

Lesbian and Gay Theologies

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Being gay is far more than just a matter of sexual behavior; it is rather a whole mode of being-in-the-world, an "existential standpoint" which colors all our perceptions of and interactions with the world and one which also stands over against established cultural and religious standards for gender roles and intimate human relationships. Such an all-encompassing givenness should also nourish and undergird our efforts at spirituality and theology.

—J. MICHAEL CLARK (1989, 1)

The divine presence is incarnate—embodied—in our relational selves. Our power in relation is being shaped in the matrix of each relational self who is true to herself as relational. The justice of God, alive in us insofar as we are true to ourselves, is reflected by the mutuality in our relationships with one another, which in turn enable us to sustain creatively the tensions in which the Sacred is at home among us. To know this deeply within ourselves is serenity.

—CARTER HEYWARD (1988, 33)

Origins of Lesbian and Gay Theologies

Lesbian and Gay theologies emerged in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s in the context of the emerging lesbian and gay civil rights and

liberation movements. The civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s and the women's movement in the 1960s and 1970s provided the theoretical framework and activist energies and strategies. With this framework and these energies and strategies, many socially marginalized groups began to name for themselves their experiences of oppression within dominant U.S. society. They created movements of social change to transform what they experienced as oppressive realities. The women's movement and "free love" countercultural movements of the sixties and seventies in particular called into question long-standing beliefs about sexuality and gender, leading to the flourishing of a sexual liberation movement in which many lesbians and gay men formed the vanguard.

Religious activism and theological reflection within this context in turn laid the groundwork for a diverse and growing body of lesbian and gay—and more recently, transgendered and bisexual—theologies. The scholarly silence about homosexuality and Christianity was broken a generation earlier with the publication in 1955 of Derrick Sherwin Bailey's book *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition*, which traced the development of anti-homosexual attitudes in the West from the biblical texts through the medieval period. A few years later, Robert Wood's *Christ and the Homosexual* became one of the first theological works to advocate the inclusion of homosexual persons within church and society.

Scholars, activists, priests, and pastors built on these early works and drew on their own experience within religious communities and churches to create theological writings that challenged the pervasive homophobic attitudes and practices in Christian churches and institutions. In the 1970s, Jesuit priest John McNeill's *The Church and the Homosexual* and Virginia Ramey Mollenkott and Letha Scanzoni's *Is the Homosexual My Neighbor?* drew on changing perspectives in psychology and the natural sciences to argue that homosexuality is as natural as heterosexuality. The problems many homosexual persons experienced were a result of society's and the churches' pervasive homophobia (fear and repression of same-sex feelings and practices) rather than their homosexual orientation itself. Together with biblical scholars Tom Horner, Robin Scroggs, and George R. Edwards, these authors also began to challenge the dominant biblical view that the Bible condemned homosexuality as unequivocally sinful and unnatural, against God's will.¹ John Boswell's landmark 1980 study, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, took gay biblical, theological, and historical studies to a deeper level. He carefully studied the social context of biblical texts and their subsequent interpretation along with the implications for how these texts are used—or misused—in arguments about homosexuality today.

¹See Horner, *Jonathan Loved David*; Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality*; and Edwards, *Gay/Lesbian Liberation*.

What characterized these early homosexual theological works is their **apologetic stance**. The authors addressed the pastoral, theological, biblical, and spiritual issues lesbian and gay Christians confronted as they came out within their churches and religious communities and the widespread efforts of the churches and religious authorities to continue to exclude homosexual persons from full acceptance in the Christian community. These authors argued that homosexual persons did not need to change to become heterosexual or remain celibate (as most Christian denominations demanded) to be either "normal" or accepted by God, and they sought to **answer dominant and anti-gay biblical and theological arguments with alternative, gay-affirming perspectives**.

Churches Affirming the Movement

Apologetic gay and lesbian theologies coincided with, and often grew out of, the rise of lesbian and gay-affirming caucuses within most of the mainline Protestant and Roman Catholic denominations. Dignity within the Roman Catholic Church, Lutherans Concerned within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Affirmation within the United Methodist Church, the More Light movement in the Presbyterian Church (USA), and the Coalition for Lesbian and Gay Concerns within the United Church of Christ all advocated and worked for full inclusion of lesbian and gay Christians within their respective denominations. Lesbian and gay theologies of this period largely reflected these concerns and struggles in their efforts to provide biblical and theological grounding for the full inclusion of lesbian and gay people within the Christian church. As queer theologian Robert Goss notes, "Gay theology in the eighties centered on two issues: biblical texts that were used to justify homosexuality as sin and psychological issues of sexual orientation to deconstruct moral theologies based on natural law" (2002, 240).

