

Reforming narratives on human sexuality in the Dutch Reformed Church

Louis van der Riet
Stellenbosch University, South Africa
vdriet@sun.ac.za

Abstract

This article offers a critique on the dominant narrative on human sexuality in the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC). A mirror is held up to the binary nature of this dominant discourse, centred on ethics, hermeneutics, and ecclesiology. The limitations of how the DRC has engaged with human sexuality, and homosexuality in particular, are framed within the church's own construction of being “vasgeloop” (stuck) amidst plurality and diversity. These limitations are discussed as issues of church unity, justice, and embodiment. Finally, a subaltern “window” is offered out of this apparent impasse, that looks upon the liberating alternatives presented by embodied queer narratives. In an attempt at seeing queerness within the Reformed tradition, queer phenomenology is presented as an epistemic shift away from the normative, binary discourse that has dominated the discourse on human sexuality in the Dutch Reformed Church.

Keywords

Queer Theology; Reformed Theology; hermeneutics; ethics; human sexuality; Dutch Reformed Church; embodiment

1. Introduction

In a recent volume titled *Sexual Reformation?* South African scholars explore what a sexual reformation within Christian dialogue on human sexuality might entail. This publication offers a variety of theological and ethical reflections on different issues of human sexuality that have been dominated by “narrow moral-ethical utterances”.¹ In her analysis of the Christian church's relationship to human sexuality, Tanya van Wyk

1 Manitza Kotzé, Nadia Marais, Nina Müller van Velden, “Sexual Reformation? Theological and Ethical Reflections on Human Sexuality: An Introduction,” in *Sexual Reformation? Theological and Ethical Reflections on Human Sexuality*, ed. Manitza

captures the dominant narrative of moral authority traditionally claimed by churches in teachings about the human body, sensuality, sexual intimacy and the so-called correct ordering of gender and sexual relationships. Her analysis points to an obsession with regulation and control, and moreover, to an epistemological and phenomenological challenge at the heart of this wrestling with morality. “Binary thinking,” van Wyk notes, “leads to a struggle with otherness and diversity, whether it be knowledge, people or morality”.² This binary thinking is thus a struggle to regulate diversity and plurality by separating what is considered normal (moral) from what is deviant (immoral) while maintaining a “moral blindness” to those that suffer from this restrictive and oppressive ethical gaze.³

This contribution illustrates and further explores the lived reality of Van Wyk’s analysis of binary thinking as it manifests within a dominant narrative in the Dutch Reformed Church, centred on ethics, hermeneutics, and ecclesiology. This analysis highlights some of the limitations and opportunities – mirrors and windows – that this discourse presents for the Reformed tradition. An alternative or subaltern methodological proposal is explored as a potential window when engaging the human body theologically that poses a challenge to the epistemological and phenomenological assumptions of this discourse.

2. Dealing with plurality and diversity in the DRC

As has been repeated in numerous reflections on Reformed Christianity in South Africa by Dirk Smit, the Reformed tradition, and its reception in the South African context, is “a story of many stories”.⁴ This plurality is also acknowledged by the Dutch Reformed Church, in a myriad of ways. Metaphors such as “ruim huis” (spacious house) continue to surface in descriptions of the DRC’s understanding of plurality and diversity and

Kotzé, Nadia Marais, Nina Müller van Velden (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2022), 3.

2 Tanya Van Wyk, “Revisiting the Church’s Moral Authority on Sexual Ethics,” in *Sexual Reformation?*, 183.

3 Van Wyk, “Revisiting,” 184.

4 Dirk J. Smit, “Reformed Theology in South Africa – A story of many stories,” in *Essays on Being Reformed: Collected Essays 3*, ed. Robert R. Vosloo (Stellenbosch: SUN MeDIA, 2009), 201–216.

has been pronounced in its discourse on homosexuality and same-sex partnerships.⁵

In his essay *What does “Reformed” mean?* Smit sees that questions of identity and self-examination – looking into the mirror – are inherently part of the Reformed tradition.⁶ Moreover, declaring any answer to what a true Christian, Reformed identity is as normative and absolute, Smit notes, is either arrogant (conceited) or uninformed (ignorant). “The only way to seriously attempt to answer such questions,” Smit concedes, “is probably to tell stories”. He continues: “Questions of identity can only be approached with narrative answers, and then only tentatively and with caution. The narrators should not be ignorant or arrogant. This means they must not withhold stories other than their own, stories that do not fit neatly (own translation).”⁷

Sexual orientation, specifically homosexuality, stands out as one aspect of human sexuality and identity that has been exceptionally polarizing and contentious over the past three decades in the DRC, but also for Reformed churches the world over. This discourse reflects the “many stories” of the Reformed tradition and calls forth renewed attempts at looking into the mirror. These stories have been attempts to make bodily experiences of sexuality and gender “fit neatly” into various theological subjects or loci, including hermeneutics, ethics, and ecclesiology. One dominant narrative in the DRC, but also in most other churches, is that theological epistemology

