

Stranger in our Midst: The Becoming of the Queer God in the Theology of Marcella Althaus-Reid (1952-2009)

“The Queer God may ... show us God’s excluded face, which is the face of a non-docile God, a God who is a stranger at the gates of our existent loving and economic order.” (Althaus-Reid 2003: 153)

“The Queer God is the God who went into exile with God’s people and remained there in exile with them.” (Althaus-Reid 2004a: 146)

Marcella Althaus-Reid’s theology has always been about pushing boundaries and refusing to take platitudes for answers. Her first book to be published in English, *Indecent Theology* (2000) makes clear that the proper project of theology is per/version, that is, deviation or turning in another direction, which might well manifest in “incorrect”, “unorthodox” interpretation (Althaus-Reid 2000: 87). This entails a querying and rejection of discourse which presents salvation as a limited good to be dispensed via those in positions of power, be they priests or politicians – and a querying of Theology with a capital T for Tradition. “T-Theology” is Althaus-Reid’s shorthand for Western systematic theology which apotheosizes its own historical outworking, not acknowledging its shifting, unfolding quality or its dubious alliances with capitalist imperialism. She comments, “The main road of T-Theology sooner or later always leads us to the same (forced) agreements, to similar exchanges and values of pre-understood laws of capital profit. It seldom lets us perceive the historical presence of God in different, unfamiliar surroundings” (Althaus-Reid 2003: 33). T-Theology therefore implies the “decented”, legitimized theology which Althaus-Reid shows continues to be oppressive to sexually and economically marginalized people.

It is in *The Queer God* (2003) that Althaus-Reid’s notion of an economically and politically subversive deity is really fleshed out – literally, as it is in queer embodiment with all its messy recalcitrance that God exists in and with human beings. The God who is truly queer, and not limited to dissemination via capitalist alliances, has been displaced by heterosexual metanarratives of desire, lack and power. It is only in overcoming such ideologies that human beings can see more clearly the nature of God’s solidarity with excluded, “indecented” persons. In this account, God’s incarnationality is a profound symbol of irreducible ungraspability, resisting sanitization or identification as untouchable transcendence (Althaus-Reid and Isherwood 2007: 310). It is important that God became incarnate in Christ, but just as important that God is also incarnate

in *every* human life, present in communities of struggle and resistance. Christian emphasis on God's radical fleshliness is hardly new; but figuring God as an orgy, an omnisexual deity (Althaus-Reid 2003: 53) who refuses to stand over against the human bodies and stories of God-seekers, is still profoundly disturbing for many readers. Language such as Whore God (2003: 94-5), Sodomite God (2003: 98, 108) and Suicidal God (2003: 87), in fact, seems *calculated* to shock and outrage. As Angela Pears comments, however, "This juxtaposing [sic] of the theological and the sexual in such pairings is part of [Althaus-Reid's] strategy of confrontation. It uses language in such a way as to invite shock and then for the reader to begin to unpack why the use of language in this way has this impact" (Pears 2004: 147).

What exactly is it that this queer imagery of God needs to shock the reader out of? Althaus-Reid explains in *Indecent Theology* that it is the annexation of God and religion by those promoting oppressive heterosexual norms bound-up with capitalist economy and control. The first step for a queer theology is therefore "the indecenting of the production of God and Jesus in order to confront the theological simulation of what we can call the Gospel family" (Althaus-Reid 2000: 96). As she explains time and again, there is nothing "natural" about the concretized linking of theology with colonial, capitalist structures of power and legitimacy which play out in ecclesiastical as well as social structures of authority (any more than there is anything "natural" about the concretized linking of human bodies with narrow, intolerant patterns of gender and sex). It is all too easy for those wishing to grasp or maintain ideological dominance economically to appeal to the controlling power of religion too. Althaus-Reid's invitations to reflect on the faggot God, the pornographic God and so on are effective exactly because such images are so far from the God of so-called traditional family values which has been enforced and reproduced by mainstream theologies – and Althaus-Reid is particularly concerned by the established Roman Catholic Church in Latin America which often sided with capitalists over workers and brought even sexual behaviour within a tightly-controlled re/productive sphere.

