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Queer Theology on Social Media: A Reflection on Queer Pastoral Influencers on Instagram

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Abstract: The field of Queer Theology can be enhanced by qualitative research on queer lived experiences. The present article addresses this through exploratory observations. The authors examine how two queer pastors (@amen_aber_sexy and @tovja_behuetet) express queer issues on Instagram, interact with Christian tradition, and engage in Queer Theology. Within the scope of this article, Instagram emerges as a productive space for lived Queer Theology based on Felix Stalder's principle of referentiality.

Keywords: Queer Theology, Instagram, Influencing, Religious Influencer, Queer

Zusammenfassung: Der Forschungsbereich Queere Theologie kann von qualitativer Forschung zu queeren Lebenswelten profitieren. Der vorliegende Artikel setzt hier an und bietet erste explorative Beobachtungen. Die Autor:innen untersuchen, wie zwei queere Pastor:innen (@amen_aber_sexy und @tovja_behuetet) queere Anliegen auf Instagram thematisieren, mit der christlichen Tradition interagieren und queere Theologie treiben. Im Rahmen dieses Artikels erweist sich Instagram als produktiver Ort für gelebte queere Theologie auf der Grundlage von Felix Stalders Prinzip der Referentialität.

Schlagwörter: Queere Theologie, Instagram, Influencing, religiöse Influencer:innen, Queer

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1. Introduction

This article addresses two current desiderata within the theological landscape. In the realm of Queer Theology, there is a noticeable lack of qualitative research for examining queer lifeworlds.¹ Conversely, in the emerging field of research on religious influencers on Instagram,² there is a shortage of practical theological investigation into queer actors.³ Through exploratory digital ethnographic observations of digital queer religious actors, we aim to establish stronger connections between queer, digital, and practical theology while stimulating new discussions on these topics.

To begin, we will delve into the foundations of Queer Theology and its central concerns. Moving forward, we will shift our focus to two remarkable German channels of pastoral influencers who self-describe as queer: Tim Lahr's channel (@amen_aber_sexy) and a smaller channel (@tovja_behuetet) run by a non-binary clergy member. Through exemplary posts, the article examines how these individuals express queer issues, interact with Christian tradition, and engage in Queer Theology.⁴

1 Ninna Edgards, "Queer Theology," in *Wiley Blackwell Companion to Qualitative Research and Theology*, ed. Pete Ward and Knut Tveitereid (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2022), 243–251.

2 A good overview of the current discourses on religious communication on Instagram is provided by Viera Pirker and Paula Paschke, eds., *Religion auf Instagram. Analysen und Perspektiven* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2023). While a range of topics (content, users, research approaches) are discussed here, the following articles explicitly address the phenomenon of influencing: Markus Brodthage, "Zwischen Lifestyle, Gaming und Beauty. Wie Top-Influencer:Innen auf Instagram (und YouTube) über Religion sprechen," in *Religion auf Instagram. Analysen und Perspektiven*, ed. Viera Pirker and Paula Paschke (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2023), 154–73; Gero Menzel, "In Allem – Gott an unserer Seite' – Ehepaare als Instanzen religiöser Kommunikation auf Instagram," in *Religion Auf Instagram. Analysen und Perspektiven*, ed. Viera Pirker and Paula Paschke (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2023); Sabrina Müller, "Glaubensinfluencer:Innen auf Instagram," in *Religion auf Instagram. Analysen und Perspektiven*, ed. Viera Pirker and Paula Paschke (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2023), 137–53.

3 While queer Christian influencers in the German-speaking area have not yet been studied, there are indeed some initial articles that address queerness on Instagram. A notable example is the analysis of #outinchurch by Paula Paschke: Cf. Paula Paschke, "#outinchurch – Hashtag-Aktivismus für die Kirchenentwicklung auf Instagram," in *Religion auf Instagram. Analysen und Perspektiven*, ed. Viera Pirker and Paula Paschke (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2023), 291–302.

