

Undoing Theology

Life Stories from Non-normative Christians

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Introduction

My favourite game as a young child was church. Of course, child's play is an attempt at recreating and exploring adult contexts, which is why children reconstruct imaginary scenarios by playing house, school and hospital scenes. They attempt to repeat what they observe adults do. Mostly I played church at home with my brothers, who often participated, somewhat reluctantly, as they attempted to consume as many of the white chocolate buttons I used as the Eucharist. I did not know it was an unusual game until my requests at primary school, where I speculated on serving a much bigger congregation, were rebuffed and mocked. I still have the prayer book that I used to preside over my living room religious ceremonies; it sits within my bedside cabinet.

Stimulating my creative play was my insistence on attending as many of the Catholic Masses my mum would obligingly take me to at weekends in our local church. I knew how to say every response, and did so boastfully, but I did not understand most of them. Until the age of about 11, I attended church weekly and served as an altar boy for a brief stint, until my clumsy disposition resulted in numerous accidents (including, setting fire to my cassock and dropping the consecrated Holy Communion). Aside from church, I liked to play house, but my preference was to be the mum and arrange all the tea sets out nicely. Again, this was unpopular with my friends, who were mainly boys. Retrospectively, I see what a queer child I was.

Impassioned by my liberal religious studies teacher, I loved my lessons in school. I remember one particular bath time experience when I received my call to priesthood at the age of 14 during a period of my life where I was wrestling with the dawn of the new consciousness of my hidden homosexuality. The priesthood, in my teenage wisdom, would be an ideal haven to avoid marrying

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a woman. Aware of the disadvantage of leading a celibate life as my body was rife with hormones, I quickly dismissed my calling, convincing myself it was dizziness from the steam in the bath, which was hardly likely as, in a household of seven, bathwater was recycled two or three times.

These earlier experiences have served to fuel this book which explores the life stories of non-normative Christians. The above account of my youth draws on my own experiences which I choose as personally and theologically relevant to my undertaking of this project. Yet I am unable to reconstruct the past and provide a narrative that is true to the actual events with any confidence. Nonetheless, these memories form part of my youthful religious consciousness and serve as an early marker of my own non-normative development.

Non-normative Christians

Queer theory has become, rapidly, a major discourse within the academy. No discipline within arts or sciences has been unaffected, pioneering much-needed research exploring minority sexualities and non-normative practices. Within theology and religious studies, queer theologies have encouraged us to see God, the Bible and religious practices differently and queer theory has informed explorations of religion from a sexual perspective. Yet, despite this much-needed pioneering academic work, the biographies of sexual migrants are significantly under-researched. There exist only few texts detailing religious experience-based work founded in lesbian, gay, bisexual stories.¹

Queer research seeks to undermine categories of identity and my use of the term 'queer' incorporates all non-normative lives, which are not necessarily understood in terms of identities. Diana Fuss's essay 'Inside/Out' encourages us to 'to erode and reorganize the conceptual grounds of identity' (1991, p. 1). Therefore, although lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, intersex lives fall neatly into an oft-used acronym LGBTI, I am in agreement with Daniel Warner, who states, 'queer research should stop adding letters to LGBT research, and should instead form a body of knowledge

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about how these categories come to be, and are lived, on a daily basis' (2004, p. 335).

At the bottom line of queer theologies, there are biographies of sexual migrants, testimonies of real lives in rebellions made of love, pleasure and suffering. (Althaus-Reid, 2003a, p. 8)

This statement from Marcella Althaus-Reid, appealing for real-life stories in theology, provides the catalyst for my work. Accordingly, my use of the term non-normative is inclusive, as it extends to all 'sexual migrants,' referred to by Althaus-Reid, and whose self-identifications or sexual practices counter traditional Christian teaching and positional statements on sexuality.

Gayle Rubin termed those who migrate because of their sexuality 'sexual migrants':

Many sexual migrants have been thrown out by their families, and many others are fleeing from the threat of institutionalization. Any random collection of homosexuals, sex workers, or miscellaneous perverts can provide heart-stopping stories of rejection and mistreatment by horrified families. (1993, p. 22)

This term is used by Althaus-Reid (2003a, p. 8) but without explicit reference to Rubin. Given the often unsupportive, hostile environments and the negativity of religious pronouncements towards those who practise non-normative sexualities, the term is appropriate.

