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Recognition of LGBTIQ bodies in the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa: An *indecent* proposal?

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Abstract

The human dignity of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ) people are threatend on the African continent. The sexual orientation, gender identity, expressions and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) of LGBTIQ persons are seen as un-African. Religious communities are one of the biggest perpetrators that violate the human dignity of LGBTIQ people. For the past fifteen years the Uniting Reformed Church in South African (URCSA) made policy decions and compiled research documents that envistigates the SOGIESC of LGBTIQ people. The URCSA failed multiple times to affirm the full inclusion of LGBTQ people. In this article I'm asking, whether the recognition of LGBTIQ bodies in the URCSA is an indecent proposal. This paper is theologically underpinned by late Latin-American bisexual theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid's Bi/Christology. Starting with my own queer autobiography, I position myself from below and outside in doing theology. Secondly, I engage shortly with the history of the URCSA and the confessional clauses of the Belhar Confession. Lastly, the paper examines whether Belhar makes an indecent proposal for the recognition of LGBTIQ bodies in the URCSA.

Keywords

LGBTIQ; SOGIESC; URCSA; recognition; Belhar

1. Binaries and hierarchies of self and other

The lines between heterosexuality as *self* and the SOGIESC of LGBTIQ persons as *other* are continuously violently kept apart by hetero-patriarchal systems of power. Heteropatriarchy is a system that makes a binary and hierarchical differentiation between the self and other, privileges cisgender bodies and heterosexuality. In other words, heteropatriarchy:

> is a term that intersects the systems of oppression identified by feminist and gender scholars (namely, patriarchy and queer scholars), that is, heteronormativity. Heteronormativity refers to the understanding that heterosexual practice and desire is considered normal and anything deviating from this norm is somehow perverse, impossible or deviant.[1]

Zambian theologian Kapya Kaoma explains that the violence of heteropatriarchy takes form in "protective homophobia – that is politically and religiously organized opposition to … the [SOGIESC of LGBTIQ bodies] … as an attempt to protect Africa's traditional heritage."[2] Kaoma, furthermore elaborates that "[t]he result is restrictive national legislations enacted under the banner of protecting African culture, religions, and children."[3] Protective ideologies impose brutal forms of violence sanctioned by national and ecclesial interests. Steyn and Van Zyl poignantly point out the violation and violence that LGBTIQ people are vulnerable to forms new categories:

> through meanings attached to non-hegemonic bodies and their desires that othering is perpetuated, and upon whom different forms of exclusion, oppression and violence are perpetuated. The body becomes the site of discursive struggle.[4]

LGBTIQ bodies are often misrecognized because heteropatriarchal templates are set in "patterns of hierarchical, binary constructive organised thought."[5] According to this ideology, bodies are essentially sexualized as heterosexual and gendered as male or female and determines

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1 Gerald West, Charlene Van Der Walt, and Kapya 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.

2 K. Kaoma, *Christianity, globalization and protective homophobia: Democratic contestation of Sexuality in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 1.

3 Ibid., 1.

4 M. Steyn, & M. van Zyl, *The prize and the price: shaping sexualities in South Africa* (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2009), 4.

5 M. Althaus-Reid, *Indecent theology: theological perversions in sex, gender and politics* (London: Routledge, 2000), 114.

"who is regarded as an acceptable social subject".[6] My body became a site of "discursive struggle" and an unacceptable ecclesiastical subject when I decided to embody my sexuality as a former minister in the URCSA by coming out of the closet. Until now the decisions, compilation of theological study reports and statements speaks about LGBTIQ people without LGBTIQ people telling our own embodied theological stories. The recognition of my body and other LGBTIQ people in the URCSA, therefore, commences with the claim that "doing theology on sexuality requires that we grant an epistemological privilege to the lived reality of LGBTIQ Christians."[7] In the next section I recount my own embodied story from a queer autobiographical epistemological perspective.

