

# **Siya Khumalo, You Have to be Gay to Know God.**

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## **Reviewer: Megan Robertson (University of the Western Cape)**

Printed in large white text on the front cover of Khumalo's book is the title, "You Have to be Gay to Know God." In my experience, the reader is likely to attract inquisitive looks from some, stretched out iterations of "...interesting..." from others, and for those who need more explanation, the question comes, "are you reading this for work?" For others, who would prefer not to know that "Gay" and "God" could lie together in one sentence, it invokes the "don't ask, don't tell" rule. It is clear that these responses assume that this book is aimed either at a niche group of queer Christians or perhaps an academic with a penchant for being unnecessarily feminist. However, the title and the content of the book is neither sensationalist nor niche; it rather serves both as a significant autobiographical insight into the lived reality of a gay black man and as a social commentary on the religious and political climate in South Africa.

Through an often humorous and sometimes provocative storytelling interspersed with theological and political analyses and reflection, Khumalo gives us insight into how he has and continues to make meaning of his sexual orientation and Christianity as he experiences school, family, the military, church, local, and international Miss Gay pageants, and the world of media. "You Have to be Gay to Know God" is therefore not simply a provocative title, but rather an assertion of the critical contribution Khumalo makes toward the theoretical insights which have been posited by queer theologians in particular. Queer theologians have argued for the potential of "dissident, marginalized epistemologies in thinking God."<sup>1</sup> The supposed contradiction imposed by conservative, heteronormative religion, of "queer" and "Christian," forces those who identify as both to

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<sup>1</sup> Marcella Althaus-Reid, "From the Goddess to Queer theology: The State we are in Now." *Feminist Theology* 13, no. 2 (2005): 271.

engage in an intense “wrestling”<sup>2</sup> and “active identity work”<sup>3</sup> in relation to sexuality, church, religion, and God. This happens in ways which heterosexual, cis-gendered people are never required to do. Khumalo describes the development of his faith as a “messy breech birth...bloody and bloody angry to have been born premature.”<sup>4</sup> It is this wrestling and birthing that allows for more critical theologies of love, sin, forgiveness, and other religious concepts to be developed. Khumalo fulfils the potential that queer theologians have mapped out. In the chapter, “The Church and I,” he critiques the “interpretive flexibility”<sup>5</sup> of scripture which churches and Christians use to impose certain restrictions and judgements, particularly on homosexuality. In this way he marks cherry-picking of religious law, hypocrisy, and using religion as a mechanism of power and control as sin. Khumalo uses humour as a tool through which to point out the absurdity of Christian homophobia and critiques narrow, heterosexual understandings of God’s love by proposing that “[I]ove didn’t have to meet a visible canon of ‘correctness’ to be holy; in fact, it was more valuable when it was up against some odd or another. And while the people in the church were extremely loving, not even they (even with a name like theirs)<sup>6</sup> really grasped this lesson.”<sup>7</sup> This proves then Adriaan van Klinken’s<sup>8</sup> assertion that “queer autobiographical storytelling can be a basis for developing queer theologies.”

Similarly to queer theologians, Feminist Standpoint Theorists<sup>9</sup> have posited that although the policies, practices, traditions, and beliefs surrounding social institutions are often presented as objective and universal, the way social institutions operate is swayed towards the ideologies of dominant (or normative) individuals and groups, namely

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<sup>2</sup> Jodi O’Brien, “Wrestling the Angel of Contradiction: Queer Christian Identities.” *Culture and Religion* 5, no. 2 (2004): 179-202.

<sup>3</sup> Nancy Ammerman, “Religious Identities and Religious Institutions,” in *Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, edited by Michele Dillon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 207-24.

<sup>4</sup> Siya Khumalo, *You Have to be Gay to Know God* (Cape Town: Kwela Books, 2018), 33.

<sup>5</sup> Khumalo, “*You Have to be Gay*,” 161.

<sup>6</sup> The term “metanoia” refers to a change of mind or heart.

<sup>7</sup> Khumalo, “*You Have to be Gay*,” 159.

<sup>8</sup> Adriaan van Klinken, “Autobiographical Storytelling and African Narrative Queer Theology.” *Exchange* 47 (2018): 212.

