

An
Introduction
to
QUEER
Theology

RADICAL LOVE

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Chapter One

What Is Queer Theology?

What is queer theology? For many people, "queer theology" is a troubling term. They may ask: What does theology have to do with "queerness"? Isn't "queer theology" an oxymoron or an inherent contradiction in terms? Isn't "queer" a derogatory word? For some, the word "queer" has painful connotations, especially if they were subjected to it as an epithet as a result of perceived or actual differences in sexuality or gender identity.

In recent years, however, the term "queer" has been used increasingly by scholars in a variety of theological and biblical contexts. One such example is the anthology *Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body*, which is a collection of provocative essays by theologians on the intersection between theology, sexuality, and gender identity.¹ Another is the groundbreaking *The Queer Bible Commentary*, a commentary on each of the books of the Christian Bible—from Genesis to Revelation—written from the perspective of those with marginalized sexualities and gender identities.²

So what exactly is queer theology? Simply put, if theology is defined as "talk about God" (that is, *theos* [God] + *logos* [word]), then queer theology can be understood as *queer talk about God*. This, of course, leads to the question of what exactly is meant by the term "queer," which is a more complicated issue. As such, we turn to a discussion of queer terminology.

Queer Terminology

This section will discuss at least three meanings of the word "queer": first, as an umbrella term; second, as transgressive

¹ See Gerard Loughlin, ed., *Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007).

² See Deryn Guest, Robert E. Goss, Mona West, and Thomas Bohache, eds., *The Queer Bible Commentary* (London: SCM Press, 2006).

action; and third, as erasing boundaries. Since the early 1990s, LGBT scholars (that is, scholars who have self-identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, questioning, or allies) have reclaimed the word "queer" from its previously negative connotations.³

Historically, the term "queer" has been used in a negative way. For example, the *Oxford English Dictionary Online* defines "queer" as "[s]trange, odd, peculiar, eccentric" as well as "relating to homosexuals or homosexuality." The *OED Online* traces the word back as far as a 1513 translation of Virgil's *Aeneid*, and it speculates that the word is derived from the German word "quer," which means "transverse, oblique, crosswise, at right angles, obstructive."

The OED Online notes, however, that although "queer" was originally used in a derogatory sense, since the late 1980s it has been used as a "neutral or positive term," citing a 1987 newspaper article that reported on a humorous sign at a march that said "We're here because we're queer."⁴ As such, we now turn to a discussion of three "neutral or positive" meanings of the word "queer."

"Queer" as Umbrella Term

One common use of the word "queer" is as an umbrella term that refers collectively to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, questioning, and other individuals who identify with non-normative sexualities and/or gender identities. The term "queer" also can include "allies" who may not themselves identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, or questioning, but stand in solidarity with their queer sisters and brothers in terms of seeking a more just world with respect to sexuality and gender identity. In other words, "queer" is a synonym for acronyms such as LGBTIQA.

It may be helpful here to review the difference between the concepts of sexuality and gender identity. Sexuality refers to the ways in which people are attracted emotionally and physically

³ For a helpful discussion of the term "queer" in the context of theological education, see Carter Heyward, "We're Here, We're Queer: Teaching Sex in Seminary," in *Body and Soul: Rethinking Sexuality as Justice-Love*, ed. Marvin M. Ellison and Sylvia Thorson-Smith (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2003), 78–96.

⁴ See "queer," *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (June 2010 draft revision), <http://www.oed.com>.

to the opposite sex, to the same sex, or to both sexes. Women who are primarily sexually attracted to other women are "lesbians," whereas men who are primarily sexually attracted to other men are "gay." People who are sexually attracted to both women and men are "bisexual." People who are sexually attracted to people of the opposite sex are "straight" or "heterosexual." In general, people within the LGBT community prefer the terms "lesbian," "gay," and "bisexual" to the more clinical term "homosexual."

By contrast, gender identity refers to the ways in which people self-identify with respect to their genders ("female" or "male"), regardless of the sex that they were assigned at birth. People who identify with a gender that is different from their assigned sex at birth are "transgender." Such people may or may not have had medical treatment (for example, hormones or surgery) to align their physical bodies with their gender identities. By contrast, people who identify with a gender that is aligned with their birth sex are "cisgender." People who decline to identify with one gender or the other are "gender queer." Finally, people who are born with ambiguous genitalia or genitalia of both sexes are "intersex."⁵

It is important to note that gender identity is a concept that is distinct from sexuality. In other words, the fact that a person is transgender is separate from that person's sexuality. Thus, a trans woman (that is, a person who was assigned the male sex at birth but who is self-identified as female) may be a lesbian (that is, sexually attracted to other female-identified people), heterosexual (that is, sexually attracted to male-identified people), or bisexual (that is, sexually attracted to both female-identified and male-identified people).

To summarize, the term "queer" is often used as an umbrella or collective term to describe people with marginalized sexualities (lesbian, gay, or bisexual) as well as with marginalized gender identities (transgender) or genitalia (intersex). We see

⁵ For additional resources about transgender issues, see Susannah Cornwall, "State of Mind' versus 'Concrete Set of Facts': The Contrasting of Transgender and Intersex in Church Documents on Sexuality," *Theology and Sexuality* 15, no. 1 (Jan. 2009): 7–28; Joanne Herman, *Transgender Explained for Those Who Are Not* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2009); Victoria S. Kolakowski, "Toward a Christian Ethical Response to Transsexual Persons," *Theology and Sexuality* no. 6 (March 1997): 10–31; Susan Stryker, *Transgender History* (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2008).

this use of the word "queer" as an umbrella or collective term in the works of LGBT theologians such as Nancy Wilson, the current moderator of the Metropolitan Community Churches,⁶ and the late Robert Williams, one of the first openly gay priests in the Episcopal Church.⁷

"Queer" as Transgressive Action

In addition to the umbrella sense of the word "queer," there is a second meaning of "queer" that is an intentional reclaiming of a word that previously had only negative connotations. In recent years, the word "queer" has been used by many LGBT people as positive label that proudly embraces all that is transgressive or opposed to societal norms, particularly with respect to sexuality and gender identity. This use parallels the reclaiming of the word "black" by African Americans during the 1960s as a positive term of pride. Prior to that time, the preferred term was "colored" or "negro," since "black" had a negative connotation in a racial context.

