

Contextual Queer Theologies in Norway

Berg, Eir Andreas Ihlang. 2021. *Becoming Queer Christians in Indecency. Exploring Queer Theologies of Peripheries*. PhD thesis. University of Oslo: Faculty of Theology. (163 pages)

THE AIM OF the thesis is to analyse how some queer Christians navigate their affiliation with a Christian community, and therefore the intersections between faith and queerness are essential. The basic research question that forms this thesis is as follows: “Given the concept of Althaus-Reid’s indecent theology, how can we understand a becoming of queer Christians in indecency?” (11).

Berg embraces the messiness of queer methods, a strategy popular in queer research in general. They build on the successful work of scholars who have employed such methods in linking real living experiences with theology more broadly (Greenough 2018; van Klinken 2019). The methods are entirely interdisciplinary and include reflections from interviews with participants, autoethnographical interludes from the author, and constructive and critical dialogue with existing empirical projects in queer theologies. The combined methodological approach is fitting for the disruptive and unruly pathway paved by queer theory, and – importantly – it is bespoke to the particular study. In breaking free from the rules of theological construction, the author employs various tools for reflection in terms of exploring queer Christians’ experi-

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ences, including their own. Queer methods should, in no way, seek to be repeatable, as that would inscribe a normativity which queer seeks to escape. Through ethnographic work, Berg presents a contextual queer theology grounded in living experience that sheds light on ecclesiology and practical theologies in Norway. Thus, this thesis makes a valuable contribution to the field of queer theologies, with a specific focus on the contextual location of the study in Oslo, Norway.

Berg demonstrates expert handling of diverse sources that are not usually put in dialogue with one another – traditional theological concepts, queer Christians' experiences, and autobiographical reflections. The level of criticality and synthesis of source material shows the proficiency of a subject area required at doctoral level. Moreover, the personal accounts are engaging, and the use of the focus study – against the backdrop of existing ethnographic inquiries – is sound. Berg is successful in negotiating the complex question of individuality and communality in relation to queer identity, aware of the problems that come on both sides. This is illuminated in the case study, where the informants clearly stand in a position where they seem inclined to defend the Christian community, no matter how problematic it may be in practice.

The thesis is structured around eight chapters. The introductory chapter gives an overview of the structure of the thesis, and explores both the messiness of queer theologies as an area of enquiry, and – therefore – the futility of attempting to tidy up queer theologies in the form of a doctoral thesis. The thesis provides a space for traditional theology, queer theologies and queer lives to intersect.

The second chapter introduces the stimulus that sets the thesis in its Norwegian context, through the exploration of The Father Project. In brief, participant discussion is shaped around a stimulus of a video that displays gay sex between two men in front of an altar. This stimulus raised questions of indecency in sacred spaces and traditional Christian teachings and attitudes towards same-sex relationships. This activity leads to discussion on how some queer Christians navigate their affiliation with a Christian community with the transgressing power of indecent sexuality we find in chapter three. The participants also reflected on

a further activist event, Rainbow Action, that took place in the Cathedral of Oslo. The event sought to promote queer visibility and demand attention to same-sex wedding liturgies in the church.

Chapter four presents Berg's real expertise in the field, through the synthesis of various source material. Queer theologies, in the plural, do not always speak with one coherent voice. While some advocate the inclusion of LGBTQ+ people in Christian communities, others believe that inclusion is tantamount to colluding with heteronormative structures; this would be anti-queer. The voices and debates are polyvocal. Berg is able to blend these voices and massage some of the tensions in the debate, with reference to queer Christian lived experiences. Berg handles, with skill, a number of influential figures in queer theology: Marcella Althaus-Reid, the womanist queer theologian Pamela R. Lightsey, and the queer/systematic theologian Linn Tonstad.

In chapter five, Berg illuminates what has previously been discussed as speculative or theoretical queer theologies by putting them under scrutiny in the light of the living experiences of queer Christians. Here, Berg highlights how the aim of empirical work has been to assess the cumulative impact of religious homophobia on queer Christian lives and how queer Christians navigate tensions between official church pronouncements and their non-normative identities. Berg then examines the relationship between queer embodiment and ritual.

In chapter six, Berg discusses the structures of the dominant theological discourse in order to characterise the presuppositions for decentralised theologies where indecent sexualities can develop bottom-up-theologies, anchored in lived experiences. Moving from the sociological discourse of Andrew Yip (1997) to Chris Greenough's critical project of "undoing theology" (2018), and Wilcox's work on individualisation (2002), queer theologies open a theoretical avenue for construction of new Christian identities after the dominance of centralised theology.

In chapter seven, this theme of decentralisation is developed further in view of ecclesiology. Challenging the underlying theme of privatised religion and belief in the wake of a decentralisation of faith, the idea of a decentralised Christian community comes into view. Berg addresses

W.C. Harris's idea of gaytheism (2014), which is an approach particularly sensitive to heteropatriarchal power, to the degree that theology and faith as such must be abandoned, rather than undone and recaptured by the private individual. But Berg argues, via Lee Edelman (2004) and Linn Tonstad (2015), for a disruptive community approach to decentralisation that clings to the general disruptive theological insight that – ultimately – all people, queer or not, are fundamentally at the margins, waiting for Christ's return.

The strength of this thesis, in view of general discussions in systematic theology, is its ambition and relative success in embracing a possibility for queer theologies in the midst of its deconstruction of traditional heteropatriarchal discourse. The argument demonstrates how it is possible to cling positively to the idea of theological construction, even if this involves deconstruction and even destruction. Furthermore, the tension between privatised and communal faith is constructively investigated both with respect to the empirical material and the theoretical sources. The new knowledge emerging from this thesis provides a lens by which contextual queer theologies are articulated in Norway, including critical reflection on the role of the church alongside the lived experiences of queer Christians. Further, more in-depth empirical work with queer Christians would complement this study, given the author's own awareness of the limitations of the focus group.

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