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Understanding Senyonjo's Ministry in the Light of Christian Theology

Abstract
This article reflects on the work of Bishop Christopher Senyonjo in the light of Christian theology. It pursues a simple yet complex question: what is theological about Senyonjo's ministry among, and advocacy for, LGBT people in Uganda? Offering a reading of Senyonjo's autobiography *In Defense of All God's Children*, I point out that his work is not so much informed by a secular agenda or an abstract conception of human rights, but is fundamentally oriented towards *missio dei*. In other words, it is concerned with, and contributes to what God is doing in the world, especially among communities most vulnerable to, and damaged by, the dehumanising effects of homophobia as sin-talk. Senyonjo's ministry is theologically grounded in the belief that God is love, and that love therefore is the primary Christian virtue, radically affirming the humanity of all God's children.

Keywords
Christopher Senyonjo
Theology
Sexuality
LGBT
Sin
Love
Humanity

How to reflect on Bishop Senyonjo's work in the light of Christian theology – which is to say, with self-articulations of Christian faith, their central themes, ethical tropes and doctrinal deposits?[1] It strikes me that some readers might be puzzled either about the existence or the importance of any such relationship that might be charted; others, perhaps, might regard a focus on Christian faith and theology in the context of LGBT issues with suspicion. Is not the most (or even the only) important thing to focus on, the fundamental character and orientation of his commitments: his activism on behalf of LGBT people, in the context of a country

[1] I mean here 'theology' in its loosest and most generic sense of speaking explicitly about God, God's dealings with the world, the situation of human beings and other creatures in it in a way that self-consciously makes connection with the gospel and traditions of diverse Christian communities in articulating the reality of God in Christ. I am not here positioning one way of doing theology or one theological tradition in a normative position (say, European traditions of systematic theology against postcolonial, African or Queer). The key contrast in relation to Senyonjo's writing and other work is between ANY of those explicit modes of Christian self-articulation and forms of activism or ministry that neither make nor draw on much explicit theological articulation. (By the end of the discussion, I shall make the case that a deeply ingrained implicit theology is pregnant within Senyonjo's work that can and deserves to be explicated.

– Uganda – where sexual minorities are systematically ostracised and marginalised? Anything else looks, perhaps, at best like distraction; at worst, a mistaken turning to a hostile discourse that is part of the problem, not part of any solution to the rights of LGBT people. Frankly, I should be surprised if some readers, on seeing the title of this contribution, were not asking themselves, 'what's theology got to do with it?'[2] For a number of reasons, it is not just an understandable, but a real and genuine, question. What has Christian God-talk to do with activism in relation to LGBT rights – or, as the title of Senyonjo's book puts it, 'the defense of all God's children'?[3]

It is worth beginning with this question, first because it will be a real and genuine question for many readers. For some, it likely reflects the secularity of basic frameworks of thought and action. From that perspective, to put it at its most neutral, speaking of God in relation to an issue such as LGBT rights seems somewhat redundant. Many of us, even those with active religious faith, actually come to a commitment in this regard on some other basis, such as a commitment to human rights or an understanding of sexuality, derived from and authorised by secular cultural, political or scientific understandings. Speaking of that basic commitment or trying to ground it in explicitly theological terms then seems nothing more than a rhetorical gloss added after it has already been established by other means; warranted on other grounds. Indeed, that commitment to LGBT rights might turn out to be as, or perhaps even more, basic than the commitments of faith – providing criteria whereby we evaluate the truth of our received traditions by measuring whether they conflict with or can be vehicles for commitment to affirming LGBT rights. So the reference to 'all God's children' might then appear to be simply a translation into a theological frame of reference of a commitment to some (perhaps foundational) account of universal human nature and human rights derived from elsewhere. Expressing that in relation to God neither adds to nor changes anything of what might then appear to be a standard, post-Enlightenment, secular commitment to universal human rights. That is putting the matter at its most neutral. Many readers, I am sure – and not least those with a connection to or are familiar with Uganda – will be keenly aware of the risks involved as soon as we talk explicitly of the Christian God in relation to sexuality. To put it mildly, my tradition of faith has an extensive history – and if only it were just history – of pathological bad form in relation to LGBT rights – indeed, in fact, in relation to sex, sexuality, embodiment and gender more broadly.

