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C/o School of Religion and Theology

University of KwaZulu-Natal

Room 111C, First Floor, New Arts Building, Golf Road Campus

Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

Tel: +27 (0) 33-260-6106 / +27 (0) 33-260-6132

Fax: +27 (0) 33-260-5858

E-mail: jgra@ukzn.ac.za / Phirii@ukzn.ac.za

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JOURNAL OF GENDER AND RELIGION IN AFRICA

EDITORIAL POLICY STATEMENT

The *Journal of Gender and Religion in Africa* (JGRA), is a semi-annual publication of the Centre for Constructive Theology, an initiative of the former Faculty of Theology, University of Durban-Westville. From 2004 its articles focused on research papers, which are relevant to gender, religion and theology in Africa. The editorial committee considers for publication submissions of a scholarly standard from any of the social science (theological) disciplines or related fields of inquiry, which provide useful perspectives in the area of gender, religion and theology in Africa. Particular areas of interest include the gendered analysis of: innovations in contextual theological education; theological and ethical reflection on social transformation; the significance of new religious movements and African-initiated churches; the role of women in religion and society; interfaith dialogue; peacemaking and reconciliation.

The *Journal of Gender and Religion in Africa* seeks to promote dialogue and response not only within the academic theological community in Africa and beyond, but also faith practitioners working “on the ground” to build a more just society in the region. These may include clergy, other church professionals and laity across broad social spectrums who seek to read their faith against the critical issues confronting society today.

Written submissions to the *Journal of Gender and Religion in Africa* may take the form of researched scholarly articles or essays. Book reviews, brief responses to articles, conference reports and summaries of research projects are also welcome. Articles submitted for the section called “praxis” must show evidence of how sound theoretical reflections are brought to bear on practical action. Within this section on “praxis” we will publish essays that are not considered “mainstream academic” but nonetheless point to theories of gender justice in action. Submissions are evaluated through an editorial committee screening process. Further, the articles are also sent to a minimum of two competent scholars working in a similar field of interest for peer-review. Prospective contributors of scholarly articles should send a typed copy of their article via email to the submissions editor at jgra@ukzn.ac.za. All submissions must strictly follow the guidelines set out in the **JGRA Style Sheet**. Any article that does not conform to the Style Sheet will be returned and will not be further considered until the style requirements are adhered to. Published contributors will receive one complimentary copies of the issue in which their work is published. Opinions expressed by contributors are solely their own, and do not necessarily reflect those of the editorial committee or the Centre for Constructive Theology.

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Tel: +27 (0) 33-260-6106

Fax: +27 (0) 33-260-5858

E-mail: jgra@ukzn.ac.za

Editorial

The issue of same-sex sexuality has captured the collective imagination of South Africa ever since the “pattern” of brutal murders of lesbians in what were termed “corrective rapes” emerged; and the subsequent legalisation of same-sex unions in 2006. This topic has gained increased attention in the second quarter of 2011, with the looming sentencing of those guilty of the murder of Zoliswa Nkonyana, a lesbian from Khayelitsha in Cape Town. The second event that has brought the issue of same-sex sexuality to the fore once again was the debates around the appointment of Mogoeng Mogoeng to the position of Chief Justice. Those who opposed his appointment forwarded several arguments regarding his position on gender justice which many considered very conservative. While the issues regarding his judgements on rape and other acts of sexual violence were brought to the fore, what was also highlighted was his stance on same-sex sexuality which he said derived from the bible and his faith as a Christian. Given the resurgence of this topic within South African discourse, as well as the Malawian, Kenyan and Ugandan rulings on matters of same-sex sexuality in 2011, this issue of the journal is most timely and pertinent.

The body of literature which currently exists on this topic is mainly from the areas of law, sociology and psychology. While some research has been done in the area of religion, culture and gender, the literature here remains limited. The appointment of Mogoeng Mogoeng and the rulings in Malawi, and Uganda, demonstrate more than ever the centrality of religion and culture in influencing decisions and policy regarding same-sexuality in Africa.

One of the most significant arguments against same-sex sexuality in Africa, especially as highlighted by various national African presidents is that same-sex sexuality is “un-African”. Compounding this issue is that much of the research in this area has been facilitated by those from outside of the continent. This issue of the journal makes a unique contribution to the body of knowledge which exists on this topic, in that we have gathered an array of scholars – experts working at the interface of religious studies, theology and gender studies – to provide original and insightful contributions on the topic of same-sex sexuality in Africa.

We are certain that you will find all the contributions contained within this issue to be innovative, and a contribution to new knowledge. We

have a bumper issue of twelve articles – eleven academic articles – and one article within a brand new section which we simply name “Praxis.” One of the founding principles of feminist theory is the notion of praxis – that is that theoretical reflection must bear fruit in practical action. In this new section we will publish work that is not considered “mainstream” academic, but nonetheless points to theories of gender justice in action. The Journal is proud to introduce its first such piece in the form of the story of Ecclesia De Lange and her journey towards Inclusion through the help of Inclusive and Affirming Ministries (IAM). The article is co-written with Judith Kotzé.

Among the academic articles, Allan Aubrey Boesak begins with an article entitled “‘Founded on the Holy Bible’ – A Bible Believing Judge and the ‘Sin’ of Same-Sex Relationships.” The article engages with the beliefs undergirding Judge Mogoeng Mogoeng’s stance on same-sex sexuality. In particular he critically interrogates the judge’s use of the term “bible-believing.”

Keeping in line with the tension between constitutional law and religion, Sifiso Khuzwayo, in his article, “God or Caesar: A Queer Debate on Interpretation in the South African Church” furthers the conversation from within the Methodist understanding of the debate. What is unique about his contribution is that he draws on the work of the Islamic scholar Ebrahim Moosa who inspired by Ghazali, a Muslim philosopher, puts forward the concept of *Dihliz/Threshold* as a means to initiate dialogue on this very contested subject.

Farid Esack and Nadeem Mahomed in their article, “Sexual Diversity, Islamic Jurisprudence and Sociality” also draw on Ghazali’s concept of *Dihliz/Threshold* to make an argument for the reclaiming of the space of the “closet.” They potently argue for the importance of the “closet” as a space for autonomy, freedom and resistance to normative sexual injunctions for homosexuals within Islam.

Creating safe spaces for people of same-sex sexual orientation is also the focus of the fourth article by Cheryl Potgieter and Finn Reygan. In their article, “Disruptive or Merely Alternative?: A Case Study of a South African Gay Church,” they question to what extent does the space created by gay churches actually disrupt heterosexual practice, or are they merely alternative?

In the fifth article, “Who’s in charge in a genderless marriage? A feminist and queer analysis of opposition to same-sex marriage by the Marriage

Alliance of South Africa” Jennifer Jane Sistig and Sarojini Nadar, examine the theological beliefs undergirding the opposition to same-sex marriage in South Africa. They conclude by proposing alternative theologies of marriage based on queer and feminist Trinitarian theologies that allow for more just forms of marriage relationship.

The next three articles all deal, in varying degrees, with the importance of the bible in the same-sex sexuality discourse in Africa. Masiwa Ragies Gunda, in his article “Gender Prejudice in the Use of Biblical Texts against same-sex relationships in Zimbabwe” shows how the source of the debates on same-sex relationships are based on literal and erroneous interpretations of the Creation narratives. He proposes new ways of reading these narratives in ways that are more life-giving rather than life-denying.

Thereafter, keeping with the theme of the bible, but also moving the debate further, is the article, “Beyond the Bible: Critical Reflections on the Contributions of Cultural and Postcolonial Studies on Same-Sex Relationships in Africa” by Lovemore Togarasei and Ezra Chitando. They argue that far too much emphasis has been placed on the role of the bible in mitigating against same-sex sexuality, without due consideration being given to African cultures and postcolonial discourses within the debates.

Adriaan van Klinken, in his article, “The Homosexual as the Antithesis of ‘biblical manhood’? Heteronormativity and Masculinity Politics in Zambian Pentecostal Sermons” shows through a careful examination of sermons by a Pentecostal preacher, how the bible is used within those sermons to promote and inculcate ideals of manhood for contemporary Zambian men.

Moving away from the bible and onto matters of religion and culture, Julius Gathogo and Isabel Apawo Phiri, and Kudzai Biri in their articles argue that while same-sex sexuality has always been present in Africa, research in this area has often only focused on the issues of practices and not on the issue of orientation. Gathogo and Phiri, in their article, “*Iweto Lelemana, Mashoga and Nguiko: Same-Sex Sexuality in Kenya from an African Spirituality and Ethics Perspective*” focus on the framework of African spirituality and ethics in order to demonstrate that the issues of practice and orientation can only be understood within the framework of continuity of African communities.

In the same vein Kudzai Biri, in her article, “Same Sex Relationships: Perspectives from Shona Traditional Religion and Culture in Zimbabwe” shows the difficulty of studying the issue of same-sex sexuality in traditional Shona culture, when the subject is secretive and considered taboo. Nevertheless she argues that this is not an excuse for misunderstandings within the literature which fails to distinguish between orientation and practice.

The final academic article from South Africa, entitled “Us and Them in the One and Undivided Church: The Methodist Church and the Same-Sex Debate in South Africa,” by R Simangaliso Kumalo, provides a critical primer for the creative piece detailing the story of exclusion of Ecclesia de Lange. Using her story as a case study Kumalo outlines the various debates within the Methodist Church regarding same-sex sexuality, and proposes some theological alternatives towards the unity of the church.

We are very proud to have brought to you this bumper issue of the Journal, especially because the uniqueness of this issue is that the majority of the articles are the thoughts and reflections of African scholars on an issue that has often only received intellectual attention from outside of Africa. It is our hope that the immense intellectual contribution by the various scholars in this issue, will continue to be critically engaged with and will serve as a foundation for further research.

Isabel Apawo Phiri and Sarojini Nadar

Section 1

“Founded on the Holy Bible...” A Bible-believing Judge and the ‘Sin’ of Same-Sex Relationships

Allan Aubrey Boesak¹

Abstract

The appointment of Justice Mogoeng Mogoeng as Chief Justice of the Constitutional Court caused an uproar in South African society. Civil society organizations – gender justice, sexual justice groups and legal justice advocacy organizations expressed deep concern. Central to these concerns was the fact that the judge is a member and lay preacher at a neo-Pentecostal church, whose interpretation of the Bible can reasonably be described as “fundamentalist”. The Judge calls his church a “Bible-believing church” and believes his and his church’s beliefs are “founded on the Holy Bible”. This article probes the consequences of the appointment of such a “Bible-believing Judge” for same-sex relationships, one of the issues the Judge (and his church) hold strong views on. The article asks whether such beliefs serve the cause of justice, not simply in the judicial sense, but justice as the “abiding cause of Yahweh”. It examines the interpretation of some of the key texts commonly used to bolster such views and explores the theological, societal and political consequences of such use of Scripture within the context of growing homophobic violence in South Africa and the continent as a whole.

“A Man of Faith”

On 8 September 2011 Justice Mogoeng Mogoeng was appointed the Chief Justice of South Africa’s Constitutional Court. During the run-up to his appointment serious questions of whether Judge Mogoeng is a “fit and proper” candidate, and whether there are insoluble conflicts between his responsibility to uphold the constitution and his personal faith as pastor of Winner’s Chapel International were raised.

That a confessing Christian should be in such a position should not present a problem; in itself a person’s faith should not disqualify them

¹ Allan Aubrey Boesak (PhD) is from South Africa. He is a Honorary Research Fellow in the School of Religion and Theology at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Email: boesak@mweb.co.za

from taking up positions of public responsibility. Every judge in our courts has religious or ideological beliefs and it is impossible for them not to be influenced by those beliefs as they sit on the bench to pass judgement. To preclude Judge Mogoeng from such a position purely on the grounds that he so publicly professes his faith is not an acceptable democratic position to adopt.

However, much is at stake. Influential Nigerian Anglican primate Peter Akinola, has argued that “the primary presupposition” of ‘bible-believing Christians’ “is a high view of Scripture as inerrant and a sufficient guide in all matters of faith and conduct, such that its ethics and injunctions are of timeless relevance...”² And as his closing argument the Archbishop states, “I didn’t write the Bible. It’s part of our Christian heritage. It tells us what to do. If the word of God says homosexuality is an abomination, then so be it.”³

As it is, according to the most recent studies, some 60% of Christians in South Africa believe that “the Bible ought to be the law of the land”.⁴ Winner’s Chapel International claims to be “bible-believing: and is among those churches that adhere to the stance of which Archbishop Akinola speaks. When Pastor Errol Naidoo, head of the Family Policy Institute attached to Cape Town-based His People Church claims that Judge Mogoeng’s views are shared by “millions of South Africans”, he is not exaggerating.⁵ The disclosure that the highest Chief Justice believes that he was appointed by God is a critical piece of information for all South Africans, whether they are believers or not. As Songezo Zibi writes, “Mogoeng’s religious devotion offers the country an opportunity to reflect on the meaning of the secular, progressive Constitution it has chosen to adopt. It is the same Constitution Mogoeng has promised to uphold”.⁶

The issue is disturbingly basic: can the Sunday morning preacher Mogoeng separate the fervent beliefs he preaches from the Monday

² Quoted in Philip Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity, Believing the Bible in the Global South*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 3.

³ Quoted in Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity*, 3.

⁴ See “Tolerance and Tension: Islam and Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa”, *Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life*, April 2010, Washington, DC, 11. Similarly, 62% of Muslims across Sub-Saharan Africa support the Koran being the “law of the land”.

⁵ Pastor Errol Naidoo as quoted in “Cosatu Slams Mogoeng ‘War Talk’”, (*Cape Times*, 7th September, 2011).

⁶ Songezo Zibi, “Caught Between Faith, Philosophy and Jurisprudence”, (*Sunday Independent*: 11th September, 2011), 8.

morning judgement he pronounces on the Bench? And if he can, is a contradiction so fundamental at all sustainable? Is the Judge not inviting a spiritual schizophrenia that will be impossible for him to manage?

The growing tensions between conservative, even fundamentalist expressions of faith and the South African Constitution are crucial to understand. Central is the question: What does it mean to be a "Bible-believing" Christian, and what does *that* in turn mean for the public role one is called to fulfil? For without a doubt Mogoeng, like so many other Christians, including myself, sees his public role as a "calling", a way of serving humankind in his service to God; a way of engaging in public worship, of honouring God. The question is whether or not that calling serves Yahweh's own "abiding cause" which is compassionate justice.⁷

Important also is a further indication of the broader context within which this appointment had taken place. In June 2011, the Equality Court returned a verdict of guilty in the hate speech case against Jon Qwelane, the journalist who had written a "particularly vile piece of homophobia" in his regular newspaper column titled "Call me names, but gay is NOT okay".⁸ Published in July 2008, Qwelane likened being gay to bestiality. "I do pray", Qwelane wrote, "that some day a bunch of politicians with their heads affixed firmly to their necks will muster the balls to rewrite the constitution of this country, to excise those sections which give licence to men 'marrying' other men, and ditto women. Otherwise, at this rate, how soon before some idiot demands to "marry" an animal, and argues that this constitution 'allows' it"?

"Astonishingly", the *Cape Times* editorial reads, "more than a year after Qwelane spewed forth his vitriol", the South African government appointed him ambassador to Uganda, "officially one of the most homophobic countries on earth". Pointing out that in this "rabid anti-homosexual atmosphere" Ugandan gay activist David Kato was bludgeoned to death in his home in January 2011, the paper voices its opposition to this appointment. "A man found guilty of hate speech of this sort cannot be the official face of South Africa anywhere, and especially not in a country where gays and lesbians are actively persecuted."⁹

⁷ Nicholas. "...the undoing of injustice and the bringing about of justice is Yahweh's own abiding cause...", Wolterstorff, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 81.

⁸ Editorial, *Cape Times*, 2nd June, 2011.

⁹ *Cape Times*, editorial.

In the midst of the furore, Pastor Errol Naidoo speaks in public defence of Justice Mogoeng and declares that the Judge “has become public enemy number one because of his Christian views and because he believes that homosexuality is a sin that can be cured through prayer.” In Naidoo’s view, “Justice Mogoeng is a man of faith. His faith and biblical views on homosexuality are shared by millions of South Africans.”¹⁰

At the Judicial Services Commission, responding to why he dissented in a case of homophobia (*Le Roux v Dey*) the Judge states,

I need to make the point though, that my Church’s opposition to homosexuality is not something peculiar to it, nor does the church have it as its core value, the attitude that homosexuality should not be practiced, or is a deviant behaviour. It is based purely on the Biblical injunction that a man should marry a woman and that there shall be a husband and a wife. The opposition to homosexuality is not therefore, a *sine qua non* for the existence of Winner’s Chapel International. The position it has adopted in this regard is similar to that of almost all Christian churches and religions, to which many other judges belong. It is unlike, for example, the Ku Klux Klan, whose core value is racial supremacy. The core values of our Church relate to the biblical teachings and the Church is not founded on homophobia. It is founded on the Holy Bible.¹¹

Several issues arise out of the Judge’s statement above: Firstly, while the Judge says this is not so, the church does, in fact, “have the attitude” that homosexuality is “deviant behaviour” and “should not be practiced”, but the judge argues that it is not a “core value”. However, the attitude that a church encourages is in fact based on belief which in turn is based on how the Bible is read and understood by that church, and so it is ultimately indeed a “core value”. On the matter under discussion, a church could (as some do) have the attitude that same-sex relationships are not sinful, nor deviant, and because that attitude is based on that church’s hermeneutics, it becomes a “core value” of that church to be a church that welcomes, affirms, and embraces Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Transsexual, and Intersex (LGBTI) persons.¹²

¹⁰ *Cape Times*, 7th September, 2011.

¹¹ “Response”, par. 22.

¹² The term “homosexuality” is a fairly recent one, coined by the Swiss sex reformer Karl Kertbeny in 1868. The Bible does not use the term. Recently the terms “gay” and “lesbian” have become more acceptable than “homosexual”, although the latter word is still widely in use. We must be reminded however, that there are more categories of sexual orientation than “gay” and “lesbian”, and where appropriate the terms “bi-sexual”, “transsexual”, and “inter-sexual” should be used. In this article, the all-inclusive acronym LGBTI is preferred.

Secondly, the church's "core value" is not homophobia, the judge argues, it is "the Holy Bible". Here the Bible's complexity is not recognised – and not just as regards the issue under discussion. Indeed, a fascinating aspect of the Bible is the struggle within the Scriptures themselves to find and hear the "voice of God". Where, for instance does one hear the voice of God on the question of war? In the chilling instruction from God to Israel in the *herem*, the "holy war" instruction, to "utterly destroy" Israel's enemies? "Make no covenant with them" says Deuteronomy 7:1-2; and in Deuteronomy 20:16-18, the text reads "You shall annihilate them". Or do we hear the voice of God in the words of the prophet Isaiah who stridently denounces even the idea that security is to be found in military strength and military alliances (Is. 31:1-5)?¹³ Where is God's word: in the annihilation of one's enemies, or in Jesus' injunction to love the enemy?

Thirdly, the judge argues that the teachings of the church are based "purely on the biblical injunction that a man should marry a woman and that there shall be husband and wife". This is a highly ambiguous view. In the Bible itself marriage evolves from polygamous relationships to monogamous ones. This view that assumes that "there shall be husband and wife" does reflect the history of the interpretation of the Genesis creation texts, but it does not reveal the intention of these texts. "The identification of marriage as the backdrop against which the homosexual prohibitions are to be understood reflects a contemporary understanding of the issues at stake, not an OT [Old Testament] view", says Phyllis A. Bird in a forceful argument.¹⁴ Moreover, the Bible is not at all judgemental about those persons like Jesus and Paul who did not

¹³ See the excellent study of Susan Niditch, *War in the Bible: A Study in the Ethics of Violence*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), in which other traditions in the Hebrew Bible that are opposed to the atrocities of war are identified. For another alternative interpretation see the still very convincing argument of Norman Gottwald, *Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250-1050 BCE*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979).

¹⁴ Phyllis A. Bird, "The Bible in Christian Ethical Deliberation", in *Homosexuality, Science and the 'Plain Sense' of Scripture*, ed. David L. Balch, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 166. "Homosexual relations in the OT are not viewed as an alternative or threat to marriage, and the creation texts are neither prescriptions nor models for heterosexual marriage as the context in which 'sexual desires rightly find fulfillment'... Bird has argued this more fully in her article "Genesis 1-3 as a Source for a Theological Understanding of Sexuality", *Ex Auditu* 3, (1987), 31-44; for the exegetical foundations of this argument see Phyllis A. Bird, "Male and Female He Created Them': Genesis 1:27b in the Context of the Priestly Creation Account", *HTR* 74 (1981), 129-159. See also her valuable considerations on homosexuality as "abomination" in "The Bible in Christian Ethical Deliberation", *Homosexuality, Science and the 'Plain Sense of Scripture*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 156-157.

marry, nor have children. The traditional reading of Genesis 1 and 2, from which Mogoeng takes his understanding of marriage, as the “order of creation” and as a fixed and unalterable structure of heterosexual marriage, is by far no longer the consensus reading of these texts.¹⁵

Fourthly, the position of Winner’s Chapel International, the judge argues, is “similar to [that of] almost all Christian churches”. There is immediately the obvious, almost trite issue that the belief of the majority is not at all a guarantee that such a belief is right. There was a time when “almost all” Christian churches believed that slavery was right, and justified that belief on a reading of the “Holy Bible”. What “most Christians believe” cannot be the criterion for a correct reading of the Bible. For centuries, Europeans, white Americans and white South Africans shared assumptions regarding slavery, black subjugation and apartheid. Whites used their monopoly of power in South Africa for the continued subjugation of the black majority justified by different permutations of three ideological positions, writes journalist Christi van der Westhuizen, namely social Darwinism, civilization, and religion.¹⁶ The so-called “theology of apartheid” was a particularly pernicious example of this damaging use of religion and of the Bible. Presumably not even Judge Mogoeng would take issue with that point. The issue is never whether “most Christians” believe that something is “biblical”. The question is always whether such a belief is right, whether it serves and affirms justice, and in doing so, whether it affirms the sustained message of the Bible, and displays the heart of the God who “loves justice” and demands “nothing but justice”. In any case, the belief that same-sex sexuality is “deviant”, “should not be practiced” or is a disease “that can be cured through prayer” is by no means shared by “almost all Christian churches”. Princeton theologian William Stacy Johnson has identified at least seven “typologies” in the church today within the range of “non-affirming” and “affirming” attitudes “concerning same-gender

¹⁵ See William Stacy Johnson, *A Time to Embrace*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), Chapter 3, “Becoming Family: The Consecration of Same-Gender Love”. The most usual interpretation of the Genesis “male” and “female” creation story assumes an anatomical understanding: the “fit” of body parts, as Johnson states. “But this is not a claim that has any explicit grounding in Genesis or anywhere else in Scripture. For that matter, biblical Hebrew does not even have specific words for genitalia”, 115. For a most useful discussion of this issue within the context of human beings created “in the image of God” see Johnson, 115, 116.

¹⁶ Christi van der Westhuizen, *White Power and the Rise and Fall of the National Party*, (Cape Town: Zebra Press, 2007), 54-61.

sexuality".¹⁷ That represents a very broad diversity of opinion which Judge Mogoeng does not take cognizance of.

Fifthly, there is a much better understanding of the results of the scientific study of human sexual orientation, from male birth order through fingerprint patterns, handedness, hearing and spatial ability, and the case for these are being made even within churches today.¹⁸ Some churches are also more aware of the fact that same-sex sexual orientation is not a disease that can be cured through "conversion therapy" or prayer. It is exactly what it is: an orientation. Suppression of one's natural (God given) sexual orientation and sexual urges is not the same as "being healed".¹⁹ While there is still much controversy as to whether or not it is possible to reverse sexual orientation, there is little doubt about the potential of physical and psychological harm in administering such change therapies.²⁰

Sixthly, the judge claims that his church's position is "unlike, for example, the Ku Klux Klan, whose core value is racial supremacy". But as already argued if one's teaching is based on the Bible which in these circles is the "infallible and inerrant Word of God", then these teachings are by definition one's "core values". In this particular understanding of the Bible, nothing on earth can claim higher authority than the Word of God. If one's reading of the Bible leads one to a teaching that homosexuality is "deviant", "sinful", and a disease that should be cured, then it is unavoidable that one's (or one's church's) "core values" must be homophobia, or better put, bigotry towards LGBTI persons. The judge's very choice of words is revealing in their judgemental character. In that reading, the logical "biblical" position is the affirmation of hetero-supremacy. Hetero-sexism is a "reasoned system of bias regarding sexual orientation; it denotes prejudice in favour of heterosexual people and denotes prejudice against bisexual and, especially, homosexual

¹⁷ Johnson's typologies are as follows: (i), Prohibition; (ii), Toleration; (iii), Accommodation; (iv), Legitimation; (v), Celebration; (vi), Liberation; and (vii), Consecration, *A Time to Embrace*, 41; 43-108. Johnson adds, "I make no claim that these seven viewpoints exhaust all the possibilities... Nonetheless, by attending to each of the viewpoints in its own integrity, the reader will be able, I hope, to push beyond surface labels and reach a new understanding of the issues", 43.

¹⁸ See David G. Myers and Letha Dawson Scanzoni, *What God Has Joined Together: The Christian Case for Gay Marriage*, (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2005), 64-65.

¹⁹ "There are few claims of reorientation but these are becoming fewer and fewer", Myers and Scanzoni, *What God has Joined Together*, 77.

²⁰ See Christine E. Gudorf, "The Bible and Science on Sexuality", in *Homosexuality, Science, and the 'Plain Sense' of Scripture*, ed. David L. Balch, 123.

people”.²¹ As such, hetero-sexism leads to the conviction that heterosexuality is *the* normative form of human sexuality and as a result “all sexual authority, value, and power are centred in heterosexuality”.²² In this way hetero-sexism is hetero-supremacy, and as a consequence, it is “analogous to racism and sexism”.²³ Hetero-supremacy is thus just as dangerous, life-threatening, exclusionist, destructive and sinful as racial supremacy. Murderous hate crimes against gay and lesbian persons are increasing, and so-called “corrective rape” is a terrifying reality in South Africa, with the courts mostly helplessly looking on. Writing on hatred for non-heterosexual persons in Uganda and speaking of the violence visited upon lesbians in Africa, reporter Lerato Mogoathe asks, “How many broken women do we need in this battered continent that’s still ravaged by disease and poverty?”²⁴

I would argue, that the six points raised above suggest that making uncritical claims based “on the Holy Bible” not only does the Bible an injustice; it is the guarantee for continued injustice covered with “biblical” sanction. These are questions the Judicial Services Commission had no intention of asking. But these are issues that critical theology must deal with.

What Does the Bible Say?

In this section my intention is not to once again examine the biblical texts commonly used in the arguments surrounding the issue under discussion. There are excellent studies dealing adequately with this²⁵. Rather, I would, in referring to these studies, endeavour to highlight some perspectives which might help in understanding these texts even better, especially as they pertain to the subject matter at hand.

Firstly, reading and interpreting biblical texts have ethical consequences and political functions, hence Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s insistence

²¹ Patricia Beattie Jung and Ralph F. Smith, *Heterosexism: An Ethical Challenge*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 13, cited by Cheryl B. Anderson, *Ancient Laws and Contemporary Controversies, The Need for Inclusive Biblical Interpretation*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 12.

²² Jung and Smith, *Heterosexism*, 52.

²³ Jung and Smith, *Heterosexism*, 52. See the cogent argument offered by Cheryl Anderson, *Ancient Laws*, 13-19.

²⁴ Lerato Mogoathe, “Killing and Dying in God’s Name – Being Gay in Uganda is Like Being Sentenced to Death”, (*Sunday Independent*, 15th December 2010).

²⁵ See for example Michael Vasey, *Strangers and Friends: A New Exploration of Homosexuality and the Bible* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1995).

that biblical interpreters "have an ethical responsibility to consider the actual consequences of their interpretations".²⁶

Second, the texts should be read within the contemporary context. This principle requires that the interpreter knows the biblical words to be understandable, credible, actual and prophetic, and to bear witness to the situation at hand. To achieve this, the reader should know and understand his/her own context and contemporary situation, as well as the questions that are pertinent to that situation. With regard to same-sex sexuality, this implies an awareness of recent scientific research, the insights of psychology, the ongoing debate within church and society, the different viewpoints on this issue, and the courage to discern the truth in light of the teachings of the gospel. When we read the biblical text therefore, Paul Germond argues correctly, "it is imperative that we be aware of not only of the assumptions we bring to our reading but also those assumptions that are implicit in the texts we read".²⁷

Thirdly, and complicating the matter further is the question of Bible translations which, in the case of same-sex issues, have done as much harm as in matters of gender and race. New Testament scholar Gosnell Yorke speaks in this regard of the "pathology of racism and the pathology of sexism" and demonstrates this pathology remarkably well as he examines certain biblical texts.²⁸ "Historically", Yorke argues, Bible translation has not been an innocent and value-neutral academic enterprise, but rather, "has been laden with gender and race-induced presuppositions".²⁹ He argues strongly and in my view convincingly that we need to re-examine Bible translations for those racial and gender biases and correct them:

²⁶ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: Decentering Biblical Scholarship", *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 107 (1988), 3-17. For a more detailed construction of her argument on this issue see her *Rhetoric and Ethic: The Politics of Biblical Studies*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999); see also Cheryl Anderson, *Ancient Laws*, 146-147, and at note 39, Chapter 6.

²⁷ See Paul Germond, "Heterosexism, Homosexuality and the Bible", in *Aliens in the Household of God: Homosexuality and Christian Faith in South Africa*, eds. Paul Germond and Steve De Gruchy, (Cape Town: David Philip, 1997), 189.

²⁸ See Gosnell L. Yorke, "Issues of Race and Gender in Bible Translation: Interfacing with Spirituality", paper presented at the Symposium in Spirituality and Professionalism, University of the Virgin Islands, St. Thomas, (The Caribbean), 18th April, 2011. He illustrates this by a critical examination of the following biblical texts: regarding sexism, Romans 16:7; 1 Cor. 14:34-36; 1 Tim. 2:9; and regarding racism, Gen. 2:10-14; Jer. 13:23; and Ps. 51:7.

²⁹ Yorke, "Issues of Race", 10.

We... are now insisting that full human flourishing, including *spiritual flourishing* must entail our critiquing of the received tradition which sometimes masks itself as objective scholarship. However, it is a scholarship which... has been touched and tarnished by certain Eurocentric, chauvinistic, and hegemonic assumptions about the world in which we live...³⁰

I contend that the same argument is valid for those texts that deal with matters of homoerotic sexuality. For, if accurately translated, it is in fact homoerotic behaviour that is under the discussion in the Bible, not stable, loving and committed same-sex relationships and love.³¹

Fourthly, literal readings of the Bible, I further argue, may lead to dangerous inconsistencies that themselves do harm to the very authority of the Bible claimed by Christians like Judge Mogoeng. "Bible-believing" churches and Christians insist on the literal understanding of the whole Bible but cannot, and in reality do not want to sustain that belief across the board. "Bible-believing" Christians, such as Judge Mogoeng, read Leviticus 18:22 literally: "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination", and they use that as a strong, even conclusive argument against same-sex relationships. At the same time they ignore verses such as Deuteronomy 22:5, regarding the law against the wearing of men's clothing by women; or the wearing of clothes made of different fabrics (Deut. 22:11); and the lending of money against interest (Deut. 23:19).

However, at issue here are not just the inconsistencies of traditional readings. At issue is also the question: what is the consistent message of the Bible? What is it that Jesus takes as the heart of his message for and of his activity in the world? There is a reason why Jesus announces his work in the world with the text from Isaiah 61, and not from Leviticus 18. That is because the sustained message of the Bible is not the punishment and exclusion of LBGTI persons. The sustained message of the Bible, repeated and deepened by the prophetic strain in the Psalms and the Prophets, and given eternal weight by Jesus of Nazareth is God's good news to the poor, God's eternal commitment to justice, liberation and inclusion.

³⁰ Yorke, "Issues of Race", 10, 11.

³¹ Studies and reflections on the "biblical position" are making this increasingly clear and even a scholar such as Lewis Smedes, who describes himself as a "traditionalist", reflects soberly on "the things the Bible does not tell us about. See Lewis Smedes, "Exploring the Morality of Homosexuality", in *Homosexuality and Christian Faith, Questions of Conscience for the Churches*, ed. Walter Wink (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 77-82.

"Strengthening the Hands of the Evildoers"

Pursuant to the arguments that have already been raised regarding Genesis 1 and 2, a few further points remain. Rather than stressing the (sexual) differences of the two human beings created by God as if God's deepest intentions with human beings are centred on, and reduced to sexual organs, Genesis instead lifts up their sameness: that both are made in the image of God. Being created in the image of God does not denote literal or physical likeness, but rather

It certainly includes something that is central to the biblical nature itself, namely, that capacity and desire to enter into deep and enduring relationships – both with one another and with God. As creatures who bear God's image, human beings have a status and a calling to live a life beyond mere animal existence. In other words, the desire for intimate companionships that all of us feel so deeply, whether we are gay or straight, is an important part of our humanity.³²

The creation account in Genesis 1 and 2 on which Judge Mogoeng builds his argument that "there shall be husband and wife", underscores not the peculiarities of anatomy, nor the wonders of gender complementarity, but the comprehensiveness and communal character of all humanity being created in God's image. "The point", writes Johnson, "is the sanctity and importance of every human being. And this sanctity applies regardless of a person's sexual identity".³³

Reflecting on Genesis 19:1-29, the story of "the men of Sodom and Gomorrah", we should again press beyond the prejudicial exegesis that has set the tone for so long. A conservative reading of this story insists that it illustrates Yahweh's punishment because the men of Sodom had wanted to engage in same-sex intercourse with the angels sent by God. Since at least the fourth century this has been the reading of this text. "We cannot avoid the obvious conclusion that God devastated the cities on the plain with a catastrophe because of the homosexuality of the Sodomites", says theologian Greg Bahnsen.³⁴

There are a number of issues that need to be taken into account here before Bahnsen's claim of the "obviousness" of the matter can be accepted. First, there is the very strong argument that what is crucial

³² Johnson, *A Time to Embrace*, 115. See also Meyers and Scanzoni, *What God Has Joined Together*, Chapter 2, "The Longing for Belonging".

³³ Johnson, *A Time to Embrace*, 116.

³⁴ Cited in Paul Germond, "Heterosexism, Homosexuality and the Bible", in *Aliens in the Household of God*, eds. Germond and De Gruchy, 214, see note 45.

here is the issue of hospitality, and that the great sin of the Sodomites was the breaking of the rules of hospitality.³⁵ Apart from that however, and more importantly, is the role of the Hebrew word *yada'*, literally "having knowledge of", often translated as "having sex with". It is, once again, more complex than that. Of the 931 times the word *yada'* is used in the Hebrew Bible, only twelve times does it refer to sexual intercourse and in all those 12 cases the reference is to heterosexual intercourse.³⁶ The text has nothing to say about intimate, love-affirming same-sex relationships.

Still, in my view, even in this more "liberal" interpretation of hospitality, the deeper meaning of the text remains obscured: it is still the men (the men of Sodom and the angels) who are central to the events.

Finally, the other references to "the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah" in the Hebrew Bible shed a completely different light on Genesis 19. Jeremiah stipulates a devastating judgement on the sins of the leaders and prophets of Israel. In Jeremiah, those sins are so great that the prophet's heart is "crushed" within him (23:9). The land is "full of adulterers"; the leaders of Israel lead the people on "an evil course; they are leaders whose might is not right" (v.10). They are not adulterers because they break their marital vows but rather because those in positions of trust, through their abuse of power ("their might is not right"), have broken their vows to Yahweh and, instead of doing justice, are leading the people on an "evil course" through their "wickedness". This already in itself is "disgusting": the prophets of Samaria are prophesying "by Baal", (that is, by telling lies, not speaking the truthful word that comes from Yahweh), leading the people astray (v.13). But in Jerusalem, the prophets do things that are even "more shocking": they commit adultery, and "walk in lies", and in doing so they "strengthen the hands of evildoers" (23:14). If they had "stood in (Yahweh's) council", they would have "turned (the evildoers) away from their evil". This judgement on all of the elite leadership is preceded by the earlier judgement on King Shallum and King Jehoiakim, sons of Josiah of Judah. Shallum, because he did not know justice, is "carried away from this place"; he shall die where he is and "shall return no more". (Jer. 22:11) Jehoiakim, who indulged in self-enrichment with his "eyes and heart only on dishonest gain", shedding "innocent blood and practicing

³⁵ See Germond, "Heterosexism, Homosexuality and the Bible", *Aliens in the Household of God*, 214

³⁶ See the excellent exposé offered by Germond, "Heterosexism, Homosexuality and the Bible", *Aliens in the Household of God*, 213-215.

oppression and violence", is similarly judged. The context is crystal clear. First there is Yahweh's plea and solemn warning:

Execute justice in the morning
and deliver from the hand of the oppressor
anyone who has been robbed,
or else my wrath will go forth like fire and burn
with no one to quench it,
because of your evil doings. (Jer. 21:12).

This is followed by the great "woe" against the king and the ruling elite:

Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness,
and his upper rooms by injustice;
who makes his neighbours work for nothing,
and does not give them their wages...
Are you a king
because you compete in cedar?
Did not your father eat and drink
and do justice and righteousness?
Then it was well with him. (22:13-15).

These rulers' eyes and heart however, "are only on [their] dishonest gain". In behaving in this way Jehoiakim shows that he does "not know (*yada'*) Yahweh" (Jer. 22:11-17). Not doing justice is "not knowing" Yahweh. Next follows the "woe" to the leaders, the prophets and priests, the "shepherds who destroy and scatter" the sheep of Yahweh's pasture (23:1). It is in this context that Yahweh cries out that "all of them have become like Sodom to me, and its inhabitants like Gomorrah" (23:14). In Ezekiel 16:49-50 the sins are "pride, surfeit of good and prosperous ease" (while) "they did not aid the poor and needy...". In addition, "they were haughty and did abominable things before me". So for Ezekiel the sins of Sodom are the sins of social injustice, greed, pride, exploitation of the poor and unbridled lust for material prosperity. In this reading by the prophets of Israel themselves, the "Sodom and Gomorrah" text can be more justifiably interpreted as a judgment upon the "prosperity gospel" and rampant capitalism as "blessings of God", so beloved of neo-Pentecostalist and Charismatic churches, rather than as the divine condemnation of LGBTI persons and same-sex relationships.

Indeed sex does play a role in the story of Sodom. However, I would argue that the text portrays repulsion at the horrific nature of wanton, violent sexual abuse, and the fact that what was intended to be an act of intimacy and affirming love is now an act of subjection to this destructive abuse. Secondly, and crucially, the story highlights the

complicity of Lot, representative of God in this city of violence, and the consequences of that complicity for those who are most vulnerable. When Lot offers his two daughters to the men of Sodom the word *yada'* is again used, but the text makes the meaning crystal clear: Lot is offering "to bring out" (read: "to deliver into the hands of") his daughters who "have not known (*yada'*) a man", to "do with them as you please" (Gen. 19:8). It is not the horrific intentions with regard to the angels, but the actual horror of the young women, that is the key to understanding the biblical text here. Lot is betraying his children, already vulnerable, but made utterly and shamelessly more so by their father in that situation, and in that act he is betraying God, while "strengthening the hands of the evildoers". That is the "more shocking thing" Jeremiah saw in the leaders of Jerusalem (Jer. 23:14), and that is the abominable thing "before Yahweh" that Ezekiel speaks of (16:50). In making that choice Lot, the man of God, has become frighteningly like the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Within the context of the times, Leviticus 22:18, which prohibits "penetration" between men, the act of penetration of a man by a man was an act usually imposed by a socially superior man on a socially inferior one. In ancient society such acts were sometimes performed on a slave or other subordinate persons, especially prisoners of war, merely as a form of social gratification or humiliation. The enemy is conquered, but the victors want to further defeat them through sexual abuse, subjecting them to the ultimate indignity: penetration of a man by a man. "By its very nature then, we are speaking of a one-sided, asymmetrical act, one that had the effect in the eyes of ancient culture of symbolically turning the man who was penetrated and had become sexually subservient, into a woman."³⁷ Phyllis Bird shows that penetration of a man by other men could also be a form of punishment for a man having done this to another man.³⁸ Understanding this, I suggest, would go a long way in understanding the intention of the biblical law.

Johnson argues that the law in Leviticus was aimed specifically at heads of households, clans and tribes.³⁹ The head of the household was allowed to seek sexual gratification in a wide number of ways. However, Leviticus specifically prohibits Hebrew men from a certain

³⁷ Johnson, *A Time to Embrace*, 126.

³⁸ See Phyllis A Bird, "The Bible in Christian Ethical Deliberation", in *Homosexuality, Science and the 'Plain Sense' of Scripture*, ed. Balch, 175.

³⁹ Johnson, *A Time to Embrace*, 126.

kind of sexual activity: they are to refrain from "uncovering the nakedness" of certain persons within the extended household, anyone in a close familial relationship, and those blood relatives more distantly related to the current wife of the man. And they are prohibited from the practice of using sexual gratification as a form of abuse and humiliation.⁴⁰ This is, in my view, an attempt to curb the power of men with regard to their lusts. So even without taking into account the cultic contexts within which these laws were given, and being acutely, and critically, aware of the submissive status that ancient law prescribes to women, the text offers the possibility of an alternative reading which sees the law as reining in the power of men: they cannot do what they like just because they are male and have power; they cannot prove their domination through engaging in some humiliating sexual ritual. But there is no inkling that the Bible says anything about, let alone passes judgement on committed, loving, stable same-sex relationships.

In the same way, Paul addresses Greco-Roman homoeroticism.⁴¹ In the three references Paul makes to homoerotic behaviour, he is not so much taking a stand against genuine, loving relationships as railing against the self-centred eroticism, hedonistic homoerotic practices, and male prostitution that were widespread in the Roman Empire. Sex is not a tool of power, Paul is trying to say. A Roman male citizen could, at will, penetrate his wife, a woman of lower standing, his slave, a prostitute – anyone who was his social inferior.⁴² Paul is harsh in his judgement on social superiors inflicting their lustful desires on social inferiors, based on their privilege and status as the Roman ruling class.

Part of Paul's Roman-Greco world was the lively trade in boys who were sold into sexual slavery. They were captured during military campaigns as prisoners of war and castrated to preserve their soft features for as

⁴⁰ Johnson, *A Time to Embrace*, 126.

⁴¹ See for example Jeremy Punt, "Homosexuality: Biblical Reflections, (NT)", "Report of the Task Team on Homosexuality to the General Synod of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa", 29th September – 5th October, 2008, Hammanskraal, *Agenda*, 2008, 99-117. He scrutinizes Romans 1:18-32, 1 Cor. 6:9, and 1 Tim. 1:10. See also especially Dale Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006); M Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998); Robin Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality: Contextual Background for Contemporary Debate*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983); and for the relationship between Paul's usage of language and concepts and that of Greek philosophy see David E. Frederickson, "Natural and Unnatural Use in Romans 1:24-27: Paul and the Philosophic Critique of Eros", in *Homosexuality, Science and the 'Plain Sense' of Scripture*, ed. Balch, 197-222.

⁴² Johnson, *A Time to Embrace*, 132-133.

long as possible. If they survived this mutilation, they went to market as sexual slaves.⁴³ Paul writes in utter condemnation of these practices and of the sexual chaos that serves no other purpose than instant gratification, social domination and oppression: all this is a result of turning away from God.

In summary, we have to ask, in light of the terror society inflicts upon LGBTI persons, whether “Bible-believing Christians” are not creating the climate for and a culture of such murderous hatred and festering injustice, in reality not serving God, but in Jeremiah’s words “strengthening the hands of evildoers, so that no one turns from their wickedness”.

“Killing and Dying in God’s Name”

In Africa no less than 43 countries have, in one way or another, criminalised same-sex relationships, of which Uganda has perhaps become the most notorious example. The Ugandan government are working hard on a bill that dramatically expands punishment for homosexuality, already illegal in the country, and that calls for the death penalty for “serial offenders”, and imprisonment for failing to report gays and lesbians to authorities.⁴⁴

“Whatever happens to gays is a result of their own misdeeds”, says the Kampala’s Rolling Stone newspaper editor, Giles Muhame, blaming the victims of violence for the crimes of the perpetrators. “It’s their own behaviour that’s causing the attacks”.⁴⁵ The morality or humanity of the act is not in question; the crime is already sanctified by society and the Holy Bible. For behind that bill and openly supportive of the newspaper’s “brave, Christian” stand, is parliamentarian David Bahati, a born-again Christian who like Judge Mogoeng believes that he “was chosen by God to deliver humanity from this calamity”. They should die, he says. “The Bible says those caught in sin should suffer death. The Qur’an says hang them and throw them over a cliff”. Then he tops it off: “These are the words of God by God”.⁴⁶ And they are indeed suffering death; hung by the neck or bludgeoned to death by murderous, but self-righteous mobs who are told that they are carrying out “the very words of God by God”. These are the actual consequences of the decisions of

⁴³ Johnson, *A Time to Embrace*, 133.

⁴⁴ Jeff Stuart, “Junkets for Jesus”, *Mother Jones* magazine, November-December 2010, 61.

⁴⁵ Lerato Mogathle, “Killing and Dying in God’s Name”.

⁴⁶ Lerato Mogathle, “Killing and Dying in God’s Name”.

persons in positions of public power whose beliefs are uncritically "founded on the Holy Bible".

The most recent in the spate of lesbian killings in Cape Town occurred in the second week of September in Khayelitsha; while the youngest victim of "corrective rape" in Pretoria a few months ago was only 14 years old. Bible-believing Christians should ponder far more seriously not only the theological, but also the societal consequences of their reading of the Bible.

Theologically and sociologically, more than ever, there are deep concerns and challenges with regard to the issue of same-sex sexuality which remain. First, is the challenge of how to encourage and foster a discernment of the voice of God from among the many voices in the Bible and from those of the seats of power; to grasp the full meaning of the justice Yahweh desires for each and every one, which is Yahweh's "abiding cause." Second, the challenge is to resist the religious supremacist stance that the Bible is in conflict with the Constitution, through a constant affirmation that the Constitution seeks to serve all members of society and not just the Christian community. Third, more research on why Christians, on the basis of the Bible for which justice is so central, question the Constitution's commitment to justice for all God's children, especially God's LGBTI children. And finally, the challenge is to resist, through critical theological and biblical analysis, the grim possibility that Constitutional Hill will become a paradigm for another hill where new crosses will arise, upon which the victims of faith will be crucified and where those who perpetrate these crucifixions feel no remorse, because their judgements, in the church and on the Bench, are "founded on the Holy Bible" and their hands are washed in the blood of the Lamb.

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God or Caesar: A Queer Debate on Interpretation in the South African Church

Sifiso Khuzwayo¹

Abstract

This article investigates how texts that are regarded as authoritative may be used to foster unity within a community in which divergent ethical views exist. The author's particular reference will be the homosexuality debate within the Methodist Church of Southern Africa. A comparative analysis of models of reading authoritative texts such as the Christian scriptures and the South African constitution is employed. Also in question will be the ways in which a text comes to be authoritative within a particular community. Whilst the texts being referred to here are all scripted, there are also unscripted sources of authority such as culture which are gaining more popularity amongst the younger generations. The divergent views, mentioned above, on the homosexuality issue seem to be irreconcilable. Therefore in light of the stalemate that is apparent in this debate, an Islamic scholar's concept of the *Dhiliz/Threshold* as a place where all stakeholders can meet to engage is proposed. The *Dhiliz*-ian position is not the same as sitting on the fence in the face of a critical debate, but is rather a place where all relevant points of view are given due recognition. John Wesley's well-known response to disagreements with the Rev. George Whitfield forms part of what is proposed here. Unless the church is willing to deal honestly with the debate on homosexuality, another schism will inevitably be the outcome.

Introduction

Where does my loyalty lie? Is it to God or to my country? This is the question that many people find themselves caught up in when it comes to the debates surrounding homosexuality within the South African church. Jesus' authority is questioned by the Pharisees who try to entrap him concerning the question of paying taxes to Caesar, as recorded in the three synoptic gospels.² This paper is neither an exegesis of this narrative, nor even an exploration of what is involved in them. I want merely to highlight how a burning issue, currently

¹ Sifiso Khuzwayo is from South Africa. He is an ordained minister in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa serving at Central City Mission yaseThekwini. He is also an Adjunct Lecturer at the Seth Mokitimi Methodist Seminary. His area of specialization are in the fields of Systematic Theology and Ethics. Email: sifisokhuz@gmail.com

² Matthew 22:15-22; Mark 12:13-17 and Luke 20:20-26.

homosexuality, can divide a community and call a person to decide which side to stand on. In the South African context, the debate has been raging for decades now on how to respond to homosexual members within the church. As a fairly young democracy, South Africa has one of the most liberal constitutions in the world and precisely because of that, the country was forced to reckon with its laws governing human sexuality, civil marriage and the rights of individuals to associate as they wish under the protection of the state. The church is therefore left with the debate on what we call our members to be loyal to – the country's Constitution or the church's teaching on the matter. It is a matter of authority.

It is a queer debate! This word is not intended in any derogatory manner.. The debate which we will encounter over the course of this paper is queer (strange) first because for some there isn't even an issue to be debated. Jesus is clear: "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." Second, it is queer (strange) for some people because, in the midst of so much world turmoil, hunger, wars and despair, the church is headed for a split over the issue of human sexuality. Obviously, the third point is that the debate itself is about queer folk; those who identify themselves as members of the Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Queer, Questioning, Transgender, Intersex and Ally (LGBTIA) communities.³

The difficulty lies in how people should interpret the texts which have authority in their lives such that they may be governed by them. I speak here specifically of the South African Constitution for citizens and the Bible for Christians. I am not going to examine each and every aspect of these texts but will merely look at how they have been applied and perhaps what can be learned from their use about humanity in general. The concept of the South African church is also too wide, since it involves the Roman Catholic Church, the Orthodox and liberal mainline churches, the Pentecostals and Charismatic movements and churches and the African Indigenous churches. Therefore I cannot begin to speak of the church as though there is only one voice in this body. Instead I will limit myself to the mainline Protestant church and specifically to my own denomination, the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA) simply because I know this church more intimately than the rest.

³ LGBTIA = Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Queer, Questioning, Transgender, Intersex and Ally. There is a myriad of ways in which to explain the forms of human sexualities that fall within this category, which is all-encompassing.

The South African constitution provides, amongst other things, equality before the law and protection by the law that no one may be discriminated against, indirectly or directly, on the grounds of race, gender, sexual orientation, age, disability, etc. It also stipulates that everyone has inherent dignity and that this dignity is to be protected. “The rights in the Bill of Rights may be limited only in terms of the law of general application to the extent that the limitation is reasonable and justifiable in an open and democratic society based on human dignity, equality and freedom.”⁴ The constitution is the governing authority within the Republic of South Africa and underpins the doctrine of the separation of powers (Executive, Judiciary and Legislature) within the three authorial bodies of the state. The constitution therefore functions, as Powell proposes in his book, “to provide a means of resolving political conflict that accepts the inevitability and persistence of such conflict rather than the possibility of consensus or even broad agreement on many issues.”⁵ If this be the case then it must be expected that in any state governed by such a constitution, issues will arise that will require the citizens to make judgments over them in a manner that is amicable to all, and that respects all viewpoints, while restraining open conflict.

Here is where perhaps the authority of the constitution becomes strongest in that, unlike the Bible as we shall see later, the community democratically elects to be governed by the constitution that they themselves designed and from there on all generations to come are to be governed by and everything is to be interpreted in the light of that constitution. However, as regards the role of the constitution and the power of the judiciary, Powell quotes Abraham Lincoln who warns against allowing “the policy of the government, upon vital questions, affecting the whole people... to be irrevocably fixed by decisions of the Supreme Court;” if the nation allows that, “the people will have ceased to be their own rulers, having, to that extent, practically resigned their government, into the hands of that eminent tribunal.”⁶ It is with such warnings that Powell can then conclude with a plea:

Constitutional law is an experiment, as all life is an experiment. The experiment is modest in its goals – we have not formed a political community to bring about the Kingdom of God or even the classless society. Our goals have been to alleviate human suffering and to

⁴ Extracts from the South African Constitution section 36 <http://www.info.gov.za/documents/constitution/1996/96cons2.htm#36> (accessed 6th September 2011).

⁵ J. Powell, *Constitutional Conscience: The moral Dimension of Judicial Decision*, (Chicago: The Chicago Press, 2008), 7.

⁶ Powell, *Constitutional Conscience*, 118.

empower men and women to live their lives as they see fit, but to do it in a political community that demands their allegiance to it and to their neighbours, and is worthy, for all its flaws, of making such demands. Such an enterprise, we have thought, nourishes our individual spirits and our sociable impulses alike. At the heart of more than two centuries of American constitutionalism is the conviction that this is an experiment worth continuing.⁷

South Africa's constitution, young as it may be, was formulated with a similar goal in mind and an aim for the well being of its citizens. It goes without saying that in developing it, much was borrowed from the democracies of the world and indeed much too was either added or omitted, in order for it to be South African.

Considering the fundamental constitutional principles of the equality of all humans, the alleviation of human suffering and the empowering of citizens, it was only a matter of time before someone questioned the status of same-sex couples who were being discriminated against when their partnerships were not recognized as legal. In a case decided in December 2005, it was brought before the Constitutional court that the Marriage Act of 1961 was discriminatory and thus needed to be changed to include same-sex couples and further that even the vows taken by marrying couples, which speak of husbands and wives were discriminatory against same-sex couples.⁸ The Constitutional Court ruled in favour of the applicants and instructed that parliament address the issue of the Marriage Act before 30 November 2006. A new Civil Union Act was thus passed, giving the same rights to people married under this Act as is accorded to those people married under the Marriage Act. Currently then South Africa has three Acts which govern partnerships between individuals; the Marriage Act of 1961, the Customary Marriages Act of 1998 (this recognizes even polygamous marriages as practiced by the African people of the land) and the Civil Union Act of 2006.

Even before this Constitutional process, in 2001, the Methodist Church of Southern Africa declared its intention to be a "community of love rather than rejection."⁹ The church summoned its Doctrine, Ethics and

⁷ Powell, *Constitutional Conscience*, 121.

⁸ In the Constitutional Court of South Africa: Minister of Home Affairs and Another v Fourie and Another, with Doctors for Life International (first *amicus curiae*), John Jackson Smyth (second *amicus suriae*) and Marriage Alliance of South Africa (third *amicus curiae*) [CCT 60/04] and Lesbian and Gay Equality Project and Eighteen others v Minister of Home Affairs and Others [CCT 10/05].

⁹ *The Methodist Church of Southern Africa 2011 Yearbook and Directory* Johannesburg: Methodist Publishing House, 2011), 104.

Worship Committee (DEWCOM) to conduct a study on how the church should respond to the issue of homosexuality. The resultant DEWCOM document included very progressive Bible study type material on the biblical texts that pertain to homosexuality and pointed to the Wesleyan Quadrilateral (Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience) as a model that could help the Methodist people to decide on the matter. This document was to be discussed at all levels of the church and responses were to be fed back through the normal channels. What followed was an outcry from those described as conservative. The document was criticised for being too progressive, while the people who had prepared it were labelled as pro-homosexual and the use of scripture was considered too modern (Historical Critical Methodology was used). Others supported the DEWCOM document, and so the church was deadlocked. Whilst it was never enumerated, a concern was raised at subsequent synods that in many instances the congregations, particularly the African majority, didn't even discuss the issue because of their minister's own prejudices. Amongst those who did discuss it, the main point of contention was that most of the African people had historically been taught that the Bible is the Word of God and is therefore inerrant and they have never heard otherwise. Ministers also never felt the need to question the Bible's inerrancy, let alone discuss this with regard to the particular issue of homosexuality. The Bible was seemingly being challenged by a document which assumed that people were aware of the Bible's inconsistency and that they were also exposed to some form of historical critical exegetical work in the course of the normal sermons of the day

DEWCOM had framed three questions that members of the Methodist Church must deal with: First; how do they feel about accepting homosexual people in the church? Second; how do they feel about accepting homosexual people in positions of leadership? Third; how do they feel about accepting homosexual people into the ordained ministry? Ironically, whilst their questions may have been a reflection of what needed to happen on the ground, I believe they were wrongly phrased because they presented in one swoop, three issues as regards the different levels of membership within the body of Christ. The current Methodist stance whilst acceding to the ongoing discussion notes "firstly; that the MCSA is, *de facto*, a church with divergent convictions on this issue that have theological integrity, [and] secondly; [that] there is a current theological inconsistency within the MCSA where it allows

this divergence of conviction to be held without the freedom for such divergence of conviction to be exercised.”¹⁰

My interest in this debate is not so much in what the Bible says or does not say. Rather, I focus on the things (texts etc.) that we hold to be authoritative in our lives and how the church can aid people in working with that authority. On the one hand, in a world where scripture has been used to justify anything from women abuse, to slavery and apartheid, how does one work with the Christian Bible in such a way that it continues to hold authority in one's life and what sort of authority should this be? On the other hand, is it possible that the liberal nature of South Africa's Constitution is due to the country's history of oppression and is therefore a corrective and a preventative measure to guard against any other form of oppression? I may not be able to answer these questions here but I submit that they are important in the consideration of any ethical issue in the life of Christian believers in the world today. It is a question of authority. Where does our authority lie: in the church or in the world? And if our authority lies in the church, then where within does such an authority lie? Is it in the Bible?

A Question of Authority

When we speak of authority we have varied understandings. Who determines that something has authority, and by whom or what should that authority be held? A general understanding would be that of something that speaks of legitimacy, of recognition and obedience, and of justification and even a right to exercise power. In our case there are then two sources of such authority: the Constitution and the Bible. The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa as the supreme law of the Republic, dictates that law and conduct inconsistent with this Constitution is invalid and that its obligations are to be fulfilled. Powell, on the role of the American constitution, says that: “There is a substantive, if quite broad, relationship between the virtues that the Constitution implicitly demands of its interpreters and the substance of its commands as they will appear to any conscientious interpreter in the early twenty-first century.”¹¹ In other words, the fundamental message of the Constitution as regards what is right and wrong is broadly comprehensible to all who are presented with its actual statements.

Defining authority for a secular state is relatively simple, but when it comes to matters of religion, the situation becomes complicated: one

¹⁰ *The Methodist Church of Southern Africa 2011 Yearbook and Directory*, 2011:106.

¹¹ Powell, *Constitutional Conscience*, 110.

never knows what comes first: authority, scripture or theology, nor which of these is a legitimizing body.

David Kelsey asserts that what undergirds the concepts of authority, scripture and theology is the theological usefulness or the demand of authority. Kelsey arrives at the following formula:

To say “scripture is authority for theology” is to commit oneself to engaging in the doing of theology under a rule that requires one to use scripture in certain ways. That involves, at least implicitly, a functionalist understanding of “authority”, an acknowledgment of scripture’s normative status *vis a vis* theological proposal, indeed its normativity specifically in regard to the “Christianness” of the proposals.¹²

Kelsey thus posits the Bible as the ultimate authority and Mary McClintock-Fulkerson in support, asserts that three features are helpful in defining an authority that is neither oppressive nor coercive, but rather helpful for assessing what is and what is not biblically authoritative: “(1) its relational character; (2) its sense as acts of legitimation; and (3) its sense as a claim that is made upon a community”.¹³

From the arguments of these two scholars one can then say the authority of the Bible is, first, relational because it demands one to be within the community of those who understand the Bible as authoritative in order to appreciate its strength; one must be part of the story. Here defining the text as scripture is linked with the acceptance of a claim that it has on the life of the believer. A complication is that, for Christians, scripture includes more than just the Bible, but the church’s tradition: its hymns, liturgy and (depending on one’s Christian heritage), iconography. This tradition then legitimizes and makes normative the beliefs, articulations and expressions of those who are members of the community. It is this situation that led to the ‘chicken and egg’ debate that has long plagued the church. Who brings legitimacy to whom: the church tradition which collated the scriptures or the Spirit which inspired the scriptures and the tradition? This question is not fully answered even to this day! A further consideration is that the claim of scripture upon the community calls for a certain way of living “Christianness”. This raises the concept of the covenant (an agreement and commitment

¹² DH. Kelsey, *Proving Doctrine: The uses of Scripture in Modern Theology*, (Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1999), 154.

¹³ M. McClintock Fulkerson, *Church Documents on Human Sexuality and the Authority of Scripture*, (Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001), 50.

by both parties) of God with the people to whom God has chosen to relate the Good News of God's reign as demonstrated by Jesus of Nazareth, accepted as the Christ.

It should be noted that in discussing scriptural authority and its claim upon a community, regardless of what the issue at hand may be, we must remain fully aware of the Bible's own ideological locations. McClintock-Fulkerson warns of this:

The significance of the grammar is seen in a comparison of feminist Christians' insights with an account of ideology. [The typical functions of the latter might] include legitimating or naturalizing the dominant, obscuring social relations justifying the powerful, and neglecting challenges. A variety of theological formulations naturalize relationships of subordination for women... Certain traditions obscure social reality, making women (and men) believe that female subordination is for their own good... Accounts that divinize scripture "naturalize" the belief by making it absolute. Teachings that sponsor proper Christian behaviour as self-denigration and selfless love work as ideology by providing a standard against which resistance looks like faithlessness, thereby denigrating any challenges women might put forward regarding their idealized position.¹⁴

Itumeleng Mosala argues along similar lines in his work on Black Theology. Mosala's main argument is that liberation movements have often consumed the work of scripture as if it carries no ideology and is thus an ahistorical, apolitical "word of God," which then disables any reading of scripture that would emancipate the oppressed but rather allows a reading that suits the oppressor: "The insistence on the Bible as the word of God must be seen for what it is: an ideological manoeuvre whereby ruling class interests evident in the Bible are converted into a faith that transcends social, political, racial, sexual, and economic divisions. In this way the Bible becomes an ahistorical, interclassist document."¹⁵ Mosala then states his plea "for an open acknowledgment of the class interests that are being represented and thus an acknowledgment of at least the social limitations of the methods [of biblical interpretation]."¹⁶

McClintock-Fulkerson and Mosala show that although the Bible has a claim upon those within the community, it still remains the duty of all

¹⁴ M. McClintock-Fulkerson, "Church documents on human sexuality and the authority of scripture." *Interpretation: a Journal of Bible & Theology*, 49 (1995), 23

¹⁵ I. Mosala, *Biblical hermeneutics and black theology in South Africa*, (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 18.

¹⁶ Mosala, *Biblical hermeneutics*, 65

who use it to be aware of the ideologies running through it, and therefore construct whatever theology or system of life accordingly. The work of interpretation is never complete and that has the implication that the work of theologizing is never complete. This then means that the interpretation of both the Constitution and the Bible for the citizens of the country remains the responsibility of those members of the community charged with it, to undertake this with diligence.

It is a methodological crisis how we listen for this authority, and to what we focus our attention the most in our listening. It is at this juncture that government is ahead of the church and therefore when called upon, the church was unable to give a united witness when the state needed a 'Word from God'. It then remains to be seen if God has, on this issue, achieved God's will despite the failings of the church? Thus far there is therefore agreement among South African Christians that authority lies in the country's constitution and in the Christian scriptures. The methodological crisis referred to above concerns how this authority is attributed.

Sam Wells sums the situation up in a sermon in which he proposes that there are four major approaches in understanding scriptural authority with regard to homosexuality.¹⁷ First, there are those who have a *Holiness* approach. These people call upon the six biblical verses that speak on the issue of homosexuality.¹⁸ Their argument is simply "the Bible is clear."

Second, there are the *Kingdom* approach people. These people argue that there are just too many important issues in the world right now for Christians to be bothered about sexuality. They therefore ask: "Can we talk about something else?" These people appeal to scriptures such as Micah 6:8 which says God's people must "Act justly, love mercy and walk humbly" with God.

The third approach is the *Pastoral* approach which says "Can't you see what this is doing to God's people?" They appeal to the virtue of honesty whereby the church admits that there have always been homosexual people amongst all her ranks. This approach highlights scriptures like Paul's recognition that "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23) in the spirit of Jesus' words "do not judge lest you be judged" (Matthew 7:1).

¹⁷ S. Wells, *Speaking the Truth: Preaching in a Pluralistic Culture*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004), 179-196

¹⁸ Leviticus 18: 22 & 20:13; Romans 1:18-32; 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 and 1 Timothy 1:8-11

The final approach is the *Liberation* approach, which claims that “this is a straight forward issue of discrimination.” Highlighted here is the fact that we are all made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27) and it is argued that, where the Bible is in opposition to homosexuality, it must be read in its context, in which homosexuality was linked to prostitution and promiscuity, and in which nothing of stable homosexual relationships was known.

The truth is that all these approaches are valid and therefore cannot be dismissed and the people who hold to them do so with all sincerity and love. However, there remains the fact that the end result of each is completely different. How does the church in such a situation guide its members?

The Church as Guide

There is a tendency within this homosexuality debate to assume that everyone understands what “church” is and that it is one entity. The ideal is indeed such, but the reality is that in every place the shape of this body is as different as the people who represent it. I am not going to try to define what the church ought to be in order to resolve the tensions around homosexuality or any other issue for that matter. I am however going to examine a concept that the church can use to understand its role in this queer debate.

John's gospel tells of Jesus' address to his disciples: “If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.” (John. 15:19). There are other instances where scripture speaks of the believers as being in the world but not of the world. These are also passages that call for believers to be ambassadors of God's kingdom here on earth. It is here that I think lies the answer to the dilemma. Contrary to certain religious opinions, homosexuality is not an issue the church can be silent on because homosexuality is located within the very pews and pulpits of the churches. It dwells among the families of our congregants whether they choose to ignore it or not. The homosexuality debate is present in society and if theologizing cannot offer guidance to that society, it must at least equip the church members to deal with such issues that surround them. The biblical concept, which finds resonances in Islam, of understanding ourselves as foreigners in the world could help in this debate.

Moosa provides a concept, found in the work of Ghazali, a Muslim philosopher, a concept he calls the *Dihliz/Threshold*. This *Dihliz* he

refers to as a position or location of articulation that neither focuses on the polarities nor the binary formulations between the inner and the outer, the indigenous or the foreign, the esoteric or the exoteric.

The *Dihliz*-ian position is where Ghazali as subject found himself, struggling between the polarities without committing himself to some intangible middle road. Thus, the *Dihliz*-ian position depends entirely on the force field of the discourse. For it often happened that in one context Ghazali found himself at one end of the polarity and in a somewhat different and variant setting he found himself nearer the other end of the spectrum. Here, far from coercing one into adopting one of the polar positions as the correct position, the polarities serve as a spectrum of variabilities.¹⁹

In engaging this there are two points on which Christianity would differ slightly. First, I am not sure that we are ever afforded the opportunity to choose to be on “the other side” in terms of principle (right and wrong). Second, the use of any other source than that which we consider authoritative to us (the Bible) is contentious. I think, however, that Ghazali offers something a little deeper than these rigid concerns for loyalty to principle and the Bible.

In talking about homosexuality, members of the church community who are in this world are forced to reckon with a multitude of force fields in terms of knowledge regarding the issue, which people must use if they are to engage meaningfully in dialogue. Engaging from the position of the *Dihliz* does not mean that one is denouncing oneself, but rather that one is choosing to let all the others speak to one another on equal terms. This is about letting science, technology, constitutional law, psychology, health, history, sociology and whatever field that is a stakeholder in this discussion speak to us as we seek to make our decision. The level of authority that we give these disciplines is interestingly not as clear cut as many would want to believe. Believers once spoke with scriptural authority of a world that stood on four pillars; Expressions like ‘the four corners of the world’ may continue to be used as figures of speech but are no longer the truth that believers once held onto; like the fact that the sun sets in the West, when we know ‘it ain’t moving!’ Therefore in this very debate, we need to stand at a place where we can receive that which might enlighten us to the facts of life to which we may be unaccustomed.

Moosa further says of Ghazali:

¹⁹ E. Moosa, *Ghazali & the Poetics of Imagination*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 272.

The psychic restlessness that he exhibited in his mental and physical crisscrossing over the threshold offers salient lessons for the postcolonial and postmodern Muslim subject in search of emancipatory knowledge and resources to address her many dilemmas. Admittedly, when located at the *Dihliz*, one acknowledges the grey areas, intermediate zones, and degrees of uncertainty that are not unequivocally resolved. Despite Ghazali's most wrenching desire for personal certainty in matters of faith, in the realm of the ethical he was aware that there is always a penumbra of uncertainty.²⁰

One can then only stand with the Christian community, acknowledging that we realize the dilemma that many of our members and those in our wider community are faced with. Rather than being stuck in our position, we then take a step to this position which is neither mine nor the opposition's.

The constitution and the Christian scriptures are not the only authoritative features in the lives of many South Africans. There is also the much undermined and side-lined force field of culture. Today, there is a growing tendency among African youths to revert to their culture based on the reason that the authority of Christianity and its scriptures is no longer rooted or firm.

I am bringing this new and revived appeal to culture as authority to light in a context of a church that to some may seem to be secularizing, a church that is losing its membership because of the competing messages from the scientific disciplines which came to predominance in the 18th century Enlightenment. Saba Mahmood speaks of the phenomenon of religious rituals that are being reinterpreted amongst contemporary Muslims in accordance with Immanuel Kant's reformulation of religion in line with Enlightenment values and modern political rationality.

Kant famously argued that phenomenal forms of religion are left over from the infancy of the human race, when man [and woman] needed such aids, and should be discarded when the human species has reached its appropriate level of maturity. For Kant, the value of scripture lay not in its temporal narrative but in the rational structure it symbolized.²¹

²⁰ Moosa, *Ghazali & the Poetics of Imagination*, 274.

²¹ S. Mahmood, "Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire: The Politics of Islamic Reformation." *Public Culture* 18 no.2, (2006), 342.

I would therefore argue that whilst this may hold true in regard to the European church emptying and losing its membership, in the African context the situation is different, due to a revitalizing of the very cultures that people like Kant thought were being shed by humanity. This is going to mean that culture becomes a new and different force field that the church will have to reckon with in its debate. It comes with a whole range of other cultural issues that have been thought of as backward and assumed to no longer be practiced. An example to substantiate this claim of a revision of African cultures would be the fact that President Jacob Zuma of the Republic of South Africa is a polygamist by virtue of the Customary Marriage Act.

There have been many calls to widen the terms of reference of this issue and, so thus in this article, I have concentrated on homosexuality alone. The whole human sexuality debate is one that authoritative bodies need to address; issues like marriage, sexual abuse and exploitation, pre-marital sex, divorce and the large number of people choosing not to marry yet engaging in sexual activities within their partnerships. The fundamental issues being questioned are the things we have spoken of in our society as norms but who are these norms normative for and whose prescription are they? Within this wide spectrum, the norms being questioned are the very norms that give authority – covenantal for some – fundamental to the way we understand ourselves within a particular relationship. It is therefore also a matter of authority demanding a response from individuals in society, in this case, Christian individuals.

A Christian Response to Authority

Rowan Williams argues for a Christian grounded understanding of relationships: “In other words, I believe that the promise of faithfulness, the giving of unlimited time to each other, remains central for understanding the full resourcefulness and grace of sexual union. I simply don't think we would grasp all that was involved in the mutual transformation of sexually linked persons without the reality of unconditional public commitments [i.e. marriage]: more perilous, more demanding, more promising.”²² He goes on to say:

Yet the realities of our experience in looking for such possibilities suggest pretty clearly that an absolute declaration that every sexual partnership must conform to the pattern of commitment or else have the nature of *sin and nothing else* is unreal and silly...Decisions about

²² R. Williams, “The Body's Grace” in *Theology and Sexuality: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Eugene F. Rogers Jr., (London: Blackwells, 2002), 315.

sexual lifestyle, to repeat, are about how much we want our bodily selves to mean, rather than what emotional needs we're meeting or what laws we're satisfying. Does this mean that we are using faith to undermine law? By no means: we are placing law itself on a firmer footing (Romans 3:31, NEB). Happily there is more to Paul than the (much quoted in this context) first chapter of Romans!

However on the authority of this relationship at the other end of the spectrum, you have a person like Oliver O'Donovan who believes certain groups of Christians are imposing a liberal agenda on the debate without hearing the voice of those for whom they are arguing:

Liberal Christianity has no need to ask such questions, because it reckons it knows what gay Christians need, which is 'stable relationships.' Stable conjugality is the point at which liberalism has made its own peace with the tradition. Or to put it unkindly, it is its characteristic form of prudishness. There is, of course, a lot to be said in favour of stable relationships; but before settling on this as the decisive point, I would like to hear the question discussed by gays, rather than by liberals. Is this in fact the key to their experience? Or is there something important in the roaming character of some gay relationships?²³

As much as I dislike O'Donovan's project of resuscitating a certain kind of Christianity, if I am to stand at the *Dihliz/Threshold* I have to hear him! O'Donovan is searching for the voice of homosexual people in the character of the relationships they want and not that they be spoken for or on behalf of by liberals. He is asking, "Is it what gay²⁴ people want?" There is also obviously an implied opposition in his language as there is support in Williams'. Beyond that these two Anglican scholars seem to be calling for the same thing: a church that will stand at the *Dihliz/Threshold* and agree to dialogue on this matter not on its own but with the concerned people present.

I cannot help but be reminded of Messrs John Wesley and George Whitefield at this juncture. Here were astute men of God in the eighteenth century who could never agree on the particulars of the doctrine of grace, yet at the funeral of the Reverend Whitefield, Wesley spoke words one needs to hear in this debate.

²³ O'Donovan 2007; *Sermons on the subject of the Day (7): Good News for Gay Christians* http://www.fulcrum_anglican.org.uk/news/2007/20070108odonovan7.cfm?doc=179 (accessed 6th September 2010), 4

²⁴ O'Donovan's use of the word 'gay' is inclusive of all those whom we defined under the umbrella of LGBTQITA above.

And, first, let us keep close to the grand scriptural doctrines which he everywhere delivered. There are many doctrines of a less essential nature, with regard to which even the sincere children of God (such is the present weakness of human understanding) are and have been divided for many ages. In these we may think and let think; we may “agree to disagree.” But, meantime, let us hold fast the essentials of “the faith which was once delivered to the saints;” and which this champion of God so strongly insisted on, at all times, and in all places!²⁵

I strongly assert that the church’s response or lack thereof pertaining to the homosexuality dialogue will ignite the breaking of many ecclesiastical communities unless we begin to admit that we do not yet have sufficient information on our hands to decide either way on it. The ramifications of such schisms do very little in witnessing to what we have in common, that is, the love for God. This love is greater than how one reads or interprets any text that allows him/her to be the best person that they believe God has created. Never to be neglected in such interpretations is the principle of Ubuntu which says “*Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu.*” *A person is a person through other persons.* It’s upon such Ubuntu principles that one finds a great distinction between reading texts in community and the trends of individualism that are evident in other communities today.

Conclusion

I have argued that the major issue facing the church is that it has become a reactionary movement and that the government was ahead of it on the issue of homosexuality. I contended that this debate on homosexuality is deeper than mere interpretation of the texts which have authority over Christian lives, the Bible and the Constitution, but it is more about the methods used in that interpretation. I propose that we need to stand at the *Dihliz/Threshold* of the epistemological enterprise and receive from everywhere that which can help Christians in dealing with this issue. I have also argued that there are many other minor authority demanding enterprises that are involved in the lives of the people we are dealing with. Some struggles, particularly the Anglican one, has suggested that even in our deliberations it is possible to be talking for but not with those involved and thus making decisions about people and never with them. The church all too often acts in this way and needs to be aware of and desist from such a practice.

²⁵ John Wesley, Death of George Whitefield. Sermon 53 (text of the 1872 edition): On the death of the Rev. Mr. George Whitefield [sic.] Preached at the Chapel in Tottenham-Court Road and at the Tabernacle, near Moorfields, on Sunday, 18th November 1770.

I appreciate what Andrew Shank's assertions have highlighted in this debate within the Anglican Communion and its pending schism. In an emphatic plea for honesty, Shanks attacks the propagandistic methods that the church has used over the years to propagate the gospel and calls for the replacement of these methods, with true liturgy. Shanks traces the use of propaganda in ways in which the church can "excite raw terror, or it may excite raw lust. Invoking images of glamour, it may seek to latch onto people's envious feelings of self-hatred – with promises of conditional relief."²⁶ True liturgy is that which he claims does justice to the element of mystery in the gospel, a systematic discipline of therapy against all forms of propaganda-borne disease. He therefore asserts: "True theology rests on three things. First: a decisive repudiation of church propaganda, even in its most orthodox forms. Second: a confident recognition that the church's historic addiction to propaganda thinking is remediable. And then, third: a principled refusal never to withdraw from conversation with other Christians, on that basis."²⁷

This can only be done if we resist the temptation of just standing our own ground and shift to a place where we can be found by Christ and helped to find each other; that place we can call the *Dihliz/Threshold*. I must reiterate, standing at the *Dihliz/Threshold* can be done only by those who are sure of who they are and the things that are of value to them (our faith) but are also interested in the well being of all citizens to the extent that they are willing to listen with an openness to others as they formulate ways of living that are for the good of all people.

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²⁶ A. Shanks, "Honesty" in *Praying for England: The Heart of the Church* S. Wells & S. Coakley (eds.), (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2008), 7.

²⁷ Shanks, "Honesty" in *Praying for England*, 7

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Sexual Diversity, Islamic Jurisprudence and Sociality

Farid Esack¹ and Nadeem Mahomed²

'I think I'm going to fall in love with you. It's a problem.
What should we do?' (Roland Barthes, *Incidents*)

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to offer a critique of contemporary attempts to construct a sexuality-sensitive or homosexual friendly Islamic jurisprudence on the basis of a singular homosexual identity. We argue that while a more tolerant Islamic environment may well be required in respect of homosexuality, the recent developments in support of Muslim gay marriages and the religious recognition and regulation of homosexual relationships results in restricting the sociality of the body and sexuality. Such, we further argue, undermines the importance of the "closet" as a space for autonomy, freedom and resistance to normative sexual injunctions.

Introduction

The existence of same-sex attraction and sexual acts, particularly male same-sex sexual relationships, has a long history within both classical and contemporary Islamic discourse.³ However, one will be hard pressed to find any discussion on the notion of exclusive innate dispositional same-sex desire and its associated sexual acts in Muslim discourse prior to the recent past. Negative permutations of homosexuality as an 'unnatural' sexual disposition and lifestyle emerged initially within modernising Muslim societies and Islamist movements, and during the initial period after the discovery of HIV, the indication that there is a concrete link between homosexual male sex and AIDS as a form of divine punishment also obtained currency.⁴ Gay and lesbian Muslim activism was born in the 1990's in predominantly Western Muslim societies. It is a recent phenomenon that some queer Muslims

¹ Farid Esack (PhD) is South African. He is a Professor in the Study of Islam and the Head of the Department of Religion Studies at the University of Johannesburg.

² Nadeem Mahomed is an attorney and a Masters candidate in Religion Studies at the University of Johannesburg.

³ Khaled El-Rouayheb, *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500-1800*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

⁴ Malik Badri, *The AIDS Crisis: A Natural Product of Modernity's Sexual Revolution*. (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization, 1997).

have challenged the normative jurisprudential view that a licit same-sex relationship is impossible. In addition, some of these queer Muslims venture further and seek to have exclusive and publicly recognised same-sex relationships which are consistent with the religious life of a Muslim.⁵ The consequence of this is both the desire to obtain public recognition and freedom from insult as well as a problematic relationship with important juridical principles in Islam, most notably in respect of falling short of what is currently accepted as sexually licit conduct as well as in regard to the act of professing the righteousness of conduct which is considered unlawful.

In Islam, sex and sexual relations are considered within the context of a larger religious methodological framework called the *shari'ah*. The sources of the *shari'ah* are primarily the Qur'an, the *Sunna* or the traditional prophetic precedent as codified in the *Hadith*⁶ and various jurisprudential sources.⁷ The legal rulings emerging from this systematic framework influence the position of sex and sexuality in Islam.

The aim of this article is to critique and analyse the intersection of sexual identity and Islamic jurisprudence and the impact both of these have upon the sociality of the sexual self. An integral component of this study is to critique the view that there exists an authentic form of (homo)sexual identity. In addition, it probes the question of whether a sexually friendly Islamic jurisprudence has the ability to provide some sort of religious legitimisation for homosexual Muslims or whether the construction of such a religious jurisprudence in itself is subject to incorporating problematic heteronormative practices dominated by a Euro-American or Western epistemological structure. The first part of the paper will analyse the construction of a singular homosexual identity and the viability of such an identity. The second part of the paper will offer a critique of the attempt at constructing a sexuality-sensitive or

⁵ Ali, Kecia. *Sexual Ethics and Islam*. (Oxford: Oneworld. 2006), 78.

⁶ "The normative legacy of the Prophet Muhammad is known as the *Sunna*, and, although it stands second to the Qur'an in terms of reverence, it is the lens through which the Qur'an is interpreted and understood. For much of Islamic history, the unit through which the *Sunna* was preserved, transmitted, and understood has been the Hadith, ... describing the words, actions, or habits of the Prophet." Jonathan Brown, *Hadith: Muhammad's Legacy in the Medieval and Modern World*. (Oneworld: Oxford. 2009), 3.

⁷ Those sources from which the law may be derived, in addition to the Qur'an and *Sunna*, are: (1) consensus (*ijma*), which is a retrospective sanctioning instrument representing the community of Muslims that provides legal and epistemological certainty on a legal ruling; and (2) analogical reasoning (*qiyas*), which by the process of reasoning an existent conclusive ruling provides the basis on which a similar legal case may be solved. Wael B. Hallaq, *Islamic Legal Theories: An Introduction to Sunni Usul al-Fiqh*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1997), 1.

homosexual friendly Islamic jurisprudence. The last part will offer an argument in favour of protecting the conceptual and social space of the 'closet' as a liberatory and protective domain for queer Muslims.

Identity and Conduct: Sexual Acts, Desire and Orientation

In the social sciences sex is a biological activity with no history. However, sexuality is a cultural and/or social construct which "represents the *appropriation* of the human body and of its physiological capacities by an ideological discourse."⁸ As such, David Halperin (b. 1952), on the authority of Michel Foucault (d. 1984), submits that sexuality indeed has a history which is culturally constructed and therefore malleable. The purpose of this section is to discern the effect of sexual identities, namely a homosexual identity, on the Muslim imagination.

Khaled El-Rouayheb contends that premodern Muslim society lacked the concept of "homosexuality."⁹ While same-sex sexual acts took place and same-sex attraction was expressed, these were articulated and viewed through various cultural milieus. The judgement on such sexual attraction and conduct depended on and oscillated between the masculinity of the "active" partner and the emasculation of the "passive" partner in male sexual anal penetrative intercourse; penetrative and non-penetrative intercourse; and whether the attraction was passionate but platonic or sensuous and erotic.¹⁰ These social attributes provided the same-sex sexual act and attraction with its meaning and were strongly attached to considerations of masculinity.¹¹

⁸ David M. Halperin, "Is There a History of Sexuality?" In *History and Theory*. 28, no. 3, (1989), 258.

⁹ El-Rouayheb, "*Before Homosexuality*", 1.

¹⁰ El-Rouayheb, "*Before Homosexuality*", 153.

¹¹ It would be unfair to suggest that classical Islamic legal discourse prohibited homosexuality since the identity construed as homosexual in our secular and modern environment did not exist as a separate class of people during the classical Islamic period. Same-sex attraction was not considered extraordinary and although same-sex sexual acts were considered unlawful they were not regarded as any different from that of illegitimate heterosexual sexual interactions. It was common for scholars to consider the sin of *zina* (pre-marital or extra-marital heterosexual sexual intercourse) as worse than *liwat* (same-sex male sexual intercourse), since the former would allegedly have had worse repercussions for society. Kecia Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam*. (Oxford: Oneworld. 2006), 76. This demonstrates that classical Islamic law distinguished between those sexual relations which were permissible (sex within a monogamous marriage and for men sex within polygynous marriage and concubinage) and those which were prohibited; its aim was never to deny the natural urge of sexual desire.

Joseph Massad (b. 1963) accepts the validity of El-Rouayheb's conclusions on pre-modern Muslim society as valid for contemporary Arab and Muslim societies. Massad¹² is a strong critic of the gay and lesbian liberation agenda in that he argues that the "Gay International"¹³, through exporting Western notions of strict sexual identity and orientation, creates gays and lesbians or homosexual individuals where none existed and assists in repressing same-sex desires and conduct that do not cohere or assimilate into the epistemological understanding of Western sexuality.¹⁴ By attempting to universalise a particular sexual identity construction peculiar to the West, the "Gay International" has incited a discourse on homosexuality in the Arab and Muslim world that has resulted in the negative impact on traditional conceptions of sexuality that either "*heterosexualise*" certain individuals who indulge in same-sex sexual conduct (usually the "active" participant) or offer little protection to, in fact increasing the possibility of attack on, other individuals (usually the "passive" participant).¹⁵ This "imperial mission" on the part of the "Gay International", he argues, is part of the larger Orientalist agenda of manipulating Arab and Muslim – and by extension, African – sexual constructions and morality to conform to Western modes of decency and morality. The major criticism that Massad has with regard to gay and lesbian rights groups are the assumptions that – or the concerted efforts to – equate sexual acts with a sexual identity.

Massad's scepticism of the gay liberation movement, the essentialisation of sexual identities and a serious indictment of Orientalism may be justified and perhaps shed fresh light on the stabilising effect of sexual identities in Arab, Muslim and African societies. Nonetheless, Massad's hypothesis is somewhat glib in that he erases all form of diversity in current queer theology and jurisprudence.¹⁶ The idea of human fragmentation, where the subjective self is not a singular unified entity with an apparent identity based on post-Enlightenment modern individuality, can be invoked to express the

¹² Massad deals almost exclusively with male homosexuality.

¹³ Massad defines the "Gay International" as organisations dominated by white Western males such as the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA) and the International Gay and Lesbian and Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC).

¹⁴ Joseph Massad, "Re-Orienting Desire: The Gay International and the Arab World" in *Public Culture*. Vol.14. (2002) 2, 384

¹⁵ Massad, "Re-Orienting Desire", 383-384.

¹⁶ Valerie Traub. "The Past is a Foreign Country? The Time and Spaces of Islamicate Sexuality Studies". In *Islamicate Sexualities*, eds. Kathryn Babayan and Afsaneh Najmabadi. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008) 5.

fluidity and polymorphous nature of sexual desire, attraction and conduct.¹⁷ The queer and cultural studies theorist Elspeth Probyn (b. 1958) provides such a supposition that human beings constitute multiple and contradictory desires and discourses which results in movement from one identity to another:

Desire is productive; it is what oils the social; it produces the pleats and the folds which constitute the social surface we live on. It is through and with desire that we figure relations of proximity to others and other forms of sociality. It is what remakes the social as a dynamic proposition, for if we live within a grid or network of different points, we live through the desire to connect to them differently.¹⁸

Desire is never static and sexuality is thus never constant. The object of sexuality may deceptively conceal the underlying dynamic of desire, attraction and sexual conduct that is always in flux beneath a *prima facie* constant object of desire. The effect of Massad's critique is that it is complicit in a sexual and epistemological essentialism. It essentialises the sexual act suggesting that there is a uniform sexual act that cannot be transposed to a uniform sexual identity. This results in the creation of a sexual economy where typology of various sexual acts – a taxonomy of sexual practice – develops and results in forcing names onto such acts “even with the alibi of presenting multiplicity”.¹⁹ As such, the relationship between sexual acts, sexual identity and the naming of such acts and identities is causally linked and complex. At the very least, it could be suggested that the gay identity is not merely an “universalisation” of a sexual identity via the “Gay International agenda” but is also simultaneously an identity exported through globalisation; that is through the increasingly interconnected world of information, cultural exchange, tourism (both benign and voyeuristic), money, media and multiple socio-political identities.²⁰

The solidifying and concretisation of sexual identities, notably an exclusive homosexual identity juxtaposed against a majoritarian heterosexual identity, results in two circular discursive realities which

¹⁷ Kathy Rudy, “Subjectivity and Belief”. In *Queer Theology*, ed Gerard Loughlin. (Oxford: Blackwell. 2007) 43.

¹⁸ Elspeth Probyn, “Queer Belongings: The Politics of Departure”. In *Sexy Bodies: The Strange Carnalities of Feminism*, edited by Elizabeth Grosz and Elspeth Probyn. (London: Routledge. 1996) 13

¹⁹ Dina Al-Kassim, “Epilogue: Sexual Epistemologies, East in West”. In *Islamicate Sexualities*, eds. Kathryn Babayan and Afsaneh Najmabadi. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 2008), 305.

²⁰ Ralph Wilde. “Queering International Law”. In *American Society of International Law* Vol. 101 (2007), 131.

feed each other. The existence of the insult against a sexual identity that is based on gender preference instead of a preference in sexual roles results in the construction of the homosexual identity.²¹ The articulation of such an identity was impossible in pre-modern Arab and Muslim societies where the object of praise, ridicule, prohibition and permission rested most heavily on typologies of sexual acts and not preferences of gender even though sexual acts were contextualised within categories of gender differentiation. Gender preference replacing the penchant for sexual roles has resulted in – or at least significantly contributed to – a more serious, vociferous and malicious insult against an identity exclusively based on *homo* gender preference, which itself is constructed in reaction to such an insult.²² Neo-traditionalists and contemporary conservative Muslim scholars in turn react to homosexuality with far more rigidity and fewer nuances than pre-modern legists displayed in their response to the issue of same-sex sexual conduct. The implication is that homosexuality is no longer seen through the pre-modern lens where same-sex attraction and same-sex sexual conduct has varying degrees of permissibility or prohibition and although certain manifestations of same-sex sexual conduct (such as same-sex male anal penetration) may be strictly prohibited (like heterosexual fornication or *zina*), it is no less natural than illicit heterosexual intercourse. However, the contemporary situation results in jurisprudential opinions (*fatawa*) on homosexuality stating that same-sex desire and same-sex sexual conduct are unnatural, abnormal and perverse. Sheikh Yusuf Qaradawi, a prominent contemporary jurist, says the following on homosexuality in his book on positive law, *The Lawful and Prohibited in Islam*:

We must be aware that in regulating the sexual drive Islam has not only prohibited illicit sexual relations and all ways which lead to them, but also the sexual deviation known as homosexuality. This perverted act is a reversal of the natural order, a corruption of man's sexuality,

²¹ Al-Kassim, "Epilogue", 316.

²² The conscientiousness of a sexual act as a peculiar – or what can be termed as a queer – practice begins with an insult. The insult can either be directed toward a homosexual identity or at a same-sex sexual act for it to form an essential component of a same-sex sexual subjectivity or a homosexual identity or also function as the motivation for the construction of a particular identity on the basis of sexuality. The notion of the 'insult' has become a recurring and constant characteristic of homosexuality and included within the language of insult in this regard are religious slurs against homosexuals. Didier Eribon's (b.1953) illuminating literary study *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self* affirms this notion of insult in relation to the homosexual subjective self: "One of the consequences of insult is to shape the relation one has to others and to the world and thereby to shape the personality, the subjectivity, the very being of the individual in question." (Didier Eribon, *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self*. (London: Duke University Press. 2004), 15.

and a crime against the rights of females. The spread of this depraved practice in a society disrupts its natural life pattern and makes those who practice it slaves to their lusts, depriving them of good decent taste, decent morals, and a decent manner of living.²³

In Qaradawi's articulation of the phenomenon of "sexual deviation known as homosexuality" one can witness the collapse of two separate concepts. The construct of a sexual identity which merely implies concrete sexual desire and attraction is authoritatively translated to also mean sexual conduct. Nonetheless, now that a homosexual identity is before us, the question is how one can find a congruent fit between a sexual orientation and a faith that seemingly disavows same-sex sexual conduct.

Modernising Jurisprudence: Rationalising the Lawgiver's Intention

Scott Siraj al-Haqq Kugle is the first scholar to comprehensively tackle the issue of same-sex sexuality from a serious and holistic religious perspective, arguing that a homosexual orientation and Islamic faith are not mutually exclusive, but compatible. Kugle first set out a textual analysis of problematic verses of the Qur'an relating to the Prophet Lot, contending that the traditional and majoritarian interpretation of such verses as prohibiting same-sex sexual conduct are not in accord with the spirit of Islam and the diversity of God's creation and are therefore untenable.²⁴ Kugle subsequently set out a comprehensive methodological legal argument justifying from the traditional sources (*usul*) not only that same-sex sexual conduct is not positively and categorically criminalised in Islam, but that same-sex sexual attraction and conduct is permissible.²⁵ ²⁶ The section of Kugle's work that is of

²³ Yusuf al-Qaradawi, *The Lawful and Prohibited in Islam*. (Indianapolis: American Trus Publicationst Qaradawi n.d), 169.

²⁴ Scott Siraj al-Haqq. Kugle, "Sexuality, Diversity and Ethics in the Agenda of Progressive Muslim". In Omid Safi (ed), *Progressive Muslims*. (Oxford: Oneworld. 2003), 190-234.

²⁵ "What matters is not the sex of the partner with whom one forms a partnership, as long as that partnership is contractual on par with legal custom. Rather, what matters is the ethical nature of the relationship one has within the constraints of one's internal disposition, which includes sexual orientation and gender identity." Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam*, 3.

²⁶ Kecia Ali raised certain jurisprudential issues with Kugle's exposition of his Qur'anic hermeneutics in her book *Sexual Ethics and Islam* (Oxford; Oneworld 2006), 75-96. Some of Kugle's subsequent work could perhaps be considered as a response to Ali's queries. Kugle also intelligently situates the struggle of gay and lesbian Muslims in association with the struggle for gender justice.

interest to the current project is his assessment of *fiqh* (jurisprudence)²⁷ with a view of reforming the *shar'iah* (law).

Kugle's argument hinges on three principal premises: (1) there is no *ijma* (consensus) on the issue of punishment for same-sex sexual conduct,²⁸ (2) the medieval jurists approached the issue of same-sex sexuality through the prism of acts and not orientation (²⁹, and (3) the effective cause (*illa*) for the prohibition of same-sex sexual conduct has morphed and as such, in light of the objectives of the law (*maqasid al-shariah*) and the benefit for human society (*maslahah*), the position on same-sex sexual conduct and desire should be one of accommodation.³⁰

The claim that there is no juridical consensus on the issue of punishment of same-sex sexuality is not contentious. A superficial reading of the legal literature on the subject sufficiently demonstrates that while there is juridical consensus (*ijma*) on the criminalisation of same-sex sexual conduct (particularly male anal penetrative sexual intercourse) there is uncertainty in the corporeal punishment to be meted out to persons guilty of same-sex sexual conduct. However, it is by the other two arguments that Kugle attempts to circumvent this problem.

In setting the framework for a homosexual friendly (or sexually-sensitive) *fiqh*, Kugle imports the principles of the school of *maqasid* as an established methodological perspective in legal theory, first elucidated by Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111) and later developed by Abu Ishaq al-Shatibi (d. 1388).³¹ The methodology of this approach

²⁷ *Usul al-fiqh* is the legal theory by which the two primary scriptural sources, the Qur'an and *Sunna*, are extrapolated to new situations by means of *qiyas* (analogical reasoning), which in turn is provided with certainty by *ijma* (juridical consensus). Daniel Brown, *A New Introduction to Islam*. (Oxford: Blackwell. 2004), 124.

²⁸ Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam*, 159.

²⁹ Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam*, 178-179.