Theology in search of a queer God, for Althaus-Reid, is therefore also always an economic project, because the limitations of neo-liberal capitalism are the limitations of cerebral individualism and monoculture (both agricultural and aesthetic). Queer stands against "idealism and the theological commercial values of profiting by not identifying multiplicity" (Althaus-Reid 2003: 110). Althaus-Reid argues that the mainstream theology brought to Latin America by Europeans has often been colonial, only allowing certain approved "paths" or routes to be taken. This also occurs everywhere that hegemony exists, where a powerful speaking group purports to sanction what is and is not decent, legitimate talk about God. Querying hegemony necessitates a willingness to travel off the path, to form alliances beyond those sanctioned by the colonizers; to

seek God in unfamiliar places, in order not to take on all the assumptions and forced agreements of theological imperialism (Althaus-Reid 2003: 31-2). Part of this entails acknowledging the “shadow-side” of God, whose “back” is “made of difference” (Althaus-Reid 2003: 16). Unless God is allowed to “come out” of the closets of human construction, God’s otherness will always be negated (Althaus-Reid 2003: 37).

Part of this “coming out” is inevitably sexual. There are sexual motifs and images throughout Althaus-Reid’s work, and she stresses repeatedly that queer theologies must comprise theological reflection that does not negate or gloss over the sexuality and sexual activity of those who formulate it (Althaus-Reid 2000: 28). To compartmentalize sex out of the rest of one’s life, she says, is to remain closeted, and risk “duplicity between the realms of a public and a private theology” (Althaus-Reid 2000: 88). So to do theology which seeks a Queer God, then, is also to “do sex in public”. The introduction to *Indecent Theology* spells out what underpins all her work, the significance of “selling lemons whilst not wearing underwear”: in other words, allowing our literal and metaphorical bodily fragrances and sited locations, even where they are not traditional areas of sacred reflection, to intermingle with “issues of theology and economy” (Althaus-Reid 2000: 2). A Queer God is not scandalized by sexual smells, and is not affronted by indigenous customs such as not wearing undergarments, but rather exists in contradistinction to the grand narratives which suggest that “underwear” is necessary and decent, a male God exercises power from the top down, and heterosexual norms somehow protect and bolster the values pleasing to this God (Althaus-Reid 2000: 18). For Althaus-Reid, a queering of the norms in which theology has been located and which it has reciprocally bolstered is vital, because it disrupts “heterosexual ideology ... as a central discourse of authority”, and “liberates the assumed reference of theology and therefore liberates [God] from assumptions and ideological justifications” (Althaus-Reid 2004a: 143).

Doing sex in public means not pretending that the ethics and dynamics of what goes on in bedrooms (and wherever sexual activity occurs) is not inextricably related to the ethics and dynamics of what goes on elsewhere. Sex cannot be a discrete part even of overtly “sexual” relationships: sexual activity occurs always in the context of the argument that preceded it, the film that follows it, the washing-up waiting in the kitchen, the decision about condom usage, the choice of attire, the tragedy of friends’ breakup, the pressure of work, the food shop, the local elections, the background music and the war on terror. Even more than this, all professional, social and especially ecclesiastical relationships also require that sex is done in public, because they are conducted by exactly the same people who also have prosaic, bodily needs and limitations. Theology happens in the context of sex – the sex we are having, the sex we are not

having, the sex we no longer desire, the sex which is our social currency – but is also concerned with far more than sex as it is often narrowly defined. Everything that happens to bodies and matters to bodies happens and matters to theology. The horrors of torture, rape, abuse, starvation and death, all the worst things that human beings can do to one another, do not go on outside theological talk but are integral to it.

Althaus-Reid's work, then, is shocking in the same way that Andres Serrano's 1987 photograph *Piss Christ* is shocking; as with the latter, what is truly "seditious" or "blasphemous" is not to suspend a crucifix in one's own urine, but to go along with a sanitized picture of a God who never could have been sullied by anything so base as urine in the first place. A poem by Andrew Hudgins, about *Piss Christ* and the responses to it, reinforces this point, appealing to a "God thrown in human waste".¹ The double meaning of *thrown* is significant here: God is thrown or tossed away into the mess and detritus like a piece of rubbish, with no concern for Jesus' deity; but God is also thrown as a pot is thrown, that is, actually *made out of* this unpromising material. Speaking on Australian radio about Christ-images popular in the public domain, such as Warner Sallman's *Head of Christ* (1941), the art critic and Uniting Church minister Rod Pattenden remarks that images of a "well-groomed" Jesus who "sits very comfortably within middle-class life" render him "too familiar, too groomed, too well-lit, too much an icon of respectability ... As an art historian and a theologian you always begin to be suspicious when things feel too comfortable, too familiar, where they slide too easily into one's life" (Pattenden in Stapleton 2009). By contrast, Serrano's Christ is so blurred as to be faceless, and is in fact made from a generic plastic gift-shop crucifix which accentuates the anonymity

