"Everything Queer, Nothing Radical?"

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Note: This paper is published as delivered at Lund University at the conference Tradition is the New Radical: Remapping Masculinities and Femininities *on December 14, 2016; only the footnotes have been somewhat expanded. It thus bears traces of its original, oral delivery. The first part of the paper mainly summarizes work I have done elsewhere, while the second part (from "A Sodomitical Theology?") represents work in progress for my second book, tentatively titled* Transformative Times.

"On the Inherent Queerness of Christianity," reads the confident title of the first chapter of a recent book on queer virtue.[1] Another author refers to "the inherent queerness of Christian traditions."[2] Yet another says that Christianity "has from the start been a site of radical queerness… even in [the] practices and doctrines that might seem most normalizing."[3] As is well known, Patrick Cheng argues that "radical love lies at the heart of *both* Christian theology *and* queer theo-

ry."[4] Another text's subtitle raises the ante considerably: *The Queerness of Creedal Christianity*, it specifies.[5] Gerard Loughlin's introduction to his *Queer Theology* anthology famously wonders whether the "most orthodox" may not be the "queerest of all."[6] And I could keep going! It has, in other words, become almost *de rigueur* for aspiring queer or radical theologians to advance claims that authentic or orthodox Christianity is at least potentially and often, more strongly yet, *inherently* queer. What in the world has made this state of affairs possible? How did Christianity – especially in its most orthodox forms – become an alibi for making claims of this kind? And ought this development to be celebrated, or does the discovery of the queerness of Christianity domesticate both queerness and Christianity, reducing them to flat reflections of widely shared liberal assumptions about the perfectibility of human beings and the likelihood of historical progress? What do claims for the queer or radical potential of Christianity actually *do* in the contemporary context – what desires, hopes,

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[1] Elizabeth M. Edman, *Queer Virtue: What LGBTQ People Know About Life and Love and How It Can Revitalize Christianity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2016), 17.

[2] Jay Emerson Johnson, *Peculiar Faith: Queer Theology for Christian Witness* (New York: Seabury, 2014), 4.

[3] Mark Larrimore, "Introduction", 1–10 in *Queer Christianities: Lived Religion in Transgressive Forms* (eds. K. Talvacchia, M. Pettinger & M. Larrimore; New York: New York UP, 2015), 2.

[4] Patrick Cheng, *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology* (New York: Seabury, 2011), x.

[5] Andy Buechel, *That We Might Become God: The Queerness of Creedal Christianity* (Eugene: Cascade, 2015).

[6] Gerard Loughlin, "Introduction: The End of Sex", 1–34 in *Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body* (ed. G. Loughlin; Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 9.

disappointments, aggressions, and, perhaps, deceptions are encoded in such claims?[7]

In this essay, I briefly examine these developments in two versions, then suggest an alternative strategy approaching Christianity using a queer analytic lens. My thesis can be summarized quickly, and then at a bit more length. The quick summary: When everything is queer, nothing is radical,[8] and most of what is called radical, is not. The longer version argues first, that there is very little that is radical about the vast majority of contemporary attempts to recover either the queer or the radical potential of Christian traditions, particularly with regard to gender and the trinity. Second, that projects of queering Christianity ought, rather than seeking validation through re-readings of patristic and medieval gender fluidity, instead mine the potential of seemingly hostile doctrines – in particular, that frightening bogeyman of original sin and its correlative implications for how we examine and relate to our own best impulses, theologically and ethically. This, I suggest, might constitute a sodomitical theology. Finally, I ask about the consequences of differences of gender and sexuality for backward-looking strategies.

Everything Queer

There are two major factors that allow for relatively theologically and theoretically unsophisticated claims for the inherent queerness of Chris-

tianity. These factors can be described and, I hope, disposed of, relatively easily. They combine assumptions around binaries, anti-essentialism, or denaturalization, and anti-normativity. Because Christianity "transgresses" binaries, whatever transgresses means in this context, it is taken to have anti-normative implications, to denaturalize, and so to be queer. The sequence of assumptions typically goes something like this: Binaries are the lifeblood of normativity; they are the means by which reality is organized into categories of the intelligible and the legitimate, and the unintelligible and the illegitimate. Christianity, when properly understood, transgresses – that is, scrambles, renders fluid, or destabilizes – the binaries that organize and demarcate normativity's proper terrain. Thus, Christianity, when properly understood, is queer. The binaries involved typically include those between male and female, homosexual and heterosexual, life and death, and, crucially and utterly wrongheadedly, God and creation or divinity and humanity. I say utterly wrongheadedly because the difference between God and creation, or divinity and humanity, is *not* a binary difference, at least for any speech oriented to a God who is more than a human projection. However, in many accounts (including at least one of the more theologically sophisticated ones that I will briefly discuss in the following section, that of Sarah Coakley) the God–creation distinction is in fact explicitly designated as a binary that can be transgressed despite the destructive consequences of such a designation for divine infinity. Those consequences are, in brief: If the distinction between God and creation is a binary, then God is whatever creation is *not*, which bounds God by creation and places God and creation on line with each other. Such a God is no more than a projection made up of the cancellation of creaturely limits. In contrast, in orthodox Christian theology – and this is an issue I believe orthodox Christian theology gets right – God is different in a way that goes beyond similarity and difference; utterly transcendent; and not on the same plane with creation and so neither in competition nor in continuity with it. Thus, the God–creation relation is not a binary.

