

# Made in Your Image

Starting a conversation about gender diversity in Dutch Christianity from the God-image of genderqueer Christians.

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## **Abstract**

This thesis aims to start a conversation on gender diversity in Dutch Christianity. In order to do so the research uses the God-image as a starting point to learn from genderqueer Christians. First the thesis provides an overview of the current debate on gender and sexuality in Dutch Christianity. Then, according to Adrienne Rich's call to start with the material, this thesis uses grounded theory as the method to analyse and create knowledge from the lived experiences of genderqueer Christians. The experiences provided by genderqueer Christians are analysed with the use of three key concepts: 'Politics of belonging' as described by Nira Yuval-Davis, negotiating and deconstructing faith and 'gender normativity' defined upon the work of Beauvoir and Butler. This thesis is an example of the value of knowledge created by 'the other.'

# Foreword

One and a half year ago I had to postpone starting this thesis because my mind went to some dark places experiencing depression and anxiety. Being able to look back at that period in which my hands were empty and then look down to find all these words on paper, the different chapters, sources and ideas coming together like this, couldn't feel like a bigger achievement. This I owe to a lot of people, friends who literally scooped me from my couch, fed me, listened and cheered me on. My parents, ever supportive and deeply caring, dragging me along on their vacation. The doctor calling weekly, psychologists and a practice assistant that shared and keep sharing their wisdom and podcast tips with me. And my kickboxing instructors, for they might never know, but it is a relief to build up your confidence in a place you allow yourself not to be the gender studies major.

In bringing all these words to paper I also owe endless gratitude to my supervisor. Ever enthusiastic she kept telling me I was doing great, all the while drowning in chapters double the prescribed length. However there would be no words to share without the genderqueer Christians that trusted me with their stories, being so ready to start a conversation hopefully even going beyond this thesis. I chose to keep them anonymous, but how I wish I could make everyone familiar with their gorgeous faces alongside their beautiful minds.

And of course I thank God for it was when I stretched out my empty hands to Them, trusting Them with all I had left, They filled them again and again and again

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## Introduction – Imagining among the least

*“But it is just boy and girl,”* a young social worker in training whispered under her breath, she was frustrated, frustrated with me calling gender bullshit. Once in a while I teach a class on gender & sexuality at a Christian university for applied sciences, or actually, I am the voluntary subject they can rip apart, hoping they find me just as human underneath the presented queerness. The tension I brought in this specific classroom was thick, these young people had no way of wrapping their head around gender beyond the safe binary they were used to. I’d let it slide, sending the frustrated girl a watery smile. In the end, it is my mistake for oversimplifying ‘gender as a construct’ and not recognizing how real the binary is to her. Her inability to cope with gender beyond the binary tells more about the environment she is raised in, in which she might still be living, than about her or about me as not fitting this environment.

Understanding gender as a concept, researching both gender studies literature as well as studying the Bible and various interpretations, has enabled me to live a more authentic life before God<sup>1</sup>. I would wish the same for others, although I understand gender beyond the binary would not enrich everyone’s faith, and that’s okay. At least I hope we can create space in Christianity for those who do flourish in their faith and as authentic creation by opening up considerations of gender as diverse. That’s why I wanted to write this thesis taking place on the intersection of religion and gender, poking around in the often still uncultivated area of gender diversity in Christianity.

I’m not interested in bickering whether gender beyond the binary exists, or nit-picking about what is allowed, what cannot be and what should have been the intention. On the one hand because people just do experience gender in a whole different way than their neighbour, discussing whether they may exist would be pointless and hurtful. I’d rather take this as a given and discover what we can learn moving from this new point of view. On the other hand, I’m not a theologian and therefore not equipped to study the Bible as such. Therefore, Christians might say I am not rooted enough in the Bible to make any claims about gender in Christianity. However, I believe God’s children can show as much of God as does God’s Word and their experiences are not any less valuable. A to me inspiring encounter studying

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<sup>1</sup> In this thesis I will refer to a possible Divine using ‘God’ as is taught me and seems most commonly used in everyday language.

gender was Sojourner Truth's (1851) speech '*Ain't I a woman?*' and the different interpretations of feminist scholars. In her speech her faith goes hand in hand fighting for injustices she encountered in her life. For example she states that through her suffering as an enslaved mother everyone abandoned her, except for Jesus. However, according to Jaqueline Grant (1989, p.214) Sojourner Truth did not preach based on Bible readings. "*The Bible is not the primary source of knowledge about Jesus for black women,*" Katrine Smiet (2016, p.114) argues reading Grants interpretations. Sojourner Truth shows, according to Grant (1989, p.214), how the personal experience of Jesus would be at least as equally important to black women as relying on scripture. That's why I also want to start with the experiences of genderqueer Christians and dare to say these are at least as valuable as any interpretations of the Bible when studying the image of God.

Of course, slavery and being genderqueer in a gender normative environment are very different experiences and cannot be compared. I also don't aim to draw any comparisons between these experiences. Nevertheless, through my research, as also depicted later on in this thesis, I learned how these experiences are not completely separate from each other. A growing amount of theologians like Vicky Beeching (2018, p.69-76, p.167) and Brian McLaren (2010, p.93 – 101, 238-239), acknowledge how Christianity, the church, has been horribly wrong in the past about the Bible teaching us slavery. They wonder if the church might be wrong again, this time in fighting homosexuality. I hope in addition to homosexuality the Christian LGBTQ+ community as a whole will find themselves, just like Sojourner Truth, fighting the oppression that has been inflicted upon them by Christians in teaching homosexuality as a sin and the crusade against "gender ideology." I hope they are strengthened in the knowledge of Jesus being amongst them, as Jesus identifying among the least, meant Christ was a black woman in the experiences of black women like Sojourner Truth (Grant, 1989, p.216, 220, Smiet, 2016, p.115).

To some that might sound offensive. I also remember the class I taught a year earlier than the class described above. My co-teacher mentioned the controversial statement of radio pastor Alje Klamer (Bos, 2019) in 1961, in which he states how Jesus by his return would say: "*I have been gay and you have hushed me.*" Some of the young people in class clearly voiced their anger on the thought of Jesus "being gay," although Klamer meant here for Jesus identifying among the least he could manifest as gay. The way people image God differs quite an amount between Christians. Already in the Bible images of God are found that might sound like complete opposites, God being a raging fire, but also a soft breeze. Saying only

one of these images is how God truly reveals Themselves would be short-sighted, as the story I once heard of a kid capturing “the sea” in their little bucket. As another example, I just used ‘Themselves’ to refer to God, for I came to understand God as without gender and as not only singular but also plural. I will continue to use capitalized They/Them pronouns to refer to God during this thesis. Using the more often practised He/Him would feel as opposing everything I learned through and hope to accomplish in this thesis. Possibly, this is still a bit complicated to you, you might even feel a bit uneasy because maybe you image God as a caring father. Because of all these different images and experiences I think it is valuable to see what we can learn from the way genderqueer people view God, use this to broaden our understanding of Them. In the process of understanding God to be again bigger then imagined I also hope to find place for genderqueer people within Christianity. For more importantly than people having an image of God, God created all people in Their image, all people manifest as an image of God, so looking at Their creation teaches us about Them. Although, we should take in account people often fail to image God properly (Zienka, 2018).

Nevertheless I hope to start a conversation about gender diversity in Christianity by emphasizing the image of God hold by genderqueer Christians. I would say studying and rethinking gender might even be of vital importance to Christianity in order to stay relevant in this day and age. Therefore I like to find out:

*How do Dutch genderqueer Christians describe their God-image and what can we learn from this with regard to gender diversity in Christian faith.*

In order to find answers to this research question I will take the following steps:

In the first chapter I will research the discourse on gender in Dutch Christianity nowadays, giving some background to this research. I give some insight in the fractured Christian landscape and look at the debates on gender and sexual diversity in churches in the Netherlands.

I will follow with a second chapter explaining the methodology I use in my research. I will look at what it entails to do feminist research, in which I focus on ‘lived experiences’ (Hesse-Biber, 2012) and creating ‘situated knowledge’ (Haraway, 1988). I take into account my own politics of location (Rich, 1984) and explain my choice for grounded theory as method to analyse my qualitative data collected by interviewing.

In the third chapter I describe the theoretical frameworks I use analysing the content I obtained through my interviews. I will explain the concept of ‘politics of belonging’ as described by Nira Yuval-Davis (2011). Then I look at the different ways of negotiating and

deconstructing faith that are known. And at last I will give an account on ‘gender normativity,’ using the work of Beauvoir (1949) and Butler (1988) who are known for their work on rethinking sex and gender.

These different concepts I use in the last chapter to analyse the experiences of my respondents. I talked with them about the development of their God image, their ideas about God’s gender, about God’s creation, their thoughts upon the “Biblical” man-woman image and I relate belonging to God’s love. The narration of their thoughts and lived experiences, carefully analysed using the theory, will contribute to our understanding of the God-image hold by genderqueer Christians and what these ideas might tell about Christian faith and God. I will end this thesis by summarizing what I encountered, answering the research question, reflecting on how these answers could impact the position of genderqueer Christians in Christianity and how the conversation could move forward.



# **1. A background on the current debate on gender in Christianity**

To see where I pick up what has preceded I start off my research into the God-image of genderqueer Christians by looking at the current discourse surrounding gender in Dutch Christianity. First I describe a general idea of Dutch Christianity and get an overview of the fractured Christian landscape. This will then help understanding the current debates in Dutch Christianity on including LGBTQ+ people, the role of women and “gender ideology.”

## **1.1 Dutch Christianity**

The complexity of Dutch Christian history makes it impossible to be complete in the scope of this thesis. However, I would like to give some general understanding of Christianity and explain the Dutch Christian landscape becoming as fractured as it is.

Religion can be defined in many ways, argue Rathouser and van der Stoep (2013, p.18-23). A definition can refer to what religion does, or what it entails, whether it is culture based or personal faith, and whether it is existing within or outside the established structures.

Nevertheless religion can be seen as something that people do, think, believe that gives their existence meaning (Rathouser & Stoep, 2013, p.31). Christianity could also be viewed from these different perspectives, what it does, how it is organised, the culture surrounding it. A definition of Christianity would differ from person to person, depending on what they find of importance to them. But overall Christianity can be defined as one of the world religions that is founded upon, as the word itself says, Jesus Christ as the messiah. (Ensie, 2015)

In the sixteenth century the Netherlands, to the extent it already existed, were officially catholic, being part of the Holy Roman Empire. But the Dutch, being doubtful about the richness and power of the catholic church resisted, this time is called the reformation, a movement becoming a new Christian strand was born: Protestantism. (Rathouser & Stoep, 2013, p.37-39) Even though Catholicism is still the biggest strand of Christianity in the Netherlands (CBS, 2019), this thesis focuses on the Dutch protestant church. Through the nineteenth century up till now the protestant church kept reorganizing over different ideas and slight alterations of teachings, resulting in different schisms which made the Dutch Christian context as fractured as it is (Rathouser & Stoep, 2013, p.45-48). Still differences might lead to new schisms, an example would be the Christian reformed church Zwolle opening the discussion within the Christian reformed church whether homosexuals are allowed to profess

their faith (RD, 2019). This specific church invites homosexuals with a relationship to the holy supper, while the Christian reformed church does not allow this. The church in Zwolle is not planning on changing their opinion, therefore it is possible they need to leave the Christian reformed church. (de Vries, 2020)

Religious historian and sociology doctor David Bos (2010, p.13) explains in his publication on homosexuality in the past half century of Dutch Protestantism there are roughly four kinds of reformed churches nowadays. Two of them live together in the Dutch protestant church, PKN, one of them being more orthodox, the “bonders,” and the other being more mainline protestant. Outside of these we find on the one hand the experimental-reformed (Gergem, HHK) and on the other hand the orthodox-reformed (CGK, GKV, NGK). There is some overlap between the “bonders,” the CGK and the experimental-reformed, together being called the “gereformeerden” (reformed) or for short the “refo’s.” Last decennia also the evangelical church was blown over from Amerika, known for being more accessible and emphasizing the gospel and personal faith, according to Ratheiser and Stoep (2013, p.49). As well as more charismatic strands came up with a focus on the Holy Ghost.

