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Introducing Queer Theology

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SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND SEMINARY
Saint John's University Collegeville, Minnesota

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Kristin Colberg

Introducing Queer Theology

Description:

The paper works through the sources of queer theology, giving special attention to how these sources are used in published works. Further, the paper explores the doctrine of the Trinity as a model of “radical friendship”, a relational model that is inclusive to LGBTQ+ folks, as well as the inadvertent queerness of Von Balthasar’s writings on the Trinity.

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Cole Epping

Introducing Queer Theology

Although discourse about queer people has been taking place for quite some time, it has only been in the last few decades that the conversation has come to the forefront of discussion. Beginning with the sexual revolution of the 60s, through the HIV/AIDs crisis, to the federal legalization of marriage equality - queer identity, politics, theory, and theology has grown more and more, resulting in a diverse body of work. Queer theology grows out of other contextual theologies like liberation and feminist theologies as well as the social science-based queer theory. Queer theology aims to shed light on a magisterially underserved and theologically underrepresented group of people, namely members of the LGBTQ+. Additionally, in queer theology, like feminist theologies and liberation theologies, the work done is important to all Christians, not just queer Christians.

The first section of this paper aims to introduce queer theology by defining it, exploring its sources, discussing its goals, and outlining its methodology. The second part of this paper will explore some of the claims of queer theology. Special attention will be paid to those areas that provide a theological anthropology for queer Christians such as queering the Trinity, queer Christology, and the meaning of sin with the goal of showing that queer theology provides an inclusive anthropology for not only LGBTQ+ Christians, but all Christians.

Defining “Queer”

But what does the “queer” in queer theology mean? Patrick Cheng suggests three definitions that inform queer theology. First, queer is an umbrella term that refers to lesbian, gay, trans*, intersex, questioning, and others who identify with non-normative sexualities and/or

gender identities.¹ Second, “queer” has been reclaimed in recent years as it previously had negative connotations. Therefore, queer theology is theology that turns “upside down, inside out”² that which is seen as normative. Third, “queer” in queer theology is that which erases boundaries. This definition is rooted in the social sciences’ queer theory, which understands sexuality and gender as constructs that are superfluous and able to be changed. This effectively allows for the erasure of labels of heterosexual/homosexual and male/female, challenging the dichotomy.

Grant Loughlin would also add a fourth definition of queer that is slightly distinct from Cheng’s. Loughlin uses David Halperin’s definition of queer as an “identity without essence”³ to argue that queer “seeks to outwit identity”⁴ by being open to those who find themselves outside of the norm- LGBTQ+ or not. In this way, queer theology is intersectional; though it is undertaken through the lens of LGBTQ+, it is intersectional in that other identities and affiliations are included in the discussion such as gender, race, social and economic standings.

¹ Patrick S Cheng, *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology*, (New York, Seabury Books, 2011), 4.

² Robert E. Goss, *Queering Christ: Beyond Jesus Acted Up* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2002), 228.

³ David M. Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 1995), 62.

⁴ Grant Loughlin, “The End of Sex”, in *Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body*, ed. Grant Loughlin, (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 9.

With these definitions in mind, we can conclude that queer theology is LGBT people talking about God in a self-consciously transgressive way, especially in terms of challenging the norms of sexuality and gender and erases traditional barriers.⁵

Sources of Queer Theology

Queer theology, like most theologies, employs four sources: scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. Cheng posits that this multiplicity of sources provides a check-and-balance, ensuring that when working with one source it is always read in light of the other three.

Scripture

Queer theology draws strongly from Hebrew and Christian scripture, often interpreting and extrapolating in creative ways. Scripture is often used to oppress and justify the marginalization of LGBTQ+ folks, but queer theology aims to read scripture, especially those texts used against members of the LGBTQ+, in a redemptive way. This is done through the reclaiming of the Bible using alternative creative interpretations of the text. There are two main ways queer theology uses the Bible- the first is reinterpretations of texts used against LGBTQ+ folks, and the second is the queering of Biblical characters. The stories of Sodom and Gomorrah and the prohibition in Leviticus 18 are prime examples of the latter.

