Reforming narratives on human sexuality in the Dutch Reformed Church

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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

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”. 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.

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”. 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

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


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...


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

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\(^9\) 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.

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

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

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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).

this based on their reading of the Bible.\textsuperscript{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”.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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


\textsuperscript{15} “Gids,” 17.

\textsuperscript{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 “regsinnig 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. 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. 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”. 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.

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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.
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”.  

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.

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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


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. 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.”

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

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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” 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. It could also

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

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


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.


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”?  

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

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


