

Theology in the first person

Identity and belonging in queer Christian autobiographies

Claudine Chionh

23 June 2017

“Theology in the First Person” will examine a variety of autobiographical writings by authors who identify as both LGBTIQ and Christian, using both the growing discipline of queer theology and the branch of practical theology known sometimes as “biographical theology,” to do so. The autobiographical writings themselves may be in the form of book-length autobiographies and memoirs, sections of anthologies, or autobiographical fragments within or prefaces to scholarly works. Although the genre of queer theology is growing as an academic discipline, and merits more attention, a close examination of its autobiographical dimensions has not yet been undertaken. So my thesis will identify and exegete common themes among autobiographical writings, particularly as they relate to identity and belonging within Christian and LGBTIQ communities, as well as point to areas which remain little developed in queer theology. Because LGBTIQ Christians are far from universally welcomed in Christian communities, I want to identify ways in which these authors: i. assert their place in these communities, ii. provide role models for others who share their experiences, and iii. contribute to Christian theology.

Originality and significance

Queer people of faith share the experience of needing to come out in at least two senses—as LGBTIQ people within their faith communities, and as people of faith within queer communities.¹ Spirituality, gender identity and sexual orientation—all deeply fundamental aspects of human identity—are presented as mutually exclusive in some contexts. Homophobia in the Christian tradition must be acknowledged. As a result of this, many queer spaces (whether physical spaces or in various media) are indifferent to religion and spirituality at best, openly hostile at worst—in the latter case, what gay theologian Thomas Bohache identifies as “christophobic.”² Where coming out is often experienced as a never-ending process repeated in different contexts and communities, for queer people of faith the effect is multiplicative; we need to come out and risk our sense of identity and belonging in both queer and spiritual spaces.

In the face of hostility or denial of one’s identity or experiences, personal testimony asserts the uniqueness and reality of our experiences. Personal testimony is how both queer and faith

¹Marsh (2012), 271.

²Bohache (2008), 157-186.

communities validate their members' experiences and hand down their culture and values. Testimony is shared in formal and informal meetings, and also in writing and other media.

The spiritual autobiography is a key genre of Christian literature.³ Common elements include the author's journey into or out of faith, personal encounters with God, and finding community in a church or among other Christians. Similarly, the queer autobiography has become an important part of the history of queer communities in the 20th and 21st centuries. Common themes among these include self-discovery, coming out to family, friends and sometimes the wider public, ostracism or rejection by family or church, and finding community among other queer people.

The queer spiritual autobiography is a developing genre that has become possible as some faith communities have begun including or affirming the queer people within them. It includes contributions from significant leaders in some churches, such as the former Episcopal bishop of New Hampshire, Gene Robinson, whose consecration engendered global debate, and notable theologians such as Carter Heyward.⁴ They share the themes that are common to both spiritual and queer autobiographies; furthermore, many of these works seek to claim a space for the author in both spiritual and queer communities at the same time. This genre has largely developed outside academia, however the autobiographical preface to academic works of queer theology is a special subset of the genre. These seek to ground the author's authenticity and authority in lived experience as well as in academic scholarship.

Methodology

There have been some studies of queer spiritual autobiographies with either a broader or narrower focus than this one.⁵ These works may take the form of standalone autobiographies/memoirs, anthologies, or autobiographical fragments within academic works on queer theology. This thesis will examine authors who self-identify as Christian of any denomination (or none), whatever their level of participation in a church. It will include authors who self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, or queer—that is, anyone who is not heterosexual and cisgender.

To interpret these testimonies, I will bring them into dialogue with two bodies of theological literature. In the first place, queer theology is a genre that has flourished in the theological academy over the past decade and a half, allied to a range of advocacy theologies such as feminist and postcolonial perspectives, and intersecting with their theories and methods. Queer theology as a genre represents a development on earlier gay and lesbian theologies which were usually conceived by their exponents more in terms of contextual theology.⁶

This thesis will track how the queering of Christian doctrine is anticipated, animated, consolidated, perhaps in some respects questioned in the autobiographical writing of LGBTIQ

³Note its significance in an anthology such as Dupré and Wiseman (2001), collecting "classics" across many centuries.

⁴Amongst other works: Robinson (2013); Heyward (2017).

⁵e.g. Stewart (2003), McGinley (2006), Marsh (2007).

⁶See e.g. Stuart (2002).

Christians. To do this, a second discipline within the wider theological enterprise will be used. Exemplified in the contemporary classic *Biography as Theology* by James McClendon, Jnr.,⁷ “biographical theology” is related to various methods of engaging people’s lived experience and self-articulated understandings of theological themes such as “ordinary theology” associated with Jeff Astley and others,⁸ “theology by heart” developed by Ellen Clark-King,⁹ and ways of attending to women’s “faithing” in the work of Nicola Slee and colleagues.¹⁰ I will study these methods as a basis for discerning method in my primary sources, elaborated in relation to current forms of biographical theology especially attentive to issues of gender, sexuality and embodiment—for example, Alison Webster¹¹ and Heather Walton.¹²

In these ways, my project will both illuminate the lived experiences of LGBTIQ Christians and, no less significantly, interrogate the discipline of theology (particularly queer theology) in order to suggest how lived experience and life-writing contributes to the practice of theology. In particular, I suggest that queer theology faces a crisis of authority in contemporary church and society. The literature reveals the breadth and depth of gay and lesbian theology, queer theology, and related fields, that has been produced by western academic theologians, clergy and activists in the last 40 years. Yet even in the supposedly advanced liberal democracies of the west, LGBTIQ rights remain contested, with denial of these rights frequently made on ostensibly Biblical or theological grounds; young Christians continue to be demonised by church, family or school if they question their sexuality or gender identity; and open hostility to religion, especially Christianity, is widely accepted in LGBTIQ spaces. It would seem that nearly half a century of queer theology has had minimal impact on the society it seeks to study.