³⁰ Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam*, 181-183.

³¹ Imam Ghazali (d.1111) set out the methodology of *maqasid al-sharia* as follows: "In its essential significance, *al-maslahah* is a term that means seeking something useful (*manfa'ah*) or warding off something harmful (*madarra*). But this is not what we mean, because seeking what is useful and preventing harm are objectives (*maqasid*) sought by creation, and the good (*salah*) in the creation of mankind consists in achieving those *maqasid*. What we mean by *maslahah* is preserving the objective (*maqsud*) of the law (*shar*) that consists in five ordered things: preserving religion (*din*), life (*nafs*), reason (*aql*), progeny (*nasl*), and property (*amwal*). What ensures the preservation of those five principles (*usul*) is *maslahah*; what goes against their preservation is *mafsadah*, and

predicates the *sine qua non* of the *maqasid* (objectives) of the law (*shariah*) on human reason. As such, although an action may be deemed permissible (*mubah*), recommended (*mustahab*), lawful (*halal*), objectionable (*makruh*), or unlawful (*haram*), its status can change according to the context in which it is considered and judged by human reason.³² Human reason is cloaked in the mantle of *ijtihad* (independent judicial reasoning) to provide it with a semblance of authority. This approach lacks the rigour of the traditional jurisprudential epistemological process in which a scholar had to constantly refer to the cause (*sabab*), effective cause (*illah*), intention (*niyyah*), objective (*qasd*), or to the wisdom (*hikmah*) mitigating a command, permission, or prohibition (*hukm*).³³

The *maqasid* methodology makes it essential to take into account the social and human environment and develop and interpret the law through reasoning, investigation and logical analysis. The human environment becomes a source of law and the pertinent question is whether the human environment has indeed been given its important ranking in the priorities of Islamic jurisprudence that it is allegedly entitled to.³⁴ In this regard, *fiqh* is co-opted into the secular modern project as a liberal tool and transforms into a flexible, rational and arbitrary legal methodology that raises human reason to a pedestal higher than that of God's intention. The human condition, *vis-à-vis* the human environment, becomes the primary source and precedent of legal development. The result is that God's intention necessarily has to accord with human reason and not vice versa.

By attempting to establish a homosexual friendly religious jurisprudence, or a *fiqh* that is both authentic and that caters for sexual realities, Kugle accepts the delineation of modernity's conceptualisation of sexual identity. The effect of grounding sexual orientation as the bedrock for legal analysis results in stabilising the dynamism of sexuality. In this sense, the fluidity of the interrelations between sexuality and identity, of sexual acts and erotic relationships which is a characteristic of medieval jurisprudence and literature is solidified. By

preventing it is *maslahah*." Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *al-Mustafa min 'Ilm al-Usul* (Baghdad: Muthanna. 1970), 286. (Translated by Tariq Ramadan in *Radical Reform*, 62).

³² Tariq Ramadan, *Radical Reform: Islamic Ethics and Liberation*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2009), 71.

³³ Ramadan, *Radical Reform*, 60. Ramadan calls this a "piecemeal" approach and suggests that the *maqasid al-sharia* developed a more holistic perspective on dealing with *fiqh*.

³⁴ Ramadan, *Radical Reform*, 76.

stabilising and “normalising” sexual relations in the mould of modern Western tastes, as a loving relationship between two parties which is essentially monogamous, Kugle gentrifies sexual relationships to mirror modern Western sensibilities. Parallel to the novel construction of sexuality is a gentrified liberal *fiqh* that serves as a religious sanction for both secular modernity and a definite sexual orientation with its accessory sexual acts as a regulated concrete lifestyle. The effective cause (*illa*) of forbidding same-sex sexual conduct in the classical legal tradition was that it is analogous to unregulated or non-contractual opposite-sex sexual conduct which results in illegitimate children. However, “sexual intercourse between consenting adult homosexual Muslims is analogous to sexual acts that do not have the potential to create pregnancy and illegitimate children” and as such the sexual intercourse cannot be analogously compared (*qiyas*) to illicit heterosexual intercourse.³⁵ As a result, the logical conclusion of this line of reasoning would unlock the doors of marriage (*nikah*) and temporary marriage (*mut’a*) to same-sex couples and this is proposed by Kugle as sufficient legitimisation of same-sex sexual intercourse. However, interestingly the issue of polygamy does not feature in Kugle’s adapting of the heterosexual marriage for a strictly monogamous homosexual pairing. The effect of this acrobatic legal performance is the secularisation of the *shari’ah* where the aim is no longer a mere discovery of God’s intention, but a positive exertion to intellectually work out certain rational and increasingly secular legal principles, and that is secondarily ascribed to God as an aside. Kugle is not alone in the enterprise of utilising *fiqh* as a jurisprudential legitimisation process to accommodate the peculiar effects of modernity which results in interesting contradictions.³⁶

Kugle recognises the impact of modernity as a positive force in that secular modernity provides Muslims with the opportunity to liberate their sexual selves from the fetters of religious dogmatism and patriarchy.³⁷ Kugle seems to think that modernisation and democratisation will create a space for homosexual Muslims within its structures of sexual power and gender and sexual categorisation. “In secular democracies”, Kugle writes, “the context is one in which same-sex intercourse is not a crime, in which homosexuality is not defined as a mental illness by health

³⁵ Scott Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam*. 183.

³⁶ Tariq Ramadan and Mohammad Hashim Kamali (Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *Maqasid al-Shariah Made Simple* (London: International Institute of Islamic Thought 2008)) are two notable Muslim scholars who offer the methodology of the *maqasid al-shariah* as a form of ethical framework for contemporary Muslims.

³⁷ Scott Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam* 233.

professionals, and in which same-sex couples have the same legal rights as heterosexual couples to partnership or even marriage. In this context, it is in the interest of justice and welfare of Muslims for Muslims to stop viewing homosexual members of their community as sinners and to cease viewing consensual homosexual intercourse as criminal.³⁸ By “welfare of the Muslims”, Kugle means *maslahah* (benefit of the public) as a legal maxim³⁹ by which something may be judged as permissible or not in jurisprudence, so as to avoid harm (*mafsadah*). The benefit of revising the traditional view on same-sex sexual conduct or homosexuals and of accommodating homosexuality, is to erase the friction that often arises between Muslims and their non-Muslim counterparts in a secular constitutional democracy on the issue of homosexuality and this has the added benefit of promoting “integration and greater cooperation on meaningful issues of political, social, and ethical importance to society as a whole”. In addition, it would lessen the extent of the harm caused to gay and lesbian Muslims.⁴⁰ In this regard, *maslahah* is viewed as the benefit that can accrue from the reading of a secular liberal constitution, and not necessarily the Qur’an and *Sunna*, together with the positive religious law (*fiqh*). This necessitates the question of whether the *grundnorm* for Muslim minorities in secular liberal constitutional democracies is the constitution and not the corpus of religious law and ethics (*shari’ah*), in that while the *shari’ah* may still function as the symbolic source of all social law (it may continue to remain the concrete source for religious ritual action (*ibadah*)), the outcome of an investigation of an issue on the basis of the *maqasid al-sharia* depends on the constitution of the secular state.⁴¹ In considering a new effective cause (*‘illa*) Kugle ventures so far as to consider the social and political reality in which homosexuals are protected and provided with the same rights as their heterosexual counterparts as a factor to be considered.⁴²

It is clear that Kugle’s primary audience are Muslims living in Western style secular liberal democracies. In this sense, he may escape Massad’s criticism of exporting Western constructs of sexuality into the Arab-Muslim world and thereby engendering a sexual imperialism that endangers the very people it seeks to protect by implanting an alien

³⁸ Scott Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam* 180.

³⁹ Scott Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam* 182.

⁴⁰ Scott Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam* 180.

⁴¹ It is important to note that while Islamic law is not binding and has no state authority in this context (Muslims living in Western societies), it continues to be used as a source of legitimisation for many Muslims in respect of how they conduct and manage their lives.

⁴² Scott Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam* 183.

sexual ontology. Kugle makes a brave demand for Muslims to confront the issue of bias towards homosexuality and same-sex sexual conduct in religious ethics and law and also makes a concerted effort at engaging with the classical Islamic intellectual tradition intent on discovering that surely God cannot prejudice against people who are sexually attracted to their same sex. How effective his plea and effort will be cannot be speculated on at this stage. However, what is problematic is that this is acquired through an admission that the secular modern project is both ethical and just. Kugle does not question the legitimacy of the concept of a solid and stable sexual orientation or the existence of homophobia in *secular* liberal democracies or perhaps any potential or actual dilemmas in articulating an Islamic homosexual discourse that is so heavily intertwined with secularism, modernity, human rights as an existential reality, and democratisation. Kugle's project also seems to be vulnerable to the same critiques levelled against liberal feminism by radical feminists, Marxist feminists and critical race feminists. By concentrating on the plight of homosexuals in predominantly secular liberal democracies from a formal standpoint of equality, the marginalised voices of those who are attracted to the same-sex or indulge in same-sex sexuality and concomitantly suffer with the consequences of colonialism, imperialism, racism and global capitalism are ignored. The relationship between homophobia and empire, between sexual prejudice and structures of power and inequality is simply disregarded.

While there is a need to transform the existing Islamic environment to be more tolerant of same-sex desire and homosexual relationships, this need is not necessarily met by legislating positive law recognising the viability of same-sex desire and sexual relationships through the prism of a liberal political and social project. This project inherently has a parochial and paternalistic tendency to 'civilise' unfamiliar ways of knowing and experiencing.^{43 44}

⁴³ Uday Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth Century British Liberal Thought*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 1999), 201.

⁴⁴ Uday Mehta argues that thinkers within the liberal political ethos managed to endorse the venture of Empire and imperialism because inherent in liberal thought is the notion that experiences of the unfamiliar need to be contained, subsumed and improved in light of the values of the liberal Empire. Sabah Mahmood endorses this view in respect of analysing the unfamiliar, particularly in regard to her fieldwork as a feminist among Muslim women in Egypt: "A similar orientation is also operative, I believe, in our feminist certainty that women's sensibilities and attachments, particularly those that seem so paradoxically inimical to what we take to be their own interests, must be refashioned for their own well-being. Personally, it was this certainty that came to dissolve before my eyes as I became enmeshed within the thick texture of the lives of the mosque participants, women whose practices I had found objectionable...I had approached the study of this movement with a

From a postcolonial perspective, the reification of the tools of liberalism – liberty, equality, fraternity and autonomy – as the only worthy moral framework in which liberation and progress can be executed, has the potential of demeaning and further marginalising the lived realities of some queer Muslims whose relationship with traditional Islam and/or their choice to maintain closeted sexual lives is both important and essential. Furthermore, to establish and endorse a concrete way of entering and maintaining same-sex sexual relations via religious law curtails the religious person's sexual conduct. It legitimises by restricting the sociality of the body, or the sexual queer self.⁴⁵

Conclusion: An Existential Alternative?

Homosexuality, whether as a sexual identity or a typology of sexual acts and/or inclinations, is a “theology of mistresses and hidden lovers”, of the memories of meaningful love affairs that contribute to our humanity, of a redemption which is a “praxis of our past and a sexual praxis which accommodates the effects of the love and the sexual life of peoples bodies”.⁴⁶ This form of queer redemption can take place in an intercessional, conceptual and social space, often termed the “closet”⁴⁷ akin to Ebrahim Moosa's notion of Ghazali's *dihliz*. The *dihliz* signifies a liminal space between the door (*bab*) and the house (*dar*). It is an intermediate space between the external (*zahir*) and the internal (*batin*) and is permeated by the influences of both the arenas it stands

sense of foreknowledge of what I was going to encounter, of how I was going to explain the women's “intransigent behaviour” in regard to the ideals of freedom, equality, and autonomy that I myself held so dear. Over time, I found these ideals could no longer serve as arbiters of the lives I was studying because the sentiments, commitments, and sensibilities that ground these women's existence could not be contained within the stringent molds of these ideals...My prejudices against their forms of life (or, for that matter, theirs against mine) could not be reconciled and assimilated within “a cosmopolitan horizon”.” (Saba Mahmood. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press. 2005) 198.

⁴⁵ Judith Butler (1956-) similarly argues that “no doubt, marriage and same-sex domestic partnerships should certainly be available as options, but to install either as a model for sexual legitimacy is precisely to constrain the sociality of the body in acceptable ways.” (Judith Butler. *Undoing Gender*. (New York: Routledge. 2004) 26

⁴⁶ Marcella Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*. (London: Routledge. 2003) 133

⁴⁷ The *hammam* – or traditional public bathhouse – can be considered as the physical representation of a queer heterotopia Abraham, Ibrahim: “The most obvious queer heterotopia is the bath house, the *hammam*. Just as veiled space...the *hammam* works as an intercessional space between the sacred space of the mosque and the potentially corruptible space of the body. The *hammam* is the place where bodies meet and where bodies are flouted; where they're remodelled, remade and re-imagined. The *hammam* works then as something of a heterotopia where queer desires beyond the everyday are made possible.” “The Veil and the Closet: Islam and the Production of Queer Space” in *Queer Space: Centres and Peripheries*. Melbourne: Monash University, 2007) 3.

between, belonging to both but identifying with neither.⁴⁸ In this sense, it is not an insular space, but a dynamic and porous alternative to public life, where a queer body is not automatically isolated from public life but where it ventures for comfort and repose and where desires are expressed, bodies meet and sexuality is exhibited. This heterotopia is beyond the scope of regulation, the purview of *fiqh* and the religious and political power structures. The articulation of a constant inflexible sexual identity, the establishment of an exclusive sexual orientation, and the attempt at a jurisprudential justification of same-sex sexual conduct and intimacy, possibly forces people out of this subliminal space and threatens the viability of this heterotopia. The attempt to rearticulate queer sexuality in terms of heteronormative institutions (as Kugle attempts to do with a gay-friendly *fiqh*) is an effort towards conformity with the “normal” and dominant discourse. This effort is important in challenging the dominant discourse which excludes the sexual Other. However, the importance of the “closet” as a dynamic redemptive queer space beyond the punishing and disciplinarian eyes of religious authority and political power should neither be underestimated nor ignored. In the same way, the liberation of Muslim women does not coalesce with the judicial removal of the institution of *hijab*, both physically in the way of personal space and interactions and socially by way of public and private women’s spaces. In fact, exclusive spaces for women, including the *hijab*, can act as a liberatory space for women, particularly in patriarchal societies.

The closet has so often been denounced by gay activists as a symbol of shame, of submission to oppression, that we have forgotten or neglected the extent to which it was also, and at the same time, a space of freedom and a way – the only way – of resisting, of not submitting to normative injunctions. And for many gays it is that still. In a certain sense, it was a way of being “proud” when everything pointed toward being ashamed.⁴⁹

The “closet” has generally been understood as a site of oppression and a covering for homosexual shame. In this respect, the domination of sexual minorities rested for the most part on the invisibility of homosexual people, people who were queer behind closed doors but heterosexual in public. We do not propose the invisibility and exclusion of queerness or homosexuality from the public realm. This paper is an effort to ensure that it is a part of continuous academic discussion and activist efforts. In addition, the “closet” is not proposed as the definitive

⁴⁸ Ebrahim Moosa, *Ghazali and the Poetics of Imagination*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. 2005) 48.

⁴⁹ Eribon, *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self*, 49.

liberatory space, a type of glamorous existential location for queer Muslims, or a panacea against the prejudice consistently faced by queer Muslims. Rather, the question is whether the “closet”, in this context can be understood as a voluntary but vital expression of fragmented selves, of multiple identities and polymorphous sexual existences that refuse to be co-opted into the dominant discourses of power and authority. The “closet” can then, in fact, function as a prophetic voice on the periphery, a mode of existence that refuses to be allured by the trappings of “normative” practice. It is also perhaps the only empowering space for many homosexual Muslims where it is possible to preserve a balance between their religion, sexuality and society even if such a balance is tenuous and incommensurable at best.⁵⁰

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⁵⁰ Tom Boellstorff concludes from his anthropological study on religion and homosexuality in Indonesia that “whether *gay* Muslims uphold heteronormativity (for instance, by seeing their homosexual desires as sinful, marrying heterosexually, or stating that they plan to marry), or destabilise it on some level (for instance, by seeing their homosexual desires as God given or saying that they will not marry heterosexually), to date no point of commensurability between the “languages” of Islam and *gay* subjectivity has been reached. Yet *gay* lives exist and are lived every day; what we find is a habitation, not a resolution, of incommensurability.” Tom Boellstorff, *A Coincidence of Desires: Anthropology, Queer Studies, Indonesia*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 158.

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Disruptive or Merely Alternative? A Case Study of a South African Gay Church

Cheryl Potgieter¹ and Finn Reygan²

Abstract

The main aim of this article is to engage with how a South African church through its discursive practices, continues to live out the conviction set out in Germond and de Gruchy's 1997 book "Aliens in the Household of God" that homosexuals are indeed not aliens in the household of God. The first part of the article briefly overviews the legal construction of homosexuality in South Africa during the 20th century and challenges the claim that homosexuality is "un-African". The latter positioning will foreground our case study of the South African Good Hope Metropolitan Community Church (GHMCC), which has its origins abroad and is attended by gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) congregants. The study provides a discursive analysis of the online written materials of GHMCC and the dominant discourses which emerged out of this analysis were: *Liberation and equality discourse*; *Discourse of natural and normal: disrupting gender?*; *Discourse challenging conservative Christian hegemony*; *Discourse of heteropatriarchal Christian sex*; *Missing feminist discourses: tensions and silences*; and *Discourse of religious colonialism*. Silent and less dominant discourses regarding race, gender and homophobia in relation to identity and religion are explored and interpreted within a feminist social constructionist paradigm. Concluding remarks talk to further research and to the danger of the (GHMCC) continued silence on issues such as poverty, racism and sexism within South African society.

Introduction

The present study is a discursive analysis of the ideology and practices of the Good Hope Metropolitan Community Church (GHMCC) in Cape Town, South Africa. The church is constructed as a lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT³)-affirming church and is affiliated with the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches

¹ Cheryl Potgieter (PhD) is from South Africa. She is Dean of Research and Professor of Psychology at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Email: deanofresearch@ukzn.ac.za

² Finn Reygan (PhD) is from the United Kingdom. He is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of KwaZulu-Natal and holds a PhD in Psychology from University College Dublin. Email: finnreygan@gmail.com

³ The acronyms LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender); LGBTI (I for intersex); and LGBTIQ (Q for queer are commonly used (queer refers to identities and practices existing beyond the binaried norms of homosexual and heterosexual, see Judith Butler for detailed information). For the purpose of consistency we employ the acronym LGBT throughout the present study and this is also the term used in the GHMCC online texts.

(UFMCC) which was founded in the United States in the 1960's by a gay man and now has churches around the globe. It is often referred to as a 'gay church' both by its members and by members of mainstream churches. The main aim of this article is to undertake an analysis and examination of the discourses of the UFMCC, and specifically that of its 'offspring', the GFMCC in relation to its interpretation of the Bible's position on homosexuality. Given that many traditional or mainstream churches have an anti-homosexuality position, the UFMCC stance is often contrasted with the traditional views. In conducting our analysis, we pose key research questions (as set out in the section on methods). Before presenting the findings of the study, we engage with the position of South African mainstream churches on homosexuality and persons who identify themselves as gay or lesbian.⁴

South African Church Practices: Race, Gender and Sexuality

Before engaging with the discursive practices of GHMCC it is important to situate the practices of the church at large in South Africa, particularly in relation to race, gender and sexuality. It is well documented that the cornerstone of the apartheid philosophy was upheld, endorsed and implemented by the Dutch Reformed Church whose members and ministers were also members of the South African Nationalist Party. Nobel prize winner Archbishop Tutu has condemned in no uncertain terms the negative stance which churches have taken in relation to gay and lesbian individuals. He states that: "I have found the position of the church illogical, irrational and frankly un-Christian, totally untenable."⁵ He also challenges the position of his own church – the Anglican church – on homosexuality because while the church does not condemn homosexuals, it condemns "homosexual activity." He argues that sexual activity is part of being human and contributes to people being more like God intended them to be. He radically and insightfully stated in 1997 that: "...if the church, after the victory of apartheid, is looking for a worthy moral crusade, then this is it: the fight against homophobia and heterosexism."⁶ In contemporary South Africa, fourteen years after Desmond Tutu made these statements, his own church has not changed its official stance on "homosexual activity" and there is an increase in the number of persons, including Black people and women,

⁴ We use the terms gay and lesbian to refer to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) people more broadly.

⁵ D. Tutu, "Foreword," in *Aliens in the household of God*, ed. P. Germond and S. de Gruchy (Cape Town/Johannesburg: David Philip, 1997).

⁶ Tutu, "Foreword," in *Aliens in the household of God* 1997

who have joined conservative anti-gay, anti-feminist charismatic churches.^{7 8} These churches' anti-gay and anti-feminist stance is based on their interpretation of the Bible in relation to homosexuality and women's roles in society. As Potgieter and Nadar have pointed out there is a worrying relationship between persons who hold important powerful positions in South African decision making institutions and their quite public association with churches which have a very strong anti-gay stance.⁹

Both in South Africa and across the African continent, one of the main arenas in which homophobia is played out most vociferously is in religious discourse and, despite advances in the legal construction of homosexuality in South Africa, homophobia continues to pervade religious life. More than a decade ago Germond and de Gruchy¹⁰ challenged the heterosexism and homophobia that still persists in South African churches and challenged the religious discourse that homosexuality is sinful. They also argued that the sin lies not in homosexuality itself but in the exclusion of lesbian, gay and bisexual people from church life.

Nadar¹¹, in discussing the teaching of gender and religion to university students, points out that in contemporary South Africa these students generally receive their theologies from televangelists rather than from rigorous theological reading and reflection. Nadar¹² views the teaching of feminist biblical studies, which is supportive of a pro- homosexuality stance, as crucial especially given globalisation and fundamentalism which not surprisingly underpins a conservative biblical interpretation of the role of women. In this sense the authority of the Bible has taken on a particularly strong role in women's lives in recent decades with the rise of neo-Pentecostalism and globalisation leading churches that previously did not ascribe to the tenet of the inerrancy and infallibility of scripture to espouse 'biblical values'.¹³ Phiri and Nadar's¹⁴ research with

⁷ S. Nadar, "Changing the world: The task of feminist biblical scholars," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 25 no.2 (2009),137-143.

⁸ S. Nadar and C. Potgieter, "Liberated through submission? The Worthy Woman's conference as a case study of formenism," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 26 no.2 (2010),141-151.

⁹ Academic Perspective – "Will he leave his church at the door?" Sunday Tribune. 11th September 2011.

¹⁰ P. Germond and S. de Gruchy, *Aliens in the household of God: Homosexuality and Christian faith in South Africa* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1997).

¹¹ S. Nadar, "Changing the world: The task of feminist biblical scholars," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 25 no.2 (2009),137-143.

¹² Nadar, *Changing the world*, 137-143.

¹³ Nadar, *Changing the world*: 137-143, 141.

religious women who experience gender-based violence also indicates that critical introspection is required when it comes to putting religious beliefs into practice, otherwise religion holds the potential to become dangerous on both a public and personal level. Nadar and Potgieter¹⁵ have challenged what they have labeled *formenism*, which is a liberation through submission discourse promulgated by persons such as the South African female 'video' evangelist, Gretha Widd. Widd's message supports the inherent superiority of men and constructs homosexuality as a sin in the eyes of God. Ackermann¹⁶ has also argued that feminist theologies contribute to progressive social change because, as critical theologies of liberation, they have developed systemic analyses that include the experiences of women and marginalised people in a constructive and transformative manner. Through the identification of misogynist and homophobic attitudes within Christian traditions and biblical passages and through the use of new approaches to reading source documents, feminist scholarship has become central to hermeneutic debate. Such critical theologies of liberation have then contributed to the growing availability worldwide – despite the simultaneous growth of fundamentalism – of churches opposed to homophobic and heterosexist thinking. Deane Stuart¹⁷ remarks that previously Christians who were identified as gay or lesbian had to remain in the closet within the church or alternatively exit the closet and the church. Churches such as the GHMCC thus provide a space where members are out of the closet but not out of the Christian church.

Method

The present study is a discursive analysis of the online materials of the Good Hope Metropolitan Community Church (GHMCC) in Zonnebloem (District 6), Cape Town, South Africa. There are two other MCC churches in South Africa which are listed as being linked to them but we chose the Good Hope Church as it was started in 1983 and is thus the oldest and also the 'main' church. The other two are the Hope and Unity MCC in Johannesburg and the Glorious Light MCC in Pretoria. We

¹⁴ I.A. Phiri and S. Nadar, "The personal is political: Faith and religion in a public university," *Acta Theologica*, 14 (2011), 81-94.

¹⁵ Phiri and, Nadar, *The personal is political*, 81-94

¹⁶ D. M. Ackermann, "Forward from the margins: Feminist theologies for life," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 99 (1997), 63-67.

¹⁷ D. Stuart, "The challenge of the churches to gays and lesbians" in *Aliens in the household of God*, ed. P. Germond and S. De Gruchy (Cape Town: David Philip, 1997), 178-187.

accessed the online materials at GHMCC's website.¹⁸ GHMCC in Cape Town is affiliated with the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches (UFMCC) which was founded by Rev. Troy Perry in California in 1968, after having lost his position as a Pentecostal minister for being gay. UFMCC has expanded over the decades to include over 300 churches in different countries around the globe. It has also grown to cater for heterosexual as well as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer-identified members. UFMCC members tend to come from a wide array of Christian and non-Christian religious backgrounds. Like its 'parent' church, GHMCC offers the rites of: ordination; matrimony; funerals; laying on of hands; and the sacraments of baptism and holy communion.

The online materials of GHMCC include: information on the history of the church; its vision; mission; statement of faith; sacraments; rites; ministry; human rights protocol; constitution; Sunday worship; groups; community kitchen; resources; resources on gender diversity and same-sex marriage; and an online Bible search portal. The GHMCC homepage is organised into seven main sections: *Home*; *About Us*; *Ministry*; *News*; *Resources*; *Spirituality*; and *Contact Us*. In each section there are a number of further subheadings under which materials are presented online as well as several links to other websites. The GHMCC website is well designed, clear and easy to navigate. The slogan *Would Jesus Discriminate?* dominates the homepage and there is a picture of Archbishop Desmond Tutu with a link to a video message from him. We printed this material from the website and conducted an analysis of the materials.

Aims

Key questions which the article asks are:

1. To what extent does the GHMCC challenge and resist the dominant traditional church discourse on homosexuality?
2. To what extent does the GHMCC challenge dominant discourses on gender roles?
3. To what extent does the discourse of the GHMCC locate its 'message' within the broader South African challenges of racism, sexism, classism and homophobia?
4. Has the church constructed its understanding of homosexuality within a social constructionist or essentialist paradigm?

¹⁸ <http://www.goodhopemcc.org> Accessed 1st August 2011.

Analysis

Our analysis involved searching for recurring themes, listing them in different files and identifying sentences and words that seemed to construct a particular message in relation to what our core aims were. We also searched for contradictory messages as well as for messages or social phenomena which were silent in relation to the South African context. Following Billig¹⁹, Strebel²⁰ and Potgieter²¹, as discourse analysts we built up an understanding of the topic before starting to analyse and understand the web based texts of GHMCC. Our analysis was thus also informed by extensive prior reading, theoretically informed ideas and previous academic and advocacy work in the area of 'homosexuality'. Underpinning our analysis is a feminist social constructionist paradigm which is employed to deconstruct notions of race, gender and homophobia in terms of identity and religion, while we situated the GHMCC texts in the wider context of post-apartheid South Africa. Following the principles of discursive analysis, we analysed the extant GHMCC texts, which were accessed online. We explored the wider ideology that was communicated through the GHMCC texts as well as the ways in which the data pointed to the political, social and historical context in which they were developed. We looked at the ways in which the GHMCC texts were based on other sources as well as the means by which power and influence was wielded through the texts. We interrogated whose reality was being portrayed through the texts as well as the people, objects and processes presented and defined in the text. We were particularly attentive to potential absences and contradictions in the texts as well as to views that may have been excluded/ silenced and which we would have expected to emerge based on our understanding of the literature and context. We were also mindful of possible alternative interpretations of the texts. In keeping with the principles of discourse analysis, we do not claim to have discovered the 'truth' of the texts in question or to have developed the only possible interpretation of these texts.

Results

We initially identified twelve broad recurring as well as atypical discursive patterns or themes. We then conducted a further stage of

¹⁹ M. Billig, "Methodology and scholarship in understanding ideological explanation," in *Analysing everyday explanation: a casebook of methods*, ed. C. Antaki (London: Sage Press, 1988), 199-215.

²⁰ A. Strebel, "Women and AIDS: a study of issues in the prevention of HIV infection" (Doctoral dissertation, University of Cape Town, 1993).

²¹ C. Potgieter, "Black, South African, lesbian: Discourses of invisible lives" (Doctoral dissertation, University of the Western Cape, 1997).

analysis to determine whether we could merge some of the themes. The themes as engaged with in this article reflect the merged themes in relation to our research questions and the following is a discussion of these discourses.

Liberation and equality discourse

The dominant discourse of liberation and equality indicates that GHMCC locates itself within a broad framework of international human rights and foregrounds their association as Christians with a pro-homosexuality discourse. On the website the section of text, entitled *Human Rights Protocol* presents the philosophy of GHMCC which states:

We are called as Christians to:

- stand in solidarity with those who are marginalized and oppressed,
- be partners in working for change,
- be witnesses who call attention to Human Rights abuses,
- be a voice in the international community for justice,
- lift up new generations of remarkable, far-reaching spiritual activists,
- build on hope and create our future

The ideologies of liberation with which GHMCC aligns itself through its texts include those of the international human rights struggle; the international LGBT rights movement; the civil rights movement in the USA; and the LGBT rights movement in South Africa. Interestingly, GHMCC associates itself with the civil rights movement in the USA and links itself to Nobel prize winner Archbishop Desmond Tutu in relation to his stance on the Bible and homosexuality. The church, which established its first congregation in South Africa in 1983 during the height of the oppressive regime, does not have a public history as an ally of anti-apartheid movements, such as the United Democratic Front. The latter organisation was launched in 1983 and was led by Allan Boesak, the well-known priest and anti-apartheid activist. The current video on the website makes a link between the oppression of Black people by the apartheid regime and the discrimination of persons who identify themselves as gay. A theology of liberation, redolent of Stuart²²,

²² E. Stuart, *Lesbian and gay theologies* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003).

Goss²³ and Boesak²⁴ is presented as a keystone of GHMCC teaching that calls on members to be 'spiritual activists' in the global fight for justice. Our analysis indicated that the GHMCC posted a message of support to the victims of the Tsunami in Japan but there was no visible response to natural disasters in Africa, such as the current drought on many parts of the continent, or even natural disasters in South Africa.

Rather, GHMCC texts function as a form of liberatory praxis, encouraging congregants to mobilize for progressive social change in relation to issues which affect the lives of members of the LBGTI community. For example, it carries slogans from activist organisations such as the Triangle Project whose slogan is: *Challenging homophobia. Appreciating sexual diversity.* The Triangle Project is also listed in the section entitled *Resources, Same-Sex Marriage* where the text reads: *Make your voice heard, loud and queer! and Gay Mass Action Required!*

The call to mobilisation is also evident in the *Gallery* section of the website, which has photographs of Gay Pride marches. The church forms strategic alliances with other organizations too. It is a member of the Joint Working Group (JWG), an activist grouping which challenges any form of discrimination against the LBGTI population. The group's members are activist organizations in South Africa such as Behind the Mask; the Durban Lesbian and Gay Community and Health Centre; the Forum for the Empowerment of Women; Gender Dynamix; and the Triangle Project. GHMCC points out the similarity between and unacceptability of the apartheid regime's 'separate but equal philosophy' as regards race and the civil partnerships (not 'full marriage') status in relation to same-sex marriages in South Africa.

In *Resources, Same-Sex Marriage, Gays and Lesbians now 'separate but equal'* the text employs legal opinion to reject the proposed separate institution of civil partnerships:

Gay men and lesbians still experience tremendous oppression, marginalisation and vilification in our society. Some are still raped, assaulted or killed because of their sexual orientation. In this context, the creation of apartheid-style, separate civil partnerships for same-sex couples merely confirms that the state does not consider their relationships worthy of equal concern and respect...In short, a doctrine of "separate but equal" was deeply humiliating and insulting

²³ R. Goss, *Queering Christ: Beyond Jesus acted up* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2002).

²⁴ A. A. Boesak, "Theological reflections on empire," *Hervormde Teologiese Studies*, 65 no.1 (2009), 645-651.

when applied to black South Africans. It remains humiliating and insulting (and now also unconstitutional) when applied to homosexuals.

We are of the opinion that apartheid was far more than humiliating and insulting like the injustices experienced by gays and lesbians. It is interesting that GHMCC did not declare apartheid a heresy, unlike some of the mainstream churches. The mainstream churches or individuals associated with these churches – except for individuals like Tutu, De Gruchy, Germond – were vocal on issues of race and silent on the issue of homosexuality. Conversely it appears as if GMHCC has been fairly silent in the context of South Africa on issues of race and vocal on issues of same-sex relationships.

In rejecting the exclusion of sections of society from meaningful participation both in society and in religious life, GHMCC texts construct a form of inclusive religious worship premised on the ideals of equality, dignity and freedom. GHMCC's fundamental and dominant discourse – similar to Germond and De Gruchy²⁵ – is that LGBT people are not 'aliens in the household of God'. This dominant discourse is exemplified by the lead banner on the homepage: *Would Jesus discriminate? Explore the 21st century question.*

Overall there is a dominant discourse in GHMCC texts that indicates the influence of the wider societal context. However, it is predominantly focussed on issues related to the LGBT community. In this sense, GHMCC texts make frequent appeals to constitutionality in support of the church's agenda of inclusivity and diversity. For example, in the section *Resources, Same-Sex Marriage, Call to Action: Same Sex Marriages* the text, sourced from an information sheet prepared by OUT LGBT Well-being in Pretoria, reads:

The arguments in favour of the inclusion of gay people within marriage are thus supported by the foundational values of our constitutional democracy. Throughout the Constitution reference is made to a society based on equality, human dignity and freedom. This state has the obligation to respect, promote and fulfil all of the rights within our Bill of Rights that realise these values.

Discourse challenging conservative Christian hegemony

Just as feminist theologians such as Daly²⁶, Radford Reuther²⁷, Nadar²⁸ and Ackerman²⁹ have challenged dominant patriarchal religious

²⁵ Boesak, "Theological reflections on empire", 2009.

²⁶ M. Daly, *The church and the second sex* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968).

discourse, so too do GHMCC texts function as a challenge to the hegemony of conservative and homophobic Christian churches. In so doing the texts reject the notion of a monolithic, homogenous, global Christianity. For example in *Resources, Same-Sex Marriage, Statement on Same Sex Marriages* the text reads:

Good Hope MCC is aware of various religious groups objecting to homosexuality from their interpretation of the Bible; however these interpretations or dogma only hold true within their own denomination and these groups do not speak for all Christians per se.

GHMCC texts point out the use of biblical passages against gay people and argue for the error of such interpretations. For example, in *Spirituality, Sexuality and Bible*, the text reads:

Sadly, divine scripture, including the Bible, is often used as a weapon to bash LGBT persons from the pulpit, in our families and in our communities. It is important to remember that such hurtful doctrines are not a reflection of The Christ – or the way God calls the church to be – these are products of fallible and imperfect human beings who guide these churches.

GHMCC texts – and the sources from which they are drawn – reinterpret the biblical passages often used to promulgate religious homophobia. Thus, the stories of Sodom and Gomorah and Leviticus are revisited and the stories of Jonathan and David and of Ruth and Naomi are presented as same-sex love stories. In *Spirituality, Sexuality and Bible, HIV/AIDS: Is it God's Judgement?* the text reinterprets scripture:

There are a few passages in the Bible that have been said to condemn homosexual acts. Currently there is much debate about these passages. Some Christians believe these passages condemn all homosexual behaviour. But a growing number of Bible experts are convinced these passages condemn only certain sexual acts that are idolatrous or abusive. For example, many Bible scholars believe that the story of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19), condemns rape, not homosexuality. Rape is a violent act and irrelevant to loving same-sex relationships. Other passages in the Bible, such as Ezekiel 16: 49-50, identify the sin of these cities as injustice and idolatry.... Jesus said nothing to condemn homosexuality, but he said a great deal about faith, hope and love.

²⁷ R. Radford Ruether, *Goddesses and the divine feminine: a Western religious history* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

²⁸ Ruther, *Goddesses and the divine feminine*, 2006.

²⁹ D. M. Ackermann, "Forward from the margins: Feminist theologies for life," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 99 (1997), 63-67.

In a manner not dissimilar to other gay 'progressive, non-homophobic' Christians in South Africa, such as De Gruchy,³⁰ the text also articulates the core of GHMCC hermeneutics by emphasising the importance of context and of correct translation from the Greek or Hebrew. For example, in *Spirituality, Sexuality and Bible, Spirituality and Sexuality* the text reads:

In order for us to understand scripture, we need to understand the context of the writings – reading what came before and after the story/parable/chapter/verses in question. A verse or a word cannot be understood in isolation, but must be seen as a whole in terms of the Bible's overall message of salvation and love for all.

In developing a lesbian and gay exegesis, GHMCC texts construct a dominant theme in the reconfiguration of the religious as secular. For example, GHMCC strategically redefines marriage in secular, not religious, terms: *Same Sex Marriage is not and should not be a religious debate, it is a question of equality and human rights.*

In so doing, the text attempts to wrestle the institution of marriage, and its attendant rights, from traditional Christian discourse. The text also appeals to constitutionality to defend and support the rights of minorities in the face of 'traditional Christian values' and to reconfigure the discourse:

The Legislature in this country should listen carefully to the ruling of the Constitutional Court and incorporate the inclusion of same-sex couples into the current Marriage Act instead of looking for alternatives to create "2nd class marriages" in order to justify "traditional Christian values".

GHMCC texts often employ a lens which makes comparisons between homophobia, racism and sexism and to evidence the ways in which biblical exegesis changes and develops over time. Given that much of the information was sourced from the USA, reference is frequently made to the historical use of the Bible to justify slavery. The Bible was used in South Africa to justify various forms of oppression including homosexuality and in this instance again, no dominant theme emerged which located the text within the struggles of South Africa. Rather, when the South African context is mentioned, it has the feel of being an 'add on'. Thus the text claims that the Bible was historically employed to

³⁰ S. De Gruchy, "Human being in Christ: resources for an inclusive anthropology," in *Aliens in the household of God*, ed. P. Germond and S. De Gruchy (Cape Town: David Philip, 1997), 233-269.

'prove' the superiority of whites and continues to be used to assert the immorality and inferiority of gay people.

Nevertheless the text does highlight similarities between the various civil rights struggles and, in the section entitled *Spirituality, Sexuality and Bible, Spirituality and Sexuality* which was written by a former pastor at GHMCC and head of the Triangle Project, it reads:

The struggle of LGBT persons is a Human Rights struggle in the same vein as the struggle of people of colour, women facing gender discrimination within the church, slavery and exploitation of children through abuse and neglect; the church needs to reflect and revisit the HARD FACT that many people are still being kept away from Christ's table of forgiveness based on their sexuality.

Here again there is reference to gender and race struggles in relation to the struggles of the LGBT population, but this remains limited to life within the church.

Discourse of natural and normal: disrupting gender?

GHMCC texts portray a particular version of the normal, legitimate, moral and natural. This vision includes: the normalcy of LGBT identities and experience; the legitimacy of same-sex relations and same-sex marriage; the morality of same-sex desire and love; and the naturalness of gender diversity. In terms of the latter, the section entitled *Gender Diversity* asserts the complexity of gender expression and highlights the damaging effects of transphobia on the lives of sexual and gendered minorities:

Simply male or female? Sometimes it's not as easy as that: gender variations are more common than [sic] most people suspect, because many people hide their true nature out of fear for their safety and security.

GHMCC texts challenge binaried gender norms by informing the reader about transgender existence and terminology, by focusing on the biblical figure of the eunuch and by reference to the modern figure of the drag queen. While GHMCC texts focus more on transgender issues than on (biological, non-trans) women's issues, they disrupt formenism (Nadar and Potgieter³¹) and indicate the ways in which GHMCC members who are women – or who identify as female – reject patriarchal scripture and ritual. GHMCC texts educate on correct terminology in the area of transgender life and under the *Resources, Gender Diversity* there is a *Trans-Glossary*. Here the text engages with

³¹ B. Dlamini, "Homosexuality in the African context," *Agenda*, (2006), 67.

the differences between sex and gender and takes a constructionist perspective that contrasts with essentialist notions of sexual orientation pervading much of the text elsewhere:

Gender is the set of socially constructed norms associated with a given birth sex i.e. masculinity or femininity. Gender may be considered as a sense of one's own maleness or femaleness.

A wide range of terms and acronyms are presented, such as *Gender Identity*, *Gender Role*, *Gonadal*, *Intersex*, *MTF (Male to Female)*, *TG*, *TS*, *Trans* and *Transitioning* and the notion of gender performativity pervading the text mirrors the work of queer theorists such as Butler³². Perhaps explain performativity?

Discourse of religious colonialism

The South African context is noticeable for its absence from much of the text. In the *Resources, Same-Sex Marriage* section there is frequent mention of the Joint Working Group, South African jurisprudence and LGBT activist groups and in the *Resources, Gallery* section there are photographs of events such as Cape Town Pride. However, much of the text is of North American origin and has a generic and non-local quality to it. Indeed something that is not articulated by the text, and that might have been expected to be stated, is the potentially colonialist nature of the diffusion of MCC churches around the globe. Despite the history of missionaries in Africa, the use of religion as an instrument of colonialism and the role of contemporary evangelical American churches in fostering homophobic foment in some African countries, there is no mention of the implications for GHMCC in this regard. Nevertheless, just as Dlamini³³ pointed to the introduction of homophobia into African societies by means of white, Christian morality, the gay-affirming teachings of an American church could be viewed – particularly by a homophobic audience – as another attempt by North Americans and Europeans to tell African peoples what to think and believe.

While the colonialist risk is not explicitly articulated in GHMCC's texts, it is referred to tangentially in UFMCC's *Human Rights Protocol* concerning the founding (or 'planting') of new churches:

What are our base line standards?

- to only go where we are invited

³² J. Butler, *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

³³ Butler, *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*, 1990.

- to assume we have a lot to learn
- to listen to our hosts
- to forge partnerships
- to respond when requested
- to be flexible to the realities and differences in establishing churches internationally

Despite UFMCC's awareness of the importance of cultural sensitivity when founding new churches abroad, there is a discourse pervading the texts that suggests that UFMCC has taken on, as a supposedly liberated western LGBT organisation, the mission of liberating LGBT people in apparently less progressive countries. While the text articulates an awareness of local contexts there is a contradictory discourse in which the organisation waits for 'windows of opportunity' in which to 'plant' new churches around the globe:

Criteria for Potential Success:

- Need to consider, potential for impact for the LGBT community, history of Christian Church in the region, political stability of country, nature and severity of the treatment of LGBT community, windows of opportunity

UFMCC's expansionist project would seem to be addressed to an American audience of MCC members intending to set up MCC churches abroad and functions as a sort of step-by-step guide to church founding globally. Steyn and van Zyl,³⁴ Potgieter,³⁵ and Reddy³⁶ have written on the silencing of indigenous southern African meanings by the westocentric colonising project.

Discourse of heteropatriarchal Christian sex

GHMCC texts construct a form of same-sex relationality heavily reliant on heteronormative, Christian, sexual values. Despite professions of queerness and a focus on sexuality and spirituality, there is very little mention of the sexual act or sex in GHMCC texts and no mention of

³⁴ Butler, *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*, 1990.

³⁵ Butler, *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*, 1990.

³⁶ V. Reddy, "Queer marriage: Sexualising citizenship and the development of freedoms in South Africa." in *The prize and the price. Shaping sexualities in South Africa*, ed. M. Steyn and M. van Zyl (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2009), 345.

non-normative sexual practices such as polyamory³⁷. However, there is a strong argument made against promiscuity and in favour of monogamous, life-long, same-sex marriage. While the text situates GHMCC in the context of the South African and international LGBT rights movement, many of the sexual practices and freedoms characteristic of these movements have not been engaged with and literally excised from the texts. The church ascribes to a Christian sexual ethics, similar to the dominant heterosexual paradigm, applied to lesbian and gay relationships. In this sense the texts no longer use the acronym LGBT but instead refer to lesbian and gay people. We interpret this as a dominant discourse which is more comfortable with the term 'homosexual' when referring to gay or lesbian persons living in suburbia. While the others who form part of the LBGTI discourse are not excluded, the sub-text seems to tacitly provide greater acceptance to gay and lesbian persons.

The excision and silencing of varied sexual practices is evident in the section entitled *Spirituality, Would Jesus Discriminate?* The text is sourced from a book entitled *The Children are Free* written by an American UFMCC pastor. The text presents the story of Tyler as an example of moral rectitude and proper sexual behaviour:

...when [Tyler] finally acknowledged his attraction to men during his fourth year of college, it was not during a search for unbounded sexual pleasure or in the context of pagan worship rituals. It was during a night of intense prayer when he was questioning whether he should try to pursue a relationship with a female friend. During that time of prayer, Tyler was strongly impressed that he needed instead to deal with his innate attraction to men...for the next several years, he continued to remain celibate as he wrestled with Scripture and with his church's teachings, trying to find out how he should live as a gay man. He tried always to live a life free of covetousness, malice, envy, strife, and pride. And, even when Tyler came to the conclusion that Scripture affirmed him as an innately gay individual, his respect for the teaching of his parents [Christian missionaries] and his love of God convinced him to remain a virgin until meeting his spouse, Rob.

Here a hedonistic sexuality – 'unbounded' and 'pagan' in nature – is contrasted with the moral, Christian sexual reserve of the confused gay man. Sexuality outside the context of (life-long, monogamous) marriage is associated with pride, covetousness and malice, refuge from which is found in sexual repression and in virginity. The text articulates a

³⁷ Polyamory is the practice of engaging in more than one intimate relationship at a time with the awareness and approval of all partners. Polyamory is different from polygamy, which is the practice of having more than one spouse.

traditional, Christian sexual ethics strongly grounded in essentialist discourse – ‘an innately gay individual’ – and most often of North American origin. In so doing, the text negates the practice of non-normative sexualities. Corbett³⁸ argues that Christianity has historically been nervous of erotic love and has attempted to neutralise it. The discourse which emerged from our analysis is that the church is similarly wary of erotic love which falls outside the boundaries of normative, western, monogamous relationships. They are silent on a practice such as polygamy, both from a feminist or a cultural perspective.

Nevertheless this conservative sexual ethic is contradicted by other more sex-positive discourses in GHMCC texts, such as in the story of Miss Davina Regina. In *Resources, Gender Diversity, Miss Davina: The Ethiopian and Philip (Acts 8)* the text reads:

Now Miss Davina Regina was no fool, in fact she hadn't got to where she was without having a fair bit of common-sense and a good deal of business acumen, and good looks as well. She was well known for striking a hard bargain and being a fierce negotiator. She was also well known for her fondness of young attractive men. She was taken with Philip the moment she saw him. So with her most charming and winsome smile she said to Philip: "Well, how can I understand unless someone explains it to me? Why don't you get in and tell me, honey?"

The sensuality and flirtatiousness of Miss Davina contrasts with the anodyne and tortured figure of the confused and repressed Christian gay man recounted in the previous story. In this way competing discourses in the text reflect the diversity of sexual ethical positions espoused by GHMCC. Nevertheless, while the texts both reinscribe a traditional Christian sexual ethic and challenge homophobic Christian mores, the full panoply of sexual expression in LGBT communities in South Africa and globally, as explored in Steyn and van Zyl³⁹, remains largely absent here.

Missing feminist discourses: tensions and silences

One of the most surprising absences and silences in GHMCC online texts is the lack of a strong, feminist voice in relation to both homosexuality and religion. Gender is predominantly understood to refer to transgenderism which is often focused on male-to-female transgenderism, such as the figure of the eunuch and the drag queen (as opposed to the drag king). Consequently there is little focus on the

³⁸ I. Corbett, "Homosexuality in the traditions of the church." in *Aliens in the household of God*, ed. P. Germond and S. De Gruchy (Cape Town: David Philip, 1997), 162-172.

³⁹ Corbett, "Homosexuality in the traditions of the church" 162-172.

issues facing the 'normative biological' woman. We are not negating the importance of GHMCC supporting all categories of 'woman' but the focus seems to be on 'the exotic other'. Reference is made to a number of female priests and several of the authors of the online texts are women, but there is a silence in terms of a radical western feminist theological perspective and an African feminist perspective and interpretation also appears conspicuously absent. The female priests appear not to have challenged images of a patriarchal god or to present discourses which could be labelled feminist. In addition, stories of lesbian desire are also overshadowed by a primary focus on gay male experience and when such stories are presented – such as that of Ruth and Naomi – they at times seem tokenistic. Although the ideology of the church aims to challenge sexism and homophobia, it also tacitly endorses these both through the erasure of non-normative sexual practices and through the absence of radical, feminist theologies. Also absent from GHMCC texts are any African or South African terms relating to transgender identities. Here the text promulgates a particularly westocentric understanding of gender and sexuality and ignores the long history of gender variance in African societies, including the figure of the *isangoma* (Epprecht⁴⁰, Dlamini⁴¹).

There is in addition an ongoing tension in GHMCC texts between essentialist and constructionist understandings of sexuality, sexual orientation and gender. In contrast with constructionist interpretations of gender, the texts develop an essentialist perspective on sexuality. For example, in *Resources, Sexuality and Bible, Spirituality and Sexuality* the text asserts that: *...faith or religion is a personal choice, unlike one's sexuality which is part of who you are and is not a choice.* The texts construct a white, gay male identity onto the biblical figure of the eunuch and employ an essentialist understanding of gender and homosexuality in interpreting eunuchs and modern gay men as being 'born that way': *Jesus said some are born gay. (Mathew 19:10-12)* Here Jesus refers to "eunuchs who have been so from birth." *This terminology ("born eunuchs") was used in the ancient world to refer to homosexual men. Jesus indicates that being a "born eunuch" is a gift from God.*

Concluding Remarks

⁴⁰ M. Epprecht, *The history of a dissident sexuality in Southern Africa* (London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004), 21.

⁴¹ Epprecht, *The history of a dissident sexuality in Southern Africa*, 21.

This article's intention is to raise debate in relation to the role of the Good Hope Metropolitan Community Church in South Africa regarding issues concerning gay and lesbian people sixteen years after the first democratic election. We have thus deliberately chosen to not make any "cast in stone" or definitive conclusions. Nevertheless Corbett⁴² in commenting on the response of the church to homosexuality remarked that it is imperative that churches respond not only for justice to be entrenched for the homosexual community but for the sake of the church itself. We would extend his concern and add that it is important that a church such as the GHMCC continue to provide a space for the LBGTI community. However, for it to grow and more importantly be relevant to the community it serves it has to have 'more voice' on issues where they have been silent. The obvious silences as has emerged from our analysis are not talking to feminist concerns and the failure to link issues such as poverty, racism and sexism which prevail in the South African context to the matters which they are dealing with.

GHMCC no doubt provides an important space and the fact that this church actively engages with organisations which have similar agendas is a positive finding which has emerged. The church is located in a contested space (District Six, from where a community was forcibly removed) and the website makes no mention of this. GHMCC is also silent on their broader politico-geographical location in the city and indeed the country, which has impacted on the identities and lived lives of the people within the metropole where they are based.

This article represents the first stage in our critical engagement with the discourse of the church and it is our intention to interview and engage with leaders and members of the church for the purpose of conducting future research.

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⁴² Epprecht, *The history of a dissident sexuality in Southern Africa*, 21.

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Who's in Charge in a Genderless Marriage? A Feminist and Queer Analysis of Opposition to Same-Sex Marriage by the Marriage Alliance of South Africa

Jennifer Jane Sistig¹ and Sarojini Nadar²

Abstract

This article offers a feminist and queer analysis of the opposition to same-sex marriage as articulated by the Marriage Alliance of South Africa (MASA) since 2004. It interrogates the theology of marriage underpinning their position, especially their over-reliance on the Bible to develop their theology. MASA's theology of marriage, particularly their reliance on their interpretation of the Bible, is analysed using two related branches of theology: feminist theology and queer theology. This analysis aims to expose MASA's patriarchal and heterosexist worldview of marriage and family, and aims to show that same-sex marriage poses a direct threat to their worldview. The article concludes with an alternative theology of marriage and family based on queer and feminist Trinitarian theologies that allow for more just forms of marriage relationship and family life.

Who's in Charge in a Genderless Marriage?

The title of this article derives from an event at an open meeting in the Kloof Methodist Church hall towards the end of 2007. The meeting involved a debate about same-sex marriage between the late Steve de Gruchy and a member of the Anglican parish of St Martin's in the Field in Durban North who was representing the Marriage Alliance of South Africa (MASA). Following the debate the chairperson opened the floor for questions. A young man stood up and presented his question. He asked, given the model of marriage offered by Paul in 1 Corinthians 11, with Christ being the head of every man and the man being the head of

¹ Jennifer Jane Sistig was ordained in the Diocese of Natal, Anglican Church of Southern Africa. She is currently ministering in the Diocese of Guildford as a non-stipendiary minister and in the Diocese of Oxford as a school chaplain at an independent boarding and day school for girls aged 11-18 in Berkshire, England. This article is derived from her Masters dissertation which was carried out at the School of Religion and Theology, University of KwaZulu-Natal under the supervision of Prof. Sarojini Nadar. Email: jenniferjanesistig@gmail.com

² Sarojini Nadar (PhD) is from South Africa. She is an Associate Professor in, and Director of, the Gender and Religion Programme in the School of Religion and Theology at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Email: nadars@ukzn.ac.za

the woman, if a marriage is to be between two men, or two women, then “who is in charge?” On the basis of this question, for him, power resides in the gender of the husband. If both persons are husbands, or both persons wives, then who has the power? This power issue is at the heart of the theology of marriage of MASA, which will be critiqued in this article.

MASA was developed and constituted in or around the year 2004 as part of a response from some parts of the Christian religious sector of South African society to the national debate on same-sex marriage. In this article, the “biblically based” theology of marriage underpinning their position will be analysed. This analysis will be undertaken using two related branches of theology: feminist theology and queer theology. It will conclude with an alternative theology of marriage based on queer and feminist Trinitarian theologies. An alternative theology of marriage and family based on queer and feminist Trinitarian theologies therefore asserts that it is not the right order or hierarchy within a relationship that is a Christian priority, but that the right ordering of relationship with the example of Christ.

The “Biblically Based” Theology Underpinning MASA’s Definition of Marriage

The Marriage Alliance of South Africa (MASA) was founded in the wake of a South African Supreme Court of Appeal judgment handed down on 30 November 2004, which concluded that the existing marriage laws unfairly discriminated against gay and lesbian couples. As noted above, the formation of MASA constituted part of the response of certain religious sections of South African society to the question of same-sex marriage. According to their press release of 11 May 2005, issued by the Director of Media Communications of MASA, Naomi Boshoff, MASA’s founding members were: Dr Michael Cassidy (International Team Leader of African Enterprise) and Reverend Moss Nthla (General Secretary of the Evangelical Alliance of South Africa.) They then joined with Cardinal Wilfred Napier of the Roman Catholic Church to “champion the cause of marriage and mobilize the Church to uphold and safeguard the traditional family.”³ According to their webpage, which is hosted by the South African Christian Leaders Association (SACLA) website, and therefore indirectly hosted by Focus on the Family which is a “global Christian ministry” that was founded in 1977 by

³ Marriage Alliance of South Africa, “Churches Unite to Defend Marriage in Constitutional Court” (2005). (Press release dated 11 May 2005.) <http://www.sacla.za.net/?component=ddb&operation=page&page=193> (accessed 25 November 2011).

Dr James C. Dobson and is “dedicated to helping families thrive.”⁴ MASA’s mission statement reads as follows:

The Marriage Alliance of South Africa exists to serve the Church and society as a platform for constructive engagement in the current debate on the definition of marriage. It aims to raise support to put its case for monogamous, heterosexual marriage to the Constitutional Court in May 2005. It will engage in the democratic processes of South Africa to ensure that marriage, family and religious freedoms are protected by both parliamentary legislation and the courts.⁵

A summary of the argument presented in the written submission was published by MASA in their press release entitled *Definition of Marriage in the Balance*. In this release they summarise for their readers what their lawyers had presented on their behalf:

Fundamental to marriage is that it consists of a man and a woman [and] marriage is an exclusively heterosexual institution ... If marriage ... [is] redefined to include same-sex couples, the nature of the institution will change. It is not simply a matter of inclusion. Married couples will find themselves in a "genderless" institution ... In the long term this will undermine the integrity and value of marriage which, for centuries, has been the 'civic glue' that binds families and societies together. It would also have extreme consequences for male-female relationships.⁶

In June 2006 MASA produced a positional statement on marriage that includes an outline of their theology of marriage in a section entitled ‘statement of faith.’ The section begins with an affirmation of the “biblical standard for marriage and the family: that is, that marriage was instituted by God and is intended to be the life-long union between a man and a woman (Gen 1:27; 2:24).”⁷ In the description of family that follows, emphasis is given to the need for both a male and female parent for the formation of a child’s character, and ends with the assertion that their view of family is “universally recognised by most people and religions as divinely ordained by God, and is the key to the moral structure of a healthy society.” Undergirding this definition is

⁴ Focus on the Family. “About us” pages. 2011. http://www.focusonthefamily.com/about_us.aspx and http://www.focusonthefamily.com/about_us/james-dobson.aspx (accessed 28 November 2011).

⁵ Marriage Alliance of South Africa, “Mission Statement”. 2008. <http://www.sacla.za.net/?component=ddb&operation=page&page=24> (accessed 04 October 2011).

⁶ Marriage Alliance of South Africa. “Definition of Marriage in the Balance” (2005). (Press release from an unspecified date <http://sacla.za.net/?component=ddb&operation=page&page=195> (accessed 25 November 2011).

⁷ Marriage Alliance of South Africa “Positional Statement – Submission on Marriage – June 2006” (2006). Pietermaritzburg. (Copy obtained from Michael Cassidy).

Michael Cassidy's view that marriage is "what God has put in place from the beginning of creation" and that this understanding of marriage is a "universally accepted norm."⁸ This understanding of marriage as having been in existence from the "beginning of creation" is linked directly to the Genesis accounts and, as it is with most arguments against same-sex relationships, MASA's argument also rests firmly on the adage 'the Bible says.'

A Queer Analysis of MASA's Appeal to the Bible

MASA, according to its positional statement, looks to the Bible for justification for their theology of marriage. The work of Stuart and Thatcher, in their chapter entitled "On the Bible" in *People of Passion* (1997), is helpful in understanding the way in which MASA has constructed this "biblically-based" theology of marriage. After presenting various theologies of marriage contained in church reports on sexuality over the previous forty years, Stuart and Thatcher assert that "with a couple of exceptions, there is a lack of hermeneutical sophistication ... [which shows] insufficient awareness of the multiple and complex issues that are raised by the use of the Bible in debates about sexuality and gender."⁹ There are two most common approaches to the Bible, they argue. The first is a 'rule book' approach, and the second is a 'relay race' approach. Each of these will be discussed in turn below.¹⁰

Judging from MASA's publications, the 'rule book' approach seems to reflect their *modus operandi*. This approach uses a literal reading of the Bible, because it considers the scriptures to be the 'Word of God' inspired by the Holy Spirit, and does not accept that there might be any historical and/or cultural influence in the way in which the biblical texts were formed. There are numerous problems with this approach, especially the fact that not all Christians agree on what the Bible says and therefore a hierarchy of authority is formed when certain groups claim to be more discerning of the truth of scripture than others. This approach adopts "an unconscious hermeneutic (method of interpretation) which enables them to choose for themselves between authoritative and non-authoritative texts."¹¹

⁸ M. Cassidy, Letter dated 10 December 2004 addressed to all South African Christian Leaders' Association participants (2004). <http://www.sacla.za.net/> (accessed 14 November 2011).

⁹ Elizabeth Stuart and Adrian Thatcher, *People of Passion: What the Churches Teach About Sex*, (London: Mowbray, 1997), 245.

¹⁰ Stuart and Thatcher, *People of Passion*, 246.

¹¹ Stuart and Thatcher, *People of Passion*, 247-248.

The other main approach that Stuart and Thatcher have identified has been named the 'relay race.' In this approach the more liberal interpreters of the Bible begin their search for the meaning of the texts with the establishment of the 'original meaning' of the text, and then follow this search with an attempt to apply this meaning to their particular historical and cultural context. [T]his process never quite works, because the definitive original meaning of a text is never established."¹² They refer to Stephen C. Barton's comments that "church debate in issues of sexuality [tend] to circle endlessly around key texts," and that "this trivializes the Bible and human sexuality. The Bible becomes both a battleground and a weapon of different interest groups and issues of human sexuality are reduced to matters of exegesis which only a very few are qualified to carry out."¹³

Stuart and Thatcher then go on to explain the emergence of feminist and queer hermeneutics as contemporary models through which biblical interpretations can be made. Specific examples of the use of a queer hermeneutic are found in *The Queer Bible Commentary* (2006).¹⁴ The chapter in this book entitled "Matthew" by Thomas Bohache and his 'note on queering' is an extremely helpful guide on how to queer(y) readings of biblical texts, and will form the basis of the discussion that follows.

Queer Biblical Hermeneutics – 'Queer(y)ing' Scripture

Thomas Bohache describes 'queering' as a process of reading the Bible "from a queer perspective."¹⁵ The aim of queering scripture is to read it afresh in order to more deeply understand the message of justice and inclusive love found in the person of Jesus Christ, his life and teaching.

Bohache uses the term 'queer' in an inclusive sense to refer to all who are disempowered in a heteronormative world. Moreover, 'queer' has both an adjectival (descriptive) and verbal (active) sense. When something is 'queer', it is uncommon, out of the ordinary, unusual and non-conforming to the dominant culture. Queering must therefore be a questioning and a turning over of layers of the heteropatriarchal tradition to reveal what lies beneath.¹⁶ Queering can thus uncover from scripture

¹² Stuart and Thatcher, *People of Passion*, 247-248.

¹³ Stuart and Thatcher, *People of Passion*, 247-248.

¹⁴ D. Guest et al. (eds.), *The Queer Bible Commentary*, (London: SCM Press, 2006).

¹⁵ Thomas Bohache, "Matthew" in *The Queer Bible Commentary*, edited by D. Guest et al., (London: SCM Press, 2006), 487-516.

¹⁶ Bohache, *Matthew*, 493.

more inclusive and just descriptions of marriage and sexuality than those that are held by those who defend 'traditional' marriage, such as does MASA.

In his example of queering scripture using Matthew's gospel Bohache begins with a description of the '*basileia*' message of Jesus, which is what most Bibles translate as the 'kingdom of God.' He maintains that this message is the "virtually undisputed ... core of Jesus' message." He draws on contemporary feminist hermeneutics to show that with the establishment of the 'reign of God' comes the establishment of the "kingdom of God", which is constituted not on the basis of a relationship within an imperial hierarchy, a kyriarchy, or on the basis of power, but on the basis of belonging and relationship. The concepts of Jesus being at the centre of an egalitarian renewal movement have been explored in depth in these works of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza: *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (1992) and *In Memory of Her* (1994). Similarly, Rosemary Radford Ruether writes of Jesus' praxis and preaching of the '*basileia*' vision of God's inclusive love.¹⁷

When concentrating on the concepts of family and eunuchs, Bohache writes that, "in recent years, several scholars have noted that in his *basileia* message Jesus opposed the traditional patriarchal family and encourages an alternative family."¹⁸ He then goes on to quote Reuther who underlines the importance of this statement when saying that "the traditional family is the bulwark not only of patriarchy but also of challenging the hegemony of a system of values and structures that produce and reproduce heterosexism and homophobia."¹⁹

In both the Jewish and the Graeco-Roman communities of Jesus' time, the patriarchal family was the basic unit of society, and the 'father' had power over the lives and possessions of all the other members of the family, including slaves and their patrons in this. The sayings and stories of Matthew 19-20 address this family structure by dealing with three categories of relationship: husbands-wives; fathers-children; masters-slaves. Bohache quotes Carter as asserting that these "two chapters subvert this hierarchical and patriarchal structure by instructing disciples in a more egalitarian manner."²⁰ Jesus teaches mutuality between husband and wife, the value of children, and the honour of the

¹⁷ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 134-138.

¹⁸ Bohache, *Matthew*, 508.

¹⁹ Bohache, *Matthew*, 508.

²⁰ Bohache, *Matthew*, 508.

slave. Bohache then goes on to state that in reading Matthew 10:34-6; 12:46-50; 13:53-8; and 19:27-30, Jesus states unequivocally that he is not just creating an alternative household but is setting out “to destroy the traditional home.” He concludes by pointing out that these texts prove that Jesus affirmed that “the loyalty to justice and truth ... supercedes the traditional family.”²¹

This example of queering scripture has presented a radically different perspective on gender and family that can offer an understanding of liberative justice to members of the LGBTI community.²² Queer(y)ing scripture in order to more deeply understand the message of justice and inclusive love found in the person of Jesus Christ therefore offers a radical critique of MASA's limited interpretation of particular texts. This critique will be further explained when queer(y)ing MASA's appeal to the Bible in the following section.

Queer(y)ing MASA's Appeal to the Bible

The biblical view of marriage on which MASA's theology of marriage is based relies on a limited reading of the Bible, as has been exposed by a feminist and queer analysis of the biblical texts referring to marriage. When reflecting on Coleman's reading of the creation narratives, it is clear that the story of Adam and Eve was not intended to instruct people on sexual politics or to present a model of marriage. He writes that the stories were rather intended to show that “humankind is centre stage in the image of God, Adam and Eve are intimately related, human disobedience explains evil, but God's purpose is not defeated.”²³

God's ordering of creation was intended for redemption through right relationship with God, not for the right order of relationship in a sociological and biological sense. This is in direct opposition to the idea that according to the Bible, God instituted marriage when he created Adam and Eve, as MASA asserts.²⁴ In analysing the references to marriage in the epistles it is clear that the apostle Paul advocated “marriage as second best to singleness,”²⁵ and he promoted adherence to the household codes contained in Ephesians 5:21-6:9, Colossians 3:18-4:1, 1 Peter 2:18-3:7 on the basis of the created order in Genesis.

²¹ Bohache, *Matthew*, 509.

²² LGBTI is an acronym used as a collective term to refer to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people.

²³ P. Coleman, *Christian Attitudes to Marriage: From Ancient Times to the Third Millennium*, (London: SCM Press, 2004), 33.

²⁴ Marriage Alliance of South Africa 2006. Positional Statement.

²⁵ Bohache, *Matthew*, 493.

These texts are to be understood within “a [patriarchal] context where women were legally and socially seen as the property of the responsible males.”²⁶ MASA’s use of the Bible depends on “the patriarchal assumptions about male superiority, headship and domination.”²⁷

Carolyn Osiek has named Ephesians 5:21-6:9 as one of the most dangerous texts in the New Testament because through it the “domination-submission relationship between husbands and wives” is affirmed.²⁸ She argues that an imbalanced power relationship between husband and wife receives further reinforcement in the mystical union analogy as the biblical text “elevates the marital relationship to a new level of understanding and experience and because of the ecclesiological comparison, ... the text has too often been seen to render normative the subordinate relationship.”²⁹

The ‘covenant’ motif is similarly dangerous in that comparing a divine covenant with a human covenant suggests “an unequal divine-human power relationship [that] may readily replicate itself in an unequal husband-wife relationship.”³⁰ As Johnson suggests, the male is idolised and female is subordinated, and this imbalance is justified by an appeal to the unequal divine-human power relationship in the covenant motif.³¹

The imbalance of power between husband and wife can be critiqued using the feminist concept of mutuality which has been widely explored within feminist theology, and which forms the basis for Elizabeth Stuart’s theology of friendship in *Just Good Friends: Towards a Lesbian and Gay Theology of Relationships* (1995).³² Meanwhile, Catherine Mowry LaCugna argues that a theology of complementarity (of the sexes) which is grounded in the hierarchical and patriarchal structures of family, society, and church, infers a corresponding hierarchy within the Trinity.³³ Therefore, both these motifs and the creation narrative allow MASA to focus on the ‘correct’ order of relationship; that is male and

²⁶ Stuart and Thatcher, *People of Passion*, 59.

²⁷ Stuart and Thatcher, *People of Passion*, 59.

²⁸ Carolyn Osiek, “The New Testament and the Family,” *The Family Concilium* 4 (1995), 8.

²⁹ Osiek, *The New Testament and the Family*, 8.

³⁰ Osiek, *The New Testament and the Family*, 8.

³¹ Stuart and Thatcher, *People of Passion*, 61; Johnson, *She Who Is*, 68.

³² Elizabeth Stuart, *Just Good Friends: Towards a Lesbian and Gay Theology of Relationships*, (London: Mowbray, 1995).

³³ Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life*, (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991), 98.

female in marriage, but include in that order an inherent inequality between the two.

While the creation accounts indicate that both men and women need partners, Coleman asserts that “the paradigm of their relationship is the covenant with God himself.”³⁴ He refers to the lengthy writings of Karl Barth in this regard and concludes that the emphasis in Genesis 1:27 on divine likeness points to “the fact that God himself exists in [Trinitarian] relationship and not isolation. ‘God is no *Deus solitarius*, but *Deus trinuus*.’ [italics his].”³⁵ Therefore, the challenge from queer theologians is to recapture from the creation narratives the principle of the relationship with God for all human kind.

According to Ken Stone, “in recent years these texts have played a central and growing role in attempts to use biblical literature to buttress heteronormative accounts of sex and gender.”³⁶ Thus, in their theology of marriage, MASA has placed their emphasis on defending the traditional model of marriage on the living out of a covenant between men and women, with little reflection on marriage as a covenant lived out within the life of God. In basing their theology of marriage and family on the household codes and the Pauline description of gender hierarchy in 1 Corinthians 11, MASA prioritises the secondary historically bound teaching of the epistles above the primary teaching in Christ’s command to love one’s neighbour as one loves one’s self.³⁷

A queer analysis of MASA’s biblical view of marriage reveals a strongly and defensively patriarchal understanding of marriage. If, when viewed through queer and feminist lenses, MASA’s ‘biblically-based’ theology of marriage is not as life-giving as has been argued thus far, one is led to query whether there are alternative theologies of marriage which are more life-giving.

Alternative Theologies of Marriage

Studies on Christian marriage over the last decades have drawn on the doctrine of the Trinity. For example, Jack Dominian³⁸ used Trinitarian theology to describe the marital relationship in 1977. Since then, feminist theologians have provided new Trinitarian language to describe

³⁴ Coleman, *Christian Attitudes to Marriage*, 31.

³⁵ Coleman, *Christian Attitudes to Marriage*, 31.

³⁶ K. Stone, “Bibles That Matter: Biblical Theology and Queer Performativity”, *Biblical Theology Bulletin*. 38 No. 1 (2008), 21.

³⁷ Marriage Alliance of South Africa. 2005. *Definition of Marriage in the Balance*.

³⁸ Dominian, *Proposals for a New Sexual Ethic*, 84.

the mystery of God in an attempt to free God-language from gender stereotypes. Thus, the classical understanding of the persons of the Trinity as being the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is replaced with the feminist alternative of the Trinity as being the Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer/Sanctifier/Life-Giver.³⁹

Feminist theologians have also contributed to the understanding of the Trinity by emphasising the concepts of “mutual relation,” “radical equality” and “community in diversity.”⁴⁰ Central to the doctrine of the Trinity is the understanding that the three ‘persons’ of the Trinity are equal in every respect. To assert that there is a hierarchy of importance within the Trinity is to fall prey to early Christian heresies such as subordinationism and modalism.⁴¹ The Trinity presents us with a community of equals, and offers a powerful image for the theology of marriage as being a partnership of equals within the presence of God. Queer theology offers further insights into the implications of Trinitarian theology for the understanding of gender that can be included in a Trinitarian theology of marriage.

By taking these understandings of the Trinity into a theology of marriage, the patriarchal understanding of the relationship between a husband and his wife is invalidated. The two partners in a marriage can be understood as equal in value, free from the categories of subordination, submission and gender. The two marriage partners belong to one another, acting as bearers of God for and to one another in order to bring new life to one another and to the wider community, and to witness to the presence of God within their relationship, continually weaving all of this into the fabric of society, or, into other ‘webs of relationship’ in society.⁴²

³⁹ See for example: Catherine Mowry LaCugna, “God in Communion with Us,” in *Freeing Theology*, ed. Catherine Mowry LaCugna (San Francisco: HarperCollins 1993); Rosemary Radford Reuther, *Sexism and God-Talk*, (London: SCM, 1984); Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, (New York: Crossroad, 1994); Megan Macrina Walker, “Can a Woman be a Monk? On Gender and Monastic Identity”, *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 42 no. 2 (2007).

⁴⁰ Johnson, *She Who Is*, 216-223.

⁴¹ Refer to Alan Richardson (ed.), *A Dictionary of Christian Theology*, (London: SCM Press, 1969), 345-351. Subordinationism suggests a hierarchy within God, where God the Father is ingenerate and the Son and Spirit are generated and therefore lesser to God; Modalism asserts that God is one, and relates to the world in three different modes. These heresies informed the development of the Nicene Creed which asserts Christian belief in the triune God, with each ‘person’ of the Trinity being co-equal and consubstantial.

⁴² Elsie Boulding’s article “The Challenge of Nonconformity” in Wink, Walter (ed.) *Homosexuality and Christian Faith: Questions of Conscience for the Churches*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 111-117.

This concept of webs of relationship is taken from Elsie Boulding's article "The Challenge of Nonconformity" which explores the contribution of gay and lesbian people to the Quaker community. She writes that "reweaving webs of relationship is our main business in life"⁴³ and suggests that we reweave the social web according to the notion of our oneness in Christ, concluding that:

Learning new ways of approaching gender identity and new ways for men and women to live and work separately and together in building the peaceable kingdom is urgent for us all. The gays and lesbians among us can help us in our learning and in our doing. It is time for them to be freed from the stereotype of embattled victims fighting for the right to be who they are and instead to be accepted as co-workers in reweaving the social web for us all.⁴⁴

As the national debate about same-sex unions was raging, Graeme Taute offered a perspective that can be merged with the idea of reweaving the social web. He writes that:

Marriage itself is in serious trouble, an institution beset with considerable disillusionment. In its current form marriage is largely structured for us by our religions and the State around its two lowest common denominators, namely so-called "heterosexuality" and procreation, neither of which guarantee its success. Its meaning is largely functional, as the heart and source of the so-called nuclear family.⁴⁵

He goes on to speak of the debate around same-sex marriage and referred to the terms 'marriage' and 'civil union.' He suggests that the emergence of the concept of the civil union is "a clue to a deeper process that might be trying to emerge"⁴⁶ where the distinction between a civil union and a marriage "isn't one between same-sex and opposite sex partnerships, but rather between levels of growth in all partnerships."⁴⁷ He suggests that an understanding of marriage should reflect a maturing and [commitment] to moving [the relationship] towards a deepening transformation of both or all people", which he suspects, "is a deeper meaning of marriage: a commitment to transformation", an

⁴³ Boulding, *The Challenge of Nonconformity*, 111.

⁴⁴ Boulding, *The Challenge of Nonconformity*, 117.

⁴⁵ Graham Taute, "Same-sex Marriage" Paper delivered at a same-sex marriage workshop held in Pietermaritzburg 4 August 2006. Reproduced with author's permission. Copy obtained from author.

⁴⁶ Taute, "Same-sex Marriage".

⁴⁷ Taute, "Same-sex Marriage".

endeavour which is nowhere found to be “dependent on the sex of the people involved”.⁴⁸

He then describes marriage as the “vale of soul-making”⁴⁹ in which the partners lead one another into an “ever deepening space of growth.” He writes that “the remarkable thing [he notices] about deepening unions is the way in which, simply by nature of their ever-increasing depth, they begin to nourish the community around them.”⁵⁰

This idea that marriage is the space in which people continue to grow and in which the shared life of the partners increase life around them fits very well into a theology of marriage based on the Trinitarian concept of shared life and shared love, where people are drawn into the life and love of God through their life-giving and loving relationships. Taute goes on to say that he suspects that:

marriage is failing in our culture, not because it is flawed, but because it has been colonised by very particular religious and cultural agendas, thereby losing much of its deeper meaning... As our religions grapple with marriage, they will also be challenged ... to grapple deeply with their sense of ‘God’.⁵¹

And so we look to theology, our words about God, to understand marriage. These contributions to the theology of marriage as relational and life-giving are validated by Migliore’s theology of the Trinity. He writes that:

The doctrine of the Trinity is the second-order reflection on the workings of divine love as attested to in Scripture and experienced by the Christian community. In other words, the starting point of Trinitarian faith is the good news of the love of God in Christ that continues to work transformingly in the world by the Holy Spirit.⁵²

He goes on to restate the meaning of the doctrine of the Trinity by affirming that: the eternal life of God is personal life in relationship⁵³; that God exists in community;⁵⁴ and that God’s life can be described in the light of the Gospel with beautiful metaphors of Trinitarian hospitality and the *‘perichoresis’*, the dance of Trinitarian love.

⁴⁸ Taute, “Same-sex Marriage”.

⁴⁹ Taute, “Same-sex Marriage”.

⁵⁰ Taute, “Same-sex Marriage”.

⁵¹ Taute, “Same-sex Marriage”. See also Germaine Greer, *The Whole Woman*, (London: Random House Group Limited, 1999), 422-425.

⁵² Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith seeking understanding: an introduction to Christian theology*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1998), 59.

⁵³ Migliore, *Faith seeking understanding*, 67.

⁵⁴ Migliore, *Faith seeking understanding*, 69.

[This] has far reaching implications. It points to experiences of friendship, caring family relationships, and the inclusive community of free and equal persons as intimations of the eternal life of God and the reign of God that Jesus proclaims. That God is a Trinity of love means ... concern for a new community ... [which] has its Christian social ethics thus grounded in Trinitarian theology. The Christian hope for peace with justice and freedom in community among peoples of diverse culture, races, and genders corresponds to the Trinitarian logic of God.⁵⁵

To take this Trinitarian theology into our theology of marriage is to affirm that just as the life of God is essentially life-giving, so the lives of the marital partners are also to be life-giving. As Balswick and Balswick write, "we are created for life in community with others, to exist in relationships of mutual fidelity and mutual freedom in fellowship."⁵⁶ A Trinitarian theology of marriage that takes feminist relational theology and queer theology seriously asserts that marriage is a partnership of equals, unencumbered by the socially constructed inequalities inherent in the concepts of gender and patriarchy, and therefore mirroring the mutuality and reciprocity of God in relationship, in order to liberate, to bring life and to enhance life in community.⁵⁷ The aforementioned contribution of queer theology leads towards an understanding of marriage as part of a theology of relationship, rather than an understanding of marriage that relies on the perspective of social formulations and definitions.

If we were to limit our understanding of marriage to the theology presented by MASA, we would maintain a heteropatriarchal model that is more in keeping with theories of power and subordination based on a literal biblical hermeneutic and an over-dependence on the Pauline anthropology described in 1 Corinthians 11. However, a queer Trinitarian theology of marriage retains the values of the Christian tradition and the traditional purposes of marriage can be easily understood within this framework. It is a legitimate theology of marriage, whether that marriage is same-sex or opposite-sex, and it allows for more just forms of marriage relationship and family life.

⁵⁵ Migliore, *Faith seeking understanding*, 70.

⁵⁶ Balswick and Balswick, *The Family*, 126.

⁵⁷ For references to feminist relational theology see: Carol P. Christ, *She Who Changes: Re-Imagining the Divine in the World*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Marjorie Suchocki, *The Fall to Violence: Original Sin in Relational Theology*, (New York: Continuum, 1994); Joseph A. Bracken and Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, *Trinity in Process: A Relational Theology of God*. (New York: Continuum, 1997); Stanley J. Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei*. (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).

While MASA's desire to bring healing to marriage relationships and families is commendable, it is based on a model of marriage and family that is insular and limited. It does not take into account current research in the field of gender. In basing their theology of marriage and family on the household codes, this analysis has shown that MASA prioritises the secondary historically-bound teaching of the epistles above Christ's command to love one's neighbour as one loves one self. Therefore, MASA's attempt to win the battle for the family is based on a legalistic approach in which believers are expected to adhere to a particular formulation of marriage and family relationships. Queer analysis, however, has shown that this approach has been unsuccessful in South Africa to date⁵⁸ and Germaine Greer argues powerfully that it has been similarly unsuccessful in the Western world to date.⁵⁹

A Trinitarian Theology Allowing for More Just Forms of Marriage and Family

In conclusion, a Trinitarian theology, based on the contributions of feminist and queer theology, is offered as an alternative theology of marriage and allows for more just forms of marriage relationship and family life. This queer approach shows that the grace-filled transformation of relationships is the starting point for any theology of marriage. Just as Paul has urged believers in to live according to the Spirit and not the law in Romans 8 and 2 Corinthians 3, so queer theology urges us to live as the redeemed who are governed by the Spirit of God who dwells within us, and not as the condemned who look to the law for redemption.

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⁵⁸ Refer to: Jean-Pierre Dozon, "Africa: the Family at the Crossroads" in A. Burguière et al., *A History of the Family Volume Two: The Impact of Modernity*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 301-338; Zoe Williams, "Gay rights: a world of inequality" in *The Guardian* newspaper. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/sep/13/gay-rights-world-of-inequality> (accessed 14 September 2011.); and sections 6.6-6.8 of Jennifer Jane Sistig (née Stewart), *Who's in charge in a genderless marriage? A queer analysis of the opposition to same-sex marriage as articulated by the Marriage Alliance of South Africa*. (Master's thesis, University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2010).

⁵⁹ Greer, *The Whole Woman*, 422-425.

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Gender Prejudice in the use of Biblical Texts against Same-Sex Relationships in Zimbabwe

Masiwa Ragies Gunda¹

Abstract

Gender and prejudice are two commonly used terms in mainstream gender studies throughout the world, whereby the former is almost synonymous with women or females. Gender prejudices affect not only women but also sexual minorities because they too are largely seen through the lenses of gender. This article looks at the homophobic response to same-sex relationships as a downstream and subtle effect of preconceived gender prejudices, which are buttressed by invoking certain texts from the Bible, especially Genesis 1 and 2. The article analyzes the gendered language of some of the slur statements used against same-sex relationships. Further, this article argues that gender prejudices against same-sex relationships are justified and presented as divine through the deployment of the biblical creation narratives. The creation narratives have provided society with a basis for prejudice since they have been interpreted to suggest that God created men and women, suggesting that male and female are synonymous with man and woman. This confusion between sex and gender is behind the gender prejudices against same-sex relationships. Finally, this article proposes a re-reading of Genesis 1 to show that the creator God cannot be limited to two sexes simply because that is what we are comfortable with. It is argued that, God is God because God continues to confound us.

Introduction

This article argues that gender prejudice, an attitude that sees women as inferior to men, is widespread and pervasive within Zimbabwe. It is further argued that gender prejudice in Zimbabwe is based on some religious fundamentals, especially elicited from a reading of the creation narratives in Genesis 1 and 2. Through a reading of these narratives, men and women tend to have a negative attitude towards womanhood, leading to ideas that sustain the inequality between men and women. While women are the direct victims of this kind of gender prejudice, it will be argued also in this article that gender prejudice has other

¹ Masiwa R. Gunda (PhD) is from Zimbabwe. He is a lecturer in Old Testament Studies and Biblical Hebrew, at the University of Zimbabwe and is currently a Humboldt Research Fellow, at the University of Bamberg, Germany. He has published on homosexuality in Zimbabwe. Email: mrqunda2002@yahoo.co.uk

downstream victims among sexual minorities. This gender prejudice is made possible by the use of the categories developed in sustaining the difference between men and women, which are then applied to same-sex relationships. The same texts that are read to sustain prejudices against women, that is, Genesis 1 and 2 are then also applied to sustain negative attitudes towards same-sex relationships in Zimbabwe. In developing this article, the following questions will be used as guiding principles: what is gender prejudice? How is gender prejudice sustained by biblical texts? How does gender prejudice affect same-sex relationships? Can the Bible be used to sustain gender equality? How does this biblically based gender equality affect same-sex relationships? This article takes Zimbabwe as a case-study and hence most of the illustrations that are referred to are contextual to that country.

What is Gender Prejudice?

Gender prejudice is widely acknowledged in studies on violence against women and in general studies focusing on the multiple discriminations suffered by women across cultures.² This conceptualization of gender prejudice is based on the understanding that “gender refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for men and women.”³ These differences created between men and women become the basis upon which individuals are categorized by their respective societies. Having defined gender, the next question is to understand what is meant by prejudice. Prejudice is an attitude which allows people to negatively prejudge others on the basis of what is supposedly known about these “others.” In this understanding, one may be prejudiced against women, children, and people of other races and so on. Having noted how gender is used to separate men from women, it further allows people to qualitatively assume differences between men and women. While the male gender can be described in terms of physical, hormonal, genetic and biological considerations, the man is expected to be one who is “virile, controls women, and is successful in competition with other men and is daring, heroic and aggressive.”⁴ Where this is the understanding of masculinity or manhood, women are largely seen as the opposite of

² Tristan Anne Borer, “Gendered War and Gendered Peace: Truth Commissions and Postconflict Gender Violence: Lessons from South Africa” in *Violence Against Women* 15, No. 10 (2009), 1169-1193.

³ WHO, “Gender, Women and Health” <http://www.who.int/gender/whatisgender/en/index.html> (accessed 28th May 2008).

⁴ Serena Nanda and Richard Warms, *Cultural Anthropology*, (New York: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1998), 210.

men, and hence they are expected to be weak, vulnerable, submissive and in need of protection from men.

Gender prejudice therefore can only be fully appreciated from this background, where women are looked down upon simply because they are women. In those cases where women have done more than is expected of them, they are then described as “being men”, hence the emergence of metaphors that are employed when women have exceeded expectations of what they are assumed to be capable of achieving. One such metaphor is “*mukadzi uya murume chaiye* [that woman is a real man].”⁵ This “apparent” elevation of women is in itself indicative of gender prejudice. Gender prejudice, owing to the separation and distinction of men from women, has long been woven into the fabric of most societies. In many cultures, including in Zimbabwe a varying amount of discrimination is especially targeted at women simply because they are women. While gender prejudice is therefore common in many societies, its manifestations differ in these societies and the basis upon which such prejudice depends on is also different. The bases upon which gender prejudice is built range from physical, social, economic, political, emotional, biological, and – most important for this article – religious bases. In this regard, the use of biblical texts is an extension of the religiously sustained gender prejudice which pervades contemporary Zimbabwean communities.

Gender prejudice in many societies has been driven by a belief that women are the weaker of the sexes emotionally as well as physically and must be protected from the world outside the home. In the traditional setting, normally, males were expected to be dominant in family matters, particularly those relating to the outside world, while females were expected to assume domestic chores. It is within this context that stereotypes become critical instruments in making prejudice operational, since all men were stereotyped as aggressive, dominant and competitive, while all women were stereotyped as weak, submissive and in need of protection. Men who failed to meet these demands, that is, men who failed to be victorious in battles, or who did not display the expected attributes of dominance and aggression, were then seen as not being “real” men; they were indeed “women”. Stereotyping suggests that all members of a group behave in certain ways and have certain characteristics that separate them from other

⁵ Masiwa Ragies Gunda, *The Bible and Homosexuality in Zimbabwe*, (Bamberg: University of Bamberg Press, 2010), 168.

groups. To that extent, therefore, prejudice becomes that negative prejudgment of a group and its members which is based on generalizations, for example on what makes a “real” man or woman in this case. While gender prejudice against women is widely covered in various studies, this article argues that it is also employed in discussions of same-sex relationships in Zimbabwe. In the following section, I will seek to highlight the manner in which Genesis 1 and 2 have been used in Zimbabwe as regards this matter.

Biblical Texts as Bases for Gender Prejudice

The most critical contribution of the Bible to the entrenchment of gender prejudice against same-sex relationships in Zimbabwe has been its deployment as an instrument that confuses sex and gender. This religious bundling together of sex and gender in Christian thinking is based on the assumption, as indicated by Mojiga that “a philological study of the creation accounts in Gen. 1-2 reveals that gender differentiation is created.”⁶ While Mijoga clearly is not necessarily referring to gender prejudice, understanding gender difference as divinely ordained becomes a firm basis upon which gender prejudice can be built. Central to this interpretation of the Bible is the assumption that there is a fundamental difference between men and women, and that this difference is divinely ordained, together with the accompanying privileges and disadvantages for men and women respectively. In fact, as Judy Tobler observes,

the idea that male and female are different and, moreover, associated with ‘good’ and ‘bad’ respectively, can already be detected in the *creation myths* (emphasis my own)... [Furthermore] the oppositional categories of male and female underlie other dualistic notions that are interpreted in ways that are both gendered and unequal, and these are perpetuated by the androcentric perspective of ‘male’ as the norm of humanness and ‘female’ as the subordinate ‘other’ that deviates from the norm.⁷

While it would seem that both of the creation narratives in Genesis 1 and 2 are used equally, this is actually not the case because the narrative in Genesis 2 is more widely used than that in Genesis 1. The former is preferred because in it Adam, the man, was created first while

⁶ Hilary Mijoga, “Gender differentiation in the Bible: created and recognized,” *Journal of Humanities (Zomba)* 13, (1999), 87.

⁷ Judy Tobler “Beyond a Patriarchal God: Bringing the transcendent back to the body” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 106, (2000), 36.

Eve, the woman, was created later, a sequence which provides for the hierarchical ordering of men and women.⁸

This usage of the Genesis 2 narrative is widely observed at weddings in Zimbabwe, where it is the most commonly used text, which is used to clarify the hierarchical ordering of the newlyweds. The bride is therefore prepared to live with the reality of inequality because it is divinely ordained or created by God.⁹ With the aid of the Bible, gender prejudice has been sacralized and firmly deposited within the divine realm. Prejudice is essentially portrayed as holiness. One of the most subtle ways in which the Bible accomplishes such tasks is through authority first being heaped on the biblical texts, after which that authority is transferred to the interpreters of these texts. This double-step is made possible because “decisions about holy books were ... not only decisions about religious matters, but about who had controlling power in the life of the community,”¹⁰ hence all manner of prejudices shared by the interpreters were then allowed to flourish as divine sanction. By using the creation story as the basis of amalgamating sex and gender, the Bible has been deployed as an instrument of justifying gender prejudice against women and sexual minorities in Zimbabwe. This stance deliberately ignores the points that challenge its biblical connection, by suggesting that all questions directed against it are in fact an assault on the authority of the Bible.¹¹ Gender prejudice is therefore seen as “biblical authority” in this understanding. With this brief overview of the creation narratives within gender discussions, the following section will now focus on how echoes of the same creation narratives find expression in same-sex discussions within Zimbabwe.

Gender Prejudice in Same-Sex Talk among Zimbabweans

One of the most common catchphrases of the anti-homosexual movement in Zimbabwe and in many other countries has come in the

⁸ Jerome Gellman, “Gender and Sexuality in the Garden of Eden” *Theology and Sexuality* 12 no. 3 (2006), 323.

⁹ Mijoga “Gender differentiation in the Bible,” 87.

¹⁰ Norman Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-Literary Introduction*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 111.

¹¹ See for example Noah Pashapa, “Even the Bible condemns homosexuality,” *The Sunday Mail*, 26th April 1998 (Harare) wherein he argues that “In the Old Testament are scattered but clear-cut references that condemn homosexuality [sic]. Dr. Noah Pashapa is a former lecturer of Old Testament studies and Classical Hebrew at the University of Zimbabwe, and a Pastor in the Hatfield Baptist Church.

form of a poetic line: “Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve!”¹² At the heart of this slogan is the assumption that Adam and Eve, male and female, man and woman mean essentially the same thing, hence “at a demonstration organized by the Apostolic Faith Church one placard read, ‘God created Adam and Eve, not Adam and Adam’,”¹³ which represents another of the variants of the catchphrase that find expression in Zimbabwe. This blend of prejudice and divinity is clearly put forward when Pastor Constantine Murefu writes that “in Gen. 1:27, the Bible says God created them male and female. This is God’s natural order which we human beings are violating.”¹⁴ The pastor uses the terms male and female to refer to men and women, since the basic understanding of the biblical text takes these categories as synonymous. What is even more interesting is that this text is in fact rarely used when relations between men and women are under discussion. When it comes to same sex relationships however, the text becomes critically important as seen in its use by Murefu. This stance is reiterated when Tongai Gwafa argues that “the Bible condemns acts of homosexuality. When God wanted to create Adam’s partner, he could have created a man not a woman, but as you can see it makes no sense.”¹⁵ The patriarchal and heterosexual framework categorizes all human beings into two classes, men and women, with the latter being at the receiving end of gender prejudice. Same-sex relationships are also talked of within this framework, hence the question: who is the woman? This is a question that essentially asks: who is being penetrated? Penetration becomes the central core of sexual relationships because in the above-mentioned framework, women are essentially sexual objects for men. This prejudice is transferred to same-sex relationships because, since women are not seen as benefitting much from sexual intercourse other than through falling pregnant, the question asked is ultimately: why would a man want to be in a position without benefits? This is made clear in the words of the late Border Gezi, who was a Member of Parliament and Minister of Youth and Gender. He is quoted as having said the following in the Parliament of Zimbabwe: “We have asked these men whether they have been able to get pregnant. They

¹² Dave Chikosi, “What is Adam doing with Steve, asked Lot?” *The Chronicle*, 13th September 1995 (Bulawayo).

¹³ Gaudencia Mutema, “African Traditional Religion and GALZ”, University of Zimbabwe Unpublished Dissertation, 1996, 1.

¹⁴ Constantine Murefu is one of the leading pastors of the Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM) in Zimbabwe, and is also the Principal of Living Waters Bible College, at which AFM pastors are trained. “Homosexuals: Pros and Cons, God’s natural order is being violated,” *The Sunday Mail*, 5th February 1995 (Harare).

¹⁵ Tongai Gwafa, “Homos erode our culture,” *The Chronicle*, 2nd September 1995 (Bulawayo).

have not been able to answer such questions. Even the women who are engaging in lesbian activities, we have asked them what they have got from such practices and no one has been able to answer.”¹⁶ It would appear that the general same-sex negative talk is targeted mainly against the ‘woman’ in gay relationships; again because the framework makes it the role of men to be penetrators, so that being penetrated weighs heavily on the ‘woman’ and not the man. This ideology is in essence gender insensitive because of the way it disparages women and same-sex relationships while insisting that gender prejudice is divinely ordained.

