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Jack Slater and Susannah Cornwall

This entry establishes the contested nature of 'queer' as a term and provides an overview of some significant theoretical perspectives on queerness. It then outlines the emergence of queer Christian theology as it developed from both <u>theological reflections</u> on LGBT+ sexuality and gender variance and a number of other theoretical traditions. In doing so, it highlights how contemporary queer theology can be grouped into two clusters: those queer theologians who are committed to advancing LGBT+ inclusion within Christian spaces and communities, and those queer theologians who are more sceptical of such a project.

This is followed by an overview of the different approaches that queer theologians have taken in negotiating biblical passages that have historically been used to condemn LGBT+ identities and gender nonconformity, using 1 Cor 6:9–10 as an exemplar. Queer engagement with scripture has a much broader scope than just these passages, and this entry provides an illustrative overview of some of the more creative directions of queer biblical scholarship. Moving from scripture to doctrine, this entry uses the differing queer perspectives on Christology to highlight how the project of queering Christian doctrine is diverse and wide-ranging.

This entry then turns towards the practical implications of queer theology for Christian communities. LGBT+ marriage is foregrounded as the most prominent avenue through which queer theology has been felt in the everyday practice of Christians, before highlighting some of the different dimensions of queer Christian practice that do not relate to marriage. This entry concludes by describing the contributions queer theology has made to ongoing debates within queer studies and exploring some of the key issues surrounding the contested relationship queer theology has with the theological mainstream.

Keywords: Queer, Queerness, LGBT+, Theology and sexuality, Gender, Lesbian and gay liberation theologies, Christology, Same-sex marriage, Antinormativity

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1 The multiple meanings of 'queer'

'Queer' is not a term with a universally agreed definition. Instead, 'queer' and 'queerness' are words with different possible meanings that are deployed by scholars and activists to different ends. This resistance to easy definition arises from the origins of the term. 'Queer' originated as word simply meaning 'strange', but over time became increasingly associated with issues of sexuality and gender. By the early twentieth century, the word had become a derogatory term for LGBT+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and other sexual and gender minorities) people, but also one used by some people as a form of self-identification (Dalzell and Victor 2013: 1810). In the 1980s and 1990s, a complex intersection of academic theory and street-level activism reclaimed the term more fully for use by LGBT+ people and communities (Rand 2014: 34–43).

Moreover, some queer theorists have argued that the inability to easily define 'queer' is a result of the opposition of queerness itself to stable categories (Butler 1993; Sedgwick 1993: 7–9). Queerness, these theorists argue, cannot be easily defined because 'queer' is resistant to definition itself.

Nonetheless, there are a few identifiable groupings in the ways that 'queer' has been deployed in queer theology and beyond. To understand how theologians have engaged with queerness, it is important to understand the most prominent uses of the term. None of these competing definitions can claim legitimacy over the others and, as such, the differing theological approaches they produce are equally authentic directions for queer theology.

1.1 Queerness as LGBT+ sexuality

Within popular discourse, 'queer' is most commonly used as an umbrella term for all sexual and gender identities and orientations that are neither cisgender (those whose gender identity aligns with the gender assigned to them at birth) nor heterosexual. In this register, queer is similar to acronyms such as LGBT+, but with an additional emphasis on the rejection of discrete identities. For some people, identifying as queer is a way of highlighting the fluid nature of sexuality and gender as they experience it. Theologians that define queer in this way have praised the ability of the term to highlight the common ground that connects the disparate experiences of sexual and gender minorities (Cheng 2011: 2–8). Queerness describes identities outside the heteronormative mainstream and queer theology describes theology produced from and for those 'outsider' identities.

1.2 Queerness as opposition to normativity

Within queer theory, queerness has more often been described in terms of resistance to social norms. David Halperin's highly influential definition argues that queerness is 'not a positivity but a positionality vis-à-vis the normative' (1995: 62). Queerness has no

substantive content in itself but is instead whatever does not fit into the mainstream. There is, therefore, no inherent connection between queerness and LGBT+ identities (Edelman 2004: 17). This definition of queerness as antinormativity has led queer theologians to expand the scope of their inquiry beyond issues directly related to sex, gender, and sexuality. If queerness is antinormativity then queer theology is any theology that contests theological norms, whatever those norms may be (Larrimore 2015: 3–4).

1.3 Queerness beyond antinormativity

In recent years, several challenges have been raised to the understanding of queerness as strict antinormativity. Concerns have been raised that antinormativity is, ironically, becoming its own norm within queer thought, and this can obscure the messy ways in which social norms actually operate (Wiegman and Wilson 2015). At the same time, a strictly antinormative understanding of queerness risks missing the complexities of how queer people actually negotiate social norms in their everyday lives (Freeman 2010).

The limitations of antinormativity have encouraged queer theorists to attend more closely to the emotional dimensions of queerness. This has fostered renewed engagement with affect theory (a theoretical perspective that seeks to understand emotions, sensations, and other felt experiences), which has itself been frequently enmeshed with queer theory (Ahmed 2004: 144–165). Queer theologians have taken up this complex intertwining of emotion, affect, and queerness to productively explore questions of how sensations and religious experiences interact and how attending to these feelings can generate new theological perspectives on familiar practices, ideas, and texts (Waller 2020).

