

[TSE 16.3 (2010) 308-311]
doi: 10.1558/tse.v16i3.308

(print) ISSN 1355-8358
(online) ISSN 1745-5170

REVIEW

CHENG, Patrick S. *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology*. New York: Seabury Press, 2011. vii + 162pp. ISBN 978-1-59627-132-6 (pbk). £ 12.99.

CORNWALL, Susannah. *Controversies in Queer Theology*. London: SCM Press, 2011. vii + 294pp. ISBN 978-0-334-04355-3. £30.00.

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Both Patrick Cheng's *Radical Love* and Susannah Cornwall's *Controversies in Queer Theology* provide comprehensive, comprehensible surveys of the vast literature that has come to be known as queer theology. In *Radical Love*, Cheng argues that Christian theology is an essentially queer enterprise because, like queer theory, it seeks to dissolve existing boundaries. Exploring doctrines related to the three persons of the Trinity as they are outlined in the Nicene Creed, Cheng contends that key Christian theological concepts can best be understood as dissolving the boundaries between human and divine, life and death, time and eternity in a manner fully parallel to queer theory's challenge to the binaries male/female, masculine/feminine, gay/straight. He also examines how the figures of the Trinity blur these binaries. Cornwall organizes her book around questions concerning the character and usefulness of queer theory, queer biblical studies, and queer theology. Rather than making an argument, she presents the range of opinion on these questions. Although her text is primarily descriptive, her evaluative voice is not wholly absent, and she returns to queer critiques of identity and to queer theology's conception of politics in helpful ways throughout. At almost twice the length of Cheng's introductory text, *Controversies* is able to treat most topics in more detail and with greater nuance. *Radical Love*, however, will likely be more accessible to the reader encountering queer theology for the first time given Cheng's reliance on a familiar doctrinal framework and his voice's strong presence in the text. Both authors are admirably clear writers.

Controversies and *Radical Love* are destined to become standard classroom texts and oft-cited secondary works. Cornwall's chapters on biblical studies scholarship ("Is the Bible Queer?") and the Christian theological tradition ("Is the Christian Theological Tradition Queer?") could expand and complicate conversations in courses on the Bible, hermeneutics, sexuality, theology, art, and Christian history. Cheng's organizational reliance on the Trinity and the Creed would allow his book to slip seamlessly into any systematic theology course. There are many things to be gained through reliance on these texts. By pulling together such a wide range of disparate material in manageable frameworks, Cheng and Cornwall provide an entry point to the conversation for the uninitiated and establish a secure foothold for the more seasoned scholar. Their awe-inspiring bibliographic attentiveness makes their volumes enormously valuable as reference tools. By distinguishing—yet again—the different meanings of "queer" and the various kinds of "queer" theology, they invite more careful reflection upon these issues when queer theology is being written or read.

Cornwall's chapter, "Is Queer Theology Synonymous with Gay Theology?," articulates well the unique perspective and contribution of queer theory. (This chapter could, in fact, provide helpful orientation even in "secular" queer theory courses.) In the space of just thirteen pages, Cheng captures the rich texture of queer theology by providing quick, cogent summaries of a number of individual works that comprise its history in a way that will undoubtedly invite readers to explore these resources further on their own.

Because these texts are likely to be read widely and relied on heavily, it is important to note the risks involved in treating them as definitive introductions to or summative overviews of queer theology. For example, although *Controversies* provides a clear, thorough and generative summary of the questions that surround queer theology as well as the range of responses to those questions, it poses the risk of all overview texts: readers can easily allow familiarity with Cornwall's treatment to stand in for familiarity with the texts she has read to produce the book. Because the literature Cornwall discusses is so massive, and because queer approaches can easily become one among several "menu options" presented in a class on biblical hermeneutics or contextual theologies, students and teachers could easily rely too heavily or quickly on her work alone. Cornwall's text is ultimately valuable only insofar as it orients readers to the conversation, convinces them to explore for themselves the texts she summarizes, and compels them to respond in their own fashion to the questions she raises. Similarly, although *Radical Love* was written to provide an introductory text on queer theology for use in systematic theology courses, and although it will undoubtedly work quite well in such courses, the ease with which it will fit in current theological curricula should, at least, give us pause. *Should* a work of queer theology fit easily into the curriculum? *Should* it look like other systematic theology texts? *Should* "fit," "usability," and "marketability" be queer values? If a work on queer theology fails to disrupt the ways we teach, talk about, and organize theological inquiry, then how queer is it?