The question, 'What has theology got to do with it?' is a real question in relation to Senyonjo's written, pastoral and activist work for another reason too: the answer to the question that Senyonjo (often implicitly and without fanfare) gives in his written work, but even more in his lived activist and pastoral witness, is not obvious. It is not obvious in part because

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2 Spoiler alert: if some of you are putting that question to the tune of Tina Turner's *what's love got to do with it*, you are already on to something. I am grateful to a reviewer for pointing me towards a prior theological citation of the song in the context of critical discussion of the significance of Queer theology in the context of other forms of liberation and oppression: Lisa Isherwood and Marcella Althaus-Reid, "Introduction," in *The Sexual Theologian: Essays on Sex, God and Politics*, ed. Lisa Isherwood and Marcella Althaus-Reid (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2004).

3 Christopher Senyonjo, *In Defense of All God's Children: The Life and Ministry of Bishop Christopher Senyonjo* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2016).

it cannot easily be read off the surface of his text; rather, it needs careful distillation and teasing out. But it is not obvious also because the doctrinal area or theological theme that appears to me to be most closely correlated with Senyonjo's work – that undergirds and therefore helps us interpret and understand it appropriately – is sin. That is neither obvious, nor what might be anticipated. Indeed, 'sin' is likely to run counter, not only to the expectations, but also to the hopes of many readers, I suspect. For it is not just an unlikely doctrinal theme to find as the answer to the question, what theology might have to do with Senyonjo's work in relation to LGBT people; the rhetoric of sinfulness has been deployed by some Christians and others to considerable negative effect against sexual minorities. Any suspicions about what happens when we connect Christian faith explicitly to issues of sexuality are likely to be intensified where the relationship is discursively mediated through the doctrine of sin. Is not that, after all, precisely where and what the problem is – in Uganda, but certainly not only there? That when Christians relate God to issues of human sexuality, 'speaking Christian', especially about LGBT sexuality, finds them reaching immediately for the language of sin deployed as a tool for judging, rejecting, marginalising, discriminating, abusing and attacking sexual minorities. That has, indeed, often been the case, and not least in Senyonjo's Uganda. But precisely this, as I suggest in what follows, is actually a very important clue, both to the deeply and specifically theological character of Senyonjo's commitment to LGBT issues, to the orientation of that commitment and to the character of his theology. Beyond that, I think that asking whether and what theology might have (helpfully) to do with sexuality, and finding an unanticipated answer, might help us expose and interrogate our assumptions concerning the nature and place of theological discourse in relation to LGBT activist commitments and to the interpretation and deployment of theological themes.

So we have two suspicions here that are mutually reinforcing. On the one hand, an expectation that positive commitments in this area are derived from grounds other than Christian faith, which then has only accidental connection to it. On the other, a suspicion – for instance, among secular LGBT right advocates – that explicit theological reflection is likely to endanger and undermine that commitment: that Christian God-talk can only be negatively, not positively, related to LGBT issues. Those suspicions and concomitant sense of risk intensify where the language of sin is deployed. With these understandable suspicions in mind, we might ask whether and to what extent Bishop Senyonjo's work and commitments are theological. And we might also ask whether it actually matters one way or another; what difference it makes. What is it we expect to find as evidence that a commitment to an argument is theological?

