



# NEW DIVERSITIES

An online journal published by the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity

Volume 24, No. 2, 2022

## Special issue: Theorizing Sexuality, Religion and Secularity in Postcolonial Europe

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© MPI MMG (2022)

ISSN-Print 2199-8108  
ISSN-Internet 2199-8116

Published by the Max Planck Institute for the  
Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity  
Hermann-Föge-Weg 11  
D-37073 Göttingen, Germany

Available online at [www.newdiversities.mmg.mpg.de](http://www.newdiversities.mmg.mpg.de)

# Theorizing sexuality, religion, and secularity in postcolonial Europe

by KIM KNIBBE  (University of Groningen) and  
RACHEL SPRONK  (University of Amsterdam)

## Introduction

This special issue addresses the ways in which sexuality, religion and secularity intersect in everyday lives and biographies in postcolonial Europe. The focus is on experiences and practices of religion and secularity in relation to gender, sex and sexuality. In bringing together the research presented here, we aim to move beyond the focus on religious-secular contestations in the public sphere. Rather than viewing gendered sexuality as a battleground, we wish to draw attention to the subjective experience and actualization of sexuality, as it is an important domain in which self and relationality come to be articulated and shaped. This takes place in a context that is deeply informed by colonial histories, as well as competing narratives of modernity and progress in which the migrant and/or religious 'other' often represent the past as being left behind. Therefore, rather than focusing only on religiously and culturally defined others, whose different attitudes toward sexuality and gender are thought to need special attention and explanation, we also turn the lens toward the everyday practices and implicit genealogies that are embedded in those actors that are the standard bearers for the norm. We thus propose to look beyond controversies to focus on how people with different cultural trajectories encounter one another, whether in person or in public debates. In short, we propose the notion of *cultural encounters* to study and disentangle the interconnections of sexuality, religion and secularity in actors' day-to-day articulations.

The most notorious intersection between sexuality, religion and secularity appears in what

has come to be called the 'migrant crisis' (Mavelli and Wilson 2016). Recent research on diversity in Europe has pointed to the racialization of migrants and refugees, and more specifically to how Muslims have become racialized as xenophobia and Islamophobia strengthen and legitimize each other (De Koning 2016; 2020). Particular understandings of Christianity's secular and historical role in Europe often play an important role in these debates (Topolski 2018), while simultaneously these understandings come to be reshaped and fixed in the spectrum of political parties across Europe. What is noteworthy is that, in particular issues around gender, emancipation and sexuality become the battlegrounds for articulating differences (Shield 2017; J.W. Scott 2009; Knibbe et al. 2018). In these public contestations, Europe is presented as progressive, secular and enlightened in its approach to gender and sex, but also as pitted against the migrant, often religious 'other', who is regarded as someone who has to be brought into secular time to fully belong to the nation (Butler 2008). This is most evident in relation to Islam, which is often framed as dangerous and oppressive. As a consequence, it is often represented as a threat undoing the gains in emancipation for women and sexual minorities that are perceived to have been made since the sexual revolution (Bracke 2011; 2012; Balkenhol, Mepschen, and Duyvendak 2016; Shield 2017; Brandt 2019). In contrast, a Christian background is often viewed more benignly as 'folklore', as something that marks the cultural heritage of particular groups of migrants. Christianity is seen as more easily fit-

ting into the European context, with its particular trajectory in which religion is seen as a part of life that can be left behind or privatized. Nevertheless, when the Christianity of migrants does not appear to follow that trajectory, the frame of religion as backward and as a threat to modern and 'healthy' approaches to sexuality expands to include Christianity. This sometimes occurs in combination with a negative racialization of 'black' churches and in relation to sexuality (Knibbe 2018). In short, in these debates, implicit and explicit civilizational hierarchies are being formulated in what Balkenhol and colleagues call 'the nativist triangle' of sexuality, race and religion (Balkenhol et al. 2016; Mepschen 2016).

A focus on public contestations may obscure how these matters present shifting realities beyond the politicization of religion. We ask how do public contestations around sexuality, religion and migration reverberate in people's everyday lives? Do they play a role in articulating the ways in which sexuality, secularity and religion interconnect at this level (Pool 2022)? For example, how do supposedly 'sexually oppressed' religious women and sexual minorities work towards their sexual well-being? How do they deal with the secular and/or migration frames through which they are viewed? Research that focuses on the interactions of sex, secularity and religion *in practice* is scarce (but see Roodsaz 2018; Rasmussen 2010; Roodsaz 2022), especially where it concerns how the secular operates as a cultural, embodied formation (Fadil 2011; Scheer, Fadil, and Johansen 2019). In addition, gender is a dimension that has been addressed surprisingly little at the level of everyday life, in contrast to its quite obvious position in debates on Muslim women and contestations around veiling (J.W. Scott 2009; Fadil 2011; Brandt 2019; Bracke and Fadil 2012; Moors 2014).

To develop the notion of cultural encounters, we build on the anthropology of the secular to study how particular groups appear as other through their perceived religiosity (Asad 2003; Bartelink 2016; Scheer et al. 2019; Schrijvers and Wiering 2018; Hirschkind 2011; D. Scott

and Hirschkind 2006; Amir-Moazami 2016; Fadil 2011). The concept of the secular brings into view how not only the religious 'other' is of interest, but also, or even more so, the cultural specificity of those cultural and institutional arrangements which are considered to be 'native', having passed through a process of secularization. For instance, an important materialization of the gains in emancipation that are perceived to be in danger from religion are public health approaches to sex, such as sex education in high schools, strong HIV-prevention policies promoting the acceptance of homosexuality and the low threshold of access to contraceptives, abortion and other such services, both in the Netherlands and in other European countries (e.g. Denmark, Shield 2017). Often, these services are characterized as based on scientific evidence, free from cultural and religious influences (Bartelink 2016). Indeed, religion, culture and tradition are often depicted as a hindrance to an enlightened approach to gender and sexuality, with religion in particular cast as promoting conservative values and upholding taboos (Bartelink and Knibbe, this issue; Bartelink and Wiering 2020). In this special issue, we question this claim and instead conceptualize secular approaches as also embedded within particular histories and cultural formations.

Accordingly, rather than asking how migrants 'adapt' to the native 'host' society and leaving unexamined the pluralities of which the latter is composed, the contributors to this issue conceptualize their research contexts as sites where different cultural trajectories intersect within the wider context of post-colonial Europe (Boehmer and Mul 2012; Bhabha 2009; Chakrabarty 2009). Thus, they de-naturalize the implications of the terms 'host' or 'receiving' society and, as a result, ask how an (implicit) rendering of differences comes about. Instead, the contributors focus on the underlying processes of how people navigate social norms and personal aspirations. The research presented here reveals the ways in which people negotiate particular contexts that are characterized by different ideologies, reli-

gious, secular and otherwise, and create new possibilities for self-formation (Rana, Burchardt), relationalities and becoming sexually knowledgeable (Bakuri and Spronk). In short, the confrontations between religious and secular approaches to sexuality can be conceptualized as *cultural encounters* and be researched as such. Moreover, they need to be studied in ethnographic detail so as to move beyond discursive claims (Rana 2022).

### **From discourse to practice: researching the intersection of sexuality, religion and secularity**

Five of the six articles in this special issue focus on the Netherlands. Known as exceptionally progressive with regard to matters of sex and sexuality, and typically (re)presented through a frame of the acceptance of gay marriage, the liberalization of prostitution and drugs, and permissive attitudes generally to adolescent sexuality, the Netherlands provides a profound case through which to study the normative implications and contours of secularity. Studying the interconnections between sexuality, secularity and religion from the experiences of migrants and/or religious people in their encounters with hegemonic secular tropes is thought-provoking for the following reasons.

First, the Dutch regime and the historical practice of religious pluralism to accommodate particular traditional religious groups means that there are strong patterns of the accommodation of religious diversity. At the same time there is a very strong popularized notion concerning the 'backwardness' of religion and the inevitability of secularization (Schuh et al. 2012). This fascinating paradox needs further investigation. Second, the hegemonic self-perception of the Dutch as progressive in combination with a pragmatic view of the regulation of morally delicate questions offers interesting insights into the governance of secularity. For instance, adolescent sexuality has been approached in such a pragmatic manner (Schalet 2011), giving Dutch organizations working on sexual health a reputation worldwide as progressive and exemplary (Roodsaz 2018; Bartelink 2016). Third, since the

early 2000's, the Netherlands has engaged in a particularly intense debate on how the religion and culture of migrants can be reconciled with so-called 'progressive' values with regard to gender and sexuality focusing mostly on Islam. These debates have generated interest worldwide (Veer 2006; Fassin 2012; Butler 2008). Fourth, Dutch integration policy has shifted from a secularity accommodating a diversity of religious groups (commonly known as the 'pillarization model') to one in which individual liberty is the guiding principle, though one that is assumed, implicitly or explicitly, to be threatened by religious strictures (Schuh, Burchardt, and Wohlrab-Sahr 2012). Moreover, discourses in the Netherlands have shifted increasingly towards the country viewing itself as in essence a culturally homogeneous nation (Van Reekum 2012; Van Reekum, Duyvendak, and Bertossi 2012). This approach fails to recognize religious sources and alternative social dimensions of human well-being (Pool 2022), going so far as to prescribe 'becoming more Dutch' as a medical answer to differences in sexual morality (Ayuandini and Duyvendak 2017). A focus on sexuality *in practice* may throw new light on the dynamics of the 'nativist triangle' (Balkenhol et al. 2016; Verkaaik and Spronk 2011) beyond the public debates.

What is also noteworthy is that several articles in this special issue focus specifically on the African Diaspora. Research has so far neglected how the debates on the intersections of migration, gender and sexuality are played out in the context of these groups, where both Christianity and Islam play a role. This is interesting, given the (submerged) notion of Africans as fundamentally 'other', e.g. as racially other, pre-modern, exotic or primordial (Mudimbe 1994). Many of the matters emerging in such conflicts in the Netherlands characterize public debates in Europe more broadly, where concerns about migration and religious 'others' inform nationalist discourses. As we will show below, the notion of Europe as a postcolonial space is deeply informed by colonial histories which continue to inform the diversities produced.



The special issue opens with the article by Brenda Bartelink and Kim Knibbe, which analyses the historical trajectory of the Dutch sexual revolution, often referenced by champions of the (strongly secularist) Dutch approach to sexual health. By attending more closely to developments before the sexual revolution and to some of its most iconic moments, they show how religious stakeholders have in fact been pivotal in shaping the progressive formation of sexuality that the country has become famous for. Amisah Bakuri and Rachel Spronk show the consequences of such a discourse. In their article, they cite a Muslim woman who grew up with the idea that Islam is not hospitable to sexual pleasure, only to find out that she was wrong. They analyse how religious women create a trajectory of becoming sexually knowledgeable by following religious discourse and authorities. Jasmijn Rana's analysis contends that kickboxing Muslimas forge pious selves through their engagement in a sport that is considered masculine by emphasizing femininity and modesty and by developing female-only sociality centred around 'heterosexy-ness'. While combining femininity with strength, the most admiration among the kickboxers goes to those who are able to combine the sport with pious modesty, presenting an alternative trajectory for the development of personal agency to that of liberal feminism. The fourth article in this issue, by Jelle Wiering, is based on auto-ethnographic research with sex educators. It carefully draws out not only how a secular bias operates but also how it is normative in ways many people do not recognize, as Dutch sex education is lauded as a progression beyond 'traditional' and religious regimes around sex and gender. Wiering shows how secular sex education promotes particular gendered ideas about role divisions around sex that build on and consolidate the association of women with the private domain and thus assign men the status of naturally unruly and sexually dangerous bodies to be disciplined and domesticated (by women). Brenda Bartelink's article introduces a group of women who often go relatively unnoticed: women leaders in Pentecostal

churches. They craft interesting ways into leadership, negotiating their own images of sexuality in a secular society and the images secular society has of them. In doing so, they play a crucial role in dealing with the messiness of people's actual sex lives, drawing on, bending and reshaping discourses on sex among Pentecostals. Marian Burchardt's analysis extends the analysis of a secular bias to queer Catholic believers in Spain. He explores how the progressive decoupling of notions of national belonging from both religion and sexual identity has been accompanied by the proliferation of new subject positions around queer spirituality and religiosity.

As the name of this journal, *New Diversities*, suggests, we can no longer speak of cultural pluralism proceeding along straightforward paths of ethnicity, race, migrant/non-migrant, religious/non-religious etc. Even in public debates, the language of intersectionality pioneered by black feminist scholars (Crenshaw 2017; Wekker 2016; Essed 1991) is now employed as a matter of course, however clumsily sometimes. As we show in this special issue, intersections are also about processes, that is, about relating, positioning, enacting and navigating personal aspirations and social expectations. For example, the biographies of queer subjects in Spain discussed in Burchardt's article show the non-linear nature of the ways in which people navigate between religious, secular and spiritual registers, countering the straightforward narrative of queer secularism as an exiting, a breaking away, from religious constraints. The focus on daily praxis and individual biographies provides knowledge about the entanglements and inherent contradictions of people's lives that are otherwise too neatly captured in binary terms, such as conservative versus progressive, restrictions versus freedom, or pious versus blasphemous.

Life is characterized by messiness, complexity and ambivalence (Ahmed 2004), and reducing matters of diversity to fit scholarly categorizations skews our productions of knowledge (Brubaker 2003; Spronk and Nyeck 2021). The categorizing effects of using religion and secularity as self-

evident classifications obscures how seemingly contradictory identifications sometimes co-exist and co-produce another, such as religious queer people. The literature on the secular frame has already shown convincingly that this frame too often represents religious people as conservative and dependent on a higher authority and irreligious people as more sovereign, emancipated citizens (Bracke and Fadil 2012; Bracke 2011; Brandt 2019). In other words, religious women are easily represented as sexually repressed, and secular women as liberated (Schrijvers and Wiering 2018). However, as the contribution by Bakuri and Spronk (this issue) shows, this dichotomy may be entirely irrelevant to people's own experience and positioning, as they find ways to become sexually knowledgeable, weighing sexual pleasure and piety. Furthermore, as Wiering (this issue) shows in his contribution on sex education, both religious and secular structures reproduce certain gender hierarchies and normative frameworks. In addition, a closer look at the historical record of Dutch religious history shows that religious actors have made major contributions to the liberalizing of ideas and practices around sexuality, a fact often forgotten in current representations of the Dutch sexual revolution (Bartelink and Knibbe, this issue). In other words, what new perspectives and conceptualizations can we develop from this 'messiness', from the ambiguities and vicissitudes that characterize day-to-day lives, to the historical and cultural processes that become cleaned up by dominant narratives?

### **Religion and secularity in postcolonial Europe**

The articles in this special issue are concerned in particular with religious/secular differentiations in relation to gender and sexuality, and they all do this against the explicit or implicit understanding of Europe as a postcolonial space, where the history of colonialism and its consequences are simultaneously present and denied. With the resurgence of the demonstrations and discussions about racism and Europe's BLM (Black Lives Matter) movements, it has become clear, once again, that Europe is particularly coagulated in a

way that obstructs the acceptance and recognition of its colonial past and its continuing legacies. As Paul Gilroy summarized, '[T]he modern histories of numerous other European countries [besides Britain], particularly Belgium, France, Spain, Italy, and The Netherlands [are] sites characterized by the inability to disentangle the disruptive results supposedly produced by an immigrant presence from the residual but potent effects of lingering but usually unspoken colonial relationships and imperial fantasies' (Gilroy 2004, 109, see also Wekker 2016). A continuing discourse on migrants and their classification creates a view that migration-related difference is naturally given: migrants forever remain that – wanderers, outsiders – and will not easily become (cultural) citizens (Van Reekum, Duyvendak, and Bertossi 2012). Some of the research on sexuality and migration has become entangled with a particular migration-policy apparatus and discourses that normalize migration and ethnicity-related differences (Krebbekx, Spronk, and M'charek 2016). The articles in this special issue move away from this, aligning with the call by Dehinden to 'de-migrantize' the current discourse by 're-orienting the focus of investigation away from "migrant populations" towards "overall populations"' (Dahinden 2016; see also Penkala-Gawęcka and Rajtar 2016).

How might the notion of post-colonial Europe be made fruitful in relation to the intersections of sexuality, religion and secularity? Recently, Birgit Meyer has proposed to conceive of Europe as a postcolonial frontier zone where religion becomes articulated, inspired by David Chidester's suggestion for the study of the history of religion in Africa (Meyer 2018). Chidester defines the frontier zone as 'a zone of contact, rather than a line, a border, or a boundary. By this definition, a frontier is a region of intercultural relations' (Chidester 1996, 20-21) where ideas about religion are developed in interaction. We would like to extend this notion to suggest that, in fact, Europe as a frontier zone is also the place where not only religion but also *secularity* comes to be articulated at the levels of both pub-

lic discourses and everyday practices, embodiments and affects. Much of the literature on the secular discusses this topic in terms of the governance of religion from the levels of international diplomacy, particular nation states to that of municipalities (Wilson 2012; Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt 2012; Tamimi Arab 2017). In contrast, in this issue we focus on the secular in terms of everyday practices and shared cultural norms, as well as on the implicit and explicit histories and binary oppositions that inform those practices (cf. Scheer, Fadil, and Johansen 2019).

In this articulation of secularity, sex is one of the primary topics around which secular actors differentiate themselves as more progressive, enlightened and modern than religious 'others' (Wiering 2020; J. W. Scott 2017; Butler 2008; Puar 2007). This does not mean, however, that 'natives' (as in 'native' Dutch, Belgians, French, Germans etc.) are by implication always non-religious, nor that they are in fact more progressive towards sexual minorities and in relation to the emancipation of women.

Interestingly, competing concepts of modernity and progress are often implicit in both the grand narratives dominating public debates and the daily lives of how people pursue well-being, both religious and non-religious. People traverse a landscape of contradictions produced through the cultural encounters of different historical trajectories, as well as minority-majority and religious-secular dynamics. From right-wing slogans expressing Islam as 'culturally backward' to Pentecostal celebrations of a modern global lifestyle to queer believers aspiring for emancipation, each ideology claims its place in a hierarchy of time and civilisation. Aspirations tie into visions of a personal future, which are tied to grander visions of the future for one's family, one's nation of origin, of Europe. Such aspirations indicate interesting similarities between groups that are usually analysed as being in opposition to one another. Integrating a focus on how the secular is produced denaturalizes the differences that are also often embedded within research frameworks. Indeed, as some of the articles here show,

secular and religious aspirations may not be recognized as distinct or as in opposition to each other in everyday life (see the articles by Rana, Bakuri and Spronk).

In other words, we propose that, central to ethnographies of religion and secularity, an approach is needed that analyses them as two sides of the same coin. Such an approach implies integrating the awareness that both secular and religious regimes articulate particular (gendered) moralities, ideas of personhood and specific practices and techniques of the self. Techniques of the self are understood as the ways that are offered to and taken up by individuals to shape and fashion themselves, aligning themselves with particular ideals of personhood and thus regulation (Burkitt 2002; Foucault 1978; Mahmood 2001). Examples of techniques of the self may include dress, ways of monitoring one's physical and/or mental health, particular forms of secrecy and disclosure regarding sexuality, and prohibitions encouraged within both religious and secular settings. By taking secularity and religion together as a joint field of inquiry, commonalities appear, such as normative expectations of dress as hip, chaste and feminine, as outlined by Rana in her piece on kickboxing Muslimas negotiating their place in a masculine sport in secular Dutch society.

Positioning secular and religious assemblages together, we propose, may suggest a particular symmetry, which would be misleading. Inequalities within the Dutch society and Europe more generally are the result of longer-term imperial and colonial legacies (cf. Wekker 2016) and processes of in- and exclusion based on class and/or religion. As Chidester notes, cultural relations are also, and always, power relations (Chidester 1996, 20-21) that, so we add, are unstable and contested and that produce encounters of conflict and co-optation as well as collaboration and appropriation. All the ethnographic encounters presented here occur in relation to the deep inequalities of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, age and more, that characterize Europe as a postcolonial space. For this reason, we choose



not to characterize the Netherlands, nor Europe more generally, as a post-secular space or as a space that is entering a post-secular period. Rather, we see religion as one of the axes along which inequalities are articulated, and secularisms as very much implicated in these articulations (Knibbe 2018; Butler 2008; Balkenhol, Mepschen, and Duyvendak 2016). A secular bias against religion is one of the results of deep-seated power relations, and the bias also implicates gender and sexuality in particular ways. For instance, religious queer believers are considered as not yet fully liberated (Arab and Suhonic 2017), while migrants are often assumed to have more conservative ideas and practices around gender roles. As Bartelink shows in this issue regarding religious leaders, the reality is more complex: while indeed promoting conservative gender ideals and premarital chastity, the Pentecostal contexts in which she conducted her fieldwork are also a fertile ground for strong female leadership and discussions about sex.

In sum, cultural encounters take place in a postcolonial context where power inequalities persist. Yet, this must not blind researchers to the instability or internal contradictions of power which generate shifting possibilities and enable agency where it may not be expected. Moreover, the affordances of the normative ideas and practices of both religious rules and secular assumptions of neutrality create and enable unexpected possibilities (Alava, Clarke, and Gusman 2022). Ethnographic research into daily experiences and encounters will reveal such seeming contradictions, as elaborated in the articles in this collection.

### Why sexuality?

Why is it that *sexuality* in particular is implicated in the dynamics of religion, secularity and migration? Sexuality is a dimension of life that is both deeply personal and subject to strong cultural, religious and political constraints and direction (Foucault 1990; Lorde 1978; Gagnon and Simon 2017 [1973]). It is a vehicle for powerful feelings – affection, eroticism, shame, aggression, and

more – that are experienced subjectively (Wekker 2006; Spronk 2014). Sex and sexuality occupy a particular place in subjective experience; while sexuality is often experienced as a very private matter, it is usually enacted in social forms of dating, cruising, marriage, and so on, and it takes place online and in person. Sex, in the sense of arousal, sex acts, eroticism and *jouissance*, is probably one of the most universal of experiences and practices, yet it remains shrouded in discourses on silence, discretion and indirection. Silence is often interpreted in terms of suppression, yet ethnographic research shows that it actually has a productive quality; what is not put into words is open to interpretation (Dankwa 2021; Bakuri et al. 2020). In various ways, sex and sexuality are also, and importantly, central to self-understanding and identity (as wo/man or neither, as a group member, as a cultural citizen) and therefore play an important role in agency and emancipation (Plummer 2002).

Besides the personal dimension, sexuality and gender roles are also often understood as essential to the social and moral order because of reproductive hetero-sex, and so a host of ideological discourses exist to produce and maintain the social fabric (Rubin 2002). Discursive formations of sexuality form and inform subjectivity and our deepest ways of feeling a person, as expressed in (proper) behaviour, dress sense, humour or political views, as well as in reactions against normative expectations (Aggleton et al. 2012; Donnan and Magowan 2012). While discursive formations play an important role, they never fully form subjectivity, while personal orientations provide a scope for deviations (Allen 2011; Boellstorff 2005; Hossain 2022), or what has come to be known as ‘being oneself’ in Euro-American understandings. In other words, people navigate personal aspirations in relation to social expectations in their enactment of gendered and sexual self-realization. More often than not this creates conflict, tension and ambiguities when people do not readily comply (for instance, with ideas about beauty or morality); sexuality is also often a site where people fall victim to conflicting

forces. As sexuality is a public as well as a personal affair, involving communal concerns and individual desires, it can be the cause of ideological debate as much as a source of both pleasure and problems.

With regard to the heated public debates on the multicultural society, we may understand sexuality as taking the form of the calm in the eye of a storm. Although it produces one loud issue, pitting sexuality and religion against another, it also produces silences and invisibilities, such as on the ignorance about the religious knowledge of erotic practice in Islam the interlocutor explains in the article by Bakuri and Spronk in this issue. Whereas public debates are preoccupied with, for instance, a select part of migrants' lives, namely their religiosity and how it is assumed to act as a constraint, major parts of migrants' lives go unnoticed. An example is the immensity and influence of the global religious networks that migrants tap into, the variety of religiously inspired sexual advice and support from religious leaders (Moyer, Burchardt, and Van Dijk 2013), and the ways in which piety and pleasure may be mutually reinforcing rather than mutually exclusive. Another example is how the direction of secular progress mentioned above may be subverted, such as for instance, the unexpected process of emancipation from queer secularity to finding queer spirituality, or how piety enables religious women to engage in sport, articulating the existing diversity of how religion and sexuality connect. Whereas queer emancipation is typically tantamount to opposing heteronormative patriarchal religion, queer believers in Burchardt's research (this issue) contest this logic by developing queer spiritualities within normative structures and beyond queer secularity.

Sexuality is part of a broader palette of the ways in which religion, belonging, health and happiness interconnect in people's pursuit of the good life. At the same time, sexuality is a field for conflict and tension as people manoeuvre normative realities that may be in conflict with their personal desires. As the articles here articulate, one way to study how problems and pleasures

are not mutually exclusive is to uncover how normative regimes also provide the tools for agency and sometimes dissent (cf. Mahmood 2001). Moreover, for many believers, sexuality is not only determined by scriptures (cf. Alava, Clarke, and Gusman 2022), but is entangled with both non-religious and religious normative expectations of the nuclear family, as well as anxieties around reproduction (to have or not to have children) and other gendered social expectations. Sexuality as it is lived is therefore a unique prism to further theorize the intersections of religion, secularity and modernity, opening up questions that throw new light on the entrenched oppositions that are inherent in public contestations around these issues.

### In conclusion

Together, the articles in this special issue provide illustrative cases of the ways sexuality becomes implicated in both religion and secularity, and how both possibilities rely on narratives of progressive modernity in their reshaping over time. Whereas some narratives, now often representing dominant cultural norms, have developed the notion that only 'secular' sex can be liberating, articulating particular meanings of 'good' sex, religious actors may present quite different possibilities. It seems that it is in particular those people who have been excluded from public debate historically (women, queers, migrants) who are reshaping the dichotomies to be found in dominant discourses, sometimes openly, but more often slipping below the radar. While avoiding public scrutiny, they work to address and resolve tensions and problems, formulating new ideals and aspirations. It is to be hoped that such developments will in time also find their way to informing more nuanced public debates around sexuality, religion and/or migration. Whereas the recent popularization of intersectionality as a lens in public debates is hopeful, the simultaneous political polarization around gender, sexuality and migration that is currently taking place is worrying. In the meantime, we hope researchers will continue to conduct ethnographic research

on the everyday realities and developments such as those presented here.

In such research, as we have argued in this introduction, it is crucial to understand 'New Diversities' in terms of the plurality of cultural trajectories that are encountering each other on the unequal playing field of post-colonial Europe. In them, secularity needs to be made productive for ethnographic research, while also bringing into view religious resources for working on self and well-being. Sexuality has gained a new form of normativity in recent decades in nationalist discourses in postcolonial Europe, and new sexual sensitivities have replaced former ones. So far, scholarly discussions deal with these sensitivities in a more deconstructivist and critical manner, denaturalizing discourses on culture, identity and religion. However, these debates do not consider the experiences of those implicated in these debates, and their often emotional and political engagement in matters where sexuality and religion intersect. We propose the notion of cultural encounters, combined with a focus on how secularity is produced in the context of postcolonial frontier zones, so as to move beyond the study of controversies and conflicts. This denaturalizes the religious 'other', moving away from a migration framework that takes for granted the cultural homogeneity of a so-called host society. Moreover, it unravels how normativity is both a religious and a secular inclination. In fact, religion and secularity co-produce each other. Furthermore, in moving towards studying cultural encounters ethnographically rather than through public discourses, we show how apparent conflicts and convictions are in practice much more ambiguous, malleable and less straightforward. While recognizing power relations, such a move also enables us to see the similarities in the forms of well-being and the futures people strive towards.

In closing, we urge scholars not to forget that sexuality is not only a subject of highly mediated contestations, but also one of the major domains of life through which the (gendered) self and relationality come into being. It is thus

an important lens onto life in the context of diversity.

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# Why the Dutch (Think They) Break Taboos: Challenging Contemporary Presentations of the Role of Religious Actors in Narratives of Sexual Liberation\*

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## Abstract

In contemporary approaches to sexual health in the Netherlands, religion and culture are often framed as a source of taboos that need to be broken in order to create more openness around sexuality. This view is often projected onto migrants with a religious background and onto other parts of the world that are 'still' religious. In this article, we suggest that one element to developing a more inclusive approach is to question existing narratives of 'sexularism' and to acknowledge that both religious and secular actors have historically been involved in the search for better ways of approaching sexual health and sexuality in the Netherlands. In contemporary characterizations of Dutch culture, the sexual revolution is referenced as a time in Dutch history when religious small-mindedness around sexuality was dismantled through a series of transgressive media events. Iconic moments in the sexual revolution have become ingrained in a collective memory of the 1960s as liberation from the firm grip of religion on peoples' intimate lives. In this article we argue that the contemporary Dutch equation of secularization with openness around sexuality obscures a more complex dynamic between conservative and progressive forces within Dutch religious history. Based on existing research, we show that openness around sexuality was taking shape from within Catholic and Protestant communities and being materialized in new discourses, services and practices around sexuality in the 1950s and 1960s. Frictions between Protestants and Catholics, the clergy and the people, and liberal and conservative circles were part and parcel of some of the iconic moments that are now considered to have shaped Dutch culture.

**Keywords:** sexual health, religion, secularity, taboo, the Netherlands

## Introduction

In 2017, the largest Dutch sexual health organization, Rutgers, celebrated fifty years of its existence. In looking back, its director at the time referenced the origins of its predecessor organi-

zation (Nisso) in 1967, in the middle of the sexual revolution:

The revolution led to all kinds of small rebellions and demonstrations. The boundaries regarding what was allowed and what was not were pushed further. The Dolle Mina's [Dutch feminist group] were influential there. But 1967 was also the year of Phil Bloom, the first woman to appear naked on Dutch television. It led to a lot of commotion, people were fired, and even questions in parliament. Also nowadays, everything concerning sexual freedom

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\* This work was supported by the Dutch Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO) under Grant 360-25-160. The authors report no conflicts of interest.

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and rights is accompanied by incidents, struggle and activism.<sup>2</sup>

Wiering, who attended the event, noted that this image of the ongoing sexual revolution was accompanied by a tacit construction of religion as a brake on these developments. For example, the presenter of the programme, Sophie Hilbrands, announced that the guest of honour, the King of the Netherlands, Willem Alexander, was coming from another event celebrating five hundred years of Protestantism: 'so you can imagine how relieved he will be to get here,' she joked (Wiering, 2020, p. 68).

The framing of religion during this event, as well as the representation of the importance of the sexual revolution as a pivotal moment in the Dutch history of sexual liberation, are staples of the so-called secular frame that is prevalent in Dutch approaches to sexual health and sexual well-being in general. As other authors have outlined, this also informs the ways in which people with a religious and/or migration background are approached. The prevailing construction of the Netherlands is that it is progressive and enlightened in its approach to gender and sexuality, in contrast to those from 'other' cultural and religious backgrounds. This is particularly evident in relation to migrants with a Muslim background around issues of gender and homosexuality (Balkenhol et al., 2016; Bracke, 2012, 2011; Bracke and Fadil, 2008; Knibbe and Bartelink, 2019; Mepschen et al., 2010). However, it is also evident in the framing of research among migrant groups on the transmission among them of sexual transmitted diseases, including HIV (e.g. Fakoya et al., 2008; Stutterheim et al., 2011; see Krebbekx et al., 2016 for a critique of how ethnicity is framed as problematic in such research).

