

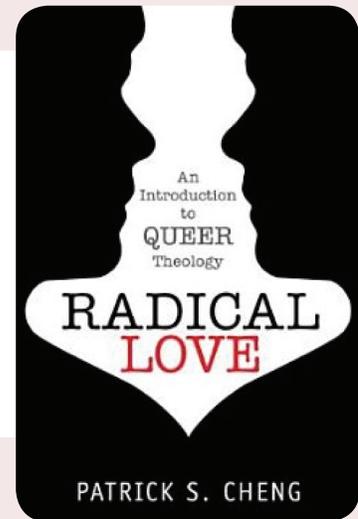
New BTI Faculty Book Reviews

RADICAL LOVE: *An Introduction to Queer Theology*

By Patrick S. Cheng

New York: Seabury Books: 2011, 140 pp. + bibliography and index

BOOK REVIEW BY: Megan K. DeFranza, PhD
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Patrick S. Cheng offers an accessible introduction to queer theology in his new text, *Radical Love*. He presents the Trinity as radical love, “a love so extreme that it dissolves existing boundaries, ... boundaries that separate us from other people, that separate us from preconceived notions of sexuality and gender identity, or that separate us from God. ... radical love lies at the heart of *both* Christian theology and queer theory” (x). Lest he be misunderstood: “radical love is not about abolishing all rules or justifying an antinomian existence, sexual or otherwise. Radical love is ultimately about love, which, as St. Paul teaches us, is patient and kind, and not envious, boastful, arrogant, or rude. As such, radical love is premised upon safe, sane, and consensual behavior” (x).

As a gay man in a committed, monogamous relationship to his partner/husband of 20 years, a theologian at Episcopal Divinity School, and an ordained minister in the Metropolitan Community Church, Cheng is particularly situated to speak to the issues. On the one hand his text is an attempt to help antigay Christians see that queer theology can be Christian; but Cheng’s primary audience is other LGBTQ Christians “who have wrestled deeply with reconciling their queerness with their faith” (xiii). At the same time, as an Asian-American, Cheng also speaks from/to the particularity of postcolonial theological construction.

At the center of his argument is the idea that love dissolves boundaries: “queer theology, like queer studies and queer theory, erases boundaries by challenging and deconstructing the ‘natural’ binary categories of sexual and gender identity” (10). He views the life and work of Jesus as “turn[ing] upside down our traditional understandings of life and death, divine and human, center and margins, beginnings and endings, infinite and finite, and punishment and forgiveness. ... in Jesus Christ... all of these seemingly fixed binary categories are ultimately challenged and collapsed” (11).

As a straight, postconservative-evangelical-feminist theologian, I support Cheng’s argument that the radical love of the Trinity is the centerpiece of the Christian critique of unjust hierarchies as well as the power of reconciliation. On the other hand, his argument could

have been stronger if he had been more nuanced about the ways in which love “dissolves” boundaries—those between “sexual and nonsexual relationships” (56-58), “pair-bonded relationships” (58-59), “fragmented identities” (59-60), “flesh and spirit” (62-63), “humanity and creation” (63-66), “marriage and queer sex” (66-67), and “gender boundaries” (90-92), to name a few. In some places dissolution means the erasure of differentiation while in others it might have been described more accurately as reconciliation between distinct categories.

Looking to the eschaton, he argues:

At the end of time, when we take on ‘spiritual bodies,’ our human identities will no longer matter—including those of sexuality and gender. In other words, all our fixed identities will be obliterated. The only thing that matters in the end is our membership in the body of Christ (131).

This dissolution of all identities seems overstated in light of texts such as Revelation 7:9 which suggest that some identities endure. Differences of nationality, “tribes and peoples and languages” are presented as distinct yet reconciled members of the “great multitude.” As Miroslav Volf has argued, it is not “difference” that is dissolved by the cross but the “dividing wall... the hostility between us” (Eph. 2:14). [Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 47.]

These critiques aside, *Radical Love* is a helpful introduction, accessible to college students while at the same time offering academics a thorough review of the current state of queer theological literature. The latter may become frustrated at the brevity of his theological construction, but calling for Cheng to give us more is a good place to end.

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