

Part I

RADICALLY INCLUSIVE MODELS OF GOD

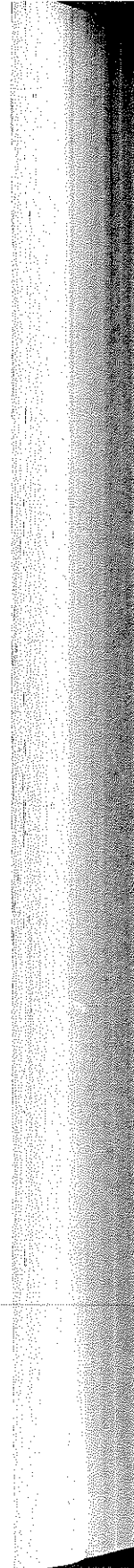
Patrick S. Cheng

One of my earliest encounters with the radically inclusive God occurred over a decade ago at the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) of New York. I was a guest at the annual MCC New York Lunar New Year communion service that celebrated queer people of Asian descent. The sanctuary was awash in red and gold, East and West. I was blown away by the integration of the Asian cultural symbols of my childhood with an unapologetically queer Christian liturgy.

For me, that Eucharistic celebration of the Lunar New Year at MCC New York was a *kairos* moment¹ in which the radically inclusive Trinitarian God—that is, the triune God of (1) sexuality, (2) race, and (3) spirituality—was made visible right before my eyes. For the first time in my life, my threefold (and heretofore fragmented) identities as a gay man, as an Asian American, and as a Christian all came together. I was whole, and I had come home.²

Each of the five chapters in Part I of *Queering Christianity* presents a different model and vision of the radically inclusive God that can be found in MCC congregations around the world. It is ironic that most young people today see Christianity as the antithesis of radical inclusion. One recent survey showed that some of the first words that come to mind for millennials about Christianity are “antigay,” “judgmental,” and “hypocritical.”³

By contrast, MCC queer theologies today are recovering a lost tradition in Christianity that affirms the radically inclusive God, whether it is Origen’s notion of *apokatastasis* or universal restoration (in which all of creation—even Satan!—will be restored to God at the end of time)⁴ or



the Eastern Orthodox doctrine of *theōsis* or divinization (in which our ultimate destiny is not judgment and punishment, but rather to become divine).⁵

In Chapter 1, the Rev. Dr. Robin Gorsline demonstrates that the queer-acting God—which he calls the “Queer-inity”—is always up to radical inclusion.⁶ Gorsline, the Pastor of MCC Richmond, describes the ways in which the God of “*extravagant generosity*” is always surprising us with radical inclusion, whether it is extending Holy Unions to polyamorous relationships, or understanding the atoning significance of Jesus Christ’s body in the context of masturbation.

Gorsline gives us many powerful images of a radically inclusive God. For example, he argues that the creative power of the First Person of the Triune God can be likened to a drag queen, who applies makeup and transforms “what may be a plain male figure into a voluptuous and over-the-top female-appearing performer.” For Gorsline, the queer God is “always up to something new and daring.”

In Chapter 2, the Rev. Dr. Patrick S. Cheng argues for a radically inclusive God that truly honors the experiences of queer people of color.⁷ According to Cheng, if we accept the definition of incarnation as the Word becoming flesh,⁸ then we must also take seriously the writings of LGBT theologians of color in which the Word becomes *racialized* flesh.

Cheng, a professor at the Episcopal Divinity School, argues that the hybrid nature of Jesus Christ—that is, a God-human who occupies a third space between divinity and humanity—can be used to deconstruct the false binary of sexuality and race. That is, like Jesus Christ, queer people of color also occupy a third space (here, between sexuality and race). The religious right often tries to exploit the tensions between LGBT people and people of color, and this strategy of race-baiting must be resisted in light of our belief in a radically inclusive God.⁹

In Chapter 3, the Rev. Dr. Robert E. Shore-Goss proposes a radically inclusive God who not only redeems humanity in the incarnation, but also redeems all of creation—including the Earth and all that is in it.¹⁰ For Shore-Goss, the Senior Pastor of MCC in the Valley, we must “go green” in our understanding of grace. That is, instead of obsessing over the red blood of atonement, we must instead focus on the greening, or *viriditas* (as coined by the mystic Hildegard of Bingen), of God’s grace.

