

“I can now thank God when I come”

Religion and sexuality in the lives of non-  
heterosexual protestant women in the Netherlands

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# Contents

- Introduction – ‘What then, how can you be?’ ..... 8
  - Methodology ..... 13
  - Structure of the thesis..... 15
- 1 – Theories and methods..... 18
  - 1.1 Theoretical framework ..... 20
    - Nationalism, homonationalism and heterosexualization of citizenship..... 20
    - Post/secularism, gender and sexuality ..... 25
    - Sex, gender and Christianity ..... 27
  - 1.2 Dutch context..... 29
    - Church and state..... 29
    - Gay liberation and sexual freedom ..... 32
  - 1.3 Methods and methodology ..... 35
- 2 – ‘I can now thank God when I come’ - Sex, faith and loving God..... 41
  - 2.1 Sexual religious selves..... 43
  - 2.2 God’s images/Images of God ..... 46
  - 2.3 Faith, love, sex..... 51
  - Conclusions ..... 53
- 3 – ‘We felt so blessed!’ - Monogamy, marriage and motherhood..... 55
  - 3.1 Monogamy..... 59
  - 3.2 Marriage..... 63
    - Equality and distinctions ..... 65
    - Heterosexual experiences..... 67
    - Church weddings as site of acceptance..... 69
  - 3.3 Motherhood ..... 73
  - Conclusions ..... 78
- 4 – ‘Stand up in society’ - Visibility, social networks and changing churches..... 80
  - 4.1 Coming out as lesbian-protestant ..... 83
  - 4.2 Communities and networks ..... 88
    - Networks of love and sex..... 90

Differences on the same platform .....	93
4.3 Changing churches .....	96
Women as role models .....	100
Conclusions .....	104
5 - Conclusion .....	106
5.1 Sexual religious selves.....	108
5.2 Contested norms .....	110
5.3 Public-Private communities.....	112
Final remarks .....	114
Bibliography.....	118
Appendixes.....	124
Appendix A: Participants.....	124
Appendix B: List of translated Protestant concepts.....	126
Appendix C: Interview questions .....	127

# Introduction – ‘What then, how can you be?’

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*I find sexuality something very beautiful. Just that... I can enjoy it as a gift of God.*

Nienke

*My faith doesn't conflict with my lesbian feelings, my lesbian feelings are completely in balance with my gender dysphoria, and my gender dysphoria is in balance with my faith and my God.*

Annelies

*If you're not allowed to act on it, you're not allowed to be it either. Since I'm allowed to engage in a relationship, I'm allowed to be as well...*

*What then? How can you be?*

Hanneke

Nienke, Annelies and Hanneke are women between the ages of 40 and 65, living all across the Netherlands. What connects these women are their stories. All three women describe themselves as lesbian. Two are ciswomen, one identifies as trans\*<sup>1</sup>. Moreover, all are active members of a Dutch protestant church, and their faith is equally or more important than their self-definition as lesbian. And the last important connection between these women is that I spoke with them, during a six month qualitative research project. During these months, women allowed me to enter their homes, to see what was going on in their lives, in their homes, churches, workplaces, bedrooms, with the aim to understand their experiences and stories. Nienke states that sexuality is just something beautiful, a gift of God. Annelies

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<sup>1</sup> The term trans\* is used to refer to a person who experiences their body or biological sex as incongruent with their gender identification, potentially but not necessarily with a surgical or hormonal desire. The asterisk after 'trans' encompasses a wide variety of identifications, such as transgender, transman, transwoman, transsexual, transidentified and more, and refers to self-definitions instead medical categories. Cis is used to refer to people whose gender identity is not in conflict with their biologically assigned sex or body. This is not a merely bodily or medical distinction, but according to Eli R. Green "*Cisgendered women have the distinct privilege of being a part of a legitimate social class – woman*" (Green 2006: 243). Throughout this thesis, the terms of cis and trans\* will be used to account for this difference in social status and privilege.

experiences her lesbian sexuality, gender dysphoria and faith, in her own words, as in a quite good harmony. Hanneke, who struggled the most with the perspectives of her church toward non-heterosexuality, refrained a long time from ‘acting on it’ while she ‘was’ a lesbian nevertheless. She decided now that she will be open to a relationship, thus allows herself to ‘be’. But what does it mean to ‘be’ a self-identified lesbian Protestant woman? All women aim to answer the question of Hanneke in less or more explicit terms. Through the stories of Hanneke, Nienke, Annelies and others, this thesis shows how these women find ways to ‘be’ a protestant non-heterosexual woman in the contemporary Netherlands through the creative negotiation of expectations, sexuality and faith. These results thus show the several ways in which religion and sexuality intersect in many different levels of the daily lives of non-heterosexual Protestant women, not as conflicting but mutually enabling and intersectional.

This overarching argument of intersectionality, which I elaborate on further, is in contrast to dominant representations of non-heterosexuality and religion in the Netherlands, where religion and sexuality are often represented as oppositional. Religion, mainly pointing to institutional religions such as Christianity and Islam, is often suspected of sex-negativity, specifically as condemning homosexuality (Bos 2010). Sexual freedom is at the same time often referred to as central element of Dutch national identity and connected to secularization (Hekma 2004). These supposedly different perspectives of non-heterosexuality often appear to clash in public discourse. What can be noticed is that ideals of sexual freedom are increasingly connected to ideals of secularism, where both sexual emancipation and secularization are imagined as processes of linear progress. In this nationalist discourse, the state becomes the site to regulate sexuality while religion is simultaneously pushed aside and privatized. Moreover, religion as sex-negative is framed on the bodies of an absolute ‘other’ to this Dutch national identity, which is mostly visible in increasing Islamophobia. ‘Sexual freedom’ in this case comes to stand for gay tolerance as a central feature of Dutchness and as

feature of secularization. This connection of ethnic discrimination and use of LGBT<sup>2</sup> politics to exclude other ethnic groups from citizenship, is what Jasbir Puar has called “homonationalism” (Puar 2007). This notion refers to the use of homosexual identities as symbolical markers of the nation, in which ‘religion’ does not have a place beyond the private sphere. Homosexuality as visible identity becomes a marker to label some societies progressive and liberal, while others as backward because these ‘others’ have a different conception and politics of sexuality. In the Netherlands, we can find a similar homonationalist and secularist discourse in which religion and sexuality appear as two distinct, mutually exclusive spheres. Where the Dutch nation is portrayed as secular, sexually liberated unity, many people are excluded as the inclusion of a religious LGBT person becomes an impossibility. This opposition is the main area of inquiry of a broader research project to which this thesis is connected, with the title ‘*Contested Privates; The oppositional pairing of religion and homosexuality in contemporary public discourse in the Netherlands*’. This is an NWO funded<sup>3</sup> project that examines public discourse and political debates in the Netherlands about homosexuality and religion. A starting point of this project, led by Ruard Ganzevoort and Anne-Marie Korte, is the pairing of religion and sexuality as oppositional. They write: “*While religion is increasingly considered to be a private matter, sexual diversity has gained public importance. And whereas religious identity, long accepted as a matter of course, steadily has become contested in its public and most characteristic manifestations, acceptance of sexual diversity is now often presented as a prerequisite for modern*

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<sup>2</sup> LGBT is currently used in mainstream politics in English speaking countries, and translated to Dutch as LHBT. This abbreviation stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender, or in Dutch lesbisch, homo, biseksueel en transgender. Recently, queer and LGBT activists have added to these four to aim for more diverse inclusion, adding up to LGBTQIP2SAA (queer, questioning, intersex, pansexual, two-spirit, asexual, allies). Nevertheless, LGBT continues to be the most commonly used way to refer to non-heterosexual people in politics, media and social movements. Throughout this thesis, I will use the English LGBT, which has very similar usages in the Netherlands as LHBT.

<sup>3</sup> The NWO is the Dutch Organization for Scientific Research (Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek), which stimulates and finances scientific research at Dutch universities and institutes, and is under the responsibility of the ministry of OCW (research, culture and science). See [www.nwo.nl](http://www.nwo.nl)

*citizenship*” (Ganzevoort 2013)<sup>4</sup>. The researchers in this broader project aim to research how religion and sexuality came to be considered oppositional in public discourse. This is apparent in the public discourse concerning homosexuality and Christianity, which are often portrayed as oppositional, or as Ganzevoort puts it, *paired* as oppositional. In this pairing, homosexual Christian people are often imagined as being in between, as coping with these conflicting spheres. Christianity, mainly Protestantism, is however at the same time considered to be a central element of Dutch national identity by nationalist parties, and essential for the development toward this particular secularism (van den Hemel 2014). The reason for choosing the Dutch Protestant Church, the *Protestantse Kerk Nederland*, further on PKN, as site of inquiry lies in the paradoxical role of the mainstream church in Dutch politics and national discourse. Protestantism is often regarded in politics as a central historical feature of the Dutch nation, and furthermore as crucial for secularization processes (Rooden 2004, Knippenberg 1998). As such, the Protestant church is simultaneously placed in the past, as a historical feature, but as well as crucial element that makes contemporary Dutch secularism specific. A focus on this PKN as a paradoxical privileged site in Dutch nationalist discourse enables me to drive to focus in the debate of religion and sexuality away from ‘the Other’, often Muslim women to critically analyze Dutchness from a perspective that has not been examined as widely.

Similar oppositional pairings as Ganzevoort notices in public discourse can be found in feminist, LGBT or queer studies in which institutional religion is often considered patriarchal and oppressive, and as limiting the possibility of sexual autonomy and women’s agency. Scholars as Sarah Bracke and Rosi Braidotti argue that these academic distinctions continue to value secularism over religion, while aligning notions of gay emancipation and secularization as linear processes of progress (Bracke 2008, Braidotti 2008). At the same

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<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.livedreligion.org/cultures/projects/contested-privates/> for the full project description.

time, a gender analysis seems needed in the field of religious studies, as this is often not a central critical perspective in religious studies. In the discourse concerning homosexuality and religion in the Netherlands, mainly male referents are used to represent 'the' LGBT community as homogenous, something not often questioned in religious studies. Many feminist scholars have argued that in Western-Europe, a private sphere is historically associated with femininity, while the public sphere is masculine (Braidotti 2008, Butler 1993b). Though this is by no means a clear cut, fixed structure, it does have implications for the process in which sexuality becomes a public matter, as is the case in the Netherlands. What we see in the case of the Netherlands is that women, and the notion of female sexual experience, are pushed to the background in public discourse<sup>5</sup>. This idea of Christianity and non-heterosexuality as two separate, mutually exclusive spheres obscures the diversity of experiences among people who identify as both Christian, in this case protestant, and non-heterosexual, in this case self-identified lesbian, queer, bisexual women. Lesbian sexuality, let alone sexuality of lesbian protestant women, is rather underexplored in feminist theory as well as in religious studies. I will look at one of these groups that remain invisible in this public discourse, namely non-heterosexual Christian women, to see in what ways these public images and expectations of citizenship are reiterated or subverted by these women in their daily life.

Coming from these theoretical considerations, the central research question is: How do religion and sexuality intersect in daily life practices and social relations of self-identified non-heterosexual Dutch Protestant women? Following this main question, several sub questions have been formulated. First, it is asked whether these women experience moments

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<sup>5</sup> A 2013 nation-wide research to 'sexual health among LGBT'ers' from the Rutgers group, shows a gendered bias concerning sexual pleasure, taken on by many LGBT organizations. The most noticeable results of this research were presented as, for men '9 out of 10 [gay/bi] men enjoy sex a lot', while for women 'one in five bisexual women has a sexual problem'. Where 'two third of men masturbate several times a week', 'a third of lesbian women did not have sex in the past six months'. Presenting these results in this way mirrors the broader tendency to focus on female sexuality as connected to sexual problems, without acknowledging them as sexual agents, opposed to men for whom pleasure and lust tends to be the focus. See de Graaf, 2014

of ‘coming-out’ considering their sexual orientation, and how religion, if at all, shapes these moments of openness. Secondly, how do these women practice and express their religion, and what changes have they experienced during their lives? As a third, social relations are central in asking which communities and networks, if at all, these women use to find and construct a sense of belonging. And finally, how do social and sexual relations shape the meaning and experience of religion and sexuality in the daily lives of these women? In short, the aim of this research is to contribute to this political and academic debate on homosexuality and Christianity in the Netherlands by elaborating on intersections of religion and sexuality from a perspective and story that has not often been told by and on women. Simultaneously, this shows how broader processes of (post-) secularism and nationalism are grounded in daily lives of these women, to show in what many ways these discourses are locally negotiated and shaped by women. Focusing on the experiences of women would furthermore see the instability of a public-private distinction, in which religion is seen as private, while sexuality becomes increasingly public. Instead, I will show how religion and sexuality are both public and private, in which the role of visibility plays a central role. For the women in this project, both sexuality and religion are embodied privately while as well shaped and expressed in the private-public sphere of church, and through public networks. Through an emphasis on lived religion and personal stories with a feminist perspective, it is shown how this paired opposition is contested by and among non-heterosexual Protestant women.

## Methodology

The main methodological approach of this research is a combining of gender studies and religious studies, by the use of intersectionality and lived religion as methodological, critical thinking tools. Questions of subjectivity and intersectionality are central concepts in gender studies, and this makes up the main perspective of the research. Intersectionality is a concept that comes from Kimberlé Crenshaw, referring to the coming together of different axes of

significance, in Crenshaw's work gender and race in the US legal system (Crenshaw 1989). This notion of interconnectedness of different factors has been central in transnational feminist studies in which the importance of accounting for gender, race, but as well class, nationality, ethnicity, sexuality and religion is stressed. The critical approach of intersectionality that I use here is in line with Kathy Davis and Nina Lykke who consider these axes not as separate factors coming together, but as always already connected (Lykke 2011, Davis 2008). Joan Scott's argument of *sexularism* is especially valuable in regards to this particular research, a concept by which Scott points to the interconnections of discourses of sexual freedom and secularism as gendered. For Scott, the study of secularization or religion would imply an analysis of gender and sexuality, as all these discourses are shaped by gender and sexual structures (Scott 2009). In this project one particular intersection is the point of focus, namely religion and sexuality but this is not to say that these are the only factors that matter to these women, as all are influenced by gender, nationality, language and ethnicity as well. Besides intersectionality as a methodological critical tool, a lived religion approach is used in this project (Nynäs 2012, D. Hall 1997). This ethnographic concept refers to the study of religion from daily lives as complicated and taking place on different levels. The focus on women's stories through an intersectional analysis of lived religion implies a working together of feminist theory and religious studies and moves beyond a narrative of conflict, and it is argued that in order to account for the diverse experiences of these women as gendered, religious, sexual and ethnic, academic tools are needed from both fields of study.

As the focus is on personal experiences of lived religion and sexuality, the most fruitful method has been qualitative in-depth interviews, which allows for data that is rich and personal. This overall project took six months, of which three were focused on interviews. The focus of this research was on women who were members of a PKN church, which is the

largest mainstream Protestant organization of the country<sup>6</sup>. This is not a homogenous church, but rather an organizational collaboration of many different church connotations. Although the PKN is sometimes perceived as unitary, and has a central board and one spokesperson, there is much variety in practice. Several official connotations represented, such as Lutheran, Dutch Reformed, Protestant, former Reformed churches, liberatory and liberated, conservative and progressive. I will not go into the specifics of these connotations, as there is much variety even among Dutch reformed church communities, and every church should be seen in its specificity. I interviewed eleven self-identified non-heterosexual women in total, whom I met through several online networks. These were women between the ages of 28 and 72 and although nationality and ethnicity were no selection criteria, all were white Dutch nationals. All the interviews were held with the same open question list, giving as much space possible to the perspectives of the informants, while positioning myself as an active listener foremost. The results were further analyzed using qualitative data analysis software and anonymized to the extent that the informants asked for. For some, this might be a mere changing of the first name, for others actual places or church connotations are left out. The stories that these women told were extensive, so limits had to be made in the process of writing this thesis and the empirical chapters have been based on main themes that women spoke of.

## Structure of the thesis

This thesis is structured as follows. The first chapter is a theoretical and contextual chapter, in which I will first elaborate on concepts of (homo) nationalism, post-secularism and the relation of Christianity with sexuality in academic literature. After these theoretical considerations the role of religion and sexuality in the Dutch nation-state are elaborated on to

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<sup>6</sup> For the information about the PKN I rely mainly on information on the PKN's website, [www.pkn.nl](http://www.pkn.nl), where they publish general information about the organization as well as policy and guidelines for church members, pastoral workers and officials. In the section 'library' ordinances, records of the synod meetings and official policy can be found.

map the context in which this research is situated. Third, I focus on the methodology and specific methods used. Chapters two, three and four will then contain the main body of this thesis as these empirical chapters focus on the stories of the participants and the data analysis. Chapter two foregrounds the personal level of embodied sexuality and the constructions of religious sexual selves. In this chapter, questions regarding sexual practices and love are central, as well as the personal Gods images of the women. What is the meaning of ‘lesbian’ and of Protestantism for these women? What is the relation between image of God and coming-out? What does it mean to thank God during sex? In this chapter, I argue that even though some women have experienced more difficulty, all have found a sense of balance in their religious sexual self-image. Moreover, religion is not limited to institutional sites as the church, but is experienced in the ‘private’ sphere of the house and bedroom, and through the body in sexual relations. The third chapter takes this personal story a step further. Even though these women have established a sense of self in which religion and sexuality do not conflict, this idea of self is often questioned in the space of their church, in which different norms and expectations circulate than they not always can, or will conform to. Three values have historically been central in Protestant ideas of sex and gender, which are monogamy, marriage and motherhood (Bos 2010). These are the three themes that my informants encounter most as well, and together shape their idea of what it means to be a PKN woman, both internally but as well in the presented ideals in church. Most women were raised with an image of motherhood as essential element in what it means to be a Protestant woman, motherhood in ideally a heterosexual monogamous marriage. They continue to struggle with these ideas in their church as a site that is both public and private. How do women negotiate these norms? What is their stance toward marriage in reference to gay marriage and church blessings? How do expectations of monogamy shape meaning in their everyday religious and sexual lives? In this chapter it will be argued that the position of these women in the church is

ambivalent. On the one hand they often aim to open up structures and strict exclusive church policies are questioned, while some church given ideas are taken on and affirmed. The fourth and last empirical chapter then analyzes more public relations, social networks and community building among these women. The notion of visibility plays an important role here as well as the notion of coming out, which for them does not refer to one particular moment, but is a gradual process in which they experience different moments of openness and concerns their sexuality, gender and religion. Questions in this chapter are how and why do these women construct social networks? What and who do they find when entering circles of non-heterosexual religious women? How do they practice or express their religion and sexuality in public spaces that are beyond their homes and own churches?

These three levels of private, sexual experiences first, public/private norms secondly, and social networks as a third together show how religion and sexuality intersect on many different levels of daily lives. Women that I spoke to did encounter problems with their self-image, their position in church and in social networks, but it does not end in this struggle. Reflecting on the opening of this introduction, the stories of Annelies, Nienke, Hanneke and others show that for them, sexuality and religion are not inherently conflicting. On the contrary, religion and sexuality for these intersect and are mutually constructive. These intersections are nevertheless fluid and continuously contested, questioned and negotiated by these women as creative agents. Starting from this personal level allows me to track these interconnections, to see how these women move or stay fixed in different spaces, in different relations and in various discourses that provide tools to answer personal questions and to claim space as simultaneously religious and non-heterosexual. In what follows, I will focus and elaborate on all these stories and more in order to analyze what it means for these women to 'be' a religious, sexual, lesbian, queer Protestant Dutch woman.

# 1 – Theories and methods

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The Netherlands is a nation often associated with sexual freedom and liberal values in academic articles but as well in public discourse in the nation and beyond<sup>7</sup> (Buijs et.al. 2011). Gert Hekma further argues that it was after the 1960s sexual revolution, that this nation came to be known as gay friendly and sexually liberated (Hekma 2011). These values of gay tolerance and sexual diversity have become markers of Dutch national identity, in a politics that is increasingly becoming homonationalist which is a concept of Jasbir Puar that refers to the appropriation of LGBT bodies and politics to represent boundaries of a nation (Puar 2007). In this process this ‘gay tolerance’ is celebrated as evidence of the Dutch nation as liberal and progressive (Bracke 2013). There are many limits on this tolerance and only some bodies can, are, or will be able to be recognized as such homonational citizens. Transnational scholars have argued that this tendency to exalt the own nation is always relational, often depending on the imagining of an Other against which nationalist ideology defines itself as unique. In the Dutch context, this absolute Other has become the figure of the immigrant Muslim (Jivraj 2011), often portrayed as incommensurable with nationalist Dutch ideals such as gay tolerance (Bracke 2008). This cultural racism in the form of Islamophobia, as Etienne Balibar describes this (1991), makes the position of Dutch mainstream religious institutes paradoxical. Scholars as Sarah Bracke and Ernst van den Hemel have noted that the Dutch political climate is becoming more conservative, calling for a strengthening of ‘traditional Dutch values’ that increasingly imagines the Dutch national citizen on the level of the secular

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<sup>7</sup> According to the Independent, Amsterdam is even one of the ten ‘best places in the world to be gay’, referring to gay rights and social acceptance of LGBT’s; <http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/love-sex/taboo-tolerance/the-ten-best-places-in-the-world-to-be-gay-932557.html?action=gallery&ino=7>, visited August 7 2014. On gay websites and tourist information, Amsterdam is likewise often considered progressive and defined by its gayscene, with the Netherlands, according to gaytimes magazine, the most liberal country in the world towards gays and lesbians, <http://www.gaytimes.co.uk/Hotspots/GayGuide-action-Country-countryid-696.html>, visited August 7 2014.

(Bracke 2008, van den Hemel 2014). Though the Netherlands is often imagined as a secular nation, this idea of Dutch nationalism and symbolic citizenship is built on a particular understanding of secularism as specifically grounded in Christianity (van den Hemel 2014). Even though religion can be seen as privatized in the Netherlands, it becomes public through conservative and homonationalist politics, in which institutionalized religion is often referred to as antithetic with secularist liberal ideals while simultaneously called upon in nationalist politics (Buijs 2011). The hesitance of large Christian institutes to take on these values of 'sexual freedom' is seen as a major problem in Dutch politics and popular media because, as Ruard Ganzevoort argues, Christian notions of homosexuality appear to clash with secular Dutch images (Ganzevoort 2011). Narratives of conflict are central in these discourses as homosexuality and religion are often paired as oppositional (Ganzevoort 2013), connected but inevitably leading to conflict. What I argue in this chapter, is that even though presented as oppositional, religion and sexuality are nevertheless inseparably linked and coconstructive in the discourse of Dutch citizenship. Where gay tolerance is staged as a crucial element of Dutch identity, this becomes disconnected from historical processes and power relations, and sanctified as a traditional value of progress. As much as nationalism is connected to sexuality and religion, this homonationalist and secularist discourse is gendered as well. Mainly cis-men are regarded representative of 'the' LGBT community, where gay liberation is aligned with narratives of progress and visibility in the public sphere, a space historically associated with masculinity. Feminist postcolonial and transnational scholars have valuably argued that women often have a different political role in national imaginings (Alexander 2005, 1994, McClintock 1997). This is similar in the Dutch case, and this research argues for an approach to religion and sexuality in the contemporary Netherlands that takes into account the gendered complexities of this discourse.

This theoretical and contextual chapter is divided into three parts. I will first consider various approaches to these interplays of religion, sexuality and nationalism. After mapping out the theoretical context in the first part, I will provide some contextual considerations regarding the Netherlands as a site of research. Building this argument while contextualizing this framework, the third part of this chapter will elaborate on the methods that I used in this research project.

## 1.1 Theoretical framework

### Nationalism, homonationalism and heterosexualization of citizenship

Transnational and postcolonial scholars such as Stuart Hall and Sunera Thobani have argued that the imagining of a national unity is always relational and unstable even though a vision of national unity and identity is portrayed (S. Hall 1997, Thobani 2007). Since a stable, coherent nation can never be achieved due to constant movements, state driven nationalism, or *official nationalism* (S. Hall 1997) aims to stabilize that which is inherently unstable, ‘the nation’. Hall further argued that it is through the constant reproduction and movement of boundaries access to citizenship is controlled, while official nationalism aims to create an ‘inside’ nation that is imagined as both unitary and unique. I find myself here aligned with the argument of Amy Brandzel, who formulates this movement in nationalism and citizenship as follows:

*“Citizenship, then, functions as a double discourse: it serves as a source of political organizing and national belonging and as a claim to equality, on the one hand, while it erases and denies its own exclusionary and differentiating nature, on the other [...] Discriminatory treatment of noncitizens is often justified as a means to safeguard the rights and benefits of citizenship as the exclusive property of recognized citizens”* (Brandzel 2005: 176)

Brandzel refers here to the double movement of citizenship as discourse, as both aiming for equality and inclusion while at the same time hiding its inherent exclusionary practices. This

is similar to Etienne Balibar's reflection on racism in contemporary Europe, as something that is changed to a cultural racism (1991). In this process, racism on the basis of biological difference is officially challenged by states, while it is still present in different forms, in a 'neo-racist' way where culture comes to be seen as inherent, 'natural' difference between groups of people (1991:22). As such, racism is challenged by official nationalism while simultaneously reiterated in different forms of cultural racism. Citizenship and nationalism thus figures as a double discourse of inclusion and implicit exclusions. Because of the centrality of citizenship as exclusive property, the imagining of Others as noncitizens is crucial to the project of nationalism and citizenship. Sunera Thobani has shown how in this process of nationalism particular bodies are exalted as national subjects, while others are excluded, similar to Hall's statement that nationalism is inherently dependent on a cultural 'Other' to define itself against (Thobani 2007). This 'Other' is not merely racialized or culturalized, but gendered and sexualized.