In thinking about the queerness of queer theology, there are a number of questions these texts fail to address or leave under-developed. First, in what way is *queer* theology *Christian* theology? Acknowledging that queer scholarship has taken place in a number of religious traditions, and providing references to key works, neither Cheng nor Cornwall explain their decision to focus exclusively on the Christian tradition. If queer theology critiques identity categories (Cornwall) or seeks to dissolve existing boundaries (Cheng), then why is "Christian" an unexamined intellectual border? And if the decision to take up the identity Christian merits discussion, then Cheng's decision to proceed within creedal constraints most certainly requires justification. Cornwall's important reminder—in her chapter entitled, "Should Queer People Stay Christians?"—that we must not think of either Christianity or queer theory as monolithic, stable entities provides the beginning of a way to think about these issues, but she does not develop the inquiry. In Cornwall's summary of Cheng's work and in one aside from *Radical Love*, it is clear that he has thought about the relation between Christian theology and non-Christian, Asian religious traditions, but he does not develop this idea either.

Second, what are the relevant sources for queer theology? Cheng lists the four typical candidates: scripture, tradition, reason and experience. He places the adjective "queer" before each, but there is nothing particularly queer about his examples. Queer Scripture, for Cheng, is the Bible. Why not *The Well of Loneliness*, *Portrait of Dorian Grey*, *Rubyfruit Jungle*, *Giovanni's Room*, *Frisk*, *Stone Butch Blues*, *Angels in America*? Even in his discussion of queer experience, Cheng mentions only confessional accounts. What about the wide array of AIDS memoirs, coming-out narratives, pornographic novels, and pulp romances that make no explicit mention of religion? Isn't any queer work of art part of the queer tradition, testimony to queer

experience—a candidate for inclusion in queer scripture? Why must the source in question engage religion in a fairly obvious way to merit consideration as a source for theological reflection? In her discussion of the potential queerness of the Christian theological tradition, Cornwall mentions Christian art and liturgy, and makes one passing mention of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, but her treatment is also exceptionally traditional in scope. Given the role of Broadway shows, dance clubs, drag performers, Hollywood movies, bathhouses, and folk songs in the cultural formation of LGBT subjectivities, why fail to at least mention these as potential sources for theological reflection? And, if these were taken seriously as sources, would theology look the same? Why should queer theologians read the Bible at all? Why is queer theology beholden to the classic texts of Christian theology? Don't queers have scriptures and traditions—songs, plays, novels, movies, images, rituals, snippets of gossip—that inform queer reason about and queer experience of the world? What kind of theology might arise from *these* sources?

