

The Transfiguration

Christianity's God as Newly Known Queer

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Abstract: The omnipresence of Christianity as a cultural structure that informs the cultural imaginary in Western society is undeniable. It is, among other interlocking structures of cultural influence, responsible for the ongoing centrality of the Western gender binary and the justified exclusion of non-white, non-male, non-cis, and non-heterosexual bodies in cultural and social spheres of influence. Conventionally understood as an antithesis to the anti-normative demands of more modern and queer conceptions of gender and sexuality, religion has retained an orthodox and disciplinary character. This paper however argues that this mutual exclusion of queerness and Christianity is inherently incorrect. It seeks to affirm that divinity and spiritual devotion are already fundamentally queer. The religious antagonism of queerness is not simply an obstacle to queer liberation but also, a denial of theological truth. Theology and queerness can rely on each other to be mobilized towards queer liberation in the Western cultural imaginary. To work towards this goal, this paper aims to create a queer theological understanding that consolidates the seemingly incompatible worlds of Western Christian culture and queer culture through the exploration of the queer transfiguration of Christian divinity and worship in order to assert a new unified vision of both the queer and the divine.

Queer theology is a sentimental reeducation in divine beauties that we were earlier taught to despise (Jordan, 2020)

The first piece of jewelry that hung around my newborn neck was an ivory rosary. It had been passed down through four generations before retaining its relevance upon my body; Becoming tethered to Christianity preceded language, movement, and arguably even thought. I am but one of many who have had Christianity pressed upon them irreversibly. The omnipresence of Christianity, defined for the sake of this paper as the Abrahamic monotheistic religion based on the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, as a “cultural structure that informs the cultural imaginary” (Bal, 2007) in Western society is undeniable, affecting even the most devout atheists. This monotheistic, patriarchally arranged religion has created a system of worship founded upon “religious symbols that legitimate and perpetuate social inequality in both ideology and practice” that contributes to the “moods [and] motivations” of our secular society (Christ 107 C.E.). It is, among other interlocking structures of cultural influence, responsible for the ongoing centrality of the Western gender binary¹ and the justified exclusion of non-white, non-male, non-cis, and non-heterosexual bodies in cultural and social spheres of influence. Conventionally understood as an antithesis to the anti-normative demands of more modern and queer, i.e. non-heterosexual non-cis conceptions, conceptions of gender and sexuality, religion has retained an orthodox and disciplinary character (Pellegrini, 2020), and the Church, metonymically referring to all Christian institutions, its role as the organ of authority and control. Even so, I refuse to believe that queerness and divinity are intrinsically incompatible and that the queer struggle for liberation is one that is inherently at odds with the demands, beliefs, and history of Christian religious identity.

This paper argues that divinity and spiritual devotion are already fundamentally queer. The religious antagonism of queerness, the state not simply of being non-heterosexual and/or non-cis but more broadly being a state of non-adherence to cisheteropatriarchal standards of being, then is not simply an obstacle to queer liberation but also, a denial of theological truth. Theology and queerness can rely on each other to be mobilized towards queer liberation in the Western cultural imaginary. To work towards this goal, this paper independently addresses all three aspects of the trinity (the father, the son, and the holy spirit) to re-evaluate the current conceptualization of each key pillar of Christianity with the aid of both queer theory and Christian history. Overall, this paper aims to create a queer theological understanding that consolidates the seemingly incompatible worlds of Western Christian culture and queer culture through the exploration of the queer transfiguration of Christian divinity and worship in order to assert a new unified vision of both the queer and the divine.

God is trans(cendant)

¹ The Western gender binary refers to the widely held cultural perspective, in Western societies specifically, that defines gender as existing in a binary that unequivocally defines men and women as natural and opposite, with differences between the two as being fundamental and enduring (West, Candance and Zimmerman 1987).

For just under half of all Americans (Froese and Bader, 2015), God is seen as a “him,” a “Father,” a divine patriarch. American sociologist Andrew L. Whitehead, using data from a random national survey and applying multivariate analysis, found that misperceived divine masculinity is not simply a matter of personal error, but more alarmingly, it is “consistently the strongest predictor of a traditional gender ideology” (Whitehead, 2012). This traditional gender ideology is further directly correlated with an adherence to misogynistic and transphobic beliefs. For the believer, God’s assumed maleness is indicative of an “underlying assumption of a gendered nature of reality...strong[ly] influenc[ing] gender roles and ideology” (Whitehead, 2012). In this sense, personal worship of a male God leads to the belief in the innateness of male superiority and authority and the creation of patriarchal social structures as reflective of good worship seeing as God, understood as masculine, is the ultimate authority and men are closer in nature to this authority than non-men. Seeing the prevalence of religious imagery that is founded in masculine conceptions of divinity, take the example of any image of the Christian cross with a figure of Jesus on it (his body emphasized as explicitly masculine), traditional gender ideology has been allowed to permeate through all aspects of Western society, inhibiting the socio-political equality of non-male, non-cis, non-heterosexual populations. For this reason, it is fundamental to rediscover the true nature of God, one that is not rooted in traditional gender adherence but instead is proof of divine gender’s queer malleability and excess.

