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## Towards a Queer Theology of Relationships

Seminars in Memory of Marcella Althaus-Reid  
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*Queer theology desacralize[s] what has been made sacred  
for the sake of ideological interests.*

Marcella Althaus-Reid

*One way of loving people is to acknowledge  
that they have desires which exclude us.*

Adam Phillips

*You are taken in the net of my music, my love,  
and my nets of music are wide as the sky.*

Pablo Neruda

*Queer Theology... destabilize(s) the assumed  
'rightness' of family values...*

Marcella Althaus-Reid & Lisa Isherwood

I am deeply honored by the invitation to participate in this series of seminars in memory of queer theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid.

I would like to thank the Darlene Garner Institute of Metropolitan Community Churches (MCC) — The Rev. Margarita Sánchez De León, Academic Dean — for envisioning and creating this virtual space for the exploration of queer theologies. I also would like to thank the members of the MCC Theologies Team for their dedication and commitment to promoting holy conversations on what we believe, and what we do because we believe.

I have been invited to share with you my understanding of queer theology and how it invites us to re-imagine relationships. Let me point out what I believe about (Queer, Transgressive, Indecent, Trespassing) Theology: it starts with bodies — human bodies with desires, sexualities, messiness, beauty, pain, limitations; "*the rebellious bodies*," Marcella (2004, 158) would say — and the stories of these bodies connecting to other human bodies. A theology that re-imagines relationships is inscribed in the stories of those relationships.

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Then, there is no theology outside the body; there is no theology outside relationships.

During this presentation I tell my story, but I do not pretend to make of my story the canon of how other stories should be measured or valued. Even though I have been reflecting on a theology of polyamory for many years now, I want to clearly communicate that my goal is not to establish a hierarchy of relational models, i.e. polyamorous relationships are superior to monogamous relationships.

This is something I learned from Marcella: I humbly stand on the ground she walked before me when she said, as an example, that her "Bi/Christ" was a "*liberative model*, [but she] *did not want to make of bisexuality a superior option to*" other ways of understanding the human experience (Althaus-Reid 2003, 187-188).

Yes, I believe that polyamory is a liberative model, but it is not the only one or a superior one. As I explore a queer theology of relationships, I want to avoid the trap of ideologies (economical, political, sexual, and relational models) that purport to define normalcy by erasing difference and demonizing the different Other. Marcella reminds us that Queer Theology — in contrast with Liberation Theology — is not about equality but about difference.

But let me not get ahead of myself, for if doing theology is about telling *our* stories, I must recount the story of how I met Marcella. It is a love story.

In 2003 I was invited to participate in a panel on queer theologies at MCC General Conference in Dallas, Texas, USA. The convener of the panel, The Rev. Dr. Robin Gorsline, asked me to reflect on the connections between queer theology and decolonization. How did I get there?

Up to that moment, I had done work from the perspectives of a gay Christian man, born and raised in Puerto Rico. By the end of 1980s and the beginning of 1990s I had the wonderful opportunity to be part of *Reencuentro*, to my knowledge, the first group exploring GLBT theology in Puerto Rico. We were an eclectic group of outcasts, nerds, political and human rights activists, from many different religious paths. In that group I began to explore the intricate connections between human sexual desire and the institutional need for control.

I began to realize the connections between religious discourse and colonization: they inflict on "the colonized" / "the believer" a sense of powerlessness. I remember thinking: colonization of the land, colonization of the mind, colonization of the body and how it is allowed or not to interact with other bodies.

My colleague Robin invited me to present my ideas at MCC General Conference, and I found myself searching and researching in order to connect such disparate themes as sexual orientation, political status, religious discourse. In this process, I came upon a paper by Marcella Althaus-Reid that changed my understanding of queer theology.

In her paper, Marcella, expresses: "*Queer theology is ... irreverent in the sense that it tends to desacralize what has been made sacred for the sake of ideological interests. There is nothing quite like queer theology for making fun of idols.*" (Althaus-Reid 2001, 58)

When I read those two sentences, I thought: Oh ... My ... God!

(Yes, the OMG! we exclaim when we reach an orgasm... Have you noticed that we call God when we have sex? Marcella (2005, 271) is right when she asserts "*that all theology is sexual and every theology is a sexual act.*")

What are you saying Marcella? Desacralize? Make fun of idols? Ideologies?

