

Queering is for everyone

“What are we looking for when we’re looking for *queer*?” asks theologian Lisa Isherwood. “I’m looking for a wider picture of incarnation.”

Interview by [Cassidy Hall](#) in the [June 2025](#) issue

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Theologian Lisa Isherwood (Courtesy photo)

**Lisa Isherwood** teaches theology at the University of Wales. In 2001 she became the first professor of feminist liberation theologies in the United Kingdom. A founding editor of the journal *Feminist Theology*, she has written or edited 28 books, including multiple volumes in the *Queering Theology* series. A longer version of this interview can be heard on the [Queering Contemplation podcast](#).

## **How do you define and experience the word *queer*?**

I'm a feminist theologian, a body theologian, so experience is the key. When you listen to people's bodily experience in the world, it doesn't fit into patterns—certainly not the patterns that churches historically would like it to fit into. The word *queer* is all about expanding boundaries, going over the edges, seeing things not as the world sees them—which fits in with Christianity very well, because Christians are called to be in the world but not of the world. So this is kind of my starting point.

What does it mean that God gave up the safety of heaven and decided to be fully incarnate? And not only in the person of Jesus, but also to say to us, *Look, all of you, you too have got this as your mission; you too must be fully incarnate*. How could that fit into one pattern? The world is so diverse, and the people within it are so diverse.

So what are we looking for when we're looking for *queer*? I'm looking for a wider picture of incarnation. To take all of that back to what Christianity has traditionally said—doctrines, ethics, and so on—and see if it works, see if Christian theology and ethics hold up next to incarnate experience. It's very much a liberation method.

Now, I'm not saying that everybody has achieved the level of incarnation that we're told Jesus achieved. But this is certainly what is given to us at baptism; it is required of us. Jesus said that we will do greater things than he did. Queering for me comes into that as a great adventure. If there's no place for you to go, then you're full of self-condemnation. But an exploration of what incarnation might mean—that's a very exciting adventure.

**I think many people fear the word *queer* because they relate it only to sexuality or gender identity, or only to the LGBTQ community. But I hear you saying that, ultimately, queering is for everyone.**

Absolutely. And I say that not to take it away from queer people but to emphasize that it doesn't have to be a scary word—it can be something that everybody can understand. It's this thing of "in the world, not of the world." I once heard Joan Casañas say it in a way I love: Jesus kicked a hole in reality and asked everybody else to make it bigger. I think that's what queering does: It kicks that hole wider. It

*says, All these restrictions are not health-giving; they're not divinely inspired.*

And when you think about it, the incarnation itself is an incredibly queer move on behalf of the Divine. Our notion is of a Divine that is above and beyond, that cannot be touched—and suddenly the Divine becomes a baby in a manger, vulnerable, fully enfleshed. That's a very queer move.

The life of Jesus in the gospels is full of queer moves. This fully incarnate person becomes present in bread and wine. How does that happen? This fully enfleshed person is still somehow present after death. I don't find that hard to believe, in the sense that people I've loved and lost are sometimes present in almost a physical sense. But it queers the whole of what we think reality is.

When it gets tied down in one person 2,000 years ago, it somehow reduces the wonderfulness of the story, the freeing-ness, the revolution. And it was a revolution—not because this person came to tell us who's going to heaven and who's going to hell but because of the fundamental message, *Come on, get off your backside and queer what you're told is your reality in the time that you live.*

**My own experience of queerness is an embodied experience. A space can be queered simply by my presence in it. Could you talk about the intersection of body theology and queer theology in your work?**

Years ago, when women were asking for contraceptive rights in England, it became a matter for the House of Lords. All these lords stood up and said, "No, the empire will fall." And I thought, how might the empire *form* if women can get some control over their own bodies? So that's where body theology started for me as a feminist theologian.

Mine is a very large body; it always has been. I put that body in a room and then just look at the reactions, especially when my mouth opens. It's really interesting how bodies, especially queer bodies, affect the space you're in. Which is why I have some sympathy with queer people who are saying, *What about us? Can I go into a church?* I recently read a lot of accounts by younger queer people who believe that hiding is the only option, perhaps not in the secular world of the UK but at least in the churches. This really makes me sad. Justin Welby didn't make it any better when he was archbishop of Canterbury and stated at the Lambeth Conference that gay sex is a sin.

The suicide rate of young people is high, and it's very, very high for LGBTQ people. It's tragic. It's blasphemous, actually; it's a sin against whatever we consider the Divine to be, because these young people are carriers of the Divine. If they're given the environment in which to love it, embrace it, and lead fully queer lives that are challenging everything, I think that's what the church needs. Or the churches—it's not just the Anglican Church.

**In *Christianity: Queer Pasts, Queer Futures*, you write, “Texts may be queered when we move beyond the expected and predicted readings laid down by church tradition.” So, we can queer spaces not just with our bodies but also with the scriptures. And Christianity demands this.**

Absolutely. Jesus didn't say it ended with him. What we see in Mark's Gospel—which we are told came first and didn't initially include any resurrection appearances—is a world in chaos, asking, *What are we going to do?*

If we think that what we have in the gospels is the whole of Jesus' life, and we interpret everything through that lens, I think we're doing a great disservice to what is a revolutionary story. Why are we told we have to read it with a certain set of ideas in mind? We're not told to read any other literature like that. We're told to come with an open mind, to bring our experience to the text.

I think womanist biblical scholarship has done fabulous work on this, in terms of countering the innate racism in the text. Why should it be any different for queer folk? Why should we not bring our experience to the text too and say, it's different for us?

For example, I love the reading that the coat of many colors is in fact a princess dress, and that Joseph, the poor devil, gets chucked down a well for wearing a princess dress. The story is now different. And why not? Are these texts not for everybody? Are they not texts that help us to reflect on our lives and the world we live in, to get a better understanding, and to get a grip on how we should move forward? Because surely it is all about moving forward, not being stuck 2,000 years ago.

Some say, *But the church has never changed*. Really? Okay, they'll say, *but the Bible has never changed*. Really? Of course it changes! So why can it not change in the hands of people who are saying that these scriptures have been used as clobber texts against queer people, and they continue to be clobber texts, and we don't like

it.

There are two choices for queer people: walk away or engage. Enough people still want to engage—and I think it's exciting, it's an adventure! Again, "queer" is not just for a certain group of people, it's for everybody. Everybody can see these texts through their own eyes and say, *What is it saying to me?*

**What is something in Christianity that comes to mind that you find is in deep need of being queered?**

Well, it's kind of the whole structure, isn't it? I think the hierarchy makes all sorts of people repress all kinds of things as they hope to go up the hierarchy. I don't think Jesus ever ordained anybody, let alone made a church structure.

But for me, it all comes down to the nature of incarnation. How are we seeing the person of Christ? That is the center of Christianity. That work needs to be continued. How do we queer it? What other experiences can be incorporated to make it a bigger vision? That's the one place where I would implore people: Add your experience into what it might mean to be incarnate, to be what became called the Christ, to be the incarnate God. What is your experience going to add to that? How is it going to help? How is it going to make a more expansive world and a more expansive church?

I was a little impolite about the Anglican Church, which I don't feel badly about. At the Lambeth Conference, they're all terribly polite to each other. Everybody's decent. Look at what's been sacrificed to that—the lives of people, actually. For Anglican churches in countries where there's a death sentence if you're gay, this is just appalling. It's beyond words. So I say, to hell with the politeness. Where is the radical justice there? What can be done to engage with people's lives? It's easy to call people sinners. It's not so easy to hear what they have to say and to include them in an ever-increasing christological story.