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Queer Theory and the Study of Religion

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Abstract

Queer Theory has become an important theoretical approach that focuses on the centrality of sexuality in modern conceptions of the self. This article reviews central ideas of queer theoretical work, notes areas in religious studies where they have been and continue to be explored, and summarizes some of the theory's promises and points of conflict.

Resumo

A Teoria Queer trouxe uma maneira importante de conceptualizar a centralidade da sexualidade em conceitos modernos do self. Este artigo revê idéias centrais da teoria, discute áreas nas ciências da religião onde elas têm sido explorados e resume algumas promessas e pontos do conflito da teoria.

Defining Queer Theory

Queer theory as academic discipline was named when feminist film critic Teresa De Lauretis introduced the term in the pages of *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* in 1991. Emerging in the context of a conference on critical approaches to gay and lesbian sexualities and a conference on queer film and video, queer theory began at the intersection of theory and activism; queer theory intended to problematize the multiple differences in the production of dominant and normative categories of sexuality. At the same time as "Queer Nation" gave a name to a new generation of activists, queer theorists in academic contexts intended to disrupt the reliance on identity categories that had been the foundation for a great deal of liberationist politics. Initially influential primarily in literary and film studies, queer theory increasingly was debated in other fields (e.g. history, social theory, and also within theology and the study of religion) and today has become an accepted theoretical approach in most fields of the humanities within the North American contexts and beyond. In other

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areas of the world, queer theory's potential is being evaluated, at times with caution, because its field of emergence and target of intervention were/are specifically Western modern conceptions of sexual normativity; queer theoretical analysis might need to shift or be "translated" in other geographic-cultural configurations.

In focusing attention on the ways in which normative sexuality is part of the construction of modern identity and meaning, queer theorists extended what had been debated in lgbt (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) and queer activist circles since the early 1980s. Embracing a term originally used as a derogatory label for sexual deviance, *queer* refuses dominant categories of discourse and challenges assimilationist and liberal-pluralist politics aimed at the legitimization and toleration of excluded groups. Instead, queer theory examines the dominant organization of sexuality and the production of the normal. "Queer" is thus not defined around an identity, but as dissent from and defiance of dominant meanings of sex and gender. As a category of positionality, Michael Warner famously states that "'queer' gets a critical edge by defining itself against the normal rather than the heterosexual" and calls queer theory's intervention in heteronormativity "resistance to regimes of the normal" while Lisa Duggan pointed out that "its actual historical forms and position are open, constantly subject to negotiation and renegotiation."[1]

In terms of its analytical tools, queer theory draws on poststructuralism, deconstruction, and psychoanalysis; scholars such as Michel Foucault, Eve Sedgwick, and Judith Butler can be named as major influences, especially Foucault's important philosophical and historical reconceptualization of sexuality as an effect of discourse. Viewing sexuality not as a natural attribute of a person, but rather as (one of) the constellations that give rise to the meaningful and intelligible construction of a modern self in the first place, queer theoretical scholarship moves away from strategies of liberating the oppressed or repressed part of an inherent sexuality, to placing greater significance on the critical examination of the discursive productions of sexual identity in its connection to other categories of meaning. Historian Jennifer Terry, for example, when studying the treatment of "sex-variants" in the 1930s, instead of attempting to retrieve actors or events elided in official history, explicates precisely the operations of defining medical and scientific categories that produced those elisions. Eve Sedgwick places the production of the homo/heterosexual binary at the core of Western

1 M. WARNER, *Fear of a queer planet: Queer politics and social theory*, p. xxvi.
L. DUGGAN, Making it perfectly queer. In: *Sex wars: Sexual dissent and political culture*, p.167.

culture. As a literary theorist, Sedgwick argues for the necessity of an anti-homophobic stance when engaging in any critical cultural theoretical inquiry. Similarly, feminist philosopher Judith Butler's work examines heterosexual assumption in the production of gender, describing sex and gender as products of a form of "performativity". Gender, like sexuality and indeed connected to it, is produced through performative engagements that occur within networks of norms. A culturally intelligible body comes into being as result of an ongoing production as necessarily gendered and sexed form, which we learn to recognize in the form of identities. Butler argues that bodies become intelligible through a citational process that compulsively reinvokes and reiterates norms. Bodies are thus not "natural" but the (material) effect of discursive regulations and normalizations.

Thus asking about the conditions of possibility, i.e. the normative networks that constrain, but also enable, the production of material bodies as specifically identified selves, together with the dynamics of power and violence that accompany these processes, leads to the queer theoretical project of attempting to expand the realm of what can be imagined -- and what can become thus livable.

Connections between theory and activism were crucial to queer theory's development and continue to be central. Emerging within contexts of HIV/AIDS activism and centrally concerned with critically analyzing - and resisting the normative logic of - the creation of deviant and (culturally) unintelligible bodies, queer theory continues to attempt to engage this intersection of discourse, public policies, and political communities. The work of Cindy Patton, for example, examines representations and shifts in AIDS discourse, tracing the production and contestation of a national AIDS pedagogy that relies on a concept of a (compassionate) citizen that is distinct from dangerous or risky bodies. Patton's ongoing work on AIDS in international contexts explores the productive tension of theoretical discursive readings and politically relevant and subversive practice. Recently, the collection *What's Queer about Queer Studies Now?* has asked further questions about the status (and future) of the queer theoretical enterprise.