2. Queer[8] autobiography from below as epistemological privilege

Adriaan van Klinken, in his article "Autobiographical Storytelling and African Narrative Queer Theology" (2018) asks critical questions regarding an African queer theology. For Van Klinken, queer bodies need to tell their stories and learn from African feminist theologians who "have used her-stories to develop her-theologies, I suggest that similarly, queer autobiographic storytelling can be a basis for developing queer theologies."[9] For this reason, I start with my own story, a queer autobiography from below and outside.

In 1995, a year after South Africa's first democratic election, I went off to first grade. Internationally, South Africa was lauded for her peaceful political settlement. South Africans were free. We – young and old – were reminded that we have human rights. It was the same year in which South Africa won the Rugby World Cup. All the boys at school were immersed in rugby fever. They knew the names of the players, national anthems and

6 A. Cranny-Francis et al, *Gender studies: terms and debates* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 20.

7 West et al., "When faith does violence," 2.

8 The term queer will be used interchangeable with LGBTIQ in this article. Queer can also be understood as an umbrella term referring to the SOGIESC of LGBTIQ people.

9 A. van Klinken, "Autobiographical Storytelling and African Narrative Queer Theology." *Exchange* 47, no. 3 (2018): 212.

even the records of each player. At recess some of the boys played rugby and cricket. Sports did not really interest me. Toy cars won me friends and I could build sand roads better than the next boy. Our fruit trees at home took care of pocket money. Friends helped me sell the fruit at a fee. I was protected because I did not just play with girls. I did not self-identify as a *moffie*.[10] I got away with not being on the bullies' radar.

High school was different. I had fewer friends and became more withdrawn. Something inside me did not feel free despite the democratic government and human rights climate in which I grew up. As a teenager I could not understand my attraction to other teenage boys. It made me depressed. I was unable to talk to my mother or teachers. My mother, unaware of my battle with my sexuality and depression, suggested I do some part-time holiday work to get out of the house. Doing carpentry and construction work helped me out of my unhappiness. I thought that my sexuality would alter my gender identity and expression. For me, being gay meant being feminine; in the meantime, I had become more anti-social and isolated. I turned to books and soon became a nerd. Work and books gave me sense of worth.

At the age of 13, faith became an important part of my life. Faith filled a void and the church became a social community network, despite no one being aware of my battle with my sexuality. I was involved with the local congregation's youth, Sunday school and catechism class. My calling to become a minister was born in fellowship and worship with my faith community.

After school I went to university, to study theology. Unfortunately, I couldn't make peace with myself and my internalized homophobia intensified. I couldn't speak to my spiritual mentors. Openly gay students weren't allowed into ministry. My mother died in the middle of 2010, losing her battle to cancer. I lost the one person I knew would support me. I decided that I would deny myself the space to live my truth.

Publicly, my congregation, friends and family knew I condemned discrimination against LGBTIQ people. I thought God made a mistake

10 Derogative term in Afrikaans referring to a male whose self-identify as gay and in some cases whose gender identity and expression is more feminine.

with me. It turned out that I was wrong. In the ministry, everything started to change. An elder on the church council suggested that the congregation host a workshop on homosexuality to equip our leaders and congregation. This workshop changed my life, guiding me to undertake a second master's degree to investigate homosexuality theologically. I found life-affirming ways to read and interpret Scripture, tradition, reason and experience that helped me to connect my sexuality and spirituality. I felt comfortable that I could determine my gender identity and expression and walk away from any form of toxic masculinity. I wanted to live my truth publicly. I resigned from my congregation as a reverend. After my resignation and coming out to the church leadership, the church did not offer me any pastoral care. The faith community where I worship and have fellowship exiled me because they were uncertain how I would fit in, although, the church publicly states that LGBTIQ people are welcome.

