

Gay and Lesbian Theologies

Repetitions with Critical
Difference

Elizabeth Stuart



GAY AND LESBIAN THEOLOGIES

Gay and lesbian theology has been one of the most distinctive voices to have emerged in Christian theology in the last 30 years. It has placed lesbian and gay experience at the heart of the theological process.

Elizabeth Stuart, one of the most prominent theologians in this field, presents the first critical survey of gay and lesbian theology arguing that its emergence was nothing short of miraculous. Gay and lesbian theologians managed to take a dominant Christian discourse which rendered them sinful, sick and harmful to the common good and transform it into a theology which argued that a person's sexuality provided the point of contact between God and themselves. Stuart argues that, miraculous though this was, gay and lesbian theology has revealed itself to be 'bankrupt' – incapable of providing universally convincing reasons for the inclusion of lesbian and gay people and their relationships in the Church and unable to deal with the defining experience of lesbian and gay communities in the late twentieth-century – AIDS.

Stuart concludes that lesbian and gay people and their opponents in the Church have too easily bought into modern constructions of sexual identity and cut themselves off from a Christian tradition which is far more 'queer' in that it refuses to accept the stability of gender and sexual desire. Stuart argues that the only way out of the current deadlock on the issue of homosexuality in the Churches is for both sides to embrace this ancient queer tradition – a Christian tradition which teaches that in the end gender and sexual identities have no ultimate importance.

This book is dedicated to Jane Robson

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Repetitions with Critical Difference

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Chapter 1

Theological Trouble

What Happens to Lesbians when they Die?

Some lesbians will be dispatched according to Catholic rites. For example, the *Order of Christian Funerals* approved for use in the Roman Catholic dioceses of England, Wales and Scotland has a rich theology of death and I want to draw attention to two elements of the funeral rites.

First, the rites are extremely hopeful. Neither hell nor even purgatory are allowed to cast their shadows over the coffin. The source of this hope for the deceased lies in their baptism, that is, in their status as a person initiated into the paschal mystery of Christ's death and resurrection. Indeed this is their only hope and the funeral rites constantly return to this fact, not only in words, but also in gestures and symbolism. The positioning of the Easter candle near the coffin recalls the Easter vigil in which the Church celebrates the paschal mystery into which Christians are baptised. Holy water sprinkled over the deceased at various points in the funeral rites 'remind the assembly of the saving waters of baptism' and 'its use calls to mind the deceased's baptism and initiation into the community of faith'.¹ Incense is used not only to symbolise the community's prayers for the deceased rising to God but 'as a sign of honour to the body of deceased, which through baptism became the temple of the Holy Spirit'.² A pall may be placed on the coffin as a reminder of the baptismal garment of the deceased and also as a symbol of the fact that all are equal in the eyes of God. The clear preference for liturgical colour (with due deference to local custom) is white, which 'expresses the hope of Easter, the fulfilment of baptism and the wedding garment necessary for the kingdom'.³ The Eucharist is the ordinary and principal celebration of the Christian funeral because it is the memorial of the paschal mystery and the place where the faith of those baptised in that paschal mystery is renewed and nourished.

Second, though the family and friends of the deceased are encouraged to play a significant part in the preparation and execution of the funeral rites, there is a strong emphasis on the involvement of the whole local Christian community, not only in offering a ministry of consolation, but in active participation in the rites from the vigil to the committal.⁴ The deceased belongs primarily to the Church of which the family is a subgroup. Other elements reinforce the priority of this ecclesial personhood. The general introduction is emphatic that 'there is never to be a eulogy' only a homily on the content of Christian hope.⁵ Only Christian symbols such as a Bible or cross may be placed on or near the coffin as a reminder of the faith of the deceased, 'any other symbols, for example, national flags, or flags or insignia of associations, have no place in the funeral liturgy'.⁶ All bonds, associations and worldly achievements pale in significance beside the status of the deceased as a baptised member of the body of Christ.