Critique/Normalization

Queer theory was criticized early on for being too narrowly focused on white gay male literary texts and for evading specificities of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or otherwise sex-

deviant identities and communities through a false inclusiveness of queer. However, even early queer theoretical work discussed the multiple differences of race, class, ethnicity and gender in the production, circulation, and maintenance of heteronormative conceptions of sexuality - and the ways these related to political strategies. As early as 1991 Tomas Almáguer argued for the inadequacy of identity categories for identifying same-sex behavior in Latino "homosexualities" and Ekua Omosupe problematized the racially unmarked category lesbian[2]. More recently, anthologies such as *Queer Diasporas* or *Queer Globalizations* explore the intersections of queer resistance to normativity within complex international networks of norms forged by globalization and migration. Bringing queer theory to bear on ideas of diaspora itself Gayatri Gopinath's *Impossible Desires* provides a nuanced understanding of both queer theory and diaspora.

Although it was not the intention of activists or theorists, *queer* has been recuperated in some commercial and normalizing ways (at least in the North American and British context). At times appearing as a marker of progressiveness seemingly devoid of critical or defiant content, "queer" has surfaced on TV shows or in other celebratory cultural contexts and seems to have shifted from a provocative position of resistance to identity categories to taking on the meaning of just another identity category implicated in much the same normativities queer theorists and activists set out to challenge. Within most academic or scholarly theoretical projects, however, queer theory continues to focus on the critical resistance to heteronormativity, reminding queers to examine their own production of norms and attempting to insist on queer as a resistant relation.

While this focus on resistance to normativity has been maintained in much of the theoretical literature, it is precisely the connection to political activist concerns together with the necessary lack of specificity (queer is not a particular identity, not a particular set of values or norms, but the ongoing critical engagement of and resistance to the establishment and maintenance of dominant normativities) that provide productive tensions and that continue to test queer theoretical relevance in a variety of fields. In specific political struggles and larger cultural contexts in which an appeal to particular values and the reliance on moral norms can

2 T. ALMAGUER, Chicano men: A cartography of homosexual identity and behavior. In: *differences*, pp. 75-100; E. OMOSUPE, Black/Lesbian/Bulldagger. In: *differences*, pp. 101-111.

be a powerful measure of "entry" or participation in realms of political legitimacy, lgbt/queers have had to negotiate appeals to rights or strategies of inclusion.[3]

Religion and Theology

Some have criticized queer theory for replicating problems found in other poststructuralist or feminist theoretical approaches to religion (e.g. that it is too removed from praxis, too partial/biased, too secular, etc.). Others resist adopting terminology that places a particularly deviant sexuality and gender discourse at the center of the analytical perspective. However, for many in the field of religion, a queer theoretical insistence on resisting the production of the normal provides an interesting starting point to study religious practices, identities, ethics and the study of religion itself.

Applying the subversive intentions of queer theory to the study of religion, liberation theologians, religious studies scholars, and religious ethicists began to explore queer theory's potential in the late 1990s. For example, (I can merely point to a few examples,) applying some of the queer provocative challenges to Christian theology, Bob Goss wrote *Queering Christ: Beyond Jesus Acted Up* and edited, with Mona West, *Take Back the Word*, a collection of lgbt and queer readings of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. Similarly establishing connections between queer theory and the academic study of religion, the anthology *Queer Theory and the Jewish Question* investigates the emergence of distinct Jewish and homosexual identities in the West - and their connections from the perspectives of Jewish cultural studies and queer theory.

Let me point to two further areas in the study of religion where queer theory is raising clusters of issues that are being investigated by scholars:

The Question of Ethics without Norms

Most queer theoretical work adopts Foucault's skeptical stance toward the modern organization of power and seeks to construct interventions (in texts or practices) that might resist the pervasive influence of normalizing power operations. A larger set of important questions needs to be considered in this context: Can there be ethics that are not implicated in normativity or effect domination? Are there norms, or constellations of norms, that do not produce or require abjection of others? Can we describe ethics that can formulate value (and

3 See, for example, M. WARNER, *The trouble with normal*.

thereby produce valuable bodies) without at the same time producing or requiring deviants who must be disciplined? How are we to formulate such ethics and what would its embodiment or political manifestations look like? These are theoretical concerns that become pressing when approaching ethics or when engaging in activist politics from a queer theoretical perspective. Does a queer theoretical view of power and resistance to identity prevent queers from having an ethics (with values and norms), concrete political agency, and a practical theory of "sexual liberation" that can respond to the contemporary political climate? These concerns are especially significant in many areas of liberation theology or otherwise socially and politically engaged and advocacy based religious movements or analyses.

