

Queer Theology as Methodological Resource

Robert Goss has observed that trans theology is “further along” than bisexual theology. This is true. Although the movement for bi liberation is over 30 years old, bi theology is still in its infancy. Today I will present 5 themes in the work of Marcella Althaus-Reid that provide a valuable resource for shaping bi feminist theology in ways that correspond with other theologies of liberation. These themes are: 1) valuing queer culture, 2) sexualizing theology, 3) reframing authority, 4) taking metaphor seriously, and 5) reclaiming the sacred.

I approach this task as a bi activist, a working class feminist, and a Mi’kmaq woman. I assess Althaus-Reid’s framework in relation to my 10 year membership in Toronto’s bi community and my recent dissertation study of 40 bi women in the Toronto area.

Marcella Althaus-Reid was born in Argentina in 1952 and died in February of this year. She described herself as a “Latin American woman brought up in the poverty of Buenos Aires,” and as a “queer amongst queers.” Her theology is postcolonial, viewing Christianity as an integral piece of the colonial project. She advocates that women begin the theological process again, discovering God outside of patriarchal relations. Due to the erasure of bisexuality in feminist theology I argue that bi women must engage in this process separately, developing our theology from the ground up.

1. Valuing Queer Culture

The first theme in Althaus-Reid’s writing that I find promising for bi theology is the value she places on queer culture.

Traditionally, reason has been a key element of theological reflection. Yet as Althaus-Reid notes, the experiences that get included are predetermined by concepts of decency. Liberation theology, she argues, has reflected only on the presentable within the life of the poor. By

contrast, Althaus-Reid's is a theology after dark, revealing suppressed experiences and claiming that these too are sacramental. Her portrayal of Latin America is peopled with bisexuals, gays, lesbians, cross-dressers transsexuals, and prostitutes. Her definition of queer also includes the poor and marginalized, and heterosexuals outside the mainstream.

Valuing queer culture as a source of revelation is made possible for Althaus-Reid by the immanence of God, which provides free access to the divine through human experience. In short, we need not search for God. We encounter the divine in our own circumstances. Instead of placing the burden upon queers to justify counter-cultural practices, we assume that God works in and through our own traditions. For bi women this will include both our bi community and the larger queer community. The women in my study participated in bi culture, but 40% also spent time in gay and lesbian space, attending events such as the Toronto Women's Bathhouse, and the Dyke March. Not only *can* and *do* these communities mediate the divine, but they are a *more effective* mediator than the Church because they offer shelter from sexual oppression—albeit limited and partial. When we assume that our culture is permeated with the immanence of God the question then becomes what plan do we discern at work for the promotion of justice and human flourishing, and how can we participate in its realization?

One issue that arises if we attach theological value to queer culture is its lack of homogeneity. There is no single international queer culture. The closet, for example, figures prominently in Althaus-Reid's work, acting as a foundational element of queer experience. For me, queer experience and closeting seem opposed to one another. 73% of the women in my study were out to family and friends. Instead, they faced problems such as achieving and maintaining visibility, countering heteronormativity and sexism, building a support network, and accessing bi community. The theological value of queer culture is therefore in its particularity

and its diversity.

2. Sexualizing Theology

A second useful theme in Althaus-Reid's work is her sexualization of theology. She asks, "If people cannot honestly incorporate the sexual aspect of their lives into their experiences of the divine, then how can they possibly hope to live with integrity and in right-relation with others?" This incorporation is important for bi women if we are to navigate between caricatures of us as hypersexual on the one hand and religious constructions of femininity as asexual and reproductive on the other. Yet "women's experience" is a loaded term and we must use it with caution. Even within my sample of 40 women in one city, there was great diversity in identity labels, gender expression, and the cultural milieu in which they live out their sexuality. Bi women's diversity must be preserved or our feminist anthropology will be an abstract norm against which other—and Othered—women are measured.

Sexualizing theology involves reflecting theologically on our sexual experiences. The way in which our sexual practices are *religious* may require a redefinition of religion. If religion is defined as humanist author Anthony Pinn does, as "that which provides orientation or direction for human life," or as Protestant theologian Paul Tillich does, as our area of "ultimate concern," then we can reclaim its meaning from organized religion. We could then paraphrase the slogan "the personal is political," and argue that the personal is also—perhaps even always—religious.