As a gay man and former minster in the URCSA I soon experienced *othering* in the church. Virginia Ramey Mollenkott theorises this position of *othering* when reading the Bible "from [be]low and outside."[11] As a gay male, heteropatriarchy as a system re-stratified my body into reading the Bible from below, because even if I self-identify as masculine, my gender identity and expression is altered into becoming feminine. Because of my sexual orientation my "insider status in [the] community"[12] was taken away and I now the read the Bible from outside. For this reason, Mollenkott asserts that LGBTIQ people should use any means necessary:

> to recover our voices within the biblical text, within religious institutions, and within society as a whole and as we regain them,

11 V. R. Mollenkott, "Reading the Bible from Low and Outside: Lesbitransgay People as God's Tricksters," in *Take back the word: a queer reading of the Bible*, eds. R. Goss, & M. West, (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2000), 13. Mollenkott reflects on her position: "From [be]low because my status as female was secondary and silenced in the church of my youth, where girls and women wore hats to signify our submission to male authority and where even in Bible studies we were not permitted so much as to ask a question. From outside because my lesbianism (fully recognized by age eleven) took away from me even the humblest of insider status in community that never mentioned that kind of sin."

12 Ibid.,13.

> to use those voices to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind and freedom to the oppressed.[13]

From below and outside I recovered my voice through queer autobiographical storytelling as a method to embody and preach the Good News. Another form of "theological resilience"[14] is Marcella Althaus-Reid's Bi/Christology. A Christology that is positioned from below and outside for those whose SOGIESC are different and deemed deviant.

3. Bi/Christology of Marcella Althaus-Reid

In her book *Indecent Theology*, Althaus-Reid constructs a queer methodology based on bisexuality that disrupts, transgresses, and erases stable binaries of heteropatriarchy. Althaus-Reid's methodology opens a new Christological model that she defines as follow:

> Bi/Christology walks like a nomad in lands of opposition and exclusive identities and does not pitch its tent forever in the same place. If we considered that in the Gospel of John 1:14, the verb is said to have 'dwelt among us' as a tabernacle (a tent) or 'put his tent amongst us', the image conveys Christ's high mobility and lack of fixed space or definitive frontiers. Tents are easily dismantled overnight and do not become ruins or monuments; they are rather folded and stored or reused for another purpose when old. Tents change shape in strong winds, and their adaptability rather their stubbornness is one of their greatest assets.[15]

Althaus-Reid Bi/Christology firstly invokes Gods salvific act, the Word becoming Incarnated, God's self becomes flesh, disrupting stable identity politics of dominant meta-narratives. Secondly, it transgresses the dualism of sacred and profane. Thirdly, erasing the hierarchy between divine and human. Bi/Christology is an obscene model of Christology that reflects particular embodied contexts of sexual and gender diverse people. Throughout history obscene Christological models of the

13 Ibid.,21.

14 West et al., "When faith does violence," 3.

15 Althaus-Reid, *Indecent theology*, 119–120.

Black Christ undressed racism, masculinity, and patriarchy that were embedded in Christology.[16] Bi/Christology undresses binaries and hierarchies that solidifies LGBTIQ people's oppression and dehumanisation based on their SOGIESC.

Althaus-Reid in Robert E. Goss's words: "… disturbs the exclusive heterosexual identity template and allows for such obscene and queer representations of Christ … an indecent Christology to reach people outside the gates of heterosexuality and the Church."[17] Bi/Christology is in no way exclusive to sexual and gender diverse persons. On the contrary Bi/Christology heralds a reality where the oppressed and oppressor are made free from systemic and structural heteropatriarchy. Why? Because "[h]eterosexuality is an economy, an administrative pattern which is sacralised in our churches even in the way they organise themselves."[18]

Althaus-Reid Bi/Christology is an indecent proposal for those who are on high and inside. For LGBTIQ people who are below and outside the Bi/Christology recognises their inalienable human dignity since God is the One that bestows dignity. Therefore, any system that dehumanises Gods creation and absolutizes God's diversity is an unjust system. In the next section I briefly state the URCSA's position on "homosexuality" and hereafter analyse whether the Belhar Confession consists of any liberative practices for the recognition of LGBTIQ people.

4. The URCSA and homosexuality

The URCSA roots could be traced back to the Dutch Reformed Mission Church and Dutch Reformed Church in Africa, with racially segregated churches for so-called coloured and black people respectively.[19] The URCSA story is one of struggle, of exclusion, inhumanity, and violent

16 Ibid., 111.

17 R. E. Goss, "Marcella Althaus-Reid's 'Obscenity no. 1: Bi/Christ': Expanding Christ's Wardrobe of Dresses." *Feminist Theology* 11, no. 2 (2003): 160–161.

