

# Contemporary Theological Approaches to Sexuality

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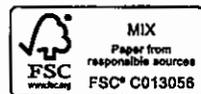
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## 21 More than a divine ménage à trois

### Friendship, polyamory, and the doctrine of the Trinity

*Hugo Córdova Quero and Joseph N. Goh*

#### Introduction

The doctrine of the Trinity is one of the pillars of the Christian faith. It encompasses both the relation of the divine persons to and with each other, and the relationship between the divine and creation. The Trinity has often been taken as a paradigm for relationality and community among human beings. Nevertheless, this seemingly “universal” paradigm after which churches and believers model their lives has often excluded queer individuals and communities. In this chapter, we use “queer” in several ways. First, we use it in reference to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and diverse queer subjects. Second, we deploy “queer” in terms of resistance to, and subversion of heteronormativity, heteropatriarchy and heterosexism in social and theological identities and notions.

Through the centuries, there seems to be a heteronormative tone to this doctrine that prevents queer individuals from being reflected in the divine in issues of relationship. More importantly, the inroads gained in the equal marriage movement around the globe (Argentina 2010, Belgium 2003, Brazil 2013) as well as a growing acceptance of relationships and lifestyles that can be understood as homonormative also seem to invalidate relationships that do not resemble either the heterosexual dictum of legal marriage or the paradigms of exclusive relationships. We suggest that the equal marriage movement may have already itself been coopted by a heteronormative perspective with the support of an emerging homonormativity. Here, we abide by Lisa Duggan’s understanding of homonormativity as “a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (Duggan, 2002, 179). Such an ideology seems to have denounced alternative performances of sexuality such as casual sexual liaisons, bisexuality, and polyamory in favor of more “decent” and “respectable” forms of queer living. As such, heteronormativity is reinscribed in new forms, even from within queer communities themselves.

Our theological interest in polyamory as practiced in queer communities furthers the conversation of queer theologians such as Robert E. Goss, who offers an image of Christ as a “multi-partnered bridegroom” (2004, 61) who is polyamorously united to innumerable Christians as his bride, the Christian Church. Goss also suggests that polyamorous queer believers provide “eschatological visions of sex in heaven” (Goss, 2004, 54) which are not bound by prevalent heteropatriarchal and heterosexist trappings. The eschatological dimension of polyamory in Goss’ mind alludes to how normative impositions of hierarchy and inequality in this present life will cease to exist in the next. Differing slightly from Goss’ angle, our chapter addresses a theological perspective of polyamory by imaginatively reconstructing the notion of the Trinity in relation to ideas of perichoresis, friendship and polyamory. We ask questions such as: Can the Trinity be understood as and beyond a divine *ménage à trois* that enlightens and supports other non-normative relationalities? And can polyamorous arrangements be imaginatively read as representative of the inner life of God? Interrogating the doctrine of the Trinity from this standpoint enables us to engage in an exercise of queering and decolonizing the doctrine of the Trinity from heteronormative norms. Thus, we problematize and destabilize the theological models of classical systematic theology, as well as lay the ground for a reappropriation and liberation of this doctrine for queer individuals and communities. In what follows we briefly trace the roots of the doctrine of the Trinity in its historical context in order to (re)imagine and enlighten current understandings of relationalities among polyamorous queer believers. We then read this doctrine from a theology of friendship that upholds and values polyamorous relationships. We conclude that the doctrine of the Trinity offers us helpful possibilities for the lives of polyamorous queer believers.

### Our location and strategy

As queer men of faith who grew up in different parts of the world, our experiences and knowledge of the Trinity are important points of entry to the doctrine itself. Paul Ricoeur, following Edmund Husserl, has affirmed that all texts have multiple layers of meaning and a reader can access these layers through manifold points of entry (Ricoeur, 1991, 50). Latina theologian Orlando O. Espín postulates that the act of theologizing is “an ongoing conversation with many partners—who interrupt, challenge, question, or agree, sometimes agreeing to disagree, always seeking to understand in order to live, act, and transform the world” (2014, xvi–xvii). As theologians and believers, we are emboldened by these scholars to approach the text of the Trinity with such expansive and transgressive mindsets.

Nevertheless, we acknowledge that our ideas have not always demonstrated a desire to meaningfully interrogate and expand normative ideas of the

Trinity. Goh ministered for almost a decade among the predominantly indigenous *Bidayûh* Roman Catholics in remote and urban areas of Malaysia, in which his theological ideas, articulations and performances were gripped by a male representation of the Trinity as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Goh notes how the conceptualization of the Trinity by *Bidayûh* Roman Catholics remained unchanged from the days of the earliest missionaries. *Tapa* [God] was incontestably *Sama’* [Father] because He created everything. *Anak* [Son] proceeded from *Sama’* and saved the world. *Roh Kudus* [Holy Spirit] was a mystical figure that was sent by *Sama’* and the *Anak* to sanctify the world and carry on the mission of Christ. God was relegated to a mystery which did not require as much comprehension as it did unquestioning acceptance. In his years as a Roman Catholic religious priest, the idea of the Trinity was a fail-safe for Goh, as it retained the infinite mystery of “necessary” detachment. One could never understand God in God’s fullness, and that ensured a sense of “security and distance” from the Godhead.

On the other hand, for Córdova Quero, the doctrine of the Trinity was a label that appeared very late in his experience of the divine. He would read theology books for fun as a teenager from the library of his grandfather, a life-long minister. It was then that he discovered that the relationship between the Jesus of his faith, God—whom Jesus called *su padre* [his father]—and *el Espíritu Santo* [the Holy Spirit], so present in the daily lived experiences at a Pentecostal Church, was labeled as “Trinity”. His experience was closer to what is theologically known as the *Regula Fidei* or rule of faith as compared to the later theological edifice of the Patristic musings. In time, his faith experience led him to embrace Catholicism as a tradition, but not without beginning to question the notorious heteropatriarchal tone upon which the doctrine seemed to have been built. While ministering to homeless people in downtown Buenos Aires, Latin American immigrants in Richmond, California, or Pacific Islander immigrants in Honolulu, Hawai’i, Córdova Quero found out that not only was the connection to humanity often lost from this doctrine, but also that many queer believers were ostracized from that belief because of their sexuality. The image of the Trinity, a divine community of equals reaching out to humanity, was absent in the pastoral praxis of the religious communities he was serving. This led him to pursue academic research to understand the connection between theo(ideo)logical dicta and liberating praxis of trinitarian spirituality.

