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Book Review

Queer Theology: Beyond Apologetics

by Linn Marie Tonstad

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Book Reviews

**Queer Theology:
Beyond Apologetics**
By: **Linn Marie Tonstad**

Publisher: Cascade Books (Eugene, Oregon, USA)

Year: 2018, Pages: 159 pp.

ISBN-10: 1498218792

Price: \$22.00

Reviewed by: Kai Moore LeFranc, Graduate Theological Union

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Linn Tonstad has taken on a monumental task in *Queer Theology*: to provide an accessible introduction to the discipline of queer theology, including relevant theological background, the underpinnings of queer theory, overviews of major arguments commonly categorized under that heading—including thorough consideration of the work of Marcella Althaus-Reid—and Tonstad’s own vision for what the future of queer theology might or should look like. Overall she has succeeded admirably, providing a remarkable amount of nuanced content in only 131 pages of text.

Tonstad is particularly concerned here with making the case that queer theology must be about more than the compatibility of Christianity with LGBT life, and as such this volume will serve as a valuable introduction both for people who are new to queer theology as a whole and for those whose experience is primarily with the apologetic arguments she treats in Chapter 2. Tonstad discusses the discipline of queer theology in the complexity of its historical and theoretical grounding, presenting the issues at stake without shying away from difficult or challenging ideas, seeking to make those debates accessible without toning down their transgressive power. She is not concerned, that is, with making the claims of queer

theology *palatable* to a mainstream audience; simply to make them available to those who might not have the extensive theoretical background which queer perspectives sometimes presume. As a result, even though her considerations of these issues are necessarily brief, they do not generally feel reductive or overly limited by that brevity.

Chapter 1 positions queer perspectives within the theological landscape by presenting an overview of key threads in Christian theological history related to the body, gender, and sexuality, seeking the background of the ubiquitous contemporary assumption “that gender and sexuality *matter* theologically” (5-6). Tonstad highlights Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, Descartes, and Freud, exploring their contributions to definitions of what it meant to be human and the implications thereof, especially concerned with the division of mind/soul from body, and the gendered, racialized, and classed ideologies which were mapped onto this distinction.

In Chapter 2, Tonstad reviews a variety of “apologetic strategies” in queer theology—including both those whose major purpose is to argue that queer sexuality and identity is not inherently sinful, as well as more positive strategies which identify queer themes at the heart of the Christian tradition. She presents a wide-ranging survey of these arguments, treating them briefly but fairly, capturing their essential themes and some of the aspects which have made them appealing to those who advance them. For each argument, she then outlines the potential problems she sees with that strategy, including unintended theological or social implications, the limitations of making that strategy central to one’s theology, or (in one instance) challenging the soundness of the argument itself. The latter is Tonstad’s response to the strategy she names “God’s Love Radically Transgresses Every Boundary,” which emphasizes that, in line with queer theory’s frequent strategy of deconstructing a culture’s binary oppositions, “Christianity is at its heart a radical, boundary-transgressing message of God’s love, which includes all without distinction” (32). This has become a favorite theme in recent years, and is at the center of a number of major works including Patrick Cheng’s *Radical Love: Introduction to Queer Theology* (2011), Jay Emerson Johnson’s *Peculiar Faith: Queer Theology for Christian Witness* (2014), and Elizabeth Edman’s *Queer Virtue: What LGBTQ People Know About Life and How it Can Revitalize Christianity* (2016).

Particularly given its influence, the few paragraphs she devotes to evaluating this argument feel insufficient.

Tonstad locates the primary source of these arguments in two particular claims about Christ: that by his nature he “‘transgresses’ the boundary between divine and human” (32), and that “Christ’s body is symbolically multigendered” (33). In relation to the first claim, she cites the Chalcedonian definition’s description of Christ’s two natures as existing “without confusion, without division, without separation,” emphasizing that the two natures are maintained as distinct, and that Jesus is not a *tertium quid*. She implies, though does not say, that this definition then renders claims of Jesus’ boundary-transgressing nature suspect at best. Further, she argues that the historical Christian interpretation of God’s relationship with creation is characterized by “difference beyond difference” (ibid.) rather than a boundary, and certainly not a binary implying opposition, distinction, and hierarchy. She concludes that “there is not as such a ‘boundary’ between divine and human” in the Christian tradition, and that Jesus’ incarnation does not “violat[e] creaturely existence or giv[e] up God’s divinity” (ibid.). Yet she fails to consider that it is precisely this negotiation within the Christian tradition—between the distinctness of divine nature and human nature, and their counter-intuitive uniting in the incarnation—which is the heart of the queer intuition that Cheng, Johnson, and Edman (among others) are chasing here. A great deal of ink and blood has been spilled in the history of Christian theology over the relationship between Christ’s divinity and humanity, and between divine nature and human nature more broadly. This very contestation points to a boundary which is *felt* even when not explicitly claimed, and an experience of incarnation which challenges easy answers as well as the boundary-drawing impulse. Christian theology has been characterized by a constant push-and-pull between seeming opposites which are continually affirmed as not opposite at all: transcendence and immanence, life and death, divine and human, among many others. Boundaries are continually drawn only to be challenged and erased again, then redrawn elsewhere and challenged again. This is itself a deeply queer process at the very heart of what it has meant to be Christian—in which Tonstad’s argument participates.

