

Review and Analysis: *Queering Christ* by Robert E. Goss

Nearly ten years after *Jesus Acted Up: A Gay and Lesbian Manifesto* in 1993, former Jesuit priest, now theologian and Pastor of a Metropolitan Community Church, Robert E. Goss publishes *Queering Christ: Beyond Jesus Acted Up*. This text, as mentioned in the forward, is not to be placed on the shelf with gay and lesbian apologetics. Rather, *Queering Christ's (QC)* audience of queer theorists and theologians will find that it is to be on a new shelf of its own as Goss constructs a new understanding of queer Christian spirituality. Goss orders the chapters by four different parts— Queering Sexuality, Queering Christ, Queering the Bible, and Queering Theology. Goss' main task with the twelve ensuing essays is to confound the heteronormativity in Christian spirituality and doctrine, while simultaneously establishing possibilities for queer Christians to engage in “sex-positive” mysticism.

Summary

Before outlining *QC*, Jim Mitulski, MCC pastor for 27 years, provides a thorough introduction and necessitates the text, the silencing of feminist and queer voices by the Roman Catholic Church (RCC). Mitulski then locates Goss in the recent lineage of several prophetic voices, feminist and queer, from the past four decades. In the preface, Goss details the course the text will take in “queering” the four areas—for him that means, “spoiling the spoiled system to make it [...] good” (xiv). Here, Goss introduces the necessity of this text in briefly discussing the political nature of sexuality and the shaming it has received.

QC's first chapter, “Out of the Closet and into the Streets” is at first autobiographical, as experience becomes a primary source in Goss' theological method. The chapter begins early in his life, recounting his first childhood model of same-sex “friendship” in Homer's *Illiad* as well as the terror, guilt, and confusion he experienced as a young Catholic. Following his passion for

Christ he became a Jesuit priest, identified with the struggles of Apostle Paul, and discovered most Catholic clergy identify with this as well, who sought the priesthood as a “clerical closet” (8). Goss then questions the “anti-body” theologies and practices, such as the “mortification of the flesh” and found Jesuits like himself were not fond of the anti-body practices. He and other Jesuits found ways to incorporate the body into their spiritual experience and claims that his “sexual/spiritual awakening took place.” Goss details the difficult task of leaving the priesthood, his marriage of 16 years, and engaging in radical justice-love with PWA. He concludes with asserting his vision for the church to engage in this radical “justice-love”, embracing sexuality in all of its forms.

Chapter 2, “Catholic Anxieties over (Fe)Male Priests”, further examines the culture of the RCC’s priesthood. Specifically, Goss reflects Mark Jordan’s work that analyzes the priesthood as a queer profession, men dressing as women (gender-bending), while excluding women who would reveal the “homosocial bastion.” Goss details varying types of gay clergy, those who enjoy the near-drag performance who “maintain female exclusion” and those clergy who see the problem and work to change it subtly, as well as comparing the power-wielding hierarchy among clergy to masochism and submission. This macho-ness, along with other traits found in RCC orders are similarly found in evangelical and Fundamentalist circles (52).

Goss’ third chapter, “Finding God in the Heart-Genital Connection” is on the sexuality and spirituality of Joe Kramer, a fellow former-Jesuit now “sexual practitioner” who became an icon in gay circles. Goss uses Kramer to enlighten the sources of quick, genital-pleasure sex, and often violent sex found among males, tracing its Augustinian influence in both Protestantism and the RCC. Instead of practicing this “balloon sex,” Kramer suggests a “heart-genital connection/full-body orgasm” that connects the individual to the “full social context of love-

making” (66). For Goss, Kramer’s thought is helpful in engaging in a transformative life and expanding his sexual theology.

“Is There Sex in Heaven?” ventures to explore HIV/AIDS and the barebacking phenomenon theologically. Goss speaks candidly about his own experience to vivify other sources concerning why barebacking is important to gay men, then urges clergy and other professionals to take the reasons seriously, instead of labeling them irresponsible. For the rest of the chapter, Goss explores ethical questions about condomless sex: “What are the ethical principles for justifying barebacking?” “Do we encourage African males to abandon [sex] with women?” “Is survival the end all of our being?” “Can we base a response without comprehending the motivations of [barebacking]?” (83-84).