The need to break taboos also figures prominently in the public policy documents and public activities of Dutch organizations advocating sexual health. This is evident in the work of the largest such organization, Rutgers. This organization published a small booklet on religion and sexuality remarkably entitled 'Zwijgen is zonde' (Ohlrichs and van der Vlugt, n.d.). This title can be read in two ways, namely: 'staying silent is a sin' or as 'staying silent is a pity/a waste'. In the booklet, the authors explain that 'in some cultures and religions it is taboo to speak about sexuality, even prohibited' (p. 20). In its international work, Rutgers also frequently refers to taboos around sexuality which have a striking similarity with how they present the need to break taboos vis-à-vis minorities in the Netherlands (Leerlooijer et al., 2011; Vanwesenbeeck et al., 2016). Another influential group of organizations referring to the need to break taboos are the local public health offices of the municipalities in the Netherlands (GGD). In their 2011 policy document, the public health office (GGD) of Amsterdam links the aim of supporting the cultural and religious organizations of migrants to tackling stigma and taboo around HIV/AIDS.<sup>3</sup> The same discourse can be observed with Pharos, a Dutch NGO that works in the area of cultural differences and health that published a toolkit for professionals in 2016 to help them talk about taboos ('taboe-onderwerpen bespreekbaar maken'), such as sexuality and sexual abuse in migrant communities.<sup>4</sup> References to taboos and the need to break them in relation to religion and sexuality are also observed in Dutch international development discourses and practices (B. Bartelink and Wiering, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Die revolutie kwam tot uiting in relletjes en demonstraties. De grenzen van wat wel en wat niet mag, werden steeds verder opgerekt. Onder meer door de Dolle Mina's. 1967 is ook het jaar van Phil Bloom, de eerste blote vrouw op de Nederlandse televisie. Dat leidde tot veel commotie, weggestuurde redactieleden en zelfs Kamervragen. Ook nu gaat alles met seksuele vrijheid en rechten nog gepaard met relletjes, strijd of activisme. (Rutgers, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> GGD Amsterdam (2011) 'GGD Visie op Seksuele Gezondheid'.

<sup>4</sup> Pharos (feb. 2016) 'Toolkit. Seksueel misbruik in migrantenfamilies. Voorlichting aan migranten over seksueel misbruik in de familie. Handreiking voor Hulpverleners'. For a direct reference to the word taboo cf. the press release on the Pharos website: <http://www.pharos.nl/nl/kenniscentrum/algemeen/nieuws/868/toolkit-voor-hulpverleners-om-taboeonderwerpen-bespreekbaar-te-maken>

Indeed, it is true that internationally, and to a lesser extent nationally, approaches emphasizing comprehensive sexual education are often opposed by conservative religious actors, particularly Catholic and evangelical Christian groups (Adams and Pigg, 2005; Ahlberg, 2011; Beckmann et al., 2014; Vik et al., 2013). In addition, evidence-based sexual health policies and programmes are increasingly being seen as ‘western moral impositions’ in the context of broader nationalizing projects, entangling them in civilizational dynamics (B. E. Bartelink, 2016; Roodsaz, 2018; Sadgrove, 2007).

As many scholars have noted, this opposition between religious and secular approaches to sexual well-being and sexual health is unhelpful since it seems to create a choice between ‘progressive’ secular approaches to sexual health and well-being and religious identities and practices. Indeed, critical researchers have pointed out the secularist and culturalist biases in approaches to sexual health and sexual health education (Bartelink, 2016; Bartelink and Wiering, 2020; Rasmussen, 2010; Roodsaz, 2018; van den Berg, 2013). This is not particular to the Netherlands: generally, what are known as evidence-based sexual health practices are not neutral but mobilize particular cultural narratives in their encounters with religion (Burchardt, 2015). Public health institutions that base their interventions on scientific evidence often frame and communicate these interventions in the context of narrative of progress and sexual liberalization (Adams and Pigg, 2005) and dismiss religion as a brake on these developments, something to ‘overcome’. This critique fits in with a broader trend within the interdisciplinary study of religion that calls for a critical examination of the secular and how it is caught up with notions of modernity, portraying those who do not fit into this narrative as ‘not yet modern’, backward, etc. (Balkenhol et al., 2016; Brandt, 2019; Cady and Fessenden, 2013; Knibbe, 2018; Mahmood, 2015; Scott, 2018; Wiering, 2020).

Public health organizations are also increasingly engaging with these critiques. As research-

ers, we were often involved in debates and discussions with representatives of Rutgers and other sexual health organizations where they were struggling to become more aware of their implicit bias and framing.<sup>5</sup> Yet, as we will show, there is still more to do. In order to be able to generate more nuanced views on the role of religion and culture, we propose that it is important to re-examine the Dutch equation between secularization and the sexual revolution as the royal road toward openness around sexuality, and thus as a healthy approach to sexuality. As we will show here, the narratives of the sexual revolution and secularization that the Netherlands went through are in fact more complicated, and religious actors were much more involved in them than is often thought.

In the following, we will trace the post-WWII history of thinking on sexuality in the Netherlands within the networks of organizations that were developed around particular denominational (Protestant and Catholic) identities until the 1960s. Reading through the historical research on how sexuality was discussed within these networks gives us a much more complex picture than the uniform ‘repressive’ moralizing that is often associated with religion in secular discourse in the contemporary Netherlands. After that, we analyse several iconic moments connected to the sexual revolution in the 1960s when taboos were broken. Here too, religious actors could be found on all sides of the controversies that arose around these acts of breaking taboos. Where relevant we will refer to broader developments in the Netherlands and western culture, but our focus is on the role of religious actors and organizations.

In describing these developments we make use of existing historical research. Thus, in a sense the stories we tell here are not new, partic-

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<sup>5</sup> Bartelink, Brenda (2019) Presentation and Panel Discussion at the *Johannes Rutgers Dialoog: De strijd om seks* (3 October 2019) <https://www.rutgers.nl/dialoog>; Bartelink, Brenda (2019) Presentation for the International Department of Rutgers, Knowledge Centre on Sexuality, 7 february 2019.

ularly to historians of religion in the Netherlands. Nor are they exhaustive and complete. Rather, we focus on the ways in which religious actors and networks were changing their discourses and practices around sex before the sexual revolution and how they were involved in some of the iconic moments of this cultural break. This more complex history problematizes and complicates current secular framings of religion as inherently and inevitably conservative in relation to sexuality. We reflect on this in the final section of this article.

### **Sex and Taboo in Dutch Religious Subcultures**

The Netherlands is known for its Christian pluralism and its social organization in terms of different religious denominations and ideological groupings. Although the Catholic community was numerically the largest, the Protestant subcultures were politically and culturally more dominant, while the socialist and the humanist organizations gained ground at the cost of the religious denominations. The existence of powerful religious subcultures in the Netherlands suggests a particular kind of secularity that situates itself within a typology developed by Wohlrab-Sahr and co-authors as secularity for the sake of accommodating religious diversity (Schuh et al., 2012).

How sex was discussed, or rather turned into an area of opacity within the Catholic and Protestant subcultures in the early twentieth century, should be seen against the background of a broader project of modernization which came with fundamental changes in views and practices around raising children, as well as with the rise of the modern nation state (Hekma and Stolk, 1990).<sup>6</sup> According to these authors, the primary goal of Dutch elites became to safeguard the sexual innocence of children. This led to a lack of sexual socialization even for those who had reached adulthood. At the same time, as a modern nation state the Dutch government

became increasingly interested in controlling sexuality and the sexual health of its population. Institutionalizing this control within and via religious communities, sexual opacity was undergirded by restrictive Catholic and Protestant moralities.

In the late nineteenth century, some of the medical elite had acknowledged the lack of sexual education in children as problematic and started to research and publish on sexual health. Motivated by projections of exploding population growth developed by the British theologian and scholar Robert Malthus, the New Malthusian Union established in 1881 became an influential organization advocating birth control. From 1901 onwards, the work of the NMB gained more popularity under the leadership of the medical doctor (and former Protestant Minister) Johannes Rutgers. Rutgers advocated that contraceptives should become accessible to the general population. Despite this plea (or, as we shall see, sometimes because of it), sexual opacity and control was further institutionalized within the Catholic and Protestant subcultures, sometimes as a direct response to the activities of the NMB and other organizations. This has led to a complex dynamic of liberation and control in the history of sexuality within Dutch religious subcultures and consociational networks in the twentieth century. The following two sections will trace these developments for Catholicism and Protestantism respectively. These overviews will necessarily be brief and lacking in precise detail, for which we refer the readers to the works cited.

### *Catholic Consociational Networks*

Within Catholic consociational networks, a strong emphasis on regulating sexuality – always a concern within Catholic theology – became increasingly systematized in theology and in the training of priests during the first half of the twentieth century. Catholic moral theology developed a view of sex as only meant for procreation and opposed the use of contraceptives, following the encyclical *Casti Connubii* published in 1932. Although a Catholic doctor, Smulders, developed

<sup>6</sup> The chapter by Schnabel is particularly relevant in this regard.



a method of 'natural' birth control (the rhythm method) in the 1930s, this method was controversial and generated opposition from Dutch organizations of family physicians and moral theologians. It was decided that his method should not be publicized, let alone published, but only offered as a possibility for women to use after a priest had examined the circumstances of 'marital life' in the confessional (Hofstee, 2012, pp. 20-21).

In universities and seminaries, the teachings on preventing any kind of sexual activity that was not geared towards procreation was developed in ever more detail. This emphasis was strongly bound up with the so-called 'frontier mentality' of Dutch Catholics: after centuries of discrimination, Dutch Catholics only started to emancipate again in 1853, when the Catholic hierarchy was re-established on Dutch soil. There was a big push after that to gain equal rights and status in the Netherlands. Indeed, for a while Dutch Catholics had a distinct demographic advantage: due to their strong stance on prohibiting birth control and encouraging large families, they grew at a rate that was noticeably faster than other groups in the Netherlands, aiming to become at least half of the population of the Netherlands, up from around 30% (Knippenberg, 1992; Schoonheim, 2005; Van Heek, 1956).

Westhoff, who wrote several important and detailed studies of the changing discourses around sexuality and mental health in Dutch Catholicism, describes the period after WWII as one where the emphasis on regulating sex through moral prescriptions and detailed behavioural guidelines first increased and was then challenged from within Catholic networks of organizations (Westhoff, 1996).<sup>7</sup> The tightening of control occurred partly in reaction to the heady days after the liberation from German occupation. At this time, sexual engagement and pleasure became part of Dutch popular culture

through the mixing of soldiers from the allied forces with local girls and through the introduction of popular culture and music from the US and the UK. This led to concerned and disapproving reactions among Catholic clergy and professionals. The regulation of sexuality became an explicit concern in schools, in organizations dedicated to leisure activities and in the training of priests. The focus was on promoting sex (understood as vaginal penetration) within heterosexual marriage, positing a view of procreation as a natural and sacred duty. Any other kind of sex, eroticism or displays of sexuality were prohibited.

This tightening of control created a counter-reaction. Towards the end of the 1950s, mental health professionals within Catholic consociational networks started to express their doubts about the soundness of the Catholic approach to sexuality. Because of their catalysing role in changing the way Catholics thought about sexuality, authority and punishment, the (mostly) men of this movement have been described as 'spiritual liberators'<sup>8</sup> by Westhoff (see the title of her monograph, Westhoff 1996). Psychiatrists treating student priests signalled that many of them developed 'neuroses' and traced this to the rules regarding celibacy and masturbation. Furthermore, it was thought that the strong emphasis on preventing sex outside of marriage led to sexual problems after marriage.

According to some prominent figures in the Catholic mental health movement (notably the physician and psychologist Buytendijk), the small-mindedness of Catholic regulations concerning morality was the source of many psychological problems, a higher delinquency among Catholics due to a not fully-grown personal conscience, and a high rate of sexual delinquency. Catholic moral education and the social and spiritual machinery of parish life focused on punishing those who sinned by excluding them from the sacraments, and thus from God's grace. According to Buytendijk and other spiritual liberators, Catholic moral teaching should focus on *inspiring*

<sup>7</sup> Much of the following in this section is based on Westhoff's superb study of the Catholic mental health movement, where sexuality was a primary concern.

<sup>8</sup> In Dutch: geestelijke bevrijders.

believers to live a morally good life, whereas now the emphasis on rules in fact *prevented* believers from developing fully as independent adults. Catholic morality as it was enforced at that time, according to the spiritual liberators, mostly inspired a fear of accidentally sinning rather than faith in God's goodness.

At first, the discussions on Catholic morality concerning sexuality took place behind closed doors. Gradually, however, the censorship of the church loosened, and sexuality and birth control became openly discussed topics in the Catholic media: first some Catholic magazines, later the radio, and finally television. Sexual relations became a subject for mental health, to be addressed by professionals trained in psychology. Within a few years, a paradigm shift occurred within the Catholic community, from combating sins to combating the psychological problems that were thought to cause the sinning.

Importantly, 'official' Catholic morality, and more specifically *Casti Connubii*, the encyclical that had been published in 1930 in response to the promotion of birth control by Neo-Malthusians, remained the primary moral source for the spiritual liberators. For example, they often referred to a '*sensus Catholicus*', a supposedly typically Catholic receptivity to direction by the Holy Spirit and the Church as the Body of Christ. It was on this '*sensus Catholicus*' that they relied to make their efforts to improve the mental health of Catholics not just neutral and professional, but a truly Catholic endeavour that would promote the liberating message of Jesus Christ (Westhoff 1996: 314-315).

Nevertheless, *Casti Connubii* was reinterpreted in such a way that the role of sexual relations in the 'primary' (procreation) and 'secondary' (a loving relationship) aims of marriage came to be seen quite differently, leading to the conclusion that limiting the number of children, and thus using birth control, could be warranted to safeguard the secondary aim of marriage. The aim of a loving relationship was also emphasized and elaborated theologically in the '*Nieuwe Catechismus*' (new Catechism) in the

light of God's love (van den Bos, 2021). Although this Catechism was later redacted and a newer version has been in use officially since 1992, it is often still cherished by Catholics who came of age at the time of its publication, as it shaped their views on how religion and sex could be understood as imbued with love and pleasure.

In time, lay Catholic professionals implemented these ideas in the many institutions and organizations of the Catholic community: from kindergarten to university, from the first experiments with co-education to the re-organization of the training of priests in open institutes mixed with the training for lay pastors. Furthermore, due to radio and television, 'the public' at large was also drawn into the discussion. And since it concerned issues very close to their heart, this public listened avidly: the radio shows of a Dr Trimbos were especially important here. A key moment, moreover, was the pronouncement of Bishop Bekkers during a television broadcast that he thought that contraception should be a matter for personal conscience (van Schaik, 1997, p. 347). This was revolutionary, since it removed an entire area of life out of the control of the Catholic Church.

### *The Protestant Subcultures*

Whereas Dutch Catholics were quite concerned with the need to operate as one block in the Dutch religious and political landscape, Dutch Protestantism is notoriously prone to splitting. Thus, the following should be read as quite a broad sketch of some of the developments within the main strands of Protestantism in the Netherlands: the '*Hervormden*' and the '*Gereformeerden*', which internally were also quite disparate in their views and practices.

Within these communities, in the first half of the twentieth century an understanding of sexuality emerged that focused on its connection to love rather than procreation. This development took place against the background of broader shifts in the Protestant churches, whereby the social role of the church was emphasized over its role to safeguard certain moral standards

and dogmas.<sup>9</sup> The Lambeth conference in 1930, in which the Anglican Church in England had accepted contraceptive use, also influenced Protestant approaches to sexuality in the Netherlands. Arguments that contraceptives were problematic because they were artificial were soon rejected within more liberal circles. Family planning was therefore accepted as a practice even before artificial contraceptive use became widely available. Over the years, the idea that the planning and spacing of children was part of being a responsible parent and spouse became firmly rooted within many Protestant communities.

A new Protestant view on sexuality was introduced by the *Hervormde* medical doctor Felix Dupuis, a sexual liberator in the Protestant community. Dupuis had become aware of the sexual health needs of young women in particular through his experience with the death of a young woman after a self-induced abortion during WWII.<sup>10</sup> Dupuis published a widely sold book on sexual health in 1947, introducing a positive view on sexuality with reference to the Bible book *Song of Songs*. Following this, the Dutch reformed synod published a pastoral letter on marriage (Herderlijk Schrijven over het Huwelijk) in 1952 that argued against the common association of the sexual with sin and affirmed sexuality as a gift from God (Bos, 2010).

Within the *Gereformeerde* community, there was a stronger emphasis on sin in relation to sexuality, yet the need to educate people about sexuality was also noted. Influenced by articles written by the *Gereformeerde* theologian Waterink and medical doctor Drogendijk, who collaborated with Dupuis, issues regarding sexual health and well-being came to be addressed directly rather than silenced or ignored (Drogendijk,

1952).<sup>11</sup> For married couples, the most visible change occurred when the Synod of the 'Gereformeerde Kerken' accepted contraceptives in 1963 (Vellenga, 1995). The *Hervormden* were much earlier than the *Gereformeerden* in their formal ecclesiastic response to the sexual and reproductive questions that were emerging in the Protestant communities (Bos, 2009). In addition, the notion of sin and the illegitimacy of sexuality continued longer for the *Gereformeerden* because of their understanding of marriage as a metaphor for humankind's unity with God and with the nation (Drogendijk et al., 1961).

The Protestant liberators, Dupuis, Waterink and Drogendijk, saw sexuality as part of human flourishing, expressing its relationship to the transcendent (God) and to the immanent (society) (Drogendijk et al., 1961).<sup>12</sup> Eroticism was seen as an essential element in a healthy marriage. Like the views of the Catholic spiritual liberators, this positive view of sexuality was still confined within a traditional morality. Marriage was seen as a spiritual and legal frame in which sexuality was practised. Children were an expression of the spiritual and physical unity within marriage, but procreation was not seen as the main purpose of marriage. This more liberal understanding of sexuality became institutionalized when, five years after the publication of the pastoral letter, the Protestantse Stichting voor Verantwoorde Gezinsvorming (PSVG) was established under leadership of Dupuis. Together with the *Hervormde Raad voor Kerk en Gezin* (Dutch Reformed Council for Church and Family) and the *Nederlandse Vereniging voor Seksuele Hervor-*

<sup>9</sup> The *Hervormde Raad voor Kerk en Gezin* (Reformed Council for Church and Family) was established to support families affected by WWII and the colonial wars in the Dutch East Indies.

<sup>10</sup> Dupuis and his colleagues found out later that girl in question had not been pregnant in the first place (Hageman 2007).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. A.C. Drogendijk *Man en Vrouw voor en in het huwelijk; Een boek over het seksuele leven voor verloofden en gehuwden*, was first published in 1941. The 1964 version is significantly different in giving more attention to love within marriage in view of 'de vorming van een gelukkig huwelijksleven.'

<sup>12</sup> Cf. the contributions of the *Gereformeerde* members of the working group on sexuality education of the *Nederlands Gespreks Centrum*, a foundation to improve communication between diverse groups and communities in Dutch society. Pp. 7 discusses sexual development and growth as essential to human development within the context of marriage.

ming (Dutch Foundation for Sexual Reform), the PSGV played a crucial role in changing medical law in 1966, which decriminalized the public selling and advertising of contraceptives. When the PSVG started Protestant counselling centres that offered medical, pastoral and social support to Protestant families, it became an accepted institution for family-planning services able to reach the Protestant constituencies that did not easily access the services offered by the secular organization, the NVSH.

### *Oscillating Between Control and Liberation*

In summary, within both Catholic and Protestant subcultures, tendencies toward liberation and tendencies toward exercising stronger control over sexuality can be observed in the post-war period. Among Protestants, the family-planning movement emerged independently of the mental health movement that was such an inspiration for the Catholic liberators and was less controversial. Yet, even before PSGV became part of the National Protestant Centre for Mental Health in 1966, there are important similarities in how the understanding of sexuality changed within Catholic and Protestant circles. The similarity is particularly evident in how promoting knowledge on sexual health emerged out of the growing importance of pastoral approaches and the professionalization of spiritual care. The then dominant moral, dogmatic understanding of sexuality was questioned, while awareness of the body, health and emotions increased. In Catholic circles this was explicitly referred to as the breaking of taboos. This shift also enabled a more material and technical approach to sexuality.

One possible difference between the Protestant and the Catholic subcultures is the extent to which liberators were developing their thinking in dialogue with or in opposition to their respective churches. The representatives of the Catholic hierarchy in the Netherlands initially refrained from making any public statements on the use of family planning methods. Archbishop Alfrink was waiting for the conclusions of the Second Vatican Council that was ongoing at the time (van Schaik,

1997). However, in 1963 the popular Bishop Bekkers foreclosed internal dilemmas by declaring on public television that couples themselves should decide how many children to have.

This statement had a profound influence on Catholics in the Netherlands, who welcomed the emphasis on individual consciousness, rather than the strong role of the church in regulating people's lives (Knibbe, 2013, Ch. 3). It also established the role of Dutch Catholicism as leading in progressive reforms. Worldwide, developments in Dutch Catholicism were seen as noteworthy. The pastoral Council of Noordwijkerhout (1966-1970) was seen as a particularly notable process, challenging priestly celibacy and suggesting that women should be allowed to enter the priesthood, among many more radical changes to reform Catholicism from a hierarchical institution to a broad movement finding its way to God ('Gods volk onderweg') (Coleman, 1978).

These developments in Dutch Catholicism were cut short by the publication of the papal encyclical *Humanae Vitae* (1968) during the pastoral council in Noordwijkerhout, which re-established procreation as the primary aim of marriage and explicitly forbade the use of artificial contraceptives. In retrospect the publication of this encyclical signalled the start of a Rome-led conservative turn within the Dutch church hierarchy during the 1970s, when two outspokenly conservative bishops were appointed. This conservative turn within the Dutch Catholic hierarchy produced a lasting polarization among Dutch Catholics more broadly. In reaction, many Catholics who had embraced Bishop Beckers' message of autonomy no longer accepted the authority of the Catholic Church in the area of sexuality, family and relationships, even mocking priests who did try to re-establish these norms as attempting to 'turn back the clock' (Knibbe, 2013, Chs. 3, 4).

Because family planning and contraceptives were less problematic in Protestant circles, there was more space for conversation on matters of sexual well-being within the Protestant community and within the different Protestant churches. This difference between Catholic and Protestant

subcultures included a sense of the self-fashioning of Protestants as responsible parents vis-à-vis allegedly conservative and backward Catholics. Protestants frowned upon Catholic moralities around family planning, criticizing the poverty trap it created for working-class families (Bos, 2009; Mulder, 2013).<sup>13</sup>

The increasing openness towards sexuality and family planning within the Catholic and Protestant communities gave rise to contestations over sexuality within and between various Catholic and Protestant subcultures. Yet, as Kennedy has noted, there was a strong sense that the whole of the Netherlands was moving towards a radical break with hierarchical cultural values (Kennedy, 1995). In this cultural revolution, secular and religious actors both played a role on both the progressive and the conservative sides of the equation. These dynamics informed some of the most iconic events of the sexual revolution, which we will discuss in the next section. Around these events, a polarization emerged between liberal and more conservative religious moral approaches to sexuality in the 1960s and 1970s.

### Breaking Taboos in the 1960s

Two issues in particular have become something of a 'litmus test' for migrants to become 'culturally Dutch': public nakedness, in particular naked breasts, and homosexuality. Not coincidentally, both topics figure prominently in the integration video for migrants who wish to immigrate to the Netherlands from so-called 'non-western' countries. This is the film called 'Naar Nederland', part of the lesson materials for the basic integration exam for migrants (Balkenhol et al., 2016; Bracke, 2012; Butler, 2008). It exists in both redacted

('gekuist', literally 'chaste') and unredacted (unchaste) versions because of the nudity and imagery depicting homosexuality.<sup>14</sup> In the following, we focus on two key events of the sexual revolution that are often seen as the origin point for the cultural changes now presented as the dominant cultural norm in the Netherlands and show how religious actors were in fact involved on all sides of the controversies generated. Both were broadly publicized and stretched out over a period of time.

The first concerns the controversy around the first naked woman to appear on TV in 1968 (Kennedy and Kennedy-Doornbos, 2017). In the first broadcast of the TV programme *Hoepla*, arts student and model Phil Bloom walked behind a musical performance wearing a very short flowery garment that covered her breasts and genitals.<sup>15</sup> The second episode made the international news because she was now fully nude. Not insignificantly, *Hoepla* was broadcast by the liberal Protestant broadcasting service VPRO. In addition, initially Phil Bloom was supposed to hold the Protestant Christian newspaper *Trouw* in front of her.

When this plan became publicly known, it generated so much controversy that the scene was changed. When the second episode was broadcast, Bloom appeared instead reading an article in the Social Democrat newspaper *Het Vrije Volk*, which covered the controversy following her performance in the first episode. After reading, she lowered the newspaper, fully exposing her breasts to the audience. This broadcast was not only covered in the international media, it also led to questions in Parliament, notably from the conservative Protestant Christian party SGP. Responding to the controversy, the board of the VPRO, chaired by liberal Protestant minister Ad Mulder, decided to terminate the programme before the series was finished.

<sup>13</sup> The earlier mentioned *Hervormde* pastoral letter, for example, firmly rejects an understanding of sexuality as exclusively focused on reproduction, which at the time was a clear reference to Catholic morality. Mulder (2013) refers to criticisms by a minister, Jan van Boven, also noted in a personal reflection by van Boven published on the website of the Condomerie in Amsterdam under the title: Church and Condom <https://condomerie.com/condomologie/condoom-historie/kerk-en-condoom>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.naarnederland.nl/lesmateriaal> accessed 19-07-2022

<sup>15</sup> The programme was made by four artists, all related to an international pop-art movement called fluxus.



Phil Bloom became an icon of the sexual revolution at the time, the first naked woman on TV in the Netherlands. In current cultural representations, it is still an important symbol of a break with opaqueness around the topic of sex and the body, as we saw in the reference the director of the largest Dutch sexual health organization made to it in celebrating fifty years of the organization's existence. The initial plan to have her hold the *Trouw* in front of her shows how the juxtaposition of the naked female body with Protestantism was used to generate 'shock value'. What is particularly interesting is that the VPRO, a broadcasting service rooted in liberal Protestantism, intentionally framed a certain kind of Christianity as a hindrance to the liberalization of sexual morality throughout the publicity that surrounded it.

Another iconic event where progressive and conservative religious trends became visible was the blasphemy trial against writer Gerard van 't Reve (later Gerard Reve) (Bos in Andeweg, 2015). As an openly gay Catholic convert, he was the living embodiment of the progressiveness in sexual matters that was then being pioneered among some Dutch Catholics, especially in Amsterdam and around the pastoral council of Noordwijkerhout.

Although Reve did not at first emerge as a Catholic intellectual, since he converted at a later stage, he was an intellectual, was openly gay, and after his conversion wrote explicitly *as a Catholic*. As an author, he was also the embodiment of the desire to break with the stolid 1950s. His first novel, *de avond*, described the suffocating atmosphere of this period, was summarized in the evocative word *spruitjeslucht* (the smell of Brussels sprouts), which is still often used in relation to the suffocation that many Dutch associate with religion and the mentality of the 1950s.

In his writing, Reve creatively combined characteristics in a way that often shocked people, and that certainly grabbed attention and provoked debate. The trial on blasphemy followed a publication by Reve in which he imagines himself having anal sex with God represented as a

donkey. At first, this text did not generate a lot of attention. It was only after Reve was criticized by a Catholic priest and a protestant minister that the content of this publication became known among a broader audience. Paradoxically, the pastors who criticized Reve were progressives who had organized the first pastoral counselling groups for homosexuals in the Netherlands. They feared Reve's provocative writings would cause a conservative backlash. This fear, expressed in a public letter, was borne out by I.R. van Dis, an MP for the conservative Protestant party the SGP, to urge the Minister of Justice to request an investigation.<sup>16</sup>

The blasphemy trial that followed was central in controversies on religion and homosexuality in the 1960s, and as such it has played a crucial role in the construction of liberal sexuality as symbol of secularism in the Netherlands. Reve was found not guilty, mainly because it could not be proved that he intended to blaspheme. His main argument was that he was himself a Catholic and that he expressed his beliefs in God as he believed, therefore he was exercising his right to freedom of religion, and the case was merely a way of making one understanding of God more important than another (e.g. Jansen 2017). Following the Supreme Courts' decision, blasphemy practically became inapplicable as an offense, which was repeatedly stressed as a corrosion of the blasphemy law by Christian political parties (ibid.). In the literary writings Reve produced during the period of the trial, which were published afterwards, critics have observed how Reve created an image of a highly personal God that reflected his own homosexual lifestyle (Batteau 2022).

Having liberated themselves from restrictive Catholic sexual morality, some Catholic intellectuals embraced Reve because his work allowed

<sup>16</sup> A central figure in this was the medical doctor and historian G.A. Lindeboom, professor at the *Gereformeerde* VU University. Rather than criticizing Van het Reve, Lindeboom criticized liberal theologians who had defended the writer. Cf. Bos (2015) and (Lindeboom, 1967).

for a representation of Catholic culture in which morality might seem restrictive but in practice allowed for a lot of freedom (Andeweg, 2015). Some Catholics argued that his text was in the tradition of Catholic mysticism, of becoming one with God.

In Dutch public memory, this trial is the moment when two taboos were broken simultaneously: the taboo on homosexuality and the taboo on blasphemy. After this trial, the law on blasphemy was in effect a dead letter. In particular in discussions around the Danish cartoon crisis, this cultural moment is often referenced as exemplifying the triumph of the right to free speech over religious sensitivities.

### Discussion

As we outlined in the introduction, in the Netherlands, as in many other western nation states, there is a particular understanding of secularism as promoting and protecting sexual freedom. This understanding, also referred to as 'sexularism', has invited fierce criticisms from scholars, most notably the historian Joan Scott, who demonstrated that historically, secularism in fact rested on the exclusion of both women and religion from the public domain, thereby naturalizing what was a gendered and unequal social order (Scott, 2018, 2011). As Cady and Fessenden have noted, the religious hold over sexuality can be analysed as a feature of secular rule. Not only the religious, but also the secular has settled on sexuality as one of the primary domains through which contestations take place (Cady and Fessenden, 2013, p. 8). This is evident in the Phil Bloom event, which precipitated the eventual secularization of the liberal Protestant broadcasting service, the VPRO. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that secularism has provided many opportunities for questioning and breaking free of such control, thereby extending freedoms (ibid.).

Our focus in this article has been on a different phenomenon, namely how the histories of different Dutch religious subcultures, as well as several iconic events associated with the sexual

revolution, demonstrate that religious actors were involved on *all* sides of the controversies around sexuality. Mass media, literature and the arts became vehicles for the celebration of liberation, resulting in powerful images that shape the collective memory and the historiography of the 1960s until today (Buelens in Andeweg, 2015). These events were produced in the context of a dynamic between progressive and conservative tendencies within religious subcultures and the broader cultural revolution of the 1960s.