18 Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 114.

19 S. Mahokoto. "The mission of the Dutch Reformed Church as mission for colonisation and division of the Reformed Church in South Africa (1652–1982),"in M. Plaatjies-Van Huffel & L. Modise (eds.), *Belhar Confession: Embracing Confession of Faith for church and society* (Stellenbosch: SunPress, 2017), 111.

erasure of indigenous cultures and heritage.[20] The URCSA's journey with homosexuality commenced in 2005 formally. Decision 90 of 2005 became the policy of the URCSA and all other synods[21] thereafter failed to fully recognise LGBTIQ people.[22]

The 2008 report on homosexuality often excluded bisexual, trans, intersex and queer bodies from the report.[23] Though at the 2012 Synod the acronym

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20 Ibid., 98–110.

21 M. Plaatjies-Van Huffel, "Acceptance, adoption, advocacy, reception and protestation: A chronology of the Belhar Confession," in M. Plaatjies-Van Huffel & L. Modise (eds.), *Belhar Confession: Embracing Confession of Faith for church and society* (Stellenbosch: SunPress, 2017), 83.

22 The decision reads as follows: "a) Synod confirms that the Bible is the living Word of God and the primary source and norm for the moral debate about homosexuality. b) Synod acknowledges the diversity of positions regarding homosexuality and pleads that differences be dealt with in a spirit of love, patience, tolerance and respect. c) Synod confirms that homosexual people are members of the church by nature of faith in Jesus Christ. d) Synod rejects homophobia and any form of discrimination against homosexual persons. e) Synod appeals to URCSA members to reach out with love and empathy to our homosexual brothers and sisters and embrace them as members of the body of Christ in our midst. f) Synod acknowledges the appropriate civil rights of homosexual persons. g) Synod emphasizes the importance of getting clarity about the theological and moral status of homosexual marriages, or covenantal unions. h) Synod emphasizes the importance of getting clarity about the ordination of practicing homosexual persons in ministry. i) Synod assigns the following tasks to the Moderamen: – Do an extensive study on Christian faith and homosexuality while taking into consideration the above-mentioned principles; Table a report with recommendations to the General Synodical Commission (GSC) during the coming recess (2005–2008); – And encourage and direct discussions on the theme of homosexuality in URCSA" (Acts General Synod URCSA 2005, 209).

23 The task team did acknowledge "the homosexual identity has very complex biological, psychological and sociological causes and that these are factors of which biblical writers in their times and circumstances had not been aware and saw no need to address" (Plaatjies-Van Huffel, "Acceptance, adoption, advocacy, reception and protestation," 85). Therefore, they acknowledged: "That Scripture's rejection is cantered upon gratuitous homosexual acts (homoeroticism) and was determined by conventions and norms current in the ancient contexts of the biblical authors, rather than the homosexual orientation and the desire of homosexual persons to enter into lasting, caring and loving relationships such as described above. That moreover the evidence of Scripture is overwhelmingly in favour of hospitality to those who are traditionally not welcomed, acceptance of those who are stigmatised, rejected and alienated, compassion towards those who endure anxiety, suffering and humiliation because of their identity, and solidarity with those who are marginalised and oppressed, justice to those who are wronged – in this case homosexual persons. That these principles constitute the heart of the ministry and Gospel of Jesus Christ as they are in equal measure found at the heart of the Confession of Belhar, and in this matter the church is once again called to 'stand where God stands'. That these considerations are essential to the unity of the church, the calling towards reconciliation placed upon the church by Jesus Christ, and

LGBT is included in the statement.[24] No particular explanation is given why the statement encapsulates Bisexual and Transgender persons. At the Synod of 2008 the report on homosexuality was rendered, but the synod did not accept the recommendations of the task team.[25] The report on homosexuality welcomed LGBTIQ bodies "based on the principles of the Belhar Confession," and "affirmed the URCSA's long tradition of social justice founded on the fundamental human dignity of every individual."[26]

