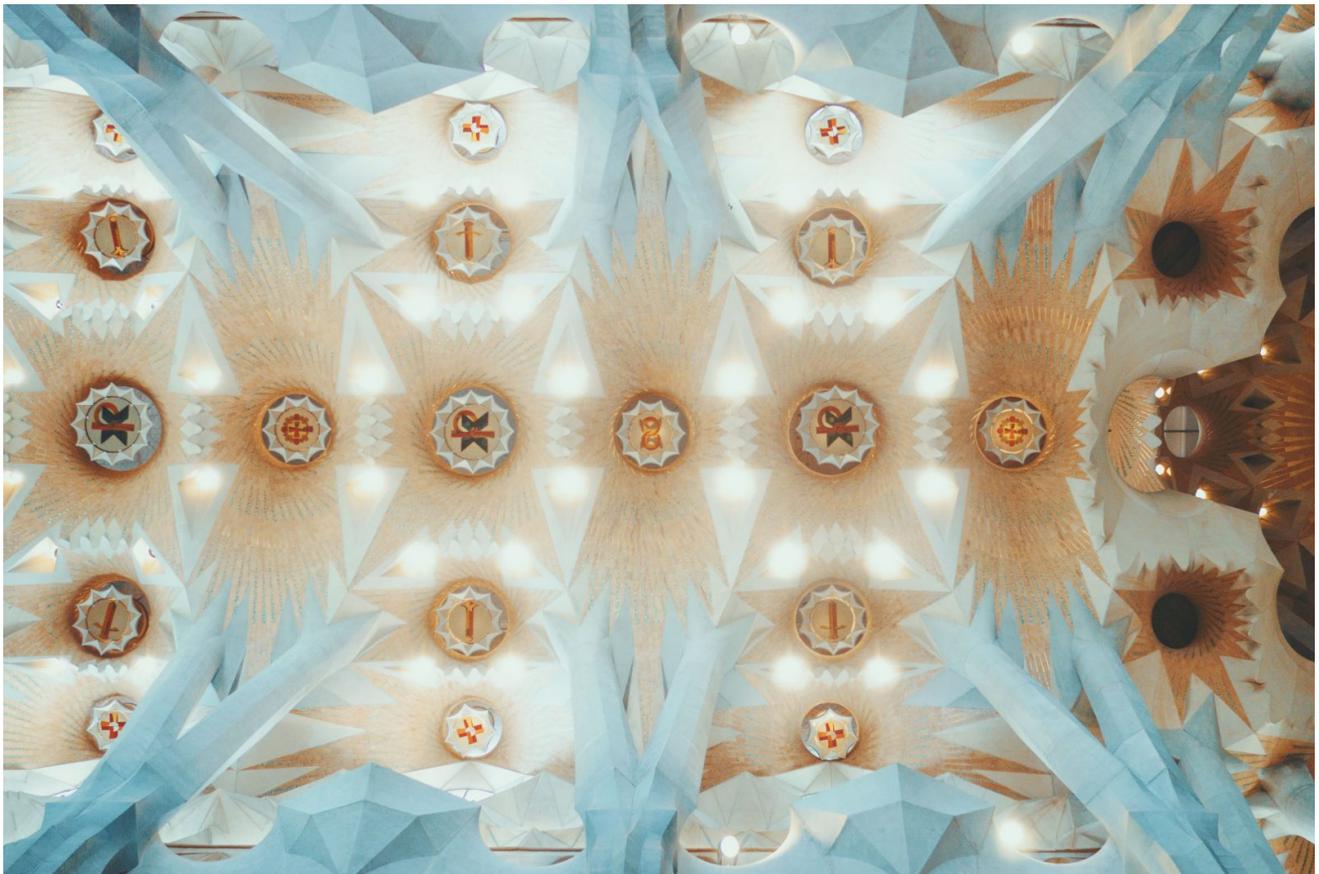


# In Faith

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*By: Rachel Chen*

“There are two unforgiveable sins – speaking blasphemy against God, and homosexuality.”