So, 'in the end' as the Church commits the whole person – body and soul – to God, what does it teach those gathered to mourn about sexuality? The answer to that question

is something so radical that the Church itself seems unable at the present time to digest its own teaching. The Church teaches that in the end all other identities other than that conveyed through baptism are eclipsed (which is not to say that they are dismissed as unimportant, as the involvement of friends and family and the opportunity provided for some personal remembrance of the deceased in some rites indicates). There is only one identity stable enough to hope in. At death the Church teaches that all secular identities are placed under 'eschatological erasure' as Malcolm Edwards has put it.⁷ At my death all that has been written on my body will be once again overwritten by my baptism as it was a few weeks after my birth, when I was immersed in the waters of death and rebirth and a new character was given to me which nothing can ever destroy. In the end, before the throne of grace, everything will dissolve except that identity. Gender, race, sexual orientation, family, nationality and all other culturally constructed identities will not survive the grave; they will pass away. The 'I' that is left, the 'I am' that I am is neither, as the popular song would have it, 'my own special creation' nor the creation of the human communities. The 'I am' that I am is God's own special creation and that is my only grounds for hope.

Gordon Lathrop has argued that 'Christian liturgy orients its participants in the world'.⁸ Liturgy provides the maps by which we interpret and navigate this world and the world to come. In the end the funeral liturgy of the Roman Catholic Church re-orientates its participants back to their baptism. This theology of baptism shakes the foundations upon which much gay and lesbian theology, and indeed most theological reflection on sexuality from all quarters, has been based in the last 30 years. For, as Mary McClintock Fulkerson has noted, what is remarkable about the debates around homosexuality in the western Churches is not so much the grounds of difference between participants as the unquestioned shared assumptions, in particular the modern discourses of sexual identity: 'Both those who refuse gay and lesbian persons and those who insist upon their inclusion in the life of the church share the idea that persons have a sexual identity and sexual preference and that this identity, for good or ill, is an absolutely fundamental status-determinative reality about subjects.'⁹ It is this assumption that the theology of baptism challenges.

What Happens to Sodomites when they Die?

In canto 26 of part two of Dante's *Divine Comedy – Purgatory* – Dante describes his experiences in the top cornice of upper purgatory, near to the earthly paradise from which humanity fell and which all the souls in the top cornice will eventually reach. The souls of those in the top cornice then are close to heaven. They consist of two groups of people running in opposite directions around the fiery cornice. One group circle the mountain from east to west (following the pattern of the sun as do all the souls on the other cornices on the mountain of purgatory), the other group uniquely run the opposite way. When they meet the souls exchange kisses and go on their way, but as they pass they name the sin from which they are being purged. One group shouts 'Sodom! Gomorrah!', the other at the same time, 'Into the cow Pasiphae/Leaps, that the bull may hasten to her lust'.¹⁰ These are penitent Christians guilty of the sin of *luxuria*, the excessive, self-indulgent love of others. They have disordered their desire

so that love for others has eclipsed their desire for God. A shade from what Dante calls the ‘hermaphrodite’ group explains that the other group ‘went awry/In that for which Caesar of old heard “Queen!”/Flung at him as he passed in triumph by...’.¹¹ The tone of this canto then is fairly light-hearted as befits the status of souls so near the end of their journey and the focus is not on the Sodomites who have violated Natural Law but on the others who have violated Human Law by behaving like beasts in their lust.

There are three points I want to make about Dante’s vision of the seventh cornice of purgatory. First, note how those guilty and repentant of excessive desire for others are placed on a higher cornice of purgatory than those guilty of gluttony or avarice, also examples of excessive desire, and how all these are sins ranked ‘higher’ than sloth or accide – defective love which fails to expend enough energy – and pride, envy and wrath, forms of perverted love, perverted because they centre on the self rather than others and God. For Dante then excessive desire for others is what Dorothy L. Sayers rather charmingly calls a ‘warm-hearted’ sin because it involves some sort of mutual exchange and reciprocity.¹² Second, note how all those guilty of the sin of *luxuria* are in the same boat or rather on the same cornice. They might run in different directions, but in purgation violators of the *Lex Naturalis* and *Lex Humana* are in the same place, engaged in the same act of purgation. Their brief exchange of kisses acknowledges their fellowship. Third, it is a theme of the *Divine Comedy* that love simultaneously propels and repels humans from the divine. When it is properly ordered love thrusts us into the heart of the divine mystery, when it is disordered, wrongly focused, it turns our orientation away from God. Yet love, however perverted, is capable of being redeemed, it always has the potential of being refocused. Like a navigator’s compass it may need to be reset but without it there is no hope at all of finding one’s way to God.