-
- 5 This term was introduced by a previous moderator of the DRC General Synod. See Coenie Burger, “Die NG Kerk as ruim huis,” *Konferensie oor Selfdegeslagverhoudings*, Sinodale Taakspan vir Leer- en Aktuele Sake, Unpublished Conference Proceedings. [Online]. Available: <https://www.kerkargief.co.za/doks/acta/StelKonf15.pdf> [Accessed: 16 January 2023]. This term has surfaced in discourse multiple times, including by another previous moderator, Nelus Niemandt, and in a description of the DRC’s latest policy decision on same-sex relationships by the actuary of the General Synod, Dewyk Ungerer, see Arisa Janse van Rensburg, “Beswaardes in NGK stig eie groep, sê ‘God nie meer sentraal,’” *Netwerk24*. [Online]. Available: <https://www.netwerk24.com/netwerk24/nuus/aktueel/beswaardes-in-ngk-stig-eie-groep-se-god-nie-meer-sentraal-20220210> [Accessed: February 10, 2022]. and Kerkbode, “Kyk: Wat behels die 2019 besluit oor selfdegeslagverhoudings?” *Die Kerkbode*. [Online]. Available: <https://kerkbode.christians.co.za/2021/10/25/kyk-wat-behels-die-2019-besluit-oor-selfdegeslagverhoudings/> [Accessed: October 25, 2021].
- 6 Dirk J. Smit, “Wat beteken ‘Gereformeerd?’” in *Opstelle oor Gereformeerd-wees Vandag: Versamelde Opstelle 4*, ed. Len Hansen (Stellenbosch: SUN MeDIA, 2013), 22.
- 7 Smit, “Wat beteken ‘Gereformeerd?’” 22–23.

and authority on (homo)sexuality, and thus conflicting ethical viewpoints and ecclesial policies, can be settled through biblical hermeneutics.⁸

The following section demonstrates how the diversity of ethical and hermeneutical viewpoints on (homo)sexuality are persistently framed within binary thinking. It is best captured by the phrase frequently used in church discourse to describe the current reality when engaging (homo)sexuality: “vasgeloop” (stuck).

3. “Vasgeloop”

Although homosexuality first appeared on the agenda of the DRC in 1986 and has been debated frequently since then, a landmark decision taken at the General Synod in 2015 towards the recognition and affirmation of same-sex relationships initiated renewed and sustained public discourse.⁹ This decision allowed individual ministers of the church to solemnise same-sex marriages and removed the celibacy requirement for gay and lesbian ministers.¹⁰ This decision was overturned in 2016, when the church convened an Extraordinary General Synod meeting due to a severe backlash from those that were opposed to the sanctioning of same-sex partnerships.

The 2015 and 2016 decisions became representative of the binary positions of support for homosexuality, and indicative of a dominant narrative within the church of how gay and lesbian members should be treated. Continued

8 For an exposition on the definitive hermeneutical and ethical differences within the Dutch Reformed Church, as evident from the discourse on homosexuality, see Henco Van der Westhuizen, “Die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk, hermeneutiek en etiek? (1986–2019),” *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 6, no. 3 (2020): 79–109. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.17570/stj.2020.v6n3.a2>.

9 According to Thyssen, the length and nuance with which the Dutch Reformed Church has discussed homosexuality is possibly unparalleled in the South African denominational landscape. See Ashwin Thyssen, “A church for others? Queering the Ecclesiology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer,” Unpublished Master’s thesis, Stellenbosch University, 2020, 104.

10 *Kerkbode*, “2015-Besluit oor selfdegeslagverhoudings,” *Die Kerkbode*. [Online]. Available: <https://kerkbode.christians.co.za/2015/10/09/2015-besluit-oor-selfdegaslagverhoudings/> [Accessed: October 9, 2015].

debate on “same-sex partnerships”¹¹ has thus led to a recognized and dominant narrative in recent years that is framed within a binary.¹²

On 7 March 2019, the Pretoria High Court delivered judgment in the case of “Gaum & Others versus Janse van Rensburg & Others”, declaring the decision on same-sex relationships adopted during the Extraordinary General Synod meeting in 2016 as unlawful and invalid, and the decision was reviewed and set aside. At the 2019 General Synod, a new policy decision was taken, centred on allowing for the diversity of theological-ethical and hermeneutical viewpoints to be accommodated. It reinstated voluntary solemnizing of civil unions by individual ministers. The decision centres on commissioning church councils (and per implication, ministers) to act “according to their convictions” in supporting or rejecting same-sex partnerships and the solemnising thereof. It starts with the acknowledgement of this binary that has created an apparent impasse:

The General Synod acknowledges that differences in the church regarding our use and interpretation of Scripture have led to an impasse, and that continued reflection regarding the responsible interpretation of Scripture is still needed.¹³

After its most recent policy decision, the DRC developed a guidebook (“Gids”) to help its members with historical and theological background as a framing of the 2019 decision. Here, the binary is also recognised and reinscribed. On the one hand of the binary are “those that want to create space for believers from the LGBTIQ+ community to live out their sexuality with responsibility toward God,” in contrast to those that oppose

11 Until 2011, the term homosexuality was used in the General Synod agenda and minutes, whereafter the term same-sex partnerships became the dominant discourse marker. The more comprehensive and inclusive acronym for sexual orientation, sex, gender identity and expression, LGBTIQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer or questioning, and sexual minorities), does not feature in any of the General Synod agendas or minutes.

