

SSEAC Bengaluru

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Panel Discussion 1: Church Engagement in Human Sexuality: Scope and Impact of Contextual theology related to human sexuality.

Queer theologies in the Asian contexts

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Introduction

First of all, I wish to assert that queer theologies of different countries in Asia cannot be identical, neither can they be universalized. Therefore, the first part of my presentation will focus on doing queer theologies in the context of Hong Kong. In the second part, I will introduce two projects to affirm that doing queer theologies in collaboration with queer Christians in other countries of Asia can bring new insights, enable us to share resources, and the exchange of contextual experiences and discourse on a *queer* God are both illuminating and empowering.

Part One

Liberating LGBTIQ from Internalized Heterosexism and Stigmatization

The Chinese culture is predominantly patriarchal and heterosexual, as a result, our hetero-normative society constructs a hierarchy of gender and sexuality by placing man and heterosexuals at the top, followed by heterosexual women and then sexual minorities at the bottom. The incorporation of negative dominant societal attitudes about LGBTI people, as well as towards themselves for being a sexual orientation minority is the cause for internalized heterosexism. The hetero-patriarchal Christian tradition also enforces such hierarchy that leads to the construction of oppressive categorizations of sexual identity. Christian sexual ethics create good and bad sexual categories. "Good or normal sex" should be heterosexual, married, procreative and non-commercial, whereas "bad or abnormal sex" comprises unmarried, homosexual, transsexual,

promiscuous and non-creative.¹ Many LGBTIQ Christians suffer internalized homophobia because their churches claim that the Bible condemns homosexuality. Their sexual orientations are labeled as "abnormal". Some of them experienced discrimination and unfair treatment by their churches after they came out, therefore, many choose to hide their sexualities because it will only bring shame and stigmatization once they reveal their true identities.

In recent years, LGBTIQ Christians in Hong Kong are being marginalized and discriminated publicly by the mainline churches. In 2013, the Evangelical Churches organized a "Love Praying Concert",

and around 50,000 Christians showed up to support our Chief Executive's refusal to a consultation for legislation against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. These Christians demonstrated an exclusive and discriminating stand against sexual minorities; they argued that the Bible and Christian tradition affirm hetero-normativity.

2014 marks the twentieth anniversary of the International Year of the family. As time changes, family composition undergoes diversification: family size is smaller, less heterosexual married couples want to have children, single parent family, divorcees, same sex couples family, and family with no blood relations. Nevertheless, three main denominational churches in Hong Kong initiated a campaign to reiterate the traditional heterosexual marriage and family values by placing a 3 page newspaper ad, a rally of 25,000 Christians condemned homosexuality and claimed that God detests same-sex relationship.

Furthermore, the Society for Truth and Light, adopting the ideology of Christian Right from the United States, is a predominant voice in Hong Kong in opposing homosexuality, same sex marriage, anti-discrimination law of sexual minorities, and they even mislead the public by maintaining itself as a victim of the reverse discrimination should the law be enacted. This

¹ Gayle Rubin, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale and David M. Halperin (London: Routledge, 1993), 13.

society is supposed to receive funding from Government departments and some of the mainline churches.

Many queer Christians in Hong Kong, myself being one of them have experienced discrimination and rejection from our churches, we contend that we must challenge the hetero-patriarchal Christian tradition of sexuality that reinforces heterosexism, condemns LGBTIQ Christians and tell us that we are unworthy beings. In a homophobic culture, denial of our own sexual orientations seems to bring a degree of safety from discrimination and protection from negative confrontations. However, the harmful impact of denial includes disconnection, self-blame, identity confusion, low self-esteem, and incongruence between the public and private identity. Denial is "about unknowing who we are."² We recognize that we must explore an affirming theology that will liberate us from internalized heterosexism and stigmatization, and our hidden voices need to be heard. That theology is queer theology, it is LGBTIQ people "talking about God", theology done by LGBTIQ in critical reflection of their own context.³ In other words, queer theologies articulate the experiences of queer people in conceptualizing God and theology.

In doing so, queer people affirm that our passion and sexuality are good, we are able to free each other from heterosexist domination and negative categorization, and work together towards social justice for LGBTIQ people.⁴

Furthermore, queer theology is transgressive, it challenges social norms about sexuality and gender. Queer theology erases boundaries, and deconstructs the binary categories of sexual and gender identity.⁵ Let me share with you how we engage queer theologies as an empowerment for queer Christians. In 2013, Queer Theology Academy published a book called, *Who isn't*

² L.J. Tessier, *Dancing after the Whirlwind* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1997), 94.

³ Patrick Cheng, *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology* (New York: Seabury Books, 2011), 9-10.

⁴ Carter Heyward, *Our Passion for Justice: Images of Power, Sexuality, and Liberation* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1984), 40-41.

⁵ Cheng, *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology*, 9-10.