2 The multiple origins and sources of queer theology

The emergence of queer theology as a distinct subdiscipline is relatively recent, but it draws from multiple sources stretching back into the middle of the twentieth century and beyond. As queer theology has developed, it has also drawn on an increasingly broad array of theological and theoretical discourses.

2.1 The development of queer theology within the Christian theological tradition

Earlier narratives of the development of queer theology tended to describe a series of chronological progressions. For example, Mary Hunt describes a 'homosexual era' that broadly encompasses the 1970s, an 'LGB era' that covers the 1980s, and then a 'queer era' that has existed from the 1990s onwards (Hunt 1996: 298–299). This neat delineation obscures the more complicated history of queer theology and, as such, later accounts have stressed that queer theology exists alongside its predecessors in gay and lesbian

theology (Cornwall 2011: 44). It is also important to recognize that queer themes have been identified within the work of much earlier theologians (Burrus 2007) which would give queer theology a much longer lineage.

2.1.1 Gay apologetic theology

The earliest direct predecessors of queer theology made relatively modest claims with respect to same-sex orientation and sexual practices. Starting in the 1950s, gay apologetic theology was concerned primarily with challenging the conventional understanding of same-sex relations as obviously worthy of condemnation (Bailey 1955). With the emergence of Christian communities that emphasized their affirmation of same-sex orientations, gay apologetic theologians developed more forcefully positive assessments of same-sex relationships (Perry 1972: 200–205).

2.1.2 Lesbian and gay liberation theologies

Gay liberation theologies emerged in the 1970s as a more defiant position with respect to the mainstream Christian perspective on issues of sexuality and gender. Although the earliest works of gay liberation theology retained an apologetic tone directed towards the broader church (Macourt 1977), later works moved towards theology by and for gay people. Much of this theology unfolded in the context of the HIV/AIDS crisis which strongly influenced many gay liberation theologians (Clark 1997: 28).

Lesbian theology is not reducible to a broader gay liberation theology. It has its own distinctive feminist predecessors (Daly 1973) and makes unique contributions that are distinct from gay theology. Lesbian theologians have identified traditional understandings of God as so enmeshed in heteronormative and patriarchal systems of power that any form of Christianity that could stand outside of these systems of power would necessitate a radical reimagining of God (Jantzen 1995). Another notable element of lesbian theology is the emphasis on erotic friendship as an empowering and emancipatory model of ethical relationship (Heyward 1989: 119–138).

2.1.3 Queer theology

The emergence of queer theologies as distinct from gay and lesbian theologies was a gradual process. Shore-Goss's 1993 book, *Jesus Acted Up* – one of the earliest direct theological engagements with queer theory – made frequent use of queer terminology but did so from a distinctly liberationist perspective (1993: xix, 62-63, 82-85). One of the most distinctive elements of queer theology is the intermingling of issues of sexuality and gender, evident in the fact that some of the earliest examples of queer theology focus on gender presentation (Sheridan 1996) and transgender experiences (Kolakowski 1997).

If the central distinguishing characteristic of queer theology is the questioning of stable sexual and gender identities as bases for theology, then queer theology had definitively

arrived by the late 1990s (Rudy 1997: 85–107). Marcella Althaus-Reid's *Indecent Theology* (2000) brought the provocative style and deconstructionist themes that would become commonplace in queer theology into the foreground, setting a template for queer theology that many subsequent queer theologians would follow.

2.2 Theory

Contemporary queer theologians have engaged with a wide range of different theoretical approaches. More than just 'translating' these ideas into theological language, many queer theologians have critically engaged these theoretical positions in their own work.

2.2.1 Queer theory

As would be expected, queer theory has been the most important theoretical approach for queer theologians. Queer theory has been placed alongside more orthodox Christian theology, with some arguing that queerness has always been present in the Christian tradition (Buechel 2015: 13–16). Some queer theologians have gone further and argued that, because it resists the norms of secular modernity, Christian theology is itself queer (Loughlin 2008). Against this position, other queer theologians have argued that queer theory presents a very troubling challenge to mainstream Christian thought and practice (Tonstad 2016). These theologians argue that queer theory is so resistant to all forms of institutional structure that it seems inevitable that queer theology will find itself in opposition to Christianity as it exists in churches, codified doctrines, and statements of faith (Schneider 2009).

2.2.2 Disability theory

The intersection of queerness and disability is an increasingly important area of inquiry for queer theology. If queerness describes identities and practices that are outside of the 'compulsory heterosexuality' of mainstream society and disability describes identities and practices outside of the 'compulsory able-bodiedness' of mainstream society, then there is the possibility of alliance between queer theory and disability theory (McRuer 2006: 17–23).

This shared direction has been explored both by theologians whose main interest is sexuality and those who take disability as their central focus. The focus on the 'unruliness of flesh' within disability theology has been held up as a useful framework for furthering queer theological accounts of the body as resistant to social control (Creamer 2010). Similarly, the possibility of chronic pain as demanding an openness to the needs of others has been taken as a point where queer theology and disability theology can further one another's ethical critique (Betcher 2016). More constructively, by challenging mainstream understanding of a 'good life', queerness and disability have been argued to point towards

a form of human life that does not hold up economic productivity as the primary source of moral worth (Bray 2019: 71–94).