For Shore-Goss and his congregation, “green incarnational inclusivity” is not simply a matter of theory, but also of praxis. MCC in the Valley has installed solar panels and reduced its carbon footprint significantly. For Shore-Goss, God’s threefold acts of creation, incarnation, and

transformation of creation are “united in one act of Trinitarian self-giving or self-communication.” And it is precisely this green grace that Christians need to cultivate in order to have a healthy relationship with creation and our radically inclusive God.

In Chapter 4, Megan More articulates her understanding of a radically inclusive God through her Christological reflections on the transgender Christ.¹¹ More, a self-identified trans-woman and a clergy-in-care intern at MCC in the Valley, understands Jesus Christ to be “fully inclusive of all variations of sex and gender.” Specifically, More traces the many ways in which the transgender Christ can be seen in his birth, ministry, death, and resurrection.

For example, More argues that Jesus Christ can be understood as being intersex. This is because if we take the doctrine of the virgin birth seriously, then Jesus would have had XX chromosomes (because there would not have been any sperm to contribute a Y chromosome) along with male genitals (as traditionally understood). Similarly, Jesus’ ministry can be understood as living outside of the male paradigm and expanding the notion of what it meant to be male, or female, or both. For More, Jesus Christ is the “first androgyne” who is “totally inclusive of the transgender, transsexual, and intersexed in all forms.”

In Chapter 5, the Rev. Dr. Robert E. Shore-Goss writes about how the radically inclusive God can be seen in the person of the Holy Spirit as a “mischief-maker.”¹² Drawing upon notions of divine foolishness as well as the mythological archetypes of tricksters and clowns (as well as Lady Gaga’s video “Judas”), Shore-Goss constructs an innovative pneumatology of wild grace that cannot be contained by any person or church institution.

Shore-Goss mentions how the Holy Spirit has served as bridge for moments of discernment throughout his life. That is, the Holy Spirit has connected the many in-between moments as a continuous flow of loving grace. Shore-Goss concludes this chapter by describing the power of laughter and the work of the Holy Spirit in the ministries of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, which can include the use of sex toys during the blessing of a leather contest. Shore-Goss urges MCC lay leaders and clergypersons to follow the example of these “queer spiritual tricksters.”

These five chapters provide a tantalizing glimpse into the many different models of the radically inclusive God that can be found in MCC congregations around the world. Although these reflections focus on the specific themes of disruption (Gorsline), race and ethnicity (Cheng), ecology (Shore-Goss), gender identity (More), and mischief-making (Shore-Goss), many other models come to mind (e.g., themes of interfaith

dialogue, disability, class, and economic justice). It is my hope that these models will be developed in future works by these and other MCC queer theologians.

It seems fitting to close these brief words of introduction with an excerpt from the eighth chapter of Romans, which is one of my favorite biblical passages about the radically inclusive God: "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."¹³ Indeed, nothing can separate queer folk from the love of the radically inclusive God.

NOTES

1. *Kairos* refers to a key moment or turning point in time, as opposed to *chronos*, which describes the passage of ordinary time.
2. Patrick S. Cheng, "A Three-Part Sinfonia: Queer Asian Reflections on the Trinity," *Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Religion* 3, no. 2.9 (2012): 1–23.
3. Robert P. Jones, "Why Are Millennials Leaving the Church?," *Huffington Post*, May 8, 2012, <http://huff.to/JdNTVj> (accessed March 15, 2013).
4. Patrick S. Cheng, *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology* (New York: Seabury Books, 2011), 135–36.
5. Patrick S. Cheng, *From Sin to Amazing Grace: Discovering the Queer Christ* (New York: Seabury Books, 2012), 56–57.
6. Robin H. Gorsline, "Faithful to a Very Queer-Acting God, Who Is Always Up to Something New."
7. Patrick S. Cheng, "Cur Deus Homo[sexual]: The Queer Incarnation." For Cheng's most recent work on the intersections of race, sexuality, and spirituality, see Patrick S. Cheng, *Rainbow Theology: Bridging Race, Sexuality, and Spirit* (New York: Seabury Books, 2013).
8. Jn 1:17.
9. John Becker, "Secret NOM Documents Reveal Race-Baiting Strategies," *Huffington Post*, March 27, 2012, <http://huff.to/HbkiUL> (accessed March 15, 2013).
10. Robert E. Shore-Goss, "Grace Is Green: Green Incarnational Inclusivities."
11. Megan More, "The Transgendered Christ."
12. Robert E. Shore-Goss, "The Holy Spirit as Mischief-Maker."
13. Rom 8:38–39.