

**Navigating Queerness and Christianity:
The “Good Christian” Myth in Dutch Christian Student Associations**

Janneke Schotanus

5678684

dr. Katrine Smiet

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Summary

In this bachelor thesis I investigate how normative ideas about what it means to be a “good Christian” contribute to the exclusion of queer members of Dutch Christian student associations. I conducted a critical discourse analysis of the *Medewerkersprofiel* (“employees’ profile”) that is used to guide interviews when members of any of the Navigators student associations apply for a leadership position. This analysis shows that while the document recognizes that Christianity is not a monolith but a diverse set of traditions and faith practices, nevertheless it presents one right way of ‘doing’ Christianity. The Christian ideals of marriage and remaining a virgin until marriage are prioritized over other values. Virginity becomes a symbol for religious commitment and the highest demand made on Christians related to being a “good Christian”. Yet the definitions of sex and virginity exclude queer people and result in a “grey area” in which what is deemed right and what is deemed wrong is unclear. Throughout the document the body and sexuality are portrayed as the ‘sites’ on which the exemplary (leadership)function is performed. The document fails to address that rules concerning bodies are gendered. In order to uncover how the document is put into practice and how its normative ideas impact the lives of queer Christians, I conducted interviews with queer members of these associations. My analysis demonstrates that the implementation of the document is considered ‘unchristian’ by the participants, as it determines how people should behave sexually and condemns those that do not abide by its rules. Rejection through an interview on the basis of the document leaves a participant feeling like she fails the “good Christian” ideal. While the participants reject this ideal, they implicitly show normative ideas concerning what it means to be a “good queer”. The normative ideal for queer Christians generated mostly by heterosexual Christians, of a “non-practicing”, celibate lifestyle, is rejected by the participants because queerness is not solely a set of actions, it is an identity. While Christianity and queerness are often constructed as contradicting one another, this research provides insight into the navigation of the two identities in the case of queer members of Dutch Christian student associations.

Introduction

One morning I settled into my study spot to work on this bachelor thesis and put on a random worship playlist, ready to get to work. The first song that came on was sung by a queer man. In this moment, I was moved. I was incredibly glad to hear him sing – yet it reminded me of all the stories I have heard about people coming out within their churches and consequently, being fired from worship bands, banned from participating in church activities, giving sermons, leading Bible study groups, baptizing others, or becoming church clergy. This song highlighted the need for me to write this thesis. Queer¹ people are systematically excluded from leadership positions within Christian communities. I want to examine one such way, one that I am personally familiar with: the exclusion of queer people within Dutch Christian student associations.

Queerness and Christianity are often constructed as two opposing identities. This notion is fueled by both ‘sides’. As social work researcher and queer Christian Rachel Murr notes, the intersecting identities of queerness and Christian faith result in both queerphobia within Christian communities and scrutiny in queer communities for religious involvement (2012, 6). Both as a gender studies researcher and as a queer Christian I can confidently assert that constructing queerness and Christianity as contradicting or opposing one another has never helped any queer Christian. If anything, this construction has been profoundly damaging to the spiritual, mental, emotional, and sometimes even physical well-being of queer Christians. There are barely any places, least of all formal institutions, in which queer Christians can practice their faith without compromise, fully accepted and supported by a community of believers. For this reason, research on the intersection of queerness and Christianity is needed. The exclusion of queer Christians and all those mechanisms that fuel this exclusion need to be talked about, need to be researched, preferably by those for whom this exclusion is palpable.

One of the challenges faced by queer people of Christian faith when they come out inside their religious communities is, as Jennifer Knapp writes in the foreword of Murr’s book *Unnatural: Spiritual Resiliency in Queer Christian Women*,

the near guarantee that in doing so, one is forced to contend with fighting against a religious response which insists on either binding up, changing, and even silencing the

¹ In this thesis I employ the term ‘queer’ as an umbrella-like definition for all those who do not identify as heterosexual.

gay voice. For many, the “good” Christian is obligated to struggle, twist, and fight for that which is so often taught as “best”: heterosexuality (2014, ix).

I want to find out how normative ideas about being this “good Christian” that Knapp refers to contribute to the exclusion of queer people within Dutch Christian student associations. In order to answer this question, I will examine in what ways (hetero)normative ideas about marriage exclude queer members of Dutch Christian student associations. Next to this, I will research how (hetero)normative understandings of virginity intersect with the exclusion of queer people within Dutch Christian student associations. Lastly, I will provide insight into whether the acceptance of queer members of Dutch Christian student associations lead to homonormativity.

In this thesis, I examine normative ideas about what it means to be a “good Christian”, which is a social construct emerging from a heteropatriarchal societal context. While the notion of the “good Christian” is not necessarily theologically funded, it is present in Christian communities. Even if one resists the “good Christian” construct, it still affects and shapes faith communities and consequently, social, personal, and spiritual interactions. This construct is infused with heteronormative ideas about sex and marriage. The debate about queer people within Christian communities is often implicitly sexualized: sex becomes the lens, the focus through which queer people are ‘defined’. My research will provide insight into the navigation of these identities while remaining critical of new normativities that may emerge when queerness is accepted within Christian communities. As Knapp writes, “[n]ow that the silence has been broken, it is all the more vital that we exercise the opportunity to not only tell our own story but to also make the effort to invite these stories to be told as well” (in Murr 2014, x). Through my bachelor thesis I make an effort to invite stories of queer members of Dutch Christian student associations to be told.

“Living the contradiction”: the intersection of queerness and Christianity

In order to understand how normative ideas about what it means to be a “good Christian” impact the lives of queer members of Dutch Christian student associations, I will give an overview of literature emerging from queer theology, queer studies, and gender studies. I will focus on the topics of queer Christianity as well as on virginity, marriage, and celibacy. I will

start by discussing the literature on the intersection of queerness and Christianity and all the tensions that come with it.

Christians who identify as queer are “living the contradiction”, as Jodi O’Brien formulates it in her contribution to *Interdisciplinary Readings on Sex and Sexuality* titled “How Big Is Your God? Queer Christian Social Movements” (2005, 238). Queer Christians living the contradiction are standing in the space between Christian communities that reject and condemn their queer identities, and on the other side, queer communities that dismiss and reject religious practices and organizations for their exclusionary ideology. The latter group has a tendency to construct religion as a final hurdle before queer liberation/emancipation (O’Brien 2005, 238). O’Brien writes that the “self-articulation [of queer Christians] is forged through attempts to grapple with this contradiction”, which she identifies as the “gay predicament” (2005, 238; 2004, 184). The gay predicament, a term she credits to Christian therapist John Furtado, “is that one cannot be a good Christian and also be queer” (O’Brien 2004, 185). O’Brien goes on to show that queer Christians’ attempts to find solidarity and comfort within queer communities may be met with rejection because of their religion.

The queer Christian is doubly damned: according to Christian doctrine, homosexuality is an affliction; among fellow (non-Christian) lesbians and gays, religious affiliation may be the affliction. Not only can one not be a good Christian and be queer, apparently one cannot be a good queer and be religious (2004, 185)

It is precisely this tension, this contradiction, this predicament that I will explore further, in how it functions in the lives of queer members of Dutch Christian student associations.

“Fluid and intertwined”

In order to further understand this contradiction that O’Brien speaks of, I have turned to Denise Louise Levy’s PhD dissertation titled *Gay, Lesbian, and Queer Individuals With a Christian Upbringing: Exploring the Process of Resolving Conflict Between Sexual Identity and Religious Beliefs* (2008). Levy proposes a model of internal conflict resolution of queer Christians which includes an awareness of the conflict, initial responses to the conflict which may include secrecy, increased religious involvement and depression, a catalyst of new knowledge, steps of working through the conflict such as seeking information, reflection,

discussion and new behaviors, and a resolution of the conflict which includes personalized faith and acceptance of sexual identity (2008, 199). One of Levy's conclusions is that the development of faith and of sexual identity are fluid and intertwined processes (2008, 225; 227; 231). This is in line with intersectional thought, which, as Gloria Wekker and Helma Lutz write, regards social axes such as religion and sexuality as "interdependent, interwoven systems of ideas and practices with regard to differences between people" (2001, 24). It is impossible to study the faith and sexual identity of queer Christians separately, as they exist simultaneously and are interwoven with one another.

Embracing ambiguity: the issue at stake

As Murr points out, the topic of homosexuality is widely debated within churches and Christian organizations (2014, 3). I will provide some more contextual background to this debate. Murr notes that "[s]omehow, the behavior of about five percent of the population has become the most important issue of the church. Clearly something more is at stake" (2014, 3). She goes on to explain, by making use of Sara Miles' memoir *Take This Bread: A Radical Conversion* (2007), what is at stake, arguing that the 'real' issue has to do with persevering tradition and the consequential exclusion of anything that may threaten the purity of tradition (Murr 2014, 3). Murr explains that queer people are a symbol for what traditionalists try to preserve most: the inerrancy of (their interpretation of) the Bible (2014, 3). The conflict of which queer Christians become victims through what their existence theologically represents, is one between those "who craved certainty and those who embrace ambiguity; those who insisted Scripture was inerrant and unchanging, given once and for all time, and those who believe that the Bible was only part of God's continuing revelation" (Miles 2007, 88). This notion is confirmed by Adrian Thatcher in his chapter "Authority and Sexuality in the Protestant Tradition", which appeared in *Embracing Sexuality: Authority and experience in the Catholic Church*. Thatcher points to "the authority and interpretation of the Bible [and] the role of experience as a possible source of theology" as well as a power struggle between different strands of Christianity as the underlying issues of the debate about sexuality (2001, 134). Consequently, "[s]exual minorities become objectified, treated as a problem, and then marginalized by majorities who often make no effort to understand them" (Thatcher 2001, 134).

