholic Church discernible in its insistence on the priests' celibacy, its exclusion of women from prestigious ranks as well as its widely disseminated proclamations and interventions regarding "proper" sexual conduct have caused many heated debates in many countries for a long time throughout the years. Indeed, at a time of an increasing sexualisation of Western societies and overall explicitness on the matter in the media, the rigid attitude of the Church appears particularly remarkable.

2 Not surprisingly then, the attitude of the Roman Catholic Church towards sexuality continues to be a controversial subject followed with great interest by the public, particularly since several recent cases of child abuse and sexual transgressions within religious communities have highlighted and sensationalised the apparent double standards regarding

propaganda and practice. The Roman Catholic theologian David Berger, former R.E. teacher as well as former editor (2003-2010) of the rather conservative and prestigious journal *Theologisches. Katholische Monatszeitschrift* has added fuel to the fire with a book called *Der heilige Schein: Als schwuler Theologe in der katholischen Kirche*.^{fn} In this diction, “Der heilige Schein” is a pun, alluding to “halo” but also to “holy pretence”. The second part of the title translates as: “Being a gay theologian in the Catholic church.” Published at the end of last year (2010) it had three reprints within six weeks after its first release and since has received much media attention. Its repercussions only have begun to become palpable. The book has turned Berger into a highly controversial figure and granted him a high profile in the media. He has since appeared on numerous TV shows, either as guest or in features on him. This summer he’s been invited to public talks and several Gay Prides in Germany and Switzerland and - not least because of the approaching visit of the pope to Berlin, Erfurt, Eichsfeld and Freiburg at the end of September 2011 - he is due to appear on several related TV talk shows and demonstrations as keynote speaker. As he tells me, the notable attention his book and person receives has, even amongst his own social circle, led to suspicions regarding the extent to which he is doing all the promotion for political or rather narcissistic reasons. Indeed, Berger’s performance betrays a common image of ecclesiastic disembodiment and rather displays an interest in physical fitness and fashion. His mediagenic looks certainly have assisted in the marketing of his story and at the same time increased the controversy around him.

3 Despite or because of the turmoil Berger’s book has caused he seems to be at complete ease when I meet him. My first question therefore is how he himself values the current status quo concerning the resonance to his book: “It’s obviously difficult to overlook the situation just now,” he muses “right in the middle of combat with so much happening and no end in sight, but personally I’m feeling really good about it all. I don’t regret having written the book. On the contrary, leaving all personal concerns aside, I’m pleased that my book proves to be an important contribution to the subject of homosexuality and the church and has put this topic onto the public agenda once more.” “I’ve met a lot of interesting public figures I wouldn’t otherwise have met” he carries on “and from a personal point of view it has ended the ridiculous and tiresome role acting. Whereas I’ve always lived my private life honestly, as far as that’s possible, I can now take my boyfriend to public occasions as my partner and not as my cousin, a good friend or whathaveyou. That feels good.” (2011) Berger’s rhetoric is in apparent accordance with the “coming out” politics of recent years, both in their stress on the need for public role models and their promise of personal freedom and authenticity. In this

regard he lines up with other celebrities such as George Michael, Ellen Degeneres, Guido Westerwelle and Klaus Wowereit, whose ongoing careers after their confirmed homosexuality appears to indicate both, individual truth and social progress.¹

4 But whereas one can note a general cultural shift in terms of “sexual liberation” politics, the Roman Catholic Church, as an institution with a self-concept of moral authority, has more or less sustained a discursive torpor on the matter. However, as becomes evident through many sex scandals involving church dignitaries and critical voices such as Berger’s, its perpetuation of and strictness on moral righteousness predominantly concerns its “performed image” more than its “lived reality”. Indeed it was David Berger’s profile on facebook that in 2007 had led to a first clash with the ecclesiastical authorities because pictures of him and his friends were said to “display his obvious rootedness within the gay subculture.” What has become a general debate on the (mis-)representation of individual lives on different internet platforms is highlighted by this case and points to the precarious boundaries of public and private self, of acting and being. To be sure, the contingencies of naturalised oppositions such as truth/pretence; mask/authenticity; loyalty/betrayal; victim/contravener - dichotomies that appear to structure the public debate on Berger’s book - become obvious but are hardly taken into account. The dominant focus on the restrictive sexual politics of the Catholic Church makes it rather easy to dismiss the topic as not pertaining to more general questions concerning the complex interplay of sexuality, gender and power. But in spite of its thematic specification, *Der heilige Schein* is a more encompassing problematisation of institutions, discourses and categorical boundaries and one’s own contribution to and positioning within them.