¹"We are born between the urine and the feces, Augustine says, and so was Christ, if there was a Christ, skidding into this world as we do on a tide of blood and urine. Blood, feces, urine – what the fallen world is made of, and what we make. He peed, ejaculated, shat, wept, bled – bled under Pontius Pilate, and I assume the mutilated god, the criminal, humiliated god, voided himself on the cross and the blood and urine smeared his legs and he ascended bodily unto heaven, and on the third day he rose into glory, which is what we see here, the Piss Christ in glowing blood: the whole irreducible point of the faith, God thrown in human waste, submerged and shining." (from *Andres Serrano, 1987*) (Hudgins 2000)

(Pattenden in Stapleton 2009). Even so, it tells something more truthful about God than Sallman's noble, impassive image can, particularly for the current age:

“One of the issues we face as contemporary human beings is that we live in the age of AIDS and other diseases which are passed on by human body fluids, and so here is a crucifix placed in body fluids. So the artist – who describes himself as a faithful Catholic, and grew up in a family that was very pious – is actually making a theological connection ... about the very humanity of Jesus, and blood, and death, and what it is to suffer ... It reminds me that as a religious person I become very familiar with my symbols: I anaesthetize them; I dust them; I make them into gold and precious ornaments, and they become something safe on my shelf. And ... he reminds me that Jesus actually died and bled and suffered, and that this is offensive and grotesque and difficult – and that that's a part of what it is to be human. So in the very offence that arises ... is an opportunity to revisit the ... fundamental shock of the crucifixion, and the meaning of Jesus' death and life.” (Pattenden in Stapleton 2009)

The point is that, in Althaus-Reid's account as in Serrano's photograph, it is the mono-loving, “decented” annexation of God that is actually the shocking, outrageous thing. It is this that has been wielded as a weapon against people whose bodies, sexualities or genders do not fit, or are deemed subordinate to “good” bodies (which are often white, heterosexual, able, unambiguously-sexed bodies) in a given theological schema. It is also this which is entirely unjustifiable – as even the tradition itself owns, given the strong emphasis in scripture on a God who sides with the marginal and despises exploitation of the poor. What is disturbed by queering God is a heteronormative *distortion* of theology; Althaus-Reid notes, “the horror of the orgy in theology may represent ... the supplement of the mono-loving God, that is, the non-relational God which does not survive well outside its ideological sites” (Althaus-Reid 2003: 36-7). Fears about non-standard and “indecent” sexual activity from mainstream theologians might, actually, then, be red herrings; what such qualms really reveal is a horror that God is not as we have supposed and that God does not, in fact, side unproblematically with the theological “colonizers” who endorse decent heteronormative and capitalist “family values”. It is for this reason, too, that unusual bodies as well as “noncompliant” sexual identities have often been negated in the Church; as I have discussed at length elsewhere, for instance, the bodies of people with intersex conditions are too often excluded from signification at best or used as weapons in a biologically-essentialist arsenal at worst (Cornwall 2009; see also Gross 1999).

Of course, human bodies have long been drawn upon as potent symbols of continence, relationality, order and so on. Intra-human relationships, especially sexual ones, have also been important theologically, as illustrations of the ways in which God relates to and interacts with

responsive, dependent humankind (as for Barth and von Balthasar). As many commentators have noted, however, when such schematizations unfold along stereotypically gendered and heteronormative lines, the alterity and excess of real human body-experience is elided. The fact that the model of a male-and-female binary anthropology perpetuated in western society continues to occur through identification with a *religious* ideology gives the paradigm more power. It also slows the process of the model's disintegration as a "given": when particular "goods" are invested with religious as well as social or political significance, there might be even more reasons to hang onto it, the more so if one happens to be in a position of power or prestige within the norms of that system. The particular and ongoing focus on appropriate gender roles in such strands of Christianity, which have privileged behaviour deemed modest, sexually continent and specifically heterosexual, for example, also turns out to be an outstandingly good deal for men in particular. Examples are found in such phenomena as the contemporary Quiverfull and Purity Ball movements in the United States. These reinforce notions of the father-husband as protector of his daughters' honour and divine warrior-conqueror, whose charge to fill and multiply upon the earth might ostensibly stem from love but is also inevitably implicated in female oppression and ecological strain (for a recent overview of the Quiverfull movement in particular see Joyce 2009).