These efforts continued to be thwarted in most denominations—and in some cases **provoked a backlash such as in the 1986 Vatican prohibition of Dignity's meeting in Catholic churches**. This led many lesbian and gay theologians and activists to move to a much more critical stance of Christian churches, theology, and tradition. **No longer content to work for full inclusion in the churches, lesbian and gay scholars began to incorporate the frameworks of liberation and feminist theologies to argue that homophobia, heterosexism, and sexism lay at the very core of the Christian tradition**. They contended that these evils needed to be rooted out and transformed if Christianity were to be faithful to the liberating message of the gospel. These authors argued that lesbians and gay men must stand on the authority of their own embodied experience to challenge external authorities of scripture, tradition, and psychology that were used to justify their exclusion and subordination in church and society.

At the same time, tensions were emerging within the lesbian and gay movement in the churches. Lesbian theologians such as Carter Heyward and Mary Hunt grounded their activism and theology within feminism. Hence they linked their critiques of homophobia and heterosexism with critiques of sexism to argue that patriarchal notions of gender and sexuality must be transformed for lesbian and gay people—as well as all women and other marginalized groups—to experience full liberation. Gay male theology, in contrast, largely overlooked issues of sexism, focusing instead on homophobic church practices, including the exclusion or expulsion of gay and lesbian clergy, the denial of ordination to openly gay and lesbian seminarians, and the refusal to bless same-sex unions.²

Moving Beyond Apologetics

Within this context, lesbian theologian **Carter Heyward was among the first lgbt (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered) theologians to move away from an apologetic framework to articulate an explicitly lesbian feminist theology of liberation**. Her 1984 book, *Our Passion for Justice: Images of Power, Sexuality, and Liberation*, gathered together her writings and sermons from the previous decade where she had begun to develop her theological analysis and critique of relations of power along lines of sexuality and gender within church and society. Essays such as "Lesbianism and the Church," "Theological Explorations of Homosexuality," and "Sexuality, Love, and Justice," began the shift in lgbt theological discourse away from merely seeking full inclusion within Christianity to a profound critique of Christianity itself for the ways it is rooted in and reinforces patriarchy.

Heyward developed this theological analysis more fully in her 1989 book, *Touching Our Strength: The Erotic as Power and the Love of God*. She critiques the dualistic and heterosexist character of the Christian theological tradition, while also developing a constructive theological and moral alternative, grounded in reclaiming our embodied experiences of the erotic in relations of mutuality as a central experience of God. In introducing her book, she writes "In struggling to come to terms with the pervasiveness of evil in our life together...I have become increasingly interested in probing the character of that which is radically good in our common life: our power in mutual relation as the basis of our creative and liberating possibilities, literally the only basis of our hope for the world" (1989, 18). Building on

²For an example of some of the differences and dialogue around these differences between lesbian and gay male theologies, see Heyward, "Embodying the Connections," and Hunt, "Opposites Do Not Always Attract," in Clark and Stemmler, eds., *Spirituality and Community*, 133–63. For a response to Heyward and Hunt, see Gorsline and Spencer, "Putting Our Bodies on the Line" in *The Journal of Men's Studies*, 291–309.

the groundbreaking work of the lesbian African American writer Audre Lorde, Heyward reclaims the erotic to articulate a sexual theology. This theology is rooted in embodied, mutual relationship that calls into question dualistic and patriarchal configurations of gender and sexuality that privilege male over female, heterosexual over homosexual, disembodied love as *agape* over embodied *eros*.

Also in 1989, J. Michael Clark's groundbreaking book, *A Place to Start: Toward an Unapologetic Gay Liberation Theology*, was published. Several features of Clark's book distinguish it from earlier gay male theologies. As the title suggests, Clark sought to break from an apologetic approach and explicitly incorporate a liberation theology framework that drew from the authority of gay male experience to articulate theology. Clark writes also from an explicitly pro-feminist gay male stance, learning from and in dialogue with feminist theologians such as Heyward and Rosemary Radford Ruether to name patriarchy as the primary social context and contradiction that leads to gay oppression. Finally, Clark writes within the context of the explosion of the AIDS pandemic as an openly gay man with AIDS who has seen his primary community devastated in recent years. Not only homophobia, but also "AIDS-phobia, structure the oppressive context against which gay men must struggle for liberation" (1989, 49).³