While the general same-sex talk among Zimbabweans is pervaded with gender prejudices, what makes the prejudices subtle and more lethal is that they are clothed with biblical injunctions. Gender prejudice presents a threat to our quest for a just society because it does not appear to us as a socially sanctioned weakness; rather it appears as a divinely ordained strength. In short, the gender prejudice that we notice against same-sex relationships and practices in Zimbabwe, is emanating from a fundamental belief among many Zimbabweans, that is, “In the name of the Almighty, women are not equal to men.”¹⁷ This fundamental belief is then used wittingly or unwittingly in the argument against same-sex relationships in Zimbabwe. While our society has experienced serious gender prejudices, which are in reality socially constructed, this prejudice is raised from the pedestal of being social to that of being divine by the constant appeal to the Bible. In concurrence with Anthony Ceresko, “in our culture, appeal to the Bible is made to advance and justify decisions and directions.”¹⁸ In the section above, we have sought to provide a few examples of statements widely used by Zimbabweans when talking about same-sex relationships. When Zimbabweans appeal to the Bible, it is not to ask open ended questions which pave the way to deeper understanding; rather the Bible is approached via closed ended questions, which are meant to confirm previously held opinions.¹⁹ Central to the gender prejudice noted above “is the fear of other

¹⁶ Marc Epprecht, *Hungochani: The History of a Dissident Sexuality in Southern Africa*, London: McGill-Queen’s University Press, (2004), 132.

¹⁷ Timothy Mubhawa is a Member of Parliament for the Movement for Democratic Change party led by Prime Minister Morgan Richard Tsvangirai. In 2006, during a debate on the Domestic Violence Bill in the Parliament of Zimbabwe, he made this infamous statement and even claimed to be representing God, the Almighty. While there was an uproar against the MP, listening to ordinary Zimbabweans, one realizes that such ideas are far more common than we dare admit. Mubhawa subsequently lost his seat as an MP.

¹⁸ Anthony Ceresko, *Introduction to the Old Testament: A Liberation Perspective*, (New York: Orbis Books, 1992), 300.

¹⁹ Andrew Marin, *Love Is an Orientation: Elevating the Conversation with the Gay Community*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2009).

heterosexual men. Or put differently, the fear of gay theology is most importantly ... a fear of how one is perceived among one's own heterosexual ... peers."²⁰ The social life of Zimbabweans is such that individuals are never truly in control of their own lives, since communities (and, in today's context, government) exert a huge influence over individual choices. Hence the fear expressed above should be understood as "a fear of the power these men have over one's life."²¹ The primary fear is for one to be suspected of being gay by one's peers and by the authorities who can easily react irrationally and violently. However, this fear is also based on the assumption that women are lesser beings than men; hence those men who 'choose' to become 'women' are in essence relegating themselves to a lower level, a level which brings shame not only to themselves but also to men in general. This understanding is the epitome of gender prejudice! The Bible is then invoked to rationalize, justify and provide divine cover for this gender prejudice.

It has now become generally accepted among those who oppose the above stance, that gender prejudice is one of the most fundamental obstacles to achieving parity among the sexes. Gender prejudice is understood as the tendency or practice of discriminating or judging people because of their gender identity. Gender prejudice affects entire societies, hence religion and sacred texts are co-opted as resources for supporting it, either because they are themselves sources of discrimination against women or because they provide the necessary divine authentication of such prejudices.

This paper now outlines gender prejudice as it emerges in general same-sex talk among Zimbabweans. Travelling on public transport for a few days will expose one to all sorts of new phrases and idioms as well as views on topical issues, including same-sex relationships and practices, from the commuter bus crews plying various routes in Harare. At a commuter omnibus rank in Harare, one will hear *mahwindi* (drivers, conductors and rank marshalls) use the phrase "*uringochani*" (you are gay) several times against each other. In this context, the men are actually friends or workmates who are having a disagreement over something. One of them decides to challenge the manhood of the other by labelling him *ngochani*. In my understanding of the scene and the use of this phrase, the man being called gay is being denigrated for not

²⁰ Björn Krondorfer, "Who's afraid of gay theology? Men's studies, gay scholars, and heterosexual silence". *Theology and Sexuality*, 13 no. 3 (2007), 269.

²¹ David J. Livingston, "Overcoming Heterosexual Anxiety before Gay Theology." *Theology and Sexuality* 14, (2007), 81.

being manly enough because homosexuals are seen as being feminine. The assumption is that gays are men who want to be women, and when one is called gay as in the scene described above, one is in fact being accused of being feminine. This labelling has two possible implications: the accusers cannot fight either because the accused is a 'woman', and fighting against a woman is seen as unmanly behaviour; or the accused is in fact already defeated since he is actually a 'woman'. The suggestion is that women are weak and will always be defeated by men; that women are lesser beings than men, and hence that men who want to be women are actually relegating themselves to a lower level. Such men are a disgrace to fellow men; they bring shame to manhood. Closely related to this is one of the questions frequently asked by heterosexuals, "Is so and so is gay?" The question is short and precise, and is structured in the same heterosexual framework: is he the 'man' or the 'woman'? The question assumes a qualitative difference between men and women in sexual relationships, hence the confusion is caused by the desire of a gay person, who biologically is a man, but who has been sociologically relegated to being a woman.

On most critical issues Zimbabwe faces, the Bible is widely invoked as the source of authority and legitimacy for whatever position one has. This trend began in colonial times, when the colonial regime used biblical injunctions to justify their minority government rule and their legitimacy, and continued when the Black nationalists appropriated the Bible for the justification of their war of liberation. The missionaries were positioned on both sides in the war, providing, via the Bible, spiritual guidance to the warring factions. Since independence, the ZANU-PF led government has continued to use the Bible to support its agenda, while opposition parties followed suit, with the MDC in particular making extensive references to the biblical texts. In the colonial era, Christians are positioned in both of the opposing camps. This has meant that the influence and clout of the Bible has long been significant in the country.²² This influence and authority has become a prized asset for those seeking influence and authority of their own. Because so much is at stake, the use of the Bible has not always been innocent, fair-minded or disinterested. Personal opinions, likes and dislikes have been justified by invoking the Bible;²³ it is in this context that this article analyzes the use of the Bible in fostering gender prejudice against same-sex relationships.

²² Gunda, *The Bible and Homosexuality*, 80-90.

²³ Gerald West, *Biblical Hermeneutics of Liberation: Modes of Reading the Bible in the South African Context*, (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1995), 170.

Researchers on same-sex practices and relationships in Zimbabwe, including Epprecht (2004, 2008), Gunda (2006, 2008, 2010), Shoko (2009) and Mutema (1996) acknowledge the fact that one of the most widely used resources for the condemnation of same-sex relationships, has been the Bible, which is alleged to have dealt with the subject once and for all. In the next section, the focus will be on investigating how the creation narratives are invoked to rationalize and justify gender prejudice against same-sex relationships under the guise of doing God's will. In such usages of biblical texts and teachings, gender transforms from being a socially constructed system to being a divinely ordained system of ordering human beings. The same idea is expressed by Pashapa who argues that the biblical texts that speak against same-sex practices and other forms of cross gender activities (Deut. 22:5) "reinforce the need for men to be men while women also must be women."²⁴ As Banana (1993:18-9) observes, "when human beings make claims that they are inspired by God and that, arising from this so-called inspiration, their utterances represent the voice of God, care should be taken so as not to mistake the voice of mortals for the voice of God."²⁵ A 'divinely created' rather than a socially constructed gender is one of the toughest challenges that women and other victims of gender prejudice must negotiate against.

Towards a Sustainable Use of the Bible against Gender Prejudice in Same-Sex Discussions

Two critical observations guide the suggestion supporting a continued use, rather than an all-out rejection of the Bible in discussions about same-sex relationships in Zimbabwe. The first is the observation that the majority of Zimbabweans are Christians who strongly rely on the Bible for guidance. The Bible remains one of the most read books in Zimbabwe, being referred to "in times of joy and sorrow,"²⁶ and hence it is not surprising that it remains possibly the most influential book in the country. The second observation is that the Bible can in fact be used to reconfigure social relations by re-engaging with its texts, since these are already so influential in Zimbabwean society. These observations make it clear that for the foreseeable future, Zimbabweans will continue, and should not be dissuaded from continuing, to make use of the Bible in

²⁴ Noah Pashapa, "Even the Bible condemns", 26.

²⁵ Canaan Banana, "The Case for a New Bible" in *"Rewriting" the Bible: the real issues*, eds. Isabel Mukonyora, James Cox and Frans Verstraelen (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1993), 18-19.

²⁶ Togarasei Lovemore, "Fighting HIV and AIDS with the Bible: Towards HIV and AIDS Biblical criticism" in *Mainstreaming HIV and AIDS in Theological Education: Experiences and Explorations*, ed. Ezra Chitando, (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2008), 73.

public life. For that reason, this article does not share the view that because the Bible is being used to sustain prejudices in our society, this means that in order to bring about justice; we should simply ignore the biblical texts. In Zimbabwe, the Bible is ignored at one's own risk. Two critical arguments against same-sex relationships in Zimbabwe are based on the creation stories of the Bible: first, same-sex relationships are seen as not being provided for in God's creation as retold in Genesis 1 and 2; and second, gender differences are understood to be part of the created order as retold in these texts. This article therefore proposes an alternative understanding based on the same creation narratives that have been central in sustaining the prejudices against same-sex relationships.

From the above sections, it is apparent that the populist views on same-sex relationships and practices have been framed around the assumption that heterosexuality is 'natural' and the Bible has been invoked to sustain this assumption. In this section, the focus is no longer on gender prejudice, but rather on why and how the Bible could be used to engender a sustainable anti-gender prejudice agenda in the context of same-sex relationships. To do this, the first observation is that a closer look at biblical texts shows that the texts come from a community which had elaborately socially constructed gender identities and roles. This realization highlights that while in Zimbabwean discussions, the Bible is seen as being neutral, just and fair to all, the fact is that biblical texts arose out of real socio-historically conditioned lives, that were shaped by socio-economic, political and cultural factors, just as are our lives today. The ancient Israelite communities were patriarchal in nature and therefore the dominant voices in the Bible are those of the most powerful men, and unless this point is taken note of, we run the risk of adopting the views of the elites and confuse them with the views of God. While the above sections have shown that the Bible has become an active instrument through which gender prejudices that have affected the discussion on same-sex relationships in Zimbabwe have been justified, this section seeks now to propose alternative readings of the same creation narratives in a way that "queers" our prejudices. The challenge is not against the LGBTI community: the war is against ourselves. To be Christian means essentially to be engaged in a war against our instincts and prejudices.

The texts that are widely cited as sustaining the condemnation of same-sex relationships must be understood as texts that are socially and historically conditioned. However, any theology that is sustainable must reflect the fundamental essence of Christianity which rises above and

beyond this social and historical context. The creation stories of Genesis 1-2, that are cited as the foundational texts for the argument against same-sex relationships were never texts that were meant to deal with human sexuality. These texts were compiled as explanations of the origins of the sexes, male and female. A re-reading of the creation narratives, especially the narrative in Genesis 1-2: 4a, shows that the Christian God that we believe in as Christians, is the creator of all that is. This God creates everything, from the universe, to the Earth and all its other inhabitants, to the males and females who were created in the image of God. Male and female, in this context, essentially represent the two extremes on a continuum of the sexes and do not necessarily mark the only sexes. In vs. 26-7, God decides to create *man* in God's own image, God created him; *male* and *female* he created them. This text suggests the creation of humanity and in this regard, femaleness pertains to the image of God as fully as maleness. God is neither male nor female since God is neither a physical nor a sexual being. God transcends both genders as they are both comprehended within God's being.²⁷ There is indeed a lot of sense in the arguments proposed by feminist biblical scholars that the ideal of God's created order was the equality of the sexes,²⁸ an element that appears well entrenched in Gen. 1: 26-7 as paraphrased above.

The creator God is too powerful to be limited to human opinions. What this implies is that all human beings are created by God, irrespective of their sexual identity; they all carry within them the image of God. This is enough to assist Christians begin the fight against our prejudices and instincts; if all human beings inherently possess the image of God, why do we fail to show respect to the image of God when discussing same-sex relationships? Still focusing on the creative work of God, it is clear that the creator God is far beyond our understanding, given the myriad of things in the created universe that Christians do not understand; the things that are called "the wonders of God". If male-female were the only sexes, how would we explain the fact that we, as Zimbabweans, from pre-colonial times, have known of children born with both sets of sexual organs? While in Zimbabwe, there was a time when some of these wonders were frowned upon, such as children born with albinism,

²⁷ Gilbert Bilezikian, *Beyond Sex Roles: What the Bible says about a Woman's Place in Church and Family*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 19.

²⁸ See: Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality: Overtures to Biblical Theology*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978); Susan S. Lancer, "(Feminist) Criticism in the Garden: Inferring Genesis 2-3", *Semeia* 41 (1988), 67-84; Phyllis A. Bird, "Bone of My Bone and Flesh of My Flesh", *Theology Today* 50 (1993), 521-34; Carol Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

twin sets of children, children born with various physical challenges, and intersexed children,²⁹ our society has since outgrown many of these prejudices and has moved to celebrating the diversities of human beings as a manifestation of the unpredictability of God, the creator. It is important to reclaim this theological understanding, which cherishes the fact that God created all things and that the universe is made beautiful by the multiplicity of diversities, from physical appearances to human sexual orientations. In fact, acknowledging God as the creator means Christians can begin to discuss with the LGBTI community in the light of all of humans being created in the image of God. This theological understanding has no room for the comparison that is seen being made between the LGBTI community and criminals, in that, while criminals offend against both God and society by engaging in activities that involve harming others, the LGBTI community is neither offending God nor harming other citizens.. This theological understanding that we all share the image of God means that the existing sexual ethic, as indicated in the biblical texts, can be applied equally to both heterosexuals and the LGBTI community.

The second dimension our theological reflection must help to us challenge is our conception of marriage, since some of the views we share are so far removed from reality that if we are to honestly apply such conceptions, not only do we find justification for our prejudices against same-sex relationships, but we also end up with a compromised heterosexuality. Focusing on the creation story in Genesis 1, the creation of male and female is clearly an attempt by the ancient Israelites to explain the beginnings of life. We all attempt to explain the beginnings, but there is hardly a mention of marriage, suggesting that marriage is not among the aspects of the divinely created universe. The creation narrative was not written by God, it is a human attempt to retell what people think happened in the beginning, and even the ancients realized that marriage was socially constructed; hence they simply refer to the creation of males and females in Genesis 1: 26-27. In disagreement with Mijoga, this creation story cannot be a basis for gender distinctions because all it does is focus on the sexes: different sexes are created by God. Gender distinctions are the result of the "fall" from gender equality;³⁰ hence they cannot be taken as what God prescribed. If anything, the creation of males and females shows that from the beginning, God designed companionship among human beings. Who we choose from the pool of human beings is left to us to

²⁹ Michael Gelfand, *The Genuine Shona: Survival values of an African culture*, (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1973), 175.

³⁰ Cf. Gellman, "Gender and Sexuality", 320.

decide as we act on various signals that are in built into all created beings. This is what makes God; the ability to confound humanity. On the basis of the creation story in Genesis 1, same-sex relationships are being undertaken by males and females who are created by God, and who possess in them the image of God.

With this theological understanding, we must concur with Eddie Makue that “religious marriage [is] a covenant that two people make publicly with God, a commitment to mutual sharing, caring, faithfulness and support.”³¹ In this summary of marriage, the idea of children or procreation ceases to be the most critical or determinative factor; rather companionship is. Marriage is primarily about companionship; God wants us to live in companion with others. This companionship is not necessarily the dominant view in the Bible because the biblical texts were developed and canonized by those whose understanding of marriage was conditioned by particular environments, which may have favoured procreation ahead of companionship. With the exception of the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox, who teaches that marriage is a sacrament, all other denominations appear to agree that marriage is a contract between human beings, and thus the sexes of the partners cannot be the decisive factor since companionship can be given by anyone, heterosexual or homosexual.

Finally, in rethinking our theology in the context of same-sex relationships, it must be clear that the battle is not between heterosexuals and homosexuals, but rather between heterosexuals and themselves. Our instincts and prejudices are behind the creation of orthodoxies around the world in many different communities. Such orthodoxy is created by the elites and not by God, and the prejudices that have been expressed against same-sex relationships are our orthodoxy and not God’s orthodoxy. It makes sense therefore to argue that “the established Church ... continues to seek to retain the orthodoxy which Jesus challenged in his day”³², and that it is this orthodoxy that needs to be questioned.

Conclusion

As Christians, we believe in a God who is fair and just, a God who is compassionate and loving, but most importantly, through Jesus Christ

³¹ Eddie Makue, “Open Letter on Marriage: South African Council of Churches,” <http://sacc.org.za/news06/marriage.html> (accessed 9th June 2008).

³² Heather Garner and Michael Worsnip, “Oil and Water: The Impossibility of Gay and Lesbian Identity within the Church” in *Towards an Agenda for Contextual Theology: Essays in Honour of Albert Nolan*, eds. McGlory T. Speckman and Larry T. Kaufmann, (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications 2001), 211.

we believe in a God who takes sides with the victims of socially constructed prejudices, prejudices that are packaged as divine, when in actual fact they are not. Socially constructed prejudices disguised as morals are critically designed by societies to serve power relationships. In many societies, prejudices are dictated by the cliques of the powerful elites and more often than not, are far removed from or contradictory to the design of God for all human beings. The debate on same-sex relationships in Zimbabwe is awash with language that clearly betrays persistent gender prejudices. These gender prejudices are based on the assumption that social hierarchies are divinely ordained, with all females being categorized as of lesser qualitative importance to men, hence meaning that those men who “want to become women” are shaming the entire group of men by failing to live according to the social standards of manhood. This prejudice has been justified by the deployment of the creation story in Genesis 1-2. However, a closer re-reading of Genesis 1 shows that this text can in fact challenge our theological prejudice against same-sex relationships in our society.

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“Beyond the Bible”: Critical Reflections on the Contributions of Cultural and Postcolonial Studies on Same-sex Relationships in Africa

Lovemore Togarasei¹ and Ezra Chitando²

Abstract

Aside from for South Africa, all sub-Saharan African countries have criminalized same-sex relationships. However, despite these criminalisations, the call for the acceptance/tolerance of those involved in such relationships is increasing and many African countries have found the topic dominating public debates. The Bible is at the centre of these debates, being used by both camps: the pro same-sex relationships camp and the anti same-sex relationships camp. However, a close analysis of the biblical texts appealed to shows that there is a selective use of the Bible to entrench one's already accepted position. There appears to be more to Africans' resistance to same-sex relationships than what the Bible says. Hence, the basic questions addressed in this paper are: do Africans resist same-sex relationships purely on the basis of the teaching of the Bible or are there other factors at play? Which texts are used to deny same-sex relationships a place and how are these texts read and interpreted? A number of African scholars have looked at such texts and exposed the weaknesses inherent in the use of these texts to resist same-sex relationships. However, not much has been said on the need to respect culture, nor on democratic values and the place of postcoloniality in discussions on same-sex relationships in Africa. The paper engages all these factors as it critically reflects on the use of the Bible in the debate on same-sex relationships in Africa.

Introduction

The subject of same-sex relationships³ has recently raised serious debates in Africa. In Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe, the President of

¹ Lovemore Togarasei (PhD) is from Zimbabwe and is an Associate Professor in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies, at the University of Botswana where he teaches biblical studies. He has published widely in the areas of Pentecostal Christianity, HIV and AIDS and other socio-cultural issues affecting biblical interpretation in Africa. Email: togaraseil@mopipi.ub.bw

² Ezra Chitando (PhD) is from Zimbabwe. He is a Theological Consultant for the World Council of Churches Ecumenical HIV and AIDS Initiative in Africa and is Associate Professor in the Department of Religious Studies, Classics and Philosophy, at the University of Zimbabwe where he teaches Phenomenology of Religion and World Religions. He has published widely on various aspects of religions in Africa, of late in the areas of HIV and AIDS and masculinities. Email: chitsa21@yahoo.com

³ 'Same-sex' and 'homosexuality' are used interchangeably in this paper.

Zimbabwe, has accused people who have same sex orientation and who are in same sex relationships of being worse than pigs and dogs.⁴ In some countries like Uganda homosexuals have been threatened with death with legislators suggesting stricter laws against them (Uganda Anti-Homosexuality Bill, 2009). Besides South Africa, all the other countries of sub-Saharan Africa have criminalised same-sex relationships. Although studies have shown that the practice of same-sex relationships has a long history in Africa,⁵ it has generally not been accepted on the continent. Cases such as those of two Malawian men⁶ and those of gay weddings in Kenya⁷ in 2010 tell the story of the criminalisation of homosexuality in Africa. But despite these criminalisations, the calls for the acceptance/tolerance of people involved in such relationships are increasing and many African countries have found that the topic has come to dominate public debates.

The recent pronouncement by David Cameron, the Prime Minister of Britain, that his country would in future cut aid to African countries that do not respect homosexual rights, has intensified the debates.⁸ However, much of the research on this issue within Africa, has focused on the use of the bible in this debate, while culture and issues of postcolonialism are given negligible attention. We wish to argue that while the bible is an important source of the resistance to same-sex relationships it is not the only source. In what follows we examine the use of the bible both for and against same-sex relationships, but then move on to examine sources of rejection to same-sex relationships such as culture and the debates around postcolonialism.

Biblical Texts on Same-sex Relationships

Choon-Leong Seow puts the texts that are used against homosexuality into four categories: legal texts that explicitly forbid same-sex relationships (Leviticus 18:22, Leviticus 20:13), narrative passages that are said to illustrate its wrongness (Genesis 19:1-14, Judges 19:22), New Testament lists of inappropriate and wrongful behaviours (Romans

⁴ Tabona Shoko, "Worse than dogs and pigs? Attitudes toward Homosexual Practice in Zimbabwe," *Journal of Homosexuality* 57 (2010), 634-649.

⁵ See, for example, essays in Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe (eds.) *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands: Studies of African Homosexualities*. (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1998).

⁶ BBC News, "Kenya Chiefs block Mombasa 'gay wedding'," 11 February 2010, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/10130240>, accessed 10th October 2011.

⁷ BBC News, "Malawi gay couple get maximum sentence of 14 years," 20 May 2010, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/10130240>, accessed 10th October 2011.

⁸ BBC News, "Uganda fury on David Cameron aid threat over gay rights," 31 October 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-15524013>, accessed 14th November 2011.

1:26-27, 1 Cor. 6:9-10, 1 Timothy 1:9-10) and the creation accounts in Gen. 1-2.⁹ Below we analyse how the texts have been used to condemn same-sex relationships.

The above texts are often cited in general discussions by those who oppose same-sex relationships. Critical analyses of the texts have mainly been given by those trying to expose the weaknesses in the use of the texts against homosexuality. Some biblical scholars have employed these texts against same-sex relationships, for example Robert A. J. Gagnon.¹⁰ The texts that explicitly forbid same-sex relationships are given in the context of the Holiness Code found in Lev. 17-26. The acts mentioned in this code are called abominations (*to eba*), meaning "an abhorrent thing, or something detestable, loathsome, utterly repugnant, disgusting, intimidating in particularly revolting and conspicuous violations of boundaries established by God against the defiling behavior characteristic of other peoples."¹¹ As a result these abominations are punishable by death. Lev. 18:22 and 20:13 are unambiguous on the prohibition of same-sex relationships and the resultant death penalty. For those opposed to homosexuality, these texts need no further interpretation.

The same applies to texts that illustrate the wrongfulness of same-sex relationships. The story of Sodom and Gomorrah has long been treated as a classic Bible story about how God hates homosexuality. However, there are some scholars who, although they are against same sex sexuality, realize the weaknesses of using this story to argue their position on this matter. They note that the story does not deal with consensual same-sex relationships and so is not an ideal one on which to base Christian sexual ethics. Gagnon is one such scholar, but does observe that although this is the case, the author crafted the story to elicit feelings of revulsion on the part of the reader/hearer by making same-sex relationships inherently degrading.¹² Gagnon's interpretation is favoured by those who condemn same-sex relationships.

From the New Testament texts there are two terms that have been singled out from the lists of vices in each of the texts. These are

⁹ Choon-Leong Seow, "Textual Orientation," in *Biblical Ethics and Homosexuality: Listening to Scripture*, ed. Robert L. Brawley, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 17-34.

¹⁰ Robert A. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics*, Nashville: Abingdon Press (2001).

¹¹ Robert A. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 113.

¹² Robert A. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 71.

arsenokoites and *malakos*. Although the definitions of both terms are not clear and are therefore contested,¹³ those who are against same sex sexuality have preferred the translations that render the two terms 'homosexuals'. In this light these texts have been read and interpreted together with the Leviticus texts to underline that God is against same sex sexuality. Gagnon even believes that Paul's reference to same sex sexuality in Romans 1:26ff was influenced by his application of the Leviticus texts to Christian values. He says, "the very term that Paul employed for men who take other males to bed, *arsenokoites*, is a compound formed from the words in Leviticus 18:22, 20:13 (LXX) for "male" and "lying".¹⁴

On the basis of the creation stories, the fact that God created Adam (male) and Eve (female) has been used to argue that heterosexual relationships are normative. Because God created man and woman, natural sex is therefore heterosexual while homosexual is unnatural. Gagnon makes his argument on the basis of complementarity. He says it is only through a woman a being made out of man that she can be a suitable and complementary counterpart for him. He argues further, "Male and female are "perfect fits" from the standpoint of divine design and blessing. Male and male and female and female are not."¹⁵ This anti-same sex sexuality reading of these texts is the one that is followed by many Christians in Africa. However those who support same-sex relationships have also used the bible to buttress their arguments.

Firstly, one argument on their part has been that the Bible does not explicitly mention same sex sexuality. Howard H. Bess, for example, says there is no reference to same sex sexual orientation in the Bible.¹⁶ He then continues to argue that it is not proper to ask the Bible to answer questions that it never addresses. Further he says that Jesus, who always commented on the evils of his day, never addressed this subject. Secondly, the explicit texts from Leviticus are viewed as selective readings as there are many other prohibitions that the Church no longer observes today. No one enforces the law that forbids crossbreeding or that forbids sowing two kinds of seeds in one field (Lev. 19:19) any more. The stipulations on who should be appointed

¹³ This is discussed at length by Dale B. Martin, "*Arsenokoites* and *Malakos*: Meanings and Consequences," in *Biblical Ethics and Homosexuality: Listening to Scripture*, ed. Robert L Brawley, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 117-136.

¹⁴ Robert A. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 112.

¹⁵ Robert A. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 62.

¹⁶ Howard H. Bess, *Pastor, I am Gay*, (Alaska: Palmer Publishing Company, 1995), 82.

priest (Lev. 21) are also no longer observed today. Why then should the stipulation on man having sex with another man be enforced, they ask.

Thirdly, when it comes to narrative texts that illustrate the wrongness of same sex sexuality Choon-Leong Seow points to cultural differences between the context of the text and that of modern society.¹⁷ He notes, for example, that Lot and the old Ephramite's offer of women to be abused by the men would definitely be unacceptable today. Furthermore, it is noted in the case of Sodom and Gomorrah that their sin was not same sex sexuality as such. Rather, as the rest of the Old Testament (Isa. 1:10, Jer. 23:14 and Ezek. 16:49) testifies, Sodom symbolized the sins of greed, injustice, inhospitality, insensitivity to the needs and pain of others and general wickedness.¹⁸ Extra-biblical sources, like the writings of Josephus also mention the sin of Sodom as general wickedness.

Fourthly, with regard to the three New Testament texts, a thorough study by Robin Scroggs has examined their message as regards same sex sexuality.¹⁹ Guided by the hermeneutical principle that for moral and ethical passages of the Bible to be applied to today's world there must be some reasonable similarity between the contexts then and now, Scroggs points out that the context of Paul was different from today's. Apart from noting the difficulty of translating the Greek words associated with same sex sexuality into English, Scroggs also argues that the context of Paul shows no indication of interest in same-sex relationships between consenting adults. He noted the widespread practice of pederasty, a form of prostitution in which young boys were used sexually by heterosexual males.²⁰ Scroggs says it is this practice that Paul was against and any attempt to link what he (Paul) says with same sex sexuality is an incorrect application of the texts.

Finally, with regard to the creation stories, according to Mel White, the creation stories are about God's power and presence in the universe, not about natural and unnatural sexual relationships.²¹ Meanwhile, Choon-Leong Seow argues that the creation stories are about biology

¹⁷ Choon-Leong Seow, "Textual Orientation," in *Biblical Ethics and Homosexuality: Listening to Scripture*, ed. Robert L. Brawley, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 62.

¹⁸ Choon-Leong Seow, "Textual Orientation," 22.

¹⁹ Robin Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality: Contextual Background for Contemporary Debate*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983).

²⁰ Bess, *Pastor, I am Gay*, 85.

²¹ Mel White, "Looking for Answers about what the Bible says about Homosexuality," www.soulforce.org, (accessed 15th September 2011).

and the human status in relation to God, not about social and sexual relationships.²² He says that they were written against other ancient creation myths that presented human beings as slaves of gods, with these gods limiting human growth. The Genesis creation stories then highlighted that humanity was created in God's image and that God commanded to multiply.

The above are positions taken by those who would want to argue from the biblical text. There are also pro-same sex sexuality arguments that question the authority of the Bible in contemporary Christian communities. Such liberal approaches to the Bible is highlighted by Masiwa R. Gunda.²³ This argument is based on the fact that the Bible was only authoritative in a specific culture and its teachings are therefore culturally relative.

In this paper we are however, interested in the two camps' use of the same Bible to reach two conclusions. We therefore do not pursue further the question of the authority of the Bible. When both camps appeal to the same Bible but arrive at different conclusions, then one is forced to ask whether the different positions are indeed informed by the Bible. We turn to this question in the next two sections.

African Culture and Same Sex Sexuality

One other source for arguments for and against same sex sexuality is "traditional African culture." Two categories of African intellectuals are central to the appeal to African culture in opposing same sex sexuality. In the first instance, one could identify African intellectuals who wield political power. A number of African male presidents have used the cultural thesis to oppose same sex sexuality. Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, Yoweri Museveni of Uganda and Sam Nujoma of Namibia have all argued that African culture condemns same sex sexuality. While Nujoma has since retired and further, might not fall under the category of African intellectuals, Mugabe and Museveni have demonstrated considerable intellectual power, though one may not readily agree with their practical political strategies. These politicians have argued that same sex sexuality is a 'Western cultural perversion' that is being pushed down the throats of Africans. Former president of Kenya, Daniel arap Moi claimed that, "words like lesbianism and

²² Choon-Leong Seow, "Textual Orientation," 26.

²³ Masiwa R. Gunda, *The Bible and Homosexuality*.

homosexuality do not exist in our languages."²⁴ In his typical anti-Western rhetoric, Mugabe has consistently argued along the lines that 'if the Europeans want to uphold their homosexuality, let them do so. However, they should not force their perversion on us.' Mugabe angrily said, "Let the Americans keep their sodomy, bestiality, stupid and foolish ways to themselves, out of Zimbabwe... Let them be gay in the US, Europe and elsewhere."²⁵ This has been Mugabe's mantra whenever he tackles the theme of same sex sexuality.

The second category of African intellectuals that has appropriated culture in the discourse on homosexuality consists of certain church leaders and theologians. Many of these church leaders share the same ideological standpoint as the politicians. They contend that the whole debate on same sex sexuality is in fact part of the Western agenda of cultural imperialism. Being Christians, they read the biblical texts against same sex sexuality literally. They also contend that the West has lost its Christian outlook and has adopted a false reading of human rights. Writing from within the context of Nigeria, both Dapo F. Asaju²⁶ and Benson O. Igboin²⁷ contend that although same sex sexuality might be found in African cultures, it has never been accepted. They insist that the latest moves to coerce Africans to accept same sex sexuality as a "lifestyle" are part and parcel of the West's cultural arrogance.

The two categories of African intellectuals who have relied on African culture in resisting same sex sexuality maintain that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) overlooks cultural specificities and pretends to have a "universal" outlook. While they are willing to accept some rights as universal, such as, for example, the right to life, they contend that the right to non-discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation is not applicable to Africa. African culture, they claim, has no room for accepting same sex sexuality as a lifestyle. Politicians like Mugabe are keen to draw attention to the West's double standards when it comes to the issue of human rights. The same Western

²⁴ Marc Epprecht, *Mail and Guardian*. Johannesburg, M. & G. Media, 1995 (25th September), 3.

²⁵ Chris Dunton and Mai Palmberg, *Human Rights and Homosexuality in Southern Africa*. (Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 1996), 5.

²⁶ Dapo F. Asaju, "The Homosexuality Controversy in the Anglican Church Revisited: A Biblical and Contextual Perspective," in *Biblical View of Sex and Sexuality from an African Perspective*, ed. S. O. Abogunrin (Ibadan: Nigerian Association for Biblical Studies (NABIS), 2006), 325-339.

²⁷ Benson O. Igboin, "A Moral Appraisal of Homosexuality in Biblical, Western and African Worldviews," in *Biblical View of Sex and Sexuality from an African Perspective*, ed. S. O. Abogunrin (Ibadan: Nigerian Association for Biblical Studies (NABIS), 2006), 340-358.

countries do not hesitate to annihilate “small people” when pushing their own agendas, Mugabe has consistently argued. According to Gunda, there is contestation over the issue of rights. Thus:

The UDHR was promulgated in 1948 soon after the Second World War and that context has meant that the UDHR is historically limited to the West, hence where human rights threaten traditional values and political survival, their Western background is emphasized. This has not been helped by the central role Western donors and agencies have played in dealing with African states where human rights have been used as a basis for cooperation. In that context, governments that are considered to be human rights violators see in rights talk, a subtle way through which Western powers seek to usurp and undermine these governments. The concept of universal human rights has been greatly challenged in the homosexual debate in Zimbabwe.²⁸

A longer narrative is required to do justice to the political ramifications of the same sex sexuality debate in Africa and how the appeal to African culture is implicated in such discourses. We wish to draw attention to only three dimensions in this regard. First, the framing of the debate into “progressive Africans who accept same sex sexuality” and “backward Africans who resist same sex sexuality” is too simplistic and only serves to fire up cultural nationalists who believe they have the responsibility to defend indigenous culture. Second, the visibility of Western donors, agencies and governments, as well as pronouncements such as those by Prime Minister David Cameron in pushing the same sex sexuality agenda, makes it difficult for African advocates of same sex sexuality to refute the argument that they are “hired guns.” To say this is not to endorse this verdict but to highlight the challenges faced by the pro-homosexual camp. Critics note that the Western same sex sexuality advocacy wing tends to be domineering in its approach to the issue in Africa. Third, the absence of African researchers on this issue equips those who oppose same sex sexuality, who are quick to dismiss findings on same sex sexuality in Africa as part of the Western agenda to s(p)oil African culture (though it must be acknowledged that journals such as the present one wherein this article is being published which dedicates special issues to African voices on the subject make a contribution in this regard). We shall return to some of these themes below.

²⁸ Masiwa R. Gunda, *The Bible and Homosexuality*, 183.

Challenges to the Cultural Argument

In an effort to refute the argument that same sex sexuality did not exist in "traditional African culture," some researchers have demonstrated that there have been many recorded cases of same sex sexuality in different parts of Africa.²⁹ In addition, other publications focus on female same-sex practices in contemporary Africa.³⁰ The logical conclusion one must draw from such research is that, even if previously same sex sexuality was non-existent in Africa, it is now an existential reality. In this context, "traditional African culture" has had to come to terms with new realities.

There have also been analyses of the theme of same sex sexuality in contemporary novels and films in Africa.³¹ These stories confirm that artists, as observant cultural workers, are keen to break the silence on the topic. They have encountered same sex sexuality in their communities and use their artistic license to discuss the subject. This is a recent development as "allusions to same-sex desire have, historically, been rare in African literature and film."³²

However, we feel that sometimes the debate lacks logical coherence. The identification of same-sex practices in Africa is not the same as accepting same sex sexuality as a sexual orientation. Same-sex relationships in Africa could have been present in traditional Africa but they were never accepted as a form of sexuality. To catalogue the occurrence of same sex sexuality in areas such as mines and prisons is not to furnish evidence of same sex sexuality in Africa. What is required are far more in-depth studies that demonstrate that specific societies in fact accepted that men could have socially accepted sexual relationships with other men and that women could have socially accepted sexual relationships with other women. Furthermore, these studies would need to demonstrate that such relationships were

²⁹ See, for example, essays in Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe (eds.) *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands; Marc Epprecht, Heterosexual Africa? The History of an Idea from the Age of Exploration to the Age of AIDS*, (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2008); and Marc Epprecht, *Hungochani: The History of a Dissident Sexuality in Southern Africa*, (Montreal McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004).

³⁰ Ruth Morgan and Saskia Wieringa, *Tommy Boys, Lesbian Men and Ancestral Wives: Female same-sex practices in Africa*. (Auckland Park, South Africa: Jacana Media, 2005).

³¹ Timothy Johns, "The Prince of Pleasure: K. Sello Duiker's *Thirteen Cents* and the Economics of Homosexuality in Africa," in *Masculinities in African Literary and Cultural Texts*, eds. Helen N. Mugambi and Tuzyline J. Allan, (Oxfordshire: Ayebia Clarke Publishing Limited, 2010), 250-269.

³² Unomah Azuah, "Same-sex Sexuality Issues in some African Popular Media," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 43, no 1 (2009), 184-187.

understood as expressions of same sex sexuality, using the term as it is currently understood. Epprecht brings out the terminological challenges that emerge from deploying the term:

The language by which same-sex relationships are described in many of these sources is often Eurocentric – the word *homosexuality*, notably, suggests a clarity arising from a specific history of scientific enquiry, social relations and political struggle that did not exist in Africa and still does not very accurately describe the majority of men who have sex with men or women who have sex with women in Africa. The language Africans have used to describe such relationships is in fact commonly euphemistic or coy almost to the point of incomprehensibility beyond those in the know.³³

Where those who challenge the appropriation of African culture in discourses on same-sex relationships in Africa have a very convincing point is in their contention that traditional cultures were not homophobic. For example, even though those individuals who were considered to be threats to the well-being of society, such as (suspected) witches, were banished from society, those who were known to indulge in same-sex relationships were not subjected to such treatment. There were however steps that were undertaken in the hope of “rehabilitating” such individuals. These steps included rituals that were meant to eradicate the “bad spirit” that was believed to afflict such persons. It was hoped that after such ritual action, the affected individuals would “become normal; heterosexual.” Here, African politicians are misrepresenting “traditional African culture.” The threats and the violence that individuals who engage in same-sex relationships are subjected to are not consistent with the tolerance envisaged by indigenous African culture.

Another key point worth noting in the argument against African culture as a resource in opposing same sex sexuality is the notion that some same-sex relationships were believed to have been sanctioned by the ancestors. Although Gunda is quick to say that such same-sex relationships were not the norm and should therefore not be used to draw attention to the existence of the practice among the Shona, it is significant that they existed in society.³⁴ Shoko also acknowledges the existence of same sex sexuality in Shona society, although he indicates that it was regarded as “temporary.”³⁵ Morgan and Wieringa have drawn attention to the existence of same-sex relationships among women

³³ Marc Epprecht, *Heterosexual Africa?*, 8.

³⁴ Masiwa R. Gunda, *The Bible and Homosexuality*, 176-177.

³⁵ Tabona Shoko, “Worse than dogs and pigs?’ Attitudes toward Homosexual Practice in Zimbabwe,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 57, (2010), 634-649.

sangomas (indigenous healers) in South Africa.³⁶ However, it remains debatable whether such relationships are socially accepted.

In this section, we have sought to indicate that those who oppose same-sex relationships in Africa are not entirely driven by the Bible. Instead, they also harness African culture to bolster their stance. In fact, in most instances, they are more dependent on the "African culture argument" than the Bible. In the next section, we seek to show that defenders of same-sex relationships in Africa also rely on other arguments, apart from the Bible.

Human Rights, Science and Same Sex Sexuality

Those who argue in favour of accepting same sex sexuality are heavily influenced by the discourse on human rights. They argue that sexual orientation should not be the basis of discrimination. Consequently, those who would like to engage in same-sex relationships should be protected by the law and be free to express their sexuality. They insist that the rights of individuals are sacrosanct and should always be upheld whether they are in the majority or in the minority.

Proponents of the human rights argument in favour of same sex sexuality in Africa are critical of the idea that it is a "foreign practice." While they insist that the rights of Africans who engage in same-sex relationships must be respected, whatever the origin of same-sex relationships, they contend that it is nonsensical to charge that this is an imported practice. Thus:

In short, it is ludicrous to think that any manner of sexual love that exists today cannot be present in post-colonial Africa. Modern Africa is of course part of the world and all its loves and hatreds, laws and restrictions. And so to argue that Africans who engage in same-sex copy foreign, un-African activities is to claim a different, marginal and otherworldly identity for Africa in the world – an identity of Africans who do not experience the same kinds of feelings and thoughts as people on other continents. There is nothing particularly different about Africans, nothing that essentially distinguishes them from Americans, Asians, Europeans and any other group of human beings except their historical and social conditions.³⁷

³⁶ Morgan and Saskia Wieringa, *Tommy Boys, Lesbian Men and Ancestral Wives*, 231-258.

³⁷ Kopano Ratele, "Male Sexualities and Masculinities," in *African Sexualities: A Reader*, ed. Sylvia Tamale, (Cape Town: Pambazuka Press, 2011), 399-419.

In addition, a scientific explanation is given by some for same sex sexual orientation. There are several studies that have been conducted on this subject with some claiming the existence of a homosexual brain, a homosexual gene, intrauterine homosexual influence and homosexual influences through socialization and education.³⁸ The argument is that there are people who are born with a same sex sexual orientation. Such people are termed inverts by Scroggs.³⁹ The opposite of an invert is a pervert, in this case, a person who engages in sexual acts contrary to his/her sexual orientation. This would include even homosexuals who engage in heterosexual activity. This scientific argument, however, does not necessarily exclude the Bible. Texts against same sex sexuality are therefore interpreted from the view that what the biblical writers were against was same sex sexuality by people with heterosexual orientation. Thus the pro- same sex sexuality position also makes use of other arguments over and above the Bible.

Critical Reflections: the Bible, African Culture, Science, Human Rights and Same-sex Relationships in Postcolonial Africa

From the foregoing sections, a number of observations can be made. First, the Bible plays a major role in influencing attitudes towards same-sex relationships in Africa. It enjoys an authoritative status in terms of shaping attitudes towards the phenomenon. How the Bible is read and acted upon will continue to be a major factor in debates on same-sex relationships in Africa. Although professional interpreters will remain helpful, popular readings of the Bible will play a dominant role in shaping attitudes towards same-sex relationships in Africa. Critical biblical scholars may expose the fallacies and weaknesses of using the Bible against same sex sexuality, however, popular readers of the Bible will continue to employ Leviticus and the Pauline texts to argue that “even the Bible condemns homosexuality.” In order to promote tolerance and dialogue, there is need to influence the popular reading of the Bible in Africa.

The second observation arising from this paper is then that African culture has also been mobilised by those who oppose same-sex relationships in Africa. They contend that “traditional African culture” does not approve of such relationships. However, it has become clear

³⁸ See Robert A. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice* and Martti Nissinen, *Homeroeroticism in the Biblical World: A Historical Perspective*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998).

³⁹ Robin Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality*, 12.

that culture has itself become another site of struggle. Who defines African culture? This question emerges as those who support same-sex relationships also appeal to the same African culture for support. The latter group points to the practice of same sex sexuality even in traditional African societies.⁴⁰ We observe that African culture is itself a contested concept. Individuals or groups that appeal to African culture should not assume that there is unanimity over what constitutes African culture. Furthermore, if culture is always "on the move", how static can it be, how much can it accept, and how much can it reject? This remains open for further reflection.

The third observation arising from this paper is that the use of science to justify same sex sexuality is problematic at this stage in two ways. First, there have not been any convincing scientific studies to prove that same sex sexuality is natural (i.e. simply a part of the human make-up). Many of the studies that have been conducted have been inconclusive either because they were not representative enough or because the interpretations given by the researchers were very subjective.⁴¹ Second, those who use the Bible to argue against same-sex relationship are not concerned with what science can prove. Their argument is simple; if the Bible is against same sex sexuality, then whether it is natural or unnatural is of no consequence. They would argue, for example, that although it is natural for a married person to be sexually attracted to someone else other than his/her marriage partner, this does not justify adultery.

Fourth, and crucial for us, the role of Western governments and agencies in the same sex sexuality debate complicates the discourse. There continues to be a strong feeling among Africans opposed to same sex sexuality that the homosexual debate in Africa is part of a Western sponsored neocolonial agenda for same sex sexuality. There is a sense among those opposed to same sex sexuality that Western institutions, especially those sympathetic to gay rights, are using their financial power to push and promote the same sex sexuality agenda in Africa. But the use of financial power is not only a feature of those Western entities promoting the practice. There is also a feeling that some evangelical groups opposed to same sex sexuality are using their financial powers to fund anti-homosexual campaigns in Africa. Thus the same sex sexuality issue has become a site of struggle for neo-colonial influence in Africa.

⁴⁰ Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe (eds.), *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands*.

⁴¹ See Robert A. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*.

Indeed as early as 1967, Franz Fanon said that same sex sexuality was associated with racism and colonial oppression.⁴² This argument has been recently advanced by Robert Aldrich who finds a number of the European imperialists like Cecil Rhodes to have had sexual and emotional proclivities oriented towards intimacy with other men.⁴³ Gourav Desai also cites Rich who talks about lesbianism being considered a left-over from colonialism and decadent Western civilization in Mozambique.⁴⁴ Citing cases from Zimbabwe, Namibia and South Africa, Neville Hoad states that gay and lesbian human rights are seen as a legacy of colonialism and as facilitating a new identity-form that threatens national values.⁴⁵ It is our opinion that as long as there is a perception that Africa is being “civilized” or talked down to accept same sex sexuality, it will remain extremely difficult to make headway in changing attitudes towards same-sex relationships.

We believe that same sex sexuality and homosexual tendencies have been part and parcel of African sexuality even before Western imperialism. However, traditional African societies had their own ways of handling it. As we have argued above, people who practiced same sex sexuality were not killed, as societies had other means of engaging with the phenomenon. The present call for the legalisation and public acceptance of same sex sexuality appears to be a new development that many Africans seem not ready to accept. Taking the legal route (by enforcing such acceptance through constitutional laws) before communities have transformed their attitudes is not very helpful, as this situation seems to be the reason for violence against those who engage in same-sex relationships. There are also perceptions within Africa that lesbian and gay rights are a form of access to international donor capital. One of the authors of this paper had a conversation with a church official who claimed that one international organization promised his church a large amount of funding if they were prepared to mainstream homosexual rights in their programmes. It is again our view that directing external financial resources to fund programmes that are perceived as “promoting” homosexuality raises the stakes even further.

⁴² Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, (New York: Groove Press, 1967).

⁴³ Robert Aldrich, *Colonialism and Homosexuality*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2003).

⁴⁴ Gourav Desai, “Out of Africa,” in *Postcolonial, Queer: Theoretical Intersections*, ed. John C. Hawley, (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001), 139-164.

⁴⁵ Neville Hoad, *African Intimacies: Race, Homosexuality and Globalization*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

The likes of Mugabe are quick to identify such programmes as extensions of Western cultural imperialism.

Fifth, we argue that debates on the acceptance or tolerance of same sex sexuality should consider seriously the nature of African culture. Tradition in Africa emphasizes that something is good and therefore easily acceptable if it brings good to the whole community. Thus individual human rights are still contested and seen as promoting Western culture. It is not surprising in some African communities to find those concerned only with their own rights, and not the rights of the whole community, being accused of witchcraft. Public acceptance of same sex sexuality is resisted now because people do not presently see its benefit to society. The use of the Bible and culture in resisting homosexuality in Africa should be understood in this context, we believe.

Conclusion

The same sex sexuality debate is gaining centre stage in public debates in a number of African countries. It is likely that this matter will continue to dominate public discourses in the foreseeable future. Although most of the institutions fighting for lesbian and gay rights do so from the human rights perspective, public engagement on the issue often makes use of the Bible. Second then, whereas there are some people in the region who question the authority of the human rights charter, there is a general acceptance of the Bible as an authoritative book. Because of this, this article has looked at the use of the Bible in the same sex sexuality debate. It has been found that although the Bible is often quoted for or against same sex sexuality it is not merely the teaching of the Bible that influences people's attitude to this practice. The article argues that African traditional culture, scientific claims and the human rights discourse are also appealed to. It is our opinion that further scholarly engagement with the topic needs to be done. Perceived Western sponsorship of pro-homosexuality needs to be further investigated while it is also important to point out and underline traditional Africa's ability to deal with the practice without killing or persecuting those found to be engaging in it. The voices of African gender scholars on this subject also need to be heard.

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The Homosexual as the Antithesis of 'Biblical Manhood'? Heteronormativity and Masculinity Politics in Zambian Pentecostal Sermons

Adriaan S. van Klinken¹

Abstract

This article offers a critical analysis of a series of sermons entitled *Fatherhood in the 21st Century* preached in a Zambian Pentecostal church, in which homosexuality is an explicit theme. The sermons are discussed in relation to the broader controversy on homosexuality in African Christianity. While it is often suggested that African Christian leaders actively oppose same-sex relationships in order to profile themselves in local and global contexts, the case study reveals an additional factor. Homosexuality is also used in the politics of gender, particularly masculinity, within the church. The references to homosexuality in the sermons create a counter-image of the promoted ideal of "biblical manhood". A stereotypical homosexual is constructed, who embodies two of the main features of Zambian men: their preoccupation with sexuality and their indifference towards the male role they are to play. This article reveals the heteronormative politics and theology underpinning "biblical manhood" and points to the problematic consequences thereof in relation to HIV&AIDS. It also suggests how to interrogate and rethink "biblical manhood" from the perspective of queer theology.

Introduction

African Christian leaders are becoming known for their aversion to homosexuality and their opposition to same-sex relationships.² While it is true that homosexuality causes disagreement and heated debates in Christian circles all over the world, this seems to be particularly the case in Africa. Atypical example is the opposition to the ordination of openly gay clergy in the American Episcopalian (= Anglican) church by a number of Anglican bishops from Africa. One could also think of the

¹ Adriaan van Klinken (PhD) is from the Netherlands. Until recently he was a research and teaching fellow in the Department of Religious Studies and Theology of Utrecht University. He is currently a postdoctoral researcher in the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London. The focus of his research is on masculinities and sexualities in African Christian contexts. Email: a.van.klinken@soas.ac.uk

² I cannot enter into the complex debate about the definition of homosexuality, but in this article it refers broadly to the orientation of sexual attraction towards others of the same sex, and the sexual identities (such as gay and lesbian) based on this orientation.

support given by various Christian leaders in Uganda, for the proposed *Anti-Homosexual Bill*.³ Although both examples actually are quite complex cases because of the critical role played by conservative Christian groups from the USA,⁴ they leave the impression that African Christian leaders, in the words of Marc Epprecht, “have taken up the cudgels against gay rights”.⁵ This impression cannot be effaced either by the highly respected Desmond Tutu, the former Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town, who frequently denounces the current homophobia in Africa and is a strong advocate for gay rights, or by a number of progressive African theologians who have begun to discuss homosexuality from a liberationist perspective.⁶

It is not difficult to recognise that African Christian leaders generally disapprove of homosexuality. A more interesting issue is why they disapprove, and various explanations have been offered in this regard. One of these explanations points to postcolonial African identity politics, where African identity is defined over and against the “morally degraded” West. As part of this, homosexuality is understood as un-African and as a Western invention.⁷ Another suggested reason is that African churches believe themselves to be custodians of the “true Christian heritage” that is to be preserved from the secularising Western world.⁸ Additionally, the African controversy centred on homosexuality is interpreted as an expression of power politics in world Christianity: due to the explosive numerical growth of Christianity in the Global South, African church leaders want to gain influence based on their numbers. In the case of the Anglican Communion, for example, this may be a

³ This bill, submitted by Member of Parliament, David Bahati, strengthens laws against homosexuality including the institution of the death penalty for people who are found guilty of “aggravated homosexuality”.

⁴ See Kopya Kaoma, *Globalizing the Culture Wars: U.S. Conservatives, African Churches & Homophobia* (Somerville: Political Research Associates, 2009); Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (2nd ed.) (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 234-243.

⁵ M. Epprecht, *Heterosexual Africa? The History of an Idea from the Age of Exploration to the Age of AIDS* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2008), 32.

⁶ Notably these are mostly women theologians, such as Mercy Oduyoye, Nyambura Njoroge, Isabel Phiri, Esther Mombo and Sarojini Nadar. For an elaborate discussion, see Adriaan van Klinken and Masiwa Gunda, “Taking Up the Cudgels Against Gay Rights? Trends and Trajectories in African Christian Theologies on Homosexuality,” *Journal of Homosexuality* (2012, forthcoming).

⁷ Neville Hoad, *African Intimacies: Race, Homosexuality, and Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 57-62.

⁸ Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, 235.

plausible explanation.⁹ Yet another explanation points to interreligious relations: African Christians would raise their voice publicly in order to not be associated with liberal Western attitudes to homosexuality by their local Muslim neighbours.¹⁰ The various reasons suggested here, all relate to the external profiling of African churches and church leaders in their local contexts, and in terms of the dynamics of globalisation and world Christianity in the postcolonial era. Certainly, this helps us to understand the enormous controversy surrounding homosexuality in African Christianity. However, the fact that contemporary African Christian leaders frequently address, and publicly disapprove of, homosexuality may also serve political purposes within their communities. In this article, I highlight the gender-political dimension of a certain rhetoric on homosexuality.

This article presents a case study of a series of sermons in which homosexuality is discussed, amongst other subjects. The sermons were preached by Bishop Joshua H.K. Banda, the senior pastor of Northmead Assembly of God in Lusaka. The focus on Banda is interesting because he is a leading figure in the rapidly growing Pentecostal movement in Zambia.¹¹ As the chairperson of the General Constitutional Principles Committee, installed by the Zambian government, and of the governmental National AIDS Council, he has considerable political influence. As a regular commentator in the media he is also a public figure. According to the church's website, "the Bishop has become a notable and influential voice on national issues in Zambia."¹² The church's TV program *The Liberating Truth*, presenting Banda's weekly sermons, is broadcast in Zambia and in the wider Southern African Development Community (SADC) region.

⁹ Mary-Jane Rubenstein, "Anglicans in the Postcolony: On Sex and the Limits of Communion," *Telos* 143 (2008), 133-160; Kevin Ward, "The Empire Fights Back – The Invention of African Anglicanism," in *Christianity in Africa and the African Diaspora: The Appropriation of a Scattered Heritage*, eds. Afe Adogame, Roswith Gerloff and Klaus Hock (London: Continuum, 2008), 96.

¹⁰ Philip Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 84.

¹¹ Cf. Austin Cheyeka, "Towards a History of the Charismatic Churches in Post-Colonial Zambia," in *One Zambia, Many Histories: Towards a History of Post-Colonial Zambia*, eds. Jan-Bart Gewald, Marja Hinfelaar and Giacomina Macola (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 150. Pentecostalism is a diverse and complex Christian revivalist movement that emerged in the 20th century, and has become a very popular form of Christianity in Africa and in other parts of the world.

¹² See Northmead Assembly of God Church, *The Bishop*, http://www.northmeadassembly.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=239&Itemid=18 (accessed 8th November 2011).

The case study approach is particularly valuable because it enables a detailed analysis and interpretation of discourses on homosexuality in their specific socio-cultural and religious contexts. Recently some ground-breaking work has been undertaken on Christian arguments in the public debate on homosexuality in African societies.¹³ Less is known about how homosexuality is discussed within church communities. A gender-critical and theological analysis of the above mentioned sermons shows that in this specific case study, the issue of homosexuality is employed as part of the church's gender politics, specifically with regard to men and masculinity.¹⁴ In the following sections of this article, I will explore the way in which homosexuality is discussed and I will critically analyse the underlying arguments and theological lines of thought. In the final section, I will show how the heteronormative¹⁵ ideal of "biblical manhood", promoted in these sermons, can be questioned and re-examined from the perspective of 'queer theology'.¹⁶ I am writing this article as a European scholar in the study of world Christianity who has a particular interest in the discourses and politics on gender and (homo) sexuality in African Christian contexts. Being aware of the potential pitfalls in this field of study from the perspective of postcolonial criticism, in this article I intend to present a careful analysis of an African Pentecostal discourse on masculinity and homosexuality, and I build on the work of certain African theologians to formulate my critical questions.

Homosexuality in the Theme of "Fatherhood in the 21st Century"

In the year 2008, Bishop Joshua Banda took the initiative to preach in his church a series of six sermons on the theme *Fatherhood in the 21st Century* (FTC). This idea was inspired by his concerns regarding men

¹³ Masiwa Ragies Gunda, *The Bible and Homosexuality in Zimbabwe: A Socio-Historical Analysis of the Political, Cultural and Christian Arguments in the Homosexual Public Debate with Special Reference to the Use of the Bible* (Bamberg: University of Bamberg Press, 2010).

¹⁴ In this article, 'masculinity' refers both to the ideological construction of male gender identity (what it means to be a man) and to the social position of men in gender relations. Because men are not a homogenous group, masculinity is understood as a plural phenomenon: various masculinities co-exist in a given context.

¹⁵ The term 'heteronormativity' refers to any ideas about sexuality in which heterosexuality is considered the normal or natural sexual orientation and in which homosexuality, subsequently, is considered abnormal and unnatural.

¹⁶ 'Queer theology' has recently emerged as a new engagement with issues of gender and sexuality in theology, in line with secular Queer Theory and poststructuralist thinkers such as Michel Foucault and Judith Butler. For an introduction, see Patrick Cheng, *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology*, (New York: Seabury Books 2011).

and hegemonic forms of masculinity in contemporary Zambia. According to Banda, there is a “distortion of manhood” in society, which expresses itself in phenomena such as violence against women, alcoholism, men’s uncontrolled sexual behaviour and men’s overall irresponsibility in the marital and family setting. He considers this “crisis of masculinity” as a key factor in the major socio-economic problems of Zambia, and of Africa more generally, such as the HIV epidemic, the high numbers of street children, the poverty levels and failing political leadership. In view of these concerns, Banda felt that as a church, “We have to restore a vision of biblical manhood”.¹⁷ Therefore, he preached this series and although the series title refers to fatherhood, it actually deals with the broader issue of manhood. Also, through other activities he and his church try to change men and transform their perceptions of masculinity.¹⁸ Interestingly, while preaching on masculinity, Banda also addressed the theme of homosexuality.

In four of the six sermons in the series, homosexuality is discussed (but not always at very great length). In doing so, frequent reference is made to recent developments and topical issues regarding homosexuality that appeared in the daily news at that time. One of them was the controversy regarding the first openly gay bishop in the Anglican Communion, Gene Robinson (USA) and his participation in the Lambeth Conference that year (2008). Robinson was denied an invitation to attend this decennial assembly of all Anglican bishops, but he decided to go to the conference venue anyway. The following Sunday, Banda commented:

Gene Robinson appeared at the gathering of our Anglican brothers and sisters. They made it very clear in a categorical manner that homosexuality is a perversion. But I heard that this bishop of the USA was saying that he was unashamedly homosexual and unashamedly Christian: it is a blasphemy. This Word does say that. It is a shame.¹⁹

Note the strong objection Banda makes by labelling Robinson’s statement a blasphemy – a term that is usually preserved for the most serious sin committed directly against God. Moreover, note the reference to the Anglicans who denied Robinson access as “brothers and sisters”. Later, Banda explained that he wanted to support the

¹⁷ Interview with Joshua Banda, Lusaka: 6th November 2008.

¹⁸ For a full case study on masculinities in his church, see Adriaan van Klinken, “The Need for Circumcised Men”: The Quest for Transformed Masculinities in African Christianity in the Context of the HIV Epidemic (PhD thesis, Utrecht University, 2011), 131-179.

¹⁹ FTC – 4. In the footnotes, FTC refers to *Fatherhood in the 21st Century* and the number indicates the particular sermon in the series.

Anglican Church in Zambia that had taken a stand against Robinson, as well as the Anglican Mainstream, a global coalition committed to “the Scriptural Truths”.²⁰ Banda’s comment on Robinson shows that the controversy on homosexuality in the Anglican Communion is not an internal Anglican debate, but creates trans-denominational allies in global Christianity across the lines of those who would respect, and those who would offend “true Christianity”.

In another sermon, Banda brings up another topical issue: the legalisation of same-sex marriage in some countries. He specifically refers to developments in California at that time, where the first same-sex couples had just been married after a decision of the Supreme Court to allow these marriages. Banda presents this as an example of the “departure from God’s Word” taking place in global society. He demonstrates an awareness of the role global politics has played in regard to homosexuality, saying that “they want us to talk about men having sex with men, women having sex with women, they want us to talk about transgender – and they call these societies progressive.”²¹ The “they” in this quote seems to refer to the liberal West (ignoring that South Africa is among the few countries worldwide that have legalised same-sex marriage). Banda has a clear message for the Western world when he says:

As Africa, we have a voice for the nations. Institutions coming to our countries with money to sponsor ...[practices] which are not original to us must be refused and rejected in the name of Jesus. Now they want to sponsor research that should begin to find out how many men are having sex with men. But what are we doing after the research? They will say, it is happening so let’s do it more. But when it happens, let’s stop it.²²

This quote reflects the postcolonial African discourse in which homosexuality is presented as a Western invention, where African identity is constructed vis-à-vis (and is to be saved from) a morally degrading West, and where Africa becomes a moral guide to the world, particularly to the former colonising regions that still hold strong political and economic power both on the continent and globally. On this point, it is also noteworthy that Banda, in one of his sermons, directly alludes to the political and public debate in Zambia about the country’s

²⁰ Interview with Joshua Banda, Lusaka: 6th November 2008. The executive secretary of the Anglican Mainstream, Dr. Chris Sudgen, is Banda’s PhD supervisor in the Oxford Centre of Mission Studies.

²¹ FTC – 2.

²² FTC – 6.

constitutional review process. Thanks to the “sodomy laws” that Zambia has inherited from its former coloniser, Britain, same-sex sexual activity (or “unnatural offences”, as the Penal Code has it) is illegal in the country. Banda’s concern is that this may change under the influence of a Western human rights lobby. So in his sermons, he frequently states that Zambia should continue to be a Christian nation by Constitution.²³ Specifically referring to homosexuality he says: “I am glad that our law has it as a crime, and that should remain so!”²⁴

The above paragraph shows that public and political issues, both at a national and global level, inspire Banda to address the topic of homosexuality. In his discussion of the topic, one can recognise some of the factors identified above which explain how and why homosexuality has become a major issue in African Christianity. Banda fits into his argument the African postcolonial identity politics on homosexuality and he joins the fight to save “true Christianity” from a secular and liberal Western world. His efforts to protect Zambia’s status as a Christian nation, where there is no space for homosexual activity, can be understood in relation to these two factors. However, there is much more to say about Banda’s discussion of homosexuality in *Fatherhood in the 21st Century*. The above quotes do not yet make clear why homosexuality is discussed precisely in a series of sermons on masculinity.

Homosexuality and the “Distortion of Fatherhood”

The first sermon of *Fatherhood in the 21st Century* was preached on Father’s Day. At the beginning of the sermon, Banda explains that this celebration day provides an opportunity to highlight the crucial role of fathers in their families and to emphasise the importance of fatherhood, not only in the family, but also in the broader society. The latter already indicates that “fatherhood” is not only understood in the biological sense: Banda also speaks about male figures with a father role in the church or in society. He then points out that it is urgent to discuss fatherhood because “the present day and time is marked by fatherlessness.”²⁵ In the rest of the sermon, he elaborates further on this, exploring his two major concerns about fatherhood in society. These concerns are “the violation of God’s order” and the “abdication of

²³ In 1991, President Frederick Chiluba declared Zambia to be a Christian nation. This declaration was included in the preamble of the 1996 Constitution.

²⁴ FTC – 1.

²⁵ FTC – 1.

leadership". Under the first sub-theme, homosexuality and, in particular, same-sex marriage is discussed.

According to Banda, countries that legalise same-sex marriage are shamefully subverting and perverting fatherhood as it is intended by God in the order of creation. His argument is twofold. First, he argues that same-sex relationships are exclusively based on sex:

The distortion here is as a result of the fact that these relationships, gay and lesbian relationships, where you have a man and a man or a woman and a woman, are purely defined by sexual orientation. Why it is a sin, same sex marriage, is because a man and a man are not engaging in sex as God says you should engage in sex. They are doing it the wrong way. And God judged that in Sodom and Gomorra. ... It is a diversion from the role that God has presented. Because marriage, even a normal liberal marriage between a man and a wife, is not purely defined by sex. It is defined by companionship, by love, by showing that two can become one. But the only reason why a man and a man are trying to come together is that because of their sexual orientation they claim they are only attracted to men. So that is a relationship purely defined by sex and it is against God's order.²⁶

Banda's reference to two men "doing it the wrong way" might be an allusion to anal sexual intercourse, but his argument about same-sex relationships that are purely defined by sex is broader. He presents a simplistic version of the widespread perception in some Christian circles in Africa (and beyond), that homosexual relationships are unnatural and immoral and, thus, a perversion.²⁷ Banda's argument is simplistic because he ignores the basic conceptual distinction between sex as 'sexual orientation' and sex as 'sexual activity'. When two men or two women enter into a relationship because of their sexual orientation, why would that necessarily mean that they only want to enjoy sexual activity and do not share love and companionship in that relationship?

In addition to the above argument, Banda raises a second question to show "the violation of God's order" in homosexual relationships. In his line of thought, man and woman have different roles according to the order of creation. So, therefore, gender roles are defined by biological sex. Giving a stereotypical representation of gay and lesbian relationships, Banda argues that one of the partners will always take up a male role, and the other a female, including the corresponding gender behaviour. As he portrays it:

²⁶ FTC – 1.

²⁷ Cf. Gunda, *The Bible and Homosexuality in Zimbabwe*, 213-230.

You will find that in these unions, man-man or woman-woman, one of them must take a role that is supposed to conform for instance to a father: one will dress like a man, and the other one will have layers of lipstick, add some very distinct eyelashes there, do their hair in a certain way, and they go to a modelling school to learn how to swing; and the women likewise will do the same.²⁸

In various sermons, Banda expresses his astonishment that in a same-sex relationship, as he sees it, one of the partners does not behave as he or she is supposed to do, but tries to perform an alternative role. For him, it is an obvious “distortion of God’s order” when a man or a woman deliberately ignores the role he or she is to play according to his or her biological sex.

The interesting thing is that the above objections against homosexuality are part of Banda’s argument on fatherhood and on manhood. For him, homosexual relationships exemplify the departure from God’s Word in global society, which also has distorted the true meaning of fatherhood. The increasing pressure of a Western liberal sexual rights agenda leads Banda into a reflection on fatherhood:

They want us to talk about men having sex with men, women having sex with women, they want us to talk about transgender – and they call these societies progressive, the champions of so-called rights in these areas. So I say to you: it is necessary for us to discuss afresh from a biblical angle what fatherhood really means in our society.²⁹

Clearly, for Banda homosexuality is an issue between “us” and “them”, the Christian nation of Zambia and an imagined progressive West.³⁰ However, a closer look at the sermons reveals that homosexuality is not only discussed to mark the difference to a liberal ‘Other’. There is also another factor, closer to home.

The Homosexual as a Counter-Image

The primary concern inspiring Banda to preach the series *Fatherhood in the 21st Century* is not with homosexuality and same-sex marriage, but with men and perceptions about manhood in contemporary Zambia. As I have explored elsewhere, in these sermons Banda addresses issues of male sexuality, HIV&AIDS, alcoholism, domestic and sexual violence,

²⁸ FTC – 2.

²⁹ FTC – 2.

³⁰ It is characteristic of this type of discourse that the West tends to be represented as a homogenous and liberal bloc. That there are conservative factions within Western countries is hardly noted. Cf. Gunda, *The Bible and Homosexuality in Zimbabwe*, 193.

male dominance over women and a general irresponsibility of men in marriage, the family and society.³¹ He explains these critical issues as resulting from the distortion of manhood he observes in society. Through the series he aimed to address this “from the spiritual side” and to teach men about the “biblical ideal of manhood”.³²

Now it seems that Banda's discussion of homosexuality in the sermons serves to address some of his major concerns about men and manhood in Zambia. His argument that homosexual relationships are purely defined by sex enables him to explain the true meaning of marriage: “Gods order of marriage is not defined purely by sex, because marriage is a much higher order than that. Sex is a gift in marriage, but it is not the thing that defines marriage. Hear me!”³³ Moreover, Banda further develops this theme with a specific focus on men. In one of the sermons, he addresses the “impairment of manhood” such as expressed in the popular belief that men are unable to control their sexuality and, therefore, have to visit prostitutes when they are away from home. He then states: “Gentlemen, you can survive without sex. God's presentation of marriage is much bigger and wider: it is about love, companionship, and commitment; sex is just one thing that God has put in there.”³⁴ The same argument about the place of sex in marriage is repeated, however, now it does not refer to homosexuals, but to Zambian men. In another sermon, he critically observes that “in our society manhood is defined in sexual terms.... The term manhood is equivalent to describing the male sexual organ.”³⁵ Coming back to this theme in a later sermon, Banda states:

I have said that some of our cultures where manhood is expressed only by one's sexual organ, they are totally distorted, because human manhood is not just defining yourself as a sex machine. That's why I have insisted that this whole thing that we have been describing, where a man and a man or a woman and a woman are trying to live together and even have a civil union, that is such a betrayal and such a departure from God's order! Because that kind of relationship is defined in sexual terms only. But marriage is not purely defined by sexual orientation, marriage is a communion, it is companionship, it is a love affair. And love is better than sex. Somebody says: 'Is that

³¹ Adriaan van Klinken, “Theology, Gender Ideology and Masculinity Politics: A Discussion on the Transformation of Masculinities as Envisioned by African Theologians and a Local Pentecostal Church,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 138 (2010), 9-10.

³² Interview with Joshua Banda, Lusaka: 6th November 2008.

³³ FTC – 1.

³⁴ FTC – 2.

³⁵ FTC – 3.

true?’ Yes! But some of you have sex without love. Men who rape women. Sex without love. So sex is nothing in this regard, compared to something greater called love .. [that] is at the centre of a relationship.³⁶

This quote clearly shows how Banda’s argument about homosexuality is smoothly incorporated in his argument regarding male sexuality and how it is used to address men in the church and to challenge popular notions of manhood in Zambia.

Banda’s second objection against homosexual relationships, concerning the transgression of gender roles, is also integrated into his argument about men and manhood in Zambia. According to Banda, man and woman have received distinct roles in God’s order of creation. This divine order is offended in homosexual relationships because, in Banda’s opinion, one of the partners will perform the role and behaviour incongruent with the person’s biological sex role. For that reason he considers same-sex marriage “a diversion from the roles that God has presented.”³⁷ In an elaborate version of the argument, he says:

Marriage is not a human custom, but a divine institution ordered by God. In marriage, man and woman have gotten a very clear role, there is a distinctive sexual identity which defines who we are as men and women created by God. We act in light of who we are and why we are here. We act in light of what God desires, so that we can mirror his holiness. This thing about same sex marriage [is that it] does not mirror God’s holiness, it is an affront in the face of a holy and just and merciful God, it is an affront and our society must reject it. We must find joy and gladness and fulfilment in maintaining God’s order.³⁸

The latter statement, about the joy, gladness and fulfilment in maintaining God’s order by performing distinctive roles as men and women, is very meaningful in relation to the sermon series as a whole. Banda’s major concern in the sermons is that men – the presumed heterosexual men in his church and in wider Zambia – do not fulfil the role they are supposed to play. Highlighting the “distortion of manhood” in the first sermon, Banda not only is pointing to the “violation of God’s order” as expressed in homosexual relationships, but also to the “abdication of leadership” by men. He clearly states that the distortion of manhood “comes as a result of the fact that men, the male factor in marriage and the male factor in society, have actually withdrawn from

³⁶ FTC – 4.

³⁷ FTC – 1.

³⁸ FTC – 6.

performing their role.”³⁹ Referring to Genesis 2 where Adam is put by God in the Garden to work it and take care of it, Banda argues that men have received the role of leadership in marriage and in society. However, he then points out that men have abused their role of leadership by engaging in domination and oppression, both in the marital and family setting and at the level of political leadership. That is why society, in his opinion, is marked by fatherlessness. Throughout the sermons, Banda reminds men of the crucial role they have to play according to God’s order. In doing so, he develops an idea of “biblical manhood” that is in contrast with the case of homosexual relationships:

Biblical fatherhood has in mind that a man, as God aimed him, in a family takes his role as a father, and a woman, as God has fashioned her, takes the role as a mother in the home, and the two become the package that bring into this life, by procreation, a family through the offspring. And nothing else exists besides that. And why should those who take up a so-called alternative life style still take on the role of a mother and a father if they are [of the] same sex, and then go into adoption of children? We can adopt children in families and that’s fine, but not in this fashion. Why do they want a different role when it is [the] same sex? ... There is no substitute for fatherhood. It is rooted in biblical manhood, and biblical manhood is rooted in creation. And in creation God made them male and female. It is Adam and Eve and not Adam and Steve. In creation, we see a man and a woman in their respective roles.⁴⁰

Clearly, the homosexual, who mixes up the divinely ordained gender roles, is presented here as a counter-image of “biblical manhood”. This was even done very literally, when Banda during one of the sermons tried to demonstrate how a stereotypical ‘feminine’ gay man would behave, generating laughter from the audience. He then commented: “You know, I can’t do it, that’s why I remain a man.”⁴¹

It can be concluded that in *Fatherhood in the 21st Century*, homosexuality is mainly discussed to depict how manhood can be distorted from its divine design. As Banda understands homosexuality, it represents two of his main concerns regarding men in contemporary Zambia: their preoccupation with sexuality and their indifference to the male role they are to play. The homosexual is presented as a counter-example of “biblical manhood”, in order to challenge men in the

³⁹ FTC – 1.

⁴⁰ FTC – 4.

⁴¹ FTC – 1.

audience to live sexually straight and morally upright lives by fulfilling their divinely ordained role as fathers in their families and in society.

“Biblical Manhood” as a Heteronormative Ideal

The aim of the series *Fatherhood in the 21st Century* is to bring about change in men and in popular forms of masculinity, as a response to the HIV epidemic and other social challenges. To achieve this aim, Banda addresses various critical issues related to men and masculinity, and he develops an alternative ideal of manhood. In doing so, he exemplifies the contribution that Pentecostal Christianity makes to promote more constructive forms of masculinity in Africa, which can help in the struggle against HIV and gender-based violence.⁴² Writing from the context of Zimbabwe, Ezra Chitando has critically commented that the Pentecostal efforts to transform masculinities, although laudable and helpful, are limited because they uphold the idea of male supremacy. “The Pentecostal approach is still rooted in the paradigm of the male as the leader [and is] not willing to challenge the myth of male headship.”⁴³ According to Chitando, Pentecostalism has to take a more radical distance from patriarchal cultural ideas about manhood, in order to nurture masculinities that can be redemptive and liberating in view of HIV and gender-based violence.

Where Chitando points to patriarchy as a common, fundamental characteristic of Pentecostal and hegemonic masculinities, the case study reveals one more deeply rooted shared pattern: the normative heterosexuality of masculinities, and the subsequent homophobia. While Banda’s sermons on “biblical manhood” are relatively balanced in terms of patriarchy – they present an example of “soft patriarchy”⁴⁴ – they are profoundly heterosexist.⁴⁵ The heterosexism is revealed, first, through a theology that considers heterosexuality as the normative and only acceptable form of human sexuality. Banda develops his ideal of “biblical manhood” theologically on the basis of the creation accounts. Elaborating on his frequent statement that “biblical manhood” is rooted in creation, he says: “In creation, God made them male and female. It is

⁴² Ezra Chitando, “A New Man for a New Era? Zimbabwean Pentecostalism, Masculinities and the HIV Epidemic,” *Missionalia* 35, no. 3 (2007), 112-127.

⁴³ Chitando, “A New Man for a New Era?”, 122 & 124.

⁴⁴ Van Klinken, “Theology, Gender Ideology and Masculinity Politics”, 12.

⁴⁵ Heterosexism refers to ‘the assumption of the rightness and normality of heterosexual sexual partnerships and the prejudice against homosexual sexual partnerships.’ See Paul Germond, “Heterosexism, Homosexuality and the Bible” in *Aliens in the Household of God: Homosexuality and Christian Faith in South Africa*, edited by Paul Germond and Steve de Gruchy (Cape Town: David Philip 1997), 194.

Adam and Eve and not Adam and Steve. In creation we see a man and a woman in their respective roles."⁴⁶ For Banda, the notion of gender difference means that only a man and a woman can complement each other in marriage and become "one body". Second, the heterosexism is manifested in the stereotypical representation of homosexuality, in the cliché jokes about gay men as being feminine, and in the statement that homosexual activity should remain illegal, implying that people in same-sex relationships are criminalised. In all this, Banda is reinforcing hegemonic masculinity rather than transforming it. This is particularly problematic in the HIV era. Referring to Zambia, among other nations, the United Nations programme on HIV&AIDS (UNAIDS) points out that men who have sex with men experience extremely high HIV prevalence and face major barriers to access HIV related health services, due to homophobia, discrimination and criminalisation.⁴⁷ Being concerned about this, Kenyan theologian and director of the Ecumenical HIV & AIDS Initiative in Africa, Nyambura Njoroge, challenges church leaders to make a "U-turn" in their theologising in the HIV context and to re-examine their views on homosexuality.⁴⁸ It seems unrealistic – but it is not impossible – that Banda will make such a U-turn sooner or later.

Queering "Biblical Manhood"

A recently emerging theological perspective on sexuality and gender is called 'queer theology'. Queer theology is characterised, first, by a critical, deconstructive edge: it employs a hermeneutics of suspicion "questioning the (hetero) sexual underlying of theological reflections" in relation to other categories such as gender, race, and class.⁴⁹ This article exemplifies this approach, as I have critically revealed how in Banda's sermons the homosexual is presented as 'the Other' as part of a heteronormative politics of masculinity, and how the promoted ideal of "biblical manhood" is rooted in a heteronormative understanding of gender based on the creation accounts. Queer theology, second, also has a constructive edge. In the words of Argentinean theologian, Marcella Althaus-Reid, it "needs to be a dissenting praxis, a praxis for

⁴⁶ FTC – 4.

⁴⁷ UNAIDS, "Reducing HIV Transmission among Men who have Sex with Men and Transgender People," http://unaidspcbngo.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/20100528_msmpcbpaper_en.pdf, 3-4. (accessed 18th September 2011).

⁴⁸ Nyambura Njoroge, "Beyond Suffering and Lament: Theology of Hope and Life", in *Shaping a Global Theological Mind*, edited by Darren Marks (Aldershot: Ashgate 2008), 119.

⁴⁹ Lisa Isherwood and Marcella Althaus-Reid, "Queering Theology", in *The Sexual Theologian: Essays on Sex, god and Politics*, edited by Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood (London: T&T Clark 2004), 3.

transformation of structures of oppression which have been normalized by ideologies in power, in alliance with Christian theology.”⁵⁰ Being aware of the Western dominance in the regimes of knowledge and power in our globalising world, I feel that it is problematic for me as a European scholar to contribute to the transformation of theologies such as those presented by Banda. It is up to African theologians to decide whether and how to develop a queer theology that recognises sexual diversity in contemporary African societies. However, because I, whilst conducting research in his church, have developed sympathy for Banda and I also have a certain respect for his efforts to transform masculinities in the context of HIV, I would like to put forward one theological suggestion, as my contribution to an intercultural theological dialogue.

For Banda, “biblical manhood” is rooted in creation. The creation accounts are the theological basis of his understanding of gender and masculinity and of his rejection of homosexuality. However, in the sermons Banda employs an additional notion: the theology of Jesus Christ as the second Adam (cf. 1 Cor. 15). In his opinion, Jesus Christ has come as the second Adam to restore the ideal of manhood that was impaired by the failure of the first Adam. Now, the term ‘restoration’ has a rather conservative connotation. But in one of the sermons, Banda speaks about Jesus Christ as God’s “innovation of masculinity”, which entails a notion of renewal or – theologically speaking – re-creation.⁵¹ When this line of thought is further developed, the meaning of manhood is not rooted in a fixed heteronormative order of creation, but is open for change, for progress, for new understandings and sensitivities. Reflecting on masculinity from a Christological perspective, one should also take into account that in Christ “there is no longer male and female” (Gal. 3:28). Feminist theologians, including African women theologians, have taken this as an argument for gender equality.⁵² In a queer theological interpretation, this verse destabilises the heterosexual male/female dichotomy and thus opens up space for a plurality of sexual and gender identities “in Christ”.⁵³ In this space, Banda can

⁵⁰ Marcella Althaus-Reid, “Graffiti on the Walls of the Cathedral of Buenos Aires: Doing Theology, Love and Politics at the Margins,” in *Religion and Political Thought*, edited by Michael Hoeltz and Graham Ward (London: Continuum 2006), 256.

⁵¹ FTC – 4.

⁵² Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroads 1984), Chapter 6; Isabel Apawo Phiri, *Women, Presbyterianism and Patriarchy* (Blantyre: CLAIM 1997), 156.

⁵³ Dale Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press 2006), 77-100.

continue to preach on "biblical manhood", but with less patriarchal, homophobic and heterosexist undertones.

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Iweto, Lelemama, Mashoga and Nguiko: Same-sex Sexuality in Kenya from an African Spirituality and Ethics Perspective

Julius Gathogo¹ and Isabel Apawo Phiri²

Abstract

The central question that this article is grappling with is: have Africans always been against same-sex sexual orientation? We respond to this question in four sections. In the first section we engage this question through a theoretical study using the framework of African spirituality and ethics as proposed by Magesa and Bujo. The central argument of this article is that while evidence of some same-sex practices may have existed in traditional societies in Kenya and elsewhere on the continent, this does not necessarily translate into same-sex sexual orientation. In the second section examples are given of *iweto* of the Kamba; and *lelemama* and *Mashoga* from Mombasa Swahili speakers of Arab descent as examples of same-sex practices in Kenya. *Nguiko* among the Kikuyu is given as an example of alternative traditional sexual practice to discourage same-sex practices. In the third section we explore more examples from the rest of the continent in order to show that research has focused on same-sex sexual practises and not same-sex orientation in traditional and postcolonial Africa. We conclude the article by cautioning scholars that by focusing the debate on sexual practices we run the danger of not recognising that the real issue it is not same-sex sexual practises that need protection by the law, but same-sex sexual orientation.

Introduction

In recent years, divisions over same-sex sexual orientation have torn apart the 200 year old unity of the global Anglican Communion. Of particular interest to this article is the fact that, the signs of division appear to manifest more in the African Anglican churches than elsewhere. Why is the issue of same-sex sexual orientation gaining

¹ Julius Gathogo, (PhD) is from Kenya. He is a lecturer in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Kenyatta University, Mombasa Campus. P O BOX 16778, Mombasa, Kenya, 80100. This article is part of his post-doctoral work at the School of Religion and Theology at the University of KwaZulu Natal. Email: jumgathogo@yahoo.com

² Isabel Apawo Phiri (PhD) is from Malawi. She is Dean and head of the School of Religion, Philosophy and Classics and professor of African Theology at the University of KwaZulu Natal, Private Bag X01, Scottsville, 3209, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. Email: phirii@ukzn.ac.za

such momentum in Africa, more than in any other continent? While some Christians in the global North have been more accepting of same-sex sexual orientation and partnerships, the global South, especially Africa, is more broadly in opposition. Same-sex sexual practice is illegal in most sub-Saharan countries in Africa, while some countries are also debating whether to change their constitutions to forbid same-sex marriages. In recent African history, the political leadership has largely tended to condemn same-sex marriages in the strongest terms possible. In particular, the erstwhile president of Namibia, Sam Nujoma, criticized the growing emphasis 'in the West' of equal rights for persons of all sexual orientations. In August 2002, Nujoma remarked thus: "When you talk about human rights, you include also homosexuality [sic] and lesbianism. It's not [part of] our culture, [for us] Africans. And if you try to impose your culture on us Africans, we condemn it, we reject it."³ Similarly, President Mugabe of Zimbabwe has also been outspoken on gay issues, referring to people who practice same-sex sexuality as being "worse than pigs and dogs."⁴

In contrast, Kenya's Chief Justice, Willy Mutunga, was quoted in the Kenyan media advising lobby groups to debate gay rights, arguing that they are human rights. Speaking on women's marginalisation in Uganda on 8th September 2011, at the launch of the Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA) office in Kampala, Mutunga said:

The other frontier of marginalisation is the gay rights movement. Gay rights are human rights. Here am simply confining my statement in the context of the human rights and social justice paradigm and avoiding the controversies that exist in our constitutions and various legislations ... We have succeeded in demanding our rights of movement and association although we cannot take them for granted. We should see less of the work-shopping in hotels, less of flip charts and tooth picks as we move to the country sides and make sure our people own and protect the human rights and social justice messages.⁵

Mutunga went on to say,

³ BBC News, "South Africa's gays target marriage," 11th September 2011, at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/>

⁴ Clare Nullis, "Amid criticism, South Africa passes same-sex marriage bill," *Associated Press*, Posted on *The Toronto Star*, 15th November 2006, Page A4.

⁵ See Joseph Kariuki, "Gay Rights Are Human Rights, Says Chief Justice Mutunga," *The Star*, P. 6, <http://www.the-star.co.ke/national/national/39845-gay-rights-are-human-rights-says-chief-justice-mutunga> (accessed 9th September 2011).

I find the arguments made by some of our human rights activists, the so called moral arguments, simply rationalization for using human rights principles opportunistically and selectively. We need to bring together the opposing viewpoints in the movement on this issue for final and conclusive debate.⁶

Do Mutunga's statements signify a new paradigm on same-sex sexuality issue in East Africa? How has it come about that the most senior lawyer in Kenya is advocating gay rights in a conservative society that judgementally treats same-sex relations as a non-negotiable issue? In his argument that human rights are principles that do not allow selective implementation, Mutunga's argument remains solid, and requires clarity on this issue in order for Africa to face its challenges. The answers to these challenges lie within the realms of political and religious forces. To this end, Mutunga took his first visit to Uganda as the new Chief Justice of Kenya, as an opportunity to discuss the debate on gay rights in a country where Members of Parliament (MPs) had passed laws that criminalise gay unions and where a renowned gay rights activist, David Kato, was beaten to death with a hammer in his neighbourhood. Police were quick to say the motive in the latter case was robbery, but members of the small and increasingly besieged gay community in Uganda suspected otherwise. A motion in Uganda's parliament was pushed by religious groups and some civil society groups who wanted all gays executed.⁷ Why this hard stance on same-sex sexuality?

Generally, same-sex sexual practise is taboo in most parts of Africa. It is illegal in Malawi, Zimbabwe, Kenya, Uganda, Nigeria, Tanzania, Ghana and most other sub-Saharan countries. Even in South Africa, where law allows the practice of same-sex unions, gay people are often attacked because of their sexual orientation.⁸ However, following the promulgation of a new constitution in Kenya on 27th August 2010, the Bill of Rights appears to have weakened the 'illegality' clause for it strongly emphasises the fundamental rights of any citizen.

While same-sex relationships are outlawed in numerous countries in sub-Saharan Africa, the question we are raising in this article is: have

⁶ See Kariuki, "Gay Rights Are Human Rights, Says Chief Justice Mutunga," 6.

⁷ See Joseph Kariuki, "Gay Rights Are Human Rights, Says Chief Justice Mutunga," 6.

⁸ See for example David Smith 'South Africa gay rights activists warn of homophobic attacks after murder' in *The Guardian* Tuesday 3 May 2011, 1. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/may/03/south-africa-homophobic-attacks> accessed 10/12/2011.

Africans always been against same-sex sexual orientation? The hypothesis of this study is: while evidence of some same-sex practices may have existed in traditional societies in Kenya and in other parts of Africa, this does not necessarily translate into an understanding of same-sex sexual orientation. In this article we respond to the above question and hypothesis in three sections. In the first section we examine the framework of African spirituality and ethics within which the debate of same-sex orientation is addressed. Second, we discuss *iweto* of the Kamba; and *lelemama* and *Mashoga* from Mombasa Swahili speakers of Arab descent as examples of same-sex practices in Kenya. *Nguiko* among the Kikuyu is given as an example of alternative traditional sexual practice to discourage same-sex practices. In the process we argue that these practises were there for practical and cultural reasons such as producing children because of the African understanding of community, but this is not the same as indicating an understanding of same-sex sexual orientation. In the third section we explore more examples from the rest of the continent in order to show that research has focused on same-sex sexual practises and not same-sex orientation in traditional and postcolonial Africa. We conclude the study by cautioning scholars of religion in Africa that our study is not denying that same-sex sexual orientation exists in Africa, but if every time one wants to prove that "Homosexuality IS African" one cites these practises, one runs the risk of undermining cultural integrity, and this may actually detract from the real issue which is sexual orientation, and ultimately recognising that it is not same-sex sexual practises that need protection by the law, but same-sex sexual orientation.

African Spirituality and Ethics

Our entry point into the debate on same-sex practices and orientation in Africa is framed in African spirituality and ethics. Here we draw from the works of Laurent Magesa⁹ and Benezet Bujo.¹⁰ Magesa has identified four characteristics of African spirituality which are:

- a) there is a link between African spirituality and morality.
- b) African indigenous spirituality emphasizes relationship with God through community.

⁹ Laurenti. Magesa, 'African Christian spirituality' in Stinton, B Diane (ed). *African Theology on the way: Current Conversations*. London: SPCK 2010, 68-78.

¹⁰ Benezet Bujo, 'Distinctions of African ethics' in Stinton, B Diane (ed). *African Theology on the way: Current Conversations*. London: SPCK 2010, 79-89.

- c) Community is understood to include: ancestors, other human beings, those who are not yet born, land and property.
- d) "The individual stands, morally, and spiritually before and in the midst of the totality of this community".¹¹

Benezet Bujo confirms that African ethics is grounded on an understanding of the human community as being three dimensional: the living, the dead, and the yet to be born. Within this three dimensional community, the existence of God is taken for granted. Nothing is understood outside an acknowledgement of the existence of God. He continues to argue that at the heart of the indigenous African community is a focus on life lived in abundance. It is also within the community that individuals understand their personhood and freedom. Within this context, Bujo argues that:

Thus to be called a person, does not simply require being a member of the community but actively participating in mutual, interpersonal relations individuals only become persons if they do not isolate themselves but act together with the entire community.¹²

Of importance is the fact that not all scholars of religion in Africa are contented with the African understanding of community. For example, while African women theologians have embraced the centrality of community in African spirituality and ethics, they have also cautioned about the need to bear in mind that the African community is structured according to patriarchal principles which are oppressive to African women and children.¹³ Furthermore the point that we are raising in this article is: in a community that puts much emphasis on continuity of the community through birth of children, what happens to the individuals who could not have children or were born with same-sex sexual orientation? In the next section we attempt to grapple with this question by looking at some examples from the Kenyan context.

¹¹ Laurenti. Magesa, 'African Christian Spirituality' 71.

¹² Benezet Bujo, 'Distinctions of African ethics' 85.

¹³ See Isabel Apawo Phiri 'The Church as a Healing Community: Women's Voices and Visions from Chilobwe Healing Centre' in *Journal of Constructive Theology* Vol. 10, No. 1, July 2004, 13-28.

Same-Sex Relationships in Traditional and Post Colonial Kenya

In indigenous African communities, there were some practises which resembled same-sex relationships but had a different meaning. A few examples will suffice.

The Practice of Iweto

The first example is *Iweto*, which was and is commonly practised among the Kamba of Kenya. It was also practised among the Gusii, the Kikuyu and other Bantu linguistic communities living around Mount Kenya.¹⁴ An *iweto* is a woman married to another woman among the Kamba. It is a phenomenon where a woman who is barren marries another woman to sire children in the name of her husband. As Zacharia Wanakacha Samita notes,

This woman to woman marriage was applicable in family situations where either a woman was barren or a couple failed to get a baby boy, even if they had girls. Such a woman would go to great lengths of finding herself a 'wife' who would give birth on her behalf. She would arrange for the courtship, payment of bride wealth and even look for the right person to stay with the newly wedded woman. This kind of marriage was rare and not the ideal model: it could sometimes mean getting a stranger (outside the family) to bring forth offspring. The barren woman was more interested in 'using' another woman to get a child without much consideration of which man really ... [fathered] it. But the *iweto*'s children, without exception would adopt the name of the man of the home, whether he was alive or dead. This was because it was his lineage that *iweto* was perpetuating.¹⁵

Iweto practice still occurs in some areas, but we need to point out that *iweto* does not necessarily indicate lesbian sexual orientation because the two women involved do not relate sexually; rather, the *iweto* provides "children from a person known in the lineage of the husband to the barren woman."¹⁶ Clearly, in a society where infertility is a virtual taboo, continuing the family line is more important than who fathers the children. Anthropologist David Maillu describes the practice as a practical way of solving a social problem. He notes, "Where there's an old woman who has no children, the option [is] to let that family continue

¹⁴ See *Daily Nation*, 26/2/2004

¹⁵ Zacharia Wanakacha Samita, "Same Gender Unions: African Traditional Analysis" in Martha Mbuggus et al., *Perspectives on the Forbidden 'Love,'* (Nairobi: Uzima, 2004), 37-38.

¹⁶ Samita, "Same Gender Unions:" 38.

by adopting a woman ... She is – to use the Western world’s interpretation – an adopted wife.”¹⁷ The practice differs from polygamy for it is a contract purely between the two women. The role of the “wife’s wife” is to provide children – who fathers them is irrelevant. Writing in 2004, Zakaria Samita talks about his interview with John Gichimu, the co-ordinator of Theological Education by Extension for the Organization of African Instituted Churches (OAIC) who explained: “in my home area of Kirinyaga, there [is] a woman who married another woman. They did not marry for sexual purposes. What she wanted was children who could inherit the wealth of her husband.”¹⁸ One can only understand this type of marriage within the framework of African spirituality and ethics with its focus on the individual’s responsibility to perpetuate the lineage in order to please the community of the living, the dead and the yet to be born.

The Practice of Lelemama

The second example is the practise of *lelemama* among the Swahili speakers of Mombasa. Stephen O. Murray builds the case for the prevalence of lesbian sexuality when he cites a woman’s dance, *lelemama*, in Mombasa, Kenya, which serves as a “recruitment strategy”.¹⁹ *Lelemama*, was thus seen as serving as a cover for women’s adultery, prostitution, and recruitment into lesbian networks without their husbands’ knowledge. However in the research of Margaret Strobel there is a different interpretation of *lelemama* dance. She argues that it was used during the struggle for Kenya’s coastal autonomy in the late 1950’s to liberate women, particularly those of Arabic descent. In particular, one hundred Arab women from Mombasa successfully petitioned the colonial government in Kenya to protest discriminatory legislation that denied them the vote but gave it to women of other ethnic communities.²⁰ She further argues that women in the second half of the 20th century and beyond have moved from *lelemama* dance associations such as *Ibinaal Wata* and *Buna Saada* to newer organizations such as the Muslim Women’s Institute and the Muslim Women’s Cultural Association; hence lobbying for a just society for all. The difference between Stephen O Murray and Margaret Strobel’s interpretation of the meaning of *lelemama* dance raise the issue of the

¹⁷ <http://app1.chinadaily.com.cn/star/2002/0502/fe20-2.html> [accessed 25/8/2011].

¹⁸ Samita, “Same Gender Unions:” 38

¹⁹ Murray, “Africa, Sub-Sahara,” 24.