Your parents say this to you in Mandarin in a fleeting moment, and you will never forget their words. As a child, you are most concerned about blasphemy. You swear sometimes to yourself when you’re really mad at someone, but you are certain you will never say, “Jesus Christ!” In regards to homosexuality, you do not understand why your parents are making this point when you are clearly not gay.

When you grow up, you will read the entire Bible front to back and find no backing for unforgiveable sins. Despite the lack of evidence, your unease remains.

*One day, while researching how to grow lettuce for your science fair project, you stumble upon one gardening blog that has a link to “the occasional naked young lady.” You click out of curiosity, pretending it was a slip of the mouse. The memory will always disgust you.*

“Statistically, homosexuals are more promiscuous than heterosexuals.”

Once on a road trip from Texas to Florida, you counted a church every minute and a Dollar General every five. You live in the Bible belt and don't know anyone queer yet, but it seems the cultural conversation about gay rights is in full swing everywhere except your town. Homosexuality is such a taboo topic that the only reason you come across a study on homosexual promiscuity is that you read everything you can. At the time, you are relieved that objective facts back your religion.

In the years preceding same-sex marriage legalization, you will remember that study as you read story after story about long-term partners and make friends with same-sex parents. You will also learn in university about biases in research.

*You feel confident enough to buy high heel wedges in Grade Eight, only one inch tall, but heels nonetheless. The day you are brave enough to wear them to school, you meet Chris, the first openly gay kid you know. He likes your shoes.*

"He didn't want to be gay, but he couldn't stop. He kept praying, and one day, a car hit him and he died. He wanted to stop sinning, but he couldn't, so God took him home."

Your Sunday school teacher loves the Lord, and you all look up to him. His explanation for his friend's death makes sense. Homosexuality is a sin, but God has mercy on those who repent. Your Sunday school teacher's friend wanted to change but could not, so God took him home rather than make him suffer from temptation.

Your Sunday school teacher was young and grieving.

Your Sunday school teacher is cool and hip, a photographer on the side who often sketches in a little notebook. He is a new student at the local theology seminary and has just joined your church. Before him, all your Sunday school teachers were parents, promulgating the blessings of being Chinese to a class of bored second-generation kids. You are at the age where you want your faith to be your own, not an extension of your parents', and this younger teacher enters your life with academic and theological scholarship. Faith has never been so interesting.

Your best friend at church is not a Christian; she only comes to hang out with you. You are not sure if the other kids know this and feel constantly on edge that someone will say something to scare her away. Today, someone asks about homosexuality. Your heart races with anxiety.

*Almost 10 years later, you will sit in your room with the lights off, and imagine killing yourself – not because you want to die, but because the idea of lying for the rest of your life already feels like death.*

"If two men are fighting and the wife of one of them comes to rescue her husband from his assailant, and she reaches out and seizes him by his private parts, you shall cut off her hand. Show her no pity."<sup>[1]</sup>

In high school, you will fall in love with a boy in your English class and love him for at least five years. Despite how outgoing you are, you never want to ask him out and can never imagine kissing him. Deep down, you know the two of you will not be compatible and tell yourself this is why you never try.

You will read more about apologetics, Christian ethics and historiographies, and feel securely grounded in your faith. Some passages from the Bible stick with you oddly. You will continue to feel discomfited by cooking milk and beef together, by the idea of touching a man's private parts. You really just do not want to. The essence of the Gospel overwhelms you with grace: God's sacrifice for humankind, the powerful story of redemption in Jesus' crucifixion, the importance of Jesus' resurrection in giving new life now. Meanwhile, you join tech theatre, make a Tumblr account, and struggle between immersing yourself in queer discourse and actively avoiding it. Your best friend from church comes out to you as asexual.