<sup>9</sup> Dorothy Smith, *The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Sociology* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1987); Patricia Hill Collins, “African-American Women and Economic Justice: A Preliminary Analysis of Wealth, Family and Black Social Class.” *University of Cincinnati Law Review* 65, no. 2 (1997): 825-52; Sandra Harding, “Introduction: Standpoint Theory as a Site of Political, Philosophic, and Scientific Debate.” In *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies*, edited by Sandra Harding. (New York: Routledge, 2004), 1-16.

those who are white, male, able-bodied, and heterosexual. Dorothy Smith<sup>10</sup> has argued that these power systems are reflected in how marginalised groups of people, who fall outside of the norm for which the institutions were developed, talk about their experiences in relation to the institution being studied. These experiences reveal how hidden subtexts or ideologies influence institutional procedures, beliefs and practices, and disadvantage those who differ from dominant groups. For example, Khumalo examines the politics and mechanisms of control in the military as it creates an institutional culture where your likelihood of thriving and surviving relies on your ability to exploit any similarities and connections you may have with others based on identifications such as tribe, language, and rank. For Khumalo, this partly meant figuring out who else was gay in a context where there is a sanctioned silence around sexual orientation. The pressure of having to navigate the institutional culture, coupled with Khumalo's "disappointment" that the military's rigidity could not restrain his sexuality, forced him to resign from the military and to retract his decision to study medicine. As he does with religion, church, and the military, Khumalo also manages to engage with the complexities of the taken-for-granted systems and beliefs and uses it to make analyses of, amongst others, Mbeki's Africanness, Zuma's toxic masculinity, and of tribalism in the ANC.

For Khumalo, to live as a gay, black man requires a questioning of religion, culture, and identity – ways which are more complex than those who fit comfortably in the margins could imagine. Khumalo's narrative and reflections illustrate this as he continuously positions his blackness, masculinity, Zuluness, Africanness, and ableness, along with his homosexuality, as complex intersecting identifications which frame his understandings of the various social institutions with which he interacts, such as school, the military, and politics. Indeed, the titles, "You Have to be Gay to Know Politics," "You Have to be Gay to Know the Military," and "You Have to be Gay to Know Education" would be equally appropriate reflections of the book's merit.

The book also lends itself to activism as it unapologetically creates space for the stories of queer and black people in South Africa to be told. As Khumalo creatively, consciously, and consistently interlaces religious and sexual metaphor and language, his narrative challenges the well-established silence around homosexuality and Christianity in Africa. Khumalo also successfully challenges academic enquiry which too often "asserts identity (especially an authentically religious one) to be a singular guiding "core" that shapes how others respond to us and how we guide

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<sup>10</sup> Smith, "*The Everyday World*."

our own behaviour.”<sup>11</sup> His narrative explores the complexities of what it means to construct and deconstruct queer, Christian, and African identities and theologies. Significantly, although Khumalo admits to very real mental health and psychosomatic symptoms brought on by the wrestling of his identifications, he manages to weave his narrative without drawing on the caricatured images of conservative, homophobic black South Africans centred on discourse which perpetuates the myth that homosexuality is un-African and un-Christian. Rather, he tells a more nuanced story of his parents’ wrestling with his sexuality. There are no incidences of dramatic family estrangements and physical violence which we may have come to expect from narratives of queer black Africans. By saying this it is not my intention to wish away these realities or to say that these stories do not exist and should not be told, however, Khumalo’s narrative allows for the acknowledgement of the variety of realities of black, gay men in Africa. Further, although vividly honest in his writing about sex, sexual fantasies, attraction, and dreams, Khumalo also devotes space in his book to narratives of a more romantic same-sex love and relationships thus as other activists have done, “serv[ing] to legitimise same-sex relationships but also to critique the dominant forces in society that oppose such relationships and demonise same-sex loving people.”<sup>12</sup>

“You Have to be Gay to Know God” lends a welcome complexity and authenticity to the narratives of black, queer men in Africa. The value of the autobiographical nature of the book, however, does not lie in its ability to offer scholars of religion, gender, and sexuality an unbiased or somehow more truthful version of reality than what might be represented in a qualitative academic inquiry. Indeed, through the performativity of creatively writing about his experiences, Khumalo actively engages in the construction and deconstruction of his identifications and experiences. Rather, the methodological and theoretical value of this book partly lies in the question it raises for scholars of how we go about researching the lived realities and narratives of the people we research. If scholars are to take seriously the value of narratives, as argued through feminist and queer research, then we must consider the ways in which narratives are co-produced and performed by the researched and the researcher. There is space, especially in religious studies, to theorise more rigorously around the practical fieldwork techniques, interview strategies and observation guidelines which we use to produce narratives. There is also space to theorise more critically around how these narratives are analysed and

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<sup>11</sup> Ammerman, “Religious Identities,” 209.

<sup>12</sup> Adriaan van Klinken, “Citizenship of Love: The Politics, Ethics and Aesthetics of Sexual Citizenship in a Kenyan Gay Music Video.” *Citizenship Studies* 22, no. 6 (2018): 13. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13621025.2018.1494901>

written about in ways which give account of the complex intersections and fluidity of narrative-making and remaking in research. If anything, this book tells us that academia is not necessary for the production of nuanced narratives, however, it is necessary for scholars to theorise on how these narratives are produced and who they are produced by and what this means in relation to building up and breaking down of harmful institutions and systems of power.

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