The use of the word "queer" as a positive term of pride for LGBT people can be traced as far back as the late 1980s. The *Oxford English Dictionary Online* cites a 1989 article that describes the LGBT community as a "queer nation" that is "assertively coed, multi-racial and anti-consumerist."⁸ In 1990, the radical organization Queer Nation was founded with the goal of fighting anti-LGBT violence and prejudice through activism and confrontational tactics such as outing closeted politicians and celebrities. Queer Nation has used a number of slogans including "We're here, we're queer, get used to it!" and "Out of the closets and into the streets!"

Along these lines, Robert Shore-Goss, an openly gay theologian and minister with the Metropolitan Community Churches, has described queer theology as a fundamentally transgressive enterprise in his book *Queering Christ: Beyond Jesus Acted Up*. Indeed, Shore-Goss has argued that transgression should

⁶ See Nancy Wilson, *Our Tribe: Queer Folks, God, Jesus, and the Bible* (San Francisco, HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), 231–80 (outlining a "queer" theology of sexuality that is grounded in "promiscuous hospitality").

⁷ See Robert Williams, *Just as I Am: A Practical Guide to Being Out, Proud, and Christian* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1992), xxv (explaining his decision to use "queer" instead of "gay" or "gay and lesbian").

⁸ See "Queer Nation," *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (December 2007 draft entry), <http://www.oed.com>.

be seen as a central metaphor for queer theologies. For Shore-Goss, the term "queer" is used to describe an action that "turns upside down, inside out" that which is seen as normative, including "heteronormative theologies." In that sense, the act of queering traditional theological discourse has a "prophetic edge."⁹

Thus, the second meaning of "queer" is a self-conscious embrace of all that is transgressive of societal norms, particularly in the context of sexuality and gender identity. In fact, this term is best understood as a verb or an action. That is, to "queer" something is to engage with a methodology that challenges and disrupts the status quo. Like the function of the court jester or the subversive traditions of Mardi Gras, to "queer" something is to turn convention and authority on its head. It is about seeing things in a different light and reclaiming voices and sources that previously had been ignored, silenced, or discarded. It is proudly asserting a worldview for which LGBT people have been historically taunted, condemned, beaten, tortured, and killed.

"Queer" as Erasing Boundaries

A third meaning of "queer" is grounded in the academic discipline known as queer theory, which arose in the early 1990s and is indebted to the work of the late French philosopher Michel Foucault. Put simply, queer theory views sexuality as something that is "continually undergoing negotiation and dissemination, rather than as a mere natural (let alone medical) fact."¹⁰ In other words, queer theory challenges and disrupts the traditional notions that sexuality and gender identity are simply questions of scientific fact or that such concepts can be reduced to fixed binary categories such as "homosexual" vs. "heterosexual" or "female" vs. "male." As such, this third definition of "queer" refers to the erasing or deconstructing of boundaries with respect to these categories of sexuality and gender.

In other words, queer theory argues that the significance of

⁹ Robert E. Goss, *Queering Christ: Beyond Jesus Acted Up* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2002), 228–29.

¹⁰ Andrew Edgar and Peter Sedgwick, *Cultural Theory: The Key Concepts*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2008), 277.

traditional categories of sexuality and gender identity are actually social constructions. For example, Foucault demonstrated how the term "homosexual" was only invented in the late nineteenth century in Germany. This is not to say that there weren't people engaging in same-sex acts prior to that time. In fact, there certainly have been people engaged in same-sex acts throughout history and across cultures. What Foucault was saying, however, was that this was the first time that a person's *identity* was defined or categorized in terms of the gender of her or his preferred sexual partner(s). Thus, sexuality became an issue of *being*—that is, *who* one was—as opposed to *what* one was doing.

Although in some ways it may be helpful for a minority group (such as "homosexuals") to identify itself in essentialist terms for purposes of achieving greater political or legal power, ultimately such classifications are problematic because, as Foucault pointed out, such classifications are actually a means by which society circumscribes and exercises power and control over the classified group.

For example, we could imagine a world that limits marriage to people who only have a hat size less than 7½ or only people who prefer Pepsi over Coke. In such a world, such classifications—that is, one's hat size or preferred brand of soda—would have significant consequences for its inhabitants. However, these classifications are no less "natural" than classifying people on the basis of the gender of their preferred sex partners. For example, for much of history, people were classified in terms of whether they were the penetrators (tops) or the penetrated (bottoms) in sexual acts, and not by the gender of their preferred sex partners."¹¹

As such, categories of sexuality are ultimately social constructions. Furthermore, the fact that sexualities are traditionally reduced to the binaries of "homosexuality" vs. "heterosexuality" ignores the more complicated notion that sexuality occurs across a spectrum. Indeed, the existence of bisexual people is a challenge for straight people as well as lesbians and

¹¹ See Martti Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World: A Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998), 128–34 ("The Interpretation of Same-Sex Relations Then and Now").

gay men because it threatens the neat categories of "homosexuality" vs. "heterosexuality."