²⁰ Strobel, Margaret, “From lelemama to lobbying: Women’s associations in Mombasa, Kenya”, Nancy J. Hafkin and Edna G. Bay (ed.), *Women in Africa: Studies in social and economic change*, 1976, Stanford, Stanford University Press, pp. 183-211.

importance of knowing the agenda of the researcher on same-sex sexuality in traditional African societies. It also raises the difficulties of researching a phenomenon which is a taboo in the community that one is researching. The fact that *lelemama* dance has evolved to the formation of organisations which deal with social justice issues for women brings into question the validity of Murray's conclusion that *lelemama* dance was initially a lesbian association of women with questionable morality. In a patriarchal society, those with power to construct the identity of women treat with suspicion any organisation that promotes the independency of women. We argue that is the case with *lelemama* dance.

The Practice of Mashoga

Third, is the practice of *Mashoga* among the Swahili-speakers of the Kenya coast. Shepherd reported that "In Mombasa [Kenya], both male and female homosexuality is relatively common among Muslims; involving perhaps one in twenty-five adults." In his view,

The Swahili [term] for a male homosexual is *shoga*, a word also used between women to mean 'friend'. Homosexual relations in Mombasa are almost without exception between a younger, poorer partner and an older, richer one, whether their connection is for a brief act of prostitution or a more lengthy relationship. In the former case, there are fixed rates of payment and in the latter, presents and perhaps full financial support for a while. But financial considerations are always involved and it is generally only the person who is paid who is called *shoga*. The older partner may have been a *shoga* himself in his youth, but is very likely to be successfully married to a woman as well as maintaining an interest in boys. Only if he is not married and has an apparently exclusive interest in homosexual contacts will he perhaps still be referred to as a *shoga*. The paid partner usually takes the passive role during intercourse, but I think it is true to say that his inferiority derives from the fact that he is paid to provide what is asked for, rather than for the [sexual] role he adopts.... The paying partner is usually known as the *basha* — the Pasha, the local term for the king in packs of playing cards.²¹

Shepherd argues that *shoga* are not classified as "women." For instance, they are not given traditional women's tasks to do, but are

²¹ Gill Shepherd, "Rank, gender and homosexuality: Mombasa as a key to understanding sexual options," in *The Cultural Construction of Sexuality*, ed. Pat Caplan, 240-7 (London: Tavistock, 1987), 250.

rather used as “junior male kin are.”²² Basically, the main argument of Shepherd is that rank is more important than gender in Mombasa, and in the Mombasan conception of homosexuality. It is not clear from Shepherd’s research whether the *mashoga* are only found among the Swahili speaking Muslims or they are also found among the Swahili speaking Christians from Mombasa. It is also not clear as to whether the *mashoga* community was created as a result of economic hardships or it is a response to an individual’s orientation to same-sex sexuality. The construction of the *Mashoga* within a monetary economy leads us to the conclusion that its roots are not within African indigenous spirituality and ethics but a product of postcolonial Africa.

The Practice of Nguiko

The fourth example focuses on the youth in indigenous African communities. Within the Kikuyu of Kenya’s understanding of spirituality and ethics, adolescents (both girls and boys) were allowed to practice *nguiko* before marriage.²³ *Nguiko* refers to the practice of sleeping together of boys and girls, where fondling of sexual organs was allowed but within some well defined parameters. In his book, *Facing Mount Kenya*, Jomo Kenyatta describes *nguiko* as non-penetrative sex among the Kikuyu. *Nguiko* (literally ‘fondling’) followed a well-regulated code of convention. According to Kenyatta,²⁴ the Kikuyu youth were taught to develop the technique of self-control in matters of sexuality, which enabled a boy to sleep in the same bed with a girl without necessarily having sexual intercourse. At such occasions, girls wore garments around their waists that were tied tightly by their grandmothers. A boy would not dare to loosen a girl’s garment because it was a taboo (*thahu*), which would be reported and could lead to a long process of purification and social stigmatization, by the community and his age-mates (*riika*), to whom it would also bring shame. This is in line with Mageša’s description of the characteristics of African indigenous spirituality. He argues that:

The question is not directly what God wants of me, but what the community through our tradition expects of me. In wrongdoing I do not stand guilty before God, first of all; rather I stand ashamed before or in

²² Shepherd, 253.

²³ For details, see Hannah Wangeci Kinoti, “*Nguiko*: A Tempering of Sexual Assault Against Women,” in *Violence Against Women: Reflections by Kenyan Women Theologians*, Grace Wamue and Mary Getui eds (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 1996), 78-85; and Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya* (New York: Vintage Books, 1938), 149-154, 175.

²⁴ Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 159.

the midst of my community, one that is directly injured on account of my behaviour.²⁵

In *nguiko*, the man squeezed his penis between his thighs and fondled the girl until they were both satisfied, without penetrating. The girl was also barred, by custom, from touching the boy's sexual organs with her hands. However, in the case of a long-standing friendship a girl could allow a boy to put his sexual organ between her thighs and hold it tight in that position without penetrating.²⁶ Full penetration was a rare occurrence, never took place between casual lovers because of the consequences stipulated by culture.²⁷ This practice was meant to cultivate "healthy" cross-gender relations among the youth; and hence avoid thoughts about same-sex relationships. Thus, the *nguiko* practise was based on the wrong assumption that every African is born with heterosexual orientation. Therefore if one deviates from what the society expected of them by being attracted to a person of the same-sex, the person concerned had to keep it to themselves for the greater good of keeping the community intact. This is the tendency that we notice in the pronouncements of the African political leaders.

Same-Sex Relationships in Media

As a fifth example, we notice an explicit discussion of same-sex sexuality in the works of a number of African artists, novelists and playwrights in Kenya. In particular, we want to draw attention to the works of Charles Githae's *A Worm in the Head* (1987), Francis Imbuga's *Betrayal in the City* (1975), and Maina wa Kinyatti's *A Season of Blood*. In their work emphasis is on formation of same-sex relations due to circumstances. The latter two are explicit that prisons in Kenya enhance the pervasive practice of same-sex relationships amongst desperate-for-food inmates.

At the same time it is important to note that some literary works by women scholars appear to support same-sex sexuality in their bid to deconstruct patriarchy. Notably is the work of Kenyan writer, Rebecca Njau, who in her novel, *The Sacred Seed* (2003),²⁸ views same-sex

²⁵ Laurenti. Magesa, 'African Christian spirituality' 2010, 71.

²⁶ Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 159.

²⁷ Thigh sex also existed among the Zulu. For more details see Andile Manxanile, *Abortion: A Human Right?* Alice: Lovendale Press, 2000, 181.

²⁸ In *The Sacred Seed*, Tesa the heroine is a talented music teacher at a city high school who has been raped by a corrupt President, Dixon Chinusi. She is devastated and decides to leave the city and seek help from Mumbi, a traditional woman with special

female bonding in the indigenous African communities as a strategy for women to pool together their resources for their own gain. African women writers who celebrate same-sex sexuality include *Our Sister Killjoy* (1977). Again even in media, the issue of the difference between the practises of same-sex relationships to same-sex orientation is not made. In the following section, we broaden the discussion on same-sex sexuality to look at some examples from outside Kenya.

Other Examples of Same-Sex Sexual Practises in Africa

In this section we give four examples of same-sex sexual practises in Africa with the intention of showing that researchers focus on same-sex practices and not orientation. First, Stephen O. Murray who has conducted extensive research on same-sex sexual practises in Africa contends that there were other examples of practices of same-sex sexual relationships among the Bangala of Congo, and the Hutu and Tutsi of Rwanda-Burundi. In particular, same-sex relationships among the Hutu and Tutsi youth trainees was evident at the royal courts. Similarly, the Christian pages of Kabaka Mwanga's kingdom in Uganda were persecuted in 1886 allegedly for defying same-sex sexual advances.²⁹ Writing in 1927, Henry Junod further notes that there was an elaborate and organized practice of same-sex relationships among the South African Tsonga.³⁰ John Mbiti in his book, *Love and Marriage in Africa*,³¹ points out that homosexual and lesbian relationships were sexual deviations by boys and girls who 'did not know what they were doing.' In such a scenario, they would be reprimanded accordingly, albeit quietly so as to avoid letting the 'embarrassment' go beyond the house; and hence cause the 'stigmatisation' of the family. Mbiti's example highlights the African spirituality and ethics that cared more for the protection of the image of the community over needs and identity of an individual. Mbiti captures this very well in his quotation on the African philosophy of "I am, because we are; and since we are therefore I am".

powers who has set up a sanctuary for abused and traumatised women in a secluded place inside a primeval forest, which is eyed with greed by Chinusi and his associates. Tesa travels to the sanctuary to seek healing and peace of mind. Mumbi immediately recognises in her special talents and an intriguing supernatural phenomenon. She places a gourd seed in her hand and requests her to plant it behind the awesome sanctuary to be a symbol of an eternal seed which grows in the midst of weeds and thorn bushes; the sacred seed from which the dreams of love and hope are created. See Rebeka Njau, *The Sacred Seed* (Books Horizon, 2003).

²⁹ Stephen O. Murray, "Africa, Sub-Saharan," in *Encyclopaedia of Homosexuality*, Vol. 1, Wayne R. Dynes, Ed (New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc.), 23.

³⁰ Henry Junod, *Life of a South African Tribe* (London: Macmillan, 1927), 492-493.

³¹ John Mbiti, *Love and Marriage in Africa* (London: Longman, 1980), 213.

This is the cardinal point in the understanding of the African view of man'.³²

Second, according to an informant of the anthropologist Evans-Pritchard, in traditional, monarchical Zande³³ culture in the Sudan and central Africa,

homosexuality is indigenous. Azande do not regard it as at all improper, indeed it was viewed as very sensible for a man to sleep with boys when women are not available or are taboo In the past this was a regular practice at court. Some princes may even have preferred boys to women, when both were available. This is not a question I can enter into further here beyond saying I was told that some princes sleep with boys before consulting poison oracles, women being then taboo, and also that they sometimes do so on other occasions, just because they like them.³⁴

Reportedly then, in the monarchical Zande, men would have sexual relations with boys. A man paid compensation to another if he had relations with 'his' boy.³⁵ What is not emphasized here is that this was an abuse of the boys by men who had economic power. It was not a norm of the society but a deviation. In contrast some of the Zulu traditional healers are involved in same-sex relationships for the protection of their medicines. The ancestors who are the custodians of the African spirituality and ethics give permission to same-sex relationships among the traditional healers and their spirit wives.³⁶ In this case too it is yet to be discovered as to whether the Zulu traditional healers who practice same-sex sexual relationships do so for religious reasons only or it is because they have a same-sex sexual orientation.

³² John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2nd, edi. rev. and enl. London: Heinemann, 1990, 109.

³³ The Zande are an Islam-influenced "forest people," living where tsetse flies preclude stock-raising in what is now southwestern Sudan, the Central African Republic and northeastern Congo.

³⁴ Evans-Pritchard, E. E. (1932) *Heredity and gestation, as the Azande see them*, (Leipzig: C. L. Hirschfeld), 400-14. Also see Evans-Pritchard, E. E. *Man and Woman among the Azande* (London: Faber & Faber, 1974), 19.

³⁵ Also see Evans-Pritchard, E. E. *Man and Woman among the Azande* (London: Faber & Faber, 1974), 19.

³⁶ See Isabel A Phiri "Peacemaking and Reconciliation: The Contribution of African Indigenous Religious Women in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. *Journal of theology for Southern Africa*, 2005, Issue 123, 84-92.

Third, Geoff Puterbaugh has surveyed the practice of same-sex relationships in North Africa from a historical perspective. Though acknowledging its social disapproval in the public domain, he cites cases in Tunisia, Libya, Algeria and Morocco where the practice was prevalent. He nevertheless attributes the origin of this sexual orientation to foreigners, thereby 'exempting' indigenous Africans from it.³⁷

Lastly, Melville Herskovits gives examples of boys who practised same-sex relationships because of circumstances as is the case of prisoners that we cited above. He gives the first example of the Nyakyusa of Tanzania, where boys who left their homesteads between ages of ten and fourteen to become cattle herders in separate settlement camps would practice same-sex relationships among themselves.³⁸ This practice would however cease with marriage. Similarly, same-sex sexual practises among the Fon of Benin were largely seen as an adolescent affair which was phased out by marriage.³⁹ Murray also cites lesbian practices among girls and young women among the Azande of Sudan, Tswana, Ila and Naman of Southern Africa.⁴⁰ In all these examples Melville Herskovits does not differentiate between the same-sex practise and same-sex sexual orientation in the mentioned cases. Furthermore, he presents all the cases as a temporary experience of adolescents which came to an end once a person was married.

Conclusion: Same-Sex Sexual Orientation in Africa

In conclusion, we began this article by asking the question, have Africans always been against same-sex sexual orientation? The examples we have given, specifically from Kenya and then from other African societies have shown that anthropological, sociological philosophical and religious studies confirm the existence of same-sex sexual practises, although sometimes the interpretation of such practices are not always accurate. However, we argue that if every time one wants to prove that "Homosexuality IS African" one cites these practises, one runs the risk of undermining cultural integrity, and this may actually detract from the real issue which is sexual orientation, and

³⁷ For details see Geoff Puterbaugh, "Africa, North," in *Encyclopaedia of Homosexuality*, Vol. 1, Wayne R. Dynes, Ed (New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc., 1990), 18-22.

³⁸ Monica Wilson, *Good Company: A Study of Nyakyusa Age Villages* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 87-88, 196.

³⁹ For details see Melville Herskovits, *Dahomey* (New York: Augustine, 1937).

⁴⁰ Melville Herskovits, *Dahomey* 1937.

ultimately recognising that it is not same-sex sexual practises that need protection by the law, but same-sex sexual orientation.

Bujo has argued that “African ethics are derived primarily from the community and governed by what enhances abundant life for all.”⁴¹ From Bujo’s statement, there are three points we would like to conclude this article with. First, while same –sex sexual practices can be regulated by the community because of how it defines “abundant life for all”, the issue of being born with a same sex orientation does not seem to be acknowledged. This issue is crucial in response to the many African political and religious leaders who have openly condemned same-sex sexual practices and orientation, and have sometimes threatened gay and lesbian people with dire consequences.

Second, within the framework of African spirituality, we recommend the definition of spirituality by Dictionary of Third World Theologies where it says:

Spirituality is a cry for life and for the power to resist death and the agents of death. It provides the strength to go on, for it is the assurance that God is in the struggle. It fulfils the quest for self-discovery, self-affirmation, and self-inclusion, so the whole human community can live fully as human beings created by God.⁴²

In African spirituality all life is sacred and was created by God. The question which everyone needs to ask is: in my context what does it mean for my community and me to affirm the fullness of life? It then becomes possible to reject any spirituality that denies others to live their lives to the full because they were created differently from what the community defines as “normal” sexuality.

Lastly, within the framework of African spirituality and community it also includes the spirituality of finding God together as a community. This means, while emphasis has been on life having meaning as it is lived in community, we need to add that life should be lived in harmonious human relationships. In this community of right relationships, it requires working together between God and human beings, men and women from different ethnic background and sexual orientation. It is therefore important to take seriously issues of justice in the pursuit for right relationships and the preservation of community. Right relationships

⁴¹ Benezet Bujo, *Distinctive of African ethics*, 2010, 83-84.

⁴² Various EATWOT members, 2000 “Spiritualities” in eds Virginia Fabella M.M. and R.S. Sugirtharajah, *Dictionary of Third World Theologies* Maryknoll: Orbis, 189.

must also mean 'non competitive, non hierarchical, non dominating modes of relationship among humans'.⁴³

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Same Sex Relationships: Perspectives from Shona Traditional Religion and Culture in Zimbabwe

Kudzai Biri¹

Abstract

Attitudes towards same sex relationships are varied and largely informed by perspectives ranging from religious beliefs, to views on human rights, ethics, and morality and understandings on biological matters, among others. Various views and criticisms, culminating sometimes in polemic, have characterised this debate in Zimbabwe. The denunciation of same sex relationships denies their historical validity and hence condemns them as both problematic and immoral, raising the two questions of acceptability (i.e. normality as opposed to 'foreignness') and morality. In spite of a host of literature on same sex relationships, very few studies have embarked on an examination of perspectives from a specific African traditional religious and cultural group. In this article I will dialogue with scholars, especially those who have studied same sex relationships among the Shona. African traditional religions and cultures defy generalisations, and cannot be spoken of in monolithic terms, despite commonalities that run across them, hence in this article I focus on the Shona culture. If Shona traditional religion and culture do not make a distinction between same sex relationships and heterosexuality, from the perspectives of same sex union for education and ritual purposes, then how valid is the denunciation thereof on the basis of 'foreignness' and immorality? In this article I will seek to answer this question through a review and survey of relevant literature. The secretive nature of traditional cultures on issues that surround sexuality extends to silence on the discourse of same sex sexuality. It is argued that establishing perspectives on same sex relationships of Shona traditional religion is problematic, hence I suggest areas for consideration that can be of use to researchers.

Introduction

In this article I aim to highlight thought provoking areas in the study of same sex relationships among the Shona of Zimbabwe as I attempt to

¹ Kudzai Biri (PhD) is from Zimbabwe. She is a lecturer in the Department of Religious Studies, Classics and Philosophy of the University of Zimbabwe. Her area of specialisation is African Traditional Religions. Her research interests are in Religion and Gender/Sexuality, Religion and Politics and Religion and Diaspora. Email: kudzibiri@gmail.com

establish the perspectives of traditional Shona society on this matter. These areas might further provoke critical thinking and open avenues for re-negotiating the terrain of the debate on same sex relationships in Zimbabwe. The study of same sex relationships in Zimbabwe is gaining momentum. Tabona Shoko has already explored both Shona traditional culture and the Christian sectors' attitudes towards same sex relationships² and this article utilises some of Shoko's findings. In the present article however, I endeavour to establish the perspective on same sex relationships, focusing only on Shona traditional societies, without incorporating views from the Christian sectors. In this article I seek to critique the complex challenges that researchers are faced with as they attempt to establish what the perspectives towards same sex relationships of Shona traditional societies are, perspectives that have inevitably shaped the attitudes and ideologies regarding this matter. We need to carefully guard against 'diluted' perspectives that are 'purely syncretistic'. These are perspectives that emanate from or are influenced by the Judeo-Christian viewpoints or any other 'foreign' stances, apart from those arising from the traditional Shona societies. It is necessary to be alert to these syncretistic perspectives because many people in Zimbabwe have 'converted' to the so called 'foreign' religions that include Christianity and Islam.

In this article I do not take a position of arguing whether or not same sex unions traditionally existed among the Shona people, but rather engages the challenges that need to be considered when establishing what the perspectives on same sex relationships are, among Shona traditional societies. This position comes from the observation that pointers of the prevalence of same sex unions among the Shona are highly contested. We seem to have no absolute phenomena or evidence from the past that we can directly engage with, in order to come up with an absolute or concrete position with regards to the historical situation. This then complicates the discourse around same sex unions, making it difficult to establish what the authentic perspectives are. However, we attempt to show the gender dynamics that relate to the understanding of same sex unions in the traditional Shona culture, which it is hoped, will in turn open up avenues for further academic inquiry.

² Tabona Shoko, "“Worse than Pigs and Dogs?”: Attitudes Toward Homosexual Practices in Zimbabwe", *Journal of Homosexuality*, 57, no. 5 (2010), 634-639.

A Brief Overview of the Shona

Shona is an umbrella term for a number of different cultural and dialectical groups in Zimbabwe. As put forward by scholars like Bourdillon³, Shoko⁴ and Taringa⁵, these include the Karanga, Manyika, Ndau, Zezuru and the Korekore among others. Linguistic and cultural commonalities have influenced the grouping, although there are notable variations within these different dialects. Hence the grouping is not meant to claim total homogeneity, nor to deny the variations that exist. Mining the perspectives of same sex relationships within Shona traditional religion and culture is placed within the context of these various dialectical groups in different geographical locations in Zimbabwe, however, without particularising a dialect. This might pose some challenges. Firstly, the challenge of how to exhaustively include all of these different dialectical groups of the Shona that has, to some extent, traits of cultural variation. Secondly, there is the challenge of considering the secretive nature of the subject in question with reference to different groups that have been bunched together. This grouping is undertaken because of the need to critically establish or point out tenets indicating the prevalence and perceptions of same sex relationships among the Shona. The article attempts to unravel the pointers that seem to testify to the prevalence of same sex relationships among the different Shona dialectical groups, while at the same time offering a critique of the challenges that beset us when we try to establish the perspective of the same sex unions through the lens of the traditional cultural and religious heritage of the Shona people.

Challenges in the Study of Same Sex Relationships among the Shona

There are several challenges that impinge upon our study and these require careful consideration in order to guard against their undue influence. The first challenge is secrecy in traditional religions. It is well documented that traditional religions in Africa are characterised by secrecy or taboos. This secrecy extends to the subject of sexuality and the Shona are no exception. The secretive nature of African traditional religions means that death robs Africans of the custodians of their

³ Michael Bourdillon, *The Shona Peoples: An Ethnography of the Contemporary Shona, With Special Reference to their Religion*, (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1976), 16-17.

⁴ Tabona Shoko, *Karanga Indigenous Religion in Zimbabwe: Health and Well-Being*, (Ashgate, Ashgate Publishing Company, 2007), 634-639.

⁵ Nisbert Taringa, *A Comparative Analysis of Shona and Christian Attitudes to Nature*, (Saarbrücken: Lambert Publishing House, 2010).

religion and culture because when these custodians die, they take with them the 'treasures' of religion and culture and this means that the society, in particular the younger generation, is deprived of this knowledge. Besides that, there is an unwillingness to disclose information about the so called taboos. Thus Antonio⁶ validly notes that African traditional religion in Zimbabwe subscribes to a view of sex which silences any discourse relating to it. Shoko⁷ adds that society has named sex and sexual practice as secret and sacred, but also as evil.

The second challenge is to ensure that we adhere to a strictly traditional perspective. This is because some people present "corrupted" views that combine perspectives from different religious and cultural traditions. Added to this, the political leadership in Zimbabwe seem to command a large amount of influence in social thinking. Their position on same sex relationships, especially their denial of their historical validity in Zimbabwe has influenced people to the degree that their attitudes towards same sex unions have been built upon the rhetoric of politicians.

Indeed, the majority of people, influenced by the Judeo-Christian worldview, have rallied behind politicians to condemn same sex relationships, which is not informed by any critical engagement with the past practices. Thus Judeo-Christian theological positions, together with the political rhetoric has widened the contested terrain as regards same sex relationships in Zimbabwe. This article therefore, engages in a critical analysis of the perspectives from the stance of traditional religion, while paying attention to gender dynamics and at the same time being aware of the threat of 'outside' perspectives. Several studies, for example, that of Shoko⁸, claim that they have engaged elders and chiefs, the perceived custodians of Shona traditional religion. An engagement of such people requires a critique. This is not because they are not the "right" people to consult in this regard, but rather because of several other reasons. Firstly, the traditional chiefs themselves have been corrupted by various governments, dating from the colonial era to post independence Zimbabwe. Most of the chiefs are salaried and inevitably support governmental positions. Today, this means that they back Mugabe's ideologies including his stance on same sex

⁶ E. P Antonio, "Homosexuality and African Culture" in *Aliens in the Household of God: Homosexuality and Christian Faith in South Africa*, ed. P Germond and S. de Gruchy (Cape Town: David Phillip, 1997), 298-310.

⁷ Shoko, "Worse than Pigs and Dogs", 637.

⁸ Shoko, "Worse than Pigs and Dogs", 637.

relationships. This presents a challenge to attempts to mine the data from the supposed custodians of the traditional religion and culture. A second challenge is that the terms homosexuality and lesbianism are Western concepts. The terms have been fashioned and fabricated in the West but have gained universal application to sexuality in Africa. This article argues that when terms are imposed, there is danger of losing or distorting the original meaning. There is also a risk of misrepresentation, hence leading to false impressions or implications. We raise this point to highlight the fact that while same sex relationships have long been prevalent in the African context (though they have remained secretive), these relationships were not and are not construed in the same manner or with the same connotations as the terms homosexuality and lesbianism are in the Western sense.

Same Sex Relationship in Traditional Zimbabwe

There are six issues I want to raise under same sex relationship in traditional Zimbabwe. First, same sex unions are traditionally known by the word *chingochani* and those who practise it are *ngochani*. It is also termed *makunakuna* (incest) and it denotes a “bizarre” practice. Translating these terms presents a challenge. However, what is significant in these interviews is that they pointed out the fact that although the subject of same sex relationships is difficult to unravel; the practice existed and continues to exist. The reference to the Shona terminology indicates that Shona society had named the practice and it was pointed out that a society cannot name that which does not exist.

Second, children’s play, popularly known as ***Mahumbwe***,⁹ was the method through which children were taught sex roles, together with the broader socialisation process and initiation ceremonies that were directed towards their future in a marital union.¹⁰ Boys and girls imitated fatherly and motherly roles respectively, as part of their games and play. Imitation took place modelled alongside the traditional daily roles ranging from that of the father, husband, mother, wife and children. Also in some cases, where the boys and girls were of mature age, they would imitate sex. It is also significant to note that the Shona patriarchal gender roles were inherited in *mahumbwe*. For example, the ‘wife’ could be beaten by the ‘husband’ for failing to cook pleasant food or the

⁹ *Mahumbwe* refers to popular children’s play among the Shona. The children imitate social roles, for example, if a boy/girl is a ‘father’ he/she brings firewood, whilst the ‘mother’ is cooking. The roles that they play and duties assigned to each one is a result of the socialisation process in the home and society.

¹⁰ Shoko, “Worse than Pigs and Dogs”, 637.

'husband' could make all decisions without contribution from the 'wife'. However, there were times when children of same sex would engage in *mahumbwe*. Those positions and roles did not cease in the absence of members of the opposite sex (i.e. when only boys or only girls were present); rather, they continued and even included the imitation of the sexual act and the pleasures that accompany the sexual act. Who taught them this? Shoko¹¹ rightly points out that children among the Shona are quick to learn things which the parents do not want them to know, including vulgar sexual language. In this regard, *mahumbwe* draws out questions that need inquiry. What was the purpose and significance of 'same sex' relationships in *mahumbwe* as children's play and does it affect the adult's sexual life? Do these games – when engaged in by children of the same sex – translate into same sex relationships as conceived in the Western world?

Apart from *mahumbwe*, young girls often had sexual encounters as slightly older and more experienced girls gradually socialised young girls into adult female roles and relationships. Sexual intimacy was a real aspect of these relationships in which homoerotic touching and kissing accompanied the mutual lengthening of the labia.¹² In regard to understanding such cultural practices, we need to engage auxiliary disciplines (psychology, sociology and others) in our study in order to fill in the gaps. The auxiliary disciplines such as sociology need to determine, for example, how the children's play and the socialisation process of sex among older girls can influence adult sexual life style and the extent to which it does. However, the auxiliary disciplines are silent on this and do not provide us with adequate information. This then makes it difficult to adopt a concrete absolute position it trying to establish perspectives on same sex relationships among the Shona.

Third, is Chinamwari¹³ which was sex education that was provided for young girls and boys who were of marriageable age, in order to develop our understanding of perspectives on same-sex relationships. These boys and girls underwent certain cultural rituals that accompanied the initiation ceremonies. It is not surprising to discover that in the secluded area where these rituals were performed, an elderly woman assuming the role of a male, 'had sex' with the young girl in order to teach and train her how she should act/perform during sexual intercourse with her

¹¹ Shoko, *Karanga Indigenous Religion*, 18-20.

¹² E.J Patron, "Heart of Lavender", *The Harvard Gay and Lesbian Review*, 1995, 23-28.

¹³ *Chinamwari* is the traditional practice under which young girls of marriageable age were given sex education.

husband-to-be. The common practice known as *chinamwari* falls within this category. The Shona patriarchal culture emphasises sex education more on the part of girls than boys, and socialises girls that they should please men sexually.

In this practise we get a glimpse of the gender bias that is again informed by Shona patriarchy. While boys undergo initiation ceremonies at puberty age, such as testing their virility, they are not taught how to please their wife-to-be sexually. This emanates from the perception that a woman's experiences are not important in sexual issues, while the 'Shona bull' (Shoko 2007) has an insatiable thirst for women that cannot be quenched. Hence cultural practices like *chinamwari* will help to 'restrain' the 'bull' through his reception of sexual satisfaction. Since elderly women were responsible for training the young girls in *chinamwari*, this reveals how women have been recruited and positioned within the patriarchal structures in order to perpetuate patriarchal practices that are not reciprocal. The training of the girls took place over a prolonged period of time until the elder was satisfied that the initiate had gained the required expertise. At this juncture we will pause and ask the question: If an 'outsider' had an encounter with these women in such a secluded area, what would be the conclusion he/she would come to? Would he/she be aware of the implications of such a 'sexual act' would he/she view it as lesbianism? These questions help us to point to the difficulties and complications surrounding the subject of same sex relationships and the challenges that we encounter in the study of these relationships from a global perspective. Unless the subject of same sex relationships is contextualised, we are bound to arrive at false impressions and conclusions. This also cautions us not to make hasty interpretations or come to conclusions on the perspectives on same sex relationships from a traditional standpoint. The 'outsider' may not realise or understand that same sex unions are accepted within the boundaries of the transitory stage within a traditional cultural analysis, and that this does not count as a lesbian sexual orientation as conceived in the Western sense.

In light of this, it is essential to establish the feelings and attitudes of the initiates themselves before coming to any conclusions. However, the major obstacle in this regard is that Shona society has placed barriers on women discussing issues pertaining to sexuality. Women can not freely discuss their feelings, views and aspirations on this matter (and others), but are expected to accede to the dictates and norms of the patriarchal society. This is complicated by the fact that various groups

constitute the Shona. One can not impose the findings of one group on the other. We have already noted that although the Shona constitute different linguistic and cultural variations, scholars have generally tended to bunch them together on the basis of commonalities that run across the religious cultures. This seems to do an injustice to these cultural groups, for example, the Manyika of Manicaland, covering a very wide geographical area, have some noticeable inbuilt cultural variations. For us to be in a position to establish their perspectives means that we need to engage with the scientific evidence from these different cultural groups of people. Reference to a generic Shona becomes suspicious and we advocate rather the 'culture area' approach.¹⁴ Otherwise, without the evidence from within the particular 'culture area', which is examined within its own specific context, it is difficult to establish a perspective that is genuinely reflective of the people being studied. If such contextuality is taken into account, it is however feasible to then move from such a 'culture area' approach to a wider Shona perspective.

Fourth is masturbation among boys. Among the Shona, masturbation among boys was located within one of the cultural practices that was meant to test fertility and virility among boys before they were married. They were taught to masturbate in relative openness while standing with their feet in the river. If the sperm floated, the boy was deemed impotent, while the sinking sperm was a sign of maturity. This cultural practice seems to have been informed more by the Shona understanding of procreation as central in sexual relations.

Although the practice of public masturbation camouflaged personal feelings, it could have encouraged a clandestine homosexual relationship that was not readily interpreted as such by society.¹⁵ Aschwanden¹⁶ reiterates the same point by arguing that among the Karanga, masturbation between two boys is considered irrelevant since it does not lead to "genuine" homosexuality and thus is simply regarded as transitory stage. However, this masturbation, in Aschwanden's view, could well develop into homosexuality later on in a person's life, but this is mostly hindered by the adoption of heterosexual marital life which is

¹⁴ F Mbon, "Some Methodological Issues in the Academic Article of West African Traditional Religions" in *The Article of Religions in Africa: Past Present and Prospects*, eds. J Platvoet, J. Cox, and J. Olupona, (Cambridge: Roots and Branches 1996), 172-182.

¹⁵ Shoko, "Worse than Pigs and Dogs", 639.

¹⁶ Herbert Aschwanden, *Karanga Mythology: An Analysis of the consciousness of the Karanga*, (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1989), 75.

enforced by the Karanga. Again, like in the case of the children's play we are not certain whether the cultural practice would influence adult sexual life or whether it simply waned as the boys grew up.

Fifth is male court place. Epprecht¹⁷ holds that men sat at the *padare* (court place) – an all male discussion forum where they spoke about issues that were kept secret from women. One can detect a strong patriarchal under-current in the all male discussion forums. Women were viewed as weak (faint hearted/cowards) and hence were excluded from the forums that made important decisions. Decisions that pertain to family issues were also made without consulting women. In this forum, male homosexuality was discouraged not because it was immoral, but because of how it impacted on the patriarchal principle of the importance of male sexuality for the purposes of procreation. The forums condemned same sex unions because it wasted male seed. Shoko¹⁸ adds that this explains why same sex unions between young boys were tolerated, while such union between boys of marriageable age was proscribed. Chigweshe¹⁹ also argues that in same sex unions, one of the two males takes on the role of a wife, which denigrates and challenges the idea of male supremacy and patriarchal hierarchy. This might also explain the uncompromising denunciation of same sex sexuality in Zimbabwe since the Shona are a patriarchal society. Accepting same sex relationships distorts patriarchal social roles. Apart from confusing the sex roles, it also brings to the fore the reason why women are relegated to an inferior position and why they are viewed as people who can not be listened to or heard in issues pertaining to sex. This emanates from the patriarchal view that men are superior to women and that the latter should remain subservient to and at the service and mercy of the former.

Lastly, Shoko²⁰ points out that scholars hold that same sex sexuality is encouraged most readily in homological activities where the sexes live in relative separation. Thus, homosexual activities tended to arise where there are polygamous families within which women sought to support one another emotionally and physically. Shoko's observation on the need for women to emotionally and physically support one another as a

¹⁷ Epprecht, "Pre-modern and early colonial Sub-Saharan Africa", in *The Encyclopaedia of Homosexuality*, ed. G.E. Maggerty, (New York: Garland Press, 1998), 5.

¹⁸ Shoko, "Worse than Pigs and Dogs", 637.

¹⁹ R. Chigweshe, "Homosexuality: A Zimbabwean Religious Perspective", (Honours Dissertation, University of Zimbabwe, 1996), 12.

²⁰ Shoko, "Worse than Pigs and Dogs" 639.

result of sexual deprivation from their husbands opens up avenues for critique. Firstly, it exposes the loopholes of polygamous marriages and challenges defenders of patriarchy who see nothing wrong with polygamy. The reality is that polygamy fails to take into account the entire needs of women. Secondly, we wonder, when the women sought to support each other through same sex relations, could it possibly be interpreted as a form of protest against their sexual deprivation by their husbands? Thirdly, this practice disregards the limited patriarchal view of sex as penetration, which undermines the equally significant same sex unions among girls or women. This is a pointer to the fact that same sex relationships among women were not only prevalent, but nurtured within some traditional cultural practices.

In the case of boys, they spent a great deal of time herding their cattle who grazed the pastures far away from home, while the girls spent time doing household chores. Homoerotic touching and fondling between two youths of the same sex at puberty did occur, fostering potential implications for future genuine same sex sexual tendencies.²¹

Views on the Meaning/Significance of Same Sex Relationships

Divergent views on same sex relationships exist among the Shona in Zimbabwe. One perception, perhaps influenced by ideas from the West is that one engages in same sex relationships because one can not get satisfaction in a heterosexual relationship. The other perception is that while there may be a relative acceptance of same sex practices, these practices however, are not understood as indicative that the persons engaging in them fall within that modern, Western definition of "homosexual". This is because those who engage in same sex unions may simply want to relieve sexual urges or seek love in contexts when heterosexual outlets are denied them. A good example in Zimbabwe has been necessitated by colonial structures such as prisons, farms, mine compounds, township hostels, and boarding schools among others, all of which are contexts viewed as promoting same sex relationships. Convicted prisoners incarcerated in prisons encourage the growth and development of homosexual activities, while in mining compound environments, the same goes for migrant labourers.²²

²¹ M Sibanda, "Attitudes towards homosexuality among Christian Zimbabweans", (Honours Dissertation, University of Zimbabwe, 1998), 43-44.

²² Shoko, "Worse than Pigs and Dogs", 641.

A further point that we need to take note of is the emphasis of responses to male same sex relationships on the role of women, which is influenced by the patriarchal society. The desirable purpose of sex and marriage is to bear children, which is the task performed by women. The value that is attached to children has been reiterated by President Mugabe when he condemned same sex relationships: "...Leave whites to do that, I received mails and calls from all over the world, some supporting me and some castigating me for castigating the homosexuals. To those who are homosexuals, my challenge to you is ... [to] prove to me you can be pregnant."²³

Hence the view of Mugabe represents that of many Shona people: if you do not want to be married, why should you engage in sex, and if you do not want children why should you marry? Same sex relationships could proceed unnoticed because they do not lead to procreation. The patriarchal nature of the Shona society makes it difficult to detect same sex relationships among women. Such same sex activities could thus go unnoticed by males.²⁴ As pointed out by Gunda²⁵, this might be linked to the bias that the patriarchal society has about its conceptualisation of sex. They conceive it as penetration, which is why same sex relationships among women are not 'an issue' in society, and according to Shoko²⁶, lesbianism could unconsciously be accommodated since men remained relatively blind to it. Their sexuality was a matter of indifference to men since their main role was to produce children and women's needs for sexual pleasure was neglected in a state of polygamy.

Analysis

It seems that Zimbabwean society has a generalised opinion of those who engage in same sex relationships as social deviants and sinners

²³ In 1995, President Robert Mugabe, on a series of occasions castigated homosexuals on the national television station, the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation and in the *Herald* newspaper. There were several responses to this, and on 21st February 2008, during the 21st February Movement Celebrations in Harare, he replied to criticisms of his castigations by further denouncing gays and lesbians and claimed that lesbianism and homosexuality are practices of white people.

²⁴ Shoko, "Worse than Pigs and Dogs", 638.

²⁵ R.M Gunda, *The Bible and Homosexuality in Zimbabwe: A Socio-Historical Analysis of the Political, Cultural and Christian Arguments in the Homosexual Public debate With Special reference to the Use of the Bible*, (Bamberg: University of Bamberg Press, 2010), 45.

²⁶ Shoko, "Worse than Pigs and Dogs", 639.

who do not conform to social norms.²⁷ However, it appears that the Judeo-Christian perspective is largely dominant in such a perspective. It thus also appears that same sex unions were implicitly accommodated in Shona society when it was not motivated by sexual intimacy and attraction, within the cultural practices and at transitory stages in life. Determining the veracity of this position could be problematic in that there might be challenges in detecting which act was based on sexual orientation or attraction, given the secretive nature of such sexual acts. Information on same sex relationships is not readily available and practitioners do not openly speak of this matter. Shona traditional religion is also silent on the biological make up of those who practice same sex relationships. This silence is based on the secretive nature of the discourse and it puts limitations on the scientific debate about same sex relationships and how they are viewed.

The study of same sex relationships in Zimbabwe inevitably drags us into the insider-outsider debate. The traditional view maintains that one who is born and raised in a religious or cultural setting is best placed to study and articulate the religious/cultural dynamics of that specific religious/cultural orientation.²⁸ In this article, this means that many people (those who do not practice same sex unions) remain 'outsiders' and are not qualified to study same sex relationships. However, the anthropological approach to religion maintains that a valid understanding of religion can be gained only by an objective outsider, who remaining an outsider obtains information from an insider 'informant'. While this approach is plausible and seems applicable, it has setbacks in terms of establishing the perspectives on same sex relationships among the Shona because of the difficulty in getting 'an insider informant'. This is mainly because the Zimbabwean society has from all angles denounced them, and even labelled them as criminals, and therefore they cannot openly discuss these relationships. The practitioners of same sex relationships are the 'insiders' who remain secretive about their practices, presenting a serious challenge to our efforts to study same sex relationships. Also, the brand of comparativism²⁹ between various perspectives from the African traditional standpoint is problematic in the sense that Africans (the Shona) 'are one but not one' at the same time. This complicates the task of finding the 'Shona perspective'. Furthermore, attitudinally, in the

²⁷ Shoko, "Worse than Pigs and Dogs", 648.

²⁸ N Ross-Reat, "Insiders and Outsiders in The Article of Religious Traditions", *Journal of American Academy of Religion*, (1983), 51, no. 3, 459-476.

²⁹ N Ross-Reat, "Insiders and Outsiders", 461.

globalising context, we need to be careful not to be submerged by Western cultural imperialism³⁰ in the academic study of same sex relationships among the Shona; because the assumptions and terminology of Western concepts have different connotations to those of Africans. Hence,

As we enter upon an age of global interaction (because of global concerns) it is important to understand points of similarity and difference ... of the various civilizations.³¹

African traditional religions are inspired by a true sense of sacredness of life and all its elements.³² The exploration of the challenges that are discussed in this article in turn raise the need for a holistic approach to the study of the phenomenon of same sex relationships among the Shona. Promising work in this regard lies in the research of oral cultures. The other side of the coin linked to the 'comparativism' mentioned above is the failure to adequately distinguish between different African cultures. We reiterate what Chitando has noted in his critical re-evaluation of African scholars and the study of religions:

Beyond the criticism that African Christian scholars are encumbered by Christian spectacles and by nationalism, the other recurrent criticism is that they are not contextually sensitive. Hasty generalisation from a specific community to the whole continent of Africa is considered a severe limitation.³³

Mandaza³⁴ has also drawn attention to the contribution of 'imperialist education' and Christianity that have played a major role in producing a middle class bourgeoisie and its African nationalist leadership, which in turn have come to dominate society and ideology. This observation by Mandaza can be seen in Zimbabwe's political and religious scenario. Christians, who have rallied behind Mugabe, denounce same sex relationships as unhistorical, unethical and an abomination that has roots in and influence from the West. Yet, Mugabe's political rhetoric is also characterised by his anti-Western political interests and indeed his hatred of the West, especially America and Britain. This means that we need to be cautious when 'mining' perspectives on same sex

³⁰ G McLean and J Hogan, *Ecumenism and Nostra Aetate in the Twenty First century*, (Washington DC: The Council for Research in values and Philosophy, 2005), 7.

³¹ McLean and Hogan, *Ecumenism and Nostra Aetate*, 51.

³² McLean and Hogan, *Ecumenism and Nostra Aetate*, 7.

³³ Ezra Chitando, "African Scholars and the Article of African Traditional Religions: A Re-evaluation", *Religion* 30, no. 4, (2000), 393.

³⁴ I Mandaza, *Race, Class and Colour in Southern Africa*, (Harare: SAPES Books, 1997), 534.

relationships, because the socio-cultural and religious orientation of the Shona, and of Shona Christians, with their political affiliations, has complicated the situation.

In such conditions, even the phenomenological approach, that treats the believer as the final court of appeal finds loopholes in application and invites valid criticism. Thus, interviewees' statements may be judged as 'inauthentic' because the condemnation of the traditional religion manifested in some of the interviewees' responses displays the strength of the Judeo-Christian influence on them. This is not meant to discredit the validity of the thinking of African Christian scholars and interviewees. While we acknowledge their positive contributions in the academic study of same sex relationships and on other matters, we highlight the limitations that might confront the attempt to mine the traditional cultural perspectives of the Shona.

Conclusion

It can be validly argued that same sex relationships existed in traditional Shona, as observed by the confirmations from the interviewees. Those who deny the existence of same sex relationships seem to lack critical engagement. We have drawn attention to the complexities that enshrine same sex perspectives among the Shona and pointed out that concrete and accurate perspectives seem to be difficult to draw out, given the fact that sexual taboos, issues of marriage and procreation, and patriarchy have camouflaged the same sex phenomenon, both directly and indirectly. Hence ignorance or lack of knowledge and misunderstanding has produced mixed feelings or views, complicating the whole discourse of same sex relationships. The study of same sex perspectives therefore requires sensitivity to the factors that characterise African traditional religion (Shona religion) that distinguishes it from other world religions,³⁵ especially the dynamics of gender. At the same time attention needs to be paid to the fact that African traditional religion is not a relic of the past, but is dynamic, and has come into contact with the outside world, affecting labels, affinities, and resonance.³⁶ Hence, further complexities arise as a result of interaction with external forces, such as Judeo-Christian thought.

³⁵ J Mosala, "African Traditional Beliefs and Christianity", *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 43 (3), 15.

³⁶ Chitando, "African Scholars and the Article of African Traditional Religions", 394.

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“Us and Them” in the One and Undivided Church: The Methodist Church and the Same-Sex Sexuality Debate

Raymond Simangaliso Kumalo¹

We believe that it is the will of God that the Church must be one and undivided. The Conference declares that its conviction be one and undivided trusting to the leading of God to bring this ideal to ultimate fruition.²

Abstract

The Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA) has been debating the position and attitude it needs to adopt with regard to same-sex sexuality for the past ten years without reaching a final conclusion. This article highlights the debate that has been raging between those who are for the acceptance of gay people into the ministry of the church and those who are against it. It analyses the “us and them” problem which has polarized the debate and widened the gaps between the two groups; those who are pro-gay, comprising mostly gay clergy and sympathetic laity are represented by an organization they have formed within the church known as “Sacred Worth” and those who are against same-sex sexuality, both clergy and lay people, who are represented by the hierarchy of the MCSA. Each group is characterised by the “us” against “them” approach, thus the Methodist Church is divided even though it professes itself to be “a one and undivided church.” This article problematizes the us/ them paradigm by showing the varying degrees of being “us and them” in the church. It analyses the undergirding theological and political reasons that inform each group’s stance. Then the article argues that the “us and them” problem in the same-sex debate can be better understood if the larger issues of human sexuality and the unity of the church are appreciated.

Introduction

The opening quotation emphasizes the commitment of the MCSA to being “one and undivided.” This article argues that the response of the MCSA on issues around same-sex relationships has not been unified.

¹ R Simangaliso Kumalo (PhD) is from South Africa. He is the Acting Head of the School of Religion and Theology, University of KwaZulu-Natal. His research interest is in Religion and Governance and the Social History of South Africa. Email: kumalor@ukzn.ac.za

² *Minutes of the Methodist Conference 1958*, (Cape Town: Methodist Publishing House, 1958), 55.

This scenario has fragmented the church, with some in support of same sex-marriage and others vehemently against it. This fragmentation has complicated the decision-making ability of the MCSA. As a consequence, the church has struggled to take a concrete stance over the matter.

According to Neville Richardson who at the time was the chairperson of the Doctrine, Ethics and Worship Committee (DEWCOM) which was guiding the MCSA on this matter, “The Methodist Church is a community of love not rejection.”³ This effectively means that the Methodist Church should embrace all including those who self-identify as gay and lesbian. However, this has not been the experience of Ecclesia de Lange who was defrocked by the church after entering into a same-sex marriage. She states:

My spiritual home has been destroyed by the decision of the church. I have found a community of supporters outside the church, who have supported us and a few from within the church. I have not been able to deal with the individual blows that I have taken from the church, it has been too painful and Amanda has not been able to do that herself... I feel ashamed of it for what it has done to me, by rejecting me.⁴

Clearly there is a contradiction between what Richardson says about the MCSA being a community of love not rejection and Ecclesia de Lange’s experience of persecution and ultimately rejection by the church that she loves and seeks to serve. How can these two pastors of the same church present such contradictory views of their church’s attitude, when it comes to same-sex relationships? What is the real position of the MCSA on this issue? Has this issue affected the ecclesiology and unity of the MCSA, as a church that has committed itself to remain ‘one and undivided’? How can the church realize the dream of being an inclusive and all-embracing community? These are some of the questions that I intend to address in this article. I will do this by first, examining the theoretical and conceptual issues around the same-sex sexuality issue. Second, I will discuss Ecclesia’s story as a case study. Third, I will look at the response of the Methodist Church on this matter. Fourth, I will give an analysis of the polarisation of the unity

³ Neville Richardson, former Chairperson of the Methodist Church’s Doctrines, Ethics and Worship Commission. Interviewed by the Rev Herbert Moyo on 20 October 2009 in Pietermaritzburg. Unpublished Report on the attitudes of mainline churches on same-sex marriages in KwaZulu-Natal.

⁴ E. De Lange, The story of Ecclesia de Lange. Unpublished brochure of an address to Central Methodist Mission, Cape Town, 10 March 2010, 1.

of the church by the “us and them” phenomenon. And fifth, It will propose a way forward for the church. While I will draw extensively on theoretical, conceptual, and theological frameworks, I also have the benefit of being an ordained minister within the MCSA, and therefore have the benefit of an “insider” status as a researcher.

Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

Richardson’s claim that the MCSA is a caring community and Ecclesia de Lange’s mourning that the church has not cared for her, go deeply into the question of the fundamental character of the church. The reality is that the MCSA has a number of people who are opposed to the acceptance of gays and lesbians⁵ within the church LGBTI’s. These people base their theological position in this regard on the analysis and exegesis of six biblical texts: Genesis 19:1-11; Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13; Romans 1:26-27; 1 Corinthians 6:9; and Timothy 1:10. A literal reading of these texts justifies the exclusion of gays and lesbians. The question that begs an answer then is why should the church care about its relationship with those who self-identify as gay and lesbian within the church? Writing in favour of a dialogue with gays and lesbians in the church Choon-Leong Seow, in her book *Homosexuality and the Christian Community*, offers an answer to this question by arguing that, our relationship with one another in the community of faith are inseparable from the character of our relationship with God.⁶ However relationships require a constant dialogue between the partners. Unfortunately that is not the case with homosexuals and those who are pro same-sex relationships in the church, for their voices are not heard. Steve de Gruchy directly addresses the characteristics that need to be embraced by the church, if it is to be an inclusive community:

We are driven throughout by a vision that the church can be and should be an inclusive, caring and affirming community of people redeemed by God’s grace, not existing for its own sake, but rather to participate in God’s mission of freedom in and for the world in the power of the Holy Spirit. In this community the voices of all disciples of Christ – young and old, male and female, black and white, schooled

⁵ While LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersexed) is the currently preferred nomenclature in academic discourse on the subject, I use the term Gays and Lesbians in this article, because at the moment the church still understands this issue at that level. I use the term “homosexual” which is currently viewed as stigmatizing only where it is used in the original quotation or reference.

⁶ Choon-Leong Seow (ed), *Homosexuality and Christian Community*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 125.

and illiterate, straight, lesbian and gay – are heard and honoured, loved and trusted.⁷

Robert Wood, a pastor in the United Church of Christ in America in his book *Christ and the Homosexual* takes a radical step by arguing that:

Homosexuals should be welcomed into the church and its ministry without any requirement that they change their pattern of sexual behaviour; the church should sponsor definite activities designed to serve homosexuals, for example promoting “drag” dances; and the church should conduct marriage ceremonies for homosexual partners who determine to relate to each other in love and devotion.⁸

Bishop Selby Spong of the Episcopal Church in America also adopts a position that accepts homosexuality on condition that it is committed to a monogamous relationship, stating that:

The relationship in which sex is shared needs to be exclusive.... Multiple sex partners at the same time is a violation of vulnerability, commitment, honesty, and the reality of caring.⁹

From the views of these theologians it is imperative for the church to move towards an inclusive community, one which would include people with same-sex preferences. The question is how does the church begin to move toward this inclusive position? For the church to succeed in this endeavour, it can learn from Miraslov Volf’s writing on the issue of the exclusion and inclusion of the ‘other’. In his book *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, Volf has argued that an inclusive community is an imperative of the gospel.¹⁰ He calls Christians to be in solidarity with those who are excluded, this being key to the theology of the cross. He observes that “the tension between the message of the cross and the world of violence presented itself to be a conflict between the desire to follow the crucified and letting myself be nailed on the cross.”¹¹ Volf terms his model of being involved with those who suffer exclusion and persecution, as self-donation or solidarity. For him, this method finds its theological motivation in the theology of the cross where “sufferers can

⁷ S. De Gruchy and P. Germond, *Aliens in the household of God: Homosexuality and the Christian Faith in South Africa*, (Cape Town: David Phillip, 1997), 235.

⁸ R. Wood, *Christ and the Homosexual*, (New York: Vantage, 1960), 23.

⁹ Selby Spong, *Living in Sin: Bishop Rethinks Human Sexuality*, (San Francisco: Harper, 1988), 216.

¹⁰ M. Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, (Cape Town: David Phillip, 1996), 10.

¹¹ Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 10.

find comfort in the solidarity of the Crucified God."¹² He understands this as meaning that Christians need to take sides with the harassed and helpless, and to indeed share their suffering.

The biblical basis of the model of self-donation is found in Romans 15:7, which refers to the Christ who 'welcomes' and 'gives himself to' all of us. From this emerges three key points which are (1) mutuality of self-giving; (2) love in the Trinity; and (3) the open arms of the "father" receiving the "prodigal son". At the heart of Volf's method is "the will to give ourselves to others and welcome them, to re-adjust our identities to make space for them prior to any judgment about others except identifying them in their humanity."¹³ In short this method can be understood as propagating a self-sacrificing approach. Volf refers to it as self-donation so that we can receive or welcome others.¹⁴ Volf's model is an appropriate theological strategy that the church should consider when dealing with the issue of same-sex relationships and being an inclusive community. The discussion on the different attitudes towards homosexuals and the ideas offered by a number of theologians, especially Spong and Miraslov Volf, can offer some insights to the MCSA as it wrestles with this issue.

"Let There be Gays and Lesbians in the Methodist Church": The Ecclesia de Lange Story

Although the church seemed to have adopted a tolerant position with regard to same-sex relationships, this tolerance evaporated when facing such a relationship involving one of its ministers. On 6 December 2009, the Rev Ecclesia de Lange, a Methodist minister in good standing, stood up to tell her congregation of her sexual orientation and her genuine love for her partner, and of her intention to enter into a same-sex marriage. Indeed on 15 December 2009 she married her partner.

Ecclesia de Lange was charged by her superintendent minister for allegedly breaching the Methodist rules and regulations by entering into marriage with a same-sex partner. The church had accepted gays and lesbians in the church membership and in the ordained ministry, but had not consented to same-sex marriages. When de Lange entered into that marriage, she had breached the Methodist covenant that she would not enter into such a union. On 20 February 2010 she was tried, found

¹² Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 24.

¹³ Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 29

¹⁴ Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 30

guilty and was dismissed from the ministry, thus losing her job, livelihood, accommodation, and a community of faith to belong to. Thus the community that de Lange loved and served rejected her.¹⁵ For de Lange, what the church expected of her was unfair because it would have meant living a lie. She decided “I have reached the point where I can no longer be silent. I have come to see that it is better to be rejected for who I am than to be accepted for who I am not...”¹⁶ Peter Storey, a respected Methodist theologian, wrote an article in solidarity with de Lange. In the article he held that through her actions, de Lange was saying that:

I desire to serve Jesus. I desire to be true to myself. I desire to minister within the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA) with integrity and be faithful to God’s call on my life.¹⁷

Following *Ecclesia de Lange’s* dismissal by the MCSA, she received many messages of solidarity both from within and from outside the church. One such message came from the synod of the Cape of Good Hope District, after a dramatic turn of events. Nineteen ministers marched out of the synod meeting in solidarity with de Lange and all who self-identify as gay and lesbian in the MCSA. They argued that the church must continue to welcome gays and lesbians into its membership, leadership and ministry and that it must also encourage them in committed relationships to enter into civil unions as provided for in the Constitution of South Africa.¹⁸ Moreover, they also called for the church to make appropriate provisions for Christian couples in such unions to receive the blessing of a Christian covenantal rite, by enabling those ministers who felt called, according to their conscience, to officiate at such civil unions.¹⁹

Those who support *Ecclesia de Lange’s* dismissal draw inspiration from Leviticus 18:22: “You shall not lie with a man as with women” and a few other texts that I have mentioned above. Meanwhile, some of those who supported de Lange found their motivation from the teaching of the church as a community of grace, love, inclusivity and embrace of *all* people. Others took sides with de Lange from the perspective of human rights. Such people have argued that since the constitution of the

¹⁵ The irony in this story is that the name *Ecclesia* refers to the church or community of believers and this happens to be her name. So *Ecclesia* was rejected by the *ecclesia*.

¹⁶ De Lange, Address, 2.

¹⁷ A. Storey, Solidarity with *Ecclesia de Lange*. Address to Central Methodist Church, Cape Town on Ash Wednesday, March 2010, 1.

¹⁸ *Methodist Yearbook 2010* (Cape Town: Methodist Publishing House, 2010), 35.

¹⁹ *Yearbook 2010*, 34.

country recognizes same-sex marriages, the church is impinging on gay and lesbian couples' rights to enter into a marriage contract. Such an approach has a tremendous appeal in the contemporary, cultural climate for liberal democracy. Proponents of this approach draw their inspiration from texts such as Galatians 3:38 and Colossians 3:11.

This situation is evidence enough that the church was fragmented. Outside the MCSA, Christina Engela, from the South African Gay and Lesbian Alliance against Defamation (SA GLAAD), condemned the news, describing it as "a shameful turn of events". She said that "the MCSA has today betrayed the trust of all its non-heterosexual members and supporters."²⁰ She further notes:

The Methodist Church of South Africa has thus fumbled a perfect opportunity to right past wrongs, to truly show a meaningful welcome to the pink community in its ranks – and has instead chosen to compound them by affirming instead rejection and bigotry.²¹

In response to the rejection by her church and the support she received from her sympathizers, Ecclesia de Lange committed herself to fighting for her recognition by the Methodist Church for who she is, for her right to marriage and for her right to belong to the church that she loves. She said that:

If I don't take action, the church hopes I will go away and the case disappear. I want to tell the church that I will not go away, there is a whole community of people in my position who love God, and love the church and would like to serve the church, and the church is poorer for not accepting us.²²

The Origins and Development of the Same-Sex Sexuality Debate in the MCSA

The dilemma faced by the MCSA regarding same-sex marriage can be traced to the beginning of the new century. At the MCSA Conference of 2001, a debate on same-sex marriage ensued. Some argued for the expulsion of members who were in favour of same-sex relationships, arguing that it was against the teachings of the Bible. The issue around membership was resolved by a general agreement that membership in the MCSA is not deserved but is an act of grace. As a result, all people

²⁰ News 24, 16th February 2011. <http://www.news24.com/southAfrica/news/Methodists> (Accessed:21/11/2011)

²¹ News 24, 16th February 2011. <http://www.news24.com/southAfrica/news/Methodists> (Accessed: 21/11/2011)

²² De Lange, Address, 2.

who are members of the church are there not because they deserve it but because “Jesus has invited and justified all of them to membership.”²³ Therefore, no one can deny anyone else the right to belong to the MCSA.

The MCSA Conference adopted the principle that the church seeks to be a “community of love rather than rejection, meaning that it seeks to accommodate and embrace all people rather than reject them for any particular reason.”²⁴ As a result, the church resolved that it will accept all people into its membership, regardless of their sexual orientation. This principle has far-reaching implications in terms of how the church should deal with people of same-sex sexual orientation. At the MCSA Conference of 2003, a discussion guide on Christians and same-sex relationships was presented by DEWCOM. It was adopted as a tool for the church’s engagement on the question and was referred to the Methodist people for their study and response, to be considered at the Conference of 2005.²⁵

The committee came up with six principles for constructive debate. These were to: seek the truth of Christ in the spirit, seek to move beyond ‘corners of conviction’, seek first to understand and then to be understood, seek to see the human face of this issue, seek to be well-informed and seek to celebrate the gift of diversity. Close analysis shows that these principles were in sympathy with those who were involved in same-sex relationships. The premise for this argument was that those in same-sex marriages never condemned their counterparts in different-sex marriages, so there was no need to implore them to embrace diversity because they were already doing so. The people who needed to be entreated to embrace diversity were those supporting only different-sex marriages, because they were rejecting the difference with which they were confronted in same-sex relationships. In view of this, the majority of people in the church deemed the members of DEWCOM of 2003 to be biased towards same-sex marriage. One of the reasons given was that DEWCOM’s membership is dominated by white people, and so its pronouncements are those of radical whites within the church. The black membership has however remained conspicuously silent on this matter.

²³ *Methodist Yearbook 2001* (Cape Town: Methodist Publishing House, 2001), 29.

²⁴ *Yearbook 2001*, 29.

²⁵ This discussion guide has been published as a booklet. See T. Attwell (ed.), *In Search of Grace and Truth* (Cape Town: Cingela Press, 2011).

In terms of the *modus operandi* for the church's engagement on the same-sex relationship issue, DEWCOM came up with an all-inclusive method of consultation. The guide thus suggested that the issue be discussed at different levels of the church, including Circuit Quarterly Meetings, Class Meetings, discussions at ministers' retreats, discussions at small group courses, Bible studies on same-sex related texts, and deliberations on this topic in other forums.²⁶

In terms of sources of theological reflection, the committee implored all participants to employ scripture, reason, tradition and experience (the Wesleyan quadrilateral). This model was designed to overcome the problem of compartmentalisation. The robust debate generated by this discussion guide made it clear that within the MCSA, there are widely divergent convictions that are sincerely and passionately held by both clergy and laity, all of whom are deeply committed to following Christ and hold to the authority of scripture. Unfortunately scripture is problematic in this context because the people who wrote, influenced and shaped it (as well as most of those who have interpreted it) were heterosexual. This point is observed by Steve de Gruchy²⁷ who said that:

The problem is this: theology has by and large been written by 'free' heterosexual men and it is their own experience which has been taken as normative for discussions on human nature. They are the subjects who do theology. The experience of others is objectified: they are a category, an issue, a topic to be quantified and discussed.²⁸

Recognizing the divergent convictions within the MCSA on this issue, the Conference of 2006 was prompted to commit the MCSA "...to an ongoing journey of discovering what it means to be part of a church which embraces many different and even opposing views on this issue."²⁹ The church was compelled to affirm that the one body of the church is "enriched and strengthened by the differing views and perspectives of its members."³⁰

The MCSA Conference of 2007 declared its determination not to permit different viewpoints around the same-sex debate to further divide the church. It sought "...a way forward that both respects and holds in

²⁶ Report of the Doctrine Ethics and Worship Committee to Conference. Johannesburg, 2003. (Unpublished), 2.

²⁷ Seow, *Homosexuality and Christian Community*, 125.

²⁸ De Gruchy and Germond, *Aliens in the household of God*, 233.

²⁹ *Methodist Yearbook 2006* (Cape Town: Methodist Publishing House, 2006), 75.

³⁰ *Yearbook 2006*, 76.

tension differing views among our ministers and people.” This Conference further resolved that “...any decision and subsequent action on the issue of civil unions between same-sex partners must await the outcome of the ongoing process of engagement as specified by Conference 2001 and 2005 ... and, in the interim, [the MCSA] expects Methodist ministers to continue to offer pastoral care to homosexual individuals but no clergy of the church would be allowed to enter into a same-sex marriage.”³¹ In other words, with regard to gay clergy, the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy was adopted.

Conference resolved that both the ministers and lay people would continue to engage with this issue in Christian conversation and respectful listening, so that all might more fully understand and articulate the variety of viewpoints held within the church. It also resolved that the church continue to seek to be a Christ-honouring community by celebrating the rich diversity of those called to follow Jesus, honouring the sacred worth of all people and practicing our Wesleyan heritage of warmth.³² Additionally, Conference resolved to seek to welcome and offer hospitality, recognizing the authority of scripture and noting that in our quest for understanding, there is no one, monolithic, and incontrovertible interpretation of scripture as far as this matter is concerned. It was acknowledged that there are therefore some issues upon which there may never be total unanimity within the church and upon which we must “agree to differ” without reducing our respect for, and trust of, one another.³³

This resolution is consistent with Miraslov Volf’s proposal that the church must be an inclusive and embracing community. The MCSA recognized the diversity of conviction within its members, and sought to celebrate this diversity as a challenging but potentially life-giving gift. This follows the thinking along the lines of Richard Wood and Steve de Gruchy who proposed that the church should celebrate the presence of same-sex couples. The MCSA called for an ongoing process of respectful dialogue and truthful engagement between those holding differing views, not with the intention of ultimately having one mind on this issue, which is unlikely, but rather to come to a deepened understanding of what it means to be one body in Christ. The MCSA also took seriously its ongoing pastoral responsibility to gays and lesbians. However it did not endorse same-sex marriages. This is

³¹ *Methodist Yearbook 2007* (Cape Town: Methodist Publishing House, 2007), 82.

³² *Yearbook 2007*, 56.

³³ *Yearbook 2007*, 58.

contrary to Spong’s proposal that monogamous same-sex marriages be recognized by the church.

The failure of the MCSA to reach a conclusive decision on this matter is regrettable, especially given the inclusive laws of the country. In fact the church itself is ambivalent on this matter because in terms of its doctrine, the MCSA indicates that it accepts the excluded. As a result, those who are in solidarity with people in same-sex relationships have formed a group within the Methodist Church known as “Sacred worth”. The main aim of this group is to offer solidarity to people in same-sex relationships and to continue to exert pressure on the Methodist Church to adopt a more ‘inclusive and embracing’ position on this matter.

The position taken by the church negates its emphasis on grace – unmerited favour. It also makes a mockery of its claim to be an all-inclusive church. It is clear that there was animosity within the church as various groups viewed each other as distinct and different from one another. Looking back at Christian history, such a situation of division, animosity and distinction is not unprecedented. In the section below, I explore how this theme of “us” against “them” impacted on the early church.

Analysis of the “Us and Them” Motif in the MCSA

The early church began as a one and undivided church. The same claim was made by the MCSA in 1958. It is generally accepted that the early church was comprised of Jews, with some exceptions. It was only later that the ministry among the Gentiles began.³⁴ The Jews met in synagogues for prayers and worship. It did not take long to become clear that there were significant differences between the followers of Christ and those who followed the Jewish beliefs. The followers of Christ began to preach that Jesus was the Messiah, much to the chagrin of those who were adherents to Judaism. The designation of Christ as God was unacceptable amongst non-followers of Christ.³⁵ This theological cleavage led to the fragmentation of the group, with Christians referring to the Jews’ synagogues as “their” synagogues. The followers of Christ thus began to conceive of themselves as “us” against them”. This forced Christians to worship in house churches and other undesignated places.³⁶ The Jewish worshippers responded by persecuting Christians and the end result was that the group

³⁴ Acts 11:19-29

³⁵ Acts 15:1-11

³⁶ Acts 18:7-9

disintegrated. This is relevant because the “us” and “them” motif in the MCSA may cause it to suffer the same fate of division as the early church. It is important, therefore, to assess the causes of this separatist mentality in the MCSA.

Culture

Culture plays a very important role in the development of a belief system. In African cultures, marriage is primarily for reproduction.³⁷ A person marries on behalf of a family in order to perpetuate a tribe.³⁸ Childlessness in African culture symbolises a curse.³⁹ Polygamy is acceptable because it grows the family.⁴¹ Children are an important economic and political resource especially considering that Africa has been prone to tribal wars. For adherents to this African culture, any sort of marriage that does not produce children is an anathema.⁴² Same-sex marriages do not produce children and as such are condemned. The influence of culture on the issue of same-sex marriage can be seen by the demographics of those who support and those who oppose it, with white people dominating the former group and black people dominating the latter. In fact, as mentioned above, the majority of people in the MCSA who have been fighting for the recognition of same-sex marriage have been from the white community, together with a tiny minority of black clergy.

Theology

Theologically, the issue of same-sex marriage is inconclusive. There are as many theologies as there are theologians.⁴³ The biblical text is not a monolith, and consequently there are several traditions of understanding with regard to same-sex marriage. It matters, though, how scripture is read and the paradigms that are adopted out of this reading. The paradigm commonly used by oppressed communities to read scripture is that of liberation theology. The Exodus narrative gives

³⁷ P. Kasenene, *Swazi Traditional Religion and Society*. (Mbabane: Webster’s Publishers, 1993), 76.

³⁸ Kasenene, *Swazi Traditional Religion and society*, 76.

³⁹ Kasenene *Swazi Traditional Religion and society*, 76.

⁴⁰ Mercy Oduyoye, “A Coming Home to Myself: The Childless Women in the West African Space”, in *Liberating Eschatology: Essays in Honor of Letty M. Russell*, edited by Margaret Farley and Shannon Jones (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1999), 105-120.

⁴¹ Kasenene *Swazi Traditional Religion and society*, 81

⁴² A. Radcliffe-Brown (ed) *African systems of kinship and marriage*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1967) 18.

⁴³ De Gruchy, *Aliens in the household of God*, 212.

a message of hope that God is on the side of those who are oppressed. It argues that just as God liberated the Israelites from oppression in Egypt, so God will do the same with those experiencing oppression in any particular context.⁴⁴ It gives them hope that "evil and oppression does not have the final word".⁴⁵ Gay and lesbian people are discriminated against and pushed out of the church, regardless of the fact that they have the right to belong to the church and serve God. They do need to see themselves as an oppressed and marginalized group, especially in a church that is supposed to welcome *all* people. I have argued elsewhere that God's call in the church is for people to sit at a roundtable as equal members of the body of Christ.⁴⁶

Politics

Same-sex marriage is as political as it is religious and sociological. The government of South Africa has allowed same-sex marriages by law and in the constitution. It is now over five years since the government promulgated the Civil Union Act. Melanie Judge writes:

The Civil Union Act of South Africa was promulgated on the 30th November 2006. The following day the first marriage was conducted and registered at a Home Affairs Office in Cape Town on 1 December 2006. The following day on the 2 December 2006 a first religious marriage ceremony under the Act. By end of 2009, there were a total of 1070 couples who had registered their relationships under the Civil Union Act.⁴⁷

Among these early marriages recognized by the state was Ecclesia de Lange's marriage to Amanda. This has placed the Methodist Church in a precarious situation because by denying its ministers the right to enter into same-sex marriage unions, it is in breach of the constitution of the country. The government's promulgation of the Civil Union Act is one example of the government being more prophetic than the church. In this case, the church is not the "light of the earth".

⁴⁴ Gunther Wittenberg, *Resistance Theology in the Old Testament*. (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2007), 14.

⁴⁵ H. Garner, H. and M. Worsnip, "Oil and Water: The Impossibility of Gay and Lesbian Identity in the Church," in *Towards an Agenda for Contextual Theology. Essays in Honour of Albert Nolan*, eds M. Speckman and L. Kaufmann (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2001), 208.

⁴⁶ R. S. Kumalo, A call to a roundtable for the church. An unpublished address to the Methodist Conference. (Port Elizabeth, September 24 2010), 2.

⁴⁷ M. Judge, ed., *To Have and to Hold: The Making of Same-sex Marriage in South Africa* (Johannesburg: Jacana, 2009), 10.

Back to a “One and Undivided Church

In view of the above, there is a need for the church to take a number of practical steps in order to address this issue with urgency.

The Need for Confession and Repentance by the Church

When one listens to the stories of gay and lesbian people, one is confronted with a litany of experiences of abuse and hurt by the church. One hears how some people were discriminated against, and told how sinful they were, while others were dismissed by the church that claims to be a community of grace.

Alan Storey has observed that:

We sometimes cause pain to others without knowing, sometimes we cause pain to others believing that we are trying to do the right thing, when we are not... That is what the MCSA and us as members of the MCSA are doing to Ecclesia and those like her. Ash Wednesday is for us an opportunity to reflect on the need for confession and repentance.⁴⁸

There is a need for the church to confess its sin for inflicting suffering on gays and lesbians. This has nothing to do with the decision regarding whether the church accepts or does not accept same-sex marriages.. As a result, those who have been hurt by the church deserve an apology from it.

Uncensoring the Discussion on Human Sexuality

The main problem faced by the church concerning this issue is its reluctance to talk about human sexuality. In the past, churches used to encourage discussions around this matter. For instance, Natasha Erlank notes that:

During the inter-war period, teachings around sexuality continued to convey older views, and children continued to learn from their elders and parents.⁴⁹

It is my view that over and above using academic tools from the social sciences, biology, and philosophy, answers regarding same-sex marriages must be found in the sources for doing theology. Here the

⁴⁸ Storey, Address, 1.

⁴⁹ N. Erlank, “Plain Clean Facts’ and Initiation Schools: Christianity, Africans and Sex Education in South Africa, c. 1910-1940.” *Agenda* 62 (2004):76.

Wesleyan quadrilateral: experience, tradition, reason and scripture, may again prove to be helpful.

Need for Patience and a Gradual Approach

In the Swahili language there is a saying that "if you want to walk fast walk alone, but if you want to walk long, walk slower in the company of other people."⁵⁰ There is a need for the pro-gay group in the church not to push too hard for radical acceptance of their situation. They need to understand that the church needs time to educate and conscientize the broader membership. The leadership have a genuine responsibility to maintain the unity of the church during this process, and too much pressure does not solve the problem but rather compounds it. It is said that only the oppressed have a right to decide the methods of struggle and its pace. However, in most denominations this debate has been polarized because there has been a lack of understanding, by both parties, of one another's pain. On the other hand, those who are struggling with accepting same-sex marriage in the church need to open themselves to learning and growing in this matter, so that those who are rejecting others can learn to experience grace rather than the law of rejection.

Conclusion

In this article, I have highlighted the different stages of the debate around same sex marriages in the MCSA. Most of the challenges identified are not unique to the MCSA, but are similar to those faced by other denominations. I have identified problems such as denial, culture, and theological positions as contributing to this dilemma for the church. Further, I have shown that the MCSA has accepted gay and lesbian people to both its membership and ministry, but has not taken the further step of recognising same-sex unions. Helpful theological insights and theories from theologians such as Steve de Gruchy, Miraslov Volf, Selby Spong, Robert Wood in regard to what the church can do to make progress on the issue of same-sex marriage was proposed. Importantly, the church has sought to maintain its unity by being very cautious with this issue, consequently adopting ambiguous positions over the years and emphasizing the need for continuous discussion. This has not stopped those who are in support of same-sex marriage from exerting pressure on the church to accede to their demands. The result is a

⁵⁰ In M. Dandala, "Behold I Create a New Africa" (paper presented at the Ecumenical Consultation on NEPAD, Midrand: 1997), 51.

church that is engaged in a struggle to maintain its most noble principle of being one and undivided. For the time being, when it comes to this issue, the church remains divided into “us and them”.

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Section 2: Praxis

“Suspended, Disciplined and Discontinued”: A Practical Response Towards Inclusion

Judith Kotze¹ and Ecclesia de Lange²

In December 2009, Ecclesia de Lange, an ordained minister in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA) announced to her congregation her intention to marry her same-sex life partner. In February 2010 she was charged, suspended, disciplined and discontinued as a Methodist Minister. This narrative traces Ecclesia's painful journey towards inclusion, and documents the role that faith-based organizations such as Inclusive and Affirming Ministries (hereafter IAM) can play toward affirming and including people of same-sex sexual orientation. Special attention is paid to IAM's *modus operandi*, described as *The Wheel of Catalyst Change* and how this wheel can empower people to become change agents in order to create a wider base of inclusion and acceptance within faith communities.

IAM has a vision of faith communities in Africa that are welcoming and affirming, where Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex (LGBTI) people can participate fully and be strengthened in their spiritual, psychological and sexual identity as human beings. IAM works toward this vision through programmes that support and empower the LGBTI community, as well as their parents, family and friends (PFF). IAM has come to understand the challenges facing LGBTI people within their faith communities in the following metaphors:

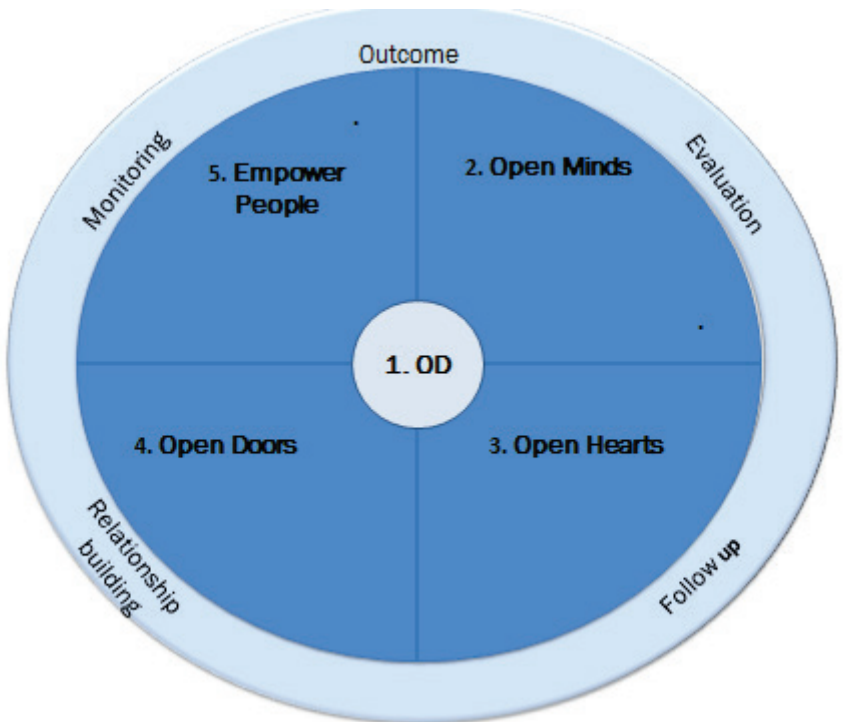
- ▲ Closed Minds – Lack of understanding of diversity in sexuality and religion due to fundamentalism, patriarchy and homophobia.

¹ Judith Kotzé is from South Africa. She is the Director of Operations for Inclusive and Affirming Ministries (IAM). She qualified as a Dutch Reformed Minister in 1995 and completed her Masters degree in Theology in 2001. The focus of her dissertation was on interreligious dialogue as a model for the intra-denominational dialogue on sexual orientation. Email: judith@iam.org.za.

² Ecclesia de Lange entered the ministry in 2001 as a probation minister of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA) and was ordained in 2006. She holds a Masters degree in Social Sciences in Religious Studies from the University of Cape Town, obtained in 2006. Email: ecclesia@mailbox.co.za

- ▲ Closed Hearts – Lack of exposure to and empathy for the pain and hurt of the marginalized.
- ▲ Closed Doors – Lack of safe spaces to start journeys with diversity towards inclusion.

This is reflected in the strategy used for empowerment namely, the *Wheel of Catalyst Change* (Figure 1). Below is an explanation of how each component of this wheel functioned within the unfolding of Ecclesia’s story.



Empower

Although the issue of homosexuality has been on the agenda of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA) for several years, it only became more widely visible in 2007 when 19 clergy (of whom Ecclesia was one) stood up in the Cape of Good Hope District and openly questioned whether or not they were adhering to the Laws and Discipline of the Church, in particular with regards to their inclusive and

affirming stance and approach toward homosexual people. These 19 individuals were empowered to take a stand for what they believe in and to take action in this regard because they were together and openly supported each other.

Ecclesia followed up on this experience of empowerment and solidarity and after several months sought the advice of Rev Pieter Oberholzer, founder of IAM, as well as two senior ministers within the MCSA. She shared with them the story of her struggle to come to terms with her sexuality, in particular the fact of her position as an ordained minister in the church and explained how this had impacted her emotional and psychological state. She became further empowered through these conversations and in January 2009 she called together colleagues whom she knew were sympathetic to the cause of homosexual inclusion, to form a support group for her. This group of clergy met with Ecclesia on a regular basis. Together they strategized the best way forward for her to announce her intended marriage to her partner to the two congregations she served. They sought the opportunity for the church as a whole to deal with the issue of inclusivity. After much deliberation it was decided, with the leadership and financial backing of IAM, to capture the views on same-sex unions of Ecclesia and several other ministers and congregation members on DVD, while Ecclesia prepared for her wedding and announcement to her congregations. With the encouragement and support of the group, Ecclesia now had a clear strategy and the support to go ahead with her intended wedding date.

As is evident, empowerment clearly builds confidence through support, which helps those who have been empowered, so that they then can move others forward toward attaining open minds through an awareness of diversity.

Open Minds

This empowerment stage became productive in particular with regard to the ways in which Ecclesia could invite her congregation to journey with her, once she announced her intended marriage. Her empowerment provided a way to expose her congregations to diversity and this aimed to open closed minds. The following document was produced (accompanied by a letter) to assist each member, once they left the church building after hearing the news of Ecclesia's impending marriage, in coming to terms with this news, by highlighting how Ecclesia had come to this particular place in her life and ministry.

Document One: My Story

I have come to see that it is better to be rejected for who I am than to be accepted for who I am not.

I desire to serve Jesus. I desire to be true to myself. I desire to minister within the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA) with integrity and be faithful to God's call on my life. This has not been easy. My journey has been complex and I would like to share some of my story with you.

During my late teens I came to the conclusion that I am a lesbian. I realized that this discovery would not be acceptable to my family or church and so I concealed it. I tried to fit in by being in heterosexual relationships, appearing to be normal and acceptable to the community. However, my ability to pretend to be heterosexual did not last and it wasn't long before others found out about my sexual orientation. I was told in no uncertain terms that I cannot be Christian and lesbian. My family relationships and support system were shattered. The Church's stance on homosexuality sent a clear message of rejection to me which forced me to leave the Church. The pain and loss was immense.

Several years later I had an encounter with God that made me return to the Church. I knew that God loved and accepted me and I renewed my commitment. I then set out to find a Church. It did not take me long to discover the official stance of the Church was unchanged on same-sex relationships. At the time the only way for me to be included in the community was either to deny my sexual orientation and live a life of secrecy or live a life of celibacy.

Seeing that my faith was very important to me and to stop the fear and pain of being rejected, I tried to conform by attending several support groups and going for counselling. I was also part of an ex-gay ministry (for recovering gay people) for several years. However none of these efforts changed my sexual orientation. In order to obey the church's teaching, I lived in denial of who I was and I settled for a life of celibacy and secrecy. The suppression of the truth enhanced my pain and steered me into a deep hole of discontent and depression. Even during this period of denial, I was at times, fearfully worried and wondered about what would happen should I meet someone and fall in love. Would I still be able to deny my sexuality, my need for love as well as my desire to give love and to live with a life companion?

My relationship and love for Jesus deepened over the years that followed, I heard and then responded to God's call to ministry by candidating for the ministry within the MCSA. My whole being was occupied, stimulated and challenged by the Theological and Ministerial training. I will be forever grateful to the MCSA for the wide expansive education given to me. It was here, during my theological

studies that I encountered another perspective on the issue of homosexuality that challenged the traditional stance within the Church. With much research and self-evaluation I discovered new ways of interpreting scripture and found a new way of coming to terms with who I am as a child of God.

I learned that when one reads Scripture in context, the traditional verses that have been used to condemn homosexuality are in all probability not referring to a faithful, loving, committed, respectful relationship between two people of the same sex. I learned by using the Wesleyan quadrilateral (Scripture, experience, reason and tradition) that my sexuality is a gift from God. I learned that the Church has had a sad history of being sure who to exclude and then had to repent later (exclusion of women to the ordained ministry, apartheid). I also learned that at the heart of God is an all inclusive love which is far wider than I can ever comprehend.

Through this learning curve my relationship with Jesus found a new intensity as I embraced the acceptance of God's love for me ... just as I am. Afresh I realized that nothing could separate me from God's love and acceptance. I have also come to a new understanding that my sexuality is part and parcel of who God created me to be – and that God created someone beautiful. Indeed the Gospel of Christ became very good news for me! This knowledge has brought me profound confidence and peace, yet accompanied by much tension about my reality and the traditional stance of the MCSA. Listening to debates and colleagues comment on the issue has been a fearful and painful experience within the MCSA. Numerous times I have wanted to stand-up and say "this is me you are speaking about; speak to me". However, the lack of "a safe space" and the fear of rejection have kept me in my seat.

In the meantime, by God's grace I have met a wonderful person, Amanda. In this relationship I discovered that by denying my sexuality, I denied a significant part of myself, my God given means of connecting and loving another human being. This relationship has brought us both much joy and pleasure. We offer one another companionship where we are committed to being respectful, faithful, caring and trustworthy. Our desire has been to honour God and so we celebrated our love relationship by getting married in Dec 2009. The context and sensitivity of the same-sex debate within the MCSA made me afraid to come out and break the silence. Hence the soul destroying silence, instead of inviting my Church family to celebrate with me.

By God's grace my immediate family embraced and supported me in my journey of coming to terms with disclosing my sexual orientation and my marriage with Amanda. I am also grateful for the acceptance and support of several colleagues and friends during this journey who

have helped me to come to this place. I have reached the point where I can no longer be silent. I have come to see that it is better to be rejected for who I am than to be accepted for who I am not.

I know that, by sharing with you my story I take a huge risk. I am also concerned for the Churches that I serve. However, I am of the conviction that my relationship and journey with Christ has brought me to this place, which requires me to speak and live in the truth, trusting that this alone will bring freedom. By denying my sexuality and my marriage I am denying who I am and who Jesus wants me to be.

I am not afraid, as I know that God is with us (with me, Amanda and the Church at large). It is my desire to serve God in the MCSA and to be accepted for who I am. I understand that we are not all of the same mind on this matter and I pray that God will help us to become an:

“... inclusive body of Christ that celebrates diversity in all its facets of religious, social and organisational being...to pastor and welcome all people irrespective of race, social class, disability, sexual orientation etc. [For] to single out any one of these for a special dispensation of salvation would be religiously spurious as well as an affront to our values of human respect, dignity and equality.”³

and affirm that:

“we will seek to be a Christ-honouring community: a. celebrating the rich diversity of those called to follow Jesus, honouring the sacred worth of all people and practising our Wesleyan heritage of warmth, welcome and hospitality; b. recognising the authority of Scripture and noting that in our quest for understanding, there is no one, monolithic and incontrovertible interpretation of it; c. acknowledging that there are therefore some issues upon which there may never be total unanimity within the church and upon which we must “agree to differ” without reducing our respect for, and trust of, one another.”⁴

I have survived the hardest part already, which is self-acceptance. I made it through – not broken but more confident and complete than I ever was. And I want to share that with the people I love and live with and those I serve within the MCSA. However people react, by God’s grace I will respond to them with love.

*Yours in Christ, Ecclesia de Lange, 6th December 2009,
Windsor Park, Cape Town, South Africa*

“Oh Church

³ MCSA 2008 Yearbook & Directory, 18

⁴ MCSA 2008 Yearbook & Directory, 81.

How baffling you are, oh Church, and yet how I love you! How you have made me suffer, and yet how much I owe you! I should like to see you destroyed, and yet I need your presence. You have given me so much scandal and yet you have made me understand sanctity. I have seen nothing in the world more devoted to obscurity, more compromised, more false, and I have touched nothing more pure, more generous, more beautiful. How often I have wanted to shut the doors of my soul in your face, and how often I have prayed to die in the safety of your arms.

No, I cannot free myself from you, because I am you, although not completely. And where should I go? To build myself another Church? But I could build one only with the same defects, because they are mine; defects which I have inside myself. And if I built one, it would be my church, no longer the Church of Christ. I am old enough to understand that I am no better than other people.”

Carlo Correto

The consequences of Ecclesia's actions were of such a nature that she had to submit herself to two disciplinary hearings at which she was found guilty of breaking the Laws and Discipline of the Church. On 20th February 2010 she was discontinued as a Methodist minister of the MCSA. She still had the option of referring the matter for arbitration, which she did. During the disciplinary hearings the support group which stood behind her ensured that T-shirts and buttons were produced and “EKKLESIA” and “Injustice to one is injustice to all” were printed on them in rainbow colours. These items were sold and distributed to be used to create awareness and open minds to the injustice toward and exclusion of homosexual people within the church. Peaceful demonstrations at the disciplinary hearings were accompanied by prayer vigils and a special service was organised at Rosebank MCSA Church. All of this was captured on DVD as well as by the media. A number of newspaper articles and photographs were published to bring to the attention/awareness of the community the Church's actions towards its own members.

Through these events minds have been opened. The DVD, *There Comes a Time*, was eventually produced and distributed to all the Methodist synods in South Africa in May 2010, together with copies of Ecclesia's text, “My story”. This has had a profound impact within the MCSA, which led to several articles being published in the MCSA internal newspaper (*New Dimension*) both for and against homosexual unions. The support group was further empowered to produce a Liturgy of Lament to be used at all synods and other events until inclusivity is reached:

Document 2: A Liturgy of Lament

*This liturgy invites participants to receive the sign of ash on their foreheads. We do this to lament the Methodist Church of Southern Africa's continued exclusion of same-sex couples from the ordained ministry and to remind ourselves and others to continue to work toward the church becoming truly one and undivided.*⁵

We Gather

O Gracious and Welcoming God,
We, your daughters and sons gather
in your presence and your name.

But, we are not all here.

We feel the absence of our gay sisters and brothers
who have been turned away from your *Ekklesia*,
and who have been allowed no place among your people.
We remember their grief, rejection and loneliness,
and we grieve the loss of their presence,
their companionship,
and their giftedness.

***Though we are part of one body,
we have been divided;***

***Though we belong to each other,
we have been divided;***

***Though we all share in the one faith,
the one baptism,
the one loaf,***

***and we all partake of your one Spirit,
we have been divided.***

We Lament, We Intercede and We Confess

In this moment of significance and grief,
we cry out to you, O God;
How long will your Church turn away the weary and burdened ones
you have invited to come to you?

***How long will your followers place heavy burdens
on those who seek you?***

⁵ The Liturgy of Lament was written by John van de Laar (© Sacredise 2010). This liturgy may be freely used and distributed for any purpose that is not for gain.

How long will we fail to recognise your image
in all of our brothers and sisters?

***How long will we deny the God-blessed gift of intimacy
to those who long for love?***

Silent prayers of lament and intercession may be offered.

Yet, even as we plead with you, O Christ,
we also confess our part
in the dividedness of our Church and our world.

***We have allowed what has little significance,
to blind us to what is truly important;
We have allowed our God-given diversity,
to keep us apart;***

***We have called what is clean unclean,
And we have rejected those who are loved by you.***

In your grace, mercy and all-embracing love,
We ask you to forgive us,
heal us,
and change us;

That, like you, we – and all your Church – may be people
of indiscriminate welcome,
of unlimited grace,
and of unconditional love.

We Receive the Ashes of Grief

As our ancestors in faith, the prophets and psalmists,
who grieved when your people rejected
justice and compassion;

We place on our heads the ashes of grief.

***We will remember the suffering of our gay sisters and brothers;
we will hold them in our hearts and our prayers,
and we will continue to strive,
until they are included among us once again.***

*Each person makes the sign of the cross on the forehead of the person
next to them,*

saying: ***Do not forget why we grieve. Those who receive respond with
Amen.***

We Affirm Our Hope

Though today, O God, we grieve,

we remember our hope in Christ;

Though today, O God, we are divided,

we remember that in Christ we are one;

Though today, O God, we long for justice,

we remember that all will be reconciled in Christ.

And we will continue to proclaim our hope, O God,

until we celebrate its fulfillment together.

Amen. Let it be so. Amen.

As a result of the above factors, and all working toward open minds, pressure was placed on the MCSA's Doctrinal Committee to complete, publish and distribute a study guide, including a Bible study, on homosexuality and homosexual unions titled *In search of grace and truth*.⁶ This book gives both views – for and against – and is presented in a study format. During the MCSA's Conference of 2010, the Church was instructed to participate in this Bible study with the intention to assist it in applying its mind on the issue.

Clearly this gave exposure, and awareness was raised within the MCSA around homosexuality, hence opening more minds.

Open Hearts

People who were moved by Ecclesia's story participated in the various protests and services which were organised in response to her treatment by the Church authorities. Speakers at these events did not mince their words, as revealed in a section of Rev. Dr. Peter Storey's address quoted below:

The Holy Spirit has waited long enough. It is time for the Church to recognize, repudiate and reject what William Sloane Coffin calls its 'last respectable prejudice' – homophobia. If that is too much to digest all at once, then the time has come for at least a full place at the table for people with a new and different mind. As a well-wisher wrote to Ecclesia, 'Gay ministers are not going to go away and more of us will want to be married.' So today we are here to say to those who differ from us, 'Hold your views if you must, but we are not prepared to see one more person – this person – sacrificed on the altar of wrongful exclusion.'

But it is we, the church, who must apologise. This apology must be a wide one, embracing every person who has been hurt, rejected,

⁶ Tim Atwell, Ray Aliston, Roger Scholtz, *In Search of Grace and Truth: Christian Conversation on Same-Sex Relationships*, (Cape Town: Cingela Press, 2010).

excluded and wounded by the Christian Church because of his or her sexual orientation. It must be deep, reaching down into centuries of wrong. The church's long compromise with slavery, our blind acceptance of racism, our stubborn exclusion of women from leadership and ordination – these are sins from which we have had to be delivered, but John Cobb would remind us that in this in particular, we may have done worse: whereas in most forms of suppression the church has given at least some support to the oppressed, in the case of homosexual persons, the church has been the leader in the oppression. I confess this sin on behalf of my church – the Methodist Church of Southern Africa today. We stand in need of forgiveness – from our God and from those we have hurt.

In the meantime several ministers undertook to intentionally journey with their congregations by taking the Conference's instruction seriously. They want to build an inclusive community of faith by giving attention to the issue by leading a Bible study using the book, *In search of grace and truth*⁷ as a discussion guide with the sole purpose of educating their congregations, as well as by inviting the LGBTI community to participate in the discussion. The importance of engaging in deeper dialogue and avoiding debate as a method to deal with the divisions and differences within the MCSA was clearly a commitment to work towards opening the hearts of members on all levels.

Open Doors

Through the momentum created in the natural pursuit of the Wheel of Catalyst Change strategy, the open heart and open minds as well as the empowerment of people, led to the opening also of doors. The initial support group continued to grow and undertook to hold a conference in December 2010, addressing the theme "Finding our way in a divided church". During this conference an independent movement was established named "Sacred Worth". It was decided during the conference to mail each minister in the MCSA a copy of the DVD *There Comes a Time* with the following letter attached:

"In response to the Conference directive for the MCSA to continue dialogue regarding same-sex relationships, SACRED WORTH was launched on the 12th August 2010.

Sacred Worth believes:
God loves All. We are All one in Christ. All people are of sacred worth.

⁷ Atwell et al, *In search of grace and truth*.

Therefore, we seek to help the church we love to become a place in which, in policy and practice, all people are welcomed and invited into full participation regardless of sexual orientation or identity.

At the same time we acknowledge that there are different convictions within the Methodist Church of Southern Africa. We are committed to dialogue through education, ministry, support, advocacy and witness.

We are committed to creating an All-Inclusive Church which will be recognised by the full participation of gay people in the totality of the Church's life, including:

- a. Recognition of Gay Marriage & Ordination.
- b. Freedom of Conscience to Conduct Gay Unions.
- c. Freedom for Congregations to declare themselves to be inclusive and affirming.

A DVD entitled: “There comes a time” has been created with the hope that it stimulates dialogue within the MCSA. To this purpose each minister has received a copy of the DVD, free of charge. If you haven't seen the DVD please ask your minister or contact us at adim_sw.mcsa@yahoo.com to buy your own copy. This DVD is produced in collaboration with Inclusive and Affirming Ministries (IAM). Sacred Worth's first official Conference will be held from 6th - 8th December 2010 in Cape Town.”

Over 1000 copies were posted!

Sacred Worth, with the assistance of IAM, have managed to maintain the “Wheel of Catalyst Change” by focusing on building relationships with colleagues and their congregations, while monitoring the process in the church, specific congregations and in particular Ecclesia's arbitration case. Sacred Worth ensured the passage of a resolution went at the 2011 Church Synod, namely that the Synod will apply pressure to the MCSA's Arbitration Committee to bring closure to the pending arbitration case against Ecclesia – which is overdue by more than 18 months. This resolution was unanimously accepted and letters have been written to address the situation. The evaluation, outcome and follow-up processes which form part of the Wheel of Catalyst Change have been challenging features due to slow movement on this issue, busy ministers and the nature of church. Several ministers, who are inclusive in their approach, have opened their churches to homosexual people, making public their commitment to inclusion, especially of LGBTI people.

To conclude, this narrative reflection was an attempt to share IAM's Wheel of Catalyst Change process which includes the four pronged

approach of empowering, opening minds, hearts and doors, via a core group, while continually engaging in monitoring, evaluation, community building, and following up. In doing so we would like to encourage people on such painful and challenging journeys within their faith communities to hold on to the light at the end of the tunnel as they persevere towards inclusion.

