

Theological Trends

Christianity is a queer thing

The development of queer theology

Elizabeth Stuart

THE STONEWALL RIOTS OF JUNE 1969 – caused when the patrons of a New York bar known as a relatively safe space for the sexually marginalized resisted a routine police raid and fought back against the harassment for four days – have become the mythical and symbolic beginnings of the modern gay liberation movement. They are commemorated each year all over the western world and beyond in annual gay pride celebrations. Stonewall symbolizes the transformation of homosexual people into lesbian and gay people as they claimed their own voice, subjectivity, moral agency and right to self-definition and determination. It also symbolizes a rejection of heterosexual normativity and the pathologizing of homosexuality. After Stonewall lesbians and gay men began to create a public cultural space for themselves and demand equality before the law and in society as a whole as a stable minority group.

Gay theology

Gay theology began to emerge in the 1970s as gay Christians started to reflect theologically upon the gay liberation movement. In its early days such reflection was dominated by men who felt able to do theology about and on behalf of lesbians. One of the first books of gay theology published was a collection of essays by British theologians, *Towards a theology of gay liberation* (1977).¹ In this volume the contributors (many of whom were members of the newly formed Gay Christian Movement) demonstrate nascent ideas and techniques which would be developed by gay theologians over the next twenty years. These include a valorization of gay experience as a hermeneutical tool in deconstructing dominant theologies and church teaching, the exposure of heterosexist assumptions in 'objective' theological and biblical scholarship and a centralizing of sexuality in human personhood. Nevertheless the book does have an apologetic tone; it was

directed to the wider Church and the 'gay debate' that was just beginning to get going in the Christian communities of the UK. As gay theology developed, apologetics ceased to be a prime concern (this was largely left to liberal heterosexuals) and was replaced by a desire to do theology by and for lesbian and gay people to enable them to survive and thrive in homophobic communities (including the churches).

What is noticeably absent from this early and ground-breaking book is the influence of Latin American liberation theology. Subsequent gay theology (most of which has been written and published in the USA) is deeply indebted to the methodology and insights of liberation theology. From liberation theology gay theologians absorbed the notion that God is always on the side of the oppressed and that theology consists of critical reflection upon active involvement in the struggle for political and social justice.

The influence of liberation theology is very obvious in the work of Richard Cleaver and Gary David Comstock.² Both of them centralize the Exodus as the paradigmatic saving event in the Judaeo-Christian tradition which reveals that salvation is an earthly, historical movement from slavery to freedom, oppression to liberation. They both see the Stonewall Riots as an Exodus-type event for gay people as a whole and coming out as a personal participation in that movement. Cleaver in particular draws very close parallels between the whole Passover experience and Stonewall, arguing that from both a new class of people (made up of different races, genders, economic groupings, etc.) was born and that, like the ancient Israelites, gay people now find themselves wandering in the desert – forming a covenanted group identity but also trying to work out what it means not to be a slave people any more. Full liberation will be possible when the gay community learns the lessons of the early Church, namely that it is only when we learn to stand in solidarity with other oppressed groups and engage in 'eucharistic hospitality' with those we regard as 'other', being prepared to be challenged and transformed by them, that a true community of lovers will be established. In the meantime the gay community is constantly tempted by 'places of safety in Egypt', pseudo-liberation in the form of a commercially based culture that turns those gay people financially able to participate in it into collaborators in an oppressive economic system and ghettos – all of which can be quickly and easily swept away. For Comstock, the Exodus and resurrection provide two pivotal movements of revelation through which the rest of the Bible must be read and assessed. This enables him to reject the authority of those biblical texts which appear to condemn same-sex relationships.