A Move to Academic Settings

Heyward's and Clark's publications also mark a tenuous shift in the context of lgbt theologies to an increasingly academic setting. Up to and through the 1980s, institutional hostility to openly lesbian and gay scholars largely prevented these scholars from either landing academic jobs or being able to write openly about lgbt themes. Increasingly, some graduate students and young faculty were writing about these issues, risking career possibilities to create and advance the much-needed theological discussion around lgbt concerns. In 1987 at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion in Boston, Michael Clark and Michael Stemmler cofounded the Gay Men's Issues in Religion group. For many years this would provide the primary outlet for publications in gay theology as most work in this area continued to be rejected by mainstream presses.⁴ During the same period, the Lesbian Feminist Issues group in the AAR began, illustrating the continued confluence between issues of lesbianism and feminism in religion.

³Clark addresses the theological issue of theodicy—evil and suffering—in the context of HIV/AIDS in many of his writings, and especially his book *Defying the Darkness*.

⁴In fact, many of these early works were either self-published or relied on small, non-mainstream presses such as Monument Press in Dallas. Lack of support from major publishers effectively prevented their wide circulation.

Features of Non-apologetic Theologies

What were some of the main features of these early non-apologetic lesbian and gay liberation theologies? All liberation theologies share several methodological assumptions and characteristics that, when analyzed, can shed light on the particular nature of each theology. Four main steps of the "hermeneutical circle" that frame theologies include the following:

1. the *starting point or context* of theology, which includes the social-historical context out of which theologies arise, the communities that produce these theologies, and the issues, questions, and contradictions these theologies seek to address
2. *social-historical analysis*, where we seek to get a clearer understanding of the social-historical dynamics that shape the contradictions theologians seek to address
3. *theological reflection*, where we name the sources and norms we reflect on to construct theology (traditionally these have included Christian scripture, tradition, and experience)
4. *action/response*, the praxis that both informs and flows from our theologies⁵

Using these categories, the starting point of lesbian and gay theologies is naming the contradictions lesbians and gay men experience between their lived, embodied experience as fully human persons and the teachings and practices of both church and society that deny this full humanity. Such denials claim that homosexuality is inferior to heterosexuality; is sick, perverse, immoral, or illegal; and is therefore to be repressed. Lgbt theologies thus explicitly develop a "hermeneutic of suspicion" with respect to dominant theologies, arguing that their heterosexist claims and practices reflect distorted and oppressive human values and assumptions rather than the experience of God or the divine. They name these contradictions variously as homophobia, heterosexism, sexism, erotophobia, and AIDS-phobia—whatever attitudes and practices that prevent lgbt people from experiencing our full humanity within church and society.

⁵Hermeneutics is the field or philosophy of interpretation. The hermeneutical circle is a method within liberation theologies that understands all theologies to be rooted in and rising from particular contexts, communities, and questions that then shape the kind of theology that is developed. For one of the earliest discussions of the hermeneutical circle within the methodology of liberation theology, see Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology*, 7–38. In the conduct of theological reflection, the theological assumption behind naming sources for theology is that God or the divine somehow is revealed through them. Hence traditional Christian theologies have claimed that God is revealed through the Bible, through the Christian tradition (such as in the creeds, teachings, and doctrines that have been developed and passed down), and through the ongoing experience of Christians in the church. *How* these sources are developed and interpreted is shaped largely by the *norms* we develop, which serve as filters. Liberation theologies, for example, explicitly use the norm of *liberation* through which to interpret these sources, arguing that God acts in the world in such a way to transform suffering and oppression into liberation.

and children to end abuse, activism around AIDS and HIV issues, organizing for same-sex partner benefits in institutions and society, confronting church denominations and religious communities on their exclusive and oppressive practices, and more. What each have in common is drawing on developing and transformed theological and theoretical understandings of sexuality, gender, justice, and liberation, informed by the experiences of diverse lgbt persons and our allies. These commonalities are used to confront the diverse array of contradictions and injustices we encounter in our settings. The goal is a profound and integrated personal and social transformation of individuals, institutions, society and the church.