4 The article was presented to both influencers. Each of them has consented to its publication.

2. Queer Theology

While Queer Theology cannot be unequivocally affiliated with a specific theological tradition, it is influenced by feminist, lesbian, and gay, as well as postcolonial and liberation theologies.⁵

The term “queer” is not easily definable and encompasses various characteristics. In a narrow sense, it refers to gender and sexual identities that exist beyond established social norms, often implying that identity is not a clear-cut concept but a fluid construct.⁶ In a broader sense, the term pertains to the disruption of seemingly ontological conceptions of sexuality and gender as well as other dimensions that organize social life: “*queer* challenges the idea of essentialism; [...] *queer* removes binary thinking and presumptions; *queer* exposes and disrupts power relations or hierarchies.”⁷

The openness and vagueness of the term “queer,” and thus Queer Theory, are programmatic, as illustrated by the following plea by the Queer Theorist Lee Edelman: “Queer theory is no one’s safe harbour for the holidays; it should offer no image of home. [...] What, then, can one say of queer theory to those who are gathered to attend to its state? Reinvent it. Resist it. Refuse it. Pursue it. Get over it. Just do it.”⁸

Also, in the context of Queer Theology, processes of clarification, and thus institutionalization, are viewed critically, as illustrated by the famous quote by two of the most important theologians in this field, Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood:

Queer Theology takes its place not at the centre of the theological discourses conversing with power, but at the margins. It is a theology from the margins which wants to remain at the margins. [...] Terrible is the fate of theologies from the margin when they want to be accepted by the centre! Queer Theology strives, instead, for differentiation and plurality.⁹

Although, accordingly, the Queer Theology movement cannot be simply defined or reduced to specific themes as a delineated field, some of its central concerns will be

5 Cf. Colby Dickinson and Meghan Toomey, “The Continuing Relevance of “Queer” Theology for the Rest of the Field,” *Theology & Sexuality* 23, no. 1–2 (2017): 1–16, 3.

6 Cf. Edgardh, “Queer Theology,” 244.

7 Chris Greenough, *Queer Theologies: The Basics* (London: Routledge, 2019), 26.

8 Lee Edelman, “Queer Theory: Unstating Desire”, *GLQ: A Journal Of Lesbian & Gay Studies* 2, no. 4 (1995): 343–346, 346.

9 Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood, “Thinking Theology and Queer Theory,” *Feminist Theology* 15, no. 3 (2007): 302–314, 304.

clarified in the following sections. For instance, the diversity of meanings associated with the term “queer” is reflected in two different strands of Queer Theology.¹⁰

The first strand mainly reflects on the status and recognition of LGBTQIA+ people in churches and theology. The goal of these works is to advocate for greater inclusion of non-normative gender and sexual identities in Christian settings.¹¹ Approaches of this kind are more strongly rooted in the tradition of identity-based lesbian and gay theologies.

The second strand emphasizes the need to go beyond such apologetic endeavors. An important advocate of this type of Queer Theology is Linn Marie Tonstad. Apologetic efforts, she explains, typically revolve around recognizing specific identities and, thus, to some extent, reproduce the idea of a fixed, clearly defined identity.¹² Tonstad’s approach continues in the tradition of Marcella Althaus-Reid, who significantly influenced and advanced Queer Theology with her books *Indecent Theology* and *The Queer God*. In her groundbreaking analyses, Althaus-Reid emphasizes that a heterosexual epistemology not only influences the perception of human identity but also the entire way of doing theology and thinking about classical theological loci.¹³

The relation between the two aforementioned strands is one of the main controversies in Queer Theology.¹⁴ A mediation of the underlying concerns of both tendencies is an ongoing task of Queer Theology: “queer theologies have not yet found a way to negotiate a resistance to prescriptive identity which does not also seem to risk erasing special protection for those who have felt themselves to be excluded by ‘mainstream’ theologies.”¹⁵

Despite this plurality within the movement, Queer Theologies are united by the goal of queering heteronormative theology.¹⁶

10 Patrick S. Cheng, “Contributions from Queer Theory,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Theology, Sexuality, and Gender*, ed. Adrian Thatcher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 153–170, 159f.

11 Cf. Linn Marie Tonstad, *Queer Theology. Beyond Apologetics*, Cascade Companions (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers 2018), 3–5.

12 Queer theology, as understood by Tonstad, takes the notion seriously that: “[h]umans are not fixed and static [...] it needs to take the messy realities and complexities of people’s lives seriously; it needs to stand against the distortive powers

of capitalism and colonialism; it needs to express and honor human bodily being; it needs to get beyond the search for identity, fixity and finality...”, Tonstad, “Queer Theology,” 103.

13 “Queer Theology takes seriously the Queer Project of deconstructing heterosexual epistemology and presuppositions in theology, but also unveiling the different, suppressed face of God amidst it.” Althaus-Reid and Isherwood, “Thinking Theology and Queer Theory,” 307f.

