Men and Masculinities in Christianity and Judaism: A Critical Reader

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Homosexuality, Queer Theory, and Christian Theology

Editor's Introduction

Queer theory "refuses the dominant categories of discourse", Claudia Schipper writes, "and challenges assimilationist and liberal-pluralist politics aimed at the legitimization and toleration of excluded groups... Queer is thus not defined around an identity, but as different and defiance of dominant meanings of sex and gender" (Schipper 1998, 825). If queer theory neither embraces the liberal paradigm of 'tolerating' marginalized groups nor submits to the liberationist paradigm of identity politics, then it puts forth a challenge to both the heterosexual men's scholarship on religion with its professed openness to others as well as to the community of gay religious scholars with its insistence on strengthening a gay identity. Queer theory, then, might actually undermine some of the efforts of the field of critical men's studies in religion since it discards the categories on which men's studies bases its observations, diagnosis and prescriptions for a cure.

Yet, both gay and straight scholars of men's studies in religion have included queer theory into their approaches or, in any event, claim that they are engaged in "queerly bringing religion" (Comstock and Henning 1997). Robert Goss, for example, has recently pushed to move from "gay theology" to "queer sexual theologies" (Goss 2002, 239); Dale Martin wonders whether the "historical Jesus" is "too queer for good historiography" (2006, 98); and Stephen Moore's God's *Beauty Parlor: And Other Queer Spaces in and around the Bible* (2001) brings queer theory to bear upon biblical interpretation.

In this chapter, Laurel Schneider reflects on the relationship between queer theory and gender in religion, particularly as it pertains to the differences between the study of homossexuals and theories of queerness. Originally published as a review article on several books on sexuality, gender and religion (Schneider 2000), the condensed reprint below introduces the reader to helpful distinctions. Schneider, like Claudia Schipper, traces the emergence of queer thinking to Michel Foucault's work on sexuality, and suggests that 'queerness' is 'more transgressive, more productive of difference, and more disruptive of stable, normative sexual identities than what we think of when we use the terms gay, lesbian, or homosexual'. Queer theory and theology, she continues, 'take on the whole paradigmatic system of meaning that produces heterosexuality and homosexuality in the first place and tend to view religious ideas as cultural means of production for that system'. Gay and lesbian writings, on the other hand, 'concern themselves with problems of exclusion and the need
to obtain justice for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people as full persons equal to their heterosexual neighbors in religious communities. Historians of homosexuality tend to assess the possibilities of a sustained analysis of gay men in the history of religion differently from the somewhat more skeptical assessment of Schneider. John Boswell may have been among these historians (see also Jordan, chapter 21), but he died before queer theory fully emerged; and, hence, we cannot say for sure how his research may have developed. Another medieval historian, Allen Frantzien, however, articulates well the discomfort he feels when privileging queer theory. In his article 'Between the Lines: Queer Theory, the History of Homosexuality, and Anglo-Saxon Penitentials' he writes:

Queer theorists are obviously political, seeking ideological confrontations and engagements with contemporary politics that traditional historians of homosexuality have shunned, at least in their scholarship. It almost seems as if queer theorists look ahead, while historians of sexuality look back...

There is, however, some reason to believe that queer theorists are hostile to the basic premises of medieval scholarship, not only to the analysis of historical categories but even to the analysis of history itself. (Frantzien 1996, 259, 257)

The question of whether queer theory implicates systems of classification and rules of discourse to such an extent that addressing 'men' and 'religion' would be, in the eyes of queer theorists, nothing but reiterations of normative regulations, or whether, on the other hand, the critical study of men in religion can be deepened by queer stipulations must remain open. Schneider's chapter, for one, makes us aware of the significance of the debate for this field of study. After all, she says, both gay and lesbian theologies as well as queer theories are all 'concerned with gender, history, oppression, identity, and liberation.' She continues:

But without the internal critique that queer theory offers, I am convinced that lesbian and gay liberation attempts in theology will not be able to avoid the mimetic that conditions homosexual inclusion in a heteronormative communion. They will not be able to avoid, in other words, advocating 'good' homosexuals who incidentally look and act a great deal like good heterosexuals at the expense, perhaps, of many of the rest of us.