An Explosion of Diverse Perspectives

The last fifteen years from the end of the 1980s have seen an explosion of diverse lgbt theological perspectives as writers and activists in diverse settings have developed liberationist and non-apologetic stances to address many issues and circumstances. With the emergence of womanist theology in the African American community, for example, lesbian womanists Renée Hill and Irene Monroe have confronted the womanist community with the need to take seriously lesbianism, homophobia and heterosexism within the African-American community.⁸ Elias Farajate-Jones, a gay-identified bisexual African American theologian and activist, lifts up biphobia and transphobia and the experience of bisexual and transgendered persons as critical to theologizing both within and outside the African American community (1993, 139–159). Hill, Monroe, and Farajate-Jones, together with some white lgbt theologians such as Robin Gorsline, insist on focusing on the multidimensional nature of oppression and privilege, foregrounding issues of race and class in developing lgbt theologies.

Similarly, emerging Latino/a theologies are beginning to break the silence around sexuality in general and homosexuality in particular within Latino/a communities. In their text, *Introducing Latino/a Theologies*, Miguel A. De La Torre and Edwin David Aponte note that Hispanic bias against lgbt persons differs from homophobia in the dominant U.S. culture. “Hispanics do not fear the homosexual; rather homosexuals are often held in contempt as men who choose not to prove their manhood.”

Sexuality in Latin American cultures typically is constructed around the notion of *machismo*, where to be a man, a *macho*, implies both the domination and protection of those under you, specifically women. *Machismo* is a multidimensional construct that integrates sexism, heterosexism, racism, ethnocentrism, and classism. In addition to serving to justify the subordination of women, *machismo* also “transfers to the non-elite male Other effeminate characteristics, placing him in a feminine space

⁸See, for example, Hill, “Who Are We For Each Other?” in *Black Theology*, 345–51. See also Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*.

From this initial stance, lgbt theologies analyze the roots of these contradictions, exploring how the patriarchal heritage and history of Christianity and Western culture have given rise to these attitudes and practices. This analytical step is critical for demonstrating that these beliefs, values, attitudes, and practices are not an inevitable part of our reality—“natural” or “God-given”—but rather they have been socially constructed, shaped by specific communities and historical contexts. These social and historical factors can be identified, named, and “deconstructed” in order to open up new, more human and liberating possibilities.⁶

Traditionally the Christian community has named the Bible and Christian tradition as two of the primary or authoritative sources for constructing Christian theology. Many lgbt theologies also include them, but now from an explicitly critical stance. These theologians no longer try to reconcile lgbt experiences with the Bible and tradition or to somehow fit ourselves in (the task of apologetic approaches). Instead, lgbt theologies name the third source—experience—as having primary authority. They draw on authority of the full humanity of lgbt persons and experience to critique the homophobic, heterosexist, and sexist dimensions of the Bible and tradition as not authoritative for theology. The authority of all sources is understood relationally rather than externally or directionally one-way. We engage scripture and tradition to discern in what ways they may reveal God, rather than assume that they are authoritative in and of themselves. Hence Gary David Comstock, in his *Gay Theology Without Apology*, uses the metaphor of “friend” to describe the norm through which he engages scripture. “Instead of making the Bible into a parental authority, I have begun to engage it as I would a friend—as one to whom I have made a commitment and in whom I have invested deeply, but with whom I insist on a mutual exchange of critique, encouragement, support, and challenge” (1993, 11).⁷ Carter Heyward, in critiquing the assumed external authority of the Bible and tradition, writes, “No person, religion, tradition, profession, rule, or resource should be inherently authoritative for us. We should always ask this question: Does it help us realize more fundamentally our connectedness to one another and hence the shape of our own identities as persons-in-relation?” (1989, 74). Authority, then, is recognized in that which can be trusted to reveal ourselves and our humanity more fully.

Finally, as in all liberation theologies, lgbt theologies are praxis-based theologies, rooted in the ongoing interaction of action and reflection. The particular locations and struggles are varied: working with battered women

⁶Hence, as an example of this, Carter Heyward deconstructs the traditional Christian emphasis on *agape* as self-giving, self-sacrificing love as the superior or normative example of Christian love to reclaim *eros* and the *erotic* as “the power in right relation” to open up new possibilities of relating (1989, 3f). See also Gilson, *Eros Breaking Free*.