The last essay in the section on Queering Sexuality, “Challenging Procreative Privilege by Queering Families” criticizes the (largely conservative) argument that same-sex couples are non-procreative, filled with “unadulterated pleasure” (91). This argument in Goss’ view reduces sex to reproduction and Goss expands this view of procreativity to more than natural law. “Justice, compassion, and love” are all capable of being produced, as well as “prophetic and sacramental” (98). Queer persons are not out of the family picture either. They are also able to create families of adoptive children, children from previous relationships, or other reproductive measures. Goss describes same-sex couples as being capable of creating justice-love as the most important offspring any couple could produce.

The sixth and seventh chapters, “Christian Homodevotion to Christ” opens the next section: Queering Christ. Goss takes a look through church history to uncover how Jesus’ sexuality has been either denied or embraced, such as erotic experiences with Christ in the Middle Ages, how Christ was depicted during the Renaissance, and the discomfort of Jeremy Bentham in the 19th

century. Goss briefly describes Jesus as the modern Queer Christ for all outsiders and disenfranchised. The second chapter in this section, "From Christ the Oppressor to Jesus the Liberator," takes a closer look at a queer christology in a chapter he borrowed from his first book, *Jesus Acted Up*. Here Goss expands traditional christology by including the excluded voices of LG persons. Surveying the history of Christian theology, Goss finds that Christianity adopted rather than formed the anti-sexual and anti-pleasure discourse found in Tertullian, Augustine, Luther, and Calvin. A Queer Christology must look to Jesus' understanding of the kingdom of heaven, *basileia*, the social practices of solidarity and justice. Jesus also becomes a Christ that identifies with the oppressed, the abused, and the excluded. Goss' third christological chapter, "Expanding Christ's Wardrobe of Dresses," as the title suggests, opens the door for more persons to participate in the queer christology, Christ is found "not only outside the gates of the churches but also outside the boundaries of heterosexuality" (173).

"Homosexuality, the Bible, and the Practice of Safer Texts" opens the section on scripture. Goss reviews the common queer texts of terror: Leviticus 18,20; Genesis 19 and Judges 19; 1 Corinthians 6; and Romans 1. Goss notes that these texts are "misapplied to translesbigay folks" while concomitantly rejecting similarly destructive opinions on women and slavery.

"Overthrowing Heterotextuality," the tenth chapter closes the section and seeks to encourage people in text subversion, that is "when queer churches, synagogues, and groups decenter heterosexual presumptions and readings that often suppress diversity, gender, race, class, ethnicity, and sexual alternatives" (213). Goss encourages his readers, after deconstructing terror texts, to befriend the texts that were once enemies.

Goss discusses the interrelationship of queer theology and queer theory in "Transgression as a Metaphor for Queer Theologies." A main effort of this chapter is to bring theologians out of

the “trap” of pinning sexual identities too easily. Goss further details our understanding of queer theory by saying the study is meant to “problematize fixed and hegemonic notions of identity” even those that already transgress binary divisions. Goss calls for the continuation of this method creating hybrid identities and transgressing them as well. (228-234). It is Goss’ hope to “expose all traces of privilege [...] supremacism, centrism, sexism, classism, or biphobia” within theology (236).

“From Gay Theology to Queer Sexual Theologies” as the title suggests follows the early movement of Gay theology in the 20th century, the movement of progressives from historical analysis of biblical texts to queer re-readings, the absence of female/lesbian voices from gay theology, and the problem of AIDS for the gay community. Goss continues in addressing the queer movement in recognizing the obstacles it has in the churches, mostly the questions of “to become a new church or challenge the current church?” (242). Goss concludes the chapter and the book by addressing future challenges of queer theology.