The influence of liberation theology (and also black theology) is evident in Robert Goss's construction of the 'queer Christ'.³ Following other contemporary theologians of liberation, Goss grounds his Christology in the praxis rather than the nature of Jesus. He follows liberation theologians in presenting Jesus as standing in the name of God in solidarity with those oppressed and marginalized by the religious and social institutions of his day. The resurrection he interprets as God 'coming out' on the side of Jesus, raising him to the status of Christ: a universal parable of God. In all times and all places Christ stands in solidarity with the marginalized and oppressed. In a homophobic and heterosexist world Christ demands that his Church follow him in aligning himself with the queer cause and detecting his presence in that community. Goss uses the term 'queer' here in a quite specific way to refer to the loose coalition of sexual 'outlaws', lesbians, gay men, bisexual and transgendered people who made common cause in the face of the AIDS pandemic, celebrating difference and engaging in transgressive action as part of a strategy to disrupt heterosexist and homophobic structures. Goss regards transgressive action as an essential part of Christian praxis in the tradition of parabolic action practised by the prophets and Jesus.

Lesbian theology

Lesbian theology as a distinct body of theology arose out of a lesbian experience of marginalization in gay and feminist theology. Lesbian theology owes more to feminist than liberation theology and has often been more radically deconstructive of the tradition than gay theology. Undoubtedly the most influential theologian writing out of lesbian experience has been Carter Heyward. From this perspective she rejects both the God of classical theism and the God of Christian liberalism as being indifferent to and beyond questions of sexuality, physicality and equality: such a God is in effect on the side of oppressors.⁴ Rather, Heyward identifies God with what the black feminist poet Audre Lorde named as 'the erotic', a deep body knowledge and power that propels people towards a sense of self-worth and mutuality in relation with others. To live out this radically immanent, relational power is to be involved in the process of 'goddling', though this is difficult to achieve in a cultural context in which relationships are constructed as unequal power relations. For Heyward the defining aspect of Jesus' ministry was his demonstration that God was not above or beyond humanity but with us and between us. In his life he demonstrated the *dunamis* of God,

the uncontrollable power of right relationship, and it is this power that is available for all of us to share. Jesus' significance lies not in his difference from us but in similarity to us, which makes christic living a possibility for all of us.⁵ As a lesbian feminist she cannot recognize a dualism between male and female, sexuality and spirituality, gay and straight, and in the same way she cannot recognize a dualism between divinity and humanity which can only be miraculously combined in one unique individual. Rather what the Jesus story teaches us is that all human beings are capable of manifesting divine power.

Several lesbian theologians including Heyward have advanced friendship as the model of relating that has the best potential to embody the power of the erotic and right relationship. Mary Hunt employs it as a paradigm for sexual and other relationships precisely because friendship has been historically valued by women as an experience of equality, mutuality and reciprocity and a motivating force for struggle against injustice.⁶ In a much more explicitly Christian and theological analysis Elizabeth Stuart argues that the model deserves attention because it is the dominant description that lesbian and gay people employ when talking about their own relationships.⁷ She argues that the non-gay Church has much to learn here from lesbian and gay people because they provide a model of relating which avoids the patriarchal structures of marriage that have become problematic for many women. It also provides one model of relating with which to unite those in gay and straight relationships, celibates and single people in one common endeavour, the creation of a friendly world. Stuart argues that the advantage of friendship is that it has a long history as the ideal relationship in the Christian tradition and was the model of relating embodied by Christ. Hence lesbian and gay experience can be employed to develop the Christian tradition rather than simply reject it.

Common features of lesbian and gay theology

It is possible to isolate two key elements that lesbian and gay theology have in common:

- a prioritizing of experience in the process of doing theology;
- an assumption of a stable sexual identity which is a site of epistemology; though theologians might differ in their opinions as to the origins of such an identity, some considering it a biological given, others a social construction, nevertheless they would all maintain that such an identity was stable enough to do theology upon.

Both of these have become increasingly difficult positions to hold. Theologies based upon experience have been increasingly perceived as problematic by those standing within them who have become aware of the fact that any attempt to firm up concepts of experience to make them sufficiently strong to bear the weight of theology necessarily involves exclusion and, therefore, doing violence to the experience of others.⁸ There is a danger that theologies based in experience end up either advocating a thinly disguised form of essentialism⁹ or an identity based upon oppression and victimhood which, however hard it tries not to, tends to avoid issues of sin except as they apply to someone else. Post-liberal theology has drawn attention to the communal, cultural and post-linguistic nature of all experience which renders problematic its usefulness as a foundation for theology.¹⁰ Theologies based upon experience are also difficult for those who do not share that experience to grasp or to translate in a meaningful – rather than reductionist – way into their own theological language. Thus experiential theologies can often become detached from the wider Christian community and ecclesial debates. While they have been extremely effective in the deconstruction of dominant theologies, they have been less successful in the reconstruction of theology, following liberal theology in a demythologizing strategy that devalues tradition and can fail to appreciate its richness and diversity. They often follow modern liberalism in reducing theology to a system of ethics which, cut off from any kind of cosmology, can only compete alongside other ethical systems on equal terms.

