

Queerology 64 - Victoria Slabinski

Episode Transcript

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- Matthias: Hey friends. This is Matthias Roberts, and you're listening to Queerology, a podcast on belief and being. This is episode 64.
- Victoria: I want there to be an asexual inclusive theology that doesn't come with the risk of somebody using it to be sex negative.
- Matthias: Victoria Slabinski is a queer, demisexual, Filipino American Christian, and who's currently working towards a Master of Divinity at Yale Divinity School. She founded Progressive Christian Students, an intersectional, feminist, LGBTQ+ affirming, and theologically inclusive student organization at Miami University, and she's working on creating a similar campus-wide organization at Yale. Victoria hopes to explore asexual and aromantic inclusive queer theologies, while she's at Yale, and theologies related to decolonizing and reclaiming efforts by Christians of color.
- Matthias: Victoria did want me to point out that she is not aromantic herself but is very passionate about including aromantic persons in our theological worlds. In October, Victoria co-led the Reformation Project's first workshop on asexual and aromantic identities. Her lifelong goals are to build welcoming communities, do faith-inspired social justice work, and pursue her values of authenticity, courage, and joy.
- Matthias: I'm so excited to have Victoria on the podcast today. When Queerology had its first episode about asexuality a month, month and a half ago with Bailey Brawner, there were so many people who reached out saying, "We need more of this. We need more of these conversations." So this is next in that context, and hopefully, again, there are going to be many more to come.
- Matthias: Before we jump in, registration is open for Q Christian Fellowship's conference in Chicago, happening in January 10 through 13th. I'm gonna be doing a live recording of Queerology there as well as a workshop on developing sustainable resiliency practices. There's so many good things. I know Kevin Garcia's gonna be doing some workshops and a live recording of his podcast as well as Jennifer Knapp, Nicole Garcia is speaking, Gungor is performing. It's gonna be so much fun, so to find out more and to grab your tickets head over to qchristian.org, and we'll see you there.
- Matthias: Let's go ahead and dive in. Victoria. Hi. Welcome.
- Victoria: Hello. Thank you for having me.
- Matthias: Yeah. Thank you. I'm so excited to have you on the podcast finally. Like it's taken a little bit of work.

Victoria: Excited to be here.

Matthias: Yeah. For people who don't know, we were supposed to do this live at the Reformation Project back in October, and obviously, that didn't happen. So here we are, and I'm excited.

Victoria: Yeah.

Matthias: So to start, the question I ask everyone, how do you identify, and then how would you say that your faith has helped formed that identity?

Victoria: I am a biracial, second generation, Filipino American woman. In terms of sexuality, I identify as queer, when I'm not being specific. But specifically as demisexual and pansexual. I think I might be the first person to identify as demisexual on the podcast, so I'll just give a little definition. Demisexuality is an orientation under the asexual umbrella, and it's a term for someone who only experiences sexual attraction within the context of a strong, emotional, or a romantic bond. When combined with pansexuality, that means that theoretically I could be attracted to someone any or no gender, but usually I'm not attracted to anyone.

Victoria: I identify as Christian. I was raised Catholic. Was a nondenominational evangelical for about two years. I still don't really have a denomination that I align with, but I've learned that nondenominational typically means something specific. Now, I just say I'm a free agent. I didn't make that up. One of my friends had that idea. Sounding a little bit more positive than, "Oh, I don't have a denomination."

Victoria: I experience my identities as all informing each other. My acceptance of my Filipino identity and the realization of my sexual orientation coincided with my faith journey and to then an overall movement towards uncertainty combined with possibility and hope.

Matthias: Oh, I love that. Uncertainty combined with possibility and hope. Tell me a little bit more about that journey 'cause I would imagine it's been ... It has been a journey.

Victoria: Yeah.

Matthias: Like you just said that.

Victoria: I'm a person who likes to always be really prepared, always know what's next, make sure that my beliefs or what I know is all the right things. I think there's just this human tendency to like to have neat little boxes to categorize everything and precise definitions, but a lot of my identities don't really fall into those neat little boxes. So I'm in some in-between spaces with race or sexuality ... or faith with not having a denomination. That was a source of tension for a long time and still can be with thinking about what identities am I allowed to claim, what communities am I allowed to be a part of.

Victoria: It's been a journey of learning to hold everything with open hands and see faith as being important because uncertainty can be an idol, but faith, for me, is about knowing that I'll never all the answers about God or maybe even about myself. My goal now is just to carve new spaces for people after me who also don't fit neatly into the categories or stories that have been given, and just looking at the present moment with a sense of possibility.

