

Maria Althaus-Reid's *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender, and Politics* is a step in the direction of liberating 'sexuality' (and all that it signifies) from the narrow confines of the heterosexual norming narrative. It finds itself situated at the intersection of Latin American Liberation Theology, Feminist Theology, Continental Philosophy, Postcolonial and Sexual Theory, and (however unlikely) Systematic Theology. Althaus-Reid brings all of her theoretical arsenal to bear on the problem of theology as a "sexual normative ideology" and the process of bringing out the Real of sexual desire in theological discourse.

Althaus-Reid's first chapter describes the process of writing/un-writing Grand Narratives by taking as a case study the *Conquista* of Latin America and the subsequent ideological moves that were made by both the colonizers and the colonized. Latin American theology, she claims, originated in a massive "mutilation of symbolic knowledge," which was the result of the inscription of reality on the continent into the metanarratives of European conquerors. To begin her indecent move, she takes as her subject the lemon vendors of Buenos Aires, poor women who refuse to wear underwear and are thus deemed "indecent." This indecency is a marker of their location within society (i.e., within the dominant political and economic ideology), as well as (and more importantly for Althaus-Reid) their location in theological systems (which often serve to reinforce the normative ideology). Her goal is to "undress" the roles of economy and sexuality (economic and sexual desires) in the construction of theology.

In *Indecent Theology* ... there is a shift in the structure of sexual feelings which disrobes the underwear of heterosexual theology. A kind of coming-out process in which we are no longer (hetero)sexually neutral theologians. (19)

Doing theology without underwear means owning up to our sexual, political, and economic desires (the order of the Real, as Lacan might say) and challenging the sexual idealism which pervades theology (22). And, as A-R repeatedly emphasizes, it is much more indecent and inflammatory to challenge the

inherent (hetero)sexual ideology of theology than to challenge even the concept of God itself.

Her main target early in the book is Liberation Theology. Her critique centers around two aspects of Lib. Theo.'s ideological content: first, the lacuna within Lib. Theo. of "the poor's" sexuality; second, the production of Lib. Theo. as a marketable commodity (economic critique). On this first point, she offers an easy example of the problem: when poor workers march together under the figure of Mary, they are God's option for the poor; however, when they parade with a "transvestite Christ accompanied by a Drag Queen Mary Magdalene, kissing his wounds, singing songs of political criticism" (25), they are not included in the theological conversation. And on the second problem, it is clear that Liberation Theology became a popular (sell-able) product of academics and, at the point in which it was no longer "hot", was abandoned by many for the more *en vogue* theologies of the day. It remained prominent in Latin America, despite unpopularity, and continued to mature in its thought (32-33). A-R's own work is an example of this mature Liberationist mode of theology, which incorporates, e.g., Feminist and Post-Colonial thought while not simply bowing to North Atlantic trends of theological merchandising.

A-R's second chapter focuses on Mariology. She effectively demonstrates how popular theologies of Mary, contrary to some Feminist interpretations, actually reinforce an intertwined theological and political hegemony. They present "a simple case of the reproduction of false consciousness" (51) revolving around an idea of decency that norms political and sexual behavior (towards subservience), especially for (poor) women. Against these forms of decent Mariology, she uses the sexually amorphous and "indecent" visions of Mary which can be found among the "poor urban dwellers" of Buenos Aires. Such blurred metaphorical truths express the actual "indecent" sexual identities, desires, and realities of the masses, which have to be subtracted for "decency" in (hetero)sexual ideology. In such a way, 'Queering' (or indecenting) is not making something appear

strange, but just the opposite.

[Indecenting is] a process of coming back to the authentic, everyday life experiences described as odd by the ideology – and mythology – makers alike. Indecenting brings back the sense of reality, and not the commonsense reality politics denounced by Gramsci which constructs not only objectivity but subjectivity too. (71)

This "indecenting" of the Virgin Mary not only serves to undermine the constrictive Narrative of decent sexuality, but offers the starting point for a new methodology of per/version, which enables the deconstruction of central theological concepts (resurrection being her primary example). By queering the basic coordinates of Christian practice (e.g., Mariology and Christology), the “institutions and the discursive gender/sexual symbolics which serve to regulate religious identities” are disrupted and the possibility of localized, “moment-based” theologies, as well as alternative forms of church are created (82-83).