As queer believers, theologians and ministers, our knowledge and faith questioning have led us to further explore this mystery. We take as our inspiration Espín’s notion of *traditioning*, in which tenets of the faith are not seen as static truths, but as “time-bound and culture-molded attempts by one generation or community to witness to another generation or community what the first regards as ‘our faith’” (2014, 9). As such, “tradition” is a process of listening and learning, as well as boldly suggesting new ways of understanding God and the human–divine relationality by drawing on

actual human experiences and contexts. Hence, with that queer-like understanding of “tradition” in mind, we are eager to see how lived experiences of queer people can become a resource for the journey of theologizing. We investigate what the Trinity means to queer people, and how relationships that do not abide by socio-cultural expectations of sexuality can mirror the triune life of God. We investigate how such relationships can, in turn, be prophetic to all non-heteronormative relationships.

### Legacy: a brief overview of the doctrine of the Trinity

As it is perceived as an integral part of our Christian inheritance, the doctrine of the Trinity is frequently conveyed through the learning of faith. As a consequence of its familiarity, we rarely analyze or question its significance. Cognizant that this doctrinal concept was developed after many years of theological reflection as well as political negotiations, we are interested to briefly pursue its evolutionary character and unpack its meaning and relevance from queer perspectives in the twenty-first century. Before addressing the doctrine of the Trinity from the perspective of John Damascene and his use of *perichoresis*, we will briefly describe the contributions of some of the Patristic writers who in the patristic period paved the way for the development of this doctrine.

The Gospel of John prefigured the understanding of a triune God in the words of Jesus during his “priestly prayer”:

I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their word, that they may all be one; even as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

(John 17:20–21 NRSV)

For us, this quotation from John is an encapsulation of the idea of a Trinitarian God. The relation that Jesus and the Father share is the foundation for relationality among the followers of Jesus. It also implies the relationality and unity of his followers with Jesus himself and with the Father. This latter is rendered even more visible through the Incarnation of Christ. The final goal is to unify the whole of creation with God. This quotation from the Gospel of John cannot be called a trinitarian dogmatic statement *per se*; that would constitute an anachronism. Nevertheless, the theology we find in it contains the elements for what would later become the *Regula Fidei*, the main statement for the production of the doctrine of the Trinity. The problem with John’s statement in this quotation arises in relation to a heteropatriarchal view of gender and sexuality.

Nonetheless, due to the vagueness of this evidence of the Trinity in the Scriptures and the ambiguities present in the *Regula Fidei*, it took theologians

many years and many councils to formulate the doctrine of the Trinity and explain it more clearly. The doctrine of the Trinity is thus the fruit of faith looking for the understanding of its belief. Nevertheless, in order to attain this understanding of faith, many details had to be considered to achieve the widest possible consensus on an idea of God. Despite all these efforts, no explanation of God was totally satisfactory for all sectors of the Christian Church. There were instances of agreement and dissidence, in which the respective advocates claimed that their own interpretation was the correct one. Hence, minority views always coexisted with majority decisions. It is problematic to use the terms “orthodoxy” (correct doctrine) and “heresy” in this period because they are the result of processes of power where some defined themselves as “owners” of the correct Christian doctrine while defining those who did not fit into this category as “owners of wrong doctrines” (Lyman, 1999, 46).

We cannot avoid affirming that the patristic period was a time of ecclesiastical and theological ferment. Basically, there were two main issues of discussion for the early Church: the Trinitarian contention, and the Christological “problem.” The writings we have received from that period are some of the richest resources for understanding these concerns—as well as others related to ecclesiology, mission, and Bible interpretation. Yet, they evince the position of those who “won” and thus “colonized” the discussions, and, sadly, most of the writings that were deemed as non-orthodox may have been lost forever. Patristic writers can be divided into two main branches: the Greek Fathers and the Latin Fathers. Three aspects of this distinction are important here:

- 1 *Language*: Greek—the language of the colonizer—was spoken for the most part in the *Eastern Churches* and Latin was the language of the *Western Churches*. This is noteworthy, because all theological reflections are expressed in a concrete language that carries out a particular worldview and cultural sentiment, both of which are overt in the subjects of discourse and covert in the ways the language is used.
- 2 *Geographical location*: People from different geographical locations respond to different cultural, sociological, economic, and historical processes, and these differences construct their theological reflections in particular ways.
- 3 *Centers of power in the Christian Church*. Each episcopal see was the origin of a different school of thought. These Sees were Rome, Alexandria, Antioch, Constantinople, and Carthage. As the main voices from which the arising orthodoxy was made, we can discern how the tendencies and particular emphases of each of these schools of thought influenced the theological arena in Patristic times.

All of these elements are present in shaping the doctrine of the Trinity. Of specific importance is the aforementioned main division among the Patristic

writers into two branches: Greek Fathers and Latin Fathers. This division led to a required exercise in translation between them in order to make the differing concerns of theologians comprehensible to each other. The fruits of such theological reflections were monumental, although the main objectives were not always reached. Language was one of the main obstacles to understanding each other, as the heuristic categories used to explain the doctrine of the Trinity were deeply entrenched in philosophies deeply imbued in particular cultures. This led twentieth-century theologians to identify culture as an intrinsic element of this doctrine (MacKenzie, 1987, 77). Allow us to briefly highlight the main positions that resonated throughout the Christian Church in patristic times.

#### *The doctrine of the Trinity in Western thought: Tertullian and Augustine*

Among the many theologians who wrote about the doctrine of the Trinity in the West, the works of Tertullian of Carthage and Augustine of Hippo emerged as the leading voices in patristic times.