2.2.3 Postcolonial, decolonial, and Black thought

While questions of race and ethnicity were not wholly absent in the earlier works of queer theology, they were undoubtedly secondary for most queer theologians (Cheng 2002). Moreover, as a result of its origination in the Global North, queer theology has been historically dominated by scholars racialized as white. This led to insufficient consideration of the ways in which the colonial experience shaped gender and sexuality both in the colony and the metropole (Kwok and Donaldson 2002: 1–28).

This lack of attention has not entirely disappeared, but a trend in contemporary queer theology has begun to situate issues of race and ethnicity at the forefront of queer theology. Importantly, increasing numbers of queer theologies have been advanced that pay particular attention to specific ethnic and racial contexts, from Uganda (Van Klinken et al. 2020) to Britain (Robinson-Brown 2020) to Malaysia (Goh 2020). These scholars, amongst others, have incisively pointed out the intersections of sexual and gender systems with other power structures. They have noted that White European approaches to understanding and regulating sexuality and gender are consistent with colonial systems of domination and control of other people.

2.3 Natural science perspectives on sexuality

While queer theologians have drawn extensively from other disciplines in the arts, humanities, and social sciences, there has been less dialogue with the natural sciences. Many queer theologians have been sceptical of the ability of science to speak authoritatively on the true nature of gender and sexuality (see History of Science and Theology) (Tonstad 2018: 52).

Nonetheless, queer theologians have drawn on the insights of the natural sciences at various points to develop their own arguments. The science of epigenetics has been pointed to as highlighting the dynamic variability that always accompanies biological reproduction (Cornwall 2017: 152–153). The neuroscientific insight into the plasticity of the human brain and its ability to change in response to different behaviours has been used to challenge the contention that transgender people experience a mental state at odds with their biology. For some people who undergo gender transition, their experience of transition is reflected in changes to their brain that represent a move away from the brain structure associated with their previous gender identification (Loughlin 2018). The diverse array of sexual strategies uncovered by ecological science has been used to highlight the limitations of thinking of heterosexual monogamy as 'natural' and advance understandings of queerness as inherent to the natural world itself (Erickson 2018).

3 Two clusters of queer theology

As a result of the complexity identified above, we should not imagine queer theology as a unified theological movement. Instead, it is a diffuse collection of academics, activists, believers, and communities with different aims and agendas that are often in tension with one another. Despite this wide variation, it is helpful to think of queer theologians as gathered into two broad clusters. These clusters are not internally uniform, nor are they entirely separated from another, but they do describe a set of shared tendencies and theoretical inclinations.

3.1 Queer inclusion

One of these clusters gathers scholars who emphasize the inclusion of LGBT+ people within Christian communities as their foremost ethical and theological goal. The historical hostility of mainstream Christianity towards queerness is understood as a mistaken reading of the radical inclusivity of Christianity (Robinson-Brown 2020: 15–21). Queer inclusion is, therefore, a necessary consequence of a correct reading of the Christian message. The inclusion of LGBT+ people within Christian communities is framed as not only good for LGBT+ believers but also for Christianity more broadly because the inclusion of queerness produces a revitalized Christianity that is more than simply one identity marker amongst others and one that can reclaim its moral authority (Edman 2016: 17–21). Research projects that align with this cluster often focus on understanding the lived experiences of LGBT+ people as they negotiate religious contexts (Beardsley and O'Brien 2016).

It is important to emphasize that this cluster of queer theology is emphatically not a naïve inclusivist position that only works to better integrate LGBT+ concerns into a Christianity that is otherwise unchanged. Scholars working from this perspective have vociferously argued that full inclusion of LGBT+ people into Christian institutions can only occur if those institutions are transformed. Moreover, this inclusion is itself a catalyst for a broader transformation of existing Christian doctrine and practice in a variety of different directions (Shore-Goss and Goh 2021). Nonetheless, this transformation is broadly understood as occurring within the broad framework of existing Christian communities and structures.

3.2 Queer disruption

In contrast, the alternative cluster of queer theology collects scholars who are far more sceptical of inclusion: including LGBT+ people in Christian communities does not sufficiently challenge the insider/outsider logic that undergirds queer exclusion (Tonstad 2016). If these anti-queer logics are more integral to Christianity than inclusivist queer

theologies would contend, then any rapprochement between queerness and Christianity becomes fraught.

Within this cluster of queer theology, we find deconstructionist readings of queerness that would be very difficult to reconcile with existing Christian belief and practice. As an illustrative example, Kent Brintnall contends that because queer theorists have identified any representation of an object or event as constraining its possible meaning, a queer reading of the crucifixion would refuse to ascribe any fixed meaning to the cross and instead hold Calvary as inherently inexplicable (2011: 167–168). This would be hard to reconcile with conventional Christian understandings of the crucifixion and its place within a broader salvific narrative.

4 Queering scripture

Scripture has been an important resource for queer theologians, and queer biblical criticism is an important component of queer religious thought more broadly. Earlier engagements between queer theologians and the Bible focused primarily on hermeneutical strategies for negotiating a number of key texts that have been held up as condemning queer patterns of life. Unpacking this problematic material continues to this day, but queer accounts of scripture have diversified significantly to both explore a much wider range of biblical texts and engage with a broader set of themes and interpretative strategies.