Systematic theology is done in the mode of heterosexual desire, constructing the sexual other as a boundary by which to define what is acceptable and meaningful. Viewing theology as a sexual act means recognizing the imperial character of its sexual orthodoxy and orthopraxy and being willing to “come-out” of the ideological closet it constructs by refusing to comply with “vanilla” public theology. In so doing, the theologian affirms his or her sexuality in their choice of theological topics or motifs and the content of their reflection instead of allowing the dominant (hetero)sexual paradigm to decide for them (forcing the real of their desire to be translated into abstract conceptualization or merely into denial or oblivion). A-R frames the theologian's struggle in terms of the relation between the Real, which is constituted by a plurality of sexual desires, and the Symbolic, which gives the illusion of certainty and homogeneity. She uses Gramsci's notion of the Historical Hegemonic Block to frame her picture of the “united field of symbolic knowledge,” which constricts and predetermines epistemic possibilities at the level of their production and exchange. Hegemony over the symbolic field “is achieved by a group of individuals or a class, controlling the spheres of production” (95). This is

apparent, A-R claims, in Western /patriarchal theology, in which productions of Jesus and God (for instance) are strictly controlled. The only way to escape the silencing effect of such hegemony is to reopen the relation between the Real and the Symbolic by insisting on the telling of sexual stories.

In this task, A-R uses the example of fetish culture as a sexual reality that can speak to theology and disrupt the fixed symbolic field which supports the ideal heterosexual matrix. Her method of “see-judge-act” is a reference to the hermeneutic circle. It involves allowing an experience to affect one's reality in a critical way, analyzing the situation in its entirety, and acting in community in response. Sexual story-telling can occur at any point in this movement. It can be the founding experience, it can temper the analysis, or it can itself be the action (as in protest or solidarity). Her use of S/M and bondage practices in this process is an example of how sexual story-telling can be used to produce per/verted or indecent theology. How does viewing Jesus as a bottom change the way we theologize? What does relating power dynamics in churches to sexual domination reveal about the motives or methods of Christian authority?

Her concluding chapter deals with the inter-relation between heterosexual theology and the politically dominant Neoliberal model of global Capitalism. At the basic level, her argument is that “political theories are sexual theories with theological frames of support” (176) and that the patriarchy or (more generally) heterosexualism is the basis for the current Neoliberal order, which is supported by North Atlantic (developmental) theology. She also looks at the current theological conversations going on in Latin America between Post-Marxism and Sexual Theory.

Critique:

The importance of her early move of telling the story of *Conquista* is understated, yet essential to the picture she wishes to paint. By offering such a broad account of ideological violence through the direct and bloody imposition of Grand Narratives, she is able to initiate the reader into the world of

critical ideological work, in which "natural" categories are obvious (and urgent) targets for critical reflection. Unfortunately, similar moves are not made with other complex (jargon-heavy) concepts and arguments. Because of the dizzying pace of the book and the often overwhelming number of sources and assertions, this lack of explanation can, at points, exacerbate the feeling that something is being lost in translation. Given this, the intended audience for *Indecent Theology* will necessarily be academic, and even then will most probably be those within academic theology for whom critical theory, liberation theology, psychoanalysis, and feminism are navigable terrains. Some may be turned off by the sometimes overly convoluted sentence style or the sheer scope of her wide-ranging claims. I, for one, oscillate between a respect for the rhetorical impact of broad claims and frustration at the lack of argumentation to back them. Similarly, there are some obvious instances of inflammatory statements (for instance, that God's lone sexual act was copulation with a young Mary, or many others throughout), yet they seem to have rhetorical merit; if not solely in their punch, then in their ability to penetrate the layers of ideology that may obscure our reading of queer stories like the annunciation. Again, there are a good many who will shy away from this sort of 'indecent' or even condemn it. That being said, I think that this volume is indispensable, both in terms of content and in approach. That is, the arguments that A-R makes are (mostly) valid and forceful both in their critical and constructive dimensions, offering Theology (i.e., the guild discipline) a mirror in which it can inspect and correct itself. The approach is honest in that it does not attempt to "simplify" or "purify" theological claims by bracketing out the wider movements of theory. It is willing to take what critical thought has to offer, combine this with theology, and deal with the consequences.