12 For an account of the discourse that led up to the 2015 decision of the General Synod of the DRC on same-sex partnerships, see André Bartlett, *Weerlose Weerstand – Die gaydebat in die NG Kerk* (Pretoria: Protea Boekhuis, 2017).

13 *Kerkbode*, “Decision: Same Sex Unions,” *Die Kerkbode*. [Online]. Available: <https://kerkbode.christians.co.za/2019/10/09/decision-same-sex-unions/> [Accessed: October 9, 2019].

this based on their reading of the Bible.¹⁴ It positions and imagines DRC members as outsiders, gazing upon the contextual, lived reality of being LGBTIQ+, and weighing themselves as “for” or “against” homosexuality.

This guidebook reads as apologetics for how and why this decision came about, acknowledging that “We come to different ethical conclusions with the same Bible”.¹⁵ It continues to appeal to the dominant narratives of the Reformed Tradition in how to deal with this “stuckness”, tracing how hermeneutical, ethical, and theological difference has historically been part of the DRC (narrowly) and Reformed identity (broadly). In an ecclesiological appeal to church unity and the DRC as a “ruim huis”, it recognises how the DRC has previously been hermeneutically and ethically “stuck” between seemingly opposing convictions.¹⁶ Interestingly, it does not explicitly refer to how two of the most divisive issues of human embodiment in the DRC’s past – race and gender – were treated theologically.

There are several limitations to this dominant narrative that appeals to church unity amidst diversity in dealing with human sexuality and homosexuality in particular, to which we now turn.

4. Limitations

4.1 Ecclesiology – Church Unity

The first limitation to note is that at the center of this dominant discourse – that there are binary ethical and hermeneutical positions on homosexuality – is not the question of how might homosexual or queer (LGBTIQ+) Christians flourish or experience salvation, but rather an

14 “Gids – Agtergrond en Inligting: Die Algemene Sinode se 2019-besluit oor selfdegeslagverhoudings.” [Online]. Available: https://www.scribd.com/document/449948438/Gids-Die-Algemene-Sinode-se-2019-besluit-oor-selfdegeslagverhoudings-KONSEPDOKUMENT0#fullscreen&from_embed. [Accessed: 16 January 2023]. 18.

15 “Gids,” 17.

16 This includes how the DRC has engaged the question of truth “die waarheidsvraag”. Mention is made of the genealogical tracing of theological difference between those who are “regsinning van hart” and “regsinnig van leer” (in the work of Vincent Brümmer); those that prioritise piety and those that prioritise church tradition and teaching; mystics and confessionalists; liberalism and fundamentalism; those that want to retrieve an “objective truth” in the Bible, and those that take seriously “the role of personal preference, own history and presuppositions” in the interpretation process.

ecclesiological problem, of how to accommodate two opposing viewpoints in one church.¹⁷ The focus quickly shifts from being about human sexuality, to church unity (at best) and hermeneutical expertise or moral superiority (at worst). This dominant narrative thus creates ever-deepening calls to church unity amidst diversity, where the values such as those centred in the Season of Human Dignity – love, listen, respect, embrace – become the single script, the only mirror or window, to mitigate this difference and division.¹⁸ This shift to church unity is illustrated by a recent occurrence that again tabled the lived realities and experiences of queer people, and elicited a mitigating ecclesiological response.

In March 2022, a conference titled “Queering the Prophet” was hosted by the Gender Unit of the Beyers Naudé Centre for Public Theology in the Faculty of Theology at Stellenbosch University. The conference explored with, and beyond, the Biblical prophet Jonah “the role of gender, postcolonial and queer interpretation in reframing what it means to be a prophet in these exceedingly queer times in which we are living”.¹⁹ True to the transgressive and disruptive nature of queerness, this title caused quite a stir, especially amongst members of the DRC, which has historically been affiliated with this faculty and remains one of its partners. As word spread about the upcoming conference, the term “queer” was introduced, perhaps for the first time with any significance, in public discourse in the DRC. Despite decades of dialogue on sexuality, queer-language has not incurred any currency in the DRC. Importantly, it held up a mirror to the queer imaginings of the DRC, and particularly how the lived realities of marginalized identities are (not) engaged.