Publications by the Same Author


Further Reading


Homosexuality, Queer Theory, and Christian Theology

LAURIL C. SCHNEIDER

A host of problems arise when the 'homosexual question' and its contemporary academic counterpart—queer theory—meet religion, theology, and the various other aspects of religious studies. One problem revolves around defining homosexual identity and queerness. Another revolves around the status of homosexuality in history, and yet another concerns the relationship of homosexuality—however defined—to religious traditions, theologies, and spirituality. What is interesting from an academic, religious studies point of view is the emergence of some key political and methodological differences between what might be called gay/lesbian liberation writings in religion and, on the other hand, queer theory and Christian theology. The former concern themselves with problems of exclusion and of justice for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people as full persons equal to their heterosexual neighbors in religious communities. The latter take on the whole paradigmatic system of meaning that produces heterosexuality and homosexuality in the first place and tends to view religious ideas as cultural means of production for that system.

Homosexuality seems, at first glance, to refer simply to people who physically love people of the same sex and identify themselves as gay or lesbian. Defined in this way, discussions of homosexuality tend to focus on issues of social, political, and cultural status, natural and political law and so forth, that have to do with the history and place of lesbian and gay persons in society and religion. Queer theory, which emerged after the 1980s, English publication of Michel Foucault's first volume of The History of Sexuality, foregrounds the role of historical and social construction in the production of what we think of as
about heterosexuality in religion both more understandable and more bizarre. Reasons for hysteria can be located in various social theories that account for incalculable fear of change at symbolic levels. Certainly queer theory does threat the whole fabric of social meaning that heteronormativity has provided to the modern world. Heterosexuality unresolved and publically contested social status as a crime; a natural state; a sin; a choice; a psycho-medical condition; a genetic variation; an identity, a behavior; a hip fancy, a product of capitalism; a product of patriarchy; a product of feminism; a product of the Phil Donahue–Oprah competition; or a myriad of other possibilities in part of its popular appeal in public discourse. Apart from this public debate, however, the content of emerging works in lesbian and gay studies in queer theory indicates a theoretical depth in cultural analysis that will not fade soon, particularly for scholars in religion.

In part, and similar to the explosive growth of research on women, studies of homosexuality in general are responding to a void of information. So little is known about the existence of homosexuals in Western history that the usefulness of the term itself is hotly debated. Is or was homosexuality limited to the Eurocentric cultures of the West? Apparently not, but all hinges on how homosexuality—as practice, identity, nature, or all of the above—is defined. Were there even any homosexuals before, say, the nineteenth century? Some, like classicist David Halperin (1995, 1999), follow Foucault and say no. Others, like Adrienne Rich (Compulsory Heterosexuality), in Abelevo et al. (1999), John Winkler’s (Double Consciousness in Sappho’s Lyrics), in Abelevo et al. (1995), and John Boswell (in Comstock and Henkin, 1996) suggest otherwise. Certainly homosexuality as we understand it today (assuming that we do have an understanding of it today) did not exist as such throughout history. This is a vexing problem for scholars, who depend upon lineages of ideas, even as they seek new ones. Feminist historians at least do not have to make the argument that there were women throughout all of patriarchal history. It is considered reasonable to infer the presence of women (even if the meaning of the term ‘woman’ changes over time).