But even apart from the issue of the God–creation binary, these queer Christianities as-

[7] See also Linn Marie Tonstad, "Ambivalent Loves: Christian Theologies, Queer Theologies", in *Literature and Theology* (2017), https://doi.org/10.1093/litthe/frw043 (published February 10, 2017), for further discussion of reparative and critical relations between queer theology and Christianity and the ambivalence that often pertains to such impulses. I include several of these quotations there as well.

[8] Carla Freccero argues that, if queer is understood as "odd, strange, aslant," then "all textuality, when subjected to close reading, can be said to be queer." Carla Freccero, *Queer/Early/Modern* (Durham: Duke UP, 2006), 5. She might be right about this, and this is the sense in which Christianity, like any complex symbol system, is arguably inherently queer. But advancing such a claim requires sacrificing the capacity to say anything specific about Christianity, which is presumably the point of making the claim in the first place.

sume that mobility is the death, rather than the lifeblood, of binaries. These ways of queering Christianity forget two fundamental and interrelated challenges: First, any complex symbol system is inherently queer, at least in the way these approaches understand queerness; second, normativity is much more complex than these approaches assume. While any particular binary can relatively easily be transgressed or queered, binaries do not live individually and so cannot be undone individually. As I have argued extensively in recent writing, binaries live only in relation to each other – this is what I term the affective life of binaries: The chain of associations and equivalencies that moves from femininity to the womb to place to passivity to nature to matter to death to darkness to chaos and so on; or from masculinity to origin to power to activity to self-making to culture to spirit to life to light to order and so on.[9] The contrasts encoded by binaries cannot be overcome or undone by simple transgression or denaturalization or by reassigning associative relations so that femininity becomes active rather than passive, since the affective network within which activity is distinguished from passivity remains and slides the "queering" back into its stable network of symbolic differences. This is a particularly acute problem for Christianity which has not only a God often made male at its center, but an actual divine-human being who, in his historical life, is typically taken to be male. There is thus a maximally direct relation and near-identity between masculinity and divinity that always has to be overcome in some way, rather than starting from an apparently neutral playing field. And this means that sexual difference in Christianity is a referential and relational difference where its constituents may move freely through a territory in which there is always some other relation that can maintain the hierarchical ordering of masculinity and femininity. Put differently, instability is one way to characterize the very nature of *stabilizing* certainties in Christian theology. Thus, queerings that fail to move beyond simple anti-

normativity and reflexive anti-essentialism have little capacity to shift the actual mechanisms by which binaries maintain their power.

Nothing Radical

More theologically sophisticated and purportedly radical recoveries of tradition give the impetus to this conference as a whole, particularly as found in the work of figures like Gerard Loughlin, Sarah Coakley, and Graham Ward. I have written extensively on all three of these figures, particularly the latter two; the first, critical part of my book *God and Difference* offers sustained engagement with Ward and Coakley with these concerns in mind.[10] I do not want to repeat those engagements here, so instead, I will briefly summarize the concerns I have with their theological projects, and the general strategies such projects involve, before moving to alternatives in the second half of my comments.

The most influential of these backward-looking theologies are deeply, and fundamentally, trinitarian. They join the trend in contemporary systematic theology that solves every difficulty through the trinity. There are two major categories of problems that get solved in trinitarian fashion: Critiques of Christianity, and modern anthropological worries. As is well known, Christian theologians in the West have been on the defensive for some centuries, guarding an ever-shrinking territory against concerns that Christianity fails to value difference. At the same time, much of the humanistic academy has "discovered," one might say, that persons are not self-legislating rational autonomous human beings in the Cartesian or Kantian senses, nor are they the self-interested, calculating individual of *homo economicus*. The trinity, in which the "three" "persons" are relations (not just relational), allows Christian theologians to use the trinity to say: "Hey, we knew this all along!" Or, as a theologian I quote early in *God and Difference* says:

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[9] See Linn Marie Tonstad, "The Limits of Inclusion: Queer Theology and Its Others", 1–19 in *Theology & Sexuality* 21 (2015), 5–11, for more extensive discussion of the affective life of binaries.

[10] See Linn Marie Tonstad, *God and Difference: The Trinity, Sexuality, and the Transformation of Finitude* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 58–132.

Rather than uncritically adopting standard modern accounts of personhood, [trinitarians] criticize these from the insight, derived from trinitarian doctrine, that to be a person does not mean to be an autonomous self-centered individual in the Cartesian sense but to find one's very identity in mutual relations with others.[11]

Of course, as is proven in every humanistic or posthuman or new materialist lecture I listen to, one does not need the trinity to discover this! But the trinity offers an almost infinite resourcefulness to Christian theologians worried about modernity's autonomous individual or about how to defend Christianity.