Asking that question in the university context, and especially of a person like me, whose job it is to do formal, academic theology in the context of a UK university, is likely to produce a response along the following lines. We might expect a position, first of all, to focus from the outset on a clearly defined question or issue and perhaps to begin with a thesis-statement on the matter. We are then likely to expect the discussion to proceed in propositional terms. In terms of establishing the *theological* content or genre of the argument, an academic theologian is likely to operate with a similarly prescriptive set of expectations. I might expect to find a careful and systematic working through of biblical passages that have some at least indirect bearing on the issue. A systematic theologian like me, trained in a Western academic context and working with the formal theological tradition, might look for a case being made

in reference to key doctrinal themes or tropes, such as the doctrine of creation, the image of God, the person and work of Christ, salvation and even, perhaps, the doctrine of sin. In this thumbnail sketch, you will have noticed a number of common academic characteristics. There is a clear focus on a specific issue that appears as an issue on its own terms, perhaps in a way that drives the discussion. The discussion operates at a certain level of abstraction. Ideas are primary and in a controlling position, such that clarity about them comes first and helps to guide practice and practical commitments. Much formal theology in the West – even after decades of liberation, feminist, queer and other contextual theologies critiquing this tendency – continues to work in this top-down way argumentatively, from ideas to practice, even if in reality commitment might precede arguing for it. There is much benefit to be gained from this sort of approach. But we should be cautious in using it as the yardstick by which we discern and judge the presence, reality and quality of all theological discourse.

If we approach Senyonjo's book with these expectations of what theology – more specifically, a theological articulation of a commitment to LGBT rights, might look like – we might easily be seriously misled in finding it wanting. In the first place, although by the end his commitment to LGBT issues (or, more accurately and significantly, his commitment to human beings whose humanity is being attacked on the basis of their sexual identity) occupies a prominent position in the text, on my reading, that is not its focus. That may be the impulse or the occasion for the book, but the book does not identify that as its main theme; it does not set out on a clear LGBT, issue-focused trajectory from the beginning, driving and pointing us towards a grand finale in the form of a set of propositions concerning Christian support for the LGBT cause.

Similarly, we do find some reference to biblical passages, formal Christian doctrine and key theological tropes. However, a systematic working through of key Christian doctrines or key biblical passages – the staples of formal, academic theological deliberation – is neither what frames nor what drives the discussion. So we look in vain for the focal and discrete chapters on the doctrine of creation, the image of God and so on. So do we conclude that this is not a theological text? That Senyonjo's position on LGBT issues, his work with LGBT people and the church in this regard are not theological in character? That they are not a specifically theological form of action and witness? In any case, are these fair or appropriate question to ask of a text that is, in fact, an autobiography and not purporting to be a book of theology, formal or otherwise? Admittedly, these may not be fair or appropriate questions to bring to an autobiography. However, asking these questions might help us discern the theological character and depth of what we are offered in Senyonjo's book, as in his life and work. It might also remind us of something very important about the character and purpose of Christian theology, even formal Western academic systematic theology. It may yet assist those of us who are Christians in understanding core theological commitments, including those expressed in formal doctrinal articulations.

My question may not be fair, since this is, after all, an autobiography. It does not present itself as a work on Christian doctrine, biblical exegesis, nor even as a book about the status of homosexuality and other marginalised sexual identities. All these elements make an appearance, yet do so – it might appear – in occasional, *ad hoc* and accidental ways, where they have some relevance to life-events being narrated. All of that is true. But consider what

we have to do in order to say that this is not a theological work. We have to completely ignore the way in which the book is in fact saturated with talk of God – in other words, theology, non-programmatic and unsystematic though that may *appear* to be.

Although this is indeed an autobiography, it is one of a very specific kind. This is autobiography where the focus, in truth, is not the author – or, at least, not the author in isolation from the grounding, orientation and focus of his life. The subtitle, in fact, signals this: *The Life and Ministry of Bishop Christopher Senyonjo*. This is the story, not simply of a life, but a life in ministry – that is, a life seeking and serving the work of God in the world, and doing so within the deep contingencies of particular institutional, political, cultural settings in a specific historical moment. The real focus of this autobiography is God's ways with the world, and the story is one of discerning where God's activity in the author's own context is most focused and needed; what the follower of Jesus – and especially the follower with a leadership role in the institutional church – is called to do in service of those ways. There is indeed theology here: theology of the deepest and most real kind. Like his commitment to LGBT rights, this theology has a specific *habitus* discerning the presence and direction of God's work in the world and the direction and character of ministering to that work, of following Jesus into the specific patterns of human brokenness and human damage that constellate in the contingencies and particularities of a given context. The theology that appears in what might appear to be *ad hoc* or occasional ways, and then be dismissed as non-essential, is in fact always already present behind the text; present at the deepest formative level of a whole life, directing it in its core orientation and commitment, discernments and most basic intuitions. It is there intuitively and unreflexively, sometimes surfacing in explicit articulation.