The arguments made by Murr, Miles and Thatcher provide more insight into what is at stake in debates about Christianity and queerness, as well as how queer Christians are

‘victimized’, for a lack of a better word, through this process. Now I will move on to what I consider to be relevant topics in the discussion of what it means to be a “good Christian”: normative ideas surrounding virginity, marriage, and (queer) celibacy.

Holy Virginity

Many Christian congregations and organizations encourage Christians to ‘save themselves’ until marriage, meaning that they ought to remain virgins until marriage vows are made. This idea is expressed in copious ways, ranging from abstinence-only sexual education programs and purity pledges, to condemning those who disregard this notion. I will discuss marriage in more detail at a later stage, but I will first shed a light on the issues raised by the notion of ‘saving oneself for marriage’.

Virginity as a tool of oppression

First and foremost, wanting to abstain from sexual intercourse until marriage can be used as a tool of oppression when it is ‘elevated’ from a personal opinion or preference to a moral code one imposes on others. It is, in essence, a way of exercising control over who can have sexual intercourse with whom, and when, under what circumstances, and define the nature of this intercourse as either ‘blessed’ or immoral and ‘sinful’. In her review of Mark D. Jordan’s *Blessing Same-Sex Unions: The Perils of Queer Romance and the Confusions of Christian Marriage* Christine E. Gudorf accounts how Jordan shows that Christianity has a history regarding control of what Christians can and cannot do relating to sex.² Christian leaders and theologians alike “continuously intervened for over a millennium and a half in marital sex to regulate when couples could have sex, in what positions, and with what intentions” (2006, 445). Sinful sex, however defined, was projected on queer people “who represented and still represent unregulated and undomesticated sex” (Gudorf 2006, 446). Regardless of sexual identity, this notion impacts the lives of those who wish to abide by this rule, as well as those who grow up in communities that do so. This is even more the case for those who do not meet the criteria of ‘moral sex’. Whether affirming it, rejecting it, or negotiating it on different terms, most if not all

² I make use of Gudorf’s review instead of Jordan’s work itself due to the limited availability of Jordan’s text and because Gudorf gives an eloquent overview of the history of Christian marriage and Jordan’s complex arguments.

Christians need to position themselves in relation to ideas about sex and marriage, as well as in relation to those who act differently from their view.

The Christian ideal of virginity until marriage is prioritized over other ideals, such as the sharing of wealth and protection of marginalized groups. I think a consequence of this pedestalization is that virginity has become a symbol: virginity until marriage has become equated with religious commitment.

Defining virginity

When Christians need to remain ‘pure’ and virginal until marriage, it begs the question: what is virginity? What is sex, premarital or otherwise? Many definitions of sex and virginity exclude queer-identified people. If penetrative sex involving a penis and a vagina constitute sex and all other forms of sexual contact fall outside the definition of sex, queer people are excluded from the rule. Definitions of sexual intercourse differ from person to person; however, because of most Christians’ desire to wait until marriage, the definition of sex is a relevant question for many to ask. When penetrative penis-in-vagina sex is the definition, Christians of all sexualities are left with a big, murky space often referred to as ‘the grey area’, where the rules about what is and what is not sinful are unclear.

Holy matrimony

Looking at the connections between Christianity, sex and marriage, a few observations can be made. First of all, the term ‘premarital sex’ assumes a relationship between sex and marriage, implying that the sex occurs before a marriage, but that marriage is on the table – if not now, it will be at some point in the future. It does not necessarily imply that the people between whom the premarital sex occurs have to be the ones marrying at some point in the future. This idea effectively ignores those who have no intention of marrying and, even for those who do want to get married someday, constructs marriage as an end-goal, both of the relationship and perhaps even of life itself. The strict Christian rules concerning marriage and sex also suppose that every marriage includes sexual intercourse, which also does not hold true for each marriage.

Added to that is the fact that same-sex marriage has, for the most part of history, been non-existent and outlawed. In Josephine Ross’ analysis of the resistance to same-sex marriage she demonstrates how a vicious cycle of exclusion has come to exist: if marriage is thought to be

sacred and all sexual intercourse that occurs outside of marriage is considered immoral, this has consequences for queer relationships (2002, 1661). Gay marriage is not legalized everywhere (especially in 2002 when Ross' research was published) and as such, gay relationships (mostly) exist outside of marriage – which is why they are viewed as immoral, because all sexual intercourse outside of marriage is viewed as immoral (Ross 2002, 1661). Thus, this line of thinking provides a legitimization for the resistance against same-sex marriage (Ross 2002, 1661). Ross writes that it is marriage which “provides privacy and makes sex legitimate” (2002, 1661). Therefore, gay relationships are seen as immoral and overtly sexual “because at least in part because they exist outside of marriage, outside the boundaries of what is deemed acceptable” (Ross 2002, 1661).

Sexualization of queer people

Ross traces back the origin of the term homosexuality, revealing that “the origins of gay identity was a sexual definition. The equation gay love = profane sex must be understood as connected to the prevailing definition of ‘gay’ as a sexual mode of being” (2002, 1665). Ross illustrates that the sexualization of queer people leads to interpretations of coming out as an invitation to discuss sex, prompting invading questions and demands for insight into the intimate lives of queer people (2002, 1663). Ross argues that the pursuit of marriage equality “can be understood as a yearning for privacy around sexuality, coupled with visibility for the relationship and its romance” (2002, 1679). Her assertion that “gay couples long for the privacy shield which will allow them to hold themselves out to the world as a couple, without having to answer questions about what they do in bed and how often” will be met with understanding and recognition from many (Ross 2002, 1680).

Ross continues to demonstrate that queer people are sexualized by considering how William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* would be received if it had been a play about two men.

If the same lines had been written about two men in love, the play would be considered a play about sex. In contrast, *Romeo and Juliet* is considered a romance. Illicit sexuality is shown as noble and pure because of the young couple's desire to marry; because they are willing to accept punishment, even death, in pursuit of their love; and because it is heterosexual (Ross 2002, 1663).

This example Ross provides demonstrates how the ideal of purity is infused with heteronormativity. What is considered pure when it involves a heterosexual couple, is viewed as profane when involving a queer couple. Thus, queer Christians who want to remain pure, however they personally define that purity, will quickly discover that this cannot be done if they want to express their desires, their love, when those desires and feelings fall outside of what is deemed acceptable. However they express their desires, they will be ‘read’ as profane.

Holy celibacy

If virginity constitutes a symbol of holiness and commitment to God, the only ‘holy’ alternative, promoted by churches and the like, for a devoted queer Christian is celibacy. This is rooted in the notion held by many that *being* queer is not a sin but *acting* on queer desires is. O’Brien starkly remarks that this “separation of act and identity is considered by some to be a statement of acceptance” (2004, 184). Yet the consequences of this separation for the well-being of the queer person are not considered by these so-called ‘accepting’ Christians. Those within Christian communities that do not accept queer people ‘acting on’ their sexual and/or romantic desires have a tendency to emphasize “that there is room in theology to ‘love the sinner but hate the sin’” (O’Brien 2005, 244). Christians subscribing to this way of thinking fail to recognize that the ‘sin’ of queerness is not a sin like any other – it is not solely action, it is an identity. It is an identity that can be expressed through actions. To clarify: the sexual sins a heterosexual person commits do not render their entire sexuality sinful. They have the ability to repent and turn away from their sinful ways. As such, their sexuality has the potential to be both sinful and ‘holy’. Yet for the queer Christian, their whole sexuality is inherently sinful and wrong. When queer people ‘act on’ their sexuality, they cannot help but sin.³ Heterosexual Christians demanding celibacy from queer Christians demonstrate a lack of understanding regarding sexual orientation as an

³ The argument here is rather complex due to the different stances/interpretations of queerness that exist. The stance I take in this thesis is a direct response to those who ask of queer people to not ‘act on’ their sexual and/or romantic desires. I do not argue that actions are not relevant for queer people. Framing the debate as sexuality as actions vs. sexuality as identity constructs identity as separate from actions. However, as many critical theorists and gender studies scholars argue, identity *includes* performativity/actions (see Judith Butler’s 2011 [1990] *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, specifically chapter 1: “Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire”, part V: “Identity, sex and the metaphysics of substance”).

identity. The queer Christian who chooses to never act upon their desires and pursues a life of abstinence is still queer. O'Brien explains as follows:

the 'homosexual' is rendered as someone (something) lacking, someone whose desires are a potential source of shame and exile (...) To experience homosexual desires, and certainly to pursue fulfillment of these desire, will result in being cast out from the cosmology through which one makes sense of one's life (2004, 184; 185).

