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Review of Adrian Thatcher (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Theology, Sexuality, and Gender*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2014, xi + 736 pp., ISBN 978-0-19-966415-3

BY MARCO DERKS, UTRECHT UNIVERSITY, THE NETHERLANDS

Thatcher has done an amazing job by bringing together many of the leading scholars in the field, even though, as he explains (14f.), a certain ecclesiastical and geographical imbalance has turned out to be inevitable in the process – which is just another reason why theological reflection on sexuality and gender is so seriously needed. This handbook does not – and does not intend to – provide an overview of how sexuality and gender are constructed, evaluated or experienced in different religions, but aims to be primarily a work of *Christian theology*: its sources and objects of reflection are taken from the Christian Church and its tradition, and most contributions use primarily theological methods instead of those from the broader field of religious studies or the humanities and social sciences in general. However, although Thatcher explains that the book ‘takes for granted that God is, that God is revealed in Jesus Christ, and that God’s Spirit is at work in Church and world’ (3), this is simply not the case for most contributions in part II (on/from disciplines other than theology) and certainly not for those in part VI (on/from religions other than Christianity).

After Thatcher’s introductory chapter, the first part (‘Methods’) continues with three programmatic and provocative chapters that show what *theologies* of gender and sexuality can look like. Borrowing a distinction from Medieval mystic Meister Eckhart, Stuart discusses the biological essentialism of Barth and Pope John Paul II (*via positiva*) and the divine disappearance into the erotic in the work of Heyward and Isherwood (*via negativa*) in order to argue for a *via creativa*, in which ‘the divine is manifest through specific types of sexual relations and human beings find their completion in such relationship’ (24). In her chapter, ‘The Theological Study of Gender’, Beattie argues that ‘theology must ask what is needed to repair the ruptured relationship between language and materiality, and between self and neighbour, without reinscribing bodies within the exhausted sexual essentialisms of modernity’ (46). And if, after these two chapters, you still believe that theology is a stumbling block in discussing issues of sexuality, then meet Rogers. Never mind he mainly repeats his argument

unfolded in his magnificent *Sexuality and the Christian Body* (1999) and never mind there are some questions about sexuality he leaves unaddressed – Rogers points the way for a *better* theology in explaining why the Bible should *not* be left unread; that ‘*Deus non est in genere*, (...) God does not belong in a gender’ (57); that we should turn to traditional Christology to escape ‘mid-twentieth-century gender binaries’ (59); and so on.

The book’s organizing principle being that of a correlation between ‘secular and theological studies in a manner which is intended to be mutually beneficial’ (5), Part II brings in relevant insights from academic disciplines other than theology – although theology is, of course, already multidisciplinary by nature. Besides contributions on biology, psychology, anthropology, and sociology, two philosophers (Nielsen & Norton) discuss the relation between sex and gender, mainly through the work of two leading (‘gender nominalist’) feminist philosophers: Butler and Alcoff. In his chapter on queer theory – an inherently hard-to-define, cross-disciplinary, intersectional, constructionist and highly critical approach to sex, gender, sexuality, and other anthropological categories – Cheng sketches four characteristics of queerness: ‘identity without essence’, ‘transgression’, ‘resisting binaries’, and ‘social construction’ (155–159). However, it remains unclear *who* does the queering – Queer Theorists? Christ? Queer folks? – and whether they do this consciously and deliberately. Moreover, although he wants to take Lee Edelman’s warning against ‘any effort to create “a communal site”, a “safe harbour”, or an “image of home”’ seriously (154), Cheng argues that ‘[b]isexual, transgender, and intersex voices *inherently* resist the binaries of heterosexual v. homosexual (sexual orientation), male v. female (gender identity), and man v. woman (biological sex)’ (162; emphasis added), ascribing to these ‘groups’ a kind of natural inability to reinforce such binaries upon others as well as upon themselves – a capacity of *non posse peccare*, as St. Augustine would have put it.