Bringing Queer Theory to bear on the analysis of religion and sexual morality in politics and public policy, Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini's *Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tolerance* raises critical questions about the seemingly tolerant attitude of loving the sinner but hating the sin. Demonstrating that this position is a particular Protestant Christian morality veiled as liberal tolerance and secular sexual moral values, Jakobsen and Pellegrini argue that tolerance is unlike and in fact contrary to freedom and democracy. The authors analyze particular legal and cultural representations of the connections of sexuality and religion in contemporary U.S. political discourse with an eye to the production of normative constructions of sexual morality. Drawing on queer theoretical perspectives, they question why in the United States the principle of religious freedom is so rarely realized in practice - and they argue for sexual freedom along lines similar to constitutional debates around religious freedom as an ethical project. Resisting the seductive appeal of dominant rhetoric of sexual morality that re-inscribes normative gender and sexual codes, Jakobsen and Pellegrini argue for the radical promise of democracy that includes sexual and religious freedom.

Queer Agency and the Materiality of Bodies

Another issue that has often been raised as contentious within the study of religion is the poststructuralist resistance to voluntary agency and the critical attitude toward the taken-for-granted materiality of the natural body that we find in much queer theoretical work. Judith Butler argues that the materiality of the body is produced within regulatory regimes of

heterosexuality. "Sex," far from being a natural fact or an existing category prior to the advent of cultural gender norms, can be shown to "be a performatively enacted signification (and hence not 'to be' at all)."[4] However, this need not be an argument *against* the reality of bodies and their experience, or an argument *against* engaged politics. Rather, shifting the use of construction, Butler's approach points to new or different political possibilities despite a radical critique of identity and materiality. By shifting the discussion to that of power operating as a constitutive constraint, attention is shifted away from the question of who does the constructing to the operations and complex networks through which power operates.

Following Butler's suggestion to shift conceptions of how bodies are materialized and effected by power results in shifted conceptions of agency: when power works as a constrained and reiterative production and operates through the foreclosure of effects, the materialization of gender or the subject is not a voluntary or singular act, but compelled through highly complex and regulated practices within the constraints of the heterosexual matrix. Although such an account does not include a model of agency that is easily recognizable within a liberation ethics framework (which tends to emphasize voluntary agency,) a queer theoretical model need not therefore lack descriptions of agency. Indeed, paralleling a Foucauldian account of the operations of power, in which relations of resistance are immanent in power relations, Butler's concept of gender performativity bears within it possibilities of resistance to, or subversion of, the regulatory process of gender production.

Despite the multiple complex networks of norms and their various connections that compel and constrain the body, the performative production of sexed bodies does not always take place, but might fail to take place. This failure opens up opportunities for contestations. One can repeat differently, not relying on the same terms of production or normative engagement.

Jose Muñoz points out such shifted representations of agency in his study of *Disidentifications: Queer of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Drawing on available citations, but shifting their meaning while embodying them, disidentificatory practices can engage, yet also change, normative discourse. Muñoz offers important case studies from among communities of queers of color.

Applying some of the queer theoretical insights directly to liberation theology, Marcella Althaus-Reid introduces a theology from the margins of sexual deviance and economic

4 J. BUTLER, *Gender trouble*, p. 33.

exclusion (including a chapter on gay worship in Brazil). Althaus-Reid extends her earlier work in *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* where she built on taking seriously (much like Sedgwick's assertion vis-à-vis the literary canon) that sexuality is centrally important in the production of all modern meanings - and thus also crucial to critically analyze in theology. All theology is sexual theology, to Althaus-Reid. Bringing queer theory into productive conversation with feminist materialism and liberation theology, *The Queer God* challenges the oppressive powers of heterosexual orthodoxy, whiteness, and global capitalism.

Queering Religion

Queer theory challenges us to think more critically about our reliance on natural bodies and authentic selves. As identities and experiences are forged within complex networks of norms, embodied selves are always mediated and identities are ongoing processes of production. The content of a queer theoretical approach, which seeks to engage and disrupt these procedures, varies depending on the shape or function normativities take in particular settings.

Consequently, at the intersection with the study of religion, realms of "appropriate" areas of study might shift and new fields can come into focus (transvestites, gay bars, and drag queens as realms for learning about the performance of sanctity, as Althaus-Reid would have it, for example). Queer theory's challenge to gender as natural or binary "fact" can prompt scholars to pay attention to the often unacknowledged dynamics that construct these gender-effects and that recruit a variety of related identity categories alongside assumed gender meanings. Rereading the Council of Chalcedon through a queer lens to imagine a possible reading of Jesus as intersexed is but one further example of new queer readings of religious material in historical and contemporary contexts.[5]

There are, then, many areas in which scholars have begun to queer religion, to demonstrate the queerness of religion (its counter-normative and subversive potential in particular circumstances, the opportunities religious spaces and rituals provide for non-normative practices in terms of sex and gender identities etc.), and to examine and seek to further the queering of religion scholarship in academic contexts. Interesting challenges continue to

5 T. SHEFFIELD, Jesus as intersexed: A transgender counternarrative of embodiment.

emerge in rethinking the nature of religious experience in contemporary cultural contexts from a queer theoretical experience -- even as queer theory has to continuously adapt in order to maintain its critical focus on the intersecting production of sexuality and power in specific cultural and social networks and communities.

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