Matthias: I mean, you just started doing an MDiv at Yale Divinity, right?

Victoria: I did. I'm in my first semester.

Matthias: Congratulations.

Victoria: Thank you.

Matthias: That's amazing. It sounds like a lot of the work that you're wanting to do in that space is to kind of do more theological work in those spaces of uncertainty or unknown like you're talking about. Specifically around asexual and aromantic identities, theological works, and I would love to hear about some of that.

Victoria: Yeah. I've been interested in queer theology for a while, even before I was out to myself and aware of my own queer identity, but it can be difficult looking at queer theology and realizing that my identity isn't really included in it. A lot of ... Well, queer theology isn't really asexual or aromantic inclusive at the moment. I remember one time I was searching to see if asexual theology existed, and there's a few people who are sort of starting to do work in that field, but really nothing that exists in the literature yet.

Victoria: I feel like there's a balance to be found because a lot of the beauty of queer theology is challenging sex negativity within Christianity. I want there to be an asexual inclusive theology that doesn't come with the risk of somebody using it to be sex negative or undo the work that queer theology has done. I'm not really sure what that's going to look like yet, but it's definitely something that I want to explore.

Matthias: So tell me a little bit about like ... Because you're right. I feel like most queer theology, at least the stuff that I have read, have been ... I mean, obviously very heavily leaning towards the white gay male experience, and then there's a large kind of more womanist queer theology emerging. But a lot of those, you're right, focuses on sexual orientation being sexual. I mean, you just said this. There isn't much asexual, aromantic literature out there.

Matthias: In your mind, what would be some of the tenets of an asexual theology? I'd love to hear about some of that work.

Victoria: I think part of that would just be articulating what the need for it is. Because there's a lot of misconceptions around asexuality, of thinking that asexuality is just the same thing as celibacy, or confusing asexuality with internalized purity culture, like internalized sex negativity. I think first challenging those misconceptions would be important.

Victoria: Something that I've been really inspired by lately is a dissertation that I read about asexuality in religion by someone named LaChelle Schilling. 'Cause this is just what I do in my free time now. She made use of the essay, *Uses of the Erotic*, by Audre Lorde, which is in *Sister Outsider*, and she made use of it in a theoretical way that's really affirming of asexual identity, and experiences that I hadn't thought of before I read her work.

Victoria: In Audre Lorde's essay, there's this idea of the erotic as meaning like human passion, or embodiment, or joy, non-rational knowledge, or just allowing oneself to feel. In the essay, she looks at the compartmentalization of those experiences as being located only within the realm of the sexual as being a problem, and how these are aspects of the human experience that should be allowed to impact all parts of our lives. I think there's a lot of possibilities within that for moving towards an asexual or aromantic inclusive theology that is not leaning back into purity culture or sex negativity.

- Matthias: Yeah. 'Cause I mean, you're talking about how asexuality often can get conflated with celibacy or, like you said, internalized sex negativity. Can you speak more about that because that's something that I feel like is a key distinguishment.
- Victoria: Yeah. People who are asexual or aromantic aren't a monolithic group, so there's a lot of diverse experiences within that group. One of the ways that people try and label or make sense of their own experiences is ... There's terms like sex favorable, sex neutral, or sex repulsed, or like similar terms with romance that asexual or aromantic individuals can use to describe their personal feelings towards sex. You could have any of those personally, but still be sex positive generally.
- Victoria: I think people can be confused by thinking that what someone personally feels is ... Like how they approach sex or romance personally is how they feel about that morally, when that's not the case. Actually, I think most people who are asexual, or at least all of the people who are asexual that I know, are sex positive and are very affirming of the other letters of the LGBTQ+ acronym.
- Victoria: I think there's a need within the asexual community to allow space for people to sort out for themselves. Like maybe they do have some kind of internalized homophobia or internalized sex negativity, and that's something that they can work through. But that's different from an asexual identity.
- Matthias: So you're using the terms like sex negativity and sex positivity a lot. I'd be curious, like those terms have very specific meanings in specific circles. I would imagine there are people out there listening who are like, "What do these things mean?" Probably general ideas, but I would love if you could maybe talk a little bit more about sex negativity, and purity culture, and sex positivity, and how those things inform and intersect with your work.
- Victoria: So sex negativity and purity culture ... Well, I guess those aren't exactly the same, but they're very close. Where purity culture is the idea that sex is only okay if it's within a marriage between a man and a woman, and anything else is sinful and dirty. That's, I think, really similar to sex negativity, which is just seeing sexuality as being dirty or impure. Whereas sex positivity is ... I guess just the opposite of that, of not seeing sexuality as making one dirty or impure.
- Victoria: I think that should be ace inclusive, and it often is with the idea of healthy sexuality can be different things for different people. It doesn't have to mean that one is sexual. It's also okay if a person is asexual and doesn't experience sexual attraction. Regardless of what somebody's orientation is or what somebody's feelings or not feelings of attraction are, those aren't tied to somebody's morality or that person's worth or how, in quotes, pure that person is.
- Matthias: That's such an important point. That idea that sex positivity needs to be ace inclusive for it to actually be sex positivity. That feels key.
- Victoria: Yeah. I think sometimes that can go the other way. It can get so far away, like going in the opposite direction of purity culture, that it becomes unhealthy in a different sort of way, where how progressive you are can be tied to how sexual you are. I've had a friend describe this as sexuality as being a sort of social currency, which is also harmful but just in a different way.
- Victoria: I think ace inclusion is really necessary for a sex positive view to be as healthy as it can be.