The profound *incoherence* of indecent theology stands over against alliances between closed systems of doctrine and closed systems of sex in which only some (narrow) behaviours are deemed to build and protect stable societies. Recognizing the veritable strangeness of God, then, requires a willingness also to question our assumptions about the structure and nature of our culture and all our social interactions, particularly those grounded in norms or truths we have tended to consider unquestionable or incontrovertible. This means that queer theology involves more than taking a "pink" (i.e. feminist) or "blue" (i.e. masculinist) stance (Althaus-Reid 2003: 15); to do so does not query the fundamental existence of the either/or dyad in which theology has often been calcified. Theology must be more fluid, more dialectical, less obsessed with demarcating who and what is in or out. In Althaus-Reid's account, we cannot "fix" theology's sexism and dubious alliance with capitalism solely through "discourse about 'the feminine side of God' (which by the way assumes that the core of God's identity is heterosexually male, and femininity is just a side or an extra point of view)" (Althaus-Reid 2004b: 100). Althaus-Reid expands,

"The old theological enquiries done long ago, about Jesus's supposed femininity or God's female metaphors (curiously linked to re/production) are such a limited exercise because they never encounter

strangers ... Displaying the symbolics of gender, useful as it is in destabilizing theological high truths which are mere gender illusions, will not liberate.” (Althaus-Reid 2004b: 104)

Like much of her work, this rejection of binary, dyadic discourse is grounded in a Deleuzian notion of being as difference, and in/out categories as unstable fictions. For many Christians, however, the heterosexual male God is still so ubiquitous that even a suggestion that God can be addressed as Mother as well as Father is staggeringly disturbing and radical. I entirely agree with Althaus-Reid that such a move is not far-reaching enough (as I have noted in my work on theology and intersex conditions, in Cornwall 2010); but it might still be a *necessary* move as human society makes its journey out of its own static sexedness as well as God’s.

In fact, in queering God we must acknowledge God’s multiplicity, which flows back into our own; for, asks Althaus-Reid,

“How can we even start to introduce the concept of a diverse subject in theology, that is, a woman, a decentralised subject from the colonial space, a person reconsidering heterosexuality from a bisexual or even an heterosexual out-of-the-closet theology if God remains essential, stable, fixed and therefore non-diverse and unique?” (Althaus-Reid 2003: 54-5)

A Queer God, then, is fundamental to queer theology. This is not quite the truism it may seem: rather than acting in *reaction* to the heteronormative Church and a heteronormative God, and therefore figuring herself as a theologian as somehow *outside* or *beyond* this, in fact Althaus-Reid continually explores her liminal position as *both* insider and outsider to the tradition. In this way her positionality mirrors and throws light back on a God who also, far from being single or unfractured, exists with “fluid borders and desires which grow in restlessness” (Althaus-Reid 2003: 110). This God is not the God of the philosophical perfections: not entirely ascetic (because God continues to exist and become through human relationality), not immutable (except perhaps in the sense that a propensity for continual change is built into God’s nature), not wholly immaterial (for God is embodied not just in Christ but in other human bodies and every part of the creation), and not omnipotent (this God must have at least an ambivalent relationship to power). That mainstream theology has also often found itself strongly attached to these philosophical attributes is not unimportant, for Althaus-Reid implies that its hands are somehow tied by its history. To reject capitalist norms will also necessitate rejecting limiting patterns of gender and family, replacing them with those less bound-up in property, control and solely-biological kinship.

The queerness of God is, importantly, not entirely alien to the theological tradition, a fact which Althaus-Reid does not, perhaps, always acknowledge as generously as she might. The God of the conquistadors is not the “only” or “real” God recognized by the mainstream Church, and there are queer elements in doctrines of God both Catholic and Protestant. Luther understood perfectly well the notion of God’s back being made of difference, as evidenced in his Thesis 20 for the Heidelberg Disputation. It is in the contrary or opposite, and posterior or “rearward” (McGrath 1985: 148) parts of God that God is truly recognizable, not in invincible triumph and glory. It is where God suffers and is broken, in the veritable “perversity and disorder” of death (Caputo 1999: 213) – which really happens to God on the cross and everywhere else that God’s people are wounded – that God is most in tune with the sufferings of the creation. As Moltmann, Bonhoeffer and others have recognized, in a world scarred by human displays of machismo, “only the suffering God can help” (Bonhoeffer 1971: 361). As Althaus-Reid recognizes in going even further, this is just as true whether the sufferings are those of a street child or a drag queen.