#### *Tertullian*

The theological reflection of Tertullian (c.160–220) led to what would be the clearest Trinitarian formula in Western theology: “one substance, three persons.” Although Tertullian did not create the term “Trinity,” he is the first to offer a way to define it. To address his topic, Tertullian begins by introducing two summarized elements from the arena of jurisprudence: “substance” and “person.” According to Justo González, Tertullian’s use of the term “substance” does not imply a metaphysical question as much as it refers to the *property* and the *right* that a *person* has (Gonzalez, 1992, 177). There is a deep debate among Christian theologians on how to understand the term “*person*.” For example, Richard Fermer analyzes the term *person* from his critique of the work of John Zizioulas and Colin Gunton on the doctrine of the Trinity. He outlines a clear distinction not only between both twentieth-century theologians, but also among Patristic writers. His main observation is that we cannot project anachronistically a modern notion of personhood—that is, individual center of consciousness—to the understanding of the term in the Patristic era. Thus, Fermer affirms that,

‘Personal’ is taken to refer to the ability to have certain intentional states, analogous to human intentional mental states, to be able to relate to another person or personal existence in a dialogical manner, but without reverting to the language of consciousness.

(1999, 178)

In following these discussions, we should understand the term “person” in Tertullian’s work as a “juridical person,” in other words, as a subject with

the right to and possession of substance or property. With the incorporation of this term—from this particular understanding—Tertullian affirmed the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit in a way that did not deny their distinctions. In *Adversus Praxean* he enunciated his theological contribution in the following manner:

This economy arranges unity in trinity, regulating three, Father, Son and Spirit—three, however, not in substance, but in attitude; not in office, but in appearance (*species*); —but of one nature and of one reality and of one power, because there is one God from whom these ranks and attitudes and appearances are derived in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

(Tertullian, in Souter, 1920, 30)

In this way Tertullian maintains distinction between the persons of the Trinity even in the face of damaging their unity. Tertullian, through his theological thought, advances his contemporaries for many centuries in the understanding of the Trinity. Thus Tertullian defines the route for the doctrine of the Trinity for *Western* thought, in a way that will not vary until Augustine’s theology will embrace the contribution of Tertullian and express it in his monumental work.

#### *Augustine*

Augustine of Hippo (c. 354–430) presented one of the strongest trinitarian positions in Western theology. His starting point in *De Trinitatis* was a statement about the Oneness of God, justified by his claim that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit share the same substance. He called this Oneness the “immanent Trinity” (*ad intra*). Augustine also suggests that God transcends God’s self in the economy of creation and salvation. Moreover, for Augustine, the persons of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit assume different roles in creation. He called this the “economic Trinity” (*ad extram*). Therefore, this economy is what God makes outside of the Godhead for administering and governing creation, which is made with and through the interaction of the three Persons of the Trinity acting as one God:

The Father is and the Son is and the Holy Spirit the same as the Father or the Son. So human inadequacy searched for a word to express three what, and it said substances or persons. By these names it did not wish to give any idea of diversity, but it wished to avoid any idea of singleness; so that as well as understanding unity in God, whereby there is said to be one being, we might also understand trinity, whereby there are also said to be three substances or persons.

(Rotelle, 1991, 51–94)

In this description, St. Augustine struggles with the problem of understanding the Trinity from a concept that relies on *essences*, rather than on the relational aspects, which focus of the understanding put forth by the Cappadocian Fathers. The main concern for St. Augustine was in the Oneness of God.

### *The doctrine of the Trinity in Eastern thought: Athanasius and the Cappadocian Fathers*

The Eastern thought on the trinitarian doctrine represents a highly sophisticated nexus between Christian beliefs and Greek philosophy.

#### *Athanasius*

The Trinitarian and Christological concerns of Athanasius (c. 296–373) arise from his soteriological focus, which he pits against the theological reflection of Arius (Widdicombe, 1997, 459). The statement that only God can save humanity defines the center of the Athanasian doctrine in his writing *Contra Arianos* 11:67 (Schaff and Wace, 1892, 385). For Athanasius, soteriology requires a divine savior to be present amidst creation. The soteriological process, then, began with the Incarnation of Christ and continues with *theosis*—or the process of *divinization* of humanity (LaCugna, 1993, 228). Athanasius did not define a fixed terminology to explain the unity and the multiplicity in the Trinity, a task that would be later fulfilled by the Cappadocian Fathers. Instead, he expressed his Trinitarian thought, which was deeply rooted in the *Regula Fidei* through a statement that sets a clear description for understanding the relationality of the *hypostasis*:

There is, then, a Triad, holy and complete, confessed to be God in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, having nothing foreign or external mixed with it, not composed of one that creates and one that is originated, but all creative; and it is consistent and in nature indivisible, and its activity is one. The Father does all things through the Word in the Holy Spirit. Thus the unity of the holy Triad is preserved. Thus one God is preached in the Church, ‘who is over all, and through all, and in all’ – ‘over all’, as Father, as beginning, as fountain; ‘through all’, through the Word; ‘in all’, in the Holy Spirit. It is a Triad not only in name and form of speech, but in truth and actuality. For as the Father is he that is, so also his Word is one that is and God over all. And the Holy Spirit is not without actual existence, but exists and has true being.

(St. Athanasius, in Shapland, 1951, 134–135)

This trinitarian statement sets a clear description for the understanding of the relationality of the *hypostaseis*. In this passage, St. Athanasius develops

an explanation of the Trinity that, because of its elaborated thought, was taken as a foundation for future trinitarian reflection, especially in the writings of the Cappadocian Fathers. Athanasius’ elaborations have been taken as foundational for future Trinitarian reflection, especially in the writings of the Cappadocian Fathers.

### *The Cappadocian Fathers*

The Cappadocian Fathers, chiefly Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Basil of Caesarea are widely referred to as the fathers of the doctrine of the Trinity. Their Trinitarian discourse is framed in relation to the concerns of their Eastern tradition, and their work includes clear yet non-homogeneous definitions of the use of the terms “*ousia*” and “*hypostasis*.” We tend to think of the Cappadocian Fathers as having a monolithic theology. While their understandings of the Trinity bear similarities, they each have specific understandings of the terminology used for the Trinity.

