

## “QUEERING THE PITCH:” SACRAMENTAL CHALLENGES TO CATHOLIC FEMINIST THEOLOGY

SUSAN ABRAHAM

**T**hank you President-elect Susan Ross for the opportunity to respond to Professor Berger’s paper and thank you Professor Berger for your thought-provoking presentation. I intend my response to be a supplemental reflection on Berger’s “Spying Forward” under two rubrics but suggest initially that Berger “queers the pitch”<sup>1</sup> for Christian theology, signaling a unique opportunity for feminist constructive reflection.

The six sacramental sightings of spying forward reflect a capacious theology of sacramentality wherein sacramentality clarifies social, political, and cultural frames of recognition, but they can be broadly analyzed under the two rubrics implicit in Berger’s presentation. The first rubric is the limit presented by the gender binary, and the second is the emphasis on sacramental relationality grounded in the Christian understanding of God. In most feminist proposals (and feminist theology is not monolithic) these two rubrics do not mutually exclude each other.

Berger emphasizes that, for any sacramental consideration of the category “gender,” the term must retain its primary sense as a relational dynamic; gender must move beyond biological and social determinants. Jeanne Boydston’s essay, which Berger references in her presentation, presents the semantic problem in the unreflective use of the category: instead of emphasizing relationality, the category has been reified so much so that we assume that what female people do is “femininity” and whatever male people do is “masculinity.” Thus, we relate gender in terms of a binary. Further, we refuse to treat the category as always contextual and related to the particulars of time, place, and culture. Consequently, “Gender” in certain forms of feminism is universalized.

Instead, the “labor of gender,” a felicitous phrase that Boydston borrows from Iranian feminist Afsaneh Najmabadi, entails that we convert gender as a prescription to a series of questions about the process whereby the human person becomes gendered. Najmabadi and other feminists have also argued that gender operates in a framework of recognition where gender is invisible<sup>2</sup> in some cases or overly visible in others and where categories such as race, ethnicity, cultural, or religious identity play disparate roles in making gender more or less visible.

If the labor of gender is not to present prescriptions about what the category does but to reveal to thoughtful people how gender comes to be valorized, how may we carry such a method into the work of feminist theology which retains both a critical as well as constructive edge? A “sacramental gaze,” to use Berger’s helpful lens, insists that to “see” in a distinctly Catholic theological frame is to insist on how created reality is “charged with Godlife.”<sup>3</sup> Feminist

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<sup>1</sup> “To queer the pitch” in British slang means to thwart somebody’s chances at winning. See Michael Quinion, “Queer Somebody’s Pitch,” *World Wide Words* (available at <http://www.worldwidewords.org/qa/qa-que1.htm>, accessed on July 12, 2012). For a fuller explanation of the term and note the provenance of the word “queer.”

<sup>2</sup> Men for example, are rarely associated with a gendered identity. Women’s identity is always gendered and complicated by other markers such as religious dress or racial characteristics.

<sup>3</sup> See Gerard Manley Hopkins, “God’s Grandeur,” *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (London: Humphrey Milford, 1918), no. 7 (available at <http://www.bartleby.com/122/7.html>, accessed on July 12, 2012).

theology’s critical lens, therefore, is sharpened when its analysis can show how the sacramental nature of gendered personhood is compromised rather than merely pointing out the limits of gender binary, as secular analysis might. As Berger also points out, in Christian theology the use of the gender binary obscures the riches of a complex tradition whose histories, theologies, and practices present resources for a much more fluid and *queer* account of gender. Berger therefore asks us to look at liturgy as the fundamental sacramental site where natal logics confound gender expectations of language about God. Here in the sacramental site of the liturgy, God the Father has both womb and breasts; it is where Jesus’ gift of the Eucharist is analogously understood to be the experience of being nursed by one’s mother; where the body of Jesus is compared to the maternal body in birthing labor; where male monks are to understand themselves as receptive and submissive brides; where the Spirit is a mother who births new life and where Mary is the *virgo sacerdos* who is the first to offer us the body and blood of Christ. As Berger asserts, these are deeply and wonderfully traditional images for theology and need not be retrieved just for “queer theology.”

The question before us is: can the liturgical sacramental site present an occasion for “queering the queer” such that Christian theology and its practices reflect the complex and queerly gendered relationality at the heart of our notion of God? That is, in the capacious context of enacted sacramentality, can the images of fluid gender turn the tables (or queer the pitch) on the kind of identity politics we have routinely associated with feminist theology? Theology has always been a queer thing—“queer,” as in strange and bizarre. It is perverse and contrary to think theology and to use its grammar in secular and in certain academic contexts. As Gerald Loughlin argues in his introduction to *Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body*, theology in Western cultural contexts, runs counter to a world given over to material consumption and earthly power, the immanent frame of many secular analyses.<sup>4</sup> The term “queer,” then, does not simply signal only erotic interests, but is a name for the central disavowal by heteronormativity. It is such heteronormative normalcy which depends upon gender binaries, or for that matter, race binaries or class binaries. Feminist theology therefore errs in the direction of a critical analysis of heteronormativity and may miss the constructive potential of sacramentality. That is, it emphasizes a critical function that sometimes obscures its constructive goal.

Berger’s suggestion to situate the term “queer” in terms of the plenitude of images of the divine in Christian theology also presents the theological enterprise a way to advance beyond secular critiques of sexuality. “Queer,” in other words, outwits “identity,” and is the site of a sacramental theology. A sacramental view queers identity markers of gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, and class such that the neoliberal demand for clear identity categories shows up as a strategic investment in continuing marginalization. Perhaps many of us, Berger and I included, must be named “queer theologians” since our gendered and geographical markers (European, Indian, American, global) continue to elide unambiguous knowledge. All geography, after all, is history.