Convictions to be tested

The marginalisation of LGBTIQ people within churches is one of the most egregious examples of the disconnection between academic theology, ordinary churchgoers, and social movements outside the churches. One reason for this may be the scholastic turn in medieval to modern theology: when the writing of theology moved from monasteries to universities, it may have lost its spiritual heart.¹³ Theology cannot return to the cloisters, but it can—and indeed is beginning to—learn from the postmodern turn to human lived experience that other academic disciplines have taken since the late twentieth century.¹⁴

This thesis will embody my conviction that theology of all disciplines should not erase the personal and the particular. In the study of contextual (or more accurately, non-normative) theologies and controversial issues, we need to hear a diversity of voices that may not sit comfortably in academic theology or church leadership. LGBTIQ Christians have experienced

⁷McClendon (1990).

⁸Astley (2012).

⁹Clark-King (2004).

¹⁰Slee (2008).

¹¹Webster (2009).

¹²Walton (2015).

¹³McIntosh (2005), 394.

¹⁴Pattison and Lynch (2005), 408.

centuries of being treated as theological or ethical problems, and of being talked *to* and *about* rather than being heard. In the wake of the twentieth-century gay liberation movement and more recent affirmations of diverse identities, LGBTIQ Christians have begun raising our own voices in personal accounts of religious and queer identity. As in contemporary activist circles: “Nothing about us without us”. This could be described as theology from the ground up or first-person theology; it is a form of theology that describes our own lived experiences, asserts our identity, and provides role models for those who will follow us.

This thesis will take these autobiographical writings as examples of theology drawn from lived experience and regard them as theological sources. It will analyse these writings as testimonies of faith, or spiritual witness; as statements of ecclesiology and missiology; and as examples of prayer. These writings provide windows into LGBTIQ and Christian communities and the individuals who identify as such. At the very least, they declare that we LGBTIQ Christians exist, and in many cases can reconcile these different aspects of our identity. Even more, they may provide real-world illustrations of how churches and LGBTIQ communities can welcome and affirm us.

Anticipated benefits

Discussions of LGBTIQ Christians in the context of church unity and division frequently conclude that theologians and church leaders need to listen to the people they are discussing.¹⁵ This thesis aims to facilitate such listening. As a systematic study of the lived experiences of LGBTIQ Christians as reported in their own words, it will demonstrate the breadth of voices that have already asserted themselves in these debates. More hopefully, it may show future generations of LGBTIQ Christians that they are not alone, and encourage them to make their voices heard in their own contexts.

Works cited

Astley, Jeff. 2012. *Ordinary Theology: Looking, Listening, and Learning in Theology*. Farnham, UK: Ashgate.

Bohache, Thomas. 2008. *Christology from the Margins*. London: SCM Press.

Clark-King, Ellen. 2004. *Theology by Heart: Women, the Church and God*. Peterborough: Epworth Press.

Dupré, Louis K, and James A Wiseman, eds. 2001. *Light from Light: An Anthology of Christian*

¹⁵e.g. Lambeth Conference (1998), paragraph (c); May (1998), 46.

- Mysticism*. New York: Paulist Press.
- Heyward, Carter. 2017. *She Flies on: A White Southern Christian Debutante Wakes up*.
- Lambeth Conference. 1998. "Resolution I.10 - Human Sexuality."
- Marsh, Victor. 2007. "The Journey of the Queer 'I': Spirituality and Subjectivity in Life Narratives by Gay Men." PhD thesis, Brisbane: University of Queensland.
- . 2012. "Writing the Spirit: Testimony and the Unauthorized Voice in the Queer Spiritual Memoir." In *Queer Religion*, edited by Donald L Boisvert and Jay Emerson Johnson, 1:251–75. Santa Barbara, Calif.: Praeger.
- May, Melanie A. 1998. "Breaking down the Dividing Wall: Ending the Silence About Sexuality." *The Ecumenical Review* 50 (1): 41–47.
- McClendon, James William. 1990. *Biography as Theology: How Life Stories Can Remake Today's Theology*. New ed. Philadelphia: Trinity Press International.
- McGinley, Dugan. 2006. *Acts of Faith, Acts of Love: Gay Catholic Autobiographies as Sacred Texts*. London: Continuum.
- McIntosh, Mark A. 2005. "Theology and Spirituality." In *The Modern Theologians*, edited by David F. Ford and Rachel Muers, 3rd ed., 392–407. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Pattison, Stephen, and Gordon Lynch. 2005. "Pastoral and Practical Theology." In *The Modern Theologians*, edited by David F. Ford and Rachel Muers, 3rd ed., 408–25. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Robinson, V. Gene. 2013. *God Believes in Love: Straight Talk About Gay Marriage*. New York: Vintage.
- Slee, Nicola. 2008. *Women's Faith Development: Patterns and Processes*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Stewart, Christopher Buren. 2003. "In Paths Untrodden: Queer Spiritual Autobiography." PhD thesis, Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI.
- Stuart, Elizabeth. 2002. *Gay and Lesbian Theologies: Repetitions with Critical Difference*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Walton, Heather. 2015. *Not Eden: Spiritual Life Writing for This World*. London: SCM Press.
- Webster, Alison R. 2009. *You Are Mine: Reflections on Who We Are*. London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.