14 Cf. Susannah Cornwall, *Controversies in Queer Theology*, (London: SCM Press, 2011).

15 Cornwall, “Controversies in Queer Theology,” 68.

16 Cf. Greenough, “Queer Theologies,” 34f.

A central point of criticism against Queer Theologies is their highly academic orientation. The underlying Queer Theory is often characterized by a language that is difficult to understand as well as a high degree of abstraction, which makes the discourse appear strongly elitist, prompting critical questions.¹⁷ This, so our initial thesis, is partly due to the lack of empirical research on this topic, which leads to considerations of Queer Theology remaining abstract and theoretical. One possible reason for this lack could be the underlying fluid understanding of identity, significantly complicating the determination of a distinct research subject.

It's questionable how a purely theoretical Queer Theology can meet one of Althaus-Reid's foundational assumptions, that the "everyday lives of people always provide us with a starting point for a process of doing a contextual theology without exclusions."¹⁸ Therefore, this article consciously shifts the focus towards queer life realities.

In the following we provide initial, exploratory observations of queer individuals on social media. The identification of these influencers as queer is based on their self-designation as such on Instagram. Tim Lahr labels himself as a "queer pastor" in his bio, and Tovja regularly uses hashtags like #queerpastor, #queer, and #queerfaith.

3. An Initial Field Access: Queer Pastors Online

In this chapter, two channels that explore Christian themes from a queer perspective will be examined: @Tovja_behuetet and @amen_aber_sexy. We were interested in how they express queer issues on Instagram and how they interact with Christian tradition in the process. The insights were gathered through an exploratory approach of digital ethnography.¹⁹ Our understanding of digital ethnography aligns closely with a line of research that Anna Neumaier describes as follows:

17 "If it is not accessible to non-academic people, does it not lose its political power and agency?" Greenough, "Queer Theologies," 28.

18 Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology. Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (London/ New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group 2000), 4.

19 Well-known approaches in the field of digital ethnography include: Tom Boellstroff et al., *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds* (Princeton University Press, 2012), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.cttq9s20>; Christine Hine, *Ethnography for the Internet: Embedded, Embodied and Everyday* (London / New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015); Christine Hine, "From Virtual Ethnography to the Embedded, Embodied, Everyday Internet," in *The Routledge Companion to Digital Ethnography* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 21–28; Robert V. Kozinets, *Netnography: Doing Ethnographic Research Online* (Sage Publications, 2010); Sarah Pink et al., *Digital Ethnography: Principles and Practice* (Sage, 2015); Tim Hutchings, *Creating Church Online: Ritual, Community and New Media*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2017), <https://doi.org/>

...others understand digital ethnography as including research questions *related* to digital media, but with a focus that moves beyond them. This is based on the premise that “those digital practices do not exist as separate [...] from other social and cultural practices” (Walker 2010:23)²⁰ [...] corresponding research consequentially includes other media environments or local fields and data and understands digital platforms as one part of a multi-sited ethnography.²¹

This qualitative research strategy emphasizes human experiences and cultural understanding, grounded “... in deep appreciation of the context of people’s everyday lives. It explores social systems of shared meaning and is informed by the self-awareness of both the researcher and the cultural participants.”²²

Regarding this research, the first author has been in contact with Tovja for nearly three years (06.2021–03.2024) and with Tim for two years (04.2022–04.2024). She regularly monitored both accounts and maintained communication with the influencers through chat messages, telephone calls, and Zoom meetings. Additionally, she interacted with the influencer’s networks by, for example, engaging in exchanges with various followers. The observations were documented in field notes and research diaries. Although a systematic analysis of the whole data set has not yet been undertaken, this article presents a carefully curated selection of six posts that exemplify the key aspects of Queer Theology in practice. These examples emerged as paradigmatic during the initial review of our field notes by the team of authors. Through this selection, we aim to provide a robust, data-driven exploration of Queer Theology on social media, offering an exemplary, thick description²³ that illuminates the significance and impact of these paradigmatic contributions.

While the digital ethnographic explorations in this article primarily focus on the texts of individual posts, it is important to note that Instagram is also significantly characterized by video and iconographic representations. This aspect is al-

10.4324/9780203111093; Anthony-Paul Cooper et al., “The Reconfiguration of Social, Digital and Physical Presence: From Online Church to Church Online,” *HTS Theologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 77, no. 3 (19 January 2021), <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i3.6286>; Mark J. Cartledge, “Empirical Theology as Theological Netnography: Methodological Considerations,” *Journal of Empirical Theology* 35 (2023): 187–204; A good overview of digital ethnography in the field of religion-related research is provided by Anna Neumaier, “Digital Ethnography,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion* (London: Routledge, 2021), 217–28.