The trinity also seems to have another anthropological capacity: It can rescue sexual difference within and beyond Christianity. In the trinity, we "discover" three co-equal but different divine persons, and through various forms of analogical mediation, we can find a way to equality between the sexes by that means. The trinity seemingly "demonstrate[es] Christianity's ability to prefigure and surpass the accomplishments of 'secular' approaches to gender and sexuality."[12] But, as I demonstrate with exhaustive attention to detail in *God and Difference*, it is not that simple. The strategies feminist and queer-friendly theologians use to unsex God or to find gender equality through the trinity often end up sexing God more insistently than ever, in unpredictable ways. In *God and Difference*, I examine a number of problems that ensue when theologians rescue sexual difference through the trinity: Corrective projectionism, the effects of finding gender in God or intensifying it in relation to God, the role of suffering, especially elision of different kinds of suffering, rendering the God-world relation competitive, the installation of something like a womb-wound, which maintains the heterosexuate structure of sexual difference while offering a translation mechanism through which difference ultimately turns out to mean sacrifice and death, and the role of origin in trini-

tarian relations which, I argue, is a fundamental enticement to the maintenance of many of these structures.

As I define corrective projectionism, it

identifies certain problems of human existence (e.g., delusions of autonomy, selfishness, self-possession, consumerism) and then generates a trinitarian theology that shows how the constitutive relationships of the trinity uniquely critique and overcome such human problems. In this way, corrective projectionism imports the very problems … it intends to overcome.[13]

Corrective projectionism also becomes a strategy for rescuing homosexuality and femininity in Christianity by taking the relationship between sexual difference and trinitarian difference, or between sexual difference and God, in the Christian symbolic order and intensifying it, just in ways that get you the "right" outcome: Valuing femininity, women, maternity, and permitting homosexuality. Typical strategies for achieving these ends include mapping the symbolic gender transformations the priest or Christ goes through, emphasizing the symbolic centrality of same-sex relations between men in Christianity, rendering femininity actively desiring rather than passively receptive, and so on. In many attempts to discover or elevate symbolic femininity in Christianity from its subjugated position, the representation of difference takes place through a structure I call the "womb-wound," the violent installation of a wound in Jesus' side through which he gives birth to the Church. The womb-wound encapsulates the way difference – especially sexual difference – is represented in heterosexuate and agonistic ways: The womb-wound names

images of relationship that assume good relations between persons (divine or human) require making room for another (the spatialization of the womb, often associated with rendering "woman" into a place for the becoming of the other) through sacrificial forms of (something like) suffering.[14]

Not only do we find the elision of femininity with both a womb and a wound (no clitoris, as

[11] Gijsbert van den Brink, "Social Trinitarianism: A Discussion of Some Recent Theological Criticisms", 331–350 in *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 16 (2014), 347, quoted in Tonstad, *God and Difference*, 12.

[12] Tonstad, *God and Difference*, 15.

[13] Tonstad, *God and Difference*, 13.

[14] Tonstad, *God and Difference*, 13.

usual) in this image, we also retain the hierarchical ordering of masculine and feminine, male and female, for Christ remains the head of his body, the Church, to which he gives birth and that he marries.

In other words, and as I show in far more detail in *God and Difference*, the sexuation of the God–creation relation stabilizes the hierarchical ordering of gender even in fluidity: The Church (symbolically feminine, partly made up of men) and Christ (morphologically male, at least per circumcision, symbolically male because divine in relation to creation and the Church and feminine in relation to God the Father, both as human and as Son) move fluidly through different gender transformations without undoing the theological sedimentation of gender distinction – and I would argue that the theological sedimentation of gender is perhaps more fundamental than the "secular." The translation mechanism of trinitarian theology takes, for example, the begetting of the Son and translates it into his birth from the Father's womb, thus finding femininity in God and rendering divine masculinity mobile while "scrambling" gender distinctions. But, as I show in *God and Difference*, the Father's womb ultimately ensures the fluidity of divine, transcendent masculinity, not the discovery of femininity in God. At the origin, *God and Difference* argues, is origin, the origin of the Son in the Father. But more on that another time.

In *God and Difference*, I develop a variety of strategies for testing various theologies and their effects. When it comes to purportedly radical retrievals of the Christian tradition, I would suggest that two fundamental tests will give us a reasonable sense of just how radical or groundbreaking a proposal may be: One, what is at the heart of the change that the theologian envisions? What is *the* crucial change that needs to happen? And, two, does the theologian imagine either that the God–world relation can continue to encode sexual difference (in particular, heterosexuality) in some way, or that gender fluidity can be achieved through extractive strategies in which

> the content of gendered designations [i.e., gender fluidity] can be distinguished from their gendered form [i.e., where masculinity is valued more highly than femininity], so that what is desirable can be extracted from the inessential (and merely apparent) implications[?][15]

These two tests give us a reasonable first-pass in determining whether something truly radical is on offer, or whether the language of radicality does something other than identify significant change.