First and foremost, Christian conceptions of God, whether they refer to him as “he” or not, do not consider God to be male in the way humanity is biologically male. To begin, in lesser-known religious works, gnostic works, i.e. first-century Christian and Jewish texts that emphasized personal spiritual pursuits above orthodox teachings, rejected from the New Testament, “gnostic theologians correlate their description of God in both masculine and feminine terms with a complementary description of human nature. Most often they refer to the creation account of Genesis 1, which suggests an equal (or even androgynous) creation of mankind. This conception carries the principle of equality between men and women into the practical social and political structures of gnostic communities” (Pagels, 1976). It is not uncommon then for pre-modern Christians to conceptualize God outside of a patriarchal framework and do so with the support of biblical evidence. Furthermore, even in Orthodox understandings of God, which do adhere more rigidly to a conception of God as fatherly, an exclusively male God is still a misconception. God, as a divine figure, “transcends the human distinction between the sexes [and] transcends human fatherhood and motherhood, although he is the standard” (Church, 2003). So, despite the rigid use of a male pronoun, even in the most orthodox and canonized conception of God, he is beyond human conceptions of maleness.

God as “He” must be understood as divinely and queerly excessive and elusive, transcending human thresholds and understandings of gender and sex. God’s masculinity is evidence of queer theory’s assertion that “masculinity has got nothing to do with... men” (Sedgwick, 1995) for God’s masculinity is completely disconnected from the male sex. Instead, God’s masculinity can be better understood in closer proximity to the queer masculinity of stone

butch² lesbians for it is a masculinity that destabilizes binary understandings of gender, overlaps with gender-queerness, and most notably, describes the identity of a lesbian that is not simply butch/masculine but more specifically characterizes themselves as someone who “does not allow [themselves] to be touched” (Zimmerman, 2000). God, as a masculine figure, cannot be touched and cannot be contained within the constraints of a conventional cis masculinity seeing God’s transgression of mortal constraints of gender and corporeality. God as a “Father” most resembles the stone butch’s alternate, malleable, impermeable, visibly constructed, and excessive masculine identity, and least resembles the cis man’s one-dimensional, binary masculinity.

Furthermore, as a divine figure, God is not restricted simply to masculinity, despite the prevalence of patriarchal conceptions of him. God’s masculinity is equally feminine, androgynous, agendered, and gender-multiple. His gender multiplicity, like his divinity, is completely disconnected from and incomprehensible to human conceptualization. God is “both (male and female) rather than neither (male nor female) ... the two add[ing] up to something non-numerical...simply gender-variant (Marchal, 2020). If God, as a divine being beyond comprehensible human understandings of gender, is incapable of being mortally masculine, it is undeniable that to consider God mortally, to use his supposed maleness to justify a patriarchal and heteronormative social arrangement, is blasphemous for it reduces God to something comprehensible and categorizable by humanity and more dangerously, to humanity’s (especially men’s) equal. If we are to strive to build a society that is in adherence to God’s gender, we need not prioritize the authority of men, but instead strive to adhere to queer conceptions of gender and sex, aiming to consistently expand our current conceptions of masculinity and femininity so that they might mirror more closely the fluidity and expansiveness of divinity.

Queer is Christ

Though reframing God as gender-transcendent has the most visible repercussions for the modern-day social structure, gender is not the only queer aspect of Christian divinity and the acknowledgement of these various other undeniably queer aspects of divinity have the potential to bring theology and the queer movement into even closer proximity. One of the most notable of these aspects is the queerness intrinsic to God’s dual corporeality and incorporeality, as manifested in the coming of Christ, non-coincidentally one of the defining features of Christianity. Christ evades the normative conceptions of divinity’s incorporeality and queers the relationship between the mortal and the divine. Acknowledging the queerness intrinsic to the nature of Christian divinity further encourages less orthodox and less binary conceptions of God, our relationship to him, and ultimately of ourselves.