The purpose of this book is to explore the content of the spiritual and religious journeys of three protagonists Alyce, Caddyman and Cath, with the aim of engaging with personal, experiential theologies. In this, I am concerned with the cumulative impact of traditional theological discourse regarding sexuality on the lives of my participants in relation to their Christian allegiances. Moreover, I explore how previously held belief systems are renegotiated as personal theologies change.

As this book is based upon experience as a source for theology, my principal claim is that storytelling needs to play a more pivotal role in grounding sexual theology. I pay attention to how non-

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normative praxis connect with Christianity, yet my approach is more inclusive as I explore a diverse range of non-normative sexual practices, including the queerness of 'straight' sexual practice. Indeed, to work solely within the parameters of queer theology would reinforce a binary between straight theology, which would remain unmarked, and queer theory, which is significantly marked. Sexual stories in theology offer a new landscape shaped largely by work in the field of queer studies, but theology must become more inclusive to expose and explore all non-normative, non-vanilla sexual migrants. This results in life stories that add colour and diversity to theology.

Tracing the development of sexual theology from James Nelson, through to Althaus-Reid, Chapter 1 explores the importance of life stories as a source for theology. The chapter examines the transformative potential of sharing sexual stories, and engages with wider sociological, religious and theological engagements with sex and sexuality. Chapter 2 is split into two parts. In Part One, I explore the act of sexual storytelling in addressing a lacuna within practical theology, largely by building on the work of Ruud Ganzevoort. The critical appraisal and fusion of the literature reveals how sharing stories is important for theology because it is relational and it helps people make sense of their lives. Such work has a lot to contribute to practical theology, and I engage with practical theology by attending to the lives of those who have traditionally felt uncomfortable in Christianity due to their non-normative identities. Within Part Two, I discuss the queer enterprise of disturbing and disrupting. In this context, I use queer theory to 'undo' the theoretical framework which allows queer investigators to disrupt and abandon traditional theological approaches. This allows for creative, reflective and intuitive outcomes to emerge from the storytelling.

Exploring non-normative life stories from an experiential perspective led to in-depth online interviews with the three protagonists of this book. There is content within these pages of a sexually explicit nature. Each narrative chapter contains the words offered by each participant, and they have consented to their full usage in this book. Confidentiality and anonymity is especially important for non-normative participants and Christians, as there is a real threat of religious or prejudice-based violence and possible fear of

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reprisals if respondents are recognized. Therefore, all participants have used a pseudonym to protect their identities, and equally any details which could potentially identify a participant have been obscured. Despite my efforts to ensure anonymity, participants are free to self-disclose aspects of their life in other contexts, which may occur in the public domain. In Chapter 3, I present my first participant, an intersex-identifying Catholic, who self-identifies as made in the image of God. In Chapter 4, I uncover the emotional involvement of researching life stories by interacting with a former 'ex-gay' religious leader, who preached conversion therapy to gay and lesbian Christians, but who ultimately accepted his own homosexuality and acknowledges the detrimental effects of such 'therapy'. Chapter 5 reveals my third protagonist, who identifies as a Christian and engages with bondage practice as a form of prayer that brings her closer to God. Each of the narrative chapters within the book offers space to each of the protagonists without attempting to make their stories blend or overlap in any way.

Throughout these narratives, the role of experience is prioritized as a source for theology. Yet queer theory is built on disruption. Lisa Isherwood asserted that 'Marcella believed that theology had to be built on earthquakes and that its job was not to heal the ruptures that such seismic shifts create but rather engage with and encourage the discontinuity' (2010, p. xvi).

Continuing the mission of discontinuity, in Chapter 6 I discuss how experience itself needs to be 'undone' too. Indeed, I argue that what is required of all theology is to be 'undone'. Finally, I consider the role of disruption and the rupture of repetition as part of queer theology and other theological troublemaking.