4.1 Troubling texts – queer negotiation of the 'texts of terror'

Biblical material presents some challenges for the broader project of queer theology. Several passages within the Bible have frequently been interpreted as condemning same-sex relations and/or gender nonconformity. Drawing on feminist biblical scholarship that identifies certain passages of the Bible as 'texts of terror' for women (Trible 1984), we might think of these passages as queer texts of terror. Precisely which passages belong to this group is a debated issue, but Gen 9:20–27, Lev 20:13, Rom 1:26–27, 1 Cor 6:9–1, and 1 Tim 1:10 are commonly cited. Because scripture can be reinterpreted and redeployed in new social and cultural contexts, texts that are innocuous in one setting can be interpreted as condemning some aspect of queerness in another setting and hence can become a new, contextually bound text of terror (Schones 2021).

For some queer theologians, engaging with these texts of terror is the first task for any queer biblical hermeneutic (Stuart 1997: 43). Certainly, much of the popular discussion surrounding the relationship of LGBT+ lives and experiences and Christianity orbits these passages. For this entry, the different approaches queer theologians have taken towards 1 Cor 6:9–10 will be taken as emblematic of the strategies queer theologians have used when negotiating the texts of terror more broadly.

4.1.1 Reinterpreting key terms in 1 Cor 6:9–10

In the NRSVA translation, 1 Cor 6:9–10 reads, 'Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers – none of these will inherit the kingdom of God'. Both the terms 'sodomites' and 'male prostitutes' have often been interpreted as referring to people engaged in same-sex relations or not conforming to conventional gender norms.

One approach that has been adopted for queer engagement with this passage has been to challenge any reading of these two terms as comparable to LGBT+ people in contemporary society. What is translated above as 'male prostitute' is the Greek word *malakoi* which connotes softness or passivity. It is not entirely clear exactly what the term refers to in this context: in wider Greek literature the term means a more general moral laxity and other biblical authors use the term to simply mean 'soft' as in clothing (e.g. Luke 7:25). In 1 Cor 6:9–10, a number of different possibilities have been advanced ranging from men who avoid appropriate degrees of masculine violence to young male slaves used for sexual purposes (Gnuse 2015: 145–146).

Likewise, what is translated above as 'sodomite' is the Greek word *arsenokoitai*. Paul may be the first writer to use this word, and later Christian authors would use the word to refer to sexual activity in general (Boswell 1980: 341–345). The exact set of practices or identities Paul envisioned when using this term is debated and it is not even clear that it is principally a sexual relationship. Dale Martin (1996) has argued that the term highlights the economically exploitative character of the relationship and so needs to be considered as part of a broader condemnation of economic and social exploitation.

4.1.2 1 Cor 6:9–10 in a context of ancient sexual practice

Moving beyond the text itself, some scholars have emphasized the extent to which scripture emerged in a cultural and social context that differs significantly from our own. Understandings of sexual practice and gender identity in antiquity often bore little resemblance to contemporary understandings (Masterson, Rabinowitz and Robson 2015). This is not to say that the ancient world was unfamiliar with what would be understood today as same-sex relations or gender nonconformity, but that the various meanings attached to these were very different. According to this argument, even if the practices condemned in 1 Cor 6:9–10 are in fact comparable to some contemporary LGBT+ practices, the meanings attributed to these practices are so different that scriptural condemnations would not apply.

As an example of this contextualizing work, within the context of the Roman empire sexual activity between males was strongly associated with military conquest and the sexual

humiliation of defeated enemies. Condemnation of male-male sex acts within the New Testament should not be separated from this context and a broader critique of Roman imperialism. Contemporary same-sex practices and identities do not share this military connotation and, hence, should not be considered part of the condemned practices of 1 Cor 6:9–10 (Johnson 2007).

4.1.3 Sidelining the texts of terror

An alternative strategy that queer biblical commentators have adopted in negotiating the texts of terror is to resist making them the sole object of queer biblical inquiry. Perhaps these passages are condemnations of sexual practices or gender identities that might be applicable to contemporary LGBT+ practices and identities. However, scripture is dense with multiple meanings and it is still possible to find queer potential in these texts without needing to 'explain away' the more problematic elements.

In reading 1 Corinthians, we do not need to get caught up in the list of condemned practices to find passages that are of interest to queer readings of biblical material. For example, that Paul dedicates the first half of chapter 11 to adjudicating on proper head coverings and hair length for each gender indicates that there were those within the Corinthian community who were not following these norms and this had become a point of some contention. These concerns mirror contemporary debates over transgender identity, and close attention to the texts reveals an ongoing negotiation over gender norms in the Corinthian community that belies the supposed unchanging stability of gender identity and expression (Marchal 2020: 50–67). Likewise, even if one part of the epistle could be read as a condemnation of LGBT+ identities, queer readers of the text can still find in the condemnation of the 'shameful' behaviours of some Corinthian men a challenge to the existing gender rules of the time. Although Paul's condemnation of these men and their behaviours might complicate a direct identification with these men and their practices, it does at the very least provide evidence of queer ancestors to which queers of today might look for support and evidence that their lives and orientations – and the resistance they face – has deep roots in Christian communities (Townsley 2017: 112–115).

These two approaches illustrate queer readings of 1 Corinthians that do not take the possible condemnation of LGBT+ practices and identities in 1 Cor 6:9–10 as wholly encompassing all the text might say about queerness.