This nuance is often forgotten in contemporary debates, whenever the sexual revolution is remembered as a time when the Dutch shook off the suffocating shackles of religion. The mediation and thus amplification of the religious voice as the conservative position vis-à-vis a secular liberal progressive agenda in the 1960s and beyond has created a blind spot regarding how the reforms in the 1960s were in fact supported rather than rejected by many Christians. Notably, many of the more 'liberal' policies introduced in the 1970s and 1980s were in fact adopted by the government while Protestant and Catholic politicians were in power (Kennedy and Kennedy-Doornbos, 2017).

As we outlined in the introduction, this association of religion with taboos and restrictive attitudes around sex is repeatedly consolidated in research into sexual health and in public debates, particularly in relation to Muslims with a migration background. Although a greater reflexivity is emerging, this association remains quite strong, especially when it remains implicit.

Indeed, the sexual revolution was the start of major transformations in Dutch society, and it took place in parallel to a process of rapid dechurched. While starting much earlier from both secular movements and intellectuals and within the Catholic and Protestant communities, there is no doubt that liberation and development towards sexual openness gained momentum in the 1960s (Schnabel, 1990). For a substantial part of the younger generation, the solid connections between sex, love, marriage and reproduction that had characterized the mod-

ern approach to family and relationships became much looser. The newly emerging infrastructure for sexual health (both secular and religious) played an important role in making contraceptives, particularly the pill, widely available and widely used in a relatively short period of time. In addition, this broader availability of contraceptives made possible a broader recognition and acceptance of sex and pleasure as avenues towards personal development and liberation even among the general population who had not been part of these emancipatory movements.

Scholars and activists have also pointed out that this 'liberation' has had mixed results, or could be called incomplete. Sociological, public health and historical research correct or even debunk the myth of sexual liberation. While new structures governing sexuality emerged, older ones continued. Cases in point are the emphasis on romantic love that resulted in people marrying at a younger age, and women's continued experiences of sexual and gender-based violence during and after this period (Hekma and Stolk, 1990).<sup>17</sup> Rather than having been liberated since the 1960s, sexuality is still shaped in the context of gender inequality, while it has also become part of new regimes of gendered and racialized power differences, as several scholars have noted (Balkenhol et al., 2016; Bartelink and Wiering, 2020; Knibbe, 2018; Roodsaz, 2018). As is evident in the literature, as well as in some of the other contributions to this special issue, the too easy assumption that a religious background is a burden when it comes to a healthy approach to sexuality contributes to the production of differences that intersect with other unwanted racial and gendered differences in ways that hinder inclusive approaches to sexual health and well-being.

We have suggested that one, often overlooked element in developing a more inclusive approach

is to question existing narratives of Dutch 'secularism' and to acknowledge that both religious and secular actors have been part of the search for better ways of approaching sexual health and sexuality in the history of the Netherlands. This will hopefully generate more curiosity regarding the unexpected and variable ways in which religion, culture and tradition become sources for shaping one's own sexual well-being.

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<sup>17</sup> While until the 1980s marriage continued to be important, it was an expression of choice and no longer part of family negotiations. After the 1980s there was a qualitative change visible in marriage and relationships.

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# Piety and Pleasure: Religion, Sexuality and the Cultivation of the Self among Ghanaian-Dutch and Somali-Dutch Women\*

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## Abstract

This article focuses on how religious piety and sexual pleasure go hand in hand, rather than mutually excluding each other, as is often articulated in the Dutch public sphere. The hegemonic idea of Dutch sexual progressiveness presents female sexual pleasure and satisfaction as being in conflict with religion. As a result, women from religiously inclined ethnic minorities are often seen as being suppressed or at least sexually restrained. In contrast, we found that, from a religious perspective, female pleasure is important to conjugal happiness and to women's well-being. While religious doctrine thus provides a space for the pursuit of sexual pleasure, this space is circumscribed by moral prescriptions, such as a prohibition on premarital sexuality. As a result, women need to craft a way of becoming sexually knowledgeable. Women's trajectories to do so show how piety and sexual pleasure are central to the cultivation of the self. We argue that the term 'sexual well-being' articulates how sexual pleasure and religious aspirations are interconnected, rather than being in tension: in the process of subject formation of piety, they mutually reinforce one another.

**Keywords:** sexuality, religion, gender, pleasure, piety, self-cultivation

## Introduction

Dahlia was a Somali-Dutch woman aged 27 who described herself as a religious person who has a personal and important relationship with Allah, the Muslim God. Bakuri, the first author, met Dahlia barely six months after her marriage in 2017. Dahlia lived with her husband in Rotterdam, a major city in the Netherlands. She had met her husband through a cousin's recommendation, and prior to her marriage they had met in the presence of her family, and had also had conversations over the mobile phone. She explained that she had gotten married as a virgin and that she had been anxious about her sex life once married. The first night was fraught with

anxiety, but 'Alhamdulillah [praise to God] we worked at it overtime, we had to get to know one another, especially what made each other happy, [what] our love languages [were] and [how to] explore our bodies together. It was important to understand ourselves first, we figured it out and it's been all joy my dear.' 'And sexual happiness?' Bakuri responded. Dahlia replied: 'Oh you! That's what I have been telling you. How explicit do you want me to be? I am shy [laughing]. It came when we understood ourselves. It wasn't difficult at all. It's important because you are happy, helpful and able to understand your own body and his as well. You start making love often and prepare for it. Our intention is clear to make our marriage work, 'Insha Allah [if God wills it], He'll help you.' What Dahlia refers to as 'understanding ourselves' is what we will explore further in this article.

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\* This work was supported by the Dutch Organization for Scientific Research (NWO) under Grant 360-25-160.

Dahlia's story highlights how, for many of the religious, heterosexual women whom Bakuri encountered in her study, sexual desire is important to them as persons and vital to their marriages. They explained the need for a couple to understand and work towards sexual pleasure for both spouses. They often justified their argument by relying on religious prescriptions drawn from both formal and informal sources, and would typically explain how women's sexual pleasure was important for their well-being. Dahlia explained that 'it is Allah's desire to see women happily married, and sex between spouses is *ibadah* [service to God].' Religious women like Dahlia understood sexual pleasure as part of their religious self-realization, and hence integral to their devotion to God. Just as acts of worship and service to God were crucial to their understandings of piety, the pursuit of sexual pleasure was part and parcel of their religious ethos. In other words, religious piety and sexual pleasure went hand in hand.

This is in contrast with the idea that female sexual pleasure and religious piety exclude each other, as is often articulated in the Dutch public sphere. Bartelink and Knibbe (this issue) show how, in publications and public debates that address sexuality, taboo is used as a code word for religion, culture and traditions. The hegemonic idea of Dutch sexual progressiveness presents female sexual pleasure and satisfaction as being in conflict with religion, hence women from religiously inclined ethnic minorities are often seen as being suppressed or at least sexually restrained. Religion is viewed with suspicion generally within Dutch society, and the Dutch unease with religion is arguably rooted in Dutch society's rapid deconfessionalization in the 1960s. Secularity and openness to sexuality were taken to be iconic of progressiveness, and this narrative continues to dominate the Dutch public discourse on sexual freedom (Mepschen et al. 2010, Scott 2009). As a result, religious people who uphold premarital and extramarital chastity are pitted against non-religious people who are imagined to embody sexual liberalism. Such

framings are easily turned into a mechanism that separates the supposedly progressive Dutch from the conservative and hence allegedly sexually repressed religious Other (Bartelink 2016). This is not only a particular Dutch phenomenon but also part of European feminist thought, with its largely secular roots in which religion has systematically been connected to women's oppression (Bracke 2008).

The Netherlands is historically a society characterized by migration. Transnational migration since the 1970s has given rise to a discourse on autochthony that sheds a particular light on certain groups of Dutch citizens as not authentically Dutch (Geschiere 2009). In particular, migrants from ethnic minority groups who are Muslims have come to be viewed with suspicion, probably due to the growing visibility of Islam in the Netherlands (Schrijvers and Wiering 2018, Rana 2017, Beekers and Schrijvers 2020). More specifically, the headscarf or *hijab* has become a preoccupation in public debate, articulating an anxiety with migration that becomes projected upon Islam (Moors 2009, Fadil 2011). The veiled Muslim woman has become the icon of religious repression, particularly sexual repression (Scott 2009). While there is less antagonism to Christian groups, their extensive religious networks and particular religious practices, such as devil worship, HIV healings or so-called homo-healings, are distrusted if not suspected of breaking the law (Knibbe 2018). Christian women are also seen as being repressed by religion, as Christianity emphasizes male headship and women's submission in many spheres of life (Schrijvers and Wiering 2018). In short, public debates on migration and ethnicity polarize around issues of gender and sexuality (Knibbe and Bartelink 2019), and religious communities are seen as an obstacle to the emancipation of women. Within this Dutch discursive setting, persons from religiously inclined minorities, such as the Somali-Dutch and Ghanaian-Dutch women in this study, are seen as restricted in general, particularly regarding their sexuality.

Interestingly, as the introductory paragraph shows, religious women in this study prioritized their sexual pleasure through practices and choices that are central to their religious self-realization. For them, a good life is a religiously inspired life. According to Mahmood (2005; 2001) religious duties and acts of worship cannot simply be represented as religious obligations, as they are crucial to the cultivation of the pious self. Religious practices have a deeper meaning, as they are crucial to self-understanding and self-respect. Mahmood's work elaborates how care of the self is something to be learned and practised through techniques of the body such as prayer or dress. As religious regimes endorse the pursuit of sexual pleasure, they provide routes to do so, while simultaneously sanctioning other morals such as the prohibition of premarital sexuality. Moreover, they prescribe chastity more strictly for women. Hoel and Shaikh (2013) outline the same paradox for women in South Africa. On the one hand, women's notions of the self are informed by gendered understandings of the God-believer relationship, including notions of what constitutes worship or devotion. Generally, this means that women are understood to be submissive, while at other times they demand full recognition of their sexual agency and equal personhood by stressing ethical ideals such as mutuality and reciprocity in marriage. Whereas Hoel and Shaikh stress how this often renders women vulnerable, we are also interested in the instances in which women successfully create spaces for manoeuvring through contradictions and tensions.

We argue that women need to craft a way of becoming sexually knowledgeable. While this is the case for non-religious women as well, for the women in this study it meant a careful weighing of being virtuous while dealing with issues that easily slip into being impious. By taking care of themselves, religious women create diverse trajectories to enhance their knowledge and sexual well-being. According to Foucault, the study of the experience and use of the body as a locus of sensory aesthetic appreciation (aesthesis) and

resourceful self-fashioning uncovers how discourse, knowledge and discipline structure what he calls care of the self. And vice versa, there is the issue of how these experiential practices develop discourse, knowledge and discipline. With regard to sexuality, people explore, acquire and assume responsibility for their sexual well-being as part of their efforts towards a good life through a variety of bodily practices. We intend neither to justify nor to argue in favour of cultural relativism, but instead wish to explain the processes through which religious relations of domination also provide the means for agency.

### **Religion and Sexuality**

This article is based on an ethnographic study by the first author of the lives of self-identifying Ghanaian-Dutch and Somali-Dutch people in the Randstad area of the Netherlands (the cities of Amsterdam, The Hague, Rotterdam and Utrecht) from February 2017 until July 2018. Data collection started with informal conversations focusing on daily life in the Netherlands, followed by participant observation involving accompanying interlocutors during religious and social events and visiting them in their homes, as well as in-depth interviews. In total, 61 interlocutors were involved, 40 Ghanaian-Dutch and 21 Somali-Dutch. In terms of gender there were 33 women and 28 men, and their ages ranged from 20 to 66 years old. Whereas the majority of the Somali-Dutch people were born in the Netherlands, the majority of the Ghanaian-Dutch people were born in Ghana. All the Somali-Dutch people involved in this study identified as Muslim. The majority of those of Ghanaian descent identified as Christian (32), the remaining eight being Muslim. Marital status varied widely among the research group, from being single, married, unmarried, divorced or living with a partner to having an informal relationship. People came from different socio-economic backgrounds and worked as sales personnel, taxi-drivers, lawyers, cleaners, social workers, journalists and non-governmental organization (NGO) employees, and a few were self-employed. Their educational back-



grounds also ranged widely, from elementary school to tertiary level. Some were on social welfare support from the government, others were seeking job opportunities, and a small number (four) were students pursuing tertiary education. To ensure the anonymity of the interlocutors we use pseudonyms and have also changed their occupations, residences and family details when these characteristics are not directly relevant to the analysis.

In general, the religious discourses and practices of both the Ghanaian-Dutch and the Somali-Dutch centred extensively around the notion of the complementarity of gender, sexuality, reproduction, family life and spirituality. Marriage relationships were understood to be based on hierarchies of female submission and male leadership. Both Muslim and Christian discourses articulated gender in essentialist terms and portrayed husband and wife as complementary yet different, with different responsibilities.

In response to the stereotyping of Muslims in the Netherlands, many of the women we interviewed strongly objected to popular views in the media and argued that, instead of representing Islam as repressive, a careful study of the Quran and the *hadith*<sup>1</sup> actually harbours ways to empower women. The women in this study drew on religious authority in a variety of ways, often citing religious texts (see also Beckman 2010, Rahbari and Longman 2018). Similarly, this *Sunna*<sup>2</sup> goes as follows: 'Do not engage in sexual intercourse with your wife like hens; rather, firstly engage in foreplay with your wife and flirt with her and then make love to her' (Halliyatul Muttaqin: 110). These words were often interpreted to mean that the prophet insists on the importance of practices of seduction and erotics

prior to sexual intercourse so that men do not climax before their wives and deprive women of sexual satisfaction. Several Islamic scholars Bakuri spoke with and listened to when accompanying her interlocutors explained that there were no specific rules for sexual intercourse for married people; whatever is pleasing is right, and likewise, whatever is mutually displeasing should be avoided. Nevertheless, some of the Islamic scholars were quick to point out that there are exceptions to this rule, arguing that the Quran clearly forbids certain acts such as anal sex. With the help of scriptures and scholars, women interpreted religious prescriptions for their benefit.

Scriptures such as those mentioned above are not always widely shared or known. When Zulaiha (29 years old, Somali-Dutch woman) was arranging the necessary requirements for her marriage ceremony in 2018, the sheikh (Islamic scholar) introduced her to the Islamic narrative on sexual satisfaction for women. She had always thought that (the importance of) sexual pleasure was a Dutch value, she explained. So she was surprised when the sheikh gave her some Islamic literature written by Islamic scholars to read so as to become knowledgeable about sex, sexuality and erotics in her marriage. She explained how the future couple were advised that they need to prioritize intimacy and romance, and that both husband and wife must be sexually satisfied.

Among the Ghanaian diaspora in Netherlands, Pentecostal groups dominate, which have a very particular take on family life, gender complementarity and sexual pleasure. Religious discourse on sexuality has expanded beyond reproduction to include happiness, intimacy, material comfort and the mutual responsibility of the spouses for achieving these goals. Churches have counsellors and leaders who discuss conjugal happiness in their sermons, and they offer a variety of booklets, courses and bible study fellowships that address building a successful marital relationship. The importance of sexual pleasure is particularly articulated during premarital counselling sessions and talks organized for would-be couples. A discourse has developed emphasizing

<sup>1</sup> The Hadith is a collection of traditions containing sayings of the prophet Muhammad which, with accounts of his daily practice (the Sunna), constitute the major source of guidance for Muslims apart from the Quran.

<sup>2</sup> The Sunna is a traditional part of Muslim law based on Muhammad's words or acts, accepted (together with the Quran) as authoritative by Muslims and followed particularly by Sunni Muslims.

the importance of sexual pleasure in creating a strong bond between the spouses, which is believed to bring joy, peacefulness and spiritual growth. An important element of this discourse is the relation between sexual pleasure and a healthy, fit and attractive body. Women and men are encouraged to work towards a healthy body, which in turn will bring spousal happiness in the enjoyment of sex. As Mama Agnes (54 years old, Ghanaian-Dutch woman and a pastor's wife<sup>3</sup>) described it during a women's fellowship meeting, 'Sex as instituted by God is a blessing and is supposed to be great. Prepare for it and enjoy God's blessings all the days of your life.'

During one visit by Bakuri to another weekly women's fellowship meeting, the pastor's wife who was presiding stressed the importance of sexual pleasure for both husband and wife by citing 1 Corinthians 7:3 (NIV): 'The husband should fulfil his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband.' Similarly, the Song of Solomon, a Bible chapter, was referenced many times because of its poetic lyrics that speak of the longing of a woman for her often absent lover. Biblical teachings on desire, sexual practices, marriage and the body are somewhat inconsistent and hence open to interpretation. However, most Christian leaders encouraged couples to satisfy each other sexually, as long as this occurred in a monogamous relationship and with mutual consent. Pastors were not explicit in sermons but used the euphemism 'marital duty', which is understood as engaging in sexual practice and was a way of letting their congregation know that every married couple must engage in sex regularly to remain good Christians.<sup>4</sup> It was often mentioned that inadequate sexual pleasure could cause lingering marital problems leading to divorce, which was considered a grave fail-

ing that had to be avoided at all costs, hence they fostered sexual pleasure as good for the marital and spiritual lives of Christians.

For most of the Somali-Dutch and Ghanaian-Dutch women, romance and sexuality coexisted with ideals of rigid sexual morality (Liberatore 2017, Bakuri 2021). Hence, the conjugal couple in Islam and Christianity is differently perceived compared with what is presumed to be the Dutch model, generally articulated in the media, that is based on the idea that the couple is ideally autonomous from any religious or other authority. Within Islam and Christianity, the couple is ordained by God. As reproduction is therefore central to living a religious life, sexual pleasure is not separate from the sacred but is part of it, an extraordinary part of life to be enjoyed by both partners. Yet, although sexual pleasure is a gift from God, it must also be cultivated.

### Caring for Oneself and Cultivating the Self

As the introductory paragraph shows, the religious women in this study prioritized their sexual pleasure through practices and choices that were central to their religious self-realization. Religious practices cannot just be seen as obligatory but become meaningful by their very exercise. According to Mahmood, religious practices are often 'critical markers as well as ineluctable means by which one trains oneself to be pious' (2001: 214). She argues how practices of and obedience to prescriptions and restrictions precede subject formation while making it possible: the pious self is not already existent and expressed through religious acts, but instead *emerges* through such acts. This processual understanding of piety uncovers how religiousness is a way of life in which the praxis of self-cultivation is central. Religious practices, such as donning the *hijab* or praying, are techniques of self-fashioning which ought to arise from and simultaneously cultivate correct attitudes, intentions and emotions. Being religious becomes a moral virtue acquired through the coordination of outward behaviour and inward dispositions (Mahmood 2005). Choices such as avoiding pre-

<sup>3</sup> In most Ghanaian churches, the religious leaders are men, and consequently their wives have a special role as female leaders.

<sup>4</sup> Although Bakuri followed her interlocutors to the mosque, because she did not understand Arabic she was not able to grasp the ins and outs of the sermons. She would ask afterwards what was being discussed but did not get to know what exactly was said and how.

marital sex and practices such as reading religious texts are religious routines which are central to self-cultivation, where the body mediates religious meanings and personal aspirations (see also Jouilli 2015).

Religious practice is also central to taking care of oneself in aspiring to a good life. Foucault employed the notion of care of the self as entailing an attitude, a mode of behaviour, that is enacted in daily life and evolves into procedures, practices and formulas that people reflect on, develop, perfect and pass on (1986). The body is a locus of sensory aesthetic appreciation (aesthesis) and is central to resourceful self-fashioning: 'technologies of the self ... permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts and a way of being, so as to transform and attain a certain state of happiness...' (Foucault 1988: 19). Care of the self is not just about preservation but about becoming a better person: piety is central to care of the self.

The way Foucault connects care of the self with cultivating happiness is important. Women's bodily aesthetic appreciation and pursuit of sexual knowledge shows how, in addition to being the fulfilment of religious obligation, religious practices are also sensory engagements that authorize religious meanings and enhance personal (religious) aspirations. For the women in this study, happiness was exactly this: a spiritually meaningful life where their personal aspirations regarding their health, employment and/or careers, family matters, material comfort, etc. could be worked on. Because our female interlocutors emphasized the importance of happiness, of which sexually fulfilling lives were a part, we were led to study sexual pleasure. Sexual pleasure is a slippery term, of course, and it risks being a self-evident concept, as we all assume we know what we mean by it. Interestingly, Foucault has argued for a 'desexualisation' of pleasure so as to work towards a 'general economy of pleasure' and to make the body 'infinitely more susceptible to pleasure' by developing its capacities

for varieties of somatic pleasures that 'transcend the sexual' (Foucault 1997: 137). Transcending the sexual partly means going beyond genital pleasure,<sup>5</sup> and we also argue for a widening of the term sexual pleasure to encompass broader aspects of well-being. Moreover, conflict, tensions and contradictions are part and parcel of the pursuit of a good life, or sexual pleasure for that matter, and it is important to take them together in the study of religion and sexuality.

For the women in this study, a good life is a religiously inspired life, and they assessed their well-being in relation to religiously inspired and socially endorsed morals. With regard to sexuality, the women explored ways to enhance their well-being, acquiring knowledge and assuming responsibility for their own sexual well-being as part of their efforts to achieve a good life. They did so through a variety of bodily practices, social praxes and lifestyle choices.

While religious regimes endorse the pursuit of sexual pleasure and provide routes to do so, they also sanction other morals such as the prohibition of premarital sexuality. Sexual relationships before or outside of marriage were socially condemned. Opportunities for extramarital sex existed, but if such behaviour was found out it was very shameful for both the woman and the man. Premarital sex could seriously damage a person's reputation and chances of finding a suitable marriage partner, though this was true to a lesser extent for men than for women. People navigated both premarital and extramarital sexuality in socially acceptable ways by using secrecy (see also Bakuri et al. 2020). Several interlocutors discussed their ambivalences regarding premarital sex. For some, engaging in premarital sexuality did not necessarily mean that women did not consider themselves as virgins. They carefully chose sexual activities which they believed would not break their hymen, the symbol of a woman's entry into sexual life. For instance,

<sup>5</sup> Foucault's argument for the desexualization of pleasure occurs in a very particular debate. His aim is to disrupt the obsession with sex as the key to all pleasure.

Rashida (28 years old, Ghanaian-Dutch Muslim woman), explained how she learnt from some Muslim friends how to keep the hymen intact while enjoying sexual pleasure through a variety of sexual practices, such as having sex between the thighs, or rubbing a penis between the labia majora, rubbing themselves against objects such as the pillow, shower head or a teddy bear, and through oral and anal sex. This was not yet her personal experience but something she was considering trying out. She had heard that it was a nice experience and that it was possible to keep her sexual life a secret. Rashida told Bakuri that this was optional for her because one could have pleasure and not be afraid of losing one's virginity or getting pregnant. For other young female interlocutors, both Christian and Muslim, this was not viable: not engaging in any erotic practice was crucial to their understanding of being a virgin and was very important to the women themselves. There was thus a variety of positions in terms of how people related to religious prescriptions.

Because of religious moralities, when women were about to marry, they were presumed to be sexually innocent. Hence women were faced with a paradox: on the one hand, sexual pleasure was discussed as being important to a spiritually fulfilling marriage, while on the other hand they were expected to be ignorant of such matters and even considered gullible. Not being knowledgeable was a source of anxiety for otherwise self-confident women. Hence women sought to become informed in readiness for their wedding day by crafting ways to become sexually knowledgeable. We propose to see this as taking care of the self: religious women created diverse trajectories to become sexually knowledgeable and to enhance their sexual well-being through self-education, socializing in homo-social environments and listening to the advice of experts.

### Self-education

Becoming sexually knowledgeable was not only a question for women who were about to get married, it concerned a longer-term process that

stretched across a woman's life course and its shifting aspirations and possibilities.

For many women who were about to get married, print media and online textual sources were an important source of information. In fact, it became clear during the research how abundant religiously appropriate information was. Women searched for and found the information they needed by reading Christian and Muslim booklets. Many Muslim interlocutors read books by authors whose workshops and conferences on marriage and relationships they had attended, such as Umm Zakiyyah and Yasmin Mogahed. Books such as *Let's Talk About Sex*, *Muslim Love* and *Love and Happiness* were being read by our interlocutors during fieldwork. In Ghanaian Christian circles too, books and booklets addressing matters of gender, sex and sexual pleasure figured prominently, and many people in this study read them, for instance during Bible fellowship meetings. At some of the women fellowship meetings that Bakuri attended they read and discussed books such as *The Perfect Couple* by Uncle Ebo White, and *Of Spiders and Silkworms* by P.G. Sebastian.

These books were and continue to be read, though not only by the particular religious groups to which the authors belong, as they have also become general knowledge. The women in this study also used texts from various settings, and while they preferred religiously inspired texts, they also consumed medical texts, popular literature and online platforms.

The media have become an important source of information regarding knowledge about sex, sexuality and sexual well-being. Dahlia, whose story this article opened with, sought for knowledge beyond Islamic literature as well, but was careful to include teachings or information that aligned with her religious values. For instance, she watched romantic Hollywood movies and read a variety of romantic novels that enlightened her about the ideal romantic relationship. Yet, she was critical in her choices: characters in these movies and novels that were deemed appropriate were seen as embodying

religious virtues worth learning about. With the increase in online media, the ability to find more resources that are appropriate to one's religious background have also increased.

While knowledge may start with information, the praxis of this knowledge is another important part of the sequence of becoming knowledgeable. Some interlocutors mentioned how they engaged in exploring their own bodies by touching and feeling, and how sexual self-stimulation became a means of knowing their bodies. Some explained that their reasons for such 'exploration' were to discover their bodies and teach their partners where they liked to be touched; others said it was meant to help delay a partner's early sexual climaxing until both became fully satisfied. Some women described masturbation as religiously inappropriate, unacceptable, or sinful, and were very uncomfortable talking about such personal experiences. Women generally avoided the term masturbation, which they preferred to describe as 'touching myself', 'exploring my body' or 'playing with my body', among other expressions. Sandra (44 years old, Ghanaian-Dutch woman) was the only person who explicitly used the word masturbation. For her, masturbation was sinful, but it was the best way to deal with her sexual desire in the absence of her husband, who lived in Ghana.

Women's explorations and becoming knowledgeable also included practices of beautification, and many emphasized proper personal hygiene. It was not uncommon for women to use aromatic herbs in cleaning parts of the body, to smell good and to look more beautiful. Cleanliness and olfactory desirability were generally well practised. Dorcas (57 years old, Ghanaian-Dutch woman), whose husband was a pastor, explained that a 'satisfied wife is a happy wife,' which in turn enabled her to serve God wholeheartedly. Dorcas explained that sexually satisfied couples are fulfilling God's plan of appreciating the whole human body as a gift. She elaborated how she would take a bath and carefully select lingerie to look and to feel 'sexy' as preparation for engaging sexually with her husband. Similarly, Fawzia

(47 years old, Somali-Dutch woman) showed Bakuri the use of *unnsi*, a sugary and herbal incense to cleanse and odorize the body.<sup>6</sup> She then demonstrated this technique to Bakuri, when she had given her *unnsi* as a gift at a time when Bakuri's husband was returning from a trip. She explained how to burn the incense, how to stand over the pot where the *unnsi* is burned, with both legs to either side of it, letting the long dress or clothes fall all the way to the ground, and thus drawing the smoke upwards, wrapping itself around the whole body and permeating the skin.

The use of olfactory products to enhance wellness has always been widely practised. In Ghana, talcum powder has been used for decades for a variety of purposes, such as absorbing sweat and avoiding its smell, but its use has declined. One day Bakuri accompanied Ama (35 years old, Ghanaian-Dutch woman) to the Ghanaian shop, where the latter bought talcum powder. Whereas Bakuri was surprised to see her buy the powder, Ama was surprised that Bakuri did not apply powder on her face and around the genitalia to smell good and in order to stimulate sexual desire. Women's care of the self reflected a variety of techniques they employed to become sexually knowledgeable and to develop their sexual well-being. For many of our interlocutors, being able to work towards and experience sexual pleasure endorsed a sense of femininity, of womanhood. They supported their explanations with religious texts to justify themselves and to manage the ambivalence between piety and sexual pleasure.

### **Homo-sociality. The Importance of Togetherness**

Care of the self, its techniques and religious aspirations are learned and cultivated and are thus developed in a social environment (see also Foucault 1986: 33). In other words, care of the self

<sup>6</sup> *Unnsi* is a sugary incense that gives off a thick, sweet, musky smoke. The mixture of ingredients varies depending on the individual making it, but it generally contains a combination of frankincense, fragrant spices and oils.



involves others. In the religious communities of the interlocutors, it is common for women and men to meet separately, and these homosocial environments proved to be very important spaces for becoming sexually knowledgeable.

As part of her research, Bakuri joined a social club made up of Ghanaian women called the Darling Sisters.<sup>7</sup> The majority of the women were above fifty years old, and the group displayed the Ghanaian diaspora in all its diversity: different ethnic groups, Christian women, some of whom were church leaders and pastor's wives, but also Muslim women and other women, some of whom held respectable positions in the Ghanaian community in The Hague. The majority of the women were married, but not all, the latter being considered to be above marriageable age. The main purpose of this association was to promote social support and friendship. Social clubs or voluntary associations have always been popular in Ghanaian communities. In their early days, associations were formed based on employment (clerks, policemen, teachers, nurses), and people found mutual support and recognition, as the majority were migrants and found themselves disconnected from their usual ties such as those of kinship. In the Netherlands the custom of associations has continued, and they can be formed on the basis of many criteria, from religion and ethnicity to – as in this case – gender. The meetings of the Darling Sisters were organized every fortnight. Typical of many Ghanaian-based groups, their meetings started with prayers, and they took it in turns to pray for individual families, partners, marriages, children, members of the group, their health, finances, Ghana and the Netherlands. During these meetings, the Muslim women usually excused themselves to find a quiet space in the room to pray the Muslim Maghreb<sup>8</sup> prayer, as it often coincided with the time of their meeting.

Before and during their meetings, the women allowed time to share stories from home, work and the Ghanaian community in general. They

shared their daily experiences and life events as mothers, wives and daughters and much more. Many of the members emphasized the importance of marriage and motherhood in their lives as pious Muslim and Christian women. Discussions were often informal, cordial and entertaining. Humour and the capacity to speak with wit were held in high regard. Unlike one-to-one conversations about sexual matters, group discussions on these topics were characterized by cheering, laughter and banter. And sexual matters were often discussed in between other conversations or put on the table as an issue to be addressed directly. For instance, while discussing a popular radio programme's feature on sexuality, Sister Emelda (in her 50s) asked 'But how would you know if you have reached orgasm?', to which Joyce (in her 40s) responded in an affectionately mocking tone: 'Maybe you'll feel some rush in your body or your body might react differently, but all I know is that it's a very exciting feeling and you can't describe it.' The way she explained it caused much laughter. Similarly, during another meeting, the announcements encouraged members to join the group gym visit at least once a week. Such announcements are part of a larger discourse on the need to work on one's health. One member, Sister Hannah (in her 50s), mentioned that she bought a medication from the pharmacy that gave her extra energy after a long day's work as a cleaner. In fact, it had increased her sexual appetite and stamina. She recommended: 'Since we are all over fifty, this is the medication to keep us on our feet, it contains all the vitamins. As black people we need sunshine, and we don't get it here [in the Netherlands]. There is vitamin D in it too.' Some of the women asked Bakuri to write down the name of the medication for them, and others took pictures of the package with their smartphones, while Sister Hajia Rafia (54 years old, married, Muslim) startlingly commented on whether 'it isn't women's Viagra?'