- Matthias: Yeah. I'd be curious 'cause you also mentioned that a lot of your work focuses on colonialism and precolonial queerness. I'd be interested in hearing about ... Have you found intersections between ... This is a very broad question, but intersections between sex positivity and colonialism. Or I guess maybe the better question would be sex negativity and colonialism. Also, asexuality and aromanticism, do those things fit together?
- Victoria: For the part of this, looking into scholarship around precolonial Philippines has been something I've been interested in for the past year, and it's not something that I've been able to find a ton of information about. A lot of it is reading between the lines because it's really difficult to find information of how things were before colonization.
- Victoria: But I did read this really great book that was called Holy Confrontation, which was about the impact of colonization and forest conversions to Catholicism on religion in the Philippines. Where in the precolonial Philippines, according to this book, religion was primarily led by women and people who today we might view as like transwomen or transfeminine individuals. I'm really unsure about terminology because it's a different time period and a different culture. Those terms aren't quite correct, but there's this idea that Catholicism and colonization together marked sexuality, as was expressed in the precolonial culture, as wrong and condemned the existing religions as, in quotes, like demon worship. Forced conversions to Catholicism where only men were allowed to be priests. Not even Filipino men, but only the men who were the colonizers were allowed to be priests. Only Filipino men later on. I guess that's how that relates to sex negativity.
- Victoria: I'm not sure how asexuality and aromanticism fit into all of this. I would love to find a way to bring everything together, but that's not something that I've come across yet.
- Matthias: Yeah. Yeah. I feel like that kind of highlights this point that I feel like you've kind of been making the whole episode is that there's not a whole lot of work out there around asexuality and aromanticism. I would imagine it as a scholar, as someone who's trying to step into and start filling this void, that poses a difficulty for you. What has it been like just even trying to start doing this work?
- Victoria: It can be frustrating because I think ... You typically think of scholarship as ... I've heard the analogy of like a brick wall, where everyone's scholarship is like a brick. You don't want to build the whole wall with your scholarship, but you see the work that's been done before. You focus on a narrow area that's of interest to you, and you build off the work of other people, and that's like your little brick in the wall. But then, what do you do if there's no wall yet?
- Victoria: There's a lot of reading between the lines. When I mentioned precolonial gender in the Philippines, I haven't really found anything that's specifically about that, at least not within academia. I was getting that mostly from Bianca Louie's workshop and TRP from a while ago, where she had mentioned precolonial queerness in different Asian countries.
- Victoria: Or like with asexuality and aromanticism, I really just know that one dissertation that I mentioned. I've been trying to sort of follow some of the steps that that other author. Like how he had mentioned *The Uses of the Erotic* by Audre Lorde. I think this relates a lot to what I was talking about earlier of like stepping into uncertainty, and believing that there is a sense of possibility and hope in all of this.
- Victoria: Where even if you are having to carve a new space, the space that ... I want to carve a space for the people that are after me. Maybe my work is not going to be perfect, and I'm

not going to be able to build this whole wall of scholarship by myself, but I want to start it.

Matthias: I mean, that feels like such deeply important and needed work. So like yay. Good for you.

Victoria: Thank you.

Matthias: That is a huge task ahead of you to jump into that. My goodness. Thank you for doing that.

