

THE IMPORTANCE OF QUEER THEOLOGY

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE BY STEVEN ANDERSON

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FOREWORD

This pamphlet is a beginner's guide to a body of academic theological research on Queer Theory, specifically Queer Theology, a field of study with great potential for personal, spiritual and community empowerment. I have put this guide together in order to make this knowledge more accessible to the people who need to see it. Hopefully, it will pique some interest and inspire others to research and learn more about queer liberation theology and its applications in your community. It is my belief that developing culturally sensitive queer theologies can help to rewrite social norms, dissolve oppressive political systems, and implement positive queer representation in our communities. Furthermore, by providing avenues for queer theology we can begin to deconstruct religious conceptions on gender, identity, and sexuality to make provide a larger space for Christ's work of salvation without imposing culturally oppressive power dynamics.

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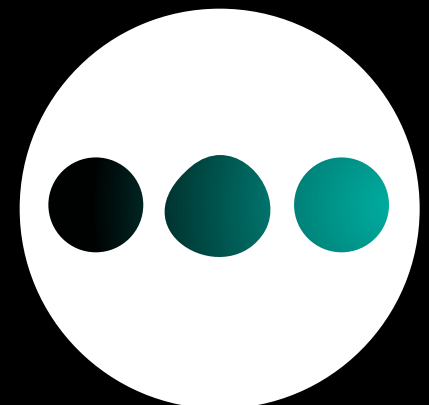
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WHAT IS QUEER THEOLOGY?

Queer Theology is a modern interpretation of the Liberation Theology movement. Liberation Theology is a branch of Christian teaching that focuses on eliminating systematic social and political oppression. Queer Liberation Theology (QLT) marks a unique aspect of Liberation Theology when it comes to the double oppression of LGBTQ+ individuals who face prejudices, socially, politically AND from religious institutions, particularly the Christian church.¹

Queer liberation theologies seek to deconstruct and reconstruct popular oppressive viewpoints against homosexuality, socially and religiously, in order to bring alternative points of view into the spotlight for debate and discussion. QLT is an opportunity to challenge the imposition of harmful prejudices and redistribute the status quo. This theology seeks to break down harmful barriers to human rights and also to give new opportunities for the positive cultural and religious representation of LGBTQ individuals. Who needs QLT



Queer Liberation theologies can be for everyone who feels that their religious institution or culture has an oppressive stance against their social status, race, gender or sexuality.² Most generally, areas of the world which have felt the oppression of colonization such as (but not limited to) the regions of Latin America, Africa, Asia, and the Pacific Islands, have begun to develop their own liberation theologies to recapture lost aspects of their indigenous cultures due to oppressive political and religious regimes.

That being said, QLTs have only just begun to deconstruct oppressive cultural systems relating to gender, sexuality, and identity in their communities. One important aspect of QLT's success is rooted in a theology of social change. Successful social change theologies are developed from within their communities through self-actualization and grassroots initiatives.³ This brings contrast against the colonialism communities may have faced in the past and gives them a voice to rebuild from their indigenous cultures as well as expand their viewpoints in order to create a more inclusive community space.

QLTs, therefore, have the potential for building unique theologies that celebrate religious faith, orthodoxy and traditions while also integrating culturally relevant viewpoints in order to develop neo-orthodoxies that uplift the oppressed and encourage critical community growth.

POST COLONIAL QUEER THEORY

Many cultures worldwide have historically made space for, or have created their own interpretations for the purposes of gender and sexuality within community. From the matriarchal cultures of the Asian Pacific Islands of Samoa to the Bissu or Warok of Indonesia, there has been a historic celebration or at the very least respect for non-heteropatriarchal systems of culture.⁴ These cultures have been imposed upon by predominantly Christian and Islamic heteropatriarchal cultures which have oppressed alternative sexual and gender expressions.⁵ Now is the time more than ever to re-approach aboriginal histories before they are lost and also to challenge the authority of the current social systems in order to create positive social reform, starting with our religious institutions.

To do this we should take a look at Queer theory. Queer theory is an attempt to deconstruct and reconstruct social expectations of a person's sexuality or gender identity, in the light of personal experience, social justice, and in this case religious experience.⁶ Sometimes queer theory also seeks only to deconstruct social and religious conventions in order to make room for individual expression without creating new boundaries that may seek to impose new oppressive systems.⁷

HOW HAVE LGBTQ+ PEOPLE BEEN OPPRESSED?

