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Book Review

Peculiar Faith: Queer Theology for Christian Witness

by Jay Emerson Johnson

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Augustine's many writings, after all, do not merely contain abstract theology from another dead man. They contain wisdom from Africa.

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Peculiar Faith: Queer Theology for Christian Witness

Jay Emerson Johnson

New York: Seabury Books, 2014. 248 pages.

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\$24.00

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In recent years, as more and more Christian communities and individuals have become receptive to LGBTQ people and causes, we have been gifted with a variety of resources that offer guidance on how to think and live Christianity and queerness together. Jay Emerson Johnson's *Peculiar Faith* is a most welcome resource in this expanding and evolving genre. A foundational claim of this book is that Christianity and queerness are not merely compatible, but that

Christianity today needs queerness. According to Johnson, queer people of faith have “a divine vocation, a way to think and a way to live in the Household of God that calls all Christian people back to the radical roots of the Gospel” (4). These roots, Johnson suggests, are not primarily dogmatic, but ethical: their fruit is social and ecological transformation (22).

The first chapter of *Peculiar Faith* beautifully interweaves spiritual autobiography, queer devotional writing, and explanation of theological method. Each of the six remaining chapters is based on an italicized phrase in the following quote: “God’s own *naturally odd* people follow the *unspeakably divine* Jesus in *perversely Pentecostal* communities, those rich locations where the *erotically social* character of divine life is *ritually aroused* with visions of an *eternally queer* horizon” (27). Packed into this statement are previews of Johnson’s claims regarding humanity, Christ, ecclesiology, social ethics, sacraments, eschatology, and more. His claims are not novel, but they are not intended to be: they are colloquial translations and applications of queer theological concepts that have heretofore been less accessible outside of the academy. Johnson covers an impressive amount of theological ground, and he does so in dialogue with an impressive array of theological sources, including historic figures (e.g., Augustine and H. Richard Niebuhr), contemporary theologians (e.g., Kelly Brown Douglas and Joerg Rieger), biblical scholars (e.g., Dale B. Martin and Stephen D. Moore), and queer theologians (e.g., Marcella Althaus-Reid and Elizabeth Stuart). Moreover, Johnson writes in dialogue with queer theory, queer history, and queer cultural analysis. One of the book’s greatest strengths, I think, is that it exposes its readers not just to Gerard Loughlin, but also to George Chauncey; not just to Mark Jordan, but also to Michael Warner.

Peculiar Faith fares well in comparison to similar introductory resources, such as Patrick S. Cheng’s *Radical Love: Introduction to Queer Theology* (Seabury Books, 2011), Andy Buechel’s *That We*

Might Become God: The Queerness of Creedal Christianity (Cascade Books, 2015), and Elizabeth M. Edman's *Queer Virtue* (Beacon Press, 2016). Cheng's and Buechel's books are shorter in length and thus narrower in scope. In general, they focus on the theological over the ethical, on thinking Christianity and queerness together over living Christianity and queerness together (although, to be sure, many of their theological claims entail ethical commitments). Cheng writes in clear accordance with norms of systematic theology, and thus *Radical Love* holds a distinct appeal for beginning theology students. While it offers a helpful introduction to queer theory, it does not venture far into queer history and cultural analysis. *That We Might Become God* focuses on the specific theological topics of incarnation, sacrament, and eschatology, whereas the doctrinal reach in *Peculiar Faith* is somewhat wider. In contrast, *Queer Virtue*, like *Peculiar Faith*, covers plenty of theological and ethical ground, and Edman includes at least as much spiritual autobiography and devotional writing as does Johnson. *Queer Virtue* is shorter in length than *Peculiar Faith*, though longer than *Radical Love* and *That We Might Become God*.

While the appeal of *Peculiar Faith* is in many ways broad, certain features of the book may register most effectively with a slightly older demographic. Beginning in the introduction and continuing throughout his book, Johnson analogizes Christian faith with reference to home economics classes, The Wizard of Oz, and additional cultural phenomena that may resonate with an older audience more than they might engage LGBTQ people under 30. I do not intend this as a critique; certainly, LGBTQ demographics of all sorts need to be reached. For me, though, the observation of these cultural references in books like *Peculiar Faith* illuminates the need for queer theological and ethical resources which will continue to resonate with emerging audiences, namely those who are carrying the queer Christian banner into the future. In this ongoing

conversation, Jay Emerson Johnson's *Peculiar Faith* is a welcome and valuable resource.

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***The Heart of Centering Prayer:
Nondual Christianity in Theory and Practice***

Cynthia Bourgeault

Boulder: Shambhala, 2016. 239 pages.

ISBN-13: 978-1-161180-314-3

\$16.95

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Drawing on an eclectic collection of sources, *The Heart of Centering Prayer* (hereafter *The Heart*) by Cynthia Bourgeault offers a radical new perspective on the purpose of contemplation and the unique role Centering Prayer has to play in Christian contemplative practice.

An explication of Bourgeault's primary thesis and its corollaries serves as the introduction to the volume. Bourgeault argues that the goal of contemplation is not a greater level of knowledge or a sense of enhanced relationship with God; rather, contemplation literally reformulates one's perception of reality, and, indeed, the way in which one perceives reality. In a metaphor to which Bourgeault