#### *Basil of Caesarea*

The core doctrinal discussions on the Trinity by Basil of Caesarea (c. 329–379) appear in his letters. His articulation of the formula “an *ousia* and three *hypostasis*” would lead to a definitive solution of the Trinitarian discussion. Although these terms had been used interchangeably in Athanasius’ theology, Basil specifies that they cannot be used as if they were synonymous. In *Epistle 38* to his brother, Gregory of Nyssa, Basil makes a detailed distinction of both terms:

Since, at present, many persons treating of the doctrines relating to the mystery [of the Trinity] make no distinction between the general term of ‘substance’ and the word ‘person’, they fall unto the same presumption, thinking that it makes no difference whether they say ‘substance’ or ‘person.’ ... This, therefore, is our explanation. That which is spoken of in the specific sense is signified by the word ‘person’ [*hypostasis*]. For, because of the indefiniteness of the term, he who says ‘man’ has introduced through our hearing some vague idea, so that, although the nature is manifested by the name, that which subsists in the nature and is specifically designated by the name is not indicated. On the other hand, he who says ‘Paul’ has shown the subsistent nature of the object signified by the name. This, then, is the ‘person’ [*hypostasis*]. It is not the indefinite notion of ‘substance’ [*ousia*], which creates no definite image because of the generality of its significance, but it is that which, through the specific qualities evident in it, restricts and defines in a certain object the general and indefinite, as is often done in many places in Scripture and especially in the story of Job. ... Accordingly, you will not err if you transfer to divine doctrines this principle of differentiation

between substance and person which you have recognized in their relation to human affairs.

(St. Basil, in Way, 1951, 84–85)

Here St. Basil specifies that *ousia* should be used in the same way as the term used for *humanity*, reserving the term *hypostasis* to designate a particular human being. He also offers an explanation of the distinctions between *ousia* and *hypostasis*. In this quotation, St. Basil not only helps us to understand the difference between *ousia* and *hypostasis*, but shows us the particular understandings he has in relation to the other two Cappadocian Fathers.

#### Gregory of Nazianzus

The thought of Gregory of Nazianzus (330–389) emerges in relation to his disputes against the Neo-Arians' movements after the Council of Nicaea, namely the Anomoeans, Homoeans and Semi-Arians. His main theological ideas are captured in his *Theological Speeches*. In the fifth speech, while discussing the question of the Holy Spirit, Gregory explains the preexistence of the Son and Holy Spirit with the Father:

If ever there was a time when the Father was not, then there was a time when the Son was not. If ever there was a time when the Son was not, then there was a time when the Spirit was not. If the One was from the beginning, then the Three were so too.

(Schaff and Wace, 1996, 318)

In this statement, St. Gregory affirms the Trinity while maintaining the Oneness of God. Complications with Gregory's theology arise when he describes the Father as cause (*aitia*) and principle (*arche*), which leads him to conclude that it is from the Father that the divine unity (*monarchia*) begins.

Gregory's positioning of the Father as the origin of the unity (*monarchia*) of the Trinity poses a problem. On the one hand, this position can damage the mutual constitution of the Trinity through *subordinationism*, a theological theory in the second and third centuries that accentuates the inferiority of the Son in relation to the Father. On the other hand, an overemphasis on the differences between the Father and the Son can lead to *monarchianism*, if the distinction of the intra-Trinitarian *persons* is dismissed (Kelly, 1978, 115–123). It is thus important, in order to avoid these two extremes, to talk about the distinctions of the *persons* of the Trinity. When explaining the persons of the Trinity and their mystery, Gregory discusses the distinctions between them by moving beyond notions of *substance* or *nature*:

And when I speak of God you must be illuminated at once by one flash of light and by three. Three in Individualities or Hypostases, if any

prefer so to call them, or Persons [*prosopon*], for we will not quarrel about names so long as the syllables amount to the same meaning; but One in respect of the Substance—that is, the Godhead. For they are divided without division, if I may so say; and they are united in division. For the Godhead is one in three, and the three in one, in whom the Godhead is, or to speak more accurately, Who are the Godhead. Excesses and defects we will omit, neither making the Unity a confusion of Sabellius and from the division of Arius, which are evils diametrically opposed, yet equal in their wickedness. ... For to us there is but One God, the Father, of Whom are all things; and One Lord Jesus Christ, by Whom are all things; and One Holy Ghost, in Whom are all things; yet these words, of, by, in, whom, do not denote a difference of nature ... but they characterize the personalities of nature which is one and unconfused. ... The Father is Father, and is Unoriginated [*agennesia*], for He is of no one; the Son is Son, and is not unoriginated, for He is of the Father. But if you take the word Origin in a temporal sense, He too is Unoriginated, for He is the Maker of Time, and is not subject to Time. The Holy Ghost is truly Spirit, coming forth the Father indeed, out not after the manner of the Son, for it is not by Generation but by Procession [*ekpoureusis*] ... ; for neither did the Father cease to be Unbegotten because of His begetting something, nor the Son to be begotten because He is of the Unbegotten ... nor is the Spirit changed into Father or Son because He proceeds [*ekpempsis*], or because He is God ...

(Schaff and Wace, 1996, 355–356)

Thus, St. Gregory establishes the characteristics of each *person* of the Trinity, describing (a) the Father as not being engendered (*agennesia*), (b) the Son as being engendered (*genesis*) and (c) the Holy Spirit in its procession (*ekpoureusis* / *ekpempsis*).

#### Gregory of Nyssa

Gregory of Nyssa (c. 330–395) develops his Trinitarian discussion with the help of Greek philosophy. Yet, at the same time, he warns us about the dangers of doing this. In order to bring Gregory's Trinitarian insights into the discussion here, we need to look at two of his major works, *About the Holy Trinity* and *That There Are Not Three Gods*. Gregory of Nyssa is very careful to explain that Father, Son and Holy Spirit are not three separate gods, but one God. For him, the unity of the Trinity is safeguarded by the notion of *energia* (will). This notion constitutes a difference with Gregory of Nazianzus for whom the unity of the Trinity was related to the notion of *monarchia*. Gregory of Nyssa expresses the idea of the unity of the Trinity more succinctly in his treatise *On the Holy Trinity*, written to Eustathius:

Godhead is a name derived from operation, as we say that the operation of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit is one, so we say that the Godhead is one: or if, according to the view of the majority, Godhead is the indication of nature, since we cannot find any diversity in their nature, we not unreasonably define the Holy Trinity to be of one Godhead.

(Schaff and Wace, 1996, 329)

There is an important similarity between Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory of Nazianzus regarding relationality. Both express the notion of *schesis* or relationality as a way to describe the members of the Trinity. In the case of Gregory of Nazianzus, he expressed this notion in his *Oratio* 3:16. This notion of relationality is important because it can be seen as a kind of friendship, which is important for our project of looking at God's relationality in the context of justice and equality.