With this global understanding of the Dutch Christian landscape I am equipped to dive further into the current debates on gender and sexual diversity in Christianity. By researching the status of acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community in the different churches I will provide a background to the experiences of my respondents.

## **1.2 Dutch Christian gender debate**

Gender in Christianity mostly appears to have a place of friction, leading to two seemingly distinct discussions. On the one hand Christians discuss the place of LGBTQ+ people in church. On the other hand gender as a topic of discussion in the Christian church most often revolves around the question what a woman can and especially cannot do. Only very recently some considerations of queer gender or gender as a construct get brought into the discourse, either carefully mentioned by people experiencing gender as complex or by people opposing this as “gender ideology,” believing in a traditional man/woman image. Not much is written about gender diversity in Dutch Christianity currently on an academic level, therefore I also partly rely on sources like newspaper articles, blogposts and television items. I recognize these do not carry the same depth as academic literature, but might support by showing more topical examples.

### 1.2.1 Homosexuality only

Around the time I was approaching and interviewing my respondents Nieuwlicht (n.d.), an opinion platform of the EO (evangelical broadcasting), published an article explaining globally the LGBT-alphabet in their online dossier on 'LGBT people in church.' One of the respondents was frustrated about the point that got made, which shows somewhat how the attention in Christianity is divided over the community. The writer assumes that the reader knows the meaning of 'lesbian,' 'gay,' 'bi' and 'transgender,' but still explains these identities in parentheses. A short explanation follows of 'intersex,' 'queer,' 'asexual' and 'pansexual,' however the article follows with stating the dossier will be mostly about homosexuality, because: *"this theme seems in the Christian world the topic people would encounter the most."* (Nieuwlicht, n.d.). I would say this seems somewhat of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Gender beyond the binary is still largely uncultivated area. Also the words *"theme"* and *"topic"* are typical for the Christian discourse on homosexuality, for it is often presented as something that needs discussion. Parsing the sentence, people *"encounter"* a *"topic"*, forgetting it concerns real people. John Lapré (Onderweg, 2018), author of 'de veilige kerk' (the safe church) argues this is something the church should be mindful of. As fractured as I showed the church is, the same goes for the approaches to homosexuality. I will try to give somewhat of an overview, however this will always be generalized for the churches differ in so many complex ways.

The PKN still has a lot of discussion on whether homosexuals can participate and be included to the holy supper if they have a relationship. Characteristic in this strand is the difference that still gets made between heterosexual marriages that can be 'blessed in' and homosexual marriages that can be 'blessed,' first decided upon in 2001. The meaning of this difference the synod kept vague, tells Bos (2010, p.20), keeping some special status for heterosexual marriage. This formulation is mostly to keep including the more conservative part of the PKN, the reformed bond. However, every church can decide for itself whether gay people can get married in their church, explains Bos (2010, p.20). In 2018 the synod decided to keep the difference, but wrote a subtext in which they explain it has the same liturgical meaning (van Houten, 2018).

Because the evangelical strand is less organised by a central synod, it is harder to say anything with certainty, argues Bos (2010, p.35). However, broadly it seems evangelicals have the most trouble with homosexuality, they often refuse to accept sexual preference as a given (Bos, 2010, p.52). Gay people are urged to change, sometimes even leading to exorcism and

healings, which is still happening these days according to the documentary of Ewout Genemans (2019) and actuality program ‘Eenvandaag’ (2019)<sup>2</sup>. A good gay in the evangelical church, according to Bos (2010, p.52), is one that is ashamed, remorseful and prepared to “bleach.”

The reformed community does not believe homosexuality is something that can be cured. Historically there is been some place for gay people, however they could not practice their orientation, explains Bos (2010, p.22). It is expected gay people live a life of celibacy. However through time it is seen there is some change, shown by incidents of churches that wanted to include gay couples at the holy supper (Bos, 2010, p.28-29), as seen before in the example of CGK Zwolle. In the experimental reformed churches, Bos (2010, p.31) argues, there is little initiative for emancipation or reconsideration about homosexuality. Research shows in these churches most people do not accept both feelings and praxis of homosexuality, however they themselves see some movement to acceptance. (Bos, 2010, p.33)

Transgender identities are much less discussed in churches than homosexuality, therefore it is difficult to sketch out the lines of acceptance in different churches. According to pastor Klomp (Hollebrandse, z.d.) it is especially the lack of education that often causes condemnation in churches. This explains the tone of voice of initiatives that appeared the last few years. For instance a brochure called ‘transgender, faith and church’ (Buijs & Zorgdrager, 2017, p.3) explaining terms like ‘gender dysphoria’ and other experiences of transgender people to give some basic information to church communities, pastors and other people encountering transgender people. Another initiative that focusses on educating and awareness in order to create emancipation is the first Dutch publication on transgender people, faith and church called: *wonderful as you made me, a guide for Transgender people of faith and workers in church* (LKP, 2019). Last year the PKN published a liturgy for transgender people wanting to receive blessing over their new name. They are the first church known to publish a text like this. The conservative part of the PKN is again having trouble with this adjustment. According to pastor Klaassen (Houten, 2019) it is disrespectful to the people who have trouble with accepting transgender persons to just publish this without a meeting of the synod first. However, as well as with blessing gay marriages, local PKN churches are able to decide for themselves whether they would use this liturgy or decline it.

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<sup>2</sup> At the time of submitting this thesis, new research was published on the current amount of gay conversion therapy offered in the Netherlands. (van Wijk et al. (2020) *voor de verandering*, accessed at Jun 19, 2020 from: [www.rijksoverheid.nl](http://www.rijksoverheid.nl))

Researching the slight alterations in the discourse on homosexuality in different churches and the slowly progressing acceptance of transgender identities, still leaves questions concerning a more broad gender diversity in church. In order to better understand how gender in general is viewed in church, I will now focus on the man/woman image.

### **1.2.2 Biblical man/woman image**

The discourse about gender diversity in the Dutch church is falling far behind on the discourse in the rest of society, argues journalist Marinde van der Breggen (2019). Discussion about gender mostly revolves around the position of women. The biggest question in this discourse seems to be whether a woman can participate as an elder or deacon and whether she may preach. This matter follows somewhat the same lines as we saw with homosexuality, although again reality is too complex to be complete. In the PKN women can preach and participate, but again this is something churches can decide for themselves and the reformed bond does not include women (Trouw, 2016). In the experimental reformed churches women are not allowed in any leading positions (Trouw, 2016). The orthodox reformed are divided on this topic and seem to have the most discussion, even leading to professor Selderhuis calling it a crisis (Houten, 2019). Also the evangelical churches differ in opinion, but women often can build a career here. Nevertheless, it is more regularly seen that a charismatic man leads the church (Mastebroek, 2018).

However, gender diversity is about more than rules allowing women to preach, another important indicator could be the everyday practice in church, which seems highly influenced by stereotypes. Breggen (2019) gives the examples of men going on survival trips, while women enjoy pampering events. She argues these stereotypes of 'men lead' and 'women are caring' are seen as a natural given especially in orthodox churches, complementarists call this the Biblical man/woman image. Especially in the evangelical corner is often spoken about being a 'Proverbs 31 woman,' which is seen as desirable. In response to Christian feminism getting more momentum a friend of mine posted an article like this about the seven characteristics of a powerful woman after God's heart by Lauren DeMoss (n.d.). She shares she does not want to be treated like a man, because she thanks God she is a woman. In these characteristics a most essentialist image of being woman gets drawn. Strong women should understand that God gave men certain tasks and women should support them, she wants to hear she is pretty and loved and she should embrace her womanhood, which means she is gentle of heart, full of love, caring and finds happiness in caring for her family. She should strive for unity instead of equality. In this we can hear an example of an often preached

sentiment: men and women are equal but not the same. This sentiment seems to push back against feminism and something that is often negatively called “gender ideology.”

Understanding how gender is mostly still a discussion within the binary, I will move on to further explore this latest “threat.”

### **1.2.3 Gender ideology**

Organisation ‘Gezin in Gevaar’ (Family in Danger) explains: *“The gender ideology finds the biological difference between man and woman without meaning. Sex has to be a choice, apart from the given biological fact.”* (2018) “Gender ideology,” more than a term, is a framework used to ridicule or spread fear about people, organisations and feminism rethinking the gender binary. According to Judith Butler (2019) people everywhere are objecting to this “ideology of gender.” She argues this backlash took shape in 2004 when the pontifical council of the Family warned the Catholic church about the danger of “gender” contesting the natural, hierarchical distinction between male and female. The pope in 2016 escalated this claiming that children today were taught they can choose their own sex. Butler (2019) opposes the idea gender as a field of study would be destructive or indoctrinating, arguing gender diversity *“affirms human complexity and creates a space for people to find their own way within this complexity.”*

In the Netherlands the negative term “gender ideology” especially got some momentum around the Nashville declaration (n.d.) published a year ago. This statement tells Christians how to deal with their faith around relationships and sexuality. The declaration soon got framed as the ‘gay-hate-manifest’ (RTLNieuws, 2019) for calling out homosexuality and transgenderism as a sinful choice that Christians couldn’t approve of, it would even be possible to be cured. The statement also made a lot of claims about gender in general, arguing against the Western culture that is rethinking the original God intended design of male and female as inherent to being human. As Alain Verheij (Klaassen, 2019) suggested, the statement could best be seen as a power move out of fear of new generations growing up with gay marriage as a fact. In defence of the Nashville declaration a university professor compared the gender ideology to the Nazi-ideology, which got met by a lot of anger (Klaassen, 2019). Other than as this supposed threat, gender beyond the binary seems to still be uncultivated area in the Christian community. Only once in a while someone experiencing gender as more complex speaks out themselves, but this often stays in the side-lines of a few people being “other.”

### **1.3 Conclusion**

This chapter provided an overview of the discourse around gender in Dutch Christianity. I explained the different strands in the fractured protestant Church of the Netherlands.

Researching queer identities in Dutch Christianity I found there is especially a focus on homosexuality. I also discovered how gender in church mostly revolves around whether women can preach and prescriptions for women on how to act. At last I investigated the term 'gender ideology,' which is seen as a threat to the traditional man/woman image.

## **2. Creating knowledge from the experiences of ‘the other’**

This chapter I use to set out the methodology I use pursuing an answer to the question how genderqueer Christians describe their God-image and what we can learn from this. I discuss what doing feminist research entails, the influence of my own politics of location on my thesis, the implications and practice of grounded theory as the method I use to collect and analyse data and at last I look at the respondents I approached.

### **2.1 Feminist research**

Being the groundwork of this thesis I like to consider what it means to do research from a feminist viewpoint. For me feminist research comes from a need within, a desire to bring some sort of social change in the world around us on behalf of oppressed groups (Hesse-Biber, 2012, p.18, Hesse-Biber, 2013, p.117). In order to foment this social change, feminist research pays attention to the lived experiences of people as the key place to start building knowledge, argues Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber (2012, p.2). Because, personal problems can be understood as political problems, explained Carol Hanish (1969), later adding that by political she meant “having to do with power relationships.”(2006) Doing feminist research is keeping an eye on these hierarchies of power that are in place, challenging knowledge created from privileged positions and recognizing the experiences of “the other” as legitimate knowledge. (Hesse-Biber, 2012, p.3-4).