²⁰ Cf. Dana M. Walker, “The Location of Digital Ethnography,” *Cosmopolitan Civil Societies Journal* 2 (3) (2010): 23–39.

²¹ Neumaier, “Digital Ethnography,” 220.

²² Cartledge, “Empirical Theology as Theological Netnography: Methodological Considerations,” 190.

²³ Clifford Geertz, *Dichte Beschreibung: Beiträge zum Verstehen kultureller Systeme*, trans. Brigitte Luchesi and Rolf Bindemann, 13th ed. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2015).

ready considered in various research papers;²⁴ besides, the digital actors themselves emphasize how much work goes into the visual design of their posts.²⁵ Thus, it becomes clear that the topic of this article is by no means exhaustively covered in the following but offers diverse potential for further analysis.

Tim Lahr – Amen_aber_sexy (Instagram) 18,800 Followers²⁶

Tim Lahr is a queer pastor based in Cologne, Germany. He runs the Instagram account “amen_aber_sexy” (amen but sexy). Originally, Tim used his account solely for private purposes. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, when he had no direct contact with his congregation, he also started to use it for his pastoral work.²⁷ Rebranding his account from “Tim Lahr” to “amen_aber_sexy” demonstrated that he wanted to use his account to represent the church in a more contemporary (“sexier”) way.²⁸

The following section presents three examples that demonstrate how Tim engages in queer theology on Instagram. Tim first reflected on his queer identity in a post published on February 18, 2021 in which he compared his experience coming out in the church with coming out in his handball club. He stated that the latter was more difficult for him because he had no role models at the time. As a result, he hopes that, in the future, more professionals in the sports world will come out because male homosexuality is still regarded as “weak” and “unmanly” in the context of sport.²⁹ Tim’s statement that coming out in the context of a sports club was more

24 Cf. for example: Viera Pirker, “Zur Macht Der Bilder. Theologische Anthropologie Im Kontext Digitaler Bildkulturen,” in *Theologie Und Digitalität. Ein Kompendium*, ed. Wolfgang Beck, Ilona Nord, and Joachim Valentin (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2021), 155–79; Patrick Todjeras and Sabrina Müller, “Im Pfarrhaus brennt (wieder) Licht: Überlegungen zum digitalen Pfarrhaus anhand der Präsentation einer christlichen Influencerin auf Instagram,” *Pastoraltheologie* 112, no. 3 (24 February 2023): 77–96, <https://doi.org/10.13109/path.2023.112.3.77>; Thomas Schlag, ‘Die Macht Der Bilder Als (Praktisch-)Theologische Herausforderung’, *ZThK* 119, no. 2 (2022): 195–216.

25 This is evident, for example, from a conversation (21st of March 2024) between co-author Sabrina Müller and Tim Lahr. Tim Lahr emphasized that, for him, both the visual design and video editing are theological tasks. Therefore, he still handles much of it himself, as he believes that theological expertise is essential even at the visual level.

26 As of February 27, 2024.

27 @amen_aber_sexy, April 16, 2020.

28 @amen_aber_sexy, January 17, 2021.

29 @amen_aber_sexy, February 18, 2021. See also the second post on the same topic: @amen_aber_sexy, January 19, 2023.

difficult than in his church is surprising³⁰ and may open up new, unexpected perspectives that challenge not only believers but also people who play sports to go beyond their established views.

The second example is a series of queer services during the liturgical year that Tim has organized and celebrated since 2021. The first of these services was a Christmas service in December 2021 in which Tim was accompanied by Drag Queen Kelly Heelton. In the announcement of the queer Christmas service on Instagram, Tim stated that “it was time to break with images of the traditional family.”³¹ Christmas, he further highlighted, was much more than the story of Mary, Joseph, and the child. Instead, it was about God becoming human to be close to those who are at the margins of society and to share in all facets of being human that are independent of one’s way of life. “Christmas is,” as Tim pointed out, “a festivity for all. That is how we celebrate it. For this reason, people will say on Christmas evening, ‘I am dreaming of a queer Christmas.’”³² The second queer service followed on Easter 2022. On Instagram, Tim announced that they would sing “Rise Like Jesus” just like Conchita Wurst³³ had sung “Rise Like a Phoenix.” Easter was about resurrection, insurrection, the stripping away of one’s old life, and the beginning of a new one, which, as Tim explained, is “an experience that queer people must often undergo.”³⁴