Certain permutations of theology, however, have indisputably been especially culpable for oppressive structures and manifestations of damaging control. Making oneself queer and indecent, therefore, may also require one overtly to reject or show-up “the closeted affairs between theology and sexual ideology” (Althaus-Reid 2004b: 99); that is, “to take this old alliance of theology and heterosexuality out of the sphere of domestic violence and to make it public” (Althaus-Reid 2004b: 99). It is not attraction to someone of another gender that is necessarily problematic;² Althaus-Reid does not counsel radical separatist lesbianism, for example. But the *structures* of heterosexual ideology, which have become petrified as heteronormativity, are particularly insidious and dangerous when they are represented as coinciding exactly with what is theologically sanctioned and endorsed. This is another reason why the gender norms propounded by Quiverfull adherents are ethically reprehensible as well as inadequate: they correspond too conveniently with the old patriarchies where males are placed above contradiction, where women have no economic independence, where mothers are counselled to submit even to their pre-teenage sons’ wills because of the inherent superiority of maleness, and where domestic cruelty, violence and abuse have often gone under the radar as a result.

There is some sense, then, in which human queerness must be *prior* to finding the queerness of God: “We lift God’s skirts after having lifted our own first” (Althaus-Reid 2004b:

² “The problem with heterosexuality, which I consider a respectable sexual option, is heterosexual ideology, in the Marxist sense of a dominant world-view which acts as an undiscussed method of understanding reality.” (Althaus-Reid 2004b: 106)

107). This is the case particularly where heteronormative annexations of God have blocked those who reject heteronormativity from accessing or owning God themselves. The alliance between the God of heteronormativity and the theology which purports to be mainstream and orthodox is such that, as Althaus-Reid suggests, it may be necessary that queer theology “uses its own sacred ways of knowing to question the sacred as a heterosexual assumption” (Althaus-Reid 2004b: 102). That is to say, it may be expedient for those people who identify as queer or dissenting to reject the notion that the God encountered in church, the God endorsed by those in authority, is the real or *a priori* God. This is important because, she notes, God is also in diaspora:

“Sexual theologies are concerned with structures such as the structures of love and knowledge which regulate affective and political decisions in our lives, run economic thought and may have even exiled God from churches and theology long ago. And that is why, for me, a queering theology is an encounter between strangers and a pursuit of God the stranger. God is also queer: perhaps the first queer of all.” (Althaus-Reid 2004b: 103)

It is therefore those humans who have – by virtue of their gender or sexuality or political resistance – been made strangers by Christianity, who can now most meaningfully “write the traces of a strange God among us” (Althaus-Reid 2004b: 105).

It is significant that among Althaus-Reid’s contemporaries there are others in whose work this queer-God theology finds echoes. In part, of course, this has occurred because these theologians knew of one another’s work. There are also, however, elements of a more serendipitous synchronicity at work: Carter Heyward has spoken of theological voices reaching the same point by different routes, or of arriving during their own journey at a place others had reached years before (the implication being that the personal journey cannot simply be circumvented by appeal to the travails of others) (Heyward 2009). By reflecting briefly on some of the places where Althaus-Reid’s understanding of God’s queerness coincides with the ideas of other theologians, it is clear that although Althaus-Reid’s Latin American liberationist background absolutely informs her understanding of God, meeting and figuring a queer God need by no means be limited to this one specific context. I therefore touch for a moment on flashes of contiguity in the work of three other theologians, Elizabeth Stuart (1963-), Grace Jantzen (1948-2006) and Nancy Eiesland (1965-2009).

Stuart, who has done some of the most important work in lesbian and gay theologies in recent decades as well as demonstrating the broader applications of queer theory for theology, makes a particularly pertinent queer reading of the “theologically disruptive” figure of Wisdom

