

CHAPTER 17

Queer Theory

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Today, many of us hear the word *queer* and don't bat an eyelash. This is not the case for everyone, of course, but chances are that if you are of the millennial generation or in college in the United States, *queer* is common parlance. You may have friends who identify as queer—perhaps you identify as queer—or you've heard the term in your intro to sociology or literary studies course (or even had a course in queer theory). For many, the only eyelashes seen batting at *queer* are those worn by the drag queens during the show at the local gay bar on Friday nights.

Throw the word *religion* into the mix, and there is certainly a bit more eyelash batting of the non-drag-queen type, but even that is waning. Most mainline denominations now ordain queer people for ministry and bless same-sex marriages. A growing number of seminaries and divinity schools offer courses in queer theology and some offer classes on topics such as ritualizing LGBTQ lives and intersectional queer ethics. But how do courses such as these understand the term *queer*, and its relation to, let alone usefulness for (or lack thereof), religious studies and practices? Isn't queerness antithetical to religion, at least to the major ones? Isn't religion antithetical to queerness? Religious institutions and queer folks have, historically, clashed over matters such as same-sex marriage, ordination for LGBTQ people, and ordained ministers presiding over same-sex marriages. Which inevitably leads to more questions: Is *queer* a synonym for lesbian or gay, or does it mean something else? And what is this whole theory thing about?

This chapter will answer these questions and more. It will explore what this thing called queer theory might have to say about and to religion—to the people and institutions that comprise it, and the disciplines that study it. It will examine why and how queer theory is particularly important and useful for a number of scholars who study and work on embodied religion. These scholars explore what desire, the body, and sexuality mean in, for, and to religious traditions and practices, and grapple with various and multiple complexities around the desiring body that is often a problem for religion but also integral to it. In order to understand why and how queer theory is an important mode of analysis for embodied religion, it is imperative to first examine what queer theory is (and isn't) and what it is about.

QUEER THEORY

What do spicy sausage jambalaya, buttery parmesan risotto, and beef bourguignon have in common? In addition to likely inducing hunger, these diverse meals all start with a humble

vegetable base. The traditional French base of onions, carrots, and celery sauteed in olive oil is called mirepoix. There are also regional variations: Italian soffritto adds parsley; the Cajun holy trinity uses bell peppers instead of carrots; German Suppengrün consists of leeks, carrots, and celery. Like mirepoix, queer theory is foundational for a number of different approaches to embodied religion, and it too has different variations based on the theoretical region it comes from. What are the key ingredients that make up queer theory, and how did it begin?

LGBT...Q? QUEER THEORY'S BACKGROUND (THE CONTEXT)

The term *mirepoix* was coined in the eighteenth century by the chef of Gaston Pierre de Lévis, the duke of the French city of Mirepoix, though the trio of sauteed vegetables served as a base of French cuisine long before it was given this name. Queer theory has traveled a similar path, and this section will outline its development via the forefathers of the field and the context that resulted in its naming.

INTELLECTUAL CONTEXT (QUEER THEORY'S FOREFATHERS)

Long before queer theory became an area of study, a number of scholars were writing on topics that would later become integral to the field. Two scholars in particular stand out: Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) and Michel Foucault (1926–1984). Their respective work in psychoanalysis and poststructuralism would serve as theoretical bases for queer theory's critique of the increasingly commonplace notion of stable, set identities.

Freud (psychoanalysis). Although Freud is well known as a founder of modern psychology, he is less known in popular culture as a progenitor of queer theory. Though some of Freud's reflections on sexuality are seen today as outdated, many of his thoughts have been revolutionary for queer theory. Two texts stand out as particularly relevant for queer theory: his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), and his lecture on female sexuality (1931).

In her foreword to a recent edition of *Three Essays*, Nancy Chodorow offers a succinct summary of their general argument: "Connecting all forms of sexuality, connecting sexuality to the non-sexual realms of individual and social life, and documenting the existence and development of childhood sexuality" (2000, xii). These insights have all been embraced by queer theory, especially the idea that sexuality develops—that it is not something innate and unchangeable—and the reflections on its development, particularly in Freud's discussion on sexual aberrations. In his discussion of perversion, which he defines as deviations in respect to the sexual aim, Freud points to the notion that sexuality develops as different experiences and psychic processes shape one's desires. Because sexuality is formed and continues to be formed, "the convergence of several motive forces," the line between "normal" and "perverse" is thin and tenuous (Freud [1905] 2000, 29). Freud explains that in sexuality, "we are brought up against peculiar and, indeed, insoluble difficulties as soon as we try to draw a sharp line to distinguish mere variations within the range of what is physiological from pathological symptoms" (27). Perversions, he explains, are "habitually present in normal love" especially in its preliminary aims, and only become pathological when they take the place of other aims "in *all* circumstances" (27). These insights on the development and diversity of sexuality are later embraced by queer theory.

Moreover, before turning to perversions generally, Freud begins his essay on sexual aberrations by discussing “inversion” (read: homosexuality), what he describes as deviations in sexual object rather than aim. Just as the line between normal and perverse is thin, so too is the line between heterosexuality and homosexuality. Freud rejects “the crude explanation that everyone is born with his sexual instinct attached to a particular sexual object,” and instead sees the objects of our “libidinal attachments” as something that develops and emerges (7). In *Three Essays*, Freud writes briefly on “an originally bisexual disposition,” though this is a topic he addresses in more detail in his later lecture on female sexuality, to which we now turn (7).

In his lecture “Female Sexuality,” Freud is trying to better make sense of the Oedipus complex, his notion that a child’s first love object is his mother. But what about young girls? How do they shift interest to the father, and eventually to men? Freud’s argument here is complex, but the even-shorter-than-CliffsNotes-version is: whereas all humans are innately bisexual, women are more prone to adult bisexuality because they have two sexual zones—the “feminine” vagina, and the “masculine” clitoris (Freud’s labels). Because of the female’s anatomy, the Oedipal stage is complicated, the female seeing herself as already castrated. You likely have far more questions at this point (in which case, turning to the chapter in this volume on psychoanalysis may be helpful). What is important to highlight here is how, again, we see that for Freud, sexuality is something that is developed, that comes into being. Although Freud’s theory had clear norms—ways he believed the human should develop—he nevertheless saw sexuality as precisely something that develops. All of us are innately bisexual. We are not born this way or that way, gay or straight. From Freud, queer theory acknowledges that sexuality is not something that is innate and unchangeable, but is something that develops and unfolds throughout our lives, shaped by a number of different personal, psychological, and cultural forces.