The same analysis applies to gender identity. The existence of transgender and intersex people challenges the traditional binary categorization of gender and sex as "female" vs. "male." This is precisely why cross-dressing can be troubling for many people; it threatens our society's neat, socially constructed notions of gender expression and sex. As Judith Butler has argued, gender is a performative act as opposed to a matter of essentialism or nature. That is, gendered notions of "femaleness" and "maleness" are culturally constructed and are not necessarily related to one's biological sex. Thus, whenever a person refuses to engage in the "correct" gender expression that is expected of her or his biological sex (such as in the case of cross-dressing), this threatens the social order and, as such, reveals the socially constructed nature of gender identity.¹²

Gerard Loughlin, an openly gay theologian at the University of Durham, has described "queer" as that which "seeks to outwit identity." In other words, "queer" destabilizes that which is perceived as "normal" identity—for example, the binary choice between "heterosexuality" and "homosexuality"—by erasing the boundaries between such polarities and thus symbolizing a "difference, a divergence." For Loughlin, queer theory is a means by which "heteropatriarchal Christianity" can be destabilized and deconstructed.¹³

Thus, the third meaning of "queer" is the erasing or deconstructing of boundaries, particularly with respect to the essentialist or fixed binary categories of sexuality and gender. As we have seen, this meaning of "queer" is grounded in the academic fields of queer studies and queer theory, which in turn is based upon the work of academics such as Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick.

¹² For a discussion of Butler's work in the context of religious studies, see Ellen T. Armour and Susan M. St. Ville, eds., *Bodily Citations: Religion and Judith Butler* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

¹³ Gerard Loughlin, "Introduction: The End of Sex," in Loughlin, *Queer Theology*, 9–10.

Defining Queer Theology

So what exactly is queer theology? If theology is "talk about God," then, in light of the above three definitions of "queer," there are at least three possible definitions for "queer theology." First, queer theology is LGBT people "talking about God." Second, queer theology is "talking about God" in a self-consciously transgressive manner, especially in terms of challenging societal norms about sexuality and gender. Third, queer theology is "talk about God" that challenges and deconstructs the natural binary categories of sexual and gender identity. Let us examine each of these three definitions in turn.

First, in light of the umbrella or collective term definition of "queer," queer theology can be understood as LGBT people "talking about God." In other words, queer theology is a shorthand term for theology that is done by and for LGBT people. Thus, instead of writing the phrase "talk about God by and for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, questioning people as well as our allies" over and over again, we can simply use the term "queer theology" as shorthand. As we have seen, Nancy Wilson has articulated what she calls a "queer theology of sexuality" that is grounded in bodily hospitality. For Wilson, this queer theology speaks to gay men, lesbians, bisexual people, and others who identify as "queer."¹⁴

Second, in light of the definition of "queer" as transgression, queer theology can be understood as a theological method that is self-consciously transgressive, especially by challenging societal norms about sexuality and gender. Thus, queer theology refers to a way of doing theology that, in the words of the *Magnificat*, brings down the powerful and lifts up the lowly.¹⁵ In particular, this theology seeks to unearth silenced voices or hidden perspectives. One example of this kind of theology is the "indecent theology" of the late bisexual theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid from the University of Edinburgh. According to Althaus-Reid, queer theology should shock people out of their complacency and help them see theology in a new light.

¹⁴ Wilson, *Our Tribe*, 231–80.

¹⁵ See Luke 1:52.

Althaus-Reid certainly did that in her books *Indecent Theology* and *The Queer God*, which contained provocative chapters such as "Oral Sex: sexual his/torias in oral theology"¹⁶ and "Kneeling: deviant theologians."¹⁷ Hence, queer theology differs from prophetic discourse in that queer theology is self-consciously transgressive in terms of methodology, whereas prophetic discourse involves speaking on behalf of the divine and subordinating one's will to that of God (which, of course, may also be a transgressive act).

Third, in light of the definition of "queer" as erasing boundaries, queer theology can be understood as a way of doing theology that is rooted in queer theory and that critiques the binary categories of sexuality (that is, homosexual vs. heterosexual) and gender identity (that is, female vs. male) as socially constructed. In other words, queer theology argues that the discourse of classical Christian theology ultimately requires the erasing of the boundaries of essentialist categories of not only sexuality and gender identity, but also more fundamental boundaries such as life vs. death, and divine vs. human. The recent work of the openly lesbian theologian Elizabeth Stuart of the University of Winchester on the eschatological dimension of the sacraments (such as baptism and the Eucharist) is strongly rooted in this view of queer theology.¹⁸

While this book will draw upon all three definitions of queer theology, the main focus will be on the third definition: that is, how queer theology, like queer studies and queer theory, erases boundaries by challenging and deconstructing the "natural" binary categories of sexual and gender identity. Indeed, it is the thesis of this book that Christian theology itself is a fundamentally queer enterprise because it also challenges and deconstructs—through radical love—all kinds of binary categories that on the surface seem fixed and unchangeable (such as life vs. death, or divine vs. human), but that ultimately are fluid and malleable.

¹⁶ Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2000), 134.

¹⁷ Marcella Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God* (London: Routledge, 2003), 7.

¹⁸ See Elizabeth Stuart, "Making No Sense: Liturgy as Queer Space," in Isherwood and Jordan, *Dancing Theology in Fetish Boots*, 113–23; Elizabeth Stuart, "The Priest at the Altar: The Eucharistic Erasure of Sex," in Althaus-Reid and Isherwood, *Trans/formations*, 127–38; Elizabeth Stuart, "Sacramental Flesh," in Loughlin, *Queer Theology*, 65–75.