5 In this scenario, ally and foe are difficult to tell apart. And while Berger appears to be confident enough to deal with the controversial reception of his book - including threats on his life - he tells of unpredictable and unpleasant encounters:

I did an interview with this guy, a journalist for *Du & Ich*, one of the oldest gay magazines in Germany. At first he acted very friendly, but in the course of our conversation it turned out he’s got all these contacts to the Vatican and Cardinal Meissner’s circle. In the printed version of our “conversation” he invented things I’d never said and wrote in the most derogatory terms about my story, culminating in his statement that he’s ashamed to be gay because of persons like me. I don’t know what his problem was, I’d never met him personally, but it seems that someone was seriously exerting influence on him - and the whole magazine by extension. On the

¹ Of course the „outness“ of stars always entails questions as to how their careers are affected by it. In most cases one can note a shift in the (public) perception after their “coming out” and their homosexuality continuously is brought up regardless of context, be it as means of praise or denunciation.

other hand... I never wanted to do an interview with *Bild*² since I deemed their reporting practices shady. But I was assured by people working within the media that they would be fair to me. And they were. (2011)

The controversial reception of Berger's book within the "gay community" hints at the artificiality of that "group" and its rather disparate interests and ideas. Whereas he has been invited to several Gay Prides this summer as keynote speaker, he has likewise faced much critique for having "played the game" for so long, for having wilfully participated in the sexist and homophobic politics of the Church. Indeed, some accuse him of egotism, of wanting the "best of both worlds" at the expense of personal integrity and loyalty to one or the other "quarter". Yet he assures me that he never approved homophobic, anti-Semitic and sexist articles during the time in which he was editor for the journal *Theologisches* and as R. E. teacher always tried to abstain from dogmatic approaches. But at the same time he has strong convictions and, given a platform, is not hesitant to articulate them publicly.

6 Berger first and foremost feels obligated to his own principles and his path so far and the uproar following his book showcase the fragility of ideological and political groupings. It is only coherent then that, whereas he is regarded by some as an erstwhile traitor of sexual liberal politics now reformed, his view reverses this stance:

In the 70s being gay seemed to entail a certain lifestyle, you were supposed to be left wing, to smoke dope, to squat, to go to demos, to listen to certain music and wear your hair and clothes in certain ways. This has changed drastically. It's become obvious to me that the ways of being homosexual are as diverse as anything else. And while I embrace the broad spectrum of available choices for homosexuals these days it bothers me, when people obviously position themselves and work against their own freedom and others identified or identifying as gay. (2011)

It becomes clear that Berger has always had a sense of mission and does not shy away from acquiring positions of authority within - at first glance - "unlikely" institutions to articulate and disseminate his concerns, but it would be far too easy to mistake the motivation behind his astonishing career with greed for power. On the contrary he calls himself an actor of conviction, which, as he quickly adds, may make matters even worse in the eyes of others. But surely, his long-term participation in the social network of the Roman Catholic Church and in-depth look "behind the scenes" add validity and force to his critique of its workings.