Matthias: I'd be curious like what can asexuality and aromanticism, and everything that you're kind of talking about ... What do you think that can tell us about the nature of God and our faith?

Victoria: That's a good question. I think it's important to consider all of the identities that we can hold as human beings because if we are all created in the image of God, that if you are excluding some of our human identities, then we're not really getting a complete picture of who God is.

Victoria: Something I've been thinking about lately is the need to move beyond inclusion. Not just thinking about how can we include queer Christians within the church, but how can queer Christians transform the church. Thinking about that same idea but with asexuality. Not just how can I make sure that queer theology includes individuals who are aromantic or asexual, but how can those identities transform the way that queer theology is done, or lead to new understandings about God.

Victoria: I think some of this relates to sexual ethics, but it doesn't necessarily just have to be about sexual ethics. It could be also good ways about how do we relate to one another, how do we relate to God, or how does God relate to us.

Matthias: I love that idea of needing to move beyond queer inclusion. Could you maybe say more about that? 'Cause I feel like the conversation for so long has been focused on ... Well, I feel like the progression in my mind has been like, "We have to tolerate queer people. We have to include queer people." To now, at least there's some communities who are inclusive. What, in your mind, does that next step look like? What is a more than inclusive space?

Victoria: There was a book I read last summer that I really liked. It was called Queer Virtue by Elizabeth M. Edman, and while it wasn't asexual inclusive, I resonated with a lot of it because that book was about the parallels between Christian values and LGBTQ+ identity, and how there's all these overlapping themes of authenticity, or community, courage. I think a lot of ideas expressed in that book are the ideas I'm thinking of. How can we not just be included but revitalize the church, or transform the way that church is done, expand the ways that we think about God.

Matthias: I love that book. It's so good. I feel like I'm hearing this need for ... not just inclusion, but maybe transformation. I don't know if I'm hearing that well, but this idea that if queer people are truly going to be a part of our faith communities, then that inclusion needs to transform the way our faith looks, the way our theology looks. Is that a good summary?

Victoria: Yeah. When I was attending church ... When I was living in Chicago last summer, I attended Urban Village Church, and it was a very LGBTQ+ affirming space. I was attending Ride N Pride month in June. I think that experience of being in an incredibly affirming and diverse church was what restored my faith in organized Christianity and the

church as an institution of ... I was just impressed by like, "Oh, this is such a vibrant community." It's really involved with the surrounding community. People are being invited in. There are queer Christians in different ministries and positions of leadership within the church.

Victoria: I didn't know that church could look like this, and it felt totally different from other church spaces I've been in. It gave me hope for like, "This is what Christianity could be." It wasn't just you are tolerated in this space, but you are an essential part of our community, and we value the gifts that you bring, and this is your community.

Matthias: That's making me think of this conference that I was at this summer, where the theme of the whole weekend was kind of this idea of spiritual giftings that queer people hold, and what queer people can bring to faith communities. I'd be curious in thinking about that in your experience at Urban Village, which is ... Like yeah. They're like one of the few churches in the US that are doing this very, very, very well. What are some of these spiritual giftings of queer people, asexual people, aromantic people? What can we bring to a faith community that brings us more fully into this image of God? That is a roundabout question.

Victoria: You're asking like what specific gifts that we're bringing to Christianity?

Matthias: Yeah. Yeah. Yes. Yeah. That's what I'm asking.

Victoria: Yeah. Creativity of bringing in new interpretations to biblical stories is a big part of it. Also, just realizing the importance of authenticity within one's own life and in striving towards joy and hope. There was one article about asexuality, an asexual interpretation of Jesus's mother, Mary, that I really loved. Where this article was imagining Mary as like Elizabeth wanting a child before she was ever told that she would have one, but thinking that she wouldn't have a child because of her own asexuality. Which asexuality is different for different people, but in this particular narrative, the virgin birth is seen as being holy not because Mary's sexuality is being denied, but because her sexuality is being honored by God.

Victoria: I'd never thought to look at that biblical story in that way before. I guess that's just one example of how people who have different identities and different experiences can bring something totally new to the way that we look at our holy texts, and can really bring new insights into how we view God's work in the world.

Matthias: I mean, when you said that about Mary, I got chills just thinking about that. That is beautiful to think about. That idea of God honoring her sexuality. You're mentioning creativity, and you haven't said the word imagination, but it's kind of in everything that you're saying. These ideas of creativity and imagination coming together to bring new insight to the text.