The theology that is already in place (in his basic Christian formation, ministerial and other theological training resources the work of theological discernment and theologically-driven commitments and action) we can see unfolding in the narrative. This explains the character of the explicit theological moments in the book. They are not systematic in an abstract or theoretical way – that kind of systematic theology is a 'luxury' that Senyonjo, like other Christians caught up in the struggles for social justice and human liberation, cannot afford and would not be well-served by. But neither is it right to see these theological moments as simply episodic or accidental. This is, rather, lived theology, a contextual theology born out of radical pastoral praxis. Senyonjo's book testifies to a life caught up in the gravitational pull of the *missio dei*, reaching for particular theological tools to assist responsible and responsive discernment, reflection and immersion in his particular context. Those tools include: prayer; reading the Scriptures; considering and reconsidering core elements of Christian faith and belief. Sometimes that takes the form of reflection on or deployment of the established coordinates of the doctrinal tradition. More often, it involves what is more like form of theological wisdom that takes less formalised or propositional form: discerning what it is required in speech and action by Christian faith's most basic commitment and orientation: the command to love. This is *auto*biography in the sense that it is a text authored by the person whose life is being narrated; yet the life narrated is not self-directed; it is caught up in the movement of God towards the world. (Whilst the immediacy and urgency of his immersion in the practical demands of serving the gospel in his situation might make recourse to detached theological reflection a dispensable 'luxury' for activists like Senyonjo, the reverse is not the

case. Western systematic and other forms of formal, academic theology can live only by connection with active pastoral, missional, ministerial and gospel-shaped action. Disconnected from the urgent contingencies of situations where God's love is most needed and where human love is prevented from flourishing, formal theology is disconnected from the purpose from which it might live, towards which it is properly directed and from whence it may draw meaning.)

Similarly, LGBT concerns do not emerge for Senyonjo as abstract issues or an agenda decided upon independently in advance, about which he then does some theology in order to decide what he and other Christians should think about the legitimacy or otherwise of LGBT sexualities. It is important that Senyonjo does eventually formulate a view about the legitimacy of LGBT orientation and practice as created and blessed by God, as part of God's created order that can foster human flourishing in community together. But this comes much later in the story. That is revealing I think in several ways.

It is not ideas that come first for Senyonjo, but human beings. Not human beings in the abstract about which we might adopt secular, universal values. Not human beings abstracted from their relationships or context. Rather, specific, flesh and blood human beings in all their particularity and in all the contingencies of their situatedness as targets of God's love. In other words, human beings in all their particularity and in their most basic, defining relationship – their relation to God. This relationship is not a static, passively received reality. What Senyonjo intuitively discerns is human beings as we are caught up in the dynamics of God's creative, saving and consummating work in the world, oriented towards our full flourishing and fulfilment in community together.

It is therefore theologically significant that it is homosexuals as particular human beings who appear as a matter of concern in this story before homosexuality as an abstract issue or agenda. Or, more precisely, it is the dehumanising mistreatment of LGBT people that becomes a human, pastoral and profoundly theological issue for Senyonjo. Consideration of the status of homosexuality in relation to Christian faith comes rather late in the story, partly because resistance to their mistreatment and support of their humanity does not depend on asking – much less resolving – a question about the legitimacy of LGBT identities and practices. In that sense, the concern with LGBT people is highly contingent and accidental; it is derived from the specific situation in which Senyonjo lived, where there was systematic assault – physical and spiritual – on the humanity of some human beings.