Sodom and Gomorrah is often argued to be a text that condemns homosexuality. However, queer scholars have argued that the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah was not homosexuality, but rather the sin of inhospitality toward strangers as evidenced by the extreme attitudes and actions taken

⁵ Cheng, *Radical Love*, 9.

by the townspeople. This would have been a much more serious sin because acting inhospitably has life or death consequences in the desert setting of this story.⁶

Yitzhak Peleg argues that the whole point of the story is to emphasize the hospitality of Lot (though he does concede that the men are probably aggressively seeking to know the visitors sexually). This is done by depicting Lot as an admirable host before the events of the night transpire: his going out to greet the men as they come near the city, his insistence that they stay inside with him, and the meal he prepared for them.⁷ However, we also see the theme of hospitality in Lot's direct narrative opposition to the crowd. Lot is patient and reasonable with the men of the town who act violently and threaten Lot and his guests. When Lot closes the door to protect his visitors, the men of the town come closer to it to break it down (v.9). According to Peleg, this is a physical representation of the moral distance between Lot and the townsmen.⁸ Peleg concludes by arguing that "Lot is saved from the destruction visited on Sodom as a reward for protecting his guests, while the men of Sodom are punished for their evil"⁹.

Another way queer theology explores this reclamation of the Bible is undertaken by authors who seek to find queer representation in the Bible by reading queerness between the lines. One example is Ruth and Naomi, two women who share an intense commitment to one another. Nancy Wilson speculates on the nature of their relationship, noting the passion and commitment they

⁶ Cheng, *Radical Love*, 12.

⁷ Yitzhak I. Peleg, "Was Lot a Good Host? Was Lot Saved from Sodom as a Reward for His Hospitality?," in *Universalism and Particularism at Sodom and Gomorrah: Essays in Memory of Ron Pirson*, ed. Diana Lipton (Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), 131

⁸ *Ibid*, 134.

⁹ *Ibid*, 135.

show to one another and the way their story subverts male privilege. Even in celebrating the birth of Ruth's son, Naomi and Ruth's relationship is what is being celebrated- not Ruth and Boaz's.¹⁰ In reading the story in this way, the irony of heterosexual couples using Ruth's words to Naomi in their wedding ceremonies cannot be missed:

“Do not press me to leave you or turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die- there will I be buried. May the Lord do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!” (1:16-17)

Tradition

Queer theology draws from the Church's history and her teachings, once again, in a creative way. Like scripture, tradition is seen as historically anti-LGBTQ+, but queer scholars have worked hard to salvage it.

Cheng points to John Boswell, who argued that Christianity wasn't widely homophobic in the early church, with anti-gay ideas only taking root in the church in the 12th and 13th centuries.¹¹ In another book, Boswell also argues that same-sex blessing rites were used in the church for centuries before being lost to homophobia. The book discusses numerous examples of traditions involving gay couples through the early centuries.¹² Boswell specifically speaks of the legal contracts that were used outside of the church that use vaguely queer-coded language that speak of bonds of brotherhood but the terms of the contract specified that they could not be

¹⁰ Nancy L. Wilson, *Our Tribe: Queer Folks, God, Jesus, and the Bible*, (Tajique, NM: Alamo Square Press, 2000), 153-156.

¹¹ Cheng, *Radical Love*, 15.

¹² John Boswell, *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe*, (New York: Villard Books, 1994).

married to women and they had to keep all possessions in common, showing that forms of queer union existed in society at the time.¹³

Others still have taken on reading the works of earlier theologians through a queer lens. These reexaminations have been done on the theologies of Augustine, Aquinas, several of the Saints, and, as this paper will discuss later in more detail, Hans Von Balthasar's Trinitarian theology.