In other words, Christian theology is fundamentally a queer enterprise because it focuses upon the incarnation, life, death, resurrection, ascension, and second coming of Jesus Christ, all of which are events that turn upside down our traditional understanding of life and death, divine and human, center and margins, beginnings and endings, infinite and finite, and punishment and forgiveness. As with the case of queer theory, it is in Jesus Christ that all of these seemingly fixed binary categories are ultimately challenged and collapsed.

Four Sources of Queer Theology

Where did queer theology come from? Did it just fall out of the sky? Was it an invention of LGBT activists? For many people, the notion of queer theology is an oxymoron, particularly in light of how traditional Christianity has condemned—and continues to condemn—same-sex acts and gender-variant identities as intrinsically sinful. However, in recent years an increasing number of theologians have written about queer theology, drawing upon a variety of different theological sources.¹⁹

Like all other theologies, queer theology draws upon at least four sources: (1) scripture, (2) tradition, (3) reason, and (4) experience. This multiplicity of sources is important because, on the one hand, theology has never been simply about reading the Bible literally (that is, scripture) nor simply about what the church authorities have taught (that is, tradition). On the other hand, theology has never been simply a matter of drawing upon philosophy (that is, reason) nor has it simply been equated with the human experience of the divine (that is, experience).

Rather, theology is a synthesis of all four sources, and each of these sources acts as a "check and balance" for the other three. Of course, different traditions give different weight for each of these sources. For example, evangelical Protestants rely heavily upon scripture, Roman Catholics rely heavily upon tradition, Anglicans rely heavily upon reason, and progressive

¹⁹ See e.g., Loughlin, *Queer Theology*; Althaus-Reid and Isherwood, *Trans/formations*.

Protestants rely heavily upon experience. But it is important to realize that each of these sources must still be read in light of the other three. Let us now turn to each of these four sources in the context of queer theology.

Queer Scripture

First, queer theology draws upon scripture—that is, the Hebrew and Christian scriptures (also known as the First and Second Testaments)—in creative ways. Although scripture (and, in particular, the handful of “texts of terror”²⁰ for LGBT people) traditionally has been used as a means of oppressing LGBT people, queer biblical scholars in recent years have not only countered these antique readings with alternative readings, but they have also “taken back” or “reclaimed” the Bible by interpreting it positively and constructively from their own perspectives.

For example, take the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19, which has been the paradigmatic story for God’s punishment of same-sex acts. In that story, two angelic visitors stay overnight in the town of Sodom. However, the lawless men of Sodom demand that the visitors’ host, Lot, turn the visitors over so that they may “know” them. The visitors escape along with Lot’s family, and God destroys Sodom and its sister city, Gomorrah, with fire and brimstone.²¹

Although the story of Sodom and Gomorrah has been interpreted traditionally as evidence of God’s punishment of LGBT people, queer biblical scholars have argued that the story is actually a condemnation of the sin of *inhospitality* toward strangers, which had life or death consequences in the harsh desert environment of the biblical world. This is evidenced by the descriptions of Sodom and Gomorrah elsewhere in the Bible (for example, Ezekiel 16:48–49), which focus on inhospitality instead of same-sex acts.²²

Ironically, some LGBT theologians and ethicists such as

²⁰ See Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1984).

²¹ See generally Gen. 19.

²² See Daniel A. Helminiak, *What the Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*, millennium ed. (Tajique, NM: Alamo Square Press), 43–50.

Nancy Wilson and Kathy Rudy have "queered" the Sodom narrative by placing hospitality at the *center* of queer theological reflection. For example, Wilson has constructed a "queer theology of sexuality" by focusing on the gift of "promiscuous" or "bodily hospitality" that many LGBT people have.²³ Rudy, an openly lesbian ethicist at Duke University, has suggested that nonmonogamous sex acts—including anonymous and communal sex—can be viewed in terms of a progressive ethic of hospitality.²⁴

Much has been written about the debate over the meaning of the half-dozen or so LGBT "texts of terror" in the Bible, and I will not rehearse those arguments here.²⁵ However, it is important to note that queer theologians have gone beyond these "texts of terror" and have read the Bible in creative and constructive ways as a means of affirming LGBT experience.²⁶ For example, Nancy Wilson has argued that LGBT people can be found in a number of biblical narratives—including David and Jonathan, Ruth and Naomi, the Roman Centurion, the Ethiopian Eunuch, and Mary, Martha, and Lazarus—which she refers to as "our gay and lesbian tribal texts."²⁷

In 2006, over thirty LGBT religious scholars, ministers, and writers contributed to *The Queer Bible Commentary*, which was the first queer commentary on all the books of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, from Genesis to Revelation. As the preface states, the commentary shows that biblical texts have the "ever-surprising capacity to be disruptive, unsettling and

²³ Wilson, *Our Tribe*, 231–80.

²⁴ See Kathy Rudy, *Sex and the Church: Gender Homosexuality, and the Transformation of Christian Ethics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), 108–30.

²⁵ For a description of the standard LGBT "texts of terror" (that is, Gen. 19, Lev. 18:22, Lev. 20:13, Deut. 22:5, Deut. 23:1, Rom. 1:26–27, 1 Cor. 6:9, and 1 Tim. 1:10) and responses by LGBT theologians, see Helminiak, *What the Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*; Goss, *Queering Christ*, 185–220; Justin Tanis, *Trans-Gendered: Theology, Ministry, and Communities of Faith* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2003), 55–84 (transgender passages); Sally Gross, "Intersexuality and Scripture," *Theology and Sexuality* 11 (September 1999): 65–74 (intersex passages). Other resources include L. William Countryman, *Dirt, Greed and Sex: Sexual Ethics in the New Testament and Their Implications for Today* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1988); Peter J. Gomes, *The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 144–72; D.J. Good, "Reading Strategies for Biblical Passages on Same-Sex Relations," *Theology and Sexuality*, no. 7 (Sept. 1997): 70–82; and Mark D. Jordan, *The Ethics of Sex* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 2002). For a helpful resource for LGBT people who are recovering from the abusive use of the Bible, see Rembert Truluck, *Steps to Recovery from Bible Abuse* (Gaithersburg, MD: Chi Rho Press, 2000).