Third, insofar as queer theology brings Christian theology and queer theory together, which queer theory do we have in mind and what is the nature of the encounter? Cheng and Cornwall both, understandably, highlight Michel Foucault and Judith Butler as representative queer theorists. Neither, however, mentions recent scholarship that challenges Butler's combination of Foucault with psychoanalysis, thus providing a picture of queer theory as a more stable, coherent discourse than it merits. (Neither mentions queer theory's reliance on psychoanalysis at all. This would make any reader's encounter with primary texts quite disorienting.) When invoking parody and performativity in his presentation of God's "omni" attributes, Cheng neither explains these concepts in detail nor attributes them to Butler. Not only does this make Cheng's analysis difficult to follow (one of the only instances in *Radical Love* that this is the case), but, except for the informed reader, it makes the dependence on queer theory invisible. Cornwall provides a broader picture of queer theory. When discussing meanings of "queer," she quotes the work of David Halperin and Alexander Doty. When discussing queer theory's treatment of race, she quotes Eve Sedgwick. When discussing queer theory's treatment of politics, she mentions the work of Lee Edelman. But she only mentions these figures rather than exploring, as one of her questions, how queer theory after and beyond Butler and Foucault may raise new and different theological controversies. For example, when Cheng discusses "last things," and characterizes the eschatological horizon as the restoration of all things in God, I wondered how such a claim might be squared with the work of writers like Tim Dean, Edelman or Heather Love, who Cheng never mentions (or even Foucault—in some of his moods—who finds a place in Cheng's text). Is queer theology a Christian systematic theology that bears a family resemblance to queer theory, because it shares broad conceptual and political commitments, or is it the trenchant reappraisal and re-articulation of theology in light of queer theory's most radical claims? As Babs herself has recently sung, "Where do you start?" Or, as Cornwall asks, when considering the queerness of the Christian theological tradition, would a truly queer theology be recognizable as Christian or as theology?

Finally, how does queer theory's critique of identity categories, its desire to dissolve existing boundaries, shape the articulation of queer theology's political and moral vision? (Each of the preceding questions, in the final analysis, is a question about negotiating the boundaries of identity categories.) Although Cornwall returns to this question several times, she sketches its full force most clearly in her chapter, "Is Queer Theology Inherently White or Western?" Like Cheng, Cornwall rightly critiques the ways that queer theory has failed to think beyond gender and sexuality and has often failed to interrogate the ways queer theory implicitly (or explicitly) conflates queerness and whiteness. At the same time, unlike Cheng, Cornwall

explores how liberation theologies organized around racial and ethnic identities offer vastly different assessments of the need to appeal to and rely on existing identity categories as sites for political, theological and moral organizing and critique. In his discussion of sin and grace, Cheng contends that, *inter alia*, sin can be meaningfully understood as maintaining boundaries, and grace can be understood as dissolving them. He then explains that, on this view, even adherence to the categories “homosexual” and “heterosexual” could be understood as sinful. Although Cheng’s analysis seems fully consistent with queer theory’s critique of identity, it is difficult to square these claims with his contention that sin can also be understood as staying in the closet due to shame and grace can be understood as coming out of the closet *by proudly adopting the identity of gay or lesbian*. In addition, when discussing the sinfulness of maintaining a boundary between race and sexuality, thereby furthering the “whiteness” and “Westernness” of queer theory, he invokes the categories “African American,” “Asian” and “Latino/a” without acknowledging that adherence to (other) identity categories might be construed as contrary to the will of God. As *Controversies* explicitly discusses, and as *Radical Love* implicitly demonstrates, liberation theologies that depend on identity categories and queer theologies that seek to disrupt them may not fit together easily or smoothly. As Cheng’s and Cornwall’s attentiveness to race and ethnicity remind the reader, facing up to this tension is a vital political, moral and theological necessity—and it may well require more precise articulation of the nature and commitments of queer theology as well as more careful choices about conversation partners and intellectual forebears.

Susannah Cornwall’s *Controversies in Queer Theology* and Patrick Cheng’s *Radical Love* render a voluminous—and ever-growing—body of literature coherent and help the reader access it in a meaningful fashion. They raise a number of significant questions, by commission and omission, that are vital for queer theology’s ongoing vibrancy. Neither Cornwall nor Cheng claim they have provided a definitive theological statement or summary; both suggest that their work should encourage further exploration. To be truly faithful readers, then, we must accept their invitation to become queer theologians in our own right; we must insure that the genres of introduction and overview, as helpful as they might be, encourage the work of queer theology, rather than unintentionally domesticate it.