The volume proceeds with four chapters on the biblical world. Against those who believe that the Bible has a unified concept of marriage – or even one that can be equated with the modern understanding of marriage – Stone explains that the Hebrew Bible doesn’t even have ‘any single word (...) that corresponds in a straightforward way to the English word “marriage”’ (174). When English translations speak of ‘husband’ and ‘wife’, the Hebrew either has ‘man’ and ‘woman’ – words that, in themselves, don’t indicate a marital relationship – or it speaks of the husband as ‘master’ or ‘lord’ over his wife. It would have been interesting if Stone had related these latter terms to the meaning of ‘helper’, a word that, according to some biblical scholars, qualifies the relationship of Yahweh with the (male) psalmist (Psalm 118: 7) and that of Eve with Adam (Genesis 2: 18) as less hierarchical. Compelling in the chapter ‘Same-sex Relations in the Biblical World’ is not the way Jennings takes the edge off conservative readings of ‘anti-gay’ biblical passages, but how he connects several examples of homoeroticism and gender bending in the Hebrew and Christian Bible.

In the fourth part, ‘Sexuality and Gender in Christian Tradition’ – note the appropriate omission of the definite article! – the editor and contributors have made excellent choices with respect to sources and periods. Whereas Kuefler shows that ‘almost all of the Church Fathers deemed sex and marriage inferior to virginity, chastity, and celibacy’ (244), Karras argues that the Medieval ‘praise of virginity has the tone of a losing battle’ (280). Kuefler also provides the interesting suggestion that ‘[i]n their lumping together of both partners’ – i.e., not

only the penetrated but also the penetrating partner – ‘as equivalent in sin (...), the Church Fathers might be considered as having helped to establish a new type of homosexual identity’ (249).

Part V discusses contemporary controversies in five denominations or strands in world Christianity: the Roman Catholic Church, the Anglican Communion, Pentecostals, Evangelicals, and the Black Church – Orthodoxy being notably absent. For those less familiar with the characteristics of different Christian denominations – and that does not necessarily exclude theologians themselves – it might have been helpful if the authors had explicated the factors that explain why and how certain issues of gender and sexuality have been addressed in particular denominations. For example, it is only in their conclusion that Kay & Hunt explain – in one sentence – that ‘Pentecostals have historically held a strong position on holiness’ (373). In this respect, Harris’ chapter on Black Churches in the U.S.A. stands out in explaining why especially homosexuality is such a taboo in many Black Churches: they are cautious not to trigger any accusation of sexual excess, because of a long history of sexual stigmatization. So whereas male homosexuality is being seen as a giving up of one’s privilege – and, thereby, threatening the privilege of other men – lesbianism is being seen as giving up one’s femininity viz. procreativity – and, thereby, threatening that of other women (399ff.).

In Part VI (‘Inter-Religious Conversations’) we do not, as Thatcher promises in his introduction, encounter ‘*conversations with* some of the non-Christian faiths’ (11; emphasis added), but contributions on, or from within, other faiths, and with very few explicit connections to Christianity. One exception is Barlas’ chapter on Islam – or actually on the Qur’an and its anti-patriarchal *episteme*: whereas, according to some Christian feminists, the othering of women in Christianity has its roots in Eve’s derivative status in the creation story, Barlas argues that the Qur’an’s creation story implies an *ontological* gender equality (437f.).

