

JR C | RELIGION & CULTURE

Volume 25



Then & Now



RELIGION & CULTURE

A Canadian Graduate Student Journal
2015 Volume 25

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The Journal of Religion and Culture is produced
by the Graduate Students of the Department of Religion at Concordia University.

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Concordia University, Montreal, Quebec.

ISSN 1198-6395
Journal of Religion and Culture Volume 25, 2015

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JRC logo designed: Christopher Burkart
Book Design: Joseph E. Brito
Front cover photography: Alexander Nachaj
The type face of this journal is Minion Pro,
designed by Robert Slimbach,
issued as a digital Open Type font
by Adobe Systems, Mountain View California, 2000.

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***Queer Christianities:
Lived Religion in Transgressive Forms***

Edited by Kathleen T Talvacchia, Michael F. Pettinger, and Mark Larrimore. New York: New York University Press, 2014, 223 pp. \$26 USD (paperback); \$79 USD (cloth).

Queer Christianities: Lived Religion in Transgressive Forms is a collection of essays that responds to the challenges and experiences of queer people of faith. Moving away from apologetic attempts to reconcile queerness and Christianity, the main premise of the book is that “queer people are not outsiders to the church. Christianity has not only always had queer members, has not only had the potential to be queered, but has from the start been a site of radical queerness” (2). Acknowledging the fact that Christianity has also been fertile ground for the production and enforcement of normativity, the essays included in this collection continue to argue, as did Elizabeth Stuart, that Christianity is nevertheless a queer thing.

Responding to ongoing scholarship on the subject of queer religiosity, these fifteen essays, divided in four different groups, tackle issues related to the “living worlds of queer Christianities” (1). Particularly, the past few years have witnessed an increasing level of interest in the study of religion and sexuality, in both academic and theological discourses. A good number of religion and theology departments now offer a concentration—or at least some courses—dealing with the study of sexualities in religion, with an important component of this scholarship focused on same-sex desire.

Whereas gay and lesbian studies remain important and relevant in theological and religious studies, the contemporary moment, with its developments in understandings of gender, sexuality, race, and class, demands that the field of religion and sexuality broadens its scope to encompass the lived experiences of all who are marginalized by heteropatriarchy. The experiences of these marginalized people of faith do not always fit strict categories such as homophobia, sexism, classism, or racism. Instead, they find themselves at the intersection of many of these discriminations. In light of this, current scholarship seeks to apply feminist, queer, anti-oppressive, subversive theories and methodologies, destabilizing the epistemological foundations of what religion is and how its study has been undertaken.

The first part explores issues of celibacy in both historical and contemporary settings. This is perhaps one of the most interesting parts of the book, as celibacy is generally seen as oppressive and anti-queer by mainstream gay politics. This suspicion is not unfounded because, as argued in part one, celibacy is the only form of sexuality that is permitted to queer folk in many churches. Celibacy has indeed been understood as an ultra-conservative lifestyle—one proper of prudes, those gays who do not dare come out, and, as stated above, many queer people of faith who wish to remain Christian without necessarily pre-tending to be heterosexual. This section, which contains essays on early Christian celibacy, the ex-gay movement, queer/celibate politics, and a queer nun's story, problematizes the idea that celibacy is a denial, voluntary or imposed, of one's queerness. Instead, it argues that celibacy is queer, and that understanding queerness and Christian celibacy as binary opposites does not do justice to the complex relationships between these two terms. By queering celibacy, one of the most orthodox components of Christianity, the essays in this section argue that Christianity is indeed a queer thing. Moreover, by discussing celibacy in queer terms, the contributors to this book push the boundaries of what it means to be queer and what it means to be Christian, thus paving the way for new understandings of Christian life and sexuality.