The third example was a reflection on religious “daddy issues,” which was held on May 18, 2023. On Fathers’ Day, Tim posted his own adaptation of Michelangelo’s *The Creation of Adam*, in which Tim is Adam. In this painting, a large crack prevents Adam and God from touching one another. With the image and the attached text, Tim criticizes the dominance of the image of God as a father in Christianity. In his view, the strong emphasis on the image of the father contributes to the perpetuation of patriarchal structures, which is why he proposes an alternative:

But here’s the thing: there are many images for God. Because we can only ever speak of the unspeakable in images. So, it’s time that we counter the image of the father with something; that the church also uses other images and puts them at the forefront. In our queer church

30 For many queer believers, coming out in church is a difficult undertaking, as their communities often read the Bible in ways that paint homosexuality as a sin. Furthermore, their belief that God created man and woman makes the recognition and acceptance of non-binary or transgender identities impossible. Tonstad, “Queer Theology,” 16.

31 Since both channels post in German, their content will be translated. For instances in which one translation is only inadequately possible due to wordplay or poetic language, the original post can be found in the footnotes.

32 @amen_aber_sexy, December 8, 2021.

33 Conchita Wurst is a drag queen who is known throughout Europe for her participation in the 2014 Eurovision Song Contest.

34 @amen_aber_sexy, April 1, 2022.

services, we always pray the ‘Our Father’ as well as the ‘Mamma mia! Holy is your name...’ To be more precise, we sing it to the tune of Abba.³⁵

These examples from Tim’s account demonstrate how lived Queer Theologies question established norms of sexuality, gender identities, and religious images that contribute to stabilizing these norms. This is exposed through Tim’s reflection on masculinity and being gay, as well as in his reflection on the exclusive use of male images of God that perpetuate patriarchal structures. Queer Theology as done by Tim closely mirrors queer people’s experiences of marginalization and discrimination and opens new paths to live the Christian faith in a liberating way.

Tovja Heymann: *Tovja_behuetet* (Instagram) 3,417 Followers³⁶

Tovja (Tobias) Heymann is a non-binary pastor, who, together with their partner, serves in the church communities of Gronau and Niederdorfeld in Germany. On Instagram, Tovja Heymann shares impressions from their life as a non-binary clergy member and nurturing parent. They advocate for human rights and use their platform to address political issues, such as climate change, women’s rights, the Iranian revolution, and sexism, as seen in their story format #MakeUpGequassel (make-up talk). They are particularly dedicated to advocating for the needs of caregiving family members, as one of Tovja’s children requires special care and the family has faced numerous challenges with institutions and schools.

Tovja’s account also testifies to their own search for identity and encourages others to embrace their own unique identities. Three examples further illustrate this. In a post from July 19, 2022, Tovja introduces their new name; before that, Tovja used to be known as Tobias on Instagram. To Tovja, their new name is a derivation of their male birth name Tobias that combines two Hebrew words *tov* (good) and *ja* (God). In Tovja’s evaluation, Tobias had overly masculine connotations, whereas Tovja has a more feminine touch. In this same post addressing their name change, Tovja also uses the hashtag #nonbinary for the first time.³⁷

35 Original Version: “Aber hier ist die Sache: Für Gott gibt es viele Bilder. Denn vom Unsagbaren können wir immer nur in Bildern sprechen. Es wird also Zeit, dass wir dem Vaterbild etwas entgegen-setzen; dass die Kirche auch andere Bilder gebraucht und nach vorne stellt. In unseren queeren Gottesdiensten beten wir neben dem ‘Vaterunser’ immer auch das ‘Mamma mia! Holy is your name...’. Genauer gesagt singen wir es auf die Melodie von Abba.” @amen_aber_sexy, May 18, 2023.

36 As of February 27, 2024.

37 @Tovja_behuetet, July 19, 2022.

The second example is from October 11, 2022. On the occasion of International Coming Out, Tovja shares a photo of themselves with eyeliner and writes that “they cry inside when they see an inspector with eyeliner in *Polizeiruf 110*” (a popular German police series). Tovja further states:

I’m tapping into who I am – oh, whatever, is it just hype? Who cares! Is it absolute? Who can say? Is it longing for life? Yes, I think so – that’s how I can be. I change, I love, I hesitate, I argue. I change, because G*d is fantasy, because life is all in flux. And what about me? I am human and don’t just shop, I am allowed to be! And today: today I choose eyeliner from black to white, change my face, and am simply neither man nor woman (perhaps) – but one thing is certain: in Christ I am a fool and a new creature – and why not now? And you?³⁸

The third example is a reel that was posted on July 15, 2023. The footage shows Tovja putting on lipstick, then opening up the *Bibel in Gerechter Sprache* (*Bible in Just Language*).³⁹ From off screen, Tovja says:

They say: Now is the time to open the Bible for the love of the Bible. And I say: Now is the time to say God is queer [laughter coming from off screen], to open the Bible and realize: There’s nothing in there at all about God creating man and woman [from off screen, someone says “nope”]. Because God never did. God creates human and then the woman, and then there is a human who says he is a man. It is not God who creates the binary. Because God is queer. It’s the truth. I guess, God wasn’t in the mood for patriarchy. Have a nice one!⁴⁰

As these examples by Tovja illustrate, emerging lived queer theologies intermingle personal experiences with the search for identity and theology. This becomes impressively manifest in their theological re-reading and changing of their name from

38 “Ich Taste nach dem wer ich bin – ach, was soll’s, ist’s nur ein Hype? Who cares! Ist es absolut? Wer kann das schon sagen. Ist es Sehnsucht nach Leben? / Ja, so glaub ich – so darf ich sein. Ich wandle mich, ich liebe, ich zaudre, ich streite. Ich wandle mich, denn G*t ist Fantasie, denn Leben ist alles im Fluss. Und ich? Bin Mensch und Kauf [sic!] nicht nur ein sondern darf sein! / Und heut: Heut wähl ich Kajal von Schwarz bis weis [sic!], wandle mein Gesicht, und bin einfach weder Mann noch Frau (vielleicht) – aber eines gewiss: in Christo Narr und Neue Kreatur – und warum nicht schon jetzt? Und du?” @Tovja_behuetet, October 11, 2022.

39 *The Bible in Just Language* is characterized by the self-claim to “correspond in a special way to the biblical theme of justice.” Ulrike Bail et al., “Einleitung”, in *Die Bibel in Gerechter Sprache* ed. Ulrike Bail et al. (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2006), 9–27, 10. This is manifested, for example, through gender-inclusive language, designations for God that go beyond male-centric expressions, and a critical examination of anti-Jewish translations and expressions.

40 Original: “Sie sagen: Jetzt ist die Zeit, mal die Bibel aufzuschlagen, aus Liebe zur Bibel. Und ich sage: Jetzt ist die Zeit zu sagen, Gott ist queer [Lachen aus dem Off], mal die Bibel aufzuschlagen und festzustellen: Da steht überhaupt nichts davon, dass Gott Mann und Frau erschafft [Stimme aus dem Off: Nope]. Denn Gott hat es nie getan. Gott schafft Mensch und dann die Frau und dann ist da ein Mensch, der sagt, er sei der Mann. Es ist nicht Gott, der Binarität schafft. Denn Gott ist queer. Es ist die Wahrheit. Gott hat wohl selber keine Lust auf Patriarchat. Habt es fein!” @Tovja_behuetet, June 15, 2023.

Tobias to Tovja. Putting on makeup, which might be considered a typically feminine habit and is sometimes criticized for being a sexist practice since women who do not conform are considered ugly, appears to be one of Tovja's strategies to be and to embrace themselves as one of God's beloved creatures. Putting on make-up as a person who identifies as trans and non-binary is a way to question binary gender roles. That way, putting on make-up is not about hiding oneself and conforming to sexist norms but about making oneself visible and expressing who one is and how one feels.

4. Referentiality as a Principle for Queer Theology

The manner in which Queer Theology is practiced on both channels can be further illuminated through the concept of referentiality. According to the cultural scholar Felix Stalder, referentiality, along with communality and underlying algorithms, is one of the three central forms characterizing a culture of digitality: "In the digital condition, one of the methods (if not *the* most fundamental method) enabling humans to participate ... in the collective negotiation of meaning is the system of creating references."⁴¹ Meaning is created by assembling different materials in new ways. The sources used are, unlike in plagiarism, clearly recognizable, yet their re-contextualization or combination with other sources gives rise to something new:

In today's referential processes ... pieces are not brought together as much as they are integrated into one another by being altered, adapted, and transformed. ... it is not the fissures between elements that are foregrounded, but rather their synthesis in the present.⁴²

This approach is evident both in a narrow sense regarding one specific work and in a broader sense in the juxtaposition of various sources, as seen, for example, in status updates on WhatsApp or in the compilation of different posts on an Instagram channel.⁴³ As Stalder's idea of a *culture of digitality*⁴⁴ already implies, this process is by no means limited to digital technologies but has become a fundamental cultural characteristic.⁴⁵

As will be seen in the following section, Tovja's and Tim's Instagram accounts testify to creative queer theologies that rely on the principle of referentiality.

⁴¹ Felix Stalder, *The Digital Condition* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), 59.