Allan Boesak, black liberation theologian and convenor of the task team on Homosexuality reflected on the Synod of 2008 and argues why the URCSA is still struggling to welcome and affirm LGBTIQ bodies:

> How could the same church that took such a strong stand against apartheid and racial oppression, gave such inspired leadership from its understanding of the Bible and the radical Reformed tradition; that had, in the middle of the state of emergency of the 1980s with its unprecedented oppression, its desperate violence, and nameless fear given birth to the Belhar Confession, that spoke of reconciliation, justice, unity and the Lordship of Jesus Christ, now display such blatant hatred and bigotry, deny so vehemently for God's LGBTI children the solidarity we craved for ourselves in our struggle for racial justice, bow down so easily at the altar of prejudice and homophobic hypocrisy?[27]

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the justice to which the church is obligated" (Acts General Synod URCSA 2008: Report on Homosexuality, 150–151).

24 "4. The General Synod affirms the URCSA's long tradition of social justice, founded on the fundamental human dignity of every individual, as well as its bearing on the controversial and emotional issues of gay rights. The General Synod URCSA, therefore, calls on all its members to exhibited concern over the protection of homosexuals from discriminatory practices. 5. The General Synod affirms that the denial of human and civil rights to homosexuals is inconsistent with the biblical witness and Reformed theology. 6. The General Synod denounces all forms of homophobic conduct. 7. The General Synod encourages church leaders to enter into constructive dialogue with LGBTI persons or groups representing them with the aim of better understanding them. General Synod requests the task team on homosexuality to organize opportunities for such dialogue" (Acts of General Synod URCSA 2012, 26).

25 Plaatjies-Van Huffel, "Acceptance, adoption, advocacy, reception and protestation," 86.

26 Ibid., 86.

27 A. A. Boesak, *Kairos, Crisis, and Global Apartheid: The Challenge to Prophetic Resistance* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), 94.

For Boesak the intersection between racial injustice and exclusion based on LGBTIQ persons SOGIESC is evident. However, the URCSA seems to fail to recognise the intersection of systemic and structural oppression that produces binaries and hierarchies of inclusion versus exclusion based. Producing subjects that is below and outside based on hegemonic identity markers. For this reason, Plaatjies-Van Huffel states: "[LGBTIQ peoples] search for recognition and protection is a search for justice."[28] In the Confession of Belhar, the URCSA, possesses a particular formulation of justice to which I will argue illustrates a Bi/Christology from below and outside for LGBTIQ people in the URCSA.

5. Belhar Confession: Indecent proposal for recognition

The Belhar Confession, in my view is theology from below and outside. This confession was born out of many years of racial oppression and subjugation of people of colour. The confession was formulated by the then Dutch Reformed Mission Church, and became part of the confessional basis of the URCSA when the DRMC and the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa unified in in 1994.[29] The Belhar Confession confessional clauses of unity, reconciliation and justice proclaimed the lordship of Jesus Christ in the belly of a political system that violently stratified people on the basis of their skin colour. This confession called any system that absolutizes human difference a heresy.[30] Carelse poignantly points out that 1 Peter 3:15–16 was used as guideline text to confess the realities under which the believers of the DRMC sought dignity:

> Why this Scripture reading? Because the DRMC recognised their painful experiences and cries in the painful experiences and cries of the people of Asia Minor to whom Peter is writing: experiences of exclusion, of being regarded as aliens and exiles, marginalised, insignificant, excluded and threatened, minorities without respect, victims of ridicule, hardships, suffering. The believers of 1982

28 Plaatjies-Van Huffel, "Acceptance, adoption, advocacy, reception and protestation," 84.

29 L.B. van Rooi, "Bevry om te bely en te beliggaam 'n Ekklesiologiese besinning oor die kerkorde van die VGKSA," *Dutch Reformed Theological Journal/Nederduitse Gereformeerde Teologiese Tydskrif* 48, no.3 (September & December 2007): 799–810.