Transnational feminist scholar M. Jacqui Alexander argues that processes of nationalism are simultaneously processes of heterosexualization, which refers to a reestablishment of heterosexuality as the norm while rendering different understandings and behaviors of sexuality deviant (Alexander 1994). This normalization of heterosexuality within nationalist imaginings takes place on many different levels as citizenship "*encompasses a wide variety of practices, institutions and ideas.*" (Brandzel 2005:173). An example where this heterosexualization is most evident is the role of marriage in nationalist imaginings, which is often seen as a 'natural' union between a man and a woman, in which marriage according to Ania Loomba symbolizes the reproduction of the nation (Loomba 2005). Marriage and sexual reproduction as such are important tools to control bodies within a nation, especially when only weddings through state structures are recognized as legal unions, as is the case in many European countries such as the Netherlands (Brandzel 2005). An emphasis on marriage as the

foundation of society connects back to Alexander's argument that nationalism is sexual and gendered in a process of heterosexualization.

Jasbir Puar continues this argument of the intersections of gender and sexuality in official nationalism by elaborating on the several ways that non-heterosexual people have a role in citizenship and nationalism with the notion of homonationalism (Puar 2007, 2006). This concept of homonationalism draws on Lisa Duggan's notion of homonormativity, referring to a normalization of gay culture anchored in consumption and domesticity (Duggan 2003). In this process, LGBT bodies become included in national imagining in the form of homonormative nationalism, or homonationalism as built on a particularly visible, consuming gay identity. In the case of the US, Puar argues, this took place in relation to and against Islamic culture by which the figure of the Muslim became the absolute Other, as supposedly constrained by sexual repressive morals and incapable of secular progress (Puar 2007). In this process gay tolerance and its ideas of progressive sexuality becomes a marker of national sovereignty and a mechanism for US nationalism against threats from symbolical 'Other' cultures. This is not merely a top-down process, but many 'progressive' liberal LGBT movements "*use, rely upon, or reinscribe US nationalism*" (Puar 2006:71). While Puar's argument is directed to US official nationalism, several authors have pointed out that similar processes of homonationalism are current in the Netherlands (Bracke 2012, Jivraj 2011). In this process gay tolerance becomes a necessity for Dutch citizenship as a marker of cultural difference. I explicitly use 'gay tolerance', because only particular bodies are included in this homonationalism as we will see later on. Puar has shown how in homonationalism "*the production of gay and queer bodies is crucial to the deployment of nationalism, insofar as these perverse bodies reiterate heterosexuality as the norm.*" (2006: 68) Puar thus argues that the inclusion of non-heterosexual bodies is conditional, allowed *insofar* this sexuality replicates heteronormativity and affirms normative ideas of sexual identity. Whereas LGBT

and queer activist movements have the potential to disrupt heterosexuality as the norm, this can pose a threat to the symbolical nation which is founded on heteronormativity. By the partial inclusion of LGBT bodies as naturalized identities while emphasizing on the 'sameness' of hetero- and homosexual couples, these bodies are controlled and deradicalized (Puar 2006). As such, homonationalism is a process of stabilization and naturalization of homosexual identity positions into a heteronormative framework. This is not in contrast to heterosexualization in Alexander's argument, but a transformation of this process in response to local developments as well as global processes, as Joseph A. Massad argues in his critique of 'gay international'.

This notion of 'gay international' (Massad 2007) refers to international universalist LGBT discourses that are based on a particular understanding of gay subjectivity. This subjectivity is built on notions of visibility and fixed identity in which 'gay identity' becomes something personal and private, while as well as necessary public and communal. Ideals of 'gay liberation' come to stand for public visibility, legal equality and conditional tolerance. Not limited to local sites alone, this modern gay subject is embedded in international and transnational networks of assimilationist Euro-American-based movements and theory. In this project of 'Gay International', Massad argues, "*sexual desire and 'deviant' practices would become the organizing principle around which these questions [of civilization] are negotiated*" (2007: 335). Although Massad focuses on the relations of international gay movements within Arab nations, his critique toward what he names 'Gay International' is valuable in this Dutch context, where as I argue, sexuality becomes a principle mode of organizing and imagining nationalism and symbolic citizenship. Massad further argues that when this is connected to state structures, "*the state [becomes] the arena where sexual practices are transformed into identities*" (2007: 265), something that can be seen in the Netherlands to a great extent. Similar to Puar's concept of homonationalism, these notions of

'gay liberation' naturalize a particular perspective of homosexuality as universal marker of progress, while rendering other modes of experiencing sexuality invisible or backward. These similar and intersecting approaches of Massad, Puar and Alexander together show how heterosexualization is embedded in modes of citizenship, reinforced in narratives that emphasize the 'sameness' of LGBT and heterosexual relations in homonationalism. In such a homonationalist framework, LGBT people are regarded respectable citizens as long as they conform to heteronormative ideals, which controls bodies as unthreatening to that which is so unstable as 'the Nation'. The conceptualization of gay identity as necessarily visible, not only makes the state the site of sexuality, as Massad argued, but makes private relations and sexual acts public. When applying for symbolical respectable citizenship, it becomes crucial to conform to an imagining of LGBT identity as monogamous and heteronormative as well as publicly expressed and connected to visible consumerism. This demand for public visibility is intrinsically gendered yet LGBT politics tend to collapse all non-heterosexual relationships in a concept of LGBT identity by which gender differences are often seen as secondary. Gill Valentine addresses the problem of imagining LGBT in public space of visibility by stating that lesbian women appear to be absent from these spaces, not because they are not there, but because of the focus on male dominated public space (Valentine 2000). This emphasis on masculine public space results in a gendered approach to LGBT communities where mostly the 'G', gay masculinity is foregrounded as representative for 'the' LGBT community, making among others lesbian experiences invisible (Sinnott 2009). Elaborating on the gendered and postsecular dynamics of homonationalism allows us to challenge normative and exclusive assumptions of identity as grounded in visibility. To unravel these several and ever changing relations within nationalism, further on in the Dutch case, I will use the concept of intersectionality foremost. This concept originated from Kimberlé Crenshaw and USA based black feminism (Crenshaw 1989), but has developed beyond this particular space to a critical

thinking tool in European and postcolonial feminism as well. Although sometimes called a ‘buzzword’ due to its apparent omnipresence in feminism (Davis 2008), I do value intersectionality as a critical tool to analyze power structures through accounting for diversity and different axes as coconstructive and ever changing (Davis 2008). Intersectionality thus points to a constant and inherent co-construction of several axes of significance, such as ethnicity, race, nationality, religion and sexuality (Davis 2008, Lykke 2011). In this thesis, the axes most focused on are religion and sexuality, as both are crucial in Dutch national imaginings.

### Post/secularism, gender and sexuality

While Protestantism is acknowledged as an important element of Dutch national identity, the public role of religion is simultaneously reduced to a private undertaking. This process, in which religion is reduced to a private sphere while simultaneously implicitly and explicitly present in politics and media, is a process that can be referred to as postsecular. This concept and field of study has been developed by scholars such as Habermas and Casanova, but has since then been the topic of many debates and interventions from feminist and queer scholars (Braidotti 2008, Bracke 2008, Nynäs 2012). The postsecular in the work of Jose Casanova refers to the process of a decline of religion in the public and political sphere on the one hand and a recurrence of religion through alternative de-institutionalized forms of religion on the other (Casanova 1994). Although Casanova and others have valuably pointed out that alternative frameworks have to be established that go beyond a religion-secular divide (Nynäs 2012), these theories of the postsecular have been criticized as well for assuming a grand narrative while overlooking specifics of local processes. Feminist and queer scholars foremost have furthermore questioned postsecular theory for lacking analysis of gender and the body (Woodhead 2008). According to Peter Nynäs and Andrew Kam-Tuck Yip, attention should be paid to the complexities of postsecular, which includes gender and sexuality as markers of

identity as well as social and political structures (Nynäs 2012). One of the most relevant arguments for this thesis in the area of religious studies, postsecular, gender and sexuality, is the Hirschmann lecture given by Joan Scott. Here Scott coins the concept of *sexularism* to argue that discourses of secularization cannot be approached separate from gender and sexuality (2009). In this lecture, Scott gives examples in which discourses of women's equality and religion/secularism are mirrored or interwoven. Through doing so, Scott emphasizes the importance of analyzing power structures of gender, because "*it is precisely the gender (and other) discriminations which remain in secular societies that are obscured when secularism and religion are categorically counterposed.*" (2009: 6). In short, the project of postsecular theory elaborates on, and questions, the counterposing of religion and secularism. Doing so, Scott argues, should imply a further understanding of gender discrimination in these processes beyond a mere 'adding' of gender as a variable to the analysis. Examining religion and secularism in the study of the postsecular should according to Scott inevitably lead to an analysis of gender and sexuality as central notions in these processes. Rosi Braidotti makes an even broader argument than Scott's call to analyze gender and secularism together, and argues that this postsecular turn is a valuable project in European feminism, in which notions of agency have been central but often placed on a secular understanding of subjectivity (2008). She argues that this turn challenges this feminism because it shows that: "*agency, or political subjectivity, can be conveyed through and supported by religious piety, and may even involve significant amounts of spirituality.*" (Braidotti 2008:1). Feminist understandings of female agency<sup>8</sup> and autonomy have often been aligned with secularism, in which religion has no place beyond an oppressive institution (Bracke 2008). Approaching religion merely as oppressive continues a line of thinking in which 'religion' and 'secularism' are positioned as oppositional, and in which secularism is

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<sup>8</sup> A broad field of study has developed on the notion of agency, which I will not go into here. See for example the work of Sarah Ahmed, Rosi Braidotti, Karen Barad for feminist theories of agency.

moreover considered necessary in the project of sexual liberation. In line with Nynäs call to account for the complexities of postsecularism and Braidotti's argument of potential value of the postsecular for feminist thinking, I approach the women in this project as agents in a postsecular Netherlands in which secularism and homonationalism are connected.

### Sex, gender and Christianity

The role of sexuality in Christian discourse is one that has often been examined, contested, undermined or reconsidered. Sex is political, as Foucault has stated in his *history of sexuality*. Sex is shaped by discourse, discourses that are accessed differently in different power relations. So we cannot, should not, look at 'sex' as isolated, untouched by race, ethnicity, nationalism, gender, religion. Foucault, who inspired many scholars working on discourse and power, traced the history of sexuality in Europe in Christianity, mostly through the role of Catholic confession as a mode of power and control over bodies and sexuality. Approached as a constraining mechanism of sexuality, Foucault argues that confession was one of the ways in which sex was presented, through discourse, as a secret; "*What is peculiar to modern societies [...] [is] that they dedicated themselves to speaking of it ad infinitum, while exploiting it as the secret.*" (1978: 35). Throughout the 19th and 20th century, sexuality became individualized and placed at the level of desires. Foucault further argued that the dominant notion of sexuality present in contemporary Europe is an idea that individuals have access to their own body, identity and intelligibility through sexuality (Foucault 1978). Judith Butler continued Foucault's explorations of power by focusing on materiality, gender and sexuality. According to Butler, bodies and sexuality are closely connected to issues of power. Butler argues that sexuality is not a part of bodies as some innate nature, but constructed through discourse (1993a). Because femininity has historically been associated with matter, and as such an object without access to the domain of discourse and decisions, an emphasis on materiality and power is a central concern in Butler's work (1993b). Understanding the

constructions and movements of bodies, sexuality and gender thus is according to Butler a crucial feminist project, something which can be found in many feminist works<sup>9</sup>. Yet besides as a constructed institution of patriarchal power, such as Catholicism in Foucault's work, religion remains absent from dominant Foucauldian and feminist analyses.

M. Jacqui Alexander critiques this absence of divine relations and argues that spirituality *matters* (2005). Though Alexander comes from a different theoretical and methodological background than Butler, with an emphasis on transnational intersectionality feminism, this phrasing is much similar to Butler's statements that bodies *matter* (Butler 1993b). Spirituality thus is not only an important site of inquiry, it matters, as something out-of-this-world, but it is materializing as well, it has matter. According to Alexander, spirit relations have real, tangible, noticeable, effects in what is often seen as 'real life' (opposed to spirit life). Spirituality thus influences the construction of subjectivity, it can influence daily life experiences and practices, not only as a top-down process coming from institutions, but as lived and questioned divine relations (2005). Studying subjectivity and relationality in the context of power structures cannot be without considering the various religiosities and spiritualities that are materialized and embodied. Such a project aims to destabilize the implied secularism in dominant feminist approaches by emphasizing on the importance of religion as materializing source of motivations and inspirations. As Grace Jantzen states: "*The point is that Foucault, by failing to problematize male sexuality, thereby also spreads false generalizations over the tradition of Christian spirituality and with it something so central to Christian thought as what it might mean to experience the love of God.*" (2007: 247) Jantzen argues for a diversification of meaning of beliefs in theory, which is absent in Foucault, as this work falsely generalizes the history of Christian spirituality. Continuing this, Jantzen rhetorically asks "*Where then, are the women?*", directing this question not only to Foucault's

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work but as well in relation to dominant theology and religious studies. When women are present in theology they are merely presented as objects for male sexuality, violence or abuse. Similar to Butler, Jantzen argues that women have been associated with the body, in the case Jantzen the theological concept of the flesh, with sin and irrationality. The notion of salvation from the flesh, central to Christian belief systems, thus has possibly very different implications and meanings for female identified bodies than masculine bodies, which have been valued as knowing, rational and closest to God (Jantzen 2007). When we continue this historical role of women in Christianity along the lines of Butler's emphasis on female materiality, the project of researching women's religiosity and experience of God is not an immaterial or merely discursive project. Because women, as well in Christian theology, have been seen as flesh, objects of male sexuality, the ways in which women themselves construct a God's image can tell us something about the various ways in which gendered norms in faith are embodied, undermined and contested. Women are not only constructed by this discourse, are not only oppressed by Christianity as institutional, but play an important role in the construction of Christian discourse from below. Examining their sense of sexuality and relation to the Divine, in this case God, as intrinsically connected provides us with examples and tools to untangle these often implicit links between sexual emancipation, nationalism and secularism in the Netherlands as a postsecular nation.

## 1.2 Dutch context

### Church and state

Since the 1950s, churches in the Netherlands have experienced a rapid decline in members and attendance (Lechner 1996), suggesting a move to secularization since. However, as Frank Lechner and Hans Knippenberg argue, this did not result in a complete removal of religion from the public sphere, which is seen as the ideal of secularism (Lechner 1996, Knippenberg

1998). The separation between Church and State in this nation-state is therefore called incomplete by these scholars, since Christianity still has a role in politics and many churches are furthermore subsidized and protected by the government (Knippenberg 1998)<sup>10</sup>. Although public visibility of religion has declined in the idealization of secularism, Christianity furthermore continues to be an explicit as well as implicit element in the Dutch state-structure of both the House of Representatives and the Senate<sup>11</sup>. There are currently three political parties with a Christian foundation<sup>12</sup> in the Dutch opposition, together having twenty one seats of the 150 in the House of Representatives and fourteen out of seventy-five in the Senate since the last elections in 2012 and 2011. None other religious affiliations are present in the structures of parties and though a few members of the parliament identify as Muslim, most are non-religious. The influence of religion in Dutch state structures, apart from the Christian parties, is dismissed as element in policy making and regarded as a merely personal matter<sup>13</sup>(Lechner 1996, Knippenberg 1999). According to the CBS, the government regulated national statistics research institute, 46 percent of the Dutch population is Christian, with the largest part consisting of Catholicism. These numbers are based on church memberships. At the same time, only a small group of people who identify as Catholic attend the church and are considered active members, which has as a result that Protestants make up the largest

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<sup>10</sup>On several levels, this role of Christianity becomes explicit. The Netherlands further a constitutional monarchy, in which the monarch has a primarily symbolical role, officially by the grace of God<sup>10</sup> and, government laws are signed with: ‘and thus we command You in God’s holy protection’. See the website of the Dutch government: <http://www.rijksoverheid.nl/regering/over-de-regering/formatie>

<sup>11</sup> In Dutch: Tweede Kamer and Eerste Kamer, also called the lower house and upper house in English. They together form the States-General, the parliament. See <http://www.houseofrepresentatives.nl> and [http://www.eerstekamer.nl/begrip/english\\_2](http://www.eerstekamer.nl/begrip/english_2), visited July 30 2014

<sup>12</sup> The largest party is the ecumenical CDA (Christendemocratisch appèl) with currently 13 representatives in the lower house of the parliament. Secondly is the Christenunie, a originally orthodox-protestant, yet developed to a Christian-Social party with 5 seats. The third is the Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij (SGP) with three seats; an orthodox protestant and highly conservative party, as well as the oldest party in the current government.

<sup>13</sup> In 2009 the religious affiliations of one oppositional member caused a controversy. Marianne Thieme is the leader of the Animal Party since 2006, and in 2009 it was discovered that she is a member of Seventh-day Adventist Church. Many people objected to this religious aspect of her life, to which Thieme responded with: “I find that my faith has nothing to do with my work as a leader of a secular party. If there is someone who does not believe in Christian politics, it is me; I would never want to work in a Christian political party.”, making a strong distinction between religion as personal beliefs and politics as secular work. Roos Schlikker, HP de Tijd Nov. 4 2013. <http://www.hpdetijd.nl/2009-11-04/marianne-thieme-geloof-niet-in-christelijke-politiek/>

active religious community in the Netherlands<sup>14</sup>. In national discourse, visible in national art, history books and political statements, Protestantism is mainly referred to as typically Dutch (Rooden 2004). After the reformation, the northern provinces of the nation became mainly Calvinist, while the three provinces in the south remained Roman-Catholic during the reformation<sup>15</sup> (Knippenberg 1999). Because of the history of separate religions in the Netherlands, a distinction remains between Protestantism in the northern provinces and Catholicism in the south, in Limburg and Brabant. Reflecting this continuing geographical distinction between Protestantism and Catholicism, none of the women in this research, which focused on Protestantism, is currently living in Limburg or Brabant.

Besides the changing role of Protestantism in the Netherlands, Islam has become a major topic of debate in media and politics where this is mostly referred to as a ‘new’ religion and moreover as a threat to the established secularism in the Netherlands<sup>16</sup> (Bracke 2013). This secularism is not self-evident either, but right-wing parties increasingly position this on Judeo-Christian roots (van den Hemel 2014). In the decade where notions of ‘Islamization’ have been apparent in discourse, and in which conservative parties express a lot of anxiety toward Islam, these Judeo-Christian roots have been called upon as an essential foundation for secularism, thus excluding all affiliations of non-Christian religion from the possibility of secularization (van den Hemel 2014, Jivraj 2011). Whereas Muslims are imagined as absolute Other, Christian Dutch people become another ‘other’ and take on a place between national subject and non-national, fixed in historical time as backward, and simultaneously seen as crucial for progress to secularism and emancipation. Postsecular theory together with van den Hemel’s argument the connection of Judeo-Christian roots to secularism, the Netherlands

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<sup>14</sup> See the 2013 report of the CBS called ‘Kerkbezoek neemt af’, <http://www.cbs.nl/nl-NL/menu/themas/vrije-tijd-cultuur/publicaties/artikelen/archief/2013/2013-3929-wm.htm>

<sup>15</sup> Different church connotations remained rather separated in the process of *verzuiling* during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. See the article of Knippenberg or Bos (2010)

<sup>16</sup> “Liberal Culture under Threat in Dutch Religious and Ethnic Crisis” Ian Traynor, the Guardian. Friday Nov. 12 2004, see <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/nov/12/iantraynor>, visited July 30 2014

should be approached as a postsecular state. Here secularism is idolized as marker of national identity, while ‘religion’ is positioned both as necessary outsider in the case of Islam, as well as crucial element in the development of Dutch national identity, in the case of Christianity.

### Gay liberation and sexual freedom

Parallel to, and on many levels intertwined with, Dutch developments to a secular ideology and the paradoxical relations between religion and politics, is the political attention to sexual freedom and gay liberation movements. Gert Hekma argues that the developments since the 1960s to a liberal and secular nationalism opened up spaces for expressions of non-normative sexuality, enabling the foundation of large gay movements (Hekma and Duyvendak 2011). Since the 1980s LGBT activists<sup>17</sup> vouched for the possibility of same-sex marriage, and in 2001 marriage was opened up to include all couples<sup>18</sup>. This achievement of ‘gay marriage’, as it is often called, is often seen as an endpoint in political activism because it supposedly grants complete legal equality. Hekma argues that the terrain of struggle is not any longer in the legal field, but has to focus on the social acceptance of homosexuality (Hekma 2011). These policies directed at social acceptance follow an assimilationist trajectory that aims to emphasize the similarity and normalcy of non-heterosexual people. In 2010 and 2012 one of the largest social research institutes of the Netherlands, funded by the government, the Socio-Cultural Planning Bureau (SCP) published research results to map out the developments and status of gay emancipation and acceptance. Though I will not go into the specific contents of these publications, I do wish to point to the titles as this directly brings us to several implications and further questions. These can be translated as followed: ‘Ever more regular, never normal’ (2010) and ‘Not too far out of the closet’ (2012)<sup>19</sup>. Providing an overview of

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<sup>17</sup> The introduction of LGBT or LHBT is rather recent, at the time the term holebi (homo, lesbisch, biseksueel), or simply ‘homo’ was more commonly used.

<sup>18</sup> “Dutch Legalize Gay Marriage”, BBC Tuesday September 12<sup>th</sup> 2000, see <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/922024.stm> visited July 30 2014

<sup>19</sup> <sup>19</sup> Translated from respectively “Steeds gewoner, nooit gewoon” and “Niet te ver uit de kast”, see [http://www.scp.nl/Publicaties/Alle\\_publicaties/Publicaties\\_2012/Niet\\_te\\_ver\\_uit\\_de\\_kast](http://www.scp.nl/Publicaties/Alle_publicaties/Publicaties_2012/Niet_te_ver_uit_de_kast) and

Dutch ‘gay emancipation’, these publications give a biannual update on the ‘gay issue’ in the Netherlands. ‘Normal’, in the case of the SCP figures as the aspiration that non heterosexual people, or LHBT in the Dutch case, can never fully achieve; one can never *be* normal. According to the SCP, this abnormality is problematic as it limits the acceptance and assimilation of LGBT people in Dutch society, something which eventually, is the aim. These titles of the SCP can be regarded as exemplary of dominant Dutch discourses considering gay emancipation. Unraveling these statements implies a questioning of the notion of the ‘normal’ and the ‘accepted’ in Dutch LGBT discourse.

Scholars as Gert Hekma, Laurens Buijs and Sarah Bracke have all argued that homosexuality is conditionally accepted in the Netherlands, *as long as* it resembles heteronormative relationships (Hekma 2011, Buijs 2011, Bracke 2013). The largest LGBT organization of the Netherlands, the COC, affirms this assimilationist tendency. The COC was founded in 1946 as the discreet ‘Centre for Culture and Leisure’ (Cultuur- en Ontspannings Centrum, COC), and developed from a cautious care center to a radical anti-homophobia movement in the 1980s<sup>20</sup>(Hekma 2011). Nowadays, this radical oppositional edge has been mostly neutralized as the COC became institutionalized and more influential in Dutch politics. Currently, the COC is for the largest part of their financial income dependent on government subsidies<sup>21</sup>, and board members are often asked to express their perspective toward developments in LGBT movements and politics as representatives of *the* LGBT community. According to Hekma these developments coming from the COC led to wide public attention of LGBT and homo/gay tolerance in Dutch discourse. These two notions of LGBT and homo/gay are used interchangeably, which explains the relative absence of the notion of ‘queer’. Because ‘queer’

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[http://www.scp.nl/Publicaties/Alle\\_publicaties/Publicaties\\_2010/Steeds\\_gewoner\\_nooit\\_gewoon](http://www.scp.nl/Publicaties/Alle_publicaties/Publicaties_2010/Steeds_gewoner_nooit_gewoon), visited August 7 2014

<sup>20</sup> See the English website of the COC for a description of the development of the organization: <http://www.coc.nl/engels>, visited August 7 2014.

<sup>21</sup> In the financial statements of 2012, it was stated that more than 90 percent of COC’s income depends on subsidies. Accessible on <http://www.coc.nl/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Jaarrekening-COC-Nederland-2012.pdf>

refers to a destabilization of heteronormativity through a disidentitarian approach, Hekma argues that this has been difficult to take ground in the Netherlands (Hekma 2011). In order to emphasize on the current notion of sexual orientation and the relative absence of ‘queer’ as a process of disruption, I will further use LGBT when referring to dominant discourses and policies in which gay and LGBT identity are used interchangeably.

Built on liberal values of progress, many right wing politicians have aligned themselves with LGBT rights and urged for the importance to defend these against threats from ‘outside’, in which this outside often is imagined on religious cultural terms. Where liberal values and tolerance toward homonormative gays are seen as essential element of Dutch identity, respect for religious and ethnic diversity is reduced and criticized. Increasingly aligning sexual freedom with conservative right-wing politics, the discourse of Dutch national identity has become homonationalist. Within the Christian parties and institutes, the issue of ‘gay marriage’ and acceptance of non-heterosexuality is a site of contestation and debate as these two are often seen as conflicting (Bos 2010, Ganzevoort 2013). Nevertheless, individual mainline protestant churches have possibilities to change policy from within the community, as is the case with the blessings of same-sex marriages, as I will further show in chapter three of this thesis<sup>22</sup>.