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University of KwaZulu-Natal

Room 111C, First Floor, New Arts Building, Golf Road Campus

Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

Tel: +27 (0) 33-260-6106 / +27 (0) 33-260-6132

Fax: +27 (0) 33-260-5858

E-mail: jgra@ukzn.ac.za / Phirii@ukzn.ac.za

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Isabel Apawo Phiri, University of KwaZulu-Natal

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sexuality".¹⁷ That represents a very broad diversity of opinion which Judge Mogoeng does not take cognizance of.

Fifthly, there is a much better understanding of the results of the scientific study of human sexual orientation, from male birth order through fingerprint patterns, handedness, hearing and spatial ability, and the case for these are being made even within churches today.¹⁸ Some churches are also more aware of the fact that same-sex sexual orientation is not a disease that can be cured through "conversion therapy" or prayer. It is exactly what it is: an orientation. Suppression of one's natural (God given) sexual orientation and sexual urges is not the same as "being healed".¹⁹ While there is still much controversy as to whether or not it is possible to reverse sexual orientation, there is little doubt about the potential of physical and psychological harm in administering such change therapies.²⁰

Sixthly, the judge claims that his church's position is "unlike, for example, the Ku Klux Klan, whose core value is racial supremacy". But as already argued if one's teaching is based on the Bible which in these circles is the "infallible and inerrant Word of God", then these teachings are by definition one's "core values". In this particular understanding of the Bible, nothing on earth can claim higher authority than the Word of God. If one's reading of the Bible leads one to a teaching that homosexuality is "deviant", "sinful", and a disease that should be cured, then it is unavoidable that one's (or one's church's) "core values" must be homophobia, or better put, bigotry towards LGBTI persons. The judge's very choice of words is revealing in their judgemental character. In that reading, the logical "biblical" position is the affirmation of hetero-supremacy. Hetero-sexism is a "reasoned system of bias regarding sexual orientation; it denotes prejudice in favour of heterosexual people and denotes prejudice against bisexual and, especially, homosexual

¹⁷ Johnson's typologies are as follows: (i), Prohibition; (ii), Toleration; (iii), Accommodation; (iv), Legitimation; (v), Celebration; (vi), Liberation; and (vii), Consecration, *A Time to Embrace*, 41; 43-108. Johnson adds, "I make no claim that these seven viewpoints exhaust all the possibilities... Nonetheless, by attending to each of the viewpoints in its own integrity, the reader will be able, I hope, to push beyond surface labels and reach a new understanding of the issues", 43.

¹⁸ See David G. Myers and Letha Dawson Scanzoni, *What God Has Joined Together: The Christian Case for Gay Marriage*, (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2005), 64-65.

¹⁹ "There are few claims of reorientation but these are becoming fewer and fewer", Myers and Scanzoni, *What God has Joined Together*, 77.

²⁰ See Christine E. Gudorf, "The Bible and Science on Sexuality", in *Homosexuality, Science, and the 'Plain Sense' of Scripture*, ed. David L. Balch, 123.

people”.²¹ As such, hetero-sexism leads to the conviction that heterosexuality is *the* normative form of human sexuality and as a result “all sexual authority, value, and power are centred in heterosexuality”.²² In this way hetero-sexism is hetero-supremacy, and as a consequence, it is “analogous to racism and sexism”.²³ Hetero-supremacy is thus just as dangerous, life-threatening, exclusionist, destructive and sinful as racial supremacy. Murderous hate crimes against gay and lesbian persons are increasing, and so-called “corrective rape” is a terrifying reality in South Africa, with the courts mostly helplessly looking on. Writing on hatred for non-heterosexual persons in Uganda and speaking of the violence visited upon lesbians in Africa, reporter Lerato Mogoathe asks, “How many broken women do we need in this battered continent that’s still ravaged by disease and poverty?”²⁴

I would argue, that the six points raised above suggest that making uncritical claims based “on the Holy Bible” not only does the Bible an injustice; it is the guarantee for continued injustice covered with “biblical” sanction. These are questions the Judicial Services Commission had no intention of asking. But these are issues that critical theology must deal with.

What Does the Bible Say?

In this section my intention is not to once again examine the biblical texts commonly used in the arguments surrounding the issue under discussion. There are excellent studies dealing adequately with this²⁵. Rather, I would, in referring to these studies, endeavour to highlight some perspectives which might help in understanding these texts even better, especially as they pertain to the subject matter at hand.

Firstly, reading and interpreting biblical texts have ethical consequences and political functions, hence Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s insistence

²¹ Patricia Beattie Jung and Ralph F. Smith, *Heterosexism: An Ethical Challenge*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 13, cited by Cheryl B. Anderson, *Ancient Laws and Contemporary Controversies, The Need for Inclusive Biblical Interpretation*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 12.

²² Jung and Smith, *Heterosexism*, 52.

²³ Jung and Smith, *Heterosexism*, 52. See the cogent argument offered by Cheryl Anderson, *Ancient Laws*, 13-19.

²⁴ Lerato Mogoathe, “Killing and Dying in God’s Name – Being Gay in Uganda is Like Being Sentenced to Death”, (*Sunday Independent*, 15th December 2010).

²⁵ See for example Michael Vasey, *Strangers and Friends: A New Exploration of Homosexuality and the Bible* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1995).

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Section 2: Praxis

“Suspended, Disciplined and Discontinued”: A Practical Response Towards Inclusion

Judith Kotze¹ and Ecclesia de Lange²

In December 2009, Ecclesia de Lange, an ordained minister in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA) announced to her congregation her intention to marry her same-sex life partner. In February 2010 she was charged, suspended, disciplined and discontinued as a Methodist Minister. This narrative traces Ecclesia's painful journey towards inclusion, and documents the role that faith-based organizations such as Inclusive and Affirming Ministries (hereafter IAM) can play toward affirming and including people of same-sex sexual orientation. Special attention is paid to IAM's *modus operandi*, described as *The Wheel of Catalyst Change* and how this wheel can empower people to become change agents in order to create a wider base of inclusion and acceptance within faith communities.

IAM has a vision of faith communities in Africa that are welcoming and affirming, where Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex (LGBTI) people can participate fully and be strengthened in their spiritual, psychological and sexual identity as human beings. IAM works toward this vision through programmes that support and empower the LGBTI community, as well as their parents, family and friends (PFF). IAM has come to understand the challenges facing LGBTI people within their faith communities in the following metaphors:

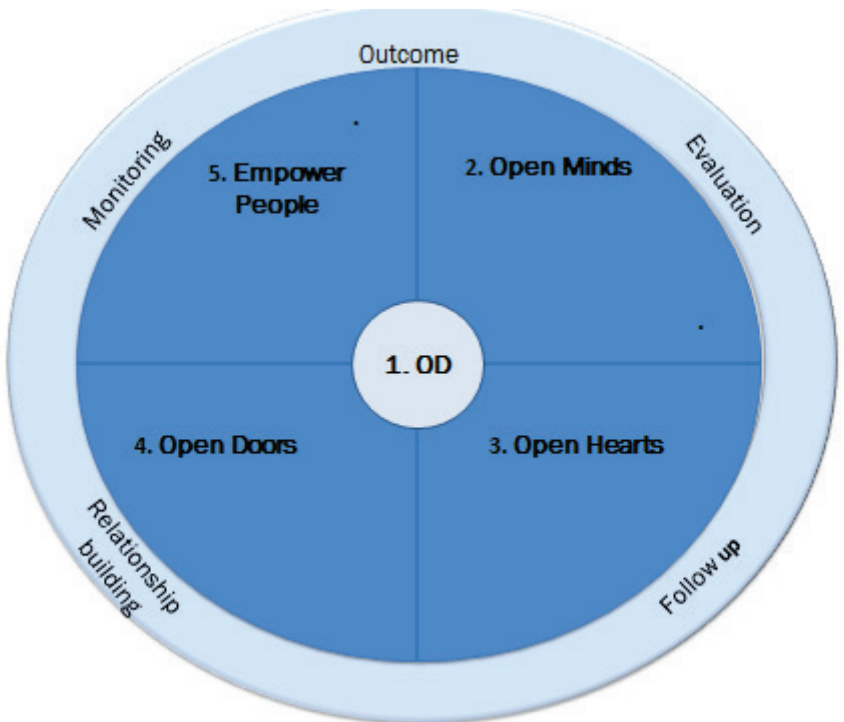
- ▲ Closed Minds – Lack of understanding of diversity in sexuality and religion due to fundamentalism, patriarchy and homophobia.

¹ Judith Kotzé is from South Africa. She is the Director of Operations for Inclusive and Affirming Ministries (IAM). She qualified as a Dutch Reformed Minister in 1995 and completed her Masters degree in Theology in 2001. The focus of her dissertation was on interreligious dialogue as a model for the intra-denominational dialogue on sexual orientation. Email: judith@iam.org.za.

² Ecclesia de Lange entered the ministry in 2001 as a probation minister of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA) and was ordained in 2006. She holds a Masters degree in Social Sciences in Religious Studies from the University of Cape Town, obtained in 2006. Email: ecclesia@mailbox.co.za

- ▲ Closed Hearts – Lack of exposure to and empathy for the pain and hurt of the marginalized.
- ▲ Closed Doors – Lack of safe spaces to start journeys with diversity towards inclusion.

This is reflected in the strategy used for empowerment namely, the *Wheel of Catalyst Change* (Figure 1). Below is an explanation of how each component of this wheel functioned within the unfolding of Ecclesia’s story.



Empower

Although the issue of homosexuality has been on the agenda of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA) for several years, it only became more widely visible in 2007 when 19 clergy (of whom Ecclesia was one) stood up in the Cape of Good Hope District and openly questioned whether or not they were adhering to the Laws and Discipline of the Church, in particular with regards to their inclusive and

affirming stance and approach toward homosexual people. These 19 individuals were empowered to take a stand for what they believe in and to take action in this regard because they were together and openly supported each other.

Ecclesia followed up on this experience of empowerment and solidarity and after several months sought the advice of Rev Pieter Oberholzer, founder of IAM, as well as two senior ministers within the MCSA. She shared with them the story of her struggle to come to terms with her sexuality, in particular the fact of her position as an ordained minister in the church and explained how this had impacted her emotional and psychological state. She became further empowered through these conversations and in January 2009 she called together colleagues whom she knew were sympathetic to the cause of homosexual inclusion, to form a support group for her. This group of clergy met with Ecclesia on a regular basis. Together they strategized the best way forward for her to announce her intended marriage to her partner to the two congregations she served. They sought the opportunity for the church as a whole to deal with the issue of inclusivity. After much deliberation it was decided, with the leadership and financial backing of IAM, to capture the views on same-sex unions of Ecclesia and several other ministers and congregation members on DVD, while Ecclesia prepared for her wedding and announcement to her congregations. With the encouragement and support of the group, Ecclesia now had a clear strategy and the support to go ahead with her intended wedding date.

As is evident, empowerment clearly builds confidence through support, which helps those who have been empowered, so that they then can move others forward toward attaining open minds through an awareness of diversity.

Open Minds

This empowerment stage became productive in particular with regard to the ways in which Ecclesia could invite her congregation to journey with her, once she announced her intended marriage. Her empowerment provided a way to expose her congregations to diversity and this aimed to open closed minds. The following document was produced (accompanied by a letter) to assist each member, once they left the church building after hearing the news of Ecclesia's impending marriage, in coming to terms with this news, by highlighting how Ecclesia had come to this particular place in her life and ministry.

Document One: My Story

I have come to see that it is better to be rejected for who I am than to be accepted for who I am not.

I desire to serve Jesus. I desire to be true to myself. I desire to minister within the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA) with integrity and be faithful to God's call on my life. This has not been easy. My journey has been complex and I would like to share some of my story with you.

During my late teens I came to the conclusion that I am a lesbian. I realized that this discovery would not be acceptable to my family or church and so I concealed it. I tried to fit in by being in heterosexual relationships, appearing to be normal and acceptable to the community. However, my ability to pretend to be heterosexual did not last and it wasn't long before others found out about my sexual orientation. I was told in no uncertain terms that I cannot be Christian and lesbian. My family relationships and support system were shattered. The Church's stance on homosexuality sent a clear message of rejection to me which forced me to leave the Church. The pain and loss was immense.

Several years later I had an encounter with God that made me return to the Church. I knew that God loved and accepted me and I renewed my commitment. I then set out to find a Church. It did not take me long to discover the official stance of the Church was unchanged on same-sex relationships. At the time the only way for me to be included in the community was either to deny my sexual orientation and live a life of secrecy or live a life of celibacy.

Seeing that my faith was very important to me and to stop the fear and pain of being rejected, I tried to conform by attending several support groups and going for counselling. I was also part of an ex-gay ministry (for recovering gay people) for several years. However none of these efforts changed my sexual orientation. In order to obey the church's teaching, I lived in denial of who I was and I settled for a life of celibacy and secrecy. The suppression of the truth enhanced my pain and steered me into a deep hole of discontent and depression. Even during this period of denial, I was at times, fearfully worried and wondered about what would happen should I meet someone and fall in love. Would I still be able to deny my sexuality, my need for love as well as my desire to give love and to live with a life companion?

My relationship and love for Jesus deepened over the years that followed, I heard and then responded to God's call to ministry by candidating for the ministry within the MCSA. My whole being was occupied, stimulated and challenged by the Theological and Ministerial training. I will be forever grateful to the MCSA for the wide expansive education given to me. It was here, during my theological

studies that I encountered another perspective on the issue of homosexuality that challenged the traditional stance within the Church. With much research and self-evaluation I discovered new ways of interpreting scripture and found a new way of coming to terms with who I am as a child of God.

I learned that when one reads Scripture in context, the traditional verses that have been used to condemn homosexuality are in all probability not referring to a faithful, loving, committed, respectful relationship between two people of the same sex. I learned by using the Wesleyan quadrilateral (Scripture, experience, reason and tradition) that my sexuality is a gift from God. I learned that the Church has had a sad history of being sure who to exclude and then had to repent later (exclusion of women to the ordained ministry, apartheid). I also learned that at the heart of God is an all inclusive love which is far wider than I can ever comprehend.

Through this learning curve my relationship with Jesus found a new intensity as I embraced the acceptance of God's love for me ... just as I am. Afresh I realized that nothing could separate me from God's love and acceptance. I have also come to a new understanding that my sexuality is part and parcel of who God created me to be – and that God created someone beautiful. Indeed the Gospel of Christ became very good news for me! This knowledge has brought me profound confidence and peace, yet accompanied by much tension about my reality and the traditional stance of the MCSA. Listening to debates and colleagues comment on the issue has been a fearful and painful experience within the MCSA. Numerous times I have wanted to stand-up and say “this is me you are speaking about; speak to me”. However, the lack of “a safe space” and the fear of rejection have kept me in my seat.

In the meantime, by God's grace I have met a wonderful person, Amanda. In this relationship I discovered that by denying my sexuality, I denied a significant part of myself, my God given means of connecting and loving another human being. This relationship has brought us both much joy and pleasure. We offer one another companionship where we are committed to being respectful, faithful, caring and trustworthy. Our desire has been to honour God and so we celebrated our love relationship by getting married in Dec 2009. The context and sensitivity of the same-sex debate within the MCSA made me afraid to come out and break the silence. Hence the soul destroying silence, instead of inviting my Church family to celebrate with me.

By God's grace my immediate family embraced and supported me in my journey of coming to terms with disclosing my sexual orientation and my marriage with Amanda. I am also grateful for the acceptance and support of several colleagues and friends during this journey who

have helped me to come to this place. I have reached the point where I can no longer be silent. I have come to see that it is better to be rejected for who I am than to be accepted for who I am not.

I know that, by sharing with you my story I take a huge risk. I am also concerned for the Churches that I serve. However, I am of the conviction that my relationship and journey with Christ has brought me to this place, which requires me to speak and live in the truth, trusting that this alone will bring freedom. By denying my sexuality and my marriage I am denying who I am and who Jesus wants me to be.

I am not afraid, as I know that God is with us (with me, Amanda and the Church at large). It is my desire to serve God in the MCSA and to be accepted for who I am. I understand that we are not all of the same mind on this matter and I pray that God will help us to become an:

“... inclusive body of Christ that celebrates diversity in all its facets of religious, social and organisational being...to pastor and welcome all people irrespective of race, social class, disability, sexual orientation etc. [For] to single out any one of these for a special dispensation of salvation would be religiously spurious as well as an affront to our values of human respect, dignity and equality.”³

and affirm that:

“we will seek to be a Christ-honouring community: a. celebrating the rich diversity of those called to follow Jesus, honouring the sacred worth of all people and practising our Wesleyan heritage of warmth, welcome and hospitality; b. recognising the authority of Scripture and noting that in our quest for understanding, there is no one, monolithic and incontrovertible interpretation of it; c. acknowledging that there are therefore some issues upon which there may never be total unanimity within the church and upon which we must “agree to differ” without reducing our respect for, and trust of, one another.”⁴

I have survived the hardest part already, which is self-acceptance. I made it through – not broken but more confident and complete than I ever was. And I want to share that with the people I love and live with and those I serve within the MCSA. However people react, by God’s grace I will respond to them with love.

*Yours in Christ, Ecclesia de Lange, 6th December 2009,
Windsor Park, Cape Town, South Africa*

“Oh Church

³ MCSA 2008 Yearbook & Directory, 18

⁴ MCSA 2008 Yearbook & Directory, 81.

How baffling you are, oh Church, and yet how I love you! How you have made me suffer, and yet how much I owe you! I should like to see you destroyed, and yet I need your presence. You have given me so much scandal and yet you have made me understand sanctity. I have seen nothing in the world more devoted to obscurity, more compromised, more false, and I have touched nothing more pure, more generous, more beautiful. How often I have wanted to shut the doors of my soul in your face, and how often I have prayed to die in the safety of your arms.

No, I cannot free myself from you, because I am you, although not completely. And where should I go? To build myself another Church? But I could build one only with the same defects, because they are mine; defects which I have inside myself. And if I built one, it would be my church, no longer the Church of Christ. I am old enough to understand that I am no better than other people.”

Carlo Correto

The consequences of Ecclesia’s actions were of such a nature that she had to submit herself to two disciplinary hearings at which she was found guilty of breaking the Laws and Discipline of the Church. On 20th February 2010 she was discontinued as a Methodist minister of the MCSA. She still had the option of referring the matter for arbitration, which she did. During the disciplinary hearings the support group which stood behind her ensured that T-shirts and buttons were produced and “EKKLESIA” and “Injustice to one is injustice to all” were printed on them in rainbow colours. These items were sold and distributed to be used to create awareness and open minds to the injustice toward and exclusion of homosexual people within the church. Peaceful demonstrations at the disciplinary hearings were accompanied by prayer vigils and a special service was organised at Rosebank MCSA Church. All of this was captured on DVD as well as by the media. A number of newspaper articles and photographs were published to bring to the attention/awareness of the community the Church’s actions towards its own members.

Through these events minds have been opened. The DVD, *There Comes a Time*, was eventually produced and distributed to all the Methodist synods in South Africa in May 2010, together with copies of Ecclesia’s text, “My story”. This has had a profound impact within the MCSA, which led to several articles being published in the MCSA internal newspaper (*New Dimension*) both for and against homosexual unions. The support group was further empowered to produce a Liturgy of Lament to be used at all synods and other events until inclusivity is reached:

Document 2: A Liturgy of Lament

*This liturgy invites participants to receive the sign of ash on their foreheads. We do this to lament the Methodist Church of Southern Africa's continued exclusion of same-sex couples from the ordained ministry and to remind ourselves and others to continue to work toward the church becoming truly one and undivided.*⁵

We Gather

O Gracious and Welcoming God,
We, your daughters and sons gather
in your presence and your name.

But, we are not all here.

We feel the absence of our gay sisters and brothers
who have been turned away from your *Ekklesia*,
and who have been allowed no place among your people.
We remember their grief, rejection and loneliness,
and we grieve the loss of their presence,
their companionship,
and their giftedness.

***Though we are part of one body,
we have been divided;***

***Though we belong to each other,
we have been divided;***

***Though we all share in the one faith,
the one baptism,
the one loaf,***

***and we all partake of your one Spirit,
we have been divided.***

We Lament, We Intercede and We Confess

In this moment of significance and grief,
we cry out to you, O God;
How long will your Church turn away the weary and burdened ones
you have invited to come to you?

***How long will your followers place heavy burdens
on those who seek you?***

⁵ The Liturgy of Lament was written by John van de Laar (© Sacredise 2010). This liturgy may be freely used and distributed for any purpose that is not for gain.

How long will we fail to recognise your image
in all of our brothers and sisters?

***How long will we deny the God-blessed gift of intimacy
to those who long for love?***

Silent prayers of lament and intercession may be offered.

Yet, even as we plead with you, O Christ,
we also confess our part
in the dividedness of our Church and our world.

***We have allowed what has little significance,
to blind us to what is truly important;
We have allowed our God-given diversity,
to keep us apart;***

***We have called what is clean unclean,
And we have rejected those who are loved by you.***

In your grace, mercy and all-embracing love,
We ask you to forgive us,
heal us,
and change us;

That, like you, we – and all your Church – may be people
of indiscriminate welcome,
of unlimited grace,
and of unconditional love.

We Receive the Ashes of Grief

As our ancestors in faith, the prophets and psalmists,
who grieved when your people rejected
justice and compassion;

We place on our heads the ashes of grief.

***We will remember the suffering of our gay sisters and brothers;
we will hold them in our hearts and our prayers,
and we will continue to strive,
until they are included among us once again.***

*Each person makes the sign of the cross on the forehead of the person
next to them,*

saying: ***Do not forget why we grieve. Those who receive respond with
Amen.***

We Affirm Our Hope

Though today, O God, we grieve,

we remember our hope in Christ;

Though today, O God, we are divided,

we remember that in Christ we are one;

Though today, O God, we long for justice,

we remember that all will be reconciled in Christ.

And we will continue to proclaim our hope, O God,

until we celebrate its fulfillment together.

Amen. Let it be so. Amen.

As a result of the above factors, and all working toward open minds, pressure was placed on the MCSA's Doctrinal Committee to complete, publish and distribute a study guide, including a Bible study, on homosexuality and homosexual unions titled *In search of grace and truth*.⁶ This book gives both views – for and against – and is presented in a study format. During the MCSA's Conference of 2010, the Church was instructed to participate in this Bible study with the intention to assist it in applying its mind on the issue.

Clearly this gave exposure, and awareness was raised within the MCSA around homosexuality, hence opening more minds.

Open Hearts

People who were moved by Ecclesia's story participated in the various protests and services which were organised in response to her treatment by the Church authorities. Speakers at these events did not mince their words, as revealed in a section of Rev. Dr. Peter Storey's address quoted below:

The Holy Spirit has waited long enough. It is time for the Church to recognize, repudiate and reject what William Sloane Coffin calls its 'last respectable prejudice' – homophobia. If that is too much to digest all at once, then the time has come for at least a full place at the table for people with a new and different mind. As a well-wisher wrote to Ecclesia, 'Gay ministers are not going to go away and more of us will want to be married.' So today we are here to say to those who differ from us, 'Hold your views if you must, but we are not prepared to see one more person – this person – sacrificed on the altar of wrongful exclusion.'

But it is we, the church, who must apologise. This apology must be a wide one, embracing every person who has been hurt, rejected,

⁶ Tim Atwell, Ray Aliston, Roger Scholtz, *In Search of Grace and Truth: Christian Conversation on Same-Sex Relationships*, (Cape Town: Cingela Press, 2010).

excluded and wounded by the Christian Church because of his or her sexual orientation. It must be deep, reaching down into centuries of wrong. The church's long compromise with slavery, our blind acceptance of racism, our stubborn exclusion of women from leadership and ordination – these are sins from which we have had to be delivered, but John Cobb would remind us that in this in particular, we may have done worse: whereas in most forms of suppression the church has given at least some support to the oppressed, in the case of homosexual persons, the church has been the leader in the oppression. I confess this sin on behalf of my church – the Methodist Church of Southern Africa today. We stand in need of forgiveness – from our God and from those we have hurt.

In the meantime several ministers undertook to intentionally journey with their congregations by taking the Conference's instruction seriously. They want to build an inclusive community of faith by giving attention to the issue by leading a Bible study using the book, *In search of grace and truth*⁷ as a discussion guide with the sole purpose of educating their congregations, as well as by inviting the LGBTI community to participate in the discussion. The importance of engaging in deeper dialogue and avoiding debate as a method to deal with the divisions and differences within the MCSA was clearly a commitment to work towards opening the hearts of members on all levels.

Open Doors

Through the momentum created in the natural pursuit of the Wheel of Catalyst Change strategy, the open heart and open minds as well as the empowerment of people, led to the opening also of doors. The initial support group continued to grow and undertook to hold a conference in December 2010, addressing the theme "Finding our way in a divided church". During this conference an independent movement was established named "Sacred Worth". It was decided during the conference to mail each minister in the MCSA a copy of the DVD *There Comes a Time* with the following letter attached:

"In response to the Conference directive for the MCSA to continue dialogue regarding same-sex relationships, SACRED WORTH was launched on the 12th August 2010.

Sacred Worth believes:

God loves All. We are All one in Christ. All people are of sacred worth.

⁷ Atwell et al, *In search of grace and truth*.

Therefore, we seek to help the church we love to become a place in which, in policy and practice, all people are welcomed and invited into full participation regardless of sexual orientation or identity.

At the same time we acknowledge that there are different convictions within the Methodist Church of Southern Africa. We are committed to dialogue through education, ministry, support, advocacy and witness.

We are committed to creating an All-Inclusive Church which will be recognised by the full participation of gay people in the totality of the Church's life, including:

- a. Recognition of Gay Marriage & Ordination.
- b. Freedom of Conscience to Conduct Gay Unions.
- c. Freedom for Congregations to declare themselves to be inclusive and affirming.

A DVD entitled: “There comes a time” has been created with the hope that it stimulates dialogue within the MCSA. To this purpose each minister has received a copy of the DVD, free of charge. If you haven't seen the DVD please ask your minister or contact us at adim_sw.mcsa@yahoo.com to buy your own copy. This DVD is produced in collaboration with Inclusive and Affirming Ministries (IAM). Sacred Worth's first official Conference will be held from 6th - 8th December 2010 in Cape Town.”

Over 1000 copies were posted!

Sacred Worth, with the assistance of IAM, have managed to maintain the “Wheel of Catalyst Change” by focusing on building relationships with colleagues and their congregations, while monitoring the process in the church, specific congregations and in particular Ecclesia's arbitration case. Sacred Worth ensured the passage of a resolution went at the 2011 Church Synod, namely that the Synod will apply pressure to the MCSA's Arbitration Committee to bring closure to the pending arbitration case against Ecclesia – which is overdue by more than 18 months. This resolution was unanimously accepted and letters have been written to address the situation. The evaluation, outcome and follow-up processes which form part of the Wheel of Catalyst Change have been challenging features due to slow movement on this issue, busy ministers and the nature of church. Several ministers, who are inclusive in their approach, have opened their churches to homosexual people, making public their commitment to inclusion, especially of LGBTI people.

To conclude, this narrative reflection was an attempt to share IAM's Wheel of Catalyst Change process which includes the four pronged

approach of empowering, opening minds, hearts and doors, via a core group, while continually engaging in monitoring, evaluation, community building, and following up. In doing so we would like to encourage people on such painful and challenging journeys within their faith communities to hold on to the light at the end of the tunnel as they persevere towards inclusion.

that biblical interpreters "have an ethical responsibility to consider the actual consequences of their interpretations".²⁶

Second, the texts should be read within the contemporary context. This principle requires that the interpreter knows the biblical words to be understandable, credible, actual and prophetic, and to bear witness to the situation at hand. To achieve this, the reader should know and understand his/her own context and contemporary situation, as well as the questions that are pertinent to that situation. With regard to same-sex sexuality, this implies an awareness of recent scientific research, the insights of psychology, the ongoing debate within church and society, the different viewpoints on this issue, and the courage to discern the truth in light of the teachings of the gospel. When we read the biblical text therefore, Paul Germond argues correctly, "it is imperative that we be aware of not only of the assumptions we bring to our reading but also those assumptions that are implicit in the texts we read".²⁷

Thirdly, and complicating the matter further is the question of Bible translations which, in the case of same-sex issues, have done as much harm as in matters of gender and race. New Testament scholar Gosnell Yorke speaks in this regard of the "pathology of racism and the pathology of sexism" and demonstrates this pathology remarkably well as he examines certain biblical texts.²⁸ "Historically", Yorke argues, Bible translation has not been an innocent and value-neutral academic enterprise, but rather, "has been laden with gender and race-induced presuppositions".²⁹ He argues strongly and in my view convincingly that we need to re-examine Bible translations for those racial and gender biases and correct them:

²⁶ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: Decentering Biblical Scholarship", *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 107 (1988), 3-17. For a more detailed construction of her argument on this issue see her *Rhetoric and Ethic: The Politics of Biblical Studies*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999); see also Cheryl Anderson, *Ancient Laws*, 146-147, and at note 39, Chapter 6.

²⁷ See Paul Germond, "Heterosexism, Homosexuality and the Bible", in *Aliens in the Household of God: Homosexuality and Christian Faith in South Africa*, eds. Paul Germond and Steve De Gruchy, (Cape Town: David Philip, 1997), 189.

²⁸ See Gosnell L. Yorke, "Issues of Race and Gender in Bible Translation: Interfacing with Spirituality", paper presented at the Symposium in Spirituality and Professionalism, University of the Virgin Islands, St. Thomas, (The Caribbean), 18th April, 2011. He illustrates this by a critical examination of the following biblical texts: regarding sexism, Romans 16:7; 1 Cor. 14:34-36; 1 Tim. 2:9; and regarding racism, Gen. 2:10-14; Jer. 13:23; and Ps. 51:7.

²⁹ Yorke, "Issues of Race", 10.

We... are now insisting that full human flourishing, including *spiritual flourishing* must entail our critiquing of the received tradition which sometimes masks itself as objective scholarship. However, it is a scholarship which... has been touched and tarnished by certain Eurocentric, chauvinistic, and hegemonic assumptions about the world in which we live...³⁰

I contend that the same argument is valid for those texts that deal with matters of homoerotic sexuality. For, if accurately translated, it is in fact homoerotic behaviour that is under the discussion in the Bible, not stable, loving and committed same-sex relationships and love.³¹

Fourthly, literal readings of the Bible, I further argue, may lead to dangerous inconsistencies that themselves do harm to the very authority of the Bible claimed by Christians like Judge Mogoeng. "Bible-believing" churches and Christians insist on the literal understanding of the whole Bible but cannot, and in reality do not want to sustain that belief across the board. "Bible-believing" Christians, such as Judge Mogoeng, read Leviticus 18:22 literally: "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination", and they use that as a strong, even conclusive argument against same-sex relationships. At the same time they ignore verses such as Deuteronomy 22:5, regarding the law against the wearing of men's clothing by women; or the wearing of clothes made of different fabrics (Deut. 22:11); and the lending of money against interest (Deut. 23:19).

However, at issue here are not just the inconsistencies of traditional readings. At issue is also the question: what is the consistent message of the Bible? What is it that Jesus takes as the heart of his message for and of his activity in the world? There is a reason why Jesus announces his work in the world with the text from Isaiah 61, and not from Leviticus 18. That is because the sustained message of the Bible is not the punishment and exclusion of LBGTI persons. The sustained message of the Bible, repeated and deepened by the prophetic strain in the Psalms and the Prophets, and given eternal weight by Jesus of Nazareth is God's good news to the poor, God's eternal commitment to justice, liberation and inclusion.

³⁰ Yorke, "Issues of Race", 10, 11.

³¹ Studies and reflections on the "biblical position" are making this increasingly clear and even a scholar such as Lewis Smedes, who describes himself as a "traditionalist", reflects soberly on "the things the Bible does not tell us about. See Lewis Smedes, "Exploring the Morality of Homosexuality", in *Homosexuality and Christian Faith, Questions of Conscience for the Churches*, ed. Walter Wink (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 77-82.

"Strengthening the Hands of the Evildoers"

Pursuant to the arguments that have already been raised regarding Genesis 1 and 2, a few further points remain. Rather than stressing the (sexual) differences of the two human beings created by God as if God's deepest intentions with human beings are centred on, and reduced to sexual organs, Genesis instead lifts up their sameness: that both are made in the image of God. Being created in the image of God does not denote literal or physical likeness, but rather

It certainly includes something that is central to the biblical nature itself, namely, that capacity and desire to enter into deep and enduring relationships – both with one another and with God. As creatures who bear God's image, human beings have a status and a calling to live a life beyond mere animal existence. In other words, the desire for intimate companionships that all of us feel so deeply, whether we are gay or straight, is an important part of our humanity.³²

The creation account in Genesis 1 and 2 on which Judge Mogoeng builds his argument that "there shall be husband and wife", underscores not the peculiarities of anatomy, nor the wonders of gender complementarity, but the comprehensiveness and communal character of all humanity being created in God's image. "The point", writes Johnson, "is the sanctity and importance of every human being. And this sanctity applies regardless of a person's sexual identity".³³

Reflecting on Genesis 19:1-29, the story of "the men of Sodom and Gomorrah", we should again press beyond the prejudicial exegesis that has set the tone for so long. A conservative reading of this story insists that it illustrates Yahweh's punishment because the men of Sodom had wanted to engage in same-sex intercourse with the angels sent by God. Since at least the fourth century this has been the reading of this text. "We cannot avoid the obvious conclusion that God devastated the cities on the plain with a catastrophe because of the homosexuality of the Sodomites", says theologian Greg Bahnsen.³⁴

There are a number of issues that need to be taken into account here before Bahnsen's claim of the "obviousness" of the matter can be accepted. First, there is the very strong argument that what is crucial

³² Johnson, *A Time to Embrace*, 115. See also Meyers and Scanzoni, *What God Has Joined Together*, Chapter 2, "The Longing for Belonging".

³³ Johnson, *A Time to Embrace*, 116.

³⁴ Cited in Paul Germond, "Heterosexism, Homosexuality and the Bible", in *Aliens in the Household of God*, eds. Germond and De Gruchy, 214, see note 45.

here is the issue of hospitality, and that the great sin of the Sodomites was the breaking of the rules of hospitality.³⁵ Apart from that however, and more importantly, is the role of the Hebrew word *yada'*, literally "having knowledge of", often translated as "having sex with". It is, once again, more complex than that. Of the 931 times the word *yada'* is used in the Hebrew Bible, only twelve times does it refer to sexual intercourse and in all those 12 cases the reference is to heterosexual intercourse.³⁶ The text has nothing to say about intimate, love-affirming same-sex relationships.

Still, in my view, even in this more "liberal" interpretation of hospitality, the deeper meaning of the text remains obscured: it is still the men (the men of Sodom and the angels) who are central to the events.

Finally, the other references to "the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah" in the Hebrew Bible shed a completely different light on Genesis 19. Jeremiah stipulates a devastating judgement on the sins of the leaders and prophets of Israel. In Jeremiah, those sins are so great that the prophet's heart is "crushed" within him (23:9). The land is "full of adulterers"; the leaders of Israel lead the people on "an evil course; they are leaders whose might is not right" (v.10). They are not adulterers because they break their marital vows but rather because those in positions of trust, through their abuse of power ("their might is not right"), have broken their vows to Yahweh and, instead of doing justice, are leading the people on an "evil course" through their "wickedness". This already in itself is "disgusting": the prophets of Samaria are prophesying "by Baal", (that is, by telling lies, not speaking the truthful word that comes from Yahweh), leading the people astray (v.13). But in Jerusalem, the prophets do things that are even "more shocking": they commit adultery, and "walk in lies", and in doing so they "strengthen the hands of evildoers" (23:14). If they had "stood in (Yahweh's) council", they would have "turned (the evildoers) away from their evil". This judgement on all of the elite leadership is preceded by the earlier judgement on King Shallum and King Jehoiakim, sons of Josiah of Judah. Shallum, because he did not know justice, is "carried away from this place"; he shall die where he is and "shall return no more". (Jer. 22:11) Jehoiakim, who indulged in self-enrichment with his "eyes and heart only on dishonest gain", shedding "innocent blood and practicing

³⁵ See Germond, "Heterosexism, Homosexuality and the Bible", *Aliens in the Household of God*, 214

³⁶ See the excellent exposé offered by Germond, "Heterosexism, Homosexuality and the Bible", *Aliens in the Household of God*, 213-215.

oppression and violence", is similarly judged. The context is crystal clear. First there is Yahweh's plea and solemn warning:

Execute justice in the morning
and deliver from the hand of the oppressor
anyone who has been robbed,
or else my wrath will go forth like fire and burn
with no one to quench it,
because of your evil doings. (Jer. 21:12).

This is followed by the great "woe" against the king and the ruling elite:

Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness,
and his upper rooms by injustice;
who makes his neighbours work for nothing,
and does not give them their wages...
Are you a king
because you compete in cedar?
Did not your father eat and drink
and do justice and righteousness?
Then it was well with him. (22:13-15).

These rulers' eyes and heart however, "are only on [their] dishonest gain". In behaving in this way Jehoiakim shows that he does "not know (*yada'*) Yahweh" (Jer. 22:11-17). Not doing justice is "not knowing" Yahweh. Next follows the "woe" to the leaders, the prophets and priests, the "shepherds who destroy and scatter" the sheep of Yahweh's pasture (23:1). It is in this context that Yahweh cries out that "all of them have become like Sodom to me, and its inhabitants like Gomorrah" (23:14). In Ezekiel 16:49-50 the sins are "pride, surfeit of good and prosperous ease" (while) "they did not aid the poor and needy...". In addition, "they were haughty and did abominable things before me". So for Ezekiel the sins of Sodom are the sins of social injustice, greed, pride, exploitation of the poor and unbridled lust for material prosperity. In this reading by the prophets of Israel themselves, the "Sodom and Gomorrah" text can be more justifiably interpreted as a judgment upon the "prosperity gospel" and rampant capitalism as "blessings of God", so beloved of neo-Pentecostalist and Charismatic churches, rather than as the divine condemnation of LGBTI persons and same-sex relationships.

Indeed sex does play a role in the story of Sodom. However, I would argue that the text portrays repulsion at the horrific nature of wanton, violent sexual abuse, and the fact that what was intended to be an act of intimacy and affirming love is now an act of subjection to this destructive abuse. Secondly, and crucially, the story highlights the

complicity of Lot, representative of God in this city of violence, and the consequences of that complicity for those who are most vulnerable. When Lot offers his two daughters to the men of Sodom the word *yada'* is again used, but the text makes the meaning crystal clear: Lot is offering "to bring out" (read: "to deliver into the hands of") his daughters who "have not known (*yada'*) a man", to "do with them as you please" (Gen. 19:8). It is not the horrific intentions with regard to the angels, but the actual horror of the young women, that is the key to understanding the biblical text here. Lot is betraying his children, already vulnerable, but made utterly and shamelessly more so by their father in that situation, and in that act he is betraying God, while "strengthening the hands of the evildoers". That is the "more shocking thing" Jeremiah saw in the leaders of Jerusalem (Jer. 23:14), and that is the abominable thing "before Yahweh" that Ezekiel speaks of (16:50). In making that choice Lot, the man of God, has become frighteningly like the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Within the context of the times, Leviticus 22:18, which prohibits "penetration" between men, the act of penetration of a man by a man was an act usually imposed by a socially superior man on a socially inferior one. In ancient society such acts were sometimes performed on a slave or other subordinate persons, especially prisoners of war, merely as a form of social gratification or humiliation. The enemy is conquered, but the victors want to further defeat them through sexual abuse, subjecting them to the ultimate indignity: penetration of a man by a man. "By its very nature then, we are speaking of a one-sided, asymmetrical act, one that had the effect in the eyes of ancient culture of symbolically turning the man who was penetrated and had become sexually subservient, into a woman."³⁷ Phyllis Bird shows that penetration of a man by other men could also be a form of punishment for a man having done this to another man.³⁸ Understanding this, I suggest, would go a long way in understanding the intention of the biblical law.

Johnson argues that the law in Leviticus was aimed specifically at heads of households, clans and tribes.³⁹ The head of the household was allowed to seek sexual gratification in a wide number of ways. However, Leviticus specifically prohibits Hebrew men from a certain

³⁷ Johnson, *A Time to Embrace*, 126.

³⁸ See Phyllis A Bird, "The Bible in Christian Ethical Deliberation", in *Homosexuality, Science and the 'Plain Sense' of Scripture*, ed. Balch, 175.

³⁹ Johnson, *A Time to Embrace*, 126.

kind of sexual activity: they are to refrain from "uncovering the nakedness" of certain persons within the extended household, anyone in a close familial relationship, and those blood relatives more distantly related to the current wife of the man. And they are prohibited from the practice of using sexual gratification as a form of abuse and humiliation.⁴⁰ This is, in my view, an attempt to curb the power of men with regard to their lusts. So even without taking into account the cultic contexts within which these laws were given, and being acutely, and critically, aware of the submissive status that ancient law prescribes to women, the text offers the possibility of an alternative reading which sees the law as reining in the power of men: they cannot do what they like just because they are male and have power; they cannot prove their domination through engaging in some humiliating sexual ritual. But there is no inkling that the Bible says anything about, let alone passes judgement on committed, loving, stable same-sex relationships.

In the same way, Paul addresses Greco-Roman homoeroticism.⁴¹ In the three references Paul makes to homoerotic behaviour, he is not so much taking a stand against genuine, loving relationships as railing against the self-centred eroticism, hedonistic homoerotic practices, and male prostitution that were widespread in the Roman Empire. Sex is not a tool of power, Paul is trying to say. A Roman male citizen could, at will, penetrate his wife, a woman of lower standing, his slave, a prostitute – anyone who was his social inferior.⁴² Paul is harsh in his judgement on social superiors inflicting their lustful desires on social inferiors, based on their privilege and status as the Roman ruling class.

Part of Paul's Roman-Greco world was the lively trade in boys who were sold into sexual slavery. They were captured during military campaigns as prisoners of war and castrated to preserve their soft features for as

⁴⁰ Johnson, *A Time to Embrace*, 126.

⁴¹ See for example Jeremy Punt, "Homosexuality: Biblical Reflections, (NT)", "Report of the Task Team on Homosexuality to the General Synod of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa", 29th September – 5th October, 2008, Hammanskraal, *Agenda*, 2008, 99-117. He scrutinizes Romans 1:18-32, 1 Cor. 6:9, and 1 Tim. 1:10. See also especially Dale Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006); M Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998); Robin Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality: Contextual Background for Contemporary Debate*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983); and for the relationship between Paul's usage of language and concepts and that of Greek philosophy see David E. Frederickson, "Natural and Unnatural Use in Romans 1:24-27: Paul and the Philosophic Critique of Eros", in *Homosexuality, Science and the 'Plain Sense' of Scripture*, ed. Balch, 197-222.

⁴² Johnson, *A Time to Embrace*, 132-133.

long as possible. If they survived this mutilation, they went to market as sexual slaves.⁴³ Paul writes in utter condemnation of these practices and of the sexual chaos that serves no other purpose than instant gratification, social domination and oppression: all this is a result of turning away from God.

In summary, we have to ask, in light of the terror society inflicts upon LGBTI persons, whether “Bible-believing Christians” are not creating the climate for and a culture of such murderous hatred and festering injustice, in reality not serving God, but in Jeremiah’s words “strengthening the hands of evildoers, so that no one turns from their wickedness”.

“Killing and Dying in God’s Name”

In Africa no less than 43 countries have, in one way or another, criminalised same-sex relationships, of which Uganda has perhaps become the most notorious example. The Ugandan government are working hard on a bill that dramatically expands punishment for homosexuality, already illegal in the country, and that calls for the death penalty for “serial offenders”, and imprisonment for failing to report gays and lesbians to authorities.⁴⁴

“Whatever happens to gays is a result of their own misdeeds”, says the Kampala’s Rolling Stone newspaper editor, Giles Muhame, blaming the victims of violence for the crimes of the perpetrators. “It’s their own behaviour that’s causing the attacks”.⁴⁵ The morality or humanity of the act is not in question; the crime is already sanctified by society and the Holy Bible. For behind that bill and openly supportive of the newspaper’s “brave, Christian” stand, is parliamentarian David Bahati, a born-again Christian who like Judge Mogoeng believes that he “was chosen by God to deliver humanity from this calamity”. They should die, he says. “The Bible says those caught in sin should suffer death. The Qur’an says hang them and throw them over a cliff”. Then he tops it off: “These are the words of God by God”.⁴⁶ And they are indeed suffering death; hung by the neck or bludgeoned to death by murderous, but self-righteous mobs who are told that they are carrying out “the very words of God by God”. These are the actual consequences of the decisions of

⁴³ Johnson, *A Time to Embrace*, 133.

⁴⁴ Jeff Stuart, “Junkets for Jesus”, *Mother Jones* magazine, November-December 2010, 61.

⁴⁵ Lerato Mogathle, “Killing and Dying in God’s Name”.

⁴⁶ Lerato Mogathle, “Killing and Dying in God’s Name”.

persons in positions of public power whose beliefs are uncritically "founded on the Holy Bible".

The most recent in the spate of lesbian killings in Cape Town occurred in the second week of September in Khayelitsha; while the youngest victim of "corrective rape" in Pretoria a few months ago was only 14 years old. Bible-believing Christians should ponder far more seriously not only the theological, but also the societal consequences of their reading of the Bible.

Theologically and sociologically, more than ever, there are deep concerns and challenges with regard to the issue of same-sex sexuality which remain. First, is the challenge of how to encourage and foster a discernment of the voice of God from among the many voices in the Bible and from those of the seats of power; to grasp the full meaning of the justice Yahweh desires for each and every one, which is Yahweh's "abiding cause." Second, the challenge is to resist the religious supremacist stance that the Bible is in conflict with the Constitution, through a constant affirmation that the Constitution seeks to serve all members of society and not just the Christian community. Third, more research on why Christians, on the basis of the Bible for which justice is so central, question the Constitution's commitment to justice for all God's children, especially God's LGBTI children. And finally, the challenge is to resist, through critical theological and biblical analysis, the grim possibility that Constitutional Hill will become a paradigm for another hill where new crosses will arise, upon which the victims of faith will be crucified and where those who perpetrate these crucifixions feel no remorse, because their judgements, in the church and on the Bench, are "founded on the Holy Bible" and their hands are washed in the blood of the Lamb.

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God or Caesar: A Queer Debate on Interpretation in the South African Church

Sifiso Khuzwayo¹

Abstract

This article investigates how texts that are regarded as authoritative may be used to foster unity within a community in which divergent ethical views exist. The author's particular reference will be the homosexuality debate within the Methodist Church of Southern Africa. A comparative analysis of models of reading authoritative texts such as the Christian scriptures and the South African constitution is employed. Also in question will be the ways in which a text comes to be authoritative within a particular community. Whilst the texts being referred to here are all scripted, there are also unscripted sources of authority such as culture which are gaining more popularity amongst the younger generations. The divergent views, mentioned above, on the homosexuality issue seem to be irreconcilable. Therefore in light of the stalemate that is apparent in this debate, an Islamic scholar's concept of the *Dhiliz/Threshold* as a place where all stakeholders can meet to engage is proposed. The *Dhiliz*-ian position is not the same as sitting on the fence in the face of a critical debate, but is rather a place where all relevant points of view are given due recognition. John Wesley's well-known response to disagreements with the Rev. George Whitfield forms part of what is proposed here. Unless the church is willing to deal honestly with the debate on homosexuality, another schism will inevitably be the outcome.

Introduction

Where does my loyalty lie? Is it to God or to my country? This is the question that many people find themselves caught up in when it comes to the debates surrounding homosexuality within the South African church. Jesus' authority is questioned by the Pharisees who try to entrap him concerning the question of paying taxes to Caesar, as recorded in the three synoptic gospels.² This paper is neither an exegesis of this narrative, nor even an exploration of what is involved in them. I want merely to highlight how a burning issue, currently

¹ Sifiso Khuzwayo is from South Africa. He is an ordained minister in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa serving at Central City Mission yaseThekwini. He is also an Adjunct Lecturer at the Seth Mokitimi Methodist Seminary. His area of specialization are in the fields of Systematic Theology and Ethics. Email: sifisokhuz@gmail.com

² Matthew 22:15-22; Mark 12:13-17 and Luke 20:20-26.

homosexuality, can divide a community and call a person to decide which side to stand on. In the South African context, the debate has been raging for decades now on how to respond to homosexual members within the church. As a fairly young democracy, South Africa has one of the most liberal constitutions in the world and precisely because of that, the country was forced to reckon with its laws governing human sexuality, civil marriage and the rights of individuals to associate as they wish under the protection of the state. The church is therefore left with the debate on what we call our members to be loyal to – the country's Constitution or the church's teaching on the matter. It is a matter of authority.

It is a queer debate! This word is not intended in any derogatory manner.. The debate which we will encounter over the course of this paper is queer (strange) first because for some there isn't even an issue to be debated. Jesus is clear: "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." Second, it is queer (strange) for some people because, in the midst of so much world turmoil, hunger, wars and despair, the church is headed for a split over the issue of human sexuality. Obviously, the third point is that the debate itself is about queer folk; those who identify themselves as members of the Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Queer, Questioning, Transgender, Intersex and Ally (LGBTIA) communities.³

The difficulty lies in how people should interpret the texts which have authority in their lives such that they may be governed by them. I speak here specifically of the South African Constitution for citizens and the Bible for Christians. I am not going to examine each and every aspect of these texts but will merely look at how they have been applied and perhaps what can be learned from their use about humanity in general. The concept of the South African church is also too wide, since it involves the Roman Catholic Church, the Orthodox and liberal mainline churches, the Pentecostals and Charismatic movements and churches and the African Indigenous churches. Therefore I cannot begin to speak of the church as though there is only one voice in this body. Instead I will limit myself to the mainline Protestant church and specifically to my own denomination, the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA) simply because I know this church more intimately than the rest.

³ LGBTIA = Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Queer, Questioning, Transgender, Intersex and Ally. There is a myriad of ways in which to explain the forms of human sexualities that fall within this category, which is all-encompassing.

The South African constitution provides, amongst other things, equality before the law and protection by the law that no one may be discriminated against, indirectly or directly, on the grounds of race, gender, sexual orientation, age, disability, etc. It also stipulates that everyone has inherent dignity and that this dignity is to be protected. “The rights in the Bill of Rights may be limited only in terms of the law of general application to the extent that the limitation is reasonable and justifiable in an open and democratic society based on human dignity, equality and freedom.”⁴ The constitution is the governing authority within the Republic of South Africa and underpins the doctrine of the separation of powers (Executive, Judiciary and Legislature) within the three authorial bodies of the state. The constitution therefore functions, as Powell proposes in his book, “to provide a means of resolving political conflict that accepts the inevitability and persistence of such conflict rather than the possibility of consensus or even broad agreement on many issues.”⁵ If this be the case then it must be expected that in any state governed by such a constitution, issues will arise that will require the citizens to make judgments over them in a manner that is amicable to all, and that respects all viewpoints, while restraining open conflict.

Here is where perhaps the authority of the constitution becomes strongest in that, unlike the Bible as we shall see later, the community democratically elects to be governed by the constitution that they themselves designed and from there on all generations to come are to be governed by and everything is to be interpreted in the light of that constitution. However, as regards the role of the constitution and the power of the judiciary, Powell quotes Abraham Lincoln who warns against allowing “the policy of the government, upon vital questions, affecting the whole people... to be irrevocably fixed by decisions of the Supreme Court;” if the nation allows that, “the people will have ceased to be their own rulers, having, to that extent, practically resigned their government, into the hands of that eminent tribunal.”⁶ It is with such warnings that Powell can then conclude with a plea:

Constitutional law is an experiment, as all life is an experiment. The experiment is modest in its goals – we have not formed a political community to bring about the Kingdom of God or even the classless society. Our goals have been to alleviate human suffering and to

⁴ Extracts from the South African Constitution section 36 <http://www.info.gov.za/documents/constitution/1996/96cons2.htm#36> (accessed 6th September 2011).

⁵ J. Powell, *Constitutional Conscience: The moral Dimension of Judicial Decision*, (Chicago: The Chicago Press, 2008), 7.

⁶ Powell, *Constitutional Conscience*, 118.

empower men and women to live their lives as they see fit, but to do it in a political community that demands their allegiance to it and to their neighbours, and is worthy, for all its flaws, of making such demands. Such an enterprise, we have thought, nourishes our individual spirits and our sociable impulses alike. At the heart of more than two centuries of American constitutionalism is the conviction that this is an experiment worth continuing.⁷

South Africa's constitution, young as it may be, was formulated with a similar goal in mind and an aim for the well being of its citizens. It goes without saying that in developing it, much was borrowed from the democracies of the world and indeed much too was either added or omitted, in order for it to be South African.

Considering the fundamental constitutional principles of the equality of all humans, the alleviation of human suffering and the empowering of citizens, it was only a matter of time before someone questioned the status of same-sex couples who were being discriminated against when their partnerships were not recognized as legal. In a case decided in December 2005, it was brought before the Constitutional court that the Marriage Act of 1961 was discriminatory and thus needed to be changed to include same-sex couples and further that even the vows taken by marrying couples, which speak of husbands and wives were discriminatory against same-sex couples.⁸ The Constitutional Court ruled in favour of the applicants and instructed that parliament address the issue of the Marriage Act before 30 November 2006. A new Civil Union Act was thus passed, giving the same rights to people married under this Act as is accorded to those people married under the Marriage Act. Currently then South Africa has three Acts which govern partnerships between individuals; the Marriage Act of 1961, the Customary Marriages Act of 1998 (this recognizes even polygamous marriages as practiced by the African people of the land) and the Civil Union Act of 2006.

Even before this Constitutional process, in 2001, the Methodist Church of Southern Africa declared its intention to be a "community of love rather than rejection."⁹ The church summoned its Doctrine, Ethics and

⁷ Powell, *Constitutional Conscience*, 121.

⁸ In the Constitutional Court of South Africa: Minister of Home Affairs and Another v Fourie and Another, with Doctors for Life International (first *amicus curiae*), John Jackson Smyth (second *amicus suriae*) and Marriage Alliance of South Africa (third *amicus curiae*) [CCT 60/04] and Lesbian and Gay Equality Project and Eighteen others v Minister of Home Affairs and Others [CCT 10/05].

⁹ *The Methodist Church of Southern Africa 2011 Yearbook and Directory* Johannesburg: Methodist Publishing House, 2011), 104.

Worship Committee (DEWCOM) to conduct a study on how the church should respond to the issue of homosexuality. The resultant DEWCOM document included very progressive Bible study type material on the biblical texts that pertain to homosexuality and pointed to the Wesleyan Quadrilateral (Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience) as a model that could help the Methodist people to decide on the matter. This document was to be discussed at all levels of the church and responses were to be fed back through the normal channels. What followed was an outcry from those described as conservative. The document was criticised for being too progressive, while the people who had prepared it were labelled as pro-homosexual and the use of scripture was considered too modern (Historical Critical Methodology was used). Others supported the DEWCOM document, and so the church was deadlocked. Whilst it was never enumerated, a concern was raised at subsequent synods that in many instances the congregations, particularly the African majority, didn't even discuss the issue because of their minister's own prejudices. Amongst those who did discuss it, the main point of contention was that most of the African people had historically been taught that the Bible is the Word of God and is therefore inerrant and they have never heard otherwise. Ministers also never felt the need to question the Bible's inerrancy, let alone discuss this with regard to the particular issue of homosexuality. The Bible was seemingly being challenged by a document which assumed that people were aware of the Bible's inconsistency and that they were also exposed to some form of historical critical exegetical work in the course of the normal sermons of the day

DEWCOM had framed three questions that members of the Methodist Church must deal with: First; how do they feel about accepting homosexual people in the church? Second; how do they feel about accepting homosexual people in positions of leadership? Third; how do they feel about accepting homosexual people into the ordained ministry? Ironically, whilst their questions may have been a reflection of what needed to happen on the ground, I believe they were wrongly phrased because they presented in one swoop, three issues as regards the different levels of membership within the body of Christ. The current Methodist stance whilst acceding to the ongoing discussion notes "firstly; that the MCSA is, *de facto*, a church with divergent convictions on this issue that have theological integrity, [and] secondly; [that] there is a current theological inconsistency within the MCSA where it allows

this divergence of conviction to be held without the freedom for such divergence of conviction to be exercised.”¹⁰

My interest in this debate is not so much in what the Bible says or does not say. Rather, I focus on the things (texts etc.) that we hold to be authoritative in our lives and how the church can aid people in working with that authority. On the one hand, in a world where scripture has been used to justify anything from women abuse, to slavery and apartheid, how does one work with the Christian Bible in such a way that it continues to hold authority in one's life and what sort of authority should this be? On the other hand, is it possible that the liberal nature of South Africa's Constitution is due to the country's history of oppression and is therefore a corrective and a preventative measure to guard against any other form of oppression? I may not be able to answer these questions here but I submit that they are important in the consideration of any ethical issue in the life of Christian believers in the world today. It is a question of authority. Where does our authority lie: in the church or in the world? And if our authority lies in the church, then where within does such an authority lie? Is it in the Bible?

A Question of Authority

When we speak of authority we have varied understandings. Who determines that something has authority, and by whom or what should that authority be held? A general understanding would be that of something that speaks of legitimacy, of recognition and obedience, and of justification and even a right to exercise power. In our case there are then two sources of such authority: the Constitution and the Bible. The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa as the supreme law of the Republic, dictates that law and conduct inconsistent with this Constitution is invalid and that its obligations are to be fulfilled. Powell, on the role of the American constitution, says that: “There is a substantive, if quite broad, relationship between the virtues that the Constitution implicitly demands of its interpreters and the substance of its commands as they will appear to any conscientious interpreter in the early twenty-first century.”¹¹ In other words, the fundamental message of the Constitution as regards what is right and wrong is broadly comprehensible to all who are presented with its actual statements.

Defining authority for a secular state is relatively simple, but when it comes to matters of religion, the situation becomes complicated: one

¹⁰ *The Methodist Church of Southern Africa 2011 Yearbook and Directory*, 2011:106.

¹¹ Powell, *Constitutional Conscience*, 110.

never knows what comes first: authority, scripture or theology, nor which of these is a legitimizing body.

David Kelsey asserts that what undergirds the concepts of authority, scripture and theology is the theological usefulness or the demand of authority. Kelsey arrives at the following formula:

To say “scripture is authority for theology” is to commit oneself to engaging in the doing of theology under a rule that requires one to use scripture in certain ways. That involves, at least implicitly, a functionalist understanding of “authority”, an acknowledgment of scripture’s normative status *vis a vis* theological proposal, indeed its normativity specifically in regard to the “Christianness” of the proposals.¹²

Kelsey thus posits the Bible as the ultimate authority and Mary McClintock-Fulkerson in support, asserts that three features are helpful in defining an authority that is neither oppressive nor coercive, but rather helpful for assessing what is and what is not biblically authoritative: “(1) its relational character; (2) its sense as acts of legitimation; and (3) its sense as a claim that is made upon a community”.¹³

From the arguments of these two scholars one can then say the authority of the Bible is, first, relational because it demands one to be within the community of those who understand the Bible as authoritative in order to appreciate its strength; one must be part of the story. Here defining the text as scripture is linked with the acceptance of a claim that it has on the life of the believer. A complication is that, for Christians, scripture includes more than just the Bible, but the church’s tradition: its hymns, liturgy and (depending on one’s Christian heritage), iconography. This tradition then legitimizes and makes normative the beliefs, articulations and expressions of those who are members of the community. It is this situation that led to the ‘chicken and egg’ debate that has long plagued the church. Who brings legitimacy to whom: the church tradition which collated the scriptures or the Spirit which inspired the scriptures and the tradition? This question is not fully answered even to this day! A further consideration is that the claim of scripture upon the community calls for a certain way of living “Christianness”. This raises the concept of the covenant (an agreement and commitment

¹² DH. Kelsey, *Proving Doctrine: The uses of Scripture in Modern Theology*, (Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1999), 154.

¹³ M. McClintock Fulkerson, *Church Documents on Human Sexuality and the Authority of Scripture*, (Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001), 50.

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JOURNAL OF GENDER AND RELIGION IN AFRICA

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The *Journal of Gender and Religion in Africa* (JGRA), is a semi-annual publication of the Centre for Constructive Theology, an initiative of the former Faculty of Theology, University of Durban-Westville. From 2004 its articles focused on research papers, which are relevant to gender, religion and theology in Africa. The editorial committee considers for publication submissions of a scholarly standard from any of the social science (theological) disciplines or related fields of inquiry, which provide useful perspectives in the area of gender, religion and theology in Africa. Particular areas of interest include the gendered analysis of: innovations in contextual theological education; theological and ethical reflection on social transformation; the significance of new religious movements and African-initiated churches; the role of women in religion and society; interfaith dialogue; peacemaking and reconciliation.

The *Journal of Gender and Religion in Africa* seeks to promote dialogue and response not only within the academic theological community in Africa and beyond, but also faith practitioners working “on the ground” to build a more just society in the region. These may include clergy, other church professionals and laity across broad social spectrums who seek to read their faith against the critical issues confronting society today.

Written submissions to the *Journal of Gender and Religion in Africa* may take the form of researched scholarly articles or essays. Book reviews, brief responses to articles, conference reports and summaries of research projects are also welcome. Articles submitted for the section called “praxis” must show evidence of how sound theoretical reflections are brought to bear on practical action. Within this section on “praxis” we will publish essays that are not considered “mainstream academic” but nonetheless point to theories of gender justice in action. Submissions are evaluated through an editorial committee screening process. Further, the articles are also sent to a minimum of two competent scholars working in a similar field of interest for peer-review. Prospective contributors of scholarly articles should send a typed copy of their article via email to the submissions editor at jgra@ukzn.ac.za. All submissions must strictly follow the guidelines set out in the **JGRA Style Sheet**. Any article that does not conform to the Style Sheet will be returned and will not be further considered until the style requirements are adhered to. Published contributors will receive one complimentary copies of the issue in which their work is published. Opinions expressed by contributors are solely their own, and do not necessarily reflect those of the editorial committee or the Centre for Constructive Theology.

by both parties) of God with the people to whom God has chosen to relate the Good News of God's reign as demonstrated by Jesus of Nazareth, accepted as the Christ.

It should be noted that in discussing scriptural authority and its claim upon a community, regardless of what the issue at hand may be, we must remain fully aware of the Bible's own ideological locations. McClintock-Fulkerson warns of this:

The significance of the grammar is seen in a comparison of feminist Christians' insights with an account of ideology. [The typical functions of the latter might] include legitimating or naturalizing the dominant, obscuring social relations justifying the powerful, and neglecting challenges. A variety of theological formulations naturalize relationships of subordination for women... Certain traditions obscure social reality, making women (and men) believe that female subordination is for their own good... Accounts that divinize scripture "naturalize" the belief by making it absolute. Teachings that sponsor proper Christian behaviour as self-denigration and selfless love work as ideology by providing a standard against which resistance looks like faithlessness, thereby denigrating any challenges women might put forward regarding their idealized position.¹⁴

Itumeleng Mosala argues along similar lines in his work on Black Theology. Mosala's main argument is that liberation movements have often consumed the work of scripture as if it carries no ideology and is thus an ahistorical, apolitical "word of God," which then disables any reading of scripture that would emancipate the oppressed but rather allows a reading that suits the oppressor: "The insistence on the Bible as the word of God must be seen for what it is: an ideological manoeuvre whereby ruling class interests evident in the Bible are converted into a faith that transcends social, political, racial, sexual, and economic divisions. In this way the Bible becomes an ahistorical, interclassist document."¹⁵ Mosala then states his plea "for an open acknowledgment of the class interests that are being represented and thus an acknowledgment of at least the social limitations of the methods [of biblical interpretation]."¹⁶

McClintock-Fulkerson and Mosala show that although the Bible has a claim upon those within the community, it still remains the duty of all

¹⁴ M. McClintock-Fulkerson, "Church documents on human sexuality and the authority of scripture." *Interpretation: a Journal of Bible & Theology*, 49 (1995), 23

¹⁵ I. Mosala, *Biblical hermeneutics and black theology in South Africa*, (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 18.

¹⁶ Mosala, *Biblical hermeneutics*, 65

who use it to be aware of the ideologies running through it, and therefore construct whatever theology or system of life accordingly. The work of interpretation is never complete and that has the implication that the work of theologizing is never complete. This then means that the interpretation of both the Constitution and the Bible for the citizens of the country remains the responsibility of those members of the community charged with it, to undertake this with diligence.

It is a methodological crisis how we listen for this authority, and to what we focus our attention the most in our listening. It is at this juncture that government is ahead of the church and therefore when called upon, the church was unable to give a united witness when the state needed a 'Word from God'. It then remains to be seen if God has, on this issue, achieved God's will despite the failings of the church? Thus far there is therefore agreement among South African Christians that authority lies in the country's constitution and in the Christian scriptures. The methodological crisis referred to above concerns how this authority is attributed.

Sam Wells sums the situation up in a sermon in which he proposes that there are four major approaches in understanding scriptural authority with regard to homosexuality.¹⁷ First, there are those who have a *Holiness* approach. These people call upon the six biblical verses that speak on the issue of homosexuality.¹⁸ Their argument is simply "the Bible is clear."

Second, there are the *Kingdom* approach people. These people argue that there are just too many important issues in the world right now for Christians to be bothered about sexuality. They therefore ask: "Can we talk about something else?" These people appeal to scriptures such as Micah 6:8 which says God's people must "Act justly, love mercy and walk humbly" with God.

The third approach is the *Pastoral* approach which says "Can't you see what this is doing to God's people?" They appeal to the virtue of honesty whereby the church admits that there have always been homosexual people amongst all her ranks. This approach highlights scriptures like Paul's recognition that "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23) in the spirit of Jesus' words "do not judge lest you be judged" (Matthew 7:1).

¹⁷ S. Wells, *Speaking the Truth: Preaching in a Pluralistic Culture*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004), 179-196

¹⁸ Leviticus 18: 22 & 20:13; Romans 1:18-32; 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 and 1 Timothy 1:8-11

The final approach is the *Liberation* approach, which claims that “this is a straight forward issue of discrimination.” Highlighted here is the fact that we are all made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27) and it is argued that, where the Bible is in opposition to homosexuality, it must be read in its context, in which homosexuality was linked to prostitution and promiscuity, and in which nothing of stable homosexual relationships was known.

The truth is that all these approaches are valid and therefore cannot be dismissed and the people who hold to them do so with all sincerity and love. However, there remains the fact that the end result of each is completely different. How does the church in such a situation guide its members?

The Church as Guide

There is a tendency within this homosexuality debate to assume that everyone understands what “church” is and that it is one entity. The ideal is indeed such, but the reality is that in every place the shape of this body is as different as the people who represent it. I am not going to try to define what the church ought to be in order to resolve the tensions around homosexuality or any other issue for that matter. I am however going to examine a concept that the church can use to understand its role in this queer debate.

John's gospel tells of Jesus' address to his disciples: “If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.” (John. 15:19). There are other instances where scripture speaks of the believers as being in the world but not of the world. These are also passages that call for believers to be ambassadors of God's kingdom here on earth. It is here that I think lies the answer to the dilemma. Contrary to certain religious opinions, homosexuality is not an issue the church can be silent on because homosexuality is located within the very pews and pulpits of the churches. It dwells among the families of our congregants whether they choose to ignore it or not. The homosexuality debate is present in society and if theologizing cannot offer guidance to that society, it must at least equip the church members to deal with such issues that surround them. The biblical concept, which finds resonances in Islam, of understanding ourselves as foreigners in the world could help in this debate.

Moosa provides a concept, found in the work of Ghazali, a Muslim philosopher, a concept he calls the *Dihliz/Threshold*. This *Dihliz* he

refers to as a position or location of articulation that neither focuses on the polarities nor the binary formulations between the inner and the outer, the indigenous or the foreign, the esoteric or the exoteric.

The *Dihliz*-ian position is where Ghazali as subject found himself, struggling between the polarities without committing himself to some intangible middle road. Thus, the *Dihliz*-ian position depends entirely on the force field of the discourse. For it often happened that in one context Ghazali found himself at one end of the polarity and in a somewhat different and variant setting he found himself nearer the other end of the spectrum. Here, far from coercing one into adopting one of the polar positions as the correct position, the polarities serve as a spectrum of variabilities.¹⁹

In engaging this there are two points on which Christianity would differ slightly. First, I am not sure that we are ever afforded the opportunity to choose to be on “the other side” in terms of principle (right and wrong). Second, the use of any other source than that which we consider authoritative to us (the Bible) is contentious. I think, however, that Ghazali offers something a little deeper than these rigid concerns for loyalty to principle and the Bible.

In talking about homosexuality, members of the church community who are in this world are forced to reckon with a multitude of force fields in terms of knowledge regarding the issue, which people must use if they are to engage meaningfully in dialogue. Engaging from the position of the *Dihliz* does not mean that one is denouncing oneself, but rather that one is choosing to let all the others speak to one another on equal terms. This is about letting science, technology, constitutional law, psychology, health, history, sociology and whatever field that is a stakeholder in this discussion speak to us as we seek to make our decision. The level of authority that we give these disciplines is interestingly not as clear cut as many would want to believe. Believers once spoke with scriptural authority of a world that stood on four pillars; Expressions like ‘the four corners of the world’ may continue to be used as figures of speech but are no longer the truth that believers once held onto; like the fact that the sun sets in the West, when we know ‘it ain’t moving!’ Therefore in this very debate, we need to stand at a place where we can receive that which might enlighten us to the facts of life to which we may be unaccustomed.

Moosa further says of Ghazali:

¹⁹ E. Moosa, *Ghazali & the Poetics of Imagination*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 272.

The psychic restlessness that he exhibited in his mental and physical crisscrossing over the threshold offers salient lessons for the postcolonial and postmodern Muslim subject in search of emancipatory knowledge and resources to address her many dilemmas. Admittedly, when located at the *Dihliz*, one acknowledges the grey areas, intermediate zones, and degrees of uncertainty that are not unequivocally resolved. Despite Ghazali's most wrenching desire for personal certainty in matters of faith, in the realm of the ethical he was aware that there is always a penumbra of uncertainty.²⁰

One can then only stand with the Christian community, acknowledging that we realize the dilemma that many of our members and those in our wider community are faced with. Rather than being stuck in our position, we then take a step to this position which is neither mine nor the opposition's.

The constitution and the Christian scriptures are not the only authoritative features in the lives of many South Africans. There is also the much undermined and side-lined force field of culture. Today, there is a growing tendency among African youths to revert to their culture based on the reason that the authority of Christianity and its scriptures is no longer rooted or firm.

I am bringing this new and revived appeal to culture as authority to light in a context of a church that to some may seem to be secularizing, a church that is losing its membership because of the competing messages from the scientific disciplines which came to predominance in the 18th century Enlightenment. Saba Mahmood speaks of the phenomenon of religious rituals that are being reinterpreted amongst contemporary Muslims in accordance with Immanuel Kant's reformulation of religion in line with Enlightenment values and modern political rationality.

Kant famously argued that phenomenal forms of religion are left over from the infancy of the human race, when man [and woman] needed such aids, and should be discarded when the human species has reached its appropriate level of maturity. For Kant, the value of scripture lay not in its temporal narrative but in the rational structure it symbolized.²¹

²⁰ Moosa, *Ghazali & the Poetics of Imagination*, 274.

²¹ S. Mahmood, "Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire: The Politics of Islamic Reformation." *Public Culture* 18 no.2, (2006), 342.

I would therefore argue that whilst this may hold true in regard to the European church emptying and losing its membership, in the African context the situation is different, due to a revitalizing of the very cultures that people like Kant thought were being shed by humanity. This is going to mean that culture becomes a new and different force field that the church will have to reckon with in its debate. It comes with a whole range of other cultural issues that have been thought of as backward and assumed to no longer be practiced. An example to substantiate this claim of a revision of African cultures would be the fact that President Jacob Zuma of the Republic of South Africa is a polygamist by virtue of the Customary Marriage Act.

There have been many calls to widen the terms of reference of this issue and, so thus in this article, I have concentrated on homosexuality alone. The whole human sexuality debate is one that authoritative bodies need to address; issues like marriage, sexual abuse and exploitation, pre-marital sex, divorce and the large number of people choosing not to marry yet engaging in sexual activities within their partnerships. The fundamental issues being questioned are the things we have spoken of in our society as norms but who are these norms normative for and whose prescription are they? Within this wide spectrum, the norms being questioned are the very norms that give authority – covenantal for some – fundamental to the way we understand ourselves within a particular relationship. It is therefore also a matter of authority demanding a response from individuals in society, in this case, Christian individuals.

A Christian Response to Authority

Rowan Williams argues for a Christian grounded understanding of relationships: “In other words, I believe that the promise of faithfulness, the giving of unlimited time to each other, remains central for understanding the full resourcefulness and grace of sexual union. I simply don't think we would grasp all that was involved in the mutual transformation of sexually linked persons without the reality of unconditional public commitments [i.e. marriage]: more perilous, more demanding, more promising.”²² He goes on to say:

Yet the realities of our experience in looking for such possibilities suggest pretty clearly that an absolute declaration that every sexual partnership must conform to the pattern of commitment or else have the nature of *sin and nothing else* is unreal and silly...Decisions about

²² R. Williams, “The Body's Grace” in *Theology and Sexuality: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Eugene F. Rogers Jr., (London: Blackwells, 2002), 315.

sexual lifestyle, to repeat, are about how much we want our bodily selves to mean, rather than what emotional needs we're meeting or what laws we're satisfying. Does this mean that we are using faith to undermine law? By no means: we are placing law itself on a firmer footing (Romans 3:31, NEB). Happily there is more to Paul than the (much quoted in this context) first chapter of Romans!

However on the authority of this relationship at the other end of the spectrum, you have a person like Oliver O'Donovan who believes certain groups of Christians are imposing a liberal agenda on the debate without hearing the voice of those for whom they are arguing:

Liberal Christianity has no need to ask such questions, because it reckons it knows what gay Christians need, which is 'stable relationships.' Stable conjugality is the point at which liberalism has made its own peace with the tradition. Or to put it unkindly, it is its characteristic form of prudishness. There is, of course, a lot to be said in favour of stable relationships; but before settling on this as the decisive point, I would like to hear the question discussed by gays, rather than by liberals. Is this in fact the key to their experience? Or is there something important in the roaming character of some gay relationships?²³

As much as I dislike O'Donovan's project of resuscitating a certain kind of Christianity, if I am to stand at the *Dihliz/Threshold* I have to hear him! O'Donovan is searching for the voice of homosexual people in the character of the relationships they want and not that they be spoken for or on behalf of by liberals. He is asking, "Is it what gay²⁴ people want?" There is also obviously an implied opposition in his language as there is support in Williams'. Beyond that these two Anglican scholars seem to be calling for the same thing: a church that will stand at the *Dihliz/Threshold* and agree to dialogue on this matter not on its own but with the concerned people present.

I cannot help but be reminded of Messrs John Wesley and George Whitefield at this juncture. Here were astute men of God in the eighteenth century who could never agree on the particulars of the doctrine of grace, yet at the funeral of the Reverend Whitefield, Wesley spoke words one needs to hear in this debate.

²³ O'Donovan 2007; *Sermons on the subject of the Day (7): Good News for Gay Christians* http://www.fulcrum_anglican.org.uk/news/2007/20070108odonovan7.cfm?doc=179 (accessed 6th September 2010), 4

²⁴ O'Donovan's use of the word 'gay' is inclusive of all those whom we defined under the umbrella of LGBTQITA above.

And, first, let us keep close to the grand scriptural doctrines which he everywhere delivered. There are many doctrines of a less essential nature, with regard to which even the sincere children of God (such is the present weakness of human understanding) are and have been divided for many ages. In these we may think and let think; we may “agree to disagree.” But, meantime, let us hold fast the essentials of “the faith which was once delivered to the saints;” and which this champion of God so strongly insisted on, at all times, and in all places!²⁵

I strongly assert that the church’s response or lack thereof pertaining to the homosexuality dialogue will ignite the breaking of many ecclesiastical communities unless we begin to admit that we do not yet have sufficient information on our hands to decide either way on it. The ramifications of such schisms do very little in witnessing to what we have in common, that is, the love for God. This love is greater than how one reads or interprets any text that allows him/her to be the best person that they believe God has created. Never to be neglected in such interpretations is the principle of Ubuntu which says “*Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu.*” *A person is a person through other persons.* It’s upon such Ubuntu principles that one finds a great distinction between reading texts in community and the trends of individualism that are evident in other communities today.

Conclusion

I have argued that the major issue facing the church is that it has become a reactionary movement and that the government was ahead of it on the issue of homosexuality. I contended that this debate on homosexuality is deeper than mere interpretation of the texts which have authority over Christian lives, the Bible and the Constitution, but it is more about the methods used in that interpretation. I propose that we need to stand at the *Dihliz/Threshold* of the epistemological enterprise and receive from everywhere that which can help Christians in dealing with this issue. I have also argued that there are many other minor authority demanding enterprises that are involved in the lives of the people we are dealing with. Some struggles, particularly the Anglican one, has suggested that even in our deliberations it is possible to be talking for but not with those involved and thus making decisions about people and never with them. The church all too often acts in this way and needs to be aware of and desist from such a practice.

²⁵ John Wesley, Death of George Whitefield. Sermon 53 (text of the 1872 edition): On the death of the Rev. Mr. George Whitefield [sic.] Preached at the Chapel in Tottenham-Court Road and at the Tabernacle, near Moorfields, on Sunday, 18th November 1770.

I appreciate what Andrew Shank's assertions have highlighted in this debate within the Anglican Communion and its pending schism. In an emphatic plea for honesty, Shanks attacks the propagandistic methods that the church has used over the years to propagate the gospel and calls for the replacement of these methods, with true liturgy. Shanks traces the use of propaganda in ways in which the church can "excite raw terror, or it may excite raw lust. Invoking images of glamour, it may seek to latch onto people's envious feelings of self-hatred – with promises of conditional relief."²⁶ True liturgy is that which he claims does justice to the element of mystery in the gospel, a systematic discipline of therapy against all forms of propaganda-borne disease. He therefore asserts: "True theology rests on three things. First: a decisive repudiation of church propaganda, even in its most orthodox forms. Second: a confident recognition that the church's historic addiction to propaganda thinking is remediable. And then, third: a principled refusal never to withdraw from conversation with other Christians, on that basis."²⁷

This can only be done if we resist the temptation of just standing our own ground and shift to a place where we can be found by Christ and helped to find each other; that place we can call the *Dihliz/Threshold*. I must reiterate, standing at the *Dihliz/Threshold* can be done only by those who are sure of who they are and the things that are of value to them (our faith) but are also interested in the well being of all citizens to the extent that they are willing to listen with an openness to others as they formulate ways of living that are for the good of all people.

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²⁶ A. Shanks, "Honesty" in *Praying for England: The Heart of the Church* S. Wells & S. Coakley (eds.), (London: Continuum International Publishing Group,2008), 7.

²⁷ Shanks, "Honesty" in *Praying for England*, 7

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Sexual Diversity, Islamic Jurisprudence and Sociality

Farid Esack¹ and Nadeem Mahomed²

'I think I'm going to fall in love with you. It's a problem.
What should we do?' (Roland Barthes, *Incidents*)

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to offer a critique of contemporary attempts to construct a sexuality-sensitive or homosexual friendly Islamic jurisprudence on the basis of a singular homosexual identity. We argue that while a more tolerant Islamic environment may well be required in respect of homosexuality, the recent developments in support of Muslim gay marriages and the religious recognition and regulation of homosexual relationships results in restricting the sociality of the body and sexuality. Such, we further argue, undermines the importance of the "closet" as a space for autonomy, freedom and resistance to normative sexual injunctions.

Introduction

The existence of same-sex attraction and sexual acts, particularly male same-sex sexual relationships, has a long history within both classical and contemporary Islamic discourse.³ However, one will be hard pressed to find any discussion on the notion of exclusive innate dispositional same-sex desire and its associated sexual acts in Muslim discourse prior to the recent past. Negative permutations of homosexuality as an 'unnatural' sexual disposition and lifestyle emerged initially within modernising Muslim societies and Islamist movements, and during the initial period after the discovery of HIV, the indication that there is a concrete link between homosexual male sex and AIDS as a form of divine punishment also obtained currency.⁴ Gay and lesbian Muslim activism was born in the 1990's in predominantly Western Muslim societies. It is a recent phenomenon that some queer Muslims

¹ Farid Esack (PhD) is South African. He is a Professor in the Study of Islam and the Head of the Department of Religion Studies at the University of Johannesburg.

² Nadeem Mahomed is an attorney and a Masters candidate in Religion Studies at the University of Johannesburg.

³ Khaled El-Rouayheb, *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500-1800*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

⁴ Malik Badri, *The AIDS Crisis: A Natural Product of Modernity's Sexual Revolution*. (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization, 1997).

have challenged the normative jurisprudential view that a licit same-sex relationship is impossible. In addition, some of these queer Muslims venture further and seek to have exclusive and publicly recognised same-sex relationships which are consistent with the religious life of a Muslim.⁵ The consequence of this is both the desire to obtain public recognition and freedom from insult as well as a problematic relationship with important juridical principles in Islam, most notably in respect of falling short of what is currently accepted as sexually licit conduct as well as in regard to the act of professing the righteousness of conduct which is considered unlawful.

In Islam, sex and sexual relations are considered within the context of a larger religious methodological framework called the *shari'ah*. The sources of the *shari'ah* are primarily the Qur'an, the *Sunna* or the traditional prophetic precedent as codified in the *Hadith*⁶ and various jurisprudential sources.⁷ The legal rulings emerging from this systematic framework influence the position of sex and sexuality in Islam.

The aim of this article is to critique and analyse the intersection of sexual identity and Islamic jurisprudence and the impact both of these have upon the sociality of the sexual self. An integral component of this study is to critique the view that there exists an authentic form of (homo)sexual identity. In addition, it probes the question of whether a sexually friendly Islamic jurisprudence has the ability to provide some sort of religious legitimisation for homosexual Muslims or whether the construction of such a religious jurisprudence in itself is subject to incorporating problematic heteronormative practices dominated by a Euro-American or Western epistemological structure. The first part of the paper will analyse the construction of a singular homosexual identity and the viability of such an identity. The second part of the paper will offer a critique of the attempt at constructing a sexuality-sensitive or

⁵ Ali, Kecia. *Sexual Ethics and Islam*. (Oxford: Oneworld. 2006), 78.

⁶ "The normative legacy of the Prophet Muhammad is known as the *Sunna*, and, although it stands second to the Qur'an in terms of reverence, it is the lens through which the Qur'an is interpreted and understood. For much of Islamic history, the unit through which the *Sunna* was preserved, transmitted, and understood has been the Hadith, ... describing the words, actions, or habits of the Prophet." Jonathan Brown, *Hadith: Muhammad's Legacy in the Medieval and Modern World*. (Oneworld: Oxford. 2009), 3.

⁷ Those sources from which the law may be derived, in addition to the Qur'an and *Sunna*, are: (1) consensus (*ijma*), which is a retrospective sanctioning instrument representing the community of Muslims that provides legal and epistemological certainty on a legal ruling; and (2) analogical reasoning (*qiyas*), which by the process of reasoning an existent conclusive ruling provides the basis on which a similar legal case may be solved. Wael B. Hallaq, *Islamic Legal Theories: An Introduction to Sunni Usul al-Fiqh*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1997), 1.

homosexual friendly Islamic jurisprudence. The last part will offer an argument in favour of protecting the conceptual and social space of the 'closet' as a liberatory and protective domain for queer Muslims.

Identity and Conduct: Sexual Acts, Desire and Orientation

In the social sciences sex is a biological activity with no history. However, sexuality is a cultural and/or social construct which "represents the *appropriation* of the human body and of its physiological capacities by an ideological discourse."⁸ As such, David Halperin (b. 1952), on the authority of Michel Foucault (d. 1984), submits that sexuality indeed has a history which is culturally constructed and therefore malleable. The purpose of this section is to discern the effect of sexual identities, namely a homosexual identity, on the Muslim imagination.

Khaled El-Rouayheb contends that premodern Muslim society lacked the concept of "homosexuality."⁹ While same-sex sexual acts took place and same-sex attraction was expressed, these were articulated and viewed through various cultural milieus. The judgement on such sexual attraction and conduct depended on and oscillated between the masculinity of the "active" partner and the emasculation of the "passive" partner in male sexual anal penetrative intercourse; penetrative and non-penetrative intercourse; and whether the attraction was passionate but platonic or sensuous and erotic.¹⁰ These social attributes provided the same-sex sexual act and attraction with its meaning and were strongly attached to considerations of masculinity.¹¹

⁸ David M. Halperin, "Is There a History of Sexuality?" In *History and Theory*. 28, no. 3, (1989), 258.

⁹ El-Rouayheb, "*Before Homosexuality*", 1.

¹⁰ El-Rouayheb, "*Before Homosexuality*", 153.

¹¹ It would be unfair to suggest that classical Islamic legal discourse prohibited homosexuality since the identity construed as homosexual in our secular and modern environment did not exist as a separate class of people during the classical Islamic period. Same-sex attraction was not considered extraordinary and although same-sex sexual acts were considered unlawful they were not regarded as any different from that of illegitimate heterosexual sexual interactions. It was common for scholars to consider the sin of *zina* (pre-marital or extra-marital heterosexual sexual intercourse) as worse than *liwat* (same-sex male sexual intercourse), since the former would allegedly have had worse repercussions for society. Kecia Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam*. (Oxford: Oneworld. 2006), 76. This demonstrates that classical Islamic law distinguished between those sexual relations which were permissible (sex within a monogamous marriage and for men sex within polygynous marriage and concubinage) and those which were prohibited; its aim was never to deny the natural urge of sexual desire.

Joseph Massad (b. 1963) accepts the validity of El-Rouayheb's conclusions on pre-modern Muslim society as valid for contemporary Arab and Muslim societies. Massad¹² is a strong critic of the gay and lesbian liberation agenda in that he argues that the "Gay International"¹³, through exporting Western notions of strict sexual identity and orientation, creates gays and lesbians or homosexual individuals where none existed and assists in repressing same-sex desires and conduct that do not cohere or assimilate into the epistemological understanding of Western sexuality.¹⁴ By attempting to universalise a particular sexual identity construction peculiar to the West, the "Gay International" has incited a discourse on homosexuality in the Arab and Muslim world that has resulted in the negative impact on traditional conceptions of sexuality that either "*heterosexualise*" certain individuals who indulge in same-sex sexual conduct (usually the "active" participant) or offer little protection to, in fact increasing the possibility of attack on, other individuals (usually the "passive" participant).¹⁵ This "imperial mission" on the part of the "Gay International", he argues, is part of the larger Orientalist agenda of manipulating Arab and Muslim – and by extension, African – sexual constructions and morality to conform to Western modes of decency and morality. The major criticism that Massad has with regard to gay and lesbian rights groups are the assumptions that – or the concerted efforts to – equate sexual acts with a sexual identity.

Massad's scepticism of the gay liberation movement, the essentialisation of sexual identities and a serious indictment of Orientalism may be justified and perhaps shed fresh light on the stabilising effect of sexual identities in Arab, Muslim and African societies. Nonetheless, Massad's hypothesis is somewhat glib in that he erases all form of diversity in current queer theology and jurisprudence.¹⁶ The idea of human fragmentation, where the subjective self is not a singular unified entity with an apparent identity based on post-Enlightenment modern individuality, can be invoked to express the

¹² Massad deals almost exclusively with male homosexuality.

¹³ Massad defines the "Gay International" as organisations dominated by white Western males such as the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA) and the International Gay and Lesbian and Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC).

¹⁴ Joseph Massad, "Re-Orienting Desire: The Gay International and the Arab World" in *Public Culture*. Vol.14. (2002) 2, 384

¹⁵ Massad, "Re-Orienting Desire", 383-384.

¹⁶ Valerie Traub. "The Past is a Foreign Country? The Time and Spaces of Islamicate Sexuality Studies". In *Islamicate Sexualities*, eds. Kathryn Babayan and Afsaneh Najmabadi. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008) 5.

fluidity and polymorphous nature of sexual desire, attraction and conduct.¹⁷ The queer and cultural studies theorist Elspeth Probyn (b. 1958) provides such a supposition that human beings constitute multiple and contradictory desires and discourses which results in movement from one identity to another:

Desire is productive; it is what oils the social; it produces the pleats and the folds which constitute the social surface we live on. It is through and with desire that we figure relations of proximity to others and other forms of sociality. It is what remakes the social as a dynamic proposition, for if we live within a grid or network of different points, we live through the desire to connect to them differently.¹⁸

Desire is never static and sexuality is thus never constant. The object of sexuality may deceptively conceal the underlying dynamic of desire, attraction and sexual conduct that is always in flux beneath a *prima facie* constant object of desire. The effect of Massad's critique is that it is complicit in a sexual and epistemological essentialism. It essentialises the sexual act suggesting that there is a uniform sexual act that cannot be transposed to a uniform sexual identity. This results in the creation of a sexual economy where typology of various sexual acts – a taxonomy of sexual practice – develops and results in forcing names onto such acts “even with the alibi of presenting multiplicity”.¹⁹ As such, the relationship between sexual acts, sexual identity and the naming of such acts and identities is causally linked and complex. At the very least, it could be suggested that the gay identity is not merely an “universalisation” of a sexual identity via the “Gay International agenda” but is also simultaneously an identity exported through globalisation; that is through the increasingly interconnected world of information, cultural exchange, tourism (both benign and voyeuristic), money, media and multiple socio-political identities.²⁰

The solidifying and concretisation of sexual identities, notably an exclusive homosexual identity juxtaposed against a majoritarian heterosexual identity, results in two circular discursive realities which

¹⁷ Kathy Rudy, “Subjectivity and Belief”. In *Queer Theology*, ed Gerard Loughlin. (Oxford: Blackwell. 2007) 43.

¹⁸ Elspeth Probyn, “Queer Belongings: The Politics of Departure”. In *Sexy Bodies: The Strange Carnalities of Feminism*, edited by Elizabeth Grosz and Elspeth Probyn. (London: Routledge. 1996) 13

¹⁹ Dina Al-Kassim, “Epilogue: Sexual Epistemologies, East in West”. In *Islamicate Sexualities*, eds. Kathryn Babayan and Afsaneh Najmabadi. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 2008), 305.

²⁰ Ralph Wilde. “Queering International Law”. In *American Society of International Law* Vol. 101 (2007), 131.

feed each other. The existence of the insult against a sexual identity that is based on gender preference instead of a preference in sexual roles results in the construction of the homosexual identity.²¹ The articulation of such an identity was impossible in pre-modern Arab and Muslim societies where the object of praise, ridicule, prohibition and permission rested most heavily on typologies of sexual acts and not preferences of gender even though sexual acts were contextualised within categories of gender differentiation. Gender preference replacing the penchant for sexual roles has resulted in – or at least significantly contributed to – a more serious, vociferous and malicious insult against an identity exclusively based on *homo* gender preference, which itself is constructed in reaction to such an insult.²² Neo-traditionalists and contemporary conservative Muslim scholars in turn react to homosexuality with far more rigidity and fewer nuances than pre-modern legists displayed in their response to the issue of same-sex sexual conduct. The implication is that homosexuality is no longer seen through the pre-modern lens where same-sex attraction and same-sex sexual conduct has varying degrees of permissibility or prohibition and although certain manifestations of same-sex sexual conduct (such as same-sex male anal penetration) may be strictly prohibited (like heterosexual fornication or *zina*), it is no less natural than illicit heterosexual intercourse. However, the contemporary situation results in jurisprudential opinions (*fatawa*) on homosexuality stating that same-sex desire and same-sex sexual conduct are unnatural, abnormal and perverse. Sheikh Yusuf Qaradawi, a prominent contemporary jurist, says the following on homosexuality in his book on positive law, *The Lawful and Prohibited in Islam*:

We must be aware that in regulating the sexual drive Islam has not only prohibited illicit sexual relations and all ways which lead to them, but also the sexual deviation known as homosexuality. This perverted act is a reversal of the natural order, a corruption of man's sexuality,

²¹ Al-Kassim, "Epilogue", 316.

²² The conscientiousness of a sexual act as a peculiar – or what can be termed as a queer – practice begins with an insult. The insult can either be directed toward a homosexual identity or at a same-sex sexual act for it to form an essential component of a same-sex sexual subjectivity or a homosexual identity or also function as the motivation for the construction of a particular identity on the basis of sexuality. The notion of the 'insult' has become a recurring and constant characteristic of homosexuality and included within the language of insult in this regard are religious slurs against homosexuals. Didier Eribon's (b.1953) illuminating literary study *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self* affirms this notion of insult in relation to the homosexual subjective self: "One of the consequences of insult is to shape the relation one has to others and to the world and thereby to shape the personality, the subjectivity, the very being of the individual in question." (Didier Eribon, *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self*. (London: Duke University Press. 2004), 15.

and a crime against the rights of females. The spread of this depraved practice in a society disrupts its natural life pattern and makes those who practice it slaves to their lusts, depriving them of good decent taste, decent morals, and a decent manner of living.²³

In Qaradawi's articulation of the phenomenon of "sexual deviation known as homosexuality" one can witness the collapse of two separate concepts. The construct of a sexual identity which merely implies concrete sexual desire and attraction is authoritatively translated to also mean sexual conduct. Nonetheless, now that a homosexual identity is before us, the question is how one can find a congruent fit between a sexual orientation and a faith that seemingly disavows same-sex sexual conduct.

Modernising Jurisprudence: Rationalising the Lawgiver's Intention

Scott Siraj al-Haqq Kugle is the first scholar to comprehensively tackle the issue of same-sex sexuality from a serious and holistic religious perspective, arguing that a homosexual orientation and Islamic faith are not mutually exclusive, but compatible. Kugle first set out a textual analysis of problematic verses of the Qur'an relating to the Prophet Lot, contending that the traditional and majoritarian interpretation of such verses as prohibiting same-sex sexual conduct are not in accord with the spirit of Islam and the diversity of God's creation and are therefore untenable.²⁴ Kugle subsequently set out a comprehensive methodological legal argument justifying from the traditional sources (*usul*) not only that same-sex sexual conduct is not positively and categorically criminalised in Islam, but that same-sex sexual attraction and conduct is permissible.²⁵ ²⁶ The section of Kugle's work that is of

²³ Yusuf al-Qaradawi, *The Lawful and Prohibited in Islam*. (Indianapolis: American Trus Publicationst Qaradawi n.d), 169.

²⁴ Scott Siraj al-Haqq Kugle, "Sexuality, Diversity and Ethics in the Agenda of Progressive Muslim". In Omid Safi (ed), *Progressive Muslims*. (Oxford: Oneworld. 2003), 190-234.

²⁵ "What matters is not the sex of the partner with whom one forms a partnership, as long as that partnership is contractual on par with legal custom. Rather, what matters is the ethical nature of the relationship one has within the constraints of one's internal disposition, which includes sexual orientation and gender identity." Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam*, 3.

²⁶ Kecia Ali raised certain jurisprudential issues with Kugle's exposition of his Qur'anic hermeneutics in her book *Sexual Ethics and Islam* (Oxford; Oneworld 2006), 75-96. Some of Kugle's subsequent work could perhaps be considered as a response to Ali's queries. Kugle also intelligently situates the struggle of gay and lesbian Muslims in association with the struggle for gender justice.

interest to the current project is his assessment of *fiqh* (jurisprudence)²⁷ with a view of reforming the *shar'iah* (law).