Donna Haraway (1988, p.583) would call this knowledge consisting of lived experiences ‘embodied knowledge’ or ‘situated knowledges,’ which she opposes against unlocatable knowledge claims that would be irresponsible. She critiques disembodied scientific objectivity, which she calls the “God trick,” seeing everything from nowhere (Haraway, 1988, p.576, 581-582). Instead she calls for embodied objectivity, for Haraway (1988, p.581-583) feminist objectivity means situated knowledges consisting of limited partial perspectives. When knowledge is situated it becomes accountable in contrast to unlocatable knowledge. No position from where knowledge gets created is innocent, not even those of the subjugated, although these locations are often preferred, for the subjugated are less likely to fall for the God trick, suggests Haraway (1988, p.584). Knowledge is a conversation, a process of constant critical interpretation, joining views from somewhere (Haraway, 1988, p.590).

It is my desire to bring social change on behalf of genderqueer Christians through listening to their lived experiences, their situated knowledges. As already argued in the introduction, I recognize their experiences, them often being “the other,” as legitimate knowledge in the



discourse on Christian gender diversity. I hope to join their views in order to start a conversation on the often still uncultivated area of gender diversity in Christianity. I am aware Christian men often tend to create knowledge from their privileged positions on these “topics.” Through leading by example I want to argue for the importance of starting to listen to the lived experiences of genderqueer Christians themselves. Those in the margins have often clearer perspectives on certain phenomena (Clarke, 2012, p.395), it is these perspectives I would like to use to get a better understanding of gender diversity in Christianity. In order to be accountable for the knowledge I create I will also locate myself in the next paragraph.

## **2.2 My own politics of location**

In order to be accountable for the knowledge I create through this thesis I need to be aware of my own location. As well as other feminist researchers before me, by enclosing my own history and positionality in advance and reflecting on the influence of this during the process I believe I improve the objectivity of my research (Hesse-Biber 2012, p.10).

‘Politics of location’ is the term Adrienne Rich (1984) uses to explain how the place you are born is also a place in history. Politics of location is Rich’s starting point for lived experiences, your location starts in the body, which is already not neutral from birth on. Different assets of the body carry meaning, which varies between different geographical locations you might find yourself. On my mirror hangs a quote of Jill Soloway (2016): “*art is propaganda for the self.*” I would say this thesis is an example of how the same could go for feminist research, for my politics of location are those of a queer Christian. I am raised in a Christian environment and through the years I have developed a personal relation with my creator. I am very fond of God, however, not always of the Christian institute. Living a queer identity, I have seen and experienced, is not always as well understood by Christians. That is why I hope this thesis might contribute to starting a conversation on gender diversity in Dutch Christianity. Being located at a Dutch university is great breeding ground for this thesis. Not everywhere would a queer Christian have the freedom to express themselves and lay this position beneath an academic magnifying glass.

The influence of being a queer Christian myself on this thesis is mostly positive. For example, it was relatively easy for me to find other genderqueer Christians in my network, which could be more difficult for someone outside of the queer community and/or being an atheist. It also helped me understand my respondents for I am at home in both Christian and queer terminology. Some respondents expressed feelings of being at ease and being able to speak

their mind because I have somewhat of the same identity and experiences. The disadvantage of me creating knowledge from a place similar to my respondents might be having blind spots, being brought up with the same patterns of thought, I might not always be able to label them as outstanding.

I chose the relationship with God as a point of departure. On the one hand because there is only one God, but a few thousand different churches, with this approach I did not have to draw lines between genderqueer Christians that can and cannot enter my research based on church background in an already small group of possible respondents. On the other hand I felt inspired to focus on the relationship with God because I feel this could act as a unifying subject, a healthy point of departure to open up conversation and start listening and learning about one another. If I were not both queer and Christian myself I might have understood less why working towards social change is not a matter of throwing out religion in a secular fight for freedom (Butler, 2008, p.3-4). Feminist research means we have to bridge differences and include religion as a relevant point of intersection (Smiet, 2017, p.135,137).

Having taken into account my own politics of location and the different ways these influence my thesis I will move on to the method of grounded theory I use collecting the experiences of genderqueer Christians in order to learn from them. I will also include why I value especially this method in this specific discourse.

### **2.3 Grounded theory**

For this thesis I used grounded theory to analyse my qualitative data collected by interviewing. Meaning, as Kathy Charmaz (2014, p.1-4) explains, I used flexible guidelines for gathering and analysing data in order to construct theories from the data itself. In the end, the theory I constructed is grounded in the data, “grounded theory.” Grounded theory suits feminism in how the situated knowledges of respondents get presented on their own terms and represents a variety of perspectives, not just the main perspective erasing the others, as Clarke argues (2012, p.392). Gender diversity in Christianity being a field of research that has not often been trotted, I am inspired by the metaphor Adrienne Rich (1984, p.31) uses to encourage us to begin with the material. She compares theory to dew that rises from, and will also return as rain, to the earth. But if the rain no longer smells like the earth (the respondents) it is not good for the earth. This is why I chose grounded theory, to raise knowledge that stays close to my respondents. Grounded theory and in-depth interviews are especially good tools to learn from your respondents, as is the aim in this thesis (Charmaz, 2014, p.85-86).

Using grounded theory means I started early with the recruitment of participants and interviewing them, without having a theory ready backing me up (Charmaz, 2014, p.18). I felt confident doing this because, as described before, I already know my way around the Christian community and queer terminology. The strict original version of grounded theory would say that it is better to go as blank as possible into the field (Charmaz, 2014, p.59), but I would argue this is not needed or possible. It would be ignorant not taking your own situated knowledge in account. Knowing some key terms is helpful putting together questions and it will ease your participants as Charmaz (2014, p.61) argues. I used grounded theory flexible, as Glaser and Strauss (Charmaz, 2014, p.16) intended it, by using my previously obtained knowledge as an asset.

Grounded theory is an exploratory way of analysing data and building theory, which can be seen as feminist in the attempt to build an adequate database by collecting data as needed, asking the researcher to stay reflexive about their experience (Clarke, 2010, p.390). It is important to keep interacting with the collected data, even when still in the process of interviewing (Charmaz, 2014, p.2). Analysing as soon as there is data is unique to grounded theory (Clarke, 2010, p.390). This way doing research becomes dynamic and the respondents become the co-producers of the thesis, influencing the steps taken. Qualitative coding enables to constantly compare data with the previous and upcoming, writing down ideas in so called 'memo's' to track progress. This going back and forth between analysing and data collection is also called an iterative process (Hesse-Biber, 2013, p.144). However, I would say the constant comparing of data and the respondents influencing your next step is somewhat idealistic. Especially in the scope of this thesis, which contains only six interviews, the content of the questions I asked did not change a great amount in between appointments. Writing out, coding and then analysing the data, as I did, is time-consuming and was not always finished before the next interview appointment. Nevertheless, I did try to stay reflexive and learn throughout the process. I started off with the interview guide<sup>3</sup> containing three broad themes I thought to be important based on the knowledge and experience I already had, an approach also used by Karp (Charmaz, 2014, p.63). These were: God-image, embodied image of God and Biblical man/woman image. I worked from there adjusting the interview guide flexibly according to what the respondents brought up, as Charmaz advises (2014, p.63). For example I early found out asking for a "biblical" man/woman image is somewhat of a trick question, also I needed to be more clear asking about the embodiment of

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<sup>3</sup> The original interview guide is available in the appendix.

the story of Genesis. During next interviews I would give more explanation and ask questions slightly altered. Also I asked at the end of interviews whether I missed something, in order to find possible blind spots I would have. Continuing to code and rereading the data, the respondents strongly influenced the theory I would use for my analysis. During the interviews they implicitly and explicitly handed me concepts, for example by talking about belonging, deconstructing faith and colonialism.

I used a semi-structured way of interviewing with open-ended questions, I had these themes which I wanted to cover but mostly followed the respondents in the way that suited them telling their story. Before asking about the three themes I asked them some more practical and easy questions. In order to be transparent about the nature of my research I told them a bit about myself and my aim with this thesis in advance. I asked the respondent permission to record them and promised everything they said is confident and would not be given to a third party. At last I also made sure they knew they did not have to answer questions they did not feel comfortable answering and they were free to ask me anything. In this way I obtained their informed consent as Hesse Biber (2013, p.120) suggests. One respondent asked if he could see the interview guide in advance, on which I agreed. His comfort outweighed for me possible negative implications like being over prepared .

The interviews took place somewhere easy accessible for the respondent. I wanted them to feel relaxed whether this is at a place they know and feel at home or they preferred a place where they could feel anonymous. One interview, due to chronic illness, was done using Skype. The other interviews were done at public spaces, one at their school, the rest in cafés. To me it seemed most of the respondents were at ease and often they did not even need the easy starter questions to get off on hours of talking about gender and Christianity. The shortest interview took an hour, the longest could even have exceeded after a good three hours. They seemed to enjoy talking about this topic and their experiences, and it was a pleasure to listen. It felt like a good start for more conversations about gender diversity in Christianity, which they seemed eager about.

I explained the concept of ‘grounded theory’ and the ways in which I worked flexibly with this method for collecting and analysing data. Also I described how this method suits feminist research and my thesis by staying close to the lived experiences of my respondents to learn from them. I already went into detail about the process of interviewing the respondents. At last I will focus on who these respondents were, how I approached and presented them.

## 2.4 Genderqueer Christians

In order to approach respondents I mostly used email and Messenger to reach people in my network I thought would fit the criteria of being genderqueer and Christian, or people I thought would know people to include in my research. Also I posted a message in a Facebook group of queer people in order to invite some variety outside of my network in. I found six respondents, which would be fitting the scope of this thesis. However, this means I did not meet the saturation level enabling me to make any claims based on this research, and even if I did, every experience is unique. It is important to take in account this group is not homogenous, the thoughts and opinions presented in this thesis do not represent all genderqueer Christians.

It turned out looking for respondents predominantly in my own network made up for most of them having somewhat of the same traits as me. All of the respondents are white, therefore I am not able to comment on any specific experiences of genderqueer Christians of colour. Most of my respondents are middle-class, their levels of education however vary as do their Christian backgrounds. Except for one, all were assigned female at birth, having included more genderqueer people assigned male at birth might have led to other nuances. At last most of them are around their 20's, so this thesis does not account for any experiences of older queer Christians.

Being a Christian means a lot of different things to different people as we saw defining religion in the background chapter. These differences are actually part of the research, the way people experience and practice Christian faith is related to their God-image. However, some people, being hurt by their community, might have trouble identifying with the term Christian. Asking for Christians I was afraid I would miss out on an important group of critical thinkers. Therefore I left the definition of Christian up to them and made sure in my approach it was clear I was open to other names and associations that could be brought under the umbrella of "Christian-minded." When in doubt I asked whether they had an image of God, which often gave clarity.

I aimed to find a spectrum of genderqueer people, leading to respondents identifying as just human, gender non-conforming, non-binary and I decided to include someone transgender. I also tried to include someone with an intersex condition, but unfortunately I did not come across someone. However, transgender and intersex people might not identify as genderqueer, they might for instance just identify as man or woman. Nevertheless, during the process I

decided to approach someone who is transgender for an interview, because already the first respondent suggested including this experience. Also I did not want to shun away from any perspective but present gender diversity in all its colourful alterations. In my approach I presented genderqueer in the broadest way in order for people to self-define, it is not up to me to decide whether people are genderqueer “enough.”

I decided to represent my respondents in this thesis by using their favourite colour. On the one hand I wanted to protect my respondents by keeping them anonymous, but on the other hand I did not want to closet them again or bring their complicated being back to a possibly gendered pseudonym. Colour, although possibly not as genderless as could be, might just portray their personality, which is the most important aspect about them. Also I made sure to ask their preferred pronouns, these I will use throughout the rest of this thesis. I spoke to the following respondents in chronological order:

<b>Colour</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Profession</b>	<b>Identifies as...</b>	<b>Pronouns</b>	<b>Christian background</b>
Sea green-blue (SGB)	35	Student theology	Gender non-conforming	She/her	Currently at a pioneering place. NGK GKV
Black-white-red (BWR)	26	Retail, actor	Human	He/him	CGK
Ice blue (IB)	22	Student music theatre	Non-binary woman Still questioning	She/her	Evangelical
Yellow (Y)	19	Student journalism	(trans) man	He/him	GerGem
Does not have one (T)	18	Student Bible school	Non-binary/ (trans) man Still questioning	They/them	GKV
Blue orange (BO)	23	Unemployed	Non-binary	He/him	GKV

## **2.5 Conclusion**

I explained in this chapter how this thesis is grounded in feminist research, using the lived experiences of genderqueer Christians to foment social change. In order to be accountable for the knowledge I create I also looked at the influence of my own politics of location on my research. I described the practice and implications of grounded theory as my method of research and at last I presented the respondents I approached to interview.