(also called Sophia or *Hochma*) in the Book of Proverbs (Stuart 2006: 327-8). *Hochma* has traditionally been contrasted with the “strange woman” who is a seducer of young men. Stuart proposes, however, that the “strange woman” could simply be *Hochma* perceived from a radically different angle. If *Hochma* is God, then this odd, “loose”, “promiscuous” figure could be God’s back, “God’s primordial non-alignment with Godself” (Althaus-Reid 2003: 16) – what Stuart calls “wisdom in drag”, an “excessive performance of the wisdom outlined in the main body of the text, and so excessive ... that previous understandings of wisdom are blown apart” (Stuart 2006: 328). The Strange Woman is nothing but a Queer God. God’s gender, singularity and certainty are all thrown into disarray. The Strange Woman seduces youths by offering herself to them sexually; *Hochma* seduces by offering the divine “to all and at the heart of human life” (Stuart 2006: 330-1). Both figures are “loud, bold, challenging and demanding” (Stuart 2006: 329) – this is not a safe or a domesticated God. Stuart does not say so, but this might be figured as part of what later inspires Jesus in his overturning of expectations about what a Messiah should do and should be. Stuart’s description of Strange-Woman-*Hochma* could easily – with different textual references – be one of Christ. *Hochma* “has built her house among the people and prepared a feast to which she invites all [Proverbs 9:1-6]” (Stuart 2006: 328); Christ is a God built in flesh who dwelt among us (John 1:14) and who also heralds a feast (Matthew 22:9-10). *Hochma* “is the expression of the divine delight in humanity [Proverbs 8:31] (Stuart 2006: 328); Christ is God’s beloved child, in whom God is well pleased. *Hochma* “is a God who is ... at the heart of human experience, the most difficult and dangerous God of all, who becomes tangled (sometimes hopelessly) in our own hopes and desires” (Stuart 2006: 328); Christ turns over tables in the Temple (Matthew 21:12) and also weeps with his friends for their dead brother (John 11:33-35). In short, for Stuart, *Hochma* is “a subversive performance of divinity, a God of the streets” (Stuart 2006: 328), who “undoes” God, disrupting God’s assumed gender, making God immanent to human experience but not thereby “any less easy to grasp or any less mysterious” (Stuart 2006: 328). Stuart concludes,

“We fear that Hochma will cause all kinds of trouble for us. And this is how it must be ... We need to two-time Hochma and the Strange Women in order to retain the possibility of transformative politics and to prevent queer becoming a foundational-fix of its own ... In the figure of Hochma (and the Strange Woman) God refuses to be easily named or understood and therefore ultimately avoids manipulation and control ... There is a greater point than social transformation for queerness and an ultimate target for it and that is the divine life. The divine is queer and summons us all into queerness.” (Stuart 2006: 336-7)

God, then, is at one and the same time both *Hochma* and the Strange Woman, both seductress and Spirit, both immanent to human concerns such as sex and beyond them. As Althaus-Reid recognizes, acknowledging God's queerness "[restores] the Other in the Other" (Althaus-Reid 2003: 16), since it recognizes God as more than a mirror of our own fears and desires, more than a giant Feuerbachian Father projected onto the sky. Stuart's reading queers Proverbs, making it a way for God to turn around and break into the pedagogical-paternal social norms and constructions which have been so carefully built up and which God is often invoked to endorse and maintain without due consideration for God's own potential role in disturbing them; but always, and inevitably, this also queers God, through an understanding that a God of relationship is open-ended, unfinished and in flux.

This sentiment is also picked up by Grace Jantzen, who notes that the story of how Christianity and queer living might go together "is not written. We will have to make it up as we go along. How the story continues is at least in part up to us" (Jantzen 2001: 276). For Jantzen, the divine is "that which summons or stands for the best in us, or better than the best, understood therefore as fluidity and process rather than straight rigidity" (Jantzen 2001: 277). Drawing on an Irigarayan reading of incarnation, Jantzen shows that Jesus' "queer incarnation" is paradigmatic for other humans *not* because Christ was somehow all-encompassing or all-embracing but precisely because he was radically particular: "Since Jesus was one man, not all humanity, his incarnation – his being an embodiment of the divine – leaves room for other incarnations, other sexualities, other embodiments" (Jantzen 2001: 279). As for Althaus-Reid (and for Heyward), this means that specificities of experience and context not only affect perceptions of God, but go to make up the God who is perceived (though no one human experience or ideology can do so completely). Here, once more, is God *thrown*. Actually, the queer divinity to which Jantzen appeals is not a single, stable, monolithic God at all, but a process of coming into being, an appreciation of the beauty and value within us, "the horizon of our becoming" (Jantzen 2001: 279). As for Heyward, for Jantzen "the divine is within us and between us, enabling our flourishing" (Jantzen 2001: 279-80). Just as we cannot divorce human souls from human bodies, so we cannot divorce God from the created world (Jantzen 1984: 12). To deny the unproblematized linking of women with sinful, in-need-of-salvation bodies and sexualities, and men with rational, ensouled God-reflectiveness, is to question and query the whole project of soteriology as disseminated in Christendom. Rather, queering categories of gender, and even of such an apparently inescapable phenomenon as death, allows for a "queer language" grounded in natality and life rather than sin and dyingness (Jantzen 2007: 253). The divine is not only within ourselves, but within the non-human creation too: "Unless the divine

can be encountered in grass and rain, in the beauty and terror of the world, the idea that bread and wine could be sacramental is mockery” (Jantzen 2001: 284). Indeed, as another before Jantzen acknowledged, if human mouths stayed closed, the very stones would cry out.