The *Divine Comedy* thrusts us back into a Christian world in which sexuality and gender and their relationship to the divine were constructed in very different terms from in our own western twenty-first century cultures. In an age when even the Roman Catholic Church has gone rather silent on the doctrine of purgatory (it is only implied in the funeral liturgy), the possibility that in the end all human love, no matter to whom it is directed, might only take us to the edge of heaven seems to have been replaced by the conviction that some forms of love, that is heterosexual marriage, carry us further than others. The idea that all love has its origins and its *telos* (end and fulfilment) in God has been replaced in much contemporary Church teaching on sexuality with the implicit or explicit teaching that all love has its *telos* in heterosexual marriage and, for some, the bringing of new life into the world from it. And the possibility that those who direct their loves in different directions might recognise and enjoy a fellowship based upon a penitent recognition of shared weaknesses and a desire for God seems totally alien to much of the current debate on sexuality in the western Churches. This debate has congealed around the ‘issue’ of homosexuality where lesbian and gay people, their supporters and their opponents currently slump exhausted, having gone too many brutal rounds with one another, barely able now to muster the energy to raise two fingers at each other – never mind exchange a loving kiss.

On the ‘issue of homosexuality’ all sides have reached a state of theological breakdown. Mark Jordan has analysed the rhetorical devices employed by the Vatican in its teaching on homosexuality and identified one of those devices as tedium achieved through repetition.¹³ Repetition of arguments creates the illusion of stability,

immutability and naturalness. It falsifies history by drowning out counter arguments or different world views. My contention is that this analysis could be applied with equal force to the body of theology written by self-identified lesbian and gay Christians. The collapse into repetition is symptomatic of a failure of all sides to produce satisfactory theologies, theologies that engage, convince and change opponents. Michael Vasey has argued that what has caused this failure in much Church teaching on homosexuality is an unconscious adoption of the assumptions and values of modernity.¹⁴ I want to argue that this is what has also blighted gay and lesbian theology.

I want to make clear at the outset that I do not think gay and lesbian theology has been a mistake. I have made a small contribution to that body of theology, a contribution of which I am proud and by which I stand. It is an ancient Christian belief that the divine speaks through all forms of knowledge. But, at the same time, as the divine speaks through a body of knowledge, it also disrupts and subverts it, theology no less so than other forms of knowledge. I want to argue that gay and lesbian theology has achieved much but has proved itself incapable of getting us to the seventh cornice of purgatory; what has prevented it from doing so is an uncritical buying into modern notions of sexual identity. Both gay and lesbian theology and much official Church teaching on homosexuality would flounder in the face of the theology of the Roman Catholic funeral liturgy or Dante's vision of purgatory. However, I believe that the newly emerging body of theology known as 'queer theology' is able to engage creatively with this tradition and bring gay and straight together in the quest to take part in the redemption of sexuality precisely because it questions the notion of stable sexual identity. I also believe that, instead of just feeding off secular knowledge, queer theology has the potential to make a contribution to queer theory and rescue it from nihilism because the Church is the only community under a divine command and constructed according to a divine logic to be queer.

This then is going to be the argument of this book. Much of the book consists of a critical survey of the development of gay and lesbian theology. No theology, however, emerges in a vacuum and gay and lesbian theology has to be understood against two backgrounds: the development of Christian theology in the west in the latter half of the twentieth century and the development of gay and lesbian studies. Many of the weaknesses of gay and lesbian theology are weaknesses inherited from these two sources.