Especially some chapters in the two final parts made me raise some questions about the coherence of this volume. First, there are hardly any cross-references between chapters, so when readers choose a few chapters as their first choice, they will be less challenged to look further. Second, and more important, most contributors show no awareness of the content of the other chapters – or even certain significant contributions in the field in general. This sometimes leads to painful situations. In her argument about sexual pleasure’s ‘ethical potential to foster more just and healing ways of being in the world’ (511), Kamitsuka seems to provide a more thorough account of justice than Cooper-White in the preceding chapter (‘Violence and Justice’). If theologians Lawler & Salzmann had taken the implicit warning in the title of the second part (‘What Theologians Need to Know’) seriously and/or had read Beattie’s critique of Roman Catholic ‘new feminism’, would they still have provided such a simplistic, confusing or downright inadequate definition of sex, gender and sexuality (pp. 558f.)? If not, they might, among others, have broadened the scope of their chapter on ‘People Beginning Sexual Experience’ from sexual experiences of adolescents to that of children. And had they read the other contributions in Part VIII (‘Sexual Theologies for All People’), would they still have argued that ‘[t]he two main contemporary alternatives to heterosexual marriage are cohabitation and same-sex union’ (557)?

One of the richest and most inspiring contributions is Sigurdson’s chapter, ‘Desire and Love’. Providing a careful and thorough reading of St. Augustine, Nygren, Williams and Žižek, he explains how, in the (Christian) West, ‘through

the emergence of sexuality, *eros* came to be reduced to the immanent eschatology of human reproduction' (525). Although – unsurprisingly – biological reproduction plays a role in most of the chapters, I haven't seen any author relating this explicitly and with a sense of urgency to the exponential growth of the world's population that we have seen over the last century. I also believe that more substantial reflections could have been provided on the role of capitalism, (religious and sexual) nationalism, and (post)secularism in shaping dominant conceptions of gender and sexuality in contemporary societies.

It seems that male gay/queer theologians, such as Cheng, Loughlin, and Rogers, more easily reclaim traditional Christian doctrines than Isherwood and Robinson, two female theologians who both emphasise the need to develop theologies out of the *lived experiences* of lesbians and bisexuals respectively. Having said this, the worst thing I can do is raising my small gay voice by asking Isherwood why she doesn't help her readers to imagine what the lived experiences of 'lesbian men' and 'straight lesbians' (634) might look like. As if I can't make things any worse, my question to Robinson would be whether it is fair to assert that, '[I]like the mainstream theology to which it responds, gay, lesbian and queer theologies have failed to be knowledgably inclusive of bisexuals' (646) and to substantiate this claim by discussing only a few examples from decades ago (McNeill 1976; Heyward 1979; Goss 1993). Is it fair to speak of 'the triumphalism and biphobia of gay and lesbian theology' – note the singular! – and then to claim 'an intersectional lens' as if it was a bisexual invention (649)? Such scholarly bitch fights can have a wrong effect on readers less familiar with LGBTQIA – I'm not forgetting anyone, am I? – theologies. On the other hand, what they do show is that there are serious issues at stake, that the plurality of genders and sexualities can easily be forgotten, and that this area is as polyphonic as theology can and should be.

This brings me to some final remarks about the general scope of this volume. First, in some chapters either gender or sexuality seems to move to the background as a conceptual focus – often without explanation. For example, reflections on sexuality are limited in the chapter on sociology (Trzebiatowska), absent in the chapter on philosophy (Nielsen & Norton), and even the chapter 'Doctrine and Sexuality' (Rogers) seems to be conceptually more concerned with gender. Moreover, in the chapters on Islam (Barlas) and Hinduism (Bose), there's no discussion of same-sex sexuality at all. Of course, this is partly a matter of limited space. However – and this is my second and more fundamental remark – I have missed a conceptual reflection on the *relation* between gender and sexuality. Thatcher doesn't explain why this volume is on (theology,) sexuality, and gender – not primarily on sexuality or gender, or on the relation between either sexuality or gender and other categories (race, class, etc.). It might be because in many Western churches especially issues related to gender and/or sexuality are often most controversial. However, we also need to be critical of this all too happy conceptual marriage between sexuality and gender.

Still this comprehensive and colourful collection of 41 essays has the potential to reach far beyond theologians as its primarily intended readers and embodies the promise of the significant role theologians can, do and should play in the study of religion, gender and sexuality.