To do such examination quickly on the three theologians I have mentioned: For Ward, the crucial change regarding sexual difference is the recognition and blessing of same-sex relationships in churchly contexts – so, as recent developments in many churches suggest, not *that* radical a change. And Ward assumes both that the God–world relation should continue to be imaged in nuptial or marital terms, *and* that gender fluidity can be extracted from the symbolic form in which it arrives. For Coakley, the rhetoric of radical change is everywhere, but when carefully examined, it turns out that what she is after is basic liberal feminist goals of equality plus (something like) suffering for everyone and the whole cosmos – rather a disappointing payoff! And she too continues to find gendered symbolics promising for understanding difference and the God–world relation. Loughlin, working in Roman Catholic traditions of interpretation, undertakes the search for symbolic recognition of same-sex relations, although he rightly recognizes that symbolic recognition of same-sex relations in Roman Catholicism would require the end of gender itself. However, he too finds himself seduced by the extractive form of gender fluidity and thus finds his imagination constrained on the explicit symbolic level by the limited positions on offer. While I am in sympathy with much of what these authors seek theologically, I do not, in the end, believe the strategies on offer to be either particularly promising or particularly radical.

In contrast to strategies that heighten gender, or that try to make femininity more valuable either by assigning it to a figure known to be valuable already (e.g. God the Father) or by making something associated with femininity more valuable, *God and Difference* is an argument for recalibrating the theological value of sexual differ-

[15] Tonstad, "Limits of Inclusion", 6.

ence through unexpected strategies: For instance, representing femininity theologically not by way of symbolic wombs or the like, but by speaking improperly of the trinity in quite specific, and non-gendered, ways. Or stopping the cycle of heteropatriarchal reproduction not by installing femininity in God but by way of the Church's abortive relation to time in an apocalyptic ecclesiology. These strategies go far beyond, and are to my mind far more promising, than remapping the gender of the body of Christ through whatever transformations we can discover and invent – in part because Christ's personhood and body engage a difference that is *not like sexual difference*: The difference between God and creation, or between God and humankind. But the surprisingly tame outcomes of many radical or queer positions ought, I suggest, to raise some questions for us regarding the work that self-designated radicality does in the contemporary theological landscape. The designation of a project as radical or queer may invoke a desire for the different, but it may also be a way to place oneself on the side of the good against the bad. More worrisome yet, the queerness or radicality of Christianity may function as an apologia for Christianity in an era in which its many failures are only too visible.

Here we encounter the question not only of whether to retrieve Christian traditions, but which Christian traditions we are retrieving. There are doctrines as well as authors that have been under-recovered, so to speak, partly because Protestantism becomes an unreflective bogeyman responsible for all the presumptive ills of modernity. So, we are in Sweden, and it is almost Christmas: I am going to recover Luther, following my current work in anthropology and theological method.

A Sodomitical Theology?

The queer anthropologist Margot Weiss argues that queer anthropological inquiry – and, I would suggest, theological inquiry – needs to ask of its practitioners, "What do we, or what do I, want?"[16] This question is not in service of re-fixing object-choice, sexually or otherwise; rather, it reaches toward a mode of inquiry that resets the conditions of inquiry itself, in which divergent, or even antagonistic, desires may be named within queerness. The denomination of something as "queer" is often also a desire for another world, an "otherwise" that intersects in complex ways with extant social and political formations as well as with what we might think of as Christianity's normative orientation toward an otherwise. This brings us to a significant methodological challenge that reflects ongoing debates in queer studies between anti-social queer theorists and others.

Anti-social theorists are typically concerned with the risky effects of imagining an authentic, full humanity that could enjoy full social recognition and integration. Instead, they suggest, queers should avoid participation in the production of normative visions of humanity, and should instead seek ways to drain the fundamental divisions and antagonisms in human relations in non-violent directions. The anti-social concern is especially directed against the insistence on social recognition, which, as Lee Edelman puts it, "perpetuates the hope of a fully unified community, a fully realized social order, that's imagined as always available in the fullness of the future to come."[17] The hope of a fully unified community becomes an alibi for the violence directed against whomever stands in for "the obstacle destabilizing every unity."[18] The one whose very insistence bespeaks non-integration, the one who cannot be tolerated within a program devoted to tolerance and unity, to the flourishing of all, is variously symbolized, to name just a few examples, in the Western imagination by the Islamist radical, the devout Muslim refugee, the Mexican immigrant rapist, the separatist lesbian feminist, or the Jew. But once upon a

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[16] Margot Weiss, "Always After: Desiring Queerness, Desiring Anthropology", 627–638 in *Cultural Anthropology* 31 (2016), 633, 635.

[17] Lee Edelman, "Ever After: History, Negativity, and the Social", 469–476 in *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106 (2007), 473.

[18] Edelman, "Ever After", 472, quoting Slavoj Žižek. See Tonstad, "Limits of Inclusion" for further discussion of Edelman on this issue.

time in Western Christendom, the obstacle de-stabilizing every unity was the Sodomite.

In his brilliant *Seeing Sodomy in the Middle Ages*, Robert Mills traces what sodomy – famously termed "that utterly confused category" by Michel Foucault – *meant* beyond its usual association with anal intercourse between men or the wasting of semen. Sodomy could indicate not only sexual sins but "*any* unnatural act committed by either man or woman." "This lack of a definitional center endowed sodomy with enormous scapegoating potential"[19] through its associative links "with idolatry, religious difference, and possibly even ethnicity."[20] In Reformation-era Germany, as Helmut Puff shows, the word often used for sodomy was that used for heresy, namely *Ketzerei*.[21] Sodomy thus concatenates a variety of threats to the stability of a Christian social order. In thirteenth-century *Bibles moralisées*, sodomy appears as "a variety of bodily disorder to which any fallen human is potentially susceptible," associated with "homoeroticism, age difference, gender transgression, and sacrilegious behavior." In representations of sodomy,