⁷For an example of a lesbian-feminist theology that uses friendship as the primary metaphor for knowing God, see Hunt, *Fierce Tenderness*.

for "easy mounting." Hence within male same-sex acts, only the man who occupies the "position" of the woman (i.e., is penetrated) is considered to be gay. Rather than calling into question the masculinity of the "dominant" male sexual actor, he is able to retain, if not enhance, his sense of machismo. Significantly, within this masculinized machismo, space for lesbian identity is absent, since there is no dominant male referent present. Rather than seeing lesbianism as a threat, it is largely ignored as outside of and irrelevant to the macho's construction of sexuality. Within Latino/a contexts, therefore, the liberation requires the dismantling of machismo and is linked to the liberation of other groups oppressed within machismo, whether for reasons of gender, race, class, or ethnicity (2001, 158–59).

Other lgbt theologians have sought to develop gay theology within a broader ecological context, expanding the notion of right-relation to include our relatedness with the entire earth community. Michael Clark's 1993 *Beyond Our Ghettos: Gay Theology in Ecological Perspective* sought to synthesize insights from ecofeminism with gay male experience to develop a gay ecotheology that would move gay theology beyond the "gay ghetto" as its primary context, linking social justice for lgbt persons with ecological justice. My 1996 *Gay and Gaia: Ethics, Ecology, and the Erotic* similarly built on feminist work in reclaiming the erotic with process theological insights about ecology to articulate an ecojustice liberationist ethic of right-relation at all levels of our lives, from the most intimate (the erotic) to the planetary (ecological).

Moving in a different direction than many lgbt theologies that explicitly use a liberation theology framework, gay theologian Ronald E. Long has argued for taking a phenomenological approach to gay male sex to ground gay theology and ethics. Long disagrees with the pro-feminist approaches of gay theologians like Clark, Gorsline, and Spencer. Long insists that such approaches move too quickly away from what is distinctive to gay male experience—gay sex and the gay ghetto—and thus miss what is of deepest religious significance for gay men. Long argues that sex has multiple meanings. He seeks to decouple the link between sex and intimacy as the assumed acceptable or ethically superior sexual ethic. Instead, he explores the phenomenon of casual sex with multiple partners as a distinctive characteristic of gay male experience that can be revelatory and valued. "What I hope is that I have given an account [of gay male sex] which is sufficiently true...to establish a recognition of the validity that casual sex can have in the life of a gay man as a vehicle of his 'humanization'—a process which some of us recognize as the substance of spirituality" (1995, 69–111). Rather than address the injustices and exclusionary practices of church and society, Long locates his theology explicitly within the gay ghetto, developing a "ghetto theology" that focuses more on understanding and revealing meaning in gay male experience than developing critiques of either societal or gay male practices.

Working from the opposite perspective of Long's ghetto theology with its assumptions of a normative gay male experience is the development of queer theology. This is rooted in the rise of queer activism around AIDS/HIV issues in the 1980s and 1990s and in the violent reaction of the religious and political right. Queer theory and queer theology seek to blur and subvert fixed and rigid categories of gender and sexuality to open up transformative and transgressive possibilities in both interpersonal relationships and societal structures. Queer theologies started with the work of Elias Farajate-Jones (discussed above) and the 1993 publication of Robert Goss's *Jesus Acted Up: A Gay and Lesbian Manifesto*. It continued up through the recent publication of Argentinian theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid's *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics*. These queer theologies "proceed from critical analysis of the social context that forms our sexual and gender experiences and the web of interlocking oppressions and from our innovative and transgressive practices. Queer theology is an organic or community-based project that includes our diverse sexual contextualities, our particular social experiences of homo/bi/transphobic oppression and their connections to other forms of oppression, and our self-affirmations of sexual/gendered differences" (Goss 2002, 20). The recent collection of queer biblical studies in *Queer Commentary and the Hebrew Bible* demonstrates how this approach of "queering" the tradition has moved even into the biblical field.⁹ The 2001 publication of Vanessa Sheridan's *Crossing Over: Liberating the Transgendered Christian* signals the arrival of transgendered liberation theologies.

In summary, from the initial apologetic stances of trying to fit lesbians and gay men into a homophobic and heterosexist church, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and queer theologies have developed within a liberationist theological framework. They call radically into question the very theological assumptions about sexuality and gender that have undergirded the church's practices and theology. Reflecting the increasing diversity of the ecosocial locations where lgbt persons are found, and the diversity of issues lgbt persons continue to confront, lgbt liberation theologies continue to develop in dynamic and transformative ways in seeking more inclusive patterns of justice and relationship for all.

⁹See Ken Stone, ed., *Queer Commentary and the Hebrew Bible*.