Foucault (poststructuralism). Whereas psychoanalysis is a major influence for queer theory, poststructuralism—the mid-twentieth-century intellectual movement that followed structuralism, characterized by the recognition of the pervasiveness of power and its effects on linguistic, institutional, and psychic structures—is seen as even more influential, the main progenitor of the field. Interestingly, even though Foucault is often seen as a, if not the, key poststructuralist thinker, he rejected the label, preferring to articulate his approach as a genealogy of the modern subject. Nevertheless, Foucault’s work is pivotal for poststructuralism, and thus has served as a key theoretical platform for early queer theory, particularly in his reflections on sexuality, history, and power.

Queer theory has been shaped in various ways through many of Foucault’s texts, but perhaps the most explicitly significant is the first of the three-volume *History of Sexuality* ([1978] 1990), which serves as an introduction to the project. In volume one, Foucault challenges the widely held assumption that sexuality is repressed (what he calls the repressive hypothesis) as well as the idea that speaking about sexuality means we are liberated. In critiquing these preconceptions, Foucault also outlines a new theory about power, arguing that it operates positively, diffusely, and productively, what he calls “the regime of power-knowledge-pleasure that sustains the discourse on human sexuality” (11). This operates through what he dubs *scientia sexualis*, the way sexuality is explained and categorized through psychoanalytic and scientific discourse. Foucault uses this method of genealogy to demonstrate how power has functioned in and through talk about sexuality, examining how society has moved from the church confessional to the therapy couch, the terms of

confession shifting from what I did to who I am, showing how power functions not as exclusion or hierarchy but through production of identity, grounded in a notion of truth. Thus, Foucault demonstrates that sexuality as we understand it has a history of its own, a history that is bound up in regulation and power dynamics: that sexuality is an effect of power, not simply the truth that power acts upon.

In this recognition of the cultural construction of sexuality, and of identity, by discourses and practices of power, Foucault articulates how the body is controlled, and how resistance and freedom can be reimagined in light of such control. It is important to explain briefly how Foucault understands different iterations of power. In *History of Sexuality*, as well as elsewhere in his oeuvre, Foucault talks about the difference between sovereign power, a king or authority exercising direct control over his subjects, and various forms of productive power: power through which humans are made—by which humans make themselves—subjects. These productive forms of power—which Foucault later describes particular iterations of, in pastoral, disciplinary, and biopower—“imposes a law of truth” on the individual, “which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him.” As such, this makes the individual “subject to someone else by control and dependence” (1982, 781). Though we think that claiming or asserting identity is a paradigmatic sign of our freedom, Foucault identifies it as a form of power exercised over us. Productive power also has the effect of us governing and controlling ourselves so that force is no longer needed. Think of the classroom: students are shaped, from a young age and through many years, to govern their own behavior—to raise their hands before speaking, to do the homework assigned by their teachers, to offer reflective and correct responses when called upon—in efforts to be identified as, and to understand themselves as, good students. In seeking to discover or build our identities, we are more shaped and formed by power—subjected—than we likely have realized.

What is important about Foucault’s theories on power is how power functions in ways that are far more subtle and ingrained, the body being self-governed, according to a broader logic of power and control, by particular norms and ideals. For Foucault, however, the fact that we are constantly shaped and produced by power does not mean that resistance—freedom—is not possible. In his essay “The Subject and Power,” Foucault explains, “there is no relationship of power without the means of escape or possible flight” (1982, 794). If our identities are produced by power, then perhaps “the target nowadays is not to discover what we are but to refuse what we are” (1982, 785). Foucault’s insights on power are vital for the field of queer theory, especially in religion. But first, more on queer theory as it comes into existence.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

While Freud and Foucault were being read and discussed among scholars in literary studies and philosophy departments, the political and social landscape also primed the way for queer theory to emerge in the 1990s as a field and mode of analysis. The Stonewall riots that ignited the modern gay rights movement were twenty-plus years past, and gay men and lesbians had experienced major victories but still faced widespread cultural and legal discrimination (many in the community at large did not yet acknowledge the existence, let alone the rights, of bisexuals, trans people, or other alternate sexualities). The gay community was still being ravaged by the AIDS crisis. The first legalized civil union for same-sex couples would not occur for another decade. But acceptance was growing and change was happening, and the LGBTQ community responded to that change in two different ways.

Growing Acceptance. LGBTQ activists and academics, while facing a number of challenges, were affecting increasing change in the courthouse and the college. The queer activist group, ACT UP (an acronym for AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), had been going strong for three years. President George H. W. Bush signed a National Hate Crimes Act (1990), the first of its kind to include protections for lesbian and gay people. Building on the political and social tide change and the emerging fields of women’s and ethnic studies, colleges and universities started not only to teach courses on lesbian and gay themes (that started in the 1970s) but also to have whole departments and programs dedicated to it. The City University of New York started the first program in gay and lesbian studies in 1986, with City College of San Francisco quickly following suit in 1989. This new field of lesbian and gay studies was rooted in historical studies, with an emphasis on uncovering the suppressed history of lesbian and gay people. John Boswell’s text *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (1980), which offered a detailed analysis of gay people in western Europe from the beginning of the Christian era to the fourteenth century, was already critically acclaimed, well on its way to becoming a classic in the field. Martin Duberman and Martha Vicinus had just published *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past* (1989), a volume of thirty essays that explores “homosexual history” from the ancient world through the mid-twentieth century, from imperial China to Renaissance Italy to Jazz Age America.