> audiences are afforded a glimpse of the kinds of people involved (mainly males, often clerics, often heretics or Jews), the kinds of partners they pursue (younger or older, "active" or "passive", of the same sex) and the kinds of activities at issue (kissing, embracing, fleshly exposure, sexual violence). Sodomy is not so confused that it cannot be seen via these other signs.[22]

But, Mills insists, in order to *see* sodomy, "dimensions such as religion, age, and material excess" are "more significant than gender and sexuality."[23]

I want us to notice several features here: Sodomy combines sexual, political, generational, social, and economic differences into a sliding set of associations that identify different, but associated, threats to the stability of a well-ordered, Christian society or city-state.[24] Sodomitical sexual practices are impure and not ordered toward reproduction, the only kind of licit sexual act; they remove themselves from the sphere of churchly authority; and they threaten the stability of generational succession in which sons eventually become fathers, both biologically and non-biologically. Generational succession, biological and non-biological, is organized around the protection of different distributions of wealth, power, and authority; sodomy is potentially a threat to those distributions of wealth, power, and authority because it is a threat to the generational forms of succession that protect unequal distribution; as Guy Hocquenghem puts it, Sodomites (or homosexuals) reproduce horizontally, not vertically.[25]

At one point, it was taken for granted that anyone might be at risk of sodomy, of committing a sodomitical act or sodomitical sin. This had something to do with concrete practices: Men sharing (very small!) beds with other men might easily find that they "slipped" into other forms of association. Later, however, the Sodomite developed into a particular kind of person and a particularly threatening kind of person: Someone who, visibly/invisibly and confusingly, threatens the social order. The Sodomite confuses gender distinction: Men lie with men as with women.

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[19] Robert Mills, *Seeing Sodomy in the Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 3–4. Emphasis added.

[20] Mills, 73.

[21] Helmut Puff, *Sodomy in Reformation Germany and Switzerland, 1400–1600* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 13–14, 18, and throughout.

[22] Mills, 75. Puff, 111, reminds us that Muslims "were often typed as sodomites" as well. Jonathan Goldberg picks up this association in a modern version in his analysis of a derogatory cartoon of Saddam Hussein that circulated during the First Gulf War in the United States. Jonathan Goldberg, *Sodometries: Renaissance Texts, Modern Sexualities* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1992), 1–6. The consequences of that typification affected not only torture of Arabs in the waning days of the British Empire, but also at Guantanamo and Abu

Ghraib. See for instance Joseph Massad, *Desiring Arabs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 45–47. See also Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke UP, 2007).

[23] Mills, 80.

[24] The rise of the authority of the city-state in Reformation-era Germany and Switzerland often coincided with an uptick in prosecutions for sodomy, as Puff shows.

[25] Guy Hocquenghem, *Homosexual Desire* (Durham: Duke UP, 1993), 109.

Men lying with men as with women is particularly dangerous because the act makes clear that from behind, a man cannot be distinguished from a woman, which threatens the ultimacy of gender distinction. Women lying with women was usually even more confusing to the medieval Christian imagination, especially if no substitute for the penis was present. Sodomy thus threatens the way in which gender difference is a fundamental organizing category for social relations. The Sodomite, named from the story to which I will turn in a moment, becomes something like the archetypal sinner: The sinner whose unrighteousness cannot even await the judgment of God, but requires immediate destruction and embodies eternal punishment.

The rise of the science of sexuality in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries transforms the Sodomite into the homosexual, the person defined by a permanent orientation or turning in the wrong direction. Homosexuals were constrained, as both Michel Foucault and David Halperin have pointed out,[26] to take up and invert some of the terms of discourse within which we were invented, as a necessary but inadequate form of resistance. Thus the rise of the classic gay-is-good strategy: Gay people are not sick, perverted, or willfully bad; gay is both innocent and unchosen. Gay is good and it cannot be helped (that is, gays are born this way). But gay is good is not a revolutionary strategy; gay is good is a strategy of heterosexuality or heterosexual thinking, I would argue.

Seeking to justify homosexuality by Christian means typically involves arguing that queers are not really sinners. This strategy takes queers out of the ranks of the condemned, and leaves others behind. But rescuing queers by leaving behind "real" sinners simply repeats the logics that generated the sinful queer in the first place. A typical example of such rescue projects is found in readings of the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. Gay apologists, seeking to rescue homosexuals from the stigma of Sodom, have sought the sin of Sodom elsewhere: In rape, sexual violence, or the absence of hospitality. The important point, for the apologist, is this: *Unlike* the men of Sod-om, who were bad and deserved destruction, homosexuals are not sinners, worthy of condemnation.[27] Instead, queer apologists have claimed, homosexuals are good, doers of good works, as can be seen in the way they display the fruits of the Spirit in their lives as they patiently wait for the Church to recognize the holiness their lives display. Homosexual lives are filled with goodness, generosity, and love. Homosexual lives are fruitful, virtuous lives, just like heterosexual lives. Indeed, homosexuals are in some ways even more virtuous: Since they may not have biological families of their own (some interpreters assume), they are even more hospitable to strangers than heterosexuals. They are especially God-imitating because, just like God, they love those to whom they are not related. These, I contend, are exactly the wrong claims to make. As Marcella Althaus-Reid points out, "what we can call the Queer difference disappears when it asserts its own sexual rights in accordance with the heterosexual system."[28]