### Perichoresis: the inner life of God

As examined in the previous section, the formation of the doctrine of the Trinity took many turns and negotiations. There is no single understanding of the way that divine community relate among themselves. This certainly presents a great opportunity to explore ways that could relate to non-heteronormative relationalities. We believe that *perichoresis*, also known in Latin as "circumincessio," is the best explanation that conveys an idea of relationality. This in turn can help us to connect human relationships to the divine, including unconventional and non-heteronormative arrangements. When we talk about perichoresis, we are referring to the interpretation by John Damascene (c.675–c.749). John Damascene dedicated a whole section in his *Fount of Knowledge* to dogma; this section is called the *Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* and also known as *De fide Orthodoxa*. Responding to "heretics" in the Christian Church, John Damascene explains his understanding of the Trinity:

For with the uncircumscribed Godhead we cannot speak of any difference in place, as we do with ourselves, because the Persons exist in one another, not so as to be confused, but so as to adhere closely together as expressed in the words of the Lord when He said: "I in the Father and the Father in me." Neither can we speak of a difference in will, or judgment, or operation, or virtue, or any other whatsoever of those things which in us give rise to a definite real distinction. For that reason, we do not call the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost three Gods, but one god, the Holy Trinity, in whom the Son and the Holy Ghost are related to one Cause without any composition or blending such as is the coalescence of Sabellius. For they are united, as we said, so as not to be confused, but to adhere closely together, and they have

their circumincession [*perichoresis*] one in the other without any blending or mingling and without change or division in substance such as the division held by Arius.

(John of Damascus, in Chase, 1958, 187)

John Damascene's particular understanding in this quotation relies in the ability to apply the term perichoresis to the intra-trinitarian persons, instead of applying it to the Father and the Son, as had Gregory of Nazianzus. In the context of the Arian controversy, three centuries before John Damascene and Pseudo-Cyril (hereinafter cited as Ps-Cyril), Gregory of Nyssa also enunciated this understanding of the Father and the Son in a similar way to Gregory of Nazianzus. John Damascene used perichoresis in a similar sense to describe the equal and inseparable, yet not discombobulated union of three divine persons. Jürgen Moltmann summarizes this doctrine as the concept through which we,

grasp the circulatory character of the eternal divine life. An eternal life process takes place in the triune God through the exchange of energies. The Father exists in the Son, the Son in the Father, and both of them in the Spirit, just as the Spirit exists in both the Father and the Son.

(Moltmann, 1993, 175)

This *circulation* of energies implies that God is a community or a fellowship of these three different persons in eternal love.

In a much later development, the Council of Florence was held from 1438 to 1445 with the purpose of unifying the Greek and Latin Churches. As the main goal was the unity of the Churches, the Council assumed as a task to rule over doctrine. In order to overcome the interpretation of the Jacobites—Copts and Ethiopians—who confessed monophysitism, the Fathers of the Council of Florence clarified and promulgated the recognition of perichoresis (Toon, 1989, 599). This Assembly stated in its *Decree for the Jacobites* that perichoresis is the basis for understanding the communion among the three persons of the Trinity:

On account of this unity the Father is wholly in the Son and wholly in the Holy Spirit; the Son wholly in the Father and wholly in the Holy Spirit; the Holy Spirit wholly in the Father and wholly in the Son. None precedes the other in eternity, none exceeds the other in greatness, nor excels the other in power. For it is from eternity and without beginning that the Son has taken His origin from the Father, and from eternity and without beginning that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son.

(Boff, 1988, 75)

Hence, perichoresis is the understanding that the persons of the trinity are one God because they are intimately related, in constant communication

and dialogue. There is a mutual indwelling of the persons of the Trinity. Perichoresis can be further understood as the intra-Trinitarian life of God that spills into humankind. In the myth of Genesis 1:26, we are told that humanity, female and male, is modeled in the image of God. Perichoresis reveals how the communion of the inner God imbues humanity and functions in the whole of humanity. It explains the reality that God is social and communitarian. It enforces the idea of mutuality and equality in friendship. Consequently, perichoresis is important because it provides a basis to help us shape relationality between human beings, and between human beings and God. As humanity is modeled in the image of a social and communitarian God, humanity is called to community and relationality.

*Trinity as perichoretic friendship and polyamory as a praxis of the inner life of God*

To *queer* the Trinity requires us to begin to think about (1) what it implies to be *human* today, and (2) when affirming that humanity has been molded in the image of God, how we understand the Divine amidst our relationalities. The way to begin to understand humanity and God is to take into account issues regarding sexuality and gender performances in the concreteness of our relations. Thus, in summation, we need to be conscious of three situations: (a) If we *mono-sexualize* God, we always already oppress other gender and sexual expressions; (b) if we include the traditional binary *female/male* in the divine image we are only colonizing God from a heterosexist gender norm; and (c) we need to have in mind that all the anthropomorphic descriptions of God are only metaphors, and cannot contain the wholeness of the Divine. Concurrently, when we talk about the Trinity, we also need to acknowledge two more issues. On the one hand, the plurality of the Trinity is the way to address the mechanisms of colonial activities, especially in the decolonization of binaries—the number three is important as a symbol for this distortion—and on the other hand, theologians as well as religious leaders need to embrace all human beings, including their multiple sexualities and gender performances. Polyamorous relationships help us in understanding community and relationality, particularly friendship. For this purpose, we see the notion of perichoresis as a useful resource which can assist us in our goal of building communities of friends seeking justice and solidarity in which non-heteronormative relations can be acknowledged. Relationalities, like friendship, modeled after the doctrine of the Trinity may transform into liberating spaces against the dicta of both heteronormativity and homonormativity. Thus, taking into account perichoresis as the understanding of the *being* of God could also help to build communities that would disrupt hegemonic notions of relationalities.