Constructing a theology that reflects on our sexual experiences of pleasure, and that values our queer culture and its practices may be deemed illegitimate by even the most affirming of Christian congregations. Yet theological illegitimacy is precisely Althaus-Reid's goal. Terms such as legitimate, she argues, are instruments of patriarchal ideology. Her work seeks to "rescue elements of illegitimacy and subversion." This illegitimacy is not reducible to an adolescent contrariness—rather, it is a transformative illegitimacy, which cuts to the root of social

expectations of the good, the proper, and the holy, revealing that God's values are not the same as hegemonic human values.

3. Reframing Authority

A third useful theme is her reframing of authority. The Holy Spirit, Althaus-Reid maintains does not limit itself to operating only within channels approved by the Church. She proposes a more flexible Holy Spirit, whose presence is saving not only in a soteriological sense but also in present concrete ways, removing our internalized oppression (such as the colonial mindset) and enabling us to voice our dissent. Such a reframing of religious authority empowers bi women to place ourselves at the centre of our own theology.

When bi women begin theologizing from our own experience the content of Christian Scripture and tradition can seem very foreign indeed. The theology we inherit from our communities of faith has been a theology by and for men, despite its claims to universality. Reframing theological authority means creating canons that embody our own experience of the sacred, that evoke the assent of our community, and that serve as the rule by which we measure our actions. Alternative revelatory texts could include writing that emerges from the queer community, secular literature, and even—perhaps especially—the text of our own lives.

At the root of the difference between Althaus-Reid's perception of Scripture and more traditional approaches lies a disagreement on the nature of revelation. The closure of the canon, agreed to by most denominations, assumes that God's direct revelation has ended and can be encapsulated in a collection of authoritative texts. Althaus-Reid assumes that revelation is an ongoing process, which requires embracing new works and abandoning works as their partiality or toxicity are revealed over time. Such a move would have serious consequences for

ecumenism, but given the relationship many queers have had with their traditions of origin, it's not unreasonable to ask why we should care.

She notes that women's theological struggle may mean "leaving the church and its alliance with the oppressive state." This may be necessary for bi women as most Christian communities are reluctant to even include the bi perspective, let alone allow it to take central place in a theological revolution. While a Christianity that is outside the church may be possible or even desirable, if our theology changes and those authorized to do theology changes, then our God also changes.

4. Taking Metaphor Seriously

A fourth theme in Althaus-Reid's theology is her re-examination of metaphors for the divine. Representations of God as singular, she argues, have baptised other mono-traditions: the deity in an exclusive relationship with his chosen people; the Pope as head of the Church; the priest as representative of Christ to the laity; and the husband as lord over his submissive wife. This monothinking has resulted in a general tendency toward authoritarianism that has often been expressed or reinforced by military violence. What radical re-ordering might result if God is revealed as multiple, and as blessing multiplicity?

If examined from a queer perspective, Althaus-Reid suggests, the Trinity, could reveal polyamory as a key element of God's nature. This reframing would revolutionize sexual ethics, but also influence other areas of theology that have taken up the monogamous model. Divine polyamory could reframe our view of the legitimacy of God's covenant with the Jewish people, too long denied by monogamist supersessionism. Such an approach also holds promise for ecological theology, which has struggled with anthropocentrism. A God whose polyamory includes all living creatures does not place our avaricious desire above the basic needs of his other lovers.

Yet it is not sufficient to replace the image of a monogamous god with a polyamorous one.

Monogamous bi women in my study felt marginalized in bi space by expectations of polyamory. This would only be reinforced by a theology that divinizes the practice. What we require is a restating of the problem. The problem is not monogamy *as such*, but the *compulsory* nature of monogamy: the heterosexist double standard that posits monogamy as natural for women, and the oppressive nature of its practice within economies of sexual oppression. Althaus-Reid denounces monothinking, but not the faithfulness, focus, commitment or intimacy of monogamy. Bi women need a new monogamy and a new polyamory in which our choices are not placeholders in a hierarchy of women. Kwok Pui-Lan puts it well: “In the end, we must liberate ourselves from a hierarchical model of truth which assumes there is one truth above many.”