Some oppression may seem obvious due to noticeable surface level persecution such as gender biases and racial prejudices which are sometimes visually discernible, lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transgender individuals, intersex individuals, queer folk and others are not as easy to identify. That being said, alongside gender and racial biases, LGBTQ+ people face a multitude of systemic oppressions around the world. People have often faced criminal charges for engaging in homosexual sex around the world.⁸ They also can face community sanctioned violence if their sexual identities or preferences where to be made public.

While some cultures such as those of Japan have traditionally had more ambivalent stances on homosexual intercourse and non-heteronormative lifestyles they might not offer legal protections.⁹ Others may not offer discourses such as gay marriages, workplace protections or options for legally changing one's gender identity. Some cultures such as those found in the United States have put in place legal protections for LGBTQ+ people, including housing non-discrimination, equal access to healthcare, and workplace protections, however, communities around the country face varying levels of enforcement. More often individual states determine protections and the laws and social attitudes on non-normative, non-heteropatriarchal community outlooks can prevent protective legislation from passing. These actions keep vulnerable people from accessing

healthcare, keep comprehensive sexual education from being taught in schools and strain the mental health of many who decide to live a queer life secretly in order to maintain job security.¹⁰

QUEERING RELIGION FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

More often than not LGBTQ+ discrimination can trace its roots to religious beliefs, particularly when it comes to Christianity. Christians tend to point back to “clobber passages” which on the surface incriminate same-sex sexual behavior, non-normative gender expression, and patriarchal power dynamics that impose heterosexual/ heteropatriarchal social dynamics without room for interpretation. These clobber passages include Genesis 1:27, Genesis 19, Leviticus 18:22 and others.^{11,12,13} These beliefs unfortunately coupled with colonization and globalization have come to dominate religious and cultural beliefs about sexuality. This action has left little room for natural human expressions of gender and sexuality for centuries. Now however with queer theory, modern biblical exegesis and a bold stance for social change, theologians, activists, and laypeople are developing the tools needed to reinterpret the religious boundaries of sexual expression.

Queer Theory combined with a theory of social change can challenge religious and cultural conventions regarding sexuality. We can queer religion by reinterpreting religious rites such as the eucharist to be culturally inclusive of indigenous foods or reimagining Jesus as bisexual or genderqueer to help diverse communities relate Christ's liberating teachings to the needs of our

own communities.^{14,15} Through the vigorous study of scripture, early near-eastern cultures, human sexuality, and our own unique regional cultures we can create a deeper understanding of human community. By reimagining and tearing down the barriers we have erected in-between us such as identity markers and traditional sexual practices we will be able to relate more closely to one another in our communities.

Focusing on the life of Christ, where Jesus continued to defy social and religious norms in order to preach God's truth is a powerful inspiration for theologians who work to reconcile their freedom through Christ with their obligations towards religious orthodoxy and tradition.

THE DANGERS OF QLT

Like any other movement that seeks to disrupt social, political and religious power dynamics in favor of a new more equitable system, there lurks a danger to the safety and wellbeing of activists and their subjects. While bold public displays of same-gender affection, essays of advocacy to clergy, and open protests have led to significant wins in the social acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals around the world including in India where a colonial-era anti-sodomy law was struck down in 2018, acting boldly with a stance towards integration and queering social norms can come at the cost of further oppression and violence.¹⁶

Queer Christians continue to be oppressed both by their regional cultures, political rulings, and religious stances throughout Malaysia, Indonesia, Uganda, Taiwan, and many other countries¹⁷. We must be cautious not to insight panic with our queer acts of rebellion but must seek to build constructive frameworks within our communities for positive change. LGBTQ+ communities around the world have rich, fledgling, Queer Liberation Theologies to examine in order to pattern their own community growth. Theologians like Boon Lin Ngeo, Andre S.

Musskopf and Greame Reid are continuing to create works reflecting on the need and practical applications of QLTs for their regional communities.^{18,19,20} By encouraging theologians to examine the needs of their communities and by reinterpreting the theological methods of others for their own contexts cautious yet bold theologies will be produced that give a voice to the needs of the queer among us.

BUILDING A FREER COMMUNITY

Queer Theology has the unlimited potential for community growth. The future is inclusive. By identifying cultural and religious oppression in our communities and confronting it by raising arguments based on human equality as well as cosmic, spiritual, equality we will be able to create a culture of social change.

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