### **3. The politics of belonging, negotiating or deconstructing faith and gender normativity**

Analysing the interviews with my respondents I will use three concepts. These concepts seemed of importance to me after a first close reading of my data. Working with grounded theory I want my research, the theory and possible new understandings, to be grounded in the experiences of genderqueer Christians themselves rather than putting a predetermined framework on them. As I described earlier, feminist research recognizes the experiences of “the other” as legitimate knowledge (Hesse-Biber, 2012, p.3-4). I reflected upon the metaphor Adrienne Rich (1984, p.31) used in her call to begin with the material: How the dew, theory, rises from the earth, the respondents. When the dew returns as rain it has to still smell like the earth to be nourishing. The following theoretical frameworks are the dew I got from the earth: the politics of belonging, negotiating and deconstructing faith and gender normativity. These will help me to analyse the interviews and ultimately find an answer to the question how Dutch genderqueer Christians describe their God-image and what we can learn from this regarding gender diversity in Christian faith.

#### **3.1 Politics of belonging**

The first concept I will use analysing the data is ‘belonging’ and the ‘politics of belonging’ Nira Yuval-Davis (2011) is known for. Although she uses the politics of belonging mostly to look at citizenship, it would also apply to other contemporary political projects of belonging, which could be the membership to a religious community (Yuval-Davis, 2011, p.vii). Belonging is about feeling ‘at home’ she argues, feeling ‘safe,’ she adds referring to academic Michael Ignatieff. Home in this sense is also an on-going project, a hope for the future, she argues using the work of professor Ghassan Hage (Yuval-Davis, 2011, p.10). Belonging might seem like a natural, an everyday practice you would not think of daily, until it becomes threatened. Gregory Walton and Geoffrey Cohen (2011, p.1447), researching minority students, reported social belonging is a fundamental human need. When someone is uncertain about belonging, especially chronical, this has a negative influence on their performance and health.

Yuval-Davis (2011, p.12) describes three analytical levels of belonging, which are connected but cannot be reduced to each other. The first level of belonging she identifies is ‘social locations’, the location someone is born in like sex, race, class. This refers to the ‘politics of location’ of Adrienne Rich (1984) I used to look at the influence of my own location on this

thesis. The conditions in which people are born have historical value. Depending on the context and the ways these positionalities intersect these come with more or less power (Yuval-Davis, 2011, p.13). 'Identifications and emotional attachments' would be the second level Yuval-Davis (2011, p.14) describes. Identity she defines as the story people tell about themselves. These identities almost never stand on themselves and are always in process and changing. As Yuval-Davis (2011, p.15) explains, identity narratives can relate to the past, can aim to explain the present and function as a projection of future trajectory. The last level Yuval-Davis (2011, p.18) describes is 'ethical and political values.' Belonging is concerned with the ways locations and identities are valued and judged by people that might belong to the same community. It is about the categorical boundaries that need to be drawn somewhere and include but therefore also exclude people. These different analytical levels might help to recognize possible exclusion and inclusion in the experiences of gender queer Christians.

It is in drawing these boundaries, the inclusion or exclusion of certain people, that 'belonging' becomes 'politics of belonging,' explains Yuval Davis (2011, p.18). Therefore Adrian Favell also called politics of belonging "*the dirty work of boundary maintenance*" (Yuval-Davis, 2011, p.20), it is separating people into an 'us' and a 'them.' Politics of belonging discusses what is involved in belonging to a certain community, which entails the different facets of belonging described before: the same locations, identities and values as possible requirements to belong. These boundaries can sometimes be presented as more open than they actually are (Yuval-Davis, 2011, p21).

These different analytical levels Yuval-Davis describes will help to recognize the role of politics of belonging in the experiences of genderqueer Christians and how this influences their God-image. The next concept I will describe is the 'negotiating of faith', which might be a result when people find they do not belong.

### **3.2 Negotiating faith**

The second concept I use analysing the interviews is about the negotiation of being both genderqueer and religious. However, researching this experience it is important to keep in mind the critique of Todd Fuist (2017, p.770-774) who argues most of the research on LGBT and religion focuses on identity reconciliation. Focussing research on identity reconciliation assumes that being both LGBT and religious could not collide and the tension this gives in an individual needs to be resolved. An identity without any tension would always be the aim. Research on LGBT and religion also tends to treat religion too homogenous, according to



Fuist (2017, p.772), while the opinions on LGBT issues are actually very diverse. As well as the identities of LGBT people themselves vary a lot, they are not fixed, but a process and a self-authoring project, influenced by their environment. Going into this concept of negotiating faith and analysing the interviews I want to keep an eye on the complexity of queer Christian identities.

Angele Deguara (2018) researched the conceptions of God LGBT Catholics hold. She found her respondents describe a journey in which the relation with God and the God-image are closely linked to the self-perception of LGBT people. The more people grow in self-acceptance, the more they would perceive God as love (Deguara, 2018, p.320, 333). This journey may, according to Deguara (2018, p.319), start at a dark place of self-loathing, shame, anger and depression, but ultimately leads to self-acceptance. In this journey people would let go of images of God as a judge and an old bearded man, and replace them with a loving God with whom they have a relationship (Deguara, 2018, p.320). In later stages of their journey God also tends to get more abstract, instead of earthly images of God as a father (Deguara, 2018, p.326). But, although many of Deguara's participants would say God has no gender, they often still refer to God as masculine, they attribute this to their upbringing. Whether people create a more positive image of God when they grow in self-acceptance, or they create a more positive self-image when they perceive God as more loving rather than judgemental, might not always be clear according to Deguara (2018, p.321). People are influenced by the images of God that are given by their environment, as also Fuist mentioned. However, according to Gross and Yip (2010, p.45), the more people grow in harmonizing their identity and faith, the less influence institutional authority has in their whole Christian life. The faith of LGBT people in God's love provides them with a strong foundation despite possible disapproval of Christian society (Deguara, 2018, p. 317). This journey Deguara describes in which God-image and self-perception are linked might help interpret the images my respondents give of God in their possible journey.

Key to deal with experiencing dissonance in identity, according to Deguara (2018, p.320), would be to separate God and the Church as institution. Through this separation a relationship with God can provide comfort and reassurance, while the Church can be seen as earthly and human and therefore subject to failure. This division leaves room to believe God will not judge where the church does. Deguara (2018, p.319-320) also recognizes multiple other ways her informants reduce dissonance between being LGBT and religious. For instance they seek therapy, they seek knowledge about LGBT and faith issues and they look for support and

meet likeminded people. They might use neutralization techniques in which they dodge blame by arguing they were created LGBT or see their identity as a God-given or God's plan worth celebrating. Or they reread scripture in a more queer-friendly way, which is something all minorities do in some amount according to Deguara (2018, p.330), questioning, challenging and rereading the Bible from their own worldview. LGBT Christians might even have to use some sort of bricolage, which is the putting together of different traditions and practices of faith (Deguara, 2018, p.320).

These different ways of dealing with dissonance in their identity might often be seen as a way of individualization and detraditionalization (Deguara, p.320). According to Lieven Boeve (2005, p.105) "*detraditionalization is the flip side of individualization*", in the process of constructing an identity tradition is no longer a given but a choice. Detraditionalization and individualization also get described as 'believing without belonging,' although Boeve (2005, p.104) would say a term as 'religiosity without belonging' would be better to describe an 'off-piste' search for spirituality, for 'believing without belonging', wouldn't have anything to do with believing. This statement shows the importance of belonging in Christianity, it seems Boeve argues one cannot practice Christianity on their own. However, LGBT people are not intently choosing an individualistic approach to religion, according to Wilcox (Deguara, 2018, p.319-320). Nevertheless the way people negotiate their faith through these acts like bricolage, reinterpreting scripture, replacing God-images, separating God from church and using neutralization techniques, might be seen as an example of how "*people tend to create God in their own image.*" This is a centuries old observation, according to Deguara (2018, p.320) which she relates to this idea of our self-perception being closely linked to our God-image, God loves us the way we love ourselves. In extension I would argue, as well as people project their own political views onto Jesus to reduce dissonance (Ross et.al. 2011, p.3616-3617), this could also mean people image God having the same opinions as they have. The different acts to negotiate dissonance might profess of this.

Analysing the interviews all these different examples of negotiating faith might help to understand how my respondents deal with possible dissonance in their identity, recognize whether they use these tactics and look for the influence on their God-image. I even need to be critical of their God-image, for it might be created in their own image. Therefore negotiating faith might leave a bit of a negative aftertaste, questioning the credibility of the God-image people create through their journey. Even more, doing this I might fall for the easy interpretation of identity reconciliation Fuist (2017) warns for, opposing LGBTQ+ and

religious identities, instead of recognizing synergy. Therefore I like to look at a concept one of the respondents mentioned and I consider to have some comparable assets to negotiating faith: ‘deconstructing faith.’

### **3.2.1 Deconstructing faith**

A process that might be closely related to detraditionalization and individualization is deconstructing faith. This is a concept mostly recognized by progressive religious leaders. Therefore I have to rely partly on sources from their hand like articles, interviews and podcasts. These podcasts are reported to have thousands of listeners (Hailes, 2019) and receive thousands of emails a month, therefore McHargue argues deconstructing faith is very common among Christians (Huckabee, 2017).

The term ‘deconstruction,’ originally coined by Derrida (Suresh, 2013), is meant to reveal the disunity that exists in all systems, which has been used to critique those systems. It is a project, more than a philosophy, Caroline Suresh (2013) explains, “*a way of working within a given system in order to find its weaknesses,*” but not to completely destroy it. Rather, Fernando Canale (2006, p.125) stresses how applied to religion it is to come to “*a more faithful understanding of divine biblical revelation,*” finding the “*things themselves.*” In his interview with well-known Christian teachers Sarah Bessy, Mike McHargue and Richard Rohr, Tyler Huckabee (2017) defines deconstruction as the “*systematic pulling apart of the belief system you were raised in. It’s what happens when the questions you’ve pushed down your whole life finally bubble over the surface, and you’re forced to stare honestly at your doubts. The infallibility of the Bible. The omniscience of God. The finality of hell.*”

Deconstruction is about recognizing how all human understanding is interpretation, argues Suresh (2013). These definitions and understandings might help to find the nuances between negotiating and deconstructing faith in the experiences of my respondents.

The process of deconstructing faith is also sometimes called a mid-faith crisis and it would not as much be about losing faith in God, but losing faith in church, according to author Nick Page (2017). He describes the mid-faith crises as a journey, in a way a journey just like the one described before of people negotiating their faith. According to Huckabee (2017) it is scary to address the doubts you have pushed down, it might for example cost your community, your job, or you might fear eternal damnation. Also it is painful to reject ideas you might have been holding for a very long time, explains Canale (2006, p.130). Therefore the process often starts with an inciting incident (Huckabee, 2017). Arguably, a discovery of

being outside the norm of traditional teachings about gender and sexuality might be such an incident to start this process of deconstructing.