In this chapter I have argued that religion and sexuality are intersecting and codependent in Dutch nationalism, in which ‘being Dutch’ means to be gay tolerant and a particular type of secular. In this process, religion is often considered privatized while sexuality becomes public. In politics, religion often is regarded as a mere private matter in the emphasis on secularism, while Protestantism is simultaneously seen as crucial for progress toward this secularism. As such, Christianity is figured both internal to Dutch nationalism, yet reduced to

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<sup>22</sup> See the SCP publication by David Bos of 2010 for a (Dutch) overview of policy changes and decisions about homosexuality in different protestant connotations in the Netherlands between 1959 and 2009 (Bos 2010). This is the same research institute that publishes biannual sociological analyses of the status of gay emancipation in the Netherlands that I referred to earlier.

a past and backwardness and incompatible with narratives of progress as present in gay liberation movements. Further, this ideal of conditional tolerance of LGBT identities becomes embedded in the national imagining of the Netherlands in a form of homonationalism. In this process, only particular bodies can apply for recognition, as long as they within heteronormative, secularized boundaries. Many differences are obscured in this process, among which the various roles women have in Protestant churches. Therefore experiences of these women are central in this research, coming from the assumption that these stories can tell us something about the creative ways that women create a sense of belonging in which those broad notions of ‘religion’ and ‘sexuality’ are intertwined. In the last part of this chapter I will present the methods used in this research, before elaborating on and analyzing the stories of these women in the following empirical chapters.

### 1.3 Methods and methodology

The main research question of this thesis is as follows: How do religion and sexuality interact in the daily life experiences and social relations of non-heterosexual Dutch Protestant women? In order to answer this question from a personal, daily live and experiential level, the focus has been on personal stories and narratives to gain insight in the many ways religion and sexuality intersect. To be able to give as much space to the stories of these women themselves, several methodological approaches have been combined. Gender studies and feminist theory often emphasizes the importance of the body, of sexuality and provides tools to critically think about the role of norms and agency (Buikema 2011, Lewin 2006). Accounting for the bodily aspects of religion as well as sexuality has been a central aim of this thesis, which is central in the first chapter mostly. These have shown to be essential elements in the lives of these women, and concepts from gender studies have allowed me to analyze these experiences in a way that gives room for diversity as well as the body (Lewin 2006). Furthermore, the notion of intersectionality has been developed in feminism as well,

coming from USA based black feminists as Crenshaw, but which has become a widely used critical tool to analyze subjectivity as multiple and diverse (Crenshaw 1989, Davis 2008). Instead of positioning religion and sexuality as two separate axes, this intersectional approach foregrounds to the interwovenness of gender, sex and faith in the lives of these women. This is a group of women that is often invisible in many public discourses, and I find myself supported by feminist interventions aiming not to speak *for* but to foreground these women's stories themselves. At the same time these methods from European feminist studies limit the possibility to account for religion in equally sensitive ways as it approaches sexuality and gender. In dominant continental feminism, secularism is often implicitly valued over religion, which is why this thesis draws on insights from religion studies as well. Mainly, the methodological approach of 'lived religion' is used. Lived religion refers to a mainly ethnographic approach to religion that encompasses the role of religion in daily life as practices and construction of meaning (D. Hall 1997). This is not opposed to structural or institutional approaches, but according to David Hall seeks to break the distinction between what is considered 'high' and 'low' areas of interest in religion studies in which theology is often valued over laity. By working from lay experiences and perspectives, lived religion allows for research and analysis that accounts for daily life as complicated and relational, while moving beyond the individual subject to look at several potentials of community and faith (D. Hall 1997, see as well Nynäs 2012 and Wilcox 2008).

The Protestant church was chosen as the site of research because of the paradoxical role of the PKN in Dutch politics and public discourse, in which mainstream Protestantism is referred to as simultaneously centrally Dutch as well as unmodern in the linear imagining of secularization. In this process, ideals of sexual freedom and 'gay tolerance' become central values on which PKN churches are profiled (Bos 2010). Because of these complicated interactions of politics, religion and sexuality, the PKN provides a valuable site to analyze

how religion and sexuality possibly conflict, but as well how these intersect and mutually constructed. In Dutch public discourse, lesbian women are often not directly visible, and it is this invisibility that first motivated me to take on these questions. Yet the aim of this research has not been to rescue these women or to make them visible, but to argue that in order to understand the diverse relations of religion and sexuality, we have to look beyond public images. Just because these bodies are not directly present, does not mean that women are not there, or that these stories are irrelevant. On the contrary, this perspective makes the researcher responsible to recognize different bodies and hear different voices. By bringing this view to the front, this approach questions limits in academic approaches that result in the obscuring of lesbian protestant women as creative, multiple and intersectional subject. The starting point of this research project was thus the personal stories of these women themselves. This focus on personal ideas, narratives and experiences is often central in cultural anthropology, and such an *emic* perspective helps me to research what it could mean for lesbians to be a Dutch protestant woman. Methods from cultural anthropology are therefore used to operationalize the research questions, within the perspective of intersectionality and lived religion. The most central method in cultural anthropology has traditionally been fieldwork, but because these women were mainly individuals living all across the country, fieldwork in the sense of participating in a culture to understand this, was not possible. Moreover, the focus has been on personal stories and experiences, for which in-depth interviews have been the most valuable research method in many research projects (Wilcox 2009, Lewin 2006), and built my methods on as well.

During two months, I did eleven in-depth interviews with nine ciswomen and two trans\* people, among whom nine self-defined as lesbian, one as queer and one as sexually fluid. Most women were between the ages of forty and sixty-five, with the eldest participant of

seventy-two and the youngest of twenty-eight<sup>23</sup>. I got in touch with these women through established online networks and through different previous acquaintances, and some email exchanges took place before our meeting in which I emphasized the anonymity of this project. Some women were initially uncertain of their participation due to their gender identity, age or sexuality, but the explanation that everyone was welcome to join who identified as non-heterosexual and member of a PKN church often made them decide to participate. I paid particular attention to the connection of sexuality and personal faith, of love relations and a relation with God as well as their personal theological reflections and religious practices<sup>24</sup>. All interviews were held in Dutch, though I explained that the thesis had to be written in English as a requirement. The interviews altogether made up twenty-five hours of material, which I analyzed through qualitative data software Nvivo during the process (Boeije 2010). These analyses allowed me to reflect on the main themes the informants spoke of, and on the basis of this material I began the structuring of the empirical chapters. When participants are quoted, the original in Dutch is provided in the footnotes. Full transcriptions are available upon request. Aware of the problematic aspects of translating religiously specific language, I will stick to the original conversations in Dutch as much as possible, while rephrasing a literal translation at certain points as well to best reflect the intended Dutch language<sup>25</sup>.

For these interviews, I used the same list of questions each time, though I did not ask the questions in the same order. Intentionally, I left a lot of space for the participants themselves, which resulted in the interviews becoming a conversation in which *rapport* was developed. This notion of rapport refers here to a relation of equality and mutual motivation and benefit from both the researcher and participant (DeWalt 2011). Because my relationship with the participants was as such open and sincere, they felt comfortable speaking about personal

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<sup>23</sup> A brief overview of the participants can be found in Appendix A at the end of this thesis

<sup>24</sup> The list with interview questions can be found in Appendix B at the end of this thesis

<sup>25</sup> An overview of translated Protestant concepts can be found in Appendix B.

issues as sexuality and desires. Besides the particular methods of open interviews, this relation was influenced by my own situatedness as researcher, but as well as Dutch woman. I was born in this country and Dutch is my first language, I am white, able bodied and my appearance is normative and constructed through privilege in many more ways, which made the women I spoke to recognize me in many ways as an equal. Yet my age, religious beliefs and sexuality were factors that sometimes set me apart and changed my relation to the informants. With my age of twenty-two, there was often a broad age difference between us, as most women were between the ages of 40 and 65. This age difference often made women curious, and I was often asked why I would look into this particular group of women. I was for example only ten years old when marriage was opened for same-sex couples, a time when René was already fifteen years together with Marja and when the eldest of my informants was sixty years old, which sometimes made it a challenge to fully understand their experiences. This element of generations at the same time makes the data rich and expansive. Besides the role of age, almost all informants asked about my relation toward the protestant church. I have not been raised Christian, but I became involved in a Protestant church in Utrecht as a teenager by joining a course about Christianity out of curiosity, and I have stayed in this environment ever since. I would not describe myself as Christian, but I am familiar with Protestant language and perspectives, and although I have my doubts toward some institutions and policies, I can understand the value and experience of Protestant faith. Combined with my knowledge from religious studies, this allowed my informants to elaborate on their experiences more, knowing that I was open for their perspectives but realizing that they needed to explain this more because I was not raised Protestant. A third important element was the role of sexuality. As a woman, I got access to a level of stories that others would not, for example concerning sexuality, though it is not certain that a male researcher would not have this access (Lewin 2006). At the same time my current relationship with a cisman could

distance myself from these women who mostly identified as lesbian. Yet because I honestly explained my view toward sexuality as well as my personal experience did not make this a large issue in our conversations.

The methodological approaches of lived religion and intersectionality combined with my research questions and qualitative method of in-depth interviews provided me with the results aimed for. At the same time, this qualitative focus limits this research to a small group and thus refuses generalizations. Furthermore, the influence of rapport on the interviews makes these results context bound, relational and therefore unrepeatably in the exact same way (Boeije 2010). Yet it is as well because of this rather limited scope of the research, that this project provides an in-depth and thick case study which focuses on personal experience, social relations of these women in which the voices of the participants are guiding the process, something that qualitative methodology enables. This has resulted in data that is innovative because of the emphasis is on intersectionality of religion and sexuality, which questions the separation of these two as oppositional in public discourse, but as well in feminist theory and religion studies. As such, this research not only shows how religion and sexuality are interwoven in the lives of these specific non-heterosexual PKN women, but points to the necessity of combining concepts of religious studies and gender studies in the analyses of contemporary religious practices and experiences.

## 2 – ‘I can now thank God when I come’

### Sex, faith and loving God

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*“I can now thank God when I come. So he has... I have my sexuality as a gift from Him too.*

*My lesbian sexuality is a gift of God.”<sup>26</sup>*

[Dieke, 53 yrs]

Dieke<sup>27</sup> is a Dutch Protestant woman living in a small town in the northern provinces, where she is an active member of her church as pastoral worker. A few years ago, Dieke came out and began to describe herself as lesbian after she divorced her husband whom she was married to for twenty-four years. She is currently living together with a woman, Mina. In her previous marriage, Dieke considered sex mostly a marital duty than a site for pleasure. During our conversation, Dieke told me that she can ‘now’, in her relationship with Mina, enjoy sexuality and can even thank God for this<sup>28</sup>. What struck me most in this quotation is that sexuality and faith are not mutually exclusive for Dieke. On the contrary, she experiences faith even in intimacy and bodily pleasure during sex, when she orgasms. As I argued in the previous chapter, dominant Dutch discourse represents homosexuality and religion as two separate, distinct spheres that are difficult to combine, mainly because ‘religion’ would limit sexual freedom and acceptance (Bracke 2013). This image is not sufficient in the case of Dieke. Dieke was raised in a rather strict protestant church where she learned that sex was useful for procreation, and the task of a woman was to become a wife and mother, with her

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<sup>26</sup> Translated from: *“Ik kan God nou danken als ik klaarkom. dus hij heeft ook ... Ik heb dus mijn seksualiteit als een gave van hem. Mijn lesbische seksualiteit is een gave van God.”*

<sup>27</sup> See Appendix A ‘Participants’

<sup>28</sup> Instead of a relation of adoration, praise or blessing, the relation to God in mainstream Protestantism in the Netherlands is a relation of humility in which gratitude toward God reflects the most common use of religious language. Therefore, the word ‘thanks’ in this quote does not only reflect the dominant language of Dutch Protestantism, but implies a certain kind of relation to the divine in which God is imagined as both giving and merciful.

sexuality directed at the needs of her husband. Now, Dieke's perspective has shifted and she no longer considers sex as a requirement, a necessity of being a protestant married woman, but sees her own sexuality as a gift of God. With this statement, she not only reclaims her body, but she emphasizes the interconnectedness of pleasure, sex, and her own lived religion. Faith as such is not only experienced in church or in rituals, but through her body and in her sex life, when she comes. Because of this experience of faith through her body, Dieke recognizes herself as a simultaneously and inherently connected religious and sexual self. In the context of female sexuality and the role of lesbian women in the Dutch protestant church, we can thus ask; what does it mean to experience sexuality as a gift of God? I find myself supported by transnational feminist scholar Jacqui Alexander, who argues that spirituality does not only exist in the so-called unreal. Instead, Alexander argues that 'spirituality *matters*', pointing to the double meaning of matter as relevance, it matters, and materiality, it materializes. Spirituality should be a site of research because it has an important impact on daily lives of many people that should not be overlooked. These material effects of spirituality are central in this chapter which analyzes the embodiment of religion and sexuality, with spirituality as important factor in the construction of subjectivity and in lived relations. These layers of interconnectedness are what I will continue to explore in this chapter.

This chapter aims to specifically focus on these intimate and personal experiences of sexuality and religion; not as separate axes of significance, but in the case of these women, intrinsically connected and intersectional. As such these women construct a sense of self as a sexual religious subject, always already multiple and diverse. What is the meaning of lesbian sexuality to Dieke, but to other women as well? And what does the framing of time, the 'now' in Dieke's words, imply? This chapter consists of three paragraphs to analyze the meaning of sex and faith in the personal lives of non-heterosexual PKN women. I will first elaborate on the meaning of sexuality and the notion of lesbian for these women. After this, their

experience of faith in Protestantism and the changing Gods images of the informants are point of focus. In the third part I will continue this line of thinking to look at the experiences of sexual pleasure and relationships with other women to elaborate on the ways in which sexual religious subjectivity is experienced, reflected upon and constructed. Here we can further unravel the statement of Dieke to try to understand what is implied by the statement ‘*I can now thank God when I come*’, where this came from, or can perhaps lead us further.

## 2.1 Sexual religious selves

*“From the moment that I was aware that I could fall in love with women, of course I started thinking how that stood in relation to faith. But I never experienced a problem toward God.”<sup>29</sup>*

[Nienke, 43 yrs]

Nienke identifies as a lesbian ciswoman and she lives in a city where she is a member of a church. In her childhood she attended a different church with a more orthodox character, where she was raised with an image of lesbian sexuality as deviant, with heterosexuality and motherhood as norm. When Nienke discovered her love for women, during her studies, she struggled with faith, church and her family. ‘*But*’, she adds, she never experienced a problem toward God. Her relation with and to God is a foremost personal bond, which is separate from the opinions from within her church. In this statement, Nienke disconnects Protestantism as bound to a church, from her personal relationship to God. This disconnection of church and personal beliefs came back in more of the interviews. For most women, the period of gradual self-discovery and identification as lesbian implied a change in Gods image. Of the participants, only one did not identify as lesbian, but Karlijn recognizes herself more in the notion of queer, because for her the word ‘lesbian’ is connected to exclusively love between

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<sup>29</sup> Tr.: “*Vanaf het moment dat ik me bewust was dat ik verliefd kon worden op vrouwen, ben ik er natuurlijk wel over na gaan denken hoe dat dan met geloof te maken had... Maar ik heb naar God toe nooit een probleem ervaren.*”

two women. Karlijn feels uncomfortable with the label of woman, which is why the word lesbian thus does not work to describe her sexuality. Notwithstanding this exception, I will elaborate further on the meaning of ‘lesbian’ among the other women in this project, as there is much diversity in perspectives and experiences with the label of lesbian. Most refer to lesbian as a form of identity, as an element of who they *are*. Others connect this to love relations and sexuality, in which being a lesbian is determined by acts; it is something they *do*. The notion of ‘lesbian’ thus is broader than a sexual orientation alone, but encompasses sexual acts as well as a sense of being. For Nienke, her self-identification as lesbian was first connected to attraction to other women in general, but it was only when she engaged in a relationship with another woman that she openly began to identify and express herself as such. Dieke on the other hand finds it explicitly important to call herself lesbian in terms of personal identity, because she feels like this identity has brought her pleasure and happiness since she rediscovered herself and has more love and joy nowadays than she had during her heterosexual marriage. For Ellen and Astrid, being lesbian is more a sexual orientation and part of their identity. Their self-definition as lesbian was mainly a relief because they experienced a deeper understanding of their selves through this discovery. For them, their sexual orientation is a part of their being, an important part, but not all-encompassing. This is different for René, who only began to call herself lesbian when she entered a relationship with a woman, now over thirty years ago. During her heterosexual marriage René felt sexually attracted to women, but it was only when she began to have relations with women that she came to self-identify as lesbian. René reflects on this period as rather uncomplicated. She told me about the night she first went home with her current partner Marja: *“I thought ‘well, what do I care.’ I didn’t need to know what I... it’s just like with God; I do not need to know what I am. So I went with her and thought it was good, it was good right away.”*<sup>30</sup> [René 65 yrs]

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<sup>30</sup>Tr. “En toen dacht ik ‘nou ja wat kan mij het ook schelen.’ Ik hoefde niet te weten wat ik... Het is eigenlijk net

On the one hand, the idea of knowing oneself is central in the stories of these women and their self-identification as lesbian. For René however, it was more important to know who she loved and how she felt, than to know which label fitted most. What is interesting in this case is that René herself coins the connection between lived religion and sexuality here, as she uses similar language to describe her relation toward God and to the notion of lesbian identity without either one excluding the other. With God, it is for René more important as well how she feels and what she desires, than to ‘know’ God once and for all, which for her is similar to her conception of the term lesbian. Evident in these stories of self-identification is that this reflection on the self cannot be distinguished from the role of faith and their relation toward God. This becomes especially noticeable in the case of Hanneke, whose experiences are in stark contrast to René’s rather smooth process of becoming lesbian, as she calls it.

Hanneke comes from a rather conservative church and has until recently condemned her own lesbian sexuality and took on the notion that one is allowed ‘be’ lesbian without acting at it, which is present in more churches with a conservative or orthodox character (Bos 2010). Hanneke thus made the decision to live in sexual abstinence, refraining from entering relationships or having sexual contact. Because this burden was eventually too heavy to carry for Hanneke, and this partly caused a depression and burn-out for her, so she eventually let this promise go. Hanneke decided to be open for a relationship when she was in her early fifties. In order to legitimize this choice, both internally as well toward church, she became more reflective and individual in her faith, which brings me to the next argument. I asked all women how they regarded their lesbian sexuality in relation to God. For Hanneke, being a lesbian was mostly a burden given by God. For other women, such as Astrid, being a lesbian is not deviant, not an abnormality but sexuality is merely a fact of life. Astrid told me that God perhaps did not intend to make people love others of the same sex, but she refuses to see

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*als met God, ik hoef toch niet te weten wat ik ben. En toen ben ik gewoon met haar meegegaan en toen dacht ik, het was goed, het was gelijk goed.”*

herself as a mistake at the same time. Dieke takes this even a step further in her statement that her sexuality, her lesbian sexuality is a gift of God, something given to her to experience joy, love and pleasure from. After being married to a man for twenty-four years, Dieke discovered why she wasn't happy in this marriage; this was because she loved women instead of men. When I asked, Dieke told me that she has only 'been' a lesbian for a few years. She did not call herself lesbian right away, but did come out to her husband about these lesbian feelings, meaning desire for women. After this coming-out, Dieke and her husband stayed together for another six years after which Dieke eventually decided to ask for a divorce, which I will elaborate on more in the following chapter. For her, it her identification as lesbian began after her divorce, when she entered her relationship with another woman, Mina, and acted upon the feelings that she had been calling 'lesbian feelings'.

Most women, however they become, are or act lesbian, have experienced a change in their relation to God as parallel to their self-discovery as lesbian. This period is either experienced as confusing or, in the case of Ellen, Astrid and Dieke, a moment of relieve because they could understand themselves better. Yet together with this gradual self-definition as lesbian, women are confronted with images from church that condemn same-sex sexuality or leave it unspoken and they negotiate these different perspectives to construct a sense of self as religious and sexual, mutually enabling and interwoven.

## 2.2 God's images/Images of God

*"First I really thought God would be proud of me for not giving heed to it. Then at a certain point I thought, it cannot be the case that He is happy that you're born at first, and then all of a sudden He's not because you're of female love [vrouwenliefde]"<sup>31</sup>*

[Astrid, 46 yrs]

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<sup>31</sup> Tr. "In eerste instantie dacht ik echt wel dat God er trots op was dat ik er geen gehoor aan gaf. En op een gegeven moment dacht ik ja het kan niet zo zijn dat hij eerst blij is dat je geboren bent, en dan toch nou niet, want je bent van de vrouwenliefde. [...] nu denk ik gewoon van nou, ik ga gewoon naar hemel, punt."

In the first years after Astrid first discovered her love for women, she refrained from putting this into action, had some boyfriends, and was not open about these feelings toward her family. This, Astrid told me, had to do with her image of God, and the objections from within her church she encountered. After a few years however, her relation toward God and the church changed. She described in our conversation how her idea of God is no longer commensurable with a condemnation of 'female love'. Though this was a gradual process, Astrid overall does not feel like she experienced any internal religious conflict during her coming-out. Other women did struggle with their role as faithful women vis-à-vis the church, God or family when they began to define themselves as lesbian. In this paragraph, I will look more closely at this noticeable shift in God's image of these women. All describe their relation to God as a relation of love and support, for some women this is in stark contrast with the image they've been raised with. As argued before, a distinction can be found between church and God as a strategy to negotiate these own religious beliefs with churches that sometimes condemn same-sex sexuality. Here personal experiences are often regarded more valuable than church-given interpretations. This shift toward personal interpretation and reflection to reclaim space for religious subjectivity is a strategy that Melissa Wilcox describes as religious individualism, a pattern in which contemporary religion becomes a process of conscious negotiation (Wilcox 2009). This process shapes religious identifications and selves as they become more and more reflexive; similar, Wilcox argues, to sexual selves. Looking at the various resources and rhetorics, by which women negotiate these religious sexual selves, thus can be seen as exemplary for contemporary subjectivity constructions. For these women, religion is interconnected to sexuality and thus intersectional in their reflection on their selves as both religious and sexual. During our conversation, Ellen explained where she sees the most important aspect of her faith:

*“You have to put effort in claiming space to be who you are. And there is space that you can claim, that you may really demand. That no one can ever take from you; I think that’s the most important. And that you... you can find inspiration and strength from your faith.”<sup>32</sup>*

[Ellen, 48 yrs]

Ellen here sees faith as a source of inspiration to continue to claim space for self-expression. In other moments, she explained that she sees her relation to God as an individual relation of guidance and support. Even though God is her guidance, her choices are nevertheless individual and her own responsibility. Protestantism generally gives room for these individual beliefs. Where Roman-Catholicism has a clear hierarchical power-structure, Protestantism knows a less strict ritualized hierarchy of faith (Woodhead 2007). Nevertheless, there is a lot of variety among Protestant connotations and even within the PKN there are many different nuances in which the individual communities and pastors vary widely. More orthodox connotations tend to consider all humans as born with sin, with God as ultimate judge and Jesus as savior. Other strands within Protestantism carry out a more nuanced God’s image as for example loving instead of strict (Bos 2010). Nevertheless, the role of the individual, though always in relation to the community, is crucial in Protestantism in which one’s own faith and actions can bring salvation. Even though these actions are shaped and influenced in church, through statements of hierarchized church boards and pastors, it is important to keep in mind that this individualism takes place in this particular setting of Protestantism. Furthermore, in mainstream Protestantism the Bible is considered the only true source of faith, there is no veneration of saints, and most importantly, no divine authority besides God as holy trinity. This has implications for the relationship that Protestants have toward faith and religion, and gives a lot of room for self-reflection which is for many women an important element of their beliefs; to be responsible for one’s own actions in the face of God (McGrath

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<sup>32</sup> Tr. “Ja dat toch wel dat je je inspant om de ruimte in te nemen, om te zijn wie je bent. En dat dat er ruimte is die je altijd mag claimen, die je echt mag opeisen. Die niemand anders ooit van je af kan nemen, denk dat dat wel belangrijkste is. En dat je, daar kan je inspiratie en kracht vinden vanuit geloof.”