A new homonormative notion that can emerge through the celibacy discourse is the idea that queer Christians are welcome in church – if they practice and promote celibacy. The few queer Christians that feel a genuine call from God to be celibate become 'hijacked' to promote this discourse, whether they are in agreement with it or not. While celibacy might be an option for some and dismissing celibacy altogether would not do justice to those, queer or otherwise, who are called to a life of celibacy, the imposing of celibacy is for many queer people harmful. It is an expression of the queer secularism vs. heteronormative religion binary: celibacy for the queer Christian who is not called by God for this is a form of sacrificing one identity for another, of having to choose.

In his research into the experiences of lesbian, gay, and bisexual Christians and Muslims Andrew K. T. Yip encounters homonormativity (2008, 8). He describes gay men's "assumptions of how all gay men – including me – should live the 'gay' identity" as uncomfortable (Yip 2008, 8). "I found such 'homonormativity' experientially alien and limiting, exerting great pressure for conformity" (Yip 2008, 8). Yip notes that white, Christian gay men in particular demonstrated homonormative thoughts concerning "the most 'valid' way to be gay" (2008, 8). Homonormativity generates new sets of rules concerning how to be a 'good' or respectable queer and can include ideas concerning family, marriage, and gender roles. In her 2017 study of Christian LGBT organizations in Poland, Magdalena Mikulak coined the term "godly homonormativity", expanding upon theories regarding homonormativity and paraphrasing Lynne Gerber's 2015 term "godly masculinity". Mikulak goes on to account how the Christian LGBT organization she researched "leaves the patriarchal power relations within the Church unchallenged, and (...) rests on, and is generative of, a set of normative ideas" (2017, 2). She concludes that the organization "while addressing one set of exclusions, reinforces and consolidates others" (Mikulak 2017, 2). Mikulak's conceptualization of godly homonormativity

helps my investigation into the emergence of new homonormativities in Dutch Christian student associations.

As the literature I have reviewed illustrates, the rules relating to virginity, marriage, and purity are different for queer Christians than for heterosexual Christians. Queer people are sexualized, which results in the Christian ideal of purity always being out of their reach. The Christian ideal of purity, virginity and marriage are heteronormative. The alternative, a celibate lifestyle, still constructs queer Christians' sexuality sinful and wrong.

Methodology

The methodology of my research is two-fold. I have done a critical discourse analysis of the *Medewerkersprofiel* (MWP) ("employees profile"), a document which guides interviews when a member of any of the NSV Navigators student associations applies for a leadership position within their association. I have conducted unstructured in-depth interviews with queer members of Dutch Christian student associations in order to uncover how normative ideas about what it means to be a "good Christian" impact the lives of queer Christian members.

Critical discourse analysis: strategies and considerations

NSV Navigators has fifteen associations throughout the Netherlands, most of which are the largest Christian student associations in their respective cities. The student associations provide members with a community of believers of the same age-group. Most associations are structured into smaller groups, often called *disputen*, that meet up on a weekly basis and share faith practices, Bible study groups and friendships. The MWP document contains the vision of NSV on various issues, which I will expand upon later. A member who holds a leadership position is expected to agree with this vision and act accordingly, as much as possible. I chose to analyze this document as it is a very concrete way to observe normative ideas that a large amount of Dutch Christian student associations support. The MWP also has a reputation within the associations, next to its formal usage, and, from my personal observations, influences the ways in which people enter into conversations (specifically conversations about sex(uality)).

According to Rosalind Gill, critical discourse analysis assumes that language is not a neutral way of describing reality and recognizes that the ways in which the world is understood are determined by social processes (2000, 172; 173). Discourse analysis illustrates the effects of language on the understandings of an event (Gill 2000, 174). My use of critical discourse analysis is aimed at exposing a discourse that is broader than the text of the Medewerkersprofiel. As critical discourse analysis has no singular approach or strategy as to how to go about it, I will now clarify which strategies I will employ in my analysis of the MWP (Gill 2000, 172). I will skeptically yet generously read and interrogate the MWP, code as inclusively as possible and provide an analysis. I will look both at what is said and what is not said. The skeptical yet generous reading of the MWP includes doing multiple readings – going back to the text again and again, with different entry points and different strategies, in order to get a more complete view of the text and to do justice to its layers. It means doing a reading in which I look for the unsaid; a reading in which I focus on opposition and the construction of binaries; a reading in which I pay attention to naming. This multitude of reading will lead to more inclusive coding than with a solitary approach to the reading of the document.

Unstructured in-depth interviewing

I will use in-depth interviewing as a way of gaining insight into the lived realities of queer members of Dutch Christian student associations. Underlying this research method is the idea that knowledge can be gained through the personal stories of individuals. As such, my methodology is rooted in feminist standpoint epistemology. As Doucet and Mauthner note, feminist standpoint epistemology holds the view that a marginalized group, such as queer people within Christian student associations, “hold a particular claim to knowing (...) [as] they represent the world from a particular socially situated perspective, which represents epistemic privilege or authority. This epistemic privileging is located in the standpoint of the marginalized or disadvantaged” (2006, 37).

I opt for unstructured interviewing to allow as much space for my interviewees as possible. While I do have an overall topic in mind, I am more interested in what my interviewees want to share than in covering a specific set of questions. My main goal is to listen deeply, which, according to Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber, “means that you, the interviewer, are focused on what your participant is saying. You are not thinking about what it is you want to ask next

(your agenda), but you are instead providing support for your participant to tell [their] story” (2014, 183). This ties into the remark made by Gloria Holguín Cuádriz and Lynet Uttal in *Intersectionality and In-Depth Interviews: Methodological Strategies for Analyzing Race, Class, and Gender*, stressing the importance of “[privileging] the voices and lives of the researched over preexisting theories and the researcher’s agenda” (1999, 160). As Shulamit Reinharz points out in *Feminist Methods in Social Research*, the value of interviewing lies in its ability to offer “researchers access to people’s ideas, thoughts, and memories in their own words rather than in the words of the researcher” (1992, 19). This is especially important when considering agency and the voices of marginalized groups – to not speak for them.

Some methodological considerations

I will now give some reflections on the limitations of my research methods. I have made an effort to thoroughly research the advantages and pitfalls of in-depth interviewing.⁴ My research material is limited. It is located in Dutch student culture. Student associations are not representative of Dutch society as a whole. Most associations only allow students who study at a university or a university of applied sciences to become a member. Some require hefty amounts of tuition, excluding people with lesser financial means. These associations reside in cities with universities and large student communities, which means that students who live in rural areas of the country might not be able to join an association due to the time it would take to commute. My research is also limited in terms of age: most members of student associations are between the age of seventeen and twenty-five.

The choices I have made regarding whom I interviewed also restrict my research. I had limited time and space to interview and as such only interviewed three people. Whom I selected to interview also depends on whom I had access to. As the acceptance of queer people within Dutch Christian student associations is reluctant at best, it can be difficult to find people who are willing to talk about that aspect of their identity. I have found queer people through word-of-mouth, but selecting participants on this basis is limiting: those who are ‘out’ within their respective communities will likely have different experiences and stories than those who have told very few, if any, within their association. Yet I have worked with these limitations: the

⁴ See Clarke 2006; Corbin and Morse 2003; King in Cassel & Symon 2004; Hesse-Biber 2014; Leggard et al. 2003.

knowledge I produce might not be generalizable, but it is an embodied knowledge. The combination of methods I make use of grants me the best entry point into the lives of queer members of Christian student associations.

Critical discourse analysis of the Medewerkersprofiel

I have focused my analysis on the section of the Medewerkersprofiel that concerns sexuality and the body, as well as the sections about the use/function of the profile, as they are the most relevant to my research. I will start by giving my analysis of the document as a whole and then discuss the relevant sections. I will conclude with some remarks concerning the use of sources in the document.

Function of the document

The Medewerkersprofiel is a document which guides interviews and contains the vision of Navigators on various topics. Before an interview, a prospective candidate reads the document and during the interview the interviewer and the interviewee go through the document together. The document contains an introduction, which includes the vision and values of Navigators and sections about who implemented the document and who can revise the document (in both cases, the board of Stichting De Navigators). This is followed by a chapter about the function of the profile, which includes sections about why the profile exists, who is required to have an interview on the basis of this document and who is not, how to use the document, and how to move forward in case of a difference of opinion. The final part of the document contains the text of the employees' profile and includes three chapters: one about personal conversion to Christ, one about growth through the relationship with Christ, and one about the call for a holy life. It is the last chapter that is discussed in depth during the interview. The chapter "Call for a holy life" has seven sections, each referring to one topic that is deemed important by the authors. The topics include rest and peace, humility, purity, working with other Christians, justice, giving, and testifying. Each of these sections ends with a few bullet points containing the explicit expectations from Navigators from its employees. From my personal encounters with the MWP interviewing process, I know that some sections are discussed in more detail than others, but all explicit points that are listed are discussed during the interview.