Analysis

As a whole, *QC* is a thorough introduction to the integration of queer theology and queer theory, historical and modern. Goss solidly roots the text in both the Christian tradition by making use of queer voices and arguing against those historical voices resounding in hetero-normative practices today. The personal nature of the book is exceptional, striking a balance, and bringing together the Holy and the (now, not so) Profane. The text makes use of the four sources of theology—scripture, explicitly in chapters 9 and 10; reason in most chapters; tradition, particularly in christological chapters; and experience (his own and that of others) throughout the text. Goss’ *QC* can at times be repetitive, and in some areas need further clarification. What I

mean by this is, a somewhat obvious point, being familiar with his sources would further one's understanding of it. For example, as a novice in theology, I'm familiar with Augustine and Augustinian views on sexuality and understood his example of Augustine, yet would have appreciated further reflection on Augustine and the doctrine of Original Sin. This could have undergirded Goss' christological chapters, in that the queer Christ frees us from erotophobia. Similarly, it would be equally helpful if the reader were previously familiar with some of his sources such as Sedgwick and Kramer.

While the text is transgressive personally, revealing new topics to white straight males who know very little, I suppose *QC* could have ventured into even queer-er areas. One of the areas that could have been strengthened, which Goss is aware of in the closing chapter, is the privileged nature of the text. Goss notes his own need to transgress his own normativity as a “white, gay male, who writes queer theological discourse from a privileged, middle-class location in a Midwestern U.S. university” (230). However, this is Goss' *sitz im leben* and he writes to speak of his own experience while simultaneously opening doors for other queer-ers of various nationalities and colors. Along with addressing the sexism within the clerical closet and within other ecclesial power structures, it would have been nice to see Goss address gay-white-male racism.

As an early voice in the theological discussion on HIV/AIDS and barebacking, Goss does a tremendous job of letting the unknowing reader begin to appreciate the spirituality of barebacking. Greatly expanding my understanding of the “sex equals death” fear, this chapter is both provocative and enlightening. While he adequately and vulnerably interjects his experience, I believe that it falls short of its potential theologically. If this discussion were weighted more in

relation to a more distinct theological theme, the reader would walk away with a better, and perhaps more practical, understanding of the desire to bareback.

QC is weighted historically and theoretically, yet seminarians and clergy new to the field could benefit from furthering the practical nature of the text, that is, to answer “what about *QC* helps put ‘boots to the ground?’ or What helps someone in a pastoral role?” in similar ways that Patrick Cheng has questions for reflection at the end of each chapter.

Goss does just what he intends to do in this provocative book. He provokes the typical theological mind to comprehend new, challenging, and relevant issues. The chapter on “Catholic Anxieties” is particularly provocative, mostly because it resonates with my own up conservative evangelical upbringing. I think of the Tim Tebows and Mark Driscolls among my former peer group who use the “‘macho religiosity’ to compensate for a cultural equation of religiousness with femininity. This religious macho-ness is characterized by misogyny, an internalized homophobia, and a low tolerance of ambiguity.” This small section, had it been given greater attention, would have broadened Goss’ audience greatly.

A few minor critiques: Goss’ *Queering Christ* is highly Cathlo-centric, readers’ experiences would benefit from an introduction to Catholic polity, as it is a language that often gets confused in both press and popular media. Surely an obvious point, the book is dated, as is the historical-critical biblical analysis in chapters 9 and 10. As the reader may know, the arguments on “what the bible says” have continued since 2002, more authors other than Boswell, Brooten, Countrymen, Martin, McNeil, and Nissinen should be used to nuance new conversations about the Bible.

The most profound take-away of this text is his development and use of “justice-love” which originated in the Presbyterian Special Committee on Human Sexuality- “To do justice-

love means seeking right-relatedness with others and working to set right all wrong relations, ... embracing sexuality ... a godly gift, ...and erotic power, rightly ordered, grounds and moves us on, to engage in creating justice with love for ourselves and for others” (97). Goss rightly notes that this should apply to “all Christian relationships.”

Once again, *Queering Christ* is a thorough introduction to the field of queer theology. Goss’ prophetic voice offers the reader interested in this field a myriad of new things to consider in future theological discourse.