Moving on, her comparison of the Ghanaian penis-shrinking witch hunt and the Argentinian dictatorial regime, which reinforced patriarchal claims to power by dehumanizing women and feminizing men who chose to dissent, illuminates the underlying *machismo* character of localized

paranoid societies (in the case of Ghanian villages) and the similar mechanisms at play on a large scale in ideology-driven state politics (in the case of Argentina). However, the extent to which this mechanism is operative today, that is, the relevance of this assessment to her discussion of globalization and Neoliberal Capitalism in a post-modern mode is negligible. Homosolidarity amongst women (against other women) in paranoid societies may help to perpetuate patriarchal domination, but global capital hardly requires such counter-productive solidarity. In fact, in today's world the fragmentation of homogenous power and the solidarity of each in-group against the other (i.e. identitarianism) is beneficial to Capital in the creation of new marketable territories.

Her development of ideology critique is one of the most useful aspects of the book (particularly for theology). Unlike Segundo, for whom ideology is simply a “subjective” position (benign or otherwise) which receives support through reasoned argumentation, A-R takes a more standard Marxist approach, in which the underlying reality (in this case, the Lacanian Real of sexual desire) is obscured by false representations, or a deliberate manipulation of the Symbolic order, for one purpose or another.

The final chapter (“*Grandes medidas economicas*”), as something that I am very interested in, was an exciting step in the direction of a critique of Neoliberal Capitalism, but it seemed to fall flat. For instance, her comparison of “globalization in the neo-liberal form” with rape, in which the resistant community could model its actions on women's experience and fear of rape (learning to be actively aware and rejecting forced negotiation) seems to be fruitful, yet after only half of one paragraph A-R has already changed topics and is talking about something completely different (192-193). This highlights another big problem with the overall style of the book and the thesis of the last chapter, in particular: the lack of one sustained line of argumentation hurts the overall effect of the chapter at conveying a coherent message.

Finally, I found Kathleen Sands' response to *Indecent Theology*¹ particularly helpful in explaining some of my own reactions to the text. While her essay is generally welcoming of A-R's approach, Sands points out a number of problems with placing too much weight on sex (particularly when arguments are brought to the public arena). Her guiding question is "How much can we ask of sex?" This question is relevant for both 'traditional' American feminist theologians and for A-R, but in different ways. Most feminist theologians, Sands argues, have looked to the concept of eros as the link to the divine, but have, in so doing, idealized it and forcibly excluded such erotic practices as S/M because of their resemblance to social patterns of domination. In other words, they aren't divine enough. Thus, the question regarding sex is answered "Not very much if we limit sex to some ideal form of divine eros." For A-R, because she is actively going against the grain of idealized eros by including sex workers, fetishists, and S/M'ers, the question is more complex. For instance, A-R's use of S/M and fetish culture as an example of mimicry or ironic parody of the everyday dominations impressed upon people of all sorts is an effective means of revealing the ideological function of norm and transgression. Yet, as Sands points out, such irony "depends on the norms it rubs against", and so can only be transformative up to a point. Secondly, Sands points out that there seems to be a limit to just how self-conscious sex can even be. Not all sex can be constantly and ironically self-aware of its socio-ideological transgressivity, most of it (even in S/M and fetish practices) is compulsive (and nonetheless satisfying). Thus, at least politically, we can't ask too much of sex without ruining it.

Another point of Sands' paper which I found helpful has to do with the difficulty of liberating sexualities and can be summed in her phrase: "Just as oppressions are complex, liberation can be ambiguous." The point here is that, at least in the USA, steps 'forward' in 'sexual liberation' are often marked by ambiguous movements in various sexualities. When one group begins to gain "rights", new

1 Sands, Kathleen. "A Response to Marcella Althaus-Reid's *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender, and Politics*." *Feminist Theology* 11, no. 2 (2003): 175-181.

norms are established. As one type of sexual difference (often accompanied by one set of newly normative gender roles) becomes normalized, "other sexual differences pick up the surplus pathology." All of this leads Sands to conclude that, at least in the public arena, any concern over sexual ethics should be minimalist (aimed at preventing harm and promoting freedom). Ultimately, A-R would have done better to offer more practical prescriptions for those operating outside of the academy, pushing for liberation in sex, gender, and politics. The book is a wonderfully transgressive piece of academic theology, and could be fruitful for new thought in related fields, yet it is also in need of more concrete ways in which "thinking theology without wearing underwear" can help to liberate more than our minds.