17 For an illustration of how the same sex debate in the Dutch Reformed Church is a soteriological dilemma, see Marais, N. 2017. Saving Marriage? The sexuality debate in the Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa. *Sárospataki Füzetek [Sárospataki Theological Journal]*, vol 21(2), 71-85.

18 For more on the Season of Human Dignity that formally came to an end in 2019, see “Season of Human Dignity.” [Online]. Available: <https://menswaardigheid.co.za/category/information> [Accessed: January 16, 2023] and “Verslag van die Moderamen.” [Online]. Available: https://kaapkerk.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/AS-2019_A.2.1-Verslag-van-die-Moderamen-Finaal.pdf [Accessed: January 16, 2023].

19 “Queering the Prophet Conference,” *Stellenbosch University*. [Online]. Available: <https://www.sun.ac.za/english/faculty/theology/bnc/units/gender-unit> [Accessed: January 16, 2023].

The Curatorium of the DRC, the body responsible for the theological training of prospective church leaders and theologians, attempted to mitigate the disruption caused by releasing a statement prior to the conference. It acknowledged the disruptive nature of this language which elicits “other fields of meaning related to sexually promiscuous behaviour” and issued a request to the faculty “to take into account the diversity of viewpoints in the church” by not divorcing “freedom” from “responsibility”.²⁰

While the statement names the imagined interpretation of “queer” as promiscuity by members of the church community, it fails to provide any sort of theological explanation, description, or appreciation of “queer” as defined in Queer Theology, including its relevance for the lives of queer people. It merely describes “queering” as “an attempt to develop understanding for people who are different from myself or who seem strange to me”.

What this example illustrates is a failure of the dominant narrative, and its resultant emphasis on maintaining church unity at all costs, to deal with the lived reality of homosexual (queer) people. This is evident in the reality that the discourse on human sexuality in the DRC remains centred on the moral regulation of homosexual bodies, avoiding the vast nuances and particularities of other dimensions of human sexuality, including other sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions, and sex characteristics. As mere illustration, bisexual, transgender or intersex realities have never explicitly been included in any official church documentation or decisions in the DRC. The emergence of the Kairos Network (not to be confused with the Kairos movement that birthed the Kairos Document and helped to dismantle apartheid theologically and has continued to counter religiously fuelled injustice globally) is a telling result of the failure of this dominant narrative, as it remains blind to the lived experience of LGBTIQ+ people. The limitation of this ecclesiological focus is clear – justice for queer lives has been sacrificed on the altar of church unity.

20 *Kerkbode*, Queering The Prophet: Verklaring deur Kuratorium. *Die Kerkbode*, February 18, 2022. [Online]. Available: <https://kerkbode.christians.co.za/2022/02/18/queering-the-prophet-verklaring-deur-kuratorium/>

4.2 Justice

Smit helps to articulate how the notion of diversity and pluralism can be understood in ways too “innocent” and “harmless” to bring into the light the breadth of the inequalities and injustices that divide the South African society, and indeed the church. He states: “Our society was and remains not merely pluralistic and different, but deeply unequal, unfair and unjust, oppressive and exclusive, in myriads of complex ways. We suffer from histories of inequality. ... The term pluralistic may simply be too innocent to remind us of all these tensions. It may suggest that we are equal in all respects, only different, but that would be far from the truth”.²¹

In naming difference, one sees how the DRC consistently and intentionally emphasizes difference and diversity, without recognizing the inequality inherent to this diversity. It is a recognition of pluralism, without naming issues of power, privilege, and especially, embodiment.²² It would be completely amiss to assume that all the stories about being a Reformed body are equal in the power they hold in constructing the (ecclesial) reality of the day. There are dominant stories, and there are those more marginalized, subaltern, alternative, queer; the stories of those lives currently not reflected in the DRC-mirror. To merely acknowledge this, is to go further than merely naming ethical or hermeneutical diversity and getting stuck at stuckness.

4.3 Embodiment

Prior to the debate about homosexuality, the DRC faced similar polarizing issues about bodies that were not male and racialized as white. Gender and race have a long history of being debated, and the bodies of those racialized

21 Dirk J. Smit, “The Contributions of Religions to the Common Good in a Pluralistic Society – From a Christian Perspective,” *International Journal of Public Theology*, 11, no. 3 (2017): 291.

22 In this regard, the work of Van Wyngaard is of value for future research. He traces the developments in the use of the notion of *diversity* in the official work of the General Synod of the DRC between 2007 and 2011 – an important antecedent in the official treatment of themes within theological anthropology such as race, gender and sexuality. Cobus van Wyngaard, “The Language of “Diversity” in Reconstructing Whiteness in the Dutch Reformed Church,” in *Churches, Blackness, and Contested Multiculturalism*, ed. R.D. Smith, W. Ackah, A.G. Reddie, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014), 157–170.

by whiteness or gendered by patriarchy have been not merely treated as different, but oppressed, excluded, and dehumanized. As objects of theological interpretation, these bodies have a history of being systemically regulated by hermeneutics and ethics. The dominant discourse on human sexuality therefore mirrors previous ecclesial responses and permutations of disruption caused by socio-cultural identities.

