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4.1.13

**The Return of the Excluded: The Indecency of Politics, Economics and Theology**

“If the theologian is committed to doing theology with the people, then the theologian must recognize that sometimes people do theology without underwear.”

--Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 43.

Like Althaus-Reid, I am willing to state (and hope it’s true) that “I am indecent enough to be able to reflect with theological honesty on issues of women, economic struggle, images of God and the flow of sexual desires.” [[1]](#footnote-1) I perform this gross act of indecency, this insistence on including the scents of lemons, parsley and sex as I call out to passers by, “*Ay, señoras y señors y los otros, me compra unos ideas de la liberación, que están bién lindos pué…*”[[2]](#footnote-2) in order to “deconstruct a moral order which is based on a heterosexual construction of reality.”[[3]](#footnote-3) I wish to see the excluded returned to inclusion; it is this reality and the reality of the ‘moral order’ against which I must position my desires, my work, and my life in a woman’s body, as a theologian. The artificial ‘reality’ created and sustained by the genderizing binaries of the heterosexual matrix and its compulsions harms everyone with its restrictions, not just the non-heterosexual; “Heterosexual people…also live in asphyxiating closets.”[[4]](#footnote-4) This suffocating, pervasive harm structure “can only be challenged in theology and capitalism alike by people whose bodies are living parables of transgression.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Female, male or other, by removing our underwear as we hawk our wares in the market we become living, embodied parables of that transgression no matter what we have under our skirts or in our pants—even if we have paws for hands.

An embodied life is messy and rich, horrific and exquisite, painful and pleasurable. Embodied life is “a quest for an out-of-body experience of purity”[[6]](#footnote-6) while still inhabiting a body. An embodied life contains all of these contradictions and more; this, as I conceive it, is the teleology of Eros: the longing for being. Embodied life is the challenge of facing what is while yet yearning for and learning to participate in what might become. This, in itself, is a transgressive act when it is experienced as an embodied reality within a system which “reinforces sexual stereotypes of control and submission.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

Desire fuels transgression not as an act of transgression in and of itself, but as an act of Life yearning for Life--a livable life, a true life, a real life. Desire is one of the “first inscriptions (of hunger, pain and sexual desire)…, always written in the body.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Desires are “the symbolic of the sacred working as desires looking for their own completion, as in the process of becoming licit desires.”[[9]](#footnote-9) Desire is the force of Life yearning to meet Itself in the embodied being. The object or fetish of this urge may vary significantly; sometimes it’s food to slake hunger, sex to slake lust, kindness to slake compassion’s demands. Regardless of its form or the form of any object it might have, desire is that which yearns for its own completion; it is “is intense, and carries that of life in itself.”[[10]](#footnote-10) Passions driven by desire carry within themselves “the duplicity of creation and chaos;”[[11]](#footnote-11) a duplicity with consequences we cannot escape. Religion emerged, in part, to help cope with this duplicity, not escape it; rather, as Ariel Glucklich has it, “the goal of the religious life is not to bring anesthesia, but to transform the pain that causes suffering into a pain that leads to insight, meaning, even salvation.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Desire exists beyond its individual containers; it is also social process[[13]](#footnote-13) and, if Althaus-Reid is correct as I believe she is, “God is desire.”[[14]](#footnote-14)

Lust is a profoundly embodied form of desire, an embodied form of God, a “living force, and a material spirituality.”[[15]](#footnote-15) Heterosexualized Christianity and other forms of oppression deny Lust its place at the table of embodied life; this is an enmeshed and virtually invisible form of social oppression and control which forbids query and examination. This control “powerfully maintains the sexual metaphors of heterosexuality in their conditions of invisibility and pervasiveness. This invisibility is what stops us from questioning.”[[16]](#footnote-16) Failing to question this pervasive, ubiquitous system of control, we are denied access to our lust, whether the object of that lust be for full, engaged contact with the Divine of full, engaged contact with one another. “Denying lust, or the ‘lustful desires of the flesh,’ determines when, how and with whom we go to bed, and as such it has been the issue of main interest in all heterosexually-based theology.”[[17]](#footnote-17)