It is argued this rethinking of beliefs is due to “*the growing gap between societal and Church attitudes,*” and is linked to people in their 20s and 30s (Hailes, 2019). Often these Christians are accused of twisting the Bible to make it reflect contemporary culture, but according to Cole Moreton (Hailes, 2019) interpreting faith in the current cultural context has always been done by people, even by Jesus. According to Phyllis Tickle (McLaren, 2010, p.14-15) every 500 years Christian faith holds a ‘rummage sale’ to get rid of all the extra baggage it collected and heads for the future with only the essentials. Think of the collapse of the Roman Empire, ‘the great schism’ and ‘the great reformation.’ Now, around 2000, we would be in ‘the great emergence.’ In that sense deconstructing faith is not new at all. It might be interesting to find out whether we could say instead of negotiating faith in order to reduce dissonance in their own body, there is some of this bigger religious shift visible in the experiences of genderqueer Christians. Arguably they would be the early adapters in this rummage sale, being more aware of this growing gap between societal and Church attitudes for this might relate to the assumed dissonance in their identity.

Having an understanding of both negotiating and deconstructing faith will help me understand the experiences of genderqueer Christians bringing together their identity and how this relates to their faith and God-image. Now I will focus on the last concept, ‘gender normativity,’ which might explain more about the worldview genderqueer Christians use to reread scripture and initiates their deconstructing.

### **3.3 Gender normativity**

The last concept I use to analyse the experiences of genderqueer Christians is ‘gender normativity.’ As argued, being supposedly out of the normative system, genderqueer people might be able to give a different perspective on gender in Christianity, rather than people living the system.

An array of different feminists influenced the way we look at gender now, one of the most important would be Simone de Beauvoir (1949, p.330), who became known for her: “*one is not born, but rather becomes a woman.*” By this she means that femininity, or certain features we label as feminine, do not come with biology, but are taught to women by society (1949, p.341). Passivity, as the essential trait that would characterize the “feminine” woman is something that she develops in her early years, not a biological given. The idea of gender as a

construct, rather than a natural given became deeply embedded in second-wave feminism. The distinction of sex and gender was crucial in feminist history to debunk the claim that anatomy is destiny (Butler, 1986, p.35). Already in the paragraph on biblical man/woman image we saw the essentialist example of what a strong Christian woman should be like. This showed how in Christianity anatomy is often still seen as destiny, the respondents explored this further.

Judith Butler (1990, p.7) building upon the theory of Beauvoir argued that not only gender but also sex, the presumed natural difference is a cultural construct. Sex is a gendered category described to the body by scientists, making a body part of the repeating culture. Saying “it’s a boy” doesn’t express anything about a new born child itself, but it expresses a meaning that has been given to the word “boy” in culture and through history. Repeating this norm is what Butler (1988) calls a performative act, gender is something you do rather than something you are. Certain appearances, like language, clothing, hairstyle, might make you feel like a woman, but there is nothing that comes before that, there is no natural core of woman (Butler, 1990, p.24) Ultimately Butler (1990, Duits, 2016) breaks the human down in a body, a gender expression and a sexual desire, one not automatically implying the other. This laid the ground for queer theory that problematizes binary systems like man or woman and gay or straight and the implication of fixed identities that come with them (Halsema, 2000, p.10). The constant reproducing of these fixed identities without questioning, behaving compatible to the cultural expectations, is what we call gender normativity (Apa, 2012). The concept of ‘gender normativity’ will help me recognize the different stereotypes that trust upon these fixed identity’s. Being able to question what seems to be a given, helps seeing how this normative thinking influences the God-image of the respondents and their environment.

Supporting the queer theory of Butler in which the gender binary is not a given but a performative act passed down from generation to generation I want to look at Lugones (2008) who challenged the inevitability of this gender normative system by emphasizing the impact of colonialization. For the gender binary, people being either man or woman and having to conform to the cultural expectation coming with this, was not a given at all times in all cultures. Lugones (2008, p.21) describes how Paula Gunn Allen speaks of cultures that were matriarchal, recognized more than two genders, in which homosexuality was normal and gender in every form was equal. However during the colonialization the colonialists introduced gender differentials where there were none, introducing the subordination of females. Gender was introduced as a tool of domination, creating two categories that opposed

each other and formed a hierarchy, excluding women from leadership roles (Oyéwúmi, 1997, p.124-125). This way Europe's cis-heterosexist gender system was extended to the colonized cultures and became the hegemonic gender norm as we know it now. This process of Europeanization, as Oyérónké Oyéwúmi (1997, p.128) calls it, was according to the British missionaries a process of educating and Christianizing, in this case, the African heathens. These missionaries, as we can also see in the letter King Leopold (1883) of Belgium sent them, were encouraged to interpret the gospel in the best interest of them as colonizers. The missionaries taught a gender bias based on male-dominated Christianity (Oyéwúmi, p.136). This critical note in gender history, challenging the gender binary, will be helpful when reading some of the alternative ideas about gender and creation of the respondents that challenge gender normative assumptions.

### **3.4 Conclusion**

In this chapter I presented three different concepts I will use to analyse the interviews with genderqueer Christians. Conform to grounded theory, the choice for these concepts was mainly influenced by the respondents. First I explained the 'politics of belonging' described by Yuval-Davis (2011), than I looked at the journey of negotiating and deconstructing faith and at last I defined 'gender normativity' through the literature and history about gender.

## 4. A conversation on gender diversity through God-image

Analysing the lived experiences of my respondents I hope to find some answers to the question: *“how do Dutch genderqueer Christians describe their God-image and what can we learn from this with regard to gender diversity in Christian faith.”* In order to do this I divided the acquired data in a few topics. First I will look at the development of their God-image, than zoom in on their ideas about God’s gender, about God’s creation and how they look at the “Biblical” man/woman image, ending with the relation between belonging and love. I will analyse these topics using the concepts mentioned before: the politics of belonging, negotiating and deconstructing faith and gender normativity. In the end I hope we learned something new, about God and about Their creation, which could be the start of a new conversation on gender diversity in Christianity.

### 4.1 Development God image

In order to find out what we could learn from the God-image of genderqueer Christians I asked the respondents to describe God, the image they were raised with and whether this changed during their process of getting to terms with their gender. Using the theory of Deguara (2018) I recognized the answers of my respondents show different examples of a journey in which they deal with dissonance and their God-image and self-perception changes.

Some of the respondents see God as a father and corresponding, T, Y and IB describe themselves as a child to Him. This, I would say, shows a more earthly image of God, instead of the more abstract images Deguara (2018) sees in later stages of peoples journey. On the other hand, some respondents describe God using the word ‘mystery,’ or tell there are no words to describe God other than ‘endlessly creative.’ Keeping God a mystery is important to SGB, not wanting to make too explicit statements about God, for there is a risk of putting god in a box which will not fit. She is cautious for she says: *“when you figured out exactly how God is (...) you will find if you are truly honest, God will look a lot like you, you created God as it suits you.”* (SGB, p.4) This resonates, I would say, with Deguara (2018) arguing people tend to create God in their own image. Despite reservation, it seems to me almost as if this point of people creating God in their own image proves itself, for people not fitting gender norms use words as ‘mystery’ and ‘elusive’ to describe God and consider God not having a gender. SGB talks about God as a woman that *“does not fit in a box”* (p.5) and is *“loving everyone without dividing in boxes”* (p.6), the same way she also shows she herself has trouble fitting into *“boxes.”* However, she also refers to people subscribing the Nashville

statement as explaining God to fit their ideas. Using the theory of Deguara (2018) and Ross (2011) I would confirm these examples show that everyone is creating God in their own image, whether it is the image of an elusive God or a more rigid God.

God's love as unconditional shows through all their answers. The respondents describe God as always there for them, no matter what, especially T and BO compare this to humans often lacking this ability. As BO emphasizes about God: *"Every now and then He thinks this is hopeless, "however I try again" (...) He never gives up, where people at a given moment say "we can't do anything, you can no longer be treated, you will stay depressed," God doesn't do that."* (BO, p.8) The respondents look at God with a feeling of being safe, which, I would argue, shows this strong foundation they find in God's love despite the disapproval of Christian society, as described by Deguara (2018). Ignatieff (Yuval-Davis, 2011) defined belonging as feeling safe, it seems the respondents feel they belong with God, rather than with people that are subject to failure. BO but also Y separate God from people and more specifically the church as doomed to fail, which Deguara (2018) describes as key to deal with dissonance. They experience a personal relationship with God in contrast with the images they report being given by their churches of a more distant God. BO explains being Christian now means to him having a relationship with God, instead of going to church with his parents and being able to exactly theorize what the Bible would say. Possibly, by separating God from the church as institution they are able to have this personal, reassuring relationship with God, as Deguara (2018) describes.

The influence of images given by the environment is especially clear in the answer of IB, who emphasized she is in the middle of a journey with God. The beautiful image of God she had, she felt was taken from her by people showing her an image of a God that would not love her for being bisexual. I would argue, using the theory of Yuval Davis (2011) people told her she does not belong based on the analytical level of social locations, being born bisexual. It seems people are able to use images of God to practice politics of belonging. Now IB has trouble describing a God-image. She also has trouble believing in a God that would punish people and she has a lot of questions about faith and God which, I would say, profess of this growing gap between societal and church attitudes Hailes (2019) described. Her journey seems to be about deconstructing faith, which she talks about as positive. IB depicts deconstructing faith as walking on the beach collecting seashells. After a while, she explains, your bag gets too heavy and you will sort out which shells you keep and which you leave behind. This explanation of deconstructing faith IB gives I recognize as similar to the rummage sale of



Tickle (McLaren, 2010). IB is in the middle of this process, taking a step back from church and having deep conversations. People rejecting her as a Christian could be part of an inciting incident, as Huckabee (2017) explains, that triggered this deconstruction of her faith.

Not all respondents describe a journey in which they find their image of God changing or are actively negotiating and deconstructing. Y argues their image of God did not change, because he has never seen God as someone who *“makes my life suck.”* (Y, p.3) T also argued that because they did not change, they look with the same eyes at God, with whom they share everything. Therefore they would probably look different at their journey from a Christian perspective, T explains, instead of their journey changing their God-image.

SGB and BWR, however, do fit the journey Deguara (2018) describes, I would argue. SGB remembers being raised with an angry police officer God, a negative God-image she says. Although, apart from the God-image she was raised with, she describes always already having an idea of God loving her. BWR also seems to have this kind of double God-image, which shows the journey Deguara (2018) describes is not black and white. Although he is raised with a loving God of mercy, the idea of God constantly looking at him caused problems with his self-acceptance. *“I felt ashamed towards God, for example when, as a teenager, I did things that were not allowed or watched porn, especially when it was not hetero porn and God was watching. (...) The moments in which I might have been the most faithful, were also the moments in which my self-image was at its lowest.”* (BWR, p.5) The link between self-image and God-image is specifically apparent in his experience. Coming from problems with self-acceptance, he now shows a very positive self-image saying he thinks the God of his parents is happy with him, joking: *“he better be, cause I am quite a nice, sweet person.”* (BWR, p.12) The God-image of BWR got more abstract, he describes God as a creative brain.

Not only BWR, but also other respondents show this link between self-perception and God-image. BO describes his God-image getting more positive and personal through his journey. For him this is linked to his physical and mental health progress and a positive experience which remarkably was the feeling of together being family of God during a concert. This concert can be seen as a less traditional place of belonging. I would argue it is possible because of these experiences his self-image increased, having positive influence on his God-image, according to the connection Deguara (2018) makes between self-perception and God-image. On the other hand, again LGBT personalities are complex, as Fuist (2017) emphasized, and cannot all be explained by a process of reducing dissonance and increasingly becoming happy. T for instance shows a God-image that sometimes appears to be abstract,

God as a feeling or a colour. Abstract images would, according to Deguara (2018) fit the later stages of a journey in negotiating faith. However, their self-image seems somewhat bleak I would argue, they told me they have a hard time believing God loves them. This would rather argue for standing at the beginning of the described journey.