Feminist queer theologians provide valuable insights into how the notion of friendship is particularly helpful as a Christian framework for same-sex relationships, in contrast with “traditional” marriages. Elizabeth Stuart,

Mary Hunt, and Laishan Yip, for instance, highlight the qualities of mutuality, equality, loving acceptance, community, transformation, non-exclusivity, honesty, flexibility, other-directedness and justice-seeking as Gospel-inspired pursuits in women’s relationships (Hunt, 1994b, 169–182; Stuart, 1997, 163–180; Yip, 2012, 63–80). In order to take into account the concept of perichoresis, Stuart turns to St. Augustine to recover the word friendship, as it is applied to the Trinity (Stuart, 1995, 241–242). She refers to the Trinity as “three friends dancing a dance of passion” (Stuart, 1995, 243). This image of God, also used by Boff, helps her to think about the Trinity in relation to human beings on both emotional as well as socio-political levels: “We are called to relate to the world in friendship: a relationship which as it grows between people results in mutual and equal acceptance, respect and delight, it is an embodied relationship with social and political repercussions” (Stuart, 1995, 213). Hence, the idea of God as a friend in a trinitarian perspective also requires us to talk about mutual responsibility and interrelation, something that can be perfectly enfleshed in binary relations as well as in multiple non-heteronormative ones.

In a similar way, Mary Hunt also offers us a vision about perichoretic friendship. Her main concern is to speak about friendship among women. Her definition of friendship is as follows: “I mean by friendship those voluntary human relationships that are entered into by people who intend one another’s well-being and who intend that their love relationship is part of a justice-seeking community” (Hunt, 1994a, 29). What is particularly helpful about her definition is that she relates friendship to the project of a *community seeking for justice*. As we saw in Stuart’s work, this affects our social and political life. At the same time, this definition of friendship is related to Hunt’s critique about how it has been traditionally understood in relation to heterosexuality:

Lines blur between friendship, love, eros, romance. What is clear is that friendship has been downplayed in favor of romance on the assumption that friendship was for buddies and romance for heterosexual married couples (or at least those who could be).

(Hunt, 1994a, 30)

Hunt’s critique points to the denunciation of parameters of relationality that do not allow the equal expression of all kind of relationalities, except those who fit into the mandates of hetero-supremacy. However, her critique is not only limited to human beings and their relationalities through different layers of power. Rather, she also turns toward the whole of creation and with this broadening of scope, all relationalities be/come enfleshment of perichoretic love.

While we acknowledge that these theologians speak from women’s experiences, we wish to expand their boundaries and reconsider them from three perspectives:

First, we wish to broaden the friendship qualities of which they speak as imperative ideals for *all* forms of relationality, queer or otherwise. Hence, we wish to articulate the aforementioned qualities as a necessary *radical relational dialogue* between those who are involved in numerous forms of relationality. If the divine community, the Trinity, has the number three as the starting point for relationalities, their very imagery disrupts the preeminence of binary relationalities as the hegemonic ones. Multiple non-heteronormative relationalities as featured in many human societies are also important. A forewarning about this is that we are not seeking either validation or recognition from heteronormativity as if non-heteronormative relationalities were in need of being granted their place. On the contrary, we are seeking to bring to light and visibility to relationalities that have been present within the spectrum of human diversity of millenia. In other words, we seek to destroy the hegemony of binary heteronormative relationalities.

Second, we agree with Stuart's assertion that all friendships are sexual (Stuart, 1996, 309) as they necessarily involve the physical body and its expressions of love. We resist a narrow view of sexuality as a reference to sexual acts, sexual orientation and genitalia, and understand it as a broad reference to relationality between people on diverse, multilayered corporeal levels. The entirety of the material self is involved in friendships. This is important in order to decenter the hegemony of Western aversions towards sexuality, a fact that has censored and condemned the expression of sexual diversity in Western societies. Again, as in the previous paragraph, this does not imply an absence of that diversity but, on the contrary, the presence of a mechanism of invisibilization and denomination that have occluded the free performance of those sexual friendships.

Third, we wish to develop these relational traits as reflections and indicators of the triune life of God. Our boldness in patterning the life of God on human lives stems from our belief in the human-divine resemblance, that "God created humankind in [God's] image ... male and female [God] created them" (Gen. 1:27). While we respect the apophatic dimensions of the divine, we believe that God can be and desires to be known through human lives, and that human lives can know and manifest the life of God. The incarnation of Jesus, the Mirror of the Godhead, attests to this reality. As previously discussed, God is not solitary. Rather, God is social, relational and communitarian within a triumvirate of creativity, integrity and outreach. A radical relational dialogue of life-sharing friendship exists in God, an other-directedness among the three persons in which they live for each other and augment each other's significance through intimate cooperation. There is thus a deep equality and mutuality between the three persons, a complementarity that can only exist because it is premised on a deep love and sense of justice to appreciate each other's personhood, without the need for one to manipulate, control or 'own' the other, or for one to 'clone' the other into the former's image and likeness. It is precisely on these premises that multiple non-heteronormative relationalities such as polyamory build their contract.

Furthermore, as the three persons are constantly inviting the other to greater intimacy and unity, they know each other through and through. Their innermost thoughts are uninhibitedly laid bare in each other's presence within a framework of total honesty. The various persons in God manifest a creative flexibility and freedom to express (themselves) and grow with (each other) in a variety of ways. Our notion of God's flexibility, expression and growth refers to how God does not limit God's love and collaborative efforts to God's self. Rather, these efforts overflow towards a non-exclusive network of relationships with human persons. We underscore scriptural revelations of God as a collaborative creative dynamism in creation, deliverance and inspiration at every moment of history. In this way, the relationship between the three persons—their flexibility, expression and growth—continuously gives birth to, transforms, and is reflected in the lives of human persons who pursue and are receptive to life-giving human qualities in friendships. We reiterate that these dynamics of the inner life of the Trinity manifest a deep perichoretic friendship between themselves, as well as between them and human persons, based on intense and continuous radical relational dialogue that seeks only to love beyond borders. Little wonder therefore, as Stuart asserts, that "the essence of Jesus' ministry was simply befriending" (Stuart, 1997, 171)—a ministry of reminding embodied persons to live and love meaningfully as friends in accordance with God's own inner life according to their own specific life contexts and circumstances.