A queer theology cannot, or should not, be about moving homosexual relationships from the category of the illicit to the category of the licit, leaving everything else unchanged. A queer witness to the Church, if there is such a thing (these categories are not particularly helpful), recognizes that sexuality *is* inherently sinful in its utter participation in, and unfreedom from, the sin that characterizes every human act and relationship. Instead of imagining that homosexuals need to be allowed to love whomever they want, in order to be whole, flourishing human persons, we should accept the ambiguity and incompletion that characterize all human relationships, avoiding what Geoffrey Rees helpfully calls "the romance of innocent sexuality."[29] Instead of dis-

[26] David M. Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995), 56–62.

[27] Kent Brintnall, "Who Weeps for the Sodomite?", in *Sexual Disorientations: Queer Temporalities, Affects, Theologies* (eds. K. Brintnall, J. Marchal & S. Moore; New York: Fordham UP, forthcoming), whose thinking in this essay was an important spur to my argument. Brintnall reads Lot's wife as a witness who refuses to forget Sodom, and who thus refuses to paper over (divine) violence.

[28] Marcella Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 123.

[29] Geoffrey Rees, *The Romance of Innocent Sexuality* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2011).

tinguishing between the sinful and the virtuous, we should place ourselves on the side of the sinful, accepting that we need to arrange socioeconomic and political orders in ways that benefit all of us, without requiring people to be virtuous, good, or respectable in order to be the beneficiaries of shared social goods. Rather than weighing the virtue of the recipient of public goods against the virtue of the worker who provides those goods, we should accept shared dependence on each other as a fundamental condition of human existence, and distribute social goods in ways that reflect that shared condition, or so I want to suggest.

Marcella Althaus-Reid terms "Queer Theology…a first person theology: diasporic, self-disclosing, autobiographical and responsible for its own words."[30] The Christian tradition she seeks to recover is not one of continuity but of "sexual ideological disruption" that may mean turning other Christian traditions "upside down, or submit[ing] them to collage-style processes."[31] Althaus-Reid adapts her call for a first-person starting point from Eve Sedgwick, who suggests that the only thing needed for something to be queer is the impulse to use queer in the first person. Queering in the first person typically encodes a confessional impulse: I am gay, I am pansexual, I am genderqueer, and so on. But what if the first-person imperative toward queering were quite differently constructed? What if it said, for instance, "I am a sinner"? Or "I am a Sodomite"?

The anti-social queer theorist cautions us about the effect of aiming at the *good*, at a sociality that will finally overcome every antagonism. That caution, and the anthropology that accompanies it, resonates strongly with certain strands in Protestant anthropology, and with typically Protestant worries about human capacities for self-deception and for doing evil in the name of seeking the good. Reformers tend to confuse their own projects with the coming of the kingdom of God. Certainty about the righteousness of one's own cause goes hand in hand – even when the cause is genuinely righteous – with demonization and distortion of the motives of those

who are not fully devoted to the social program one believes belongs to God. The result is often that the pursuit of (arguably) just ends becomes unjust as it generates the projection of injustice onto those who do not support those just ends, or who do not support them in the right way, or to the right degree. "Our" fight for the rights of the marginalized quickly turns into denigration of those who, unlike us, do not recognize the claims of the marginalized – thus, those of us who recognize that God loves queers may pity the limited vision of those who, trapped in their distorted and dualistic categories, wrongly condemn those whom we love. In fighting for their rights, we may find ourselves investing in an object that, we hope, will finally fulfill the desires for justice embedded in that object.[32] Yet the justice carried by the object of our investment fails: Fails not only to fulfill our hopes for it, but to bring justice at all. Instead, Christian theological anthropology ought to recognize both that our projects fall short of justice itself and the dangers we are susceptible to in pursuing justice, the good, or righteousness.

Christian strategies for defending one's own righteousness are tricky and mobile. In Luke's story of the Pharisee and the tax collector, Jesus tells a parable "to some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else" (18:9, NIV). The figure of the Pharisee praises himself for his righteousness, while the tax collector begs for mercy. The story promises exaltation for the humble and humiliation for the exalted. An easy way to, at least apparently, put oneself on the right side of the story would be to pray very loudly for forgiveness for one's own sinfulness. But such prayer might well take the following form: "Lord, have mercy on me a sinner who recognizes that I am a sinner, unlike that Pharisee over there, who does not recognize that he is a sinner." Such self-confessed sinfulness, combined with self-distinction from the other, reflects the fundamental form of claiming righteousness before God that the story condemns. The self-distinguishing contrast with the other is the issue here. We do not get "credit" before God for confessing our

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[30] Althaus-Reid, 8.
[31] Althaus-Reid, 8–9.

[32] See Robyn Wiegman, *Object Lessons* (Durham: Duke UP, 2012).

sinfulness, and the confession of sin is not a purely good work. The moment one distinguishes one's own confession of sinfulness from the lack of confession on the lips of the other, one has come to use sin as a form of division rather than in its two proper uses: Solidarity among sinners and the confession that follows forgiveness. That is, we are given the right to beg for and claim mercy because we are forgiven sinners; in begging forgiveness we rejoice that God's mercy is *for* sinners: For us.