Looking through the different images of God I wonder whether the age of the respondents, and therefore maybe also the era they grow up in, influences their perception of their journey. The older they are, the more they seem to fit the journey that is sketched in literature (Deguara, 2018). BWR and SGB being the oldest respondents are reflecting upon a journey in which they exchanged their image of a judging old man for more abstract and loving images. The other respondents already from the start oppose an image of God as an old bearded figure, however they do lean more to images of God as a father. Being begin 20's, OB is also able to reflect on a journey, which is more present and IB is very clear about being in the middle of a process with God. Y and T, being the youngest both argue their image of God has not changed. Possibly this process still needs to happen, but it is also good to keep in mind they grow up in a slightly altered environment. It is possible they already start with a different image of God, because of a change in the image of their social environment, caused by other people preceding them in negotiating and deconstructing faith.

I looked at the different ways my respondents move through a journey of negotiating faith and their different images of God. The link between self-perception and God-image showed, the ability of people to create God in their own image and images as politics of belonging. Arguably age influences the amount of reflecting the respondents are able to do on a possible journey. The respondents detraditionalize and feel safe with God. Now I will take an even deeper look into the image of God, specifically looking at the ideas my respondents have about God's gender.

## **4.2 God's gender**

Talking with the respondents about the development of their God-image some of them touched upon the possible gender of God. Most of my respondents argue how God has no gender, or rather as T argues, has both stereotypical characteristics of man and woman. The same showed with the respondents of Deguara (2018) they also understood God not having a gender. Still, my respondents as well as those of Deguara (2018), tend to refer to God as masculine, using male pronouns and images of a father or friend. Even the respondents with whom I did not explicitly discuss God's gender, for I did not want to impose this issue on

them, were using he/him pronouns. T, just as the respondents of Deguara (2018), argues this is due to them being raised with God portrayed as male. They continue to reproduce this image, which shows again the influence of images people receive by their environment. The image is possibly gender normative, for is God solely male?

SGB makes it a point to also show the female side of God, as well as BWR she uses male and female pronouns interchangeably throughout the interview. SGB also switches between or avoids using pronouns when preaching in church. She even sometimes starts the mercy greeting with “*God who is our father and mother,*” although she has to defend this often. BWR, as well as SGB, sees the female side of God that is described in the Bible. He gives examples of God presenting as ‘Racham’, which means ‘uterus,’ or how God tells Israel: “*as a mother comforts her son, I will comfort you.*” BWR finds beauty in God using these soft powers to describe Themselves. Both SGB and BWR, coming from God as a white/grey old male, emphasize now how they experience God having no gender or race. According to BWR God has not even a human form. I would argue they actively oppose a gender normative image of God as solely male.

Also Y ponders whether God is man or woman, although he seems to still neigh to God as a man who protects and leads, which he explains as male characteristics. But he also figures that if Adam was created in God’s image and Eve out of Adam, God must be both male and female. The same sort of point gets made by T, arguing God created humans male and female in Their image according to the Bible (Gen 1:27), so therefore God must be both. But, they explain, people looked more negative to women in the time the Bible was written, it would have been a scandal to call God a mother. T believes if the Bible was written today this could be different.

One more than the other, the respondents reread the Bible in a more queer-friendly way, in a worldview fitting theirs, as Deguara (2018) argues all minorities do. They are deconstructing, using texts from within the belief system to pull it apart. The respondents seem aware of the role interpretation plays, as T describes the role of a gender normative culture in the Bible. BWR even seems to argue, I would say, a gender normative interpretation could again be a way of creating God in your own image, but now from the viewpoint of Christian men. He argues how mostly men would want to see God as a man and therefore created this image. Because, he explains, when God is man, the male form could also be seen as godly, making men more in God’s image than women. BWR also refers to the history of colonialization as the need of Christians to create a binary system and by extension capturing God within in,

having to be man or woman. This history I researched using Oyéwúmi (1997) who explains during colonialization gender was introduced by Christians as a tool of domination. BWR challenges this gender normative image of God and the Bible, using his queer perspective, he tells: *“For me it has something godly, something spiritual (...) to believe in the diversity and the richness and creativity of God.”* (BWR, p.7) To BWR believing in God and believing in more than just man and woman is parallel, he wonders why a complex God would make such a simple design. According to him, the non-binary has something godly in being mysterious and elusive. I recognize it is almost as if he suggests that gender normativity makes blind to the complexity of God. If we only look through a binary lens and need to divide everything in man or woman, even God, we would miss all the ways in which God is elusive and complex, in which a human construct as gender falls short to describe God. Ignoring the complexity of Their creation, being more than man and woman, we would miss the ways in which genderqueer people are made in God’s image and represent Them.

I would argue, looking at the respondents recognizing the female side of God and God’s elusiveness, they show us the interpretation of God as male that most Christians are used to is indeed gender normative. Wondering how genderqueer people reflect this in a possible more complex design I will move on to look at the ideas of my respondents about God’s creation.

### **4.3 God’s creation**

Discussing God’s gender the respondents already touched upon God’s design and the story of Genesis. With all the respondents I talked about creation and their interpretation of the Bible on this point. I also asked them in what way they feel they embody God’s creation.

#### **4.3.1 Genesis**

Looking back at the respondents interpreting the story of Genesis it became clear to me that most of them are again rereading the scripture and trying to make sense of it from their, queer-friendly, point of view.

A first important discussion in their answers seems to be whether the story of Genesis should be read as a factual story. Y and T tend to believe the story as true, while the other respondents do not agree on taking the whole Bible literal, BO and SGB for instance argue we should look at Genesis as poetry. IB argues the Bible might be God inspired, but it is still written down by humans and also BO refers to the story of Genesis being influenced by culture. A culture, he argues, that needed this framework of man or woman, but the framework is no aim in itself. Here I see how he is looking for the “things themselves.” The

respondents being aware of cultural influences, I argue, are looking for a more “faithful understanding” as Canale (2006) described deconstructing, being aware of how human understanding is interpretation (Suresh, 2013).

Which also explains why, as conversations progressed, I found some reluctance to whether Genesis was true or not. They are interpreting faith in the contemporary cultural context, as Cole Moreton (Hailes, 2019) described as part of deconstructing, which, I think, makes they have other priorities. An example of such a priority might be the current issues around climate change which IB and Y touch upon. The Bible could actually be a danger to environmental issues, IB points out, referring to people who tend to ignore climate problems because they think the Bible says the earth will exist for at least a 1000 years more. BWR mentions he would gladly come back to church when the big systems of injustice like capitalism, colonialism, racism and sexism would be topics that would be discussed, instead of in comparison questions like ‘may gay people have sex?’ and ‘may trans people transition?’ It shows, I would argue, the respondents experience the gap between societal and church attitudes Hailes (2019) describes, which might be an important reason for these people to deconstruct. Deconstructing enables them to reduce dissonance between their awareness of contemporary issues, like systems of injustice and climate problems, and their Christianity by uniting them.

When bringing their faith to the current cultural context, looking for the “things themselves,” I also find them struggling with “God’s intentions” and the relevance of these now when a lot has changed since Genesis. As IB tells: *“I also believe that it was not God’s intention that we all would drive around in machines producing so much gas that His nature... you know. (...) A lot has changed, because of the fall, or through time, by which what God intended may be not so relevant anymore.”* (IB, p.14) This also makes her question a possible intention about gender. The binary might have been the intention from the start, but does it still matter when their experiences now, as IB emphasizes, of gender beyond the binary, are also true to them? On the other hand, God’s intention of people as social creatures does still get valued by OB and BWR. Therefore I would say, there is no distinct line between people creating God in an image suiting them and deconstructing faith in order to interpret scripture in current cultural context to end up with a more faithful understanding. In that sense interpreting God’s intention is subject to our intentions. This shows again how all human understanding is interpretation which is never innocent or objective (Suresh, 2013) people create God in their own image (Deguara, 2018).

Looking for “the things themselves” the respondents seem to wonder, is this “framework,” as OB called it, still needed and sufficient? Are the possible intentions still relevant? Are Adam and Eve in that sense meant as an example? something IB and BWR question. How to interpret what is not written? Did God intentionally not draw a circle when He was drawing a square, as IB opposes? Or, as Y suggests, would there have been a third person if there was actually more than woman and man? What about people born with a different gender in other cultures, asks T, are they not created? BWR argues the story of Genesis mostly gets misused to hurt people who do not fit the heteronormative gender boxes. I would translate this to the story getting misused as boundary maintenance presenting a gender normative picture, Adam and Eve, to make sure some people do not belong (Yuval-Davis, 2011). A normative picture that, the respondents seem to argue, might not even collide with a faithful understanding of the story. IB argues, for example, however you look at the story of Genesis, the gender stereotypes known now cannot be explained as biblical based on this story, for it does not describe them. With IB agreeing, SGB argues that gender is more like a theme in the story of Genesis, with possible variations. *“God created water and land, yes well, go sit in a swamp or mud (...) all variations on a theme.”* (SGB, p.8) It is exactly all those variations in which SGB sees the many colours of God’s good creation.

The examples show, I would argue, the respondents do not find any ground for gender normativity in the story of Genesis. The respondents seem to be aware of the role of interpretation and are rereading and deconstructing Genesis to fit their experiences now and their worldview which is less gender normative and better suited for the current culture.

#### **4.3.2 Embodiment**

Using a more traditional interpretation of the story of Genesis I also asked the respondents whether they felt like they are part of God’s good creation, or whether they as genderqueer people embody the often so called “fall.” Arguably, I indirectly asked whether they felt they belong with God’s creation.

Their answers, I would say, show most of the respondents use the tactic of dealing with dissonance Deguara (2018) describes by presenting their LGBT identity as a God-given, God’s plan, or even a little more reluctant dodging the blame by arguing this is how they are born. T, Y and IB respond very matter of fact, they are here, so apparently God must have wanted them here. *“God already knew everything you would think and he already knew that this all would happen and still you are born,”* Y (p.2-3) reasons to himself. *“This is who I am”*, argues IB (p.14), *“who I should have been, does that matter then?”* Again using, I

would argue, her experience now to deconstruct the belief system. T acknowledges they are human and therefore created in God's image. BO describes himself as "*God's creative outburst*" and also SGB sees herself as part of "*God's colourful creation.*" These notions of "creative" and "colourful" emphasize how they see their diversity as part of God's plan. BO emphasizes God intended and created everyone to be unique, including him. I would say they all find themselves belonging to God's creation even if it is just because otherwise they would not have existed.

This question also gives insight in what Fuist (2017) critiques, whether an identity should always be without tension. Because even when the respondents say they belong with God's creation, some also live with dissonance. For instance, Y believes that everything not colliding with his interpretation of the paradise as perfect is part of the fall. This includes for him the search for his gender identity. BO argues pain and illness are not God's intention, living with disabilities himself, but he does believe God can turn this around in something positive, as well as Y believes there is a plan behind his journey with his gender identity. Again the respondents show a strong foundation in God's love, even when living with tension. BO even argues people who think about themselves as a mistake sell themselves and God too short. IB talks about "the fall" having a negative connotation, which makes us say that therefore its consequences are not good, but we cannot draw conclusions like that, she argues. I would say she recognizes human understanding is interpretation (Suresh, 2013). Interpreting the fall as having solely negative outcomes makes up for a gender normative interpretation of God's creation, resulting in possible dissonance for queer Christians.

Opposing Y and BO, BWR does not believe there is so much of a purpose or a plan at all. For him there is no such thing as a plan of God in which everything is directed, "*for there are also people born in a body that does not work at all or babies being born dead, was that God's intention?*" (p.8) He experiences life more as fluid than fixed. He does not experience his identity as sinful or failed, but also does not use the tactic of arguing he is made this way as part of God's plan. BWR does not believe in a micromanaging God, "*purpose is more about where you are going, and less about how you arrive.*" (p.8) I would say he is asking questions about the omniscience of God, which Huckabee (2017) specifically mentioned in his definition of deconstructing faith. BWR does not use worlds misery to proof God does not exist but to find a deeper understanding. This resonates with his focus on the bigger systems of injustice in our current culture of which he says we need a God to free us from them, "*let's*

*hope there is a God (...) that could say okay, it's enough, let's do a restart.*" (p.7) Even BWR shows some trust, a foundation in God's love, living with tension.