2004). It is exactly because they can make a self-reflective distinction between their personal beliefs and the message and interpretation from their church that these women negotiate their stance in Protestantism. This sometimes conflicts with the way that they have been raised but these personal negotiations nevertheless do not separate them from faith, even though they do experience a sense of non-belonging in relation to church. This tendency toward individualism is exemplified by many of my informants. Most women describe their current relation toward faith as a relation of love and support which enables them to refer to themselves as loved and valuable. For some, this is the same image that they've been brought up with, for others this is in contrast with a strict God as constant judge. For Dieke, this has been a major turnover, in which she describes:

*"It was like 'I have to be obedient to God'. So I have to do as He says. And [now] I think, 'God, here I am. And you can be angry at me if I do things that aren't good, but I'll still do those things.' So that was a whole shift. [As well] to regain confidence in God still, that God likes you anyway..."*<sup>33</sup> [Dieke, 53 yrs]

Dieke was raised in a conservative church, in which obedience to God was central. This is another Protestant notion of an imagined relation that is open and direct, granting the possibility of direct contact with God, while simultaneously deeply humble and focused on obedience. These two notions, of direct responsibility toward God, as well as of obedience and the idea of born a sinner, has been central in the childhood of other women as well, such as Astrid and Annelies. Dieke nowadays has confidence in herself and in her relation with God to refrain from this constant obedience. She claims space in the face of God; she positions herself as autonomous and as possibly doing things that aren't considered 'good' by God. And most importantly, as she adds, Dieke can do things that might be considered wrong,

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<sup>33</sup> Tr. "En in mijn geloof is het inderdaad een omslag geweest dat ik... Dat niet gehoorzaam meer ben, eerst was het zo van ik moet God gehoorzaam zijn. Dus ik moet doen wat hij zegt. En dat ik denk ja, God, hier ben ik. En dan ben je maar boos op me als ik dingen doe die misschien niet goed zijn, maar ik doe ze toch. Dus dat was een hele omzwaai. En dan weer vertrouwen te krijgen dat God wel, dat God je dan toch wel ziet zitten of zo."

but God loves her anyway. Ellen is somewhat an exception in this case; she was raised in a more liberal church of the most progressive strands within the PKN in which her individual search was encouraged within her church community as well as by her parents. Nevertheless, her idea of personal responsibility is similar to Dieke's; both see the importance of individual actions and choices with God as guidance, instead of approaching God as ascribing these choices. One of the means through which women construct their God's image is a rereading of the Bible. Again, in Protestantism the bible is considered the one true word of God. The women spoken to often refer to church interpretations of the Bible as just that; personal interpretations, which enables them to counterpose their personal readings to these perspectives. Reconsidering some of the central texts allows for a clearer and though through positioning as a Protestant woman, while these reflections are at the same time negotiated with church and their image of God. This noticeable shift and construction of their subjectivity as religious has everything to do with their sexual subjectivity, and this cannot be separated from these experiences of love for women. This interwovenness of their Gods image and lesbian self-identification does not end here though, at an individualized self, picking and choosing and negotiating as she goes, but has impact on their love relations and influences their bodily experience and perspective to their sex life. God and sex are for these women not two separate scopes which cause for conflict in need of coping. Rather, faith enables sexual pleasure and these Protestant women describe their identity is as multiple and intersectional, providing crucial perspectives for feminist anthropology and theory. These women have not been listened to that much, but show the multiplicity and relationality of subjectivity, in which sexual pleasure and Christian faith are not antagonistic but mutually enabling a sense of self and belonging.

## 2.3 Faith, love, sex

For Ellen, faith is a personal and individual relation foremost as I wrote before. Even though both she and her partner are protestant, which is for Ellen not a requirement but pleasant nevertheless, this does not play a large role in their relationship. Astrid's experience can be counterposed to this. Referring to a bible text<sup>34</sup>, Astrid describes her relation as follows:

*“That’s how I see Eefje, God and myself, as a strong chord. That can simply not be broken. And then I would like God’s blessing upon that... I do feel very strongly that we are together, and as well together with God.”* [Astrid, 45 yrs]<sup>35</sup>

In the case of Astrid, God is imagined as a crucial third element which influences their daily life practices. For example, Eefje and Astrid pray together, visit church together, and read the bible every day, moments that for Astrid are most valuable. Most women see their love relation as blessed, though there is diversity in the wish to marry. As I will show more broadly in chapter three, the women who do not have a strong desire to marry, are mainly women who have been married to a husband prior to their coming-out and current relation with a woman. These experiences of heterosexuality have a great influence on their experience of sexuality as well. All women with the exception of Karlijn have been involved in heterosexual relations, from casual dating during their teenage years to long term marriages of Annelies with a woman before her coming out as transwoman, and Dieke's twenty-four year marriage to her husband. Dieke describes that her biggest motivation to marry Peter was her wish to become a mother. About the sex, she said:

*“It was nice as long as children came... and for the rest... I was raised [with the idea that] you have to please your husband. So I did... but yeah... it didn't bother me that much no... [...]. And I discovered when I was with Mina; this is the kind of intimacy I've been looking for*

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<sup>34</sup> Preacher 4:12 'a chord of three strands is not quickly broken', or in Dutch Prediker 4:12: Een koord dat uit drie strengen is gevlochten, is niet snel stuk te trekken.

<sup>35</sup> Tr. *“Dus zo zie ik zeg maar Eefje, God en mezelf als een sterke kabel zal ik maar zeggen. En die kan niet meer kapot gewoon. En dan wil ik daar graag Gods zegen over... Ik voel wel heel erg dat we samen zijn en ook samen met God zijn”*

*all that time. And it isn't due to the fact that he... that I didn't get along with Peter... it's because he is just a man*"<sup>36</sup> [Dieke, 53 yrs]

Dieke here makes a difference between the way she was raised, and her own sexuality. She was raised with the notion that as a woman, you have to please your husband first during sex, something that she didn't enjoy but felt required to do. When she got in touch with Mia, and 'was' intimate with her for the first time, she discovered her own sexuality and intimacy, something that she had wished for but didn't see room for in her marriage to Peter. When these women stepped out of heterosexual relations, where the sexual role of women was mainly defined as opposed to men's, they entered a different space for sexual subjectivity in their contact with other women. Connected to Grace Jantzen's argument that women are present in heteronormative religious discourse as objects for male sexuality, but not as subjects (2007)<sup>37</sup>, it could be argued that through these sexual relations, these women come to recognize themselves as autonomous subjects. No longer defined or restricted by expectations where women's sexuality was opposed to men's, together with an idea of sex for procreation, they experience sexuality more fully and autonomously.

Interwoven with these changes in self-image and experience of sexuality, are the aforementioned changes in God's images. The gradual change of a strict God to a loving God is reflected in the idea of sexuality as a central, crucial aspect in their lives and bodies and as something women can and should enjoy, as well when they have sex outside heterosexual marriages. Karlijn for example, a student in her late twenties, feels that her personal relation to God gives her confidence to experiment with sexuality and an open relationship. Although Karlijn feels like this type of relationship is something that can be frowned upon by society, it's not a cause for conflict for herself as she feels supported by her faith. Nienke told me that

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<sup>36</sup> Tr. "*Het was leuk zolang er kinderen kwamen.. en voor de rest was ik opgevoed dat je je man te wille moest zijn. Dus dat deed ik dan. Ja... Maar het deed me verder niks nee. [...]*"

<sup>37</sup> See chapter 1 paragraph 1.1.3 'Sex and Christianity'

even though she asked herself how her sexual orientation stood in relation to religion, she never experienced any problems toward God. And for Dieke, who we started this chapter with, sexuality is nowadays something she can enjoy and in which she can experience God through her body; she can now, now that she is a lesbian, thank God when she comes. All women experience a lot of room to feel pleasure and joy in their love life, something which is in contrast with the social norms they have been raised with. Here, faith is not something separate, but an essential and central element in their experience and practices of love and sex.

## Conclusions

A lot has changed before Dieke could thank God during sex, and an in-depth exploration of these experiences points to many different ideas and experiences of subjectivity. Instead of two opposing spheres, religion and sexuality are interwoven and interconnected in Dieke's construction of subjectivity and practices of the self, which is exemplary for most women. Feeling bodily pleasure during sex with women does not exclude this religious element of the self, but these are instead inseparable. For most women, the feelings of sexual pleasure goes hand in hand with a reclaiming of space in religion, both within her church, but as well her own position vis-à-vis God. I have argued in this chapter that these reflections on their sexual, religious selves are in contrast with the God's image that most experienced in the church they attended during their childhood in which sexuality was presented foremost as functional, either reproductive or as a marital duty to the husband's pleasure in the case of Dieke. By analyzing the experience of God and sex as material and embodied, it has been argued that faith, even in dominant institutions as the PKN, takes place beyond the church, through the body as both personal and relational. What I wish to argue for here, is that in order to understand the narrative of Dieke and others, we need more tools than dominant feminist theory can bring, as this is often based on a secular approach. Rather, religious studies combined with feminist thinking can bring us further to see the many ways in which 'religion'

materializes in everyday practices, and how this is not merely an institutional site of oppression, but can be empowering for women as well. Such a project aims to destabilize the implied secularism in dominant feminist approaches by emphasizing on the importance of religion as materializing source of motivations and inspirations. In any case, experiences of 'religion' are very diverse, complicated and intrinsically connected to gender and sexuality; not only as excluding or oppressive. Following the argument of Jacqui Alexander that spirituality *matters*, the importance of accounting for all these layers of self-reflections, bodily experience and religious practices has been emphasized. These material strategies go beyond a mere notion of coping or otherwise dealing with conflict. This focus on personal experiences of faith and sex does not mean that these women are unaffected by norms and expectations, which is where the next chapter will focus on. By most women, sexual norms are not directly subverted, but are questioned and negotiated in order to claim space for lesbian relationships and sexual pleasure within their church.

Even though some women have struggled with these issues more than other, nowadays during our conversations, all women have a sense of balance. Coming from all these negotiations, self-reflective stances toward church, and practices of lesbian love and sex, we can now understand what is actually said by Dieke when she told me: "*I can now thank God when I come.*"

### 3 – ‘We felt so blessed!’

## Monogamy, marriage and motherhood

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*“The pastor came that evening and asked us, ‘[why won’t you do] a church blessing?’ But it all sounded a bit silly to us... [...] The idea of two brides was too prim and proper for us, we were feminists! So when the pastor came that evening, I told him ‘well... if this isn’t blessed, after fifteen years, I don’t know what is!’ We felt so blessed!”<sup>38</sup>*

[René, 65 yrs]

René told me about the day she legally registered her relationship with Marja. This registration was mostly a practical matter, and the thought of asking for a church blessing did not come to either René’s or Marja’s mind. They did throw a party that same evening, to which the pastor of René’s church paid a visit and asked why they had not asked for a church blessing. The religious language that the pastor uses is the notion of ‘blessing’ by God through the ritual of marriage in church. René responded to the pastor that she felt blessed even without a church wedding, something which to her sounded strange. René uses similar language in her response to her pastor by stating ‘we felt so blessed’, a feeling that was for her not bound to a church ceremony. At the time, René and Marja had been together for fifteen years already. Marja was René’s first female partner after René had been engaged in marriage for ten years during which she gave birth to three children. This previous marriage was solemnized in church, but she did not wish for this again. Through this expression she distances herself from church as the only site which enables a blessing of a relationship. René does not underestimate the importance of blessing, in her case God’s, but she experienced this together with Marja without church rituals.

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<sup>38</sup> Tr. “En toen kwam de dominee naar ons toe en die vroeg, waarom geen kerk inzegening? Maar wij vonden het ook nog een beetje gek. [...] Het idee van tweede bruiden dat vonden wij maar een beetje tuttig. Want wij waren gewoon feministen, dus ja! En toen kwam ‘s avonds die dominee en toen heb ik gezegd tegen hem, ach... Als hier geen zegen op rust, na 15 jaar, dan weet ik het ook niet meer. Wij voelden ons zo gezegend!”

Earlier, I discussed the several ways in which sexuality and religion intersect in the personal sexual lives of non-heterosexual PKN women. For these women, religion is embodied and experienced through their sexual acts and in their bodies. I have also argued that women distance themselves, where needed, from church interpretations of sexuality, regarding their relation toward God as a foremost personal bond. In this previous chapter I elaborated on René's stance toward labels as lesbian or Christian. Instead of feeling the need to '*know what I am*', René found it more important to know what she felt, whom she loved. When René met Marja, she went home with her and, in her words, 'never left'. After fifteen years of being together, they legally registered as partners and years after that they changed this partnership to a marriage at the community hall. Nowadays, René is with Marja for almost 35 years and their relationship is, in their words, still going strong. For René's marriage was a commitment toward Marja, as both a confirmation of their love, and as a practical and legal registration. Both her partnership registration and marriage were rather simple, since both René and Marja felt hesitance to the ritualized elements of marriage. They did not, in René's words, want to be '*two brides*' because they were feminists and she did not want to conform to these '*prim and proper*' ideas. René spend a lot of time in feminist circles of the 1980s and she began to call herself lesbian in this community, her ideas toward marriage were shaped here as well, as '*silly*' and heterosexual. The religious element of the ritual of marriage, like church blessings, was not as important to René as her personal bond to Marja. Why then, did René eventually partner register with Marja, and even decided to get married? Both experienced a lot of joy that day, and René added that marriage even brought their relationship to another, more spiritual, level. What is this spiritual level for René and how does this stand in relation to her protestant faith? And how is this related to her previous heterosexual marriage? The story of René points to a certain ambivalence toward ideas of marriage, which is similar as other women in this project, and it is on this ambivalence that this chapter focuses on further.

Through a distinction between their personal beliefs and church-given interpretations women as Dieke, Nienke and René find and claim their space in religion, both in their churches as well as in their personal relations vis-à-vis God. Instead of experiencing conflict, an image often first visible in public discourse regarding Christianity and homosexuality in the Netherlands (Hekma 2011)<sup>39</sup>, religion enabled these women to feel sexual pleasure, and to claim their female bodies as sexually autonomous. Although some women dealt with more obstacles than others, all women feel a sort of harmony between personal faith and their lesbian sexuality. Overall, these stories present a rather optimistic view which could easily fall into some linear narrative of sexual liberation; of different ‘steps’ that women have to take in order to achieve this level of harmony and ‘freedom’. To reiterate this linearity, as I hope I have shown, has not been the intention. The informants negotiate religion and sexuality not only on a personal, sexual, embodied level. Rather, they also continue to encounter norms and expectations that they sometimes reject, and sometimes reiterate. Entering church is as such not a homogenous undertaking, but a complicated site in which gender and sexual norms are shaped, questioned, undermined or negotiated. Especially ideas about monogamy, marriage and motherhood appear as relevant, which are for these women connected to their church given interpretation of what it means to be protestant women. Women have their personal ideas of what it means to be a Protestant women, but how do they position themselves in the public/private space of Church? A closer analysis of the position and experience of these women shows the diversity of church communities in relation to sexual and gendered norms. Continuing the argument of this thesis concerning the intersections of religion and sexuality in daily lives, this chapter elaborates on these three issues of monogamy, marriage and motherhood as central features of the daily lives of these women.

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<sup>39</sup> See chapter 1 of this thesis

The first paragraph focuses on one of these sets of norms in the notions of normalcy and monogamy. These women experience sexual pleasure and autonomy in their love lives, yet most women explicitly upheld strong views toward monogamy as essential in relationships and emphasize their normality on the basis of monogamy. These two notions of normalcy and monogamy are not the same, but in the case of these women are connected as a strategy to claim space within church as a faithful lesbian Christian. Secondly, the role of marriage and more specifically the PKN stance toward ‘gay marriage’<sup>40</sup> has become a site of debate in public discourse and politics, affecting the experiences of acceptance among these women as well. The second paragraph of this chapter thus concerns the role of marriage, both same-sex couples as well as previous heterosexual marriages of some informants. In the Netherlands, same-sex couples can legally wed, though these unions are not allowed in all Protestant churches. For some women, this desire to marry results in a change of church, others take matters in their own hands and ask for a church community council, even others decided to only have a civil marriage, or rejected marriage completely. The third paragraph takes another central point in these women’s lives, namely motherhood. These women were often raised with an image of ideal PKN woman as wife and caring mother, and these notions of motherhood continue to shape their lives. Not all women are mothers, but most do have strong views towards this. The wish to become a mother has been the main motivation for some women to enter a heterosexual marriage, while some have children with their female (ex-) partner. A few regarded motherhood as a natural part of what it meant to be a woman, while the whole concept of motherhood is troubling and problematizing for the trans\*people in this project.

This focus on normativity through women’s experiences and perspectives of monogamy, marriage and motherhood, brings our narrative to another level. Not merely personal or

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<sup>40</sup> The term of gay marriage is often used by my informants, which is why I will use this term in this chapter as well, even though there is no legal distinction between gay marriage and heterosexual marriage.

embodied any longer, these are gendered, sexual concepts in relation to church and family structures, although this is not a clear ‘public’ feature alone but shaped through personal relations in their churches. An analysis of the role of these three issues points to the ambivalence and complexity of PKN churches. Though these ideas shape their experience of faith, sex and love, women actively negotiate these norms in many different ways.

### 3.1 Monogamy

*“I am just very normal. Don’t make a big deal out of it...”<sup>41</sup>*

[Evelien, 33 yrs]

When I asked Evelien what she found most important for other people to know about her, she replied that she wanted people to see that she is just very normal, that one should not ‘make a big deal’ of her sexual orientation. What is this ‘normal’ that Evelien refers to? Why is it so important for her to be recognized as such? The emphasis on normality as an assimilationist strategy has been central in many LGBT social movements, with the aim to be recognized as equal a central motivation (Eng 2005, Butler 1993b<sup>42</sup>). Similar words have been used by Evelien, a protestant ciswoman of 33 who describes herself as lesbian and aims to be recognized as normal. In this paragraph, I will explore these claims of normality that Evelien makes, to see how Evelien and other women deal with norms and normativity. Many of the women consciously or unconsciously reiterate some of these normative power discourses in their narratives and perspectives towards sexuality. Besides one informant, Karlijn, all other see the place to enjoy sex strictly a monogamous relationship of trust and love. Evelien even sees the emphasis on monogamy as one of the positive aspects of Christian faith, as faith gives extra value to sexuality by preventing one to “*go from one to another*”. The claim of

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<sup>41</sup> Tr. “*Dat ik ook maar heel normaal bent. Doe niet zo moeilijk!*”

<sup>42</sup> It has mostly been queer studies scholars that have criticized this tendency to LGBT assimilation politics, trying to work against norms and normalization processes. See for example the essay of Butler (1993b) for her critique on normalization which has inspired many queer studies scholars, or see Eng et.al. (2005) for a critical reflection on queer studies.

normality is for Evelien based on her value of monogamy and faithfulness. Evelien emphasizes that she is ‘normal’, *because* her sexuality and her relationships do not differ from heterosexually identified people. This is not a mere reiteration of heterosexual norms, but influenced by her position in church, a place experienced by her as heavy with sexual norms. For Evelien, this emphasis on sameness and equality, through her description of herself as normal, legitimizes her place in church. In many churches, the sexual boundary between proper and improper Christians was built on a distinction between heterosexuals and homosexuals, with the latter considered deviant. By emphasizing on the similarity on the basis of monogamy, Evelien displaces the boundary by explicitly referring to monogamy as symbolical border of the church.

Although this PKN institute is often perceived as homogenous, as well by my informants, there are many different nuances in these experiences as well as policies. For these women, mainstream Protestantism is overall not experienced as sex-negative per definition, but does present strict limits for the spaces in which sexuality can be experienced with pleasure. These spaces are most often heterosexual marriages, which nowadays in the Netherlands are becoming more open to non-heterosexual unions (Bos 2010). Over all, monogamy and, as I will show in the next paragraph marriage, remain central in most church-given perspectives of sexuality. The emphasis on sameness and equality as a strategy by these women to claim space within church is connected to a reiteration of monogamy as norm. These issues come to the front in relation to fellow church members, to church boards and pastors, but as well more indirectly through social control. Many women attend a church within their neighborhood or small town, and see a high level of social control both among the church community, both within and around their church buildings.

For Annelies, who identifies as a lesbian transwoman and is 65 of age, sexuality is important and sexual pleasure an essential part of being human. Similar to Evelien she and others at

some point have to deal with the sometimes paradoxical relation of sexual pleasure and monogamy, and her views could be regarded as exemplary for most participants. She told me:

*“What I do find important is that you can ask the same things of [non-straight] people in relation to faith, but as well of those without faith, as of straight people. That love and faithfulness have to be central in a relationship. I find that very, very, very important. [...] I think that sexuality and the experience of sexuality with each other in a relationship, is a great gift of God.”* [Annelies, 65 yrs]<sup>43</sup>

Annelies carefully states here that non-straight and straight people should share the same values, which mainly concerns a value of monogamy or in Annelies' words; relations of love and faithfulness. These are not only conditions for sexual relations as social interactions, but Annelies adds *'with each other in a relationship'* as the place in which sexuality can be experienced as a gift of God. These requirements are not different for non-heterosexual people as they are for a man and woman in a relationship. Monogamy, faithfulness, love and honesty are essential for sexual relations independent of who enters such a relationship, thus a distinction is made by Annelies between sex out of love, and sex out of lust. Furthermore, sex out of love should result in a one-for-one relationship, which shapes her conceptualization of monogamy as a bond of a one-person relationship based on love and faith. These ways of framing sexual pleasure in a monogamous relationship have been put to the front by many of my informants. The religious background of Annelies plays an important role in her view toward monogamy. She was raised in a reformed orthodox church in which a fear of God was central, as well in her family. God for Annelies was a punishing God, a God who knew everything and gave little room to self-expression or sexual experimentation<sup>44</sup>. In this environment she discovered early on, in her words, that although she was born in a male

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<sup>43</sup> Tr. *“Wat ik dan wel van belang is dat je aan die mensen in relatie tot het geloof, maar ook zonder geloof, eigenlijk dezelfde eisen mag stellen als aan een hetero. Dat liefde en trouw in een relatie moet zijn. Dat vind ik heel erg, heel erg van belang. [...]Ik denk dat seksualiteit en het met elkaar in een relatie seksualiteit beleven, dat dat een groot geschenk van God is.”*

<sup>44</sup> See chapter 2 of this thesis

body, she was not a boy. This had an enormous impact on her life, and she reflects back on this struggle with her gender identity, as she calls it, as a very lonely but harsh struggle. In this loneliness she found strength in God through reading the Bible and prayer and she was therefore never truly alone, even though, as she told me, ‘she left Him for some times’, during her depressions. After years of depression and psychosomatic health issues, Annelies came out as transwoman and her body was modified to fit her self-understandings as a woman almost ten years ago. Annelies was a church elder, both when she still presented herself as a man and as living a woman’s life<sup>45</sup>. However she had to resign this function during her coming-out in her church because this community did not allow women in the church board. After her divorce was finalized, Annelies moved to a small town in one of the Northern provinces, where she enrolled in a reformed church as herself. This church did allow female elders, and she was asked for this function as well, which she accepted after some hesitation. In the context of her strong religious background and her broad personal knowledge of Protestantism, Annelies has clear expectations and ideas of sexuality and religion. Women who seek pleasure outside, or without, a relationship are seen as not having access to sex-as-gift in her perspective. Though some women have a less explicit stance toward monogamy, this plays an important part in their conception of relationships. For most women, the importance of faithfulness in love and sexuality comes from their faith, and their faith is reflected in this emphasis on monogamy. Loyalty toward one’s partner as well as to religion, faithfulness, are connected and strengthened in this process, by which monogamy is not only regarded as something of two people in a relationship, but as well crucial toward God.

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<sup>45</sup> In the PKN, the church elders together with the deacons and pastors form the church council (*kerkenraad*), responsible for the structure, theology and organization of the congregation. Church elders, the amount depending on the size of the community, are mainly responsible for the pastoral work in the community and the wellbeing of the fellow church members. Deacons focus on the help for people in need, both within the community and outside. See the PKN church order, ordinance 3: ‘office and other services’ (het ambt en de andere diensten). Accessible in Dutch on: <http://www.pkn.nl/Lists/PKN-Bibliotheek/Kerkorde-PKN-Ordinantie-03-Het-ambt-en-de-andere-diensten.pdf>, visited July 29 2014.

These women undermine several expectations and social roles, both toward church and religion as institute by creating their own Gods Image, as well as with assigned sexual gender roles through the exploration of one's own body and the experiences of pleasure in the face of God. At the same time the emphasis on normality is present as a strategy to legitimize their subjectivity within church. Where non-heterosexual people are often regarded as deviant, these expressions of monogamy displace this symbolical sexual boundary by creating a distinction between proper and improper Christians on the basis of monogamy and faithfulness. This emphasis on similarity and normality, as connected to monogamous ideals of a one-to-one relationship, is often criticized by queer scholars as being heteronormative (Eng 2005). An institute where heteronormativity is found is marriage, which is yet another central issue of debate among LGBT activists and scholars. Continuing this exploration of norms and expectations, the following paragraph will look at this role of marriage, both in the perspectives of women, but as well through their practices and experiences.

### 3.2 Marriage

One of the issues most debated concerning 'sexual freedom' in the Netherlands, is probably gay marriage. Officially and legally, this change of law in 2001 was an opening up of the institute of marriage to include partners of the same sex, which is often referred to as *homohuwelijk* (gay marriage) in public discourse. A few years after the legal opening up of civil marriage, the PKN collaboration was formed in 2004 (van Rooden 2004, Wallett 2005)<sup>46</sup>. One of the declarations in the fusion between protestant churches was the stance toward gay marriages. They newly formed general PKN council, the synod, decided than each individual church board could decide for itself, after a deliberation in the church community,

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<sup>46</sup> The collaboration of Protestant churches had already started in the early 1960s and 1970s with the 'Samen op Weg' process (translatable as *going together*), a long process by which first *hervormde* and *gereformeerde* churches (Dutch reformed and Reformed churches in the Netherlands) worked together which later on developed into the PKN together with the Lutheran church (Wallett 2005)

whether their church would bless same-sex unions or not<sup>47</sup>. Until now, there are no clear guidelines from the PKN concerning gay marriage, and no overview can be found of churches that allow same sex couples to marry in church. One element of policy that is a requirement for all PKN churches is a written difference between types of blessings for same-sex and heterosexual couples. In Dutch, this is the difference between *inzegenen* and *zegenen*, both translated as blessing in English (Bos 2010). I asked a few Protestant pastors about this difference, but it appears to be unclear what the implications are. According to one female pastor of a large community, this difference has been stated in the synod for the sole purpose of difference, to remain a distinction between heterosexual and homosexual marriages. This is similar to David Bos' reading of this difference, who argues that the synod wanted to maintain the special status of the heterosexual marriage without explaining the meaning of the difference between types of blessing (2010: 20). For the purpose of this chapter, it is especially interesting to note that this distinction exists with an unclear meaning, instead of trying to define the subtle differences between *inzegenen* and *zegenen* as this is unknown to my informants. This diversity of PKN policies is reflected in the experiences of the women I spoke to, for whom marriage, both civil and church, has very different meanings and implications. First is a stance of hesitance toward marriage as institute. Second, most women who have been engaged in a heterosexual marriage do not feel a desire to remarry to a woman because of their experiences with divorce and the meaning of marriage as heterosexual. Third, some women see in their church's stance toward gay marriage a crucial sign of acceptance of their lesbian identity, and actively try to create more space for this acceptance on the site of gay marriage.