Scholars in lesbian and gay studies and queer theory are primarily interested in the differences that sexualities make in cultures that have rules about such things. Questions about the difference that homosexuality makes lie at the root of queer theory. They have enlarged and deepened an already wide-ranging debate within theology and religious studies about the sources and authority of traditions that define social norms and human identities in terms of sin, redemption, good, and evil, particularly as these categories are expressed through gender and race. Homosexuals are, in one sense, additional ‘others’ to add to the list of those ostracized by social norms originating in the mists of myth and codified in religious doctrines and traditions. Yet homosexuality also represents a convergence of issues and ideas troubling theology, religion, and scholarship that only now is beginning to emerge. According to Gayle Rubin’s essay that introduces The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader, ‘Contemporary conflicts over sexual values and erotic conduct have much in common with the religious disputes of earlier centuries. They acquire immense symbolic weight. Disputes over sexual behavior often become the vehicles for displacing social anxieties, and discharging their attendant emotional intensity’ (Abelevo et al..
Above all, queer theory enlarges and critically sharpens feminism; together they constitute a deep challenge to religion precisely because they turn attention to the very exclusions that define religious ideas upon which those ideas are contingent. This debate . . . provides an intellectual framework for treating homosexuality as a meaningful site of difference that could illuminate religion and religious ideas in helpful, if sometimes unsettling, ways. This is perhaps the point of greatest tension between queer theory that destabilizes homosexual identities and lesbian/gay theologies that seek to make a space for them. At the same time, this tension also offers a point of possibility for deeper critical thought in religious studies.

Queering Religion?

[...] Queer theorists in general, concerned with the cultural production of normative heterosexuality and thereby the cultural production—and repression—of homosexuality, illuminate the accidental quality (speaking philosophically) of all social formation, meaning, and identity. This creates and recreates the tension between queer theory’s questions and gay and lesbian liberationist attempts at answers in religious scholarship. Writers and scholars in the area of homosexuality and religion still edge warily around queer questions of spatial historicity and performativity in order to support those gay and lesbian Christians batting for a place at the communion table on the basis of a stable homosexual identification. When queer thinking meets religion, as it begins to do in the Queer-Bending Religion anthology, the result is uneven. Not all of gay and lesbian religious scholarship is dedicated to more or less stable assertions of homosexual identity in what Mary McClintock Polkerson calls the "therapeutic and scientific discourse of modernity" (in Comstock and Henking 1997, 189), but low of the contributors to Queer-Bending Religion take such a critical or historicist position. Some, like Bonwell, indicate an understanding and appreciation of historicism and the social production of homosexuality, even as he dismisses its more radical implications for claims about homosexuality in history (in Comstock and Henking 1997, 119-29). On the whole, however, this is not an anthology of writers engaging queer theory with religious studies. Instead, it is a loose organization of voices that are for the most part documenting a kind of homosexual history in religious, describing homosexual presences in religious communities, or advocating for homosexual inclusion in those communities.

Perhaps because contemporary Western religious institutions are currently embroiled in so much hysteria about homosexuality, it is difficult to develop and maintain a theoretical discussion about the niceties of queer theory in relation to religion. To be sure, when homosexuality is introduced, arguments about good and evil, sin and redemption, and the nature of being Christian metamorphose from fairly sedate, sometimes chibblish, and often anachronistic meditations into high-pitched, public tantrums. Uncounted gay and lesbian clergy and lay people continue to suffer seemingly endless violent exclusions in their own denominations and congregations, even as high-profile church trials of heterosexual pastors receive more publicity. [...]
So where do things queer and things Christian meet? The current small explosion of sorts going on in monograph publishing about religion and homosexuality indicates that religion is ripe for queer analyses. I. J. Mark Jordan's careful work on the history of the idea of sodomy in *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology* (1997) is a good example. It traces the invention and development of the idea of the sodomite in Christian theology from Peter Damian's virulent polemics to Thomas Aquinas's systematic assumption of sodomy as the 'vice which cannot be named' (1997, 205). Jordan's work reveals the profoundly constructed quality of homosexuality in the evolution of Christian heteronormative ethics. What is fascinating in this project is its queerness. Jordan uncovers Peter Damian's medieval invention of the terms sodomite and sodomy and his consequent attachment of a relatively stable, criminal identity to men who perform homosexual acts. These are sodomites who are fundamentally deformed in their persons by both their homosexual desire and behavior. Jordan argues persuasively that Damian forges a link between act and essence that creates, for the first time, a homosexual identity in the lexicon of boasts and demons. 'That transition from acts to persons,' he suggests, 'is perhaps what an essence does best. By coining an abstract term [sodomy] to group together a series of acts, Peter Damian has made the inference from acts to agent almost automatic. The acts display an essence, the essence of Sodomy' (1997, 44).