4.2 Troubling texts – queering scripture beyond the texts of terror

Queer engagement with scripture is not limited to the select passages that directly address issues of sexuality and gender. As queer theories and theologies have developed an increasing number of methodologies and theoretical approaches, queer biblical

commentary has developed in multiple directions to encompass a broad range of biblical texts, characters, and themes (Hornsby and Stone 2011).

4.2.1 Biblical queers – Ruth and Naomi

Within queer theory, there is substantial debate as to whether terms such as 'queer', 'gay', or 'homosexual' can be meaningfully applied to historical contexts. This debate originally took the form of a dichotomy between an insistence on the radical difference of the past that would make such terms anachronisms and a transcendent queerness that exists unchanged across different historical periods. This debate has since become increasingly complex, with multiple different perspectives emerging on the location of queerness within history (Brintnall, Marchal and Moore 2017: 14–25). Particularly important is the work of the medievalist Carolyn Dinshaw, who contends that queers in the present can identify with inhabitants of the past, not through a resemblance of gender identity or sexual practice but through a shared marginalization (Dinshaw 1999: 39). This identification with historical figures complicates the rigid distinction between past and present such that, in the context of queer theology, naming a biblical character as queer is itself a queer act.

In the search for biblical queers, the book of Ruth appears frequently. While evidence of sexual activity is never made clear, the close and intimate loyalty between Ruth and Naomi has been pointed to as an affirmational example of a loving same-sex relationship within the Hebrew Bible (West 2006). Other scholars have argued that the queerness of Ruth and Naomi's relationship is more complex. The ambiguity of their relationship and the shifting location of the (male) Boaz within this principally female-female relationship has been read as a form of bisexual desire that resists definite categorization. The very fact that it is unclear precisely what form Ruth and Naomi's relationship takes is itself a queer challenge to a simple distinction between sexual and platonic relationships (Duncan 2000: 92–96).

Alternatively, the queerness of the book of Ruth might not be a facet of the characters and their relationships per se, but in the way these relationships are themselves part of a broader intersection of economic relations, ethnic tensions, and patriarchal social forces. Ruth and Naomi are not, in this reading, queer because they love one another or evince a mutual sexual attraction but because their relationship enmeshes sexuality into a more complex social web. Within the book of Ruth, the simple image of sexuality as a discrete and separable element of human life is overturned: sexuality is itself queered (Preser 2017).

4.2.2 Biblical queerness – Canaan

In looking for queerness within scripture, we do not need to limit ourselves to the varied characters that populate the text. For example, some scholars have identified queerness within the ways in which identity categories are deployed within the biblical text in order

to construct particular communities. Ken Stone argues that there is an important parallel between the distinction between 'Israelite' and 'Canaanite' in scripture and the distinction between 'heterosexual' and 'homosexual' in the modern world. 'Israelite' is an ambiguous religious identity that only becomes clear when contrasted with 'Canaanite': we know who Israelites are because they are 'not-Canaanites'. In the same way, 'heterosexual' is an ambiguous sexual identity; beyond the very basics of sexual attraction, it is not clear what exactly makes up heterosexual identity. All that is truly clear and distinct about heterosexuality is that it is not homosexuality. Building on this parallel, Stone posits that Canaanite religious identity is troublingly close to Israelite identity as an Other that is nonetheless central to the coherence of Israel. This is not to say that the Israel/Canaanite relationship is queer, but that we can identify queerness at work within this distinction (Stone 2004).

Within the New Testament, 'Canaanite' continues to act in queer ways. In the Matthaean pericope of the Canaanite woman (15:21-28), time does not flow in a straight line. The interaction is set in a world dominated by the Roman empire, but by describing the woman as a 'Canaanite' the passage instead becomes oriented towards a reimagined distant past in which the Israelites manage to complete their conquest of the Canaanites. Moreover, by recognising Jesus' divinity, the Canaanite woman seems to adopt a Christology that would only emerge in her future (that of the Matthaean community). The Canaanite woman jumbles together an imagined alternative past, the future, and the present. In doing so, she queers the flow of time within the Bible and upsets any neat chronology in which events follow one another in clear lines (Moore 2017: 63–67).

4.2.3 Queering the Bible

Moving from a focus on the content of scripture, some queer scholars have argued that the way in which the Bible operates within a Christian community is itself queer. Certainly, there is something decidedly strange about a community in the secular, modern world structuring itself around repeated reference to a collection of texts that originated in a wildly differing time and place. This strangeness gains a particular queer dimension when read through the advances of queer theory. One of the most influential ideas in queer theory is that of 'performativity', which posits that gender is not an immutable characteristic but a repeated act. Gender only exists in and through the actions of people who (intentionally or not) imitate and reproduce existing gender norms (Butler 1990).

Translating this argument into a biblical context, we might say that the Bible only exists in and through the actions of believers within particular religious contexts. Of course, the texts themselves have a literal, physical existence that is independent of their use, but they only gain meaning as 'the Bible' through collective and social processes of reading and interpretation. The Bible can be understood as queer on account of the process by which it comes to matter in particular religious and social contexts (Stone 2008).

This understanding of scripture points towards a constructive strategy for queer biblical scholarship as imagining new ways of reading biblical material outside of the constraints of heteronormativity (Van Klinken and Muyunga-Mukasa 2021).