Reason

The third source used in queer theology is reason, which relies on philosophy, rationality, and human observation. Cheng argues that reason hasn't been seen as a "queer friendly" source of theology due in part to the Catholic teaching that same-sex acts are intrinsically evil.

The Church teaches this based using a natural law argument, but theologian Gareth Moore challenges this teaching and charges that the Roman Catholic Church ought to ask themselves if the teaching is true¹⁴. Cheng summarizes these, asking, "is it really true that all same-sex acts and relationships are intrinsically evil? Is it true that all LGBT people are unhappy and poorly adjusted? Is it true that same-sex acts and relationships do not occur naturally?"¹⁵

Moore uses scientific observation and human reason to come to the conclusion that the only reasonable action is to "continue to believe in the possible goodness of homosexual

¹³ Ibid, 331.

¹⁴ Gareth Moore, *A Question of Truth: Christianity and Homosexuality*, (London: Continuum, 2003) 27-37.

¹⁵ Cheng, *Radical Love*, 16.

relationships.”¹⁶ Moore doesn’t see this as dissent, but rather as pointing out that the Catholic Church lacks a sound, reasonable argument to support its condemnation of same-sex acts.

Experience

Finally, the fourth source of queer theology is experience. Like other contextual theologies, queer theology “is premised upon the belief that God acts within the specific contexts of our lives and experiences, despite the fact that [LGBTQ+] lives and experiences have been excluded from traditional theological discourse.”¹⁷

Indeed, contextual theology is a relatively recent shift from classic Christocentric theologies. However, experience does not replace God in any way, but rather experience should point back to God. Karl Rahner argues that we “cannot speak about the human reality without referring this reality back to God, that is, without the human as the subject destined to participate in the divine life.”¹⁸ Thus, with this “turn to the subject”, we situate the human subject within a specific experience. By queer theologians talking about their experiences of faith and of encountering God within their social context, one finds that experience is an important source for doing queer theology.

Miguel Diaz writes that “in turning to gender experience as a locus of divine revelation, feminist theologians have also expanded upon and challenged the relationship between

¹⁶ Moore, *A Question of Truth*, 282.

¹⁷ Cheng, *Radical Love*, 18.

¹⁸ Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Ideas of Christianity*, trans. William V. Dych, (New York: Crossroads, 1990), 225.

anthropology and theology.”¹⁹ In the same way, I would argue that turning to sexuality and gender expression as a locus of divine revelation expands upon and challenges the relationship between anthropology and theology.

Three Queer Persons in One Queer God

Images of God are unique and creative when done in contextual theologies, but they all find ways to reflect their own experiences when discussing God. In queer theology, the experience of sexual orientation and gender expression is at the forefront in the language and imagery pertaining to God.

God

Cheng describes God in the action of “sending forth of radical love”²⁰, a love so extreme that it dissolves boundaries. Through the doctrine of revelation, we understand that God reveals Godself through scripture and through human reason, but in queer theology, God is understood as a matter of experience as well. Cheng calls the doctrine of revelation “God’s coming out”²¹ as radical love. God’s self-disclosure of Godself parallels the self-disclosure of LGBTQ+ folks when they come out to someone whom they love about their sexuality and/or gender identity. Just as God shares Godself with those whom God loves, humans do the same.

God’s coming out is an act of radical love because, like the coming out experience of LGBTQ+ folks, it results in the dissolving of boundaries. God’s self-revelation dissolves

¹⁹ Miguel Diaz, “On Being Human from Rahnerian Perspectives” in *On Being Human: U.S. Hispanic and Rahnerian Perspectives*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001), 3.

²⁰ Cheng, *Radical Love*, 44.