Bakuri's interactions in social meetings with Somali-Dutch women were limited due to her inability to speak Somali, the main language used

<sup>7</sup> The name is a pseudonym.

<sup>8</sup> The Maghreb prayer is said just after sunset.

in such settings. She often relied on the support of an interpreter, which presented some limitations, and thus she mainly observed. She often heard women referencing the Quran and Hadith as promising a sensual life for men and women who live by the Islamic teachings. Discussions about sexual pleasure emerged spontaneously during conversations and were also met with banter and fun. During one meeting about childbirth, women discussed the link between the conception of children and their physical resemblance: according to them there is a connection between sexual satisfaction and the physical resemblance of the child with either the father or the mother. A few women explained that when a woman climaxed or reached orgasm while the man ejaculates, the child will physically resemble her. If she does not, then the child will look like the father. Thus they claimed it was very important to prioritize sexual satisfaction. Interestingly, in the Ghanaian community there was a similar narrative but slightly different in detail, as it was asserted that, when the woman 'outperformed sexually' during conception, the child will look after her.<sup>9</sup>

Bakuri also witnessed the elaborate art of applying creams, oils and lotions to the face, back, arms and hands, feet and legs during her visits to the sauna section of one of the gyms in Utrecht with middle-aged Somali-Dutch women. They regularly went to this particular gym in pairs and would meet others on Mondays anytime between 9 am to 4 pm, when the sauna was reserved for women only. The process of moisturizing, scrubbing and reapplying took considerable time in shifting between the bathroom and the gym's sauna section. They enjoyed these moments and explained how they reminded them of Somalia and how bath houses were an important part of their lives back there. Going in groups was important so they could help each other to apply the oils and lotions, while talking and sharing about their lives. The social impor-

tance of the sauna goes hand in hand with ideas of hygiene and how cleanliness is an essential part of their womanhood (see also Lowe 2015).

Middle-aged and elderly women are often overlooked in matters of sexuality due to stereotypes that during and after the menopause women have no sexual or erotic interest. Middle-aged and elderly women are often represented as asexual, and when their sexuality is considered, it is often in a medicalized way. The older women in this study understood and discussed femininity and sexuality alongside the stress of marriage and motherhood. In their discussions they enacted the importance of sexuality for themselves. And the same goes for young women: although they were expected to be sexually active in marriage only, they appropriated the religious discourse on responsibility to become sexually knowledgeable when unmarried. Women from different ages shared experiences, knowledge and advice during any social occasion, but regular meetings where the same group of women regularly met were the most productive, as they created a space in which to cultivate trust. For religious women, homo-social groups are important due to the way gender roles and gendered chastity, and gender segregation in the case of Muslims, is highlighted. These homo-social avenues provided ways to become knowledgeable in a trusting context.

The importance accorded to sexual pleasure as the panacea for a good marriage and for reproduction also put a lot of pressure on women. While the majority of the women seemed to genuinely enjoy having sex, others described sex as tiring and a wife's 'marital duty,' by which they meant that they had limited choice. A wife's refusal or reluctance to engage in sexual intercourse was often explained as allowing the husband to engage in extramarital relations, which was thought to lead to unhappiness and eventually to divorce. Women felt responsible for maintaining a sexually satisfactory marriage, which sometimes also caused anxiety, and these were some of the occasions for involving experts.

<sup>9</sup> The term 'outperforming' meant being the most active person during sexual intercourse.

**Expert Advice**

Besides discussing sexual matters among friends, women also sought assistance about sexual matters through experts such as physicians, counsellors, religious scholars and leaders. Medical professionals such as general practitioners (GP)<sup>10</sup> and midwives were most often contacted. With regard to religious leaders, most Somali-Dutch interlocutors solicited the help of the imam or sheikh. Ghanaian-Dutch interlocutors also mentioned the imam and sheikh when they were Muslims, while Christians mentioned pastors, pastor's wives, other religious leaders and counsellors in their churches.

For the Ghanaian-Dutch people in the study, seeking advice from a pastor was a common choice. Sometimes couples went together to see their pastor or the pastor's wife for support. In such cases both husband and wife had an interest in resolving conflicts. For instance, Esther and Kwame (Ghanaian-Dutch couple both in their 40s) tried never to go to bed without having resolved an argument and would then make love. They had agreed to do so during their pre-marital counselling classes, it had been an explicit piece of advice of the counsellors, 'and it works,' Esther said. If their usual first steps towards reconciliation did not work, they went to their pastor: 'This hardly happens but there have been a few occasions we sought the voice of God through the pastor.' It helped them to maintain the kind of home they wanted 'out of love for my husband and towards working going to heaven.' As pleasurable sex was seen as an act of faith bringing the couple closer to God, for Esther such an 'intervention by God resisted the devil's plans to destroy Christian homes'.

During an interview in 2017, Ayisha (31 years old, Somali-Dutch woman) expressed her uncertainty about how she should negotiate sexual intercourse with her husband. He was often away from home due to his job, which required

much travelling and irregular shifts. She felt in some way stuck about what to do. On the one hand, piety required her to behave modestly, which implied that she could not demand too much attention from her husband, especially when he was tired from work. In addition, it was not appropriate to discuss her intimate marital issues with a third party. On the other hand, she recognized married women's need for sexual pleasure, and she mentioned how she missed sexual intimacy with her husband. As her husband had failed to respond to her question about how they could resolve this, she decided to seek help. She turned to a sheikh whom she and her husband knew well and whom they trusted, and whose authority was beyond question for her husband. The sheikh advised her to talk to her husband again. He had said 'Don't stop telling him what you need and like. Do not get tired of talking about your needs as a wife.' Subsequently the sheikh spoke to her husband and then to both partners and told them to take care of one another and to prioritize each other's sexual needs. He also told her she was right to seek his assistance, as her intention was to be happy, not to sin against her husband, but to make her marriage work. He concluded: 'God rewards good intentions.' She had thus handled the issue in a religiously appropriate way without having compromised her modesty. Ayisha's careful approach to solving her problems shows how little flexibility women sometimes have. Especially some Muslim women have less leeway because of religious prescriptions of modesty and shyness as gendered modes of behaviour.

There is a final remark which needs making on Somali-Dutch women and their capacity for sexual pleasure. An elephant in the room of this discussion is the question of female circumcision, often referred to as female genital mutilation. In public discourse and academic scholarship, the idea that women who have been circumcised cannot enjoy sexual intercourse and/or cannot enjoy sexual satisfaction is a very common and strong trope. From this study, a more complex and differentiated picture arises. During an event

<sup>10</sup> In the Netherlands, everybody must be registered with a General Practitioner (GP) near the place where he or she lives. The starting point for every medical intervention is the practice of this GP.

organized on the 'eradication of female circumcision (FC),' attended by Bakuri in The Hague in 2018, Hawa (in her 40s) who helped Bakuri with the translation from Dutch to English, told her that, more than the circumcision itself, she suffered from the stories about female circumcision in health programmes and the media. She had been circumcised before turning four years old, and she had not faced any difficulty when having sexual intercourse and always had a 'good time with my husband; it is a nice experience and never painful.' She had also had uncomplicated vaginal births for all her six children. Not only did the public debate distress her, so did the way that any gynaecological issue she faced was subsequently related to her circumcision.

Female circumcision was never discussed straightforwardly. When Bakuri inquired about it, women were hesitant to reply, though eventually most of them discussed it with her, explaining how they have come to distrust any conversation about female circumcision and preferred to shun it altogether. Basr (in her 50s) explained how she had enjoyed sex with her first husband even with what she called 'being cut' (this phrase shows how it has become nearly impossible not to relate to the hegemonic discourse). However, after her divorce and in her second marriage sexual intercourse had become quite painful. According to Basr this was not because she had been circumcised but because her body was aging and her husband was incapable of adjusting and providing the appropriate foreplay. It would go beyond this article to address and discuss the complexity of the custom and politics of female circumcision: we can only point out that more research is needed to articulate the density of the topic and women's experiences of it. The current knowledge about female circumcision needs to be more inclusive: if women cannot recognize themselves in health messages, they are likely to withdraw. The suspicions harboured by quite a number of women towards the Dutch health sector is the result of longer-term global and/or racial inequalities that need to be included in the production of knowledge. Our argument,

namely that piety and pleasure are not mutually exclusive, but co-produce one another and simultaneously create conflicts, tension and possibilities, depending on the situation and context, takes paradoxes and friction as starting points to understand, rather than as problems to solve.

### Conclusion

In this paper we have been describing the lives of pious women in response to simplistic tropes about religion, gender, and sexuality. Dominant ideas of Dutch sexual progressiveness present female sexual pleasure as in conflict with religion, hence women from religiously inclined ethnic minorities are often framed as being suppressed or at least sexually restrained. In the discourse of secularism, the secular and the sexually liberated are synonymous. Sexual liberation is represented 'as fulfilling the natural inclinations of all women, whereas religion denies their innate femininity' (Scott 2018: 157). In contrast to common thought, the question of sexual pleasure and female satisfaction is situated at the heart of religious Ghanaian and Somali communities in the Netherlands. Conjugal happiness is a religious responsibility, and religious regimes therefore provide the space for female sexual pleasure. The importance accorded to female emancipation in the name of sexual progressiveness rests more on an opposition between the West and the rest, as ironically the notion of gender equality rests on a fundamental unequal complementarity of heteropatriarchy (cf. Scott 2018). Interestingly, there is thus more commonality between so-called Dutch and non-Dutch values. For the women in this study, ideals of complementarity and matrimonial well-being required exploration, acquiring knowledge and assuming responsibility for one's sexuality and general well-being. Sexual knowledge was actively searched for and negotiated by women while they positioned themselves in the different social fields of religious and cultural belonging. We have shown that sexual pleasure is important to people's well-being and that religious regimes provide a space towards achieving it. Even though religious

regimes provide a space for women to explore sexual pleasure, their agency is critically structured by, and seeks to uphold, the restrictions of a discursive tradition that holds subordination to a transcendent will, and thus in many instances sees male authority as its coveted goal.

Both Islamic and Christian regimes emphasize that God's rules make possible a unique and exceptional sexual experience that contributes to a larger narrative about being pious. Pleasurable marital sex was seen as helpful to defeat the 'plans of the devil' (to break down marriages), creating positive effects for families and one's relationship with God. Yet, the avenues provided by religious regimes are not unambiguous. Women's reputations were generally policed more than men's, and both Christian and Muslim interlocutors faced dilemmas about how to develop sexual pleasure without committing what was considered sinning. With the assistance of religious scriptures and authorities, they justified their choices by focusing on pleasure as a fundamental spiritual pursuit.

In this article, we consciously decided upon the term 'sexual pleasure' to show the importance of studying sexual enjoyment beyond genital pleasure, so as to include broader aspects of erotic practice and well-being. Similarly, the term 'sexual well-being' assumes a more inclusive approach in contrast to the common term 'sexual health,' to encompass all those social, cultural and economic aspects of life that are interconnected in people's lives. Specifically, sexual well-being articulates how sexual pleasure and religious aspirations are interconnected rather than being in tension. In the subject formation of piety, they can mutually enforce one another.

Women's bodily aesthetic appreciation and pursuit of sexual knowledge shows how religious practices are not simply religious obligations but sensory engagements that endorse religious meanings and enhance personal (religious) aspirations. Care of the self is a matter of cultivating the self as an ethical being according to culturally, religiously and historically specific formations. As sexual pleasure is a religious prescription, it

can become an integral part of a virtuous life, the overarching goal being for people to work towards a good life for themselves and their families in the spirit of maintaining their relationship with God. The cultivation of piety provided ways to pursue sexual pleasure in order to enjoy heterosexual companionate marital relationships.

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# Muslim Piety as Emphasized Femininity in Women-Only Kickboxing\*

by JASMIJN RANA  (Leiden University)

## Abstract

Martial arts and combat sports scholars have demonstrated how the gym or dojo can be a site for renewed articulations of gender subjectivities. Through my study of Muslim women in kickboxing, I have found that articulations of emphasized femininity take different forms than previous studies have demonstrated. In this article, I analyse narratives on sexualities and gendered subjectivities in two kickboxing gyms in the Hague, the Netherlands. I argue that Muslim women in kickboxing emphasize their femininity based on a Muslim, pious ideal, in which they apologetically claim space in sport vis-à-vis men and non-Muslim women. In doing so, they counter Islamophobic and racist stereotypes of 'the Muslimwoman' by playing with traditional notions of masculinity and femininity. The strategies and choices with regard to sexuality and gender found in women-only kickboxing reveal how Muslim women contest and negotiate the grammars of secularity underlying sports by performing a pious femininity in a masculine space.

**Keywords:** piety, femininity, Islam, sport, Europe

## Introduction

One rainy day in September, I sat down on a bench in a dojo smelling of sweat and tiger balm, where a group of young women had just started their kickboxing training. After a vigorous warming up of running laps, push-ups and stretching, the students were paired up for the exercises: left-right-left, left-right-left. One person jabbed, the other holding up her gloves with her feet firmly on the ground. The level of intensity between the pairs revealed the level of expertise. Some were talking, laughing, and figuring out the task together. Others only made a hissing sound whenever it was their turn to jab. When the trainer stopped the training with a loud 'OK, time for a break', a young, more advanced fighter whom I later got to know as Ilham<sup>1</sup> sat next to me and took a water bottle out of her bag. A short interaction occurred in which

I complimented her on her style and asked if she participated in competitions. She answered laughingly, but seriously: 'Oh no, I'll leave that to the men! I don't want to mess up my pretty face!'<sup>2</sup>

Twice a week, Ilham and her adolescent and young adult peers meet to exercise in the gym of an old school building in The Hague, the Netherlands. With the instruction of a kickboxing teacher, they learn how to punch, kick and spar. The 'women-only' kickboxing classes are offered by a kickboxing club that is known for its competitive fighters, including the owner of the gym and his trainers. By contrast, most participants in the women-only training sessions take part for leisure. Some come for the exercise, but few have ambitions to become competitive fighters. Most of the adolescent kickboxers live in the neighbourhood and go to school there. Many of the adult kickboxers start by coming for their

\* I would like to thank the editors of this special issue, the anonymous reviewers and Jessica Rivers for their comments on previous versions of this article.

<sup>1</sup> For reasons of privacy, all names in this article are pseudonyms.

<sup>2</sup> All quotes are my translations from Dutch.

children's practice sessions and stay an hour longer for their own exercise.

When I first started exploring women's kickboxing, the above interaction with a young woman, who, as I later learned, had been kickboxing for three years, triggered my curiosity to study how women pair the masculinity of kickboxing with ideas of femininity. Ilham's response highlights how she perceived competitive kickboxing as a masculine practice, despite her own involvement and presence in this space in the kickboxing gym. She distanced herself from men and men's kickboxing by not engaging in competitions and emphasizing the importance of beauty as a reason. This female apologetic behaviour in sports, which emphasizes the athlete's femininity as a response to masculine stereotypes, is a much-studied topic in sports studies (Bordo 1989; Hargreaves 1994; Young 2005; Krane 2001; Theberge 2000).

However, as I discovered later, Ilham's choice, like that of many other female kickboxers in that space, to engage only in technique training and not in fighting included religious reasons. The embodiment of fighting-sport skills, bodily comportment, adornment and dealing with pain results in a kind of fighter who is highly gendered, but also pious. Muslim women in the Netherlands legitimize their participation in fighting sports through the ways they dress, walk and talk. They engage in what Connell (1987) terms 'emphasized femininity' in that they articulate their belonging in the sport through their identification with, and performance of, femininity. This research differs from previous studies of emphasized femininity as female apologetic behaviour in sport by including the cultivation of a pious self as part of a feminine ideal. Following my informants' lead, I treat learning to kickbox as religious and gendered embodiment. Through an examination of narratives on sexualities and gendered subjectivities in gyms in the Netherlands, this article reveals how Muslim women in fighting sports instrumentalize particular sexual subjectivities to claim a position vis-à-vis men.

From 2011 to 2013, I conducted extensive ethnographic fieldwork, which included immersive participant observation in women-only and mixed-gender training sessions in two kickboxing gyms and interviews with participants, gym-owners and trainers. In this article, I analyse my field notes and interviews to understand the role of piety in the process of emphasising femininity in kickboxing gyms. Piety and kickboxing go together: this may seem like a contradiction to some points of view in the Netherlands, since it challenges the associations between sport and secular modern spaces and stereotypes of the submissiveness of Muslim women, but it is not a contradiction in the everyday life of these women. In this community, the pious, feminine ideal advocates a heterosexual, heteronormative set of preferences for body shape, comportment and adornment. While the women embrace some form of female masculinity (Halberstam 1998, see also Rana 2022a), they are also outspoken against lesbians and lesbianism. I argue that the emphasized femininity of women-only kickboxing includes techniques of the self that allow young women to contest and negotiate gendered and sexual subjectivities, as well as providing a strategy for claiming space in a masculine and secular space.

### Kickboxing in the Netherlands

The choice to kickbox is not common in the Netherlands, but it is popular among young Moroccan-Dutch men and women, who are mainly second-generation migrants who have been born and raised in the Netherlands. In the women-only kickboxing classes I participated in, Muslim Moroccan-Dutch women comprise the majority of participants.<sup>3</sup> Kickboxing is popular among this demographic because of its proxim-

<sup>3</sup> *Kickboxing* is an umbrella term for contact sports that involve kicking and punching. 'Dutch kickboxing,' the style that is generally practised in the Netherlands, developed from boxing, muay thai and karate. Some of the gyms I have studied also refer to their practice as muay thai, Thai boxing, or all three interchangeably. For the sake of simplicity, in this article I use the term *kickboxing* alone.



ity and accessibility, as well as familiarity with the sport through male family members' involvement in it. Muslim girls increasingly take part in sports practices in the Netherlands, at the same time as the growing visibility of Islam in the Netherlands is leading to a secular discomfort (Bracke 2011). Anti-Muslim and anti-Islamic rhetoric have increased in the Netherlands, as in other European countries. Muslim minorities in the Netherlands are categorized as the ultimate 'Other' in Dutch society, and they often have to cope with being pigeonholed as the 'forever foreign' who cannot assimilate to the Dutch way of life. The labels 'Moroccan' and 'Muslim' are frequently used interchangeably in negative public discourse. For instance, there is now an even stronger tendency to criminalize Moroccan-Dutch Muslim youth, especially men and boys (de Koning 2020). Discrimination against Muslims has grown in recent years. In other Western nations, such as the United States, there has been a rise in discrimination against Muslims in the form of increased attacks and problematic media representations of Muslim men (Alsultany 2012; Beaman 2017; Rana 2011). Muslim men are racialized as violent, dangerous and radicalized in both the United States (Bayoumi 2015; Garner and Selod 2015) and Europe (de Koning 2020; Korteweg 2020).

However, the racialization of Muslim men does not occur in isolation. The counterpart trope in this discourse racializes Muslim women as passive dupes and as the powerless victims of Muslim male tyranny. They are stereotyped as 'the Muslimwoman' (Abu-Lughod 2016) who must be saved from her culture, religion and men. In this discourse, the ordinary, iconic figure of 'the Moroccan youth' (de Koning and Vollebergh 2019) meets his female counterpart, the Muslima (Muslim woman), who is characterized in hegemonic discourse as oppressed and lacking in autonomy (Moors 2018). This dynamic is central to the racialization of Muslims in Dutch society, and it manifests itself in Muslim women's participation in sport (Rana 2022a; van den Bogert 2021). The mainstream Dutch liberal soci-

ety assumes a dichotomy between the secular/modern on the one hand, and the religious and/or backward on the other, giving an implicit superiority to Christianity (Bracke 2011) and whiteness (Wekker 2016). Current secularist discourse in Europe leans on public debates on Islam (e.g. Sunier and Van Kuijeren 2010; van der Veer 2006) that cast Muslim practices as a danger to the European self (Bracke 2011). Several studies have focused their attention on the secular as an embodied mode of living (Bakker Kellogg 2015; Mahmood 2005a; Scott 2009). Following Fadil and Fernando (2015), who argue that 'secularity too includes a range of ethical, social, physical, and sexual dispositions' (Fadil and Fernando 2015: 64), (recreational) sports can provide a lens through which to analyse secularity as a moral field (see also Deeb 2015).

In sum, we can understand sports as a secular space of modern self-fashioning (Guttmann 1988; Hirschkind 2011; Sehlirkoglu 2021; van den Bogert 2021). The emergence of women-only kickboxing, as well as other women-only sports clubs with large groups of religious practitioners such as swimming and fitness, contests the assumption that sport is merely secular. Historically, Dutch women's participation in sports is seen as a secular, emancipatory achievement, going beyond religious restrictions on modesty and 'soft' ideals of femininity. This also influences views of Muslim women and girls and their (non)participation in sports, which often stereotype Muslim women as not being able to participate in sports due to modesty rules and ideals of femininity, or that sports provide them with the tools to 'break free' from religion and tradition (Rana 2018). Sports clubs that target Muslim women demonstrate that sport cannot be perceived as solely either secular or religious. Religiously inspired women-only training furthermore challenges the juxtaposition of the secular, modern feminist woman versus the religious, conservative and backward woman that is portrayed by the media and in sports policies (Rana 2018; 2022b). Muslim women combine pious and secular sensibilities in such 'non-reli-

gious' spaces, and simultaneously embody and contest secularity through physical practices (Rana 2022b). These physical practices, this article argues, include a performance of piety which is embedded in a specific form of emphasized femininity.

### **Emphasized femininity**

The capacity for physical violence is perceived as the ultimate difference in power between men's and women's bodies (McCaughey 1997). It is therefore not surprising that the participation of women in martial arts and combat sports has often been perceived as an act of resistance to current gender norms. Recent scholarship on women in martial arts and combat sports not only documents the increase in women engaged in these sports, but also how they negotiate gender in these male-dominated sports practices (Lafferty and McKay 2004; Kavoura, Ryba, and Chroni 2015; Hamilton 2020). Women in martial arts and combat sports challenge gender norms by embracing an 'alternative femininity' (Channon and Phipps 2017), which they do not experience as coercive and restrictive. Instead, women's enactment of femininity is experienced as enjoyable and at the same time useful because it challenges sexist ideals of what a 'normal woman' should be (*ibid.*: 32). Women use their femininity strategically to aim for inclusion and acceptance in sports and see beauty as complementary to strength (Davies and Deckert 2020). Feminist sports scholars argue that a global discourse of post-feminism is producing these new articulations of femininity and shaping young women's embodied experiences (Toffoletti et al. 2018: 15). Post-feminism counters previous forms of feminism by embracing normative beauty ideals and gender roles and the agency that women find in it. It displays a preoccupation with expressions of heterosexual femininity that vary among demographics and cultures.

Other martial arts scholars question if this really changes the power dynamics (Kavoura, Ryba, and Chroni 2015; Hamilton 2020). Is this not a form of emphasized femininity that thus

reproduces heteronormativity and hegemonic masculinity? In her canonical work on hegemonic masculinity, Connell defines emphasised femininity as 'the pattern of femininity which is given most cultural and ideological support at present' (Connell 1987: 186-187). The characteristics of this preferred form of femininity always comply with the subordinating effects of hegemonic masculinity.

As many studies on women's sport have argued, emphasized femininity is part of 'the female apologetic' in sports (Theberge 2000). Social sports scholars have long observed and analysed more common displays of emphasized femininity by young women athletes (Bordo 1989; Young 2005; Krane 2001; Theberge 2000). The embodiment of femininity in sport often highlights characteristics that oppose performances of masculinity. Women's bodies are deemed less physically strong and are always judged in terms of cosmetic beauty (McCaughey 1997; Markula 2003). Performing femininities and heterosexuality are more than aesthetic choices: they are also strategies for legitimizing unequal power relations between men and women. The question of emphasized femininity and heterosexuality can be deepened and broadened by taking seriously the various configurations in which it is embedded. The various patterns of femininity have received little attention. Topics such as beauty or its absence, physical strength and sociability are often analysed in feminist sport studies; religion and race/ethnicity are not. At the same time, the question of emphasized femininity, which has been so prevalent in feminist sport studies, is non-existent in scholarly debates on Muslim women in sports (see, for example, (Hargreaves, Hargreaves, and Vertinsky 2007; Kay 2006; Pfister 2000; Walseth and Fasting 2003), and for a critique, see Samie 2018). By analysing how 'women-only' spaces are created, what a pious feminine kickboxing aesthetic entails and how discursive practices revolve around heterosexuality, I show that women-only sessions that specifically welcome Muslim women in a sport that is considered masculine produce a specific

femininity that intersects on the axis of secularity and religion.

### **Women-Only Kickboxing**

Men's and women's competition and training are separated in almost all team sports and many individual sports. Kickboxing, as a relatively new sport, began as a men's sport and remains male-dominated. The first women to engage in combat sports trained with men. Separation replaced this gender-mixed training environment as the number of women participants grew. Kickboxing classes in gyms and community centres that specifically cater to women have increased the popularity of kickboxing among women and girls, the majority of whom do not aim to become competitive athletes. They participate for leisure and seek to become fit, strong and healthy together. Gender separatism is not limited to Muslim practice, but government-led and grassroots initiatives for gender-grouped sports activities, compared to gender-mixed sports activities, have increased Muslim women's participation in kickboxing (Rana 2018).

The execution of women-only kickboxing varies, but in all cases only women participants can join the class. Often the trainer is a woman as well. Some gyms ensure that the door is closed and the window blinds pulled down so that onlookers cannot look in or enter. For some Muslim women and girls in The Hague, sport cannot become an option until it is clear that gender separation is practised very strictly. Male trainers or onlookers would be considered inappropriate or make them uncomfortable. One of the two kickboxing clubs where I trained prominently targeted Muslim women in their online advertisements and offline flyers for women-only training. Mainstream Dutch kickboxing flyers often depict women wearing tank tops and pink sportswear, but the promotional material for these women-only classes markets kickboxing with factual information (where and when it takes place) alongside a small picture of the two trainers in body-covering clothing, portraying a clear alternative for femininity in mainstream

kickboxing posters. The flyers also list the special characteristics of these classes: blinded windows, the absence of men and no music. The first two points relate to the full separation of men and women. The absence of music is a prerequisite for Muslims who believe that most kinds of contemporary music are *haram* (Otterbeck 2008). The list of features is accompanied by a picture of a *halal* stamp like those used to certify food products, to indicate that a product is permissible according to Islamic standards. Although there is no certification for anything like 'halal sports', the stamp highlights the Muslim character of the kickboxing classes. More Muslim women and girls visited the women-only training sessions at this gym than any other gym that I researched. Practicing kickboxing at this gym, with its combination of religious motifs, can be considered an act of piety.

Before signing up for kickboxing, observant Muslims also have to decide whether they want to fight and hit each other in the face. Most men in the mixed training sessions have found peace with hitting each other's faces and hurting one another. They may affirm it by agreeing on the rules and consenting to the fight. In women-only training, hitting an opponent in the face remains a point of negotiation. Most women-only trainers do not let their pupils hit each other in the face because there are often many beginners. In training sessions with more advanced fighters, there is often a division in the classroom. The trainer divides the students into thirds during technical and sparring exercises. The first group only does the techniques and does not participate in sparring exercises. The second group engages in sparring exercises, but are not allowed to hit each other in the face. The third group spars and can hit opponents in the face. The third group consists entirely of advanced pupils, whereas the first and second groups mainly consist of beginners and advanced beginners respectively. However, there are also women who are advanced enough to compete with the advanced students, but prefer not to spar at all for religious reasons; thus, they train with the beginners. Three other

advanced young women join the advanced beginner group because they like to spar but want to avoid getting hit in the face. Their motives are both gendered and religious. Some refer to the *hadith* (sayings of the prophet Muhammad) that forbids hitting another person in the face. Others do not want to ‘mess up their faces’ while kickboxing, or do not want the pain that comes with it. Ilham’s explanation in the opening vignette referred to standards of feminine beauty, but in longer conversations, religious reasonings appear to be intertwined with aesthetic choices.

The women fighters feel they must negotiate the *haram* aspects of kickboxing just as they do other aspects of their daily lives.<sup>4</sup> Both religious and gender discourses articulate norms and values for women. In this case it is inappropriate for girls to hit each other in the face, and even less appropriate for adult women. Kickboxing women and girls often express their motives for sparring or fighting competitively in terms of their youthfulness or adulthood (Rana 2022a). Some women, including fighters, see fighting as part of being a (playful) youth. As they become adults, they must become ‘more serious’, which may include quitting fighting altogether. Women negotiate the terms and conditions under which they engage in kickboxing, making it halal enough for them to participate. The women-only sessions, compared to mixed training sessions, allow for this pious femininity to come to the fore and to shape it further.

A second gendered difficulty for observant Muslim women is the spectacle that is inherent to kickboxing event when kickboxing. For women who see themselves as pious Muslims, being in the spotlight should be avoided. Compared with other sports, it seems difficult not to attract attention to oneself in competitive kickboxing. Nadia, a professional taekwondoka and amateur kickboxer, pointed out:

In taekwondo, there are six matches in one hall at the same time. There is practically no one looking at you. So, you are only there for the competition. With kickboxing, it is different because it’s a whole show around you: with the music, the lights, the emcee. Basically, you’re showing yourself off.

Nadia does not compete in kickboxing. She and many women do not want to participate in kickboxing events because they do not want the added attention. Compared with taekwondo and other competitive sports, kickboxing is more focused on show and entertainment. Other girls and women mentioned the criminal environment associated with competitive kickboxing<sup>5</sup> and the consumption of alcohol as reasons why kickboxing events are not the ‘right place to be’ for Muslim women. Others mentioned the ring girls, the entertainers who announce the fighters, often in little clothing.<sup>6</sup> Most of the male fighters with whom I spoke agreed that fight events are unsuitable places for women. Even amateur and professional fighters who value women’s fights told me that they ‘understand why women don’t go there because it’s not really a good place to be’ or that they ‘won’t let my sister fight at competitions’. Deciding to kickbox is a choice for the girl herself, but it also depends on the negotiation of a whole net of relationships and ideas. At the same time, deciding not to pursue a kickboxing career emphasizes pious femininity and can be understood as apologetic behaviour that enables Muslim women to partake in kickboxing in different ways.

The separation of men and women in sport enables many women to engage in combat as well as other sports and to counter the stereotype of submissive, passive ‘Muslimwoman’ (Abu-Lughod 2016). Simultaneously, the women who populate this space are reproducing their own heterosexual, heteronormative ideals in the form of another ideal, that of the ‘good Muslim woman’. Kickboxing is not a religious practice,

<sup>4</sup> The men in the mixed training sessions have, in general, agreed to kickboxing and its consequences, and they do not discuss this issue further.

<sup>5</sup> See Dortants, Knoppers, and Van Bottenburg (2016) for a discussion of this image of ring sports.

<sup>6</sup> See Lafferty and McKay (2004) and Mazer (2020) for a discussion of the sexualized position of ring girls.

but it allows for the production and performance of pious femininity. This production and performance are mostly based on the informal circulation of religious knowledge, a key aspect in the production of pious selves (Jouili and Amir-Moazami 2006). In the following sections, conversations about becoming more pious through sartorial practices and making sense of romantic relationships demonstrate how ways of knowing Islam are shared in women-only kickboxing.