To act for the better in a Christian way is not, then, to seek one's own divinization or one's own righteousness, but to act securely out of one's dual status as a creature and as a sinner: God wills that the creature may live, and the sinner is the one on whom God has mercy (it is only as a sinner that one is the target of grace – Luther). But God's *mercy* regarding our sinfulness cannot be directly shown by us to one another. God's mercy regarding our sinfulness comes to expression in intrahuman relations in negative form: Namely, the solidarity in which we know ourselves, and our enemies, as the sinful objects of God's mercy. The solidarity of sinners does and should affect how we treat our enemies – who are, just like us, as creatures and sinners the targets of God's will that the creature may live – but it prevents the projection of unrighteousness onto the other in contrast to the self. We do not need to confuse our proximate goals, the better, with God's ultimate transformation of the world and establishment of a kingdom of infinite and unchangeable love, the good.

To my mind, these themes are very much in tune with basic insights in queer theory regarding the disunified status of the self, human capacity for self-deception, and misrecognition of the relation between our desires and their objects, the human tendency for scapegoating and abjection of others, the figuration of the "obstacle to every (social) unity" through refugees, Muslims, Jews, and Sodomites, and the admission of libidinal investment in denunciation. Denunciation of the evil of the other is a perverse pleasure, and arguably a ground of morality itself.

Now, denunciation of sin is a basic prophetic modality. But the form of denunciation must avoid both traps of self/other distinction: The straightforward trap in which denunciation of the other distinguishes the other's sin from my own innocence, and the more convoluted trap in which declaration of my own sin is distinguished from the lack of confession on the lips of the other. Sin, in a fundamental sense, ties us together even when its ties are distorting. Sin is about our relationships with one another and with God. Sin does not touch any of us alone, even if it touches us differently. Its distortive capacity is part of its viciousness.

Is homosexuality, then, sinful? It is my contention that any queer theology can and must answer an emphatic yes to this question. A queer witness to the Church says, "I am the Sodomite." To say, "I am the Sodomite" is also to say "Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner." We *should* see homosexuals and Sodomites as sinners, and we should accept shared sinfulness as a theological basis for human solidarity between the different. Now, I want to be very clear: This is an intra-Christian argument that has to do with the sinfulness of *Christians*, quite specifically. A sodomitical queer theology cannot argue for solidarity with the victims of Sodom, as if imaginatively arraying ourselves alongside them allays our sodomitical sin. The desire to get out from under sin's mark returns in many forms; compassion's compulsion, as Lee Edelman calls it, with its libidinal investment in the continued suffering of the other, is not the least of these.

Althaus-Reid never forgets that homosexuality, or queer sexual practices alone, are not necessarily revolutionary.[33] She insists that:

> there is more to being a Sodomite than having a particular kind of sexual relationship. We may ask if God finds Godself at home in a culture of grace, that is of pleasure given and received in a free community, without the expectation of any sort of final product or profit. If so, then also in cultural terms God is a Sodomite.[34]

To live a sodomitical life requires a revolution in cultural, economic, and social terms. According

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[33] In his early work, Guy Hocquenghem makes a similar point, for instance in "Towards an Irrecuperable Pederasty", 233–246 in *Reclaiming Sodom* (ed. J. Goldberg; New York: Routledge, 1994).

[34] Althaus-Reid, 86.

to Althaus-Reid, Sodomites are "outside utility and reproduction," and they love the non-identical. A sodomitical queer theology requires a revolution all the way down: "The aim of theological and economic reflection should not be a new system of distribution, but a different system of production."[35] Here we may, by the way, be reminded of how in the 1970s, issues as diverse as

> union organizing, nuclear disarmament, peace, urban renewal, prison activism, immigration reform, the environment, rape, abortion, domestic violence protection, and birth control topped the list of lesbian causes.[36]

Looking Backward – Who Looks for What?

Seeking the radical potential of Christian traditions involves a general posture of looking backward, trying to find antecedents and legitimation for forward movement in the intersection between Christianity and gender and sexuality. So when the queer theologian looks at Sodom, she sees something other than a righteous divine destruction of the inhospitable and the sinful. Instead, she sees the destruction of the different, Althaus-Reid suggests. When the queer theologian looks back, she stands in the position of Lot's wife, who

> did not perish in the destruction of Sodom neither did she reproduce the father. She represents diverse, promiscuous love: the erotic love which does not discriminate, in contrast with the agapian,

which marks off categories of the loved and the unloved.[37]

Marking the loved off from the unloved, and the bad off from the good: The destruction of Sodom allows us to see the *consequences* of making distinctions of this kind.