The section “Function Medewerkersprofiel” contains an overwhelming amount of statements about what *is* the function of the document and nearly as many phrases about what is *not* the function of the document. Apparently, there is a wrong way and a right way to read and use the document. The authors continuously stress that the profile is not a measuring stick, but a compass to determine the direction employees should go in. They emphasize on multiple occasions that it is not their intention to judge those who cannot or will not identify with their views. The diversity of views within Christianity stressed many times, while a call for unity and the importance of all employees going in the same direction is also made. The authors do not address the tensions that could emerge when Christians who vary in views and practices ‘go in the same direction’. They do not address which one of the many Christian views gets to determine which direction all Christians within Navigators should go in, nor do they mention the scope of this direction. The entire document stresses that it is not about being perfect or having no flaws greatly and contains many phrases that construct Christian lifestyle as a process or refer to growth. Interestingly, when I coded the explicit bullet points of each section in the part “Call to a holy life”, I discovered that almost all include words that refer to this idea of the Christian lifestyle as a process. Oftentimes, the expectations are phrased using words that connote this lack of perfectionism that is emphasized explicitly in the section about the function of the document. Most expectations are phrased as things to strive towards and include words such as “try to”, “being open to”, “being aware of”, “balance”, “learn to see”, “not a primary focus on...”, “attitude”. The ‘things’ to strive towards are left open to multiple interpretations. For example, the bullet point stating that an employee of Navigators should be “aware of his responsibility to take care of the creation, nature and culture, both in his personal and social life, as a God-given task”⁵ does not explicitly define what this awareness or responsibility should look like (Navigators 2016, 15). It is up to the employee to do this to their best ability in the ways that they can. Almost all explicit expectations reflect the idea that a Christian lifestyle is a process of growth – a person might succeed in some areas, while still struggle in others, which is to be expected. All expectations – except two. Two out of nineteen bullet points are rigidly defined. Both are in the section about purity and refer directly to relationships and sexuality. I will discuss

⁵ In Dutch: “Het is de verwachting dat een Navigator medewerker zich bewust is van zijn verantwoordelijkheid om zowel in persoonlijk als in maatschappelijk leven zorg te hebben voor de schepping – de natuur en de cultuur, als een taak van God”

the section about purity in depth later, but in light of the whole document it is important to mention that only these points are defined explicitly, while all other expectations are more flexible. One expectation states that “God’s purpose for marriage and discipleship should be applied to the choice of a partner: only a follower of Christ meets this criterium”⁶ and the following expectation states that an employee should “wait with the pursuit of an intimate sexual relationship until they are married”⁷ (Ibid., 14). Apparently, sexuality and the choice of partner are areas where Navigators’ understanding of Christian lifestyles as a process ends. Either you do or you do not (intend to) meet these expectations. There is, supposedly, no grey area here. Or at least, it is not addressed. My interview analysis will provide more insight into these two expectations.

The document constructs Christianity in opposition to secular society. As Joan W. Scott proposes in her work *Sexularism*, “the secular ideal [is constructed as] synonymous with progress, emancipation, and freedom from the strictures of religiously-based traditionalism” (2009, 3).⁸ This construction is harmful to queer people who do not wish to abandon their religious affiliations. However, Christians are just as guilty as atheists of constructing a binary opposition between secularism and Christianity. A reference to ‘the world’ or secular (Dutch) society is made ten times in the MWP document, often followed by statements that construct Christianity in opposition to this: “we unavoidably are in conflict with the values that dominate our Western society (...) but we have to be different” (Navigators 2016, 15).⁹ This line of thinking operates “as if the two categories were in eternal opposition rather than discursively interdependent [to one another]” (Scott 2009, 3).

Purity

I have chosen to analyze the section “Text Medewerkersprofiel: chapter 3: the call for a holy life, C: purity (about your body as a temple: sexuality, food & drinks, alcohol and drugs)” in

⁶ In Dutch: “Het is de verwachting dat een Navigator medewerker Gods bedoeling van huwelijk en discipelschap toepast op de keuze van een partner: alleen een volgeling van Christus komt hiervoor in aanmerking”

⁷ In Dutch: “Het is de verwachting dat een Navigator medewerker wacht met het aangaan van een intieme seksuele relatie tot binnen het huwelijk”

⁸ I would add to that that secularism is often aligned with women’s rights and gay rights while constructing religion as oppressive to women and queer people, notions which are often appropriated in homonationalist discourse.

⁹ In Dutch: “Daardoor raken we onvermijdelijk in conflict met de waarden die onze Westerse samenleving domineren (...) Maar wij moeten anders zijn”

depth as it refers directly to sex and sexuality, which are central themes of my research.¹⁰ It is significant to note that of all sections under the heading of the call for a holy life, the section about purity is the longest, taking up a near two pages. Other topics that are addressed in this chapter take up approximately half a page. After a skeptical yet generous reading of the section about purity, I find the following points important to note. The section, in its title, claims to be about sexuality, food and drinks, as well as the use of alcohol and drugs. Yet food and drinks are referred to only one time explicitly in the body of the text, and once in a footnote, and alcohol and drugs are referred to twice, one of which is at the end of the chapter, where expectations for the prospective leader are listed explicitly. As mentioned before, the expectations relating to sex and relationships are rigidly defined, while the expectation relating to substance use is phrased in the following manner: “an employee should be responsible in the use of stimulants and realize that excessive use and addiction do not honor God” (Navigators 2016, 14).¹¹ The responsible use of stimulants is not defined: again, it is up to the employee to determine how much is too much. Meanwhile, the rest of the section about purity is about sex and the body. The amount of space devoted to sex and the body in combination with the lack of specification regarding substance use demonstrates what the authors deem important. Indeed, when I coded the text for how often the importance of the topic of sex was emphasized, it is done so nine times, whether explicitly or implicitly, in the span of less than two full A4 pages. The sections about the function of the profile stress the importance of the body and sexuality on multiple occasion. That the importance of sex and the body is emphasized so greatly in the document resonates with what I proposed earlier: the Christian ideals concerning marriage, sex, and virginity are prioritized over other ideals, such as sharing wealth and protecting marginalized groups in society. The section about giving states that “the intense warnings Jesus has given concerning the power of money and property and the special place that the poor have in the Bible at least show the great importance of the topic [of giving]” (Ibid., 15).¹² Even so, the topic of marriage is dubbed “clearly of the utmost importance” (Ibid., 14).¹³

¹⁰ In Dutch: “Tekst Medewerkersprofiel: Hoofdstuk 3: Roeping tot een heilig leven C. Reinheid (over je lichaam als tempel: seksualiteit, eten & drinken, alcohol en drugs)”.

¹¹ In Dutch: “Het is de verwachting dat een Navigator medewerker zich verantwoordelijk opstelt in het gebruik van genotsmiddelen, en beseft dat bij overmaat en verslaving God niet geëerd wordt”

¹² In Dutch: “De uiterst heftige waarschuwingen van Jezus over de macht van geld en bezit, en de bijzondere plaats die de armen in de bijbel innemen, laten in ieder geval het grote belang zien van dit onderwerp”

¹³ In Dutch: “Daarmee is dit onderwerp duidelijk van het allergrootste belang”

Now that I have established that the Medewerkersprofiel views sex, marriage, and the body as extremely important topics, it is necessary to look at how these topics are viewed. Nowhere in the chapter is sexual orientation mentioned explicitly. What is mentioned is the phrase “sexual desires and preferences”. The term ‘sexual preference’ is often used in Dutch to signify sexual orientation. According to the document sexual desires and preferences are not wrong or sinful of themselves, but in how a person acts on these desires and preferences (Ibid., 13). This idea resonates with what O’Brien mentions: love the sinner, hate the sin (2005, 244). Which actions, stemming out of sexual preference or desire, are sinful and wrong, is not mentioned explicitly, except for any sexual act that is performed premaritally or extramaritally and/or between more than two people. In one section, sex is referred to without mention of gender, mentioned “sexual intercourse with another person (...) binds two people in a unique way” (Navigators 2016, 13). Optimistically, this can be read as non-normative and inclusive. However, it is more likely that the language in this section is not gendered because the gender of the reader is unknown but assumed to be male or female and heteronormativity is so infused in the Christian ideal that it is not even mentioned. The text that concludes the section about purity, which follows immediately after the non-gendered one, mentions that this binding between two people assumes a “deep promise of commitment and loyalty between a man and a woman” which is described as ‘the way God intended it to be’ (Ibid., 13). The document presents a clear heteronormative view on sex and marriage, effectively excluding queer members of NSV.

Sex is mostly referred to in a negative way, oftentimes through language that signifies a warning. Sex, when described in a negative manner, is constructed as something dangerous, an act which, when performed “wrongly”, can cause “brokenness, shame, and guilt” (Ibid., 12). The few times when sex is referred to in a positive manner, sex is often constructed as a gift of God, something for people to enjoy. The warnings issued by Navigators concerning sex outweigh the positive aspects of sex.