7 In this regard *Der heilige Schein* is not so much a continuation of an ongoing and - some may say - muted debate, in which a conservative Catholicism is set off against an enlightened way of thinking. Berger's book in fact undermines reiterated concepts of power

² *Bild*, comparable to *The Sun* in UK, is the daily tabloid newspaper with the highest circulation in Germany and notorious for its polemic, opinion building news coverages.

and discrimination as well as clear-cut positionings of perpetrator and victim. On the one hand homosexuality generally figures as the repressed and marginalised desire in oppressive, heteronormative cultural systems. But the apparent fear of its disruptive potential and its assumed opposition to “the norm” on the other hand has endowed it with a highly mythologised status. Within the realms of the Roman Catholic Church, the power mechanisms in relation to same sex desire are even more complex. Because while as an institution the Church strongly promotes the repression of homosexuality since it “hates the sin and not the sinner”, it is built upon the support of gay men and even provides a welcome setting for its pursuit. It is the transgression and blurring of boundaries in terms of communities and obligations, its foregrounding of the ambiguous interplay of repression and oppression which renders the text so uncanny. It can be argued that – through its perpetuated tabooisation and stigmatisation - homosexuality has always been “the abject” haunting the constitution of the Roman Catholic Church. As Judith Butler writes in *Bodies that Matter*:

The exclusionary matrix by which subjects are formed requires the simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings, those who are not yet “subjects,” but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject. The abject here designates precisely those “unlivable” and “uninhabitable” zones [...] which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject. (3)

Butler’s considerations may well be applied to the constitution of the Church and in particular its proclaimed attitude towards homosexuality. But Berger does not only delineate the Church’s rather familiar practices of abjection, but deconstructs the related dichotomies of inside and outside, belonging and repudiation. Berger thus not only lends a voice to the abject and their silenced same sex desires within a repressive institution, but moreover shows that a large part of the church’s apparatus is founded on their wilful participation. Sex as the “omnipresent cause” and “fear that never ends” to which Foucault alludes is at the same time its omnipresent and abiding subject, the taboo becomes a leitmotif. Thus, contrary to an established discourse that catenates homosexuality with shame and views the apparent attraction of priesthood for gay men as a last means of escape from social pressure, Der heilige Schein additionally ponders on the homophile structure which the Roman Catholic Church as an institution is built upon and its benefits for male homosexuals. Berger therewith subverts a prevalent logic of exclusion and inclusion, an ascertainable divide of “abject beings” and “subjects”. On the contrary, his book suggests the seeming contamination of a conservative order to be a matter of mutual interests. The threat of homosexuality in this homosocial milieu is by the same token an open invitation and ongoing attraction.

8 In all his explanations, Berger is very careful not to generalise or polarise. His very personal reasons for having “played the game for so long”, however, can be linked to a more common phenomenon originating from the recent cultural climate. He says:

In a world, in which all taboos seem to have already been broken and everything is easily available and allowed, the Roman Catholic Church provides a space, where transgression is still possible and desirable. I think Julien Green once said that “nothing is more innocent than a room full of naked people.” The hidden and forbidden appear to grant the greatest pleasures and remain desirable. And inhabiting apparently two opposed worlds at the same time has its appeal. I look at the gay youths in big cities these days and ask myself: what’s left for them to find out, which borders to cross or inhibitions to overcome? And sometimes I feel privileged for having had these challenges and limits set for me in order to recognise my own. (2011)

The ecclesiastical apparatus in Berger’s picture not only becomes a refuge for closeted gay men, but also a place of lived nostalgia, a world of strict rules and orders unbending to reform and so-called liberation. The theatrical aspect of the Roman Catholic Church with all its ritualised performances and overall aestheticism does not only add an additional charm to its routines. The public’s willing “suspension of disbelief” and demand for religious events as orchestrated spectacles further facilitates a notion of being on- and offstage among its employees, so that what goes on “behind the curtain” can precisely be viewed and experienced as a different matter altogether. Or a different play.

9 The still prevailing “repression hypothesis” which Foucault in *The History of Sexuality* suggests to be informing many Western discourses of an assumed enlightened and progressive approach to sexuality therefore needs to be reconsidered in regard to the Roman Catholic Church, as one may consider the ecclesiastical apparatus rather as a setting, in which sexuality is not excluded but integral albeit under very particular conditions. As *Der Heilige Schein* makes clear, the authorities know about and sometimes are involved in what goes on in terms of sexual “violations” of proclaimed limits. The outward tabooisation only heightens the incitement and pleasure for the “transgressors” within. Of course, similar to other homosocial settings, the absence of women and tabooisation of homosexual affairs merely assists in bringing its possibility constantly into play. As Berger remarks: “My father often quoted an old saying: ‘name not a rope in his house that hanged himself’. But, of course, it turns precisely into what everybody is thinking about.” (ibid.)