The Development of Christian Theology

Joerg Rieger has provided a useful model with which to make sense of the development of western Christian theology in the twentieth century. He characterises the development of Christian theology as four 'turns'.¹⁵ The first turn is the turn to the self, the defining characteristic of liberal theology which dominated British and North American theology in the twentieth century. Responding to the breakdown of metaphysics, liberal theology took the Enlightenment's notion of the autonomous, rational self and made that the point of contact between humanity and the divine. All human beings are believed to share common experiences and these become the road to the divine. Theology ceases to consist of reflection on the nature of God and becomes

a hermeneutical enterprise reflecting on the meaning of human experience and Christian faith. Doctrine is understood as a symbolic articulation of human experience and constantly open to critique by that experience. Liberal theology has many strengths. Because it locates the point of contact between the divine and humanity in human experience it opens up the theological enterprise and enables people previously excluded from the processes of theology to make a contribution. It reminds us that doctrine and theology always have their origin in the context of peoples' lives. However, there are problems with liberal theology. While it may present itself as a democratic and inclusive form of theology, the modern self upon which liberal theology is based is not the universal human self (which, of course, does not exist) but the middle-class self which emerged from the Enlightenment claiming the right and ability to interpret the world. Charles Winquist said of the father of modern liberal theology, Friedrich Schleiermacher, 'Schleiermacher constructed a definition of religion out of an experience that most of us have not had. Instead of being inclusive of what we might call religion, it now functions negatively, excluding experiences that cannot meet its measure'.¹⁶ So while claiming to be inclusive, liberal theology ends up doing violence to experiences that contradict or question the experience of the middle-class self. Collapsing doctrine into the self's experiences renders the self incapable of being challenged or hoisted above its own horizons. Theology can be reduced to a form of narcissism.

The second turn in twentieth-century theology is the turn to the Other and this turn manifested itself in the neoorthodoxy of Karl Barth and his disciples. Neoorthodoxy is a conscious reaction against the turn to the self, the idolatry of which it was believed by Barth led to two world wars. Neoorthodoxy emphasises the radical difference between God and humanity. God is constructed as wholly other. Whereas liberal theology is fundamentally an apologetic theology justifying the place of Christian belief and practice in the modern world, neoorthodoxy concerns itself primarily with the internal workings of the Church and its tendency to fall into heresy, which is the identification of the human with God whether that manifests itself in the liberal turn to the self or in doctrinalism. Theology must begin from the realisation that it itself is helpless, incapable of even asking the right questions still less of straddling the divide between the divine and the human. There is no natural point of contact between humanity and God. The only point of contact is God's word incarnate in Jesus Christ. While drawing attention to the dangers of liberal theology and insisting on a proper humility in the process of doing theology which restored some awareness of the majesty and glory of God, neoorthodoxy also has its weaknesses. Unless respect for God's otherness is combined with a respectful consciousness of the otherness of human beings it is tempting to construct the otherness of God in one's own image so that the modern self is not dislocated but repressed. Furthermore, part of the attraction of the turn to the Other may well be a desire to escape from dealing with the harsh political realities of human otherness.

The turn to others constitutes the third turn. Theologies of liberation are, like liberal theology, rooted in experience, not the experience of the middle-class self but the experience of conflict and a sense of cognitive dissonance, of disconnection between reality as presented and reality as experienced. Unlike liberal theology, which cannot deal with the reality of conflict because it threatens to unmask the fiction of universal human experience, and neoorthodoxy, which is only concerned with the conflict

between humanity and God, theologies of liberation begin in the reality of what hurts, of conflicts between human beings, and it is there that God is encountered. Experience does not function foundationally as it does in liberal theology but rather as a reminder of the conflicts and power games that other forms of theology ignore or try to disguise. In theologies of liberation, the theologian is acutely aware of their relationship to others and the possible misuse of their own power. In theologies of liberation, notions of absolute truth are jettisoned in favour of a glimpse of truth encountered where relationships begin to be healed. Doctrine is a pointer to the truth and meaningful only to the point that it aids such healing. Because of an awareness of the power dynamics behind the formation of doctrine, doctrine is no longer limited to the formal statements of the Church. This third turn attempts to guard against the idolising of the self and attempts to make theology truly inclusive by adding more and more voices to it. It has a tendency to romanticise the position of the marginalised, however, and while its aim is to constantly broaden theological horizons, ironically an awareness of the otherness of others can serve to ghettoise theologies of liberation into special interest groups.