Another aspect that proved itself to be dominantly present in the text is the importance of the body. The phrase “honoring God with our bodies” is used often. Phrases relating to what the authors dub “God’s will” or the honoring of God’s will are infused throughout the text. The phrase “the body is a temple” is also used repetitively. The prevalence of the body in the text reflects the potential danger bodies have, especially those that deviate from the white, male, able

norm. This document is not disconnected from the social context it is produced in – a context, a society, in which women’s bodies are often constructed as dangerous, as tempting men, as excusing atrocious actions caused against women, as ‘asking for it’ (see Moor 2010; Whatley 1996). Similarly, bodies that deviate from the white norm are also constructed as dangerous. There are different rules concerning bodies, rules that are directly linked to social axes. Fat bodies, disabled bodies, genderqueer bodies are all considered dangerous, immoral and/or inferior. Again, the important of an intersectional analysis becomes evident. These factors are not considered in the document: no attention is paid to social rules concerning bodies. While it is not mentioned in the text, ideas about the body are gendered. The phrase “honor God with your body” will unlikely be read by a man as containing the implicit message to cover up – yet this is precisely what women are told to do, argued by people that use the very Bible verses referring to the body as a temple and honoring God with your body.¹⁴

Next to this, the idea of an employee having an exemplary function is mentioned often, most explicitly in the section about sexuality and the body. In the view of Navigators, the body is the site on which this exemplary function is expressed the most. This is interesting, given the fact that most other explicit expectations can be expressed in the public sphere, while having sexual intercourse with is usually an affair reserved for the private sphere. The profile blurs the lines of the public/private divide by its notions regarding the body and sex(uality). The authors stress the importance of the body for Christians, arguing that one needs to use one’s body in honor of God. But who decides what it means to honor God with one’s body? Who makes the rules? Who has the right to say: this is the will of God and this is not? Whoever claims this right to decide was is and is not God’s will does not exist outside of ideology, outside of the societal context in which these interpretations are (re)produced. If the vision of Navigators is that Christianity is not a one singular unit, but a diverse set of traditions, visions, and practices, there ought not be a problem. In this line of thinking there is space for different interpretations, for different ways of thinking. While the document claims that Christianity is not homogenous, it does present Navigators as such.

Accountability and the use of sources

¹⁴ For an elaborate insight into the ways in which women’s bodies have been constructed in Christian discourse, I recommend Margaret R. Miles’ *Carnal Knowing: Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the Christian West*.

Quoting credible sources can be a persuasive discursive tactic. This document, which contains sixteen pages, refers to the Bible 98 times, either through direct references to verses (mostly in footnotes), or through phrases that discuss the authority of the Bible. The only other source that is mentioned (but not credited) is an illustration by Dawson Trotman, the founder of the international Navigators movement. This illustration includes a reference to the Bible. The document refers to the Bible as a high authority: “[t]he most important source to discover the will of God is the **Bible**. We expect from employees that they are prepared to recognize its authority for life and test their decisions in according with the Bible” (Ibid., 9).¹⁵ The document constructs the Bible as a credible source and to the reader who agrees with this stance, the arguments made in the profile are very credible due to the many references to the Bible. Yet the authors use the Bible as a source without addressing the ambiguity of the verses they quote. They never address the multiple interpretations and readings connected to each verse, each chapter, each Biblical author, nor do they make explicit the thought process leading up to their decision for one specific interpretation. As feminist theologian Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza writes, “context is as important as text. What we see depends on where we stand. One’s social location or rhetorical context is decisive of how one sees the world, constructs reality, or interprets biblical texts” (1988, 5). The people who have interpreted the Bible verses are invisible in the MWP: the authors of the document are not specified. The Bible verses are presented as though they speak for themselves, as though every reader would or should come to the very same conclusions the authors intended. While the authors continuously state that Christianity is plurality, is diversity, is ambiguity, they do present a singular reading of the Bible. There is a danger in the profile silently putting forward one interpretation of the Bible, proposing one ideal way of being a Christian, without even making explicit the process that lead up to this interpretation.

As soon as the document is put to practice, the singularity that is proposed falls apart, as every reader of the document interprets and reinterprets, and every interviewer does the very same. This document is read and implemented by people whose readings and practices are influenced by their experiences, traumas, sexualities, genders, bodies, specific religious traditions, families, communities and spaces they are (un)able to move through. All readers will

¹⁵ In Dutch: “De belangrijkste bron om Gods wil te leren kennen is de **Bijbel**. Van medewerkers vragen we de bereidheid om haar autoriteit voor het leven te erkennen, en beslissingen daaraan te toetsen”

have their own perspective and interpretation of the document, regardless of the intentions of the authors. Similarly, the interviews are also held within specific social contexts, infused with power relations, which may influence the interviewing process.

There is an invisible power determining whose Christianity is right and whose is wrong, who is honoring God with their body and who is not, establishing an invisible norm. The lack of transparency concerning the contributors of the document could be linked to, but not excused by, the desire to present Navigators as one ‘front’ striving towards one goal – but the idea that this organization has only one voice, one perspective, does not do justice to its own vision of multiple Christianities, nor does it honor the various people that work for this organization. There is a contrast between what is written about the diversity within Christianity in the document and the singular voice that is presented. The singular reading of what Christians ought to do, be, and want, does not do justice to the reality, the diversity of Christianity – which is why I will now present my analysis of my interviews with queer members of NSV student associations. Through these interviews I am able to uncover lived experiences of members of the associations and gain further insight into the implementation of the document.

Interview Analysis

First, I will give a short introduction to each participant before highlighting some important themes that emerged through my analysis of the interviews. The participants had varying experiences and backgrounds, but all participants are white and have identified as Christian at some point in their lives. The interviews have been anonymized.¹⁶ The NSV associations that the participants are or have been members of are referred to as NSX. The first interview I conducted was with Anne, a homosexual male who no longer identifies as a Christian. Anne was a member of one of NSX for one year. We talked mostly about what made him decide to leave, his coming out to his family, as well as his thoughts on how sex is talked about within NSX. The second interview I conducted was with Kevin, who identifies as gay and is a current member of NSX. He joined his association three years ago. In the interview we covered many topics, such as

¹⁶ In order to ensure the full anonymity of my research participants, the audio files of my interviews have been stored in my private computer. In case these audio files need to be accessed for institutional purposes, or to verify the accuracy of my representation of their contents, they can be accessed by contacting me.

leadership, love and its connections to faith practices, coming out, and his vision for NSV. The final interview I conducted was with Evelien, a current member of one of the NSV associations in her twenties who does not fully identify as heterosexual.¹⁷ She joined NSX four years ago. In this interview we talked about what her faith means to her, her experience of being rejected through the MWP interviewing process and her ideas on marriage and Christian culture. I will now address themes that emerged through these interviews.

Coming out

Anne and Kevin both lamented how little queerness is talked about within their associations and that it perhaps even contributes to the exclusion of queer people. When I asked how conversations about homosexuality that he has had within NSX went, Kevin explains that he is dissatisfied with how little people talk about the topic. He recalls conversations he has had with people about his sexuality in light of his faith. He enjoys talking about it, saying that it is often the first thing people ask him about when they find out he is gay. He mentions that a common response is that people had not considered matters from the perspective he presents and he likes ‘enlightening’ people in this way. Kevin says that when he joined NSX he wanted to come out as quickly as possible, as to avoid uncomfortable moments in which people expressed their opinions about homosexuality without knowing that he is gay. He did not want people to feel bad when they found out he was gay after expressing their thoughts about the topic, thinking they might think they offended him, and adds that maybe he finds it awkward when people talk about him without knowing it. After coming out to his dispuut, he told everyone to say what they really think. He came out after the topic came up, which is what he prefers over randomly announcing it. Kevin explains that this is why he wanted to host a lecture about homosexuality this year, so members from NSX would have an opportunity to come out, whether within their dispuut, or at all. Yet he and the people he had arranged this lecture with were forbidden from hosting it, as NSV was still developing their vision on homosexuality.

¹⁷ When I asked how she identified herself, Evelien described her sexuality as follows (in Dutch): “Ja, nou, ik zie mijzelf niet als helemaal honderd procent hetero, maar... ik zie mijzelf ook *niet* als bi denk ik... maar, als in van, ik zit nu gewoon in een hetero relatie en dat vind ik superfijn, maar ik zie het ook echt prima voor me dat ik dat zou kunnen hebben met een vrouw” (Anonymous. 2018. Interview with NSX member by author. May 23). I will abstain from imposing any label on Evelien’s sexuality, as I consider doing so highly problematic and inappropriate. Instead, I leave this question in the midst and listen to her story as is.

Kevin and I then delved into a conversation about how to phrase a coming out, both feeling that the Dutch phrases “ik val op mannen” (I am into men) or “ik val op vrouwen” (I am into women) sound odd. Kevin added that a straight man saying “ik val op vrouwen” would also be weird, but that straight people never have to explain their sexuality. Heteronormativity is dominantly present in society and in Christian communities such as NSX. People operate under the assumption that everyone is heterosexual unless proven otherwise. The abstraction of queer people, which I will expand upon later, is a notion that is fueled by heteronormativity. Heterosexual Christians do not realize they speak about their fellow dispuut members because they assume everyone is heterosexual like they are.

When Anne recounts how he came out to his dispuut after hearing people whisper about his sexuality behind his back, he says some well-meaning people applauded that he dared to tell them (“I was thinking, ‘what do you mean, *dare* to tell? This is just who I am.”).¹⁸ One member commented that some people still had to ‘give his news a place’ or did not know how they felt about it. Anne says he was no longer used to meeting such closedminded people as most of his friends and fellow students are gay, so encounters like these set off some alarms in his head. He theorizes that if he had not joined that particular dispuut that year, they would not have thought about the topic, or at least in a different manner. He says that if people are confronted with it, especially within Christian contexts, they are forced to think about it more quickly.¹⁹ I think that heterosexual Christians often do not realize that when they express their views, they are not speaking about an abstract category but about the very people sitting next to them in church. These conversations occur often because of what I mentioned earlier: queer people theologically represent a conflict between different ways of viewing the holy Scripture, statically or more ambiguously. The issues at hand are related to the preservation of tradition and its consequential exclusion of any threat formed against the purity of said tradition, how the Bible is viewed and used, as well as power struggles between different strands of Christianity. For these reasons is it a popular topic of debate. Yet both Kevin and Anne think that it is still not talked about enough

¹⁸ In Dutch: “Ik dacht van, ‘hoe zo *durft* te zeggen? Dit is gewoon hoe ik ben” (Anonymous. 2018. Interview with former NSX member by author. May 17).