Queer theory

The second position is one called into question by the body of knowledge known as queer theory. Queer theory is chiefly associated with Michel Foucault and the development of his ideas by Judith Butler.¹¹ Foucault questioned the two central notions upon which post-Enlightenment theory and the theology of sexuality have been based. The first is the notion of a fixed, essential identity, sexual or otherwise. Foucault argues for the social construction of sexual identity through discourse and constant redefinition. The second is the idea that power is something held by dominant groups and used against others who have less power, e.g. women, gay people, the poor, etc. Foucault argued that power was fluid and present in all parts of society and could be deployed by any group. Where power was exercised there was always resistance to it, which itself was a kind of power.

These ideas are developed by Judith Butler. She argues that feminism has made a fundamental error in continuing to assume that there is a stable identity of 'woman' somehow bound up with the female body which is stable enough to make some (though perhaps not many) generalizations about. This is a paradoxical position for most feminists to take, considering their antipathy to the 'biology is destiny' approach to gender. Butler seeks to question the 'natural' connection between sex, gender and desire, arguing that gender and desire are unstable. Indeed, she famously asserts that gender is not expressive of some inner nature but performative. We learn to become a woman or a man by following the gender scripts that our culture hands out to us and each performance reinscribes that gender upon our bodies. It is only when some people throw away the scripts or perform them badly or subversively that the non-natural nature of gender is revealed. Butler argued that the parodic performance of gender by drag queens or butch and femme lesbians most clearly demonstrated and disrupted the connection between sex, gender and performance. She called for a resistance to the gender scripts that are handed out to us and a proliferation of subversive performances of gender, but noted the difficulty of resisting such scripts because no one stands completely outside of them.

This is then the 'essence' of queer theory, that there is no essential sexuality or gender. 'Queer', then, is not actually another identity alongside lesbian and gay (although it is sometimes rather confusingly used to convey a radical coalition of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered persons¹²) but a radical destabilizing of identities and resistance to the naturalizing of any identity.

Queer theology

Queer theology, then, is properly identified as that theology which has a Foucauldian and Butlerian understanding of the free-floating relation between sex, gender and desire and seeks to reflect theologically from that perspective. It need not be done by lesbian or gay people or necessarily be purely concerned with issues of sexuality and gender. Queer theology in this sense is only just beginning to carve out a place for itself but the signs are that it could become one of the most important elements in one of the most significant contemporary theological movements.

Kathy Rudy draws upon queer theory to argue that for Christians the only stable identity is that of a member of the people of God, the

Church, conveyed by baptism and constituted by God's self.¹³ No identity should take precedence over Christian identity and hence within the Church gender cannot be a determining factor in assessing what kind of sex constitutes moral sex. Baptism and not biology is the means by which one becomes Christian and in Christ there is 'no male or female': gender is radically decentralized.

In order to establish what a degendered notion of moral sex might look like, Rudy turns to the Christian tradition and the persistent understanding that sex must be unitive and procreative. In insisting that sexual activity must be unitive the Church requires that it involve the blurring and transcending of the boundaries of the self, which is what all Christians are called to accomplish in the body of Christ. Indeed, sexual love is part of the process of building up the communion of the Church. The procreative principle sought to ensure the unitive dimension by making every act of sexual love open to the generation of a new member of the Church. In recent years, however, there has been a move among even Roman Catholic moral theologians to argue that procreation need not necessarily be completely identified with reproduction. This is evident in the shift towards the theory of complementarity among both Protestant and Roman Catholic theologians. The theory of complementarity, however, is thoroughly gendered and lacks an ecclesial dimension. It also marginalizes the celibate and single along with those involved in lesbian and gay relationships. Rudy is equally critical of her fellow lesbian theologians who advocate mutuality as the criterion for moral sex. Rudy finds such an approach unrealistic: power is an element in all relationships and sometimes a positive one, and none of us is free from inculturation; there is no 'pure' form of sex completely free from any kind of influence.