Here we might tarry for a final moment with two backward-looking figures who have played significant roles in queer theory: Orpheus, who looks backward and so loses Eurydice, and Lot's wife, who looks backward and so loses her life and future. Robert Mills's reading of the difference between Orpheus and Lot's wife crystallizes a central challenge for symbolic rescue projects regarding masculinity and femininity in Christian theology. Orpheus serves as a figure for Christ already in Clement of Alexandria;[38] "Christ, like Orpheus, harrowed hell," and, like Orpheus, he is the "archetypal lover and bridegroom."[39] But Orpheus is not only a lover of women: Albrecht Dürer calls Orpheus the first sodomite or bugger,[40] for, as Ovid describes, for a time following his loss of Eurydice, Orpheus turns away from the love of women. Orpheus, like Christ, turns away from fleshliness and death to the higher realms of masculine virtue.

Mills shows that in medieval interpretations of the myth of Orpheus, there are even instances in which

> sodomy… provides a framework for explaining the most central "jointure" of all, the incarnation … [P]ederasty … can … become a metaphor for spiritual ascent … endow[ed] with spiritual significance when viewed allegorically.[41]

Mills contrasts the spiritual potential of Orpheus with Lot's wife. She "is consistently identified as a sinful scopophile. She is the very embodiment of eternal regret, a loser who is lost. Unlike Orpheus she has no future."[42] Looking backward is a gendered act, with gendered differences and

[35] Althaus-Reid, 148.

[36] Sara Warner, *Acts of Gaiety: LGBT Peformance and the Politics of Pleasure* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), xxi. I make use of this same quote in a somewhat different context in Linn Marie Tonstad, "Debt Time is Straight Time", 434–448 in *Political Theology* 17 (2016), 445. For more on retro lesbian temporality, see also Linn Marie Tonstad, "The Entrepreneur and the Big Drag: Risky Affirmation in Capital's Time", in *Sexual Disorientations: Queer Temporalities, Affects, Theologies* (eds. K. Brintall, J. Marchal & S. Moore; New York: Fordham UP, forthcoming).

[37] Althaus-Reid, 93.

[38] Mills, 140.

[39] Mills, 141.

[40] Mills, 133.

[41] Mills, 148.

[42] Mills, 182.

different gendered consequences. There are similarities between Orpheus and Lot's wife:

> Each thrives on the age-old equation of femininity with fleshly desire, sin, silence, and death, and masculinity with wisdom, redemption, eloquence, and beginnings.

But their gender differences

> organize… [them] according to a distinction between movement and stasis. Although Lot's wife momentarily acts like a man by appropriating the power to look, henceforth she is not afforded the luxury of being an active presence in the world. Only Orpheus has that privilege. Only Orpheus rides off into the sunset of eternal movement and transformation.[43]

Sodomitical looking thus raises questions for any Christian theology seeking to invest in mobility over against stasis, in the capacity for mobility when extracted from gendered hierarchy, in the desire for fluidity in the Christian imaginary or in looking backward to the radical potential of Christian traditions. As Mills points out, homoeroticism can be "a virtuously virilizing pursuit – just so long as the misogyny motivating this rejection of the feminine continues to keep gender dichotomies in place."[44] In that sense, sodomitical reading practices have to remain invested in fixity even as they search for the clitoris – that is,

sodomy cannot always read from behind, from the angle at which mother and father cannot be told apart.[45] Rescuing the womb will never be enough, since both the Father and Christ already have a womb. Instead, the fixity of the lesbian feminist in the narratives that structure our telling of feminist stories[46] asks us to look for the one left behind, the one caught in stasis, unable to participate in the delightful fluidities of the father (and even, to some extent, the mother); the symbolism that identifies this problem is the absence of the clitoris.[47] It may not be possible to find the clitoris in Christian history by way of looking backward, or by way of looking from behind, from the angle at which persons are indistinguishable. Thus, sodomitical looking requires different strategies, different angles.

Our problem as homosexuals is not primarily that we, in particular, have been placed on the side of the sinful, threatening other. It is the distinction between the good and the bad to begin with, the virtuous and the filthy, the deserving and the undeserving. So let us place ourselves with the filthy, underserving, sinners; let us stay with the Sodomites and accept the fixity of Lot's wife – the fixity of feminism, which does not get over gender – rather than, like Abraham or Lot, bargaining with God about the number of the righteous that outweighs a city of sinners as we seek to escape into the hills to repeat the order of the fathers.

Summary

Many theologians have recently argued that Christianity is inherently queer, in part on the basis of traditions of gender fluidity in Christianity. This essay argues that such symbolic recovery projects often ignore the way the symbolics of sexual difference in Christianity are not threatened by gender fluidity, but in fact depend on such fluidity. Thus other strategies for queering Christianity are needed. Through a reworking of the doctrine of original sin, the essay sketches a sodomitical theology that chooses solidarity among sinners over contrastive distinction between self and other. Identification with the Sodomite, the archetypal sinner, can avoid reproducing the distinction between the bad and the good that generates condemnation of queerness in many Christian contexts in the first place. At the same time, gender differences in looking backward or recovering Christian histories must be taken into account.

[45] See Lee Edelman, "Seeing Things: Representation, the Scene of Surveillance and the Spectacle of Gay Male Sex", 265–287 in *Reclaiming Sodom* (ed. J. Goldberg; New York: Routledge, 1994), especially 270–273, 276.

[46] See Clare Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory* (Durham: Duke UP, 2011).

[43] Mills, 182–183.

[44] Mills, 154.

[47] It cannot be repeated too often that I am speaking symbolically, not biologically, in this invocation.