In her analysis of feminist theology and Reformed spirituality, Rachel Baard points to the value of insisting on the real conditions of lived realities in Reformed theology. This is to insist on a “double hermeneutic” that does not merely engage the Bible, but also the real lives of people.²³ Such theology carries a contextual awareness, which is indivisible from the Reformed tradition. As Baard notes, a phenomenological emphasis on women’s experience does not imply a separate norm for theology, but rather that revelation occurs in the midst of women’s experience, and that the source of theology remains “the God who is revealed within women’s experience”.²⁴

Taking the embodiment of queer lives seriously, as Queer Theology does, calls forth the same central methodological emphasis. It is an incarnational emphasis, that practically responds to the presence of God within the realities of human life, also when dominant discourses render queer lives destitute, poor, and wronged.

It is thus also clear that the dominant narrative of human sexuality, that does not reckon with queer embodiment, reflects – mirrors – other binary debates on human bodies in the DRC and the Reformed tradition. As with the current discourse on (homo)sexuality, previous binary debates on Black bodies and women’s bodies have been sustained by those whose bodies and bodily experiences have rarely needed to be justified or granted authority by the church – white, heterosexual, cisgender, male bodies. It is no surprise that these bodies are stuck. This observation is not to shame these dominant perspectives or voices; it is merely to hold up the mirror to them, and to reflect back what they are literally unable to see by their

23 Rachel S. Baard, “Feminist theology and Reformed spirituality,” in *Living Theology: Essays presented to Dirk J. Smit on his sixtieth birthday*, ed. Len Hansen, Nico Koopman, Robert Vosloo (Wellington: Bible Media, 2011), 248.

24 Baard, “Feminist theology,” 241.

own embodiment. All bodies do matter, but when the gift and goodness, the very lives of queer people in their particularity, are reduced to a marker of difference, it not only negates their reality: it ends in an ongoing debate between standpoints.

This observation also does not want to deny the reality that for these bodies that dictate inclusion, the divisive debate on homosexuality in the DRC really has been an embodied theological conflict that has impacted their lives in various ways. However, this requires honesty and acknowledgement that this struggle over standpoints can overshadow and even render irrelevant the actual lives of queer people. Even as allies to queer people, this approach can assume power over queer bodies in repeatedly concerning itself with legislating and sanctioning other's embodiment.

However, similar to how Black bodies and women's bodies have found themselves not stuck, but liberated, and indeed liberating within the Reformed tradition, so too can queer bodies, and other bodies that have been marginalized or unrecognized affirm themselves within the "hermeneutical community"²⁵ of the church. This raises the question of if, and how, marginalized, subaltern, alternative – indeed, *queer* – stories can become "windows" in this "ruim huis". How could "windows" into the lived reality of bodies that are *not reflected* in the dominant narratives of the DRC allow for more perspective, especially in a context where the diversity within this house has led to stuckness?

5. Windows: Reforming Queer Narratives

There could be many reasons to substantiate *why* and *how* the dominant narrative on human sexuality and its methodological bias exists and manages to persist. One could frame it within the broader context of heteropatriarchy, heteronormativity, ideological blindness, the far-reaching realities of whiteness (as an example of intersectionality), or even the exclusivity of the Reformed insistence on Sola Scriptura.²⁶ It could also

25 Baard, "Feminist theology," 241.

26 For an analysis of homophobia in Africa, see Gerald West, Charlene Van Der Walt, and Kapy John Kaoma, "When Faith Does Violence: Reimagining Engagement between Churches and LGBTI Groups on Homophobia in Africa," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 72, no. 1 (2016): 1, <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v72i1.3511>.

simply be, as Smit warned, “arrogance” or “ignorance”. While some of these realities have been touched on, a thorough analysis of the context informing the dominant narrative on human sexuality, both in the DRC and more broadly in the Reformed tradition in Africa, would be critical for ongoing research and engaged praxis that allows all bodies to be included and affirmed.