10 The misogyny inherent in the Roman Catholic Church as an institution for many gay men does not appear to pose a serious problem, since the absence of women from positions of power hardly interferes with their own career interests and additionally deflects questions as to why the temptation of heterosexual affairs does not appear to form a serious obstacle. A

still popular view of homosexuality as an inverted copy of heterosexual desire, however, figures within the gay network and binds gay men to a very dubious notion of femininity. As Berger tells me, not only do many gay clergymen assume female pseudonyms, but there is – in analogy to a reiterated concept of ancient Greek “homosexual” relationships – a gendered differentiation between those who penetrate and those who are penetrated, in which the “passive” partner is regarded as a *kinaidos*³ and therefore of a lower because feminised status within this system. The question, where in this scenario “camp playfulness” ends and internalised homophobia – coupled with heterosexist assumptions of the “female sex” – begins, remains an open one.

11 In Berger’s estimation it is not only the homosociality but also the apparent engagement with aestheticism and ritualised performances that connote the Roman Catholic Church and the male “gay scene”. In both settings the banality and randomness of everyday life as well as a sense of solitude and meaninglessness are shaken off through the communal celebration of orchestrated grandiosity accompanied by elevating hymns and mythologies. In this conceptualisation (homo)sexuality as the collectives’ ultimate taboo or goal, as its abject or subject, are merely two sides of the same coin. It is the delineated proximity and conjunction of the two polarised realms, which most critics from “both camps” find difficult to accept in Berger’s writing. *Der Heilige Schein* reconsiders the self-concept and separation of the Roman Catholic Church and the “gay scene” in particular but also of political and clerical interests in general and poses more serious questions concerning assumed borders and power distributions. The revocation of Berger’s licence to teach as a Roman Catholic theologian therefore is another case in point for the untenability of clear-cut demarcations of religious and “worldly” affairs and the more complex entanglements of power mechanisms.

12 Despite being employed by the state as a civil servant and despite protests of his pupils and their parents, the revocation of the *missio canonica*⁴ through the bishop meant that Berger had to stop teaching religious education at his school very soon after the publication of the book and its coverage in the media. As he tells me, the precise statutory provisions which

³ In *How to Do the History of Homosexuality* David Halperin writes: “The *kinaidos* [...] is someone who represents what every man would be like if he were so shameless as to sacrifice his dignity and masculine gender status for the sake of gratifying the most odious and disgraceful, though no doubt voluptuous, bodily appetites. Such a worthless character is so radical and so complete a failure as a man that he can be understood, at least by the ancients, as wholly reversing the internal gender hierarchy that structures and defines normative masculinity for men and that maintains it against manifold temptations to effeminacy.” (33-34)

⁴ The *missio canonica* within the Roman Catholic Church is the assignment of teaching and proclamation tasks. With the application for the granting of the *missio* the teacher vows to teach in accordance with the church doctrines. Since a ruling of the German dioceses at a synod in 1974, the teacher additionally is expected to lead his/her own life according to the basic principles of the church doctrines. Berger’s book was perceived as evidence – and thus as a violation – against them.

made this procedure possible were downplayed in order to not cause more uproar among the public:

The school had no choice but to obey the church's order despite everybody, including the head of department, asserting their regrets about this decision. The pupils could not understand that a bishop was able to take their teacher away from them. And while formally there are juridical means to challenge the revocation of the *missio*, chances are close to zero to win such a case, especially when it is backed up by ecclesiasticals of high ranks such as an archbishop. Which in my case obviously applied. The Roman Catholic Church still is very much a hierarchical apparatus. Its legal framework is pre-democratic, dictatorial even and in this case extends upon stately affairs. The state hereby even puts itself under the command of the church just like in medieval times, when the pope crowned someone emperor. And I guess the state has to ask itself - and I'm abstracting from my own case here since I participated knowingly in that system - how much interference from the side of the church it is willing to admit as well as how many allowances it wants to make for and award privileges to this institution. Not to forget the church taxes most of us pay in Germany for an organisation which many do not even set a foot into. (ibid.)