### **Appropriate kickboxing attire**

In women-only kickboxing, self-improvement is a matter of building strength, losing weight and learning how to fight. It also intersects with techniques of comportment and adornment. Like many other sports, kickboxing requires specific attire. Punching gloves and shin-guards are necessary; many pupils have their own, but beginners can borrow them from the club. Kickboxing shorts and a tank top or t-shirt are optional when pupils train for leisurely purposes. The women's attire mainly differs from the men's in terms of fit and emphasizes femininity by using the colour pink. As part of the apologetic behaviour among Muslim women, however, femininity is emphasized in clothing in additional ways.

Modesty in clothes and behaviour is often described as characteristic of the Muslim woman (Moors and Salih 2009; Ünal and Moors 2012), and it is a recurrent theme both during training and in the locker room. The women-only setting enables girls to wear whatever they want in theory, but I observed a 'proper' way of dress at both of the gyms I studied. The tensions between women fighters and what they assumed to be male fighting practices were visible in the trainees' kickboxing attire. Pink continues to be the most popular colour, but it is often combined with black. There has also been an observable growth in women's and 'feminine' clothing in traditional and online kickboxing shops. Some clubs sell clothing and gear carrying their club logos, and they often have a pink variety for women.

The women in women-only training do not wear what the women fighters on promotional

flyers and the internet often only wear, namely shorts and a tank top or sports bra. Soon after I started kickboxing classes in a women-only setting, I adopted the other girls' style of sportswear. In addition to the shorts, shin-guards and gloves, I began wearing leggings and long shirts. When doing push-ups or bending down for stretching, the girls ensured that their shirts were tucked into their shorts so that no part of their mid-riffs or backs were visible. I noticed that other new girls followed the unspoken dress code as well.

Before I participated in women-only kickboxing, I would not have minded showing my legs or my back in training, especially, perhaps, when only women were present. However, after a while I felt uncomfortable showing too much bare skin. It surprised me how easily my feelings adapted to this norm. I noticed that every new pupil underwent this process. The way in which we became accustomed to covering our bodies shows how communal such practices are. Describing her fieldwork experience, Abu-Lughod explains that 'veiling became an automatic response to embarrassment' (Abu-Lughod 1999: 155). Such small actions as wearing leggings under my shorts or tucking in my shirt worked the same for me. In a women-only setting, it might appear that women should not have to worry about the male gaze, but nonetheless they cannot wear whatever they want. The female gaze, the constant checking of each other's clothing and habits, may be just as critical.

Most habitual clothing practices, including covering one's legs and shoulders, were practised without much conversation. When I asked the young women why they dressed the way they do, their answers often relied on religious arguments:

Well, it's haram to show my bare legs, so it's just easier to wear leggings. Because then I can dress in the locker room and my legs won't be bare if there are still any men in the training hall when I enter. (Hind, 14 years old)

Uhm, I think it is written in the Quran, right? Like, we also have to wear hijabs. That's why I don't wear shorts. And, I will also wear a hijab when I'm older, inshallah. (Loubna, 16)



I know people say 'shorts are bad', but I think tank tops are worse. My mother says it's OK if I wear shorts. Also, on holidays I do that. But she doesn't want me to wear tank tops, because then my shoulders are showing, and also my cleavage. (Fouzia, 18 years old)

The girls do not refer to religious scholars, lectures or specific texts in making these remarks. Much of what they know is acquired through word-of-mouth communication. When I asked Alia how she knew what is *haram* and what is not, she referred to her neighbour, who 'knows a lot'. In my interviews and daily interactions with the young women, I saw the role of dress become even more significant. Whether to veil or not was a much-debated topic in the lives of the girls I met. It is a choice that many girls ponder when they are, in their words, 'getting older' and 'more serious'. For many girls, wearing a headscarf is a reason not to engage in competitive fighting. Even though there are cases of veiled Muslim women in competitions in other combat sports, such as taekwondo, both veiled and unveiled young women consider kickboxing with a headscarf 'not right'. Sports competitions are events where secularity is articulated. Religious symbols are in some cases not allowed, and in other cases are at least a rarity. A male kickboxer might bow down and say a prayer before a fight, but when a woman kickboxer decides to compete wearing a hijab, both herself, fellow Muslims and non-Muslims might understand it as a contradiction within the performance of faith, while that is not the case for male fighters. The symbolic power of the hijab, representing submissiveness, modesty and pious femininity in general, shows the tensions between kickboxing and piety.

However, because of the parameters of women-only training, this presumed contradiction did not exist in training sessions. Girls and women explicitly praised each other when they noticed that they had started wearing clothes that cover more of the body, whether that meant covering their hair with a headscarf or wearing dresses down to their ankles. When Amina, a sixteen-year-old recreational kickboxer, put on

a long dress over her jeans after training once, I asked her about the change in her style. She explained that it felt good, but that she was not yet sure if it was a permanent shift in her dressing habits. She was afraid that she would miss the clothes that she was accustomed to wearing. She explained that she would not be able to meet her boyfriend anymore either: 'Actually, it would be exactly the same, but still it feels different. Like if you are dressed like this, you can't do that anymore'. Saba Mahmood argues that we should 'examine the work that bodily practice performs in creating a subject that is pious in its formation' (Mahmood 2005: 160). In her study of the pious women's movement in Egypt, Mahmood explains how a modest bodily form was not an expression of piety, but the means through which piety was acquired (2005: 161). A modest dress that covers more of the body was part of the cultivation of a pious femininity for Amina. It encouraged her to behave more righteously. These trends towards piety reinforced each other, as many of the girls at the gym also visited the mosque together. Some went to Quran class on Saturday, while others attended lectures in the mosque. The trainer, Alia, generally wore jeans, but on Friday she sometimes entered and left the gym in an abaya and hijab. It was what she had worn to the mosque earlier. The first time she did this, I noted the following:

Alia walked into the gym fifteen minutes before her training started. Many girls and women had arrived before her and were already preparing for training: getting dressed, adjusting shin-guards and wrist bandages. When Alia walked in, sounds of admiration and surprise softly filled the room: 'Oh look, it's Alia'. 'Wow!'. 'Mashallah.' She usually wore a pair of jeans or sweatpants and a hoodie or leather jacket to the gym. But this time, Alia arrived in a fully covering Muslim dress, an abaya and hijab. 'People here are not used to seeing me like this', she explained while changing into shorts and a tank top. 'But I went to Friday prayers today and thought, 'You know what? I will just keep wearing this today.'

The women-only setting provided a space for Alia to experiment with a more covert way of dress-

ing. Whenever she did, the other women praised her for her piety and for looking good. It did not stop her experimenting with wearing shorts and t-shirts during the summer outside the gym. Kickboxing helped her tap into a variety of clothing habits. Muslim women see sport as secular, and they may feel pressured to secularize their clothing choices. Nadia expressed how non-Muslim fighters often ask her why she 'still' wears a headscarf. But participation in this sports setting allowed Alia, Amina and others, to experiment with more obviously religious clothing, which also meant experimenting with new beauty ideals. The women did not merely compliment Alia because of the importance of her pious performance in covering her body but complimented her on a particular ideal of feminine beauty as well, one that is based on covering the body instead of showing it.

The negotiation of gendered and religious practices and subjectivities that was apparent in the kickboxers' clothing choices also informed their narratives about sexuality and personal relationships with boys and men. These points of discussion were especially significant for competitive fighters and girls with fighting ambitions.

### Heterosexual Emphasis

The young women in this research emphasized their femininity by stressing their heterosexuality and countering the masculine features of kickboxing. They commonly downplayed their physical strength. Knoppers and Elling point out that the media rarely focus on the physical strength needed by women athletes, and that if it is mentioned, the women athlete's strength is compared to that of her male counterparts (e.g., she hits as hard as a man) (Knoppers and Elling 2001: 179). These rote-learned utterances also filled the gym. Women kickboxers stated that they hoped to shape their bodies in a certain way that is 'slim and muscled, but not too muscled'. They train for tight abs but not 'super-defined'. They want to appear 'sporty, but not manly'. They use these standards to measure their peers' appearances as well.

You know, some girls do kickboxing, and they start behaving like a man. You know, like that girl Imane. I don't get that. Why would you do that? You know, she walks like a man, talks like a man. She just looks very masculine. I mean, she doesn't have to wear make-up or anything, but just... I don't know... act normal. (...Silence...) Maybe she is a lesbian. (Hanane, 17 years old)

Hanane expresses how kickboxing and being a kickboxer is OK as long as it does not interfere with the requirement to emphasize femininity. She analyses the appearance of another girl, not by commenting on her looks but by noticing how she walks and talks. She even takes a step further, linking the girl's supposed manly features to her sexual orientation. Making this connection has long been part of a general observable female apologetic in sport (Theberge 2000). Women do not merely emphasize femininity in general; they often feel compelled to perform heterosexual, heteronormative femininities. On the one hand, women and girls embraced a 'female masculinity' that is attached to the sport of kickboxing (Rana 2022a), but if women are 'too muscular', they are seen as 'masculine', 'ugly' and 'lesbians' (Elling 2002; Hargreaves 1994). Many women athletes openly distance themselves from lesbianism and seek to create conventional feminine appearances through their make-up, hairstyles and clothing. Often women feel that, to be accepted as athletes, they must behave in a heterosexual, feminine manner (Elling 2002; Krane 2001). In her research on Pakistani-British basketball players, Samie (2013) analyses this behaviour as *hetero-sexy*. In my research, I noticed that sexual subjectivities were narrated following the same lines of hetero-sexiness. The hetero-sexy talk occurs both during training and in locker-room banter. During training, both trainers and trainees joke about certain movements where the legs should be spread as wide as possible, referencing potential boyfriends and sex lives or making sounds to mimic sex. This space, where women are among themselves, can also enable women to think creatively about their sexual subjectivities, talk openly, gossip, and joke about experiences and expectations.

It appeared that the topics that seemed the most hetero-sexy were related to specific Muslim subjectivities. Heterosexuality, monogamy and abstinence were considered the norm among the regulars at the women-only training sessions, and they were often silently agreed on. The locker room before and after the women-only sessions offered a space in which to discuss these issues. When eighteen-year-old Jamila talked about her boyfriend with her thirty-year-old sparring partner Miryam, the issue of abstinence before marriage in Islam was debated:

Miryam (30): Well, but actually, he should be a virgin as well, right?

Jamila (18): But for the woman, it is more important, because when she's not a virgin, it's a real problem. People don't think the boy's virginity's that important.

M: I know that's what people say, but I just think it's unfair. There is this one rule that applies to both men and women, but only women get punished for it...

J: Punished?

M: Well yeah, nothing happens to him when he screws around, right? And you said he probably does! While, if you did that, he would probably not want to marry you anymore.

J: Yeah, maybe, that's unfair.

Miryam and other adult women at the gym opened up about sexual relationships in and outside of marriage and about having multiple partners. The locker room in this kickboxing gym served as a safe space for these discussions. Religious norms seem strict and rigid from a textual perspective, but the everyday encounters in a women-only space demonstrate how religious and sexual subjectivities intersect:

I'm from Casablanca, the big city, you know, and this already gives you a bit of a reputation. And well, I did try some things in life, like going out and dating. Because I think you should try things. That's how you learn about life. I am willing to be stricter, if it's for a good man, with clothing and all, for example. I'm already more, like, more into studying Islam than I used to be. (Fatima, 28)

Fatima describes her contextual negotiation of the boundaries around being a good Muslim

woman. The process is ongoing and changes with time, space and people. She expects that, with age, a different, more pious and religiously observant subjectivity will emerge. Seriousness, which refers to modesty in this context, is a form of femininity that transcends youthfulness. It is *the* step towards womanhood. Being part of a women-only kickboxing club and engaging with other women with religious common grounds gave Fatima the space to align herself with particular ideals of gendered religious subjectivity.

### Conclusion

The cultural encounters that take place in gyms during training and in the locker room produce new articulations of femininity. The juxtaposition between pious and sexually liberated is too black and white, as is the juxtaposition between 'pious Muslim' and secular sport. By acknowledging that gender and sexual expressions can be produced in a variety of ways in everyday practice, this article shows that the kickboxing gym can be a space where women strive to become a pious, feminine self and work on this ideal itself.

While previous studies of emphasized femininity in sport have focused on cosmetic beauty and (a lack of) physical power, this article demonstrates that considering different communities of athletic women can lead to a more comprehensive understanding of the concept of emphasized femininity. The embodiment of femininity emphasizes characteristics that oppose masculinity. It also contests certain features of hegemonic femininity with the introduction of a more pious ideal. While there are multiple variations in pious femininity in the women-only kickboxing gym, it remains heterosexual and heteronormative in its evaluation of body shape, comportment and adornment. The outspoken opinion against lesbians and lesbianism secures Muslim women a place of their own in a patriarchal hierarchy. Muslim women kickboxers instrumentalize pious femininity to claim a space in sport through an apologetic position vis-à-vis men and non-Muslim women. Sports feminists agree that femininity and the focus on heterosexuality

are more than aesthetic choices: they are also tools for legitimizing unequal power relations between men and women. Emphasized femininity is a form of apologetic feminine behaviour that enables participation in a sport that is characterised as masculine. In this case, women-only kickboxing demonstrates a variation in the pattern of emphasized femininity because of the emphasis on piety.

Women's combining of sexual and gendered behaviours and subject positions demonstrates that the pious self is not only produced in conventional 'religious spaces'. While sports practices and sports spaces are perceived and presented as secular, performances of faith are an undeniable part of women-only sports. Muslim women's participation in sports is embedded in public and political discourses in which their bodies and practices are pitted against the modern, secular way of life. Sports are presented as a path towards belonging to the progressive, secular nation state. For the women who participate in women-only kickboxing, however, cultivating fighting techniques is a way to create healthy, beautiful, *hetero*-sexy but also pious selves that do not pose too big a threat to their male counterparts.

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# ‘Why Aren’t You a Woman?’; Gender and Secular Affect in the Dutch Field of Sexual Health\*

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## Abstract

This article draws on anthropological fieldwork among Dutch sexual health professionals to explore the ways Dutch secular sex education classes are gendered. By investigating how the discourse of liberal secular sexuality becomes reified in the concrete setting of sex education classes, the article brings together two theoretical fields within the study of the secular: secularity and its entanglements with gender and sexuality; and scholarly inquiry into secular bodies and affect. The article argues that these sex education classes communicate a binary heterosexual understanding of sexuality, which ascribes feminine sexuality the role of sexuality managers, and masculine sexuality the role of passive observers. The promotion of these gendered roles in sex education classes implies that feminine sexuality is cultivated to be burdened with a challenging and pressuring responsibility, whereas masculine sexuality is subtly exempted from taking up a responsible role in thinking about sex. This gendered differentiation, cultivated through sex education, helps to sustain secular associations of femininity with responsibilities and roles in managing the private sphere, as opposed to the association of masculinity with roles and responsibilities in the public sphere.

**Keywords:** sex education, gender, secularity, secular body, sexuality

‘It would be so nice if boys could start these conversations about sex. Just tell them, Jelle. Please, tell boys they should start talking about it [sex]! That would make things so much easier! We really do not care [if they let go of their cool image].’  
Seventeen-year-old girl during a sex education class.

## Introduction

Gradually, all students enter the classroom. It appears most of them look forward to this lesson, probably because they have been told about the special lesson they are going to have: one that is about sex. One approximately twelve-year-old boy is the first to sit down at his desk at the front of the classroom. He puts down his bag, has a quick look at the posters on the walls of the classroom and then notices me, his guest

teacher. While the other students are still finding their seats, this boy gazes at me for a while, clearly trying to make up his mind about me. After about twenty seconds or so he frowns and asks me: ‘Sir, why are you not a woman?’

Though this lesson took place a couple of years ago, I can still recall my feelings of surprise upon hearing the boy’s question. How was I to answer his question? What did he actually mean by it? As happened most of the time during my fieldwork when a student asked me a complicated or unexpected question that I could not answer straightaway, I just said something unclear and quickly turned my back, pretending to be distracted by something else. However, on this occasion,

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\* The work conducted for this article was funded by the Dutch NWO, project number 360-25-160. The author would also like to thank the Catherina Halkes Foundation for its financial support. Finally, the author would like to thank Rachel Spronk, Kim Knibbe and Willemijn Krebbekx for their assistance and feedback.

I instantly realized that his question was interesting because it had revealed an important expectation that the boy had: that sexuality education classes were to be taught by women.

This lesson took place near the end of my anthropological fieldwork among Dutch sexual health professionals in the Netherlands as part of a project on religious and secular approaches to sexuality (see introduction). By that time, I had already attended many of their meetings on sex education and had gained some insights into their understandings of sexuality in relation to their views on the role of religion and the merits of secular approaches to sexuality. However, the gendering of sex education classes that we were teaching – which is an important topic of discussion in academic debates on sex education (e.g. Davidson 1996; Allen 2006) – had never been discussed among these professionals. The boy's question thus pointed to an interesting mismatch between what went on during sex education classes taught in classrooms and the features that were discussed by sexual health professionals during their evaluation of these sex education lessons.

In this article, I draw on my anthropological findings to explore how the gendering of sexuality<sup>1</sup> in sex education (e.g. Davidson 1996; Allen 2006), the gendering of the secular<sup>2</sup> (Cady and Fessenden 2013; Toldy et al. 2015) and secular bodies (Hirschkind 2011; Wiering 2017; Scheer et al. 2019) are related. Building on the work of

feminist historian Joan Scott (2018), I employ a post-secularist lens (see also Knibbe 2018), which I understand as one that assumes it is not only religion but also secularity that 'has a purpose and a set of effects that produce a particular vision of the world – a vision that shapes and is accepted as reality, even as it misrepresents history.' (Scott 2018: 9). Many scholars have called for more critical ethnographic inquiry into the secular, but so far not many such studies have been conducted. This article provides such an ethnographic study of secularity.

In what follows, I investigate how Dutch sex educators' notion of liberal and secular sexuality was reified in the concrete setting of sex education classes. The classroom has frequently been identified as an arena for the construction of gender and sexuality, but these observations have only rarely been brought into larger conversations about religion and secularity (see Rasmussen 2012 and Krebbekx 2019 for two exceptions). This article will use these sex education classes as a case study to explore the cultivation of secular gendered normativities. It will nuance the popular narrative that secular forms of sexuality have moved beyond the sexual constraints that religious sexualities are still facing. In addition, it will provide further insights into the cultivation of secular feminine and masculine sexualities, which are proposed as superior secular alternatives.

The article argues that current forms of secular sex education classes in the Netherlands communicate a binary heterosexual understanding of sexuality, which ascribes feminine sexuality the role of sexuality managers and masculine sexuality the role of passive observers. The promotion of these roles in sex education classes implies that many women are cultivated that it is their task to remain burdened with a challenging and pressuring responsibility, whereas most men are subtly exempted from having to take up such a responsible role in thinking about sexuality. Through sex education classes, these differences between masculine and feminine sexuality become deeply ingrained in how students

<sup>1</sup> I use the term 'sex' to refer to biological, chromosomal and other manifestations in secondary sexual characteristics. Seen in this light, all humans have a sex (XX, XY, intersex), though of course the social obsession with one's sex shows that gender and sex are impossible to separate totally. I employ the term 'sexuality' to refer to sexual practices such as oral sex and intercourse. Finally, I use the term 'gender' as 'a highly inflected concept that is performative and specific to race, ethnicity, geographical location, era, age bracket, education, ability, religion, and other demographic' (Richie 2019: 379).

<sup>2</sup> In order to relate properly to academic discussions about the secular, I will stick to the terminology employed in these debates and use the term 'secular' to refer to nonreligious phenomena (see Wiering 2020 for a critique on this utilization of the term 'secular').

understand, approach and indeed (will) experience sexuality. One can thus observe how sex education classes serve to cultivate youngsters' particular interpretations of and affects related to supposedly natural feminine and masculine talents, which then help re-establish secular associations of women with responsibilities and roles in managing the private sphere, and men, by implication, with duties in the public sphere.

This article proceeds as follows. First, I present a concise overview of two important fields of research in the study of the secular that I bring together in this article: the study of secularity and its entanglements of sexuality and gender; and the study of secular bodies and affect. Then I turn to debates about the specific context of this article: sex education classes. Subsequently, I present my fieldwork findings to introduce the reader to the emancipatory aims that most sexual health professionals in the Netherlands embrace and how they seek to pursue these goals through their profession in particular ways. Building on this, I reflect on the ways that these professionals integrate their emancipatory ideals in their sex education classes to finally extrapolate these findings to the discussion about the gendering and embodiment of the secular.

### **Sexuality, Gender and Secularity in the Netherlands**

In academia, the idea of religion as *the* troublemaker in clashes over sexuality and gender is increasingly nuanced (Scott 2009, 2018). In a similar vein, the idea that a farewell to religion implies sexual liberation has also received increasing criticism (Rasmussen 2012; Cady and Fessenden 2013; Scott 2009, 2018). Rather, scholars now mostly agree that the encounters between the secular and the religious produce these contestations related to sexuality and gender.

In her 2018 book *Sex and Secularism*, Scott elucidates how in secular societies gender and politics are interconnected. To understand this, it is important to realize that gender on the one hand and democratic politics on the other, are

both characterized by an irresolvable indeterminacy (Scott 2018: 190). Writes Scott:

There is no ultimate explanation for the difference of the sexes and no concrete embodiment for democratic politics. Each relies on the other for certainty: the supposed natural difference of the sexes explains why men predominate in politics (and in many other spheres as well), and the reference to that natural difference as a justification for politics secures gender inequality—explaining it not as a constructed social inequality, but as a fact of nature. (Scott 2018: 190-191)

Scott supports this argument by presenting many examples where men, in various historical and geographical contexts, draw on arguments about the supposed natural place of women in society (the private sphere) to justify the latter's exclusion from, among other things, politics. Gender referred its attributions to nature; politics naturalized its hierarchies by with reference to gender (Scott 2018: 22).

Key to this gendering of secular societies is the latter's emphasis on the private/public dichotomy, which according to Scott is one of the principles that lies at the heart of secularity. The point is that this emphasis not only installs a particular division in society, but that this division is strongly gendered. Thus, while claiming to protect the public sphere from irrational religious baloney and dogmatism, in practice secularism separates women and men into different categories associated with different tasks, affects and qualities (2018: 13). This article explores how Scott's analysis of the entanglements of gender, religion and secularity in relation to the public-private division helps to make sense of the gendering of sex education.

A second area of research inquiry within the study of the secular will shed further light on the entanglements of gender, secularity and sex education: the study of secular bodies, forms of embodiment and affect (e.g. Hirschkind 2011; Wiering 2017; Scheer et al. 2019). The 2019 volume *Secular Bodies, Affects and Emotions: European Configurations* develops further Asad's (2003) argument about secular appreciations of particular forms of emotions and affects. The



authors argue that a secular body might approve of particular embodied virtues (such as rationality) and disapprove of others (particular emotions). The authors argue that ‘the secularity of a subject will not only be found in her propositional knowledge, but also in the embodied actions of perception, emotion and comportment.’ (Scheer et al. 2019: 5). Surprisingly, however, there is not much literature on how secular bodies or these secular affects are gendered.

This specific lens on bodies and affect provides an interesting perspective with which to investigate the gendering of sex education classes, as it urges one to think about gender on the more secluded level of perception, feeling and sensibility. What kind of gendered embodied actions, understandings and feelings do secular sex education classes advocate? And what ways of perceiving and experiencing sexuality are, perhaps unintentionally, cultivated through such lessons?

### **Religion and Gender in Sex Education**

Many academic discussions about sex education debate the (alleged) differences between comprehensive sex education (CSE) and abstinence-only (AO) education (e.g. Lesko 2010; Lamb, Lustig and Graling 2013). Put concisely, the notion of AO education captures methods that highlight abstinence as the only morally right path, which many participating in these discussions associate with tradition, backwardness and conservative religion-infused public politics. CSE, purportedly in contrast to AO, stands for a broader discussion of sexuality, which in these academic debates is associated with modernity, scientific accuracy and the freedom to talk about and enact sexuality (*idem*).

Recently, however, CSE has increasingly become subject to criticism. It has been criticized for its unacknowledged normative features, such as its tacit anti-religious sentiments (Rasmussen 2012). Others have highlighted that its implicit neoliberal focus champions individual choice (Lesko 2010; Lamb et al. 2013). And yet others have pointed to the particular liberal notion of agency undergirding these lessons, which leaves

little room for other interpretations of agency (Roodsaz 2018).

Though I sympathize with the criticisms of CSE, I have also noted that they often limit their scope to interrogating its written content, thus not examining the practicalities and embodied dimensions of these lessons. As Willemijn Krebbekx (2019: 3-4) argued, one can also explore the variety of practices that together constitute a sex education. I agree with Krebbekx that, in addition to the increasing number of critical studies that aim to unravel the normativities that underpin policy documents or sex education curricula, it is also important to research the ‘empirical mess’ of sex education classes (Krebbekx 2019: 4). As Krebbekx shows, there are many important differences between written course curricula on the one hand and actual lessons taught by sex educators on the other. I suggest that the difference between written theory and embodied practice will undoubtedly influence the ways students come to understand and experience sexuality, particularly on the tacit level of perception and experience.

Many studies of sex education have explored how these classes are gendered, and two major patterns can be distinguished here. First, quite a few scholars have pointed to the lack of attention to feminine sexual pleasure in particular (e.g. Fine 1988; Allen 2006; Lamb 1997). Sex education classes have long limited their focus to discussing sexuality as simply meaning sexual intercourse, which, among other problems, implies a strong emphasis on masculine rather than feminine forms of sexual pleasure. Realizing this, scholars have argued for the inclusion of sexual pleasure in sex education (e.g. Allen and Carmody 2012).

A second pattern relates to the observation that sex education classes often entail an extravagant focus on the notion of boys as ‘sexual predators’ who need to learn to domesticate their sexual urges (Tolman et al. 2003: 9; DePalma and Francis 2014; Davidson 1996). Seeking to combat sexual violence and other forms of undesired sexual behavior, many sex education classes articulate an image of men as needing

disciplinary moralities in order to learn to control themselves sexually.

Having observed both gendered patterns in their ethnographic study of sex education in South Africa, DePalma and Francis discuss the implications such a gendering of sexuality can have:

A key element of heteronormativity is that girls and boys are socialized into different gender roles in ways that propagate the patriarchy, and these differences are viewed as the natural order of things. [In our own research,] we noticed a tendency for teachers to cast boys as predatory and girls as victims of sexual predation, either by their peers or by older boys or men. Teachers stopped short of questioning these roles as emerging from a heteronormative society, instead feeding into the normative by casting them as natural aspects of male and female sexuality. Such essentialist gendered expectations can serve as self-fulfilling prophecies, and may be transmitted and reinforced unconsciously in well-meaning educational interventions meant to protect girls. (DePalma and Francis 2014: 626)

Considering these observations, I deem it interesting to think about DePalma and Francis's observations in relation to Scott's broader analysis of the gendered binaries between the public and private sphere, and between the secular and the religious. So, how does the cultivation of these gender roles through sex education classes relate to the categories of the secular and the religious?

In what follows, I draw on my fieldwork among secular sexual health organizations in the Netherlands to explore what the gendering of sex education looks like in the Netherlands. Between 2016 and 2018, I conducted thirteen months of fieldwork to study Dutch sex education classes and related activities such as professional seminars on sex education. I observed fifteen sex education classes taught by different professional organizations and also taught thirty such lessons myself as a trained volunteer. The sex education classes aimed at teaching people (students, their parents, other professionals, migrants) about sexuality. In addition, I interviewed several sexologists, some general practitioners and nineteen sex educators.

### Improving Dutch Sexual Wellbeing

While learning about sexuality by spending time among sexual health professionals, I soon came to understand that most of my interlocutors had reflected extensively on the topics of sexuality and gender. Most of them identified as women who, through their work, sought to improve marginalized people's sexual wellbeing and their position in society more generally. They wanted to support those they considered to be in need: HIV-positive people, people who felt rejected by society because of their sexual orientation, girls and young women who (had) experienced sexual violence, and so on. Motivated by their stories, my interlocutors had chosen a profession through which they sought to support people in similar situations. Janneke's account exemplifies this trajectory. Janneke was a 32-year-old woman who taught and coordinated sex education classes for students but also parents. She explained what motivated her:

Well, I worked abroad with women's groups, student groups, and we worked on social issues [like] pregnancy, and there was a lack of awareness related to that topic. But also about abortions, which happened a lot there. And abortion was a topic that one could not speak about there, so I think that has triggered me to make sure that [conversations about abortion] do take place here. When I came back to the Netherlands, I wanted to initiate conversations [about issues like abortion] among children at school. [...]. To let people speak about sex.

Many interlocutors similarly perceived the lack of conversations about sexuality in the context of their work to be rather problematic, as they were convinced sexuality was an important topic.

In most of my interviews, my interlocutors provided me with concrete illustrations of how their work, be it voluntary or paid, had proved relevant. Isa, for instance, a 57-year-old woman who had worked for the CHS for a long time already, illustrated numerous times why she finds it so important that migrants should be provided with reliable, factual information about sexuality. For instance, she said:

A lot of people in asylum-seekers' centres come from societies where proper education is rather rare. It happens very often that they start asking me: 'Yeah, but how, uhm, can you explain to me how one gets pregnant?' Well, so [you see] people come across a lot of stuff on the internet, and they can't really determine which source is reliable and which is not. [...] Yeah, so, if nobody stops me from doing it, I try to provide as many sex education classes for these groups as I can: up to eight lessons even!

Isa was convinced that these migrants benefited from her lessons, and she kept on providing examples which, according to her, illustrated this. For example, she mentioned that people are often convinced that it is easy to spot the difference between a broken and an unbroken hymen, which she considered nonsense.

Both Janneke and Isa were convinced they were contributing to improving people's (sexual) wellbeing, and this was the case for most of my interlocutors: each of them appeared passionate about their (volunteering) work, and they deemed a successful execution of their job to be both of individual and social importance. This shared motivation, importantly, also influenced the ways in which these professionals did their job. In pursuing the aim of improving people's sexual wellbeing, for example, my interlocutors particularly accentuated the need to change the gendering of sexuality. Most sex educators I spoke with, for example, had integrated a particular emancipatory aim into their lessons. They stressed that girls also had the right to kiss as many boys as they wanted. Sometimes this was a message they had integrated themselves, but sometimes the message was part of the discourse that the organization they worked for had integrated. We thus observe how my interlocutors tried to integrate an emancipatory agenda in their work, which hints at the normativity undergirding sex education curricula.

Anouk, a twenty-year-old sexual health consultant, told me that, during sex education classes, she sometimes pretended to have a slip of the tongue, as she casually said 'a boy and his boyfriend'. Often a student would correct her, after

which she could point out the student's heteronormative assumptions. I have also seen how the 32-year-old CHS employee Miranda took quite some time and patience to convince a boy in class that men too might not be in the mood for sex. Both Anouk's and Miranda's endeavours corresponded to their broader aim of improving people's sexual wellbeing by correcting the gendering of sexuality. To correct someone, however, implies that one is convinced of one's own correctness. So, what is assumed to be correct?

### The Social/Natural Body Distinction

Most of my interlocutors departed from the idea of a clear distinction between the body's natural and social features. The natural features were seen as characteristics that the body was believed just to happen to have, which implicitly meant they were ascribed a lot of authority. Examples I came across were the colour of one's eyes and the shape and size of one's genitals. Of course, one could influence or adapt these features, and hence invite the social, but I noted a tacit disapproval among my interlocutors regarding such modifications of the natural body, even those that are common in Dutch society. An example here is the practice of shaving one's genitals. Though Miranda, in one of her sex education classes, admitted that this is a frequent practice in the Netherlands, she nevertheless emphasized three times that one was by no means required to do it.