5 Queering doctrine

One of the distinctive features of queer theory, from its inception, has been its application to issues that are only tangentially connected to gender and sexuality (Warner 1991). Queer theologians have followed this expansive stance and brought a wide range of differing Christian doctrines into contact with queer theology: eschatology (Daniels 2017); the Trinity (Tonstad 2015); the nature of God (Isherwood 2015); and many more. Because queer theology is diverse, the broader project of 'queering doctrine' has not involved the emergence of a unified 'queer doctrine' but instead the emergence of new territories of debate. The breadth of queer doctrinal work can be best exemplified through the diverse ways in which queer theologians have approached the figure of Christ.

5.1 Christ

As the central figure of Christian theology, it is to be expected that queer theologians have repeatedly looked to Christ as the focus of their work and differing queer theologians have taken very different approaches to what a queer account of Christ might look like.

Early predecessors of queer theology argued for a 'homosexual explanation' as the most cogent explanation for Jesus' celibacy (Montefiore 1968: 10), and the development of gay liberation theology catalysed further work in this direction, with some pointing to Jesus' relationships with his disciples as comparable to modern same-sex relations (Williams 1992: 116–123). As queer theology began to contest the stability of sexual identities, efforts to locate queerness in Jesus' life and actions became more circumspect (Bohache 2008).

Alternatively, queerness and divergence from sexual and gender norms have been located more directly in Jesus' body. Through a literal reading of the virgin birth, it is possible to argue that Jesus lacked a Y chromosome (carried only by sperm). At the same time, Jesus clearly presented as male (see Sonship in the Bible) and, as such, we might read Jesus' body as intersex (Mollenkott 2001: 105–106). As understandings of intersex characteristics have developed, arguments for an intersex reading of Jesus have been advanced that do not rely on the literality of the virgin birth. For example, because the majority of intersex bodies do not exhibit obvious morphological features, we cannot definitively state that Jesus was not intersex and, therefore, the designation of Jesus as male is necessarily unstable (Cornwall 2014).

For other queer theologians, queerness resides in the mutability of Christ's flesh. Far from a stable body, the Christian tradition holds that Christ's body is variably transformed, consumed, and resurrected. As a sacrament, Christ's flesh is transposed across different boundaries in a process that disrupts clear gender distinctions: it is the male body of Jesus, but also the genderless bread and wine and also the multi-gendered body of the church (Stuart 2007). In total contrast, Christ's transfiguration as the revelation of an existing reality (that is, the opposite of a transformation) has been held up as a theological legitimation of understandings of gender transition not as 'sex reassignment' but as the alignment of the body with identity (Wolff 2019).

Turning instead to the most fundamental claims of Christian theology, queerness has been located in the incarnation itself. If queerness is, at its core, a challenge to the idea of identity as fixed, then as a challenge to the separation of human and divine identity, the incarnation might be read as a queerness at the heart of the Christian narrative (Althaus-Reid and Isherwood 2007). By entangling all existing beings with one another as part of an ongoing unfolding of salvation, the incarnation makes rigid categorical distinction between different identities an impossibility (Isherwood 2017).

6 Queering Christian practice

Queer theology has obvious implications for Christian practice. These implications are varied, but the most prominent of them are directly related to the lives of LGBT+ people. Foremost of these implications is the expansion of marriage beyond heterosexual cisgender couples, which has absorbed much of the popular debate and discussion connected to queer theology.

6.1 Same-sex marriage

The debate surrounding the legitimacy of same-sex marriages is more complex than a simple opposition of LGBT+ Christians and their allies being uniformly opposed to a traditionalist perspective. For example, some LGBT+ Christians (sometimes referred to as 'side B') hold that same-sex relations are impermissible and oppose same-sex unions (Yarhouse et al. 2017). Some ecclesial polities, such as the Church in Wales, hold a compromise position whereby same-sex civil partnerships can be blessed but same-sex marriage remains impermissible. In many legal jurisdictions, legal recognition is granted to marriages officiated in Christian churches, which involves state power in these debates. Sometimes, debates over the theological legitimacy of same-sex marriage are entangled with broader disputes between competing ecclesial authorities and the construction of competing ideas of accepted belief and practice (Brittain and McKinnon 2011).

These complexities make it very difficult to make blanket statements about the state of same-sex marriage in different churches. Some bodies of Christians, like the Eastern

Orthodox Church, have a fairly uniform position, although this uniformity is not total (Gallagher and Tucker 2019: 7–9). In other groupings, the picture is more mixed: the Lutheran churches of Norway, Denmark, and Sweden bless same-sex unions, but the Lutheran church of Finland does not. For denominations like the Methodists, the issue is often delegated to individual congregations and there can be substantial variations at global, regional, and even local scales. Any discussion about same-sex marriage ought to be grounded in a particular geographic and ecclesial context.

6.1.1 Same-sex marriage in the Anglican Episcopal Church of Brazil

The debates and developments concerning same-sex marriage within the Anglican Episcopal Church of Brazil (Igreia Episcopal Anglicana do Brasil – IEAB) exemplify many of the features common in similar debates in other ecclesial polities. However, it should be remembered that this does not mean that other examples will perfectly mirror the IEAB in this regard.