Growing Resistance. While acceptance for lesbian and gay people was increasing, activists and academics were also beginning to question the terms and limits of that acceptance. In March 1990, some folks from ACT UP formed a new group, Queer Nation, using more radical means such as public outings to increase LGBT visibility and counter discrimination. This was the first major group to use *queer* in a nonderogatory way, to reclaim the term. In the reclaiming, the group pressed against assimilation and tolerance. Their manifesto, which they distributed at gay pride parades in New York, Atlanta, Houston, and a number of other major cities, explained that “being queer means leading a different sort of life ... not about the mainstreams, profit-margins, patriotism, patriarchy, or being assimilated” (1990; for more on the history of *Queer Nation* and *Act Up*, see the documentary *United in Anger*, 2012). In the academy, shaped by this sociopolitical context and the works of Freud and Foucault, resistance to growing acceptance of lesbian and gay people was also occurring.

QUEER THEORY 101: A GENEALOGY OF/IN/THROUGH THE BODY (THE CONTENT)

In light of the influential insights of Freud and Foucault on the instability of identity—as something that is not fixed, but has a history, formed by power—and the complex political and cultural forces surrounding LGBTQ lives, queer theory emerges. Although impossible to summarize in a chapter, this section turns to some pivotal thinkers in the field, focusing on these scholars’ queer reflections on and about the body.

THE FOUNDERS AND EARLY FIGURES OF QUEER THEORY

Like the chef who dubbed the commonly used vegetable base mirepoix after the duke of the French town, queer theory also has an originary moment that postdates much of its early use. This section gives a brief account of that moment and also names some early figures in the newly named discourse.

De Lauretis on Queer Theory. In 1990, Teresa de Lauretis (1938–), a professor of the history of consciousness at University of California Santa Barbara, organized a conference with the goal of articulating “the terms in which lesbian and gay sexualities may be understood and imagined as forms of resistance to cultural homogenization, counteracting dominant discourses with other constructions of the subject in culture” (1991, iii). In order to capture this sense of resistance, to call into question what it has meant that “lesbian and gay” ... has become standard currency” and to “both transgress and transcend” the liabilities that come with those identity markers, de Lauretis called the conference “Queer Theory: Gay and Lesbian Sexualities” (v). De Lauretis is credited for coining the term, and (at least) three other texts are seen as igniting the conversation in this new discipline.

Bersani: Psychoanalysis, AIDS, and Queer Bodies. During the height of the AIDS crisis, three years before queer theory was coined as a term, literary theorist Leo Bersani (1931–) wrote “Is the Rectum a Grave?” (1987). The provocative essay, which later became canonical for queer theory, critiqued the gay communities’ movement toward assimilation. Bersani called into question whether the path of “growing acceptance” was built on lies that “the AIDS crises has rendered obsolescent,” and from there, whether it should be the path the community seeks to travel (206). Bersani relies on psychoanalytic theory to suggest an alternate path—rather than strive for acceptance, which is a political aim that will fail (and has failed), the gay community should embrace sex and sexuality for what it really is: “anticommunal, antiegalitarian, antinurturing, antiloving” (215). The resistance of heteronormative ideals about sex is where the gay community should focus its attention, not fearing or denying the perception of gay men’s obsession with sex, but instead recognizing the subversive and freeing potential in acknowledging their healthy enjoyment of sex.

Sedgwick: Literary Analysis and Moving Beyond Binaries. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1950–2009), an English professor at Duke University, had been using literary criticism to explore and question dominant discourses about sexuality for some time. In 1985, she published *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, and her second book, *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), was especially formative during the early days of queer theory. In it, Sedgwick argues against the binary distinction of heterosexual versus homosexual (a distinction, you may recall, that is assumed by many in LGBT studies and lauded as important for sociopolitical change), offering detailed analysis of how such clear distinctions are not epistemologically necessary nor given, but instead are the result of (false) assumptions we hold about identity. Relying on Foucault’s (and Nietzsche’s) insights on power, history, and identity, Sedgwick looks to nineteenth-century literature, from Herman Melville and Henry James to Marcel Proust and Oscar Wilde, to uncover, and thus challenge, these assumptions, examining how they are historically rooted rather than natural. By performing an analysis of “the epistemology of the closet,” to further her goal of “antihomophobic inquiry,” Sedgwick calls for the deconstruction of clear categories of identity, suggesting that those categories are not only historical, but also potentially oppressive (1990, 14).

Butler: Discourse and Performativity. The same year that *Epistemology of the Closet* was published, Judith Butler’s (1956–) *Gender Trouble* (1990) was also hot off the press. Even though the text’s argument was directed primarily to feminist theory (made clear by its



The subjects of Paris Is Burning, 1990. In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Judith Butler cites drag as an example of the performative nature of gender. Through a critical engagement with this film, Butler explains that “there is no necessary relation between drag and subversion” but that it “is subversive to the extent that it reflects on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced and disputes heterosexuality’s claim on naturalness and originality.” OFF WHITE PRODUCTIONS/RONALD GRANT ARCHIVE/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO.

subtitle, *Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*), its impact on queer theory is nearly unparalleled. Building on the insights of both Freud (as well as another psychoanalytic theorist, Jacques Lacan [1901–1981]) and Foucault, *Gender Trouble* challenged the reigning assumption in feminist studies about gender—suggesting not only that gender is a constructed category but that sex too is constructed, and that presumed categories of sex and the assumptions of heterosexuality that come with such presumptions, shape (and limit) how we think about gender (recall Foucault on power as productive). It is our expectations and discourses about gender, sex, and sexuality that produce these categories, these labels as markers of identity that we assume as natural. Butler suggests that it is the “regulatory practices of gender formation and division [that] constitute identity” thus making “identity” a “normative ideal rather than a descriptive feature of experience” (23).