²⁶ For discussions about queer hermeneutics, see Timothy R. Koch, "A Homoerotic Approach to Scripture," *Theology and Sexuality*, no. 14 (Jan. 2001): 10–22; Mona West, "Reading the Bible as Queer Americans: Social Location and the Hebrew Scriptures," *Theology and Sexuality*, no. 10 (March 1999): 28–42.

²⁷ See Wilson, *Our Tribe*, 111–64. Texts cited by Wilson include 1 Sam. 18:1–4, 20:14–17 (Jonathan and David); Ruth 1:16–17 (Ruth and Naomi); Matt. 8:5–13, Luke 7:1–10 (the Roman Centurion); Acts 8:26–40 (the Ethiopian Eunuch); John 11 (Mary, Martha, and Lazarus).

unexpectedly but delightfully *queer*." Furthermore, the contributors employed a wide range of hermeneutic approaches, including "feminist, queer, deconstructionist, postcolonial, and utopian theories, the social sciences, and historical-critical discourses."²⁸

Other examples of using scripture as a positive source for queer theology include: *Jacob's Wound: Homoerotic Narrative in the Literature of Ancient Israel*; *Queer Commentary and the Hebrew Bible*; *The Subversive Gospel: A New Testament Commentary of Liberation*; *Take Back the Word: A Queer Reading of the Bible*; *Torah Queeries: Weekly Commentaries on the Hebrew Bible*; *When Deborah Met Jael: Lesbian Biblical Hermeneutics*; and *The Word Is Out: Daily Reflections on the Bible for Lesbians and Gay Men*.²⁹ By engaging with scripture from our unique social locations, queer people are able to articulate more clearly how the Word of God has touched us, and how we in turn can "talk about God" from an authentically queer perspective.

Queer Tradition

Queer theology draws upon tradition—that is, church history as well as the teachings of the church over the last two millennia—in creative ways. As in the case of scripture, Christian tradition usually has been seen as being uniformly anti-queer. However, in 1955 Derrick Sherwin Bailey, an Anglican priest, published the groundbreaking historical study *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition*, which for the first time challenged the traditionally negative view of the Christian theological tradition toward LGBT people.³⁰

Bailey's book was followed twenty-five years later by *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century*, a groundbreaking work by the late John

²⁸ Guest et al., *Queer Bible Commentary*, xiii.

²⁹ See Theodore W. Jennings, *Jacob's Wound: Homoerotic Narrative in the Literature of Ancient Israel* (New York: Continuum, 2005); Ken Stone, ed., *Queer Commentary and the Hebrew Bible* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2001); Tom Hanks, *The Subversive Gospel: A New Testament Commentary of Liberation* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2000); Robert E. Goss and Mona West, eds., *Take Back the Word: A Queer Reading of the Bible* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2000); Drinkwater et al., *Torah Queeries*; Deryn Guest, *When Deborah Met Jael: Lesbian Biblical Hermeneutics* (London: SCM Press, 2005); and Chris Glaser, *The Word Is Out: Daily Reflections on the Bible for Lesbians and Gay Men* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994).

³⁰ See Derrick Sherwin Bailey, *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition* (London: Longmans, Green, 1955), viii.

Boswell, an openly gay history professor at Yale University. Boswell argued that Christianity was not uniformly homophobic throughout its early history and that it only became significantly homophobic in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.³¹ The book was incredibly influential and even generated a collection of essays on its impact on religious scholarship.³² Prior to his death in 1994, Boswell published *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe*, which argued that same-sex blessing rites existed in the Christian church for centuries.³³

In addition to Boswell, other scholars have reexamined the Christian tradition from the LGBT perspective. These include Bernadette Brooten, a religious studies professor at Brandeis University, who wrote about female homoeroticism in early Christianity—an issue that was largely overlooked by Boswell—in *Love Between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism*, and Judith C. Brown, who documented the story of Sister Benedetta Carlini, a lesbian abbess in sixteenth-century Italy, in *Immodest Acts: The Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy*.³⁴

Finally, a number of LGBT scholars have reexamined the work of classical theologians from a queer perspective. These include Mark D. Jordan, an openly gay theologian at Harvard Divinity School, who examined the work of medieval theologians such as Peter Damian and Thomas Aquinas in *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology*. Jordan concluded that the theological term "sodomy" was invented by medieval theologians as a result of their fear of the pure erotic state (that is, sexual pleasure without any connection to biological reproduction) and thus created a category by which such a state could be condemned unequivocally by the church.³⁵

Such scholars also include Virginia Burrus, a professor of early church history at Drew University, who has read early

³¹ See John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

³² See Mathew Kuefler, ed., *The Boswell Thesis: Essays on Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

³³ See John Boswell, *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994).

³⁴ See Bernadette J. Brooten, *Love Between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Judith C. Brown, *Immodest Acts: The Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

³⁵ See Mark D. Jordan, *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

Christian stories of saints from a variety of interpretive lenses, including queer theory, in *The Sex Lives of Saints: An Erotics of Ancient Hagiography*, and who, along with Mark Jordan and Karmen MacKendrick, has examined the themes of seduction and confession in the work of Augustine of Hippo in *Seducing Augustine: Bodies, Desires, Confessions*.³⁶

By reclaiming the Christian tradition, these queer scholars have located the LGBT experience squarely within the history and teachings of the church. As such, we are able to draw upon this work as a source for constructing our own theologies.