There is in life, as in theology, an economy of lust, only one of many ruled by Empire. Althaus-Reid states that “We may describe an empire as a single politico-economical enterprise of monochromatic characteristics gravitating around a handful of central ideas.”[[18]](#footnote-18) Religion often functions as a gross organ of colonization; imperial power structures exploit the bulk of their subjects in order to provide abundance for the ruling class and are built on the backs of the Others. “Imperialisms are, by definition, criminal activities of expansion, possession and control….”[[19]](#footnote-19) Empires colonize, as they must, in order to exploit ever-larger resource bases to sustain otherwise unsustainable ways of life and “Empires excel in the art of blurring the limits of the real and hyper-real in colonial societies.”[[20]](#footnote-20) This blurring effect can make it very difficult to see the centrally functioning organizing principles below the surface of empire and coloniality.

The “handful of central ideas” Althaus-Reid mentions are theological; more specifically, they are systemized theological beliefs formulated within and sustained by the heterosexual matrix, “bounded by male desire”[[21]](#footnote-21) as authority;[[22]](#footnote-22) “Heterosexuality is an economy, an administrative pattern which is sacralised in our churches even in the way they organize themselves.”[[23]](#footnote-23) This notion alone twines theology, economics and politics with a simplicity and clarity. It seems so clear and simple that I wonder if I’m missing something (other than the enormous complexities this simplicity engenders). All theology is sexual and rooted in desire; there are multiple economies of desire and all of those economies influence politics and are politically influenced. “Based on sexual categories and heterosexual binary systems, obsessed with sexual behavior and orders, every theological discourse is implicitly a sexual discourse, a decent one, an accepted one… the commonality of all ex-centricity in theology is sexuality.”[[24]](#footnote-24) “The point is that the political and economic constructions of this world are based on sexual experience, or the interpretation of sexual experience.”[[25]](#footnote-25)

If we are forbidden to see and examine sexualities, we are forbidden access to the roots of political influences as well. “Politics is not only what parliamentarians and political parties do, but is the superficial expression of deep socio-economic realities.”[[26]](#footnote-26) The vast consequences of sexual questioning (and its absence) reach into economic theory, “because economics like theology is the old science of human relationships”[[27]](#footnote-27) and “the configuration of sexual behavior is the basis of political behavior.”[[28]](#footnote-28) Being confined to only superficial expressions of deep realities keeps us from one another and from God by creating enforced exclusions of all but those in line with the imperial hegemony. This relegates God to a budget category which would appear to imply that there simply is not enough God to go around, and only those who conform to heterosexuality are eligible for their share of God. How can the Infinite and Ineffable be confined to a politically regulated deprivation economy?

There is a spiritual poverty in this structure that is echoed in the economic poverties of our world, but we are not encouraged to see either of them. Of the two, spiritual and material poverty, it is impossible not to witness, daily, the presence of material poverty yet it is rendered less visible and more acceptable by universalizing all economically disadvantaged people (many of whom are disadvantaged by the very system that makes them less visible and desirable) into the category of ‘poor’ and explaining away their conditions and any possible remediation by ‘giving them to God.’ Having a specific category of people to ‘care for’ makes it easier for advantaged people feel better and therefore less likely to examine the oppressive systems in which they participate and from which they benefit: “natives holding to a childlike, innocent faith in the midst of their suffering, produced tender smiles in the romantic European Christians.”[[29]](#footnote-29) Often, these categories and the communities contained within them exist only in imagination, as in the story of the priest described by Althaus-Reid on page 31.[[30]](#footnote-30) But conflated notions of the “poor” in liberation theology are used in the same hegemonic, otherizing categorical structures that attempts to neatly package and sell the product of religion or theology while selling out the people who model for the pictures on the box. Althaus-Reid calls this the “parallel categories system which uses old concepts in new frames, thus rendering the challenges minimal…as if just by adding the formula ‘of the poor’ was enough to produce any substantial structural or epistemological challenge.”[[31]](#footnote-31)