Any “windows” that suggest alternative, liberating realities in the Reformed tradition will need to reckon with the reality of the radical challenges that the Reformed tradition faces in dealing with plurality, as clearly formulated by Smit:

Since it is very deliberately and consciously a confessing church with a confessional tradition, it does not have recourse to many forms of unity and many ways of dealing with plurality and ambiguity that other religious, including other Christian and even other Protestant traditions may have – no central authority, no hierarchical structure, no teaching magisterium, no corpus of infallible doctrine, no common canon of biblical interpretation, no continuous an unchanging liturgical tradition, no charismatic leadership, no basic ethnic or national loyalty, no shared set of religious symbols or legacy of cultic practices, no characteristic kind of religious experience, no special kind of spirituality, not even one common and universal book of confessions. Instead, it is a tradition that claims in radical fashion that it strives to live by “the Bible alone” – and then admits that it has no final interpretation of that Bible and no final authority that can guarantee any interpretation, only a plural and ambiguous confessional tradition.²⁷

Promising and liberating work has been done in African and Reformed contexts that draws on the methodological insights of queer theory and its constructively disruptive contribution to what is considered normative, in service of liberation and justice. It is also the promise of dealing with plurality and ambiguity that makes a queer approach so apt within the

27 Dirk J. Smit, “Confessing as gathering the fragments? On the Reformed way of dealing with plurality and ambiguity,” in *Essays on Being Reformed: Collected Essays 3*, ed. Robert Vosloo, (Stellenbosch: SunMedia, 2009), 305–306.

Reformed tradition, as the South African biblical scholar Charlene van der Walt, who has done extensive work in queer biblical hermeneutics, posits:

... this approach creates space for a diversity of non-binary and non-conforming identities and positionalities. Precisely because the aim is not to create a new master narrative, but rather to destabilize and disrupt, it does not insist on a singular positionality but instead articulates the possibility of a multiplicity and even contradiction of experience.²⁸

The well-documented embodied practice of Contextual Bible Reading, that has for been treating the lives of those marginalised and excluded by dominant narratives for decades, reads the Bible as a “reflective surface”.²⁹ This is because it employs embodied narratives that are located within the lived realities of marginalised communities. The role of narrative and queer autobiographic storytelling has been shown to be a basis for developing queer theologies³⁰ and strong methodological contributions to African theology have been made by employing storytelling as a theological method, such as in the work of Mercy Oduyoye and other African women theologians.³¹

28 Charlene van der Walt, “‘The Bra Is Wearing a Skirt!’ Queering Joseph in the Quest to Enhance Contextual Ethical Gender and Sexuality Engagements,” in *Sexual Reformation? Theological and Ethical Reflections on Human Sexuality*, ed. Manitza Kotzé, Nadia Marais, Nina Müller van Velden (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2022), 111.

29 For more on how the functions of the Bible as a reflective surface in the process of Contextual Bible Study, see Charlene van der Walt, “It’s the Price I Guess for the Lies I’ve told that the Truth It No Longer Thrills Me ...’ Reading Queer Lies to Reveal Straight Truth in Genesis 38,” in *Restorative Readings: The Old Testament, Ethics, and Human Dignity*, ed. Juliana L. Claassens and Bruce C. Birch, 57–74 (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publisher, 2015) and Gerald O. West, Sithembiso Zwane & Charlene van der Walt, “From Homosexuality to Hospitality; from Exclusion to Inclusion; from Genesis 19 to Genesis 18,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 168 (2021): 5–23.

30 Adriaan van Klinken, “Autobiographical Storytelling and African Narrative Queer Theology,” *Exchange* 47, no. 3 (2018): 212. Hanzline R. Davids, “Recognition of LGBTIQ bodies in the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa: An indecent proposal?” *Stellenbosch Theological Journal*, Vol 6, No 4 (2020), 301–317. <http://dx.doi.org/10.17570/stj.2020.v6n4.a12>.

31 Adriaan van Klinken and Ezra Chitando, *Reimagining Christianity and Sexual Diversity in Africa* (London: C Hurst & Co, 2021), 50.

I therefore conclude with a narrative of a queer practice that has allowed for more inclusive policy decisions to be birthed in the DRC.

Before the DRC Western Cape Synod meeting of 2019, I joined Philipp Dietmann, the only other openly gay minister in this regional synod, to consider how the embodied lives of queer individuals, and those of allies and family members, could be granted power, even *within* the constraints of a formal synod meeting.

Given the limited options within the formal meeting protocol, it called for some form of creative disruption. With our intention clearly framed, we went through several rounds of discussions with the church leadership on how to include these subaltern narratives. After several rounds of permutations, we agreed that this embodied storytelling could be introduced within the guise of a demonstration on how to have conversations on human sexuality. We therefore modelled how to discuss the question: “What should the church do with gay people”?³²

We gathered a group of queer bodies and allies on stage and witnessed to the truth of the gospel through our own stories, and the stories of those close to us. We demonstrated and embodied how, when, and why we are *not* “vasgeloop”; we are indeed free. With these counter narratives, we embodied resistance to domineering discourses. We created a space for alternative stories to enrich the institutionalized normative discourses. This activity could well have influenced the policy decision taken at this synod, and that later became the basis for the General Synod decision of 2019.