The body's social features, however, were considered to be the outcome of socially inspired modification, and hence they were taken as malleable and not given much authority. They were articulated as matters that people had ascribed to the body themselves. Some were interpreted as positive (e.g. transforming one's body if one *genuinely* felt this was the right thing to do), but most as negative (e.g. changing one's body as a consequence of experiencing social pressure). Natural features, in contrast, were ascribed a veracity: they were deemed to constitute the body in its raw and unspoiled form.

My interlocutors' categorization of embodied features as natural was rarely contested by students. On those few occasions when it was, as when a student questioned it during a sex education class, the teacher simply stated that research had proved it to be a natural characteristic of the body. Alternatively, the sex educator might defend the categorization as natural by giving a personal account they believed underscored the identification. Miranda, for example, re-classified the supposedly natural characteristic that boys are always in the mood for kissing as a social expectation that could be disproved by objective research. She pointed out to one class that one in seven Dutch boys experiences 'unacceptable sexual behaviour' ['Grensoverschrijdend gedrag']. One boy in class immediately contested this, as he found her statement rather hard to believe. 'A guy being groped?' he loudly said, expressing his scepticism. Miranda then said:

Well, once a boy in my class told everyone how he was being chased by a girl in a discotheque. She tried to kiss him all the time, even when he had made his disinterest really clear. The boy then asked the doorman to help him, but he just smiled and said that it [kissing] was nice, so he should just enjoy it instead.

Miranda sought to debunk the social conception that masculine sexuality implies one is always into kissing by highlighting how research findings (one out of seven boys experiences unacceptable sexual behaviour) and her personal experience (the story of the boy in the discotheque) articulate a different, ontologically more accurate natural body.

I noted that this differentiation of the natural body versus the social body provided my interlocutors with a helpful and persuasive scheme through which they could communicate particular notions of sexuality. By distinguishing the natural body from the social body, my interlocutors were equipped to correct supposedly incorrect assumptions of sexuality or gender among the students they were teaching. If features of the body were categorized as social, they could

simply be put forward for discussion in class and, because of their 'socialness', corrected.

For example, a couple of times I observed a sex educator insisting on the impossibility of verifying a woman's claims of virginity by examining the visual appearance of her vagina. They told the class that this idea had simply been made up and that a relationship between the appearance of the vagina and virginity was not a natural characteristic of the body. This example also illustrates how the natural/social differentiation can be used to problematize undesired cultural and/or religious norms. In this example, the social body/natural body binary is implicitly mobilized to condemn the ostensibly questionable practices of Muslim Others. As Isa's comments above indicates, the lesson about the hymen is considered particularly relevant for Muslim migrants, as they are assumed to have learned differently in their country of origin. This, then, also shows how secular knowledge is proposed as a superior, natural alternative to religiously constructed knowledge.

Because of the usefulness of the social body/natural body distinction, people who knew a lot about such natural facts, or who had the knowledge to separate the natural body clearly from the social body, were highly respected. In fact, since I told all my interlocutors that I was doing research on sexuality and worked for a university, people expected me to have mastered such knowledge. For example, during one of Jacintha's trainings for upcoming sex educators, the group, including me, was shown an unfamiliar object. Unfortunately, nobody in the group could answer Jacintha's question as to what this object was. Jacintha then turned to me, but I did not know either. Then she was a little puzzled and after a short while she said 'I expected *you* of all people to know this, Jelle!'. Sadly, I had unintentionally disproved her hypothesis that a researcher studying sexuality always would be aware of what the organ of the clitoris looked like in its entirety.

The strategy of categorizing embodied features as either social or natural appeared very

effective in convincing students about the (il) legitimacy of particular practices and notions. Most sex education classes I attended therefore focused on separating the two. Cases that perhaps were not so easy to allocate to one of these categories were often avoided because of the large amount of time that it would require to elucidate the complexities here: a lesson most often only lasted about fifty minutes. Homosexuality, for example, was thus often avoided because sex educators knew that this topic would evoke a lot of controversy and was difficult to explain. From my own experiences as a sex educator, I found that a lot of students consider homosexuality gross, and it requires a lot of time and skill to deal appropriately with the controversy that emerges when one begins to talk about the topic.

From the examples discussed here, we can already see that gender plays a big role in the social/natural distinction, with the category of the 'natural' being harnessed for emancipatory purposes, such as closing what my interlocutors called 'the orgasm gap'. In the following, I dig more deeply into the underlying notions of the gendering of sexuality that are navigated in sex education classes.

### **Developing Protocols versus Disciplining Oneself**

As I stated earlier, most people in the field where I conducted my research identified as cis-gender women.<sup>3</sup> For example, all the sex educators from CHS I spoke with were women. In the organization where I volunteered I happened to be the only male volunteer, and indeed, male sex educators in the Netherlands are quite rare. This observation, catapulted by the question of the boy described in the introduction, made me wonder about the consequences of this imbalance and the image of sexuality that it conveyed to students.

I decided to re-visit my notes, which drew me back to the sex education classes I had attended

at the beginning of my fieldwork. Some of these classes were developed especially for parents. In these lessons, parents were taught how to stimulate their children to engage in dialogues about sexuality. Such education classes were held at schools and featured a theatrical performance of a scenario that many parents would recognize. After the performance, the parents in the audience were then asked to evaluate and discuss the behaviour of the parents as shown in the performance.

The first performance was about a mother who attempted to initiate a conversation with her eighteen-year-old daughter. Her daughter was planning to embark on a holiday to Spain, her first vacation without her parents. Her parents expected her to engage in her first sexual encounter during this trip. This expectation, and the parents' conviction that a conversation was needed to avoid the daughter engaging in sexual activity that she later might regret was not contested by the audience. Some parents pointed out that the conversation should have taken place a few years earlier, but none of them disputed the general requirement for a dialogue on this issue. The second scenario addressed a boy who had been caught watching porn on his father's laptop. Again, a conversation about sexuality was presumed to be required, and again none of the parents disputed this. Additionally, all the parents in the audience appeared to agree with the father's message to the boy: porn was fake, and, among many other problematic features, very unfriendly towards women. The parents in the audience advised the father to emphasize that porn was not like real sexual activity at all.

The two scenarios illustrate how girls are perceived as being in need of a conversation that serves as a protective measure, whereas boys are not considered to be similarly in need, except perhaps to discipline themselves. The actors and the parents in the audience both appeared a little anxious about the fact that the daughter would probably become sexually active, a concern which was not similarly depicted in the context of the son's developing sexual activities. Instead,

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<sup>3</sup> An important exception here should be made here for people taking up higher positions in organizations.



it was only emphasized that the son should become sexually active in a proper way in order not to harm anyone. Bearing the social/natural body paradigm in mind, we can observe how the girl is encouraged to develop her feminine sexuality by what is suggested to be her natural body: to ignore forms of social pressure that would force her to do things she might later regret, and instead to discover and clarify her natural preferences. The boy, on the other hand, is advised that he needs to discipline his masculine sexuality: that, in contrast to the men in the porn, he needs to respect women and treat them in ways corresponding to their wishes. In sum, feminine sexuality is about discovering one's natural body and remaining faithful to it, while masculine sexuality invites socialization.

Another sex education class sheds further light on this gendering of sexuality. Again, it concerned an educational theatre play, though this time it was aimed at students. In this performance, a girl (Linda) and her boyfriend (Nick) have been engaged in a long-distance relationship for a year or so. The audience is told that they will meet each other during the upcoming holidays. We are also informed that Linda has told Nick via WhatsApp that she will be up for sexual practices during that holiday. Since both are still virgins, this implies they might each experience their first sexual encounter. However, during these holidays, when both perceive the moment to be there – Nick surprises Linda with a late-night picnic – Linda suddenly changes her mind and says: 'I would prefer to do this another time, is that alright with you?'. Nick says he understands, though he clearly appears a bit disappointed. Later in the show, Linda does agree to have sex because she feels pressured as a consequence of having said no the previous time. After the sex, she runs off stage crying.

During the plenary discussion afterwards, a boy and a girl from the audience are asked to come to the stage and to help out the characters with some advice. The boy from the audience is asked to help Nick, and the girl to help Linda. The boy tells Nick: 'If a guy wants to have sex with

a girl, he can only do so if the girl really wants that as well.' Nick agrees with him, but he also insists that Linda had, in fact, already given her agreement via WhatsApp. Therefore, he maintains, he does have the right ['ik heb er recht op'] to have sex with her. The boy from the audience rejects this argument by stating that a girl is simply allowed to change her mind.

The girl from the audience advises Linda that she should have been clearer both to herself and Nick about what she wanted. Linda, however, retorts that she is not so sure about that because that might cause Nick to leave her. The girl from the audience is not impressed by this counter-argument and tells Linda that, in that case, Nick would not have been an appropriate boyfriend anyway. The discussion's moderator does not need to interfere much: the conversation goes exactly according to plan.

Again, I believe this performance reflects how feminine sexuality is cultivated to be about conceptualizing personal, indeed supposedly natural boundaries and to communicate these clearly. This is a recommendation that hinges on the assumption, concretely depicted in the play, that girls may otherwise run the risk of engaging in sexual acts that they might later regret. Masculine sexuality, on the other hand, is articulated to be about domesticating themselves, which includes being attentive to what girls like and do not like. In contrast to men in porn, boys need to sense and take into account the protocols that girls have developed, including when girls themselves are perhaps not so clear about these. They need to learn to deal with their discomfort regarding sexuality in proper ways – which is often given as the explanation for boys' problematic behaviour – and not to turn to inappropriate forms of assertiveness as a way out. Girls are taught what to do, boys are taught what not to do.

Taking these understandings into account, the idea that women are slightly better suited to teach sex education makes sense. Boys are not those who set up the protocols; they are the ones who have to live up to them. To take care of sexu-

ality, it seems, becomes a women's issue. It is not difficult to see how these gender roles hinge on – and thus discursively communicate – a notion of boys as predatory and of girls as potential victims of sexual predation, which was also observed in the sex education classes in South Africa referred to earlier (DePalma and Francis 2014).

What is more, looking at this point from the perspective of a former sex educator, I recall how I myself noted how my own embodied experience and gender influenced how I replied to students' questions. Many questions from students, for example, required an answer that (partly) built on my own experiences and views. While performing as a teacher, I have been asked about issues such as relationships, one-night stands, how to ask someone out, and so on. Regardless of my training, which emphasized to me the importance of at least trying to downplay my own views and experiences and instead to encourage the students to develop their own opinions, I am sure that my own perspectives, obviously influenced by sex and gender, often were reflected and thus communicated in all my classes.

Considering how gender or sex may influence one's sexual experiences, one may wonder whether, sometimes, sex education classes taught by women may relate more to girls than to boys, as (sexual) experiences are obviously gendered. Moreover, taking into account the large majority of female teachers in the field, one could say that this imbalance might even further confirm associations of women as sexuality managers, resulting in a circularity. Both these suggestions, therefore, might also invite another question: how does the gendering in the context of sex education classes relate to perceptions of gendered difference in society at large?

## Discussion

If one agrees with my argument that the sex education classes I presented here convey an image of sexuality where the responsibility for the proper performance of sexual practices lies within the duties of feminine sexuality – while masculine sexuality is subtly granted exemption

from this challenging task – one can also reflect on the larger social understandings this representation might evoke or prolong. Scott's work, introduced earlier in this article, is helpful in this regard. Let me briefly recall Scott's argument: in many secular societies gender refers its attributions to nature, whereas politics naturalizes its patriarchal hierarchies with reference to gender.

In light of my own observations of sex education classes, I suggest that a similar interpretation can be developed. We observe how a presumed feminine talent to teach about sexuality is cultivated, which is then pointed at, and thus employed, to explain the imbalance of feminine engagement with issues in the private sphere. Or, looking at this circular argument from the other side, we can observe how a particular incapacity ascribed to masculine behaviour (a supposed natural incompetence to take responsibility for sexual practices) serves to cultivate in boys an estrangement from responsible sexuality, and thus between masculinity and the private sphere.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, sex education, which is a private topic *par excellence*, is tacitly understood as best being taught by women, and the lack of male educators in Dutch society serve as evidence to some that this is indeed the case. The young male student's question: 'Why are you not a woman?' seems to stem from such an understanding. According to the boy, women should be teaching about sexuality, not men.

The possibility that this lack of male sex educators could be ascribed to the fact that masculine sexuality is taught as being about taking up a passive role in communicating about sexuality, because males are considered to be 'always up for it' and in danger of becoming predatory, is not considered in this line of reasoning. Moreover, if, like the men discussed in Scott's work,

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<sup>4</sup> One could argue that teaching at a school is a professional and public activity, which hence is part of the public sphere rather than the private sphere. However, since it concerns teaching about sexuality, a topic that many consider to be a rather intimate and private one, I do consider teaching about it as an activity that falls within the scope of the private sphere.

one departs from a dichotomous and naturalized notion of men versus women, the perception that women are more talented in communicating on private matters may steer them away from participation in other domains, for which they are not considered to have a similar talent. Hence it seems to me that Scott's argument is relevant here: interpretations of supposedly natural talents help re-establish particular gendered differentiations in society.

Building on the observations presented here, I would also add that the construction and cultivation of sexuality as a feminine topic might discourage forms of communication, which subsequently may contribute to problematic misunderstandings and situations. Men's assigned passive role regarding thinking about and discussing sexuality, obviously combined with a lot of other factors that go beyond the scope of this article, may lead to situations where they might not themselves feel motivated to partake in conversations about sexuality, nor take any responsibility. And if they join in the conversation, they easily make mistakes and are disciplined for them, as their masculine sexuality dictates that they take a more passive role.

An example of such disciplining occurred during a sex education class I attended when a boy asked the female teacher a somewhat special question that was not well received by his classmates. He said: 'Miss, can I ask. Let's say I have sex with a girl, and I am wearing a condom. Then, I go out [of her vagina], upon which she gives me a blowjob. Can she then get an STD [from herself]?'. One of the girls attending then loudly expressed her amazement: 'What kind of weird ideas do you have man, ha-ha.' The whole class laughed loudly, and the teacher smiled and said, 'Well I do not really think this is likely to happen, but if so, she can get a STD from herself indeed. It will spread.' Back then, sitting at the back, I was quite sure that the boy would not dare to ask any other question, and indeed he did not. Nor did any other boy, which suggests that the class's laughing had indeed disciplined the boy, and discouraged others from asking questions.

However, the sexual behaviour that is claimed to constitute feminine sexuality may similarly lead to difficulties that hinder productive forms of communication about sex. Women, as we have seen, are pressured to become experts in developing protocols, which also implies that dialogues about sex are expected to be initiated by them. On one occasion, I taught a class where some girls lamented that they hated the fact that boys always expected *them* to initiate a conversation about sex. This was the lesson where the seventeen-year old girl whom I quoted in the introduction asked me to encourage boys to initiate conversations about sex. She was unhappy about the complex task of always having to take care of the conversations about sex that she felt were allocated to her.

This gendering of responsibilities concerning communication regarding sexuality also extends to informal education on sexuality. As one sexual health professional and mother once told me, in the Netherlands women are often expected to have 'the talk' with their children and are most expected to take care of contraceptives. Moreover, the ostensibly best way of engaging in sexuality healthily, referred to by my interlocutors in sex education classes as 'double Dutch', suggests that men bring a condom, while women use the physically and mentally obviously much more demanding birth control pill.

## Conclusion

Beginning with the observation that most of the people I worked with were motivated women who aspired to improve the lives of young women, in this article I have explored the gendering of sexuality as conveyed in sex education in the Netherlands. In pursuing their aim of improving sexual wellbeing, my interlocutors often sought to correct supposedly incorrect assumptions about gender roles among both students and parents. In the case of women, my interlocutors focused on pointing out natural features of their bodies that are often downplayed. At the same time, my interlocutors drew on these natural features to problematize and correct

other features they considered social and hence made up.

In the case of boys, however, it was mainly their natural bodies that were supposedly in need of domestication. Boys were encouraged first to observe and carefully consider girls' protocols and signs of communication. These understandings of the natural body are questionable, to say the least. For example, women are encouraged only to engage in sexual behaviour that they will not regret later. However, regret has very much to do with the complex social and personal meanings assigned to sex, which indicates that what may feel naturally 'good' to these women is not just natural. This is of the many examples that shows how secular sex education classes in the Netherlands cultivate particular sensibilities and affects.

I have also suggested that these cultivated feminine and masculine forms of sexuality contribute to an understanding of sexuality as a women's topic, which further (re-)establishes conventional understandings of sexuality. The transmitted roles assigned to masculine and feminine sexuality imply that many women are burdened with a challenging and pressuring responsibility, whereas most men are subtly exempted from having to take up an active role in thinking about sex. Women are made responsible for sex, whereas the main culprits of sexual harassment and sexual violence (men) are discouraged from thinking about sex or taking up an active role in conversations about it.

Similar to what Shannon (2016) observes in Australian sex education curricula, not only the implicit assertion that only two genders and two sexes exist, and that both result from the other, but also the significant disregard of LGBTQ+ sexuality in sex education classes, illustrates the problematic dominance of the heterosexual gender matrix in the Netherlands (Butler 2007). So, regardless of the Netherlands' often ascribed status as largely secular and 'thus' as sexually progressive, my fieldwork shows it is no guarantee of the acceptance of homosexuality, nor of gender equality more broadly.

This article also provides empirical substantiation to the many claims about secular normativities, as it exposes some of the gendered, embodied and naturalized assumptions that both underpin and enable secular sexual politics to operate in the first place. Sometimes, as in the case of Isa's lesson about the hymen, it becomes very explicit how the secular body is put forward as a superior, supposedly natural alternative to the religious constructed body.

However, much more often, the inculcation of secular affect takes place more implicitly. This article's focus on both the gendering of the secular *and* secular bodies and affect is shown as important in this regard, as it helps to shed light on the more tacit normativities of the secular. Like Scott in her 2018 book, this article has presented some of the gendered and embodied notions of sexuality and sexual experience that accommodate and support forms of gender inequality in secular societies, and which become re-established through the cultivation and gendering of particular feelings and understandings in sex education. It illustrates how dichotomous representations of both the natural and social body are developed and drawn upon to communicate understandings of sexuality that support emancipatory ambitions, but which, paradoxically, also contribute to a further entrenchment of undesired patriarchal notions of feminine and masculine sexuality.

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# Queens in the Kings Business: African Pentecostal Female Leadership in a European City\*

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## Abstract

This article explores ethnographically how African Pentecostal leaders in the city of The Hague in the Netherlands navigate patriarchal structures and create a space for female leadership. It argues that the female Pentecostal leaders make a gender paradox visible, in which they model Christian womanhood in order to then go legitimately beyond it. The article demonstrates that this becomes particularly visible in how female leaders engage with women in their congregations around matters of gendered and sexual well-being. The article challenges a double bias in research and policy: a secular bias that tends to explain the challenges around gender and sexuality primarily in religious and cultural terms; and a gender bias that only considers religious women's leadership in terms of their agency as women in male-dominated institutional contexts.

**Keywords:** sexuality, religion, secularity, gender, leadership

## Introduction

Every year in the autumn, female religious leaders organize a 'women in leadership' conference in a hotel on the outskirts of the city of The Hague in the Netherlands. These religious leaders, who are all of African and Afro-Caribbean descent, minister to various international churches in the city and annually invite the Nigerian-born and UK-based Pastor Miranda to lead the conference. Every year the conference includes an evangelical outreach event to the red-light district. In 2017, the outreach started just outside the small area of streets in the city center where sex-workers offer their services to customers while standing barely dressed in a window. After a motivational talk that emphasized the outreach to the sex-workers as spiritual warfare, Pastor Miranda led a prayer to invite the Holy Spirit to support the women while doing this. The women were encouraged to ask permission to pray with the sex-workers and to 'invite Jesus in their lives'.

The women seemed nervous when going around in pairs to the sex-workers offering them leaflets with the Biblical story of Rahab and a call to prayer or further contact with a local church.<sup>1</sup> While many sex-workers refused to engage in conversation, Maria (reluctantly) replied to Pastor Miranda's initial questions. She explained she had come from Romania to work in The Hague for a few months to provide for her family, emphasizing the problem of unemployment and the obligations of her motherhood. Upon hearing Miranda telling her about Jesus who could save her, Maria challenged Pastor Miranda: 'Why have you come? This is a dark place, there is no God here. God is in my home. You should come there if you want to talk God'. Pastor Miranda responded by telling her that she need not be a Christian only at home: Christianity is supposed to be lived in one's whole life and not in just a part of it.

\* This work was supported by the Dutch Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO) under Grant 360-25-160. The author reports no conflicts of interest.

<sup>1</sup> Rahab was a prostitute who played a crucial role in helping Israeli spies escape the hostile city of Jericho in the book of Joshua in the Bible.

Pastor Miranda's response reflects a typical Pentecostal understanding of the world and of everyday life, in which one's most important aim is to become fully entrenched with the divine. It is by living a holy life that healthy people, families and societies emerge (Bartelink 2020). From a Pentecostal perspective, sex-workers represent a world that is evil and morally flawed and from which they need rescue (McGrow 2019). However, African Pentecostals living in European cities have to navigate different views on health and well-being. Studying the complexities and paradoxes that emerge in the process of navigating contributes to a better empirical understanding of European cities as contemporary 'frontier zones' in which various religious and secular approaches interact (Meyer 2018: 65). The meeting between Miranda and Maria signals how, in the postcolonial European city, 'differences and distances are produced, negotiated and affirmed in the framework of identity politics' (Meyer 2018: 69). Therefore, understanding the encounter as one between two women with opposing perspectives fails to consider the plurality of views, perspectives and lived realities in the lives of both women.

For example, what goes unnoticed here is how the secular progressive discourse that is influential in contemporary politics in the Netherlands is part of the dynamic (e.g. Schuh et. al 2012). In this discourse, which is dominant in particular in the politics and policies around gender and sexuality, sex-workers are no longer seen as disempowered women, but as entrepreneurs making independent, agentic choices (Gill 2016). In this view, the sex-workers' emancipation mirrors the desired emancipation of religious (migrant) women. Religion is perceived as hindering women's emancipation, while secularism is associated with women's agency and free choice (Scott 2017, 2009). The general assumption for migrant religious women in particular is that they are disempowered and 'unemancipated', especially within their own religious and cultural communities. However, assumptions that religion will dwindle when women emancipate them-

selves and become sexually liberated contrast with how African Pentecostal women develop their religious leadership based on a holy and pious lifestyle (e.g. Mahmood 2005, Casselberry 2017). The vignette illustrates what is by now well known among researchers of Pentecostal Christianity, namely that Pentecostal women do become religious leaders (Martin 2001), while for many centuries female authority was hardly possible within Christianity (Le Roux and Du Toit 2017). Furthermore, as churches have been recognized as spaces in which forms of black and ethnic leadership emerge that challenge established social orders in postcolonial and post-migration societies, Afro-Dutch female leaders make an interesting case (Werbner 1991, Johnson 1991). In particular this is because Pentecostal female leaders paradoxically mirror secular feminists who advocate the necessity to break through the so-called glass ceilings to the top of businesses and institutions.

The encounter between Pastor Miranda and sex-worker Maria sensitizes us to the paradoxes that are part of living in the postcolonial city. When looking at all these mirrors, I ask: What becomes visible when we zoom in on female Pentecostal leaders of African descent in the Netherlands? I therefore explore African female Pentecostal leadership as an in-between space in which identities are not a given, but in which new ways being and acting emerge (Meyer 2018). I explore this ethnographically, in particular by asking how these female Pentecostal leaders navigate the complex and precarious matters in women's everyday lives that do not fit within the normative ideal type. The title of this article loosely refers to another women's conference entitled 'The King's Business' that will be discussed in this article. While referring to God's holy mission for this planet, the title also indicates a particular gendering of this mission. I am interested in how, within these gendered spaces, particular forms of female leadership become visible.

After introducing the conceptual framework and the study on which this article is based, I

will present an ethnographic exploration of how the Pentecostal aspiration of holiness is gendered and how it is entangled with the sexual and general well-being of women in African Pentecostal praxis. In subsequent sections, I will outline the diverse strategies that African Pentecostal female leaders propose for women (and men) in navigating the gendered norms and ethics around what is considered to be 'good' and Christian sex and in their own subjective experiences of sex and sexual interactions (e.g. Spronk 2014). I will conclude with a reflection on the practices of holiness and care in relation to gender and female leadership, and consider which reflections female religious leadership open up on religion and diversity in European cities.

### **It's the Patriarchy, Stupid**

The encounter between female migrant missionaries and female migrant sex-workers is symbolic of how people from diverse backgrounds meet and interact in a multicultural city such as The Hague. Following Meyer's understanding of European cities as 'frontier zones', I understand The Hague as a space where various religious and secular understandings and practices co-exist (Meyer 2018). The realities of African Pentecostal women's lives in a city such as The Hague are complex, involving a multiplicity of experiences and positionalities. In the following I unpack some of the most relevant of these for this article.

First of all, research demonstrates that women with a migration background struggle to become part of society in the Netherlands (Gorashi 2017, Buitelaar and Stock 2010, Gorashi 2010). This is first of all influenced by their legal status, as many African migrants experience periods of being undocumented (Andrikopolous 2017). Furthermore, migration tends to make women suffer because they often experience a loss of income or occupational status compared to their situation prior to migration unless they migrate as expats (Caarls and Mazzucato 2015, e.g. Coe 2014, Parrenas 2015, Boyle et. al 2008). The shift to a different context that is part of migration

also places additional pressure on families and relationships. Couples who migrate, for example, are more likely to experience marital instability which has negative consequences for women's autonomy and economic security in the post-migration context (Caarls and Mazzucato 2015). Due to women's easier access to the labour market in postmigration societies compared to men, traditional gender roles need to be reconfigured in postmigration contexts (e.g. Pasura and Christou 2018). While this may be empowering for women, it may also add additional pressures in their relationships with men, who have to grapple with the loss of status and hegemonic masculinity post-migration (ibid., e.g. Parreñas 2015). Research shows, however, that women are not powerless victims of these circumstances, but actively navigate their situations and find solutions by drawing on social, emotional and legal ways of support (Feldman-Savelsberg 2016; De Regt and Notermans 2017).

Secondly, national and local public policies often fail to do justice to the lived realities of women of African origin. Informed by secular formations and not immune to public discourses that revive older colonialist racist stereotypes, public policies are often based on the assumption that migrant women need to be saved from their oppressive religions and religious communities (Abu Lughod 2012, Bracke 2012). In the dominant secular progressivist discourse (e.g. Schuh et al. 2012), gender inequality and gender-based violence are assumed to be rooted in religious and cultural factors (Knibbe and Bartelink 2019). Muslim women in particular are constructed as the racialized and gendered others and are excluded from (full) citizenship, unless they are liberated from oppressive Muslim men and become fully secular (Scott 2017: 175). Christianity is more often considered outdated than dangerous (Meyer 2018, Schrijvers and Wiering 2017). Yet, the vilification of homosexuality in conservative Christian settings, the large scale of sexual abuse cases in the Catholic Church and the religious opposition to safe abortion care have mobilized public outrage over gender

and sexuality in relation to Christian religiosity. Moreover, African Christians have become subject to contestations over female circumcision, sex-trafficking and homo-healings (Van Dijk 2001, 2006; Vloeberghs 2012, Wekker 2016, Knibbe et al. 2018). African migrant women, both Muslim and Christian, are therefore predominantly represented as in need of rescue from their religions and cultures (Knibbe and Bartelink 2019; Wekker 2016).

The contrasts between these lived realities and how they are understood and approached in policies must be grasped in the context of a broader assumption that women's empowerment can only emerge within secular liberalism. Anthropologist Sabah Mahmood (2006) has convincingly demonstrated the dominance of this assumption within western feminist thinking. As a consequence, the agency and leadership of pious women is denied, while the broader patriarchal structures in society in which religious forms of patriarchy have emerged, are shaped and are legitimized remain intact (Mahmood 2006, 2015; also Le Roux and Du Toit 2017). Therefore, rather than focusing on religion alone, modern family norms have to be considered, as research suggests that constructions of the male breadwinner and the feminization of caring labor are influential in sustaining the inequality between men and women (Erickson 2011, Andrikopolous 2017). In most European societies, these traditional gender roles continue to shape male-female relations despite increased female employment, while women continue to be the primary carers in their families, which includes practical and emotional management (Hochschild 2013, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995). Given these broader sociological trends, African Pentecostal women in the Netherlands may not experience a huge difference in how they navigate gender-unequal structures at church, in their families or in their (secular) work environments (Casselberry 2017). Furthermore, given the evidence of female leadership in African Pentecostal settings, it is important to understand how African Pentecostal women navigate the patriarchal structures they

encounter in everyday life (Hochschild 2003 and 2013, Erickson 2011).

Focusing further on African Pentecostalism, the transformative impact of Pentecostalism on social and cultural gender relations and roles in many African societies is of crucial importance (Bochow and van Dijk 2012). In many of these societies, and not unlike other parts of the globe, women have the main responsibility for the children and the household (e.g. Bochow and van Dijk 2012, Coe 2014). The reshaping of traditional masculine roles into the figure of the responsible family man has made Pentecostalism particularly attractive to women. Furthermore, the emphasis on marriage as reflecting the personal choices of two individuals, rather than as an arrangement between families, has contributed positively to female agency within the family (Bochow and Van Dijk 2012). The transformation of Christian gender roles is also visible in how Pentecostal churches allow women to access positions of leadership that were historically denied them in most Christian congregations. Finally, as the vignette on spiritual warfare illustrates, Pentecostalism offers technologies that are not confined to the spiritual configurations of families and communities in Nigeria or Congo, but that can be translated and applied across borders in the localities of postcolonial cities in Europe (e.g. Van Wyk 2014). Pentecostalism therefore offers women the religious and theological context for choosing their marital partners and for exercising influence in family, church, profession, cities and broader societies. This leads women to choose Pentecostalism as part of their journeys of empowerment and agency.

In these journeys of empowerment and agency, African Pentecostal women have to navigate certain paradoxes. First of all, the emphasis on men's roles as fathers results in an emphasis on male leadership and in a gender-normative construction of leadership as heads of the family (Van Klinken 2012, Burchardt 2017). While women do become leaders, their leadership is also shaped according to these gender norms. Women are primarily seen as spouses and moth-



ers, and female leaders are often referred to as the pastor's wife, or as mother or 'mummy' (Maier 2012, Casselberry 2017). Furthermore, female leaders are still an exception, and senior leadership positions are mainly held by men (Ukah 2008, Maier 2012). The paradoxical transformation of masculine roles that results in the empowerment of women within the extended family and within in the church, while strong gender norms continue to be emphasized at the same time, is also referred to as the 'Pentecostal gender paradox' (Maier 2012, Brusco 1995, Martin 2001). Why are such strict gender norms acceptable for women as part of how they work towards positions of authority and leadership? In her study of Afro-American Pentecostalism in New York, Casselberry (2017) argues that the paradoxical submission to male leadership produces female holiness and spiritual authority. This work should be seen as a form of emotional labour (Hochschild 2012), as women submit to male leadership and authority in the church and the workplace through a cooperative ethic. This is part of their practice of holiness and produces *holy female personhood* and spiritual authority (Casselberry *ibid.*: 5). Female leaders also perform intimate labour, praying with people and offering pastoral and other forms of support. This gives them intimate knowledge about people, which contributes to their authority and their ability to bend gender and class norms (Casselberry 2017: 151; also, e.g., Klaitz 2019). Women's religiously inspired leadership can therefore be seen as active labour to ensure a 'politics of incomplete male domination' in both religious and secular contexts (Casselberry 2017: 171). The reconfiguration of gender roles and relations in a post-migration context may further amplify this dynamic (e.g. Pasura and Christou 2018). As I will explore in the subsequent sections in this article, female Pentecostal leadership offers us a unique insight into complexities of post-migration life in the European city. It also provides insights into what is a frontier zone in the study of religion, as well as the new ways of being and acting that emerge in highly diverse contexts.

