

Heavy Burdens

Rivera, Bridget Eileen. *Heavy Burdens: Seven Ways LGBTQ Christians Experience Harm in the Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2021. 240 pp. \$19.99. Paperback. ISBN: 9781587434839.

Bridget Eileen Rivera's *Heavy Burdens* examines the ways in which LGBTQIA+ individuals have been subject to trauma by the Church. Using Matthew 23 as a foundational framework, she analyzes the divide between what the Church has required of queer Christians for participation and incorporation into community life and the standards these individuals have held for themselves. These, she writes, are heavy burdens. In Rivera's estimation, these contradictions harm not only queer believers but church communities at large. According to her theological positioning, she also reads LGBTQIA+ people into Christ's Matthew 25:40 declaration, "as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me." The 'one' are vulnerable queer believers; the doers, those at the other end of this warning, she identifies as the Church. The book is structured around seven burdens, each featuring two chapters on sexuality or gender identity. Moving from the Protestant sexual revolution, she catalogs the ideological shifts from mandated clerical celibacy, and sex as a mere method for procreation to sexual intercourse as an experience ordained by God for the enjoyment of God's people. As the Protestant tradition has evolved to make clerical celibacy less common, the Church has maintained this mandate for LGBTQIA+ individuals, if they wish to be saved. Rivera also chronicles the rise of AIDS in the 1980s, and the Church's participation in further ostracizing the suffering queer community. Adeptly, she draws parallels between the responses of religious-political leaders such as Jerry Falwell, Sr., in the 1980's, and those that were recorded following the Pulse Nightclub shooting in 2016. Moving to a discussion about gender, she evaluates the role of 'priestly' language, and its effect on those who fall outside of gender norms. Identifying this as the language of headship, she explores how people of all genders who fail to move into the dominant or subservient roles that are designated for them are seriously punished. In "More Than Just Monkeys", she retraces the origins of gender essentialism to Greco-Roman culture, reviews Darwin's natural selection theories, and then skillfully pinpoints the way such ideas have become woven into Christian theologies that disallow the possibility of, for instance, biblically masculine same-sex attracted males; according to these theologies, the essence of masculinity is an attraction to, and drive for partnership with women.

In terms of resolving theological differences surrounding the issues of LGBTQIA+ people and their right to full membership in the Church, Rivera admonishes us to take as models the ways in which divergent beliefs about the sacraments have been dealt with in the past. Finally, she addresses the contradiction between how scripture is applied to heterosexuals and to queer believers. For the former, she argues, interpretation of scripture has allowed nuance and room for conversation. For the latter, interpretation of scripture read it as inherently clear. One of Rivera's solutions is for the Church to allow LGBTQIA+ Christians the necessary room for mystery, when it comes to scriptural interpretation—just as it has with its majority of believers. In Rivera's appraisal, Christians should adopt a posture of humility, which emphasizes discussion and discovery, over commitments to traditional perspectives.

Based on this book's title, one might believe that it is for Christians who also identify as LGBTQIA+. This is only partly true. Queer Christians know the bends and bumps of their own experiences, and this book does not discuss at any significant length things like self-care, community, or self-acceptance for queer people. To be sure, the final chapter, "Weights of Glory" does encourage LGBTQIA+ people through direct appeal: "However dark our lives may be right now, it *does* get better" (204).

Yet, the bulk of chapters are aimed at those *outside* of the LGBTQIA+ spectrum. Rivera also makes clear that she does not write to spar with theologians, or those who wish to engage in queer apologetics. She writes, “Unlike most books that tackle LGBTQ issues in Christianity, this book is not going to spend much time debating whether same-sex marriage is biblical” (17). In a departure from the majority of titles on queer Christians and the church, which debate LGBTQ apologetics as a launching point, Rivera writes directly toward the central issue: harm. Among her intended audience, then, are those individuals, parents, ministers, and laypeople who perpetuate harm towards the queer people in their midst. In essence, Rivera reframes the conversation so that the Church, not queer Christians, are at the center. To be sure, though, some elements of queer apologetics are necessary as a theoretical framework, but Rivera engages with these less as a defense of queer Christianity and more towards historical context.

Heavy Burdens makes a logical point-by-point case for the ways in which LGBTQIA+ individuals have been harmed by the Church. The intuitive structure of the book lends it an accessibility and broader readership. In like manner, the ‘Burden Summary’ at the end of each section can be used as a launching off point for theological discussion. This further bolsters the notion that the author is writing to the Church, and laying the burden back on their shoulders. She writes, “I invite you to grapple with these stories and to unpack their causes” (18). In addition to this, she begins each chapter with an anecdote, which enriches her argument and datasets by humanizing—essentially contextualizing her claims. A specific chapter on the burden that has been laid on queer people of color in the Church, in conjunction with national policy and rhetoric would make this book even more useful. For instance, Rivera might discuss the parallels between the politicized Black matriarch and conversion therapy narratives of the overbearing mother.

With aplomb, Rivera writes in a manner that bridges the academic and the popular. The language employed throughout the book is elevated, as befits her nuanced discussion. Yet, it is not so esoteric as to unnecessarily alienate those everyday readers who wish to utilize the book for small group discussions or the like. Perhaps anticipating the wide breadth of her audience, Rivera offers helpful background for once-popular words utilized in Christian discipleship, like “Onanism.” Recognizing the arcane nature of words like these, while also acknowledging their germaneness to this discourse, Rivera offers a brief reception history before continuing her argument. The lexical ease-of-access clears that way for readers to focus on terms that are critical, but with which they may be unfamiliar.

The author acknowledges the odd position through which she enters the conversation about LGBTQ people and church harm. Rivera is a celibate lesbian, a choice that many queer individuals are forced to make when they come out in their churches; it is either celibacy or Hell. Acknowledging this peculiarity, she says, “...many use stories like mine as proof that gay people ought to be celibate” (101). Yet, she moves beyond this potential stumbling block by describing celibacy as a ‘pathway’, and not as prescription. Celibacy, by her estimation, becomes a tool for a harm only when it is foisted upon LGBTQIA+ individuals by their Christian communities. This curious position does not detract from a healthy analysis of harm in the church.

Heavy Burdens is an important title for today’s inclusive thinkers, ministers, and laypeople, who wish to understand the ways in which the church has both excluded and antagonized LGBTQIA+ people. Its multifaceted appraisal of the intersection of gender and sexuality, as it relates to the sufferings of queer people in religious spaces, marks it as a preeminent text on the subject.

Kashif Andrew Graham
Vanderbilt Divinity Library