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<sup>47</sup> The 2004 ordinance 5 article 4.1 tells: "De kerkenraad kan - na beraad in de gemeente - besluiten dat ook andere levensverbintenissen van twee personen als een verbond van liefde en trouw voor Gods aangezicht kunnen worden gezegend." In English: "The church council can, after community deliberation, decide that other life commitments of two people as a bond of love and faith before the face of God can be blessed as well."

### Equality and distinctions

*“It’s not something of two individuals on an island, but something from inside the group, like ‘we want this, and help us’ ... I like that. That you declare ‘I really want this and will try it with this one, this is the one’<sup>48</sup> [Karlijn, 28 yrs]*

Karlijn’s ideas of marriage, expressed in this statement, reflect a first position toward marriage. She studies theology at a renowned university in one of the largest cities of the country. Where a few years ago she described herself as lesbian, this term is increasingly problematic to her because she feels uncomfortable with the term woman and is discovering different self-identifications as trans\* or queer. Karlijn does not see herself as transgender, but feels at her place in the transcommunity, and refers to herself as “in between” genders, though she continues to explore her self-description because she explains she’s unfamiliar with all the different terms. However, she calls herself ‘she’, which is why I do the same. Because lesbian refers to a relation between two *women*, she rejects this term to describe her own sexuality, going toward queer and intergender. Combined with her personal experiences as well as her readings of queer theology, Karlijn has a clear stance toward marriage. She states that church marriage is not something of two individuals, but a group matter to ask the church community for help in the relationship with the person that is ‘the one’. Karlijn does not see the blessing by God as the most important aspect, as other might regard this. She told me: *“I don’t think that God necessarily gives some extra blessing, that’s not part of my beliefs... I think that God gave his blessing to all humans beforehand.”<sup>49</sup>* Marriage as such, is for Karlijn mainly a ritual before the community and not a question for blessing toward God, as God gave his blessing already to everyone. Although she does see the added value of marriage for the community, in the support and guidance from within church, Karlijn does feel some hesitancy toward the role of gay marriage within the protestant church. This

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<sup>48</sup> Tr: *“dat het niet iets is van twee individuen op een eilandje, maar dat is van in de groep, van wij willen dit en help ons... Ik wel mooi iets. Wel dat je zegt van ik wil het echt met deze probeer, deze is het geworden...”*

<sup>49</sup> Tr: *“ik denk niet dat God dan per se een extra zegen geeft of zo, dat zit bij mij niet bij eentje... Ik denk dat God vooraf aan alle mensen zijn zegen heeft gegeven.”*

hesitancy has to do with the difference between types of blessing, which I pointed to before. For Karlijn, a distinction remains between heterosexual and non-heterosexual PKN marriages, which is a distinction of inequality by which ‘gay marriage’ remains secondary:

*“That’s [written] in the synod. Like even if you wed, you can only bless [zegen] them. No one really knows the difference, between blessing [zegenen] and blessing [inzegenen], but it is written down as a clear distinction. So it means that there is a distinction.”*<sup>50</sup> [Karlijn, 28 yrs]

For Karlijn, this difference between possible blessing ceremonies results in hesitancy toward church marriage, as she argues that for as long as this distinction remains, inequality and exclusion takes place in regard to relationships. Ellen has a similar stance toward marriage. Ellen is a lesbian ciswoman of 48 and currently living together with another woman. Ellen has written down her will at a notary to ensure the position of her partner after separation or untimely death, but does not see any added value of marriage or partnership to this. This is as well influenced by loss in her family. Marriage for her is a family celebration, but this would be an event of grief as well and she feels like her wedding would never be a happy celebration alone. She explained to me that *if* she would marry, it would feel strange still:

*“I would think it’s just not right. Just like registered partnership, that’s so insane to me... Hello! Either you’ll get married, or you won’t, one of the two...”*<sup>51</sup> [Ellen, 48 yrs]

Ellen has actively engaged in politics, first as leftist political activist. After she discovered that there is still a lot to gain in the area of LGBT acceptance, she became active in this particular political field as well, for example in creating online networks for lesbian Christian women, which I will focus on more in the next chapter. Ellen rejects church marriage because to her, it is not equal to her because of the difference between types of blessing. Marriage for both Ellen and Karlijn is mostly a ritual, a celebration, and less so a confirmation of their

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<sup>50</sup> Tr. “Maar bij de PKN kerken, omdat dat in de synode staat. Van ook al trouw je, je mag ze alleen zegenen. Niemand weet echt wat het verschil is, tussen inzegenen en zegenen maar het staat er wel echtals een duidelijk verschil. Dus dan is er een verschil.”

<sup>51</sup> Tr. “Net zoals geregistreerd partnerschap, dat vond ik ook zoiets gestoord... Hallo van je gaat trouwen, of niet, een van de twee...”

relationships toward God. Church ceremonies can be a way to express this love for the community, but both women are hesitant toward this ritual of marriage because they sense an inequality. Because of the distinctions in PKN policy between gay marriage and heterosexual marriage, they regard PKN marriage unequal, preferring not to marry as long as this distinction remains, even though it is unclear what this distinction actually implies. Other women who do not marry take a less political stance but draw on their personal experiences with heterosexual marriage as reason not to marry their female partners.

### Heterosexual experiences

*“My mother experienced severe difficulties accepting me as a lesbian and my father toward the idea that [Peter and I] would split up. And I’d never seen my father cry, so that touched me. I expected my mother to throw a fit, but it was really hard for me to see my father cry.”<sup>52</sup>*

[Dieke, 53 yrs]

When Dieke told her parents that she and Peter would split up, her mother was mostly upset with Dieke being a lesbian. Her relation with her mother had never been well, so Dieke anticipated this response. However, her father found the element of divorce most difficult to handle. Marriage according to him was a God blessed bond that should not be broken, something which Dieke did no longer agree with. For her father, marriage was a mostly religious concern, something that was expected to last in the face of God. During her youth the ideal image of a protestant woman that Dieke was confronted with was that of a loving, caring wife and mother. And so she married Peter in her early twenties because, in her words, she wanted to become a mother. According to Dieke, she had been rather passive during her marriage, not taking much initiative while giving Peter most responsibilities. This continues to be a point of internal conflict for Dieke and she still finds it difficult to forgive her own role

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<sup>52</sup> Tr. *“Mijn moeder vond het het ergste dat ik lesbisch was, en mijn vader dat we uit elkaar gingen... En ik heb mijn vader nog nooit zien huilen, dus dat deed me wel wat. Dat mijn moeder het een drama zou vinden dat had ik wel verwacht, maar dat mijn vader ging huilen dat vond ik moeilijk.”*

in this marriage and blames herself for not getting out of it earlier. Although she now wishes she had made some different decisions about en during her marriage, she has no regrets about this. Nevertheless, her experience with divorce makes her careful toward entering another marriage, with perhaps her current partner Mina. For Dieke, marriage is connected to this idea of heterosexuality, of obligations instead of pleasure in relation to images from her childhood onward that limited the ideal of PKN woman to a heterosexually married mother. Though Dieke does not reject marriage for same-sex couples in general, she does not feel the need or desire to engage in another marriage herself. This is similar to René's ideas, who in the beginning of this chapter stated '*we felt so blessed!*' where she referred to her partnership registration with Marja outside of church ceremonies. René had been married to a man as well, and gave birth to three children in this marriage. After fifteen years of having a relationship after her divorce, René and Marja partner registered. However, this legal partnership stands separate from church. By her response to the pastor in which she refused a church blessing, she does not reject faith but claims her space within Protestantism beyond official rituals. For Dieke and René, relationships are not about the rituals but about the relation itself. For both women, this perspective has been influenced by their own heterosexual experiences and their associations of marriage with heterosexual expectations and institutions. Nevertheless, René did decide to marry Marja eventually. Describing her ambivalent experiences with marriage, René told me:

*"We found the registered partnership strange, because we thought we were imitating straight people [hetero's]. [...] We ourselves found it weird. Everyone from the outside thought it was very normal. But... you can't just imitate straight people, that's silly... [...] And I still can't say 'my wife', it sounds so strange. I think it sounds so hetero!"*<sup>53</sup> [René, 65 yrs]

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<sup>53</sup> Tr. "Met de partnerregistratie dat we gek vonden, omdat we vonden dat we hetero's na deden. [...] Wij vonden het zelf gek. Iedereen, kijk van buitenaf vonden ze dan heel normaal. Maar je gaat toch niet een hetero nadoen, dat is toch raar... [...] En ik kan ook nog 'mijn vrouw' nooit uit mijn mond krijgen, ik vind het zo raar, ik vind het zo hetero klinken!"

For René and her partner Marja, although they eventually did partner register and did get a civil marriage, it felt strange to ‘imitate straight people’. The meaning of registered partnership, which they later changed to a marriage status, was initially a practical one because they wanted to buy a house together. It was as well a reason for a party and celebration, but for René this had nothing to do with religion, something which she described as a mostly individual desire and wish.

So far, the women’s stories point to a distinction between civil union, personal relationships and ritualized church blessings. All women do see themselves as blessed, and therefore their relationship as such, with church rituals either as imitations of heterosexuality, as still unequal for non-heterosexual couples, or as burden filled with expectations. For other women however church marriage is wished for and can even become a strategy to open up the debate in churches, to create space for lesbian relationships.

#### Church weddings as site of acceptance

*“I’ve had a registered partnership with Claire. Back then you couldn’t get married, that was later. Actually it was very basic; I wanted to make sure that she would be taken care of if I died. [...] So it wasn’t... it didn’t really have any deeper meaning. While [Eefje and I] want to get married as well, and that truly feels... That I want to confirm our love, so to say. Eefje is so much different than my former relationships.”<sup>54</sup> [Astrid, 45 yrs]*

In her previous relationship with Claire, Astrid registered her partnership. For her, this was mostly a practical matter to ensure her support in case of her death. This registration, Astrid tells, did not really have any deeper meaning to her, similar to the experiences of Dieke, Ellen and René in the previous paragraph. Astrid’s current relationship with Eefje is in contrast to

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<sup>54</sup> Tr. “Ik heb met Claire een geregistreerd partnerschap gehad. Want toen kon je nog niet trouwen, dat kwam daarna uit... Nou, eigenlijk was het heel basaal, ik wilde er gewoon voor zorgen dat als ik overleefd dat ze dan goed achterbleef. [...] Dus het was niet, verder eigenlijk niet echt een diepgaande betekenis... Terwijl als Eefje’s huis verkocht is zegmaar dan willen wij samen ook gaan trouwen dat voelt dan wel echt heel erg... Dat ik gewoon mijn liefde wil bezegelen zal ik maar zeggen. Eefje is echt.. daar zo anders in dan mijn voorgaande relaties.”

her partnership with Claire. With Eefje, she does want to get married, not out of practical reasons, but to confirm their love, to add this deeper meaning that she did not experience before. In her relation with Claire, Astrid experienced partnership mostly a civil union, without including religion or faith in this registration. With Eefje however, she does feel that they are blessed, together in a relation with God as Astrid told in the previous chapter, and they do desire to get married in a few months. Astrid and Eefje are both religious and feel welcome as a couple in their church; this is the place they wish to get married as well. For other women, this is not such an evident factor. I wrote before that the PKN policy gives the responsibility and decision to, or to not, wed same-sex couples to the church boards in relation to the church community. While this complicates the clarity of Protestant's stances toward 'gay marriage', it gives some room as negative positions can be challenged from within the churches themselves. A few women I spoke to who had been in a church that did not solemnize non-heterosexual marriages actively asked a church community meeting to discuss the issue of marriage. Evelien is one of these women. For Evelien, the stance toward lesbian marriages was a breaking point for her activity in the church when she was asked to become a church elder. Although she was single at the time and did not see herself marrying in the near future, she did ask whether this would be possible in her church, in order to understand what her position in the community was as a lesbian woman. She explained:

*"I said, 'first I want to know if I can marry there.' They had a community council about it, about the blessing of so called different kind of marriages. And I told them I'd wait for that before doing my confirmation. I didn't go there, I didn't want to be there. Eventually they decided that the church is for the blessing different kind of relations. Well, I then told them I'd do my confirmation, so I did. It gave me a feeling like 'yeah, I'm really welcome here.'"<sup>55</sup>*

[Evelien, 33 yrs]

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<sup>55</sup>Tr. "Binnen de gemeente werd ik toen gevraagd als ouderling. En toen, ik had geen belijdenis gedaan. Toen zei ik ik wil dan eerst weten dat ik er kan trouwen. Toen kwam er een gemeente beraad over, over het inzegenen van anderssoortige huwelijken. En toe zei ik nou daar wacht ik op voordat ik belijdenis ga doen. Daar ben ik toen ook niet heen geweest. Daar wilde ik niet bij zijn. Nou toen hebben besloten dat de PKN [plaats] voor het

Evelien makes the connection here between her feelings of belonging, of being welcome, in her church and the possibility of marriage. This activity in the church is both visible in her position as church elder, but as well in her confirmation ceremony, which in the PKN implies a conscious declaration of faith in the community after which one becomes a full participating member of the church. One prerequisite to have her confirmation ceremony and to become a church elder, so to declare herself belonging in this church, was the opinion from the church toward gay marriage. Instead of asking for this directly to the church board, she took advantage of the possibilities of the PKN policy and called for a community council<sup>56</sup>. After the positive decision that they would allow the blessing of ‘different kind of relations’, which is PKN terminology, Evelien felt accepted and did her confirmation. As such, the allowance of blessings of same-sex couples, in the future herself and a female partner, confirmed her position in the church. For Evelien, this stance toward such marriages was a sign of acceptance. Nienke asked for a similar council in church at the moment that she wished to get married to a woman. Nienke was initially a member of a church in which the community had voted against blessings of same-sex couples in marriage. When she and Anne decided to get married, they did not go to the church board of this particular church again, but went and asked in a different community. Besides her and Anne’s civil union, they found it important to ask God’s blessing of their marriage in a protestant service. Nienke described this process as follows:

*“We realized it was a special situation, but we still asked if it would be possible from their community. And we wrote as well that we intended to join the church. [...] That I can marry*

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*inzingen van andersoortige relaties is. Nou toen zei ik nou dan wil ik wel belijdenis doen dat heb ik ook gedaan. Ja, dat was gaf wel een gevoel van ja ik mag hier ook echt zijn.”*

<sup>56</sup> In a community council, the congregation together discusses a topic without having an established opinion beforehand and on which the church council can base their policy. All church members have an equal voice, and these councils often end with a voting. The PKN published pastoral guidelines for specific community councils on the topic of non-heterosexual marriages in which they emphasize the importance of having an honest, respectful dialogue within the community and give several possible perspectives on this issue. This guide is in Dutch with the title: *“Hebben zij uw zegen? Handreiking voor het gemeenteberraad over het zegenen van levensverbintenissen anders dan man en vrouw”*, accessible on [www.pkn.nl](http://www.pkn.nl), visited July 29 2014.

*in my church? Yes, that's important to me, but at the same time not... Because in the [former church], there they don't do it, but there are many... you know, there are some homosexual couples. And to ask the church's blessing is a step too far, but [homosexual couples] are accepted anyway. So to that extent, I didn't really have any problems there... I felt at home there and felt accepted.”*<sup>57</sup>[Nienke, 43 yrs]

Here an interesting comparison can be made between Nienke and Evelien. While both women asked the communities whether they could get married, they did it with different motivations. The feeling of belonging and acceptance that Evelien searched through the stance toward lesbian marriage was experienced by Nienke in the church she previously attended. Even though they didn't allow the blessing of same-sex couples in that community, Nienke did feel at home and accepted there. Only when she wanted to marry Anne in a church ceremony, this rejection of her church became a motivation to seek another church. With this new church, the stance toward marriage did become the precondition as to whether they would join this community, because they wished to get married at that time. Instead of a sign of acceptance for herself as a lesbian woman, as in the case of Evelien, this was a condition for the entrance of Nienke and Anne as a couple, as a married and blessed couple. This was eventually allowed and they did get married in this new church. Nienke had two children with Anne, who were baptized in their church as well. I already mentioned that all women who had been in heterosexual marriages, René, Lillian, Dieke, Edith, all had children, and both Astrid and Nienke became mothers in a lesbian relationship. So, coming from all these different backgrounds, both in relationships but as well as in church, it should not be a surprise that motherhood has very different meanings for these women as well. These issues are further

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<sup>57</sup> Tr. “*dat we wel beseften van het is een bijzondere situatie, maar dan ook wel vragen of het vanuit hun wijkgemeente zou kunnen. En daar ook al bijgeschreven dat we van plan waren om ook bij de kerk wel te gaan meedraaien. Nou... dat ik mijn kerk zou kunnen trouwen? Ja dat vind ik wel belangrijk zeg maar maar vonden het toch ook weer niet... Zoals in de [vorige kerk] daar doen ze het niet maar ze zijn er, er zijn er wel veel, of na ja veel er zijn er wel een aantal homoseksuele stellen. En een zegen vragen vanuit de kerk dat is dan een stap te ver maar wordt wel gewoon verder geaccepteerd. Dus in die zin had ik daar ook niet zo heel veel problemen mee. En ik voelde me daar ook op zich wel thuis ik voelde me daar wel geaccepteerd.*”

complicated by the stories of the two trans\* participants of this project, for whom their gender identity troubles the notion of what a ‘mother’ actually is, or should be.

### 3.3 Motherhood

*“With Eefje I truly wish for it [having a child] myself because... that does feel like... I could see that as an extension of our love, even though there would be nothing genetically mine in it, I would experience it that way.”<sup>58</sup>*

[Astrid, 45 yrs]

In the previous paragraph, I wrote about Astrid’s current relationship as experienced different from her former registered partnership with Claire. In her previous relationship Astrid became a mother. This was mainly, Astrid told, because her partner Claire had the desire to become a mother, Astrid herself did not feel this need directly. One condition to have a child with Claire was that she did not have to give birth herself, something which she never desired and refused with Claire. Now both mother of a 10 year old daughter, Astrid and Claire are separated. Although she feels completely her daughter’s mother, she did admit that *“with [Claire], I think it was mostly an escape to want to become a mother”<sup>59</sup>*. Her relationship with Claire was difficult at that time, as Claire had selfish tendencies and did not take Astrid’s feelings into account. A child would then be something to love, giving Astrid the possibility to experience love within her relationship. Astrid experiences her current relationship with Eefje in stark contrast to her time with Claire. In the last chapters I wrote about her stance toward marriage, of her threefold relationship with Eefje, God and herself and her feeling of commitment. This deeply felt connection with Eefje have brought a desire to become a mother to Astrid herself. She told me that she wishes it *‘for myself’*, as an *‘extension of our love’*, which is rather different than her first experience with motherhood. The child with Eefje would be a child

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<sup>58</sup> Tr. *“Met Eefje wil ik het zelf gewoon echt omdat... Daar voelt het wel heel erg... Dat zou ik wel echt als een verlengstuk van onze liefde kunnen zien, ook al zou er niets genetisch van mij inzitten zou ik dat wel heel erg als zodanig ervaren.”*

<sup>59</sup> Tr: *“Nee bij Claire, ik denk dat het bij haar meer een vlucht was om moeder te willen worden”*

born out of love, not out of expectations or escapes. Even though she still has now desire to carry a child herself, thus there would be nothing genetically 'hers' in it, she would experience it as completely her child.

Motherhood is a complicated matter on the feminist agenda, both politically as well as in academia (Bordo 1993, Thornham 2000, Braidotti 2011)<sup>60</sup>. The pressing normative images of woman as caregiver, wife and mother, have been questioned and challenged by feminist scholars and activists, yet continue to shape images of ideal PKN womanhood. Many women I spoke to do experience a desire to become a mother. How than to approach these statements by Astrid? Is motherhood necessarily a bodily experience, a social confirmation, a political project? This framework is already troubled by Astrid's experiences. She does want to become a mother, but does not feel a desire to carry a child herself. For her, motherhood is not connected to her own body, so becoming a mother in that sense, challenges the often heard feminist perspective toward motherhood as sacrifice of the female body (Bordo 1993). Nevertheless, she would feel, and does so with her daughter now, completely mother. This desire to become a mother again came in her relation with Eefje. Some women have had this desire existed entering into a relationship. For some even, such as Dieke, the wish for motherhood was the main reason to enter a heterosexual marriage. This is as well shaped by expectations from her family and social environment, in which motherhood was idealized as greatest aim for a woman for Dieke. Some women have had children in a heterosexual marriage, while lesbian motherhood could have different meanings and implications for protestant women.

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<sup>60</sup> The field of continental feminist philosophy and poststructuralist theory has focused specifically on the role of the mother in psychoanalytical theory. Because of the density and complexity of this theoretical field, which is not directly relevant for the purpose of this research, I will not go into this issue here. It should be noted however that motherhood as a concept, psychoanalytical, philosophical or qualitative has been a major focus point of feminist academia. See for example the works of Bracha Ettinger and Julia Kristeva.

In order to understand these intersections between motherhood, religion and lesbian sexuality, it is valuable to look at the experiences of Hanneke. Hanneke is a lesbian ciswoman of 55 who is a member of a rather conservative PKN church. When she discovered her lesbian feelings, she initially refrained from acting upon these. Now, after twenty years, she told her story in her church and to her family, and no longer excludes the possibility of a relationship<sup>61</sup>. What she found most difficult to accept, and continues to grieve nowadays, is that she never became a mother:

*“That was crystal clear to me, if you’re lesbian, you cannot enter a relationship with a woman. It’s not allowed, so as well no children... and that has always been hard for me, but I stood by it completely. And... I consciously experienced that feeling as mourning process, that you will not become a mother. [...] I’d want to relive those years, now you’re too old to become a mother. But sometimes I would like to relive those years in order to make the decision again. And I’m not sure yet what I’d have done... No, it could have been completely different...”*<sup>62</sup>[Hanneke, 55 yrs]

It was clear to Hanneke that because she was a lesbian, she had to remain single, and therefore could not become a mother. Motherhood had been something she wished for a long time and her lesbian sexuality for her excluded that. Hanneke felt she could not enter a relationship because of her religious beliefs mostly, because it was sinful to do so. Motherhood had always been something she wished for, as she later told me that she felt from within that, as a woman, she wanted to give life. With Hanneke, we see that not only her wish to become a mother was shaped in this church environment, but as well her decision to *not* become a mother, and the mourning process that followed this decision. Now that she is open for a relationship, she feels like she is too old to become a mother and regrets her initial decision even more. She

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<sup>61</sup> See as well chapter 2, paragraph 1 ‘sexual religious selves’ of this thesis

<sup>62</sup> Tr. “Maar voor mij stond dat toen als een paal boven water, als je lesbisch bent kan je geen relatie met een vrouw aangaan, het mag niet, en dus ook geen kinderen en dat heb ik wel altijd moeilijk gevonden, maar ik stond er wel helemaal achter. En... Ik heb dat echt heel bewust als een rouwproces gevoel ervaren toen ook, van dan word je dus geen moeder. [...] Ik zou die jaren weer over willen doen, ja nu ben je te oud om moeder te worden. Maar soms zou ik nu die jaren weer over willen doen om opnieuw die keuze te kunnen maken. Dan weet ik nog niet wat ik had gedaan. Nee, het zou wel eens heel anders geweest kunnen zijn. ....”

would even want to relive *'those years'* because she would have possibly made a different decision. Hanneke is the only woman I spoke to who has had this particular struggle with motherhood, in which the motivations and reasons behind these decisions are deeply personal, embodied and shaped by personal religion as well as church and societal norms. Although Hanneke, Dieke and Astrid have very different conceptions and ideas about motherhood, they all position this on the female body, even though Astrid disconnects her own body from childbirth. For the two trans\* participants of this project, the whole notion of motherhood becomes more complicated because of their different gender identifications.

Lillian, who gave birth to four children, is 46 years of age and lives in a small town in the Dutch 'Bible belt', in a conservative and orthodox protestant town. Lillian, who does not come from this town and was raised Catholic, is currently married to a man of the town and lives here. Recently, Lillian came out as a transman a few years after coming out as a lesbian. Nowadays, Lillian lives as a woman still, and feels stuck in this conservative environment<sup>63</sup>. Experiences of another town member who was 'caught' as transwoman and bullied away shape Lillian's perception of this town as unsafe and transphobic. This person presented as a man in town but as woman when entering the gay scene in Amsterdam. One night, she was caught by fellow town members and harshly bullied and nowadays no longer lives in this community. In a place where women are already looked upon when not wearing the proper outfit, which is long skirts and high collars, the implications of her publicly living as a man would, according to Lillian, be enormous. When I asked her what it was like to become a mother<sup>64</sup>, she replied that it was traumatic and horrible all four times. Her body has never felt like her own, but she became even more disconnected from her body during pregnancy, which

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<sup>63</sup> When I asked how to refer to Lillian, she told me that she preferred the female pronoun, as she visibly lives as a woman and now has not made up her mind as to what extent she wishes to live as a man. The pseudonym of Lillian is of her choosing as well.