¹⁹ In Dutch: “[S]tel... mijn dispuut, ik was nooit in mijn dispuut gaan zitten maar in het... dispuut er naast bij wijze van spreken, ..., hadden ze toch in het jaar dit ik er zat daar helemaal... niet over nagedacht. Of heel anders in elk geval, snap je? En dat bedoel ik een beetje met dat... als je, als mensen ermee worden geconfronteerd, vooral binnen christelijke sferen, ze dan ook sneller eigenlijk... worden gedwongen om erover na te gaan denken” (Anonymous. 2018. Interview with former NSX member by author. May 17).

in the context of NSX. What I argue is that when conversations about homosexuality *do* occur, most heterosexual Christians feel the need to weigh in on them and when they do so, they do so without realizing how ‘concrete’ the conversation is – until someone in their inner circle comes out to them. That is for many the point at which they realize that what they have been saying about queer people is not ‘just an opinion’ or an interesting theological debate, but actually involves and affects people. This issue is related to theoretical abstraction, which does not only occur within academia’s ivory tower, but in personal conversations and debates, for example, in Christian student associations. As Adrienne Rich so aptly notes, “[a]bstractions severed from the doings of living people, fed back to the people as slogans” is what, might I add, ought to be combatted (1984, 213). Rich’s proposed solution of practicing a politics of location and bringing the body into work is an adequate one within the context of knowledge and media production. For heterosexual Christians who (think they) do not know queer people, I would suggest a thought experiment any time they discuss the topic of queerness. I propose they try to imagine their conversational partner is queer, as they might very well be.

Microaggressions

Anne gave the most examples of homophobic microaggressions of all participants, referring to instances both within and outside NSX. Anne says that people often comment on his sexuality unprompted and some ask questions about his sex life, going as far as asking heteropatriarchal questions like ‘who is the man and who is the woman’. Anne says that he would never ask a heterosexual couple questions like that, yet he receives invasive, personal questions like this often – also when the topic of conversation is not sex. This resonates with an example Ross, a professor of law who has researched topics such as consent and sexualization of mixed-raced and same-sex couples, gives from her personal life experience as a queer woman to show how the sexualization of queer people can emerge. She recounts how, when she mentioned she had a girlfriend to a stranger she met on a plane, the first response she received was a question regarding her sex life. Ross explains that this response

betrayed an obsession with gay sexuality and suggests that [the stranger] views gay sexuality as qualitatively different from his own, and that he equated [her] coming out to him as a willingness to discuss sex, as if [she] had brought up the topic (2002, 1663).

Interactions like the one Ross describes, which demonstrate the sexualization of queer people, are commonplace in Anne's life as well.

Respectable queerness

Before Anne joined NSX he outright asked a member how NSX viewed gay people. She said there is no difference to God and then proceeded to compare gay people to a Biblical prostitute called Rahab, implying that both were accepted by God, which did not sit right with Anne.²⁰ The discourse surrounding prostitution and sex work within feminist studies and within (most) Christian contexts differ greatly. I will very quickly explicate on the story of Rahab. My summary is most definitely incomplete: I am aware that this is one reading and the amount of words I devote to this will not do justice to the story in full.²¹ That being said, here are some observations regarding the story of Rahab. Rahab is a gentile woman and citizen of Jericho who endangers her own life protecting Israelite spies, hiding them in her house and lying to authority figures about their whereabouts (Assis 2004, 82). While many mentions of Rahab in the Bible are followed by the phrase “the prostitute”, the story she is involved in is not about her occupation. Some important observations about Rahab is that she has a key role in the journey of God's people and her name is mentioned in the Matthean genealogy of Jesus, which is of great significance.²² The comparison of Rahab to queer people could go a number of ways. One such way might be: Jesus Himself spent time with social outcasts and the marginalized, such as prostitutes, and is a descendant of Rahab. Similarly, Christians ought to support and uplift the marginalized. Yet this is not the reading put forward by the NSX member. Apparently, to this member queer people and prostitutes are comparable and fit into the same category, with her saying that God also ‘was there for’ Rahab. *Even* Rahab. Prostitutes like Rahab were social outcasts and deviated from the sexual norm – just like queer people deviate from heteronormativity.

²⁰ In Dutch: “[T]oen zei zij echt zo van, en dat is dan goed bedoeld, van ‘ja, nou, weet je wel, we maken echt geen onderscheid voor God, God was er ook voor Rachab de hoer en zo’, dat ik dacht van, ‘wow, oké, chick, ik vind het interessant dat je een homo met een hoer...’ ik ken ze ook wel in combinatie, maar het was meer van, dit gaat niet helemaal lekker” (Anonymous. 2018. Interview with former NSX member by author. May 17).

²¹ To uncover more narratives, interpretations and theology surrounding Rahab, I suggest the reader turn to Rose Wu's “Women on the Boundary: Prostitution, Contemporary and in the Bible” (2001) and Melissa A. Jackson's chapter about Rahab in *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible: A Subversive Collaboration* (2012).

²² Again, this is not the time nor place to elaborate on this – but I recommend that those interested turn to feminist theology for more insight into the significance of this.

The offense Anne took – which should not be exaggerated, as he laughed when he recalled this encounter and seemed to find it more odd than deeply offending his sensibilities – contains implicit ideas relating to respectability. To not want to be compared to a whore (the word Anne used), to try to distance oneself from prostitutes as a category, is related to what Gayle S. Rubin says about the system of erotic stigma. Rubin refers to Western religious traditions, amongst which are Christianities, which the intensity of the stigma is rooted in (1984, 107). She has created an overview of the sex hierarchy: the list of “good, normal, natural, blessed sexuality,” which Rubin refers to as the charmed circle, includes “heterosexual, married, monogamous, procreative, non-commercial, in pairs, in a relationship, same generation, in private, no pornography, bodies only, vanilla” (1984, 109). The “bad, abnormal, unnatural, damned sexuality” referred to as the outer limits include “homosexual, unmarried, promiscuous, non-procreative, commercial, alone or in groups, casual, cross-generational, in public, pornography, with manufactured objects, sadomasochistic” (Rubin 1984, 109). All those in the outer limits are constructed as inferior. Notice that queer people cannot help but be in that category. Or, nearly. Rubin notes that

[s]table, long-term lesbian and gay male couples are verging on respectability, but bar dykes [*sic*] and promiscuous gay men are hovering just above the groups at the very bottom of the pyramid. The most despised sexual castes currently include (...) sex workers such as prostitutes and porn models (Rubin 1984, 107).

Respectability is what queer couples abiding by the laws set by homonormativity *might* obtain, yet is often done so by distancing themselves from and denouncing those who do not strive for the same goal. One group (of ‘acceptable queers’) is included but in its inclusion, new exclusions are created. While it might not be very explicitly present, the idea that a ‘good queer’ is not a sex worker creates a new other, new hierarchies, within the already marginalized group. A tentative conclusion I would propose is that as queer people are already outside of what is deemed respectable within the sexual hierarchy and given that the intense erotic stigma is dominantly present within Christian communities, a move that many queer Christians make is to distance themselves from all other sexual behaviors and preferences that are considered inferior. This is done in order to obtain some respectability for themselves. *Yes, I am gay, but I don’t cheat on my partner like those other gay men. Yes, I am gay, but I’m not into BDSM, I’m not weird like that.*

This distancing is a coping mechanism of sorts, albeit not an innocent one. It creates Others, it provides new exclusions. All queer people should be accepted and respected, without any conditions or demands, without having to prove their ‘worth’ by not having ‘immoral’ sex.

In relation to what I said earlier about queer celibacy as a form of godly homonormativity, I would like to share Kevin’s ideas about non-practicing queer people. He asked an important question for queer Christians, one that often goes ignored by heterosexual Christians that demand celibacy from queer people: what is practicing homosexuality? Is it sex? In Kevin’s opinion, him thinking another man looks nice would already be ‘practicing’ homosexuality. Since queerness is not just actions, it is an identity, the idea that by not pursuing sex or relationships one no longer ‘practices’ queerness makes little sense, if at all. The idea that sexual intercourse is the ‘site’ on which one ‘practices’ queerness, whereas thoughts and all other possible ways of being queer are not, is another way of sexualizing queer people.