One major critique to multiple non-heteronormative relationalities such as polyamory is their supposed "lack of commitment and ethics." Nothing is more divergent from reality. For example, Patricia Wilson-Kastner finds *perichoresis* as the foundation of an ethics based on inclusiveness, community and freedom (1983, 131–133). These elements are key concepts for polyamorous friends who strive to en flesh clusters of resistance and disruption, not only against compulsory heterosexuality, but also against colonial thought subtly working in neocolonial and globalizing discourses based on an ever-growing homonormativity. Christianity cannot be outside of this process. Relationalities are built on communitarian decisions, where everyone participates in equality. What is implicit in this statement is that members of a community do not need the approval of the heterosupremacist colonialist ideology in order to embody their relationalities. Egalitarian perichoretic relationships have to promote the dialogue and understanding among different subjects in order to build community, avoiding a ghetto mentality that sometimes colonizes the LGBTT community. If gender and sexuality are performance and fluidity, and humanity mirrors the Trinity, God's friendship with creation also reflects this performance and fluidity. This statement destroys exclusivist images of God and humanity.

With this in mind, we underscore perichoretic friendship as a Trinity-based "model of relating" (Stuart, 1997, 171) for all forms of relationality,

particularly among queer people. The basis of a life-giving, constructive friendship is a mindfulness towards and practice of mutuality, equality, loving acceptance, community, transformation, non-exclusivity, honesty, flexibility, other-directedness and justice-seeking. Many people, including those who identify as queer, are convinced that these qualities can only be harbored within dyadic and/or officially sanctioned arrangements of two men or two women. In contrast with this perception, we believe that the qualities of perichoretic friendship can be pursued and lived out outside of “pair-bonded, monogamous relationships” (Goss, 1997, note 13). They can be imbued by those who choose to live together as a configuration of three or more mutually agreeing partners, such as polyamorous arrangements.

The term “polyamory” relates to the fact that one person can love multiple individuals at the same time, thus expanding emotional, mental and erotic connections beyond “compulsory monogamy.” The term comes from the joining of two words in different languages. “Poly” comes from the Greek πολύ, which means “multiple,” “many,” “several.” “Amory” comes from the Latin word *amāre*, which is one of the terms to indicate the action “to love.” According to Daniel Cardoso, it was in 1953 that the term was used for the first time:

Up to now, the first known bibliographical registry we could find dates back to 1953. In the first volume of the *Illustrated History of English Literature*, by Alfred Charles Ward, Henry VII is called a “determined polyamorist,” when the author comments upon the rising of Protestantism in England – something that has to do with the King’s “polyamorist” behavior, certainly.

(Cardoso, 2011, 17)

Since that moment the term was used on a few occasions from the 1960s to the 1990s. It was from the 1990s that the term came to be noticed (Cascais and Cardoso, 2011). As a critique of patriarchal, gender-essentialist and heterosexist insistence, polyamory is manifested in a variety of ways. Maura I. Strassberg (2003, 440) points out that individuals, couples, triads or groups can act as basic departure points of relationality in polyamory. Individuals, couples, triads and groups can form other dyadic or triadic (or more) connections with different levels of attraction, commitment, sexual involvement and sexual exclusivity. These connections are same-sex and/or opposite-sex. Polyamory thus cannot be simplistically conflated with polygamy, as they destabilize the normative boundaries of polygyny and polyandry. While extremely diverse in configuration, polyamorous relationships place great emphasis on loving relationships in contrast with casual, fleeting sexual liaisons, and require the knowledge and consent of all parties involved (Strassberg, 2003, 452–455).

Jim Haritaworn, Chin-Ju Lin and Christian Klesse define polyamory in the following way:

Polyamory has ... arisen from the confluence of a number of sexually emancipatory discourses. It tries to provide languages and ethical guidelines for alternative lifestyles and sexual and intimate relationships beyond the culture of ‘compulsory monogamy’. At its most basic, the concept of polyamory stands for the assumption that it is possible, valid and worth-while to maintain intimate, sexual, and/or loving relationships with more than one person.

(Haritaworn, Lin, and Klesse, 2006, 518)

We recognize that polyamory, like all forms of relationality, is not without its potential “human” challenges, notably differences, jealousy and conflict. Additionally, there are no precisely coherent socio-cultural or legal dictates for polyamory. Nonetheless, differences do not spell the impossibility of unity. The basic—and frequently adhered to—aspirations and practical characteristics of polyamory provide spaces for queer people to practice the qualities of mutuality, equality, loving acceptance, community, transformation, non-exclusivity, honesty, flexibility, other-directedness and justice-seeking. Those who pursue polyamorous relationships are thus keen on a manner of relationality and life practice that is based on integrity. From a queer theological perspective we suggest that polyamory can be imaginatively expressed as perichoretic friendship. Moreover, we suggest that polyamory can be a way of understanding and explaining the inner, intimate life of God, as well as reflect human–divine relationality. Hence, the Trinity can be understood as a “circulation of energies” within a polyamorously perichoretic friendship.

The three persons of God are points of departure for intra-relationality as individuals. The triadic loving relationship that courses through each of them and which binds one to the other is intense and steady, rather than fleeting. In this sense, the three persons are caught up in an interminable energy of other-directedness. Although distinct and different, all persons in the Trinity are of one mind and heart as a community of friends in honesty, mutuality, equality and knowledge of the other. As Paul Chung points out in the Trinitarian theology of Jürgen Moltmann, the “divine perichoretic unit is an affirmation of differences-in-unity” (Chung, 2002, 133). Rather than a desperate obsession with superiority or leadership over the other, each of the three persons of God relate to each other within an *energia*, a will to live intimately within a matrix of unity, harmony and unconditional love without diminishing each person’s distinctiveness and uniqueness.

The implications for Christian communities are noteworthy. Traditionally in blessings and recognition of families, especially since the first industrial revolution (c.1750), Christianity has taken two individuals—a woman and a man—as the enfleshment of “divinely sanctioned” relationalities. The equal marriage movement has shaken that foundation by also posing two females or two males as enfleshment of that recognition. However, other types of non-heteronormative relationalities have been ostracized until

recently from that recognition. It seems that for many inclusive communities, that inclusion can only proceed when non-heteronormative couples can be homogenized into the heterosexual paradigm. The preeminence and hegemony displayed when narrowly defining coupleship and families as compounds of only two individuals constitute a new binary that erases diversity and forecloses the recognition of other types of relationships. While queering Christianity from polyamorous relationalities, queer theologians, ministers, and lay believers should aim to advance spaces of resistance and distort the long-ingrained hegemony of heteronormativity. The work of David Cunningham when offering a threefold paradigm of action could assist us in moving towards this goal. As specific trinitarian practices, he suggests: (a) Peacemaking, or “[Overcoming the] violence [that] springs from the drive toward homogeneity” (Cunningham, 1998, 234); (b) Pluralizing or “Christianity must not only ‘make room’ for multiple modes of discourse and multiple forms of practice; it is in fact defined by such multiplicity” (ibid., 234); and (c) Persuading, or “[B]ecause the decision of act, even in the midst of difference, can be helpfully illuminated by analogy to the faculty of rhetoric” (ibid., 235). These liberatory practices are key for justice and respect of all human diversity.