In this parallel categories system, poverty as materially experienced in embodied lives as real and treacherous becomes an externally imposed category that reconstructs identities and practices: “The poor native was conceived according to a restricted heterosexual model.”[[32]](#footnote-32) This system is profoundly dangerous to embodied life of all types because it addresses and subsumes a far wider swath of populations than may be implied by any title that appears singular and monolithically universal (in this case, ‘the poor), as the apparently-singular title simultaneously ignores both causes and results of the creation and occupation of the category. “Not only did ‘the poor’ subsume women, it also subsumed lesbian, gay, transgendered and bisexual people. The reality of the old traditions of Latin American poverty such as incest and abuse of girls in their communities was ignored.”[[33]](#footnote-33) Indecent Theology insists on the inclusion of sex without underwear, which reveals more that simply the parts that might be beneath clothing; it reveals what is being done to and with those parts in a frame of discontinuity.

“A theology from the poor also needs to be a sexual theology, a theology of economics and desires that have been excluded from our way of ‘doing theology’ as a second act.”[[34]](#footnote-34) Sexuality must be included in theological considerations because:

“Theology is a sexual ideology performed in a sacralizing pattern: it is a sexual divinized orthodoxy (right sexual dogma) and orthopraxy (right sexual behavior); theology is a sexual action. Theologians, therefore, are nothing else but sexual performers who need to take many ethical and sometimes partisan decisions when reflecting on God and humanity, because theology is never innocuous or sexually innocent or neutral.”[[35]](#footnote-35) (87)

The Mary machine is a prime example of how sexualities are disenfranchised and excluded from theological processes. It may seem innocuous enough on the outside, but poor women are actually fetishized and subsumed by this machine: “The problem is that in the discourse of liberation, women are already disembodied in the category of the poor woman, which is a romantic conceptualization, a universal which fits the invention of women and the invention of the poor at the same time.”[[36]](#footnote-36) Latin and, I argue, other women, go to bed with God “without questioning that sexual act of theology which is simultaneously economical. It regulates numbers, fixes positions and pre-empties intimacy and meaning.”[[37]](#footnote-37) This has a profound effect on the economies of desire and politics:

“Mary is a machine which processes multiple Othernesses and oppressions and returns them in the image and similitude of the onlooker, and in this lies the dangerous trap of the worship of Mary. Mary interpellates men and women, especially among the poor, and produces the false consciousness that is Marian faith, concerned with the perpetuation of capitalist models of marriage, biological sexual definitions and universal faith constructions of women believers, submissive or courageous, but always determined by their relation to the symbolic of Mary.”[[38]](#footnote-38)

I add that the biological sexual definitions to which Althaus-Reid refers are binaristic, naturalizing and universalizing theologically, which, for differently-gendered people, creates the automatic exclusion even from identification with a “no-body”[[39]](#footnote-39) like Mary. For trans people, inclusion in one of the only two categories available (woman and man as God-created, naturalized identities) demands severe and inappropriate identity and behavior alteration and produces unutterable physical and cognitively-dissonant pain. It’s almost as if the Mary machine is a Marian trap that has extra punitive features for those who don’t fit into a rigid binary definition of ‘woman.’ Trans folk, like poor women, “do not come with the sexuality of dogmas; that is the reason why dogmas exist in the first place, to re-order reality”[[40]](#footnote-40) “That is the point for a theology without underwear, made by people whose sexual misfortunes, personal or political, need to be reflected on as a part of our theological praxis.”[[41]](#footnote-41) 28