### A Brief Introduction to the Study

In this article, I will investigate questions around female leadership in relation to gender and sexual well-being in the context of African Pentecostal Churches in the Netherlands, and in particular in the city of The Hague. These churches are Dutch churches in the sense that they are located in a Dutch city. They can be considered African in the sense that their leaders and the majority of their congregations were born in societies on the African continent or were raised by parents born there.<sup>2</sup> For many of my interlocutors, the connection to their Nigerian, Ghanaian or Congolese roots was an important reason for attending these churches. The latter were differentiated in terms of their use of language (mainly English, French or Twi, in addition to Dutch), their connections to particular groups and networks of African-Dutch with origins in particular countries such as Ghana, Nigeria, Congo or Eritrea, and their links to larger transnational church organizations or networks originating in Nigeria or Ghana. In terms of their positioning in the Netherlands, these churches are attended by diverse groups of people, including those who were born in the Netherlands, those who have obtained citizenship and those who aspire to do so (Knibbe 2011). Some of these churches are Dutch branches of large, transnational Nigerian- and Ghanaian-initiated churches, as is the case with the Nigerian-initiated Redeemed Christian Church of God (Ukah 2008, Knibbe 2011). Other churches have been started by people who decided to do so after migrating to the Netherlands. Yet others are part of historical Christian denominations such as the Catholic or Orthodox Churches, although these are not explicitly discussed in this article. Between 2016 and 2018, I paid multiple visits to ten churches in

<sup>2</sup> The term 'African' is problematic, as are the terms 'diasporic' or 'migrant churches' (cf. Knibbe 2011). Acknowledging this, I choose to use the term as a descriptive term when referring to churches or interchurch groups with diverse African roots, who often refer to themselves in these terms as well. In some of the churches and in the interchurch settings, Afro-Caribbean women participated as well.

The Hague, participated in a course on Christian Leadership at the Bible College of the RCCG, and attended five Pentecostal conferences and over ten interchurch meetings on themes related to sexual well-being or health more broadly. I have conducted ten formal interviews, though most of my interviews were informal and spontaneous.<sup>3</sup> In this article I focus mainly on Pentecostal churches and ministries, much of the material coming from fieldwork in the RCCG. Most of the female leaders I introduce by pseudonym in this article I have followed over the course of these three years, interacting with them in several public meetings, reading their work and sitting down for longer conversations and interviews.

My interest and approach to the fieldwork stem from both scholarly and personal engagement with religion, gender and cultural diversity. I grew up in a Calvinist Protestant family in the Netherlands and participated in various charismatic, Pentecostal networks and churches until my early twenties. The fieldwork I did for this study made me return to Pentecostal churches twenty years later, which was in some ways a reconnection with familiar religious practices. However, my role was different. The churches and their leaders welcomed me in their churches as a scholar, which they saw as a prestigious role. It also meant that I was always noticed, I stood out in my whiteness, as well as for my perceived social and economic success. The choice to focus on women was motivated by previous research on the intersections of religion, secularity, gender and sexuality. Being a cisgender woman certainly helped me access women and female spaces as part of the broader fieldwork in African Pentecostal churches. It was in these female spaces that I noticed how the themes around gender and sexual well-being were addressed more elaborately than in regular meetings.

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<sup>3</sup> These activities were part of the now-funded research project Cultural Encounters carried out by Knibbe, Spronk, Bakuri, Wiering and myself (all in this issue).

### Undoing and Doing Gender in a Pentecostal Mission

There is gender equality in the church because both men and women can be leaders.

When I interviewed the male Dean of the Pentecostal Bible College I attended in April 2017, leadership was the proof of gender equality. I myself, on the other hand, was quite puzzled by what I observed in the field. A few months earlier that year I had attended a European Women's Conference in Amsterdam organized by the RCCG and entitled 'Queens in the Kings Business'. For much of the conference I wondered what made the conference a women's conference. Was it the style in which the female leaders were dressed? The elegant hats and hair-styles were both modest in the sense of covering up their bodies and colourful and luxurious. They reminded me of the late Queen Elizabeth of England or the former Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands. Or perhaps it was the language used throughout the conference, which signposted gender in the teaching, prayers and worship? The service book announced worship and prayer sessions with talks from prominent female leaders addressing themes such as 'The King's Business', which was the conference theme, and Bible reading 'from our mother in Israel', as Pastor Fole Adeboye, the wife of the General Overseer, is referred to within the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG).

To understand how leadership is gendered in African Pentecostal churches in the Netherlands, one needs to be aware that Christian, Pentecostal leadership, is first and foremost shaped by a desire to secure Christian spaces for Christianity and conquer new terrains for Jesus with the aim of (re-) converting the dark continent of Europe (cf. Knibbe 2011; Knibbe and van der Meulen 2009). While leaders migrate to the Netherlands for different reasons, a missionary calling is always part of their narrative (Oblau 2009). In the missionary paradigm of Pentecostal leadership gender equality is assumed, and gender differences are considered irrelevant. The women's conference, an all-female gathering, did not come across as a female space. I could see little

difference between the worship and sermons in this conference compared to the Sunday services, Bible college lectures and conferences I attended during my fieldwork. Furthermore, women such as Pastor Mercy, who ministers to a church in the The Hague's city centre, seem to support the claim of the Bible College Dean. Being ordained as a pastor while working as a legal expert in the Rwanda Tribunal in Tanzania, she quickly found herself engaged in a leadership role when she came to the Netherlands for a position at the International Criminal Court. She is a full pastor to the parish she currently ministers in. Pastor Mercy is no exception. Her educational and professional background seemed to matter in her leadership more than her gender.

However, the gender paradox was visible in the aesthetic and discursive construction of leadership. In my preparations for a full-day lecture on Christian leadership at the RCCG Bible College I attended, I read, for example:

*Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task. Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable (...) He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?).* (Course Manual on Christian Leadership, CRC Bible College)<sup>4</sup>

As reflected in the text, a Christian leader is by default a man, who needs a heteronormative, patriarchal family structure to complete his male leadership. Part of Pentecostal masculine self-formation is a 'holy' lifestyle that includes self-discipline and a disciplined family. In doing so, religious leaders 'become enviable role models to the members of their parishes' (Knibbe 2011). With female leaders, the story is more complex. For some female religious leaders, such as Mercy, there exists a space in which to develop their leadership independently of a husband, or with their husbands present but not in a leadership

role. Other female leaders shape their leadership as a 'pastors' wife'. Dr Grace Sola-Oludoyi, a medical doctor by training, is currently in the senior leadership of the RCCG Europe Mainland Mission together with her husband. In her book *Trials of a Pastor's Wife* she introduces the pastor's wife first and foremost as 'the queen of her husband, the helpmate, lover and the supermom', before turning to the many roles and responsibilities of pastor's wives as 'first lady, prayer warrior, doctor, role model, minister and 'mother in Israel'' (the latter being a typical reference to the wife of the General Overseer of the RCCG). Pastor Julie introduced herself to me in an interview as a legal expert in an international organization, and as a pastor and a diplomat's wife. Her introduction was followed by the concluding sentence: '... so in short, I am the pastor's wife. I followed him when he became a pastor just as I did for his diplomatic job'.

However, her laugh and twinkling eyes when she made the remark about following her husband indicated that there was more to this conclusion. In the following two hours of the interview, she talked about her ministry, her vision and her approach. Her husband was remarkably absent from our ongoing conversation. Even though the notion of a 'pastor's wife's leadership is framed as depending on male leadership, the example of Pastor Julie suggests that female leaders do not understand their leadership only in these terms. In her book Sola-Oludoyi also confirms that a female leader should not be submissive and 'living in the shadow of her husband (...) she has a role to fulfil' (Sola-Oludoyi 2015). Therefore, even though women's leadership is often constructed in relation to male leadership, in practice women may shape their leadership roles independently from their husbands. As the examples in this section suggest, their educational and professional backgrounds may be influential in this. At the same time, male senior leadership is (also) dependent on the ability to have a stable marriage and family along with professional and material success.

<sup>4</sup> Unpublished document obtained during my participation in the CRC Bible College as a student in 2017.

### Intimate Matters

*'Socially, the fundamentals of orderly society, the family, are embedded in a deep crisis (...) the problems we confront in our homes, business and society emanate from a lack of leadership.'* (Olowu, vi, viii)

In the African Pentecostal perspective, a fruitful marriage and a healthy and disciplined family are key to realizing spiritual and political impact. The spiritual, the political and the intimate are therefore closely interlinked (e.g. Bartelink 2020). Dele Olowu devotes a substantial part of his book on leadership to marriage and the family. Olowu is Special Advisor to the General Overseer, leader of the European Mission of the RCCG and a retired university professor in public policy. In a part of the book that is co-written with his wife, Mrs Bukky Olowu, he emphasizes the importance of female virtuosity for leadership (Olowu 2012: 39). In her book on pastors' wives, Sola-Oludoyi emphasizes the responsibility of a pastor's wife to ensure romance and a satisfying sex life as important to the leadership of her husband (Sola-Oludoyi *ibid.*: 52).

As part of the Pentecostal transformation of masculinity, sexual discipline for men is emphasized in the norm of being faithful to their spouses. However, another paradox becomes visible, as the responsibility to manage male sexual desire lies primarily with women. The Marriage Counseling Handbook of the RCCG, for example, gives women advice to keep themselves pure: 'Sisters, you should be very firm and should discourage any unhealthy overture from brothers. Males are moved easily by sight. A deliverance minister could suddenly be overwhelmed by lust and passion'. Male sexual desire, apparently, must be navigated not only in the marital bed, but also in relationships between male leaders and female congregants in the church. During the conference 'Queens in the King's Business', Elizabeth, a senior female leader from The Hague, explained that: 'Men are wired so that they demand sexual intercourse more than women do; that is how God has made them. It is your part as a wife to satisfy your man sexually'.

Since sexual pleasure is considered important in realizing a stable marriage, and since stable marriages are in turn the basis for healthy families, churches and societies, it is considered the responsibility of churches and religious leaders to support their congregants, and in particular women, in having healthy sex lives. In her remarkably detailed talk during the conference, Pastor Elisabeth offered rather explicit information about possible sexual positions and techniques that enhance sexual pleasure. There was a clear emphasis on male sexual pleasure during the workshop, and there was also a very candid and open way of explaining sexual intercourse. The tone of the talk was light and humorous, though not devoid of normative remarks. Elisabeth explained which position was considered Christian and which was not, announcing she only talked about vaginal sexual intercourse between a husband and wife, because 'others are abuse, we don't do it'. She also emphasized that solo-sex is sinful and not allowed. However, she also argued that sexual pleasure for women is important. Pastor Elisabeth emphasized: 'I am in my sixties, so I am allowed to say it .... Sex calms the nerves', inviting laughter and cheering from the audience. The affirmation of sexual pleasure as important for women turned the Women's Conference into a female space in which intimate matters could be discussed. In this space women are simultaneously holy and sexual. Moreover, there is no contradiction between the two as long as sex happens within the heteronormative context of marriage (see also Werbner 2010 on Pakistani women in Manchester).

### Caring Work

That intimate matters relate to the caring work of female leaders was illustrated during the King's Business conference. During a Q and A, Pastor Elisabeth and two other female leaders on stage responded to questions that women in the audience had written on paper and handed to the session's facilitator, Pastor Julie, who was introduced earlier in the article. A question for 'advice to a good friend' silenced the laughing and

cheering audience. According to the anonymous note read out by the facilitator, this friend had been sexually abused as a child and had problems enjoying sex in her marriage, so any advice would be welcome. Pastor Elisabeth, who was forced to respond instantly and seemed somewhat uncomfortable, advised the 'friend' to pray for healing and to focus on her husband's sexual pleasure as a way to learn how to enjoy sex again. Pastor Julie gently summarized pastor Elisabeth's advice, while adding some suggestions of her own. She said that these were complicated questions to respond to in a public forum and that support from a pastor and from professionals was needed in these complex situations: 'Abused women need help and care, they need a proper diagnosis and professional support with their healing process'. She was very clear in pointing out the limitations of the pastors' role, implying that pastors are not equipped to support survivors of gender-based violence.

This moment struck me as significant, as leadership was no longer framed solely within the missionary paradigm, with its strong emphasis on holiness and being a good Christian role model. When I interviewed Pastor Julie a few weeks later, she explained further her awareness of the complexities and precarities of women's everyday lives and experiences. 'As much as you want to focus on the spiritual part, you cannot neglect the practice', she said. Pastor Julie expressed what I have observed with other female leaders in interviews and in interchurch gatherings for leaders that focused on topics such as sexual well-being, sexual violence and raising children. Many female religious leaders were deeply involved in the lives of women and families living in precarious circumstances. In addition, and similar to pastor Julie, these female leaders brought a professionalism into their leadership that they had developed in their secular jobs and careers. An example is Pastor Ruth, who is the founder and pastor of an international ministry that currently has parishes in The Hague and outside the Netherlands, in Canada and Nigeria. She is also a university lecturer in microbiology in the

UK. Pastor Ruth is regularly invited to churches and interchurch gatherings in The Hague to speak about sexuality education. Most churches do not address sexuality until a couple who want to marry participate in marriage counselling. While male and female leaders I interviewed expressed that they saw a need to offer sexuality education because of teenage pregnancy in their congregations and communities, they struggled with how to balance Christian norms with information about the body and sexuality. Addressing a room of twenty pastors and church leaders in The Hague, Pastor Ruth criticized religious leaders for their reluctance to address sexuality with unmarried people: 'You can't be naïve! Children grow up, develop hormones! The Holy Spirit won't protect you from sex!'

Pastor Ruth emphasizes the importance of giving children and teenagers knowledge about their bodies and about sexuality, alongside teaching them the Pentecostal norms and values around abstinence and fidelity. In doing so, she challenges assumptions among churches and religious leaders on how teaching on sexuality may encourage young people to engage in sexual relations when they are still unmarried. The combination of her professional knowledge and spiritual authority allowed her to claim authority, to bend and break certain gender norms. In one meeting, for instance, Pastor Ruth publicly challenged a male religious leader who had made assumptions about women's roles in sexual relationships based on interviews he had conducted with other male religious leaders. On the church website it is explained that Pastor Ruth was called to leadership, and that her husband followed her mission to serve as a deacon in the church. This reversal of gender roles is an example of how gender norms can be changed by female leaders based on the degree of spiritual authority they are able to exercise.

### **Gender Trouble, Spiritual Trouble: Female Leadership in Precarity**

The female Pentecostal leaders introduced in this article demonstrate various strategies that Afri-



can Pentecostal women can draw on to navigate gender paradoxes in the messy and complex context of a post-migration, post-colonial European city. The approaches of Pastor Miranda and Pastor Elisabeth place a strong emphasis on being a good Christian woman. Both pastors demonstrate an approach that seems to be more aware of the precarities and power relations in which women of African origins build their everyday lives in Dutch cities. In this section I will discuss the practices of holiness and care in more detail, without assuming that these are completely different or opposed.

First of all, for all the female leaders with whom I interacted in the context of my study, good Pentecostal womanhood is rooted in the practice and performance of a holy lifestyle. This requires intense religious labour (e.g. Casselberry 2018), as has become visible in this article. The vignette already indicates that inviting the people to bring Jesus into their lives in the red-light district is not something that these women do lightly and easily. It required intense prayer before, during and after the outreach. Moreover, the outreach itself was seen as a form of spiritual warfare. Engaging in this spiritually dangerous and morally fraught part of the city, as well as coping with the reluctance of the sex-workers to agree to talk to them, were all part of this intense labour. Bringing people to Jesus is serious business. It's 'The King's Business', as the organizers of the Women's Conference put it, the word business indicating that good Christian womanhood indeed requires work. I observed women performing such intense religious labour in church settings as well. Before stepping into a leadership role during a religious service, pastors kneel down next to their chairs and pray intensely. I met Pastor Julie after her prayer group in a Hague parish church, when she had not been at home after a long day at the office. Individual women I interviewed and a group of female pastors from the Rotterdam area I joined for an evening retreat all mentioned their daily and weekly routines of prayer in the morning. For Pentecostal Christians these intense practices of prayer and worship

have the purpose of becoming fully absorbed by their spiritual lives and developing an intimate relationship with God (e.g. Luhrman 2005). This is significant beyond personal and church life, as it also affirms that they are good Christians and good citizens (Fumanti 2010). For female leaders this serves as a way to claim spiritual authority (e.g. Casselberry 2018).

Secondly, this article has demonstrated that sexuality is intrinsically part of living holy. It is from living holy that good sex emerges (e.g. Spronk 2014), while good sex in turn also constructs holiness. Living holy is emphasized as important to all Christians, regardless of their gender. However, the construction of good sex in African Pentecostal churches relies on distinct feminine and masculine roles, symbolically marked by referring to female leaders as wives and mothers. I noted the centrality of male sexual desire and virility that is central to both male and female roles. Women are expected to fulfil male sexual desire to realize a stable marriage, or resist men and their urges to prevent sexual interaction outside of marriage. Female sexuality, in other words, appears to be central to the personal and social transformation that is required to produce good Christian personhood, families and congregations (e.g. van de Kamp 2012). Moreover, male-female relations are sexualized to produce a form of masculine authority that is associated with virility (Obadare 2018, Lindhardt 2015). Women's cooperative ethic, as we observed in the figure of Pastor Elisabeth with her emphasis on women's responsibility to please their husbands sexually, has the purpose of completing male authority that otherwise remains incomplete (Casselberry 2018).

This study has focused on female Pentecostal leaders, women who are predominantly middle-class, educated professionals, and part of an emerging elite within religious and ethnic communities (e.g. Werbner 1991). In informal interactions with the women who made up the audience of the two conferences there was a lot of appreciation for how space was created for what they considered to be 'typical' women's

issues, yet in this informal public setting there was little opportunity for more detailed conversations about how they experienced the ways in which sexuality and intimacy came up during the conference. However, research among Afro-Dutch women conducted as part of the same project, did suggest that religious leaders do play important roles in offering knowledge, guidance and counselling on matters of sexual well-being (e.g. Bakuri 2021, Bartelink and Knibbe 2019). A focus on female leadership among Afro-Dutch Pentecostal women is also relevant in terms of how it reflects broader trends in female leadership in European societies. Pastor Elisabeth's construction of female and male roles in marriages illustrates the division of labour in which the physical and emotional support of members of the family falls primarily on the women (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995). Yet, as the irony in Pastor Julie's introduction of herself as a pastor's wife indicates, this is not the only narrative about women. Since the 1960s women are no longer defined solely by their husbands, and their individual biographies have changed alongside the dynamics within marriage and the family (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995). Female leadership makes these changes visible, hence offers a lens on how the pressures on family and marriage that have emerged since then are navigated and solved within African Pentecostal communities in European cities.

This article has demonstrated how female leaders navigate the challenges of gendered norms and individual lived realities in different ways. The outreach in the red-light district in the vignette constructs the Pentecostal women as 'respectable' Christian women in contrast to the unsaved sex-worker, who is a woman in need of recovery and conversion (e.g. McGrow 2017). The sex-worker Maria resisted this binary opposition. Maria's critique can be seen as a critique on women who reaffirm and promote patriarchal norms. Her critique laid bare the limited interest of the missionaries in the sex-workers' lives, their multiple identities, their religiosity and spirituality. While we do need to consider that,

from a Pentecostal perspective, saving women to become part of the Kingdom of God is also a loving and divine act, the encounter reveals women who are caught up in the patriarchal construction of gender and sexuality. Lacking knowledge about the individual women who were doing sex work, the glass windows became 'mirrors' (McGrow 2017) in which the sex-worker had to be the very other to the Pentecostal women: 'unholy', 'unsaved', 'unchaste' and 'unclean'.

These mirrors, however, also indicate that Christian rescue missions have something in common with secular progressive politics, as discussed in the literature review. Secular progressivism problematizes religion and culture as hindering women's empowerment, which has influenced domestic and international policies and programmes that focus on rescuing women from harmful religions and cultures (e.g. Abu Lughod 2015, Bartelink and Le Roux 2020). Christian rescue missions that want to save women from their lives in darkness and sin tend to be seen as deeply problematic because they confirm the secular preoccupation with religion as a force imposed on women. Yet, both are missionary endeavours that centralize a problem analysis that is not (necessarily) shared by women who are affected by inequality and violence. They also tend to impose their solution strategies without considering how those women who are subjected to them propose to navigate precarity and realize well-being.

Female Pentecostal leaders' perspectives and approaches in respect of gender and sexuality are more complex and diverse than public understandings of religious conservatism suggest. The ethnographic account of conversations around sexual well-being in church contexts, forms of care and support become visible that often remain unnoticed within both the dominant secular *and* Christian discourses. When I invited Pastor Julie to reflect on her gentle correction of Pastor Elisabeth's advice that women with sexual trauma should focus on sexually pleasuring their husbands, she suggested that Pastor Elisabeth is an older woman and that generational differ-

ences in addressing sexuality in public were at play. Furthermore, Pastors Ruth, Julie and Mercy all bring their professional and academic knowledge and skills into their practice as pastors. This does not make all female leaders formally independent of their spouses or marital status in the context of the church: after all, Pastor Julie is also a pastor's wife. Yet, these female leaders' roles go beyond the traditional gender roles to which society confined them for so long. At the same time, their authority as 'mothers' in the church is also vested in their class position and, in the cases of Julie, Mercy and Ruth, their professional knowledge and skills.

The question remains to what extent these leaders as 'mothers' are endowed with an authority that also denies women in less privileged positions their agency (e.g. Gaitskell 2000 on the construction of motherhood in missionary narratives in South Africa)? Here we have observed how female leaders' caring work creates a space for alternative forms of leadership in the church. While caring relations may reaffirm gender and class differences, Hochschild (2013) also reminds us that care produces empathy. In the case of the female Pentecostal leaders in The Hague, this meant that they created a space for leadership around precarious gender and sexual issues that does not fit the normative ideal type of Pentecostal discourse and theology. This 'politics of the personal', as observed in historical studies of female Christian leadership in southern Africa, creates solidarity among women across racial and class divides (Gaitskell 2000, 88). In the context of the African-Dutch churches this translates not only into a more sensitive and knowledgeable approach to issues around sexual well-being, but also into a greater awareness for those women who need professional support. The care that was expressed for survivors of sexual trauma by the female leaders during the Kings Business Woman's Conference also created a space in which to mend and challenge patriarchal religious and social norms. The focus of the conversation shifted from the focus on (male) sexual pleasure as a basis for a stable

marriage to the well-being of the women and their experiences of sexuality. In addition, pastor's roles were also acknowledged as limited and their authority as incomplete. While people might consult them and seek advice regarding matters of sexuality, it was emphasized that this should not exclude seeking professional support.

It is in the complex realities of post-migration life in diverse cities in Europe that Pentecostal norms and ideals regarding sexuality have to be navigated in relation to the real and lived experiences of women. I argue that it is within such frontier zones (Meyer 2018) that female leadership emerges as an in-between space in which new ways of being and acting can unfold. The intimate and caring labour performed by female leaders within the churches allows them to complement the practices of holiness and spiritual authority with the practices of empathy and care. In doing so, a form of leadership emerges that is more attuned to the complexity and precarity of life in the frontier zone.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have investigated female, African Pentecostal leaders in the Netherlands and the religious labour they perform to navigate patriarchal systems and create a space for female power and influence. While questions about diversity in contemporary societies often focus on religious and cultural differences, this focus distracts from how challenges around diversity are gendered. In addition, the ways in which women exercise power and influence in the context of both secular and religious patriarchal structures continue to be overlooked and ill understood. In this article I have demonstrated ethnographically that the leadership and religious labour of female Pentecostal leaders need to be understood in the context of a gender paradox. Women can grow into leadership by performing intense religious labour. However, paradoxically, this religious labour includes female leaders modelling the perfect Christian woman. A woman's responsibility to be a good Christian woman is first of all emphasized as her ability to satisfy her hus-

band sexually and be a good mother. Yet, female leaders model Christian womanhood in order to go beyond it legitimately, as they engage with women in their congregations who struggle to live up to these ideal types. The intimate religious labour that female leaders perform creates a space for power and influence in church and society. Some female leaders use that space to critique patriarchal gender norms and practice empathy and care.

In this article I have argued that research should consider female leadership as a site of power and influence, beyond emphasizing women's agency in male-dominated institutional contexts. This will enable scholars to have a more critical understanding of leadership as it is shaped and altered by women within their everyday practice of leadership. It also challenges policymakers and NGOs concerned with the challenges around gender and sexuality in diverse European cities and communities to consider female religious leaders as authorities and to recognize the religious and professional qualities they bring to their roles as leaders in religious communities. Research on female leadership in African Pentecostal settings, and more broadly in religious conservative contexts, remains overlooked. The influential role that female leaders play in the lives of the people in their congregations and communities goes unnoticed, and with it the possibility of more nuanced and complex understandings of how diversity and difference are constructed, navigated and countered in the lived experiences of religious (migrant) women. It will therefore be useful to conduct more research in various countries and institutional networks, and to consider the intersections of education and professional experience, as well as class and race, alongside gender.

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# Contesting Queer Secularity: The Spiritual and the Sexual after Secularization

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## Abstract

Queer and social science scholarship has amply demonstrated how contestations over sexual diversity in the public sphere are structured by antagonisms between heteronormative public religion and progressive politics, even as processes of secularization advance in most European societies. In this article, by contrast, I explore how the progressive decoupling of notions of national belonging from both religion and sexual identity has accompanied the proliferation of new subject positions around queer spirituality and religiosity. Engaging with theories of secularization and belonging, as well as Jasbir Puar's notion of 'queer secularity', I examine emergent entanglements between queer emancipation, religion and sexual citizenship as they are taking shape through the biographical trajectories of queer subjects in Spain. The article argues that emancipation from queer secularity and access to these subject positions of queer spirituality are mediated through situated biographical trajectories. They depend on but also expedite the unmaking of antagonisms between queer secularity and heteronormative religion.

**Keywords:** Sexual freedom, homosexuality, religion, secularity, sexual liberation, Spain

## Introduction

On 18 June 2005, thousands of people descended on Madrid's *puerta del sol*, the ground zero and mother of all street politics in Spain (Vicherat Mattar 2010), in order to protest against the eminent legalization of same-sex marriage. The number of participants was subject to much controversy; the organizers, which included the Spanish Forum of the Family, as well as around twenty Catholic bishops, claimed 1.5 million and the local conservative PP government counted 700,000 whereas the National Police estimated 166,000 protesters.<sup>1</sup> The Catholic inspiration behind the protest was very evident, and representatives of several church-based initiatives, next to conservative politicians, took up much of the speaking time. Protesters declared their

dissatisfaction with plans for both same-sex marriage and the adoption rights of same-sex couples. Chiefly, Catholics argued that the law promoted a vision of sexuality that was 'humanly impoverished', reduced to individual pleasure and denying the unique value of unions between husbands and wives.<sup>2</sup> The irony of ending the ceremony by playing Queen's 'We are the Champions' seemed to have been lost on both the organizers and most of the mainstream media reporting on the event. The band's late lead singer Freddy Mercury is perhaps the most iconic openly gay pop musician.

This mobilization against same-sex marriage was embedded in wider European contestations against the legal recognition of same-sex identities, which were often driven by Catholic actors and sentiments (Dobbelaere and Perez-Agote

<sup>1</sup> See [https://elpais.com/sociedad/2005/06/18/actualidad/1119045601\\_850215.html](https://elpais.com/sociedad/2005/06/18/actualidad/1119045601_850215.html), accessed 14 August 2020.

<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.catholicculture.org/news/features/index.cfm?recnum=38522>, accessed 17 August 2020.

2015).<sup>3</sup> On the one hand, the intensity of these contestations was surprising given the rapidly declining influence of Catholicism in Spanish society, a process which secularization theorists often associate with the rise of individualism and personal autonomy, not least in matters of family and sexuality (Dobbelaere 2002: 143; Kuhar and Patternotte 2017). On the other hand, these contestations resonate with much recent scholarly writing on new forms of public religion and the emergence of post-secularity.<sup>4</sup> Significantly, the discourses surrounding the legal claims of queer communities were tantamount to the re-staging of the dominant narrative around sexual emancipation – supported in fact by both secularization theories and theories of post-secularity and public religion – that is based on a rigid dichotomy between religion on the one hand and queer political frames and forms of subjecthood on the other. What is left out here are forms of agency and biographical trajectories in which non-heteronormative sexualities and religion do not abide by such neat separations.

In this article, I seek to interrogate this dominant narrative by exploring the multiple crossings and mutual entanglements of queer emancipation and religiosity in a social context marked by contested cultural memories, increasing transnational migration and divergent trans-regional (European, Mediterranean) affiliations (Astor and Grier 2015). I do so on the basis of ten biographical interviews with Christian gays and lesbians carried out between 2013 and 2015 in the Spanish capital city, Madrid, and the Catalan metropolis of Barcelona. The analysis of biographical interviews, I suggest, allows me to unearth the affiliations, dis-affiliations and re-affiliations of queer subjects with their religious and spiritual lives (see also White and White 2004, Neitz 2000). Following Fedele and Knibbe

(2020), I assume that secular contexts powerfully shape the meanings of spiritual experience.

In her book *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (2007), Jasbir K. Puar has cogently described how public debates about progressive politics and emancipation, as well as queer political frames, rely on a particular secular grounding. According to Puar (ibid.: 13):

Queer secularity demands a certain transgression of norms, religious norms that are understood to otherwise bind that subject to an especially egregious interdictory religious frame. The queer agential subject can only ever be fathomed outside the norming constrictions of religion, conflating agency and resistance. [...] Queer secularity understands observance of religious creeds, participation in religious public spaces and rituals, devotion to faith-based or spiritual practices [...] as marks of subjugated and repressed sexuality void of any agency. (13)

This foundational opposition of sexual agency and religion has the paradoxical effect that queer forms of subjecthood are not so much placed at the margins of the modern social order or formulated in opposition to it but are in fact its paradigmatic expression. As sexually autonomous subjects, homosexuals 'stand for the ideal citizen of neoliberal modernity' (Mepschen et al. 2010: 970). Puar therefore suggests that 'Queer secularity is constitutive of and constituted by the queer autonomous liberal subject [...]' (ibid: 15). While Puar develops her argument chiefly in relation to the place of Muslims in global queer politics, I suggest that it is also highly relevant to the trajectories of Christian queers.

One seemingly central implication of the hegemonic status of queer secularity within queer culture is that it describes a situation in which the only choice at hand for queer subjects is to abdicate religious creeds and institutions based on homophobia and misogyny. My argument is that this rendering ignores first, the ways in which queers create spaces of spirituality and religiosity both inside and outside dominant religious institutions, and second, the nonlinear nature of certain queer biographies themselves, characterized as they are by multiple biographical

<sup>3</sup> Similar protests occurred, for instance, in Paris in May 2013. See <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-22671572>, accessed 14 August 2020.