The queering of theology requires that an expansive notion of sacramentality take into account the spirituality of the everyday, in which relationality between human persons and between the divine and human is the emphasis of the constructive theological task. Here again, I stand in a different place from Professor Berger. In my view, the queering of theology beyond the gender binary requires that the context of the everyday be the site of sacramental engagement, not simply to devalorize the unique moment of sacramental liturgical enactment,

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<sup>4</sup> Gerard Loughlin, ed., *Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 7.

but to provide a corrective measure to the *idolization* of the liturgical enactment. My very good friend and wise guide in the world, Franciscan Friar Xavier Seubert, cogently argues that sacramentality opens up the space to preserve the *iconic* nature of everyday relationality.<sup>5</sup> Sacramentality as icon moves beyond the ritual structures of the sacraments which sometimes run the danger of becoming idols. His argument, however, is developed through a constructive theology of the image of God foundational to a sacramentality of the everyday.

Quotidian sacramentality necessitates an understanding of the nature of God as other than immutable and unchanging, explicit in forms of onto-theology. Drawing on Richard Kearney's *The God Who May Be*, Seubert asserts that God is the most changing of all precisely because God is the one who is always "faithfully here" in all the "unpredictability of true love's utterly selfless response."<sup>6</sup> God changes, therefore, to be with us in the here and the now in responsive love. Further, the nature of God cannot be properly onto-theologically conceived, but only eschatologically. That is, the human response to God's love shapes the present and will shape the future forms of God's being with us in love in the plenitude of God's fulfillment of time.

If the relational process happens in the ordinary and everyday, what we and God will become relationally can only be seen at the terminus of a process only completed in the fullness of God's time. In such a view, we avoid the overemphasis on the everyday, in accord with Berger caution. Eschatological sacramentality then, permits us to move beyond the idolization of the sacraments and the literalization of liturgical language to the iconic space of ongoing revelation in which the everyday must be viewed proleptically. Such a move queers the linearity of time that heteronormativity presumes.

What queer theology of God can we draw upon for such a quotidian sacramentality? Roman Catholic theologian Gavin D'Costa's essay "Queer Trinity," developed in critical conversation with von Balthasar, may provide ways forward.<sup>7</sup> Queering "queer," D'Costa asserts that secular queer theory need not be determinative of theology. His concern therefore is not simply secular commitments to "equality," but "to make space for God with our (Eucharistic) language, so that we might listen, see, smell, touch, taste and worship."<sup>8</sup> Underlying this assertion is the theological mandate to forge and practice God language adequate to the complex liturgical enactments that we have heard Berger articulate.

Since we only have human language to speak of the divine, we must guard against revelatory positivism. Instead, we must emphasize the analogical. Thus, the language of "Father," "Son," and "Spirit" ought not to reflect gender positivist names, but are instead names for the "endless outpourings and sharings"<sup>9</sup> of divine relationality. These outpourings and sharings are simultaneously active *and* receptive, confounding the binary gender scheme that constricts the image of the trinitarian God in terms of human biology. Analogical language for the Trinity is for gesturing beyond human projections of divine activity and receptivity. Instead, analogical language attempts to understand how the divine persons are present to each other.

Emphasizing the analogical "queers" language about God, since the trinitarian understanding of God sees action and receptivity as a feature of all three persons, but in

<sup>5</sup> Xavier John Seubert, O.F.M., "Sacramentality—Icon or Idol," in *Franciscan Identity and Postmodern Culture*, ed., Kathleen A. Warren, O.S.F., Washington Theological Union Symposium Papers 2002 (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2003, 73–94).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>7</sup> Gavin D'Costa, "Queer Trinity," in *Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body*, 269–80.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 270.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 273.

particular for the first and second persons. In von Balthasar’s own constructive proposal, the Father and the Son are “supra-masculine” in that feminine receptivity is not excluded in the drama of the ecstatic eternal circle of overflowing love. Utter self giving and receptivity in the trinitarian relations is analogously reenacted in a worshipping community by drawing on quite traditional ideas; the “homosexuate language”<sup>10</sup> that privileges male activity over female receptivity can and must be rendered anew in view of our vibrant worshipping communities, as Berger has outlined. Our challenge then is to represent Catholic history, theology, and practice such that male activity and female receptivity are valorized in the liturgical enactment in light of queer trinitarian relationality.

What Berger has successfully done is to volley a googly<sup>11</sup> at the feminist theological pitch that reinscribed gender binaries. Of course, this also applies to other theologies that re-inscribe gender binaries. Sacramentality, particularly the sacramentality of the everyday, demands that we bat theology in terms of a trinitarian theology of God that helps us move beyond the gender binary to sacramental relationality. For this insight, I am deeply grateful.

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<sup>10</sup> “Homosexuate language” is a term used by Luce Irigaray to describe the exclusion of the feminine and woman from the symbolic order. See D’Costa, (“Queer Trinity,” 275) whose concrete issue in this essay is the forgetting of women in the modern church.

<sup>11</sup> A pitching term in Cricket. “A pitch which is thrown with baseball's "screwball" grip but reverse finger spin... to *look like* a leg-break that *should* move across and AWAY from the batter, but *actually* moves in the OPPOSITE direction, i.e. INTO the batter like an *off-break*, after it bounces.” See <http://sccwa.tripod.com/cktlist.html#EtoH>, accessed on July 12, 2012.