I have argued the respondents are rereading and deconstructing Genesis, being aware of the role of interpretation. This way they find a more faithful understanding that fits their worldview and helps to interpret current world issues. Most of them do feel they embody God's good creation even if they experience dissonance. Now I will take a deeper look at how their less gender normative interpretation translates to their ideas about the "biblical" man/woman image.

#### **4.4 "Biblical" man/woman image**

In my research I found different examples of a "biblical" man/woman image or an explanation of how man and woman should relate to each other. I was curious how my respondents, being not binary and therefore looking from the outside in, look at the relationship between man and woman in Christianity. I asked my respondents whether they were familiar with the "biblical" man/woman image and what they thought this looks like. Y paints the most gender normative picture, arguing God created only man and woman and the man is meant to protect the woman. According to him it is not meant as an insult to women men are meant to lead and preach, he calls upon the Bible, *"there will be a good reason for it.* (Y, p.9)"

The other respondents rather reread the Bible on man/woman images. T and BO for instance argue this "biblical" man/woman image is based in another culture. When Paul tells women to be silent this is not something that comes from God, BO argues, it is part of that culture. Nowadays this man/woman image would be better and more equal, explains T, however they add our culture *"can still be a bit sexist."*(T, p.5) BO argues there still seems to be a strict separation of gender in church, pointing at campfires for men and beauty-days for women. People even put in effort to look like people of the same gender, BO explains, they conform to one image and this reinforces each other. *"At one moment all the women of my mother's age were wearing a little scarf (...) the ones who didn't have a little scarf, also wore a little scarf the next week. And among men even so (...) male fashion in church is actually all the same."* (BO, p.18-19) IB, however, expresses all those gender stereotypes are not biblical at all, *"it doesn't say in the Bible that all boys wore shirts with dragons and girls 'I'm a princess,' you know (...) the Bible is actually a bit irrelevant in this discussion."* (IB, p.9) These stereotypes are not only seen in clothes and events, but also in practices. According to BWR men get



treated far more serious than women, men congregate and preach while women can go crafting with the children. The respondents are aware of the gender normativity in church and reread the scripture which is according to Deguara (2018) a way to deal with dissonance. Most respondents deconstruct in a way they bring the scripture to current culture, even dismiss the Bible as irrelevant as IB does. Only Y seems to have more trouble letting go of the old ideas Canale (2006) mentions and therefore rather chooses to sit with tension and trust God's love even in what he does not understand.

SGB would argue there even is some danger in using the Bible as an adjective, because the Bible is very diverse and it is possible to explain everything that suits you with the Bible in your hand. Again SGB shows an awareness of how people tend to create God in their own image (Deguara, 2018). She argues how in all these stories of the Bible we do not see one consistent man/woman image, we see many different images. The Bible portrays women who are mothers, preachers, prostitutes, queens, who run their own business, the same goes for men and this list is not exhaustive according to SGB. BWR agrees the Bible shows many sides according to your interpretation, it is also possible to read the Bible in a way giving ground for more gender diversity. BWR even wonders who is the gender ideologist in this sense, suggesting the Nashville subscribers having ideologist ideas about what it means to be man or woman.

The respondents show again they are aware all human understanding is interpretation and by acknowledging this challenge gender normative readings of the Bible and the consequences in the Christian community nowadays. At last I will look at the experiences of my respondents belonging to Christianity and link this to their experience of God as loving.

#### **4.5 Love to belong**

When asked, starting off the interview, whether they were Christian most respondents hesitated. *"I have a completely different opinion than most typical Christians about a lot of topics, so for that matter, I would rather not belong with this group,"* confessed T (p.1) and the other respondents resonate with this confession up to some point, even though Boeve (2005) suggested belonging is vital to Christianity. Especially IB and SGB explained extensively their doubts about identifying as a Christian. IB explained she does believe in God but has trouble with the negative connotation she has with the term 'Christian' because of the things some Christians think, do, write and say, *"that's not me."* (IB, p.2) Both IB and SGB mention the Nashville declaration as an example of a reason to not identify as a Christian. As

SGB points out, this statement written by orthodox Christian leaders argues how a Christian should agree with its values, “*so then I am not a Christian and I prefer it that way.*” (SGB, p.2) As explained before, Yuval-Davis (2011) describes three different levels on which people could experience politics of belonging. Social locations, identifications and values can be used as a ground on which people would decide whether someone is included or excluded. I would argue the respondents experience politics of belonging based on different values. This uneasiness with traditional Christian values also shows when BO and Y, although having less trouble identifying as Christian, react with reluctance to their church for it would be 20 years behind or rush to say they have different ideas than their church strand is known for. The respondents experience this boundary maintenance not only on the level of values, but also on the level of social location and identity. As mentioned, people told IB she is no Christian because she is born bisexual. BO even got evicted from his home, and in extension his community, after coming out as transgender to a group of Christians, his parents did not agree on sharing the story of his identity like this.

Nevertheless, even though they feel the tension of not belonging, all of them participate in some sort of voluntary work combining their Christian and queer identity. Some of them are affiliated with organisations focused on advocacy, they are vlogging, preaching, teaching, manage a LGBT-group, participate in online activism and many other projects. I would suggest that working with these issues is a way of negotiating this tension of not belonging, a next step after deconstructing and negotiating faith through getting more knowledge about LGBT and faith issues and possibly meeting likeminded people, as Deguara (2018) describes, putting this knowledge to use. It shows how people who are successful in harmonizing their identity and faith, are less influenced by institutional authority as Gross and Yip (2010) argued. They are fighting back against the politics that made them not belong, wanting this harmony for everyone.

This mission shows in what they think and want to show the world around them, almost all of the respondents talked about the love of God which they specifically label as for everyone and without conditions. In extension of this love for everyone they talk about showing a diversity in possibilities, people and lives. Y and SGB oppose this diversity against what people might have initially learned in their faith, they want to show the beauty of what people are not used to, beyond what they think things ought to be. “*Showing how differences are possible and how that is okay.*” (Y, p.12) The respondents talk about creating an openness to different people, to a general diversity that the church needs according to BO. He stresses this is not

only about gender diversity, but the freedom to be whoever you are without any conditions. He speaks out against a Christianity in which people are welcome but do not belong. *“We welcome you because you are different, not because you belong with us, but because we have to welcome you, just like refugees who do not actually fit (...) cause that is the Christian way, we will take good care of you, but you do not belong with us. Well, that is not how it works.”* (BO, p.21)

Again I see the respondents have a strong foundation in God’s love and are able to separate this from church and more traditional teachings (Deguara, 2018). Imagining God as unconditionally loving might be just a way of reducing dissonance, but this trust in God’s love also shows why they stayed with their faith instead of reducing dissonance by leaving. I would like to argue that especially these people show God’s unconditional love is belonging. In all the ways they might differ from the norm and experience dissonance, they do feel safe with God and are able to pay this forward to others. SGB explains, by giving the same easy loving without conditions they receive, they are able to show the way God also loves people. With God there is no boundary maintenance based on social location, identity or values, because God’s love is without any politics of belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2011).

#### **4.6 Conclusion**

In this chapter I analysed the content obtained by the interviews with genderqueer Christians, using politics of belonging, negotiating and deconstructing faith and gender normativity. I wanted to learn from the God-image of genderqueer Christians and I did. I learned about them, their God-image, their ideas and experiences and what these might say about God, about ourselves and the Christian community. I saw them negotiate and deconstruct their faith by, among other things, detraditionalizing and rereading the Bible through their own experiences and bringing it to a contemporary cultural context for a more faithful understanding. This way they challenge gender normative ideas about God, the story of Genesis, the Bible and everyday practice in the Christian community. The respondents are aware human understanding is interpretation and show how people, including themselves, tend to create God in their own image. Some of them journey through their faith and God-image, which I also linked to their self-perception, going from a judging to a loving God. This loving God they want to show everyone around them, even though they do not always belong themselves. I learned some of them have trouble identifying as Christian due to the politics of belonging they experience. However they do feel they belong to God’s good creation. They explain God’s love as unconditional and for everyone, which surpasses discussions on gender

and includes everyone who is seen as 'other' in God's love. Therefore I argued God's love might be about belonging, the respondents feel they belong and in extension of this argue everyone should belong.

## Conclusion

I tried to find an answer to the question: *“how do Dutch genderqueer Christians describe their God-image and what can we learn from this with regard to gender diversity in Christian faith?”* in order to start a conversation on Gender diversity in Christianity. I started off by looking at the current discourse on Gender and sexuality in Dutch Christianity, learning the discourse is mainly focused on the place of homosexuals in church and the role of women. Possible discussion about gender beyond the binary gets mostly framed as “gender ideology,” a threat to the traditional man/woman image.

Moving on I explained what it means to do research from a feminist viewpoint, focussing on creating knowledge from lived experiences to foment social change. I also considered the influence of my own politics of location, being a queer Christian, on this thesis. It enabled me to find respondents, understand them, make them feel at ease and starting my research. Unfortunately most of my respondents mirror me being white and quite young. Therefore, this thesis does not contain experiences of queer Christians of colour or of older age. In order to stay close to the experiences of my respondents, inspired by the metaphor of Adrienne Rich (1984) about the dew (theory) rising and returning to the earth (the respondents), I used grounded theory. Grounded theory is a way of collecting and analysing data which fits feminism because it creates situated knowledge. The theory I used is grounded in the experiences of six genderqueer Christians, identifying along a spectrum of human, non-binary and transgender and with varying Christian backgrounds.

I explained three different concepts I used to analyse the data. First, I researched the ‘politics of belonging’ of Nira Yuval-Davis (2011) in which she describes three analytical levels to belonging: ‘social locations,’ ‘identifications and emotional attachments’ and ‘ethical and political values.’ These categories are used to include or exclude certain people which is when ‘belonging’ becomes ‘politics of belonging.’ The next concept I used was the negotiating and deconstructing of faith. Even though the complexity of the experiences of queer Christians needs to be taken in mind, I encountered a journey in which LGBT Christians let go of images of God as a judge and move on to images of a loving God. This process is linked to their self-perception, people would perceive God as more loving when they grow in self-acceptation or the other way around. Also different techniques like separating God and church and rereading scripture were mentioned as ways to deal with dissonance between faith and a LGBT identity. These acts of detraditionalization and individualization are often critiqued as a way in which

people create God in their own image. Therefore I also looked at deconstructing faith in which people are pulling faith apart to find a more faithful understanding. This process often starts with an inciting incident which I argued could be finding out your gender does not fit the norm. In deconstructing faith there is more attention on how to interpret faith in the current cultural context. I argued it could be possible genderqueer Christians are early adapters in the current great emergence, for they are more aware of the growing gap between societal and Church attitudes manifesting in their own lives. The last concept I used analysing my data was gender normativity. Looking back in feminist history I researched the idea, initiated by Simone de Beauvoir (1949), of gender as a construct, rather than a natural given. Judith Butler (1988) explained gender as something you do rather than something you are, and how we are constantly repeating this act. The constant reproduction of these fixed identities according to the cultural expectation without questioning it is called 'gender normativity.' Supporting the theory of gender as a construct I used Lugones (2008) and Oy ew umi (1997) to understand the gender-binary as a tool of domination used during the colonialization by Christians twisting the Bible to fit the interest of the colonizers.

Using these concepts I analysed the data I obtained by the interviews divided in a few topics. I looked at the development of their God image, their ideas about God's gender, about God's creation, how they look at the "Biblical" man/woman image and ended with relating belonging to love. A lot of knowledge was created from their experiences and for all the details and nuances on how genderqueer Christians image God I like to refer to the chapter with the full analysis. For now, in order to answer the research question I will summarize a few points I would argue we could take away from this first conversation about God-image with genderqueer Christians.