Indeed, both the success of Berger's book *and* his revocation indicate a remarkable status and discursive force of the Church within an allegedly secularised culture. In a climate of overall democratisation and demystification, the Roman Catholic Church for many may still present one last resort of morality, discipline and grandeur, a concept whose "purity" Berger's contribution thoroughly undermines.

13 Preparing the interview it was alarming to come across an internet site named *kreuznet*, a notorious online journal whose parlance appears to be vigorously set against any hint of political correctness. In several "articles" and letters to the editor, Berger is affronted as being "scum", "sick", "possessed by the devil", or "a poisonous viper cherished in the bosom of the Roman Catholic Church". Of course it is difficult to assess the representative value and influence of such anonymised statements, but as Berger informs me, he is sure that the journal, despite official distancing from the clerical apparatus, has many sympathisers among the authorities of the Roman Catholic Church. Several attempts to ban or sue *kreuznet* as a medium of sedition have failed. Numerous problems with the protection of the constitution in Germany only have led to it having moved to a provider in Canada. What becomes obvious through such media and articulations is that what people "really" think in our overall culture of political correctness may be two different matters altogether. A clear-cut demarcation of pretence and authenticity thereby is rendered unfeasible.

14 Berger's mission has remarkably changed he tells me. Once figuring as an appealing spokesperson of the neo-conservative wing within the Roman Catholic Church, his book has turned him into a role model for many homosexuals within and beyond the realms of the

Church. He protests against the recurring allegations on him of being a traitor, a turncoat, selfish and disloyal, a “poisonous viper cherished in the bosom of the Church”:

I’ve never abused any position for career purposes. I’ve always acted out of conviction. I was useful for the conservative wing of the Roman Catholic Church since by their standards I was young and presented a rejuvenated image. I had written eloquent pieces on Thomas Aquinas that attracted attention. I was deemed able to reach out to and win over a new generation of Christian believers. I did my part because that was what I believed in and did them a service in the process. I’ve always been a teacher first and never earned stacks of money with the work I was doing for the Church, neither as an editor nor writer. So I don’t accept their accusations of being indebted to any charitable facilitation of my career on their part. I don’t feel obliged to any institution for that matter. I’ve never been congruent with any group... and loyalty?... I’m loyal to individuals, my boyfriend for example. Maybe because of having recognised my complex, paradoxical and schizophrenic nature early on, I’ve never felt belonging to or liable to an organisation as a whole. And I’m sceptical of authenticity and wholeness within the realms of representation. You need to simplify and accentuate.

15 From a feminist viewpoint, David Berger’s participation in this patriarchal bastion remains a dubious affair. But although at first it may seem that he makes things too easy on himself it becomes apparent that it is *our* insistence on authenticity, attributability and consistency - against better knowledge - that makes it difficult to approach the complexity of the matter adequately. In the book and interviews Berger shies away from either-or positions and his overt self-questioning anticipates and acknowledges potential reprovals regarding his implication in dubious networks. His story therewith adds to an overall *zeitgeist* of disillusionment regarding the compatibility of individual aims with communal structures. But as he states, he embraces the new tasks which life bestows upon him now. And indeed, his readiness to take on new roles such as providing young gay men with an alternative image of homosexuality may help to widen identificatory possibilities. As he states: “I don’t want us to face a similar situation as in the USA, where the suicide rate among young homosexuals has even increased lately and celebrities speak up under the heading ‘It Gets Better’. Every life that can be saved by me being out there and telling my story makes the verbal attacks on my person worthwhile.” (ibid.) And who would disagree with that?

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