6. Conclusion: Queer phenomenology, in the Reformed tradition?

Apart from dealing with the afterlife of apartheid and its racialized divisions and injustices, discourse on “selfdegeslagverhoudings” (same-sex partnerships) and homosexuality has dominated the DRC’s public witness more than any other subject in the post-1994 period. Centred on the theological discourse on human dignity, there have been significant shifts

32 Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk in Suid-Afrika (Wes-Kaapland), “Handelinge van die 48ste Vergadering van die Sinode,” 2019, 30.

towards more inclusion and affirmation of queer bodies in the DRC, more than in any other mainline denomination in South Africa, and indeed other Reformed churches in Africa. I have benefitted from these shifts and this discourse, and I am indeed grateful. I am, however, aware that these gains could be repeating the same shallow theological assessment of justice in how we “include” other bodies in our “ruim huis”, our diversity and our unity, without confessing how embodiment matters. The DRC will need to continue to look into the mirror to see how normative and dominant bodies and stories matter, *and* how racialised, sexualised, perverted, misrecognised, and bodies not reflected, matter. To a denomination that has valued being orderly, this will necessarily require some disruption.³³

In keeping to the nature of queerness and its ability to open new doors and windows, I am therefore increasingly interested in queer phenomenology, the lived experience of being queer and Christian, as an epistemic shift in the discourse on human sexuality as I read it within its reception in the Dutch Reformed Church. It is an epistemic shift that can indeed offer windows into a more just reality. This is an attempt at seeing queerness as a window within the Reformed tradition; a spacious house to encounter God. Indeed, “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known” (1 Cor 13:12).

33 An illustration of this is that the logo or official seal of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa (the official name for the Western Cape Synod), the founding church of the General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church, has “gepas and ordelik” inscribed on their official seal, a reference to 1 Corinthians 14:40 which reads, “But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way”. Interestingly, this was commissioned by my direct relative in 1826, J.W. van der Riet, and instated by his grandson, Van der Riet in 1852. The official documentation reads, “Rev Van der Riet declared that he will gladly accomplish that which he in the Acta of the former Synod had read that had been promised by his late grandfather, that in his grandfather’s name the silver seal may be made for that Synod. The meeting expressed its heartfelt thanks for this”. See <http://www.kaapkerkadmin.co.za/doks/Logo3.pdf>.

References

- Gids – Agtergrond en Inligting: Die Algemene Sinode se 2019-besluit oor selfdegeslagverhoudings. [Online]. Available: https://www.scribd.com/document/449948438/Gids-Die-Algemene-Sinode-se-2019-besluit-oor-selfdegeslagverhoudings-KONSEPDOKUMENT0#fullscreen&from_embed. [Accessed: 16 January 2023].
- Queering the Prophet Conference. [Online]. Available: <https://www.sun.ac.za/english/faculty/theology/bnc/units/gender-unit>. [Accessed: January 16, 2023].
- Season of Human Dignity. [Online]. Available: <https://menswaardigheid.co.za/category/information>. [Accessed: January 16, 2023].
- Verslag van die Moderamen. [Online]. Available: https://kaapkerk.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/AS-2019_A.2.1-Verslag-van-die-Moderamen-Finaal.pdf. [Accessed: January 16, 2023].
- Baard, R.S. 2011. Feminist theology and Reformed spirituality. In *Living Theology: Essays presented to Dirk J. Smit on his sixtieth birthday*, edited by Len Hansen, Nico Koopman, Robert Vosloo, 239–250. Wellington: Bible Media.
- Bartlett, A. 2017. *Weerlose Weerstand – Die gaydebat in die NG Kerk*. Pretoria: Protea Boekhuis.
- Burger, C. Die NG Kerk as ruim huis. Konferensie oor selfdegeslagverhoudings. Sinodale Taakspan vir Leer- en Aktuele Sake, Unpublished Conference Proceedings. [Online]. Available: <https://www.kerkargief.co.za/doks/acta/StelKonf15.pdf> [Accessed: 16 January 2023].
- Davids, H.R. 2020. Recognition of LGBTIQ bodies in the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa: An indecent proposal? *Stellenbosch Theological Journal*, Vol 6, 4(301–317). <http://dx.doi.org/10.17570/stj.2020.v6n4.a12>.