⁴² Stalder, "Digital Condition," 61.

⁴³ Stalder, "Digital Condition," 76.

⁴⁴ Culture of digitality is the title of the German version of his book.

⁴⁵ "[...] the term 'condition' will be used to designate a cultural condition whereby the processes of social meaning – that is, the normative dimension of existence – are explicitly or implicitly negotiate and realized by means of singular and collective activity." Stalder, "Digital Condition," 7.

4.1 Between Identity and Fluidity

The process of referentiality first comes into play in relation to the concept of identity. It is evident that self-identification and fluidity appear as combinable principles, particularly on Tovja's channel.

First, the use of hashtags is noteworthy. By using hashtags like #queer and #nonbinary, Tovja expresses their gender identity. However, by incorporating seemingly contradictory hashtags like #nonbinary and #transjoy in the same post,⁴⁶ this self-description does not appear as unequivocal, but rather highly fluid. Social media, therefore, allows people to experiment with different labels and apply them without the need for definitive determination. The pronouns placed in one's bio can also be adjusted anytime, making them provisional in nature.

Tovja's naming process can also be described as referentiality par excellence, as they created a new neologism from two Hebrew terms. Here, an identity process through naming occurs but does not express a clear category. Since the name Tovja is not a common, existing name, it cannot be definitively assigned to a specific gender, resisting the cultural script that a naming process simultaneously leads to a determination of one's gender identity.

This symbiosis of identity and fluidity further attains a theological point on Tovja's account. In the aforementioned post from October 11, 2022, Tovja describes their identity as fluid, ambiguous, and temporary: "And today, I choose eyeliner from black to white, change my face, and am simply neither man nor woman (perhaps)." In this post, the transformation, not the determination of identity, becomes a constitutive part of the self: "I change, because G*d is fantasy, because life is all in flux." For Tovja, their identity is not constituted by clear gender categories or labels. Instead, self-assurance is gained through their theological identity as a creature of God: "...but one thing is certain: in Christ, I am a fool and a new creature."

Tovja's Instagram channel vividly illustrates how the principle of referentiality can contribute to a constructive Queer Theology. The advantages of identity categories, such as self-assurance and recognition of one's own person, derive from the relationship with God. Thus, freedom is created to leave one's own gender identity open, to experiment, and to be flexible with it.

⁴⁶ @Tovja_behuetet, May 29, 2023.

4.2 Between Deconstruction and Construction

Furthermore, the principle of referentiality gives rise to a form of Queer Theology that is characterized by simultaneous deconstruction and construction. While theory-based Queer Theology often engages deeply in the deconstruction of theological norms,⁴⁷ the lived Queer Theology of the two pastors discussed here incorporates a constructive element. This is evident in the liturgical example of Tim Lahr. By juxtaposing the traditional Lord's Prayer with the pop-cultural song "Mamma Mia," the patriarchal understanding of the concept of God can be addressed and dismantled. Addressing God simultaneously as both Father and Mother transcends a purely binary gender framework, allowing God to be conceived of not as an either/or gendered entity, but as a both/and, thereby, non-binary existence. Tim's Easter post also operates on the principle of referentiality by juxtaposing the Christian concept of the resurrection of Christ with the experiences of queer individuals: "Rise up, start anew, begin a new life." In Stalder's terms, this can be described as follows: "In one and the same gesture, both one's own new position and the context and cultural tradition that is being carried on in one's own work are constituted performatively."⁴⁸

As the two examples illustrate, the principle of referentiality allows for a continual connection to Christian tradition, while also updating it to resonate with one's own lived experience. Consequently, the embraced tradition is simultaneously queered⁴⁹, merging deconstruction and construction into a single act. This creative and inventive potential of Queer Theology is also reflected in Tovja's language. They blend theological reflection with an artistic expression in numerous posts, practicing Queer Theology as a form of theopoetics.⁵⁰

47 "queer theologians have used queer theory to scrutinize hegemonic ecclesial traditions." Edgardh, "Queer Theology," 244.

48 Stalder, "Digital Condition," 60.

49 In this article, queering is understood as deconstructing established theologies from a queer perspective.

50 The uniqueness of their language was partially lost in this article through translation, but in German, it is evident, for example, in the post from October 11, 2022. @Tovja_behuetet. 2023, October 11, 2022. More on the topic of theopoetics and Practical Theology can be found at: Heather Walton, "A Theopoetics of Practice: Re-Forming in Practical Theology: Presidential Address to the International Academy of Practical Theology, Eastertide 2017," *International Journal of Practical Theology* 23, no. 1 (2019): 323, <https://doi.org/10.1515/ijpt-2018-0033>.