30 Plaatjies-Van Huffel, Acceptance, adoption, advocacy, reception and protestation," 23.

> linked their desire for recognition and their yearning for a just and inclusive society with the living hope proclaimed by Peter.[31]

This confession talks about the "suffering, despair and humiliation"[32] of black people in South Africa. From an anthropological perspective Reformed Church historian Christina Landman notes that system is anthropologically dualistic.[33] LGBTIQ people whose SOGIESC is deemed deviant do not fit into the anthropological dualism of heteropatriarchy and therefore experience "suffering, despair and humiliation" on a continuous basis in the URCSA. Confessions, as statements of faith are not documents that are dead. Rather Reformed theologian and draft task team member of the Confession of Belhar Dirkie Smit[34] points out that Reformed Confessions play various roles in the life of the church. Smit writes:

> a) they provide the church with a language to proclaim God's praise, both in liturgy and in ordinary life; b) they become hermeneutical lenses by which to read the Scriptures; c) they express identity and thereby contribute to a sense of belonging; d) they help to instruct and form new believers; e) they help the church to distinguish truth

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31 D. P. Carelse, "Yearning for a just and inclusive society," in M. Plaatjies-Van Huffel & L. Modise (eds.), *Belhar Confession: Embracing Confession of Faith for church and society* (Stellenbosch: SunPress, 2017), 162.

32 Ibid., 162.

33 C. Landman "The Anthropology of Apartheid According to Official Sources," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 108, no. 76 (1991): 32. Landman provides the following definition for a dualistic anthropology: "a) In its most basic form, a dual anthropology accentuates the *differences* between groups of people, that is, the differences between blacks and whites and between men and women. This distinction is often made at a biological level. b) In its more advanced form, a dual anthropology acknowledges that people are *equal but different*. This anthropology claims that whites and blacks are equal in the eyes of God but are divinely destined to stay apart because of national differences between them. This anthropology also presupposes that men and women are equal but that they are different in order to be complementary to one another. c) In its most sophisticated form, a dual anthropology acknowledges the emancipation of people but still works with the presupposition that groups of people need to be polarised in order to affect this emancipation," 32.

34 M. Plaatjies-Van Huffel, "Dirk Smit – An apologist for confessions," in L. Hansen, N. Koopman, R. Vosloo (eds.), *Living theology: essays to Dirk J Smit on his sixtieth birthday* (Wellington: Bybel-Media, 2011), 251–263.

> from falsehood; and f) they serve as forms of public witness to Jesus Christ the Lord.[35]

Reformed churches, in this case the URCSA confess their faith:

> in the form of confessional documents … as their interpretative statements of the meaning of the biblical message for themselves and their own times, but also in the form of a concreted embodiment of their own convictions in everyday actions.[36]

Boesak agrees with Smit and explains the impact of the Confession of Belhar on the URCSA as a faith community:

> It has fundamentally changed the life, outlook, and public witness of the church. Together with Scripture, the ancient beliefs of the Christian church, and the Reformed theological tradition it has become the foundation of all our theological reflection and action in the public square.[37]

For this reason, Reformed theologian Russel Botman points out that the Belhar Confession calls on the URCSA to be disciples with a particular Christology:

> the Christology of Belhar is rooted in social ethics. Belhar's theological significance does not only lie in its contextual association with apartheid (a word which is not mentioned in the text), but in its insistence that the question of ethics is also central to confession.[38]

The Christology of Belhar confess and advocates for a reality where justice is embodied in a radical manner. The confession "reject[s] any doctrine which absolutizes either natural diversity or the sinful separation of people …"[39] In other words, a dual anthropology that upholds difference, proclaims

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35 D.J. Smit. Essays on *Being Reformed: Collected Essays* 3 (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2009), 302.

36 Ibid., 95.

37 Boesak, Kairos, *Crisis, and Global Apartheid*, 103.

38 H.R. Botman, "Barmen to Belhar: A Contemporary Confessing Journey: Barmen En Belhar." *Dutch Reformed Theological Journal/Nederduitse Gereformeerde Teologiese Tydskrif* 47, no. 1 (March 2006): 240.