Despite its biblical echoes, this does not necessarily sound quite orthodox (and Jantzen does not mean it to): there is something deeply panentheistic about this account. Jantzen does not even directly name her queer divine as God; she is eager to resist a monolithic account where one truth arrives direct from heaven and is not even touched by human and creaturely experience in the process. There are clear similarities here with Althaus-Reid’s description (also indebted to Heyward) of real people participating in God and making God real (Althaus-Reid 2003: 148) – a God who is “fluid and unstable” (Althaus-Reid 2003: 171) and who “depends on our experiences of pleasure and despair in intimacy to manifest Godself” (Althaus-Reid 2003: 108).

There are also striking parallels between Althaus-Reid’s God and that of Nancy Eiesland, another brilliant liberation theologian who died long before her time, and just a few weeks after Althaus-Reid’s own death. Eiesland’s *The Disabled God* (1994) has long been considered one of the most important and seminal theologies from disability, profoundly influential for subsequent work in the area. Eiesland depicts Jesus as a disabled God, saying, “Jesus, the resurrected Savior, calls for his frightened companions to recognize in the marks of impairment their own connection with God, their own salvation” (Eiesland 1994: 100). The resurrected Jesus, with impaired hands and feet, is God’s revelation of a new humanity – “underscoring the reality that full personhood is fully compatible with the experience of disability” (Eiesland 1994: 100). This means that other impaired bodies can also “announce the presence of the disabled God” (Eiesland 1994: 115) and need not be figured as inherently pathological or imperfect. God’s incarnation in the unexpected, non-dominant body of Christ opens the way for other unexpected, non-dominant bodies to reflect and live God too. Liberation theology from disability challenges patriarchal imagery of God (Eiesland 1994: 97). Eiesland’s *Disabled God* is profoundly contextual, challenging able-bodiedness as theological norm for both resisting readers and the God who is portrayed. This chimes with the challenge to heteronormativity and closeted “decency” throughout Althaus-Reid’s work: the latter was Professor of Contextual Theology at the University of Edinburgh at the time of her death, and was always concerned to explore how specificities of embodiment and location influenced theologizing.

Relationality is also important: just as for Eiesland human bodies and their stories help to constitute God (Eiesland 1994: 99), so Althaus-Reid’s Queer God might be understood as

requiring help from human members in order to overcome the closetedness of ecclesiastical history. Odd, queer things are held together in this God: Eiesland says,

“In the resurrected Jesus Christ, [the disciples] saw not the suffering servant for whom the last and most embodied word was tragedy and sin, but the disabled God who embodied both impaired hands and feet and pierced side and the *imago Dei*. Paradoxically, in the very act commonly understood as the transcendence of physical life, God is revealed as tangible, bearing the representation of the body reshaped by injustice and sin into the fullness of the Godhead.” (Eiesland 1994: 99-100)

This is, as Eiesland says, God’s promise to be with us “embodied as we are” (Eiesland 1994: 100), even when our bodies are deemed troubling or excessive or transgressive or abnormal. And just as “our bodies participate in the *imago Dei*, not *in spite of* our impairments and contingencies, but *through* them” (Eiesland 1994: 101) (my emphasis), so for Althaus-Reid the Queer God is revealed in us not *despite* our socially-unacceptable beliefs, actions and proclamations, but *in* them. God is a stranger at our gates, already a stranger in our midst. But God’s strangeness is not finished or cut-and-dried any more than any other aspect of God’s nature. This is “a dialogic God, whose identity is dependent somehow on people’s own loving relationships” (Althaus-Reid 2003: 43). God’s strangeness, in short, is fed and honed by our own, and when (as Pattenden notes above) we find ourselves sitting too easily and comfortably with western capitalist heterosexual theological norms we must ask ourselves hard questions about whether we are doing justice to God’s world-shattering disposition.