The fourth turn is the turn to the text or postmodern theology. Theologians have responded to the end of the metanarrative which postmodernity brings in two different ways. There are those such as Mark C. Taylor who have taken postmodern philosophy as foundational and gleefully embraced the loss of truth, self and God that it brings, collapsing theology into religious studies, anthropology and cultural studies and spirituality into a nihilistic mysticism.¹⁷ Then there are those such as the post-liberal and radical orthodoxy schools of theologians who have taken advantage of the eclipse of the metanarrative in order to reclaim a place for Christianity in social discourse and as a form of epistemology. In these theologies, there is a recentralising of the texts of the Christian tradition which are understood to constitute the 'grammar' of the Church. Like neoorthodoxy these theologies exhibit enormous self-confidence in the Christian tradition, but unlike neoorthodoxy they refuse to recognise any sort of dualism between faith and reason or grace and nature. These theologians declare that there is no secular realm, no space beyond divine elucidation. The turn to the text sometimes suffers from a failure to engage with the power dynamics behind the text. It does not give much thought to the possibility that Christianity may have sometimes gone wrong.

These then are the four turns that took place in twentieth-century theology. What Rieger fails to make sufficiently clear is that while these four turns did occur in chronological succession they all continued and continue to exist. We shall see that three of these turns are evident in the body of work produced by self-identified gay and lesbian theologians who tend to replicate the general weaknesses of the approaches outlined above. The one turn that is not evident in gay and lesbian theology is the turn to the Other. This may be because Barth took the view that homosexuality was a 'physical, psychological and social sickness ... [a] phenomenon of perversion, decadence and decay' which resulted from a contravention of a divine command – the command for male and female to exist in fellowship.¹⁸ Indeed, Barth advocated a theory of the complementarity of the sexes that went further than the Roman Catholic Church could ever go because he believed that everything that segregated the sexes, including religious orders, directly disobeyed the divine command and often led

to homosexuality. Neoorthodoxy does not therefore look a very promising type of theology from a lesbian or gay perspective.

The Development of Gay and Lesbian Studies

As well as developing in and from the broad context of western Christian theology, gay and lesbian theology has also developed against the backdrop of gay and lesbian studies and therefore it is important to outline the 'turns' that have taken place in this discipline because shifting understandings of sexuality have certainly impacted upon gay and lesbian theology.¹⁹

The Stonewall Riots of June 1969 – caused when the patrons of a New York bar, known as a relatively safe space for the sexually marginalised, resisted a routine police raid and fought back against the harassment for four days – have become the mythical and symbolic beginnings of the modern gay liberation movement. They are commemorated each year all over the western world and beyond in annual gay pride celebrations. Stonewall symbolises the transformation of homosexual people into lesbian and gay people as they claimed their own voice, subjectivity, moral agency and right to self-definition and determination. It also symbolises a rejection of heterosexual normativeness and the construction of homosexuality as a pathological condition. After Stonewall lesbians and gay men began to create a public cultural space for themselves and demand equality before the law and in society as a whole as a stable minority group. In other words what Stonewall represents is the creation of a gay or lesbian self. The act of 'coming out' became the ritual by which men and women claimed with pride an identity which others despised and in the process challenged and undermined the modern construction of the homosexual. A key target for the gay and lesbian studies that emerged from the gay liberation movement was the psychological construction of homosexuality as an illness. The experience of gay and lesbian people was presented as being far more authoritative than that of heterosexual 'experts'. In the early years of the gay liberation movement the social agenda was radical and included a deconstruction of traditional constructions of sexuality and gender to enable the emergence of the fundamentally bisexual nature of humanity and the reconstruction of sex as primarily a pleasurable rather than reproductive activity. However by the mid-1970s this liberationist agenda, which was constructed on an understanding of human nature as fundamentally androgynous and polymorphous in its desire, had by and large given way to a model of identity based upon an ethnic minority model and a political agenda aimed no longer at subverting the social order, but reforming it through integration.

The lesbian feminist movement developed in parallel to the gay liberation movement among lesbians who felt marginalised in both gay liberation circles and in the women's movement. In its early days this movement shared much of the vision of the gay liberation movement. Lesbianism tended to be understood less as a sexual orientation and more as a defiant way of being in a patriarchal world. One popular definition of a lesbian was 'a woman-identified woman' which potentially included all women. It was to other women rather than to gay men that lesbian feminists tended to look for solidarity, gay men being regarded as implicated in the structures of patriarchy to