<sup>64</sup> This conversation took place during our break without audio recordings, which is why I don't have the exact transcriptions

she regarded mostly as obligatory duty of a woman, something which she, then, defined herself as. Relieve came when her uterus was surgically removed due to health issues and she no longer had to bear children. Not having sexual intercourse was then justified because it was no longer necessary, or possible, to have children out of her marriage. She had never enjoyed sex with her husband, but felt obliged to do so because of her role as wife and the pressure to have children. Her husband knows about her struggles, but for the sake of her children, and as well out of fear toward the community, Lillian does not wish to divorce her husband at the moment of writing.

Annelies did divorce her wife after her coming out as transwoman. Because Annelies lived many years presenting as man and as a father, her relation toward her three children is complicated. Annelies had been married to a woman for thirty-five years, something which she looks back on with gratitude. Although her, then, wife accepted and supported her, Annelies' three children found her gender reassignment trajectory more difficult to deal with, and the contact that Annelies has with them became scarce. Now, after a few years of living as herself, her daughter and two sons begin to accept her as a woman, but do not see her as their second mother: *"You know, every now and then he starts saying 'Annelies'. Very occasionally he says it. And my eldest sometimes says 'pams', like a combining of papa and mama..."*<sup>65</sup> This change from father alone to a combining of papa and mama has been very important to Annelies. After her coming-out, she had a double feeling of relieve of being acknowledged as a woman, but as well of fear of losing her job, her family and her friends. To some extent, this did take place; Annelies moved to another province, she and her wife got divorced and she lost her job. However, in this process, Annelies told me that she never lost God. Because as well her family and her children did not accept her as woman, though her

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<sup>65</sup> Tr. *"Weet je, af en toe begint hij ook Annelies te zeggen. Heel af en toe zegt hij het nou wel. En mijn oudste zegt nog wel eens anders, een soort samentrekking van papa en mam..."*

wife did, this period was very lonely. In this time, she found strength in her faith and tries to give this to her children as well. Nowadays, she sees herself as transwoman, lesbian and Christian, three elements that are not in conflict, but rather in good harmony. This self-acceptation influences her position toward her children who still find it difficult to accept Annelies as woman, let alone as lesbian mother.

## Conclusions

The women that I spoke to in this project all have different conceptions of motherhood and marriage, shaped by their personal beliefs and by expectations from within their families and churches, in which monogamy and faithfulness remains a central feature. Throughout this chapter, I have focused on gender and sexual norms as constructed within church as well as by personal experience. This diversity refuses a generalization of what it means to be a Dutch protestant woman, but does give an elaboration of the several meanings and strategies that women can have to reposition themselves as a female PKN member in relation to their own body as well as the body of the church. Even when they refuse, for example, church marriage, this does not result in a rejection of personal faith and when they are not allowed to marry in their church, some women actively try to change this from within, or seek another community where they do feel welcome. René feels blessed without a church blessing ceremony; Astrid has a wish to become a mother without the desire to carry a child herself and Evelien focuses on equality to question the church position toward lesbian sexuality. Some women struggle with these boundaries between the personal and public more than others, as in the case of Hanneke, for whom motherhood was excluded because of her lesbian feelings. Others reject their heterosexual marriages while simultaneously feeling gratitude for this because of their children, as the case of Dieke. Yet all women show a sense of creativity, of strategic negotiation between expectations from the church and personal desire. Where the first chapter took an approach from the personal, embodied, sexual religious self, this chapter examined

how these selves are negotiated and contested in church, family and in perspectives of personal expectations. This position is far from homogenous, as both experiences of these women as well as their church communities are very diverse and have different options and openness toward non-normative sexualities. This position is foremost one of ambivalence, and in this chapter I have analyzed this ambivalence in relation to these sexual norms as sites in which religion and sexuality intersect while being negotiated and contested simultaneously. The following chapter takes yet another turn to see in what ways these women relate to broader networks, both religious as well as LGBT, or in some cases networks for lesbian religious women.

## 4 – ‘Stand up in society’

### Visibility, social networks and changing churches

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*“I can stand up in society in this way. And I won’t draw back, I don’t think about what people might think of me, and so on... And I think well, let’s talk about it. I think we’re all grownups, so come on. Ask your questions, just do it, try to become as brave as I am.”*

[Annelies, 65 yrs]<sup>66</sup>

Annelies told me that she feels like she is rather easily recognizable as a transwoman because of her appearance and low pitch voice. She also senses that because of this visibility, her presence alone can bring up questions and discussions within church and beyond. Instead of being a reason to then hide an aspect of herself, Annelies regards this visibility as an added value and wishes to help people who are having difficulty with their sexuality, gender identity or faith. In being present and visible, her she feels like she is already claiming space without needing to be explicit about her sexuality. She does not hide or disguise these elements of herself, but she shows that she can ‘*stand up in society*’ as herself, but she wants other people to be open about this as well, to ask questions to her straight away. As a transwoman, her relation to Protestant faith has been the issue of struggle and discussion, both personally as well as in her church. Nowadays, she stands up in society; she does not hide and has a sense of harmony instead of conflict. Annelies needed a lot of courage to stand up in this way while not rejecting either her religion, nor her lesbian sexuality or gender identity, as she calls it herself. In this process, Annelies has provided support to others, but has gotten a lot of

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<sup>66</sup>Tr. “*Dat ik op deze manier in de samenleving kan staan. En dat ik me niet terugtrekt, en dat ik niet denk van wat zullen ze nou denken enzovoorts enzovoorts... En dan denk ik nou kom op we praten er van over. We zijn allemaal volwassen mensen denk ik, kom. Stel je vragen maar, doe maar, wordt maar net zo moedig als dat ik ben.*”

support through social networks herself as well. This mainly took place through a network of transpeople, but as well among her friends and in her church.

Scholars as Suhraiya Jivraj and Gert Hekma have argued that Dutch discourse concerning LGBT rights often puts great emphasis on sexual freedom connected to visibility, in which a secular narrative of liberation is central (Jivraj 2011, Hekma 2004:127, Hekma and Duyvendak 2011). These secularized LGBT organizations can play a large role in politics. For example the largest organization COC<sup>67</sup> falls under the ministry of Education, Culture and Science (*OCW*) and has a strong lobby in politics. It appears that these types of organizations are accepted when aligning with secularist ideals (Hekma 2004). In the past, the COC has foregrounded issues concerning Christianity and Islam on their agenda. This mainly concerns a negative perspective toward religion, in which Christianity is presented as institutional, repressive and standing in the way toward sexual freedom<sup>68</sup>. Besides these political projects against sex-negativity in religious institutes, there are some organizations and groups, some COC initiated, that are specifically directed at religious LGBT's<sup>69</sup>. These two developments of first an outspoken negativity toward religion as institute from mainstream LGBT organizations, and secondly a founding of groups specifically for religious LGBT's can be seen as two sides of the same coin. Most of these platforms position religious homosexuals as in-between, with a focus on dealing with conflict. This representation of Christian homosexuality reiterates the idea that religion is intrinsically intolerant toward LGBT sexuality, which is a narrative that is complicated by this research. All these processes

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<sup>67</sup> See [www.coc.nl/engels](http://www.coc.nl/engels). The COC (abbreviated from *Cultuur-en Ontspanningscentrum*) is officially called "Federation of Dutch associations for the integration of homosexuality COC Netherlands" (*De Federatie van Nederlandse Verenigingen tot Integratie van Homoseksualiteit COC Nederland*). This organization exists since 1946 and considers itself the oldest active LGBT association worldwide.

<sup>68</sup> In 2011, a nation-wide debate was started concerning the 'weigerambtenaar' (translatable as refusing officiant). This considered a 2007 government policy that allowed officiants, who are officially employed by the government, to refuse to wed same-sex couples on the basis of religious beliefs. This issue caused a lot of resistance in liberal parties but as well from the COC. The COC made the abolishment of this possibility one of their central aims, and in June 2014 the government put an end to the phenomenon of the 'weigerambtenaar'. See <http://www.coc.nl/politiek-2/coc-gelukkig-met-afschaffing-weigerambtenaar>, visited July 30 2014, and (Ganzevoort 2011).

<sup>69</sup> See <http://www.coc.nl/thema/geloof-cultuur>, visited July 29 2014

together make up the landscape of contemporary Dutch LGBT organizing and politics that the women in this current research move in. Where in the first chapter their personal relation to God was central, and in the second their relation to norms, this chapter will look at relations that women have in, with and around social networks. This chapter thus aims to show how women enter relations with social networks and groups while as well paying attention to their position in church. It will be argued that these women actively and consciously aim to change the social landscape they move in to create and claim space for themselves and for other non-normative PKN members. In order to understand this movement in public spheres of social networks, this chapter will first analyze the role of visibility for these women by focusing on their experiences and ideas of coming out as lesbian in different spaces. Secondly, this chapter looks at the practices of social networks in which motivations, practices and political views are analyzed. After elaborating on the motivations and practices concerning social networks, the third paragraph takes the expectations and changes that these women experience or envision as starting point. How do they see their churches changing? How is this related to the PKN structure? And what role do they give themselves in this process? In the relations that these women enter in their social life, religion and sexuality are interwoven, as they give meaning to their everyday life in relation to other women, Christians, lesbians, or lesbian PKN women. Though never disguised, some elements are expressed more than others by these women, depending on the circumstances. In short, in this final chapter it is argued that these women creatively move boundaries of the public space of religion and sexuality as social, personal and political elements of their lives by claiming space as lesbian protestant women.

## 4.1 Coming out as lesbian-protestant

*“I still thought in terms of will they accept it. And I felt that they had to know quickly. Because I do not want to enter a relationship with someone who doesn’t accept it, so it had to be told right away. Just people... colleagues, people in the bus... everyone I spoke to!”<sup>70</sup>*

[René, 65 yrs]

After René first came out as a lesbian woman, something which she considers as a rather uncomplicated, smooth process of ‘becoming lesbian’<sup>71</sup>, she told people about her sexuality rather quickly. Even though René does not recall any personal struggles combining her sexuality and religion, at first she did find it important that people knew about her sexual orientation. While other women do not often speak about their lesbian sexuality, some, like René, found it important to express right away as a precondition for entering a social relation. She found it especially important that people ‘knew’ in the first years after her initial coming out, as a way to know how their relationship would proceed. Would this other person, ‘colleagues, people in the bus, everyone I spoke to’, respond negatively to her self-identification as lesbian, she would not engage further with this person. Being open about her lesbian sexuality thus created several moments of coming-out, in which the response of the other person was for René a precondition for entering a social relationship. Nowadays, she does not feel the need to tell people about her lesbian sexuality anymore, because she feels like her relationship with Marja will speak for itself. Marja and René often go together to a service in her church, and she feels like fellow church members know without her needing to explicitly speak out about her lesbian identity. Moreover, she does not experience negativity from within her church. Similar to René, most women in this research do not see one central point as their coming-out as lesbian, but see this as a gradual process. They continue to

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<sup>70</sup> Tr. *“Ik dacht toen ook nog, denk ik toch wel in termen van accepteren ze het wel. En ik dacht, ze moeten het snel weten. Want ik wil niet een relatie met iemand aangaan die het niet accepteert. Dus het moest snel verteld worden. Gewoon, collega’s, mensen in de bus... Iedereen met wie ik praatte.”*

<sup>71</sup> See chapter 2 paragraph 2 ‘Sexual Religious Selves’ of this thesis.

navigate through life with several moments of openness of both their sexuality as well as their religion. Instead of seeing either as a mere private aspect of their life, both are private as well as public concerns and influence the social relations of these women outside their church or homes.

The women in this project all navigate through their social life with different experiences and perspectives toward coming out as lesbian. During their childhood, most women did not encounter any positive images of lesbian women. Dieke and Edith did have examples of homosexual men, but these were not positive examples. Edith explained:

*“I didn’t have any examples of lesbians, there were examples of homosexual men in the sense that they were of course all TV-figures, and there was nothing good about that. So it was not good to belong to that group. No... no. And I didn’t know any lesbian women at all, definitely not.”* [Edith, 72 yrs]<sup>72</sup>

Edith was raised in a church where sexuality was not a topic of discussion. Where Edith was presented with ideas of male homosexuality, this was mainly as sinful and as lacking anything ‘good’. She did not know lesbian women at all, in person or in images. It was only later on in her life that she discovered the term lesbian, when she was in her twenties, and encountered different perspectives to homosexuality as not something sinful or evil, but as potentially loving and sexual. Most other women did not have any positive examples of homosexuality growing up. When this was spoken of, in church, family or at school, it was often about male homosexuality as sinful and immoral. Lesbian sexuality however was often invisible and it was only later in life that these women discovered the meanings of the word ‘lesbian’. Edith is the eldest of the participants, and grew up in a time where she hardly found any images of homosexuality besides these condemnations, and did not know any lesbian women. For

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<sup>72</sup> Tr. “Ik had geen voorbeelden van lesbiennes, en ik had in die zin voorbeelden van homoseksuele mannen in die zin dat het allemaal... dat waren natuurlijk allemaal tv figuren en dat deugde ook geen hout van. Dus het was nou ook niet leuk om daarbij te horen. Nee... nee. En lesbische vrouwen die kende ik helemaal niet, kende ik absoluut niet.”

Karlijn on the contrary, who is the youngest participant, lesbian sexuality was always presented as a valuable possibility by her family, and neither her parents nor her liberal church community had any difficulty accepting her as lesbian. Karlijn sees her church at the same time as rather exceptionally liberal, and notices the continuing invisibility and taboo of non-heterosexuality in other PKN churches, mostly referring to orthodox and conservative church communities. Though they have an age difference of forty-four years in between them, both Edith and Karlijn sense a lot of negativity and invisibility of non-heterosexuality in church circles. This negative connotation of homosexuality continues to have an important role in both women's life and influences the way they express and position themselves in different social situations.

For most women, the hesitance to position themselves as lesbian first comes not only from a fear of negative responses, but as well from their self-identification as more than lesbian alone. Ellen told me about this:

*"It [lesbian] is only one aspect of my life, and not the only central aspect. But that is for everyone to decide for themselves. But I'm not flaunting here as that one pink woman who has to talk about it all day long. What I still feel as well, which is something that lesbians and gays sometimes talk about amongst each other, is that you always try to sense how people you newly met will respond to you. Not necessarily coming from the question of whether I'll tell them or not, but in order to be prepared for someone punching you in the face."*  
[Ellen, 48 yrs]<sup>73</sup>

Even though Ellen sees her lesbian sexuality as only *one* aspect of her life, and not as the central element of what defines her, she does continue to balance how open she will be about this element. To her, some people might foreground this element of herself as her overarching

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<sup>73</sup> Tr. "het is één aspect van mijn leven, en niet het enige, niet centraal aspect van mijn leven. Maar dat moet iedereen natuurlijk voor zichzelf bepalen. Maar ik loop hier niet te koop als die ene roze vrouw die het hele dagen moet vertellen. En wat ik altijd nog wel, en dat is ook wel natuurlijke lesbiennes en homo's onderling het wel eens over, dat je toch altijd ook even met nieuwe mensen aanvoelt van nou gaat dit veilig landen of niet. En dat is niet per se vanuit de gedachte dat ik het niet zou willen vertellen, maar wel dat je voorbereid of iemand gaat iemand je een knal klapte uitgeven zo dan."

lifestyle, and some people disapprove of this 'lifestyle'. For her it is not a question of whether she will disguise her sexual orientation, but to prepare herself for possibly negative responses. Similar to Ellen, Astrid describes her being a lesbian as “*like having blue eyes and being lefthanded*”<sup>74</sup>. She means by this statement that her sexuality is just one element of her life that should not be foregrounded. Describing her own perspective as rather simplistic, she believes that people just love different people, and leaves it there. Where Ellen does have a strong political view, both Astrid's and Ellen's statements tend to depoliticize sexuality as central element of their lives. Both women do not feel the need to be known as 'pink woman' alone, referring to the connotation of pink with LGBT expression, and both have different moments of openness in relation to different anticipated responses. The people who they continue to suspect for negative responses are mainly religious people, and it is especially among Christian groups that they are careful with positioning themselves. As such, coming-out is not a linear trajectory, but a gradual process that continues in new relationships and environments. This is of course not a question for religious lesbians alone, as many authors have shown LGBT's everywhere often encounter negativity, homophobia and even violence, and the question of 'coming-out' figures centrally in much literature about non-heterosexuality, academic and popular (Valentine 2000, Manalansan 1997). What makes these stories specific is the connection of their sexuality to their religious identification and practices in this gradual non-linear process of coming-out. Not only create the ongoing invisibility or explicit negativity toward homosexuality within their church a sense of insecurity for their acceptance, but their religion itself becomes an element that they come out for in different social spheres

In contrast to her sexual orientation, Astrid considers her religion as central aspect of herself, as her faith influences, in her words, her whole sense of being, her worldview and her social

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<sup>74</sup> Tr: “*Het is gewoon een item van mij zoals ik ook al grijzend haar heb een blauwe ogen heb en linkshandig bent*”

life. Ellen sees Christianity as most important element of her life as well, but at the same time, she does not add any political perspectives to her faith. For her, beliefs are individual and personal foremost. Although her beliefs influence social relations indirectly, faith is not political for her, whereas sexuality is as she actively participates in political LGBT movements. Both Astrid and Ellen often encounter negative responses to their religious identification similar to responses toward their lesbian sexuality, similar to many other women in this research. The experiences of Karlijn are exemplary in this case, who experiences feeling a stranger sometimes in her Christian circles in her department of theology, where her queer sexuality is often not understood or frowned upon, but as well in her circle of friends who move in the gayscene and are mainly atheist. Karlijn told me:

*“It was very strange at first, I feel like I’m not understood on two sides. I think the gayworld is as intolerant as the religious world. [...] I get a lot of different reactions from people who get very angry toward church things... [...] at first they mainly don’t understand why I would join something like that voluntarily. For them it’s an institute that oppresses and where all of this can’t happen.”* [Karlijn, 28 yrs]<sup>75</sup>

The ‘this’ that Karlijn refers to in the last sentence, is expressing non-normative sexuality as this takes place in the ‘gayworld’. ‘*All of this*’, the parties Karlijn attends, the people she meets and the other ways sexuality is expressed in the gayworld, supposedly cannot take place within church according to her friends. Again, Karlijn does not see a personal conflict in being queer and protestant, but she does feel an outsider from time to time in both what she refers to as the ‘gayworld’ and the ‘religious world’. Although she values her friends and colleagues and finds a lot of joy in both scenes, people in both of these social circles tend to judge one element of herself, even though these are inseparable in her self-identification.

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<sup>75</sup> Tr. “*In het begin was dat heel raar, ik heb echt idee dat ik van twee kanten...niet begrepen wordt. Ik denk dat de homowereld even intolerant is als religieuze wereld. [...]Ik krijg verschillende reacties van mensen die of helemaal boos geworden tegen, kerkelijke dingen... [...]Maar ze snappen aan het begin vooral niet waarom ik vrijwillig bij zoiets zou gaan. Dat het toch een instituut is wat mensen onderdrukt en waar het allemaal niet kan...*”

Where gayscenes are often represented as open-minded and accepting, she actually experiences this place as intolerant toward her beliefs and expression as protestant. At the same time there is a lot of intolerance toward her sexual identity and practices in her theology department and broader religious circles. As such, Karlijn feels '*not understood on both sides*' and often out of place in similar terms, because of similar aspects of her self-identification and representation. In her case, both religion and sexuality become to stand for a boundary of her social group, in which sex and faith are seen as incommensurable. In the gayscene, she is accepted because of her sexual practices and identification, but the limit of this acceptance is connected to a secularism and she encounters a lot of negativity toward her religion. In her religious circles, she similarly feels out of place because of her sexuality. Though religion and sexuality are often seen as completely different, in Karlijn's case these are very similar in terms of acceptance, visibility and the influence on her social relations. Other women have similar negotiations of their sexuality and their religion, experiencing several moments of openness concerning both these elements of their selves. All women have hesitance in being open about their sexuality, but many feel similar dynamics of acceptance or judgment concerning their self-representation as Christian. These women represent themselves as Christian, protestant, lesbian or queer in different social spheres and among different people. Christian groups are mainly at first distrusted for not accepting them as lesbian while more secularist groups can be intolerant toward their religion. In her own practices of faith, Karlijn did find a queer-friendly church in which she feels she belongs especially as queer Protestant. This is one social network that Karlijn has found in which she feels at home. The next paragraph elaborates on the ways in which women create social networks in which they feel a sense of belonging as *both* lesbian and protestant.

## 4.2 Communities and networks

*“At a certain point I noticed that you won’t meet that many lesbians in society... so I discovered that peer groups have some value. That it is nice to exchange ideas about it. But as well coming from the more political aspect: to be a platform for people who do have a lot of struggle with their faith.”<sup>76</sup>*

[Ellen, 48 yrs]

Earlier, Ellen told me that she herself never experienced any struggle with her faith in relation to her sexual orientation. Yet a few years after her initial coming out she noticed that there are not that many lesbians visible in the broader Dutch society. During her studies, she became politically active in left-wing movements, and a few years later within specific Christian LGBT organizations. Her initial motivation to do so was her observation of an invisibility of lesbian women in society, as role models but as well as potential lovers. Peer groups for her have value as a place to meet other women and to talk about being lesbian and Christian. Besides these personal motivations, Ellen sees a necessity in creating networks for Christian LGBT people who have struggled with their faith in order to create political awareness, as she told me, but as well to build a safe space where these issues can be spoken about. Ellen is nowadays involved with an online social network, a website containing news and shared experiences on the topics of sexuality and faith. This network organizes annual weekends as well where women come together and speak about a central theme in workshops, have ecumenical church services together and dance in the evenings.

Ellen’s statements already point to the many different motivations among women to participate in, or create, a social network. She reflects on this as a combination of political

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<sup>76</sup> Tr. “Op een gegeven moment merkte ik dat in de samenleving.. kom je niet altijd vanzelf lesbiennes tegen..... Dus dat het hebben lotgenoten contact dan, voor zover je het een lot vind, nou dat dat best iets heeft. Dat dat wel leuk is om daar met elkaar ideeën over te wisselen. Maar ook wel vanuit meer de politieke kant...ik ben ook een poos actief geweest bij CHJC, het klankbord zijn voor mensen die wel een hele hoop geloofs worstelingen hebben daarmee.”

reasons, the opportunity to meet women as potential lovers and the sharing of experiences to gain knowledge. As well for the other women, the main motivations to participate in these groups are a search for knowledge, to exchange experiences or to meet other individual women for possible relationships. The networks that these women do enter are mainly directed specifically at lesbian and bisexual religious women. Most women only join an online group, such as the Mirre network or the Holy Females mailing list, in which experiences are shared and are often cause for online discussions. Other women attend offline groups as well, for example through the Kringen which organizes monthly peer groups for LGBT's without a specific religious background, or through the CHJC which is the largest Christian gay community.<sup>77</sup> Because it is important for them to be respected as both religious and lesbian, they seek out groups of women who are similar on this aspect. In more mainstream organizations, such as the COC, they do not feel welcome first because there are not that many women present, and secondly because they experience a negativity toward their religious beliefs. As such, the social networks of these women beyond their church and family mainly consists of online contact with non-heterosexual spiritual women.

### Networks of love and sex

The search for potential partners, who they often do not meet in their general social life, has been an important motivation for many other women to participate in events directed at religious non-heterosexual women. In the previous chapters, I have written about the story of Hanneke, who initially refrained from acting upon her lesbian feelings. Not that long ago her perspective changed when she made the decision to be open for a relationship and she joined some women's groups as well. She told me:

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<sup>77</sup> Mirre – [netwerkmirre.nl](http://netwerkmirre.nl), Holy Females – [holyfemales.nl](http://holyfemales.nl), de Kringen – [dekringen.nl](http://dekringen.nl), CHJC) - [chjc.nl](http://chjc.nl). Mirre and HolyFemales are online platforms directed at religious or spiritual lesbian and bisexual women. De Kringen has specific women's only groups but is open for everyone who wants to talk about and meet other LGBT's. CHJC (originally from Christelijke homo jongeren contact) is an association of Christian gays, lesbians and bisexuals of which its membership mainly consist of gay men, there are some women specific groups.

*“Since then I go to groups of lesbian women. When you don’t want to engage in a relationship, and you go to those groups, the chances of falling in love are way bigger, and you’d only make it more difficult for yourself. So after I decided that I’m allowed to engage in a relationship, I started looking for similar women, not before.”* [Hanneke, 55 yrs]<sup>78</sup>

Before Hanneke decided to be open for a relationship, she did not attend any lesbian groups because she felt this would increase her risk of falling in love with a woman, which would make her abstinence more difficult to maintain. Now that she does want to meet other women she joined some groups of women and had some dates with women she met there. Similar to Hanneke, Edith has met many women through the Kringen, which organizes several support groups for LGBT people throughout the Netherlands. When she was in her thirties, Edith came to terms with her lesbian sexual orientation and joined one of the groups because she wanted to do something with her feelings. She looks back at this decision to join as something that she wanted without knowing exactly what it was she was looking for, it was a desire and wish foremost. Edith was married to a man at the time, whom she shared her personal questions concerning her sexuality with and who she eventually divorced. Together with her husband she attended church while participating in the Kringen group as well. This is not a specifically religious organization, and Edith recalls her initial confusion when going to her Kringen group after church service.