The second part of the book deals with matrimones, and contains four chapters that deal with issues of marriage ranging from medieval brides to queer family life. An interesting article by William E. Smith III titled "Two Medieval Brides of Christ: Complicating Monogamous Marriage" explores the complicated relationship that two medieval women had with their respective husbands and with Christ, arguing that these relationships exemplify polyandrous arrangements. The second and fourth articles deal with queer marriages, one of them focusing on New York's first same-sex marriage and providing a valuable history of gay rights in America. The other one explores queer family life, and provides fascinating ways of understanding same-sex marriage that move away from assimilationist critiques. This article was fascinating, as it moved away from the question of whether same-sex marriage is subversive or normalizing, arguing that it should be seen as sacred work, which ought to be understood as a quest for legitimization rather than the desire to be normal. An article by Teresa Delgado titled "Beyond Procreativity: Heterosexuals Queering Marriage," is perhaps one of the most thought-provoking contributions to this volume. Although the ideas raised by Delgado are quite interesting and valid, I am still wondering whether I believe that heterosexual Catholics "have an

ethical responsibility to act on behalf of those who have been relegated to the margins of the church, namely, queer Catholics” (93). As a Catholic-raised queer person of faith, do I truly believe that heterosexuals ought to defend me, like a big brother would from the bullies in the schoolyard? I am not quite sure. Doesn't emphasizing the role of the privileged in queer liberation take away from the struggle, self-determination, and efforts of the marginalized themselves? This is something that I see in everyday life, where “allies” of LGBTs are constantly applauded and celebrated for their willingness to help queer folk, but we barely talk about the real issues faced by queer communities. For example, I always find news articles about so-and-so heterosexual pop star who claims to support gays, but queer youth homelessness and the efforts made by local queer groups are rarely talked about. I write this not to diminish the role that heterosexually-identified folk play in the queering of Christianity, but it is clear to me that when I read or do queer Christianity and theology, I like to keep my attention on queers themselves. Delgado's anti-oppressive analysis was definitely intriguing and provocative, and certainly provokes thought on the role of heterosexuals in the queering of religion.

The third section had fun with its subject. Titled “Promiscuities,” this section moved from Augustine to ethics of relationships and friendships to BDSM - it was a wild ride. The articles included here are a great intellectual exercise as they introduce a variety of extremely interesting ideas, all of them related, in one way or another, to sexual ethics. “Love Your Friends: Learning from the Ethics of Relationships” by Mary E. Hunt is a brilliant contribution to this volume. It centers its argument on the idea that marriage does not make people friends, but that friendship could (but does not have to) evolve into marriage. In other words, as I have told some of my colleagues, it is not because gays can now get married that we ought to get married. Hunt explores relationships through the lens of friendship, which makes this a great piece to examine the importance and flourishing of friendship, which tends to be obscured by a society obsessed with the marriage industrial complex. She argues that in friendship we find a variety of ways of relating to one another that are not available in marriage-centered relationships.

The fourth and final part “Forward!” brings together the themes discussed throughout the book and points the reader towards new directions in the study of religion and sexuality. The book seems to refuse a conclusion. If that is the case, it makes a lot of sense. The myriad of ideas, methodologies,

and approaches discussed across the chapters in the book cannot be synthesized in one conclusion. The contributions to this volume show is that Christianities may be queer in many different ways, and as readers we must be open to the possibility contradictions, headaches, agreements, and more contradictions. Because of its boundary-pushing approach, its diversity in terms of subjects and authors, and its accessibility, *Queer Christianities* is a solid introduction to the world of queer issues in Christianity. Readers are bound to find some of the articles interesting and engaging, some others less interesting or outrageous, whereas others could prove to be quite the intellectual challenge. This book, or selections from could serve to introduce new students to the field, or to push the boundaries of more advanced students. *Queer Christianities* navigates the grey zone between the socio-scientific study of religion and theology, a gap that many students take too seriously. For example, many courses offered by departments of religion tend to shy away from theological reflection, and some theological studies courses do not bridge the gap between the humanities and the social sciences by putting both methodologies into conversation. This division is further exemplified by an all-too-common joke among many of my religions studies classmates, which consists of being offended by someone confusing “Religious Studies” with “Theological Studies.” How dare they assume that our socio-scientific field has anything to do with theology or faith-based religious studies? Perhaps this division is not as clear-cut as one has been taught. This collection of essays draws from theology—particularly the queer theology of Patrick Cheng’s *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology*—while simultaneously engaging with the social sciences, notably history, politics, and some cultural studies. What *Queer Christianities* shows with its skillful interplay of religious studies and theological reflection is that both fields could benefit from some interdisciplinary dialogue. By combining politics, history, ethics, and queer family life, *Queer Christianities* raises the idea that perhaps students of religion and theology have a great deal to learn from each other.

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