This argument leads Butler to contend that gender is not natural, but rather, performative. Butler explains: “Gender is not a noun, but neither is it a set of free-floating attributes, for we have seen that the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence.” Our accounts of gender as natural and real (what she refers to as metaphysics of substance) actually constitute gender as “the identity it is purported to be” (33). Because gender is performed, inside structures of power, Butler inquires about the “possibilities of recirculation” that might exist, performances that “repeat and displace through hyperbole, dissonance, internal confusion and proliferation the very constructs by which they are mobilized” (41–42). Butler goes on to produce a number of texts on and about queer theory more explicitly, but her work, and the discipline of queer theory as a whole, is deeply shaped by her arguments in *Gender Trouble*, that our gendered, sexed, and sexual identities are not fixed essences but formed and performed, often unconsciously. Agreeing with Sedgwick that our identities are shaped by the power of language and categories, Butler identifies opportunities for challenging dominant norms within the very performances themselves, and in doing so, resisting and freeing ourselves (in part) from oppressive effects of dominant norms.

DEFINITION AND DEBATES

Now that we have a solid, albeit broad, grasp of the kinds of questions asked and assumptions held by the early figures in queer theory, it may be helpful to attempt to summarize what queer theory is and wants, and turn to some of the debates that occur among the academics who do queer theory. Returning to the mirepoix analogy, this section explores the question: why do some theorists prefer the French mirepoix as their base, whereas other scholars favor the Italian soffritto, and others still the spice of the Cajun holy trinity? What flavors do these theorists favor, and what kinds of dishes are they seeking to create?

What Queer Theory Wants: an Incomplete Summary and Definition. What might we say that queer theory is? What does it want? In an effort to summarize, we might say that queer theory challenges the fixed nature of identity, recognizing identity as historically and socially shaped by various forces of power—and that freedom (political, social, or otherwise) lies in challenging and resisting the notion of fixed identity, seeing sociocultural norms for what they are. Michael Warner, a queer theorist who has written, edited, and contributed to texts such as *The Trouble with Normal* (1999) and *Fear of a Queer Planet* (1993), suggests queerness is “resistance to heteronormativity” (1993, xxvi). Or, as David Halperin puts it a bit more broadly: “Queer is by definition *whatever* is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant” (1995, 62).

In light of these definitions, and of what we already know about queer theory, one may quickly discern that the attempt to summarize queer theory and its aims is flawed. Because the term *queer* is about “collective contestation,” Butler suggests, it “will have to remain that which is, in the present, never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes” (1993, 19). Sedgwick mirrors Butler’s optimism in her text *Tendencies* (1993), finding the term exciting because of “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically” (8). Because power is diffuse and productive, in resisting current norms, we can (and do) create

new norms, which then also must be challenged—which is what queer theory seeks to name and do.

Debates. Debate, reasoned and otherwise, is a common—if not definitive—marker of academic scholarship. And queer theory is no exception. Just as queer theory’s resistance of norms and account of the complexities of power call for a resistance of clear definition and political agenda, there are an abundance of matters that queer theorists tend to debate and disagree about. This section highlights just a few.

The place and usefulness of psychoanalysis in the field is a topic of frequent debate among queer theorists. On the one hand, queer theory has been indebted to Freud and to the French psychoanalyst Lacan, utilizing their insights on the shaping of identity and the complexity of desire. On the other hand, queer theory has, since its inception, been critical of the structuralism of psychoanalysis and the norms it proscribes. Foucault was particularly critical of psychoanalysis: one of his earliest texts, *The History of Madness* (1961), challenges the way madness is medicalized and the human is confined in the modern era, and *History of Sexuality* (1976) critiques the confessional nature of therapeutic interventions and their normalizing and identitarian effects. Contemporary theorists such as Lynne Huffer, in her book *Mad for Foucault: Rethinking the Origins of Queer Theory*, have reinvigorated and built upon Foucault’s critique, challenging the ways that psychoanalysis has functioned as a “gilded sexual cage,” arguing that it “cannot free us because its rationalist, moralizing structures preclude the possibility of speaking about sexual experience except as it is already captured by a patriarchal scientific gaze” (2009, 137, 163).

Another key debate in queer theory is how it understands its goals in relation to the future. This topic is often referred to as (part of) the antisocial thesis, largely represented by the two extremes of Lee Edelman (1953–) and José Esteban Muñoz (1967–2013). In his book *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004), Edelman, deeply influenced by Leo Bersani’s work, argues against what he calls reproductive futurism, a logic that undergirds our very conception of the political, as we “attempt to produce a more desirable social order” which “it then intends to transmit to the future in the form of its inner Child” (3). This logic of securing the future for the child is inherently heterosexist. So, using the psychoanalytic frame of Lacan, Edelman posits that queerness represents a rejection of futurity—the “death drive” of the social order—and that queers should embrace this logic that others project onto them regardless. The future has no place for the truly queer, so our political and social task is to stop trying to conform (as to do so is to erase queerness) and embrace the present and our status as the Other in it.

Representing the other end of the debate is Muñoz’s *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009). Contra Edelman, Muñoz calls for an embrace of the future, because he sees the potential for a different kind of future, a “future in the present” (49). For Muñoz, the future is what we make of it, not the source of our problem. Instead, our problem is straight time, an account of time and space that demands conformity to the norm. Muñoz calls for us to work toward a queer kind of future, beyond what he sees as the negativity of Edelman and the oppression of a straight future. This utopic vision cannot so much be grasped and attained, Muñoz explains (as that too would fall under a logic of straight time), but enacted and glimpsed through performances and politics.

Both sides are discontent with the way things are, but have different approaches of how to resist and change the reigning social order and its entrenched normalizing (and heterosexism).

Three years after de Lauretis coined the term *queer theory* she gave up on it, arguing that it had “quickly become a conceptually vacuous creature of the publishing industry” (1994, 296). Although de Lauretis’s critique did not seem to stop the proliferation of the field, her disavowal is gaining traction decades later, as much of LGBTQ politics continues to gain (and seek) assimilation and acceptance from the broader culture, and some major avenues for publication of scholarship in queer theory no longer exist. Has queer theory folded under pressure to conform and betrayed its original aims? Is it no longer necessary in our modern society that is now far more accepting of LGBTQ people and lifestyles? From the beginning, queer theory has been ambivalent about its own aims and ability to attain them—is that ambivalence, as Butler suggested, part of queer theory’s effectiveness, or of its inefficacy? Is it time to move on to something new? These questions are being asked with increasing frequency, and the fact that they are being asked at all highlights the continuing influence of the field. Although perhaps waning—or, some may suggest, simply shifting—queer theory is still alive and well, its work influencing and shaping a variety of conversations and fields. Among the fields that queer theory has, and continues to shape, is religion, the topic to which we now, finally, turn.