I fell in love with Marcella; it was love at "first read!"

To fall in love is not far from what this presentation is all about; or to quote Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood (2007, 303), "*To reflect theologically is always an activity done with a presupposition of love. To talk theology is to talk about a loving style of relationship.*"

This is the love story between Marcella and I. Some may say it is a one sided love story since we never met face to face, or even had a long distance relationship. (Though, we exchanged some emails by the end of her life on this earthly realm, but more about this later in my presentation.)

I have heard some people say they are in love with Jesus, but they never met him. Perhaps, what they mean is that they are in love with what Jesus stands for. Then I am in love with what Marcella (and Lisa Isherwood, 2007, 312) stands for: a "*queer theology [that] asks that we de-mystify, undo and subvert.*" Marcella and I are in love with the irreverent, with the indecent, with the Queer God we only get to know by meeting the Other.

What needs to be desacralized? What needs to be de-mystified? What are the relational ideologies that have become idols we can make fun of?

(The word "idols" reminds me of Kathleen Norris (1998, 88) saying "*idolatry makes love impossible.*" There it is again, that thing called "love." What's love got to do with it? Everything! But I will come back to this later.)

To do theology is to tell our stories.

Let me tell you a story.

A few years ago, before the advances of 'marriage equality' in many countries around the world, a congregant approached me to express her joy in celebrating another anniversary of the Holy Union with her partner. I rejoiced with her. Then she asked me "*When did you and William get married?*" I replied, "*We have never had a Holy Union.*" Then I heard her say: "*Oh... Then you do not know what it means to have a relationship. The real thing is when you get married.*"

I was flabbergasted... speechless...

(Which in itself is kind of a miracle: a preacher and teacher who has no words... .. Well, not exactly true, I did have words, but they were not very pastoral.)

Marcella kicked in again: desacralize what has been made sacred for the sake of ideologies.

Marriage *à la straight* had already been enthroned by GLBT folks. I believe Marcella would have said: "Good job Liberation Theologians! You got what you wanted: equality at the expense of difference!"

A people who pride themselves in being *different* find themselves demonizing the different Other by asserting with words and deeds that real relationships are those with a specific structure, go through a process of validation, and/or are sanctioned by the state.

How did this happen? Marcella helps us understand this by bringing Marxist perspectives into the theological realm. (Please do not turn off your connections at the sound of Marx!): Ideas are formed by social interactions and people's experiences, and then, like a act of magic, people disappear and "*disembodied ideas become "persons," while real persons ... become inanimate objects.*" (Althaus-Reid 2000b, 48)

In the 1960s our founder, The Rev. Elder Troy Perry, realized while listening to his own story, and the stories of others, that God loved gay individuals. This was a breakthrough, a disruption in the belief system, an indecent theology. I believe Troy was able to do theology from below: what do our relationships say about God? And Troy answered: our sexualities — our rebellious bodies — say that God loves us.

Then disembodied ideas became persons, and persons became inanimate objects: we wanted to fit into the mainstreams of Christianity. The normalization process was carried through creed and bylaws. The different Other, the rebellious bodies, began to disappear as our "We believe" statements were proclaimed here and there trying to convince other denominations and churches that we were as Christians as they were.

(Of course, I would ask, what kind of Christianity are we talking about? But that is a different presentation.)

I know I am oversimplifying this process. However, one example may suffice to see how ideas become 'persons' while real persons become objects. The Rite of Holy Union, or Rite of Holy Matrimony, is defined in our bylaws (UFMCC, 2013) as follows:

The RITE OF HOLY UNION/RITE OF HOLY MATRIMONY is the spiritual joining of two persons in a manner fitting and proper by a duly authorized clergy, Interim Pastoral Leader of the church, or UFMCC Elders.

For many years a group of MCCers have brought up for discussion and vote an amendment to change the wording of this section. The amendment is quite simple: delete the word "two," so the section would read, "spiritual joining of persons..." This amendment has never passed.

The last time this amendment came up for discussion and vote I heard arguments quite similar to those voiced in mainstream churches when they are considering statements on sexuality: "The Bible says...", "It is not the right time...", "We should continue to pray..."