Kevin personally sees more harm in the celibate queer ideal than good. He recalls a talk about sexuality given by a non-practicing gay man at one of the NSX activities and finds it very difficult and painful. “Then I really think, ‘ah, boy, what are you doing to yourself?’”²³ Kevin thinks that repression of one’s sexual identity will likely lead to its other extreme: derailment (“ontsporing”). While he expresses concerns for the individual’s well-being when such derailment occurs, his statements *could* contain similar ideas relating to erotic stigma as Anne’s distancing himself from sex workers. I say could, as Kevin never defines this derailment. Kevin gives an example of someone else who repressed his homosexual identity and then, in Kevin’s words, “completely went too far. Then he did the most bizarre things on the terrain of sexuality”.²⁴ Later he calls this “not good,” specifically in relation to the demand to not ‘practice’ queerness. Kevin did not give examples of the ‘bizarre’ sexual acts he refers to, so I cannot give a definitive conclusion. Should they concern sexual acts that fall into Rubin’s outer limits of the sex hierarchy, he would, like Anne, unconsciously be creating good ways and bad ways to ‘be’ queer. So while Kevin’s well-intended concern is for the emotional, mental, and perhaps also

²³ In Dutch: “Dan denk ik echt, ‘ah, jongen, wat doe je jezelf aan?’” (Anonymous. 2018. Interview with NSX member by author. May 22).

²⁴ In Dutch: “Hij was het heel erg aan het onderdrukken en op een gegeven moment was hij gewoon compleet doorgeslagen. Toen deed die echt de meest bizarre dingen op het gebied van seksualiteit” (Anonymous. 2018. Interview with NSX member by author. May 22).

spiritual well-being of the queer person that is ‘sexually deranging’ after repressing their identity, a construction of ‘good sex’ and ‘bad sex’ may be present in what he says. These notions can contribute to the construction of respectable queers vs. unrespectable queers, which is directly linked to godly homonormativity.

Sex and control

Another important topic that came up implicitly during all interviews is power. Power structures are dominantly present in the discourse about sex and marriage within Christian communities. This ranges from the MWP determining who can have sex with whom and under what conditions, to Christian organizations determining that Evelien is prohibited from sharing the love of God through their organization. Evelien says marriage in the Christian world is pedestalized greatly. She recalls how a course she followed at NSX about relationships and sexuality promotes a healthier image of marriage, but that this does not rhyme at all with what the MWP represents. While in this course members are encouraged to formulate their opinion about sex and relationships, the MWP does not allow this space. It has determined which, out of all opinions about these topics, is the right one. Evelien encounters the pedestalization of marriage in churches as well. The MWP puts forth a Christian ideal, involving heterosexual marriage with children. Yet, as Evelien notes, in its portrayal it does not address the messy reality of relationships and sex.

Anne recalls a ‘guy’s night’ with his dispuut when they discussed sex and states that Christian student associations are hypocritical when it comes to sex, saying that it is barely talked about and that people assume that sex before marriage is bad and sex is for heterosexual couples. Anne has not encountered the MWP directly. He was a member for only one year and realized he did not want to stay longer early in the year, so he would not have considered applying for any leadership position and thus not have read the document. Yet through his accounts of the way sex is talked about in his dispuut, it is apparent that he has encountered the practical impact of the norms set by the MWP. Anne says that people acted as if sex was a bad thing, while sex can be something really good. This is similar to the way sex is described in the MWP: it is mostly phrased in a negative way. At the time Anne was exploring his sexuality and

had sex and he did not feel as though he could tell his dispuut.²⁵ He later adds that these encounters made him aware that he was not going to be able to be himself in his dispuut. Anne says that NSX deciding his partner has to be heterosexual, a Christian, and that they are not allowed to have sex is what he finds difficult: “why... do you decide for me what I do between the sheets? I don’t do that for you either.”²⁶ While he has not been in contact with the MWP directly, Anne was confronted with the sexual norm within NSX and felt a taboo in regards to his own sexual experiences.

“Unchristian” rejection

Out of all participants, Evelien talked most explicitly about the “good Christian” myth and its consequences. When I asked for her opinion of the MWP, Evelien said she understood why it needs to exist, but the issue lies in how the MWP is implemented.

Especially since, also when you read the MWP, it is very much written down as, ‘this is a guideline and not, say, a measuring stick to be measured with’, except – well, let me (...) speak about the experience I had with it – it is used as a measuring stick and I find that difficult.²⁷

Evelien was rejected because she has a boyfriend who is not a Christian and she is sexually active while unmarried. She describes the MWP interview itself as a positive experience, saying that she was able to explain her decision to have sex, demonstrating that it was a well thought through choice she made with God and with her boyfriend and that the interviewer responded positively, applauding her for how well thought out her decision was. Then she recounts how

²⁵ In Dutch: “[E]n zo’n andere gast zei van, ... ‘ik heb een keer seks gehad met mijn vriendin’ en er werd een beetje zo over gedaan zo alsof het slecht was, terwijl in die tijd was ik achttien of zo, ik studeerde—ik ging op kamers wonen, of, in elk geval, ik ging mijn seksualiteit ontdekken, ik bleef eens een keer bij een man slapen, ik had een keer seks, en ik dacht echt van, ‘oh, hier wordt echt erover gedaan zo van alsof het allemaal slecht is, terwijl seks ook juist iets heel fijns kan zijn, *juist*.’ ... en dat dus ook echt wel een punt dat ik bij mijzelf dacht van, ‘ja, maar ik ga hier dan niet echt aankomen met, ‘jongens hee, ik heb bij wijze van spreken gister—gisteren ben ik na het stappen mee geweest met een hele leuke vent, heb ik effe lekker seks mee gehad’... Dan zouden die mensen allemaal een hartaanval krijgen of zo. Dus toen (unintelligible segment) dat ik bij mijzelf dacht van, ‘ja, dit gaat ‘m niet worden’” (Anonymous. 2018. Interview with former NSX member by author. May 17).

²⁶ In Dutch: “waarom... beslis jij voor mij wat ik tussen de lakens doe? Dat doe ik ook niet voor jou” (Anonymous. 2018. Interview with former NSX member by author. May 17).

²⁷ In Dutch: “I: Wat zie je daarin als een probleem? Problemen? P: Ja. Vooral dat, ook als je het MWP leest, dan is het gewoon heel erg ook opgeschreven als, “dit is een richtlijn en geen lat, zeg maar, om langs gemeten te worden, alleen – nou ja, laat ik (...) dan spreken over de ervaring die ik daarmee heb – is dat het wel gebruikt wordt als lat en dat vind ik dan wel moeilijk” (Anonymous. 2018. Interview with NSX member by author. May 23).

during a phone call between her and her interviewer in which they would discuss the final decision, the interviewer said that after reading the Bible, she thought Evelien had not made the right choices, mostly her decision to date someone who is not a Christian. Again, similarly to the use of the Bible in the MWP document itself, the Bible is put forth as an unquestioned, transparent authority, containing a singular vision on these topics, providing grounds to determine Evelien is not a suitable leader. Evelien says: “[i]t did feel like an attack, as in, like, say, ‘hey, you’re not good enough as a Christian’. Like, ‘okay, we do accept you, but you can’t represent us’, that’s what it kind of felt like”.²⁸ She recounts feeling angry and sad, yet she was confident in her relationship and in her faith, convinced that God agreed with her, convinced she was doing the right thing. Her concern is not so much for herself, but for other members of NSX that are less confident who experience similar rejection of the MWP. Evelien wonders out loud to what extent lives are changed through such rejections and expresses that her anger is mostly directed at what would have happened if it had not been her, but someone else, someone less confident. Evelien explains that before she had the MWP interview, she did not expect to ‘pass’, yet because she had never felt unaccepted in NSX or as if what she was doing was not okay, she had fostered some hope. She never got the idea that she was doing the wrong thing from NSX, especially not from her dispuut, and even during the interview itself she describes not feeling judged. While people accept her and respect her choices, the minute she wants to share her faith or spread God’s love, she is prohibited from doing so. She is not allowed to represent a Christian organization, because they want to portray a perfect image of Christianity and she does not fit into that image. Later, after she recounts a similar experience of rejection from a Christian organization, she mentions that she now sometimes finds it more difficult to go to a church. While church attendance is helpful to her spiritually, she wonders to what extent the people in the churches she attends accept her. She also mentions that if she would have had this experience of rejection through the MWP earlier in her NSX membership, she would have lost interest in NSX sooner and would have no longer attended association-wide events and focused solely on her dispuut. Evelien’s experiences show the consequences of the Christian ideal of virginity until marriage for those who do not abide by this rule. She can no longer represent Christianity,

²⁸ In Dutch: In Dutch: “Het voelde wel als een aanval, als in van, ‘hee, je bent niet goed genoeg als christen, zeg maar. Van, ‘oké, we accepteren je wel, maar je mag ons niet vertegenwoordigen’, zo voelt het een beetje” (Anonymous. 2018. Interview with NSX member by author. May 23).

despite having made her decisions in line with her faith and expressing an interest to lead her dispuut or share her faith. While Christians, especially in her age group, are encouraged to develop leadership skills and to share their faith, Evelien is discouraged because of her sex life and the (lack of) religious affiliations of her partner. The idea that virginity until marriage becomes a symbol for religious commitment does not seem farfetched in the light of Evelien's experiences.

Evelien says that the MWP section concerning sex and relationships is very black and white and lacks any explanation as to how to deal with it. She mentions that faith is different to each person, which is why she does not see how the MWP could set up rigid rules, when the reality is not rigid. When I asked her what she would change about the MWP, she says that she would remove the part about having a Christian partner and that the section about sex should focus on encouraging people to make well thought through choices. About the Christian partner expectation, she adds a very practical argument, saying that it is rather likely that NSX members date people who are not Christians, demographically speaking. Evelien would prioritize changing the practice over the content of the MWP.