Queer Reason

Queer theology also draws upon reason—that is, our ability as human beings to observe the world and use philosophy to know God. Traditionally speaking, this source of theology assumes that God can be known by observing nature and the created order. For example, Thomas Aquinas' famous five proofs for God are derived from the principles of reason.

Traditionally speaking, reason has not been seen as a queer-friendly source of theology. This is due in large part to the Roman Catholic view that nonprocreative sexual acts (including same-sex acts) are always intrinsically evil as a matter of natural law. However, the Roman Catholic theologian Gareth Moore challenged this traditional view in his book *A Question of Truth: Christianity and Homosexuality*. According to Moore, the magisterium of the Roman Catholic Church must ask itself whether what it teaches is actually true. 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 in the created order?³⁷

The truth is that, contrary to the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, there are hundreds of animal and bird species in the natural world that engage in same-sex acts or gender-variant behavior.³⁸ Furthermore, there have been numerous

³⁶ See Virginia Burrus, *The Sex Lives of Saints: An Erotics of Ancient Hagiography* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Burrus et al., *Seducing Augustine*.

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

³⁸ See Bruce Bagemihl, *Biological Exuberance: Animal Homosexuality and Natural Diversity* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999).

Roman Catholic bishops, priests, members of religious orders, and laypersons who have come out of the closet and written about their experiences as LGBT people.³⁹

After reviewing the scientific evidence, Moore concludes in his book that the "only rational course at the moment" is to "continue to believe in the possible goodness of homosexual relationships." For Moore, this is not a question of dissent, but rather the fact that the Roman Catholic Church currently lacks any sound arguments upon which its condemnation of same-sex acts can be based. That is, "the church teaches badly."⁴⁰

In addition to challenging the traditional natural law arguments about the intrinsically evil nature of same-sex acts,⁴¹ queer theologians have increasingly drawn upon reason in the form of poststructuralist philosophy—that is, queer theory—in constructing their queer theology. Queer theory rejects the traditional view that categories of sexuality (that is, homosexual vs. heterosexual) and gender identity (that is, female vs. male) are "natural," essentialist, or fixed. Instead, as articulated in the work of theorists such as Judith Butler and Michel Foucault, queer theory argues that the meanings of such categories are socially constructed.

This is not to deny that there are in fact physiological differences between people in terms of sexual attraction and bodies. These differences *do* exist. Furthermore, this is not to deny that sexuality and gender identity can effectively be immutable characteristics for many people and thus are deserving of legal protections akin to race. However, the *significance* of such differences in terms of sexuality and gender identity is not simply a matter of "nature," but rather is socially constructed. As noted above, even though people may differ in terms of, say, hat size, that particular physical marker of difference has little to no

³⁹ See, e.g., Rembert G. Weakland, *A Pilgrim in a Pilgrim Church: Memoirs of a Catholic Archbishop* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2009); Robert L. Arpin, *Wonderfully, Fearfully Made: Letters on Living with Hope, Teaching Understanding, and Ministering with Love, from a Gay Catholic Priest with AIDS* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993); Paul Murray, *Life in Paradox: The Story of a Gay Catholic Priest* (Winchester UK: O Books, 2008); Amie M. Evans and Trebor Healey, eds., *Queer and Catholic* (New York: Routledge, 2008); Dugan McGinley, *Acts of Faith, Acts of Love: Gay Catholic Autobiographies as Sacred Texts* (New York: Continuum, 2004); Scott Pomfret, *Since My Last Confession: A Gay Catholic Memoir* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2008).

⁴⁰ Moore, *A Question of Truth*, 282.

⁴¹ For a discussion on moral argumentation and homosexuality, see Pim Pronk, *Against Nature?: Types of Moral Argumentation Regarding Homosexuality* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1993).

relevance in everyday life. Similarly, there is no reason why a person's genitalia must *automatically* determine everything from hair and clothing styles to preferred color (for example, pink vs. blue) to family role to career choices. It is important to understand that the spectrum of behaviors normally associated with an individual's birth-assigned sex are actually a matter of a social convention that is constantly changing.

Queer theologians have used queer theory to challenge not only the fluidity of sexual and gender boundaries,⁴² but also the boundaries relating to Christian theology itself. These boundaries include the divine vs. human, soul vs. body, life vs. death, heaven vs. earth, center vs. margins, and numerous other boundaries that are dissolved or erased by radical love as we approach the eschatological horizon. Indeed, Christian theology is, as I have suggested, fundamentally a queer enterprise.

Finally, queer theologians—and especially queer theologians of color—are drawing upon other forms of reason and philosophy, such as a postcolonial theory, in their “talk about God.” The language of postcolonial theory is especially effective in terms of dealing with issues of hybridity and intersectionality (that is, the multiple social locations of sexuality, gender identity, sex, race, and other identities) and the power dynamics between and within various identity groups.⁴³

Queer Experience

Finally, queer theology draws upon experience as a source for theology. As in the case of 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 LGBT lives and experiences have been excluded from traditional theological discourse. Indeed, queer experience is an important—if not critical—source for doing theology from a queer perspective.

⁴² For the intersection of queer theory with religious studies, see Armour and St. Ville, *Bodily Citations*; James Bernauer and Jeremy Carrette, eds., *Michel Foucault and Theology: The Politics of Religious Experience* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2004); Jeremy R. Carrette, *Foucault and Religion: Spiritual Corporality and Political Spirituality* (London: Routledge, 2000).

⁴³ For examples of postcolonial readings of classical theologians, see Kwok Pui-lan, Don H. Compier, and Joerg Rieger, eds., *Empire and the Christian Tradition: New Readings of Classical Theologians* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007).