Should not theology, especially an Indecent Theology, also be “a creative device to bring about something else that needs to happen in society”?[[42]](#footnote-42) Might not the indecency of transtheology cross enough lines to work itself right out of a job while, simultaneously, modeling both its own structures and de/structions? Are not the fixations and resultant problems of concretized dogmatism the very reason we need something new in the first place? What, in theological theory and praxis, might begin to seduce us towards the release of permanence, the release of a notion of an eternal Right, Correct, Always True that, in turn, traps us in a place where the challenge of contextual relevance vanishes on the event horizon because of monocropping? “Evidently, the organizational standpoint of capitalism has not been challenged.” (35). Moreover, the contradiction within these challenges that have not yet been widely made “are many.”[[43]](#footnote-43) And, indeed unfortunately,

…theology has become the art of erasing them. The homogenization of sexuality and, specifically, the sexuality of the poor, serves as a basic pattern from which behavior, aspirations and relationship to God and to economic systems are worked out and sacralised with an aura of immutability and eternity.”[[44]](#footnote-44)

This immutability and eternality produces a certainty and the horrible conflicts of “a faith which does not respond effectively to the economic injustices of society.”[[45]](#footnote-45) Economies, politics and sexualities are always in flux; “Life is less static than theological systems.”[[46]](#footnote-46) Thus, the creation of certainty is problematic because “certainty silences everybody and everything….”[[47]](#footnote-47) This misplaced certainty and the resultant enforced and brutal silences ensure that “our symbolic knowledge and our reality do not coincide;”[[48]](#footnote-48) all people, including those who can and do identify as heterosexual, are forced to occupy “aborted identities from unrecognized desires which cannot find their name when reflecting about Jesus because there is nothing translatable there.”[[49]](#footnote-49)

We must remove our underwear, and indecently, obscenely examine for ourselves what Mary, Jesus, and God might have in theirs. We must become Drag Queens like Guto, “forming and informing [our] own identity.”[[50]](#footnote-50) While, as Althaus-Reid states, “leather people may sometimes entertain theological fantasies”[[51]](#footnote-51) about the dress of Jesus’ sexuality (and especially what s/he might have in hir underwear), the bottom line is, as noted therapist and leatherman Guy Baldwin states, “Sexualities that keep us apart only diminish us as people.”[[52]](#footnote-52) If human sexualities that keep us apart diminish people, how much more diminishing, then, a divine sexuality that keeps us apart from one another? How criminal a theology that perpetuates this separation if everything, including God, yearns for being? The essentialist and absolutist theological views rooted within the heterosexual matrix produce vehemence and violence masquerading as certainty, but “it is only by opening the relation between the real and the symbolic that one can envisage the return of the excluded.”[[53]](#footnote-53)

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Oxford, 2001.

1. Althaus-Reid, *Indecent*, 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid., 3; adapted from “*Ay, señoras, me compra unos limoncitos, que están bién lindos pué…*” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., 2 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., 179. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Indecnt*, 103. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid., 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid., 96. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid., 125. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid., 125. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Glucklich, 40 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *Indecent*, 147. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid., 147. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid.*,* 120. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid., 127 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid., 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid., 90. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid., 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Ibid., 97. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid., 91. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid., 13 “Authority defines authority, begets authority and resurrects authority. Authority is always positioned authority.” [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Ibid., 114. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Ibid., 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Ibid., 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid., 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Ibid., 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Ibid., 133. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Ibid., 32 [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Ibid., 31: “The community of the poor he wanted to visit only existed in his imagination, composed in his colonial ancestral memory of stereotypes of such degrees that he could not have recognized a community of the poor if he had spent a month among them.” [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Ibid., 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Ibid., 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Ibid., 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Ibid., 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Ibid., 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Ibid., 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Ibid., 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Ibid., 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Ibid., 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Ibid., 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Ibid., 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Ibid., 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Ibid., 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Ibid., 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Ibid., 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Ibid., 108. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Ibid., 107. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Ibid., 107. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Ibid., 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Ibid., 196. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Ibid., 150. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Baldwin, 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. *Indecent*, 107. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)