Eiesland’s Disabled God imagery speaks of touching otherness, of intimate encounter with bodily taboos. Althaus-Reid’s God of the margins does likewise: the differences to which Althaus-Reid appeals are not so much the congenital physical ones, but the ones which come with being marked out because of what one *does* with one’s body. Moreover, both God-figures need others: Eiesland speaks of a Disabled God who “embodies practical interdependence, not simply willing to be interrelated from a position of power, but depending on it from a position of need” (Eiesland 1994: 103). She continues,

“To posit a Jesus Christ who needs care and mutuality as essential to human-divine survival ... debunks the myth of individualism and hierarchical orders, in which transcendence means breaking free of encumbrances and needing nobody and constitutes the divine as somebody in relation to other bodies.” (Eiesland 1994: 103)

Eiesland's Disabled Christ relies on human interaction and human activity to carry on remaking and disseminating him – to *re-member* him, to put him back together, in Eucharist and in loving, mutual service. Likewise, Althaus-Reid's Queer God *needs humanity*: the boundaries between redeemer and redeemed are blurred (Althaus-Reid 2003: 138). Indeed, perhaps God's often-closeted status – tied up and squashed into small, respectable spaces – means that God really is not at liberty to remake the Body of Christ independently, thus requiring human members and co-constituents to take this initiative.

“God cannot be Queered”, warns Althaus-Reid, “unless theologians have the courage to come out from their ... closets” (Althaus-Reid 2000: 88). Here Althaus-Reid's work owes a particular debt to Heyward, in whose conception God simply cannot exist independently of human relationship. Heyward says, “Without our crying, our yearning, our raging, there is no God. For in the beginning is the relation, and in the relation is the power that creates the world through us, and with us, and by us, you and I, you and we, and none of us alone” (Heyward 1982: 172). God is, then, a stranger in our midst; but there is also an important sense in which God *becomes* stranger – that is, stranger and stranger than before – via the queer, transgressive human lives and stories which contribute to God's continued coming-into-being. Just as the obscured face of Serrano's *Piss Christ* might be an invitation for the viewer to respond, to participate in the completion of the image (Pattenden in Stapleton 2009), so the instability and recalcitrance of Althaus-Reid's Queer God induces a continuousness of journey and process for those who walk with this deity. And this happens in all the little deaths and resurrections which testify to the unfinished nature of the way – which reject the *finality* of a static and explicable cross, “an attempt to kill once and for all the multiple resurrections of a queer Jesus ... so that no queer God would do what queer Gods do” (Althaus-Reid 2006: 525).

So God is *becoming* in this way; but we must also ask what is “becoming” *to* this God. What behaviour and belief is it that *suits* a queer God and is thus necessary, ethical activity for queer people? Claudia Schippert and others have reflected on the fact that queer theology might have to be somehow ethically “empty”, since rejecting grand narratives of normativity might necessitate rejecting norms altogether, even “good” ones (Schippert 1999, 2006). Queer theology would therefore be unable to be directive or prescriptive about what constitutes ethically sound actions. But Schippert concludes that norms do not *inevitably* solidify into normativities, so a queer ethics with “multiple starting points and alliances of contradictory norms” (Schippert 2006: 172) is perhaps still possible. It is exactly in and through the uncertainty and provisionality that praxis occurs. This is also what Althaus-Reid realizes when, with Isherwood, she affirms that the theology of the Queer God “pertains to the exploitation but also to the solidarity and

cooperation of people at the margins of society and theology. Therefore, it is not correct to say that Queer Theology lacks agency. Queer Theology is an agent for transformation” (Althaus-Reid and Isherwood 2007: 308). What is “becoming” to a Queer God is queer activity which values people above profits and relationship above legalistic rightness. God becomes *stranger* as God becomes *estranged* from divisive capitalist structures. There is an ambivalence in Althaus-Reid about the extent to which this might mean jettisoning the “T-theology” tradition which has distorted the message that a queer God is fundamentally a God of justice and on the side of the poor: Althaus-Reid does not always recognize the counter-streams present even in the main body of the tradition, or the fact that theological univocity is alien even to its own genealogy. However, what is certain is that Althaus-Reid’s queer God is not an overbearing parent who punishes children for rules they were not even fully aware they had broken. In the queer God, humans take on responsibility for what they are to do and what they are to be – for the ways in which they are to live out this God’s story, not sanitized or removed from their own everyday stories as lived out in a natal, dying, embodied, sexual, dirty, broken and beautiful world.

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