Matthias: You're a theologian. As a theologian, I feel like there's a certain amount of play, and creativity, and imagination that can go into working with these texts. But I feel like the world that I grew up in especially, which was kind of conservative world, there wasn't that freedom to get creative with the text. I'm curious as someone who has stepped into this role of getting creative and letting there be some air within our theology ... I mean, can you speak to that a little bit? Both the fear that can come to ... Or the rigidity of working with a text, but also the space. Does that make sense?

Victoria: Yeah. Yeah. I'll start answering, and then you can tell me if you meant something different.

- Matthias: Okay.
- Victoria: First off, I like that you called me a theologian. I feel like I don't really think of myself as that, but I like that.
- Victoria: I had also come from ... At least being theologically conservative for a certain time of my life, and seeing Christianity as being knowing all the right answers about faith, and making sure that I knew all the right doctrines, and believed all the right doctrines, and was able to articulate them to anyone who might ask me. My faith journey, moving away from that, is ... I was still stuck on that idea of I have to all the answers. I just need to have all the progressive answers. Thinking that, "Okay, I know all these conservative interpretations. Now I just need to find the progressive interpretations, and make sure that I understand those, and believe those, and can articulate them to anyone who would ask me about them."
- Victoria: As I read some more of what other people studying theology were saying, I realized there's not just a single progressive interpretation of any given biblical story or passage. People have different identities and different life experiences, and all approach the same text in different ways, and find all these different insights, and there's not one that's necessarily more valuable or more true than other ones.
- Victoria: When I look at something, with my experience, I can think, "This is how I interpret this text, and maybe this isn't the same way that somebody who has different identities from me will interpret this text." It's not really about arguing which one of us is right, but realizing that we are both in the image of God, and we can't just erase the insights that are brought by this person with other identities. They're all revealing something about who God is.
- Matthias: Yeah. I mean, it seems like there's a lot more freedom in that. There's an openness in there that feels really beautiful. I feel like I say the word beautiful a lot on this podcast, but ... But yeah. I'm curious and maybe to start wrapping up a little bit. This is the second episode that we've done on asexuality and aromanticism. With the first one back with Bailey a couple months ago, I was shocked at the response, and the number of people who reached out who were like, "There's literally no one talking about this." I had some idea, but really had no idea that-
- Victoria: I got really excited when I heard that podcast.
- Matthias: Yeah. We need to be talking about these things. For people who like this is a new concept to, who are maybe just waking up to the idea that, "Oh, I'm asexual," or, "I'm aromantic," or both, what would you have to say to those people who are trying to figure this out for themselves?
- Victoria: First off, to know that you are not broken. This is your identity, and not something that is wrong with you. I will say that labels maybe aren't helpful for everyone, but they are helpful for a lot of people for finding community. I would encourage people to explore those, but with the knowledge that your labels can change over time because sexuality is fluid, or you might learn more about yourself over time. It's okay to have a label because that label provides you community, and change it later if you find out that it no longer fits your experience.
- Victoria: I would say definitely look to the resources that are there. There aren't a lot of resources within theology yet, but there are a lot of great communities and online ways to find ways to find support. Like The Asexual, which is an online journal that just started. But just

know that your identity does not make you broken, and that you are created in the image of God. There are a lot of people out there who want to love and support you in whatever your identity is.

Matthias: How can people find your work?

Victoria: I'm on Instagram @victoriaslabinski. I am going to have a blog very soon. Hopefully in December.

Matthias: Yay.

Victoria: It's not out yet, but I will post about it on my Instagram.

Matthias: Yay. I'm excited about that 'cause I will definitely be reading. Thank you so much Victoria. This has been absolutely wonderful.

Victoria: Thank you for having me.

Matthias: You can find Victoria on Instagram @victoriaslabinski. That's Victoria S-L-A-B-I-N-S-K-I. Be sure to keep an eye out for her new blog. Queerology is on Twitter and Instagram @queerologypod. Or you can tweet me directly @matthiasroberts. Queerology is supported by its listeners. You can help keep spreading the message of love and belonging to thousands all over the world by pledging a dollar or more a month over at matthiasroberts.com/support. A really easy way to support Queerology is by leaving a rating and review. Do that right in your podcast app, or head to matthiasroberts.com/review, and it'll take you right there.

Matthias: As always, I'd love to hear from you. If you have ideas of what you want to hear on an episode or just want to say hi, reach out, I'll get back to you. Until next week y'all, bye.