Jordan's history of sodomy is provocative for queer theory and for religious studies in that it explores invented identities through negation. Unlike Boswell in *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (1980) or Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe (1994), Jordan views homosexuality in relief through the polemical invention of the sodomite. He does not attempt to argue for the existence of homosexuals but rather to demonstrate that modern minds would have run aground on its possibilities as such in medieval Europe; rather he documents the development of a logic of identity and essence in the polemics of prohibition and the systematicness of theological construction. What is provocative and new in his becomes around current debates about the history of homosexual identity assertion.

Jordan's conclusion that sodomy is a medieval invention does not surprise queer theorists nor does it change the conclusions of any authors working on reformulating traditional Christian prohibitions against homosexuality. His critical analysis of this particular historical development in Christian thought supports that work through specific documentation and inference, and the possibility that a premodern presumption of essence to homosexuality can be inferred from the development of an essential sodomite identity (although Jordan is careful to point out that Peter Damian's and our concept of identity do not coincide) provides an interesting twist in the social construction of homosexuality.

Intrepid queers who seek to root out homophobia at its deepest levels must at some point turn to religion to do so, but because of the depth of religious polemics against homosexuality, they must choose their political tools carefully. Homosexuals who want to claim religious traditions and existing Christian communities as their own have to make the case that lesbianism and gay experiences are themselves legitimate in Christian or religious terms. This tends to mean a reformulation of human nature to include homosexual desire in order to place homosexuality under the aegis of divine good will. This task by itself establishes a methodological tension with queer theory's suspicion of 'natural' identity claims of any kind...
traditions to homosexual practice and life, it is astounding that so many members of so many religious communities are gay, lesbian, or bisexual. Comstock's survey offers data to support the old adage that gay and lesbian people are members of the church. They often literally are the church, as well as members of the nominating committees, the stewardship boards, the diaconate, and every other arm (yes, even the clergy) of organized religious life. That gay people participate extensively within their religious bodies and serve the needs of people in their wider communities is apparent. But their participation and service are often unrecognized and rejected" (1995, 98).

Comstock's findings still suggest that the majority of gay, lesbian and bisexual Americans have left religious organizations in the dust. The intense leadership involvement of those who remain may be the result of a natural winnowing process. For remaining in such a contested environment to make any sense at all to a queer person, there must be a high level of investment in the community. Not surprisingly, the highest numbers of out gay and lesbian members of church congregations are found in those denominations (like the United Church of Christ and Metropolitan Community Church) that fully accept homosexuality as an acceptable Christian identity. For those who are members of more conflicted religious bodies (like the United Methodist Church or Presbyterian Church) and whose investment in the community is less, the incentive to leave is far greater. (p. 1)

Daniel Spencer constructs an ethical basis for gay and lesbian spirituality in Gay and God (1996) and also in Kowaleski (1998) that is predicated on assumptions of gay and lesbian identification and religious arguments for ecological reform. Spiritual health, he argues, must be global and not merely anthropocentric. Based on primarily lesbian writings (after Heyward, Mary Hunt), Spencer adopts arguments for relationality in order to refogel embodiment and eroticism as ecological and liberative. The habilitation of homosexuality can only occur, he argues, in terms of a much larger vision of ecological, erotic, embodied wholeness. The focus cannot be on how to fit gays and lesbians into existing structures of thought but on how to change the structures of thought (what he calls the grounding) to encompass gay, lesbian, and bisexual experiences of life.