QUEER THEORY IN RELIGION

It has already been a long journey, and we are just now getting to the main topic of this chapter; the mirepoix of queer theory, like the cooking base, demands sautéing in a slow simmer before adding the other ingredients. Similarly, the content thus far is imperative in order to understand how queer theory functions in and for religion. Now, we turn to some of the recipes different scholars have created, though hopefully in the raw materials that have been presented, you have already begun to get a whiff of some of the recipes that they concoct, and perhaps have even begun to think of some of your own.

LGBT ... Q IN RELIGION

Just as queer theory stemmed from lesbian and gay studies and shifting attitudes toward lesbian and gay people, as well as challenged the identitarian claims that so often accompanied those attitudes, the turn to queer theory in religious studies reflects a similar trend, though it took a bit longer to take hold.

LGBT STUDIES IN RELIGION (CONTEXT REDUX)

The growth of lesbian and gay studies was deeply connected to the field of religion. John Boswell (1947–1994), who was pivotal to the development of LGBT studies, was a historian of religion. His book *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (1980), which argued that the church had not condemned gay people until the twelfth century, was groundbreaking for the field, receiving numerous awards. Boswell later went on to help found the Lesbian and Gay Studies Center at Yale. Although some readings of Boswell’s texts have suggested that they question the categorical opposition between heterosexuality and homosexuality (identifying the categorization as a historical moment), many, including Boswell himself, read his work as essentialist, uncovering the repressed history of the fixed, distinct identity of the homosexual. The embrace of fixed, stable identity has been (and, for

many, continues to be) seen as important, if not vital, in light of queer bodies and lives in religious contexts and communities.

QUEER BODIES AND LIVES

Due to the historic condemnation of homosexuality by major religions of the West, many in the LGBTQ community have embraced a notion of fixed identity, the logic of being “born that way” seen as useful for countering the religious invectives against homosexuality as a practice that one can simply choose not to participate in. From claims, such as Boswell’s, that there were gay individuals in early religious histories and scriptures (i.e., the story of David and Jonathan in the Hebrew Bible) to arguments that scriptures do not condemn modern homosexual identity, as such identities were not understood in the ancient world, many in the LGBTQ community have found the notion of a stable fixed homosexual identity true to their experiences, as well as useful in securing rights to marry and be ordained in their religious traditions. Perhaps even more basic, many affirm being “born this way,” reasoning that the Divine would not send someone to hell, to face an eternity of torture and suffering, for something the individual has no control over.

Although these reasons are compelling, they have proven unsatisfying for many who practice and study religion. Many have found that the notion of being born gay does not adequately describe their experience; they also may not feel as though they need to defend their gender or sexual identity from a religious standpoint. Relatedly, many scholars and practitioners of religion have embraced queer theory’s insights that sexuality and identity are produced through various uses and techniques of power. As such, they have recognized ways that religious discourses and practices, especially those that assume identity to be stable and fixed, further perpetuate the oppression that the marginalized face because of their sexual or gendered identities or practices. Moreover, they have also found an abundance of resources within religious texts, beliefs, and practices that challenge the idea of fixed identity and recognize norms for what they are, productions of power.

FROM LGBT(Q) IN RELIGION TO STUDYING RELIGION QUEERLY

Turning to the insights of queer theory, scholars of religion broadened their focus beyond lesbian and gay identities to examine critically the way identities and practices are formed and normalized, seeking to uncover the histories not of gay people but of these processes of normalization, their genealogies, and from there to critique and counter the way those processes have been limiting and oppressive. Rather than seek to add LGBT people into religious narratives, scholars now sought to question the very narratives that excluded particular identities and practices in the first place; instead of shaping the player, they sought to change the game—to explore religion queerly, or, put another way, to queer religious discourses and practices.

Uncovering the Queerness in and of Religion. As LGBT studies have explored the existence of homosexual people in religious contexts, queer theory has similarly examined how there are bodies, identities, and practices within religions that are queer—that challenge, question, and trouble various norms of identity, whether it be sexual identities of individuals, the religious identities of communities, or the identity of religious studies as a field. As religion scholar Claudia Schippert argues, “The very discipline of religion is being challenged, certainly in its modern academic version, when we take seriously what current

queer studies bring to the discussion” (2011, 68–69). Almost as soon as queer theory was taking off, religion scholars were relying on the same thinkers in their analysis. In his text *Religion and Social Theory* (1983), Brian Turner uses Foucault’s insights to suggest a shift in emphasis in the study of religion from ideology to the body. Seeking to uncover the queerness of and in religion, these approaches seek to take seriously the paradox the desiring body presents within and to religion, and from there—through countering, destabilizing, and subverting oppressive norms—strive to identify spaces and possibilities of resistance and freedom.

Although this chapter addresses religion broadly as an object of study, and explores the way queer theory is a useful form of analysis for the study of it (i.e., methodologically) in and through various contexts, as a Christian theologian I am most familiar with the ways other scholars of Christianity have utilized queer theory, and thus focus heavily on Christian discourses and practices. This focus is abetted by the fact that, while scholars of a variety of religious persuasions now utilize queer theoretical approaches, Christian theologians have tended to embrace queer theory earlier and more rapidly than scholars of other religions. As Claudia Schippert notes, “When focusing on religious studies beyond theology ... the intersections of queer theory have been notoriously difficult and underexplored” (2011, 71). To rely on the mirepoix analogy again, this section focuses on dishes made with the French mirepoix, the most common of the bases, while acknowledging that there are many fine recipes made with other cultural variations such as soffritto or Suppengrün or the Polish wloszczyna. Finally, I am perhaps echoing Foucault, who, although not a scholar of religion, once exclaimed, “Yes, I have a very strong Christian Catholic background, and I am not ashamed” ([1978] 1990, xvi). Also not ashamed, I do nevertheless recognize my Christian-centric emphasis and acknowledge the limitations that come with it.