Kevin applied for the position as president of NSX. This is the highest position a member of any of the NSV student associations can hold and a fulltime job, and as such, the interviewing process is more elaborate than for positions at dispuut-level. During his MWP interview Kevin explained that he agrees with all things, with the principles, but that he would not harshly tell people that they are doing it wrong. He thinks that doing so is not Christian, especially in light of love, a central topic to his personal theology which we talked about in detail. He adds that he would ask a person who is not in line with whatever expectation more questions and encourage them to think about it more, but if someone has made a well-thought-out decision, who is he to say that they are doing it wrong? When one of his interviewers made it clear he wanted to hear that Kevin would reject someone, Kevin explained that he would say to this person that he himself would not do the same thing, phrased more gently than outright rejecting someone. He encourages people to find out themselves that what they are doing maybe is not right. When I asked what kind of rejection the interviewer referred to, the case study Kevin was presented with during his MWP interview was an informal one: what would you do if a first-year member tells you that they are dating someone who is not a Christian? Kevin says he would tell them that it

might be difficult and ask questions, but that he thinks it is more valuable to discover yourself whether it works out or not. You will learn more if you struggle with something yourself than when someone tells you not to do it, Kevin thinks. He then comments that maybe he is “too human”. Kevin also mentions that during any MWP interview, you are supposed to be in total agreement with the document, which is why he called after the interview to clarify that he agrees with it in principle, despite being careful not to be too harsh. Regarding sex before marriage, he said that he agrees with the MWP in principle, in that he thinks that sex should occur within a good relationship, preferably when married. He adds that the MWP interview is something that you just have to get through and that in principle, he does agree with what it says. Kevin mentioned the Dutch phrase “in principe” (in principle) a number of times when we talked about the MWP – this phrase connotes both principally agreeing with something as well as agreeing with something only on a vague level. Perhaps a more accurate translation for Kevin’s use of the phrase might be “basically”, a phrase that carries similar ambiguity. During the MWP interview Kevin had elaborately shared his ideas about homosexuality in light of Christianity and where his ideas came from and he was told it was good that he had thought about it. He was supposed to have another meeting to talk about homosexuality specifically, but he was rejected for the position he applied for before that meeting occurred. Kevin made it clear to me that it was not because of the MWP interview that he was rejected, saying that he ‘passed’ it. The reasons that he was given for his rejection were more related to the job itself and all that comes with it, than not meeting the requirements set by the MWP.

Both Evelien and Kevin take issue with the implementation of the MWP document: while Evelien was more explicit about this, Kevin’s more gentle approach to how he would use the MWP and his reluctance to harshly reject people illustrate a similar train of thought. The rejection of people did not sit right with any of the participants, with Anne addressing the hypocrisy of rejection, saying that he does not decide for others what they should and should not do, so neither should NSX. Kevin considers outright rejection unchristian and not the right thing to do in light of love and Evelien elaborates on the consequences of rejection through the MWP for her and others, revealing the damage that it can do. Evelien in particular, but Anne as well, showed that the normative ideas about sex and marriage are not only present in student associations, but in many Christian communities, organizations, and churches. All are in

agreement that condemning those who do not fit the criteria set by NSX and similar Christian institutions is not appropriate in the light of Christian faith.

Concluding remarks

The interviews I conducted demonstrate in what ways normative ideas about marriage and virginity are present in the context of NSV student associations. Christian student associations have the potential to be radically healing and inclusive, yet in practice, many people are left with a feeling of rejection. They are restricted in the freedom to make personal choices regarding sexual activity and the gender and (lack of) religion of a partner. Making choices that are deemed 'wrong' by the MWP result in exclusion from leadership positions. While the experiences Evelien, Anne and Kevin have shared with me during the interviews were their own personal stories, the exclusion and marginalization of queer people is not individual, it is systematic. It is structuralized through exclusionary practices that can emerge from Christian theologies and visions. Yet the interviewees propose a different way of believing, an alternative to the way that the MWP deems right. By centralizing love the participants demonstrate a more inclusive, accepting, and welcoming faith. They do so by refusing to condemn people who do not meet the standards of the MWP, like Kevin does, by encouraging people to make up their minds for themselves instead of providing one way of viewing matters, as Kevin and Evelien discuss, and by not determining for others what they can and cannot do in the metaphorical bedroom. They all stress that there is room in Christianity to be more accepting of the choices people make in regards to sex and relationships. Even Anne, who no longer calls himself a Christian, thinks that Christian student associations like NSX have the potential to be the very place where queer people feel accepted and understood. As he says himself at the end of our interview,

every gay person has felt different or misunderstood or 'less than' and then, a Christian association is supposed to be about... 'we're all the same, we, we join [this association], we have something in common, *we are NSX, we are this or that,*' ... but especially by indeed, not talking about it, or very... as in, 'hmm, okay, not in my backyard', you make sure people feel misunderstood again and that indeed, people leave. While if you have a different stance... you could for example make sure that people [feel really understood],

you know? Even though it all is difficult, blablabla. So it is actually just really, really regretful.²⁹

Conclusion

Normative ideas about what it means to be a “good Christian”, such as the ideal of remaining a virgin until marriage and its heteronormative definitions of sex and marriage, contribute to the exclusion of queer members of Dutch Christian student associations in a manner of ways. I have conducted a critical discourse analysis of the *Medewerkersprofiel* (MWP) (employees’ profile), a document which guides interviews when a member of any of the NSV Navigators student associations applies for a leadership position within their association. In order to find out how the document is implemented and how its heteronormative ideas impact the lives of queer Christians, I have conducted unstructured in-depth interviews with queer members of NSV student associations.

While the MWP recognizes and stresses the diversity of Christianity in many ways throughout the document, one singular perspective and direction is constructed as the ‘right’ one. The singular reading of what Christians ought to do, be, and want, does not do justice to the reality of the diversity within Christianity. The MWP presents the Bible as a high authority, yet the authors do not explicate on how they interpret the Bible verses they cite. My analysis of the in-depth interviews demonstrates that while all participants have different backgrounds and experiences, the exclusion they face as queer people is systematic. Dutch Christian student associations have the potential to be inclusive, yet in practice many people are left feeling rejected. By centralizing love the people I interviewed show a more inclusive, accepting, and welcoming faith than proposed through the requirements and standards set by the MWP. All participants stressed that there is enough space in Christianity to be more accepting of people’s

²⁹ In Dutch: “elke homo heeft zich al heel vaak anders gevoeld of niet begrepen of minder en dan, een christelijke vereniging hoort juist om te draaien van..., ‘we zijn allemaal hetzelfde, wij, we gaan hierbij, we hebben iets gemeen, wij zijn NSX, wij zijn dit of dat,’... maar juist door dus inderdaad ‘t er niet over te hebben of heel... zo van, ‘hmm, oké, not in my backyard,’ zorg je er weer voor dat mensen zich onbegrepen worden en dat je dus inderdaad krijgt dat mensen weg gaan. Terwijl als je d’r dus anders in staat... kan je er dus bijvoorbeeld juist voor zorgen dat mensen dus juist..., ‘ooh, ik voel me echt begrepen’, weet je wel? Ook al is het allemaal lastig, blablabla. Dus het is eigenlijk gewoon heel, heel jammer” (Anonymous. 2018. Interview with former NSX member by author. May 17).

choices regarding sexual intercourse and the religion and gender of their romantic or sexual partners.

While the ‘rules’ concerning the “good Christian” myth, such as remaining a virgin until marriage, may contribute to feelings of shame and rejection to heterosexual Christians as well as to queer Christians, the impact of the heteronormative ideas concerning marriage and virginity contributes to the exclusion and sexualization of queer people. Where straight Christians may feel judged and condemned, they have the ability to repent and turn away from the ways that are deemed wrong. Even if these notions are normative and perhaps unhealthy, heterosexual people do have the capacity to ‘redeem themselves’, as it were. This capacity is a heterosexual privilege. Queer Christians do not have the option of ‘turning away from the wrong path’ because the ‘wrong path’ they inherently walk is their very identity. While they could strive to live a life abstaining from sex and the pursuit of a queer relationship, they will not become heterosexual. The narrative of the non-practicing queer Christian is problematic as it assumes queerness is solely a set of actions, as opposed to an identity.

All participants reject the notion of the “good Christian”, but some statements participants made demonstrate implicit constructions of what it means to be a ‘good’ queer. While this form of godly homonormativity was not present very explicitly, it is worth further investigation. Further research into the construction of a normative ‘good queer Christian’ is encouraged. More research could be done into how other social axes such as race, gender and class influence the lived experiences of queer Christians, as well as expand upon normativities stemming from different strands of Christianity.

Queerness and Christianity are often constructed as opposing one another. This constructed contradiction is not helpful to those who identify both as queer and as Christian, which is why research into the intersection of these identities is of great importance. I encourage researchers from queer studies, gender studies, as well as feminist and queer theology to embark upon this journey with me. Especially those who identify as queer and Christian themselves – let us speak up, and, out of love for our fellow Christians, our queer siblings, and our loving Father, break the silence surrounding the hurt of queer Christians and find ways to embrace our identities without compromise.

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