Spencer is quite conscious of feminist and queer theory's arguments for gender construction and so does not support with McDermott's confidence that God established homosexuality as we know it today from the beginning of time. Instead he argues for a process-based relationality that allows for historical change and social construction in all forms of identity, from binary homosexual and heterosexual oppositions, to queer multiplicities, to animal, human, and planetary relations. His point is that homosexuality is not an add-on identity to a list of outsider identities contesting the status quo. Instead he wants to establish sexualities as integral expressions of the wholeness evident in all of life, a wholeness that in its fecundity does not exclude any particularity of bodily intensity. Homosexuality or queerness will always remain oppressed and outside of the dominant norm unless queer spirituality becomes a larger ecological sensibility. (p. 1)

Spencer challenges homosexuals that serve to reinforce heteronormative assumptions—stable heterosexuality—that, in other words, oppositively mirror heterosexuality and provide the rationale for its dominance. Spencer's distinctly queer shift away from identities and onto ecological processes could create a more livable space for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and straight people and thus a more challenging, if more viable, space for queer religion.

A Space for Queer Theology?

In a sense, whether intentional or not, all these theologies and theories together could be labeled queer. That is, the relationship between homossexualities that are construed as act, as identity, as public forum, as dissent, and as difference remain unclear and in many ways unresolvable. The notorious instability of sexual identities becomes a problem only when there is something at stake in fixing them. What could be at stake? The stability of heterosexuality, for one. And of course the stability of homosexuality. The place of bisexuality is also at stake, and the relationship of bodies to sex and gender. From these follow investments in notions of creation and divine will. There are other more intimate things at stake as well, such as expectations for love and erotic companionship, friendships, and for politics.

The tension that underlies all of this discussion is one we cannot avoid. In an academic sense it is, as I have suggested, the tension between strategies of lesbian and gay liberation on the one hand and queer reimagining of the world on the other. On an entirely more raw and close level, lesbian and gay liberation may be about intense and intimate needs for inclusion, recognition, and identity that are worth the cost of some heteronormativity. Queer theology may be about creative reimagining of possibilities in which we are no longer recognizable, but in which we no longer beg for recognition either. The cost of freedom and integrity seems so great on the one side and the risk of loss so real and impos-

sible on the other.

This tension is powerful, creative, and dynamic, but it is powerfully devastating as well. Our need to be human in the grandest and most intimately social senses of that term implicates us in conservative strategies that would reduce the threat to heteronormativity reassuring our families, neighbors, employers, students, and potential balearcher by establishing a normative identity to homosexuality. Which side is the more correct? There is so little information about us and so much speculation that the real queerness here may be only just beginning. (p. 1)

Gay and lesbian liberationists attempt to challenge, reform, and reinframe Christian faith to values, beliefs, and incorporate queer experiences are, in the perspective of more radical queer theory, simply ludicrous. But the gay/lesbian liberationist and the queer theorist positions both rest on very different key assumptions about Christian faith and its contents. For the liberationists, Christian faith is fundamentally about something true and real, although it can be and has been distorted. The object of gay liberation faith is an 'Act-Up' kind of Jesus who preached appallingly radical kindness and who transgressed all sorts of rules about who should be in or out. In the context of this type of assumption, religious reform makes a particular kind of sense. From this viewpoint, the God-man of Christian faith would most certainly associate with fagi
and dykes. He might even call them his own ‘family’ (what was that about the beloved disciple?). This view grants to the object of Christian faith a position of truth that demands reinterpretation in contemporary terms.

But in much of queer theory, indebted as it is to postmodern literary criticism, the objects of religious faith can never be resolved enough to matter in the ways that the subjects of faith can. Religion and its contents illuminate the workings of cultural formation and of compulsory heterosexuality but religion is the locus of that compulsion. To develop new theologies that include and even affirm homosexuality may make some gay Christians feel better, but the compulsory aspect of religion remains the same, therefore always excluding queerness even after homosexuals are admitted. [...]