Chapter 3 is a brief tour of key themes in queer theory, highlighting the strategies of denaturalization, anti-essentialism, and non-normativity and their potential relationships to theology. Tonstad touches on insights from thinkers including Judith Butler, Hortense Spillers, David Halperin, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick before introducing the work of Marcella Althaus-Reid and the ways she mobilizes these themes in her theological work. Tonstad describes *denaturalization* as the process of “render[ing] visible the culturally constructed nature of our basic organizing categories, thus limiting their power and efficacy” (56). Chief among those basic organizing categories are the hierarchical binaries of culture/nature, men/women, straight/gay, cisgender/transgender, and so on. Just as queer perspectives challenge the givenness of these categories and their implicit valuation, the strategy of *anti-essentialism* calls into question the stereotypical assumptions about the nature or essential character of people in these groups, drawing attention to the historical and cultural provisionality of such assumptions. Underlying these queer strategies is an attention to the construction of the normative subject, and the ways in which concepts of normativity are used to deny recognition to anyone considered non-normative, and thus are inherently discriminatory even as the boundary shifts, as with the legalization of same-sex marriage. Tonstad also notes ways in which LGBT people of color, for instance, may have a different relationship to social normativity because of the ways it has been forcibly denied them, and thus the way ‘queer’ itself is a contested, unstable category, both by design and by the ways it is lived. It is in this relationship to the normative that queer intersects with theology, says Tonstad, because of theology’s investment in describing both who humans *are* and who humans *ought to be*.

Tonstad turns to the work of Marcella Althaus-Reid in some detail in Chapter 4, which stands as the heart of the book both in its passion and in its theological depth. Althaus-Reid is an enormously influential figure in queer theology as it has been, and Tonstad proposes that her work “should play a significant role in how we understand what queer theology can and should mean” into the future (103). She touches on some of Althaus-Reid’s key challenges, such as identifying constructions of decency and indecency and their impact on theology, and proposing bisexuality as a critical

epistemological position, a “practice of thinking both-and and beyond the two [as] a reflective praxis of liberation” (94). Recognizing the irony of schematizing a writer who so insistently challenges schematization along with other norms of theological work, Tonstad summarizes the implications of her work for queer theology as a discipline: “it needs to take the messy realities and complexities of people’s lives seriously; it needs to stand against the distortive powers of capitalism and colonialism; it needs to express and honor human bodily being; it needs to get beyond the search for identity, fixity, and finality; and it needs to be about God’s presence in, identification with, and love for the body, the way God calls us to bring love, lust, and justice together” (103).

Chapter 5 gathers together snippets, themes, and case studies from works which relate to queer theology in various ways in order to sketch what queer theology is and what it could be, and ultimately to consider whether Queer and Christianity are compatible at all. It is not clear whether Tonstad thinks they are; she leaves this question hanging somewhat abruptly after presenting the tension between Christian theology’s traditional emphasis on life overcoming death, and queer perspectives’ affirmation of death and finitude, following the recognition that it is often the fear of death and bodily vulnerability which underlies cultural hatred of the marginalized identities which have implicitly or explicitly been associated with body, nature, and death. Of the three themes Tonstad cites in emerging queer theologies, it is worth noting that only one of these—theophanic materiality—considers itself a *theology* at all. These choices, coupled with the focus on critique in Chapter 2, position *Queer Theology* within the negative strain of queer discourse, emphasizing criticism over construction, present over future. (This difference could be illustrated productively by the contrast between, for instance, Lee Edelman’s *No Future* and José Esteban Muñoz’ *Cruising Utopia*.)

Thus, Tonstad’s readers are offered a thorough, accessible introduction to the major commitments of queer theory and the ways it has intersected with Christian theology, both critically and constructively. Her text would be a valuable addition to an introductory theology course or a survey of contemporary theological methods, as well as essential reading for anyone interested in queer and LGBTQIA perspectives. Tonstad lays out

a convincing case that queer theologies must be concerned with more than apologetics for the compatibility of LGBT identity and Christianity, and offers both parameters and provocations toward a way forward.

Kai Moore LeFranc is a doctoral student in Christian theology at the Graduate Theological Union, and an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church (USA). Their work focuses on constructive queer perspectives in Christology and theological anthropology.

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God in Cosmic History:
Where Science & History Meet Religion
By: **Ted Peters**

Publisher: Anselm Academic (Winona, Minnesota, USA)

Year: 2017, Pages: 356 pp.

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Reviewed by: Joseph Ramelo, Graduate Theological Union

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*When I consider your heavens,
the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars,
which you have set in place,
what is mankind that you are mindful of them,
human beings that you care for them?¹*

¹ Psalm 8:3-4 (NIV)