*Gender normativity makes blind to the complexity of God.*

According to the respondents God has no gender. If we keep repeating the gender normative images of God as male with which we are raised, we would miss out on all the ways in which God is female and elusive. We would even miss out on recognizing genderqueer people as bearing Their image.

*We all create God in our own image.*

As humans we all tend to create God in our own image, make Them fit the way that suits us. Whether this is genderqueer Christians describing God as elusive and a mystery, or Christian men seeing God as male and dictating a fixed man/woman image. Genderqueer Christians

make us aware of how all human understanding is interpretation, by challenging the gender normative reading we got so used to.

*The images we present of God have influence and might even work as politics of belonging.* Analysing the experiences of my respondents I became aware of the influence presented images of God can have on people. Images of a judging God are directly linked to problems with self-acceptation. Sometimes God gets presented as someone who only loves people that do/think/are a certain way. Therefore we saw some people have to separate God from the Church and traditional teachings in order to be safe with Them. A clear example was IB losing her image of God as a loving friend because of people who said God did not love her for being bisexual. But also in the rereading of the story of Genesis we saw how this story gets presented as gender normative, misusing it as boundary maintenance. Which is strengthened in seeing the fall and its consequences as solely negative.

*Genderqueer Christians make us aware of necessary deconstruction.*

In different ways I have seen the respondents, more than negotiate, deconstruct their faith in order to find some deeper understanding. Specifically they were using their worldview and own experiences now to reread the Bible. The respondents are more aware of the gap between societal and church attitudes, possibly because of living in this gap every day as an inciting incident causing them to deconstruct. Not only do they argue the church falls behind on gender and sexuality issues, but in many current social problems.

*Genderqueer Christians find no ground for gender normativity in the Bible.*

Rereading the Bible on gender, looking for a more faithful understanding, the respondents find no ground for gender normative readings. They recognize the Bible does not teach one “biblical” man/woman image and does not prescribe certain gender stereotypes. Nevertheless, this gender normative interpretation of a man/woman image is still practised in church every day.

*God's love is belonging.*

Most of the respondents reported trouble with identifying as a Christian because of the different values they have. They experience direct or indirect politics of belonging, therefore it might be only logical they separate church and God to deal with dissonance. However, they do not choose to step away from faith to deal with dissonance, but they report feelings of safety with God as well as they feel they belong with God's good creation. Even when living with some sort of tension, they show a strong foundation in God's love. They talk about

God's love as unconditional and therefore for everyone, they are even able to pay this forward. I argued for a next step after negotiating: after successfully harmonizing their identity and faith, they want this harmony for everyone. They want to create an openness to a general diversity, which is not only about gender but the freedom to be whoever you are without any conditions. I argued genderqueer Christians show God's love is about belonging, for with God there are no politics to belonging.

Having collected these learning points, the knowledge created through the lived experiences of genderqueer Christians, what could this mean to their position in the Christian community? Possibly, Christians taking these points at heart might create not only more space in Christianity for genderqueer Christians but maybe even for a more diverse understanding of gender and God in general. For I would argue, recognizing the influence of our images of God and how these are based on our own interpretation, might humble us. Which is the ultimate starting point for Genderqueer Christians to precede us, as they already do, in a more critical learning attitude that could deepen our faith.

Moving forward I would suggest we should hear more experiences of genderqueer Christians in this conversation, for now I only scratched the surface as a start. It would be good to also include the experiences of genderqueer Christians of colour or of older age, for this thesis does not account for them. Also experiences on encounters within the Christian community and of those who have left their faith for they are hurt by this community would be an important addition. Only by educating ourselves it is possible to make less mistakes in the future. I hope we take a next step from discussing only the place of homosexuality in church to including gender diversity, letting go of toxic frames like 'gender ideology' and share our interpretations of the Divine with an open mind. Eventually I hope we might recognize each other in all our unique ways as image bearers of a God that loves without any politics of belonging, for that is what genderqueer Christians teach us.



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# Appendix

## Interview (translated)

How can the God-image of gender outlaws help us rethink the biblical man-woman image.

### *Informed consent*

This interview focuses on your relation with God, which I believe is of great value in the conversation about (gender)diversity in the Christian community. However, it is your experience, so take your time, nothing is wrong and if there are questions to personal or I say something stupid, tell me. The most important thing is you feeling comfortable in this conversation.

For you it might be pleasant to know a little bit more about me, that seems fair. I am Jetske, 24 years old and at the moment I do a master gender study. I identify as queer myself, but also as Christian. To me it seems cool to create more space in the Christian community for diversity, therefore this research. For I think there is a lot discussion about homosexuality, but gender minorities are heard less and I would like to make your voice heard.

- I like to record this conversation, the material will only be listened back by me to transcribe in the context of this research, it won't end up in the hands of a third party. Is that okay for you?

- which pronouns may I use for you in this research report?

- Do you prefer to be called by the name in your legal documents, another name that suits you better or anonymous?

### **Universal**

Who are you? (name, age)

What is your job?

What is your favourite colour and with what reasons?

What is your favourite natural phenomenon and with what reasons?

How do you identify and what does this mean to you? (gender/sexuality)

Do you identify as Christian and what does this mean to you.

(which church strand)

Do you see yourself as a gender outlaw [someone who does not fit (or refuses to fit) in the traditional expectations and rules of masculinity and femininity fitting their biological sex] (in the Christian community)

### **God-image**

- Who is God to you?

- How is your relationship with God?

- What attracts you in God?

- How would you describe God?

- With what image of God are you raised?

- Is your image of God changed since you are more aware of your own gender expression?

- What has been the influence of being [...] on your relationship with God?

- What is, according to you, the core of Christianity?

### **Embodiment of creation/ created in His image**

- We have talked about how you look at God, but how does God look at you?

- Is this who you wear meant to be? Could you explain that?
- How do you relate to the story of Genesis?
- Do you embody Genesis 1 and 2 (God's creation) or Genesis 3 (the fall)? Could you explain this? How do you experience this?
- God created man in his image, as image of God created he man, male and female he created humans. – Gen 1:27 If you read this text, what do you get from this?
- Do you feel free to do with your body and gender expression what is needed to be as much yourself as possible? How does that work? Or what is keeping you back?
- Which piece of God may you show the people around you?

### **Biblical man/woman image**

- What is the "biblical" man/woman image according to you?
- In which way do or don't you fit this (stereotypical) man/woman image? How do you experience this?
- The Nashville declaration speaks of a clear divide in gender inherent to being human. How do you relate to this statement?
- What do you think, coming from your relation with God, is missing in this statement?
- "Man and woman are equal but not the same," say the Nashville declaration as well as it is a one-liner in the Christian community. What do you think about this?
  
- What do you think God wants to show by giving you to the people/Christians around you?
- What do you think people/Christians will see when they look through your lens to the world surrounding them?
- What have you learned in your relation with God that you would like to give to other people?

### **Closing up**

Did I miss something? Is there a topic or an aspect of your experience I did not touch upon?  
 Is there something, looking back on this conversation, that you would like to change, emphasize or say more about?  
 Do you have questions for me?

## **Interview (Dutch original)**

How can the God-image of gender outlaws help us rethink the biblical man-woman image.

### *Informed consent*

Dit interview richt zich op jouw relatie met God, ik geloof dat deze van onschatbare waarde is in het gesprek over (gender)diversiteit in de christelijke wereld. Echter, het is jouw ervaring, dus neem de tijd, niks is fout, en als er vragen zijn die te dichtbij komen of ik zeg iets stoms, geef dat dan ook aan. Het belangrijkste is dat jij je prettig voelt bij dit gesprek.

Voor jou is het misschien ook prettig om iets meer over mij te weten, dat is wel zo eerlijk. Ik ben Jetske, 24 jaar en ik doe momenteel genderstudies. Ik identificeer zelf als queer, maar ook als christen. Het lijkt me heel tof om steeds meer ruimte te creëren in de christelijke gemeenschap voor diversiteit, vandaar dit onderzoek. Ik denk namelijk dat er wel steeds meer wordt gepraat over homoseksualiteit, maar dat genderminderheden nog weinig gehoord worden en ik zou dus graag jouw stem laten horen.

- Ik vind het fijn om dit gesprek op te nemen, het materiaal zal enkel teruggeluisterd worden door mij voor het uitwerken van dit onderzoek en zal dus niet bij derden terecht komen, is dat oké voor jou?
- Welke voornaamwoorden mag ik voor jou gebruiken in het onderzoeksrapport?
- Wil je in het onderzoeksrapport de naam in je paspoort gebruiken, een naam die beter bij jou past of een schuilnaam?

### **Algemeen**

Wie ben je? (naam, leeftijd)

Wat doe je? (levensinvulling)

Wat is je favoriete kleur en met welke redenen?

Wat is je favoriete natuurverschijnsel en met welke redenen?

Hoe identificeer jij je en wat betekent dit volgens jou? (gender/sexuality)

Identificeer jij je als christen en wat betekent dit volgens jou?

(Evt. welke kerkstroming/achtergrond)

Zou jij jezelf zien als gender outlaw? [Iemand die niet past (of weigert te passen) in de traditionele verwachtingen en regels van mannelijkheid of vrouwelijkheid passende bij hun biologische geslacht.] (evt. binnen de christelijke community)

### **Godsbeeld**

- Wie is God voor jou?
- Hoe is jouw relatie met God?
- Wat trekt je aan in God?
- Hoe zou je God beschrijven/omschrijven?
- Met welk beeld van God ben je opgevoed?
- Is jouw beeld van God veranderd sinds je je meer bewust bent geworden van je eigen genderexpressie?
- Welke invloed heeft het zijn van [...] gehad op jouw relatie met God?
- Wat is volgens jou de kern van het christendom?

### **Belichaming van de schepping/ geschapen in Zijn beeld**

- We hebben nu gehad over hoe jij God ziet, maar hoe denk je dat God naar jou kijkt?
- Is dit wie je had moeten zijn? Kun je dat uitleggen?
- Hoe verhoud jij je tot het scheppingsverhaal?



- Belichaam jij Gen. 1 en 2 (Gods schepping) of Gen. 3 (de zondeval)? Kun je dit uitleggen? Hoe ervaar je dit?
- *God schiep de mens als zijn evenbeeld, als evenbeeld van God schiep hij hem, mannelijk en vrouwelijk schiep hij de mensen.* - Gen 1:27 Als je deze tekst leest, wat haal je hier dan uit?
- Voel jij je vrij om dat te doen met jouw lichaam en genderexpressie wat nodig is om zoveel mogelijk jezelf te zijn? Hoe komt dat? Of wat houdt je tegen?
- Welk stukje van God mag jij laten zien aan de mensen om je heen?

### **Bijbels man/vrouw beeld**

- Wat is het "Bijbelse" man/vrouw beeld volgens jou?
- In welke zin pas jij wel/niet in dit (stereotype) man/vrouw beeld? Hoe ervaar je dit?
- De Nashvillerverklaring spreekt van een duidelijk onderscheid in gender inherent aan mens-zijn. Hoe verhoud jij je tot deze verklaring?
- Wat denk je, vanuit jouw relatie met God gezien, dat er ontbreekt in dit statement?
- *"Man en vrouw zijn gelijkwaardig maar niet hetzelfde,"* zegt zowel de Nashvillerverklaring als dat het als oneliner de christelijke wereld door gaat. Hoe kijk jij hier tegenaan?
- Wat denk je dat God wil laten zien door jou aan de mensen/christenen om je heen?
- Wat denk je dat mensen/christenen gaan zien als ze met jouw lens om zich heen kijken?
- Wat heb jij geleerd in jouw relatie met God dat je aan anderen mee zou willen geven?

### **Afsluitend**

Heb ik iets gemist? Is er een onderwerp of aspect van jouw ervaring waar ik volledig aan voorbij ben gegaan?

Is er iets wat je nu achteraf nog zou willen veranderen, benadrukken of aanvullen?

Heb je nog vragen aan mij?