*By the nature of being a teenager who never had a formal sex education, you are baffled when you finally learn what it means to have oral sex. Your immediate thought is that you would rather go down on a girl than a boy, but you quickly push that down.*

"I support gay rights, don't you?"

Barack Obama has been president for a few years now. The gay rights movement is active but you cannot participate. Lately, you connect to your queer friends on far deeper levels than with some of your staunchly Christian friends. You cannot figure out how to reconcile your faith with your friends' experiences. You do remind questioning Christian friends that the Bible is explicitly anti-gay; you know your theology at least.

Your fellow environmentalist friend is not religious and is passionate about gay rights, but she is hesitant to say so to most people. You don't tell her what you think. After all, you are both still in Republican Texas.

*One day, as you're reading through fashion blogs, you accidentally find one of the bloggers really attractive, but not in the usual "She's so pretty" way, but in a way where you want to touch her, and you panic, deleting her blog from your reading list.*

"Between my religion and my sexuality, I spent a lot of time on my knees."

In university, your sister's words of advice ring clear: do not date in first year. You think it will be difficult not to like boys since you have always maintained a "crush" on someone. It is not. You find boys interesting and attractive, but nothing serious. You wind up stuck in a

class on Medieval Culture, and after a lifetime of Protestantism, learn about Catholicism. Your professor points out, "Catholicism has more rules than Protestantism, but is more forgiving." He surprises you by telling your class of four people about his mentor, who was a serious Catholic scholar and gay. You knew that moving to a big liberal city would challenge you, and it is.

Later that year, you accompany a friend to report sexual assault and suddenly find yourself so angry. You have never been so academically entrenched in your faith as now and that only fuels your anger. Why didn't your old church see the pain it was creating? How did you miss it? Despite attending a Chinese-English church, you never realized how entrenched in white evangelism you were. The story of your professor's mentor is more life-giving than your old Sunday school teacher's version of faith. There was a man in existence who dedicated his life to Christ, despite his homosexuality.

*One summer day a year later, you and a friend are cuddling in a hammock on the back patio of a café, talking about crushes and relationships when she mentions she had a girlfriend in high school. At one point she says, "I wouldn't say I'm gay, but sometimes I like women." You realize you know exactly what she means. A year later, she tells you that she is bisexual.*

"Are you a lesbian?"

The first time your mom asks your older sister, who has remained single all this time, you laugh. The first time your mom asks you, you also laugh, and tell her that you are not dating because you are married to career aspirations. Your mother sighs. You wonder why you did not just say no. All your friends automatically assume you are cool with gay rights when they meet you, but you avoid attending LGBTQ+ events because of your faith. At the same time, you avoid calling yourself straight when you can.

In third year, you drunkenly tell one of your closest friends that you think you might be attracted to women, and she says she feels the same. A year later, she will tell you that she thinks she might be bisexual too. You have your first kiss with a boy this year, and later hook up with a boy that loves you. All this against your Christian background, and you didn't even liked either of them. You will realize later that you only went along with them because you thought you were supposed to like those boys too...

*While watching the movie "Philomena" with your mom, the movie reveals that the main character's son was gay, and your mother says, "Mothers always know." She looks at you pointedly and asks, "You don't only like women, right?" The question is worded oddly; you wonder if she knows.*

"How could something that felt so pure, like loving a girl, be evil?"

A few women have hit on you at this point. You make eye contact with them, and there is subtle acknowledgement that this is okay. You have managed to reconcile your feminism

with the Bible; that used to stress you out. You decide that God cannot be on the side of oppression of the marginalized, but you are still not sure about the whole “gay issue.” You are not sure where this places you.

One day in your summer English class, you look over at your friend sitting next to you and have a moment of realization. You really like her. You remember your other friend talking about liking girls sometimes. Maybe this is that. You spend the rest of the summer thinking about the girl in your English class. You attend a Pride event for the first time, telling yourself it is only because you are going to your friend’s birthday party. You spend the event looking for women with women because you need to feel less alone.