39 *The Belhar Confession* §2.

false equality and emancipation, but holds binaries and hierarchies at the core of the system. For this reason, Belhar rejects:

> any teaching which attempts to legitimate such forced separation by appeal to the gospel, and is not prepared to venture on the road of obedience and reconciliation, but rather, out of prejudice, fear, selfishness and unbelief, denies in advance the reconciling power of the gospel, must be considered ideology and false doctrine.[40]

Furthermore, the confession proclaims that:

> God is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged and that God calls the church to follow in this; that God brings justice to the oppressed … God supports the downtrodden, protects the strangers, … that the church must therefore stand by people in any form of suffering and need, which implies, among other things, that the church must witness against and strive against any form of injustice, so that justice may roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.[41]

The Christology of Belhar and the Bi/Christology of Althaus-Reid proclaim justice for those who are marginalized by systemic and structural systems of oppression. Injustices are nuanced and evasive, however through our bodies as LGBTIQ and people of colour we experience how the binaries of racism and heteropatriarchy stratify our humanity. Through the confessional clauses of unity, reconciliation, and justice, the Christ of Belhar and the Bi/Christ that disrupts, destabilize and transgress stable truths is the same Christ although described in different languages because of time, space and contexts. Christ stands with those who are below and outside. These Christological conceptions and understandings radically reconfigure recognition and power. In other words, Belhar is an indecent proposal to the manner in which the URCSA wants to recognise LGBTIQ+ people.

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40 *The Belhar Confession* §3.

41 *The Belhar Confession* §4.

6. Reconfiguring recognition and power through embodiment

Confessing that Christ stands with LGBTIQ people that are below and outside is one aspect of theological resilience. LGBTIQ people need to be equipped with theological tools to analyse and contribute to how they want to be recognised. From the conversation above, it is clear that auto-graphical epistemological privilege is central to the recognition of LGBTIQ people. Therefore, reconfiguring recognition and power starts from the embodied experiences of LGBTIQ people.

In gay sexual practices, the partner who penetrates is viewed as the top (active role) and the partner who is penetrated the bottom (passive role) or in other words the dominant (D) and submissive (S) partner. Not all bottoms are passive in their sexual position at times they take on a power-bottom role. Robyn Henderson-Espinoza in provides the following description when a power-bottom reconfigures power:

> By engaging in a D/S engagement where the S leans into a power bottoming orientation, the engagement itself has the capacity to destabilize traditional power arrangements and lean into the potential of the power bottom to harness their imagination and internal power meter to help shape and shift new strategies of dominance and submission.[42]

Christ on the cross reconfigured power by taking on the submissive role willingly without the triune God surrendering power. Therefore, LGBTIQ people maybe below and outside but because of Gods positionality at the margins the power of recognition for inclusion in the URCSA does not reside in the matrix of institutional power but where God is standing. The language of Belhar therefore disrupt stable "truths" of heteropatriarchal theology that disrupts, destabilizes and transgresses metanarratives of biological essentialism and erases politics of decency that misrecognizes LGBTIQ bodies. Theological meaning-making becomes indecent and contrary to a "Theology that has made of Jesus the 'Systematic Messiah' … wrapped up in male heterosexual masculinity."[43]

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42 R. Henderson-Espinoza, "Decolonial Erotics: Power Bottoms, Topping from Bottom Space, and the Emergence of a Queer Sexual Theology." *Feminist Theology* 26, no. 3 (2018): 296.

43 Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 114.

7. Conclusion

LGBTIQ people's bodies as discursive sites ought to be the first space of theological meaning making. From the Bi/Christ model of Althaus-Reid it becomes clear that SOGIESC of LGBTIQ people is political and expose the violent backlash from heteropatriarchal powers. The URCSA ought to make an intersectional link based on their own embodied suffering and the injustices that LGBTIQ people in the URCSA experience. Belhar could be used as a hermeneutical tool of dialogue that empowers the URCSA to stand where God stands in church and society. Because this confession born out of the cries and suffering of the downtrodden and marginalised was and still is an indecent proposal to any hegemonic system that absolutizes natural diversity.

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