During the 1980s, Brazilian theology saw the emergence of a 'theology of the body' that understood human bodies as the focus of different pleasures. Christ's redemptive sacrifice, happening through the medium of a human body, theologically affirms these pleasures. With the development of queer theology in the Global North, queer theologians in Brazil brought foreign works of queer theology together with this existing Brazilian theology to produce a distinctive Brazilian queer theological perspective (Musskopf 2017).

In part as a response to this developing theological direction, the IEAB released a statement in 1997 that affirmed the divine origins of sexuality and stressed the need for pastoral sensitivity regardless of sexual orientation. As other churches within the Anglican Communion moved to ordain those in same-sex relationships, the debate within the IEAB became increasingly fraught. In 2005, the bishop of Recife and 32 clergy of his diocese were deposed for their outspoken opposition to LGBT+ inclusion. After a period of quiet, LGBT+ inclusion returned to the fore in 2013 with the IEAB adopting a range of different measures to further LGBT+ acceptance. This culminated in a 2018 vote in the General Synod that allowed individual dioceses of the IEAB to amend their canon to allow for same-sex marriage (Filho 2020). This position has seen the IEAB distanced from conservative elements of the Anglican Communion who have recognized the Anglican Church in Brazil (an alternative ecclesial polity in Brazil) as the legitimate Anglican Church in the region.

While many of these details are specific to the IEAB, they resonate with the debate over same-sex marriage in other churches. The acrimony of debates; the interrelation of domestic theological developments and an international queer theology; and the threat (or actuality) of schism are repeated themes that will be familiar to many across the world who have been involved in this debate.

6.1.2 Same-sex marriage and queer theology

Despite its prominence within popular discussion, same-sex marriage has occupied a more mixed position within theology. For queer theologians aligned with the more disruptive cluster of queer theological positions described above, same-sex marriage has been understood as, at most, a marginal gain for the broader project of queer theology. If Christian conceptions of marriage are rooted in a patriarchal socio-economic order concerned primarily with ensuring the legitimate transmission of power and property across generations and if, moreover, monogamous marriage is structurally bound up with a heteronormative reading of intimacy, then simply changing the genders of the participants is not a very disruptive transformation (Tonstad 2015: 258–259). For these queer theologians, the ability of LGBT+ Christians to now participate in the institution of marriage should not be read as a queer development.

At the same time, some queer theologians have understood same-sex marriage as valuable in so far as it uncovers the confusion of different theologies that undergird heterosexual marriage. For Mark Jordan, close attention to the debates over the legitimacy of same-sex marriage has revealed the surprising absence of a coherent theology of marriage that is itself grounded on a deep historical ambiguity over sexuality (Jordan 2005: 100–106). Efforts to theologically legitimate same-sex marriage have forced a clarification of theologies of marriage and sex from both proponents and opponents. This has revealed these theologies to be far more historically pliable and contingent than is often thought (Bradbury and Cornwall 2016: 4–5).

Other queer and aligned theologians have offered far more positive appraisals of same-sex marriage as a theological good. For some, this is because of the similarity of same-sex marriages to heterosexual unions, which can be a 'means of anticipating God's catching human beings up into that wedding feast that God celebrates in the life of the Trinity, an elevation that the tradition has had the wisdom to call consummation' (Rogers 1999: 27). For others, it is the difference between same-sex marriages and heterosexual marriages that marks the former's theological goodness. By affirming the value of sexual intimacy outside of a reproductive context, same-sex marriage has the potential to radically upset the close association of reproduction and marriage that is dominant in many Christian circles, with possible implications far beyond just same-sex couples. Moreover, it has been suggested that the experience of being in a same-sex relationship can point to entirely new directions for conceiving of marriage and intimacy that develop and diversify existing Christian practice (Haldeman 2007).

6.2 Queer Christian practices beyond marriage

The implications of queer theology for Christian practice extend beyond same-sex marriage. Some of these practices relate to the specifics of the lives and experiences

of LGBT+ people, but others are broader in scope and affect the routine practice of all Christians.

6.2.1 Liturgical resources for queer rites of passage

Many Christian communities have developed 'rites of passage' that celebrate important milestones in the life of a believer, and these often have specific <u>liturgical</u> resources and patterns of worship attached to them. These liturgical resources are not always attuned to the particular details of LGBT+ lives and, as such, some LGBT+ Christians and allies have worked to produce liturgical material that better reflects these particularities.

For example, many LGBT+ people understand coming out and the public recognition of their sexuality as an important milestone. Some LGBT+ Christians have wanted to see this milestone marked liturgically, but traditional liturgical resources lack directly applicable material. This has led to the emergence of liturgies, prayer books, and other worship materials that are applicable to this 'queer rite of passage' (Storey 2002). These alternative liturgical resources have received different degrees of approval from different ecclesial polities, with some Christian communities incorporating them into their own bodies of approved liturgical resources. As an example, the Anglican Church of Canada is currently trialling a supplemental set of liturgies focusing on gender transition and affirmation.

6.2.2 Queering the Eucharist – open communion

Beyond the specifics of LGBT+ lives and experiences, queer theology has sometimes become connected with elements of Christian practice that are seemingly unconnected to issues of sexuality or gender. This is exemplified in the practice of open communion (the offering of the Eucharist regardless of church membership) which has become a core practice for the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC), a highly influential community in the history of queer theology. It has been argued that the MCC's practice of open communion is inextricably part of a broader queer approach that challenges conventions surrounding propriety and decency (Shore-Goss et al. 2013).