With the limited scope of the author in mind, let’s turn to Christianity as a brief case study of what it might look like to examine the queerness of and in religion. As the culturally predominant religion within the United States, and in light of the political and social influence of the religious right, where Christian beliefs are deployed to deny rights to (and the humanity and dignity of) LGBTQ people, Christianity is not typically seen as all that queer. Yet theologians such as Gerard Loughlin have argued that Christianity, as well as the study of it (theology), is “radically queer” (2007, 7). Loughlin expounds on this claim at length in the introduction to the edited volume *Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body*, the title of which highlights the fact that something called queer theology even exists. In his introduction, Loughlin offers a variety of examples of how Christianity, and theology, is rather queer: whether it be in and through the Christian church’s practice of the Eucharist, which calls for ties of affiliation rather than biology to mark kinship; the sexually tinged mystical practices and writings of early Christian thinkers; or even the Being it claims and seeks to worship, “the queerness of God, who is not other than strange and at odds with our ‘fallen’ world” (8). The twenty-one essays that comprise the volume Loughlin introduces explore in greater depth the queerness of and in Christianity, exploring the queerness of and in Christian lives, Christian community (the church), tradition, the origins of faith, modern history, and doctrine.

Queering Religion. In her *Critical Introduction to Queer Theory* (2003), Nikki Sullivan suggests that “it may be more productive to think of queer as a verb (a set of actions) rather than a noun” (50). Attendant with identifying the queerness of and within religion, scholars

use queer theory to do the work of queering religion, which is what many of the essays in *Queer Theology* do—subverting how religious communities are imagined, challenging normative (read: traditional or orthodox) interpretations of scripture and doctrine, and so on. The next and final section of this chapter will turn to some examples of how scholars have queered religious discourse and practices, but by way of moving into the particular, let's first turn to two broad strategies scholars of religion utilize from queer theory.

Two key ways that scholars of religion queer their object of study is through queering history and queering key categorical and definitional assumptions—in these ways, they use queer theory as a method to interrogate, challenge, and subvert religious discourse, practice, and reflection. Perhaps inspired by Foucault's own critical intrigue toward religion and its effects, scholars of religion have found his work—particularly his genealogical method and his insights on power—especially useful. For instance, one might look to Elizabeth Castelli's critical historical examination of Christian discipleship (1991) and how she reads the invective to imitate Paul through a Foucauldian analysis of power, or to Jeremy Carrette's work (1999) tracing Foucault's engagements with religion in order to challenge a variety of assumptions within religious scholarship—from the transcendence-immanence dichotomy to how our understanding of Divine presence and absence shapes our understanding of religious experience.

Another key way that Foucault has been pivotal for scholars queering religion is the genealogical method. Although Foucault bases his method off the work of Friedrich Nietzsche, his own use and development of genealogy is deeply influential. Perhaps most notable here is Mark Jordan's groundbreaking text *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology* (1997). Jordan takes what Foucault does broadly with sexuality—tracing how it has functioned as a form of power-knowledge in and through history—and utilizes that method to look more specifically at *sodomy* within Christian history. Tracing the concept of sodomy throughout medieval Christian history, from its Latin etymology to its use by Aquinas hundreds of years later, Jordan demonstrates how sodomy as a concept is invented, highlighting the incoherencies in its deployments in order to call religious communities to question what they have (falsely) seen as historically justified homophobia. Jordan has continued to employ and reflect on genealogy in his work: for instance, in *The Silence of Sodom* (2002), he analyzes homophobia in modern Catholicism, tracing its tangled history with the Church's homoerotic discourses and practices. *Recruiting Young Love* (2011) extends the historical scope outlined in Jordan's earlier texts, tracing shifting discourse on homosexuality through manifestations about and directed to adolescents; and *Convulsing Bodies* (2014) offers a compilation of meditations on Foucault's work on, in, and for religion.

Following Jordan's analysis in *Invention of Sodomy*, scholars increasingly utilized genealogy to critically examine Christian history and challenge assumed norms, and to continue to explore discourses and practices around sexuality and gender. For example, Linda Woodhead's and Jane Shaw's chapters in *Queer Theology* track discourses on gender and sex during the time of the Reformation to demonstrate how particular historical patterns and ideas were particularly delimiting to women's desires (Loughlin 2007, 215–229, 230–245). Vincent Miller does similar work with the role of consumerist culture on religious practices, as does Catherine Bell in examining religious rituals. Religious studies scholars such as Talal Asad and Tomoko Masuzawa genealogically trace how the very idea of religion is a contingent, historical category. Although Freudian and psychoanalytic engagements by and in religious studies discourse are oddly lacking, the use of Foucault,



A woodcut of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah that originally appeared in Hartmann Schedel's Nuremberg Chronicle, 1493. In *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology* (1997, 44), Mark D. Jordan traces how Peter Damian coined the term sodomy (intentionally linking it to the word blasphemy, posing it as an unrepentable and unforgiveable sin), effectively making "the inference from acts to agent almost automatic." WORLD HISTORY ARCHIVE/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO.

particularly Foucauldian genealogy, to analyze diverse religious themes, approaches, and topics highlights how *queer* is indeed a verb, and one that is useful in and for religious scholarship.