Kugle's argument hinges on three principal premises: (1) there is no *ijma* (consensus) on the issue of punishment for same-sex sexual conduct,²⁸ (2) the medieval jurists approached the issue of same-sex sexuality through the prism of acts and not orientation (²⁹, and (3) the effective cause (*illa*) for the prohibition of same-sex sexual conduct has morphed and as such, in light of the objectives of the law (*maqasid al-shariah*) and the benefit for human society (*maslahah*), the position on same-sex sexual conduct and desire should be one of accommodation.³⁰

The claim that there is no juridical consensus on the issue of punishment of same-sex sexuality is not contentious. A superficial reading of the legal literature on the subject sufficiently demonstrates that while there is juridical consensus (*ijma*) on the criminalisation of same-sex sexual conduct (particularly male anal penetrative sexual intercourse) there is uncertainty in the corporeal punishment to be meted out to persons guilty of same-sex sexual conduct. However, it is by the other two arguments that Kugle attempts to circumvent this problem.

In setting the framework for a homosexual friendly (or sexually-sensitive) *fiqh*, Kugle imports the principles of the school of *maqasid* as an established methodological perspective in legal theory, first elucidated by Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111) and later developed by Abu Ishaq al-Shatibi (d. 1388).³¹ The methodology of this approach

²⁷ *Usul al-fiqh* is the legal theory by which the two primary scriptural sources, the Qur'an and *Sunna*, are extrapolated to new situations by means of *qiyas* (analogical reasoning), which in turn is provided with certainty by *ijma* (juridical consensus). Daniel Brown, *A New Introduction to Islam*. (Oxford: Blackwell. 2004), 124.

²⁸ Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam*, 159.

²⁹ Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam*, 178-179.

³⁰ Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam*, 181-183.

³¹ Imam Ghazali (d.1111) set out the methodology of *maqasid al-sharia* as follows: "In its essential significance, *al-maslahah* is a term that means seeking something useful (*manfa'ah*) or warding off something harmful (*madarra*). But this is not what we mean, because seeking what is useful and preventing harm are objectives (*maqasid*) sought by creation, and the good (*salah*) in the creation of mankind consists in achieving those *maqasid*. What we mean by *maslahah* is preserving the objective (*maqsud*) of the law (*shar*) that consists in five ordered things: preserving religion (*din*), life (*nafs*), reason (*aql*), progeny (*nasl*), and property (*amwal*). What ensures the preservation of those five principles (*usul*) is *maslahah*; what goes against their preservation is *mafsadah*, and

predicates the *sine qua non* of the *maqasid* (objectives) of the law (*shariah*) on human reason. As such, although an action may be deemed permissible (*mubah*), recommended (*mustahab*), lawful (*halal*), objectionable (*makruh*), or unlawful (*haram*), its status can change according to the context in which it is considered and judged by human reason.³² Human reason is cloaked in the mantle of *ijtihad* (independent judicial reasoning) to provide it with a semblance of authority. This approach lacks the rigour of the traditional jurisprudential epistemological process in which a scholar had to constantly refer to the cause (*sabab*), effective cause (*illah*), intention (*niyyah*), objective (*qasd*), or to the wisdom (*hikmah*) mitigating a command, permission, or prohibition (*hukm*).³³

The *maqasid* methodology makes it essential to take into account the social and human environment and develop and interpret the law through reasoning, investigation and logical analysis. The human environment becomes a source of law and the pertinent question is whether the human environment has indeed been given its important ranking in the priorities of Islamic jurisprudence that it is allegedly entitled to.³⁴ In this regard, *fiqh* is co-opted into the secular modern project as a liberal tool and transforms into a flexible, rational and arbitrary legal methodology that raises human reason to a pedestal higher than that of God's intention. The human condition, *vis-à-vis* the human environment, becomes the primary source and precedent of legal development. The result is that God's intention necessarily has to accord with human reason and not vice versa.

By attempting to establish a homosexual friendly religious jurisprudence, or a *fiqh* that is both authentic and that caters for sexual realities, Kugle accepts the delineation of modernity's conceptualisation of sexual identity. The effect of grounding sexual orientation as the bedrock for legal analysis results in stabilising the dynamism of sexuality. In this sense, the fluidity of the interrelations between sexuality and identity, of sexual acts and erotic relationships which is a characteristic of medieval jurisprudence and literature is solidified. By

preventing it is *maslahah*." Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *al-Mustafa min 'Ilm al-Usul* (Baghdad: Muthanna. 1970), 286. (Translated by Tariq Ramadan in *Radical Reform*, 62).

³² Tariq Ramadan, *Radical Reform: Islamic Ethics and Liberation*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2009), 71.

³³ Ramadan, *Radical Reform*, 60. Ramadan calls this a "piecemeal" approach and suggests that the *maqasid al-sharia* developed a more holistic perspective on dealing with *fiqh*.

³⁴ Ramadan, *Radical Reform*, 76.

stabilising and “normalising” sexual relations in the mould of modern Western tastes, as a loving relationship between two parties which is essentially monogamous, Kugle gentrifies sexual relationships to mirror modern Western sensibilities. Parallel to the novel construction of sexuality is a gentrified liberal *fiqh* that serves as a religious sanction for both secular modernity and a definite sexual orientation with its accessory sexual acts as a regulated concrete lifestyle. The effective cause (*illa*) of forbidding same-sex sexual conduct in the classical legal tradition was that it is analogous to unregulated or non-contractual opposite-sex sexual conduct which results in illegitimate children. However, “sexual intercourse between consenting adult homosexual Muslims is analogous to sexual acts that do not have the potential to create pregnancy and illegitimate children” and as such the sexual intercourse cannot be analogously compared (*qiyas*) to illicit heterosexual intercourse.³⁵ As a result, the logical conclusion of this line of reasoning would unlock the doors of marriage (*nikah*) and temporary marriage (*mut’a*) to same-sex couples and this is proposed by Kugle as sufficient legitimisation of same-sex sexual intercourse. However, interestingly the issue of polygamy does not feature in Kugle’s adapting of the heterosexual marriage for a strictly monogamous homosexual pairing. The effect of this acrobatic legal performance is the secularisation of the *shari’ah* where the aim is no longer a mere discovery of God’s intention, but a positive exertion to intellectually work out certain rational and increasingly secular legal principles, and that is secondarily ascribed to God as an aside. Kugle is not alone in the enterprise of utilising *fiqh* as a jurisprudential legitimisation process to accommodate the peculiar effects of modernity which results in interesting contradictions.³⁶

Kugle recognises the impact of modernity as a positive force in that secular modernity provides Muslims with the opportunity to liberate their sexual selves from the fetters of religious dogmatism and patriarchy.³⁷ Kugle seems to think that modernisation and democratisation will create a space for homosexual Muslims within its structures of sexual power and gender and sexual categorisation. “In secular democracies”, Kugle writes, “the context is one in which same-sex intercourse is not a crime, in which homosexuality is not defined as a mental illness by health

³⁵ Scott Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam*. 183.

³⁶ Tariq Ramadan and Mohammad Hashim Kamali (Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *Maqasid al-Shariah Made Simple* (London: International Institute of Islamic Thought 2008)) are two notable Muslim scholars who offer the methodology of the *maqasid al-shariah* as a form of ethical framework for contemporary Muslims.

³⁷ Scott Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam* 233.

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professionals, and in which same-sex couples have the same legal rights as heterosexual couples to partnership or even marriage. In this context, it is in the interest of justice and welfare of Muslims for Muslims to stop viewing homosexual members of their community as sinners and to cease viewing consensual homosexual intercourse as criminal.³⁸ By “welfare of the Muslims”, Kugle means *maslahah* (benefit of the public) as a legal maxim³⁹ by which something may be judged as permissible or not in jurisprudence, so as to avoid harm (*mafsadah*). The benefit of revising the traditional view on same-sex sexual conduct or homosexuals and of accommodating homosexuality, is to erase the friction that often arises between Muslims and their non-Muslim counterparts in a secular constitutional democracy on the issue of homosexuality and this has the added benefit of promoting “integration and greater cooperation on meaningful issues of political, social, and ethical importance to society as a whole”. In addition, it would lessen the extent of the harm caused to gay and lesbian Muslims.⁴⁰ In this regard, *maslahah* is viewed as the benefit that can accrue from the reading of a secular liberal constitution, and not necessarily the Qur’an and *Sunna*, together with the positive religious law (*fiqh*). This necessitates the question of whether the *grundnorm* for Muslim minorities in secular liberal constitutional democracies is the constitution and not the corpus of religious law and ethics (*shari’ah*), in that while the *shari’ah* may still function as the symbolic source of all social law (it may continue to remain the concrete source for religious ritual action (*ibadah*)), the outcome of an investigation of an issue on the basis of the *maqasid al-sharia* depends on the constitution of the secular state.⁴¹ In considering a new effective cause (*‘illa*) Kugle ventures so far as to consider the social and political reality in which homosexuals are protected and provided with the same rights as their heterosexual counterparts as a factor to be considered.⁴²

It is clear that Kugle’s primary audience are Muslims living in Western style secular liberal democracies. In this sense, he may escape Massad’s criticism of exporting Western constructs of sexuality into the Arab-Muslim world and thereby engendering a sexual imperialism that endangers the very people it seeks to protect by implanting an alien

³⁸ Scott Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam* 180.

³⁹ Scott Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam* 182.

⁴⁰ Scott Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam* 180.

⁴¹ It is important to note that while Islamic law is not binding and has no state authority in this context (Muslims living in Western societies), it continues to be used as a source of legitimisation for many Muslims in respect of how they conduct and manage their lives.

⁴² Scott Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam* 183.

sexual ontology. Kugle makes a brave demand for Muslims to confront the issue of bias towards homosexuality and same-sex sexual conduct in religious ethics and law and also makes a concerted effort at engaging with the classical Islamic intellectual tradition intent on discovering that surely God cannot prejudice against people who are sexually attracted to their same sex. How effective his plea and effort will be cannot be speculated on at this stage. However, what is problematic is that this is acquired through an admission that the secular modern project is both ethical and just. Kugle does not question the legitimacy of the concept of a solid and stable sexual orientation or the existence of homophobia in *secular* liberal democracies or perhaps any potential or actual dilemmas in articulating an Islamic homosexual discourse that is so heavily intertwined with secularism, modernity, human rights as an existential reality, and democratisation. Kugle's project also seems to be vulnerable to the same critiques levelled against liberal feminism by radical feminists, Marxist feminists and critical race feminists. By concentrating on the plight of homosexuals in predominantly secular liberal democracies from a formal standpoint of equality, the marginalised voices of those who are attracted to the same-sex or indulge in same-sex sexuality and concomitantly suffer with the consequences of colonialism, imperialism, racism and global capitalism are ignored. The relationship between homophobia and empire, between sexual prejudice and structures of power and inequality is simply disregarded.

While there is a need to transform the existing Islamic environment to be more tolerant of same-sex desire and homosexual relationships, this need is not necessarily met by legislating positive law recognising the viability of same-sex desire and sexual relationships through the prism of a liberal political and social project. This project inherently has a parochial and paternalistic tendency to 'civilise' unfamiliar ways of knowing and experiencing.^{43 44}

⁴³ Uday Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth Century British Liberal Thought*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 1999), 201.

⁴⁴ Uday Mehta argues that thinkers within the liberal political ethos managed to endorse the venture of Empire and imperialism because inherent in liberal thought is the notion that experiences of the unfamiliar need to be contained, subsumed and improved in light of the values of the liberal Empire. Sabah Mahmood endorses this view in respect of analysing the unfamiliar, particularly in regard to her fieldwork as a feminist among Muslim women in Egypt: "A similar orientation is also operative, I believe, in our feminist certainty that women's sensibilities and attachments, particularly those that seem so paradoxically inimical to what we take to be their own interests, must be refashioned for their own well-being. Personally, it was this certainty that came to dissolve before my eyes as I became enmeshed within the thick texture of the lives of the mosque participants, women whose practices I had found objectionable...I had approached the study of this movement with a

From a postcolonial perspective, the reification of the tools of liberalism – liberty, equality, fraternity and autonomy – as the only worthy moral framework in which liberation and progress can be executed, has the potential of demeaning and further marginalising the lived realities of some queer Muslims whose relationship with traditional Islam and/or their choice to maintain closeted sexual lives is both important and essential. Furthermore, to establish and endorse a concrete way of entering and maintaining same-sex sexual relations via religious law curtails the religious person's sexual conduct. It legitimises by restricting the sociality of the body, or the sexual queer self.⁴⁵

Conclusion: An Existential Alternative?

Homosexuality, whether as a sexual identity or a typology of sexual acts and/or inclinations, is a “theology of mistresses and hidden lovers”, of the memories of meaningful love affairs that contribute to our humanity, of a redemption which is a “praxis of our past and a sexual praxis which accommodates the effects of the love and the sexual life of peoples bodies”.⁴⁶ This form of queer redemption can take place in an intercessional, conceptual and social space, often termed the “closet”⁴⁷ akin to Ebrahim Moosa's notion of Ghazali's *dihliz*. The *dihliz* signifies a liminal space between the door (*bab*) and the house (*dar*). It is an intermediate space between the external (*zahir*) and the internal (*batin*) and is permeated by the influences of both the arenas it stands

sense of foreknowledge of what I was going to encounter, of how I was going to explain the women's “intransigent behaviour” in regard to the ideals of freedom, equality, and autonomy that I myself held so dear. Over time, I found these ideals could no longer serve as arbiters of the lives I was studying because the sentiments, commitments, and sensibilities that ground these women's existence could not be contained within the stringent molds of these ideals...My prejudices against their forms of life (or, for that matter, theirs against mine) could not be reconciled and assimilated within “a cosmopolitan horizon”.” (Saba Mahmood. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press. 2005) 198.

⁴⁵ Judith Butler (1956-) similarly argues that “no doubt, marriage and same-sex domestic partnerships should certainly be available as options, but to install either as a model for sexual legitimacy is precisely to constrain the sociality of the body in acceptable ways.” (Judith Butler. *Undoing Gender*. (New York: Routledge. 2004) 26

⁴⁶ Marcella Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*. (London: Routledge. 2003) 133

⁴⁷ The *hammam* – or traditional public bathhouse – can be considered as the physical representation of a queer heterotopia Abraham, Ibrahim: “The most obvious queer heterotopia is the bath house, the *hammam*. Just as veiled space...the *hammam* works as an intercessional space between the sacred space of the mosque and the potentially corruptible space of the body. The *hammam* is the place where bodies meet and where bodies are flouted; where they're remodelled, remade and re-imagined. The *hammam* works then as something of a heterotopia where queer desires beyond the everyday are made possible.” “The Veil and the Closet: Islam and the Production of Queer Space” in *Queer Space: Centres and Peripheries*. Melbourne: Monash University, 2007) 3.

between, belonging to both but identifying with neither.⁴⁸ In this sense, it is not an insular space, but a dynamic and porous alternative to public life, where a queer body is not automatically isolated from public life but where it ventures for comfort and repose and where desires are expressed, bodies meet and sexuality is exhibited. This heterotopia is beyond the scope of regulation, the purview of *fiqh* and the religious and political power structures. The articulation of a constant inflexible sexual identity, the establishment of an exclusive sexual orientation, and the attempt at a jurisprudential justification of same-sex sexual conduct and intimacy, possibly forces people out of this subliminal space and threatens the viability of this heterotopia. The attempt to rearticulate queer sexuality in terms of heteronormative institutions (as Kugle attempts to do with a gay-friendly *fiqh*) is an effort towards conformity with the “normal” and dominant discourse. This effort is important in challenging the dominant discourse which excludes the sexual Other. However, the importance of the “closet” as a dynamic redemptive queer space beyond the punishing and disciplinarian eyes of religious authority and political power should neither be underestimated nor ignored. In the same way, the liberation of Muslim women does not coalesce with the judicial removal of the institution of *hijab*, both physically in the way of personal space and interactions and socially by way of public and private women’s spaces. In fact, exclusive spaces for women, including the *hijab*, can act as a liberatory space for women, particularly in patriarchal societies.

The closet has so often been denounced by gay activists as a symbol of shame, of submission to oppression, that we have forgotten or neglected the extent to which it was also, and at the same time, a space of freedom and a way – the only way – of resisting, of not submitting to normative injunctions. And for many gays it is that still. In a certain sense, it was a way of being “proud” when everything pointed toward being ashamed.⁴⁹

The “closet” has generally been understood as a site of oppression and a covering for homosexual shame. In this respect, the domination of sexual minorities rested for the most part on the invisibility of homosexual people, people who were queer behind closed doors but heterosexual in public. We do not propose the invisibility and exclusion of queerness or homosexuality from the public realm. This paper is an effort to ensure that it is a part of continuous academic discussion and activist efforts. In addition, the “closet” is not proposed as the definitive

⁴⁸ Ebrahim Moosa, *Ghazali and the Poetics of Imagination*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. 2005) 48.

⁴⁹ Eribon, *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self*, 49.

liberatory space, a type of glamorous existential location for queer Muslims, or a panacea against the prejudice consistently faced by queer Muslims. Rather, the question is whether the “closet”, in this context can be understood as a voluntary but vital expression of fragmented selves, of multiple identities and polymorphous sexual existences that refuse to be co-opted into the dominant discourses of power and authority. The “closet” can then, in fact, function as a prophetic voice on the periphery, a mode of existence that refuses to be allured by the trappings of “normative” practice. It is also perhaps the only empowering space for many homosexual Muslims where it is possible to preserve a balance between their religion, sexuality and society even if such a balance is tenuous and incommensurable at best.⁵⁰

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⁵⁰ Tom Boellstorff concludes from his anthropological study on religion and homosexuality in Indonesia that “whether *gay* Muslims uphold heteronormativity (for instance, by seeing their homosexual desires as sinful, marrying heterosexually, or stating that they plan to marry), or destabilise it on some level (for instance, by seeing their homosexual desires as God given or saying that they will not marry heterosexually), to date no point of commensurability between the “languages” of Islam and *gay* subjectivity has been reached. Yet *gay* lives exist and are lived every day; what we find is a habitation, not a resolution, of incommensurability.” Tom Boellstorff, *A Coincidence of Desires: Anthropology, Queer Studies, Indonesia*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 158.

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Disruptive or Merely Alternative? A Case Study of a South African Gay Church

Cheryl Potgieter¹ and Finn Reygan²

Abstract

The main aim of this article is to engage with how a South African church through its discursive practices, continues to live out the conviction set out in Germond and de Gruchy's 1997 book "Aliens in the Household of God" that homosexuals are indeed not aliens in the household of God. The first part of the article briefly overviews the legal construction of homosexuality in South Africa during the 20th century and challenges the claim that homosexuality is "un-African". The latter positioning will foreground our case study of the South African Good Hope Metropolitan Community Church (GHMCC), which has its origins abroad and is attended by gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) congregants. The study provides a discursive analysis of the online written materials of GHMCC and the dominant discourses which emerged out of this analysis were: *Liberation and equality discourse*; *Discourse of natural and normal: disrupting gender?*; *Discourse challenging conservative Christian hegemony*; *Discourse of heteropatriarchal Christian sex*; *Missing feminist discourses: tensions and silences*; and *Discourse of religious colonialism*. Silent and less dominant discourses regarding race, gender and homophobia in relation to identity and religion are explored and interpreted within a feminist social constructionist paradigm. Concluding remarks talk to further research and to the danger of the (GHMCC) continued silence on issues such as poverty, racism and sexism within South African society.

Introduction

The present study is a discursive analysis of the ideology and practices of the Good Hope Metropolitan Community Church (GHMCC) in Cape Town, South Africa. The church is constructed as a lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT³)-affirming church and is affiliated with the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches

¹ Cheryl Potgieter (PhD) is from South Africa. She is Dean of Research and Professor of Psychology at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Email: deanofresearch@ukzn.ac.za

² Finn Reygan (PhD) is from the United Kingdom. He is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of KwaZulu-Natal and holds a PhD in Psychology from University College Dublin. Email: finnreygan@gmail.com

³ The acronyms LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender); LGBTI (I for intersex); and LGBTIQ (Q for queer are commonly used (queer refers to identities and practices existing beyond the binaried norms of homosexual and heterosexual, see Judith Butler for detailed information). For the purpose of consistency we employ the acronym LGBT throughout the present study and this is also the term used in the GHMCC online texts.

(UFMCC) which was founded in the United States in the 1960's by a gay man and now has churches around the globe. It is often referred to as a 'gay church' both by its members and by members of mainstream churches. The main aim of this article is to undertake an analysis and examination of the discourses of the UFMCC, and specifically that of its 'offspring', the GFMCC in relation to its interpretation of the Bible's position on homosexuality. Given that many traditional or mainstream churches have an anti-homosexuality position, the UFMCC stance is often contrasted with the traditional views. In conducting our analysis, we pose key research questions (as set out in the section on methods). Before presenting the findings of the study, we engage with the position of South African mainstream churches on homosexuality and persons who identify themselves as gay or lesbian.⁴

South African Church Practices: Race, Gender and Sexuality

Before engaging with the discursive practices of GHMCC it is important to situate the practices of the church at large in South Africa, particularly in relation to race, gender and sexuality. It is well documented that the cornerstone of the apartheid philosophy was upheld, endorsed and implemented by the Dutch Reformed Church whose members and ministers were also members of the South African Nationalist Party. Nobel prize winner Archbishop Tutu has condemned in no uncertain terms the negative stance which churches have taken in relation to gay and lesbian individuals. He states that: "I have found the position of the church illogical, irrational and frankly un-Christian, totally untenable."⁵ He also challenges the position of his own church – the Anglican church – on homosexuality because while the church does not condemn homosexuals, it condemns "homosexual activity." He argues that sexual activity is part of being human and contributes to people being more like God intended them to be. He radically and insightfully stated in 1997 that: "...if the church, after the victory of apartheid, is looking for a worthy moral crusade, then this is it: the fight against homophobia and heterosexism."⁶ In contemporary South Africa, fourteen years after Desmond Tutu made these statements, his own church has not changed its official stance on "homosexual activity" and there is an increase in the number of persons, including Black people and women,

⁴ We use the terms gay and lesbian to refer to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) people more broadly.

⁵ D. Tutu, "Foreword," in *Aliens in the household of God*, ed. P. Germond and S. de Gruchy (Cape Town/Johannesburg: David Philip, 1997).

⁶ Tutu, "Foreword," in *Aliens in the household of God* 1997

who have joined conservative anti-gay, anti-feminist charismatic churches.^{7 8} These churches' anti-gay and anti-feminist stance is based on their interpretation of the Bible in relation to homosexuality and women's roles in society. As Potgieter and Nadar have pointed out there is a worrying relationship between persons who hold important powerful positions in South African decision making institutions and their quite public association with churches which have a very strong anti-gay stance.⁹

Both in South Africa and across the African continent, one of the main arenas in which homophobia is played out most vociferously is in religious discourse and, despite advances in the legal construction of homosexuality in South Africa, homophobia continues to pervade religious life. More than a decade ago Germond and de Gruchy¹⁰ challenged the heterosexism and homophobia that still persists in South African churches and challenged the religious discourse that homosexuality is sinful. They also argued that the sin lies not in homosexuality itself but in the exclusion of lesbian, gay and bisexual people from church life.

Nadar¹¹, in discussing the teaching of gender and religion to university students, points out that in contemporary South Africa these students generally receive their theologies from televangelists rather than from rigorous theological reading and reflection. Nadar¹² views the teaching of feminist biblical studies, which is supportive of a pro- homosexuality stance, as crucial especially given globalisation and fundamentalism which not surprisingly underpins a conservative biblical interpretation of the role of women. In this sense the authority of the Bible has taken on a particularly strong role in women's lives in recent decades with the rise of neo-Pentecostalism and globalisation leading churches that previously did not ascribe to the tenet of the inerrancy and infallibility of scripture to espouse 'biblical values'.¹³ Phiri and Nadar's¹⁴ research with

⁷ S. Nadar, "Changing the world: The task of feminist biblical scholars," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 25 no.2 (2009),137-143.

⁸ S. Nadar and C. Potgieter, "Liberated through submission? The Worthy Woman's conference as a case study of formenism," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 26 no.2 (2010),141-151.

⁹ Academic Perspective – "Will he leave his church at the door?" Sunday Tribune. 11th September 2011.

¹⁰ P. Germond and S. de Gruchy, *Aliens in the household of God: Homosexuality and Christian faith in South Africa* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1997).

¹¹ S. Nadar, "Changing the world: The task of feminist biblical scholars," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 25 no.2 (2009),137-143.

¹² Nadar, *Changing the world*, 137-143.

¹³ Nadar, *Changing the world*: 137-143, 141.

religious women who experience gender-based violence also indicates that critical introspection is required when it comes to putting religious beliefs into practice, otherwise religion holds the potential to become dangerous on both a public and personal level. Nadar and Potgieter¹⁵ have challenged what they have labeled *formenism*, which is a liberation through submission discourse promulgated by persons such as the South African female 'video' evangelist, Gretha Widd. Widd's message supports the inherent superiority of men and constructs homosexuality as a sin in the eyes of God. Ackermann¹⁶ has also argued that feminist theologies contribute to progressive social change because, as critical theologies of liberation, they have developed systemic analyses that include the experiences of women and marginalised people in a constructive and transformative manner. Through the identification of misogynist and homophobic attitudes within Christian traditions and biblical passages and through the use of new approaches to reading source documents, feminist scholarship has become central to hermeneutic debate. Such critical theologies of liberation have then contributed to the growing availability worldwide – despite the simultaneous growth of fundamentalism – of churches opposed to homophobic and heterosexist thinking. Deane Stuart¹⁷ remarks that previously Christians who were identified as gay or lesbian had to remain in the closet within the church or alternatively exit the closet and the church. Churches such as the GHMCC thus provide a space where members are out of the closet but not out of the Christian church.

Method

The present study is a discursive analysis of the online materials of the Good Hope Metropolitan Community Church (GHMCC) in Zonnebloem (District 6), Cape Town, South Africa. There are two other MCC churches in South Africa which are listed as being linked to them but we chose the Good Hope Church as it was started in 1983 and is thus the oldest and also the 'main' church. The other two are the Hope and Unity MCC in Johannesburg and the Glorious Light MCC in Pretoria. We

¹⁴ I.A. Phiri and S. Nadar, "The personal is political: Faith and religion in a public university," *Acta Theologica*, 14 (2011), 81-94.

¹⁵ Phiri and, Nadar, *The personal is political*, 81-94

¹⁶ D. M. Ackermann, "Forward from the margins: Feminist theologies for life," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 99 (1997), 63-67.

¹⁷ D. Stuart, "The challenge of the churches to gays and lesbians" in *Aliens in the household of God*, ed. P. Germond and S. De Gruchy (Cape Town: David Philip, 1997), 178-187.

accessed the online materials at GHMCC's website.¹⁸ GHMCC in Cape Town is affiliated with the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches (UFMCC) which was founded by Rev. Troy Perry in California in 1968, after having lost his position as a Pentecostal minister for being gay. UFMCC has expanded over the decades to include over 300 churches in different countries around the globe. It has also grown to cater for heterosexual as well as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer-identified members. UFMCC members tend to come from a wide array of Christian and non-Christian religious backgrounds. Like its 'parent' church, GHMCC offers the rites of: ordination; matrimony; funerals; laying on of hands; and the sacraments of baptism and holy communion.

The online materials of GHMCC include: information on the history of the church; its vision; mission; statement of faith; sacraments; rites; ministry; human rights protocol; constitution; Sunday worship; groups; community kitchen; resources; resources on gender diversity and same-sex marriage; and an online Bible search portal. The GHMCC homepage is organised into seven main sections: *Home*; *About Us*; *Ministry*; *News*; *Resources*; *Spirituality*; and *Contact Us*. In each section there are a number of further subheadings under which materials are presented online as well as several links to other websites. The GHMCC website is well designed, clear and easy to navigate. The slogan *Would Jesus Discriminate?* dominates the homepage and there is a picture of Archbishop Desmond Tutu with a link to a video message from him. We printed this material from the website and conducted an analysis of the materials.

Aims

Key questions which the article asks are:

1. To what extent does the GHMCC challenge and resist the dominant traditional church discourse on homosexuality?
2. To what extent does the GHMCC challenge dominant discourses on gender roles?
3. To what extent does the discourse of the GHMCC locate its 'message' within the broader South African challenges of racism, sexism, classism and homophobia?
4. Has the church constructed its understanding of homosexuality within a social constructionist or essentialist paradigm?

¹⁸ <http://www.goodhopemcc.org> Accessed 1st August 2011.

Analysis

Our analysis involved searching for recurring themes, listing them in different files and identifying sentences and words that seemed to construct a particular message in relation to what our core aims were. We also searched for contradictory messages as well as for messages or social phenomena which were silent in relation to the South African context. Following Billig¹⁹, Strebel²⁰ and Potgieter²¹, as discourse analysts we built up an understanding of the topic before starting to analyse and understand the web based texts of GHMCC. Our analysis was thus also informed by extensive prior reading, theoretically informed ideas and previous academic and advocacy work in the area of 'homosexuality'. Underpinning our analysis is a feminist social constructionist paradigm which is employed to deconstruct notions of race, gender and homophobia in terms of identity and religion, while we situated the GHMCC texts in the wider context of post-apartheid South Africa. Following the principles of discursive analysis, we analysed the extant GHMCC texts, which were accessed online. We explored the wider ideology that was communicated through the GHMCC texts as well as the ways in which the data pointed to the political, social and historical context in which they were developed. We looked at the ways in which the GHMCC texts were based on other sources as well as the means by which power and influence was wielded through the texts. We interrogated whose reality was being portrayed through the texts as well as the people, objects and processes presented and defined in the text. We were particularly attentive to potential absences and contradictions in the texts as well as to views that may have been excluded/ silenced and which we would have expected to emerge based on our understanding of the literature and context. We were also mindful of possible alternative interpretations of the texts. In keeping with the principles of discourse analysis, we do not claim to have discovered the 'truth' of the texts in question or to have developed the only possible interpretation of these texts.

Results

We initially identified twelve broad recurring as well as atypical discursive patterns or themes. We then conducted a further stage of

¹⁹ M. Billig, "Methodology and scholarship in understanding ideological explanation," in *Analysing everyday explanation: a casebook of methods*, ed. C. Antaki (London: Sage Press, 1988), 199-215.

²⁰ A. Strebel, "Women and AIDS: a study of issues in the prevention of HIV infection" (Doctoral dissertation, University of Cape Town, 1993).

²¹ C. Potgieter, "Black, South African, lesbian: Discourses of invisible lives" (Doctoral dissertation, University of the Western Cape, 1997).

analysis to determine whether we could merge some of the themes. The themes as engaged with in this article reflect the merged themes in relation to our research questions and the following is a discussion of these discourses.

Liberation and equality discourse

The dominant discourse of liberation and equality indicates that GHMCC locates itself within a broad framework of international human rights and foregrounds their association as Christians with a pro-homosexuality discourse. On the website the section of text, entitled *Human Rights Protocol* presents the philosophy of GHMCC which states:

We are called as Christians to:

- stand in solidarity with those who are marginalized and oppressed,
- be partners in working for change,
- be witnesses who call attention to Human Rights abuses,
- be a voice in the international community for justice,
- lift up new generations of remarkable, far-reaching spiritual activists,
- build on hope and create our future

The ideologies of liberation with which GHMCC aligns itself through its texts include those of the international human rights struggle; the international LGBT rights movement; the civil rights movement in the USA; and the LGBT rights movement in South Africa. Interestingly, GHMCC associates itself with the civil rights movement in the USA and links itself to Nobel prize winner Archbishop Desmond Tutu in relation to his stance on the Bible and homosexuality. The church, which established its first congregation in South Africa in 1983 during the height of the oppressive regime, does not have a public history as an ally of anti-apartheid movements, such as the United Democratic Front. The latter organisation was launched in 1983 and was led by Allan Boesak, the well-known priest and anti-apartheid activist. The current video on the website makes a link between the oppression of Black people by the apartheid regime and the discrimination of persons who identify themselves as gay. A theology of liberation, redolent of Stuart²²,

²² E. Stuart, *Lesbian and gay theologies* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003).

Goss²³ and Boesak²⁴ is presented as a keystone of GHMCC teaching that calls on members to be 'spiritual activists' in the global fight for justice. Our analysis indicated that the GHMCC posted a message of support to the victims of the Tsunami in Japan but there was no visible response to natural disasters in Africa, such as the current drought on many parts of the continent, or even natural disasters in South Africa.

Rather, GHMCC texts function as a form of liberatory praxis, encouraging congregants to mobilize for progressive social change in relation to issues which affect the lives of members of the LGBTI community. For example, it carries slogans from activist organisations such as the Triangle Project whose slogan is: *Challenging homophobia. Appreciating sexual diversity.* The Triangle Project is also listed in the section entitled *Resources, Same-Sex Marriage* where the text reads: *Make your voice heard, loud and queer! and Gay Mass Action Required!*

The call to mobilisation is also evident in the *Gallery* section of the website, which has photographs of Gay Pride marches. The church forms strategic alliances with other organizations too. It is a member of the Joint Working Group (JWG), an activist grouping which challenges any form of discrimination against the LGBTI population. The group's members are activist organizations in South Africa such as Behind the Mask; the Durban Lesbian and Gay Community and Health Centre; the Forum for the Empowerment of Women; Gender Dynamix; and the Triangle Project. GHMCC points out the similarity between and unacceptability of the apartheid regime's 'separate but equal philosophy' as regards race and the civil partnerships (not 'full marriage') status in relation to same-sex marriages in South Africa.

In *Resources, Same-Sex Marriage, Gays and Lesbians now 'separate but equal'* the text employs legal opinion to reject the proposed separate institution of civil partnerships:

Gay men and lesbians still experience tremendous oppression, marginalisation and vilification in our society. Some are still raped, assaulted or killed because of their sexual orientation. In this context, the creation of apartheid-style, separate civil partnerships for same-sex couples merely confirms that the state does not consider their relationships worthy of equal concern and respect...In short, a doctrine of "separate but equal" was deeply humiliating and insulting

²³ R. Goss, *Queering Christ: Beyond Jesus acted up* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2002).

²⁴ A. A. Boesak, "Theological reflections on empire," *Hervormde Teologiese Studies*, 65 no.1 (2009), 645-651.

when applied to black South Africans. It remains humiliating and insulting (and now also unconstitutional) when applied to homosexuals.

We are of the opinion that apartheid was far more than humiliating and insulting like the injustices experienced by gays and lesbians. It is interesting that GHMCC did not declare apartheid a heresy, unlike some of the mainstream churches. The mainstream churches or individuals associated with these churches – except for individuals like Tutu, De Gruchy, Germond – were vocal on issues of race and silent on the issue of homosexuality. Conversely it appears as if GMHCC has been fairly silent in the context of South Africa on issues of race and vocal on issues of same-sex relationships.

In rejecting the exclusion of sections of society from meaningful participation both in society and in religious life, GHMCC texts construct a form of inclusive religious worship premised on the ideals of equality, dignity and freedom. GHMCC's fundamental and dominant discourse – similar to Germond and De Gruchy²⁵ – is that LGBT people are not 'aliens in the household of God'. This dominant discourse is exemplified by the lead banner on the homepage: *Would Jesus discriminate? Explore the 21st century question.*

Overall there is a dominant discourse in GHMCC texts that indicates the influence of the wider societal context. However, it is predominantly focussed on issues related to the LGBT community. In this sense, GHMCC texts make frequent appeals to constitutionality in support of the church's agenda of inclusivity and diversity. For example, in the section *Resources, Same-Sex Marriage, Call to Action: Same Sex Marriages* the text, sourced from an information sheet prepared by OUT LGBT Well-being in Pretoria, reads:

The arguments in favour of the inclusion of gay people within marriage are thus supported by the foundational values of our constitutional democracy. Throughout the Constitution reference is made to a society based on equality, human dignity and freedom. This state has the obligation to respect, promote and fulfil all of the rights within our Bill of Rights that realise these values.

Discourse challenging conservative Christian hegemony

Just as feminist theologians such as Daly²⁶, Radford Reuther²⁷, Nadar²⁸ and Ackerman²⁹ have challenged dominant patriarchal religious

²⁵ Boesak, "Theological reflections on empire", 2009.

²⁶ M. Daly, *The church and the second sex* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968).

discourse, so too do GHMCC texts function as a challenge to the hegemony of conservative and homophobic Christian churches. In so doing the texts reject the notion of a monolithic, homogenous, global Christianity. For example in *Resources, Same-Sex Marriage, Statement on Same Sex Marriages* the text reads:

Good Hope MCC is aware of various religious groups objecting to homosexuality from their interpretation of the Bible; however these interpretations or dogma only hold true within their own denomination and these groups do not speak for all Christians per se.

GHMCC texts point out the use of biblical passages against gay people and argue for the error of such interpretations. For example, in *Spirituality, Sexuality and Bible*, the text reads:

Sadly, divine scripture, including the Bible, is often used as a weapon to bash LGBT persons from the pulpit, in our families and in our communities. It is important to remember that such hurtful doctrines are not a reflection of The Christ – or the way God calls the church to be – these are products of fallible and imperfect human beings who guide these churches.

GHMCC texts – and the sources from which they are drawn – reinterpret the biblical passages often used to promulgate religious homophobia. Thus, the stories of Sodom and Gomorah and Leviticus are revisited and the stories of Jonathan and David and of Ruth and Naomi are presented as same-sex love stories. In *Spirituality, Sexuality and Bible, HIV/AIDS: Is it God's Judgement?* the text reinterprets scripture:

There are a few passages in the Bible that have been said to condemn homosexual acts. Currently there is much debate about these passages. Some Christians believe these passages condemn all homosexual behaviour. But a growing number of Bible experts are convinced these passages condemn only certain sexual acts that are idolatrous or abusive. For example, many Bible scholars believe that the story of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19), condemns rape, not homosexuality. Rape is a violent act and irrelevant to loving same-sex relationships. Other passages in the Bible, such as Ezekiel 16: 49-50, identify the sin of these cities as injustice and idolatry.... Jesus said nothing to condemn homosexuality, but he said a great deal about faith, hope and love.

²⁷ R. Radford Ruether, *Goddesses and the divine feminine: a Western religious history* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

²⁸ Ruther, *Goddesses and the divine feminine*, 2006.

²⁹ D. M. Ackermann, "Forward from the margins: Feminist theologies for life," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 99 (1997), 63-67.

In a manner not dissimilar to other gay 'progressive, non-homophobic' Christians in South Africa, such as De Gruchy,³⁰ the text also articulates the core of GHMCC hermeneutics by emphasising the importance of context and of correct translation from the Greek or Hebrew. For example, in *Spirituality, Sexuality and Bible, Spirituality and Sexuality* the text reads:

In order for us to understand scripture, we need to understand the context of the writings – reading what came before and after the story/parable/chapter/verses in question. A verse or a word cannot be understood in isolation, but must be seen as a whole in terms of the Bible's overall message of salvation and love for all.

In developing a lesbian and gay exegesis, GHMCC texts construct a dominant theme in the reconfiguration of the religious as secular. For example, GHMCC strategically redefines marriage in secular, not religious, terms: *Same Sex Marriage is not and should not be a religious debate, it is a question of equality and human rights.*

In so doing, the text attempts to wrestle the institution of marriage, and its attendant rights, from traditional Christian discourse. The text also appeals to constitutionality to defend and support the rights of minorities in the face of 'traditional Christian values' and to reconfigure the discourse:

The Legislature in this country should listen carefully to the ruling of the Constitutional Court and incorporate the inclusion of same-sex couples into the current Marriage Act instead of looking for alternatives to create "2nd class marriages" in order to justify "traditional Christian values".

GHMCC texts often employ a lens which makes comparisons between homophobia, racism and sexism and to evidence the ways in which biblical exegesis changes and develops over time. Given that much of the information was sourced from the USA, reference is frequently made to the historical use of the Bible to justify slavery. The Bible was used in South Africa to justify various forms of oppression including homosexuality and in this instance again, no dominant theme emerged which located the text within the struggles of South Africa. Rather, when the South African context is mentioned, it has the feel of being an 'add on'. Thus the text claims that the Bible was historically employed to

³⁰ S. De Gruchy, "Human being in Christ: resources for an inclusive anthropology," in *Aliens in the household of God*, ed. P. Germond and S. De Gruchy (Cape Town: David Philip, 1997), 233-269.

'prove' the superiority of whites and continues to be used to assert the immorality and inferiority of gay people.

Nevertheless the text does highlight similarities between the various civil rights struggles and, in the section entitled *Spirituality, Sexuality and Bible, Spirituality and Sexuality* which was written by a former pastor at GHMCC and head of the Triangle Project, it reads:

The struggle of LGBT persons is a Human Rights struggle in the same vein as the struggle of people of colour, women facing gender discrimination within the church, slavery and exploitation of children through abuse and neglect; the church needs to reflect and revisit the HARD FACT that many people are still being kept away from Christ's table of forgiveness based on their sexuality.

Here again there is reference to gender and race struggles in relation to the struggles of the LGBT population, but this remains limited to life within the church.

Discourse of natural and normal: disrupting gender?

GHMCC texts portray a particular version of the normal, legitimate, moral and natural. This vision includes: the normalcy of LGBT identities and experience; the legitimacy of same-sex relations and same-sex marriage; the morality of same-sex desire and love; and the naturalness of gender diversity. In terms of the latter, the section entitled *Gender Diversity* asserts the complexity of gender expression and highlights the damaging effects of transphobia on the lives of sexual and gendered minorities:

Simply male or female? Sometimes it's not as easy as that: gender variations are more common than [sic] most people suspect, because many people hide their true nature out of fear for their safety and security.

GHMCC texts challenge binaried gender norms by informing the reader about transgender existence and terminology, by focusing on the biblical figure of the eunuch and by reference to the modern figure of the drag queen. While GHMCC texts focus more on transgender issues than on (biological, non-trans) women's issues, they disrupt formenism (Nadar and Potgieter³¹) and indicate the ways in which GHMCC members who are women – or who identify as female – reject patriarchal scripture and ritual. GHMCC texts educate on correct terminology in the area of transgender life and under the *Resources, Gender Diversity* there is a *Trans-Glossary*. Here the text engages with

³¹ B. Dlamini, "Homosexuality in the African context," *Agenda*, (2006), 67.

the differences between sex and gender and takes a constructionist perspective that contrasts with essentialist notions of sexual orientation pervading much of the text elsewhere:

Gender is the set of socially constructed norms associated with a given birth sex i.e. masculinity or femininity. Gender may be considered as a sense of one's own maleness or femaleness.

A wide range of terms and acronyms are presented, such as *Gender Identity*, *Gender Role*, *Gonadal*, *Intersex*, *MTF (Male to Female)*, *TG*, *TS*, *Trans* and *Transitioning* and the notion of gender performativity pervading the text mirrors the work of queer theorists such as Butler³². Perhaps explain performativity?

Discourse of religious colonialism

The South African context is noticeable for its absence from much of the text. In the *Resources, Same-Sex Marriage* section there is frequent mention of the Joint Working Group, South African jurisprudence and LGBT activist groups and in the *Resources, Gallery* section there are photographs of events such as Cape Town Pride. However, much of the text is of North American origin and has a generic and non-local quality to it. Indeed something that is not articulated by the text, and that might have been expected to be stated, is the potentially colonialist nature of the diffusion of MCC churches around the globe. Despite the history of missionaries in Africa, the use of religion as an instrument of colonialism and the role of contemporary evangelical American churches in fostering homophobic foment in some African countries, there is no mention of the implications for GHMCC in this regard. Nevertheless, just as Dlamini³³ pointed to the introduction of homophobia into African societies by means of white, Christian morality, the gay-affirming teachings of an American church could be viewed – particularly by a homophobic audience – as another attempt by North Americans and Europeans to tell African peoples what to think and believe.

While the colonialist risk is not explicitly articulated in GHMCC's texts, it is referred to tangentially in UFMCC's *Human Rights Protocol* concerning the founding (or 'planting') of new churches:

What are our base line standards?

- to only go where we are invited

³² J. Butler, *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

³³ Butler, *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*, 1990.

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- to assume we have a lot to learn
- to listen to our hosts
- to forge partnerships
- to respond when requested
- to be flexible to the realities and differences in establishing churches internationally

Despite UFMCC's awareness of the importance of cultural sensitivity when founding new churches abroad, there is a discourse pervading the texts that suggests that UFMCC has taken on, as a supposedly liberated western LGBT organisation, the mission of liberating LGBT people in apparently less progressive countries. While the text articulates an awareness of local contexts there is a contradictory discourse in which the organisation waits for 'windows of opportunity' in which to 'plant' new churches around the globe:

Criteria for Potential Success:

- Need to consider, potential for impact for the LGBT community, history of Christian Church in the region, political stability of country, nature and severity of the treatment of LGBT community, windows of opportunity

UFMCC's expansionist project would seem to be addressed to an American audience of MCC members intending to set up MCC churches abroad and functions as a sort of step-by-step guide to church founding globally. Steyn and van Zyl,³⁴ Potgieter,³⁵ and Reddy³⁶ have written on the silencing of indigenous southern African meanings by the westocentric colonising project.

Discourse of heteropatriarchal Christian sex

GHMCC texts construct a form of same-sex relationality heavily reliant on heteronormative, Christian, sexual values. Despite professions of queerness and a focus on sexuality and spirituality, there is very little mention of the sexual act or sex in GHMCC texts and no mention of

³⁴ Butler, *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*, 1990.

³⁵ Butler, *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*, 1990.

³⁶ V. Reddy, "Queer marriage: Sexualising citizenship and the development of freedoms in South Africa." in *The prize and the price. Shaping sexualities in South Africa*, ed. M. Steyn and M. van Zyl (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2009), 345.

non-normative sexual practices such as polyamory³⁷. However, there is a strong argument made against promiscuity and in favour of monogamous, life-long, same-sex marriage. While the text situates GHMCC in the context of the South African and international LGBT rights movement, many of the sexual practices and freedoms characteristic of these movements have not been engaged with and literally excised from the texts. The church ascribes to a Christian sexual ethics, similar to the dominant heterosexual paradigm, applied to lesbian and gay relationships. In this sense the texts no longer use the acronym LGBT but instead refer to lesbian and gay people. We interpret this as a dominant discourse which is more comfortable with the term 'homosexual' when referring to gay or lesbian persons living in suburbia. While the others who form part of the LBGTI discourse are not excluded, the sub-text seems to tacitly provide greater acceptance to gay and lesbian persons.

The excision and silencing of varied sexual practices is evident in the section entitled *Spirituality, Would Jesus Discriminate?* The text is sourced from a book entitled *The Children are Free* written by an American UFMCC pastor. The text presents the story of Tyler as an example of moral rectitude and proper sexual behaviour:

...when [Tyler] finally acknowledged his attraction to men during his fourth year of college, it was not during a search for unbounded sexual pleasure or in the context of pagan worship rituals. It was during a night of intense prayer when he was questioning whether he should try to pursue a relationship with a female friend. During that time of prayer, Tyler was strongly impressed that he needed instead to deal with his innate attraction to men...for the next several years, he continued to remain celibate as he wrestled with Scripture and with his church's teachings, trying to find out how he should live as a gay man. He tried always to live a life free of covetousness, malice, envy, strife, and pride. And, even when Tyler came to the conclusion that Scripture affirmed him as an innately gay individual, his respect for the teaching of his parents [Christian missionaries] and his love of God convinced him to remain a virgin until meeting his spouse, Rob.

Here a hedonistic sexuality – 'unbounded' and 'pagan' in nature – is contrasted with the moral, Christian sexual reserve of the confused gay man. Sexuality outside the context of (life-long, monogamous) marriage is associated with pride, covetousness and malice, refuge from which is found in sexual repression and in virginity. The text articulates a

³⁷ Polyamory is the practice of engaging in more than one intimate relationship at a time with the awareness and approval of all partners. Polyamory is different from polygamy, which is the practice of having more than one spouse.

traditional, Christian sexual ethics strongly grounded in essentialist discourse – ‘an innately gay individual’ – and most often of North American origin. In so doing, the text negates the practice of non-normative sexualities. Corbett³⁸ argues that Christianity has historically been nervous of erotic love and has attempted to neutralise it. The discourse which emerged from our analysis is that the church is similarly wary of erotic love which falls outside the boundaries of normative, western, monogamous relationships. They are silent on a practice such as polygamy, both from a feminist or a cultural perspective.

Nevertheless this conservative sexual ethic is contradicted by other more sex-positive discourses in GHMCC texts, such as in the story of Miss Davina Regina. In *Resources, Gender Diversity, Miss Davina: The Ethiopian and Philip (Acts 8)* the text reads:

Now Miss Davina Regina was no fool, in fact she hadn't got to where she was without having a fair bit of common-sense and a good deal of business acumen, and good looks as well. She was well known for striking a hard bargain and being a fierce negotiator. She was also well known for her fondness of young attractive men. She was taken with Philip the moment she saw him. So with her most charming and winsome smile she said to Philip: "Well, how can I understand unless someone explains it to me? Why don't you get in and tell me, honey?"

The sensuality and flirtatiousness of Miss Davina contrasts with the anodyne and tortured figure of the confused and repressed Christian gay man recounted in the previous story. In this way competing discourses in the text reflect the diversity of sexual ethical positions espoused by GHMCC. Nevertheless, while the texts both reinscribe a traditional Christian sexual ethic and challenge homophobic Christian mores, the full panoply of sexual expression in LGBT communities in South Africa and globally, as explored in Steyn and van Zyl³⁹, remains largely absent here.

Missing feminist discourses: tensions and silences

One of the most surprising absences and silences in GHMCC online texts is the lack of a strong, feminist voice in relation to both homosexuality and religion. Gender is predominantly understood to refer to transgenderism which is often focused on male-to-female transgenderism, such as the figure of the eunuch and the drag queen (as opposed to the drag king). Consequently there is little focus on the

³⁸ I. Corbett, "Homosexuality in the traditions of the church." in *Aliens in the household of God*, ed. P. Germond and S. De Gruchy (Cape Town: David Philip, 1997), 162-172.

³⁹ Corbett, "Homosexuality in the traditions of the church" 162-172.

issues facing the 'normative biological' woman. We are not negating the importance of GHMCC supporting all categories of 'woman' but the focus seems to be on 'the exotic other'. Reference is made to a number of female priests and several of the authors of the online texts are women, but there is a silence in terms of a radical western feminist theological perspective and an African feminist perspective and interpretation also appears conspicuously absent. The female priests appear not to have challenged images of a patriarchal god or to present discourses which could be labelled feminist. In addition, stories of lesbian desire are also overshadowed by a primary focus on gay male experience and when such stories are presented – such as that of Ruth and Naomi – they at times seem tokenistic. Although the ideology of the church aims to challenge sexism and homophobia, it also tacitly endorses these both through the erasure of non-normative sexual practices and through the absence of radical, feminist theologies. Also absent from GHMCC texts are any African or South African terms relating to transgender identities. Here the text promulgates a particularly westocentric understanding of gender and sexuality and ignores the long history of gender variance in African societies, including the figure of the *isangoma* (Epprecht⁴⁰, Dlamini⁴¹).

There is in addition an ongoing tension in GHMCC texts between essentialist and constructionist understandings of sexuality, sexual orientation and gender. In contrast with constructionist interpretations of gender, the texts develop an essentialist perspective on sexuality. For example, in *Resources, Sexuality and Bible, Spirituality and Sexuality* the text asserts that: *...faith or religion is a personal choice, unlike one's sexuality which is part of who you are and is not a choice.* The texts construct a white, gay male identity onto the biblical figure of the eunuch and employ an essentialist understanding of gender and homosexuality in interpreting eunuchs and modern gay men as being 'born that way': *Jesus said some are born gay. (Mathew 19:10-12)* Here Jesus refers to "eunuchs who have been so from birth." *This terminology ("born eunuchs") was used in the ancient world to refer to homosexual men. Jesus indicates that being a "born eunuch" is a gift from God.*

Concluding Remarks

⁴⁰ M. Epprecht, *The history of a dissident sexuality in Southern Africa* (London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004), 21.

⁴¹ Epprecht, *The history of a dissident sexuality in Southern Africa*, 21.

This article's intention is to raise debate in relation to the role of the Good Hope Metropolitan Community Church in South Africa regarding issues concerning gay and lesbian people sixteen years after the first democratic election. We have thus deliberately chosen to not make any "cast in stone" or definitive conclusions. Nevertheless Corbett⁴² in commenting on the response of the church to homosexuality remarked that it is imperative that churches respond not only for justice to be entrenched for the homosexual community but for the sake of the church itself. We would extend his concern and add that it is important that a church such as the GHMCC continue to provide a space for the LBGTI community. However, for it to grow and more importantly be relevant to the community it serves it has to have 'more voice' on issues where they have been silent. The obvious silences as has emerged from our analysis are not talking to feminist concerns and the failure to link issues such as poverty, racism and sexism which prevail in the South African context to the matters which they are dealing with.

GHMCC no doubt provides an important space and the fact that this church actively engages with organisations which have similar agendas is a positive finding which has emerged. The church is located in a contested space (District Six, from where a community was forcibly removed) and the website makes no mention of this. GHMCC is also silent on their broader politico-geographical location in the city and indeed the country, which has impacted on the identities and lived lives of the people within the metropole where they are based.

This article represents the first stage in our critical engagement with the discourse of the church and it is our intention to interview and engage with leaders and members of the church for the purpose of conducting future research.

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Who's in Charge in a Genderless Marriage? A Feminist and Queer Analysis of Opposition to Same-Sex Marriage by the Marriage Alliance of South Africa

Jennifer Jane Sistig¹ and Sarojini Nadar²

Abstract

This article offers a feminist and queer analysis of the opposition to same-sex marriage as articulated by the Marriage Alliance of South Africa (MASA) since 2004. It interrogates the theology of marriage underpinning their position, especially their over-reliance on the Bible to develop their theology. MASA's theology of marriage, particularly their reliance on their interpretation of the Bible, is analysed using two related branches of theology: feminist theology and queer theology. This analysis aims to expose MASA's patriarchal and heterosexist worldview of marriage and family, and aims to show that same-sex marriage poses a direct threat to their worldview. The article concludes with an alternative theology of marriage and family based on queer and feminist Trinitarian theologies that allow for more just forms of marriage relationship and family life.

Who's in Charge in a Genderless Marriage?

The title of this article derives from an event at an open meeting in the Kloof Methodist Church hall towards the end of 2007. The meeting involved a debate about same-sex marriage between the late Steve de Gruchy and a member of the Anglican parish of St Martin's in the Field in Durban North who was representing the Marriage Alliance of South Africa (MASA). Following the debate the chairperson opened the floor for questions. A young man stood up and presented his question. He asked, given the model of marriage offered by Paul in 1 Corinthians 11, with Christ being the head of every man and the man being the head of

¹ Jennifer Jane Sistig was ordained in the Diocese of Natal, Anglican Church of Southern Africa. She is currently ministering in the Diocese of Guildford as a non-stipendiary minister and in the Diocese of Oxford as a school chaplain at an independent boarding and day school for girls aged 11-18 in Berkshire, England. This article is derived from her Masters dissertation which was carried out at the School of Religion and Theology, University of KwaZulu-Natal under the supervision of Prof. Sarojini Nadar. Email: jenniferjanesistig@gmail.com

² Sarojini Nadar (PhD) is from South Africa. She is an Associate Professor in, and Director of, the Gender and Religion Programme in the School of Religion and Theology at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Email: nadars@ukzn.ac.za

the woman, if a marriage is to be between two men, or two women, then “who is in charge?” On the basis of this question, for him, power resides in the gender of the husband. If both persons are husbands, or both persons wives, then who has the power? This power issue is at the heart of the theology of marriage of MASA, which will be critiqued in this article.

MASA was developed and constituted in or around the year 2004 as part of a response from some parts of the Christian religious sector of South African society to the national debate on same-sex marriage. In this article, the “biblically based” theology of marriage underpinning their position will be analysed. This analysis will be undertaken using two related branches of theology: feminist theology and queer theology. It will conclude with an alternative theology of marriage based on queer and feminist Trinitarian theologies. An alternative theology of marriage and family based on queer and feminist Trinitarian theologies therefore asserts that it is not the right order or hierarchy within a relationship that is a Christian priority, but that the right ordering of relationship with the example of Christ.

The “Biblically Based” Theology Underpinning MASA’s Definition of Marriage

The Marriage Alliance of South Africa (MASA) was founded in the wake of a South African Supreme Court of Appeal judgment handed down on 30 November 2004, which concluded that the existing marriage laws unfairly discriminated against gay and lesbian couples. As noted above, the formation of MASA constituted part of the response of certain religious sections of South African society to the question of same-sex marriage. According to their press release of 11 May 2005, issued by the Director of Media Communications of MASA, Naomi Boshoff, MASA’s founding members were: Dr Michael Cassidy (International Team Leader of African Enterprise) and Reverend Moss Nthla (General Secretary of the Evangelical Alliance of South Africa.) They then joined with Cardinal Wilfred Napier of the Roman Catholic Church to “champion the cause of marriage and mobilize the Church to uphold and safeguard the traditional family.”³ According to their webpage, which is hosted by the South African Christian Leaders Association (SACLA) website, and therefore indirectly hosted by Focus on the Family which is a “global Christian ministry” that was founded in 1977 by

³ Marriage Alliance of South Africa, “Churches Unite to Defend Marriage in Constitutional Court” (2005). (Press release dated 11 May 2005.) <http://www.sacla.za.net/?component=ddb&operation=page&page=193> (accessed 25 November 2011).

Dr James C. Dobson and is “dedicated to helping families thrive.”⁴ MASA’s mission statement reads as follows:

The Marriage Alliance of South Africa exists to serve the Church and society as a platform for constructive engagement in the current debate on the definition of marriage. It aims to raise support to put its case for monogamous, heterosexual marriage to the Constitutional Court in May 2005. It will engage in the democratic processes of South Africa to ensure that marriage, family and religious freedoms are protected by both parliamentary legislation and the courts.⁵

A summary of the argument presented in the written submission was published by MASA in their press release entitled *Definition of Marriage in the Balance*. In this release they summarise for their readers what their lawyers had presented on their behalf:

Fundamental to marriage is that it consists of a man and a woman [and] marriage is an exclusively heterosexual institution ... If marriage ... [is] redefined to include same-sex couples, the nature of the institution will change. It is not simply a matter of inclusion. Married couples will find themselves in a “genderless” institution ... In the long term this will undermine the integrity and value of marriage which, for centuries, has been the ‘civic glue’ that binds families and societies together. It would also have extreme consequences for male-female relationships.⁶

In June 2006 MASA produced a positional statement on marriage that includes an outline of their theology of marriage in a section entitled ‘statement of faith.’ The section begins with an affirmation of the “biblical standard for marriage and the family: that is, that marriage was instituted by God and is intended to be the life-long union between a man and a woman (Gen 1:27; 2:24).”⁷ In the description of family that follows, emphasis is given to the need for both a male and female parent for the formation of a child’s character, and ends with the assertion that their view of family is “universally recognised by most people and religions as divinely ordained by God, and is the key to the moral structure of a healthy society.” Undergirding this definition is

⁴ Focus on the Family. “About us” pages. 2011. http://www.focusonthefamily.com/about_us.aspx and http://www.focusonthefamily.com/about_us/james-dobson.aspx (accessed 28 November 2011).

⁵ Marriage Alliance of South Africa, “Mission Statement”. 2008. <http://www.sacla.za.net/?component=ddb&operation=page&page=24> (accessed 04 October 2011).

⁶ Marriage Alliance of South Africa. “Definition of Marriage in the Balance” (2005). (Press release from an unspecified date <http://sacla.za.net/?component=ddb&operation=page&page=195> (accessed 25 November 2011).

⁷ Marriage Alliance of South Africa “Positional Statement – Submission on Marriage – June 2006” (2006). Pietermaritzburg. (Copy obtained from Michael Cassidy).

Michael Cassidy's view that marriage is "what God has put in place from the beginning of creation" and that this understanding of marriage is a "universally accepted norm."⁸ This understanding of marriage as having been in existence from the "beginning of creation" is linked directly to the Genesis accounts and, as it is with most arguments against same-sex relationships, MASA's argument also rests firmly on the adage 'the Bible says.'

A Queer Analysis of MASA's Appeal to the Bible

MASA, according to its positional statement, looks to the Bible for justification for their theology of marriage. The work of Stuart and Thatcher, in their chapter entitled "On the Bible" in *People of Passion* (1997), is helpful in understanding the way in which MASA has constructed this "biblically-based" theology of marriage. After presenting various theologies of marriage contained in church reports on sexuality over the previous forty years, Stuart and Thatcher assert that "with a couple of exceptions, there is a lack of hermeneutical sophistication ... [which shows] insufficient awareness of the multiple and complex issues that are raised by the use of the Bible in debates about sexuality and gender."⁹ There are two most common approaches to the Bible, they argue. The first is a 'rule book' approach, and the second is a 'relay race' approach. Each of these will be discussed in turn below.¹⁰

Judging from MASA's publications, the 'rule book' approach seems to reflect their *modus operandi*. This approach uses a literal reading of the Bible, because it considers the scriptures to be the 'Word of God' inspired by the Holy Spirit, and does not accept that there might be any historical and/or cultural influence in the way in which the biblical texts were formed. There are numerous problems with this approach, especially the fact that not all Christians agree on what the Bible says and therefore a hierarchy of authority is formed when certain groups claim to be more discerning of the truth of scripture than others. This approach adopts "an unconscious hermeneutic (method of interpretation) which enables them to choose for themselves between authoritative and non-authoritative texts."¹¹

⁸ M. Cassidy, Letter dated 10 December 2004 addressed to all South African Christian Leaders' Association participants (2004). <http://www.sacla.za.net/> (accessed 14 November 2011).

⁹ Elizabeth Stuart and Adrian Thatcher, *People of Passion: What the Churches Teach About Sex*, (London: Mowbray, 1997), 245.

¹⁰ Stuart and Thatcher, *People of Passion*, 246.

¹¹ Stuart and Thatcher, *People of Passion*, 247-248.

The other main approach that Stuart and Thatcher have identified has been named the 'relay race.' In this approach the more liberal interpreters of the Bible begin their search for the meaning of the texts with the establishment of the 'original meaning' of the text, and then follow this search with an attempt to apply this meaning to their particular historical and cultural context. [T]his process never quite works, because the definitive original meaning of a text is never established."¹² They refer to Stephen C. Barton's comments that "church debate in issues of sexuality [tend] to circle endlessly around key texts," and that "this trivializes the Bible and human sexuality. The Bible becomes both a battleground and a weapon of different interest groups and issues of human sexuality are reduced to matters of exegesis which only a very few are qualified to carry out."¹³

Stuart and Thatcher then go on to explain the emergence of feminist and queer hermeneutics as contemporary models through which biblical interpretations can be made. Specific examples of the use of a queer hermeneutic are found in *The Queer Bible Commentary* (2006).¹⁴ The chapter in this book entitled "Matthew" by Thomas Bohache and his 'note on queering' is an extremely helpful guide on how to queer(y) readings of biblical texts, and will form the basis of the discussion that follows.

Queer Biblical Hermeneutics – 'Queer(y)ing' Scripture

Thomas Bohache describes 'queering' as a process of reading the Bible "from a queer perspective."¹⁵ The aim of queering scripture is to read it afresh in order to more deeply understand the message of justice and inclusive love found in the person of Jesus Christ, his life and teaching.

Bohache uses the term 'queer' in an inclusive sense to refer to all who are disempowered in a heteronormative world. Moreover, 'queer' has both an adjectival (descriptive) and verbal (active) sense. When something is 'queer', it is uncommon, out of the ordinary, unusual and non-conforming to the dominant culture. Queering must therefore be a questioning and a turning over of layers of the heteropatriarchal tradition to reveal what lies beneath.¹⁶ Queering can thus uncover from scripture

¹² Stuart and Thatcher, *People of Passion*, 247-248.

¹³ Stuart and Thatcher, *People of Passion*, 247-248.

¹⁴ D. Guest et al. (eds.), *The Queer Bible Commentary*, (London: SCM Press, 2006).

¹⁵ Thomas Bohache, "Matthew" in *The Queer Bible Commentary*, edited by D. Guest et al., (London: SCM Press, 2006), 487-516.

¹⁶ Bohache, *Matthew*, 493.

more inclusive and just descriptions of marriage and sexuality than those that are held by those who defend 'traditional' marriage, such as does MASA.

In his example of queering scripture using Matthew's gospel Bohache begins with a description of the '*basileia*' message of Jesus, which is what most Bibles translate as the 'kingdom of God.' He maintains that this message is the "virtually undisputed ... core of Jesus' message." He draws on contemporary feminist hermeneutics to show that with the establishment of the 'reign of God' comes the establishment of the "kingdom of God", which is constituted not on the basis of a relationship within an imperial hierarchy, a kyriarchy, or on the basis of power, but on the basis of belonging and relationship. The concepts of Jesus being at the centre of an egalitarian renewal movement have been explored in depth in these works of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza: *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (1992) and *In Memory of Her* (1994). Similarly, Rosemary Radford Ruether writes of Jesus' praxis and preaching of the '*basileia*' vision of God's inclusive love.¹⁷

When concentrating on the concepts of family and eunuchs, Bohache writes that, "in recent years, several scholars have noted that in his *basileia* message Jesus opposed the traditional patriarchal family and encourages an alternative family."¹⁸ He then goes on to quote Reuther who underlines the importance of this statement when saying that "the traditional family is the bulwark not only of patriarchy but also of challenging the hegemony of a system of values and structures that produce and reproduce heterosexism and homophobia."¹⁹

In both the Jewish and the Graeco-Roman communities of Jesus' time, the patriarchal family was the basic unit of society, and the 'father' had power over the lives and possessions of all the other members of the family, including slaves and their patrons in this. The sayings and stories of Matthew 19-20 address this family structure by dealing with three categories of relationship: husbands-wives; fathers-children; masters-slaves. Bohache quotes Carter as asserting that these "two chapters subvert this hierarchical and patriarchal structure by instructing disciples in a more egalitarian manner."²⁰ Jesus teaches mutuality between husband and wife, the value of children, and the honour of the

¹⁷ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 134-138.

¹⁸ Bohache, *Matthew*, 508.

¹⁹ Bohache, *Matthew*, 508.

²⁰ Bohache, *Matthew*, 508.

slave. Bohache then goes on to state that in reading Matthew 10:34-6; 12:46-50; 13:53-8; and 19:27-30, Jesus states unequivocally that he is not just creating an alternative household but is setting out “to destroy the traditional home.” He concludes by pointing out that these texts prove that Jesus affirmed that “the loyalty to justice and truth ... supercedes the traditional family.”²¹

This example of queering scripture has presented a radically different perspective on gender and family that can offer an understanding of liberative justice to members of the LGBTI community.²² Queer(y)ing scripture in order to more deeply understand the message of justice and inclusive love found in the person of Jesus Christ therefore offers a radical critique of MASA’s limited interpretation of particular texts. This critique will be further explained when queer(y)ing MASA’s appeal to the Bible in the following section.

Queer(y)ing MASA’s Appeal to the Bible

The biblical view of marriage on which MASA’s theology of marriage is based relies on a limited reading of the Bible, as has been exposed by a feminist and queer analysis of the biblical texts referring to marriage. When reflecting on Coleman’s reading of the creation narratives, it is clear that the story of Adam and Eve was not intended to instruct people on sexual politics or to present a model of marriage. He writes that the stories were rather intended to show that “humankind is centre stage in the image of God, Adam and Eve are intimately related, human disobedience explains evil, but God’s purpose is not defeated.”²³

God’s ordering of creation was intended for redemption through right relationship with God, not for the right order of relationship in a sociological and biological sense. This is in direct opposition to the idea that according to the Bible, God instituted marriage when he created Adam and Eve, as MASA asserts.²⁴ In analysing the references to marriage in the epistles it is clear that the apostle Paul advocated “marriage as second best to singleness,”²⁵ and he promoted adherence to the household codes contained in Ephesians 5:21-6:9, Colossians 3:18-4:1, 1 Peter 2:18-3:7 on the basis of the created order in Genesis.

²¹ Bohache, *Matthew*, 509.

²² LGBTI is an acronym used as a collective term to refer to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people.

²³ P. Coleman, *Christian Attitudes to Marriage: From Ancient Times to the Third Millennium*, (London: SCM Press, 2004), 33.

²⁴ Marriage Alliance of South Africa 2006. Positional Statement.

²⁵ Bohache, *Matthew*, 493.

These texts are to be understood within “a [patriarchal] context where women were legally and socially seen as the property of the responsible males.”²⁶ MASA’s use of the Bible depends on “the patriarchal assumptions about male superiority, headship and domination.”²⁷

Carolyn Osiek has named Ephesians 5:21-6:9 as one of the most dangerous texts in the New Testament because through it the “domination-submission relationship between husbands and wives” is affirmed.²⁸ She argues that an imbalanced power relationship between husband and wife receives further reinforcement in the mystical union analogy as the biblical text “elevates the marital relationship to a new level of understanding and experience and because of the ecclesiological comparison, ... the text has too often been seen to render normative the subordinate relationship.”²⁹

The ‘covenant’ motif is similarly dangerous in that comparing a divine covenant with a human covenant suggests “an unequal divine-human power relationship [that] may readily replicate itself in an unequal husband-wife relationship.”³⁰ As Johnson suggests, the male is idolised and female is subordinated, and this imbalance is justified by an appeal to the unequal divine-human power relationship in the covenant motif.³¹

The imbalance of power between husband and wife can be critiqued using the feminist concept of mutuality which has been widely explored within feminist theology, and which forms the basis for Elizabeth Stuart’s theology of friendship in *Just Good Friends: Towards a Lesbian and Gay Theology of Relationships* (1995).³² Meanwhile, Catherine Mowry LaCugna argues that a theology of complementarity (of the sexes) which is grounded in the hierarchical and patriarchal structures of family, society, and church, infers a corresponding hierarchy within the Trinity.³³ Therefore, both these motifs and the creation narrative allow MASA to focus on the ‘correct’ order of relationship; that is male and

²⁶ Stuart and Thatcher, *People of Passion*, 59.

²⁷ Stuart and Thatcher, *People of Passion*, 59.

²⁸ Carolyn Osiek, “The New Testament and the Family,” *The Family Concilium* 4 (1995), 8.

²⁹ Osiek, *The New Testament and the Family*, 8.

³⁰ Osiek, *The New Testament and the Family*, 8.

³¹ Stuart and Thatcher, *People of Passion*, 61; Johnson, *She Who Is*, 68.

³² Elizabeth Stuart, *Just Good Friends: Towards a Lesbian and Gay Theology of Relationships*, (London: Mowbray, 1995).

³³ Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life*, (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991), 98.

female in marriage, but include in that order an inherent inequality between the two.

While the creation accounts indicate that both men and women need partners, Coleman asserts that “the paradigm of their relationship is the covenant with God himself.”³⁴ He refers to the lengthy writings of Karl Barth in this regard and concludes that the emphasis in Genesis 1:27 on divine likeness points to “the fact that God himself exists in [Trinitarian] relationship and not isolation. ‘God is no *Deus solitarius*, but *Deus trinus*.’[italics his].”³⁵ Therefore, the challenge from queer theologians is to recapture from the creation narratives the principle of the relationship with God for all human kind.

According to Ken Stone, “in recent years these texts have played a central and growing role in attempts to use biblical literature to buttress heteronormative accounts of sex and gender.”³⁶ Thus, in their theology of marriage, MASA has placed their emphasis on defending the traditional model of marriage on the living out of a covenant between men and women, with little reflection on marriage as a covenant lived out within the life of God. In basing their theology of marriage and family on the household codes and the Pauline description of gender hierarchy in 1 Corinthians 11, MASA prioritises the secondary historically bound teaching of the epistles above the primary teaching in Christ’s command to love one’s neighbour as one loves one’s self.³⁷

A queer analysis of MASA’s biblical view of marriage reveals a strongly and defensively patriarchal understanding of marriage. If, when viewed through queer and feminist lenses, MASA’s ‘biblically-based’ theology of marriage is not as life-giving as has been argued thus far, one is led to query whether there are alternative theologies of marriage which are more life-giving.

Alternative Theologies of Marriage

Studies on Christian marriage over the last decades have drawn on the doctrine of the Trinity. For example, Jack Dominian³⁸ used Trinitarian theology to describe the marital relationship in 1977. Since then, feminist theologians have provided new Trinitarian language to describe

³⁴ Coleman, *Christian Attitudes to Marriage*, 31.

³⁵ Coleman, *Christian Attitudes to Marriage*, 31.

³⁶ K. Stone, “Bibles That Matter: Biblical Theology and Queer Performativity”, *Biblical Theology Bulletin*. 38 No. 1 (2008), 21.

³⁷ Marriage Alliance of South Africa. 2005. *Definition of Marriage in the Balance*.

³⁸ Dominian, *Proposals for a New Sexual Ethic*, 84.

the mystery of God in an attempt to free God-language from gender stereotypes. Thus, the classical understanding of the persons of the Trinity as being the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is replaced with the feminist alternative of the Trinity as being the Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer/Sanctifier/Life-Giver.³⁹

Feminist theologians have also contributed to the understanding of the Trinity by emphasising the concepts of “mutual relation,” “radical equality” and “community in diversity.”⁴⁰ Central to the doctrine of the Trinity is the understanding that the three ‘persons’ of the Trinity are equal in every respect. To assert that there is a hierarchy of importance within the Trinity is to fall prey to early Christian heresies such as subordinationism and modalism.⁴¹ The Trinity presents us with a community of equals, and offers a powerful image for the theology of marriage as being a partnership of equals within the presence of God. Queer theology offers further insights into the implications of Trinitarian theology for the understanding of gender that can be included in a Trinitarian theology of marriage.

By taking these understandings of the Trinity into a theology of marriage, the patriarchal understanding of the relationship between a husband and his wife is invalidated. The two partners in a marriage can be understood as equal in value, free from the categories of subordination, submission and gender. The two marriage partners belong to one another, acting as bearers of God for and to one another in order to bring new life to one another and to the wider community, and to witness to the presence of God within their relationship, continually weaving all of this into the fabric of society, or, into other ‘webs of relationship’ in society.⁴²

³⁹ See for example: Catherine Mowry LaCugna, “God in Communion with Us,” in *Freeing Theology*, ed. Catherine Mowry LaCugna (San Francisco: HarperCollins 1993); Rosemary Radford Reuther, *Sexism and God-Talk*, (London: SCM, 1984); Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, (New York: Crossroad, 1994); Megan Macrina Walker, “Can a Woman be a Monk? On Gender and Monastic Identity”, *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 42 no. 2 (2007).

⁴⁰ Johnson, *She Who Is*, 216-223.

⁴¹ Refer to Alan Richardson (ed.), *A Dictionary of Christian Theology*, (London: SCM Press, 1969), 345-351. Subordinationism suggests a hierarchy within God, where God the Father is ingenerate and the Son and Spirit are generated and therefore lesser to God; Modalism asserts that God is one, and relates to the world in three different modes. These heresies informed the development of the Nicene Creed which asserts Christian belief in the triune God, with each ‘person’ of the Trinity being co-equal and consubstantial.

⁴² Elsie Boulding’s article “The Challenge of Nonconformity” in Wink, Walter (ed.) *Homosexuality and Christian Faith: Questions of Conscience for the Churches*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 111-117.

This concept of webs of relationship is taken from Elsie Boulding's article "The Challenge of Nonconformity" which explores the contribution of gay and lesbian people to the Quaker community. She writes that "reweaving webs of relationship is our main business in life"⁴³ and suggests that we reweave the social web according to the notion of our oneness in Christ, concluding that:

Learning new ways of approaching gender identity and new ways for men and women to live and work separately and together in building the peaceable kingdom is urgent for us all. The gays and lesbians among us can help us in our learning and in our doing. It is time for them to be freed from the stereotype of embattled victims fighting for the right to be who they are and instead to be accepted as co-workers in reweaving the social web for us all.⁴⁴

As the national debate about same-sex unions was raging, Graeme Taute offered a perspective that can be merged with the idea of reweaving the social web. He writes that:

Marriage itself is in serious trouble, an institution beset with considerable disillusionment. In its current form marriage is largely structured for us by our religions and the State around its two lowest common denominators, namely so-called "heterosexuality" and procreation, neither of which guarantee its success. Its meaning is largely functional, as the heart and source of the so-called nuclear family.⁴⁵

He goes on to speak of the debate around same-sex marriage and referred to the terms 'marriage' and 'civil union.' He suggests that the emergence of the concept of the civil union is "a clue to a deeper process that might be trying to emerge"⁴⁶ where the distinction between a civil union and a marriage "isn't one between same-sex and opposite sex partnerships, but rather between levels of growth in all partnerships."⁴⁷ He suggests that an understanding of marriage should reflect a maturing and [commitment] to moving [the relationship] towards a deepening transformation of both or all people", which he suspects, "is a deeper meaning of marriage: a commitment to transformation", an

⁴³ Boulding, *The Challenge of Nonconformity*, 111.

⁴⁴ Boulding, *The Challenge of Nonconformity*, 117.

⁴⁵ Graham Taute, "Same-sex Marriage" Paper delivered at a same-sex marriage workshop held in Pietermaritzburg 4 August 2006. Reproduced with author's permission. Copy obtained from author.

⁴⁶ Taute, "Same-sex Marriage".

⁴⁷ Taute, "Same-sex Marriage".

endeavour which is nowhere found to be “dependent on the sex of the people involved”.⁴⁸

He then describes marriage as the “vale of soul-making”⁴⁹ in which the partners lead one another into an “ever deepening space of growth.” He writes that “the remarkable thing [he notices] about deepening unions is the way in which, simply by nature of their ever-increasing depth, they begin to nourish the community around them.”⁵⁰

This idea that marriage is the space in which people continue to grow and in which the shared life of the partners increase life around them fits very well into a theology of marriage based on the Trinitarian concept of shared life and shared love, where people are drawn into the life and love of God through their life-giving and loving relationships. Taute goes on to say that he suspects that:

marriage is failing in our culture, not because it is flawed, but because it has been colonised by very particular religious and cultural agendas, thereby losing much of its deeper meaning... As our religions grapple with marriage, they will also be challenged ... to grapple deeply with their sense of ‘God’.⁵¹

And so we look to theology, our words about God, to understand marriage. These contributions to the theology of marriage as relational and life-giving are validated by Migliore’s theology of the Trinity. He writes that:

The doctrine of the Trinity is the second-order reflection on the workings of divine love as attested to in Scripture and experienced by the Christian community. In other words, the starting point of Trinitarian faith is the good news of the love of God in Christ that continues to work transformingly in the world by the Holy Spirit.⁵²

He goes on to restate the meaning of the doctrine of the Trinity by affirming that: the eternal life of God is personal life in relationship⁵³; that God exists in community;⁵⁴ and that God’s life can be described in the light of the Gospel with beautiful metaphors of Trinitarian hospitality and the *‘perichoresis’*, the dance of Trinitarian love.

⁴⁸ Taute, “Same-sex Marriage”.

⁴⁹ Taute, “Same-sex Marriage”.

⁵⁰ Taute, “Same-sex Marriage”.

⁵¹ Taute, “Same-sex Marriage”. See also Germaine Greer, *The Whole Woman*, (London: Random House Group Limited, 1999), 422-425.

⁵² Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith seeking understanding: an introduction to Christian theology*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1998), 59.

⁵³ Migliore, *Faith seeking understanding*, 67.

⁵⁴ Migliore, *Faith seeking understanding*, 69.

[This] has far reaching implications. It points to experiences of friendship, caring family relationships, and the inclusive community of free and equal persons as intimations of the eternal life of God and the reign of God that Jesus proclaims. That God is a Trinity of love means ... concern for a new community ... [which] has its Christian social ethics thus grounded in Trinitarian theology. The Christian hope for peace with justice and freedom in community among peoples of diverse culture, races, and genders corresponds to the Trinitarian logic of God.⁵⁵

To take this Trinitarian theology into our theology of marriage is to affirm that just as the life of God is essentially life-giving, so the lives of the marital partners are also to be life-giving. As Balswick and Balswick write, "we are created for life in community with others, to exist in relationships of mutual fidelity and mutual freedom in fellowship."⁵⁶ A Trinitarian theology of marriage that takes feminist relational theology and queer theology seriously asserts that marriage is a partnership of equals, unencumbered by the socially constructed inequalities inherent in the concepts of gender and patriarchy, and therefore mirroring the mutuality and reciprocity of God in relationship, in order to liberate, to bring life and to enhance life in community.⁵⁷ The aforementioned contribution of queer theology leads towards an understanding of marriage as part of a theology of relationship, rather than an understanding of marriage that relies on the perspective of social formulations and definitions.

If we were to limit our understanding of marriage to the theology presented by MASA, we would maintain a heteropatriarchal model that is more in keeping with theologies of power and subordination based on a literal biblical hermeneutic and an over-dependence on the Pauline anthropology described in 1 Corinthians 11. However, a queer Trinitarian theology of marriage retains the values of the Christian tradition and the traditional purposes of marriage can be easily understood within this framework. It is a legitimate theology of marriage, whether that marriage is same-sex or opposite-sex, and it allows for more just forms of marriage relationship and family life.

⁵⁵ Migliore, *Faith seeking understanding*, 70.

⁵⁶ Balswick and Balswick, *The Family*, 126.

⁵⁷ For references to feminist relational theology see: Carol P. Christ, *She Who Changes: Re-Imagining the Divine in the World*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Marjorie Suchocki, *The Fall to Violence: Original Sin in Relational Theology*, (New York: Continuum, 1994); Joseph A. Bracken and Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, *Trinity in Process: A Relational Theology of God*. (New York: Continuum, 1997); Stanley J. Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei*. (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).

While MASA's desire to bring healing to marriage relationships and families is commendable, it is based on a model of marriage and family that is insular and limited. It does not take into account current research in the field of gender. In basing their theology of marriage and family on the household codes, this analysis has shown that MASA prioritises the secondary historically-bound teaching of the epistles above Christ's command to love one's neighbour as one loves one self. Therefore, MASA's attempt to win the battle for the family is based on a legalistic approach in which believers are expected to adhere to a particular formulation of marriage and family relationships. Queer analysis, however, has shown that this approach has been unsuccessful in South Africa to date⁵⁸ and Germaine Greer argues powerfully that it has been similarly unsuccessful in the Western world to date.⁵⁹

A Trinitarian Theology Allowing for More Just Forms of Marriage and Family

In conclusion, a Trinitarian theology, based on the contributions of feminist and queer theology, is offered as an alternative theology of marriage and allows for more just forms of marriage relationship and family life. This queer approach shows that the grace-filled transformation of relationships is the starting point for any theology of marriage. Just as Paul has urged believers in to live according to the Spirit and not the law in Romans 8 and 2 Corinthians 3, so queer theology urges us to live as the redeemed who are governed by the Spirit of God who dwells within us, and not as the condemned who look to the law for redemption.

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⁵⁸ Refer to: Jean-Pierre Dozon, "Africa: the Family at the Crossroads" in A. Burguière et al., *A History of the Family Volume Two: The Impact of Modernity*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 301-338; Zoe Williams, "Gay rights: a world of inequality" in *The Guardian* newspaper. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/sep/13/gay-rights-world-of-inequality> (accessed 14 September 2011.); and sections 6.6-6.8 of Jennifer Jane Sistig (née Stewart), *Who's in charge in a genderless marriage? A queer analysis of the opposition to same-sex marriage as articulated by the Marriage Alliance of South Africa*. (Master's thesis, University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2010).

⁵⁹ Greer, *The Whole Woman*, 422-425.

Editorial

The issue of same-sex sexuality has captured the collective imagination of South Africa ever since the “pattern” of brutal murders of lesbians in what were termed “corrective rapes” emerged; and the subsequent legalisation of same-sex unions in 2006. This topic has gained increased attention in the second quarter of 2011, with the looming sentencing of those guilty of the murder of Zoliswa Nkonyana, a lesbian from Khayelitsha in Cape Town. The second event that has brought the issue of same-sex sexuality to the fore once again was the debates around the appointment of Mogoeng Mogoeng to the position of Chief Justice. Those who opposed his appointment forwarded several arguments regarding his position on gender justice which many considered very conservative. While the issues regarding his judgements on rape and other acts of sexual violence were brought to the fore, what was also highlighted was his stance on same-sex sexuality which he said derived from the bible and his faith as a Christian. Given the resurgence of this topic within South African discourse, as well as the Malawian, Kenyan and Ugandan rulings on matters of same-sex sexuality in 2011, this issue of the journal is most timely and pertinent.

The body of literature which currently exists on this topic is mainly from the areas of law, sociology and psychology. While some research has been done in the area of religion, culture and gender, the literature here remains limited. The appointment of Mogoeng Mogoeng and the rulings in Malawi, and Uganda, demonstrate more than ever the centrality of religion and culture in influencing decisions and policy regarding same-sexuality in Africa.

One of the most significant arguments against same-sex sexuality in Africa, especially as highlighted by various national African presidents is that same-sex sexuality is “un-African”. Compounding this issue is that much of the research in this area has been facilitated by those from outside of the continent. This issue of the journal makes a unique contribution to the body of knowledge which exists on this topic, in that we have gathered an array of scholars – experts working at the interface of religious studies, theology and gender studies – to provide original and insightful contributions on the topic of same-sex sexuality in Africa.

We are certain that you will find all the contributions contained within this issue to be innovative, and a contribution to new knowledge. We

have a bumper issue of twelve articles – eleven academic articles – and one article within a brand new section which we simply name “Praxis.” One of the founding principles of feminist theory is the notion of praxis – that is that theoretical reflection must bear fruit in practical action. In this new section we will publish work that is not considered “mainstream” academic, but nonetheless points to theories of gender justice in action. The Journal is proud to introduce its first such piece in the form of the story of Ecclesia De Lange and her journey towards Inclusion through the help of Inclusive and Affirming Ministries (IAM). The article is co-written with Judith Kotzé.

Among the academic articles, Allan Aubrey Boesak begins with an article entitled “‘Founded on the Holy Bible’ – A Bible Believing Judge and the ‘Sin’ of Same-Sex Relationships.” The article engages with the beliefs undergirding Judge Mogoeng Mogoeng’s stance on same-sex sexuality. In particular he critically interrogates the judge’s use of the term “bible-believing.”

Keeping in line with the tension between constitutional law and religion, Sifiso Khuzwayo, in his article, “God or Caesar: A Queer Debate on Interpretation in the South African Church” furthers the conversation from within the Methodist understanding of the debate. What is unique about his contribution is that he draws on the work of the Islamic scholar Ebrahim Moosa who inspired by Ghazali, a Muslim philosopher, puts forward the concept of *Dihliz/Threshold* as a means to initiate dialogue on this very contested subject.

Farid Esack and Nadeem Mahomed in their article, “Sexual Diversity, Islamic Jurisprudence and Sociality” also draw on Ghazali’s concept of *Dihliz/Threshold* to make an argument for the reclaiming of the space of the “closet.” They potently argue for the importance of the “closet” as a space for autonomy, freedom and resistance to normative sexual injunctions for homosexuals within Islam.

Creating safe spaces for people of same-sex sexual orientation is also the focus of the fourth article by Cheryl Potgieter and Finn Reygan. In their article, “Disruptive or Merely Alternative?: A Case Study of a South African Gay Church,” they question to what extent does the space created by gay churches actually disrupt heterosexual practice, or are they merely alternative?

In the fifth article, “Who’s in charge in a genderless marriage? A feminist and queer analysis of opposition to same-sex marriage by the Marriage

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Gender Prejudice in the use of Biblical Texts against Same-Sex Relationships in Zimbabwe

Masiwa Ragies Gunda¹

Abstract

Gender and prejudice are two commonly used terms in mainstream gender studies throughout the world, whereby the former is almost synonymous with women or females. Gender prejudices affect not only women but also sexual minorities because they too are largely seen through the lenses of gender. This article looks at the homophobic response to same-sex relationships as a downstream and subtle effect of preconceived gender prejudices, which are buttressed by invoking certain texts from the Bible, especially Genesis 1 and 2. The article analyzes the gendered language of some of the slur statements used against same-sex relationships. Further, this article argues that gender prejudices against same-sex relationships are justified and presented as divine through the deployment of the biblical creation narratives. The creation narratives have provided society with a basis for prejudice since they have been interpreted to suggest that God created men and women, suggesting that male and female are synonymous with man and woman. This confusion between sex and gender is behind the gender prejudices against same-sex relationships. Finally, this article proposes a re-reading of Genesis 1 to show that the creator God cannot be limited to two sexes simply because that is what we are comfortable with. It is argued that, God is God because God continues to confound us.

Introduction

This article argues that gender prejudice, an attitude that sees women as inferior to men, is widespread and pervasive within Zimbabwe. It is further argued that gender prejudice in Zimbabwe is based on some religious fundamentals, especially elicited from a reading of the creation narratives in Genesis 1 and 2. Through a reading of these narratives, men and women tend to have a negative attitude towards womanhood, leading to ideas that sustain the inequality between men and women. While women are the direct victims of this kind of gender prejudice, it will be argued also in this article that gender prejudice has other

¹ Masiwa R. Gunda (PhD) is from Zimbabwe. He is a lecturer in Old Testament Studies and Biblical Hebrew, at the University of Zimbabwe and is currently a Humboldt Research Fellow, at the University of Bamberg, Germany. He has published on homosexuality in Zimbabwe. Email: mrqunda2002@yahoo.co.uk

downstream victims among sexual minorities. This gender prejudice is made possible by the use of the categories developed in sustaining the difference between men and women, which are then applied to same-sex relationships. The same texts that are read to sustain prejudices against women, that is, Genesis 1 and 2 are then also applied to sustain negative attitudes towards same-sex relationships in Zimbabwe. In developing this article, the following questions will be used as guiding principles: what is gender prejudice? How is gender prejudice sustained by biblical texts? How does gender prejudice affect same-sex relationships? Can the Bible be used to sustain gender equality? How does this biblically based gender equality affect same-sex relationships? This article takes Zimbabwe as a case-study and hence most of the illustrations that are referred to are contextual to that country.

What is Gender Prejudice?

Gender prejudice is widely acknowledged in studies on violence against women and in general studies focusing on the multiple discriminations suffered by women across cultures.² This conceptualization of gender prejudice is based on the understanding that “gender refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for men and women.”³ These differences created between men and women become the basis upon which individuals are categorized by their respective societies. Having defined gender, the next question is to understand what is meant by prejudice. Prejudice is an attitude which allows people to negatively prejudge others on the basis of what is supposedly known about these “others.” In this understanding, one may be prejudiced against women, children, and people of other races and so on. Having noted how gender is used to separate men from women, it further allows people to qualitatively assume differences between men and women. While the male gender can be described in terms of physical, hormonal, genetic and biological considerations, the man is expected to be one who is “virile, controls women, and is successful in competition with other men and is daring, heroic and aggressive.”⁴ Where this is the understanding of masculinity or manhood, women are largely seen as the opposite of

² Tristan Anne Borer, “Gendered War and Gendered Peace: Truth Commissions and Postconflict Gender Violence: Lessons from South Africa” in *Violence Against Women* 15, No. 10 (2009), 1169-1193.

³ WHO, “Gender, Women and Health” <http://www.who.int/gender/whatisgender/en/index.html> (accessed 28th May 2008).

⁴ Serena Nanda and Richard Wombs, *Cultural Anthropology*, (New York: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1998), 210.

men, and hence they are expected to be weak, vulnerable, submissive and in need of protection from men.

Gender prejudice therefore can only be fully appreciated from this background, where women are looked down upon simply because they are women. In those cases where women have done more than is expected of them, they are then described as “being men”, hence the emergence of metaphors that are employed when women have exceeded expectations of what they are assumed to be capable of achieving. One such metaphor is “*mukadzi uya murume chaiye* [that woman is a real man].”⁵ This “apparent” elevation of women is in itself indicative of gender prejudice. Gender prejudice, owing to the separation and distinction of men from women, has long been woven into the fabric of most societies. In many cultures, including in Zimbabwe a varying amount of discrimination is especially targeted at women simply because they are women. While gender prejudice is therefore common in many societies, its manifestations differ in these societies and the basis upon which such prejudice depends on is also different. The bases upon which gender prejudice is built range from physical, social, economic, political, emotional, biological, and – most important for this article – religious bases. In this regard, the use of biblical texts is an extension of the religiously sustained gender prejudice which pervades contemporary Zimbabwean communities.

Gender prejudice in many societies has been driven by a belief that women are the weaker of the sexes emotionally as well as physically and must be protected from the world outside the home. In the traditional setting, normally, males were expected to be dominant in family matters, particularly those relating to the outside world, while females were expected to assume domestic chores. It is within this context that stereotypes become critical instruments in making prejudice operational, since all men were stereotyped as aggressive, dominant and competitive, while all women were stereotyped as weak, submissive and in need of protection. Men who failed to meet these demands, that is, men who failed to be victorious in battles, or who did not display the expected attributes of dominance and aggression, were then seen as not being “real” men; they were indeed “women”. Stereotyping suggests that all members of a group behave in certain ways and have certain characteristics that separate them from other

⁵ Masiwa Ragies Gunda, *The Bible and Homosexuality in Zimbabwe*, (Bamberg: University of Bamberg Press, 2010), 168.

groups. To that extent, therefore, prejudice becomes that negative prejudgment of a group and its members which is based on generalizations, for example on what makes a “real” man or woman in this case. While gender prejudice against women is widely covered in various studies, this article argues that it is also employed in discussions of same-sex relationships in Zimbabwe. In the following section, I will seek to highlight the manner in which Genesis 1 and 2 have been used in Zimbabwe as regards this matter.

Biblical Texts as Bases for Gender Prejudice

The most critical contribution of the Bible to the entrenchment of gender prejudice against same-sex relationships in Zimbabwe has been its deployment as an instrument that confuses sex and gender. This religious bundling together of sex and gender in Christian thinking is based on the assumption, as indicated by Mojiga that “a philological study of the creation accounts in Gen. 1-2 reveals that gender differentiation is created.”⁶ While Mijoga clearly is not necessarily referring to gender prejudice, understanding gender difference as divinely ordained becomes a firm basis upon which gender prejudice can be built. Central to this interpretation of the Bible is the assumption that there is a fundamental difference between men and women, and that this difference is divinely ordained, together with the accompanying privileges and disadvantages for men and women respectively. In fact, as Judy Tobler observes,

the idea that male and female are different and, moreover, associated with ‘good’ and ‘bad’ respectively, can already be detected in the *creation myths* (emphasis my own)... [Furthermore] the oppositional categories of male and female underlie other dualistic notions that are interpreted in ways that are both gendered and unequal, and these are perpetuated by the androcentric perspective of ‘male’ as the norm of humanness and ‘female’ as the subordinate ‘other’ that deviates from the norm.⁷

While it would seem that both of the creation narratives in Genesis 1 and 2 are used equally, this is actually not the case because the narrative in Genesis 2 is more widely used than that in Genesis 1. The former is preferred because in it Adam, the man, was created first while

⁶ Hilary Mijoga, “Gender differentiation in the Bible: created and recognized,” *Journal of Humanities (Zomba)* 13, (1999), 87.

⁷ Judy Tobler “Beyond a Patriarchal God: Bringing the transcendent back to the body” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 106, (2000), 36.