In recent years, there have been a number of anthologies of the voices of LGBT people of faith, including *From Queer to Eternity: Spirituality in the Lives of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual People*; *Recreations: Religion and Spirituality in the Lives of Queer People*; *Queer and Catholic*; and *Sanctified: An Anthology of Poetry by LGBT Christians*.⁴⁴ These anthologies are helpful sources in terms of articulating experience as a source for queer theology.

Queer theologians of all backgrounds and perspectives have used experience as a source of theology. For example, Robert Shore-Goss has written provocatively about his erotic love for Jesus in constructing a queer christology. Shore-Goss tells us that, while a novice with the Jesuits, he imagined a "naked Jesus as a muscular, handsome, bearded man." Shore-Goss wrote that, later on, during "passionate lovemaking, I felt Christ in a way that I only experienced in my solitary erotic prayer."⁴⁵

Carter Heyward, an openly lesbian theologian and professor emerita at the Episcopal Divinity School—and one of the first female priests in the Episcopal Church and the wider Anglican Communion—has written about finding God in her sensual and embodied connection with nature while walking with her dogs. She writes that, in observing the "trees' gnarled roots at the water's edge, the wind-chill whipping my cheeks, the pile of dog shit I step in, the crows harping from the fence, the joggers and other walkers," she knows that her sensuality is her "most common link" to the rest of the earth and "can be trusted."⁴⁶

Laurel Dykstra, an openly bisexual theologian and member of the Catholic Worker movement, has written about how, as "a Canadian living in the United States, a bisexual person, [and] a theologically educated lay person," she is always living in "in-between spaces." As such, her sexuality and spirituality are closely connected. Indeed, Dykstra's in-between experience

⁴⁴ See Peter Sweasey, *From Queer to Eternity: Spirituality in the Lives of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual People* (London: Cassell, 1997); Catherine Lake, ed., *Recreations: Religion and Spirituality in the Lives of Queer People* (Toronto: Queer Press, 1999); Evans and Healey, *Queer and Catholic*; Justin R. Cannon, *Sanctified: An Anthology of Poetry by LGBT Christians* (Scotts Valley, CA: Createspace, 2008).

⁴⁵ Robert E. Goss, "Passionate Love for Christ: Out of the Closet, Into the Streets," in *Male Lust: Pleasure, Power, and Transformation*, ed. Kerwin Kay, Jill Nagle, and Baruch Gould (Binghamton, NY: Harrington Park Press, 2000), 298, 301.

⁴⁶ Carter Heyward, *Touching Our Strength: The Erotic as Power and the Love of God* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1989), 93.

actually helps her to "live and love joyfully and defiantly, like Jesus embracing the glorious ambiguity and refusing to be held by purity codes, gay or straight."⁴⁷

Finally, Justin Tanis, a self-identified transman and ordained Metropolitan Community Church minister, has written about how his theological work arises out of the intersections of his personal experiences as a "transsexual person" and his "professional life as a clergyperson." Tanis described how his calling in terms of gender was "remarkably familiar to me; it was like my experience of discerning a call to the ministry." Like his vocational call, the journey of transitioning for Tanis was a "journey to authenticity, a deeply spiritual process."⁴⁸

By writing about their experiences of encountering God within their particular social contexts, each of the above queer theologians have shown that experience is a central source for "talking about God" and doing queer theology.

Example: Same-Sex Marriage as Sacrament?

This chapter will close with an example of "doing" queer theology in light of the four sources of theology described above. Specifically, it examines the issue of same-sex marriages and whether such marriages should be treated as a sacrament (that is, a formal rite of the church) in the same way as opposite-sex marriages.⁴⁹ This, of course, is an issue that is creating much division in the mainline Christian churches, particularly as more civil jurisdictions in the United States (for example, Connecticut, Iowa, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Vermont) permit same-sex couples to marry under civil law.

With respect to the first source—scripture—a queer theologian might turn to narratives in the Bible about intimate same-sex relationships, including Jonathan and David (who made a "covenant" together),⁵⁰ Ruth and Naomi (whose vow to

⁴⁷ Laurel Dykstra, "Jesus, Bread, Wine and Roses: A Bisexual Feminist at the Catholic Worker," in *Blessed Bi Spirit: Bisexual People of Faith*, ed. Debra R. Kolodny (New York: Continuum, 2000), 78–79, 87.

⁴⁸ Tanis, *Trans-Gendered*, 1, 4.

⁴⁹ It should be noted that the Roman Catholic Church recognizes seven sacraments, including marriage, but most Protestant denominations recognize only two sacraments: baptism and Eucharist. Here, I use the term "sacrament" broadly as a formal rite of the church.

⁵⁰ See 1 Sam. 20:16.

follow each other is traditionally used in opposite-sex marriage ceremonies),⁵¹ and even Jesus and the Beloved Disciple. Nancy Wilson has written about these same-sex relationships,⁵² as has Robert Williams, who hypothesized that Jesus was gay and that the Beloved Disciple was not only his lover but also another name for Lazarus.⁵³

With respect to the second source—tradition—a queer theologian might draw from John Boswell's work on same-sex rites of blessing throughout the history of the church. Boswell hypothesized that these rites were based upon ancient Roman "brotherhood" rites and arose out of an early Christian fascination with same-sex saint couples, including "military pairs like Serg[ius] and Bacchus" who may have been in romantic relationships.⁵⁴ Similarly, such a theologian could draw upon the research of Alan Bray, a University of London historian, which focused on an Anglican tradition—dating back to at least the fourteenth century—of burying two same-sex friends, complete with marital imagery, in the same tomb.⁵⁵

With respect to the third source—reason—a queer theologian might turn to queer theory and poststructuralist thought to challenge the notion that, as a result of "nature," marriage must be restricted to one man and one woman. As noted above, there are hundreds of animal species that engage in same-sex acts and gender-variant behaviors. Also, as in the case of sexuality and gender identity, the definitional boundaries with respect to marriage are socially constructed and do change over time.⁵⁶ For example, polygamy was recognized in biblical times, and the antimiscegenation laws that prohibited interracial marriage were not declared unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court until 1967.