*Later while talking to the girl you like, you tell her you are bisexual, because you want her to like you. The ease with which that slips out shocks you. Bisexual.*

“Why do you have to follow the Bible all the time?”

Your best friend from back home, whose faith you have always admired, is surprisingly the second person from home that you tell, after your older sister. Both of them are unexpectedly calm. “Don’t do anything stupid,” your best friend says.

You start to wonder why there weren’t more consequences for all the “sins” that you have committed in the past few years: the partying, the drinking, the weed, the boys... admittedly, each time you felt guilty after. Liking a girl feels right.

You are afraid that you will feel racked with guilt for dating a woman, afraid that you will not be able to pray. It is not entirely untrue. There are times when you feel uncomfortable in Christian settings, but it is mostly due to your uncertainty about how people will react. Your sister, who works at a church, lets you know that even if you are not sure how your sexuality will function with your faith, she is glad you figured this out. She reminds you that it does not help to pretend it is not happening. This is comforting, coming from her.

You ask the friend from your English class out. This is definitely what your friend meant by something “stupid.” Perhaps you do not push people away after all; you are just not attracted to men. Your girlfriend is not religious. You don’t really care. It’s not like this is an orthodox relationship anyway. You just really like her.

One day she asks you about your faith, which is sweet, but when she asks why you have to follow the Bible all the time, you pause. Suddenly, you are not sure what is going on. You’re still attending Bible study, still praying, but you just also happen to be dating someone you’re completely attracted to for the first time ever, a woman.

You break up with your girlfriend because it isn’t working out. In the end, you are happy that your breakup is due to an actual rift in the relationship and not due to sudden religious shame on your end.

*Still, your university track record and theological track record do not line up.*

"I know that I'm evil / I guess I was trying to even it out // When I know there is nowhere I can hide / From your humiliating grace."<sup>[ii]</sup>

After your finals are finished, you will finally let yourself sit down and really think, Julien Baker's album *Turn Out the Lights* playing in the background. Now that you are being honest with yourself, where is God? You wonder how you will tell your parents, who have always been terrified that you or your sister would turn out to be lesbians. You actively seek out queer media now, but it feels like everyone either gives up God or turns to a version of theology you cannot reconcile yourself to because you are certain the Bible is explicitly against homosexuality. You cannot bring yourself to "pray the gay away" and you cannot give up God. For the first time since coming out to yourself, you will cry.

*You will ask your parents for January's rent ahead of time, just in case, while your roommate, whose parents are also very religious, assures you that family always will love you.*

"God and sinners reconciled."

It is December.

You go to church for the first time since accepting your queerness. To be honest, you are uncertain if you were subconsciously avoiding church or if you are truly busy. Nevertheless, you are excited to be back. It is the Christmas carol singalong service, in other words, it's not even a real service. Oh well. you are so busy with school that you have yet to celebrate Christmas anyway.

The congregation sings "Joy to the World." You know these songs by heart; you close your eyes and chuckle at the familiarity, flooded with memories of church services. It strikes you suddenly that these are hymns about the birth of Christ. For years, you taught others about the redeeming grace of God, but never felt the need for it like this.

You are still unsure about how faith and sexuality line up or if they can at all, but for the first time, you understand how great God's grace must be. You hear Jesus came to die for our sins, that no sin is too great for forgiveness. If your queerness is a sin, then God can forgive you, even if the church cannot.

For now, you will find comfort in that.

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<sup>[i]</sup> Deuteronomy 25:11-12. New International Version.

<sup>[ii]</sup> Julien Baker. *Turn Out the Lights*. Matador, 2017.

Rachel Chen is a Christian Chinese-Canadian Texan journalist environmentalist feminist, in that order, and she is equally as confused about it as you are. You can follow her on Twitter ([@RachEndeavours](#)), where she yells into the void about representation, or you can follow her on Instagram ([@cafecatalogue](#)).