<sup>4</sup> For a programmatic statement on public religion, see Casanova (1994); for a critical response, see Hjelm (2015); on post-secular society see Habermas (2008).

ruptures and reorientations. Conversing with the work of Puar, thinking studies of queer religiosity in conjunction with the scholarship on secularization and post-secularity, I suggest that attention to queer biographies helps us to consider sociological debates on secularization, belonging and citizenship in Europe in novel ways. In the following section, I situate my account in these debates, arguing that the decoupling of national belonging from religion, sexual identities and sexual citizenship, itself part of secularization processes, has facilitated the creation of new queer spiritual subject positions. The rest of the article centers on a detailed analysis of two queer biographies, both exemplifying the dynamics of lives *beyond queer secularity* mentioned above. These biographies are driven by a utopian longing and by a notion of queerness as ‘a structuring and educated of mode desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present’ (José Muñoz 2004: 1).

### Religion and the Sexual Politics of the Present

Across Europe, issues of sexuality and gender have acquired renewed significance in debates about citizenship and national belonging. In many instances, such debates and public discourses pivot on the sexualization of migrants’ identities, casting migrant women as sexually unemancipated and migrant men as sexually deprived and driven by uncontrolled sexual impulses. Circulating through classical media outlets, social media and political commentary, such public portrayals have emerged especially in the wake of rape cases in which refugee men, mostly of North African and Middle Eastern origin, were the perpetrators and which were often associated with their cultural background and Muslim religion. In the same debates and based on similar forms of ethno-religious labelling, Muslims and other ethno-religious minorities are often perceived as homophobic, and their presence therefore constituting a threat to Western sexual freedoms and emancipation. Accordingly, states and municipalities have initiated far-flung programs around sexual education, targeting immi-

grants and refugees in order to promote sexual tolerance among them and close the perceived cultural gap between them and Western populations.

In some societies, especially the Netherlands, sexual freedom and tolerance of sexual diversity have meanwhile acquired iconic status within the pantheon of national values as they began to be supported even by conservative political actors who had hitherto not been suspicious of such views (El-Tayeb 2012; Schuh et al. 2012). Astutely termed ‘homonationalism’ (Puar 2007), this folding of queer emancipation into the national political order appeared to end the long history in which trans, gay and lesbian bodies and sexual practices have been criminalized, stigmatized, viewed as deviant and cast as a moral danger. Moreover, according to Puar (ibid.) it seemed to question the time-honored notion, especially among queer circles, of nation-states’ inherent heteronormativity, showing instead how queer identities could be enlisted in reactionary projects and mobilized toward the exclusion of religious minorities. Significantly, since as a matter of fact queer emancipation is closely associated with, and largely an outcome of, struggles towards both liberalization (Frank and McEneaney 1999) and secularization, secularity has again turned into a metonym of progressiveness and a source of modern subjecthood (Schuh et al. 2012) as that which enables people to embrace tolerance of sexual diversity. While the imbrications of anti-Muslim sentiment with sexual liberation served to portray Europe as the ‘avatar of both freedom and modernity’ (Butler 2008: 2), the politics around sexual freedom turned into a platform for rearticulating antagonisms between religion and secularism.

However, as the above-mentioned mass mobilizations against same-sex marriage in Spain demonstrate, homonationalism may be much less pervasive and heteronationalism much more enduring and vital than is often assumed. In fact, many of the more recent populist mobilizations in Europe – from center-right to far-right – and their affective politics thrive on discourses that



condemn the legal equality of gays and lesbians and castigate sexual diversity education as the state-sponsored 'homosexualization' of children. Subsuming projects towards sexual inclusiveness under the label of 'gender ideology' (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017), right-wing nationalist populism is a central social force behind the new waves of 'anti-genderism' (Von Redecker 2016) and 'femonationalism' (Sarris 2017), a finding that is perhaps at odds with the notion that 'we are all conditioned by [homonationalism] and through it' (Puar 2013: 336). Whereas Puar likens homonationalism to modernity, something that one simply cannot opt out of, I suggest viewing homonationalism as a concrete process with a fixed structure and set of actors. Related to that, there are increasing criticisms of how debates on homonationalism sometimes fail to address transnational collusions of heteronationalisms. As Dhawan (2013: 191) suggestively argued:

Religious violence against sexual minorities is ignored by prioritizing violence against religious minorities. The sole focus on queer racism and homonationalism in the Global North neglects how supposedly conflicting ideologies of heteronationalism across the postcolonial divide in fact collaborate with each other.

In this article, I focus on Spain as a southern European context that is characterized by increasing levels of ethnic and religious diversity (Griera 2012; Martínez et al. 2014), but in which the dynamics around homonationalism are much less pronounced than elsewhere in the West. With the gradual expulsion of Jews and Muslims following the completion of the Catholic kings' *reconquista* in 1492, Spain became a largely mono-religious society in which church, state and notions of nationhood were intimately entwined (Casanova 1994). Antagonisms between liberal, republican and secular political forces and segments of the populace on the one hand, and conservative, traditionalist and Catholic actors on the other, have started to structure political life in Spain since the liberal revolutions of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, famously culminating in the Spanish Civil War. However, with the end of Fran-

co's dictatorship in 1975 and ensuing democratization, the power of this political and cultural cleavage seemed to have withered. In particular, it seemed that secularization processes – visible in the decline of religious attendance, religious belief and the demand for Catholic rituals, especially Catholic marriages – had led to a weakening of Catholicism's cultural power (Pérez-Agote 2012). And yet in 2005 the 'Two Spains', as the cleavage described above is generally referred to, were back and took the center stage of public space. Significantly, it was the politics of sexuality and queer emancipation that revived this binary, and with it a particular reading of modernity. In this understanding, modernity is achieved and won over and against Catholic sexual traditionalism and is only made possible to the extent that Catholic understandings of intimate life become privatized and the public sphere secular. In this image, queer love could only be placed outside religion and was premised on the latter's demise.<sup>5</sup>

In an important intervention in the debate, Mepschen et al. (2010: 972) have argued that there is a need 'to get beyond the false dichotomy of defending the religious and cultural rights of minorities versus the sexual rights of women and gays'. In many ways, the individuals I interviewed for this study, their narratives, practices and political commitments, embody this 'beyond'. They are religiously *and* sexually minoritized and therefore positioned at the crossing points of multiple lines of difference. However, as the analysis demonstrates, the breaking open of the dichotomies of queer secularity and religious heteronormativity is the result of complex, sometimes fraught biographical journeys.

In order to understand these biographical journeys as outcomes of situated practices and the shaping influences of social forces, I draw on existing research on life histories in queer studies, as well anthropological and sociological traditions of biographical research (Rosen-

<sup>5</sup> Similar contentions in relation to religion, modernity and women took hold during the post-independence nation-building processes across the Arab world (see Abu-Lughod 1998).

thal 2004; Wohlrab-Sahr and Frank 2018). Life-history approaches in queer studies center on the insight that the recording and analyzing of queer individuals' trajectories gives voice to the lived experiences of unheard and historically oppressed communities and advances our understanding of the interactions between subjective experiences and institutional contexts (Olive 2014). Doing so, queer historians have followed feminist historians in positioning their interlocutors as historical experts, taking narratives seriously and seeking to empower them by returning to them the means to control their own social representation (for a summary, see Boyd 2008).

Going beyond these aims, sociological approaches seek to understand the specific situatedness of practices and biographical choices that steer a person's life in one direction instead of another. Based on the assumption that every practice is an engagement with practical problems, social norms, past experiences and future expectations, the question is: why do people actualize certain possibilities while leaving aside others? Within the perspective employed here, interpreters of biographical narratives gain access to queer subjects' social realities not by reconstructing the subjective meanings they attach to their practices and statements, but rather by confronting *what is said* with *what is done*, from analyzing how subjective meanings are linked to objectified expressive forms and objective problems of practice (see Wacquant and Bourdieu 1992).

### Christian Queers in Secular Spain

Any discussion of queer religiosities in contemporary Spain needs to begin by recognizing that being a believing, religiously affiliated and practicing homosexual is indeed a highly exceptional subject position, one that instantiates a threefold social exclusion: exclusion from dominant heteronormative sexuality; exclusion from the center of hegemonic post-Catholic secular culture; and exclusion from mainstream queer activism. This marginalization has been facili-

tated and exacerbated by the fact that Spain's Catholic church belongs to the most conservative sections of global Catholicism and the ways in which queer activists adopted radically atheist positions in response. It also became abundantly clear in interviews I did with leading members of the *Federación Estatal de Lesbianas, Gais, Trans y Bisexuales* (National Federation of Lesbians, Gays, Transsexuals and Bisexuals). Confirming dominant notions of sexual emancipation and democratization, one former president told me:

Religion means nothing to me, and I don't know any person to whom it means something. Contrary to what many people abroad think, this is a very secularized country. It was a dictatorship until 1975, and for us the end of the dictatorship was the end of religion in our lives. Religion simply doesn't exist in our personal lives.

At the same time, in queer debates the Catholic Church is construed as the only real enemy, since, in the eyes of activists, conservative political actors are usually tactical homophobes, promoting anti-queer sentiment for electoral purposes. Homophobia is thus located outside the secular society in the realm of Catholic doctrine and hierarchies. Significantly, the secularist and partly atheist underpinnings of Spain's queer politics also powerfully structure its perceptions of religious queers. Too insignificant in numbers to become a real cause of concern, they are certainly viewed with incomprehension and subjected to ambivalent judgments. On the one hand, Christian queers are part of an institution that is a declared enemy and thus placed on the other side of the frontlines of queer politics. On the other hand, they are viewed as heroines and heroes who seek to transform this institution from the inside and end its homophobia. However, for most mainstream queer activists such efforts are either quixotries, i.e. wasted efforts in the face of immutable Catholic homophobia, or simply unnecessary, as they view the Catholic Church as an institution that is already in decline, a dying enemy. While there is some understanding for those creating their own spiritual spaces outside existing religious institutions, the domi-

nant view is that religious queers are driven by false consciousness in seeking to be or become members of a club that rejects them.

The exclusionary consequences for religious homosexuals of the antagonism between heteronormative religious institutions and mainstream queer activism was also manifested in the latter's organizational dynamics in Spain. After the Madrid-based LGBT+ collective COGAM established a discussion group of issues related to religion, religious members felt encouraged to use a hall inside the association's headquarters for meetings that included religious worship. However, as soon as COGAM's leadership became aware of this, they banned the meetings, arguing that the association was civil and non-confessional or even atheist, that religious practices were discriminatory of non-believers and that it was imperative to maintain the secular nature of their spaces.<sup>6</sup> Religious members in turn felt they had been treated unfairly by the association's secularist majority.

A part of them felt that the proscription of religious worship was effectively an expulsion from the association. As a result, they formed a new collective called CRISHMOM (cristianas y cristianos LGBTI+H de Madrid). Thanks to the personal ties to a parish priest and his sympathies, this group began meeting in the premises of a local church. As such meetings would not have been approved by the church, they had to occur secretly. This afforded them an atmosphere of clandestineness and privacy, which actually strongly aided the solidarity among the participants, as one informant told me. At the same time, 'meeting in the catacombs', as he put it, created severe risks for the priest, raising the stakes of loyalty inside the group. I suggest that the group's location 'in the catacombs' is highly illustrative of religious queers' exclusion from both mainstream heteronormative religion and mainstream queer culture and politics. However, the question that remains is how to account the-

oretically for the emergent entwinings between religion and homosexual identities in the first place?

Building on the sociological phenomenology of Alfred Schütz and Peter Berger, social theorist Silke Steets (2017) has usefully suggested the term 'cognitive minorities' to describe groups whose relevance structures and taken-for-granted understandings about the world are fundamentally different from those of the societies surrounding them. This is especially true of cases of what she calls 'pluralism of the mind'. I suggest that religious queers are a particularly paradigmatic case of 'pluralism of the mind' that juxtaposes religious and secular knowledge around sexuality, whose integration requires major cognitive efforts. Against the backdrop of experiences of cognitive dissonances, there is a need to create further plausibility. One way in which this happens has been the creation of dense networks of interaction and organization among Christian queers. Such networks create cognitive support and moral confirmation. On the individual level, I suggest that plausibility is addressed through biographical work, i.e. the ways in which trajectories of queer religiosity are shaped by particular biographical choices in particular contexts. I now turn to the analysis of these trajectories.

### **Desire Work and Faith Work**

Against the dominant assumption inherent in the notion of the queer secularity of linear biographical trajectories towards sexual emancipation, religious queers typically embody lives marked by deep biographical ruptures, regardless of whether they are raised in pious families or not (Erzen 2006; Taylor and Snowden 2014). As in many social contexts, subject positions of queer religiosity from which to speak and around which to form biographical choices are not easily publicly available or accessible but are ruptures articulated through shifts *between* queer and religious points of view. I wish to illustrate the ensuing biographical dynamics by exploring the life of a man I call Aurelio.

<sup>6</sup> On the material spaces of spiritual queers, see also Browne et al. (2016).

Aurelio was born in 1975 and told me that he always knew he was gay. When he was fifteen his parents found out about his gayness because they opened some letters of his, chiefly because his mother had already become suspicious of his sexual orientation. Although reading the love letters from his male friends left her shocked, his father found it easier to accept his homosexuality because he knew homosexuals from his wider circle of acquaintances. Significantly, after recounting this brief opening story, Aurelio offers a second beginning that operates as a mirror image of the first one: 'But I was always also spiritual', he told me, 'and from early on I was deeply involved in what is called *New Age*. I went to retreats where I did alternative therapies and took drama lessons and like, culturally speaking, these meetings were cutting edge.'

In this context, he also became interested in theories of personal growth and participated in a course dedicated to that topic. The teacher was an evangelical pastor, and the course was made up of several levels in each of which participants had to contribute greater amounts of money. In this course, he also got to know a girl he liked and began to date: 'I had never dated a girl before, but I liked her, so I thought why not?' and it seems that together with her he grew into the world of *New Age* as they engaged in practices of psychic healing and out-of-body experiences. But they also started to have doubts about the economic side of this world, the weekly payments they were expected to make. This criticism of *New Age* had two consequences for him. On the one hand, it involved him more strongly in evangelical social networks because much of that criticism was levelled by these groups. On the other hand, however, this involvement made the dilemmas and conundrums linked to his sexual orientation more explicit.

His girlfriend took him to an evangelical church, where they read the Bible in more intense ways. Aurelio was impressed by the spiritual personality of the pastor, who, in an act of charismatic initiation, handed Aurelio a copy of the Bible, telling him: 'This book will change your life'. Overall

Aurelio felt welcome and enjoyed the specific warmth of his fellow congregants. However, at some point he disclosed to his girlfriend that he was gay. She responded by telling him that this was against God's will and that he had to change. She painted a very dark picture of homosexuality as something that was only practised by prisoners or men in faraway countries such as the Netherlands and that they all ended up killing themselves. Subsequently, they hastily abandoned their relationship and Aurelio sought to find a new life, in London and thus away from home, at the age of 26.

This episode is remarkable in several ways. It is clear that Aurelio's understanding of his engagement with his girlfriend differed strongly from hers. Whereas his girlfriend assumed this to be a romantic relationship based on an assumed heterosexual background consensus, Aurelio refused to address the apparent disjuncture between his sexual orientation and his relationship, or else he saw no contradiction in it. There are two possible interpretations here. First, his heterosexual engagement speaks to how his internalization of the shame associated with homosexuality in Christian life-worlds produced the desire to become straight. Second, his heterosexual engagement can also be seen as illustrating sexual fluidity, pointing to the absence of a coherent and enduring coupling of sexual orientation as an inner, mental substrate and romantic practice. The fact that, even twenty years after this episode, he would seek to generate plausibility with the rhetorical question 'I liked her, so why shouldn't I go out with her?' seems to corroborate this idea. However, since he does not describe himself as bisexual or polysexual, it rather appears that these encounters remain unresolved.

After his arrival in London, his spiritual journey continued in an intensified fashion. He began to read many books written by Indian spiritual masters, but he also returned to the Bible, and especially the story of Jesus Christ. Again, he got in touch with evangelical groups and also actively engaged with evangelical literature on homo-

sexuality. The result was, as he told me: 'Well, if God doesn't think it's right, then I leave the sexuality on the side'. For almost three years, he continued being a member of what he described as 'fundamentalist, literalist churches'. He said: 'So I did what many gays did after having an experience of faith – you try to change your sexuality and ask God to change you. So you do that, but time passes and it doesn't yield any results.' He recalled how he participated in charismatic church healings in which pastors used techniques of hypnosis and other practices that he felt were manipulative.

Aurelio's efforts to become straight powerfully illustrate the dynamics of what anthropologist Melissa Hackman (2017) has called 'desire work'. According to Hackman there is a fundamental paradox at the heart of desire work: one must learn to feel heterosexual desire that supposedly comes naturally. In fact, while heterosexual gender models are construed as natural in the world of evangelical Christianity, for these gays seeking to straighten themselves it takes work on the self to achieve them. As Hackman cogently demonstrates, in this context, agency manifests itself as a technology of the self à la Foucault, whereby individuals seek to construe themselves as particular kinds of subjects through the application of specific procedures. Aurelio spends years reading theological texts about heterosexual desire and makes efforts to date women and develop and cultivate a life as part of a heterosexual couple, thus seeking to gain control over his sexual desires. But agency also emerges as that fragile and paradoxical construction of radical autonomy – the self that allows the Holy Spirit to act in his or her life – and radical heteronomy whereby agency is fully dependent on this external power (Mahmood 2011).

In order to strengthen his efforts to overcome his own homosexual drives, Aurelio even began campaigning for heterosexual 'desire work' among his gay friends asking them to give up their gay lives. Yet the upshot of these efforts was that they began avoiding him. At the same time, in the charismatic church he

attended he became friends with the couple running the church. When he realized that his work to develop exclusively heterosexual desires had failed, he took the decision to disclose to them that he was gay. Their answer was that apparently he was not a real Christian, that he hadn't undergone a process of conversion in Christ, and he began spreading this view among his friends in the church as well. Here too, as a result people in the church stopped talking to him. Torn between different subject positions, Aurelio thus faces multiple exclusions. These exclusions highlight the tensions that result from his inability to inhabit the position of a religious queer.

### **'A reality of which I had no idea'**

After four years Aurelio returned to Madrid, where he made a last effort to remain in a straight evangelical church. He got in touch again with the pastor who had given him the Bible that had drawn him into evangelical Christianity seven years earlier. He went to visit the congregation, but experienced the same kind of fundamentalist views on family and sexuality as in London, and realized that he would never be able to show up there with a homosexual spouse. At this point, he finally decided to give up. Instead, he became a member of an Anglican church community that was gay-friendly and sexually inclusive. Via internet research, he found an LGBT church where members produced materials in which they deconstructed religious condemnations of homosexuality and which he later introduced to his Anglican congregation. Getting in touch with these groups changed his life: 'Suddenly, I found this whole world out there. There was a reality out there of which I had no idea.' Immersing himself in this reality, Aurelio became one of the leaders of Christian gay and lesbian networks in Spain.

The analysis suggests three central conclusions. *First*, there are two distinct temporalities of narrating, one built around linear time that underwrites efforts towards biographical continuity and coherence and is epitomized in the sentence



'I always knew I was gay'. The other temporality is organized through disruptions, in particular Aurelio's failed desire work and repeated religious and sexual reorientations. *Second*, desire work takes place alongside forms of religious seeking, or 'faith work', which are manifest in numerous reaffiliations and changes of church communities. Desire work and faith work are linked to one another. But importantly, for Aurelio the value of developing and cultivating his spiritual self is never eclipsed by his frustrating experiences of sexual disclosure. Even after having multiple experiences of rejection and marginalization in both religious and queer contexts, he maintains his spiritual search.

*Third*, it was only upon his entering into the social world of religious queers that Aurelio was able to inhabit the subject position of a Christian homosexual and that his change of social framework produced plausibility for it. The 'reality' that Aurelio discovered is in the first place the *social reality* constructed through the work of religious queer activists. Aurelio comes to inhabit this reality by 'cruising utopia', as José Muñoz (2004) beautifully put it, and by understanding queerness as 'essentially a rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality and concrete possibility for another world' (ibid.: 1).

His entry into the world of religious queers more or less coincided with the legal recognition of same-sex marriages. Realizing that this was the remarkable result of many years of hard work and continued struggle on the part of LGBTQ+ activists, Aurelio decided to become an activist himself and began taking over offices in queer religious associations. He became involved in the founding of a federation of religious gays and lesbians which also engaged in networking with Jewish, Hindu and Muslim groups. In fact, in 2012 the first gay Muslim association called *Asociación de Musulmanes Homosexuales* (Association of Muslim Homosexuals) was formed, led by the Argentinian-Syrian Abdel Jhalil Zam-Zam, a man who was a non-practising Catholic until he was 37 and then converted to Islam to become Spain's first Muslim queer activist. As shown by

my subsequent analysis of the life of Joan, a gay man at the age of 55 at the time of the interview, trajectories into networks of religious gay and lesbian activism may differ starkly.

### Coming Out of the Monastery

The openings of biographical interviews are typically characterized by the way in which subjects mark a particular beginning. Aurelio told me 'I always knew I was gay'. Joan, by contrast, opened by explicitly marking his speaker position, which is worth quoting at length:

So, I am telling you, first, I was strongly involved in the development of the city's inclusivity policies here in Barcelona, which involved religious and sexual diversity. It was the first of its kind in Spain and has been a hugely important experience for so many groups in the city. Then second, I am the counsellor of the Asociación Cristiana de Gays y Lesbianas de Barcelona [Christian Association of Gays and Lesbians of Barcelona]. This is also a social movement that seeks to reach out to Christian communities. and thirdly, I belong to an inclusive church [...] So that you know, when I am speaking, I am speaking from these three perspectives.

Choosing this opening, Joan portrays himself as a person with a political agenda, which, although differentiated here into diverse offices, pivots on one pillar, and thus bridging divides.

Marked as it was by parallel efforts at desire work and faith work, Aurelio's biographical trajectory contrasts strongly with that of Joan. What they have in common, though, is that both grew up in secular, only nominally Catholic families and developed their religious quests in their own ways. Joan was born in 1960 in the small town of Vilanova near Barcelona. He thus belongs to the first generation to experience fully the cultural and political freedoms that emerged with the end of Franco's dictatorship. His interest in religious life began early, and already as a teenager he participated in numerous Catholic parish activities and other Catholic groups. His sense of a calling developed quickly, and at the age of seventeen he decided to become a monk in the order of Saint Benedict and asked to be admitted to the Monastery of Montserrat in the

mountains near Barcelona.<sup>7</sup> Entering at the age of nineteen, he spent four years in monastic life. At least since he was fourteen years he accepted that he was gay and was very open about it with friends and even parish priests, although he did conceal this part of his life from his superiors at Montserrat. When he realized his difficulties in remaining celibate, he went to disclose his sexual life to the abbot, who told him that his sexual orientation was not an issue for him but that celibacy was non-negotiable. Joan stayed on for two years, realizing that his yearning for sexual activity was too strong to hide and suppress. He left the monastery, and within less than a year he had become an activist in the *Front D'Alliberament Gai de Catalunya* [Gay Liberation Front of Catalonia], a gay organization with very leftist leanings. Because of their political views, the organization was widely ridiculed in public debates, a fact that reinforced Joan's commitment to the group's activism. At the same time, he began to feel a growing sense of detachment from his religious life. He began to lose touch with his Catholic friends and stopped going to church. 'and for twenty years, things remained like that', he explained.

Becoming a monk in a Catholic monastery at the age of nineteen and initiating a life in what Goffman (1961) called a 'total institution', with its encompassing regulation of behaviour and identities, is surely a radical and exceptional choice in that it creates a maximum distance between the individual and society. During the period of his adolescence and the insecurities around sexual identity that characterized it, this distance allowed Joan not to be permanently confronted with his sexuality in peer contexts in which the contradictions between being Catholic and gay would have become more obvious. I suggest that for Joan, the monastery operated as something akin to a safe space, a space in which his religious commitments were not questioned, but in which he would develop his own resolution. Eventually,

this implied leaving his religious life behind. Fully benefitting from the legal changes mentioned above, Joan got married, and he and his male partner adopted and raised three children. With a stable income and integration into local social life, one can say that they became something of a model queer family.

Later on, he worked as a head of division in the municipality, a time which he perceived as incredibly hard and challenging, upon which he decided to change his mind:

One day I went to the church, actually for something completely unrelated. It was still the same church, in the same neighbourhood, [and] people knew me. and they already knew about my life, now being married to another man and with three adopted children. And I realized they weren't bad people, much less than their parents. So, I realized that the community was still there, and they opened their arms to me and welcomed me. and And I rediscovered the spiritual side of my life and that Christ was still there, even though I hadn't visited him for some twenty years. And I returned to live my life with faith.

Two things stand out in this narrative. The *first*, is the unexpected way in which he is able to reconnect with his Catholic past, something he feels was not possible twenty years ago and which enables him to connect and weave together the central threads of his biography. *Second*, there is the position from which he rediscovers his religious needs. Joan is a fully socially established and esteemed member of the neighbourhood community, and it is this position of autonomy from which he begins to develop his second religious life, as it were.

Later on, however, Joan realized that, although the majority of parishioners accepted him unconditionally, the local media continued to raise concerns about his sexual identity, which annoyed and frustrated him. As one father of the only openly gay family father in a small-town parish he had become something of a local celebrity, which was not what he had hoped for. As a result, he eventually decided to reach out to other gay Catholics across Spain, and they founded a gay church which did not discriminate against any-

<sup>7</sup> For lucid recent study of monastic life at Montserrat, see Clot-Garrell (2016)

one and which accepted, as he called it, 'la doble militancia' or dual activism, both gay and Catholic. This was the *Comunidad Apostólica Fronteras Abiertas* [Apostolic Community Open Borders]. Eventually, he became the bishop of that church.

### Queer Emancipation and Postmodern Religion

What enabled this trajectory, in Joan's view, has been a 'postmodern shift' (his words) in Spain's culture. While being openly gay, a priest and leading a religious grouping would have made him subject to much ridicule 25 years ago, things were different now. He felt that postmodernity had brought a shift away from this 'pure and hard materialism' of the 1970s and 1980s and a new opening for spiritual life and holistic visions of existence (see also Clot-Garrell and Grier 2019). 'My sister, who is four years younger than me', he said, 'is a complete atheist. Today she is practicing reiki and meditation, believes in healing and energies and what not. So, the question is: Is this religion and spirituality?' According to Joan, it is.

I suggest that underlying his narrative of his life and Spanish culture is a particular vision of time, a temporal modality in which cultural change provides new openings and social pathways that have different moral values. This is illustrated in the way he describes the lives of his contemporaries in terms of mental movements and mobility: being stuck vs. evolving.

Sure, some have become stuck on the way, stuck in the eighties, stuck in materialism [*anquilosados*, *enganchados*]. When you talk to them about religion, they still tell you that Christianity is the punishment of the body, but the others who have evolved see that there is more than the body, there is a spirituality in relationships to others, which unites all of us and the universe and the creation. This sounds very New Age but it's not! It goes beyond New Age!

The terms he uses for this idea of being held back in history are worth exploring in more detail. *Anquilosado* refers to people suffering from *anquilosis*, which is a kind of stiffness or numbness in the joints and which disables one from walking and moving. *Enganchado* literally means being held back by a hook and is often

used to describe strong attachments, both positive and negative. For Joan, those who in his eyes remained closed towards the possibilities of spiritual fulfilment and flourishing were mentally stuck in a dualistic, uncompromising moral formation in which progressive political outlooks were closely coupled with antireligious stances and pitted against conservative Catholicism and which had already vanished.

Our conversation ended with the following story:

Something very strange happened to me when they proposed to me the idea of getting ordained as the bishop of our gay church here. For four months I was sick without knowing what I was suffering from. The physicians examined every corner of my body, and in the end they told me that I was perfectly fine. Well, at the bottom of my heart I knew that getting ordained here meant that I would be excommunicated in the official Catholic church. I didn't believe in these things. and although there was nothing, no open battle, not even a debate or a public comment, I knew I would be cutting the ropes with the Church, and it produced this pain.

This story, I argue, provides an intriguing twist and complicates Joan's notion of stuckness. The physical pain produced through his anticipation of cutting the cords that tied him to his Catholic home suggest there is no simple distinction between moving forward into an imagined queer future and remaining in the here and now as being stuck. In fact, the story powerfully resonates with Halberstam's (2011) suggestion that we transcend the binary of 'cynical resignation' and 'naïve optimism' that is often thought to structure queer engagements with heteronormative institutions, and to imagine alternative activism beyond these boundaries.

### Conclusions

My analysis of the biographical trajectories presented above offers at least three suggestive lessons for anthropological, critical sociological and queer studies debates about secularization, sexuality and belonging in contemporary Europe. *First*, secularization is often understood to entail the waning of religious authority in political life,

public institutions and legal frameworks (Chaves 1994) and as thus enabling legal reforms around sexual citizenship such as same-sex marriage. However, it also entails an increasing decoupling, or differentiation, of religious belonging and moral and political orientations, e.g. around sexuality. Being Christian no longer implies by default adherence to the closely-knit set of ideas around heteronormativity and family values. I argue that this decoupling of religion and sexual identities opens up a space for new connections between queer subjectivities and religion and contested re-affiliations of queers with diverse spiritual lineages, and that it is itself a part of secularization processes. Secularization thus not only produced queer secularity in the sense of Puar (2007), but allowed for the fashioning of new subject positions that pivot on queer spiritualities and religiosities (see also Burchardt 2013).

This decoupling and re-affiliating of religion and sexual subjectivities also opens up new spaces for thinking about marginalization. In his analysis of the debates surrounding the visibilities and claims of queer and Muslim subjects in Canadian educational institutions, David K. Seitz (2014) describes how conservative media discourses invariably viewed Catholic school administrators who sought to marginalize queer visibility in Catholic schools and Muslim spokespersons who mobilized to demand spaces for prayer for Muslim students as the *injuring party* (ibid.: 92). In contrast, he suggests queers and Muslims be viewed as two relatively disempowered student groups that are contesting their marginalization. Such emerging spaces of the contestation of marginalization are similarly articulated in the way Spanish religious queers revolt against their multiple exclusions, wrought, as they are, by the triple strictures of the persistence of Catholicism's institutional power, secularism's insistence on the privatization of religion, and queer insistence on the transgression of religious norms, or queer secularity.

*Second*, these subject positions are not readily and equally available to actors who are differently positioned in hierarchically ordered social

spaces. Instead, as the analysis has shown, access to these subject positions and the ways in which individuals inhabit them are mediated through situated biographical trajectories. I argue that the stronger the antagonism between queer secularity and heteronormative religion and its bearing on the social contexts in which biographical trajectories unfold, the more difficult it is for individuals to develop radically autonomous queer spiritualities. Finally, I suggest that radical queer autonomy, the value on which queerness is generally seen to pivot, also enables such forms of emancipation from queer secularity. Two findings are central for understanding what enabled this emancipation: the creation of interstitial social spaces outside established religious and queer-secular spaces, and the fact that queer biographical trajectories are non-linear. As we saw, biographical ruptures of temporal frames of openness engender episodes of radical reorientation, which in turn enable people to move *beyond* queer secularity.

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