*“[I remember] the bewilderment of being in church in the morning, having participated even at the Lord’s Supper, and being among people who were all so different in the evening. I couldn’t quite grasp that, those worlds were so different, yes there was a big difference in scenes...”* [Edith, 72 yrs]<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Tr. *“Wat ik ook vanaf die tijd deed was naar groepen van lesbische vrouwen gaan, want als je toch geen relatie wil aangaan, en je gaat wel naar groepen toe, is de kans dat je daar verliefd zou worden is natuurlijk veel groter, zo maak je het jezelf nog moeilijker. Dus pas nadat ik de knoop hebdoorgehad dat ik een relatie mag, ben ik ook begonnen met hen opzoeken. En niet eerder.”*

<sup>79</sup> Tr. *“En dan de verbijstering dat ik ‘s ochtends in de kerk zat, ook het avondmaal gevierd, en ‘s avonds zat ik tussen dat volk wat helemaal anders was... Dat kon ik eigenlijk niet bevatten, dat was zo ‘n verschil in wereld, ja een heel groot verschil in wereld.”*

At first, Edith experienced a stark difference between her church environment and the group of the Kringen, two scenes that were not necessarily mutually exclusive, but which Edith found difficult to combine nevertheless. The religious practices of the Lord's Supper<sup>80</sup> stood for her life before coming out, and it was through the Kringen that she discovered another part of herself as lesbian woman. She met many different women and the sexual contact that came out of this was very important for Edith. She told me: *"Of course I met women through the Kringen. I invited them over, and they came every now and then, and not much was needed to have sex!"*<sup>81</sup> In this lesbian scene, during the 1980s, she met many different women up to a point that, she told me, she slept with several women in one week. This was too much for her and no longer felt right, so she eventually took a step back from dating and participating in such groups as the Kringen. A few years after that she got in touch with other specifically Christian lesbians and homosexual and came to join another group that was particularly directed at protestant gays and lesbians. She wrote many articles and organized several meetings specifically for these women.

While many women seek out networks to get in touch with other religious lesbian women, Karlijn is hesitant to do so and as such the exception in this case. In the previous paragraph, Karlijn expressed her position of non-belonging in either gay scene, nor in her religious environment. She does participate in a particular Christian LGBT network, but does take some distance from this:

*"It was very helpful for me at first. I can see how it works for them, so I do see the value of it,*

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<sup>80</sup> The Lord's Supper is an important ritual within the PKN and other Protestant churches which takes place in different frequencies from every Sunday to once a month or less. This ritual celebration is a remembrance of the last supper of Jesus with his disciples in which bread and wine are shared. Even though this shows similarity to the Roman-Catholic Eucharistic, it is not a ritual of transubstantiation by which the bread and wine become the blood and flesh of Christ, but a symbolic ritual of remembrance. Generally, more liberal churches allow all church members to participate at Lord's Supper, but more conservative churches limit this to confirmed members. See the PKN ordinance 7 for the PKN specific perspective, and the Blackwell Companion to Protestantism for an overview of the theological background (McGrath 2004).

<sup>81</sup> Tr: *"Ik ontmoette die vrouwen ook via de kringen, en dan nodigde ik ze uit en dan kwamen ze weer eens en dan was er niet zoveel voor nodig om te gaan vrijen."*

*it can be very supportive. But I think yeah... you should be able to be accepted everywhere. It's not like I only want to be in touch with Christian gays... Its way better not to be fixed somewhere!* [Karlijn, 28 yrs]<sup>82</sup>

Even though Karlijn experiences her position as in between the gayscene and protestant scene, this is not a source for conflict for her. She feels like her position as unfixed is even valuable, and she feels it's important to be accepted everywhere instead of building a group of Christian gays together. 'At first' however, when she first came out as a lesbian, this group did provide her support and helped to deal with different perspectives toward sexual orientation and religion. Same as Ellen, she believes it is important to provide a network for support, but this should move beyond a fixed or enclosed group.

#### Differences on the same platform

There are many different motivations to be found among these women that are often crossing and changing. For Ellen, political motivations were a starting point. For many other women such as Nienke, Hanneke and Edith, meeting other women as potential lovers, was either a motivation or outcome of joining these groups. Specific networks for lesbian Christian women can further provide support and guidance in expressing oneself as both lesbian and protestant, and can furthermore create a political platform. Annelies summarized this when she told me:

*"You feel that with all the differences among you, you'll stand on the same platform in that moment. You want to be there for one another."* [Annelies, 65 yrs]<sup>83</sup>

Annelies acknowledges that there are many differences among these women, but sees the value of joining a group because it provides support and possibly political power in

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<sup>82</sup> Tr. "Nou, het was wel aan het begin, was het voor mij heel fijn. Dat ik dacht ook dit kan zo, en ik zie dat het bij hen zo werkt, dus ik zie zeker de waarde er heel erg van in, dat het gewoon heel erg steunt. Maar vindt ja... Je moet ook overal het kunnen zijn. Van dingen... Het is niet dat ik nu alleen maar met christelijke homo's wil omgaan... Het is veel leuker om niet ergens in vast gezet te worden!"

<sup>83</sup> Tr. "Je voelt ook met al die verschillen die je hebt, dat je toch ook wel even op hetzelfde platform staat. En dat je er dan ook voor elkaar wilt zijn."

constructing a platform. All see an added value of exchanging experiences online or in groups, as it can provide a unity in that space, at that moment. When joining these groups, women sometimes encounter women with different experiences and perspectives, and deal with this diversity in very different ways. Some women find it difficult to connect to others who have had more suffering, more conflict, in their combining of sexuality and religion. Evelien had never felt like she belonged to the group of HolyFemales. She told me:

*“Up until now I’ve never connected to these women because they all have problems, and I’d never had. Because I thought my friends were all fine with it. I never spoke about it, yet I didn’t think they had any difficulty with it, so I didn’t see the problems of these other women. So I couldn’t talk about it.”* [Evelien, 33 yrs]<sup>84</sup>

The time that Evelien refers to here, is when she first participated in meetings with other women from Holy Females. She met many women there who were struggling to combine their religious and sexual selves in their personal faith but as well in church circles. Evelien had never experienced such problems in her own life and she found it difficult to relate to lesbian Christian women who did. Although she did never speak with her friends about her sexual orientation, she expected that all of them were fine with it. However, in the recent years Evelien discovered that some of her friends did find it difficult to accept her as lesbian. Because Evelien had been single for a while then, some friends assumed that this was on purpose, that she chose abstinence on religious reasons. This was not the case for Evelien, and when they did speak about this issue Evelien felt betrayed and broke the friendship off. After this experience, she could empathize more with women who ‘*had problems*’, because she discovered that her sexuality was apparently a problem after all for her friends. This issue of ‘having problems’ was a topic of discussion for René as well. She has a niece who is lesbian, has a girlfriend and joined the Kringen. The parents of this niece were very accepting of her

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<sup>84</sup> Tr. “Tot nu toe had ik daar nooit een link mee want zij hadden daar problemen mee, ik nooit. Want mijn vrienden groep rond allemaal prima, ja ik had het er nooit over maar ik had niet het idee dat het dat ze er problemen mee hadden dus ik zag hun problemen niet. Dus ik kon er ook niet over meepraten.”

sexuality, and René cannot see the need why her niece would join such a group:

*“She told me ‘there are definitely some things that bother me sometimes!’. And I don’t get that, I don’t understand it one bit. But we are so uncomplicated, I became lesbian so uncomplicated. [...] I might lack a bit of empathy there, I’ve noticed this. Yes, that comes back to me through email or through Holy Females.”* [René, 65 yrs]<sup>85</sup>

René, who is a member of the Holy Females mailing list herself, finds it difficult to understand why her niece would join this group. Her reason to join these groups is to be able to connect to other women, and to learn about other people’s stories to perhaps help them. René herself reflects on her ‘becoming lesbian’ as uncomplicated, as written about in previous chapters as well. Because of this rather easy process in her own experiences, she sees herself as lacking ‘*a bit of empathy*’ toward stories of women who do struggle with being lesbian and Christian. Yet sharing her experiences sometimes meets with critique from other members of Holy Females, in the case of her niece. Her niece grew up in an according to René, progressive and accepting household, which should assure an uncomplicated self-image. Most women have difficulty at one point to relate to the experiences of other women who come from a similar background, meaning having a non-normative sexual orientation as well as being actively protestant. However, all see the importance of providing a platform, a network of social relations to simultaneously learn about other women’s stories, to help others to deal with possible conflicts, to meet women as potential partners or lovers, or to create a political unity, visibility or a platform. In their diversity, as Annelies stated, they feel the necessity to stand together, both to look out for each other as well as to stand together against and within the broader society.

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<sup>85</sup> Tr: “Zegt ze nou er zijn toch ook echt wel dingen waar ik soms mee zit hoor. Dat snap ik dan niet, dat snap ik helemaal niet. Maar wij zijn zo ongecompliceerd, ik ben zo ongecompliceerd lesbisch geworden.[...] ik heb misschien te weinig begrip. Dat heb ik wel gemerkt. Ja. Ja dat krijg ik dan ook via de mail of via ho live e-mails terug. En toen zei iemand, ja je hebt helemaal geen lesbische identiteit. Ja dat zal dan wel”

So far, the several ways in which women move in social networks have been the point of focus. The networks used by these women are often a space to exchange stories among religious, non-heterosexual women. Besides these networks, the church remains a central element of social life for all women, as all are active members of a protestant church. How do they move in their church? How do they create a space within their own church? The focus will first be their perspective toward church as a community, after which I will elaborate on the ways in which they continue to push boundaries as well as the role they envision for themselves within their religious environment.

### 4.3 Changing churches

Karlijn does not feel completely accepted either in the gay scene, or in her Protestant circles, as I wrote in the previous paragraphs. Where some Protestant people do not accept her as queer, some queer friends cannot understand why she studies theology or attends church. This is a continuing negotiation for many women. Going back to Hanneke, her position in church is affected directly by her self-expression as lesbian. It is uncertain whether the church board accepts her completely as a lesbian woman, and it is even possible than she will not be allowed to participate in the Lord's Supper when she engages in a relationship. Why then would she remain in this church? More than a site of norms and dogma alone, understanding of these women in church points to the importance of church as a social site. Hanneke described this as follows:

*“Church is a community. God gave groups of people to each other to help one another on many different levels. To help talking about your faith as well, but just as much when I need help and someone reaches out to me. That you care about one another.”*[Hanneke, 55 yrs]<sup>86</sup>

Hanneke thus defines church first as a community, which was intended by God in order to

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<sup>86</sup> Tr: *“De kerk is een gemeenschap, God heeft gewoon een groep mensen aan elkaar gegeven om elkaar te helpen, op allerlei verschillende gebieden. Ook om elkaar te helpen om over je geloof te praten, maar net zo goed als ik eens een keer hulp nodig hebt dat een ander een hand naar mij uitsteekt. Dat je naar elkaar omziet.”*

help one another and care for each other. Instead of seeing church as a merely ritualized site of practicing faith, God is present through the relations among church members, which makes this a site that is simultaneously spiritual and social. Even though some people might not accept her as lesbian, she still feels like church is a central element of being a Protestant; to attend church, to help each other in the space of church. In response to her story, some community members remain silent, which is difficult to deal with for Hanneke. In the church she attended in her childhood and later on, there has always been a silence regarding sexuality in general and homosexuality in particular. When it was spoken about, during services or other activities, it was in negative terms. Hanneke experienced that people in her church remain silent about sexuality as well, and some have not spoken to her about her sexual orientation. She still associates this silence with negativity: *“That’s still in the back of my mind, that when you don’t say anything, it’s not a positive thing.”*<sup>87</sup> For her, it is difficult to navigate in her church, because she does not know where she stands in relation to this community and she is unsure as to how accepted she is within this community. Sometimes, this silence is explained by other church members by stating that nothing has changed, that they still see her as the same person. Hanneke told me that she needs this reassurance and appreciates it when people speak out, because she still associates not-speaking with negativity. For all women, the role of community is central in church, yet this is not the only site in which they practice faith and experience a relation with God. Edith for example distinguishes God from church:

*“I used to identify God and Church with each other, those were basically the same. But I let that go. God is something else than church. Church is a means, not an aim in itself.”*[Edith, 72 yrs]<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Tr. *“Ik zit natuurlijk nog wel met dat in mijn achterhoofd, van als je nu dus niks zegt, dan is dat voor mij niet positief. Dat is voor mij negatief.”*

<sup>88</sup> Tr. *“Ik identificeerde god en kerk met elkaar, dat was ongeveer gelijk. En voordat ik dat los had... god is heel wat anders dan de kerk. De kerk is een middel, geen doel.”*

Simultaneously as God is redefined outside and beyond church<sup>89</sup>, ‘church’ as such is reimagined as a means instead of an aim; a means to experience religion, share beliefs and build a community. This distinction between God as personal beliefs, and church as given beliefs, allows for a distance toward their church, as well as an often critical reflection of church as a social space. When church is criticized, for example bible interpretations of the pastor or church policies that they do not agree with, this does not directly affect personal beliefs, because ‘God is something else than church’. This separation gives some room to question their own beliefs, but as well the church environment.

Many women see their church changing and reflect on this change positively. For Nienke, her church became more accepted towards sexuality. She and her, now ex, partner attended church services and additional activities as a couple, the same church in which they were married. Referring to her position, Nienke told me:

*“At a certain point it just becomes less of an issue. At first, we were mostly lesbian, that one lesbian couple. When they get to know you personally, it winds down a bit as well.”* [Nienke, 43 yrs]<sup>90</sup>

At first instance, Nienke and Anne were approached on the basis of their relationship; they were foremost seen as ‘that lesbian couple’. It was an issue in the first few months because the status of their relationship was what made them stand out in the community. However, after participating more in their church and when more church members got to know them personally, this became less of an issue. Nowadays, Nienke is single in her church and she felt like people now mostly try to help with her divorce and support her in this, and no longer frame her as lesbian only. Other women have never experienced their lesbian identification in church as an issue, and are open about their sexuality in different ways. Nienke, Ellen René

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<sup>89</sup> See as well chapter 2 paragraph 2 ‘God’s Images/Images of God’ of this thesis

<sup>90</sup> Tr. *“Op een gegeven moment valt het ook eigenlijk een beetje weg. Waar je in het begin nog wel vooral lesbisch bent, van dat is dat lesbische stel. Wanneer ze je meer persoonlijk leren kennen valt dat ook weer een beetje weg.”*

and Astrid simply attended church with their female partner, while Evelien, Dieke and Hanneke have been explicitly open about this to the pastor and community. Astrid for example *'just went there'* because she assumed that her church would be open for her as lesbian, but as well because she does not regard her lesbian sexuality the first important element of herself.

Edith tries to change church from within through her participation as a deacon<sup>91</sup>, and she has a critical stance in her church. During our conversation, Edith explicitly connected this approach in church to her lesbian sexuality:

*"Because I was a lesbian, I discovered that everything is surely very masculine, all what happens in church. Of course! Everything was directed by men and looked at from a men's perspective. [...] I started to pay attention to... that the women aren't there in church. Everything is obscured..."* [Edith, 72 yrs]<sup>92</sup>

Within her church, she is active as a deacon and tries to give more attention to the role of women in Protestantism, both in their community but as well in bible readings and the structure of the church. Especially the role of women in church becomes the site of contestation for Edith, as well as for Dieke. Many women encountered feminist perspectives through their social networks, and some have looked into feminist theologies, noticing that female perspectives have been excluded from church. Instead of rejecting church as such, Dieke tries to change this masculinist perspective by foregrounding bible stories of women and asks for more attention to the specific role of women in Protestantism. In the second chapter, I wrote about Nienke and Evelien, who asked for the possibility of a church wedding and caused their church to have a community council and change in policy<sup>93</sup>. This shows that

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<sup>91</sup> Deacons are part of the church board together with the pastors and pastoral workers and focus on the help for people in need, both within the community and outside with special attention to finances for charity.

<sup>92</sup> Tr. *"ik ging ook door dat lesbisch zijn ging ik ontdekken dat het toch wel ontzettend mannelijk allemaal was, wat er in de kerk gebeurde. Tuurlijk, alles werd geregeerd door mannen en alles vanuit een mannenstandpunt bekeken. [...] Toen ging ik nog meer kijken van... de vrouwen zijn helemaal niet in de kerk. Dat wordt allemaal verdonkeremaand."*

<sup>93</sup> See chapter 3 paragraph 3.2.3 'church weddings as site of acceptance'

instead of being fixed institutes with a top-down transfer of religious ideals, churches can be changing communities in which individual church members change and push boundaries from within, from the bottom up. Their negotiation of church policy is not only on the level of sexuality, as in non-heterosexuality versus heterosexuality, but is gendered in which masculine perspectives are questioned. These sexual, gendered limits of church are pushed by these women in various ways. Protestant churches are changing and becoming more open to sexual and gender diversity in relation to broader political processes (Bos 2010, Hekma 2004), but these women often have a hand in the changing of their church as well. And through all of this, church as congregation continues to figure as a central element of their social life. These women consciously reflect on the role of church in their lives, as well as their position within this religious community. Most of all envision their position as a role model, in which their visibility and self-representation opens up discussions about gender and sexuality and creates a safety for other non-heterosexual Christians. In the last paragraph I will thus focus on the role of visibility in their church as a community by not only elaborating on what they do, but how they reflect on this and their own position as potential role model.

#### Women as role models

Many women do not foreground their sexuality, but they often do find important to make themselves visible as religious and lesbian within church. This can come from themselves, for example when Evelien and Hanneke explicitly told their stories in their own church. Or they can be recognized as lesbian when taking their partner to church, for example in the case of René and Ellen. However this process takes place, the women had the idea that most fellow church members knew about their sexual orientation, because they wanted them to know or because they stood apart from heterosexual norms. This increased visibility and recognition of them as lesbian protestant, can result in negative responses from their church community, such as that because of this ‘lifestyle’, as lesbian sexuality often is put, one cannot be a true

protestant. This notion is often tackled by these women in their community. Nevertheless, these women experience little space for lesbian people, either lesbian as lifestyle, sexual orientation or sexual practices. Yet as showed earlier on, they do not see a conflict in their personal beliefs. As such, these women see themselves as potential examples in church of how sexuality and religion can go together. Nienke describes her position:

*“I do [see myself as a role model]. Not in the way that I’ll stand on the barricades or anything... But in the sense that I’m always very open about myself, this [lesbian] is not something that I disguise or anything [...] I’m always quite open about it. Because I have the idea that you won’t get any further if you keep things a taboo area.”* [Nienke, 43 yrs]<sup>94</sup>

The main motivation of Nienke to open up about her sexual orientation is to show that this is not a part of herself that she disguises, that she does not want to hide her sexuality. For her, religion and sexuality are both important elements of her life, though in certain places one element is often pushed aside in different social contexts. In her church, sexuality is often disguised, while religion is often a taboo in secular circles such as at her job. By being open and honest about her sexuality and faith, Nienke aims to take sexuality in church out of its taboo area and to make sex and non-heterosexuality something visible and discussable. The same invisibility is for her a motivation to speak out as a protestant woman in her non-religious circles, for example on her job. Mostly, she tries to question the stereotype that religious people are naïve, subordinate and cannot think for themselves. She finds these stereotypes in mainstream media, but as well in opinions of colleagues, friends and other acquaintances. Some women, as Nienke, explicitly position themselves as example and try to change perspectives that are negative toward religion and, or sexuality in conversations and meetings with other religious and non-religious people. Others feel like they are used as

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<sup>94</sup> Tr. “Ja dat wel. Niet in de zin van, ik sta niet zo snel op de barricades. Maar wel dat ik denk van ja... Ik ben er altijd heel transparant over, dit is niet iets dat ik achter hou ofzo [...]Ik ben daar toch altijd wel vrij open over. Omdat ik het idee dat je niet veel kan opschieten als je dingen in een taboesfeer houdt”

example and thus become a role model without consciously positioning one as such, and feel like they can bring discussions by their presence alone. In her department of theology, Karlijn experienced some negativity concerning non-heterosexuality. For her, the negativity from within religious circles toward non-normative sexuality mainly comes from ignorance and lack of knowledge. In this process, she finds that her sexual identification can be used as an example, and bring a more nuanced discussion about the topics of gender and sexuality in relation to Christianity. At the same time, she is hesitant to take on the position of a role-model, though she is politically motivated and active. Karlijn was raised in a rather liberal, progressive church and still attends a church in which sexual norms are not strict and diversity is encouraged. Because of her church background, she feels distanced from fellow students, for whom she is already an outsider because of her progressive beliefs. She told me:

*“I’m afraid I am [a role model]. I’m a bit skeptical about those things in the PKN. Because people are so stuck around LGBT issues... a role model... well... I don’t think I am the right model. I think it’d be better to have an orthodox gay as role model. Someone with the same norms and values like doing nothing on Sundays, and disapproving of nudity, or who knows what... that sort of stuff... whatever they all share... And I’m too distanced from that. For emancipation I think it’s better if someone... You know [spokesperson of Christian LGBT organization], he’s from a more orthodox background. I think that’ll help way more. “[Karlijn, 28 yrs]”<sup>95</sup>*

Karlijn first states that she think she is a role model, but she does not see herself particularly fit for that task. At the same time, she feels like people in the PKN are too focused, too stuck, on LGBT issues, which is why she does not want to remain in this discussion alone. Protestantism for her is more about community and relations, and she expressed frustration

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<sup>95</sup>Tr. *“Ik ben bang dat ik het wel ben. nee, het is... Ik ben een beetje sceptisch over al die dingen binnen de PKN... Omdat mensen zo vast zitten omtrent LHBTers... een voorbeeld... Ja... Ik denk niet dat ik het juiste voorbeeld bent... Ik denk dat je beter een orthodoxe homo kan hebben als voorbeeld. Iemand die wel, dus ook wel dezelfde normen en waarden heeft van dat je op zondag niks doet, en dat het niet goed is om tussen naakte mensen te staan of weet ik veel, dat soort dingen... Wat zij allemaal delen... En daar sta ik toch te ver van af. Dus ik denk dat voor de emancipatie dat het beter is als... Ik weet niet of je die naam van .... kent, die echt meer uit de orthodoxe komt. Ik denk dat dat veel beter helpt.”*

about the, for her too extensive, attention to ‘*LGBT issues*’ within the PKN as characteristics on which churches are defined mostly in Dutch society nowadays. This overwhelming attention and stress about LGBT issues disregards the elements of religion that are most important to Karlijn, namely personal faith and church community. Even though she is hesitant to focus too much on these topics, she does see that she became a role model without explicitly taking on this role. As a queer Christian, she changes the discussion in her theology studies and other religious circles besides her own church, and people tend to approach at her as an example. However, she states here that her rather liberal church beliefs and her practices and expressions of non-normative sexuality make her unsuitable as a role-model. Karlijn argues that someone with a similar background to ‘*them*’ would be more helpful in emancipation, by which she refers to orthodox and conservative churches where most negative perspectives toward non-heterosexuality are found. She thus does not distance herself from the emancipation model, but does from the environment and people who have strict sexual norms based on their Christian faith. Describing the people who are negative toward non-heterosexuality, she states that ‘*they*’ share the same values, while her more liberal church tend to carry out less strict norms. Karlijn feels she is a religious outsider from these more orthodox strands of the PKN, but has the idea she became a role model nonetheless. Annelies has similar experiences, who as an outspoken transwoman became a role model and example without herself consciously claiming this position. People can ask questions, she is open to answer them, as long as this does not take place behind her back. Openness is very important to Annelies, and she feels like it is better to talk about it than to disguise anything. She is brave enough to claim space, and demands from people when they have questions to ask those to herself stating ‘*ask your questions, try to become as brave as I am.*’

## Conclusions

There are many different reasons for women to engage in social networks. All of these women continue to negotiate ideas of visibility, expressing themselves as lesbian at some points, as religious in others, without disregarding either. Instead of seeing one particular moment as their coming-out, this is a continuing process in which they are open about their lesbian self-identification in different ways. These movements between visibility and invisibility, of belonging and disbelonging often create a desire to join specific Christian LGBT groups, where they do not have to explain themselves as a Protestant lesbian woman. Even though they experience a sense of similarity and unity, there are many differences among the women in these groups as well, some of which are more difficult to deal with than others. Nevertheless, all see the value of a platform to share experiences, gain knowledge, and meet other women but as well in relation to the outside; to take a stance and create visibility as a group in a society that portrays religion and non-heterosexuality as two opposites and where religious women are not easily recognized as sexually autonomous. Though many seek out social groups and networks specifically directed at Christian LBT women, they continue to actively participate in their church as well. For them, church is not the first site to practice religion, as their personal beliefs are experienced, practiced and shaped outside of the physical building of their church. Church as such becomes a site of community, of sharing and learning. Though this is a community of which its boundaries appear to be fixed, for these women but as well in public discourse, these stories show how norms are questioned and challenged. Changes in the PKN concerning sexual norms are pushed by Dutch politics and media debates (Bos 2010), but this does not mean that church members themselves merely follow these top-down regulations. Instead, these women change churches from within through positioning themselves as visible role models. This takes place either explicitly and self-conscious, but their mere presence and visibility in church can be the starting point for

more discussion among church members as well, which can create space for non-normative sexuality within religious ideals. Though not all women explicitly positioning themselves as political or visibly lesbian, this is something they do not disguise or change, but try to find and shape social relations in which they can express themselves as protestant *and* lesbian or queer, in which religion and sexuality are inseparable and intersecting elements of their personal self-image, broader social relations and relations in, with and beyond church.