This is a disembodied theology; the stories of those whose relationships are not described by our bylaws remain as outsiders, invisible people. To do queer theology is to bring to the fore the suppressed face of God these individuals carry with them.

From our pulpits some of us preach that in "MCC we believe families and relationships come in different forms." And yet, as a denomination we have given in into the "family values" as they are proclaimed by mainstream society.

Saint Marcella, what would you say?

She responds: *"Terrible is the fate of theologies from the margin when they want to be accepted by the center!"* (Althaus-Reid & Isherwood, 2007, 304)

And

*"We can become fully accepted and authorized versions of official theology, forgetting to plot our desires simply because we are just joining the structures which suppressed them centuries ago."* (Althaus-Reid 1997, 47)

As a part of us wants to be the authorized version of official theology, forgetting to plot our desires, our stories are not told.

What are the untold stories that carry within them the face of the suppressed queer God?

Let me tell you stories.

One story.

A couple was in a relationship with another couple. They would go to each others homes, sit and talk. They would get into a car and go around together. They would have feasts because they loved to eat together. They took care of each other when they were sick. They carried each others burdens. They laughed together. They cried together. Life is full of changes, and the foursome ended; it was painful. The two couples drifted apart, and they moved to different countries.

Another story.

"Garrett, I have something to tell you. I think I'm in love with you. And I know it doesn't make much sense. But, if I've ever felt love, this is it. And, well — I think I'm in love with you."

Garrett stopped and thought for a moment. Then he asked, "Do you miss me when I'm away?" Mike nodded his head. "Do you get excited to see me?" Mike nodded again. Then Garrett said, "Well, then I think I might love you too."

And yet another story.

The gay couple stood in front of the minister. Two lesbians were the witnesses of the ceremony. After getting married, the gay couple, the lesbian couple, and the minister went out for brunch to a nearby restaurant.

If we want to do queer theology we must deconstruct the normative presuppositions that come to the surface when we hear these stories.

1. In the first story, one normative presupposition is that these two couples are connected to each other by their gender, e.g. both female couples, or perhaps by a sexual attraction. In fact, the story is about a gay couple and a lesbian couple. They were a quad, a foursome, a family, though they never gave a name to what they had together.
2. The presupposition in the second story could be that Garrett and Mike are gay. They are not. In fact, they are straight men, dear friends, who fell in love with each other while keeping their heterosexual orientation. (Thank you, Mike Iamele [2014], for sharing your story.)
3. The third story is about a marriage ceremony; you got that right. The queer layer of this marriage is that the minister who married the gay couple was at the same time the boyfriend of one of the individuals in the couple.

In these three stories we see the faces of the queer God. The God of difference. If Liberation Theology is about equality, Queer Theology is about difference.

By this point in the presentation, you may have noticed what underscores my queer theology of relationships: love.

(I remember Saint Augustine: *"Love, and do what you will... [L]et the root of love be within, of this root can nothing spring but what is good."*)

However, let us be clear about this. I am not talking of love as a feeling, which is only one dimension of it. I am saying with Saint Augustine and psychoanalyst Stephen Mitchell that when people say love "I love you" to each other it is not only a report of what they feel, but an expression of what *"sort of agents they can become for themselves and each other."* (Mitchell 2002, 196) Agents have agency. Queer agents are bold to navigate into uncharted territories, the territories of desire.

What seems to be a challenge in our communities is to "plot our desires," when these go beyond the marriage/family values we have assimilated. Queer Theology, as methodology, transgresses the boundaries on the ideological maps of desire. Queer Theology brings out of the closet the body and its desires.

Love and desire. Desire and love.

Psychoanalyst Adam Phillips (1996, 115) beautifully connects desire and love: *"One way of loving people is to acknowledge that they have desires which exclude us; that it is possible to love and desire more than one person at the same time."*

Why is so difficult to acknowledge this truth? Love and life are risky. We may feel unsafe because life and love are uncertain; we need some sense of safety, and control becomes the way we cope with uncertainty. Then ideas become persons, and real persons become inanimate objects: the idea that my needs are supplied by one person and that I will supply the needs of this person.

We bind loved ones in an economy of debt when we come to believe they are there to provide for us, to attend to all our needs, to be like the Holy Spirit hovering over us, watching us and protecting us. It is time to cancel the debt.