4.3 Between Apologetics and Queering Theology

Mediated by the principle of referentiality, the two streams of Queer Theology introduced in chapter 2 no longer appear as a dichotomous antitheses, but rather as productive ambiguities. Both Tovja and Tim's accounts demonstrate that fostering inclusion of LGBTQAI+ people and deconstructing identities and theologies from a queer perspective are by no means mutually exclusive. In their posts, both address experiences of discrimination, engage in political and theological work against discrimination, and advocate for the inclusion of queer people. As shown above, Tovja argues why queer lives are part of God's creation.

Similarly, Tim advocates for destigmatizing of HIV and rejects the notion of it being a "just punishment from God for homosexuality."⁵¹ However, the examples discussed also go beyond these apologetic strategies and reflect constructive proposals for exploring one's identity and creative approaches to conducting theology.

On both Tovja's and Tim's accounts, apologetics and queering theology, representation politics and theology that concerns everyone, as well as identity and fluidity, find expression through the principle of referentiality, making the work of these two queer influencers an intriguing aspect of the overall field of Queer Theology.

5. Conclusion: Queer Theology and Social Media

In prior years, the special role of social media in queer life has been repeatedly emphasized. Mary Robertson considers the spread of the Internet in general to be "the most significant factor in the shifting norms around same-sex desire and LGBTQ culture."⁵² She emphasizes the possibility, through the Internet in general and social media in particular, of learning new cultural scripts beyond social norms.⁵³ For queer individuals, as Robertson underscores, "the Internet [is] one of the few safe spaces they inhabit, where they can be open about their sexualities and gender and make friends with those who share their experiences."⁵⁴ Through virtual communities, queer people from around the world can come together and, by transcending geographical boundaries, counter the marginalized status they experience locally. The interplay of limitless access to information and the simultaneous

⁵¹ @amen_aberSexy, December 1, 2023.

⁵² Mary Robertson, *Growing Up Queer. Kinds and the Remaking of LGBTQ Identity*, Critical Perspectives on Youth 3 (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 93.

⁵³ Robertson, "Growing Up Queer," 96–99.

⁵⁴ Robertson, "Growing Up Queer," 93.

option to remain anonymous is, without a doubt, of great importance for the process of self-discovery.⁵⁵

This potential can be seen in the two examples of Tim Lahr and Tovja presented above. Social media provides a space for these two queer pastoral influencers to amplify their voices and share their stories. These online platforms allow them to transcend the limitations of traditional religious institutions and represent individuals who may not have access to inclusive and affirming spaces in their local communities. Moreover, social media enables Tovja and Tim to challenge and expand traditional theological discourses. They engage in critical discussions, deconstruct normative ideas about gender and sexuality, and present alternative perspectives for theology that are rooted in their own lived experiences.

Since the potential of social media for queer influencers became visible in this article, it is important to point out that these platforms should not be universally understood as safe spaces for queer individuals. In his 2022 study, Ian Callahan challenges the notion of social media as a safe space by highlighting how frequently queer students experience online harassment. Particularly “individuals who were non-white, non-cis, and non-monogamous experienced backlash from homophobic and heterosexist users on a variety of platforms.”⁵⁶ Furthermore, it becomes evident that “[queer] users are quite intentional about who sees (and does not see) their content.”⁵⁷ Carefully curated privacy settings contradict the notions of social media as a queer utopia. The risks of social media for queer individuals can also be observed in the cases of Tim Lahr and Tovja. Both pastors have been attacked online and challenged to justify their interpretation of the Bible as well as their way of life. This is reflected, among other aspects, in Tovja’s third example, which deals with their unique interpretation of the creation story. On Tim’s account, there is a post with the title: “Greetings to my haters!”⁵⁸

Our study suggests, however, that Instagram emerges as a productive space for lived Queer Theology based on the principle of referentiality. For Queer Theology in academic settings, it is necessary to integrate these impulses, which can potentially be beneficial for overcoming internal divisions.

⁵⁵ Ian Callahan, “How Queerness Goes Online: Intersectional Perspectives on Digital Sociality,” in *Research Anthology on Inclusivity and Equity for the LGBTQ+ Community*, ed. Information Resources Management Association (Hershey: IGI Global, 2022), 149–169, 149.

⁵⁶ Callahan, “How Queerness Goes Online,” 164.

⁵⁷ Callahan, “How Queerness Goes Online,” 155.

⁵⁸ @amen_aber_sexy, May 17, 2023.