

DRAFT
QUEER/CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY
STFT-3287

Pacific School of Religion
The Graduate Theological Union

Fall Semester 2008
Tuesdays, 8:10 – 11:00 a.m.

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COURSE OVERVIEW

Michael Warner has wryly noted that “the appeal of ‘queer theory’ has outstripped anyone’s sense of what it means.” William Turner, in a similar vein, has wondered whether “everyone might in some sense be ‘queer,’” since queerness refers to the experience of not fitting in to established categories of experience or patterns of relation. Meanwhile, Elizabeth Stuart claims that “Christianity itself is a queer thing.”

The academic work transpiring overly the last fifteen years or so under the banner of “queer theory” represents a rather wide array of cultural strategies and scholarly modes of analysis, the reach of which extends well beyond “gay and lesbian studies.” Rooted in a deep suspicion of fixed and stable gender-sex identities, queer theorists seek to expose and analyze the persistence of those identities in contemporary cultural/political assumptions and the implications of adopting more fluid and malleable notions of personal and communal identification. This queer approach, furthermore, carries significant implications for the intersections of race and ethnicity, class and economics, and politics and culture.

The significance of “queering theory” for religious studies and Christian theology has only recently been considered in some quarters, mostly as a way to move beyond apologetic arguments fully to include lesbian and gay people in Christian churches. Beyond apology, in other words, there are queer insights into Christian faith and theology that carry the potential to revitalize and transform the academic discipline of theology, as well as the practice of Christian faith, and not only for the benefit of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people but for the whole people of God. It is that overall claim that we will consider together in this course, a consideration that includes key and critical questions such as the following.

Is “queer theory” a foundational discipline for theology or one among many tools for constructive theological work? Does “queering theology” reinvent Christian faith or retrieve ancient Christian insights or both? Can Christian theology contribute to the ongoing development of queer theorizing just as much as queer theorizing can contribute to the ongoing development of Christian theology? Where and how does queer theorizing challenge and critique the prevalence of sexism, racism, and other forms of social oppression operating within and among lesbian and gay communities? To what extent can queer theory assist in making the critical connections among gender-sex, race, ethnicity,

class, economics and politics? What do those connections have to do with Christian theology and the practice of Christian faith?

We'll address such questions by first reviewing the development of modern theological projects (the methods and strategies of liberal Protestantism, fundamentalism, neo-orthodoxy, and liberation theologies). Second, we will consider the emergence of "queer theory" as *both* a critique of late twentieth century gay and lesbian studies *and* a retrieval of earlier twentieth century critiques of modern western culture (which will thus highlight some of the vulnerabilities of modern Christian theology). Third, we will test queer theory's usefulness as a tool for doing constructive theological work with reference to several traditional Christian doctrinal topics (creation, Christology/soteriology, Trinity, and ecclesiology). These three steps will prepare us to engage in some collective assessment of "queer theory" with the hope of discerning creative ways to perform/enact a vibrant Christian faith in the diversity of contemporary cultural contexts.

Overall we will attempt an approach to these topics and issues that is both serious and playful, both analytical and reflective. In doing so we will ponder together the possibility that "Christian witness" and "queer performance" are actually synonymous. Or to put this in another way, we might find that to speak of "Queer/Christian" theology is actually redundant.

Learning Outcomes

Students completing this course successfully will be able to:

- ✓ discern the broad features of four modern theological developments in Protestant Christianity (such as liberal Protestantism, Neo-Orthodoxy, etc.), and describe their significance for the religious landscape in the United States today;
- ✓ describe the emergence of "queer theory" in relation to and as distinct from "gay and lesbian studies";
- ✓ articulate both the challenges and the opportunities at the intersection of queer theory and Christian theology for contemporary Christian leadership and faith communities; and
- ✓ develop strategies for putting "queer Christian theology" to use in nurturing thriving faith communities.

REQUIRED TEXTS

- Nikki Sullivan, *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*
- Gerard Loughlin, ed. *Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body*
- Elizabeth Stuart, *Gay and Lesbian Theologies: Repetitions with Critical Difference*
- *Course Reader*

ASSIGNMENTS/EXPECTATIONS

A successful completion of this course, whether or not this course is taken for a letter grade, requires: regular preparation for in-class conversation based on the assigned texts; two critical reflection papers; and a final project.