Rudy seeks to reconfigure the procreative principle around the biblical notion of hospitality. Sexual activity must be hospitable both in terms of opening ourselves to another and in terms of that relationship helping us to open our lives to the stranger among us. All Christians are called to be hospitable in every aspect of their lives because the body of Christ is a hospitable body. Moral sex is unitive and hospitable, building up the body of Christ by breaking the boundaries of the self and propelling us towards the stranger. It has nothing to do with gender.

In her most recent work Elizabeth Stuart has moved from a lesbian to a queer theological perspective.¹⁴ Like Rudy she argues that baptism relativizes all other identities. Drawing upon Butler's notion of parody, defining it as repetition with critical difference, Stuart argues that the parodic performance of gender is an essential element of Christian

discipleship precisely because gender is destabilized by baptism and decentralized in Christian morality. The performance of maleness and femaleness by the baptized must be strange (and has often been in the Christian tradition) because it must constitute a cultural critique of gender. Also like Rudy, Stuart seeks to ground a Christian sexual morality in ecclesiology, arguing that a chaste relationship in the body of Christ should bear the four marks of the Church. They should be one in the sense of being unitive; they should be holy in that they should manifest the divine reality of sheer grace and excessive giving that creates the possibility of mutuality and reciprocity rather than mere exchange; they should be catholic in that they must be caught up in the project of the whole Church; and they are apostolic in that they are not private affairs but conducted within a community that understands itself as being under the authority of a tradition and which is in constant danger of betraying that tradition. Due humility is therefore required in assessing the morality of any relationship.

Queer theory and 'radical orthodoxy'

The insight of queer theory that serves to return to us to a dimension of the Christian tradition which modernity has obscured, which asserts the instability of gender in the body of Christ, is also to be found in the new theological movement known as 'radical orthodoxy'. 'Radical orthodoxy' is characterized by a rejection of theological liberalism on the one hand and nihilistic post-modernism on the other. 'Radical orthodox' theologians wish to argue that Christianity is not simply one discourse competing with others on an equal basis because Christianity is in its discourse and practice, in its narration of itself, more post-modern than any other discourse. What Christianity offers is a non-foundational metanarrative. Its doctrines of creation and incarnation provide a narrative of resistance to all forms of essentialism by asserting 'the priority of becoming and unexpected emergence'.¹⁵ From its beginnings Christianity sought not to eradicate difference and diversity but to incorporate and harmonize such difference in the body of Christ, and if the Church has often failed to do this then it has been unfaithful to its own nature. 'Radical orthodoxy' refuses to recognize the reality of a secular realm. True to the spirit of Platonism that has hovered so faithfully over Cambridge for so long, theologians in this mould wish to maintain that there is no space which exists apart from God and therefore there is no space, no discipline, no narrative, no subject, which is beyond the concern of theology.¹⁶ The secular is

therefore non-existent. 'Radical orthodoxy' differs from Barthianism in its insistence that revelation and reason do not exist in a relationship of ontological dualism. The Logos is always mediated through human discourses but in the process transfigures and subverts these discourses.

The influence of queer theory on 'Radical orthodoxy' is obvious – though it is not often highlighted by the theologians themselves. Graham Ward's contribution to the first book to emerge from the movement, 'Bodies: the displaced body of Jesus Christ', reflects on the instability of Jesus' gendered body from the beginning of the Christian narrative in terms that owe a great deal to Foucault and to Judith Butler. But by taking up their insights on the social construction and consequent slipperiness and performative nature of gender into the story of the incarnate Logos, Ward transfigures queer theory with the mystery that is at the heart of the incarnate body and therefore all bodies. As he says, 'The body of Jesus Christ, the body of God, is permeable, transcorporeal, transpositional. Within it all other bodies are situated and given their significance. We are all permeable, transcorporeal and transpositional.'¹⁷ Thus the potentially exhausting nihilism of queer theology is avoided by a radical reworking of it within the context of the body of Christ where gender is so caught up in what Ward calls the orders of mystery that it can only be faithfully performed within the Church subversively. In the same volume Gerard Loughlin utilizes Bataille's concept of parody to probe critically into Balthasar's erotics, exposing its grounding in a modern masculinist, fixed understanding of gender and an ancient patriarchal understanding of biology which the Christian tradition parodies. For example, Loughlin draws attention to the subversive parodying of gender in Ephesians 1:4–6 where the male Christ is said to have a female body, the Church; in as much as women are members of the body of Christ and thereby called to represent him to the world they are caught up in the symbolics of masculinity and in so far as men are part of the Church they are caught up in the symbolics of femininity.¹⁸

