

### Review of

**Patrick S. Cheng. *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology* (New York: Seabury Press, 2011), pp. 162.**

**Susannah Cornwall. *Controversies in Queer Theology* (London: SCM, 2011), pp. 294.**

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In *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology* Patrick Cheng has created for us all a very valuable resource for teaching. He has put together a comprehensive historical survey of the way in which queer theology has developed and through the use of the ecumenical creeds devised a method of examining the major advances in theology that have been enabled by this particular contextual theology. Those creeds that have stood for narrow and exclusive boundaries and dry traditional ways of believing have in this book come alive through being told via the lives of queer people. Dare one say these creeds are redeemed! *Radical Love* offers useful and provocative questions at the end of each chapter, which focus the mind of the reader and highlight the ways in which queer theology has developed its own path and challenged traditional theologies.

For Cheng, radical love is the thread that joins Christianity and queer theory. He believes that the queer community and the gospels both attest to radical love, which is a moving of boundaries to explore how we may love more fully. This, of course, is a notion that was central to the theology of Marcella Althaus-Reid and is central to my own theology, which maintains that radical love is at the very core of the meaning of incarnation. It is not surprising, therefore, that I find his suggestion very convincing, nor is it surprising that many denominations may need some convincing.

Cheng considers himself to be well placed to investigate the experience of queerness, since he is a gay Asian male, which he sees as positioning him on the edges of many groups and discourses. He views his ethnicity as particularly illuminating as he is neither black nor white. Certainly bringing this experience to bear on the central doctrines of Christianity causes more than a ripple in those disciplines. What Cheng is doing is opening new possibilities within theology, yet his method and that of many queer theologians is not as new as we might think: Has the Church and the doctrines on which it rests not always grappled with what appear to be secular philosophies and the bodies of those who have enfolded them? Here is a fresh challenge, but theology and the churches should not see it as wholly unknown and therefore extremely frightening.

The book contains a very comprehensive bibliography, which also leads the reader to further delights of scholarship that are not always fully explored in the pages of this book. This is not a criticism, since what we have here is an introduction and in my view a very thorough one. A book such as this has been a long-time coming and there is no doubt that if people engage with it their views of theology and the Church will be broadened. The struggle now is perhaps to get enough courses in theological colleges and seminaries in which we can use this wonderful book.

Cheng's *Radical Love* and Susannah Cornwall's *Controversies in Queer Theology* are like buses that seem never to come and then all of a sudden, two come at once. However, in this case, I would not suggest jumping on one at the expense of the other. These two books complement each other very well and, if read together, will greatly benefit those interested in this area of theology.

Cornwall does a wonderful job of broadening the engagement with queer theology by taking us headlong into the controversies. This in itself is encouraging as it shows that queer theology has been around long enough to represent different viewpoints. Cornwall is to be congratulated for not making this a white, Western Christian project, but for broadening it to include many different perspectives. Her self-identification as a heterosexual woman married to a heterosexual man right at the beginning is a signal that queer is far beyond the (dare one say at times narrow?) identities of gay and lesbian. Here, then, is a controversy: What does and can “queer” include? Cornwall thoroughly investigates this question, and others, in Chapters 1 and 2 of the book in which she asks what queer might be and how it sits in relation to gay theology.

She then moves on to ask if queer theology is inherently white, if the Bible is queer, if the Christian tradition is queer and whether queer people can—should—stay in the tradition. All these topics are given space and time and a variety of opinions are presented. They are very well-researched chapters and Cornwall does not hold back from entering the debate herself in a very productive way.

The final chapter, which covers other controversies in queer theology, is a fascinating unpacking of central issues and perhaps shows well where the debates are at present. As Cornwall points out, Marcella Althaus-Reid and myself, with our backgrounds in feminist and liberation theologies, have always considered queer theology to be a political theology deeply concerned with social transformation. This, of course, is not a view shared by all, particularly those who see it as too naive because it supposedly overlooks the hostility of queer theory to religion and therefore the difficulties of being true to the theory while trying to develop a theology. Some may consider “queer” an empty category, void of useful meaning and concrete political sensibility. Others find it particularly useful in discussions pertaining to ethics, for example, especially in those cases in which questioning normativity is central to the working out of ethics. Some feel that queer theology enables certain conversations about God but such conversations are not in themselves political. Cornwall does acknowledge that much queer theology does seem to be apolitical but she also strikes the counter arguments. Of course a further concern is that queer theology is purely self-indulgent and ties God down to sex and sexual pleasure. A counter to this may be that liberation theologies have not always taken seriously the sexual and gender oppression of the poor, a point Althaus-Reid makes and one that Cornwall endorses.

Cornwall has done a fantastic job of laying out the controversies for us and shows how queer theology “whips away the rug from under theological feet” (p. 255) and in so doing refuses “to be shut down by small and unyielding certainties” (p. 256). Surely then, in my view, it is an ideal partner for incarnational theology.

I recommend this book to readers and as suggested previously, why not read the two together? A new world will undoubtedly emerge for you.

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