- **Regular and Active Participation in the Class Sessions (25% of the final grade)**
Students are expected to read the assigned texts carefully enough to discuss them critically in class and will be asked to submit occasional “discussion starter” questions based on the readings; missing more than two class sessions will make a significant impact on the final grade. “Discussion Starters” may be handwritten (legibly!) and need not be more than one page and may consist entirely of questions. The purpose of this exercise is engage critically with the readings assigned for the day and to prompt informed conversation in class. (Due dates for Discussion Starters are noted in the schedule below.)
- **Two critical reflection papers (30% of the final grade)**
Students will submit two papers of at least four but no more than five pages each based on the readings and class discussions. The first will consider critically the development of modern theological discourse in relation to gender and sexuality; the second will consider critically the emergence of queer theory in relation to religious identities. These two papers can be helpful preparation for the final project. Papers should follow the formatting guidelines noted below.

Critical Reflection Paper #1: Modern Theological Discourse & “Homosexuality”

The purpose of this paper is to outline, describe and reflect critically on modern Protestant theology (comparing and contrasting Protestant Liberalism, Christian Fundamentalism, Neo-Orthodoxy and Liberation Theologies) and its relevance for and posture toward “homosexuality” (which includes issues of both gender and sexuality).. Students may choose to reflect on how modern Protestant theology has or has not shaped their own understanding of issues related to gender and sexuality.

Critical Reflection Paper #2: Queer Theory & Religious Identities

The purpose of this paper is to engage with the challenge posed by “queer theory” to notions of stable identities and especially to the formation of religious identity. In addition to the challenge, this paper should also involve critical reflection on the opportunities presented by queer theory for re-imagining how religious and spiritual identities could function in today’s faith communities.

- **The Final Project (45% of the final grade)**
In consultation with the instructor, each student will choose some aspect of or topic in Christian theological discourse and consider how “queering” that topic might reshape and renew contemporary Christian practice. The project may take a variety of forms, including but not limited to: a research paper (of no fewer than 15 pages); a congregational study; or a multi-media presentation (primarily visual or multi-media projects must be accompanied by a written analysis). Both the topic and the format/medium of the final project must be approved by the instructor.

***** *The Final Project is Due no later than Monday, May 21* *****

Paper Format: Papers in this course (other than “Discussion Starters”) should be word-processed (preferably using Microsoft Word), double-spaced with no more than one-inch margins, using no larger than a 12-point font and submitted on or

before the due date. Sources must be referenced accurately and according to standard academic practice; plagiarism is a serious academic offense and will result in a failing grade for the paper. If you have any questions about adequate citation or how to avoid plagiarism, don't hesitate to speak to the instructor *before* submitting a paper. "Double dipping" (submitting the same paper for more than one course) is likewise not allowed as this would mean receiving double academic credit for the same work. For the sake of ecological ethics and responsibility, it is perfectly acceptable and even preferred that papers be printed out on ***previously used paper*** (the clean side, obviously).

Late Work, Documented Disability, and ESL

- Apart from dire circumstances or emergency, late papers *will not be accepted* and the instructor will *not* grant an "incomplete" for this course.
- If students anticipate any trouble in completing the assigned work in this course due to *documented* disability, this should be discussed with the instructor at the beginning of the semester.
- Students for whom English is a second language should likewise speak with the instructor early on in the semester concerning any challenges anticipated in meeting the course requirements in a timely manner.