His commitment you might say therefore was contingent, but only in the way that all true humanising action and all true Christian faith in the world – the faith of the incarnation – has to be. It is driven by a concern for and orientation in a particular world, towards actual human beings as they are loved by God. That commitment and orientation are sensitised to and focussed on those places where there is denial and resistance to human beings loved by God; where human flourishing and the conditions for flourishing community (the Kingdom of God) are blocked and frustrated; where the movement of God towards the full humanity of all encounters resistance and denial and appears as a counterfactual. Christian faith orients life towards this flourishing, but that inevitably means a focus that parallels that of God's own presence and movement in and to the world towards those places where humanity is most restricted in its flourishing, where it is most damaged and damaging; where humanity is most vulnerable to the power of sin. And where the power of sin in one's situation achieves

most energised and focussed intensity: where the humanity of human beings is most vulnerable; where the conditions for their full flourishing require creative, transformative and hope-filled presence, witness and action; where, indeed, their own flourishing and love are denigrated and derided as their opposite. That is where Christian ministry is led to follow Jesus to counter the dynamics of sin, to be witness, companion to and vector instead of the transformative power, presence and action of God's movement towards the world.

I shall come back to say a little (just a little) more about the understanding of sin that seems to me to underlie Bishop Senyonjo's testimony in his life, as in its written narration. For now, I want to say something first about the direction and then the character of Senyonjo's commitment to LGBT people and issues as both theologically derived – from the spirit-filled direction and character of God's movement towards humanity in its full individual and communal flourishing. At key points in his text, Senyonjo cites Isaiah 61:1 and Luke's virtual quotation on it in 4:18-19:

> The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners.
>
> The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

As a minister of the gospel or good news, Senyonjo's basic orientation is towards those who, in biblical terms, are crying out for help from the Lord, most in need of the good news; those whose humanity is denigrated, denied, abused; who are oppressed, stigmatised, marginalised. It is not the result of a secular agenda, nor an abstract conception of human rights. It is deeply theological, immersed in a life oriented as an accompaniment and ministry to what God is doing in the world, directed towards those places in society where there is most vulnerability, where there is most risk that the dehumanising effects of sin might be internalised and redoubled: where human beings are most damaged and damaging. Or, to put that in explicitly theological terms, where the dynamics of sin achieve dangerous intensity.

The main *character* of that orientation is love. Biblical passages conveying the character of God's love for the world and of love as the primary Christian virtue saturate Senyonjo's text as they also suffuse, undergird and direct his own ministry. Love describes the fundamental character of God's ways with the world, God's costly seeking of the communal conditions for maximal flourishing of all human beings in their integrity in communion with one another and God's resistance to all that inhibits or counters that movement. The main focus of God's action and attention is where that flourishing of integrity and community is denied: what, theologically, we call sin. And the primary focus for God's presence and action is where the damage of sin is at its most intense and apparently resistant, where human beings' flourishing and capacity for flourishing are most restricted and oppressed; where their own expression of love and formation of flourishing in relation is denigrated as their opposite, as perversion of humanity, sexuality and relation. That is where the conditions of dehumanisation, of being damaged by and in bondage to sin, are at their most intense.