Christ as God on Earth, divinity as flesh, “becomes the permanent disruption of godly abstraction and sovereign singularity...the porosity of flesh means incarnation can only be promiscuous” (Rubenstein, 2020). Christ queered our conception of God, complicating our perception of his immaterial character, debauching it in a sense, through the corporeal transgression of divinity as Other. “Th[is] coming to flesh of divinity disrupts the smooth

² A stone butch is a lesbian who displays female butchness or traditional "masculinity" (Halberstam 111)

otherness of the divine, its separateness from the changeable stuff of earth, its abhorrence of rot, its innocence of death, and its ignorance of life or desire” (Rubenstein 294). This disruption irreversibly changes the identity of both divinity and mortality, humanizing the former and eternizing the latter. In Christ’s disruption of this binary, he can be understood in close proximity to Anzaldúa’s “new mestiza,” who similarly transgresses the binary between Chicana and White culture and in doing so, develops a new consciousness that redefines both herself and both cultures. This new mestiza consciousness is a way of understanding the world that embraces dualities, ambiguities and serves, according to Anzaldúa, as the most compelling perspective for changing the world for the better. Like the mestiza, Christ, in belonging to two worlds, that of the terrestrial and the divine, “develop[ed] a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity...operat[ing] in a pluralistic mode...nothing thrust out...nothing abandoned...turn[ing] the ambivalence into something else” (Anzaldúa, 1987). Christ is known for his radical acceptance of all of humanity’s sins while not abandoning his sustained devotion to God. He is thus, like the mestiza, pluralistic, radically tolerant, and turning his dual status as mortal god into something else: the promise of divine salvation. Furthermore, in his coming to Earth as flesh, in working out a synthesis of the mortal and divine, Christ, like the mestiza, “has added a third element which is greater than the sum of its severed parts. That third element is a new consciousness...and though it is a source of intense pain, its energy comes from continual creative motion that keeps breaking down the unitary aspect of each new paradigm. (Anzaldúa, 1987). Christ’s new consciousness, the fulfilled Trinity, is greater than the sum of its parts for the Trinity is consubstantial and a source of intense pain, for to achieve this consciousness Christ had to undergo crucifixion. This fulfilled Trinity further enables the continual creative motion of closing the binary between the mortal and divine. Unlike the mestiza however, whose consciousness and vision for the future does not call for universal hybridization as the goal of racial inclusivity, Christ’s new trinitarian consciousness does propel a unifying vision of universal and equalizing salvation under Christ. Nonetheless, the closeness to the new mestiza positions Christ in undeniably closer contact with the queer than the normative. As a result of Christ’s divinely queer transgression into the world of the mortal, God too is difficult to conceptualize as simply being an aloof monarch of the universe, and instead, must be more productively imagined in queer terms as well: a “lord who pursues pleasure and inclusivity over domination and control” (Hoke, 2020).

Furthermore, the coming of Christ queered worship by transforming the Church into a space of queer intimacy through the integration of the Eucharist. By ritually pursuing closeness to God through the performance of carnal closeness (the consumption of Christ’s flesh and blood), Christ’s coming to Earth made worship a visceral experience driven equally by bodily and spiritual desires. As Pope Benedict XVI, a contemporary figure in the Catholic world, firmly asserts, “the Eucharist [is] the ultimate erotic encounter with God...erotic love reach[ing] its climax...in the Eucharist” (Grimes, 2016). As God’s materiality became known to us, sensuality becomes an undeniable aspect of our religious sensibility, eroticism becoming a medium through which religious content can take hold (Bal, 2007). Furthermore, this eroticism is not

heterosexually oriented; on the contrary, it is wholly and undeniably queer. As Benedict explains, “the Eucharist [is] a means of erotic encounter with other human beings... While marriage requires us to love monogamously, the Eucharist demands promiscuity...the Eucharist brings men union not with one wife but with all those who have become [Christ’s] own” (Grimes 513) and in doing so, “sex and gender are destabilized as men take Jesus’s male body into their own and women become the male body of Christ... the Eucharist exhibits the very queer tendency of contesting and reconfiguring embodied identities. If the Eucharist truly provides the “source and summit” of Christian life, then Christian love cannot help both producing and being mediated through queer bodies” (Grimes, 2016). By contesting the heteronormative boundaries between bodies, their genders, and their sexualities, the Eucharist demands a queer re-conceptualization of the self and of worship. It demands eroticism to be at the forefront of spirituality and universalizing gender-transcendent promiscuity, not singular heterosexual monogamy, to be at the heart of divine salvation. In this undeniably queering act, the Eucharist further asserts Christianity’s closeness to queerness and its ever-growing distance with the heteronormative. In acknowledging the intrinsic erotics of Christian worship and the queerness of God’s incomprehensible multiplicity of (im)materiality, we begin to lose grasp of any conceivable binary between the mortal and the divine, the bodily and the spiritual, the self and Other. Therefore, if we are to live a life guided by divine principles, we too should strive to conceptualize ourselves and our environments beyond the simplicity of binaries towards a sensuous appreciation of everything’s deeply unknowable multiplicity and queer interconnectedness.