The battles over homosexuality today are most bitterly and publicly waged in religious venues, although the battlegrounds are also in college dormitories, on lonely Wyoming fences, in small Alabama towns, and in some legislatures. Christian denominations and communities are politically polarized, warring a drama in relief for the entertainment of the larger culture. Ironically, state and federal attempts at nondiscrimination legislation exempt religious institutions. Laws that protect gay and lesbian persons from discrimination in the public sphere do not apply to ordaining bodies, church colleges, or parochial institutions. The gay and lesbian liberationist literature is crucial in the fray of these battles because the battles are primarily about rights and privileges predicated on the modernist logic of identity and community. If gay and lesbian scholars in religion can demonstrate clear moral grounds for homosexuality as a good, they have gone a long way to dismantle the grounds of the opposition.

Gay and queer theologies, linked to the prophetic outsider ministry of Jesus, argue for the legitimacy of homosexuality within Christian teaching, but they also argue for a particular kind of Christian theology that de-emphasizes tradition and commandment and emphasizes justice and inclusion. They de-emphasize purity as a basis for Christian life and emphasize relationship and mercy. This is not just queer theology; it is a particular kind of ethical theology. Queer theory as intellectual acrobatics of difference and performance cannot encompass this move or even begin to approach it, but theology that shifts its locus to the Act-Up, dangerously kind Jesus is certainly queer and cannot be fixed (in any sense of that word).

Queer theology is still, therefore, waiting to be written. [...]

Notes
1. In its theological aspects, this essay focuses on Christian writings. This does not mean that other projects addressing homosexuality, queer theory and theology are not underway by religious scholars dealing with other traditions. However, the majority of writings to date deal with Christian theology and so form the subject of this study.
2. Editor's note For a fuller discussion of the essential link between feminism and queer theory, see Laural C. Schneider's original article in the Religious Studies Review 26/1 (January 2000):6-6. For Schneider, it is important that the link to feminism is not neglected among scholars working on men and masculinities issues, especially in terms of queer theory. See Pulido (1994).

Literature


Part 3
Theorizing and Theologizing
Alternative Masculinities

Available books on men and religion, especially from popular presses, have often stressed spiritual and practical concerns of men. If not that, some have limited themselves to describing historical manifestations of masculinity without seriously probing the underlying paradigms, thus often reiterating rather than challenging versions of patriarchal modes of thinking. Theoretical sophisticated, a common lament among scholars of gender, is still missing in the study of masculinities in general, and in the study of religion and masculinities in particular. If masculinity is to be a viable methodological compass, scholars must seriously pursue the complex theoretical and historical ambiguities such a concept poses, writes Kathryn Lottin in her review of works in religion and masculinity (2004). 

This section takes up the challenge. The following six chapters represent a diverse set of theoretical and theological investigations revealing some of the complexities of a critical men’s studies approach. With Daniel Boyarin, we encounter a Jewish intellectual maverick who embraces Jewish orthodoxy as an alternative masculine ideal of queerness. Graham Ward, a Christian theologian belonging to the British-based school of radical orthodoxy, engages postmodern discourse on desire (especially the French deconstructionist thinkers like Lacan, Julia Kristeva and Jacques Lacan) for his theological project of understanding the ‘male’ body of Christ. Philip Culbertson, another Christian theologian, wonders what would happen when the heterosexual male gaze does not rest on the bodies of Others but turns against itself would the heterosexual body disappear? Looking for answers, Culbertson turns to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s concept of homosexuality. Joy Johnson’s theological probing of the contributions of gay theology leads him, with the help of American pragmatism, towards an epistemology of the ‘gay experience’. Robert Goss applies queer theory to the task of queer theologizing, aiming at shaking up self-imposed templates of gay normativity. Stephen Moom, finally, muses on the impact of the autobiographical turn in literary criticism on biblical studies, assessing the efforts of male biblical scholars to insert autobiographical disclosures into their own texts.