SCHEDULE OF TOPICS AND ASSIGNMENTS

September 2: YOU ARE HERE: MAPPING THE AMERICAN RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE
Course introductions and overview

September 9: CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY REDUX
A Review of Modern Theological Methods and Discourses

September 16: HOMOSEXUALITY REDUX
The (Political) Construction of Gay and Lesbian Identities
Due: Discussion Starters

September 23: QUEER DISTURBANCES, PART I
Gender Trouble in Religion and Society

September 30: QUEER DISTURBANCES, PART II
Gender-Sex, Race, and Ethnicity: From Identities to Performance
Due: Critical Reflection Paper #1: Modern Theological Discourse

October 7: "INTRINSICALLY DISORDERED"
Divine Creation and the Denaturalizing of Nature

October 14: "UNSPEAKABLE ACTS"
Christ, Part One: The Erotic Word

October 21: Reading Week – No Class

October 28: “PERFORMING THE INVISIBLE”
Christ, Part Two: Redeeming Salvation

Due: Critical Reflection Paper #2: The Emergence of Queer Theory

November 4: IT TAKES THREE TO TANGO?
Trinitarian Disruptions of Cultural Norms

Due: Discussion Starters

November 11: THE DANCE FLOOR OF FAITH
Baptismal Gowns and Ecclesial Identities

November 18: FROM QUEER TO ETERNITY
Apocalyptic Musings on Hope for the “Beloved Community”

Due: Discussion Starters

November 25: HOME ECONOMICS
Theo-Ethical Practices in the Marketplace

December 2: PROJECT TOPIC CONVERSATION

December 9: PROJECT TOPIC CONVERSATION

December 12: **Final Project Due by 5:00 p.m.**

COURSE EVALUATION

The goal in evaluation is to determine whether, from the instructor’s perspective, the student has engaged effectively with the course material and objectives. Regardless of the outcome, please remember that evaluations refer to the work produced and not to the student who produced it.

Students taking this course on a “pass/fail” basis will be expected to complete all of the requirements and produce adequate work in order to “pass.” (Students anticipating further graduate study beyond the master’s level are strongly encouraged to take this course for a letter grade. Most graduate schools do not consider courses taken on a “pass/fail” basis as adequate data for making decisions about admission. Students involved in a process toward ordination should likewise determine whether their diocesan or judicatory authorities prefer more information than merely a “passing” grade can provide.)

Interpretations of letter grades vary, sometimes widely, at the GTU. Overall, grades are pedagogical tools to help students understand two things: 1) where they stand in relation to others in the class, since grading is mainly a comparative and relative matter; and 2) whether or not the instructor believes they have demonstrated an effective engagement with the

material in the course. To the extent that letter grades can serve those pedagogical purposes, an “A” ought to mean more than “adequate” and should indicate excellence. With these perspectives in mind, letter grades in this course are an attempt to communicate the following about a student’s work:

- A Excellent work, demonstrating creative engagement with the material.
(A+ would indicate potentially publishable work.)
- B Good work, demonstrating effective engagement with the material.
- C Passable work, but indicates lapses in engagement with the material.
- F Failure to engage with the material adequately.

Or, for those more visually inclined, the review graphics in the San Francisco Chronicle might be more helpful:



A



B



C



F

“SAFE SPACE,” LEARNING STYLES, AND GOOD-HEARTED HUMOR

Absolutely and perfectly safe spaces are actually impossible; there is no such thing as a “sin free zone” in human relationships. But there are *safer* spaces. Let us endeavor to make this class, at the very least, safer than a BART station for the kind of theological conversation this course will demand of us. Creating safer space is an art and not a science, and we will need to keep practicing this art with each other the entire semester.

Facilitating shared inquiry is likewise an art and involves being attentive to the diversity of learning styles and cultural expectations (some people learn by talking, for example, and various cultures have varying notions of etiquette for classroom interaction). Let us endeavor together to pay attention to our differences and encourage active engagement from all.

Let us keep in mind as well that Christian faith and theology (not to mention LGBTQ sensibilities) are matters of profound personal and social investment. The challenges in doing this work extend well beyond scholarship and academic expertise; they engage many aspects of our personal lives, with implications for our various communities of faith. As we seek to explore such topics together this semester, let us commit ourselves to careful listening of divergent opinions and perspectives and to respecting the dignity each person possesses as a child of God.

Let us also remember that while Christian theology involves hard work, this does not mean it shouldn’t be any fun. Good-hearted humor is not only allowed but also encouraged in this class as we seek to understand better the queerness of Christian theology itself.