⁵¹ See Ruth 1:16.

⁵² See Wilson, *Our Tribe*, 140–57.

⁵³ Williams, *Just As I Am*, 120–23.

⁵⁴ Boswell, *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe*, 218–19.

⁵⁵ See Alan Bray, *The Friend* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); see also Alan Bray, "Friendship, the Family and Liturgy: A Rite for Blessing Friendship in Traditional Christianity," *Theology and Sexuality*, no. 13 (Sept. 2000): 15–33. For example, Blessed John Henry Cardinal Newman was buried in the same grave as his close friend Ambrose St. John, but what was left of Newman's remains were moved as the Roman Catholic Church prepared to beatify him in 2010.

⁵⁶ There is, of course, disagreement within the progressive LGBT faith community as to whether same-sex marriage ultimately benefits queer people or is merely a way of reinscribing patriarchal values. See, e.g., Mary E. Hunt, "Same-Sex Marriage and Relational Justice," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 20, no. 2 (Fall 2004): 83–92.

Finally, with respect to the fourth source—experience—a queer theologian might turn to experiences of LGBT people in long-term relationships and examine how such relationships are in fact a visible manifestation of the invisible grace of God in the lives of such individuals. For example, Richard Hardy, a professor of spirituality and a gay man, has written about the lives of gay male couples who are touched by HIV/AIDS, and how the men in these relationships are "saints" who "live and love passionately, each in their own way, place, and time."⁵⁷

As this example shows, "doing" queer theology is not simply a matter of advocacy or determining the "right" answer. Rather, it is an engagement with the four theological sources of scripture, tradition, reason, and experience, and reflecting deeply upon how LGBT people "talk about God."



Study Questions

1. How do you react to the definition of queer theology as "queer talk about God"?
2. How have you used the word "queer" in the past? How does it make you feel to use "queer" in the context of theology?
3. Describe each of the three definitions of "queer" as (a) an umbrella or collective term; (b) transgressive action; and (c) erasing boundaries. What are the three corresponding ways of understanding "queer theology"?
4. How does queer theory erase boundaries, particularly in the context of traditional categories of sexuality and gender identity? How does Christian theology also erase boundaries?

⁵⁷ Richard P. Hardy, *Loving Men: Gay Partners, Spirituality, and AIDS* (New York: Continuum, 1998), 183. For a discussion of how the sacred manifests itself in the sex lives of gay men, see David Nimmons, *The Soul Beneath the Skin: The Unseen Hearts and Habits of Gay Men* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2002). For a general discussion of same-sex relationships and blessings, see Mark D. Jordan, ed., *Authorizing Marriage?: Canon, Tradition, and Critique in the Blessing of Same-Sex Unions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

5. Which of the four sources of queer theology—scripture, tradition, reason, and experience—appeals to you the most? The least?
6. Which of the various theological sources mentioned in support of same-sex marriage do you find the most persuasive?

For Further Study

Queer Theory

- Buchanan, *Oxford Dictionary of Critical Theory*, 393–94 ("queer studies," "queer theory").
- Edgar and Sedgwick, *Cultural Theory*, 277–78 ("queer theory").
- Hall, *Queer Theories*.
- Jagose, *Queer Theory*.
- Macey, *Dictionary of Critical Theory*, 321–22 ("queer").
- Stryker, *Transgender History*.
- Sullivan, *Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*.
- Turner, *Genealogy of Queer Theory*.
- Wilchins, *Queer Theory, Gender Theory*.

Defining Queer Theology

- Goss, *Queering Christ*, 223–58.
- Heyward, "We're Here, We're Queer."
- Loughlin, "Introduction."
- Shore-Goss, "Gay and Lesbian Theologies."
- Siker, "Queer Theology."
- Spencer, "Lesbian and Gay Theologies."
- Stuart, *Gay and Lesbian Theologies*.
- Stuart, *Religion Is a Queer Thing*.

Four Sources of Queer Theology

Scripture

- Drinkwater et al., *Torah Queeries*.
- Glaser, *The Word Is Out*.
- Goss, *Queering Christ*, 185–220 ("Homosexuality, the Bible, and the Practice of Safe Texts"; "Overthrowing Heterotextuality—A Biblical Stonewall").
- Goss and West, *Take Back the Word*.
- Guest, *When Deborah Met Jael*.
- Guest et al., *Queer Bible Commentary*.
- Hanks, *Subversive Gospel*.
- Helminiak, *What the Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*.
- Stone, *Queer Commentary and the Hebrew Bible*.
- Tanis, *Trans-Gendered*, 55–84 ("Gender Variance and the Scriptures").

Tradition

- Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*.
- Boswell, *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe*.
- Brooten, *Love Between Women*.
- Brown, *Immodest Acts*.
- Burrus, *Sex Lives of Saints*.
- Jordan, *Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology*.

Reason

- Armour and St. Ville, *Bodily Citations*.
- Bagemihl, *Biological Exuberance*.
- Bernauer and Carrette, *Michel Foucault and Theology*.
- Carrette, *Foucault and Religion*.
- Foucault, *Religion and Culture*.
- Moore, *Question of Truth*.

Experience

- Cannon, *Sanctified*.
- Evans and Healey, *Queer and Catholic*.
- Lake, *Recreations*.
- Sweasey, *From Queer to Eternity*.