Marcella (2000a, 31-35) tells us that we can re-write God by canceling the sex debt. What she means, I believe, is that Christianity has inscribed sexuality and desire in a discourse of control, and this patriarchal structure has written God in such a way that what we read is, for example, women's desires have been subsumed under "a system of affection and reproduction." Queer theology invites us to cancel this debt and re-write God by listening to the stories of women in all their depth and extension beyond affection and/or reproduction.

I take Marcella's words at heart, and I say that we should cancel the relational (sexual, desire, companionship, and other layers of it) debt and re-write God as a the Holy Polyamorous One. God has multiple loving relationships, like us, even if we do not want to acknowledge this reality.

Pablo Neruda (2004, 37) writes: "*You are taken in the net of my music, my love, and my nets of music are wide as the sky.*" I find it fascinating how Neruda's unconscious communication expands what he writes: even though he is writing to one loved woman, he also acknowledges that the nets are wide. What do you make of this?

Why is polyamory such a difficult subject to talk about even in progressive communities?

Franklin Vaux and Eve Rickert (2014, 9) tell us that "*polyamory can feel threatening because it upsets our fairy-tale assumption that the right partner will keep us safe from change. Polyamory introduces the prospects of chaos and uncertainty.*" This is Queer Theology: it does not avoid reality with its chaos and uncertainty, and tells the truth about our fantasies.

I have learned that we live in tension: on the one hand, we want to feel safe by anchoring ourselves on predictable ground; on the other hand, we long to step beyond the boundaries and experience the excitement of a world that is rich beyond our imagination. The ideology behind some relational models is that we should stay on the predictable ground. Stepping beyond the boundaries of the map we have been given is immature, irresponsible, a sin.

What to do with our desires, the longing for the predictable and the longing for the unpredictable?

In my work as a pastor I have heard the stories of monogamous individuals and polyamorous people. I have heard stories of broken relationships (monogamous and poly). I have heard stories of new beginnings. I have heard couples telling me of the desire to open their relationships. I have heard, from monogamous and poly individuals, about envy, jealousy, loneliness. I remain surprised by the richness in the lives of the people I serve, and the humanness of their desires. If there is a role a queer pastor assumes, the one I assume, is to listen carefully so that I can put into words both the illusions and the ideologies, both hope and dread, I hear from the people who share their stories with me.

In the end, a queer theology of relationships should lead us not into a specific model of relationships — God deliver us from ideologies! — but to an acknowledgment and celebration of diversity and the myriad of ways we relate to each other. One way of lovingly relate to others is not less than another form of relating.

## **Postscript: In Memoriam of Marcella Althaus-Reid**

I never met Marcella personally, and we exchanged only a few emails; however, through her books and papers she taught me well that "*coming out is always about the urgency of changing the present*" (Althaus-Reid 2001, 65). Marcella challenged me to see how our social structures make the Other invisible, and she helped me to make connections between GLBT concerns and the fight for freedom for those living in the margins.

As a Latino, I feel proud of this bold woman who courageously defied patriarchal and classist structures in Argentina – and elsewhere – proclaiming that all the children of God have a place at Table. Through her careful analysis she unmasked the hypocrisy of religious institutions that keep women, poor, and queer out of sight. Even though she was a woman of the academic world – a renowned professor of theology – she was also firmly grounded in the day-to-day of the people of God living in the margins. She knew well that theology must be embodied; otherwise, it is speculative and serves no one except those in power.

During the summer of 2008 I got news that she was ill, and I sent her an email sharing with her that she was in my prayers and thoughts. In her reply she thanked me, and included a phrase that I would describe now as the ‘expectation of a sacramental event,’ that outward – physical – sign of an inward experience of grace: "*Espero que pronto podamos sentarnos a tomar un café.*" (I hope that we can sit down for coffee soon.)

To my expressions of "prayers and thoughts," she replied with gratitude and with a clear testimony of a down-to-earth theology: let's have coffee. In the Latino cultures to have a cup of coffee is more than just to have a cup of coffee. It is an embodied experience: the sharing of the aroma, the taste, the sound of the words, the closeness of the bodies, and the openness of the hearts. Isn't this a relational experience of life? Isn't this a sign of God's grace?

Marcella, we did not have the opportunity to share that sacramental cup of coffee. We will. Until then, may Light Eternal shine upon you, Saint Marcella.

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