Subversion and Resignification (Creation Through Destruction). In a response challenging feminist critiques that postmodern and deconstructive approaches are politically ineffective, if not harmful, Judith Butler explains:

To deconstruct the concept of matter or that of bodies is not to negate or refuse either term. To deconstruct these terms means, rather, to continue to use them, to repeat them, to repeat them subversively, and to displace them from the contexts in which they have been deployed as instruments of oppressive power. (1995, 51)

On more than one occasion, Christian theologian Eugene Rogers cites Butler's claim, suggesting that one could use *queer* in place of *deconstruct* to explain the work that queer theory does in and for religion. To queer, for instance, marriage, or the Christian ritual practice of the Eucharist, or ordination in the Anglican Communion (all examples Rogers offers), is not to refuse these religious terms, beliefs, or practices, but rather to reinterpret and reperform them, and in doing so, potentially transform the way they function (see, for instance, 2006, 152–153). This idea of transforming by reappropriating, of resignifying, transports us back to the beginning of queer theory—the political and cultural reclaiming

of the term against its use as an insult (“We’re here, we’re queer, get used to it!”) and the conference on queer theory—and even further back in time, to Foucault’s rejoinder that “where there is power, there is resistance” (1990, 96). Rogers is among a diverse group of scholars and practitioners of religion who turn to queer theory not only to understand and interpret how bodies are figured in religion—as gendered, as sexed, as desired and desiring—but to reinterpret and reform religion’s complex dealings with bodies, a task that demands continual and consistent vigilance in light of the complex ways power works in, on, and through bodies, texts, and communities. By way of conclusion, let’s now turn to some examples of scholars of religion doing this critical, subversive, resignifying work.

FROM Footholds and Foundations to Fissures and Cracks: Applications

Having begun to explore what it means to queer religion, offering some various examples (ingredients) along the way, this penultimate section seeks to dig just a little bit deeper, to turn to applications—some specific dishes or recipes, one might say—that elucidate in more detail how scholars of religion are doing that creative work of critical examination and resignification. We’ll turn to two dishes of sorts: first, to intersectional analysis within queer theory and religion, which we’ll describe as a kind of soup, and then we will conclude with the spicy indecent theology.

Queerness and/as/of Difference (Soup). A key, and important, topic in queer theory is that of difference—recognizing and celebrating difference is a grounding principle in the field as well as in queer politics. An important way difference is engaged is through the negotiations and connections between different forms and representations of difference. Whereas section two explores various religious and cultural traditions, and other chapters in this section address different markers of identity, here we turn to how queer theory engages difference in all its multiplicity, and what this means in and for religious scholarship. Mirepoix, in its traditional forms, is comprised of three ingredients. Queer theory’s canon, traditionally, has only two: Freud and Foucault. Is there a third key ingredient of the base of queer theory? Perhaps that third key ingredient is intersectional analysis that emphasizes difference—analysis that foregrounds racial and ability differences. Michael Hames-García gestures to this possibility in his work in *Gay Latino Studies*, where he charts the “early emergence of intersectional thinking” in queer studies—some of which preceded many of the prominent founders of queer theory and developed, unacknowledged for many years, alongside the dominant, canonical discourse (2011, 21). This section, then, explores difference as the third foundational ingredient of queer theory.

Just as a good soup or stew calls for the right ingredients to complement the base and spices (e.g., madras curry does not exactly go in Italian Wedding Soup, but adds a nice kick to a vegetarian chili), many queer theorists in religion thoughtfully consider the ways queer sexual identity interacts and intersects with other markers of identity (e.g., race, gender, ability, class, etc.) as well as how queering as a method and approach applies to different contexts and realities. In the 1970s and 1980s, black feminist thought turned to intersectionality as a form of analysis to challenge the predominance of white feminism and the universal claims and assumptions that went with it.

Scholars in queer theory such as José Esteban Muñoz and Jasbir Puar have observed and challenged a similar phenomenon of cultural dominance in queer studies. Muñoz, for

instance, explores how queers of color offer keen insights on how to negotiate mainstream culture in his book *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Politics of Performance* (1999). Others have explored related and overlapping intersections: Andrea Smith turns to Native American contexts, critiquing heteronormativity in what she calls “settler colonialism,” and scholars such as Robert McRuer and Alison Kafer have reimagined disability studies by reading (dis-)ability through a queer theoretical lens, to develop what they call crip theory. Religious studies is building on these insights. For example, Deborah Beth Creamer turns to crip theory in her work *Disability and Christian Theology* (2009). These scholars, amidst many others, not only have used queer theory to call for a more intersectional analysis, but also have critiqued normalized accounts and practices of queer sexuality as it manifests in and relies upon different contexts, cultures, and traditions, what they have come to call homonormativity.

A particularly notable example of this attention to difference and critique of homonormativity is Jasbir Puar’s book *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (2007). Although Puar is not a religious studies scholar, the text examines dominant cultural and religious (read: Christian) misrepresentations of Muslim and Sikh communities—and was even the subject of a panel at the annual joint meetings of the American Academy of Religion and Society of Biblical Literature in 2011, the proceedings later published in *Culture and Religion* (2014). *Terrorist Assemblages* looks to the dynamic of constructing difference as Other in US politics and culture, particularly in and through the discourse of *terror*, where the terrorist/Muslim/Arab is cast as perverse and deviant, as queer, explaining how homonormative politics have taken on a nationalist logic (thus, homonationalism), gays and lesbians becoming complicit in the heteronormativity that oppresses them. Puar explores this homonationalism in relation to the queering of the terrorist body by exploring three interrelated phenomena that she addresses throughout the book: US sexual exceptionalism, queer liberal secularism, and the ascendancy of whiteness.

Two things in particular in Puar’s text bear highlighting. First, Puar’s notion of the assemblage offers a way of expanding on the notion of intersectionality in a way that aligns with queer theory’s criticisms of identity. Whereas the idea of intersectionality conjures an image of discrete subjects or ideas moving through and past one another, assemblage connotes the formation of something new as various identities, experiences, and forms of power shape it. Or, to extend our recipe metaphor: whereas intersectionality might be analogized to a soup or stew, different ingredients all distinguishable but coming together to create a unique, robust taste, assemblage could potentially be imagined as a pureed soup—a butternut squash or tomato soup, or a rich homemade broth. Puar uses language of fusing, as different parts come together to form something new, but also ever-changing, which “scrambles into chaotic combinations” (193). Second, and closely related, is the role of religion in Puar’s argument. Puar points us to how religion, like other aspects of our identities and experiences, is part of a broader cultural landscape and can be, and has been, implicated in homonationalism. *Terrorist Assemblages* calls for us to tend to the ways religion shapes and is shaped by various and multiple factors. As Melissa Wilcox suggests, within religious studies “The assemblage might be useful ... as a way of seriously approaching the multiple effects of power that religion carries, expresses, and is subject to” (2014, 155–156). Whereas this chapter has hoped to especially highlight ways religion is and can be queer, Puar reminds us that religion can also be, and often is, normative—that now, even homosexuality is and can be normative.