The Spirit’s uncanny timing

The other essential aspect of Christianity, the eternity and thus atemporality of God and biblical knowledge is also undeniably both queer and divine. The Bible’s continued relevance in the modern world is indicative of its queer relationship to time, one transcending chrononormativity³, one that resists the pull towards hetero-capitalist futurity by bringing the ancient in miraculously close contact with both the present and the future. Understanding God’s eternity as queer can unbound us from our own strict adherence to chrononormativity, making room for a re-imagined relationship with time that queerly and religiously values awe, unfamiliarity, and, above all, miracle.

The Bible’s “queer persistence” (Kotrosits, 2020) as a “timeless, eternal, [and] primordial” (Marchal, 2020) object undeniably relevant in the modern world is indicative of its revolutionary (both in the symbolic sense of dramatic change and literal sense of turning back) queer affect (Freeman, 2011). Its strength lies in its queer ability to “manifest the power of anachronism to unsituate the present tense...and to illuminate or even prophetically ignite

³ The use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity (Freeman, 2011); is responsible for our understanding of time as being standardized, with certain life benchmarks (graduation, marriage, etc.) holding particular weight over other life events (like taking a walk or making dinner); delineates the past, present, and future as three distinct times that do not overlap.

possible futures” (Freeman, 2011). For worshippers, this power is at the root of the Bible’s divinity for to have faith in the Bible is to reimagine one’s future as one tied to the eternality of Heaven and for non-believers, for whom Heaven has no affective resonance, the Bible’s queer persistence nonetheless calls into question the future and capital-oriented momentum of chrononormativity by insisting on the modern relevance of ancient mythos and non-productive religious affect. The Bible’s “multiple, even simultaneous temporalities...cross time and exceed periodization” (Marchal, 2020). The very essence of what makes the Bible miraculous both to believers and non-believers alike is its ability to both remain contemporarily relevant while also fully grounded in pre-modernity, often bringing these two worlds into collision through the regulatory nature of its religious doctrine. This is undeniably rooted in its adherence to queer time. It is no wonder why biblical adherence, i.e. faith in the bible, when viewed from a secular social point of view that does, in its secularity adhere to chrononormative time, can be so defamiliarizing and often resisted, for the queerness intrinsic to its reimagining of time disrupts the hetero-capitalist illusion of the present, calling forth for a disorienting intimate relationship with the past, undermining the hetero-capitalist compulsion towards futurity and innovation.

Similarly, the image of God himself queers time through his eternality and warped relationship to futurity. To know God is impossible for his divine immateriality prevents it however; the knowledge that Jesus Christ once roamed Earth becomes part of the Christian “memory” for it is an event that took place in the past and often resurfaces in the religious present as proof of a promise of the afterlife, the future. In this way, we do know God but as a “memory of futurity... as the promise of the future” (MacKendrick, 2020). God is a strange and disruptive wielder of queer time that makes the future untenable through the present and timeless persistence of an unknowable past. God, like queerness, or more adventurously, as queerness, is something we can never touch but whose “warm illuminations of a horizon imbued with potentiality” (Muñoz 1) we can feel, and whose “queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future” (Muñoz, 2019). Like a queer utopic sentiment, a “remembered God is the non-foreclosure of the possible, is the possible, the open, the giving in the given, [making] all time...queer: always open to other than it is, as the very condition of its being” (MacKendrick, 2020).

Knowing God becomes, for individuals raised into Western religious thought, the first and only exposure to queer time that, when demanded to co-exist uncritically with the rampant upholding of chrononormativity, often results in religious disillusion. In this way, a critical re-adherence to religion relies on the queer socio-political disavowal of hetero-capitalist time in exchange for the embracing of queer affective time driven by a corporeal receptivity to wonder. Therefore, to advance both the agendas of queer liberation and Christian worship it is undeniably important to re-imagine our relationship to time, avowing instead to the queer conception of time as malleable, affective, and driven by the miraculous and frightening endlessness of possibility.

Conclusion

Overall, the worlds of queerness and Christianity are not as diametrically opposed as they are conventionally understood to be. Both challenge the socially constructed limitations of gender, humanity, and time and do so with an unwavering commitment to affectivity, sensuousness, and miracle. In this sense, they are more aligned than opposed.

It is my hope that in highlighting the similarities these worlds undeniably hold, in bringing both worlds into close proximity to each other, that the antagonism these social spheres hold for each other can begin to unravel. Both Queerness and Christianity hold such great weight in the Western cultural psyche and so it is my hope that they can begin to jointly illuminate the miraculousness of expansive thought and transgressive behavior to unbind the hetero-capitalist restraints imposed on our lives.

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