Conclusion

Queer theology has shifted the focus away from lesbian and gay experience and on to the playing out of gender in the Christian tradition and in the Church as the body of Christ. Many lesbian and gay people are suspicious of this refocusing, unwilling to sacrifice a sense of identity and distinctive voice that they have only recently acquired, and unconvinced by the theory of the instability of gender. Neither lesbian

and gay theology nor queer theology has yet made any noticeable impact on the ecclesiastical debates on the issue of homosexuality, but perhaps queer theology with its deep engagement with the tradition has the potential to inspire some real and mutually transforming engagement among Christians on issues of sexuality.

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NOTES

- 1 Malcolm Macourt, *Towards a theology of gay liberation* (London: SCM Press, 1977).
- 2 Richard Cleaver, *Know my name: a gay liberation theology* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1995) and Gary David Comstock, *Gay theology without apology* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1993).
- 3 Robert Goss, *Jesus acted up: a gay and lesbian manifesto* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1993).
- 4 Carter Heyward, *Touching our strength: the erotic as power and the love of God* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989).
- 5 Carter Heyward, *Speaking of Christ: a lesbian feminist voice* (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1984).
- 6 Mary Hunt, *Fierce tenderness: a feminist theology of friendship* (New York: Crossroad, 1991).
- 7 Elizabeth Stuart, *Just good friends: towards a theology of lesbian and gay relationships* (London: Mowbray, 1995).
- 8 See Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, *Sex, race and God* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1990) and Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Changing the subject: women's discourses and feminist theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994).
- 9 Nancy Wilson, *Our tribe: queer folks, God, Jesus and the Bible* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), can nevertheless talk about lesbian and gay culture as being characterized by hospitality. The impossibility of testing such a claim (even though there may be good sociological or anthropological evidence to substantiate it, as there was for my claim in *Just good friends* that lesbian and gay people tend to define their primary relationships in terms of friendship), the very fact that such claims cannot be universally applicable, renders them less potent and exclusionary.
- 10 George Lindbeck, *The nature of doctrine, religion and theology in a postliberal age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984).
- 11 Michael Foucault, *The history of sexuality, volume 1: an introduction* (New York: Random House, 1978); Judith Butler, *Gender trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990).
- 12 This is certainly how Goss uses it in his work and how it is used in Elizabeth Stuart with Andy Braunston, Malcolm Edwards, John McMahon and Tim Morrison, *Religion is a queer thing: a guide to the Christian faith for lesbian, gay and bisexual and transgendered people* (London and Herndon VA: Cassell, 1997).

- 13 Kathy Rudy, *Sex and the Church: gender, homosexuality, and the transformation of Christian ethics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997).
- 14 Elizabeth Stuart, 'Sexuality: the view from the font (the body and the ecclesial self)', *Theology and Sexuality* 11 (1999), pp 7–18.
- 15 John Milbank, 'Postmodern critical Augustinianism: a short *summa* in forty-two responses to unasked questions' in Graham Ward (ed), *The postmodern God: a theological reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), pp 267–268.
- 16 John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward, *Radical orthodoxy: a new theology* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), pp 1–20.
- 17 Graham Ward, 'Bodies: the displaced body of Jesus Christ' in Milbank, Pickstock and Ward, *Radical orthodoxy*, p 176.
- 18 Gerard Loughlin, 'Erotics: God's sex' in Milbank, Pickstock and Ward, *Radical orthodoxy*, pp 143–162.