Wherever Christians engage in social concerns, liberation will feed God’s yearning for justice, love and life. Justice needs to be in contact with all areas of life, especially spirituality, as a way to recover the power for active action in situations of injustice. This yearning also constitutes the basis for elaborating a speech and praxis that allow Christians to fulfill the task that arises from our commitment to theology. According to Latin American Liberation Theology the task for theology is to transform the world. Boff uses this liberationist understanding of the perichoretic aspect of theology rooted in the action of the Trinity in immanent life as the “inspiration for human society”: “Trinitarian communion is a source of inspiration rather than of criticism of the social sphere. Christians committed to social change based on the needs of majorities; above all, see tri-unity as their permanent utopia” (Boff, 1988, 151).

This also was the basic conviction that guided Gustavo Gutierrez to affirm that the utopia of building community as a just communion of sisters and brothers becomes the goal for transformation of the world in doing justice through economic, social, and political liberation. Although prefigured in Latin American Liberation Theology, the invisibilization of non-heteronormative relationalities was too notorious. Christians seeking liberative actions need to trace back those roots and en flesh them in all types of relationalities.

The polyamorous perichoretic friendship in God overflows to humanity. As a community of divine individuals, God invites human persons towards intimate relationships with God’s self, and extends unconditional love and acceptance to each of them. Human persons who befriend each other on varying levels experience God in qualities of friendship in a variety of their

manifestations, including polyamorous practices, in which the potential for transformation and justice-seeking is present. Hence, one could say that God is three *hypostases* that share one *ousia* of loving, flexible and non-exclusive friendship, both within and beyond themselves. Human persons in various modes of relationality, including in polyamorous relationships, participate in the polyamorous perichoretic friendship of the Trinity. They hold the potential to be transformed into the image of the Godhead. In other words, the pursuit of mutuality, equality, loving acceptance, community, transformation, non-exclusivity, honesty, flexibility, other-directedness, and justice-seeking as qualities of a perichoretic friendship becomes an exercise of theosis for those who are involved in polyamorous relationships. Such queer arrangements of relationality become avenues for incarnating the divine in actual queer lives. It is impossible to fully participate in the life of the Divine if our sexualities and gender performances have to be left aside, and this implies to also recognize that polyamorous relationships are an enfleshment of divine perichoretic love.

In this chapter we have addressed the need for the visibilization of polyamorous relationalities by engaging in a process of tracing back the doctrine of the Trinity from the standpoint of perichoresis and its implications for human life. We have explored how the formation of the doctrine of the Trinity responds to different contextual understandings. Our analysis led us to affirm the notion of perichoresis to be the most significant element in order to recognize non-heteronormative relationalities such as polyamory. Read from this perspective, queer theologies based on notions of friendship become a third space in order to distort theo(ideo)logical and heteronormative binaries that have encased relationalities for millenia. As it is rooted in the doctrine of the Trinity, perichoresis calls for Christians—especially queer believers—to decolonize our relationalities and notions of friendship and partnership, even in the midst of the ever-growing recognition of same-sex marriages. It is very important to remember that our task is to queer and to decolonize heteronormative understanding of relationality from a trinitarian standpoint. This is not to make an adaptation functional to power structures—whether religious or politic/economic—but to bring into the conversation and visibilize non-heteronormative relationships. The importance of polyamorous relations resides in the fact that they convey a sense of trinitarian communities that become a beacon against both heteronormativity and homonormativity. Thus, sexual friendships bring trinitarian relationality to daily life in order to honor the multiple and rich experiences of a variety of human sexuality and gender performances. Through the deconstruction of heteronormativity from perichoretic love, a liberating movement advances in ways that could transform communities, turning them away (*metanoia*) from oppressive/colonialist behaviors and working toward the establishment of real processes of diversity, inclusivity, and justice, especially in sexuality and gender performances. The trinity then becomes a divine *ménage à trois* that enfleshes and thrives amidst our polyamorous friendships.

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## 22 Sacramental sex/uality

*Alejandro S. Escalante*

Body theology has oriented theological discourse to the expression of the human person in their fullness and their relation to God (Althaus-Reid and Isherwood, 2008, 3). This fullness of the human person is not limited to the "materiality" of the body, which would ultimately do violence to the particularity of identity and the material realities of class, race, gender, and sexuality by ignoring how they are manifested in the world. Indeed, the fullness of the human person is how the body is expressed in the world, which should be pushed to include and consider the dynamics of sex and sexuality, and their relationship therein as mutually establishing each other. This chapter, then, is an indecent consideration of sex, that is, the erotic, and sexuality, that is the proclivity to engage in the erotic as liberative actions that seek to promote the flourishing of the human person via the emancipation from restrictive sexual ideologies. Secondly, this chapter connects these liberative sexual actions with natural theologies of sacrament, which argue that the very biblical idea of God is intricately connected to actions of human liberation. By using the work of Judith Butler's *Bodies That Matter* and *Gender Trouble* in conversation with Edward Schillebeeckx's work on natural theology and revelation, I mine the queer possibilities of sacramental theology, especially as it relates to the embodied experience of God-in-history. In this way, I put forward an indecent approach, as formulated by the late Argentinian theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid, to understanding the relationship between sex, sexuality, and sacramentality. In the end, I will show two paradoxical themes of a new embodied sacramentality: first, that there is only one sacrament: human liberation; and second, despite there being only one sacrament, its historical manifestations are infinite. Beyond finding God in the midst of sexual encounters, the embodied sacramentality moves the act itself to be a manifestation of God's praxis-oriented justice in the world, which is God's revelation.

### Sex/uality and its discontents

My linking of sex and sexuality follows the body theology of black humanist theologian Anthony Pinn who argues that because of their shared historical