At last, I want to say a little something about what Senyonjo does in his implicit (is it too dangerous to mention explicitly in the context of sexuality?) understanding of sin. Whilst it is love that drives and energises Senyonjo's commitment towards those who are most in need of affirming and transformative love, that need is generated by discourse and actions (genocidal and torturing in their worst manifestations) that are the opposite of love: sin. In an ecclesiastical, social, cultural and political context where the language of sin is already operationalised *against* sexual minorities, using the language is dangerous. In Uganda, as elsewhere, the language of sin is being used in a way that radicalises rhetoric and behaviour opposed to the 'sin' of 'the gays'. That is characterised by demonisation and consequent dehumanisation through spiritual and physical attacks on the humanity of LGBT people; of their humanising love cast as the opposite of love and of human flourishing as depravity. What Senyonjo intuitively and immediately understands is that the theologically grounded priority of love is more urgent and more radical where people are subject to the sort of demonisation and dehumanisation that becomes his concern. About this he is extremely and repeatedly explicit. But there is an accompanying intuition about sin and sin-talk that remains implicit and that deserves explication here: that using the language of sin to warrant demonisation and dehumanisation rather than love is itself sinful. This is not Christian sin-talk. Turning sin-talk into an agent of homophobic demonisation, abuse and attack effectively unplugs it from the dynamics of God's movement towards human beings and human flourishing, characterised by love. Deploying the language of sin as a warrant or tool for homophobic abuse pulls it out of the gravitational field of the dynamics of salvation, which its function is to serve. Christians talk of sin in order to understand the ways in which human reality presently contradicts human flourishing that stand in need of creative, loving transformation. Christian-inflected homophobia is one of the ways in which human beings misuse sin-talk in such a way that it becomes itself, not only sinful, but sin at its most dangerous. It is all the more dangerous, precisely because it is dressed up to look like its opposite. Rather than confession and a sense of all being in the same boat, trying to find ways to become more human together, to transform damaged and damaging humanity, sin-talk becomes a language of self-righteous blame directed towards others and away from oneself. This is perhaps the characteristic sin of religious people – we sin religiously – in exactly the way that Jesus recognised and challenged in his ministry to the oppressed and outcast (i.e., the victims precisely of religio-cultural self-righteousness). Sin is nowhere more dangerous than when we think we have identified it (funnily enough, always at a safe distance from us and who we think we are), where it feeds our sense of innocence rather than our sense of all being in a situation of sin together. Senyonjo in his work understands that love is the orientation that best resists the conditions of sin's reproduction.

Significantly, all this remains true even if it were the case that homosexuality is a sin, as some Christians and theologians will maintain. Homophobic misuse of sin-talk would still even then be sin. (Indeed, is not that where sin is at its most dangerous? When we oppose not just mis-perceived and mis-identified, but actual sin with strategies that are neither loving nor reparative; that dehumanise rather than restore the conditions of human flourishing; that are locked into death-dealing dynamics rather than dynamics that energise the possibilities of life where there is death; that turn the language of sin into a tool for self-righteous condemnation, blame and punishment rather than something that is protective and life-giving.) Hence, when

Senyonjo provides a theological basis for affirming LGBT identities and sexualities, it serves only to underline the sinfulness of homophobic sin-talk and action. That it is also misdirected towards a different form of love in and through which humanity might abound and persist as blessed by God. Implied also in Senyonjo's life and words is the realisation that what is at stake here is the church's ability to be the church; to talk and act in ways that are in consonance with God's movement in love towards all human beings. And when the church ceases to be the church for LGBT people, when the church cannot be queered and cannot be a sanctuary for damaged queer identities and bodies,[4] then a bishop has to help create alternative safe spaces where the integrity[5] of LGBT identities might be protected and celebrated, and where the people carrying those identities experience themselves as both blessing and blessed. In such a space, there might be healing of those bodies and identities that are damaged by theologically supported denials of the blessed and blessing of human life and love in one of its many splendid forms.

Tshepo Masango Chéry, ""No One Shakes Me": Rejected Queer Identities and the Creation of Sacred Ugandan Spaces in Honor of the Orlando Massacre," *Qualitative Inquiry* 23, no. 7 (2017): 550-56.

Lisa Isherwood and Marcella Althaus-Reid, "Introduction," in *The Sexual Theologian: Essays on Sex, God and Politics*, ed. Lisa Isherwood and Marcella Althaus-Reid (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2004).

Christopher Senyonjo, *In Defense of All God's Children: The Life and Ministry of Bishop Christopher Senyonjo* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2016).

4 See the discussion of Tshepo Masango Chéry, ""No One Shakes Me": Rejected Queer Identities and the Creation of Sacred Ugandan Spaces in Honor of the Orlando Massacre," *Qualitative Inquiry* 23, no. 7 (2017): 550-56.

5 Senyonjo was the founder of Integrity Uganda, which is a branch of the Episcopal Church's LGBT outreach organisation Integrity USA.