However, open communion is not only practiced by Christian communities that understand themselves as queer or LGBT+ affirming. Nor do all churches that understand themselves as queer or LGBT+ affirming practice open communion. This demonstrates that Christian practices can be queer, but only as part of a broader queering project. No single practice can be queer on its own (Garrigan 2009).

7 Queer theology and the queer mainstream

As well as drawing on queer theory, queer theologians have also contributed to the ongoing development of queer thought and practice. This has been particularly important in dismantling the widespread narrative that queerness and religion are opposing forces.

7.1 Contesting christophobia

In addition to the homophobia they experienced from many Christian communities, LGBT + Christians have also felt constrained by the belief held by many LGBT+ people that a queer identity necessitates a rejection of Christianity (Perry 1972: 103–105). This was particularly significant in the earliest periods of queer theology, with empirical studies suggesting that this belief was widely prevalent across the LGBT+ community (Comstock 1996: 30–32). The antipathy towards Christianity also extended into queer theory itself, wherein Christianity was conventionally imagined as a 'stultifying, oppressive institution of a heteronormative, sexist social order' (Wilcox 2006: 74). This picture of Christianity, which has been aptly named 'queer christophobia', was in large part a product of the widespread homophobia within Christian communities (Bohache 2003).

One of the most important contributions of queer theology to the broader queer project has been to recognize and challenge this christophobia. For some queer theologians, this has been an intentional strategy targeted against Christian homophobia. If the LGBT+ community were to accept the notion that Christianity and queerness are incompatible, then homophobic forms of Christianity that claim the same thing from the opposite perspective would be strengthened (Sweasey 1997: 79). For other queer theologians, opposition to christophobia has instead been motivated by the simple recognition that many LGBT+ people express some degree of religious affiliation (Cravens 2019); as such, it would be a mistake to obscure their lived experience through an insistence on some form of inherent opposition between queerness and Christianity. While it is not the case that the work of queer theologians has seen queer christophobia entirely eliminated, its decline can be noted in the fact that the former CEO of Stonewall (the largest LGBT+ rights organization in Europe) could edit a volume of essays on sexuality and religion with little controversy (Hunt 2020).

7.2 Complicating intersectional identities

Connected to the task of dismantling queer christophobia has been the contribution of queer theologians in providing an increasingly complex picture of intersectional identities. One of the earliest commitments of queer theory was that different components of identity (gender, race, class, etc.) are not independent from one another (De Lauretis 1991). Queer theologians have pushed this insight further, paying attention to the complex roles that different faith commitments can have in constructing LGBT+ identities (Bong 2020).

8 Queer theology and the theological mainstream

As well as being part of a broader queer project, queer theology has also become increasingly prominent in theological discourse. Whether this increased prominence is a

beneficial development is a point of disagreement amongst queer theologians and it is unclear what future developments will hold for queer theology.

8.1 What should the relation be of queer theology to the theological mainstream?

While queer theology might once have been entirely marginal to mainstream theological discussion, this is no longer the case: many universities and institutions of theological education now offer courses in queer theology, and an increasing number of churches are dedicating attention and resources to the specific needs and contributions of LGBT+ people. While this has undoubted benefits, some queer theologians have raised concerns that this might lead to queer theology losing its distinctive qualities. If queer theology is 'a theology from the margins that wants to remain at the margins' (Althaus-Reid and Isherwood 2007: 304), then this move towards the theological centre is worrying.

At the same time, other queer theologians have been committed to highlighting the continued relevance of queer theology for the entire discipline of theology, arguing that there is something queer about the entire theological project (Dickinson and Toomey 2017). While this does not imply that queer theology should necessarily become part of the mainstream, it indicates that there is a tension in how queer theologians want to position their subdiscipline. As queer theology continues to propagate across theological institutions, it is likely that this tension will only increase.

8.2 Queering the focus of theology

One of the possible implications of the increased prominence of queer theology is a diversification of the texts, spaces, and practices that theology as a discipline is interested in. Brintnall (2010) has argued that a list of 'queer scripture' ought to add new texts such as *Stone Butch Blues* (Feinberg 1993) alongside the canonical biblical material. Brandy Daniels (2017) has located the punk bar as an informative space for thinking through the possibilities of Christian eschatology. Bryan Mok and Pearl Wong (2019) have contended that the healing grace of the Eucharist is as much present in the fetishistic violence of BDSM practice as it is in Calvary. Queer theologians are building a much broader and more diverse theological archive that has the potential to dramatically widen the scope of theological inquiry.

8.3 The multiple futures of queer theology

One of the central themes of this entry has been the diversity of queer theological approaches. Queer theologians do not agree on a shared meaning of 'queer' or 'theology'; they do not have a shared political goal; they embrace differing political strategies and affiliations. While it is impossible to predict the future, it seems likely that as queer theology continues to develop, this diversity will only increase and it will be increasingly

necessary to speak of 'queer theologies' in the plural. What little unity queer theology might have once possessed will become increasingly eroded as queer theologians adopt an increasing array of methodologies, disciplinary partners, and rhetorical approaches. This is not, however, a pessimistic vision of queer theology's future because it is precisely this instability that will allow queer theologies to remain queer.

Attributions

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