- Jackson, N. Selfdegeslagbesluit:Diversiteit is ‘n gawe. *Die Kerkbode*. [Online]. Available: <https://kerkbode.christians.co.za/2019/10/08/selfdegeslagbesluit-diversiteit-is-n-gawe/> [Accessed: October 10, 2019].
- Janse van Rensburg, A. Beswaardes in NGK stig eie groep, sê “God nie meer sentraal”. *Netwerk24*. [Online]. Available: <https://www.netwerk24.com/netwerk24/nuus/aktueel/beswaardes-in-ngk-stig-eie-groep-se-god-nie-meer-sentraal-2022/02/10>. [Accessed: February 10, 2022].
- Kerkbode*. Queering The Prophet: Verklaring Deur Kuratorium. *Die Kerkbode*. [Online]. Available: <https://kerkbode.christians.co.za/2022/02/18/queering-the-prophet-verklaring-deur-kuratorium/> [Accessed: February 18, 2022].
- Kerkbode*. 2015-Besluit oor selfdegeslagverhoudings. *Die Kerkbode*. [Online]. Available: <https://kerkbode.christians.co.za/2015/10/09/2015-besluit-oor-selfdegaslagverhoudings/> [Accessed: October 9, 2015].
- Kerkbode*. Decision: Same Sex Unions. *Die Kerkbode*. [Online]. Available: <https://kerkbode.christians.co.za/2019/10/09/decision-same-sex-unions/> [Accessed: October 9, 2019].
- Kerkbode*. Kyk: Wat behels die 2019 besluit oor selfdegeslagverhoudings? *Die Kerkbode*. [Online]. Available: <https://kerkbode.christians.co.za/2021/10/25/kyk-wat-behels-die-2019-besluit-oor-selfdegeslagverhoudings/> [Accessed: October 25, 2021].
- Kotzé, M., Marais, N., & Müller van Velden, N. 2022. Sexual Reformation? Theological and Ethical Reflections on Human Sexuality: An Introduction. In *Sexual Reformation? Theological and Ethical Reflections on Human Sexuality*, edited by Manitzka Kotzé, Nadia Marais, Nina Müller van Velden. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications. 1–14.
- Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk in Suid-Afrika (Wes-Kaapland). Handeling van die 48ste vergadering van die Sinode. 2019.

- Marais, N. 2017. Saving Marriage? The sexuality debate in the Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa. *Sárospataki Füzetek [Sárospataki Theological Journal]*, vol 21(2), 71-85.
- Smit, D.J. 2009. Confessing as gathering the fragments? On the Reformed way of dealing with plurality and ambiguity. In *Essays on Being Reformed: Collected Essays (Vol.3)*, edited by Robert Vosloo. Stellenbosch: SunMedia. 295–306.
- Smit, D.J. 2009. Reformed Theology in South Africa – A story of many stories. In *Essays on Being Reformed: Collected Essays 3*, edited by Robert R. Vosloo. Stellenbosch: SUN MeDIA.
- Smit, D.J. 2017. The Contributions of Religions to the Common Good in a Pluralistic Society – From a Christian Perspective. *International Journal of Public Theology*, 11(3):290–300.
- Smit, D.J. 2013. Wat beteken “Gereformeerd”? In *Opstelle oor Gereformeerd-wees vandag*, edited by Len Hansen. Stellenbosch: SUN MeDIA. 21–31.
- Thyssen, A. 2020. “A church for others? Queering the Ecclesiology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.” Unpublished Master’s thesis. Stellenbosch University, 2020.
- Van der Walt, C. 2015. It’s the Price I Guess for the Lies I’ve Told that the Truth It No Longer Thrills Me ... Reading Queer Lies to Reveal Straight Truth in Genesis 38. In *Restorative Readings: The Old Testament, Ethics, and Human Dignity*, edited by Juliana L. Claassens and Bruce C. Birch. Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publisher. 57–74.
- Van der Walt, C. 2022. The Bra Is Wearing a Skirt! Queering Joseph in the Quest to Enhance Contextual Ethical Gender and Sexuality Engagements. In *Sexual Reformation? Theological and Ethical Reflections on Human Sexuality*, edited by Manitza Kotzé, Nadia Marais, Nina Müller van Velden. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications. 106–121.
- Van der Westhuizen, H. 2020. Die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk, hermeneutiek en etiek? (1986–2019) *Stellenbosch Theological Journal*, 6(3):79–109. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.17570/stj.2020.v6n3.a2>.

- Van Klinken, A. 2018. Autobiographical Storytelling and African Narrative Queer Theology. *Exchange* 47(3):211–229.
- Van Klinken, A. & Chitando, E. 2021. *Reimagining Christianity and Sexual Diversity in Africa*. London: C Hurst & Co.
- Van Wyk, T. 2022. Revisiting the Church’s Moral Authority on Sexual Ethics. In *Sexual Reformation? Theological and Ethical Reflections on Human Sexuality*, edited by Manitza Kotzé, Nadia Marais, Nina Müller van Velden. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications. 171–186.
- Van Wyngaard, G.J. 2014. The Language of “Diversity” in Reconstructing Whiteness in the Dutch Reformed Church. In *Churches, Blackness, and Contested Multiculturalism*, edited by R.D. Smith, W.Ackah, A.G. Reddie. New York: Palgrave MacMillan. 157–170.
- West, G., Van der Walt, C., & Kapyra, J.K. 2016. When Faith does Violence: Reimagining Engagement between Churches and LGBTI Groups on Homophobia in Africa. *Hervormde Teologiese Studies*, 72(1):1–8. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v72i1.3511>.
- West, G.O., Zwane, S., & Van der Walt, C. 2021. From Homosexuality to Hospitality; from Exclusion to Inclusion; from Genesis 19 to Genesis 18. *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 168:5–23.