Eve, the woman, was created later, a sequence which provides for the hierarchical ordering of men and women.⁸

This usage of the Genesis 2 narrative is widely observed at weddings in Zimbabwe, where it is the most commonly used text, which is used to clarify the hierarchical ordering of the newlyweds. The bride is therefore prepared to live with the reality of inequality because it is divinely ordained or created by God.⁹ With the aid of the Bible, gender prejudice has been sacralized and firmly deposited within the divine realm. Prejudice is essentially portrayed as holiness. One of the most subtle ways in which the Bible accomplishes such tasks is through authority first being heaped on the biblical texts, after which that authority is transferred to the interpreters of these texts. This double-step is made possible because “decisions about holy books were ... not only decisions about religious matters, but about who had controlling power in the life of the community,”¹⁰ hence all manner of prejudices shared by the interpreters were then allowed to flourish as divine sanction. By using the creation story as the basis of amalgamating sex and gender, the Bible has been deployed as an instrument of justifying gender prejudice against women and sexual minorities in Zimbabwe. This stance deliberately ignores the points that challenge its biblical connection, by suggesting that all questions directed against it are in fact an assault on the authority of the Bible.¹¹ Gender prejudice is therefore seen as “biblical authority” in this understanding. With this brief overview of the creation narratives within gender discussions, the following section will now focus on how echoes of the same creation narratives find expression in same-sex discussions within Zimbabwe.

Gender Prejudice in Same-Sex Talk among Zimbabweans

One of the most common catchphrases of the anti-homosexual movement in Zimbabwe and in many other countries has come in the

⁸ Jerome Gellman, “Gender and Sexuality in the Garden of Eden” *Theology and Sexuality* 12 no. 3 (2006), 323.

⁹ Mijoga “Gender differentiation in the Bible,” 87.

¹⁰ Norman Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-Literary Introduction*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 111.

¹¹ See for example Noah Pashapa, “Even the Bible condemns homosexuality,” *The Sunday Mail*, 26th April 1998 (Harare) wherein he argues that “In the Old Testament are scattered but clear-cut references that condemn homosexuality [sic]. Dr. Noah Pashapa is a former lecturer of Old Testament studies and Classical Hebrew at the University of Zimbabwe, and a Pastor in the Hatfield Baptist Church.

form of a poetic line: “Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve!”¹² At the heart of this slogan is the assumption that Adam and Eve, male and female, man and woman mean essentially the same thing, hence “at a demonstration organized by the Apostolic Faith Church one placard read, ‘God created Adam and Eve, not Adam and Adam’,”¹³ which represents another of the variants of the catchphrase that find expression in Zimbabwe. This blend of prejudice and divinity is clearly put forward when Pastor Constantine Murefu writes that “in Gen. 1:27, the Bible says God created them male and female. This is God’s natural order which we human beings are violating.”¹⁴ The pastor uses the terms male and female to refer to men and women, since the basic understanding of the biblical text takes these categories as synonymous. What is even more interesting is that this text is in fact rarely used when relations between men and women are under discussion. When it comes to same sex relationships however, the text becomes critically important as seen in its use by Murefu. This stance is reiterated when Tongai Gwafa argues that “the Bible condemns acts of homosexuality. When God wanted to create Adam’s partner, he could have created a man not a woman, but as you can see it makes no sense.”¹⁵ The patriarchal and heterosexual framework categorizes all human beings into two classes, men and women, with the latter being at the receiving end of gender prejudice. Same-sex relationships are also talked of within this framework, hence the question: who is the woman? This is a question that essentially asks: who is being penetrated? Penetration becomes the central core of sexual relationships because in the above-mentioned framework, women are essentially sexual objects for men. This prejudice is transferred to same-sex relationships because, since women are not seen as benefitting much from sexual intercourse other than through falling pregnant, the question asked is ultimately: why would a man want to be in a position without benefits? This is made clear in the words of the late Border Gezi, who was a Member of Parliament and Minister of Youth and Gender. He is quoted as having said the following in the Parliament of Zimbabwe: “We have asked these men whether they have been able to get pregnant. They

¹² Dave Chikosi, “What is Adam doing with Steve, asked Lot?” *The Chronicle*, 13th September 1995 (Bulawayo).

¹³ Gaudencia Mutema, “African Traditional Religion and GALZ”, University of Zimbabwe Unpublished Dissertation, 1996, 1.

¹⁴ Constantine Murefu is one of the leading pastors of the Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM) in Zimbabwe, and is also the Principal of Living Waters Bible College, at which AFM pastors are trained. “Homosexuals: Pros and Cons, God’s natural order is being violated,” *The Sunday Mail*, 5th February 1995 (Harare).

¹⁵ Tongai Gwafa, “Homos erode our culture,” *The Chronicle*, 2nd September 1995 (Bulawayo).

have not been able to answer such questions. Even the women who are engaging in lesbian activities, we have asked them what they have got from such practices and no one has been able to answer.”¹⁶ It would appear that the general same-sex negative talk is targeted mainly against the ‘woman’ in gay relationships; again because the framework makes it the role of men to be penetrators, so that being penetrated weighs heavily on the ‘woman’ and not the man. This ideology is in essence gender insensitive because of the way it disparages women and same-sex relationships while insisting that gender prejudice is divinely ordained.

While the general same-sex talk among Zimbabweans is pervaded with gender prejudices, what makes the prejudices subtle and more lethal is that they are clothed with biblical injunctions. Gender prejudice presents a threat to our quest for a just society because it does not appear to us as a socially sanctioned weakness; rather it appears as a divinely ordained strength. In short, the gender prejudice that we notice against same-sex relationships and practices in Zimbabwe, is emanating from a fundamental belief among many Zimbabweans, that is, “In the name of the Almighty, women are not equal to men.”¹⁷ This fundamental belief is then used wittingly or unwittingly in the argument against same-sex relationships in Zimbabwe. While our society has experienced serious gender prejudices, which are in reality socially constructed, this prejudice is raised from the pedestal of being social to that of being divine by the constant appeal to the Bible. In concurrence with Anthony Ceresko, “in our culture, appeal to the Bible is made to advance and justify decisions and directions.”¹⁸ In the section above, we have sought to provide a few examples of statements widely used by Zimbabweans when talking about same-sex relationships. When Zimbabweans appeal to the Bible, it is not to ask open ended questions which pave the way to deeper understanding; rather the Bible is approached via closed ended questions, which are meant to confirm previously held opinions.¹⁹ Central to the gender prejudice noted above “is the fear of other

¹⁶ Marc Epprecht, *Hungochani: The History of a Dissident Sexuality in Southern Africa*, London: McGill-Queen’s University Press, (2004), 132.

¹⁷ Timothy Mubhawa is a Member of Parliament for the Movement for Democratic Change party led by Prime Minister Morgan Richard Tsvangirai. In 2006, during a debate on the Domestic Violence Bill in the Parliament of Zimbabwe, he made this infamous statement and even claimed to be representing God, the Almighty. While there was an uproar against the MP, listening to ordinary Zimbabweans, one realizes that such ideas are far more common than we dare admit. Mubhawa subsequently lost his seat as an MP.

¹⁸ Anthony Ceresko, *Introduction to the Old Testament: A Liberation Perspective*, (New York: Orbis Books, 1992), 300.

¹⁹ Andrew Marin, *Love Is an Orientation: Elevating the Conversation with the Gay Community*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2009).

heterosexual men. Or put differently, the fear of gay theology is most importantly ... a fear of how one is perceived among one's own heterosexual ... peers."²⁰ The social life of Zimbabweans is such that individuals are never truly in control of their own lives, since communities (and, in today's context, government) exert a huge influence over individual choices. Hence the fear expressed above should be understood as "a fear of the power these men have over one's life."²¹ The primary fear is for one to be suspected of being gay by one's peers and by the authorities who can easily react irrationally and violently. However, this fear is also based on the assumption that women are lesser beings than men; hence those men who 'choose' to become 'women' are in essence relegating themselves to a lower level, a level which brings shame not only to themselves but also to men in general. This understanding is the epitome of gender prejudice! The Bible is then invoked to rationalize, justify and provide divine cover for this gender prejudice.

It has now become generally accepted among those who oppose the above stance, that gender prejudice is one of the most fundamental obstacles to achieving parity among the sexes. Gender prejudice is understood as the tendency or practice of discriminating or judging people because of their gender identity. Gender prejudice affects entire societies, hence religion and sacred texts are co-opted as resources for supporting it, either because they are themselves sources of discrimination against women or because they provide the necessary divine authentication of such prejudices.

This paper now outlines gender prejudice as it emerges in general same-sex talk among Zimbabweans. Travelling on public transport for a few days will expose one to all sorts of new phrases and idioms as well as views on topical issues, including same-sex relationships and practices, from the commuter bus crews plying various routes in Harare. At a commuter omnibus rank in Harare, one will hear *mahwindi* (drivers, conductors and rank marshalls) use the phrase "*uringochani*" (you are gay) several times against each other. In this context, the men are actually friends or workmates who are having a disagreement over something. One of them decides to challenge the manhood of the other by labelling him *ngochani*. In my understanding of the scene and the use of this phrase, the man being called gay is being denigrated for not

²⁰ Björn Krondorfer, "Who's afraid of gay theology? Men's studies, gay scholars, and heterosexual silence". *Theology and Sexuality*, 13 no. 3 (2007), 269.

²¹ David J. Livingston, "Overcoming Heterosexual Anxiety before Gay Theology." *Theology and Sexuality* 14, (2007), 81.

being manly enough because homosexuals are seen as being feminine. The assumption is that gays are men who want to be women, and when one is called gay as in the scene described above, one is in fact being accused of being feminine. This labelling has two possible implications: the accusers cannot fight either because the accused is a 'woman', and fighting against a woman is seen as unmanly behaviour; or the accused is in fact already defeated since he is actually a 'woman'. The suggestion is that women are weak and will always be defeated by men; that women are lesser beings than men, and hence that men who want to be women are actually relegating themselves to a lower level. Such men are a disgrace to fellow men; they bring shame to manhood. Closely related to this is one of the questions frequently asked by heterosexuals, "Is so and so is gay?" The question is short and precise, and is structured in the same heterosexual framework: is he the 'man' or the 'woman'? The question assumes a qualitative difference between men and women in sexual relationships, hence the confusion is caused by the desire of a gay person, who biologically is a man, but who has been sociologically relegated to being a woman.

On most critical issues Zimbabwe faces, the Bible is widely invoked as the source of authority and legitimacy for whatever position one has. This trend began in colonial times, when the colonial regime used biblical injunctions to justify their minority government rule and their legitimacy, and continued when the Black nationalists appropriated the Bible for the justification of their war of liberation. The missionaries were positioned on both sides in the war, providing, via the Bible, spiritual guidance to the warring factions. Since independence, the ZANU-PF led government has continued to use the Bible to support its agenda, while opposition parties followed suit, with the MDC in particular making extensive references to the biblical texts. In the colonial era, Christians are positioned in both of the opposing camps. This has meant that the influence and clout of the Bible has long been significant in the country.²² This influence and authority has become a prized asset for those seeking influence and authority of their own. Because so much is at stake, the use of the Bible has not always been innocent, fair-minded or disinterested. Personal opinions, likes and dislikes have been justified by invoking the Bible;²³ it is in this context that this article analyzes the use of the Bible in fostering gender prejudice against same-sex relationships.

²² Gunda, *The Bible and Homosexuality*, 80-90.

²³ Gerald West, *Biblical Hermeneutics of Liberation: Modes of Reading the Bible in the South African Context*, (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1995), 170.

Researchers on same-sex practices and relationships in Zimbabwe, including Epprecht (2004, 2008), Gunda (2006, 2008, 2010), Shoko (2009) and Mutema (1996) acknowledge the fact that one of the most widely used resources for the condemnation of same-sex relationships, has been the Bible, which is alleged to have dealt with the subject once and for all. In the next section, the focus will be on investigating how the creation narratives are invoked to rationalize and justify gender prejudice against same-sex relationships under the guise of doing God's will. In such usages of biblical texts and teachings, gender transforms from being a socially constructed system to being a divinely ordained system of ordering human beings. The same idea is expressed by Pashapa who argues that the biblical texts that speak against same-sex practices and other forms of cross gender activities (Deut. 22:5) "reinforce the need for men to be men while women also must be women."²⁴ As Banana (1993:18-9) observes, "when human beings make claims that they are inspired by God and that, arising from this so-called inspiration, their utterances represent the voice of God, care should be taken so as not to mistake the voice of mortals for the voice of God."²⁵ A 'divinely created' rather than a socially constructed gender is one of the toughest challenges that women and other victims of gender prejudice must negotiate against.

Towards a Sustainable Use of the Bible against Gender Prejudice in Same-Sex Discussions

Two critical observations guide the suggestion supporting a continued use, rather than an all-out rejection of the Bible in discussions about same-sex relationships in Zimbabwe. The first is the observation that the majority of Zimbabweans are Christians who strongly rely on the Bible for guidance. The Bible remains one of the most read books in Zimbabwe, being referred to "in times of joy and sorrow,"²⁶ and hence it is not surprising that it remains possibly the most influential book in the country. The second observation is that the Bible can in fact be used to reconfigure social relations by re-engaging with its texts, since these are already so influential in Zimbabwean society. These observations make it clear that for the foreseeable future, Zimbabweans will continue, and should not be dissuaded from continuing, to make use of the Bible in

²⁴ Noah Pashapa, "Even the Bible condemns", 26.

²⁵ Canaan Banana, "The Case for a New Bible" in *"Rewriting" the Bible: the real issues*, eds. Isabel Mukonyora, James Cox and Frans Verstraelen (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1993), 18-19.

²⁶ Togarasei Lovemore, "Fighting HIV and AIDS with the Bible: Towards HIV and AIDS Biblical criticism" in *Mainstreaming HIV and AIDS in Theological Education: Experiences and Explorations*, ed. Ezra Chitando, (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2008), 73.

public life. For that reason, this article does not share the view that because the Bible is being used to sustain prejudices in our society, this means that in order to bring about justice; we should simply ignore the biblical texts. In Zimbabwe, the Bible is ignored at one's own risk. Two critical arguments against same-sex relationships in Zimbabwe are based on the creation stories of the Bible: first, same-sex relationships are seen as not being provided for in God's creation as retold in Genesis 1 and 2; and second, gender differences are understood to be part of the created order as retold in these texts. This article therefore proposes an alternative understanding based on the same creation narratives that have been central in sustaining the prejudices against same-sex relationships.

From the above sections, it is apparent that the populist views on same-sex relationships and practices have been framed around the assumption that heterosexuality is 'natural' and the Bible has been invoked to sustain this assumption. In this section, the focus is no longer on gender prejudice, but rather on why and how the Bible could be used to engender a sustainable anti-gender prejudice agenda in the context of same-sex relationships. To do this, the first observation is that a closer look at biblical texts shows that the texts come from a community which had elaborately socially constructed gender identities and roles. This realization highlights that while in Zimbabwean discussions, the Bible is seen as being neutral, just and fair to all, the fact is that biblical texts arose out of real socio-historically conditioned lives, that were shaped by socio-economic, political and cultural factors, just as are our lives today. The ancient Israelite communities were patriarchal in nature and therefore the dominant voices in the Bible are those of the most powerful men, and unless this point is taken note of, we run the risk of adopting the views of the elites and confuse them with the views of God. While the above sections have shown that the Bible has become an active instrument through which gender prejudices that have affected the discussion on same-sex relationships in Zimbabwe have been justified, this section seeks now to propose alternative readings of the same creation narratives in a way that "queers" our prejudices. The challenge is not against the LGBTI community: the war is against ourselves. To be Christian means essentially to be engaged in a war against our instincts and prejudices.

The texts that are widely cited as sustaining the condemnation of same-sex relationships must be understood as texts that are socially and historically conditioned. However, any theology that is sustainable must reflect the fundamental essence of Christianity which rises above and

beyond this social and historical context. The creation stories of Genesis 1-2, that are cited as the foundational texts for the argument against same-sex relationships were never texts that were meant to deal with human sexuality. These texts were compiled as explanations of the origins of the sexes, male and female. A re-reading of the creation narratives, especially the narrative in Genesis 1-2: 4a, shows that the Christian God that we believe in as Christians, is the creator of all that is. This God creates everything, from the universe, to the Earth and all its other inhabitants, to the males and females who were created in the image of God. Male and female, in this context, essentially represent the two extremes on a continuum of the sexes and do not necessarily mark the only sexes. In vs. 26-7, God decides to create *man* in God's own image, God created him; *male* and *female* he created them. This text suggests the creation of humanity and in this regard, femaleness pertains to the image of God as fully as maleness. God is neither male nor female since God is neither a physical nor a sexual being. God transcends both genders as they are both comprehended within God's being.²⁷ There is indeed a lot of sense in the arguments proposed by feminist biblical scholars that the ideal of God's created order was the equality of the sexes,²⁸ an element that appears well entrenched in Gen. 1: 26-7 as paraphrased above.

The creator God is too powerful to be limited to human opinions. What this implies is that all human beings are created by God, irrespective of their sexual identity; they all carry within them the image of God. This is enough to assist Christians begin the fight against our prejudices and instincts; if all human beings inherently possess the image of God, why do we fail to show respect to the image of God when discussing same-sex relationships? Still focusing on the creative work of God, it is clear that the creator God is far beyond our understanding, given the myriad of things in the created universe that Christians do not understand; the things that are called "the wonders of God". If male-female were the only sexes, how would we explain the fact that we, as Zimbabweans, from pre-colonial times, have known of children born with both sets of sexual organs? While in Zimbabwe, there was a time when some of these wonders were frowned upon, such as children born with albinism,

²⁷ Gilbert Bilezikian, *Beyond Sex Roles: What the Bible says about a Woman's Place in Church and Family*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 19.

²⁸ See: Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality: Overtures to Biblical Theology*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978); Susan S. Lancer, "(Feminist) Criticism in the Garden: Inferring Genesis 2-3", *Semeia* 41 (1988), 67-84; Phyllis A. Bird, "Bone of My Bone and Flesh of My Flesh", *Theology Today* 50 (1993), 521-34; Carol Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

twin sets of children, children born with various physical challenges, and intersexed children,²⁹ our society has since outgrown many of these prejudices and has moved to celebrating the diversities of human beings as a manifestation of the unpredictability of God, the creator. It is important to reclaim this theological understanding, which cherishes the fact that God created all things and that the universe is made beautiful by the multiplicity of diversities, from physical appearances to human sexual orientations. In fact, acknowledging God as the creator means Christians can begin to discuss with the LGBTI community in the light of all of humans being created in the image of God. This theological understanding has no room for the comparison that is seen being made between the LGBTI community and criminals, in that, while criminals offend against both God and society by engaging in activities that involve harming others, the LGBTI community is neither offending God nor harming other citizens.. This theological understanding that we all share the image of God means that the existing sexual ethic, as indicated in the biblical texts, can be applied equally to both heterosexuals and the LGBTI community.

The second dimension our theological reflection must help to us challenge is our conception of marriage, since some of the views we share are so far removed from reality that if we are to honestly apply such conceptions, not only do we find justification for our prejudices against same-sex relationships, but we also end up with a compromised heterosexuality. Focusing on the creation story in Genesis 1, the creation of male and female is clearly an attempt by the ancient Israelites to explain the beginnings of life. We all attempt to explain the beginnings, but there is hardly a mention of marriage, suggesting that marriage is not among the aspects of the divinely created universe. The creation narrative was not written by God, it is a human attempt to retell what people think happened in the beginning, and even the ancients realized that marriage was socially constructed; hence they simply refer to the creation of males and females in Genesis 1: 26-27. In disagreement with Mijoga, this creation story cannot be a basis for gender distinctions because all it does is focus on the sexes: different sexes are created by God. Gender distinctions are the result of the “fall” from gender equality;³⁰ hence they cannot be taken as what God prescribed. If anything, the creation of males and females shows that from the beginning, God designed companionship among human beings. Who we choose from the pool of human beings is left to us to

²⁹ Michael Gelfand, *The Genuine Shona: Survival values of an African culture*, (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1973), 175.

³⁰ Cf. Gellman, “Gender and Sexuality”, 320.

decide as we act on various signals that are in built into all created beings. This is what makes God; the ability to confound humanity. On the basis of the creation story in Genesis 1, same-sex relationships are being undertaken by males and females who are created by God, and who possess in them the image of God.

With this theological understanding, we must concur with Eddie Makue that “religious marriage [is] a covenant that two people make publicly with God, a commitment to mutual sharing, caring, faithfulness and support.”³¹ In this summary of marriage, the idea of children or procreation ceases to be the most critical or determinative factor; rather companionship is. Marriage is primarily about companionship; God wants us to live in companion with others. This companionship is not necessarily the dominant view in the Bible because the biblical texts were developed and canonized by those whose understanding of marriage was conditioned by particular environments, which may have favoured procreation ahead of companionship. With the exception of the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox, who teaches that marriage is a sacrament, all other denominations appear to agree that marriage is a contract between human beings, and thus the sexes of the partners cannot be the decisive factor since companionship can be given by anyone, heterosexual or homosexual.

Finally, in rethinking our theology in the context of same-sex relationships, it must be clear that the battle is not between heterosexuals and homosexuals, but rather between heterosexuals and themselves. Our instincts and prejudices are behind the creation of orthodoxies around the world in many different communities. Such orthodoxy is created by the elites and not by God, and the prejudices that have been expressed against same-sex relationships are our orthodoxy and not God’s orthodoxy. It makes sense therefore to argue that “the established Church ... continues to seek to retain the orthodoxy which Jesus challenged in his day”³², and that it is this orthodoxy that needs to be questioned.

Conclusion

As Christians, we believe in a God who is fair and just, a God who is compassionate and loving, but most importantly, through Jesus Christ

³¹ Eddie Makue, “Open Letter on Marriage: South African Council of Churches,” <http://sacc.org.za/news06/marriage.html> (accessed 9th June 2008).

³² Heather Garner and Michael Worsnip, “Oil and Water: The Impossibility of Gay and Lesbian Identity within the Church” in *Towards an Agenda for Contextual Theology: Essays in Honour of Albert Nolan*, eds. McGlory T. Speckman and Larry T. Kaufmann, (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications 2001), 211.

we believe in a God who takes sides with the victims of socially constructed prejudices, prejudices that are packaged as divine, when in actual fact they are not. Socially constructed prejudices disguised as morals are critically designed by societies to serve power relationships. In many societies, prejudices are dictated by the cliques of the powerful elites and more often than not, are far removed from or contradictory to the design of God for all human beings. The debate on same-sex relationships in Zimbabwe is awash with language that clearly betrays persistent gender prejudices. These gender prejudices are based on the assumption that social hierarchies are divinely ordained, with all females being categorized as of lesser qualitative importance to men, hence meaning that those men who “want to become women” are shaming the entire group of men by failing to live according to the social standards of manhood. This prejudice has been justified by the deployment of the creation story in Genesis 1-2. However, a closer re-reading of Genesis 1 shows that this text can in fact challenge our theological prejudice against same-sex relationships in our society.

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“Beyond the Bible”: Critical Reflections on the Contributions of Cultural and Postcolonial Studies on Same-sex Relationships in Africa

Lovemore Togarasei¹ and Ezra Chitando²

Abstract

Aside from for South Africa, all sub-Saharan African countries have criminalized same-sex relationships. However, despite these criminalisations, the call for the acceptance/tolerance of those involved in such relationships is increasing and many African countries have found the topic dominating public debates. The Bible is at the centre of these debates, being used by both camps: the pro same-sex relationships camp and the anti same-sex relationships camp. However, a close analysis of the biblical texts appealed to shows that there is a selective use of the Bible to entrench one's already accepted position. There appears to be more to Africans' resistance to same-sex relationships than what the Bible says. Hence, the basic questions addressed in this paper are: do Africans resist same-sex relationships purely on the basis of the teaching of the Bible or are there other factors at play? Which texts are used to deny same-sex relationships a place and how are these texts read and interpreted? A number of African scholars have looked at such texts and exposed the weaknesses inherent in the use of these texts to resist same-sex relationships. However, not much has been said on the need to respect culture, nor on democratic values and the place of postcoloniality in discussions on same-sex relationships in Africa. The paper engages all these factors as it critically reflects on the use of the Bible in the debate on same-sex relationships in Africa.

Introduction

The subject of same-sex relationships³ has recently raised serious debates in Africa. In Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe, the President of

¹ Lovemore Togarasei (PhD) is from Zimbabwe and is an Associate Professor in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies, at the University of Botswana where he teaches biblical studies. He has published widely in the areas of Pentecostal Christianity, HIV and AIDS and other socio-cultural issues affecting biblical interpretation in Africa. Email: togaraseil@mopipi.ub.bw

² Ezra Chitando (PhD) is from Zimbabwe. He is a Theological Consultant for the World Council of Churches Ecumenical HIV and AIDS Initiative in Africa and is Associate Professor in the Department of Religious Studies, Classics and Philosophy, at the University of Zimbabwe where he teaches Phenomenology of Religion and World Religions. He has published widely on various aspects of religions in Africa, of late in the areas of HIV and AIDS and masculinities. Email: chitsa21@yahoo.com

³ 'Same-sex' and 'homosexuality' are used interchangeably in this paper.

Zimbabwe, has accused people who have same sex orientation and who are in same sex relationships of being worse than pigs and dogs.⁴ In some countries like Uganda homosexuals have been threatened with death with legislators suggesting stricter laws against them (Uganda Anti-Homosexuality Bill, 2009). Besides South Africa, all the other countries of sub-Saharan Africa have criminalised same-sex relationships. Although studies have shown that the practice of same-sex relationships has a long history in Africa,⁵ it has generally not been accepted on the continent. Cases such as those of two Malawian men⁶ and those of gay weddings in Kenya⁷ in 2010 tell the story of the criminalisation of homosexuality in Africa. But despite these criminalisations, the calls for the acceptance/tolerance of people involved in such relationships are increasing and many African countries have found that the topic has come to dominate public debates.

The recent pronouncement by David Cameron, the Prime Minister of Britain, that his country would in future cut aid to African countries that do not respect homosexual rights, has intensified the debates.⁸ However, much of the research on this issue within Africa, has focused on the use of the bible in this debate, while culture and issues of postcolonialism are given negligible attention. We wish to argue that while the bible is an important source of the resistance to same-sex relationships it is not the only source. In what follows we examine the use of the bible both for and against same-sex relationships, but then move on to examine sources of rejection to same-sex relationships such as culture and the debates around postcolonialism.

Biblical Texts on Same-sex Relationships

Choon-Leong Seow puts the texts that are used against homosexuality into four categories: legal texts that explicitly forbid same-sex relationships (Leviticus 18:22, Leviticus 20:13), narrative passages that are said to illustrate its wrongness (Genesis 19:1-14, Judges 19:22), New Testament lists of inappropriate and wrongful behaviours (Romans

⁴ Tabona Shoko, "Worse than dogs and pigs? Attitudes toward Homosexual Practice in Zimbabwe," *Journal of Homosexuality* 57 (2010), 634-649.

⁵ See, for example, essays in Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe (eds.) *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands: Studies of African Homosexualities*. (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1998).

⁶ BBC News, "Kenya Chiefs block Mombasa 'gay wedding'," 11 February 2010, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/10130240>, accessed 10th October 2011.

⁷ BBC News, "Malawi gay couple get maximum sentence of 14 years," 20 May 2010, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/10130240>, accessed 10th October 2011.

⁸ BBC News, "Uganda fury on David Cameron aid threat over gay rights," 31 October 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-15524013>, accessed 14th November 2011.

Alliance of South Africa” Jennifer Jane Sistig and Sarojini Nadar, examine the theological beliefs undergirding the opposition to same-sex marriage in South Africa. They conclude by proposing alternative theologies of marriage based on queer and feminist Trinitarian theologies that allow for more just forms of marriage relationship.

The next three articles all deal, in varying degrees, with the importance of the bible in the same-sex sexuality discourse in Africa. Masiwa Ragies Gunda, in his article “Gender Prejudice in the Use of Biblical Texts against same-sex relationships in Zimbabwe” shows how the source of the debates on same-sex relationships are based on literal and erroneous interpretations of the Creation narratives. He proposes new ways of reading these narratives in ways that are more life-giving rather than life-denying.

Thereafter, keeping with the theme of the bible, but also moving the debate further, is the article, “Beyond the Bible: Critical Reflections on the Contributions of Cultural and Postcolonial Studies on Same-Sex Relationships in Africa” by Lovemore Togarasei and Ezra Chitando. They argue that far too much emphasis has been placed on the role of the bible in mitigating against same-sex sexuality, without due consideration being given to African cultures and postcolonial discourses within the debates.

Adriaan van Klinken, in his article, “The Homosexual as the Antithesis of ‘biblical manhood’? Heteronormativity and Masculinity Politics in Zambian Pentecostal Sermons” shows through a careful examination of sermons by a Pentecostal preacher, how the bible is used within those sermons to promote and inculcate ideals of manhood for contemporary Zambian men.

Moving away from the bible and onto matters of religion and culture, Julius Gathogo and Isabel Apawo Phiri, and Kudzai Biri in their articles argue that while same-sex sexuality has always been present in Africa, research in this area has often only focused on the issues of practices and not on the issue of orientation. Gathogo and Phiri, in their article, “*Iweto Lelemana, Mashoga and Nguiko: Same-Sex Sexuality in Kenya from an African Spirituality and Ethics Perspective*” focus on the framework of African spirituality and ethics in order to demonstrate that the issues of practice and orientation can only be understood within the framework of continuity of African communities.

In the same vein Kudzai Biri, in her article, “Same Sex Relationships: Perspectives from Shona Traditional Religion and Culture in Zimbabwe” shows the difficulty of studying the issue of same-sex sexuality in traditional Shona culture, when the subject is secretive and considered taboo. Nevertheless she argues that this is not an excuse for misunderstandings within the literature which fails to distinguish between orientation and practice.

The final academic article from South Africa, entitled “Us and Them in the One and Undivided Church: The Methodist Church and the Same-Sex Debate in South Africa,” by R Simangaliso Kumalo, provides a critical primer for the creative piece detailing the story of exclusion of Ecclesia de Lange. Using her story as a case study Kumalo outlines the various debates within the Methodist Church regarding same-sex sexuality, and proposes some theological alternatives towards the unity of the church.

We are very proud to have brought to you this bumper issue of the Journal, especially because the uniqueness of this issue is that the majority of the articles are the thoughts and reflections of African scholars on an issue that has often only received intellectual attention from outside of Africa. It is our hope that the immense intellectual contribution by the various scholars in this issue, will continue to be critically engaged with and will serve as a foundation for further research.

Isabel Apawo Phiri and Sarojini Nadar

1:26-27, 1 Cor. 6:9-10, 1 Timothy 1:9-10) and the creation accounts in Gen. 1-2.⁹ Below we analyse how the texts have been used to condemn same-sex relationships.

The above texts are often cited in general discussions by those who oppose same-sex relationships. Critical analyses of the texts have mainly been given by those trying to expose the weaknesses in the use of the texts against homosexuality. Some biblical scholars have employed these texts against same-sex relationships, for example Robert A. J. Gagnon.¹⁰ The texts that explicitly forbid same-sex relationships are given in the context of the Holiness Code found in Lev. 17-26. The acts mentioned in this code are called abominations (*to eba*), meaning "an abhorrent thing, or something detestable, loathsome, utterly repugnant, disgusting, intimidating in particularly revolting and conspicuous violations of boundaries established by God against the defiling behavior characteristic of other peoples."¹¹ As a result these abominations are punishable by death. Lev. 18:22 and 20:13 are unambiguous on the prohibition of same-sex relationships and the resultant death penalty. For those opposed to homosexuality, these texts need no further interpretation.

The same applies to texts that illustrate the wrongfulness of same-sex relationships. The story of Sodom and Gomorrah has long been treated as a classic Bible story about how God hates homosexuality. However, there are some scholars who, although they are against same sex sexuality, realize the weaknesses of using this story to argue their position on this matter. They note that the story does not deal with consensual same-sex relationships and so is not an ideal one on which to base Christian sexual ethics. Gagnon is one such scholar, but does observe that although this is the case, the author crafted the story to elicit feelings of revulsion on the part of the reader/hearer by making same-sex relationships inherently degrading.¹² Gagnon's interpretation is favoured by those who condemn same-sex relationships.

From the New Testament texts there are two terms that have been singled out from the lists of vices in each of the texts. These are

⁹ Choon-Leong Seow, "Textual Orientation," in *Biblical Ethics and Homosexuality: Listening to Scripture*, ed. Robert L. Brawley, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 17-34.

¹⁰ Robert A. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics*, Nashville: Abingdon Press (2001).

¹¹ Robert A. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 113.

¹² Robert A. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 71.

arsenokoites and *malakos*. Although the definitions of both terms are not clear and are therefore contested,¹³ those who are against same sex sexuality have preferred the translations that render the two terms 'homosexuals'. In this light these texts have been read and interpreted together with the Leviticus texts to underline that God is against same sex sexuality. Gagnon even believes that Paul's reference to same sex sexuality in Romans 1:26ff was influenced by his application of the Leviticus texts to Christian values. He says, "the very term that Paul employed for men who take other males to bed, *arsenokoites*, is a compound formed from the words in Leviticus 18:22, 20:13 (LXX) for "male" and "lying".¹⁴

On the basis of the creation stories, the fact that God created Adam (male) and Eve (female) has been used to argue that heterosexual relationships are normative. Because God created man and woman, natural sex is therefore heterosexual while homosexual is unnatural. Gagnon makes his argument on the basis of complementarity. He says it is only through a woman a being made out of man that she can be a suitable and complementary counterpart for him. He argues further, "Male and female are "perfect fits" from the standpoint of divine design and blessing. Male and male and female and female are not."¹⁵ This anti-same sex sexuality reading of these texts is the one that is followed by many Christians in Africa. However those who support same-sex relationships have also used the bible to buttress their arguments.

Firstly, one argument on their part has been that the Bible does not explicitly mention same sex sexuality. Howard H. Bess, for example, says there is no reference to same sex sexual orientation in the Bible.¹⁶ He then continues to argue that it is not proper to ask the Bible to answer questions that it never addresses. Further he says that Jesus, who always commented on the evils of his day, never addressed this subject. Secondly, the explicit texts from Leviticus are viewed as selective readings as there are many other prohibitions that the Church no longer observes today. No one enforces the law that forbids crossbreeding or that forbids sowing two kinds of seeds in one field (Lev. 19:19) any more. The stipulations on who should be appointed

¹³ This is discussed at length by Dale B. Martin, "*Arsenokoites* and *Malakos*: Meanings and Consequences," in *Biblical Ethics and Homosexuality: Listening to Scripture*, ed. Robert L Brawley, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 117-136.

¹⁴ Robert A. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 112.

¹⁵ Robert A. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 62.

¹⁶ Howard H. Bess, *Pastor, I am Gay*, (Alaska: Palmer Publishing Company, 1995), 82.

priest (Lev. 21) are also no longer observed today. Why then should the stipulation on man having sex with another man be enforced, they ask.

Thirdly, when it comes to narrative texts that illustrate the wrongness of same sex sexuality Choon-Leong Seow points to cultural differences between the context of the text and that of modern society.¹⁷ He notes, for example, that Lot and the old Ephramite's offer of women to be abused by the men would definitely be unacceptable today. Furthermore, it is noted in the case of Sodom and Gomorrah that their sin was not same sex sexuality as such. Rather, as the rest of the Old Testament (Isa. 1:10, Jer. 23:14 and Ezek. 16:49) testifies, Sodom symbolized the sins of greed, injustice, inhospitality, insensitivity to the needs and pain of others and general wickedness.¹⁸ Extra-biblical sources, like the writings of Josephus also mention the sin of Sodom as general wickedness.

Fourthly, with regard to the three New Testament texts, a thorough study by Robin Scroggs has examined their message as regards same sex sexuality.¹⁹ Guided by the hermeneutical principle that for moral and ethical passages of the Bible to be applied to today's world there must be some reasonable similarity between the contexts then and now, Scroggs points out that the context of Paul was different from today's. Apart from noting the difficulty of translating the Greek words associated with same sex sexuality into English, Scroggs also argues that the context of Paul shows no indication of interest in same-sex relationships between consenting adults. He noted the widespread practice of pederasty, a form of prostitution in which young boys were used sexually by heterosexual males.²⁰ Scroggs says it is this practice that Paul was against and any attempt to link what he (Paul) says with same sex sexuality is an incorrect application of the texts.

Finally, with regard to the creation stories, according to Mel White, the creation stories are about God's power and presence in the universe, not about natural and unnatural sexual relationships.²¹ Meanwhile, Choon-Leong Seow argues that the creation stories are about biology

¹⁷ Choon-Leong Seow, "Textual Orientation," in *Biblical Ethics and Homosexuality: Listening to Scripture*, ed. Robert L. Brawley, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 62.

¹⁸ Choon-Leong Seow, "Textual Orientation," 22.

¹⁹ Robin Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality: Contextual Background for Contemporary Debate*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983).

²⁰ Bess, *Pastor, I am Gay*, 85.

²¹ Mel White, "Looking for Answers about what the Bible says about Homosexuality," www.soulforce.org, (accessed 15th September 2011).

and the human status in relation to God, not about social and sexual relationships.²² He says that they were written against other ancient creation myths that presented human beings as slaves of gods, with these gods limiting human growth. The Genesis creation stories then highlighted that humanity was created in God's image and that God commanded to multiply.

The above are positions taken by those who would want to argue from the biblical text. There are also pro-same sex sexuality arguments that question the authority of the Bible in contemporary Christian communities. Such liberal approaches to the Bible is highlighted by Masiwa R. Gunda.²³ This argument is based on the fact that the Bible was only authoritative in a specific culture and its teachings are therefore culturally relative.

In this paper we are however, interested in the two camps' use of the same Bible to reach two conclusions. We therefore do not pursue further the question of the authority of the Bible. When both camps appeal to the same Bible but arrive at different conclusions, then one is forced to ask whether the different positions are indeed informed by the Bible. We turn to this question in the next two sections.

African Culture and Same Sex Sexuality

One other source for arguments for and against same sex sexuality is "traditional African culture." Two categories of African intellectuals are central to the appeal to African culture in opposing same sex sexuality. In the first instance, one could identify African intellectuals who wield political power. A number of African male presidents have used the cultural thesis to oppose same sex sexuality. Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, Yoweri Museveni of Uganda and Sam Nujoma of Namibia have all argued that African culture condemns same sex sexuality. While Nujoma has since retired and further, might not fall under the category of African intellectuals, Mugabe and Museveni have demonstrated considerable intellectual power, though one may not readily agree with their practical political strategies. These politicians have argued that same sex sexuality is a 'Western cultural perversion' that is being pushed down the throats of Africans. Former president of Kenya, Daniel arap Moi claimed that, "words like lesbianism and

²² Choon-Leong Seow, "Textual Orientation," 26.

²³ Masiwa R. Gunda, *The Bible and Homosexuality*.

homosexuality do not exist in our languages."²⁴ In his typical anti-Western rhetoric, Mugabe has consistently argued along the lines that 'if the Europeans want to uphold their homosexuality, let them do so. However, they should not force their perversion on us.' Mugabe angrily said, "Let the Americans keep their sodomy, bestiality, stupid and foolish ways to themselves, out of Zimbabwe... Let them be gay in the US, Europe and elsewhere."²⁵ This has been Mugabe's mantra whenever he tackles the theme of same sex sexuality.

The second category of African intellectuals that has appropriated culture in the discourse on homosexuality consists of certain church leaders and theologians. Many of these church leaders share the same ideological standpoint as the politicians. They contend that the whole debate on same sex sexuality is in fact part of the Western agenda of cultural imperialism. Being Christians, they read the biblical texts against same sex sexuality literally. They also contend that the West has lost its Christian outlook and has adopted a false reading of human rights. Writing from within the context of Nigeria, both Dapo F. Asaju²⁶ and Benson O. Igboin²⁷ contend that although same sex sexuality might be found in African cultures, it has never been accepted. They insist that the latest moves to coerce Africans to accept same sex sexuality as a "lifestyle" are part and parcel of the West's cultural arrogance.

The two categories of African intellectuals who have relied on African culture in resisting same sex sexuality maintain that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) overlooks cultural specificities and pretends to have a "universal" outlook. While they are willing to accept some rights as universal, such as, for example, the right to life, they contend that the right to non-discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation is not applicable to Africa. African culture, they claim, has no room for accepting same sex sexuality as a lifestyle. Politicians like Mugabe are keen to draw attention to the West's double standards when it comes to the issue of human rights. The same Western

²⁴ Marc Epprecht, *Mail and Guardian*. Johannesburg, M. & G. Media, 1995 (25th September), 3.

²⁵ Chris Dunton and Mai Palmberg, *Human Rights and Homosexuality in Southern Africa*. (Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 1996), 5.

²⁶ Dapo F. Asaju, "The Homosexuality Controversy in the Anglican Church Revisited: A Biblical and Contextual Perspective," in *Biblical View of Sex and Sexuality from an African Perspective*, ed. S. O. Abogunrin (Ibadan: Nigerian Association for Biblical Studies (NABIS), 2006), 325-339.

²⁷ Benson O. Igboin, "A Moral Appraisal of Homosexuality in Biblical, Western and African Worldviews," in *Biblical View of Sex and Sexuality from an African Perspective*, ed. S. O. Abogunrin (Ibadan: Nigerian Association for Biblical Studies (NABIS), 2006), 340-358.

countries do not hesitate to annihilate “small people” when pushing their own agendas, Mugabe has consistently argued. According to Gunda, there is contestation over the issue of rights. Thus:

The UDHR was promulgated in 1948 soon after the Second World War and that context has meant that the UDHR is historically limited to the West, hence where human rights threaten traditional values and political survival, their Western background is emphasized. This has not been helped by the central role Western donors and agencies have played in dealing with African states where human rights have been used as a basis for cooperation. In that context, governments that are considered to be human rights violators see in rights talk, a subtle way through which Western powers seek to usurp and undermine these governments. The concept of universal human rights has been greatly challenged in the homosexual debate in Zimbabwe.²⁸

A longer narrative is required to do justice to the political ramifications of the same sex sexuality debate in Africa and how the appeal to African culture is implicated in such discourses. We wish to draw attention to only three dimensions in this regard. First, the framing of the debate into “progressive Africans who accept same sex sexuality” and “backward Africans who resist same sex sexuality” is too simplistic and only serves to fire up cultural nationalists who believe they have the responsibility to defend indigenous culture. Second, the visibility of Western donors, agencies and governments, as well as pronouncements such as those by Prime Minister David Cameron in pushing the same sex sexuality agenda, makes it difficult for African advocates of same sex sexuality to refute the argument that they are “hired guns.” To say this is not to endorse this verdict but to highlight the challenges faced by the pro-homosexual camp. Critics note that the Western same sex sexuality advocacy wing tends to be domineering in its approach to the issue in Africa. Third, the absence of African researchers on this issue equips those who oppose same sex sexuality, who are quick to dismiss findings on same sex sexuality in Africa as part of the Western agenda to s(p)oil African culture (though it must be acknowledged that journals such as the present one wherein this article is being published which dedicates special issues to African voices on the subject make a contribution in this regard). We shall return to some of these themes below.

²⁸ Masiwa R. Gunda, *The Bible and Homosexuality*, 183.

Challenges to the Cultural Argument

In an effort to refute the argument that same sex sexuality did not exist in "traditional African culture," some researchers have demonstrated that there have been many recorded cases of same sex sexuality in different parts of Africa.²⁹ In addition, other publications focus on female same-sex practices in contemporary Africa.³⁰ The logical conclusion one must draw from such research is that, even if previously same sex sexuality was non-existent in Africa, it is now an existential reality. In this context, "traditional African culture" has had to come to terms with new realities.

There have also been analyses of the theme of same sex sexuality in contemporary novels and films in Africa.³¹ These stories confirm that artists, as observant cultural workers, are keen to break the silence on the topic. They have encountered same sex sexuality in their communities and use their artistic license to discuss the subject. This is a recent development as "allusions to same-sex desire have, historically, been rare in African literature and film."³²

However, we feel that sometimes the debate lacks logical coherence. The identification of same-sex practices in Africa is not the same as accepting same sex sexuality as a sexual orientation. Same-sex relationships in Africa could have been present in traditional Africa but they were never accepted as a form of sexuality. To catalogue the occurrence of same sex sexuality in areas such as mines and prisons is not to furnish evidence of same sex sexuality in Africa. What is required are far more in-depth studies that demonstrate that specific societies in fact accepted that men could have socially accepted sexual relationships with other men and that women could have socially accepted sexual relationships with other women. Furthermore, these studies would need to demonstrate that such relationships were

²⁹ See, for example, essays in Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe (eds.) *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands; Marc Epprecht, Heterosexual Africa? The History of an Idea from the Age of Exploration to the Age of AIDS*, (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2008); and Marc Epprecht, *Hungochani: The History of a Dissident Sexuality in Southern Africa*, (Montreal McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004).

³⁰ Ruth Morgan and Saskia Wieringa, *Tommy Boys, Lesbian Men and Ancestral Wives: Female same-sex practices in Africa*. (Auckland Park, South Africa: Jacana Media, 2005).

³¹ Timothy Johns, "The Prince of Pleasure: K. Sello Duiker's *Thirteen Cents* and the Economics of Homosexuality in Africa," in *Masculinities in African Literary and Cultural Texts*, eds. Helen N. Mugambi and Tuzyline J. Allan, (Oxfordshire: Ayebia Clarke Publishing Limited, 2010), 250-269.

³² Unomah Azuah, "Same-sex Sexuality Issues in some African Popular Media," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 43, no 1 (2009), 184-187.

understood as expressions of same sex sexuality, using the term as it is currently understood. Epprecht brings out the terminological challenges that emerge from deploying the term:

The language by which same-sex relationships are described in many of these sources is often Eurocentric – the word *homosexuality*, notably, suggests a clarity arising from a specific history of scientific enquiry, social relations and political struggle that did not exist in Africa and still does not very accurately describe the majority of men who have sex with men or women who have sex with women in Africa. The language Africans have used to describe such relationships is in fact commonly euphemistic or coy almost to the point of incomprehensibility beyond those in the know.³³

Where those who challenge the appropriation of African culture in discourses on same-sex relationships in Africa have a very convincing point is in their contention that traditional cultures were not homophobic. For example, even though those individuals who were considered to be threats to the well-being of society, such as (suspected) witches, were banished from society, those who were known to indulge in same-sex relationships were not subjected to such treatment. There were however steps that were undertaken in the hope of “rehabilitating” such individuals. These steps included rituals that were meant to eradicate the “bad spirit” that was believed to afflict such persons. It was hoped that after such ritual action, the affected individuals would “become normal; heterosexual.” Here, African politicians are misrepresenting “traditional African culture.” The threats and the violence that individuals who engage in same-sex relationships are subjected to are not consistent with the tolerance envisaged by indigenous African culture.

Another key point worth noting in the argument against African culture as a resource in opposing same sex sexuality is the notion that some same-sex relationships were believed to have been sanctioned by the ancestors. Although Gunda is quick to say that such same-sex relationships were not the norm and should therefore not be used to draw attention to the existence of the practice among the Shona, it is significant that they existed in society.³⁴ Shoko also acknowledges the existence of same sex sexuality in Shona society, although he indicates that it was regarded as “temporary.”³⁵ Morgan and Wieringa have drawn attention to the existence of same-sex relationships among women

³³ Marc Epprecht, *Heterosexual Africa?*, 8.

³⁴ Masiwa R. Gunda, *The Bible and Homosexuality*, 176-177.

³⁵ Tabona Shoko, “Worse than dogs and pigs?’ Attitudes toward Homosexual Practice in Zimbabwe,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 57, (2010), 634-649.

sangomas (indigenous healers) in South Africa.³⁶ However, it remains debatable whether such relationships are socially accepted.

In this section, we have sought to indicate that those who oppose same-sex relationships in Africa are not entirely driven by the Bible. Instead, they also harness African culture to bolster their stance. In fact, in most instances, they are more dependent on the "African culture argument" than the Bible. In the next section, we seek to show that defenders of same-sex relationships in Africa also rely on other arguments, apart from the Bible.

Human Rights, Science and Same Sex Sexuality

Those who argue in favour of accepting same sex sexuality are heavily influenced by the discourse on human rights. They argue that sexual orientation should not be the basis of discrimination. Consequently, those who would like to engage in same-sex relationships should be protected by the law and be free to express their sexuality. They insist that the rights of individuals are sacrosanct and should always be upheld whether they are in the majority or in the minority.

Proponents of the human rights argument in favour of same sex sexuality in Africa are critical of the idea that it is a "foreign practice." While they insist that the rights of Africans who engage in same-sex relationships must be respected, whatever the origin of same-sex relationships, they contend that it is nonsensical to charge that this is an imported practice. Thus:

In short, it is ludicrous to think that any manner of sexual love that exists today cannot be present in post-colonial Africa. Modern Africa is of course part of the world and all its loves and hatreds, laws and restrictions. And so to argue that Africans who engage in same-sex copy foreign, un-African activities is to claim a different, marginal and otherworldly identity for Africa in the world – an identity of Africans who do not experience the same kinds of feelings and thoughts as people on other continents. There is nothing particularly different about Africans, nothing that essentially distinguishes them from Americans, Asians, Europeans and any other group of human beings except their historical and social conditions.³⁷

³⁶ Morgan and Saskia Wieringa, *Tommy Boys, Lesbian Men and Ancestral Wives*, 231-258.

³⁷ Kopano Ratele, "Male Sexualities and Masculinities," in *African Sexualities: A Reader*, ed. Sylvia Tamale, (Cape Town: Pambazuka Press, 2011), 399-419.

In addition, a scientific explanation is given by some for same sex sexual orientation. There are several studies that have been conducted on this subject with some claiming the existence of a homosexual brain, a homosexual gene, intrauterine homosexual influence and homosexual influences through socialization and education.³⁸ The argument is that there are people who are born with a same sex sexual orientation. Such people are termed invert by Scroggs.³⁹ The opposite of an invert is a pervert, in this case, a person who engages in sexual acts contrary to his/her sexual orientation. This would include even homosexuals who engage in heterosexual activity. This scientific argument, however, does not necessarily exclude the Bible. Texts against same sex sexuality are therefore interpreted from the view that what the biblical writers were against was same sex sexuality by people with heterosexual orientation. Thus the pro- same sex sexuality position also makes use of other arguments over and above the Bible.

Critical Reflections: the Bible, African Culture, Science, Human Rights and Same-sex Relationships in Postcolonial Africa

From the foregoing sections, a number of observations can be made. First, the Bible plays a major role in influencing attitudes towards same-sex relationships in Africa. It enjoys an authoritative status in terms of shaping attitudes towards the phenomenon. How the Bible is read and acted upon will continue to be a major factor in debates on same-sex relationships in Africa. Although professional interpreters will remain helpful, popular readings of the Bible will play a dominant role in shaping attitudes towards same-sex relationships in Africa. Critical biblical scholars may expose the fallacies and weaknesses of using the Bible against same sex sexuality, however, popular readers of the Bible will continue to employ Leviticus and the Pauline texts to argue that “even the Bible condemns homosexuality.” In order to promote tolerance and dialogue, there is need to influence the popular reading of the Bible in Africa.

The second observation arising from this paper is then that African culture has also been mobilised by those who oppose same-sex relationships in Africa. They contend that “traditional African culture” does not approve of such relationships. However, it has become clear

³⁸ See Robert A. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice* and Martti Nissinen, *Homeroeroticism in the Biblical World: A Historical Perspective*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998).

³⁹ Robin Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality*, 12.

that culture has itself become another site of struggle. Who defines African culture? This question emerges as those who support same-sex relationships also appeal to the same African culture for support. The latter group points to the practice of same sex sexuality even in traditional African societies.⁴⁰ We observe that African culture is itself a contested concept. Individuals or groups that appeal to African culture should not assume that there is unanimity over what constitutes African culture. Furthermore, if culture is always "on the move", how static can it be, how much can it accept, and how much can it reject? This remains open for further reflection.

The third observation arising from this paper is that the use of science to justify same sex sexuality is problematic at this stage in two ways. First, there have not been any convincing scientific studies to prove that same sex sexuality is natural (i.e. simply a part of the human make-up). Many of the studies that have been conducted have been inconclusive either because they were not representative enough or because the interpretations given by the researchers were very subjective.⁴¹ Second, those who use the Bible to argue against same-sex relationship are not concerned with what science can prove. Their argument is simple; if the Bible is against same sex sexuality, then whether it is natural or unnatural is of no consequence. They would argue, for example, that although it is natural for a married person to be sexually attracted to someone else other than his/her marriage partner, this does not justify adultery.

Fourth, and crucial for us, the role of Western governments and agencies in the same sex sexuality debate complicates the discourse. There continues to be a strong feeling among Africans opposed to same sex sexuality that the homosexual debate in Africa is part of a Western sponsored neocolonial agenda for same sex sexuality. There is a sense among those opposed to same sex sexuality that Western institutions, especially those sympathetic to gay rights, are using their financial power to push and promote the same sex sexuality agenda in Africa. But the use of financial power is not only a feature of those Western entities promoting the practice. There is also a feeling that some evangelical groups opposed to same sex sexuality are using their financial powers to fund anti-homosexual campaigns in Africa. Thus the same sex sexuality issue has become a site of struggle for neo-colonial influence in Africa.

⁴⁰ Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe (eds.), *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands*.

⁴¹ See Robert A. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*.

Indeed as early as 1967, Franz Fanon said that same sex sexuality was associated with racism and colonial oppression.⁴² This argument has been recently advanced by Robert Aldrich who finds a number of the European imperialists like Cecil Rhodes to have had sexual and emotional proclivities oriented towards intimacy with other men.⁴³ Gourav Desai also cites Rich who talks about lesbianism being considered a left-over from colonialism and decadent Western civilization in Mozambique.⁴⁴ Citing cases from Zimbabwe, Namibia and South Africa, Neville Hoad states that gay and lesbian human rights are seen as a legacy of colonialism and as facilitating a new identity-form that threatens national values.⁴⁵ It is our opinion that as long as there is a perception that Africa is being “civilized” or talked down to accept same sex sexuality, it will remain extremely difficult to make headway in changing attitudes towards same-sex relationships.

We believe that same sex sexuality and homosexual tendencies have been part and parcel of African sexuality even before Western imperialism. However, traditional African societies had their own ways of handling it. As we have argued above, people who practiced same sex sexuality were not killed, as societies had other means of engaging with the phenomenon. The present call for the legalisation and public acceptance of same sex sexuality appears to be a new development that many Africans seem not ready to accept. Taking the legal route (by enforcing such acceptance through constitutional laws) before communities have transformed their attitudes is not very helpful, as this situation seems to be the reason for violence against those who engage in same-sex relationships. There are also perceptions within Africa that lesbian and gay rights are a form of access to international donor capital. One of the authors of this paper had a conversation with a church official who claimed that one international organization promised his church a large amount of funding if they were prepared to mainstream homosexual rights in their programmes. It is again our view that directing external financial resources to fund programmes that are perceived as “promoting” homosexuality raises the stakes even further.

⁴² Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, (New York: Groove Press, 1967).

⁴³ Robert Aldrich, *Colonialism and Homosexuality*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2003).

⁴⁴ Gourav Desai, “Out of Africa,” in *Postcolonial, Queer: Theoretical Intersections*, ed. John C. Hawley, (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001), 139-164.

⁴⁵ Neville Hoad, *African Intimacies: Race, Homosexuality and Globalization*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

The likes of Mugabe are quick to identify such programmes as extensions of Western cultural imperialism.

Fifth, we argue that debates on the acceptance or tolerance of same sex sexuality should consider seriously the nature of African culture. Tradition in Africa emphasizes that something is good and therefore easily acceptable if it brings good to the whole community. Thus individual human rights are still contested and seen as promoting Western culture. It is not surprising in some African communities to find those concerned only with their own rights, and not the rights of the whole community, being accused of witchcraft. Public acceptance of same sex sexuality is resisted now because people do not presently see its benefit to society. The use of the Bible and culture in resisting homosexuality in Africa should be understood in this context, we believe.

Conclusion

The same sex sexuality debate is gaining centre stage in public debates in a number of African countries. It is likely that this matter will continue to dominate public discourses in the foreseeable future. Although most of the institutions fighting for lesbian and gay rights do so from the human rights perspective, public engagement on the issue often makes use of the Bible. Second then, whereas there are some people in the region who question the authority of the human rights charter, there is a general acceptance of the Bible as an authoritative book. Because of this, this article has looked at the use of the Bible in the same sex sexuality debate. It has been found that although the Bible is often quoted for or against same sex sexuality it is not merely the teaching of the Bible that influences people's attitude to this practice. The article argues that African traditional culture, scientific claims and the human rights discourse are also appealed to. It is our opinion that further scholarly engagement with the topic needs to be done. Perceived Western sponsorship of pro-homosexuality needs to be further investigated while it is also important to point out and underline traditional Africa's ability to deal with the practice without killing or persecuting those found to be engaging in it. The voices of African gender scholars on this subject also need to be heard.

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The Homosexual as the Antithesis of 'Biblical Manhood'? Heteronormativity and Masculinity Politics in Zambian Pentecostal Sermons

Adriaan S. van Klinken¹

Abstract

This article offers a critical analysis of a series of sermons entitled *Fatherhood in the 21st Century* preached in a Zambian Pentecostal church, in which homosexuality is an explicit theme. The sermons are discussed in relation to the broader controversy on homosexuality in African Christianity. While it is often suggested that African Christian leaders actively oppose same-sex relationships in order to profile themselves in local and global contexts, the case study reveals an additional factor. Homosexuality is also used in the politics of gender, particularly masculinity, within the church. The references to homosexuality in the sermons create a counter-image of the promoted ideal of "biblical manhood". A stereotypical homosexual is constructed, who embodies two of the main features of Zambian men: their preoccupation with sexuality and their indifference towards the male role they are to play. This article reveals the heteronormative politics and theology underpinning "biblical manhood" and points to the problematic consequences thereof in relation to HIV&AIDS. It also suggests how to interrogate and rethink "biblical manhood" from the perspective of queer theology.

Introduction

African Christian leaders are becoming known for their aversion to homosexuality and their opposition to same-sex relationships.² While it is true that homosexuality causes disagreement and heated debates in Christian circles all over the world, this seems to be particularly the case in Africa. Atypical example is the opposition to the ordination of openly gay clergy in the American Episcopalian (= Anglican) church by a number of Anglican bishops from Africa. One could also think of the

¹ Adriaan van Klinken (PhD) is from the Netherlands. Until recently he was a research and teaching fellow in the Department of Religious Studies and Theology of Utrecht University. He is currently a postdoctoral researcher in the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London. The focus of his research is on masculinities and sexualities in African Christian contexts. Email: a.van.klinken@soas.ac.uk

² I cannot enter into the complex debate about the definition of homosexuality, but in this article it refers broadly to the orientation of sexual attraction towards others of the same sex, and the sexual identities (such as gay and lesbian) based on this orientation.

support given by various Christian leaders in Uganda, for the proposed *Anti-Homosexual Bill*.³ Although both examples actually are quite complex cases because of the critical role played by conservative Christian groups from the USA,⁴ they leave the impression that African Christian leaders, in the words of Marc Epprecht, “have taken up the cudgels against gay rights”.⁵ This impression cannot be effaced either by the highly respected Desmond Tutu, the former Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town, who frequently denounces the current homophobia in Africa and is a strong advocate for gay rights, or by a number of progressive African theologians who have begun to discuss homosexuality from a liberationist perspective.⁶

It is not difficult to recognise that African Christian leaders generally disapprove of homosexuality. A more interesting issue is why they disapprove, and various explanations have been offered in this regard. One of these explanations points to postcolonial African identity politics, where African identity is defined over and against the “morally degraded” West. As part of this, homosexuality is understood as un-African and as a Western invention.⁷ Another suggested reason is that African churches believe themselves to be custodians of the “true Christian heritage” that is to be preserved from the secularising Western world.⁸ Additionally, the African controversy centred on homosexuality is interpreted as an expression of power politics in world Christianity: due to the explosive numerical growth of Christianity in the Global South, African church leaders want to gain influence based on their numbers. In the case of the Anglican Communion, for example, this may be a

³ This bill, submitted by Member of Parliament, David Bahati, strengthens laws against homosexuality including the institution of the death penalty for people who are found guilty of “aggravated homosexuality”.

⁴ See Kopya Kaoma, *Globalizing the Culture Wars: U.S. Conservatives, African Churches & Homophobia* (Somerville: Political Research Associates, 2009); Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (2nd ed.) (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 234-243.

⁵ M. Epprecht, *Heterosexual Africa? The History of an Idea from the Age of Exploration to the Age of AIDS* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2008), 32.

⁶ Notably these are mostly women theologians, such as Mercy Oduyoye, Nyambura Njoroge, Isabel Phiri, Esther Mombo and Sarojini Nadar. For an elaborate discussion, see Adriaan van Klinken and Masiwa Gunda, “Taking Up the Cudgels Against Gay Rights? Trends and Trajectories in African Christian Theologies on Homosexuality,” *Journal of Homosexuality* (2012, forthcoming).

⁷ Neville Hoad, *African Intimacies: Race, Homosexuality, and Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 57-62.

⁸ Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, 235.

plausible explanation.⁹ Yet another explanation points to interreligious relations: African Christians would raise their voice publicly in order to not be associated with liberal Western attitudes to homosexuality by their local Muslim neighbours.¹⁰ The various reasons suggested here, all relate to the external profiling of African churches and church leaders in their local contexts, and in terms of the dynamics of globalisation and world Christianity in the postcolonial era. Certainly, this helps us to understand the enormous controversy surrounding homosexuality in African Christianity. However, the fact that contemporary African Christian leaders frequently address, and publicly disapprove of, homosexuality may also serve political purposes within their communities. In this article, I highlight the gender-political dimension of a certain rhetoric on homosexuality.

This article presents a case study of a series of sermons in which homosexuality is discussed, amongst other subjects. The sermons were preached by Bishop Joshua H.K. Banda, the senior pastor of Northmead Assembly of God in Lusaka. The focus on Banda is interesting because he is a leading figure in the rapidly growing Pentecostal movement in Zambia.¹¹ As the chairperson of the General Constitutional Principles Committee, installed by the Zambian government, and of the governmental National AIDS Council, he has considerable political influence. As a regular commentator in the media he is also a public figure. According to the church's website, "the Bishop has become a notable and influential voice on national issues in Zambia."¹² The church's TV program *The Liberating Truth*, presenting Banda's weekly sermons, is broadcast in Zambia and in the wider Southern African Development Community (SADC) region.

⁹ Mary-Jane Rubenstein, "Anglicans in the Postcolony: On Sex and the Limits of Communion," *Telos* 143 (2008), 133-160; Kevin Ward, "The Empire Fights Back – The Invention of African Anglicanism," in *Christianity in Africa and the African Diaspora: The Appropriation of a Scattered Heritage*, eds. Afe Adogame, Roswith Gerloff and Klaus Hock (London: Continuum, 2008), 96.

¹⁰ Philip Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 84.

¹¹ Cf. Austin Cheyeka, "Towards a History of the Charismatic Churches in Post-Colonial Zambia," in *One Zambia, Many Histories: Towards a History of Post-Colonial Zambia*, eds. Jan-Bart Gewald, Marja Hinfelaar and Giacomina Macola (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 150. Pentecostalism is a diverse and complex Christian revivalist movement that emerged in the 20th century, and has become a very popular form of Christianity in Africa and in other parts of the world.

¹² See Northmead Assembly of God Church, *The Bishop*, http://www.northmeadassembly.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=239&Itemid=18 (accessed 8th November 2011).

The case study approach is particularly valuable because it enables a detailed analysis and interpretation of discourses on homosexuality in their specific socio-cultural and religious contexts. Recently some ground-breaking work has been undertaken on Christian arguments in the public debate on homosexuality in African societies.¹³ Less is known about how homosexuality is discussed within church communities. A gender-critical and theological analysis of the above mentioned sermons shows that in this specific case study, the issue of homosexuality is employed as part of the church's gender politics, specifically with regard to men and masculinity.¹⁴ In the following sections of this article, I will explore the way in which homosexuality is discussed and I will critically analyse the underlying arguments and theological lines of thought. In the final section, I will show how the heteronormative¹⁵ ideal of "biblical manhood", promoted in these sermons, can be questioned and re-examined from the perspective of 'queer theology'.¹⁶ I am writing this article as a European scholar in the study of world Christianity who has a particular interest in the discourses and politics on gender and (homo) sexuality in African Christian contexts. Being aware of the potential pitfalls in this field of study from the perspective of postcolonial criticism, in this article I intend to present a careful analysis of an African Pentecostal discourse on masculinity and homosexuality, and I build on the work of certain African theologians to formulate my critical questions.

Homosexuality in the Theme of "Fatherhood in the 21st Century"

In the year 2008, Bishop Joshua Banda took the initiative to preach in his church a series of six sermons on the theme *Fatherhood in the 21st Century* (FTC). This idea was inspired by his concerns regarding men

¹³ Masiwa Ragies Gunda, *The Bible and Homosexuality in Zimbabwe: A Socio-Historical Analysis of the Political, Cultural and Christian Arguments in the Homosexual Public Debate with Special Reference to the Use of the Bible* (Bamberg: University of Bamberg Press, 2010).

¹⁴ In this article, 'masculinity' refers both to the ideological construction of male gender identity (what it means to be a man) and to the social position of men in gender relations. Because men are not a homogenous group, masculinity is understood as a plural phenomenon: various masculinities co-exist in a given context.

¹⁵ The term 'heteronormativity' refers to any ideas about sexuality in which heterosexuality is considered the normal or natural sexual orientation and in which homosexuality, subsequently, is considered abnormal and unnatural.

¹⁶ 'Queer theology' has recently emerged as a new engagement with issues of gender and sexuality in theology, in line with secular Queer Theory and poststructuralist thinkers such as Michel Foucault and Judith Butler. For an introduction, see Patrick Cheng, *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology*, (New York: Seabury Books 2011).

and hegemonic forms of masculinity in contemporary Zambia. According to Banda, there is a “distortion of manhood” in society, which expresses itself in phenomena such as violence against women, alcoholism, men’s uncontrolled sexual behaviour and men’s overall irresponsibility in the marital and family setting. He considers this “crisis of masculinity” as a key factor in the major socio-economic problems of Zambia, and of Africa more generally, such as the HIV epidemic, the high numbers of street children, the poverty levels and failing political leadership. In view of these concerns, Banda felt that as a church, “We have to restore a vision of biblical manhood”.¹⁷ Therefore, he preached this series and although the series title refers to fatherhood, it actually deals with the broader issue of manhood. Also, through other activities he and his church try to change men and transform their perceptions of masculinity.¹⁸ Interestingly, while preaching on masculinity, Banda also addressed the theme of homosexuality.

In four of the six sermons in the series, homosexuality is discussed (but not always at very great length). In doing so, frequent reference is made to recent developments and topical issues regarding homosexuality that appeared in the daily news at that time. One of them was the controversy regarding the first openly gay bishop in the Anglican Communion, Gene Robinson (USA) and his participation in the Lambeth Conference that year (2008). Robinson was denied an invitation to attend this decennial assembly of all Anglican bishops, but he decided to go to the conference venue anyway. The following Sunday, Banda commented:

Gene Robinson appeared at the gathering of our Anglican brothers and sisters. They made it very clear in a categorical manner that homosexuality is a perversion. But I heard that this bishop of the USA was saying that he was unashamedly homosexual and unashamedly Christian: it is a blasphemy. This Word does say that. It is a shame.¹⁹

Note the strong objection Banda makes by labelling Robinson’s statement a blasphemy – a term that is usually preserved for the most serious sin committed directly against God. Moreover, note the reference to the Anglicans who denied Robinson access as “brothers and sisters”. Later, Banda explained that he wanted to support the

¹⁷ Interview with Joshua Banda, Lusaka: 6th November 2008.

¹⁸ For a full case study on masculinities in his church, see Adriaan van Klinken, “The Need for Circumcised Men”: The Quest for Transformed Masculinities in African Christianity in the Context of the HIV Epidemic (PhD thesis, Utrecht University, 2011), 131-179.

¹⁹ FTC – 4. In the footnotes, FTC refers to *Fatherhood in the 21st Century* and the number indicates the particular sermon in the series.

Section 1

“Founded on the Holy Bible...” A Bible-believing Judge and the ‘Sin’ of Same-Sex Relationships

Allan Aubrey Boesak¹

Abstract

The appointment of Justice Mogoeng Mogoeng as Chief Justice of the Constitutional Court caused an uproar in South African society. Civil society organizations – gender justice, sexual justice groups and legal justice advocacy organizations expressed deep concern. Central to these concerns was the fact that the judge is a member and lay preacher at a neo-Pentecostal church, whose interpretation of the Bible can reasonably be described as “fundamentalist”. The Judge calls his church a “Bible-believing church” and believes his and his church’s beliefs are “founded on the Holy Bible”. This article probes the consequences of the appointment of such a “Bible-believing Judge” for same-sex relationships, one of the issues the Judge (and his church) hold strong views on. The article asks whether such beliefs serve the cause of justice, not simply in the judicial sense, but justice as the “abiding cause of Yahweh”. It examines the interpretation of some of the key texts commonly used to bolster such views and explores the theological, societal and political consequences of such use of Scripture within the context of growing homophobic violence in South Africa and the continent as a whole.

“A Man of Faith”

On 8 September 2011 Justice Mogoeng Mogoeng was appointed the Chief Justice of South Africa’s Constitutional Court. During the run-up to his appointment serious questions of whether Judge Mogoeng is a “fit and proper” candidate, and whether there are insoluble conflicts between his responsibility to uphold the constitution and his personal faith as pastor of Winner’s Chapel International were raised.

That a confessing Christian should be in such a position should not present a problem; in itself a person’s faith should not disqualify them

¹ Allan Aubrey Boesak (PhD) is from South Africa. He is a Honorary Research Fellow in the School of Religion and Theology at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Email: boesak@mweb.co.za

from taking up positions of public responsibility. Every judge in our courts has religious or ideological beliefs and it is impossible for them not to be influenced by those beliefs as they sit on the bench to pass judgement. To preclude Judge Mogoeng from such a position purely on the grounds that he so publicly professes his faith is not an acceptable democratic position to adopt.

However, much is at stake. Influential Nigerian Anglican primate Peter Akinola, has argued that “the primary presupposition” of ‘bible-believing Christians’ “is a high view of Scripture as inerrant and a sufficient guide in all matters of faith and conduct, such that its ethics and injunctions are of timeless relevance...”² And as his closing argument the Archbishop states, “I didn’t write the Bible. It’s part of our Christian heritage. It tells us what to do. If the word of God says homosexuality is an abomination, then so be it.”³

As it is, according to the most recent studies, some 60% of Christians in South Africa believe that “the Bible ought to be the law of the land”.⁴ Winner’s Chapel International claims to be “bible-believing: and is among those churches that adhere to the stance of which Archbishop Akinola speaks. When Pastor Errol Naidoo, head of the Family Policy Institute attached to Cape Town-based His People Church claims that Judge Mogoeng’s views are shared by “millions of South Africans”, he is not exaggerating.⁵ The disclosure that the highest Chief Justice believes that he was appointed by God is a critical piece of information for all South Africans, whether they are believers or not. As Songezo Zibi writes, “Mogoeng’s religious devotion offers the country an opportunity to reflect on the meaning of the secular, progressive Constitution it has chosen to adopt. It is the same Constitution Mogoeng has promised to uphold”.⁶

The issue is disturbingly basic: can the Sunday morning preacher Mogoeng separate the fervent beliefs he preaches from the Monday

² Quoted in Philip Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity, Believing the Bible in the Global South*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 3.

³ Quoted in Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity*, 3.

⁴ See “Tolerance and Tension: Islam and Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa”, *Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life*, April 2010, Washington, DC, 11. Similarly, 62% of Muslims across Sub-Saharan Africa support the Koran being the “law of the land”.

⁵ Pastor Errol Naidoo as quoted in “Cosatu Slams Mogoeng ‘War Talk’”, (*Cape Times*, 7th September, 2011).

⁶ Songezo Zibi, “Caught Between Faith, Philosophy and Jurisprudence”, (*Sunday Independent*: 11th September, 2011), 8.

Anglican Church in Zambia that had taken a stand against Robinson, as well as the Anglican Mainstream, a global coalition committed to “the Scriptural Truths”.²⁰ Banda’s comment on Robinson shows that the controversy on homosexuality in the Anglican Communion is not an internal Anglican debate, but creates trans-denominational allies in global Christianity across the lines of those who would respect, and those who would offend “true Christianity”.

In another sermon, Banda brings up another topical issue: the legalisation of same-sex marriage in some countries. He specifically refers to developments in California at that time, where the first same-sex couples had just been married after a decision of the Supreme Court to allow these marriages. Banda presents this as an example of the “departure from God’s Word” taking place in global society. He demonstrates an awareness of the role global politics has played in regard to homosexuality, saying that “they want us to talk about men having sex with men, women having sex with women, they want us to talk about transgender – and they call these societies progressive.”²¹ The “they” in this quote seems to refer to the liberal West (ignoring that South Africa is among the few countries worldwide that have legalised same-sex marriage). Banda has a clear message for the Western world when he says:

As Africa, we have a voice for the nations. Institutions coming to our countries with money to sponsor ...[practices] which are not original to us must be refused and rejected in the name of Jesus. Now they want to sponsor research that should begin to find out how many men are having sex with men. But what are we doing after the research? They will say, it is happening so let’s do it more. But when it happens, let’s stop it.²²

This quote reflects the postcolonial African discourse in which homosexuality is presented as a Western invention, where African identity is constructed vis-à-vis (and is to be saved from) a morally degrading West, and where Africa becomes a moral guide to the world, particularly to the former colonising regions that still hold strong political and economic power both on the continent and globally. On this point, it is also noteworthy that Banda, in one of his sermons, directly alludes to the political and public debate in Zambia about the country’s

²⁰ Interview with Joshua Banda, Lusaka: 6th November 2008. The executive secretary of the Anglican Mainstream, Dr. Chris Sudgen, is Banda’s PhD supervisor in the Oxford Centre of Mission Studies.

²¹ FTC – 2.

²² FTC – 6.

constitutional review process. Thanks to the “sodomy laws” that Zambia has inherited from its former coloniser, Britain, same-sex sexual activity (or “unnatural offences”, as the Penal Code has it) is illegal in the country. Banda’s concern is that this may change under the influence of a Western human rights lobby. So in his sermons, he frequently states that Zambia should continue to be a Christian nation by Constitution.²³ Specifically referring to homosexuality he says: “I am glad that our law has it as a crime, and that should remain so!”²⁴

The above paragraph shows that public and political issues, both at a national and global level, inspire Banda to address the topic of homosexuality. In his discussion of the topic, one can recognise some of the factors identified above which explain how and why homosexuality has become a major issue in African Christianity. Banda fits into his argument the African postcolonial identity politics on homosexuality and he joins the fight to save “true Christianity” from a secular and liberal Western world. His efforts to protect Zambia’s status as a Christian nation, where there is no space for homosexual activity, can be understood in relation to these two factors. However, there is much more to say about Banda’s discussion of homosexuality in *Fatherhood in the 21st Century*. The above quotes do not yet make clear why homosexuality is discussed precisely in a series of sermons on masculinity.

Homosexuality and the “Distortion of Fatherhood”

The first sermon of *Fatherhood in the 21st Century* was preached on Father’s Day. At the beginning of the sermon, Banda explains that this celebration day provides an opportunity to highlight the crucial role of fathers in their families and to emphasise the importance of fatherhood, not only in the family, but also in the broader society. The latter already indicates that “fatherhood” is not only understood in the biological sense: Banda also speaks about male figures with a father role in the church or in society. He then points out that it is urgent to discuss fatherhood because “the present day and time is marked by fatherlessness.”²⁵ In the rest of the sermon, he elaborates further on this, exploring his two major concerns about fatherhood in society. These concerns are “the violation of God’s order” and the “abdication of

²³ In 1991, President Frederick Chiluba declared Zambia to be a Christian nation. This declaration was included in the preamble of the 1996 Constitution.

²⁴ FTC – 1.

²⁵ FTC – 1.

leadership". Under the first sub-theme, homosexuality and, in particular, same-sex marriage is discussed.

According to Banda, countries that legalise same-sex marriage are shamefully subverting and perverting fatherhood as it is intended by God in the order of creation. His argument is twofold. First, he argues that same-sex relationships are exclusively based on sex:

The distortion here is as a result of the fact that these relationships, gay and lesbian relationships, where you have a man and a man or a woman and a woman, are purely defined by sexual orientation. Why it is a sin, same sex marriage, is because a man and a man are not engaging in sex as God says you should engage in sex. They are doing it the wrong way. And God judged that in Sodom and Gomorra. ... It is a diversion from the role that God has presented. Because marriage, even a normal liberal marriage between a man and a wife, is not purely defined by sex. It is defined by companionship, by love, by showing that two can become one. But the only reason why a man and a man are trying to come together is that because of their sexual orientation they claim they are only attracted to men. So that is a relationship purely defined by sex and it is against God's order.²⁶

Banda's reference to two men "doing it the wrong way" might be an allusion to anal sexual intercourse, but his argument about same-sex relationships that are purely defined by sex is broader. He presents a simplistic version of the widespread perception in some Christian circles in Africa (and beyond), that homosexual relationships are unnatural and immoral and, thus, a perversion.²⁷ Banda's argument is simplistic because he ignores the basic conceptual distinction between sex as 'sexual orientation' and sex as 'sexual activity'. When two men or two women enter into a relationship because of their sexual orientation, why would that necessarily mean that they only want to enjoy sexual activity and do not share love and companionship in that relationship?

In addition to the above argument, Banda raises a second question to show "the violation of God's order" in homosexual relationships. In his line of thought, man and woman have different roles according to the order of creation. So, therefore, gender roles are defined by biological sex. Giving a stereotypical representation of gay and lesbian relationships, Banda argues that one of the partners will always take up a male role, and the other a female, including the corresponding gender behaviour. As he portrays it:

²⁶ FTC – 1.

²⁷ Cf. Gunda, *The Bible and Homosexuality in Zimbabwe*, 213-230.

You will find that in these unions, man-man or woman-woman, one of them must take a role that is supposed to conform for instance to a father: one will dress like a man, and the other one will have layers of lipstick, add some very distinct eyelashes there, do their hair in a certain way, and they go to a modelling school to learn how to swing; and the women likewise will do the same.²⁸

In various sermons, Banda expresses his astonishment that in a same-sex relationship, as he sees it, one of the partners does not behave as he or she is supposed to do, but tries to perform an alternative role. For him, it is an obvious “distortion of God’s order” when a man or a woman deliberately ignores the role he or she is to play according to his or her biological sex.

The interesting thing is that the above objections against homosexuality are part of Banda’s argument on fatherhood and on manhood. For him, homosexual relationships exemplify the departure from God’s Word in global society, which also has distorted the true meaning of fatherhood. The increasing pressure of a Western liberal sexual rights agenda leads Banda into a reflection on fatherhood:

They want us to talk about men having sex with men, women having sex with women, they want us to talk about transgender – and they call these societies progressive, the champions of so-called rights in these areas. So I say to you: it is necessary for us to discuss afresh from a biblical angle what fatherhood really means in our society.²⁹

Clearly, for Banda homosexuality is an issue between “us” and “them”, the Christian nation of Zambia and an imagined progressive West.³⁰ However, a closer look at the sermons reveals that homosexuality is not only discussed to mark the difference to a liberal ‘Other’. There is also another factor, closer to home.

The Homosexual as a Counter-Image

The primary concern inspiring Banda to preach the series *Fatherhood in the 21st Century* is not with homosexuality and same-sex marriage, but with men and perceptions about manhood in contemporary Zambia. As I have explored elsewhere, in these sermons Banda addresses issues of male sexuality, HIV&AIDS, alcoholism, domestic and sexual violence,

²⁸ FTC – 2.

²⁹ FTC – 2.

³⁰ It is characteristic of this type of discourse that the West tends to be represented as a homogenous and liberal bloc. That there are conservative factions within Western countries is hardly noted. Cf. Gunda, *The Bible and Homosexuality in Zimbabwe*, 193.

male dominance over women and a general irresponsibility of men in marriage, the family and society.³¹ He explains these critical issues as resulting from the distortion of manhood he observes in society. Through the series he aimed to address this “from the spiritual side” and to teach men about the “biblical ideal of manhood”.³²

Now it seems that Banda's discussion of homosexuality in the sermons serves to address some of his major concerns about men and manhood in Zambia. His argument that homosexual relationships are purely defined by sex enables him to explain the true meaning of marriage: “Gods order of marriage is not defined purely by sex, because marriage is a much higher order than that. Sex is a gift in marriage, but it is not the thing that defines marriage. Hear me!”³³ Moreover, Banda further develops this theme with a specific focus on men. In one of the sermons, he addresses the “impairment of manhood” such as expressed in the popular belief that men are unable to control their sexuality and, therefore, have to visit prostitutes when they are away from home. He then states: “Gentlemen, you can survive without sex. God's presentation of marriage is much bigger and wider: it is about love, companionship, and commitment; sex is just one thing that God has put in there.”³⁴ The same argument about the place of sex in marriage is repeated, however, now it does not refer to homosexuals, but to Zambian men. In another sermon, he critically observes that “in our society manhood is defined in sexual terms.... The term manhood is equivalent to describing the male sexual organ.”³⁵ Coming back to this theme in a later sermon, Banda states:

I have said that some of our cultures where manhood is expressed only by one's sexual organ, they are totally distorted, because human manhood is not just defining yourself as a sex machine. That's why I have insisted that this whole thing that we have been describing, where a man and a man or a woman and a woman are trying to live together and even have a civil union, that is such a betrayal and such a departure from God's order! Because that kind of relationship is defined in sexual terms only. But marriage is not purely defined by sexual orientation, marriage is a communion, it is companionship, it is a love affair. And love is better than sex. Somebody says: 'Is that

³¹ Adriaan van Klinken, “Theology, Gender Ideology and Masculinity Politics: A Discussion on the Transformation of Masculinities as Envisioned by African Theologians and a Local Pentecostal Church,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 138 (2010), 9-10.

³² Interview with Joshua Banda, Lusaka: 6th November 2008.

³³ FTC – 1.

³⁴ FTC – 2.

³⁵ FTC – 3.

true?’ Yes! But some of you have sex without love. Men who rape women. Sex without love. So sex is nothing in this regard, compared to something greater called love .. [that] is at the centre of a relationship.³⁶

This quote clearly shows how Banda’s argument about homosexuality is smoothly incorporated in his argument regarding male sexuality and how it is used to address men in the church and to challenge popular notions of manhood in Zambia.

Banda’s second objection against homosexual relationships, concerning the transgression of gender roles, is also integrated into his argument about men and manhood in Zambia. According to Banda, man and woman have received distinct roles in God’s order of creation. This divine order is offended in homosexual relationships because, in Banda’s opinion, one of the partners will perform the role and behaviour incongruent with the person’s biological sex role. For that reason he considers same-sex marriage “a diversion from the roles that God has presented.”³⁷ In an elaborate version of the argument, he says:

Marriage is not a human custom, but a divine institution ordered by God. In marriage, man and woman have gotten a very clear role, there is a distinctive sexual identity which defines who we are as men and women created by God. We act in light of who we are and why we are here. We act in light of what God desires, so that we can mirror his holiness. This thing about same sex marriage [is that it] does not mirror God’s holiness, it is an affront in the face of a holy and just and merciful God, it is an affront and our society must reject it. We must find joy and gladness and fulfilment in maintaining God’s order.³⁸

The latter statement, about the joy, gladness and fulfilment in maintaining God’s order by performing distinctive roles as men and women, is very meaningful in relation to the sermon series as a whole. Banda’s major concern in the sermons is that men – the presumed heterosexual men in his church and in wider Zambia – do not fulfil the role they are supposed to play. Highlighting the “distortion of manhood” in the first sermon, Banda not only is pointing to the “violation of God’s order” as expressed in homosexual relationships, but also to the “abdication of leadership” by men. He clearly states that the distortion of manhood “comes as a result of the fact that men, the male factor in marriage and the male factor in society, have actually withdrawn from

³⁶ FTC – 4.

³⁷ FTC – 1.

³⁸ FTC – 6.

performing their role.”³⁹ Referring to Genesis 2 where Adam is put by God in the Garden to work it and take care of it, Banda argues that men have received the role of leadership in marriage and in society. However, he then points out that men have abused their role of leadership by engaging in domination and oppression, both in the marital and family setting and at the level of political leadership. That is why society, in his opinion, is marked by fatherlessness. Throughout the sermons, Banda reminds men of the crucial role they have to play according to God’s order. In doing so, he develops an idea of “biblical manhood” that is in contrast with the case of homosexual relationships:

Biblical fatherhood has in mind that a man, as God aimed him, in a family takes his role as a father, and a woman, as God has fashioned her, takes the role as a mother in the home, and the two become the package that bring into this life, by procreation, a family through the offspring. And nothing else exists besides that. And why should those who take up a so-called alternative life style still take on the role of a mother and a father if they are [of the] same sex, and then go into adoption of children? We can adopt children in families and that’s fine, but not in this fashion. Why do they want a different role when it is [the] same sex? ... There is no substitute for fatherhood. It is rooted in biblical manhood, and biblical manhood is rooted in creation. And in creation God made them male and female. It is Adam and Eve and not Adam and Steve. In creation, we see a man and a woman in their respective roles.⁴⁰

Clearly, the homosexual, who mixes up the divinely ordained gender roles, is presented here as a counter-image of “biblical manhood”. This was even done very literally, when Banda during one of the sermons tried to demonstrate how a stereotypical ‘feminine’ gay man would behave, generating laughter from the audience. He then commented: “You know, I can’t do it, that’s why I remain a man.”⁴¹

It can be concluded that in *Fatherhood in the 21st Century*, homosexuality is mainly discussed to depict how manhood can be distorted from its divine design. As Banda understands homosexuality, it represents two of his main concerns regarding men in contemporary Zambia: their preoccupation with sexuality and their indifference to the male role they are to play. The homosexual is presented as a counter-example of “biblical manhood”, in order to challenge men in the

³⁹ FTC – 1.

⁴⁰ FTC – 4.

⁴¹ FTC – 1.

audience to live sexually straight and morally upright lives by fulfilling their divinely ordained role as fathers in their families and in society.

“Biblical Manhood” as a Heteronormative Ideal

The aim of the series *Fatherhood in the 21st Century* is to bring about change in men and in popular forms of masculinity, as a response to the HIV epidemic and other social challenges. To achieve this aim, Banda addresses various critical issues related to men and masculinity, and he develops an alternative ideal of manhood. In doing so, he exemplifies the contribution that Pentecostal Christianity makes to promote more constructive forms of masculinity in Africa, which can help in the struggle against HIV and gender-based violence.⁴² Writing from the context of Zimbabwe, Ezra Chitando has critically commented that the Pentecostal efforts to transform masculinities, although laudable and helpful, are limited because they uphold the idea of male supremacy. “The Pentecostal approach is still rooted in the paradigm of the male as the leader [and is] not willing to challenge the myth of male headship.”⁴³ According to Chitando, Pentecostalism has to take a more radical distance from patriarchal cultural ideas about manhood, in order to nurture masculinities that can be redemptive and liberating in view of HIV and gender-based violence.

Where Chitando points to patriarchy as a common, fundamental characteristic of Pentecostal and hegemonic masculinities, the case study reveals one more deeply rooted shared pattern: the normative heterosexuality of masculinities, and the subsequent homophobia. While Banda’s sermons on “biblical manhood” are relatively balanced in terms of patriarchy – they present an example of “soft patriarchy”⁴⁴ – they are profoundly heterosexist.⁴⁵ The heterosexism is revealed, first, through a theology that considers heterosexuality as the normative and only acceptable form of human sexuality. Banda develops his ideal of “biblical manhood” theologically on the basis of the creation accounts. Elaborating on his frequent statement that “biblical manhood” is rooted in creation, he says: “In creation, God made them male and female. It is

⁴² Ezra Chitando, “A New Man for a New Era? Zimbabwean Pentecostalism, Masculinities and the HIV Epidemic,” *Missionalia* 35, no. 3 (2007), 112-127.

⁴³ Chitando, “A New Man for a New Era?”, 122 & 124.

⁴⁴ Van Klinken, “Theology, Gender Ideology and Masculinity Politics”, 12.

⁴⁵ Heterosexism refers to ‘the assumption of the rightness and normality of heterosexual sexual partnerships and the prejudice against homosexual sexual partnerships.’ See Paul Germond, “Heterosexism, Homosexuality and the Bible” in *Aliens in the Household of God: Homosexuality and Christian Faith in South Africa*, edited by Paul Germond and Steve de Gruchy (Cape Town: David Philip 1997), 194.

Adam and Eve and not Adam and Steve. In creation we see a man and a woman in their respective roles.”⁴⁶ For Banda, the notion of gender difference means that only a man and a woman can complement each other in marriage and become “one body”. Second, the heterosexism is manifested in the stereotypical representation of homosexuality, in the cliché jokes about gay men as being feminine, and in the statement that homosexual activity should remain illegal, implying that people in same-sex relationships are criminalised. In all this, Banda is reinforcing hegemonic masculinity rather than transforming it. This is particularly problematic in the HIV era. Referring to Zambia, among other nations, the United Nations programme on HIV&AIDS (UNAIDS) points out that men who have sex with men experience extremely high HIV prevalence and face major barriers to access HIV related health services, due to homophobia, discrimination and criminalisation.⁴⁷ Being concerned about this, Kenyan theologian and director of the Ecumenical HIV & AIDS Initiative in Africa, Nyambura Njoroge, challenges church leaders to make a “U-turn” in their theologising in the HIV context and to re-examine their views on homosexuality.⁴⁸ It seems unrealistic – but it is not impossible – that Banda will make such a U-turn sooner or later.

Queering “Biblical Manhood”

A recently emerging theological perspective on sexuality and gender is called ‘queer theology’. Queer theology is characterised, first, by a critical, deconstructive edge: it employs a hermeneutics of suspicion “questioning the (hetero) sexual underlying of theological reflections” in relation to other categories such as gender, race, and class.⁴⁹ This article exemplifies this approach, as I have critically revealed how in Banda’s sermons the homosexual is presented as ‘the Other’ as part of a heteronormative politics of masculinity, and how the promoted ideal of “biblical manhood” is rooted in a heteronormative understanding of gender based on the creation accounts. Queer theology, second, also has a constructive edge. In the words of Argentinean theologian, Marcella Althaus-Reid, it “needs to be a dissenting praxis, a praxis for

⁴⁶ FTC – 4.

⁴⁷ UNAIDS, “Reducing HIV Transmission among Men who have Sex with Men and Transgender People,” http://unaidspcbngo.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/20100528_msmpcbpaper_en.pdf, 3-4. (accessed 18th September 2011).

⁴⁸ Nyambura Njoroge, “Beyond Suffering and Lament: Theology of Hope and Life”, in *Shaping a Global Theological Mind*, edited by Darren Marks (Aldershot: Ashgate 2008), 119.

⁴⁹ Lisa Isherwood and Marcella Althaus-Reid, “Queering Theology”, in *The Sexual Theologian: Essays on Sex, god and Politics*, edited by Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood (London: T&T Clark 2004), 3.

transformation of structures of oppression which have been normalized by ideologies in power, in alliance with Christian theology.”⁵⁰ Being aware of the Western dominance in the regimes of knowledge and power in our globalising world, I feel that it is problematic for me as a European scholar to contribute to the transformation of theologies such as those presented by Banda. It is up to African theologians to decide whether and how to develop a queer theology that recognises sexual diversity in contemporary African societies. However, because I, whilst conducting research in his church, have developed sympathy for Banda and I also have a certain respect for his efforts to transform masculinities in the context of HIV, I would like to put forward one theological suggestion, as my contribution to an intercultural theological dialogue.

For Banda, “biblical manhood” is rooted in creation. The creation accounts are the theological basis of his understanding of gender and masculinity and of his rejection of homosexuality. However, in the sermons Banda employs an additional notion: the theology of Jesus Christ as the second Adam (cf. 1 Cor. 15). In his opinion, Jesus Christ has come as the second Adam to restore the ideal of manhood that was impaired by the failure of the first Adam. Now, the term ‘restoration’ has a rather conservative connotation. But in one of the sermons, Banda speaks about Jesus Christ as God’s “innovation of masculinity”, which entails a notion of renewal or – theologically speaking – re-creation.⁵¹ When this line of thought is further developed, the meaning of manhood is not rooted in a fixed heteronormative order of creation, but is open for change, for progress, for new understandings and sensitivities. Reflecting on masculinity from a Christological perspective, one should also take into account that in Christ “there is no longer male and female” (Gal. 3:28). Feminist theologians, including African women theologians, have taken this as an argument for gender equality.⁵² In a queer theological interpretation, this verse destabilises the heterosexual male/female dichotomy and thus opens up space for a plurality of sexual and gender identities “in Christ”.⁵³ In this space, Banda can

⁵⁰ Marcella Althaus-Reid, “Graffiti on the Walls of the Cathedral of Buenos Aires: Doing Theology, Love and Politics at the Margins,” in *Religion and Political Thought*, edited by Michael Hoeltz and Graham Ward (London: Continuum 2006), 256.

⁵¹ FTC – 4.

⁵² Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroads 1984), Chapter 6; Isabel Apawo Phiri, *Women, Presbyterianism and Patriarchy* (Blantyre: CLAIM 1997), 156.

⁵³ Dale Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press 2006), 77-100.

continue to preach on "biblical manhood", but with less patriarchal, homophobic and heterosexist undertones.

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***Iweto, Lelemama, Mashoga and Nguiko:* Same-sex Sexuality in Kenya from an African Spirituality and Ethics Perspective**

Julius Gathogo¹ and Isabel Apawo Phiri²

Abstract

The central question that this article is grappling with is: have Africans always been against same-sex sexual orientation? We respond to this question in four sections. In the first section we engage this question through a theoretical study using the framework of African spirituality and ethics as proposed by Magesa and Bujo. The central argument of this article is that while evidence of some same-sex practices may have existed in traditional societies in Kenya and elsewhere on the continent, this does not necessarily translate into same-sex sexual orientation. In the second section examples are given of *iweto* of the Kamba; and *lelemama* and *Mashoga* from Mombasa Swahili speakers of Arab descent as examples of same-sex practices in Kenya. *Nguiko* among the Kikuyu is given as an example of alternative traditional sexual practice to discourage same-sex practices. In the third section we explore more examples from the rest of the continent in order to show that research has focused on same-sex sexual practises and not same-sex orientation in traditional and postcolonial Africa. We conclude the article by cautioning scholars that by focusing the debate on sexual practices we run the danger of not recognising that the real issue it is not same-sex sexual practises that need protection by the law, but same-sex sexual orientation.