Queer? Exploring Queer Theologies in the context of Hong Kong. This book is the first public discourse on queer theologies in Hong Kong, and the articles are written by LGBTIQ people base on their personal experiences, sexualities and as people of faith. These authors have challenged the social norms about sexuality and gender, a discourse that churches and seminaries in Hong Kong perceive as dangerous. An article written by a female Christian uses her own experience of masturbation to challenge the moral and immoral binary categories reinforced by her church.

Another article attempts to erase the boundaries between perverted sex and godly sex through the experiences of female sex workers in Hong Kong. One of the authors challenges the negative dominant societal perceptions towards sexuality and disability. The book has served two purposes. Firstly, it provides a channel for the LGBTIQ people to expose their voices that have been silenced by the society and the churches. The ability to come out of their shame and stigmatization to tell their stories has an empowering effect for themselves as well as for others. Secondly, since most churches in Hong Kong ignore the existence of LGBTIQ within their communities, and many churches even avoid addressing issues such as gender and sexual diversity, this book is an access for Christians to learn about the struggles of LGBTIQ people and those who have been stigmatized because of their sexualities.

Other than introducing queer theologies through publication, we also organize courses on Sexuality, and the challenge of queer theologies to Christian Ethics. Our course participants include LGBTIQ Christians, LGBTIQ friendly pastors and social workers who need theological resources and training for them to provide counseling to sexual minorities. We have also been invited by youth ministries of different denominations, students' associations of universities and seminaries in Hong Kong, and also in China and Taiwan to talk about queer theologies. We always invite LGBTIQ persons to come along and share their powerful testimonies that have touched many hearts.

I will now move on to introduce two projects that I have taken part in doing queer theologies in collaboration with queer Christians in other countries of Asia.

Part 2

(First Project) The Queer Theology Academy Asia project (QTAAP) in 2014

We saw the great need for affirming programs for LGBTIQ Christians in Hong Kong, Taiwan and China, and for them to respond from a theological perspective to fundamentalist churches and Christians who are often homophobic. In fact, many of them grew up in homophobic churches. Therefore, we organized a week- long course on queer theology and pastoral care for LGBTIQ Christian leaders from these three regions during the summer of 2014. Twenty-five students and twelve instructors gathered in Hong Kong, we were very privileged to have three queer theologians as our core instructors, Rev. Dr. Patrick S. Cheng and Rev. Dr. Boon Lin Ngeo from the United States, both of Asian decent, and Dr. Rose Wu from Hong Kong. The students were a diverse group in terms of their national origin, dialect, sex, sexuality, gender identity, church background, HIV status, and class. We observe two outcomes from this project. First, the week long course provided key LGBTIQ Christian leaders with the resources to counter fundamentalist Christians who are opposed to the equal rights of LGBTIQ people in Chinese-speaking countries. This occurred through lectures and tutorial about queer theology, queer pastoral care, queer biblical studies, and LGBTIQ history. Second, the week long course provided such leaders with the resources to minister more effectively to their congregations. This occurred through the offering of educational resources and networking opportunities, spiritual exercises, fellowship over meals, and site visits to organizations supporting transgender, intersex and other marginalized groups.

One unanticipated result from this workshop was how much the participants bonded with each other through table fellowships, social events and listening to other queer voices, the participants formed deep relationships and a support network for each other that have continued to this day.

(Second Project) Special Issue of in God's image on Queer Theologies (December 2015)

Dr. Joseph N. Goh and I accepted the invitation from AWRC to be the guest editors for the special issue of *in God's image on Queer Theologies* published in December 2015. This special issue showcases the works of nine emerging scholars and activists from Asia and Latin America who engage with socio-political and cultural issues from a queer theological perspectives. This issue features the lived realities of LGBTIQ people and their experiences of God and a clearer sense of self-identity for them as both LGBTIQ and people of faith. A professor shares insights and strategies on her pedagogical practices as well as her approaches to doing queer theology to empower queer voices in Hong Kong. This issue also shows how "queer" can be deployed as a critical theological methodology to re-read religio-historical, socio-cultural and scriptural narratives and personages, lived religion and film texts in relation to sexuality, expand ideas of community, love, scripture and intra-LGBTIQ diversity.⁶

In this issue, the contributors, Joseph and myself affirm the significance of queer theologies. Queer people are often theologically oppressed and excluded because the mentality of heteronormativity claims that theology can never interlace with LGBTIQ issues. The collaborations of writers doing queer theologies in critical reflection of their own contexts affirm the importance of queer voices, experiences, insights and knowledge in the task of theologizing.

In Conclusion

Theology should not be *talking about God* as an abstract concept of the divine. The conceptualization of God and theologies are based on actual experiences, and queer theologies are based on the theological articulations of LGBTIQ people in light of their experiences. This paper has demonstrated that in doing queer theologies in the context of Hong Kong, as well as in collaboration with other countries in Asia, queer people can affirm their sexualities and identities are good, they can free each other from heterosexist domination and negative categorization, and work together towards social justice for LGBTIQ people.

Thank You!

⁶ Joseph N. Goh and Pearl Wong eds., *Queer Theologies*, in *God's image*, vol.34, No.2, (December 2016),2-3.

