

Book Review | Samuli Korkalainen

## Queer reflections on liturgical theology and worship practices

**Cones, Bryan (ed.) with Fennema, Sharon R., Haldeman, W. Scott & Burns, Stephen (co-eds) (2023) *Queering Christian worship: Reconstructing liturgical theology*. New York: Seabury Books.**

Even though queer theology has been established and practised for decades, it is astonishing how little it has affected mainstream practice in Christian churches, worship services and liturgy. However, it would also be wrong to claim that no influence has been felt at all. Scholarship once excluded from, and overlooked by academia has established its place in liturgical theology and has had an impact on Christian practice in some assemblies. Queer worship can enrich the sometimes-rigid liturgy of many churches by being more direct, and through not shying away from the broad variety of queer expression, sexual and interpersonal. Nevertheless, there is still a long way to go, also here in the Nordic countries, and I am afraid that the journey will be arduous.

For that reason, it is truly remarkable that an anthology with the title *Queering Christian worship: Reconstructing liturgical theology* was published last year. It is a fascinating collection of essays written by leading scholars in queer theology and liturgical studies. The texts strengthen the distinctive voices of LGBTQIA2S+<sup>1</sup> Christians who are transforming traditional liturgical practices, such as preaching, administering the sacraments, and music. The volume explores the growing impact of the queer approach on Christian rituals, and provides examples of existing liturgical practices. The book also looks ahead towards potential futures. Well-reasoned, introspective, and even critical considerations examine controversies that arose when queer reflection on liturgy and more inclusive worship methods were introduced.

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<sup>1</sup> Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and/or gender expansive, queer and/or questioning, intersex, asexual, two-spirit, and all those who identify themselves outside of 'normative' understandings of sex, gender, and sexual orientation.

The volume starts with an introductory part, entitled 'Listening'. The starting position is found in two previously published essays, 'Ordo and coyote' by Gordon W. Lathrop, and 'Queer worship' by Siobhan Garrigan. Both of these essays have influenced many of the other authors of the volume. The second part, 'Practicing', introduces a series of case studies dealing with the worship of different denominations conducted in bolder and more inclusive ways, also focusing on certain parts of the liturgy, such as Bible readings, preaching, and congregational song. The last part of the book, 'Proposals', examines future horizons and latent possibilities of queer liturgical theology and practice.

The most interesting article for readers of *Hymnologi – Nordisk tidsskrift* is probably 'Queer congregational song: Past celebrations, current resources, and hopes for the future' by Stephanie A. Budwey. Budwey is an academic scholar, and an Episcopal church musician. In her research, she has been focusing on the relationships between social justice issues, liturgy, and the arts. She has examined intersex issues and theology, Marian hymnody, queer congregational song, and Saint Wilgefortis as a queer image for today. Budwey was a member of the working group that created the collection *Songs for the holy other: Hymns affirming the LGBTQIA2S+ community*, that can be downloaded on [the website of the Hymn Society in the United States and Canada](#).

Budwey defines queer congregational song as 'songs and hymns by, for, or about the LGBTQIA2S+ community'. Using the words of Cameron Partridge, she describes congregational song as one place in worship where LGBTQIA2S+ people can 'hear their humanity echoed, making them feel included rather than erased from worship'. However, the reality is that these minorities are more often made to feel invisible, excluded, or erased from worship. The reason is not that they are necessarily told that they are not welcome. Unfortunately, it often happens that even in inclusive worship services, LGBTQIA2S+ people are not named in prayers, texts, or songs, nor are their lives reflected, which makes them feel like outsiders. This topic is also pondered in other essays of the anthology.

Budwey begins with the history of queer congregational song, a history spanning at least fifty years. A forerunner was the Metropolitan community church (MCC), established in 1968, that today is an international LGBTQIA2S+-affirming Protestant church with over 200 member congregations in 37 countries, including in every Nordic country. Since the 1970s, inclusive and liberating texts have been written and published by the MCC, and often paired with familiar evangelical hymn tunes. However, the style of music had been varied widely and covers many genres. Budwey gives a number of examples from this rich hymnodic history.

Budwey then turns towards current resources, and expands the perspective to include other denominations, and continents as well. A sad reality is that almost without exception, queer congregational songs are missing in denominational hymnals, even though some of them may contain general songs of inclusion. For that reason, specific collections of queer songs have been published in different countries and denominations. Budwey introduces many of them, mainly from North America, but also from Europe and Latin America. One of them is the *Songbook* of the European Forum of LGBT Christian groups, published in 2021, which contains thirteen songs. Budwey also shows that many songs from the Taizé community are popular in LGBTQIA2S+ communities because, according to Kittredge Cherry, they are 'multilingual and decentralized, embodying the queer values of diversity, internationalism, and equality'.

Budwey concludes with hopes for the future. She introduces scholars who have focussed on inclusive language, and have acknowledged the still valid need 'to move beyond the binary and toward the spectrum in the language of congregational song'. The issue is broad, and is not only about creating new texts but also finding ways to revise existing lyrics. Budwey anticipates and hopes for more hymns and songs written and composed by LGBTQIA2S+ people that voice their experiences. She also hopes that in future queer congregational song, on the one hand, LGBTQIA2S+ people are named, and on the other hand, masculine, feminine, and nongendered language is used for God 'to show that the Divine encompasses *all* sexes, genders, and sexual orientations'.

Music-related issues are also discussed in some of the other articles in the volume. Of particular interest is Karl Hand's essay 'Queer Pentecostal worship'. According to Hand, Pentecostal worship music does not usually aim to teach theology through song because the understanding of worship is 'an intimate encounter with God's manifest presence'. For that reason, the queer-affirming and liberating style of hymnody, and the inclusive and emancipatory language of queer songs and hymns do not necessarily function in Pentecostal context. However, many Pentecostal worship songs can be embraced by queer people through feelings and experiences when, for instance, a song 'delivers healing to people wounded by church rejection over issues of sexuality and gender'.

In the Nordic churches, there are few that practice queer congregational song or even reflect on queer liturgy, nor is the topic discussed or examined much, even though there is a strong tradition of academic feminist and queer theological discourses and associated research. Hopefully, this fine anthology can and will generate discussion and, above all, influence and inspire future liturgical practices in the Nordic countries.