Introduction

In recent years, divisions over same-sex sexual orientation have torn apart the 200 year old unity of the global Anglican Communion. Of particular interest to this article is the fact that, the signs of division appear to manifest more in the African Anglican churches than elsewhere. Why is the issue of same-sex sexual orientation gaining

¹ Julius Gathogo, (PhD) is from Kenya. He is a lecturer in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Kenyatta University, Mombasa Campus. P O BOX 16778, Mombasa, Kenya, 80100. This article is part of his post-doctoral work at the School of Religion and Theology at the University of KwaZulu Natal. Email: jumgathogo@yahoo.com

² Isabel Apawo Phiri (PhD) is from Malawi. She is Dean and head of the School of Religion, Philosophy and Classics and professor of African Theology at the University of KwaZulu Natal, Private Bag X01, Scottsville, 3209, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. Email: phirii@ukzn.ac.za

such momentum in Africa, more than in any other continent? While some Christians in the global North have been more accepting of same-sex sexual orientation and partnerships, the global South, especially Africa, is more broadly in opposition. Same-sex sexual practice is illegal in most sub-Saharan countries in Africa, while some countries are also debating whether to change their constitutions to forbid same-sex marriages. In recent African history, the political leadership has largely tended to condemn same-sex marriages in the strongest terms possible. In particular, the erstwhile president of Namibia, Sam Nujoma, criticized the growing emphasis 'in the West' of equal rights for persons of all sexual orientations. In August 2002, Nujoma remarked thus: "When you talk about human rights, you include also homosexuality [sic] and lesbianism. It's not [part of] our culture, [for us] Africans. And if you try to impose your culture on us Africans, we condemn it, we reject it."³ Similarly, President Mugabe of Zimbabwe has also been outspoken on gay issues, referring to people who practice same-sex sexuality as being "worse than pigs and dogs."⁴

In contrast, Kenya's Chief Justice, Willy Mutunga, was quoted in the Kenyan media advising lobby groups to debate gay rights, arguing that they are human rights. Speaking on women's marginalisation in Uganda on 8th September 2011, at the launch of the Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA) office in Kampala, Mutunga said:

The other frontier of marginalisation is the gay rights movement. Gay rights are human rights. Here am simply confining my statement in the context of the human rights and social justice paradigm and avoiding the controversies that exist in our constitutions and various legislations ... We have succeeded in demanding our rights of movement and association although we cannot take them for granted. We should see less of the work-shopping in hotels, less of flip charts and tooth picks as we move to the country sides and make sure our people own and protect the human rights and social justice messages.⁵

Mutunga went on to say,

³ BBC News, "South Africa's gays target marriage," 11th September 2011, at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/>

⁴ Clare Nullis, "Amid criticism, South Africa passes same-sex marriage bill," *Associated Press*, Posted on *The Toronto Star*, 15th November 2006, Page A4.

⁵ See Joseph Kariuki, "Gay Rights Are Human Rights, Says Chief Justice Mutunga," *The Star*, P. 6, <http://www.the-star.co.ke/national/national/39845-gay-rights-are-human-rights-says-chief-justice-mutunga> (accessed 9th September 2011).

I find the arguments made by some of our human rights activists, the so called moral arguments, simply rationalization for using human rights principles opportunistically and selectively. We need to bring together the opposing viewpoints in the movement on this issue for final and conclusive debate.⁶

Do Mutunga's statements signify a new paradigm on same-sex sexuality issue in East Africa? How has it come about that the most senior lawyer in Kenya is advocating gay rights in a conservative society that judgementally treats same-sex relations as a non-negotiable issue? In his argument that human rights are principles that do not allow selective implementation, Mutunga's argument remains solid, and requires clarity on this issue in order for Africa to face its challenges. The answers to these challenges lie within the realms of political and religious forces. To this end, Mutunga took his first visit to Uganda as the new Chief Justice of Kenya, as an opportunity to discuss the debate on gay rights in a country where Members of Parliament (MPs) had passed laws that criminalise gay unions and where a renowned gay rights activist, David Kato, was beaten to death with a hammer in his neighbourhood. Police were quick to say the motive in the latter case was robbery, but members of the small and increasingly besieged gay community in Uganda suspected otherwise. A motion in Uganda's parliament was pushed by religious groups and some civil society groups who wanted all gays executed.⁷ Why this hard stance on same-sex sexuality?

Generally, same-sex sexual practise is taboo in most parts of Africa. It is illegal in Malawi, Zimbabwe, Kenya, Uganda, Nigeria, Tanzania, Ghana and most other sub-Saharan countries. Even in South Africa, where law allows the practice of same-sex unions, gay people are often attacked because of their sexual orientation.⁸ However, following the promulgation of a new constitution in Kenya on 27th August 2010, the Bill of Rights appears to have weakened the 'illegality' clause for it strongly emphasises the fundamental rights of any citizen.

While same-sex relationships are outlawed in numerous countries in sub-Saharan Africa, the question we are raising in this article is: have

⁶ See Kariuki, "Gay Rights Are Human Rights, Says Chief Justice Mutunga," 6.

⁷ See Joseph Kariuki, "Gay Rights Are Human Rights, Says Chief Justice Mutunga," 6.

⁸ See for example David Smith 'South Africa gay rights activists warn of homophobic attacks after murder' in *The Guardian* Tuesday 3 May 2011, 1. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/may/03/south-africa-homophobic-attacks> accessed 10/12/2011.

Africans always been against same-sex sexual orientation? The hypothesis of this study is: while evidence of some same-sex practices may have existed in traditional societies in Kenya and in other parts of Africa, this does not necessarily translate into an understanding of same-sex sexual orientation. In this article we respond to the above question and hypothesis in three sections. In the first section we examine the framework of African spirituality and ethics within which the debate of same-sex orientation is addressed. Second, we discuss *iweto* of the Kamba; and *lelemama* and *Mashoga* from Mombasa Swahili speakers of Arab descent as examples of same-sex practices in Kenya. *Nguiko* among the Kikuyu is given as an example of alternative traditional sexual practice to discourage same-sex practices. In the process we argue that these practises were there for practical and cultural reasons such as producing children because of the African understanding of community, but this is not the same as indicating an understanding of same-sex sexual orientation. In the third section we explore more examples from the rest of the continent in order to show that research has focused on same-sex sexual practises and not same-sex orientation in traditional and postcolonial Africa. We conclude the study by cautioning scholars of religion in Africa that our study is not denying that same-sex sexual orientation exists in Africa, but if every time one wants to prove that "Homosexuality IS African" one cites these practises, one runs the risk of undermining cultural integrity, and this may actually detract from the real issue which is sexual orientation, and ultimately recognising that it is not same-sex sexual practises that need protection by the law, but same-sex sexual orientation.

African Spirituality and Ethics

Our entry point into the debate on same-sex practices and orientation in Africa is framed in African spirituality and ethics. Here we draw from the works of Laurent Magesa⁹ and Benezet Bujo.¹⁰ Magesa has identified four characteristics of African spirituality which are:

- a) there is a link between African spirituality and morality.
- b) African indigenous spirituality emphasizes relationship with God through community.

⁹ Laurenti. Magesa, 'African Christian spirituality' in Stinton, B Diane (ed). *African Theology on the way: Current Conversations*. London: SPCK 2010, 68-78.

¹⁰ Benezet Bujo, 'Distinctions of African ethics' in Stinton, B Diane (ed). *African Theology on the way: Current Conversations*. London: SPCK 2010, 79-89.

- c) Community is understood to include: ancestors, other human beings, those who are not yet born, land and property.
- d) "The individual stands, morally, and spiritually before and in the midst of the totality of this community".¹¹

Benezet Bujo confirms that African ethics is grounded on an understanding of the human community as being three dimensional: the living, the dead, and the yet to be born. Within this three dimensional community, the existence of God is taken for granted. Nothing is understood outside an acknowledgement of the existence of God. He continues to argue that at the heart of the indigenous African community is a focus on life lived in abundance. It is also within the community that individuals understand their personhood and freedom. Within this context, Bujo argues that:

Thus to be called a person, does not simply require being a member of the community but actively participating in mutual, interpersonal relations individuals only become persons if they do not isolate themselves but act together with the entire community.¹²

Of importance is the fact that not all scholars of religion in Africa are contented with the African understanding of community. For example, while African women theologians have embraced the centrality of community in African spirituality and ethics, they have also cautioned about the need to bear in mind that the African community is structured according to patriarchal principles which are oppressive to African women and children.¹³ Furthermore the point that we are raising in this article is: in a community that puts much emphasis on continuity of the community through birth of children, what happens to the individuals who could not have children or were born with same-sex sexual orientation? In the next section we attempt to grapple with this question by looking at some examples from the Kenyan context.

¹¹ Laurenti. Magesa, 'African Christian Spirituality' 71.

¹² Benezet Bujo, 'Distinctions of African ethics' 85.

¹³ See Isabel Apawo Phiri 'The Church as a Healing Community: Women's Voices and Visions from Chilobwe Healing Centre' in *Journal of Constructive Theology* Vol. 10, No. 1, July 2004, 13-28.

Same-Sex Relationships in Traditional and Post Colonial Kenya

In indigenous African communities, there were some practises which resembled same-sex relationships but had a different meaning. A few examples will suffice.

The Practice of Iweto

The first example is *Iweto*, which was and is commonly practised among the Kamba of Kenya. It was also practised among the Gusii, the Kikuyu and other Bantu linguistic communities living around Mount Kenya.¹⁴ An *iweto* is a woman married to another woman among the Kamba. It is a phenomenon where a woman who is barren marries another woman to sire children in the name of her husband. As Zacharia Wanakacha Samita notes,

This woman to woman marriage was applicable in family situations where either a woman was barren or a couple failed to get a baby boy, even if they had girls. Such a woman would go to great lengths of finding herself a 'wife' who would give birth on her behalf. She would arrange for the courtship, payment of bride wealth and even look for the right person to stay with the newly wedded woman. This kind of marriage was rare and not the ideal model: it could sometimes mean getting a stranger (outside the family) to bring forth offspring. The barren woman was more interested in 'using' another woman to get a child without much consideration of which man really ... [fathered] it. But the *iweto*'s children, without exception would adopt the name of the man of the home, whether he was alive or dead. This was because it was his lineage that *iweto* was perpetuating.¹⁵

Iweto practice still occurs in some areas, but we need to point out that *iweto* does not necessarily indicate lesbian sexual orientation because the two women involved do not relate sexually; rather, the *iweto* provides "children from a person known in the lineage of the husband to the barren woman."¹⁶ Clearly, in a society where infertility is a virtual taboo, continuing the family line is more important than who fathers the children. Anthropologist David Maillu describes the practice as a practical way of solving a social problem. He notes, "Where there's an old woman who has no children, the option [is] to let that family continue

¹⁴ See *Daily Nation*, 26/2/2004

¹⁵ Zacharia Wanakacha Samita, "Same Gender Unions: African Traditional Analysis" in Martha Mbuggus et al., *Perspectives on the Forbidden 'Love,'* (Nairobi: Uzima, 2004), 37-38.

¹⁶ Samita, "Same Gender Unions:" 38.

by adopting a woman ... She is – to use the Western world’s interpretation – an adopted wife.”¹⁷ The practice differs from polygamy for it is a contract purely between the two women. The role of the “wife’s wife” is to provide children – who fathers them is irrelevant. Writing in 2004, Zakaria Samita talks about his interview with John Gichimu, the co-ordinator of Theological Education by Extension for the Organization of African Instituted Churches (OAIC) who explained: “in my home area of Kirinyaga, there [is] a woman who married another woman. They did not marry for sexual purposes. What she wanted was children who could inherit the wealth of her husband.”¹⁸ One can only understand this type of marriage within the framework of African spirituality and ethics with its focus on the individual’s responsibility to perpetuate the lineage in order to please the community of the living, the dead and the yet to be born.

The Practice of Lelemama

The second example is the practise of *lelemama* among the Swahili speakers of Mombasa. Stephen O. Murray builds the case for the prevalence of lesbian sexuality when he cites a woman’s dance, *lelemama*, in Mombasa, Kenya, which serves as a “recruitment strategy”.¹⁹ *Lelemama*, was thus seen as serving as a cover for women’s adultery, prostitution, and recruitment into lesbian networks without their husbands’ knowledge. However in the research of Margaret Strobel there is a different interpretation of *lelemama* dance. She argues that it was used during the struggle for Kenya’s coastal autonomy in the late 1950’s to liberate women, particularly those of Arabic descent. In particular, one hundred Arab women from Mombasa successfully petitioned the colonial government in Kenya to protest discriminatory legislation that denied them the vote but gave it to women of other ethnic communities.²⁰ She further argues that women in the second half of the 20th century and beyond have moved from *lelemama* dance associations such as *Ibinaal Wata* and *Buna Saada* to newer organizations such as the Muslim Women’s Institute and the Muslim Women’s Cultural Association; hence lobbying for a just society for all. The difference between Stephen O Murray and Margaret Strobel’s interpretation of the meaning of *lelemama* dance raise the issue of the

¹⁷ <http://app1.chinadaily.com.cn/star/2002/0502/fe20-2.html> [accessed 25/8/2011].

¹⁸ Samita, “Same Gender Unions:” 38

¹⁹ Murray, “Africa, Sub-Sahara,” 24.

²⁰ Strobel, Margaret, “From lelemama to lobbying: Women’s associations in Mombasa, Kenya”, Nancy J. Hafkin and Edna G. Bay (ed.), *Women in Africa: Studies in social and economic change*, 1976, Stanford, Stanford University Press, pp. 183-211.

importance of knowing the agenda of the researcher on same-sex sexuality in traditional African societies. It also raises the difficulties of researching a phenomenon which is a taboo in the community that one is researching. The fact that *lelemama* dance has evolved to the formation of organisations which deal with social justice issues for women brings into question the validity of Murray's conclusion that *lelemama* dance was initially a lesbian association of women with questionable morality. In a patriarchal society, those with power to construct the identity of women treat with suspicion any organisation that promotes the independency of women. We argue that is the case with *lelemama* dance.

The Practice of Mashoga

Third, is the practice of *Mashoga* among the Swahili-speakers of the Kenya coast. Shepherd reported that "In Mombasa [Kenya], both male and female homosexuality is relatively common among Muslims; involving perhaps one in twenty-five adults." In his view,

The Swahili [term] for a male homosexual is *shoga*, a word also used between women to mean 'friend'. Homosexual relations in Mombasa are almost without exception between a younger, poorer partner and an older, richer one, whether their connection is for a brief act of prostitution or a more lengthy relationship. In the former case, there are fixed rates of payment and in the latter, presents and perhaps full financial support for a while. But financial considerations are always involved and it is generally only the person who is paid who is called *shoga*. The older partner may have been a *shoga* himself in his youth, but is very likely to be successfully married to a woman as well as maintaining an interest in boys. Only if he is not married and has an apparently exclusive interest in homosexual contacts will he perhaps still be referred to as a *shoga*. The paid partner usually takes the passive role during intercourse, but I think it is true to say that his inferiority derives from the fact that he is paid to provide what is asked for, rather than for the [sexual] role he adopts.... The paying partner is usually known as the *basha* — the Pasha, the local term for the king in packs of playing cards.²¹

Shepherd argues that *shoga* are not classified as "women." For instance, they are not given traditional women's tasks to do, but are

²¹ Gill Shepherd, "Rank, gender and homosexuality: Mombasa as a key to understanding sexual options," in *The Cultural Construction of Sexuality*, ed. Pat Caplan, 240-7 (London: Tavistock, 1987), 250.

morning judgement he pronounces on the Bench? And if he can, is a contradiction so fundamental at all sustainable? Is the Judge not inviting a spiritual schizophrenia that will be impossible for him to manage?

The growing tensions between conservative, even fundamentalist expressions of faith and the South African Constitution are crucial to understand. Central is the question: What does it mean to be a "Bible-believing" Christian, and what does *that* in turn mean for the public role one is called to fulfil? For without a doubt Mogoeng, like so many other Christians, including myself, sees his public role as a "calling", a way of serving humankind in his service to God; a way of engaging in public worship, of honouring God. The question is whether or not that calling serves Yahweh's own "abiding cause" which is compassionate justice.⁷

Important also is a further indication of the broader context within which this appointment had taken place. In June 2011, the Equality Court returned a verdict of guilty in the hate speech case against Jon Qwelane, the journalist who had written a "particularly vile piece of homophobia" in his regular newspaper column titled "Call me names, but gay is NOT okay".⁸ Published in July 2008, Qwelane likened being gay to bestiality. "I do pray", Qwelane wrote, "that some day a bunch of politicians with their heads affixed firmly to their necks will muster the balls to rewrite the constitution of this country, to excise those sections which give licence to men 'marrying' other men, and ditto women. Otherwise, at this rate, how soon before some idiot demands to "marry" an animal, and argues that this constitution 'allows' it"?

"Astonishingly", the *Cape Times* editorial reads, "more than a year after Qwelane spewed forth his vitriol", the South African government appointed him ambassador to Uganda, "officially one of the most homophobic countries on earth". Pointing out that in this "rabid anti-homosexual atmosphere" Ugandan gay activist David Kato was bludgeoned to death in his home in January 2011, the paper voices its opposition to this appointment. "A man found guilty of hate speech of this sort cannot be the official face of South Africa anywhere, and especially not in a country where gays and lesbians are actively persecuted."⁹

⁷ Nicholas. "...the undoing of injustice and the bringing about of justice is Yahweh's own abiding cause...", Wolterstorff, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 81.

⁸ Editorial, *Cape Times*, 2nd June, 2011.

⁹ *Cape Times*, editorial.

In the midst of the furore, Pastor Errol Naidoo speaks in public defence of Justice Mogoeng and declares that the Judge “has become public enemy number one because of his Christian views and because he believes that homosexuality is a sin that can be cured through prayer.” In Naidoo’s view, “Justice Mogoeng is a man of faith. His faith and biblical views on homosexuality are shared by millions of South Africans.”¹⁰

At the Judicial Services Commission, responding to why he dissented in a case of homophobia (*Le Roux v Dey*) the Judge states,

I need to make the point though, that my Church’s opposition to homosexuality is not something peculiar to it, nor does the church have it as its core value, the attitude that homosexuality should not be practiced, or is a deviant behaviour. It is based purely on the Biblical injunction that a man should marry a woman and that there shall be a husband and a wife. The opposition to homosexuality is not therefore, a *sine qua non* for the existence of Winner’s Chapel International. The position it has adopted in this regard is similar to that of almost all Christian churches and religions, to which many other judges belong. It is unlike, for example, the Ku Klux Klan, whose core value is racial supremacy. The core values of our Church relate to the biblical teachings and the Church is not founded on homophobia. It is founded on the Holy Bible.¹¹

Several issues arise out of the Judge’s statement above: Firstly, while the Judge says this is not so, the church does, in fact, “have the attitude” that homosexuality is “deviant behaviour” and “should not be practiced”, but the judge argues that it is not a “core value”. However, the attitude that a church encourages is in fact based on belief which in turn is based on how the Bible is read and understood by that church, and so it is ultimately indeed a “core value”. On the matter under discussion, a church could (as some do) have the attitude that same-sex relationships are not sinful, nor deviant, and because that attitude is based on that church’s hermeneutics, it becomes a “core value” of that church to be a church that welcomes, affirms, and embraces Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Transsexual, and Intersex (LGBTI) persons.¹²

¹⁰ *Cape Times*, 7th September, 2011.

¹¹ “Response”, par. 22.

¹² The term “homosexuality” is a fairly recent one, coined by the Swiss sex reformer Karl Kertbeny in 1868. The Bible does not use the term. Recently the terms “gay” and “lesbian” have become more acceptable than “homosexual”, although the latter word is still widely in use. We must be reminded however, that there are more categories of sexual orientation than “gay” and “lesbian”, and where appropriate the terms “bi-sexual”, “transsexual”, and “inter-sexual” should be used. In this article, the all-inclusive acronym LGBTI is preferred.

rather used as “junior male kin are.”²² Basically, the main argument of Shepherd is that rank is more important than gender in Mombasa, and in the Mombasan conception of homosexuality. It is not clear from Shepherd’s research whether the *mashoga* are only found among the Swahili speaking Muslims or they are also found among the Swahili speaking Christians from Mombasa. It is also not clear as to whether the *mashoga* community was created as a result of economic hardships or it is a response to an individual’s orientation to same-sex sexuality. The construction of the *Mashoga* within a monetary economy leads us to the conclusion that its roots are not within African indigenous spirituality and ethics but a product of postcolonial Africa.

The Practice of Nguiko

The fourth example focuses on the youth in indigenous African communities. Within the Kikuyu of Kenya’s understanding of spirituality and ethics, adolescents (both girls and boys) were allowed to practice *nguiko* before marriage.²³ *Nguiko* refers to the practice of sleeping together of boys and girls, where fondling of sexual organs was allowed but within some well defined parameters. In his book, *Facing Mount Kenya*, Jomo Kenyatta describes *nguiko* as non-penetrative sex among the Kikuyu. *Nguiko* (literally ‘fondling’) followed a well-regulated code of convention. According to Kenyatta,²⁴ the Kikuyu youth were taught to develop the technique of self-control in matters of sexuality, which enabled a boy to sleep in the same bed with a girl without necessarily having sexual intercourse. At such occasions, girls wore garments around their waists that were tied tightly by their grandmothers. A boy would not dare to loosen a girl’s garment because it was a taboo (*thahu*), which would be reported and could lead to a long process of purification and social stigmatization, by the community and his age-mates (*riika*), to whom it would also bring shame. This is in line with Mageša’s description of the characteristics of African indigenous spirituality. He argues that:

The question is not directly what God wants of me, but what the community through our tradition expects of me. In wrongdoing I do not stand guilty before God, first of all; rather I stand ashamed before or in

²² Shepherd, 253.

²³ For details, see Hannah Wangeci Kinoti, “*Nguiko*: A Tempering of Sexual Assault Against Women,” in *Violence Against Women: Reflections by Kenyan Women Theologians*, Grace Wamue and Mary Getui eds (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 1996), 78-85; and Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya* (New York: Vintage Books, 1938), 149-154, 175.

²⁴ Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 159.

the midst of my community, one that is directly injured on account of my behaviour.²⁵

In *nguiko*, the man squeezed his penis between his thighs and fondled the girl until they were both satisfied, without penetrating. The girl was also barred, by custom, from touching the boy's sexual organs with her hands. However, in the case of a long-standing friendship a girl could allow a boy to put his sexual organ between her thighs and hold it tight in that position without penetrating.²⁶ Full penetration was a rare occurrence, never took place between casual lovers because of the consequences stipulated by culture.²⁷ This practice was meant to cultivate "healthy" cross-gender relations among the youth; and hence avoid thoughts about same-sex relationships. Thus, the *nguiko* practise was based on the wrong assumption that every African is born with heterosexual orientation. Therefore if one deviates from what the society expected of them by being attracted to a person of the same-sex, the person concerned had to keep it to themselves for the greater good of keeping the community intact. This is the tendency that we notice in the pronouncements of the African political leaders.

Same-Sex Relationships in Media

As a fifth example, we notice an explicit discussion of same-sex sexuality in the works of a number of African artists, novelists and playwrights in Kenya. In particular, we want to draw attention to the works of Charles Githae's *A Worm in the Head* (1987), Francis Imbuga's *Betrayal in the City* (1975), and Maina wa Kinyatti's *A Season of Blood*. In their work emphasis is on formation of same-sex relations due to circumstances. The latter two are explicit that prisons in Kenya enhance the pervasive practice of same-sex relationships amongst desperate-for-food inmates.

At the same time it is important to note that some literary works by women scholars appear to support same-sex sexuality in their bid to deconstruct patriarchy. Notably is the work of Kenyan writer, Rebecca Njau, who in her novel, *The Sacred Seed* (2003),²⁸ views same-sex

²⁵ Laurenti. Magesa, 'African Christian spirituality' 2010, 71.

²⁶ Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 159.

²⁷ Thigh sex also existed among the Zulu. For more details see Andile Manxanile, *Abortion: A Human Right?* Alice: Lovendale Press, 2000, 181.

²⁸ In *The Sacred Seed*, Tesa the heroine is a talented music teacher at a city high school who has been raped by a corrupt President, Dixon Chinusi. She is devastated and decides to leave the city and seek help from Mumbi, a traditional woman with special

female bonding in the indigenous African communities as a strategy for women to pool together their resources for their own gain. African women writers who celebrate same-sex sexuality include *Our Sister Killjoy* (1977). Again even in media, the issue of the difference between the practises of same-sex relationships to same-sex orientation is not made. In the following section, we broaden the discussion on same-sex sexuality to look at some examples from outside Kenya.

Other Examples of Same-Sex Sexual Practises in Africa

In this section we give four examples of same-sex sexual practises in Africa with the intention of showing that researchers focus on same-sex practices and not orientation. First, Stephen O. Murray who has conducted extensive research on same-sex sexual practises in Africa contends that there were other examples of practices of same-sex sexual relationships among the Bangala of Congo, and the Hutu and Tutsi of Rwanda-Burundi. In particular, same-sex relationships among the Hutu and Tutsi youth trainees was evident at the royal courts. Similarly, the Christian pages of Kabaka Mwanga's kingdom in Uganda were persecuted in 1886 allegedly for defying same-sex sexual advances.²⁹ Writing in 1927, Henry Junod further notes that there was an elaborate and organized practice of same-sex relationships among the South African Tsonga.³⁰ John Mbiti in his book, *Love and Marriage in Africa*,³¹ points out that homosexual and lesbian relationships were sexual deviations by boys and girls who 'did not know what they were doing.' In such a scenario, they would be reprimanded accordingly, albeit quietly so as to avoid letting the 'embarrassment' go beyond the house; and hence cause the 'stigmatisation' of the family. Mbiti's example highlights the African spirituality and ethics that cared more for the protection of the image of the community over needs and identity of an individual. Mbiti captures this very well in his quotation on the African philosophy of "I am, because we are; and since we are therefore I am".

powers who has set up a sanctuary for abused and traumatised women in a secluded place inside a primeval forest, which is eyed with greed by Chinusi and his associates. Tesa travels to the sanctuary to seek healing and peace of mind. Mumbi immediately recognises in her special talents and an intriguing supernatural phenomenon. She places a gourd seed in her hand and requests her to plant it behind the awesome sanctuary to be a symbol of an eternal seed which grows in the midst of weeds and thorn bushes; the sacred seed from which the dreams of love and hope are created. See Rebeka Njau, *The Sacred Seed* (Books Horizon, 2003).

²⁹ Stephen O. Murray, "Africa, Sub-Saharan," in *Encyclopaedia of Homosexuality*, Vol. 1, Wayne R. Dynes, Ed (New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc.), 23.

³⁰ Henry Junod, *Life of a South African Tribe* (London: Macmillan, 1927), 492-493.

³¹ John Mbiti, *Love and Marriage in Africa* (London: Longman, 1980), 213.

This is the cardinal point in the understanding of the African view of man'.³²

Second, according to an informant of the anthropologist Evans-Pritchard, in traditional, monarchical Zande³³ culture in the Sudan and central Africa,

homosexuality is indigenous. Azande do not regard it as at all improper, indeed it was viewed as very sensible for a man to sleep with boys when women are not available or are taboo In the past this was a regular practice at court. Some princes may even have preferred boys to women, when both were available. This is not a question I can enter into further here beyond saying I was told that some princes sleep with boys before consulting poison oracles, women being then taboo, and also that they sometimes do so on other occasions, just because they like them.³⁴

Reportedly then, in the monarchical Zande, men would have sexual relations with boys. A man paid compensation to another if he had relations with 'his' boy.³⁵ What is not emphasized here is that this was an abuse of the boys by men who had economic power. It was not a norm of the society but a deviation. In contrast some of the Zulu traditional healers are involved in same-sex relationships for the protection of their medicines. The ancestors who are the custodians of the African spirituality and ethics give permission to same-sex relationships among the traditional healers and their spirit wives.³⁶ In this case too it is yet to be discovered as to whether the Zulu traditional healers who practice same-sex sexual relationships do so for religious reasons only or it is because they have a same-sex sexual orientation.

³² John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2nd, edi. rev. and enl. London: Heinemann, 1990, 109.

³³ The Zande are an Islam-influenced "forest people," living where tsetse flies preclude stock-raising in what is now southwestern Sudan, the Central African Republic and northeastern Congo.

³⁴ Evans-Pritchard, E. E. (1932) *Heredity and gestation, as the Azande see them*, (Leipzig: C. L. Hirschfeld), 400-14. Also see Evans-Pritchard, E. E. *Man and Woman among the Azande* (London: Faber & Faber, 1974), 19.

³⁵ Also see Evans-Pritchard, E. E. *Man and Woman among the Azande* (London: Faber & Faber, 1974), 19.

³⁶ See Isabel A Phiri "Peacemaking and Reconciliation: The Contribution of African Indigenous Religious Women in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. *Journal of theology for Southern Africa*, 2005, Issue 123, 84-92.

Third, Geoff Puterbaugh has surveyed the practice of same-sex relationships in North Africa from a historical perspective. Though acknowledging its social disapproval in the public domain, he cites cases in Tunisia, Libya, Algeria and Morocco where the practice was prevalent. He nevertheless attributes the origin of this sexual orientation to foreigners, thereby 'exempting' indigenous Africans from it.³⁷

Lastly, Melville Herskovits gives examples of boys who practised same-sex relationships because of circumstances as is the case of prisoners that we cited above. He gives the first example of the Nyakyusa of Tanzania, where boys who left their homesteads between ages of ten and fourteen to become cattle herders in separate settlement camps would practice same-sex relationships among themselves.³⁸ This practice would however cease with marriage. Similarly, same-sex sexual practises among the Fon of Benin were largely seen as an adolescent affair which was phased out by marriage.³⁹ Murray also cites lesbian practices among girls and young women among the Azande of Sudan, Tswana, Ila and Naman of Southern Africa.⁴⁰ In all these examples Melville Herskovits does not differentiate between the same-sex practise and same-sex sexual orientation in the mentioned cases. Furthermore, he presents all the cases as a temporary experience of adolescents which came to an end once a person was married.

Conclusion: Same-Sex Sexual Orientation in Africa

In conclusion, we began this article by asking the question, have Africans always been against same-sex sexual orientation? The examples we have given, specifically from Kenya and then from other African societies have shown that anthropological, sociological philosophical and religious studies confirm the existence of same-sex sexual practises, although sometimes the interpretation of such practices are not always accurate. However, we argue that if every time one wants to prove that "Homosexuality IS African" one cites these practises, one runs the risk of undermining cultural integrity, and this may actually detract from the real issue which is sexual orientation, and

³⁷ For details see Geoff Puterbaugh, "Africa, North," in *Encyclopaedia of Homosexuality*, Vol. 1, Wayne R. Dynes, Ed (New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc., 1990), 18-22.

³⁸ Monica Wilson, *Good Company: A Study of Nyakyusa Age Villages* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 87-88, 196.

³⁹ For details see Melville Herskovits, *Dahomey* (New York: Augustine, 1937).

⁴⁰ Melville Herskovits, *Dahomey* 1937.

ultimately recognising that it is not same-sex sexual practises that need protection by the law, but same-sex sexual orientation.

Bujo has argued that “African ethics are derived primarily from the community and governed by what enhances abundant life for all.”⁴¹ From Bujo’s statement, there are three points we would like to conclude this article with. First, while same –sex sexual practices can be regulated by the community because of how it defines “abundant life for all”, the issue of being born with a same sex orientation does not seem to be acknowledged. This issue is crucial in response to the many African political and religious leaders who have openly condemned same-sex sexual practices and orientation, and have sometimes threatened gay and lesbian people with dire consequences.

Second, within the framework of African spirituality, we recommend the definition of spirituality by Dictionary of Third World Theologies where it says:

Spirituality is a cry for life and for the power to resist death and the agents of death. It provides the strength to go on, for it is the assurance that God is in the struggle. It fulfils the quest for self-discovery, self-affirmation, and self-inclusion, so the whole human community can live fully as human beings created by God.⁴²

In African spirituality all life is sacred and was created by God. The question which everyone needs to ask is: in my context what does it mean for my community and me to affirm the fullness of life? It then becomes possible to reject any spirituality that denies others to live their lives to the full because they were created differently from what the community defines as “normal” sexuality.

Lastly, within the framework of African spirituality and community it also includes the spirituality of finding God together as a community. This means, while emphasis has been on life having meaning as it is lived in community, we need to add that life should be lived in harmonious human relationships. In this community of right relationships, it requires working together between God and human beings, men and women from different ethnic background and sexual orientation. It is therefore important to take seriously issues of justice in the pursuit for right relationships and the preservation of community. Right relationships

⁴¹ Benezet Bujo, *Distinctive of African ethics*, 2010, 83-84.

⁴² Various EATWOT members, 2000 “Spiritualities” in eds Virginia Fabella M.M. and R.S. Sugirtharajah, *Dictionary of Third World Theologies* Maryknoll: Orbis, 189.

must also mean 'non competitive, non hierarchical, non dominating modes of relationship among humans'.⁴³

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⁴³ Susan Rakoczy 2004, *In Her Name: Women Doing Theology*, Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications. 380.

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Same Sex Relationships: Perspectives from Shona Traditional Religion and Culture in Zimbabwe

Kudzai Biri¹

Abstract

Attitudes towards same sex relationships are varied and largely informed by perspectives ranging from religious beliefs, to views on human rights, ethics, and morality and understandings on biological matters, among others. Various views and criticisms, culminating sometimes in polemic, have characterised this debate in Zimbabwe. The denunciation of same sex relationships denies their historical validity and hence condemns them as both problematic and immoral, raising the two questions of acceptability (i.e. normality as opposed to 'foreignness') and morality. In spite of a host of literature on same sex relationships, very few studies have embarked on an examination of perspectives from a specific African traditional religious and cultural group. In this article I will dialogue with scholars, especially those who have studied same sex relationships among the Shona. African traditional religions and cultures defy generalisations, and cannot be spoken of in monolithic terms, despite commonalities that run across them, hence in this article I focus on the Shona culture. If Shona traditional religion and culture do not make a distinction between same sex relationships and heterosexuality, from the perspectives of same sex union for education and ritual purposes, then how valid is the denunciation thereof on the basis of 'foreignness' and immorality? In this article I will seek to answer this question through a review and survey of relevant literature. The secretive nature of traditional cultures on issues that surround sexuality extends to silence on the discourse of same sex sexuality. It is argued that establishing perspectives on same sex relationships of Shona traditional religion is problematic, hence I suggest areas for consideration that can be of use to researchers.

Introduction

In this article I aim to highlight thought provoking areas in the study of same sex relationships among the Shona of Zimbabwe as I attempt to

¹ Kudzai Biri (PhD) is from Zimbabwe. She is a lecturer in the Department of Religious Studies, Classics and Philosophy of the University of Zimbabwe. Her area of specialisation is African Traditional Religions. Her research interests are in Religion and Gender/Sexuality, Religion and Politics and Religion and Diaspora. Email: kudzibiri@gmail.com

establish the perspectives of traditional Shona society on this matter. These areas might further provoke critical thinking and open avenues for re-negotiating the terrain of the debate on same sex relationships in Zimbabwe. The study of same sex relationships in Zimbabwe is gaining momentum. Tabona Shoko has already explored both Shona traditional culture and the Christian sectors' attitudes towards same sex relationships² and this article utilises some of Shoko's findings. In the present article however, I endeavour to establish the perspective on same sex relationships, focusing only on Shona traditional societies, without incorporating views from the Christian sectors. In this article I seek to critique the complex challenges that researchers are faced with as they attempt to establish what the perspectives towards same sex relationships of Shona traditional societies are, perspectives that have inevitably shaped the attitudes and ideologies regarding this matter. We need to carefully guard against 'diluted' perspectives that are 'purely syncretistic'. These are perspectives that emanate from or are influenced by the Judeo-Christian viewpoints or any other 'foreign' stances, apart from those arising from the traditional Shona societies. It is necessary to be alert to these syncretistic perspectives because many people in Zimbabwe have 'converted' to the so called 'foreign' religions that include Christianity and Islam.

In this article I do not take a position of arguing whether or not same sex unions traditionally existed among the Shona people, but rather engages the challenges that need to be considered when establishing what the perspectives on same sex relationships are, among Shona traditional societies. This position comes from the observation that pointers of the prevalence of same sex unions among the Shona are highly contested. We seem to have no absolute phenomena or evidence from the past that we can directly engage with, in order to come up with an absolute or concrete position with regards to the historical situation. This then complicates the discourse around same sex unions, making it difficult to establish what the authentic perspectives are. However, we attempt to show the gender dynamics that relate to the understanding of same sex unions in the traditional Shona culture, which it is hoped, will in turn open up avenues for further academic inquiry.

² Tabona Shoko, "“Worse than Pigs and Dogs?”: Attitudes Toward Homosexual Practices in Zimbabwe", *Journal of Homosexuality*, 57, no. 5 (2010), 634-639.

A Brief Overview of the Shona

Shona is an umbrella term for a number of different cultural and dialectical groups in Zimbabwe. As put forward by scholars like Bourdillon³, Shoko⁴ and Taringa⁵, these include the Karanga, Manyika, Ndau, Zezuru and the Korekore among others. Linguistic and cultural commonalities have influenced the grouping, although there are notable variations within these different dialects. Hence the grouping is not meant to claim total homogeneity, nor to deny the variations that exist. Mining the perspectives of same sex relationships within Shona traditional religion and culture is placed within the context of these various dialectical groups in different geographical locations in Zimbabwe, however, without particularising a dialect. This might pose some challenges. Firstly, the challenge of how to exhaustively include all of these different dialectical groups of the Shona that has, to some extent, traits of cultural variation. Secondly, there is the challenge of considering the secretive nature of the subject in question with reference to different groups that have been bunched together. This grouping is undertaken because of the need to critically establish or point out tenets indicating the prevalence and perceptions of same sex relationships among the Shona. The article attempts to unravel the pointers that seem to testify to the prevalence of same sex relationships among the different Shona dialectical groups, while at the same time offering a critique of the challenges that beset us when we try to establish the perspective of the same sex unions through the lens of the traditional cultural and religious heritage of the Shona people.

Challenges in the Study of Same Sex Relationships among the Shona

There are several challenges that impinge upon our study and these require careful consideration in order to guard against their undue influence. The first challenge is secrecy in traditional religions. It is well documented that traditional religions in Africa are characterised by secrecy or taboos. This secrecy extends to the subject of sexuality and the Shona are no exception. The secretive nature of African traditional religions means that death robs Africans of the custodians of their

³ Michael Bourdillon, *The Shona Peoples: An Ethnography of the Contemporary Shona, With Special Reference to their Religion*, (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1976), 16-17.

⁴ Tabona Shoko, *Karanga Indigenous Religion in Zimbabwe: Health and Well-Being*, (Ashgate, Ashgate Publishing Company, 2007), 634-639.

⁵ Nisbert Taringa, *A Comparative Analysis of Shona and Christian Attitudes to Nature*, (Saarbrücken: Lambert Publishing House, 2010).

religion and culture because when these custodians die, they take with them the 'treasures' of religion and culture and this means that the society, in particular the younger generation, is deprived of this knowledge. Besides that, there is an unwillingness to disclose information about the so called taboos. Thus Antonio⁶ validly notes that African traditional religion in Zimbabwe subscribes to a view of sex which silences any discourse relating to it. Shoko⁷ adds that society has named sex and sexual practice as secret and sacred, but also as evil.

The second challenge is to ensure that we adhere to a strictly traditional perspective. This is because some people present "corrupted" views that combine perspectives from different religious and cultural traditions. Added to this, the political leadership in Zimbabwe seem to command a large amount of influence in social thinking. Their position on same sex relationships, especially their denial of their historical validity in Zimbabwe has influenced people to the degree that their attitudes towards same sex unions have been built upon the rhetoric of politicians.

Indeed, the majority of people, influenced by the Judeo-Christian worldview, have rallied behind politicians to condemn same sex relationships, which is not informed by any critical engagement with the past practices. Thus Judeo-Christian theological positions, together with the political rhetoric has widened the contested terrain as regards same sex relationships in Zimbabwe. This article therefore, engages in a critical analysis of the perspectives from the stance of traditional religion, while paying attention to gender dynamics and at the same time being aware of the threat of 'outside' perspectives. Several studies, for example, that of Shoko⁸, claim that they have engaged elders and chiefs, the perceived custodians of Shona traditional religion. An engagement of such people requires a critique. This is not because they are not the "right" people to consult in this regard, but rather because of several other reasons. Firstly, the traditional chiefs themselves have been corrupted by various governments, dating from the colonial era to post independence Zimbabwe. Most of the chiefs are salaried and inevitably support governmental positions. Today, this means that they back Mugabe's ideologies including his stance on same sex

⁶ E. P Antonio, "Homosexuality and African Culture" in *Aliens in the Household of God: Homosexuality and Christian Faith in South Africa*, ed. P Germond and S. de Gruchy (Cape Town: David Phillip, 1997), 298-310.

⁷ Shoko, "Worse than Pigs and Dogs", 637.

⁸ Shoko, "Worse than Pigs and Dogs", 637.

relationships. This presents a challenge to attempts to mine the data from the supposed custodians of the traditional religion and culture. A second challenge is that the terms homosexuality and lesbianism are Western concepts. The terms have been fashioned and fabricated in the West but have gained universal application to sexuality in Africa. This article argues that when terms are imposed, there is danger of losing or distorting the original meaning. There is also a risk of misrepresentation, hence leading to false impressions or implications. We raise this point to highlight the fact that while same sex relationships have long been prevalent in the African context (though they have remained secretive), these relationships were not and are not construed in the same manner or with the same connotations as the terms homosexuality and lesbianism are in the Western sense.

Same Sex Relationship in Traditional Zimbabwe

There are six issues I want to raise under same sex relationship in traditional Zimbabwe. First, same sex unions are traditionally known by the word *chingochani* and those who practise it are *ngochani*. It is also termed *makunakuna* (incest) and it denotes a “bizarre” practice. Translating these terms presents a challenge. However, what is significant in these interviews is that they pointed out the fact that although the subject of same sex relationships is difficult to unravel; the practice existed and continues to exist. The reference to the Shona terminology indicates that Shona society had named the practice and it was pointed out that a society cannot name that which does not exist.

Second, children’s play, popularly known as ***Mahumbwe***,⁹ was the method through which children were taught sex roles, together with the broader socialisation process and initiation ceremonies that were directed towards their future in a marital union.¹⁰ Boys and girls imitated fatherly and motherly roles respectively, as part of their games and play. Imitation took place modelled alongside the traditional daily roles ranging from that of the father, husband, mother, wife and children. Also in some cases, where the boys and girls were of mature age, they would imitate sex. It is also significant to note that the Shona patriarchal gender roles were inherited in *mahumbwe*. For example, the ‘wife’ could be beaten by the ‘husband’ for failing to cook pleasant food or the

⁹ *Mahumbwe* refers to popular children’s play among the Shona. The children imitate social roles, for example, if a boy/girl is a ‘father’ he/she brings firewood, whilst the ‘mother’ is cooking. The roles that they play and duties assigned to each one is a result of the socialisation process in the home and society.

¹⁰ Shoko, “Worse than Pigs and Dogs”, 637.

'husband' could make all decisions without contribution from the 'wife'. However, there were times when children of same sex would engage in *mahumbwe*. Those positions and roles did not cease in the absence of members of the opposite sex (i.e. when only boys or only girls were present); rather, they continued and even included the imitation of the sexual act and the pleasures that accompany the sexual act. Who taught them this? Shoko¹¹ rightly points out that children among the Shona are quick to learn things which the parents do not want them to know, including vulgar sexual language. In this regard, *mahumbwe* draws out questions that need inquiry. What was the purpose and significance of 'same sex' relationships in *mahumbwe* as children's play and does it affect the adult's sexual life? Do these games – when engaged in by children of the same sex – translate into same sex relationships as conceived in the Western world?

Apart from *mahumbwe*, young girls often had sexual encounters as slightly older and more experienced girls gradually socialised young girls into adult female roles and relationships. Sexual intimacy was a real aspect of these relationships in which homoerotic touching and kissing accompanied the mutual lengthening of the labia.¹² In regard to understanding such cultural practices, we need to engage auxiliary disciplines (psychology, sociology and others) in our study in order to fill in the gaps. The auxiliary disciplines such as sociology need to determine, for example, how the children's play and the socialisation process of sex among older girls can influence adult sexual life style and the extent to which it does. However, the auxiliary disciplines are silent on this and do not provide us with adequate information. This then makes it difficult to adopt a concrete absolute position it trying to establish perspectives on same sex relationships among the Shona.

Third, is Chinamwari¹³ which was sex education that was provided for young girls and boys who were of marriageable age, in order to develop our understanding of perspectives on same-sex relationships. These boys and girls underwent certain cultural rituals that accompanied the initiation ceremonies. It is not surprising to discover that in the secluded area where these rituals were performed, an elderly woman assuming the role of a male, 'had sex' with the young girl in order to teach and train her how she should act/perform during sexual intercourse with her

¹¹ Shoko, *Karanga Indigenous Religion*, 18-20.

¹² E.J Patron, "Heart of Lavender", *The Harvard Gay and Lesbian Review*, 1995, 23-28.

¹³ *Chinamwari* is the traditional practice under which young girls of marriageable age were given sex education.

husband-to-be. The common practice known as *chinamwari* falls within this category. The Shona patriarchal culture emphasises sex education more on the part of girls than boys, and socialises girls that they should please men sexually.

In this practise we get a glimpse of the gender bias that is again informed by Shona patriarchy. While boys undergo initiation ceremonies at puberty age, such as testing their virility, they are not taught how to please their wife-to-be sexually. This emanates from the perception that a woman's experiences are not important in sexual issues, while the 'Shona bull' (Shoko 2007) has an insatiable thirst for women that cannot be quenched. Hence cultural practices like *chinamwari* will help to 'restrain' the 'bull' through his reception of sexual satisfaction. Since elderly women were responsible for training the young girls in *chinamwari*, this reveals how women have been recruited and positioned within the patriarchal structures in order to perpetuate patriarchal practices that are not reciprocal. The training of the girls took place over a prolonged period of time until the elder was satisfied that the initiate had gained the required expertise. At this juncture we will pause and ask the question: If an 'outsider' had an encounter with these women in such a secluded area, what would be the conclusion he/she would come to? Would he/she be aware of the implications of such a 'sexual act' would he/she view it as lesbianism? These questions help us to point to the difficulties and complications surrounding the subject of same sex relationships and the challenges that we encounter in the study of these relationships from a global perspective. Unless the subject of same sex relationships is contextualised, we are bound to arrive at false impressions and conclusions. This also cautions us not to make hasty interpretations or come to conclusions on the perspectives on same sex relationships from a traditional standpoint. The 'outsider' may not realise or understand that same sex unions are accepted within the boundaries of the transitory stage within a traditional cultural analysis, and that this does not count as a lesbian sexual orientation as conceived in the Western sense.

In light of this, it is essential to establish the feelings and attitudes of the initiates themselves before coming to any conclusions. However, the major obstacle in this regard is that Shona society has placed barriers on women discussing issues pertaining to sexuality. Women can not freely discuss their feelings, views and aspirations on this matter (and others), but are expected to accede to the dictates and norms of the patriarchal society. This is complicated by the fact that various groups

constitute the Shona. One can not impose the findings of one group on the other. We have already noted that although the Shona constitute different linguistic and cultural variations, scholars have generally tended to bunch them together on the basis of commonalities that run across the religious cultures. This seems to do an injustice to these cultural groups, for example, the Manyika of Manicaland, covering a very wide geographical area, have some noticeable inbuilt cultural variations. For us to be in a position to establish their perspectives means that we need to engage with the scientific evidence from these different cultural groups of people. Reference to a generic Shona becomes suspicious and we advocate rather the 'culture area' approach.¹⁴ Otherwise, without the evidence from within the particular 'culture area', which is examined within its own specific context, it is difficult to establish a perspective that is genuinely reflective of the people being studied. If such contextuality is taken into account, it is however feasible to then move from such a 'culture area' approach to a wider Shona perspective.

Fourth is masturbation among boys. Among the Shona, masturbation among boys was located within one of the cultural practices that was meant to test fertility and virility among boys before they were married. They were taught to masturbate in relative openness while standing with their feet in the river. If the sperm floated, the boy was deemed impotent, while the sinking sperm was a sign of maturity. This cultural practice seems to have been informed more by the Shona understanding of procreation as central in sexual relations.

Although the practice of public masturbation camouflaged personal feelings, it could have encouraged a clandestine homosexual relationship that was not readily interpreted as such by society.¹⁵ Aschwanden¹⁶ reiterates the same point by arguing that among the Karanga, masturbation between two boys is considered irrelevant since it does not lead to "genuine" homosexuality and thus is simply regarded as transitory stage. However, this masturbation, in Aschwanden's view, could well develop into homosexuality later on in a person's life, but this is mostly hindered by the adoption of heterosexual marital life which is

¹⁴ F Mbon, "Some Methodological Issues in the Academic Article of West African Traditional Religions" in *The Article of Religions in Africa: Past Present and Prospects*, eds. J Platvoet, J. Cox, and J. Olupona, (Cambridge: Roots and Branches 1996), 172-182.

¹⁵ Shoko, "Worse than Pigs and Dogs", 639.

¹⁶ Herbert Aschwanden, *Karanga Mythology: An Analysis of the consciousness of the Karanga*, (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1989), 75.

enforced by the Karanga. Again, like in the case of the children's play we are not certain whether the cultural practice would influence adult sexual life or whether it simply waned as the boys grew up.

Fifth is male court place. Eppretcht¹⁷ holds that men sat at the *padare* (court place) – an all male discussion forum where they spoke about issues that were kept secret from women. One can detect a strong patriarchal under-current in the all male discussion forums. Women were viewed as weak (faint hearted/cowards) and hence were excluded from the forums that made important decisions. Decisions that pertain to family issues were also made without consulting women. In this forum, male homosexuality was discouraged not because it was immoral, but because of how it impacted on the patriarchal principle of the importance of male sexuality for the purposes of procreation. The forums condemned same sex unions because it wasted male seed. Shoko¹⁸ adds that this explains why same sex unions between young boys were tolerated, while such union between boys of marriageable age was proscribed. Chigweshe¹⁹ also argues that in same sex unions, one of the two males takes on the role of a wife, which denigrates and challenges the idea of male supremacy and patriarchal hierarchy. This might also explain the uncompromising denunciation of same sex sexuality in Zimbabwe since the Shona are a patriarchal society. Accepting same sex relationships distorts patriarchal social roles. Apart from confusing the sex roles, it also brings to the fore the reason why women are relegated to an inferior position and why they are viewed as people who can not be listened to or heard in issues pertaining to sex. This emanates from the patriarchal view that men are superior to women and that the latter should remain subservient to and at the service and mercy of the former.

Lastly, Shoko²⁰ points out that scholars hold that same sex sexuality is encouraged most readily in homological activities where the sexes live in relative separation. Thus, homosexual activities tended to arise where there are polygamous families within which women sought to support one another emotionally and physically. Shoko's observation on the need for women to emotionally and physically support one another as a

¹⁷ Eppretcht, "Pre-modern and early colonial Sub-Saharan Africa", in *The Encyclopaedia of Homosexuality*, ed. G.E. Maggerty, (New York: Garland Press, 1998), 5.

¹⁸ Shoko, "Worse than Pigs and Dogs", 637.

¹⁹ R. Chigweshe, "Homosexuality: A Zimbabwean Religious Perspective", (Honours Dissertation, University of Zimbabwe, 1996), 12.

²⁰ Shoko, "Worse than Pigs and Dogs" 639.

result of sexual deprivation from their husbands opens up avenues for critique. Firstly, it exposes the loopholes of polygamous marriages and challenges defenders of patriarchy who see nothing wrong with polygamy. The reality is that polygamy fails to take into account the entire needs of women. Secondly, we wonder, when the women sought to support each other through same sex relations, could it possibly be interpreted as a form of protest against their sexual deprivation by their husbands? Thirdly, this practice disregards the limited patriarchal view of sex as penetration, which undermines the equally significant same sex unions among girls or women. This is a pointer to the fact that same sex relationships among women were not only prevalent, but nurtured within some traditional cultural practices.

In the case of boys, they spent a great deal of time herding their cattle who grazed the pastures far away from home, while the girls spent time doing household chores. Homoerotic touching and fondling between two youths of the same sex at puberty did occur, fostering potential implications for future genuine same sex sexual tendencies.²¹

Views on the Meaning/Significance of Same Sex Relationships

Divergent views on same sex relationships exist among the Shona in Zimbabwe. One perception, perhaps influenced by ideas from the West is that one engages in same sex relationships because one can not get satisfaction in a heterosexual relationship. The other perception is that while there may be a relative acceptance of same sex practices, these practices however, are not understood as indicative that the persons engaging in them fall within that modern, Western definition of "homosexual". This is because those who engage in same sex unions may simply want to relieve sexual urges or seek love in contexts when heterosexual outlets are denied them. A good example in Zimbabwe has been necessitated by colonial structures such as prisons, farms, mine compounds, township hostels, and boarding schools among others, all of which are contexts viewed as promoting same sex relationships. Convicted prisoners incarcerated in prisons encourage the growth and development of homosexual activities, while in mining compound environments, the same goes for migrant labourers.²²

²¹ M Sibanda, "Attitudes towards homosexuality among Christian Zimbabweans", (Honours Dissertation, University of Zimbabwe, 1998), 43-44.

²² Shoko, "Worse than Pigs and Dogs", 641.

A further point that we need to take note of is the emphasis of responses to male same sex relationships on the role of women, which is influenced by the patriarchal society. The desirable purpose of sex and marriage is to bear children, which is the task performed by women. The value that is attached to children has been reiterated by President Mugabe when he condemned same sex relationships: "...Leave whites to do that, I received mails and calls from all over the world, some supporting me and some castigating me for castigating the homosexuals. To those who are homosexuals, my challenge to you is ... [to] prove to me you can be pregnant."²³

Hence the view of Mugabe represents that of many Shona people: if you do not want to be married, why should you engage in sex, and if you do not want children why should you marry? Same sex relationships could proceed unnoticed because they do not lead to procreation. The patriarchal nature of the Shona society makes it difficult to detect same sex relationships among women. Such same sex activities could thus go unnoticed by males.²⁴ As pointed out by Gunda²⁵, this might be linked to the bias that the patriarchal society has about its conceptualisation of sex. They conceive it as penetration, which is why same sex relationships among women are not 'an issue' in society, and according to Shoko²⁶, lesbianism could unconsciously be accommodated since men remained relatively blind to it. Their sexuality was a matter of indifference to men since their main role was to produce children and women's needs for sexual pleasure was neglected in a state of polygamy.

Analysis

It seems that Zimbabwean society has a generalised opinion of those who engage in same sex relationships as social deviants and sinners

²³ In 1995, President Robert Mugabe, on a series of occasions castigated homosexuals on the national television station, the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation and in the *Herald* newspaper. There were several responses to this, and on 21st February 2008, during the 21st February Movement Celebrations in Harare, he replied to criticisms of his castigations by further denouncing gays and lesbians and claimed that lesbianism and homosexuality are practices of white people.

²⁴ Shoko, "Worse than Pigs and Dogs", 638.

²⁵ R.M Gunda, *The Bible and Homosexuality in Zimbabwe: A Socio-Historical Analysis of the Political, Cultural and Christian Arguments in the Homosexual Public debate With Special reference to the Use of the Bible*, (Bamberg: University of Bamberg Press, 2010), 45.

²⁶ Shoko, "Worse than Pigs and Dogs", 639.

Secondly, the church's "core value" is not homophobia, the judge argues, it is "the Holy Bible". Here the Bible's complexity is not recognised – and not just as regards the issue under discussion. Indeed, a fascinating aspect of the Bible is the struggle within the Scriptures themselves to find and hear the "voice of God". Where, for instance does one hear the voice of God on the question of war? In the chilling instruction from God to Israel in the *herem*, the "holy war" instruction, to "utterly destroy" Israel's enemies? "Make no covenant with them" says Deuteronomy 7:1-2; and in Deuteronomy 20:16-18, the text reads "You shall annihilate them". Or do we hear the voice of God in the words of the prophet Isaiah who stridently denounces even the idea that security is to be found in military strength and military alliances (Is. 31:1-5)?¹³ Where is God's word: in the annihilation of one's enemies, or in Jesus' injunction to love the enemy?

Thirdly, the judge argues that the teachings of the church are based "purely on the biblical injunction that a man should marry a woman and that there shall be husband and wife". This is a highly ambiguous view. In the Bible itself marriage evolves from polygamous relationships to monogamous ones. This view that assumes that "there shall be husband and wife" does reflect the history of the interpretation of the Genesis creation texts, but it does not reveal the intention of these texts. "The identification of marriage as the backdrop against which the homosexual prohibitions are to be understood reflects a contemporary understanding of the issues at stake, not an OT [Old Testament] view", says Phyllis A. Bird in a forceful argument.¹⁴ Moreover, the Bible is not at all judgemental about those persons like Jesus and Paul who did not

¹³ See the excellent study of Susan Niditch, *War in the Bible: A Study in the Ethics of Violence*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), in which other traditions in the Hebrew Bible that are opposed to the atrocities of war are identified. For another alternative interpretation see the still very convincing argument of Norman Gottwald, *Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250-1050 BCE*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979).

¹⁴ Phyllis A. Bird, "The Bible in Christian Ethical Deliberation", in *Homosexuality, Science and the 'Plain Sense' of Scripture*, ed. David L. Balch, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 166. "Homosexual relations in the OT are not viewed as an alternative or threat to marriage, and the creation texts are neither prescriptions nor models for heterosexual marriage as the context in which 'sexual desires rightly find fulfillment'... Bird has argued this more fully in her article "Genesis 1-3 as a Source for a Theological Understanding of Sexuality", *Ex Auditu* 3, (1987), 31-44; for the exegetical foundations of this argument see Phyllis A. Bird, "Male and Female He Created Them': Genesis 1:27b in the Context of the Priestly Creation Account", *HTR* 74 (1981), 129-159. See also her valuable considerations on homosexuality as "abomination" in "The Bible in Christian Ethical Deliberation", *Homosexuality, Science and the 'Plain Sense of Scripture*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 156-157.

marry, nor have children. The traditional reading of Genesis 1 and 2, from which Mogoeng takes his understanding of marriage, as the “order of creation” and as a fixed and unalterable structure of heterosexual marriage, is by far no longer the consensus reading of these texts.¹⁵

Fourthly, the position of Winner’s Chapel International, the judge argues, is “similar to [that of] almost all Christian churches”. There is immediately the obvious, almost trite issue that the belief of the majority is not at all a guarantee that such a belief is right. There was a time when “almost all” Christian churches believed that slavery was right, and justified that belief on a reading of the “Holy Bible”. What “most Christians believe” cannot be the criterion for a correct reading of the Bible. For centuries, Europeans, white Americans and white South Africans shared assumptions regarding slavery, black subjugation and apartheid. Whites used their monopoly of power in South Africa for the continued subjugation of the black majority justified by different permutations of three ideological positions, writes journalist Christi van der Westhuizen, namely social Darwinism, civilization, and religion.¹⁶ The so-called “theology of apartheid” was a particularly pernicious example of this damaging use of religion and of the Bible. Presumably not even Judge Mogoeng would take issue with that point. The issue is never whether “most Christians” believe that something is “biblical”. The question is always whether such a belief is right, whether it serves and affirms justice, and in doing so, whether it affirms the sustained message of the Bible, and displays the heart of the God who “loves justice” and demands “nothing but justice”. In any case, the belief that same-sex sexuality is “deviant”, “should not be practiced” or is a disease “that can be cured through prayer” is by no means shared by “almost all Christian churches”. Princeton theologian William Stacy Johnson has identified at least seven “typologies” in the church today within the range of “non-affirming” and “affirming” attitudes “concerning same-gender

¹⁵ See William Stacy Johnson, *A Time to Embrace*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), Chapter 3, “Becoming Family: The Consecration of Same-Gender Love”. The most usual interpretation of the Genesis “male” and “female” creation story assumes an anatomical understanding: the “fit” of body parts, as Johnson states. “But this is not a claim that has any explicit grounding in Genesis or anywhere else in Scripture. For that matter, biblical Hebrew does not even have specific words for genitalia”, 115. For a most useful discussion of this issue within the context of human beings created “in the image of God” see Johnson, 115, 116.

¹⁶ Christi van der Westhuizen, *White Power and the Rise and Fall of the National Party*, (Cape Town: Zebra Press, 2007), 54-61.

who do not conform to social norms.²⁷ However, it appears that the Judeo-Christian perspective is largely dominant in such a perspective. It thus also appears that same sex unions were implicitly accommodated in Shona society when it was not motivated by sexual intimacy and attraction, within the cultural practices and at transitory stages in life. Determining the veracity of this position could be problematic in that there might be challenges in detecting which act was based on sexual orientation or attraction, given the secretive nature of such sexual acts. Information on same sex relationships is not readily available and practitioners do not openly speak of this matter. Shona traditional religion is also silent on the biological make up of those who practice same sex relationships. This silence is based on the secretive nature of the discourse and it puts limitations on the scientific debate about same sex relationships and how they are viewed.

The study of same sex relationships in Zimbabwe inevitably drags us into the insider-outsider debate. The traditional view maintains that one who is born and raised in a religious or cultural setting is best placed to study and articulate the religious/cultural dynamics of that specific religious/cultural orientation.²⁸ In this article, this means that many people (those who do not practice same sex unions) remain 'outsiders' and are not qualified to study same sex relationships. However, the anthropological approach to religion maintains that a valid understanding of religion can be gained only by an objective outsider, who remaining an outsider obtains information from an insider 'informant'. While this approach is plausible and seems applicable, it has setbacks in terms of establishing the perspectives on same sex relationships among the Shona because of the difficulty in getting 'an insider informant'. This is mainly because the Zimbabwean society has from all angles denounced them, and even labelled them as criminals, and therefore they cannot openly discuss these relationships. The practitioners of same sex relationships are the 'insiders' who remain secretive about their practices, presenting a serious challenge to our efforts to study same sex relationships. Also, the brand of comparativism²⁹ between various perspectives from the African traditional standpoint is problematic in the sense that Africans (the Shona) 'are one but not one' at the same time. This complicates the task of finding the 'Shona perspective'. Furthermore, attitudinally, in the

²⁷ Shoko, "Worse than Pigs and Dogs", 648.

²⁸ N Ross-Reat, "Insiders and Outsiders in The Article of Religious Traditions", *Journal of American Academy of Religion*, (1983), 51, no. 3, 459-476.

²⁹ N Ross-Reat, "Insiders and Outsiders", 461.

globalising context, we need to be careful not to be submerged by Western cultural imperialism³⁰ in the academic study of same sex relationships among the Shona; because the assumptions and terminology of Western concepts have different connotations to those of Africans. Hence,

As we enter upon an age of global interaction (because of global concerns) it is important to understand points of similarity and difference ... of the various civilizations.³¹

African traditional religions are inspired by a true sense of sacredness of life and all its elements.³² The exploration of the challenges that are discussed in this article in turn raise the need for a holistic approach to the study of the phenomenon of same sex relationships among the Shona. Promising work in this regard lies in the research of oral cultures. The other side of the coin linked to the 'comparativism' mentioned above is the failure to adequately distinguish between different African cultures. We reiterate what Chitando has noted in his critical re-evaluation of African scholars and the study of religions:

Beyond the criticism that African Christian scholars are encumbered by Christian spectacles and by nationalism, the other recurrent criticism is that they are not contextually sensitive. Hasty generalisation from a specific community to the whole continent of Africa is considered a severe limitation.³³

Mandaza³⁴ has also drawn attention to the contribution of 'imperialist education' and Christianity that have played a major role in producing a middle class bourgeoisie and its African nationalist leadership, which in turn have come to dominate society and ideology. This observation by Mandaza can be seen in Zimbabwe's political and religious scenario. Christians, who have rallied behind Mugabe, denounce same sex relationships as unhistorical, unethical and an abomination that has roots in and influence from the West. Yet, Mugabe's political rhetoric is also characterised by his anti-Western political interests and indeed his hatred of the West, especially America and Britain. This means that we need to be cautious when 'mining' perspectives on same sex

³⁰ G McLean and J Hogan, *Ecumenism and Nostra Aetate in the Twenty First century*, (Washington DC: The Council for Research in values and Philosophy, 2005), 7.

³¹ McLean and Hogan, *Ecumenism and Nostra Aetate*, 51.

³² McLean and Hogan, *Ecumenism and Nostra Aetate*, 7.

³³ Ezra Chitando, "African Scholars and the Article of African Traditional Religions: A Re-evaluation", *Religion* 30, no. 4, (2000), 393.

³⁴ I Mandaza, *Race, Class and Colour in Southern Africa*, (Harare: SAPES Books, 1997), 534.

relationships, because the socio-cultural and religious orientation of the Shona, and of Shona Christians, with their political affiliations, has complicated the situation.

In such conditions, even the phenomenological approach, that treats the believer as the final court of appeal finds loopholes in application and invites valid criticism. Thus, interviewees' statements may be judged as 'inauthentic' because the condemnation of the traditional religion manifested in some of the interviewees' responses displays the strength of the Judeo-Christian influence on them. This is not meant to discredit the validity of the thinking of African Christian scholars and interviewees. While we acknowledge their positive contributions in the academic study of same sex relationships and on other matters, we highlight the limitations that might confront the attempt to mine the traditional cultural perspectives of the Shona.

Conclusion

It can be validly argued that same sex relationships existed in traditional Shona, as observed by the confirmations from the interviewees. Those who deny the existence of same sex relationships seem to lack critical engagement. We have drawn attention to the complexities that enshrine same sex perspectives among the Shona and pointed out that concrete and accurate perspectives seem to be difficult to draw out, given the fact that sexual taboos, issues of marriage and procreation, and patriarchy have camouflaged the same sex phenomenon, both directly and indirectly. Hence ignorance or lack of knowledge and misunderstanding has produced mixed feelings or views, complicating the whole discourse of same sex relationships. The study of same sex perspectives therefore requires sensitivity to the factors that characterise African traditional religion (Shona religion) that distinguishes it from other world religions,³⁵ especially the dynamics of gender. At the same time attention needs to be paid to the fact that African traditional religion is not a relic of the past, but is dynamic, and has come into contact with the outside world, affecting labels, affinities, and resonance.³⁶ Hence, further complexities arise as a result of interaction with external forces, such as Judeo-Christian thought.

³⁵ J Mosala, "African Traditional Beliefs and Christianity", *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 43 (3), 15.

³⁶ Chitando, "African Scholars and the Article of African Traditional Religions", 394.

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“Us and Them” in the One and Undivided Church: The Methodist Church and the Same-Sex Sexuality Debate

Raymond Simangaliso Kumalo¹

We believe that it is the will of God that the Church must be one and undivided. The Conference declares that its conviction be one and undivided trusting to the leading of God to bring this ideal to ultimate fruition.²

Abstract

The Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA) has been debating the position and attitude it needs to adopt with regard to same-sex sexuality for the past ten years without reaching a final conclusion. This article highlights the debate that has been raging between those who are for the acceptance of gay people into the ministry of the church and those who are against it. It analyses the “us and them” problem which has polarized the debate and widened the gaps between the two groups; those who are pro-gay, comprising mostly gay clergy and sympathetic laity are represented by an organization they have formed within the church known as “Sacred Worth” and those who are against same-sex sexuality, both clergy and lay people, who are represented by the hierarchy of the MCSA. Each group is characterised by the “us” against “them” approach, thus the Methodist Church is divided even though it professes itself to be “a one and undivided church.” This article problematizes the us/ them paradigm by showing the varying degrees of being “us and them” in the church. It analyses the undergirding theological and political reasons that inform each group’s stance. Then the article argues that the “us and them” problem in the same-sex debate can be better understood if the larger issues of human sexuality and the unity of the church are appreciated.

Introduction

The opening quotation emphasizes the commitment of the MCSA to being “one and undivided.” This article argues that the response of the MCSA on issues around same-sex relationships has not been unified.

¹ R Simangaliso Kumalo (PhD) is from South Africa. He is the Acting Head of the School of Religion and Theology, University of KwaZulu-Natal. His research interest is in Religion and Governance and the Social History of South Africa. Email: kumalor@ukzn.ac.za

² *Minutes of the Methodist Conference 1958*, (Cape Town: Methodist Publishing House, 1958), 55.

This scenario has fragmented the church, with some in support of same sex-marriage and others vehemently against it. This fragmentation has complicated the decision-making ability of the MCSA. As a consequence, the church has struggled to take a concrete stance over the matter.

According to Neville Richardson who at the time was the chairperson of the Doctrine, Ethics and Worship Committee (DEWCOM) which was guiding the MCSA on this matter, “The Methodist Church is a community of love not rejection.”³ This effectively means that the Methodist Church should embrace all including those who self-identify as gay and lesbian. However, this has not been the experience of Ecclesia de Lange who was defrocked by the church after entering into a same-sex marriage. She states:

My spiritual home has been destroyed by the decision of the church. I have found a community of supporters outside the church, who have supported us and a few from within the church. I have not been able to deal with the individual blows that I have taken from the church, it has been too painful and Amanda has not been able to do that herself... I feel ashamed of it for what it has done to me, by rejecting me.⁴

Clearly there is a contradiction between what Richardson says about the MCSA being a community of love not rejection and Ecclesia de Lange’s experience of persecution and ultimately rejection by the church that she loves and seeks to serve. How can these two pastors of the same church present such contradictory views of their church’s attitude, when it comes to same-sex relationships? What is the real position of the MCSA on this issue? Has this issue affected the ecclesiology and unity of the MCSA, as a church that has committed itself to remain ‘one and undivided’? How can the church realize the dream of being an inclusive and all-embracing community? These are some of the questions that I intend to address in this article. I will do this by first, examining the theoretical and conceptual issues around the same-sex sexuality issue. Second, I will discuss Ecclesia’s story as a case study. Third, I will look at the response of the Methodist Church on this matter. Fourth, I will give an analysis of the polarisation of the unity

³ Neville Richardson, former Chairperson of the Methodist Church’s Doctrines, Ethics and Worship Commission. Interviewed by the Rev Herbert Moyo on 20 October 2009 in Pietermaritzburg. Unpublished Report on the attitudes of mainline churches on same-sex marriages in KwaZulu-Natal.

⁴ E. De Lange, The story of Ecclesia de Lange. Unpublished brochure of an address to Central Methodist Mission, Cape Town, 10 March 2010, 1.

of the church by the “us and them” phenomenon. And fifth, It will propose a way forward for the church. While I will draw extensively on theoretical, conceptual, and theological frameworks, I also have the benefit of being an ordained minister within the MCSA, and therefore have the benefit of an “insider” status as a researcher.

Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

Richardson’s claim that the MCSA is a caring community and Ecclesia de Lange’s mourning that the church has not cared for her, go deeply into the question of the fundamental character of the church. The reality is that the MCSA has a number of people who are opposed to the acceptance of gays and lesbians⁵ within the church LGBTI’s. These people base their theological position in this regard on the analysis and exegesis of six biblical texts: Genesis 19:1-11; Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13; Romans 1:26-27; 1 Corinthians 6:9; and Timothy 1:10. A literal reading of these texts justifies the exclusion of gays and lesbians. The question that begs an answer then is why should the church care about its relationship with those who self-identify as gay and lesbian within the church? Writing in favour of a dialogue with gays and lesbians in the church Choon-Leong Seow, in her book *Homosexuality and the Christian Community*, offers an answer to this question by arguing that, our relationship with one another in the community of faith are inseparable from the character of our relationship with God.⁶ However relationships require a constant dialogue between the partners. Unfortunately that is not the case with homosexuals and those who are pro same-sex relationships in the church, for their voices are not heard. Steve de Gruchy directly addresses the characteristics that need to be embraced by the church, if it is to be an inclusive community:

We are driven throughout by a vision that the church can be and should be an inclusive, caring and affirming community of people redeemed by God’s grace, not existing for its own sake, but rather to participate in God’s mission of freedom in and for the world in the power of the Holy Spirit. In this community the voices of all disciples of Christ – young and old, male and female, black and white, schooled

⁵ While LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersexed) is the currently preferred nomenclature in academic discourse on the subject, I use the term Gays and Lesbians in this article, because at the moment the church still understands this issue at that level. I use the term “homosexual” which is currently viewed as stigmatizing only where it is used in the original quotation or reference.

⁶ Choon-Leong Seow (ed), *Homosexuality and Christian Community*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 125.

and illiterate, straight, lesbian and gay – are heard and honoured, loved and trusted.⁷

Robert Wood, a pastor in the United Church of Christ in America in his book *Christ and the Homosexual* takes a radical step by arguing that:

Homosexuals should be welcomed into the church and its ministry without any requirement that they change their pattern of sexual behaviour; the church should sponsor definite activities designed to serve homosexuals, for example promoting “drag” dances; and the church should conduct marriage ceremonies for homosexual partners who determine to relate to each other in love and devotion.⁸

Bishop Selby Spong of the Episcopal Church in America also adopts a position that accepts homosexuality on condition that it is committed to a monogamous relationship, stating that:

The relationship in which sex is shared needs to be exclusive.... Multiple sex partners at the same time is a violation of vulnerability, commitment, honesty, and the reality of caring.⁹

From the views of these theologians it is imperative for the church to move towards an inclusive community, one which would include people with same-sex preferences. The question is how does the church begin to move toward this inclusive position? For the church to succeed in this endeavour, it can learn from Miraslov Volf’s writing on the issue of the exclusion and inclusion of the ‘other’. In his book *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, Volf has argued that an inclusive community is an imperative of the gospel.¹⁰ He calls Christians to be in solidarity with those who are excluded, this being key to the theology of the cross. He observes that “the tension between the message of the cross and the world of violence presented itself to be a conflict between the desire to follow the crucified and letting myself be nailed on the cross.”¹¹ Volf terms his model of being involved with those who suffer exclusion and persecution, as self-donation or solidarity. For him, this method finds its theological motivation in the theology of the cross where “sufferers can

⁷ S. De Gruchy and P. Germond, *Aliens in the household of God: Homosexuality and the Christian Faith in South Africa*, (Cape Town: David Phillip, 1997), 235.

⁸ R. Wood, *Christ and the Homosexual*, (New York: Vantage, 1960), 23.

⁹ Selby Spong, *Living in Sin: Bishop Rethinks Human Sexuality*, (San Francisco: Harper, 1988), 216.

¹⁰ M. Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, (Cape Town: David Phillip, 1996), 10.

¹¹ Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 10.

find comfort in the solidarity of the Crucified God."¹² He understands this as meaning that Christians need to take sides with the harassed and helpless, and to indeed share their suffering.

The biblical basis of the model of self-donation is found in Romans 15:7, which refers to the Christ who 'welcomes' and 'gives himself to' all of us. From this emerges three key points which are (1) mutuality of self-giving; (2) love in the Trinity; and (3) the open arms of the "father" receiving the "prodigal son". At the heart of Volf's method is "the will to give ourselves to others and welcome them, to re-adjust our identities to make space for them prior to any judgment about others except identifying them in their humanity."¹³ In short this method can be understood as propagating a self-sacrificing approach. Volf refers to it as self-donation so that we can receive or welcome others.¹⁴ Volf's model is an appropriate theological strategy that the church should consider when dealing with the issue of same-sex relationships and being an inclusive community. The discussion on the different attitudes towards homosexuals and the ideas offered by a number of theologians, especially Spong and Miraslov Volf, can offer some insights to the MCSA as it wrestles with this issue.

"Let There be Gays and Lesbians in the Methodist Church": The Ecclesia de Lange Story

Although the church seemed to have adopted a tolerant position with regard to same-sex relationships, this tolerance evaporated when facing such a relationship involving one of its ministers. On 6 December 2009, the Rev Ecclesia de Lange, a Methodist minister in good standing, stood up to tell her congregation of her sexual orientation and her genuine love for her partner, and of her intention to enter into a same-sex marriage. Indeed on 15 December 2009 she married her partner.

Ecclesia de Lange was charged by her superintendent minister for allegedly breaching the Methodist rules and regulations by entering into marriage with a same-sex partner. The church had accepted gays and lesbians in the church membership and in the ordained ministry, but had not consented to same-sex marriages. When de Lange entered into that marriage, she had breached the Methodist covenant that she would not enter into such a union. On 20 February 2010 she was tried, found

¹² Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 24.

¹³ Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 29

¹⁴ Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 30

guilty and was dismissed from the ministry, thus losing her job, livelihood, accommodation, and a community of faith to belong to. Thus the community that de Lange loved and served rejected her.¹⁵ For de Lange, what the church expected of her was unfair because it would have meant living a lie. She decided “I have reached the point where I can no longer be silent. I have come to see that it is better to be rejected for who I am than to be accepted for who I am not...”¹⁶ Peter Storey, a respected Methodist theologian, wrote an article in solidarity with de Lange. In the article he held that through her actions, de Lange was saying that:

I desire to serve Jesus. I desire to be true to myself. I desire to minister within the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA) with integrity and be faithful to God’s call on my life.¹⁷

Following *Ecclesia de Lange’s* dismissal by the MCSA, she received many messages of solidarity both from within and from outside the church. One such message came from the synod of the Cape of Good Hope District, after a dramatic turn of events. Nineteen ministers marched out of the synod meeting in solidarity with de Lange and all who self-identify as gay and lesbian in the MCSA. They argued that the church must continue to welcome gays and lesbians into its membership, leadership and ministry and that it must also encourage them in committed relationships to enter into civil unions as provided for in the Constitution of South Africa.¹⁸ Moreover, they also called for the church to make appropriate provisions for Christian couples in such unions to receive the blessing of a Christian covenantal rite, by enabling those ministers who felt called, according to their conscience, to officiate at such civil unions.¹⁹

Those who support *Ecclesia de Lange’s* dismissal draw inspiration from Leviticus 18:22: “You shall not lie with a man as with women” and a few other texts that I have mentioned above. Meanwhile, some of those who supported de Lange found their motivation from the teaching of the church as a community of grace, love, inclusivity and embrace of *all* people. Others took sides with de Lange from the perspective of human rights. Such people have argued that since the constitution of the

¹⁵ The irony in this story is that the name *Ecclesia* refers to the church or community of believers and this happens to be her name. So *Ecclesia* was rejected by the *ecclesia*.

¹⁶ De Lange, Address, 2.

¹⁷ A. Storey, Solidarity with *Ecclesia de Lange*. Address to Central Methodist Church, Cape Town on Ash Wednesday, March 2010, 1.

¹⁸ *Methodist Yearbook 2010* (Cape Town: Methodist Publishing House, 2010), 35.

¹⁹ *Yearbook 2010*, 34.

country recognizes same-sex marriages, the church is impinging on gay and lesbian couples' rights to enter into a marriage contract. Such an approach has a tremendous appeal in the contemporary, cultural climate for liberal democracy. Proponents of this approach draw their inspiration from texts such as Galatians 3:38 and Colossians 3:11.

This situation is evidence enough that the church was fragmented. Outside the MCSA, Christina Engela, from the South African Gay and Lesbian Alliance against Defamation (SA GLAAD), condemned the news, describing it as "a shameful turn of events". She said that "the MCSA has today betrayed the trust of all its non-heterosexual members and supporters."²⁰ She further notes:

The Methodist Church of South Africa has thus fumbled a perfect opportunity to right past wrongs, to truly show a meaningful welcome to the pink community in its ranks – and has instead chosen to compound them by affirming instead rejection and bigotry.²¹

In response to the rejection by her church and the support she received from her sympathizers, Ecclesia de Lange committed herself to fighting for her recognition by the Methodist Church for who she is, for her right to marriage and for her right to belong to the church that she loves. She said that:

If I don't take action, the church hopes I will go away and the case disappear. I want to tell the church that I will not go away, there is a whole community of people in my position who love God, and love the church and would like to serve the church, and the church is poorer for not accepting us.²²

The Origins and Development of the Same-Sex Sexuality Debate in the MCSA

The dilemma faced by the MCSA regarding same-sex marriage can be traced to the beginning of the new century. At the MCSA Conference of 2001, a debate on same-sex marriage ensued. Some argued for the expulsion of members who were in favour of same-sex relationships, arguing that it was against the teachings of the Bible. The issue around membership was resolved by a general agreement that membership in the MCSA is not deserved but is an act of grace. As a result, all people

²⁰ News 24, 16th February 2011. <http://www.news24.com/southAfrica/news/Methodists> (Accessed:21/11/2011)

²¹ News 24, 16th February 2011. <http://www.news24.com/southAfrica/news/Methodists> (Accessed: 21/11/2011)

²² De Lange, Address, 2.

who are members of the church are there not because they deserve it but because “Jesus has invited and justified all of them to membership.”²³ Therefore, no one can deny anyone else the right to belong to the MCSA.

The MCSA Conference adopted the principle that the church seeks to be a “community of love rather than rejection, meaning that it seeks to accommodate and embrace all people rather than reject them for any particular reason.”²⁴ As a result, the church resolved that it will accept all people into its membership, regardless of their sexual orientation. This principle has far-reaching implications in terms of how the church should deal with people of same-sex sexual orientation. At the MCSA Conference of 2003, a discussion guide on Christians and same-sex relationships was presented by DEWCOM. It was adopted as a tool for the church’s engagement on the question and was referred to the Methodist people for their study and response, to be considered at the Conference of 2005.²⁵

The committee came up with six principles for constructive debate. These were to: seek the truth of Christ in the spirit, seek to move beyond ‘corners of conviction’, seek first to understand and then to be understood, seek to see the human face of this issue, seek to be well-informed and seek to celebrate the gift of diversity. Close analysis shows that these principles were in sympathy with those who were involved in same-sex relationships. The premise for this argument was that those in same-sex marriages never condemned their counterparts in different-sex marriages, so there was no need to implore them to embrace diversity because they were already doing so. The people who needed to be entreated to embrace diversity were those supporting only different-sex marriages, because they were rejecting the difference with which they were confronted in same-sex relationships. In view of this, the majority of people in the church deemed the members of DEWCOM of 2003 to be biased towards same-sex marriage. One of the reasons given was that DEWCOM’s membership is dominated by white people, and so its pronouncements are those of radical whites within the church. The black membership has however remained conspicuously silent on this matter.

²³ *Methodist Yearbook 2001* (Cape Town: Methodist Publishing House, 2001), 29.

²⁴ *Yearbook 2001*, 29.

²⁵ This discussion guide has been published as a booklet. See T. Attwell (ed.), *In Search of Grace and Truth* (Cape Town: Cingela Press, 2011).

In terms of the *modus operandi* for the church's engagement on the same-sex relationship issue, DEWCOM came up with an all-inclusive method of consultation. The guide thus suggested that the issue be discussed at different levels of the church, including Circuit Quarterly Meetings, Class Meetings, discussions at ministers' retreats, discussions at small group courses, Bible studies on same-sex related texts, and deliberations on this topic in other forums.²⁶

In terms of sources of theological reflection, the committee implored all participants to employ scripture, reason, tradition and experience (the Wesleyan quadrilateral). This model was designed to overcome the problem of compartmentalisation. The robust debate generated by this discussion guide made it clear that within the MCSA, there are widely divergent convictions that are sincerely and passionately held by both clergy and laity, all of whom are deeply committed to following Christ and hold to the authority of scripture. Unfortunately scripture is problematic in this context because the people who wrote, influenced and shaped it (as well as most of those who have interpreted it) were heterosexual. This point is observed by Steve de Gruchy²⁷ who said that:

The problem is this: theology has by and large been written by 'free' heterosexual men and it is their own experience which has been taken as normative for discussions on human nature. They are the subjects who do theology. The experience of others is objectified: they are a category, an issue, a topic to be quantified and discussed.²⁸

Recognizing the divergent convictions within the MCSA on this issue, the Conference of 2006 was prompted to commit the MCSA "...to an ongoing journey of discovering what it means to be part of a church which embraces many different and even opposing views on this issue."²⁹ The church was compelled to affirm that the one body of the church is "enriched and strengthened by the differing views and perspectives of its members."³⁰

The MCSA Conference of 2007 declared its determination not to permit different viewpoints around the same-sex debate to further divide the church. It sought "...a way forward that both respects and holds in

²⁶ Report of the Doctrine Ethics and Worship Committee to Conference. Johannesburg, 2003. (Unpublished), 2.

²⁷ Seow, *Homosexuality and Christian Community*, 125.

²⁸ De Gruchy and Germond, *Aliens in the household of God*, 233.

²⁹ *Methodist Yearbook 2006* (Cape Town: Methodist Publishing House, 2006), 75.

³⁰ *Yearbook 2006*, 76.

tension differing views among our ministers and people.” This Conference further resolved that “...any decision and subsequent action on the issue of civil unions between same-sex partners must await the outcome of the ongoing process of engagement as specified by Conference 2001 and 2005 ... and, in the interim, [the MCSA] expects Methodist ministers to continue to offer pastoral care to homosexual individuals but no clergy of the church would be allowed to enter into a same-sex marriage.”³¹ In other words, with regard to gay clergy, the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy was adopted.

Conference resolved that both the ministers and lay people would continue to engage with this issue in Christian conversation and respectful listening, so that all might more fully understand and articulate the variety of viewpoints held within the church. It also resolved that the church continue to seek to be a Christ-honouring community by celebrating the rich diversity of those called to follow Jesus, honouring the sacred worth of all people and practicing our Wesleyan heritage of warmth.³² Additionally, Conference resolved to seek to welcome and offer hospitality, recognizing the authority of scripture and noting that in our quest for understanding, there is no one, monolithic, and incontrovertible interpretation of scripture as far as this matter is concerned. It was acknowledged that there are therefore some issues upon which there may never be total unanimity within the church and upon which we must “agree to differ” without reducing our respect for, and trust of, one another.³³

This resolution is consistent with Miraslov Volf’s proposal that the church must be an inclusive and embracing community. The MCSA recognized the diversity of conviction within its members, and sought to celebrate this diversity as a challenging but potentially life-giving gift. This follows the thinking along the lines of Richard Wood and Steve de Gruchy who proposed that the church should celebrate the presence of same-sex couples. The MCSA called for an ongoing process of respectful dialogue and truthful engagement between those holding differing views, not with the intention of ultimately having one mind on this issue, which is unlikely, but rather to come to a deepened understanding of what it means to be one body in Christ. The MCSA also took seriously its ongoing pastoral responsibility to gays and lesbians. However it did not endorse same-sex marriages. This is

³¹ *Methodist Yearbook 2007* (Cape Town: Methodist Publishing House, 2007), 82.

³² *Yearbook 2007*, 56.

³³ *Yearbook 2007*, 58.

contrary to Spong’s proposal that monogamous same-sex marriages be recognized by the church.

The failure of the MCSA to reach a conclusive decision on this matter is regrettable, especially given the inclusive laws of the country. In fact the church itself is ambivalent on this matter because in terms of its doctrine, the MCSA indicates that it accepts the excluded. As a result, those who are in solidarity with people in same-sex relationships have formed a group within the Methodist Church known as “Sacred worth”. The main aim of this group is to offer solidarity to people in same-sex relationships and to continue to exert pressure on the Methodist Church to adopt a more ‘inclusive and embracing’ position on this matter.

The position taken by the church negates its emphasis on grace – unmerited favour. It also makes a mockery of its claim to be an all-inclusive church. It is clear that there was animosity within the church as various groups viewed each other as distinct and different from one another. Looking back at Christian history, such a situation of division, animosity and distinction is not unprecedented. In the section below, I explore how this theme of “us” against “them” impacted on the early church.

Analysis of the “Us and Them” Motif in the MCSA

The early church began as a one and undivided church. The same claim was made by the MCSA in 1958. It is generally accepted that the early church was comprised of Jews, with some exceptions. It was only later that the ministry among the Gentiles began.³⁴ The Jews met in synagogues for prayers and worship. It did not take long to become clear that there were significant differences between the followers of Christ and those who followed the Jewish beliefs. The followers of Christ began to preach that Jesus was the Messiah, much to the chagrin of those who were adherents to Judaism. The designation of Christ as God was unacceptable amongst non-followers of Christ.³⁵ This theological cleavage led to the fragmentation of the group, with Christians referring to the Jews’ synagogues as “their” synagogues. The followers of Christ thus began to conceive of themselves as “us” against them”. This forced Christians to worship in house churches and other undesignated places.³⁶ The Jewish worshippers responded by persecuting Christians and the end result was that the group

³⁴ Acts 11:19-29

³⁵ Acts 15:1-11

³⁶ Acts 18:7-9

disintegrated. This is relevant because the “us” and “them” motif in the MCSA may cause it to suffer the same fate of division as the early church. It is important, therefore, to assess the causes of this separatist mentality in the MCSA.

Culture

Culture plays a very important role in the development of a belief system. In African cultures, marriage is primarily for reproduction.³⁷ A person marries on behalf of a family in order to perpetuate a tribe.³⁸ Childlessness in African culture symbolises a curse.³⁹ Polygamy is acceptable because it grows the family.⁴¹ Children are an important economic and political resource especially considering that Africa has been prone to tribal wars. For adherents to this African culture, any sort of marriage that does not produce children is an anathema.⁴² Same-sex marriages do not produce children and as such are condemned. The influence of culture on the issue of same-sex marriage can be seen by the demographics of those who support and those who oppose it, with white people dominating the former group and black people dominating the latter. In fact, as mentioned above, the majority of people in the MCSA who have been fighting for the recognition of same-sex marriage have been from the white community, together with a tiny minority of black clergy.

Theology

Theologically, the issue of same-sex marriage is inconclusive. There are as many theologies as there are theologians.⁴³ The biblical text is not a monolith, and consequently there are several traditions of understanding with regard to same-sex marriage. It matters, though, how scripture is read and the paradigms that are adopted out of this reading. The paradigm commonly used by oppressed communities to read scripture is that of liberation theology. The Exodus narrative gives

³⁷ P. Kasenene, *Swazi Traditional Religion and Society*. (Mbabane: Webster's Publishers, 1993), 76.

³⁸ Kasenene, *Swazi Traditional Religion and society*, 76.

³⁹ Kasenene *Swazi Traditional Religion and society*, 76.

⁴⁰ Mercy Oduyoye, “A Coming Home to Myself: The Childless Women in the West African Space”, in *Liberating Eschatology: Essays in Honor of Letty M. Russell*, edited by Margaret Farley and Shannon Jones (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1999), 105-120.

⁴¹ Kasenene *Swazi Traditional Religion and society*, 81

⁴² A. Radcliffe-Brown (ed) *African systems of kinship and marriage*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1967) 18.

⁴³ De Gruchy, *Aliens in the household of God*, 212.

a message of hope that God is on the side of those who are oppressed. It argues that just as God liberated the Israelites from oppression in Egypt, so God will do the same with those experiencing oppression in any particular context.⁴⁴ It gives them hope that "evil and oppression does not have the final word".⁴⁵ Gay and lesbian people are discriminated against and pushed out of the church, regardless of the fact that they have the right to belong to the church and serve God. They do need to see themselves as an oppressed and marginalized group, especially in a church that is supposed to welcome *all* people. I have argued elsewhere that God's call in the church is for people to sit at a roundtable as equal members of the body of Christ.⁴⁶

Politics

Same-sex marriage is as political as it is religious and sociological. The government of South Africa has allowed same-sex marriages by law and in the constitution. It is now over five years since the government promulgated the Civil Union Act. Melanie Judge writes:

The Civil Union Act of South Africa was promulgated on the 30th November 2006. The following day the first marriage was conducted and registered at a Home Affairs Office in Cape Town on 1 December 2006. The following day on the 2 December 2006 a first religious marriage ceremony under the Act. By end of 2009, there were a total of 1070 couples who had registered their relationships under the Civil Union Act.⁴⁷

Among these early marriages recognized by the state was Ecclesia de Lange's marriage to Amanda. This has placed the Methodist Church in a precarious situation because by denying its ministers the right to enter into same-sex marriage unions, it is in breach of the constitution of the country. The government's promulgation of the Civil Union Act is one example of the government being more prophetic than the church. In this case, the church is not the "light of the earth".

⁴⁴ Gunther Wittenberg, *Resistance Theology in the Old Testament*. (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2007), 14.

⁴⁵ H. Garner, H. and M. Worsnip, "Oil and Water: The Impossibility of Gay and Lesbian Identity in the Church," in *Towards an Agenda for Contextual Theology. Essays in Honour of Albert Nolan*, eds M. Speckman and L. Kaufmann (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2001), 208.

⁴⁶ R. S. Kumalo, A call to a roundtable for the church. An unpublished address to the Methodist Conference. (Port Elizabeth, September 24 2010), 2.

⁴⁷ M. Judge, ed., *To Have and to Hold: The Making of Same-sex Marriage in South Africa* (Johannesburg: Jacana, 2009), 10.

Back to a “One and Undivided Church

In view of the above, there is a need for the church to take a number of practical steps in order to address this issue with urgency.

The Need for Confession and Repentance by the Church

When one listens to the stories of gay and lesbian people, one is confronted with a litany of experiences of abuse and hurt by the church. One hears how some people were discriminated against, and told how sinful they were, while others were dismissed by the church that claims to be a community of grace.

Alan Storey has observed that:

We sometimes cause pain to others without knowing, sometimes we cause pain to others believing that we are trying to do the right thing, when we are not... That is what the MCSA and us as members of the MCSA are doing to Ecclesia and those like her. Ash Wednesday is for us an opportunity to reflect on the need for confession and repentance.⁴⁸

There is a need for the church to confess its sin for inflicting suffering on gays and lesbians. This has nothing to do with the decision regarding whether the church accepts or does not accept same-sex marriages.. As a result, those who have been hurt by the church deserve an apology from it.

Uncensoring the Discussion on Human Sexuality

The main problem faced by the church concerning this issue is its reluctance to talk about human sexuality. In the past, churches used to encourage discussions around this matter. For instance, Natasha Erlank notes that:

During the inter-war period, teachings around sexuality continued to convey older views, and children continued to learn from their elders and parents.⁴⁹

It is my view that over and above using academic tools from the social sciences, biology, and philosophy, answers regarding same-sex marriages must be found in the sources for doing theology. Here the

⁴⁸ Storey, Address, 1.

⁴⁹ N. Erlank, “Plain Clean Facts’ and Initiation Schools: Christianity, Africans and Sex Education in South Africa, c. 1910-1940.” *Agenda* 62 (2004):76.

Wesleyan quadrilateral: experience, tradition, reason and scripture, may again prove to be helpful.

Need for Patience and a Gradual Approach

In the Swahili language there is a saying that "if you want to walk fast walk alone, but if you want to walk long, walk slower in the company of other people."⁵⁰ There is a need for the pro-gay group in the church not to push too hard for radical acceptance of their situation. They need to understand that the church needs time to educate and conscientize the broader membership. The leadership have a genuine responsibility to maintain the unity of the church during this process, and too much pressure does not solve the problem but rather compounds it. It is said that only the oppressed have a right to decide the methods of struggle and its pace. However, in most denominations this debate has been polarized because there has been a lack of understanding, by both parties, of one another's pain. On the other hand, those who are struggling with accepting same-sex marriage in the church need to open themselves to learning and growing in this matter, so that those who are rejecting others can learn to experience grace rather than the law of rejection.

Conclusion

In this article, I have highlighted the different stages of the debate around same sex marriages in the MCSA. Most of the challenges identified are not unique to the MCSA, but are similar to those faced by other denominations. I have identified problems such as denial, culture, and theological positions as contributing to this dilemma for the church. Further, I have shown that the MCSA has accepted gay and lesbian people to both its membership and ministry, but has not taken the further step of recognising same-sex unions. Helpful theological insights and theories from theologians such as Steve de Gruchy, Miraslov Volf, Selby Spong, Robert Wood in regard to what the church can do to make progress on the issue of same-sex marriage was proposed. Importantly, the church has sought to maintain its unity by being very cautious with this issue, consequently adopting ambiguous positions over the years and emphasizing the need for continuous discussion. This has not stopped those who are in support of same-sex marriage from exerting pressure on the church to accede to their demands. The result is a

⁵⁰ In M. Dandala, "Behold I Create a New Africa" (paper presented at the Ecumenical Consultation on NEPAD, Midrand: 1997), 51.

church that is engaged in a struggle to maintain its most noble principle of being one and undivided. For the time being, when it comes to this issue, the church remains divided into “us and them”.

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