²¹ *Ibid*, 45.

boundaries between human and divine, for without this revelation we would not experience a “God-with-us” but a God apart from and unknown to humanity.²²

God’s self-revelation dissolves the line between the powerful and the weak, the rich and the poor. God revealing Godself in the incarnation of Jesus disrupts these traditional boundaries. In God’s coming out as the infant Jesus, God reveals God’s solidarity with the marginalized and the vulnerable of the world. In God’s coming out as the Jesus who ministers to outcasts and dines with sinners, God reveals God’s preference and love for the marginalized.²³

Just as God comes out to reveal Godself as love, so ought we. Just as God coming out and caring for the poor, marginalized, and oppressed, so ought we. Just as God comes out to break barriers and erase boundaries, so ought we.

The Trinity

In line with Cheng’s analysis of God’s self-disclosure coming from a loving relationship, feminist theologian Catherine LaCugna understands the central theme of Trinitarian theology to be relationship. For LaCugna, “the doctrine of the Trinity summarizes what it means to participate in the life of God through Jesus Christ in the Spirit”²⁴

Cheng calls the Trinity an “internal community of radical love”²⁵. As previously discussed, Cheng’s sense of radical love is that which dissolves boundaries. The Trinity begins

²² Cheng, *Radical Love*, 46.

²³ Chris Glaser, *Coming Out as Sacrament*, (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1998), 85.

²⁴ Catherine Mowry LaCugna “The Practical Trinity” in *The Christian Century* July 15-22 (1992), 1.

²⁵ Cheng, *Radical Love*, 56.

by breaking down the barrier between the self and the other; as an internal community, the difference between self and that which is external to the self becomes non-existent. The Trinity gives us an image of radical love, interpenetration, and intimacy that we ought to base our own relationships on.

This community of radical love also breaks down the categories of sexual and non-sexual relationships. Rather than seeing these relationships as fundamentally different, we should see the Trinity as the ideal basis of all human relationships. By seeing Trinity as *passionate friendship*, we can stop seeing relationships as defined by marital status (which inherently excludes any LGBTQ+ folk) or blood relationships, and instead ground our communities in passionate friendship.

In his chapter “Queer Trinity”, Gavin D’Costa engages Hans von Balthasar’s theology on the Trinity. D’Costa points out the accidental queerness of von Balthasar’s work: Von Balthasar understands each person of the Trinity as both “supramasculine” and “suprafeminine”; each of them is pure act and pure receptivity. D’Costa sees Balthasar’s representation as fruitful because it “symbolizes divine love in terms of interpenetrating and reciprocal relationships between supramasculine and suprafeminine, suprafeminine and suprafeminine, and supramasculine and supramasculine”.²⁶ The author understands these analogously as heterosexual, lesbian, and gay relationships being ontologically present in von Balthasar’s Trinity. Cheng further comments on von Balthasar’s theology by adding that there is a transgender nature within the Trinity, showing

²⁶ Gavin D’Costa, “Queer Trinity,” in *Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body*, ed. Grant Loughlin, (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 273.

that all LGBTQ+ are “divinely sanctioned” so long as they represent “an overflowing love to the wider community,” just as the Trinity teaches us.²⁷

Queer Theology for All

Although Christians still have a long way to go to become inclusive and establish thoughtful and effective ministries for LGBTQ+ folk, queer theology is making bounds and leaps in the right direction. It should be evident by now that queer theology isn't exclusive; God as sending forth radical love does nothing to exclude heterosexual people, God's coming out does nothing to invalidate the sexuality of straight cisgender people, understanding the Trinity as passionate friendship doesn't diminish heterosexual unions, and even the queer imagery in the Trinity comes alongside a reaffirmation of heterosexual couplings. The point of queer theology is not to exclude anyone or shift from only recognizing heterosexual people to only recognizing queer people. This isn't a radical movement and, although some the more erotic images used might deter some, it isn't something outside of Christianity. Instead, queer theology represents LGBTQ+ folk fighting for a space in the Church and the images and theologies that have come out of queer theology show that there is space for everyone.

²⁷ Cheng, *Radical Love*, 58.

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