Moreover, there is a problem with treating monogamy and polyamory as opposites. The women in my study did not fall easily into separate monogamous and polyamorous categories, but used these identities strategically at different points in their lives. Moreover, their definitions of these practices did not always correspond with the expected; some monogamous women were open to threesomes with their partners, and some polyamorous women were contentedly single or celibate. A theology developed by bi women may include a sense of dynamic movement that reflects the transitions of bi women themselves.

5. Reclaiming the Sacred

A final theme in Althaus-Reid’s work is her reclaiming of the Sacred, particularly for queer women. She applies her hermeneutic of suspicion not only to texts, but also to the content of their message—that of a monotheistic male divinity. Traditional theology, she argues, has constructed women as the Other to all that is normative, including God. To discover the divine apart from patriarchy, apart from the violent dominance and submission of colonialism, and apart from the sexualized violence of heteronormativity, is in effect to discover a different God than the one most Christians would recognize. At this point Althaus-Reid exits Christian theology, a

concern that bothers her not at all if her choice is between Christian orthodoxy and an authentic God. “We must be proud to be called betrayers,” she writes, “if our unfaithfulness to patriarchal ideology opens up the possibility of discovering God anew.”

Althaus-Reid develops the idea of the “queer God,” whose face has been suppressed by heterosexual theology. This God is not a reformer of the Church but is an alternative to fixed structures of any kind. Instead of the monotheistic father God, which sacralizes compulsory monogamy and male domination, the queer God is a diverse, and dynamic deity whose presence is felt among the outcast and within intimate human relationships. The queer God can be moved, and far from being independent and transcendent, “depends heavily on our intimate relationships to configure Godself.” In short, the queer God needs us, and thus sacralizes the extent to which we need one another.

Althaus-Reid rejects the authenticity of the God of the patriarchal colonial heterosexist Church, which constructed him in its own image. Reflecting upon the history of women in Latin America, she notes that “other divinities are not only more friendly, but that there is a ‘god’ who is one of us: for women she was the Goddess.” This other divinity is not just God in a dress. Instead, she is as Althaus-Reid describes her “the Other goddess, the Goddess who reads *Capital* and understands the need for agrarian reform.”

Intimacy with a female deity offers intriguing possibilities for bi women’s theology. Such a relationship, particularly if accompanied by ritual, could be a resource for those women in relationships with men, who find long-term bi visibility a challenge. It could also ground celebratory expressions of women’s polyamory as reflective of divine love. While the potential is revolutionary, the history of Mariology within the Catholic tradition ought to make women concerned about which elements of the “feminine” are identified with deity.

Given bisexual erasure, more attention needs to be paid to the sacred quality of *being out*. I agree with Chris Glaser (glosser) who argues that “simply being ‘out’ is a form of ministry.” An adequate theology must facilitate bisexual visibility. As I discovered in my research, being out as bi requires a community of witness, as our sexuality is often only visible serially, to people we have known for long periods of time. Affirming the social nature of our sexuality requires a commitment to building and supporting such communities. This is not a separatist enterprise, but occurs amidst webs of relationships with lesbians, transsexuals, gay and bisexual men, and non-conforming heterosexuals.

Coming back to Robert Goss’ observation, he speculates that our sluggishness in developing bi theology may be “due to insufficient bi activism within communities of faith or to bisexuals not experiencing the degree of exclusion and hostility that transgendered folks do.” I see the slow development of bi theology as having other causes. Primary among these is the fact that, in most cases, bisexuals do not have our own communities. Bi community provides a space where we need not defend or explain ourselves, and enables us to begin the conversations and reflections that produce a uniquely bi theology.

To be adequate to the task of meeting bi women’s needs, theology must also support a raised consciousness. Rather than a theology that is blind to social sin, bi feminism needs a theology where sexual decisions are made with an awareness of the social, political, and moral context. The imagination of conscientized women is a key resource for bi feminist theology. Althaus-Reid’s queer methodology can provide a framework, but it will take our own awakened imaginations to put meat to the bones, as it were. It may be that an authentic bi feminist theology is no longer identifiable as Christian. Theologians such as Althaus-Reid have been willing to

follow God out of Christianity if that is where God leads. It is time that bisexual women began to discuss where God is leading us.