## 5 - Conclusion

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This thesis has focused on the relation between religion and sexuality of women who identify as lesbian, trans\*, queer or bisexual, and who are members of a Dutch Protestant, PKN, church as well, which is the largest mainline protestant collaborative church in the Netherlands. The aim has been to move beyond a narrative of conflict between religion and sexuality as current in Dutch debates, which is why the main research question has been formulated as follows: How do religion and sexuality intersect in daily life practices and social relations of self-identified non-heterosexual Dutch Protestant women? Through the stories of women as Dieke, Karlijn, Astrid and Annelies, this thesis has shown the several ways in which religion and sexuality are negotiated and interconnected.

In the Netherlands, dominant images in public discourse indicate a privatization of religion, while sexuality appears as a social, public concern (Ganzevoort 2013, Bracke 2008). At the same time, religion continues to be an important site of political debate, and even though the role of religion in the public sphere has changed, it has not disappeared. As much as the country is represented as secular, right-wing parties increasingly call on the Protestant roots of this particular secularism, which positions the Protestant church as both central to Dutch nationalism, as well as 'backward' in a linear narrative of secularization. Furthermore, the Netherlands is a nation-state often associated with progressive sexual norms, emancipation and sexual freedom. An emphasis on 'gay tolerance' as central aspect of Dutch national identity is evident in politics and social movements, making the state the central space to guarantee the safety of gay Dutch citizens (Bracke 2008, Jivraj 2011, Hekma 2004). Where these two discourses of religion-secularism and homonationalism intersect, religion and sexuality are often paired as oppositional and as mutually exclusive spheres (Ganzevoort

2013). Religion comes to be represented as limiting the possibility of emancipation by condemning non-normative sexualities and as such as a threat to ideals of sexual freedom, which are central in nationalist imaginings. This discourse - examined in more detail in the research project 'Contested Privates'- is characterized by notions of opposition and conflict, with images of homosexual Christians as struggling, moving in between these conflicting fields of religion and sexuality. A public-private distinction is constructed and reiterated in this debate, as religion comes to appear as a private while sexuality as public. This discourse imagines LGBT sexuality as public matters in which the state becomes the site to regulate sexualities, with the level of sexual freedom related to visibility and occupation of public space. This public space is gendered, and historically associated with masculinity, and many scholars in lesbian studies have argued that this obscures women in debate, who often are less visible in these traditional gay spaces (Sinnott 2009, Valentine 2000). The main representative in this image is a gay cisman, coming from a focus on visibility and dominant public and political organizations as the COC, which historically knows an overrepresentation of men. In this political and academic debate, in which religion and sexuality are often referred to as mutually exclusive, women tend to be invisible as there is no well-established gender critique in this theoretical and public field. How than does this work for LGBT self-identified Christian women? Is there more to this story than the struggling Christian gay? Coming from these contexts, this research aimed to complicate these distinctions of religion-sexuality and public-private by elaborating on the daily lives of non-heterosexual PKN women.

Instead of continuing a discourse of opposition, these stories show how religion and sexuality are both central elements to these women's lives. With the focus on three different levels of experience, it has been argued that religion and sexuality are mutually constituted; showing how women's relation with God enables an experience of sexual pleasure, how norms concerning monogamy and marriage are negotiated, and how women strategically relate to

churches and social networks. In three different levels these stories have moved from personal relations and experiences of sex and faith in chapter two, through dealings with sexual norms in Church communities in chapter three, to even broader relations toward social networks in the last chapter. In the analysis, I initially formulated four sub questions. The first question referred to the experience of moments of coming-out considering their sexual orientation while including the ways how religion, if at all, shapes these moments of openness. This question was foremost answered in the second and last chapter of this thesis, where the relation between self-identification and -expression and responses from other people was central. The second question was how women practice and express their religion, and what changes they have experienced during their lives. This is a question that came back throughout the chapters, as they practice religion on different levels in various ways. The third question then asked which, if at all, communities and networks these women use to find and construct a senses of belonging, a question that was the starting point of chapter four. The last question, that comes back in several chapters as well, is how social and sexual relations shape the meaning and experience of religion and sexuality in the daily lives of these women? Although these questions were the start of the analysis process, the empirical chapters were built on themes and issues that these women spoke of most. The analysis of the four formulated sub questions has brought three main arguments and implications in the conclusion of this research project, which makes up the following final part of this thesis.

## 5.1 Sexual religious selves

What this thesis argues throughout is that religion and sexuality influence one another, not as a conflict but in positive ways in personal and intimate ways. This was mainly argued in the first empirical chapter. Here, I began with a quotation of Dieke who stated “*I can thank God now when I come*”, by which she referred to her experience of sex with a woman as contrary to her previous heterosexual experiences, where sexuality was mainly a requirement.

Sexuality and God are nowadays experienced together, in most intimate and embodied sexual practices and Dieke's experience is exemplary for most women. This intersection is as well apparent in these women's self-definition of their selves as both religious and sexual, without foregrounding one or the other element as fixed identity. For some, the self-definition as lesbian is a sense of identity, of something that they have always already 'been'. Others only began to consider themselves lesbian when entering a sexual relationship with another woman. Lesbian thus is seen as practices, something they *do*, as inherent identity, something they *are*, or as changing concept, as something they *become*. Religion in this matter is often described in similar terms. Some women see the motivation to practice Protestant beliefs in their childhood, as something they always already did, or as a foremost personal relationship to God, and for others the role of community is the main reason for entering church. Both faith and sexuality are described as intimate relationships, and can be similar sites of personal conflict as well. For these women, feelings of sexual pleasure go hand in hand with a reclaiming of space within religion, both in their personal position toward God, but as well within church. Within their churches they attended in their childhood, they have not always experienced space for female sexuality, and were moreover often confronted with images that condemn same-sex sexuality. This motivated women to seek a different way of personally relating to God and Protestantism. Instead of a fearsome, punishing God, women see their relation to God as a relation of love, support and care. They make a distinction between their church, which often for them is not directly a safe space to express sexuality, and their own beliefs, in which sex and faith do not exclude one another. This interconnection of religion and sexuality influences the love relations that women engage in, as most women wish for a partner to have a similar background and want to be able to share their beliefs. Relationships thus become sites where religion and sexuality are experienced together, and faith can bring an extra dimension to love relationships. For some women, this can be confirmed through a

marriage with a church blessing, though others see their relationship as blessed by God even without a ceremony. Even while women do not see religion and sexuality as conflicting in their personal, loving, sexual lives, they do encounter sexual norms in church that they continue to negotiate.

## 5.2 Contested norms

The second implication of this thesis is the role of norms and normativity, with which these women have a non-linear relationship. As argued before, norms of religion and sexuality are often referred to as in a difficult relationship, in which religion often is represented as unitary, homogenous and top-down in the construction of norms. Within the PKN however, there is not one central policy, and policies that are present are moreover no fixed discourses. In the Netherlands as homonationalist, postsecular state, the stances from religious institutes toward LGBT sexuality becomes the terrain by which institutes profile themselves (Bos 2010), and especially in the PKN the role of gay marriage, christening of children of non-heterosexual couples or the possibility for LGBT people to take part in the pastorate are issues of debate. When entering church, the women in this research encounter foremost expectations built on sexual and gender norms that present an image of what it means to be a protestant women, which are mostly norms concerning monogamy, marriage and motherhood. In their churches, norms concerning sex are directed at the private sphere, at one's home and body, but are made public in church environments as markers of church identity in the context of the Netherlands. At the same time, the church is experienced as a place that is both public, but limited as community as well. As such, examining the church as a public-private space gives interesting insights in the ways in which norms work and move, as well as the several ways in which these are negotiated. These sexual and gender norms were central in the third chapter, where I elaborated on the ambivalent position of women in regard to church-given expectations. Some of these norms are internalized, such as monogamy, while women creatively give meaning to

other norms based on their own interpretation, such as marriage. Some women feel like they cannot conform to norms, as was in the case of Hanneke's initial ideas of motherhood as impossible because of her lesbian sexual orientation, which was something she refrained from acting upon for most her life so far. Motherhood as such has various meanings. For some, this has been the main motivation to enter a heterosexual marriage; others have children within a lesbian relationship, while for Hanneke being a lesbian implied not becoming a mother. Similar meanings can be found toward marriage, which is a more politicized issue in the Netherlands, where 'gay marriage' is often celebrated as crucial element of the nation-state. The PKN churches are increasingly pushed to take on these values and to allow same-sex couples to be married. Because the PKN leaves the responsibility up to the church board to decide the stance toward LGBT people, there is some room to change policy which some women actively did. For Evelien and Nienke, the possibility to marry with a woman in church was a prerequisite of their membership of this church. Others seek a different community, and even others do not wish to get married because they sense there is still inequality in the rituals of marriage for heterosexual and non-heterosexual couples. One aspect of normativity that continues to be strategically foregrounded by most women is monogamy. Most women explicitly see the main place to enjoy sexuality in a monogamous relationship, in which sex can be experienced as a gift of God. Here sexual boundaries of church are displaced, by which monogamy comes to represent the limits of sexual acceptance and no longer heterosexuality. As such, space for their sexuality is claimed on the basis of similarity of heterosexual and lesbian relationships; all should be monogamous relations of love and faith, and this vocal emphasis on monogamy, sameness and thus normality, is an important strategy to claim space in their church communities. These various experiences with marriage, monogamy and motherhood make the position of non-heterosexual women in PKN churches ambivalent. This wide diversity rejects a generalization of what it means for them to be a PKN woman, but

shows the several strategies that enable women to reposition themselves as such in relation to their own body as well as to the body of the church.

### 5.3 Public-Private communities

A third important outcome of this research is the critique it brings to the distinction between public and private in the discourse of homosexuality and Christianity in the Netherlands. Sexuality appears as a political matter in the Netherlands, yet this refers to LGBT identity as connected to visibility and secularity. In this emphasis on visibility, ‘coming-out’ is a central concept which makes different ways of relating and expressing sexuality illegitimate. For the women I spoke to, ‘coming-out’ is not the most important element of their sexuality and most do not see one particular moment as their coming-out moment. Similar to the continuous, non-linear negotiating of norms in church, women deal differently with ideas of visibility and openness of both their sexuality and religious beliefs in spaces beyond church. Women explicitly present themselves as lesbian in some places, and as religious in others, depending on the site and anticipated response from the people concerned. Within religious circles, they encounter people who reject their sexual orientation, while in non-religious spaces they find that their religious beliefs are disapproved of. Karlijn even put it as a feeling of non-belonging both in LGBT and in religious spaces by stating “the gay world is as intolerant as the religious world”. Dutch discourse tends to focus on the intolerance of what Karlijn calls the ‘religious world’ in homonationalist secularist representations of religion as oppressive and sex-negative. Karlijn questions this idea of the ‘gay world’ as open and free by stating that this scene is rather intolerant of religious people. This balancing of disclosure of their selves as religious and sexual often motivates women to seek out networks in which they are accepted as both lesbian and protestant woman, which are described in chapter four. The sharing of experience and gaining knowledge from other women’s experiences are often seen as a great value of such networks, while for others the possibility of meeting potential lovers was the

main motivation to enter networks. These spaces are furthermore seen as potential political platforms to create more understanding of specific women's experiences. Religious women are not easily recognized as sexually autonomous, creative agents, neither in feminist theory, nor in public LGBT discourse (Braidotti 2008, Bracke 2008). These platforms provide a way to share these discontents with this polarized public representation, while giving more strength to make a political stance as platform in a society that often portrays religion and non-heterosexuality as oppositional while women remain invisible.

At the same time as they participate in social networks, all women continue to attend church and actively participate in their church. Nevertheless, this church is not referred to as the preferred site to practice religion, but as foremost a community to share faith and learn new insights of beliefs. In their church, women create openness and space for sexual diversity in their community by either explicitly sharing their experience as lesbian Protestant, or by merely being present and claiming space in their church. Although the PKN is often referred to as a homogenous institution, sometimes as well by the informants, these stories point to the diversity and possibility of change from within. That some women are not accepted as full members of the church, when they for example cannot marry their partner or are excluded from supper ceremonies, does not mean that these boundaries are fixed. Instead, the stories of these women point to the potential of creativity and change within church. The church is a particularly interesting site to examine further here, since this is a space both public and private. Women see this as a central element in their personal life, as they get inspiration, answers to questions and social contact in this space. However, they often move at the boundary of this space when they express their sexuality. For some women, negative responses from their community result in a change of church for self-protection and other women are no longer allowed to participate fully in their church. Because the PKN is foremost a collaboration, there is much diversity within, and many decisions are left up to the

individual church boards. Many churches are currently in the process of changing policy regarding sexuality and gender differences, allowing for same-sex couples to wed or for female pastors to lead the service. It thus seems that boundaries of the church are formed around expressions and ideas concerning non-heterosexuality for these women. In these constructions of boundaries on the basis of sexuality, it becomes evident that ‘church’ as site is between private and public. Church as a community and site of faith is open, but conditionally, in which boards and communities together try to find a way to position their PKN church in this postsecular, homonationalist landscape. If religion is pushed to the private sphere, while sexuality becomes more public, they do so in paradoxical ways. Both religion and sexuality are personal, intimate matters and referred to by these women in similar terms. At the same time, both these elements of their lives are publicly shaped and negotiated in social relations. Protestantism in the PKN is privatized in public discourse, while there is a lot of public attention to the PKN stance toward sexuality. In this representation, sexuality becomes especially the site on which churches become public. At the same time gender and sexuality become the sites where boundaries are formed and enclosed communities constructed. I argue that this binary of sex as public, and religion as private, is problematized when elaborating on daily life experiences among these women, because both religion and sexuality are private and embodied, as well as public in the construction of norms and potential political instruments.

## Final remarks

Overall, the experiences of the women in this thesis project complicate the oppositional pairing of homosexuality and religion in the Netherlands. In these debates, mainly men are represented when it concerns Christianity. When women figure in this debate, the focus is mainly on Muslim women (Bracke 2013, 2008) as Other figure and victim, mostly visible in harsh integration and immigration debates. But academic attention concerning the role of

women in religion often overlooks the role of women in Christianity. These debates and stakes are very different between and among women of different religious connotations, and these issues are too complicated for a quick comparison. Nevertheless, it should be noted that when women are represented in public debate of religion and sexuality, stories of Protestant, white women are not there as the focus tends to be on the symbolic 'other'. Academic attention should aim to move beyond a reiteration of this tendency to approach religious women as 'other'. The focus on non-visible women as non-heterosexual women in the PKN can add to this debate by looking at gender, sexuality and religion in a rather privileged religious site, such as the PKN is as mainstream government-funded institute. Furthermore, feminist politics and academia often tend to regard institutional religion merely oppressive, which, as scholars as Rosi Braidotti and Sarah Bracke argue, limits the possibility of non-secular agency (Braidotti 2008, Bracke 2008). Feminism as such needs more tools to recognize these women as creative while not disregarding the influence of religion on their lives. At the same time, gender and sexuality are often under examined in religious studies, which is why a combination of these two perspectives is needed to account for the crossings of religion and sexuality in the lives of these women. The use of intersectionality as a critical tool and methodology to approach subjectivity as multiple and diverse acknowledges the intrinsic connections of religion and sexuality. Instead of mutually exclusive, these results show how religion and sexuality are intersectional. These women shape their sexuality as multiple and in relation to their faith, community and networks, and less in direct relation to public discourse or visibility-based politics; as such their story can challenge the debate regarding religion and non-heterosexuality as based on a particular, visible, public image of homosexuality. For these women, religion is always already sexual. Likewise, sexuality is shaped by religious practices and beliefs. They do not describe their identity as 'lesbian' alone, but always pointed to the mutual elements of their selves. What I argue is that in order

to understand these complicated narratives, we need more tools than dominant feminist theory can bring, as this is often based on a secular approach. Rather, religious studies combined with feminist thinking can bring us further to see the many ways in which ‘religion’ materializes in everyday practices, and how this is not merely an institutional site of oppression, but can be empowering for women as well.

These women should not be seen as a fixed or homogenous group. They express diverse ways of negotiating norms and practices of religion and sex, sometimes confirming, otherwise questioning or undermining ideas concerning same-sex love. There is a lot more work to be done, to which I hope this thesis has contributed a small but in-depth case study, with Dieke, Annelies, Nienke, Karlijn, Astrid and others. Some readers might recognize themselves in their stories, others might have contradicting experiences. The aim has never been to describe a homogenous group as generalizing for the whole nation-state of the Netherlands. Rather, this thesis shows how different perspectives and norms influence constructions of the selves, practices and perspectives of this particular group of women, which consists of many different individual women. Further research could point to the social position of women in public discourse, to non-heterosexual women in different, for example catholic, religious spheres, or would entail a more trans-specific analysis. One of the first quotes of this thesis was by Hanneke, asking “*What then, how can you be?*” Instead of giving a once-and-for-all answer to the question of how lesbian protestant women *are*, I have given these stories as examples of the various ways in which women create a sense of being. This is not a solitary undertaking, but always in relation to their sexual bodies, God, church and other networks; not as excluding but as crucial and central elements to their lives as protestant women who love women, and who are always more than this. Some women have struggled more than others with the combination of religion and sexuality for various reasons, but the story should not end at an idea of these women as victims who inevitably struggle in between. Rather, they

show how religion and sex go together, how norms affect their lives but can be challenged as well. How can you be? There is not one answer, but all have their own personal answers. These women are different in different spaces in different relations, but they all are with a great sense of creativity, love and joy; love for God and love for women.

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Ordinantie 3: Het ambt en de andere diensten.

Ordinantie 5: De eredienst

Ordinantie 7: Het heilig avondmaal

All are accessible on [www.pkn.nl](http://www.pkn.nl), visited July 29 2014

# Appendixes

## Appendix A: Participants<sup>96</sup>

All have Dutch as first language and identify as white Dutch national citizen. I have had one interview with each participant.

Annelies: sixty-five, lesbian transwoman. Retired salesperson. Raised in gereformeerde church, nowadays member of hervormde church, has been church elder in her former church as well as in her current church. Divorced of woman, has two sons and one daughter, currently single. Lives in a small town. Interview (3hr) at her home.

Astrid: forty-five, lesbian ciswoman. Works in education. Raised in orthodox gereformeerde church, nowadays member of a mixed church. Divorced from a registered partnership with a woman in which one child was born. Currently living with Eefje. Lives in a small town. Interview (2hr) at her home.

Dieke: fifty-three, lesbian ciswoman. Pastoral worker. Raised in hervormde church, nowadays member of a different hervormde church where she works as pastoral worker. Divorced from a twenty-four year marriage with a man in which three children were born. Currently living with Mina in a five year relationship. Lives in a small town. Interview (3hr) at her home.

Evelien: thirty-three, lesbian ciswoman. Works in health care industry. Raised in hervormde church, nowadays member of the same church, has been church elder of this church. Currently single. Lives in a small town. Interview (2 hr) at her home.

Hanneke: fifty-five, lesbian ciswoman. Works in health care industry. Raised in gereformeerde church, nowadays member of different gereformeerde church. Currently single. Lives in a small town. Interview (2,5 hr) at her home

Karlijn: twenty-eight, queer lesbian, feels connected to trans identity. Student in theology. Raised in mixed gereformeerde and hervormde church, nowadays member of a liberal hervormde church. Currently in a one year relationship with a woman. Lives in a city. Interview (2hr) at the university where she studies.

Ellen: forty-eight, lesbian ciswoman. Civil servant. Raised in liberal hervormde church, nowadays member of a different hervormde church. Currently living with a woman. Lives in a city. Interview (1,5 hr) at her work.

Edith: seventy-two, lesbian ciswoman. Retired from service industry. Raised in gereformeerde church, nowadays member of different gereformeerde church in which she is deacon. Divorced from marriage with a man in which two children were born.

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<sup>96</sup> For the descriptions I follow the example of Melissa Wilcox in her book *Queer women and religious individualism*

Widow of Inge, whom she married at her deathbed after a relationship of 19 years. Currently single. Lives in a small town. Interview (3 hr) at her home.

Lillian: forty-six, lesbian transman. Hairdresser. Raised in gereformeerde church, nowadays inactive member of orthodox gereformeerde church. Currently in a marriage with a man in which four children were born. Living in a small town. Interview (4hr) at her home.

Nienke: forty-three, ciswoman who identified as lesbian for a long time but recognizes herself more in the concept of sexual fluidity. Civil servant. Raised in hervormde church with an orthodox character, nowadays member of gereformeerde church. Divorced from a marriage with a woman in which two children were born. Currently single. Lives in a city. Interview (3 hr) at her home.

René: sixty-five, lesbian ciswoman. Retired from health care industry. Raised in hervormde church, nowadays member of different hervormde church. Divorced from marriage with a man in which three children were born. Currently married to Marja in a 32 year long relationship. Lives in a city. Interview (2,5 hr) at her home

## Appendix B: List of translated Protestant concepts

PKN/Protestantse Kerk Nederland – Dutch Protestant Church

Dominee – Pastor

Ouderling - Church elder

Diaken - Deacon

Pastoraal werker - Pastoral worker

Gemeenteberaad - Community council

Kerkenraad - Church board

Heilig Avondmaal - Lord's Supper

Belijdenis - Confirmation

Hervormde kerk - Dutch reformed

Gereformeerde kerk - Reformed churches in the Netherlands

## Appendix C: Interview questions

### Algemeen

- Leeftijd
- Ethnisch/nationale identiteit
- Baan/opleiding
- Familie, kinderen etc.?

### Jeugd en coming-out

- Waar heeft je jeugd zich afgespeeld? Heb je broers en zussen?
- Wat is je eerste herinnering, of een van je meest waardevolle herinneringen, waarin geloof voor jou voor het eerst in je leven een belangrijke rol heeft gespeeld? Bijvoorbeeld doop, kerstdiensten, binnen je familie, opa's en oma's etc.?
- Heeft geloof een rol gespeeld in je opvoeding? Zo ja, hoe dan? Kun je een voorbeeld geven?
- Welke veranderingen heb je in je geloof ervaren in je tiener- of studententijd? Kun je een voorbeeld geven? Waren deze veranderingen positief of negatief?
- Hoe kwam je erachter op vrouwen te vallen? Weet je nog de eerste keer dat je verliefd werd op iemand? Was dit altijd een vrouw, of ook andere mensen?
- Kun je je herinneren wanneer je voor het eerst iemand vertelde over je seksualiteit? Kun je een voorbeeld geven? Hoe heb je dit ervaren, positief, negatief, angstig, trots?
- Heb je ouders, opvoeders of vrienden vertelt over je eerste verliefdheid, of relatie? Weet je nog hoe ze reageerden? Hoe keek je toen naar hun reactie en kijk je er nu anders naar? Leg uit.
- Hoe was de relatie met je gemeente, vrienden en familie in je jeugd? Heb je deze relatie als positief ervaren, of niet? (vraag naar voorbeelden en herinneringen)

### Seksualiteit

- Wanneer had je voor het eerst een relatie met een vrouw? Hoe reageerde je omgeving hierop?
- Huidige relatie (indien van toepassing): Hoe ben je bij elkaar gekomen?
- Single (indien van toepassing); ben je op zoek naar een partner, hoe doe je dat dan etc.?
- Wat betekent het voor jou om vrouw te zijn?
- Hoe definieer jij je seksualiteit? Geboren, gekozen? Hoe staat dit in relatie tot je geloof?

- Welk belang hecht jij aan seksualiteit ten opzichte van je geloof? Vind je het bijvoorbeeld belangrijk dat anderen hiervan op de hoogte zijn? Hoe zou jij jezelf omschrijven in één zin?

### Religie

- Hoe beschrijf je jouw geloof en religie vandaag de dag? Hoe ben je hiertoe gekomen?
- Wat is het belangrijkste aan de Kerk voor jou? (gemeente, eigen geloof etc.)
- Hoe krijgt je geloof een plek in je dagelijks leven? Wat doe je in het dagelijks leven om uiting te geven aan je geloof? (praktisch) bijvoorbeeld kerkbezoek, bijbellezen etc.

### Religie en seksualiteit

- Speelt religie een rol in jouw relaties of keuze voor een partner? Zo ja, waarom? Zo nee, want?
- Heeft trouwen een speciale betekenis voor jou, waarom wel of niet?
- Speelt seksualiteit een rol in het uiten en beleven van je geloof? Zo ja, of nee, hoe of waarom?
- Heb je het idee dat je seksualiteit je relatie met God beïnvloedt? Waarom wel of niet? Kun je voorbeeld geven?
- Hoe wordt er binnen je geloofsgemeenschap gesproken over seksualiteit? Vind je dit prettig of niet? Kun je nog herinneren de laatste keer dat seksualiteit wel of niet ter sprake kwam? (een preek, gesprek, catechisatie, etc).
- Speelt seksualiteit een rol in jouw beleving in de kerk? Praat je er met veel mensen over, of juist niet? Ga je bijvoorbeeld naar een bijbelkring? Hoe verschilt dat met de kerkdiensten?
- Indien van toepassing: Kun je een passage uit de bijbel noemen die jou heeft gesteund, beïnvloed, verward?
- Kun je voorbeelden noemen wanneer geloof en seksualiteit in conflict waren?
- Kun je voorbeelden noemen wanneer je geloof en seksualiteit elkaar positief beïnvloedden?

Wil je iets meegeven aan iedereen die jouw verhaal mogelijk hoort?

Is er nog iets anders wat je belangrijk vindt dat ik weet?