Which brings us to the final section: what does it mean and look like to keep queer theory (of/and religion) queer?

Keeping Queer Theory (of/and Religion) Queer (Jambalaya). One of the most famous variations of mirepoix is the holy trinity of onions, celery, and bell peppers, which gives the dishes it flavors a bit of spice. This cooking base is most commonly used in *jambalaya*, a spicy Creole or Cajun dish of meat, rice, and vegetables. Jambalaya was created in the French Quarter of New Orleans in the early nineteenth century as an amalgamation of a number of ingredients (the word itself comes from the Provençal word *jambalaia*, which roughly translates as a “mishmash or mix up”) based on what the residents of the region could access and afford—French ham, African rice, Spanish paella. In southern Louisiana—a poorer region where food was scarce—the large slave population and free people of color who had emigrated from Haiti creatively combined the resources of the region with the ideas of the past, adding spice to give it a bite that suited their palettes, to create jambalaya.

One might look to what Marcella Althaus-Reid (1952–2009) has called indecent theology as a queer theory in religion equivalent to jambalaya, as it too is something that stems from a variety of traditions and contexts—tending to the intersections (assemblages) of those contexts, particularly to the voices and experiences of those who are economically, racially, and sexually disenfranchised, looking to build the theology from those voices, and in doing so, to develop something new and good (in the instance of indecent theology, something liberating) out of it.

If the first sentence of a book sets the tone, it is not difficult to see why Althaus-Reid called her theology indecent: “Should a woman keep her pants on in the streets or not?” she muses, and then proceeds to reflect on parallels between an Argentinian female theologian and a female street vendor selling lemons (2000, 1). Why focus on ladies’ skivvies? It is through this short example that Althaus-Reid suggests what indecent theology might offer us: “The issue of lemon vendors without underwear has never been a theological issue in Latin America,” she explains, “yet a whole theological story and history can be revealed through them” (2). Indecent theology, she explains, is “a theology that problematizes and undresses the mythical layers of multiple oppressions in Latin America, a theology which, finding its points of departure at the crossroads of liberation theology and queer thinking, will reflect on economic and theological oppression with passion and imprudence” (2). Like the peep shows of the Times Square of the 1970s, Althaus-Reid sought to take the underwear off theology, in order to both critique and challenge economic and sexual oppression as well as to explore what it might mean to embrace and perform desire in the midst of it. To be indecent is to challenge oppressive norms. To be indecent is to be queer.

Althaus-Reid explored and argued indecency in and of theology in various forms throughout her career. In *Indecent Theology*, for instance, she offers an indecent reading of Mary (the mother of Jesus), carefully critiquing how Mary is often deployed as a figure of decency and holiness to keep poor women subservient and from there turning to “indecent forms of popular Mariology from the cultural grounds of the poor urban dwellers of Buenos Aires” (8). Later in the book, she turns to sexual fetishes (BDSM, leather practices, etc.) as a resource for doing theology that is liberating. Her book *Queer God* seeks to free our conceptions of God from the oppressive closets of traditional Christian theology, envisioning Trinitarian theology through God as Orgy, supporting her approach to reading scripture by an image of God as Sodomite. Indecent theology, Althaus-Reid explains, enables us to “find or simply recognize God sitting amongst us, at any time, in any gay bar or in the home of a camp friend who decorates her living room as a chapel and doesn’t leave her rosary at home when going to a salsa bar” (2003, 4). In and

through indecency, she explains, we find God, freeing God and thus ourselves from oppressive norms—a freedom that must be continually fought for, and that must be economic, gendered, and sexual.

Summary

In her essay tracing LGBT movements and queer theory in religion, Melissa Wilcox grieves the passing of Althaus-Reid, who died in 2009 after battling breast cancer, lamenting how her passing has “left a significant gap in the development of queer theology” (2012, 240). While her absence is noticeable and her death grieved by many, a number of scholars, explicitly or indirectly, continue to do rather indecent work in religious studies and queer theory. For instance, in his book *Ecce Homo* (2012), Kent Brintnall explores how images and accounts of the suffering male body portray vulnerability and eroticism, and charts how representations of Christ’s crucifixion both support and subvert cultural ideals of masculine power. Ethicists such as Robyn Henderson-Espinoza and Thelathia Young have turned to queer theory and religion in the context of race and liberation ethics. Edited volumes such as *Dancing Theology in Fetish Boots* (2010), a collection of essays honoring Althaus-Reid, are a testament to the ongoing interest in queer theory and religious studies.

The scholars mentioned, as well as some appearing here in *Embodied Religion*, are just a sample of many who use queer theory in and for their various religious contexts and disciplines, who do the ongoing work of interrogating and resisting the normalizing effects of power. Scholars who toil at the assemblage that is queer theory and the study of religion do the difficult and careful work of examining how power produces norms that shape our identities, and of mapping the way that power works through various religious ideas, contexts, and institutions to sanitize our desires, to make our bodies and actions decent. And within the same constellations—the same assemblages—they imagine, pursue, and produce the queerness and indecency of and in religion, all the while staying vigilant to the new and shifting assemblages that religion in its various forms and modes morphs and fuses into, embracing what Althaus-Reid explains as a “queer theological praxis which by definition has the instability of becoming and not the certainty of an arrival” (2008, 109). Like mirepoix, queer theory doesn’t just add flavor to the study of (embodied) religion, but builds the flavor of it—whereas an ingredient like salt adds to a dish, enhancing its already existing flavor, queer theory, like mirepoix, helps frame and foreground the taste, serving as a base on which possibilities can be built. As such, like mirepoix, the possibilities for queer theory’s use to complexify, challenge, and contribute to religious discourse and practice are many.

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