



**Utrecht
University**

I praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made

Dutch queer Christians' individual narratives and lived experiences
of the self, love, God, and 'the Institute'

Charlotte Tiebosch

January 2024

I praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made

Dutch queer Christians' narratives and experiences of the self, love, God, and
'the Institute'

Research Master thesis Religious Studies
Department of Religious Studies and Philosophy
Faculty of Humanities
Utrecht University

Student	Charlotte Tiebosch
Student nr.	6114458
Email	c.i.tiebosch@students.uu.nl
Supervisor	dr. Lucien van Liere
Second Supervisor	Prof. dr. Anne-Marie Korte
Wordcount	35,615 (excl. appendix)
Date	26 th of January 2024

Abstract

This ethnographic study, conducted over four months, delves into how Dutch queer Christians in The Netherlands construct and (re)negotiate their identities and corporeality through individual narratives and lived experiences. Focused on listening to participants' individual stories, the research aims to go beyond the imposed and framed societal narrative of queer Christian identity as 'dichotomous', nuancing the importance of fluidity and intersectionality regarding the process of identity construction. In this mosaic of experiences, 'the Institute' emerges as a negative signifier in identity construction and corporeality, entangled with power dynamics rooted in early experiences of a 'punishing almighty God'. Queer Christians navigate and manoeuvre boundary making processes, engaging in a performative dance to grapple with their identities within the complexities of 'the Institute', heteronormativity, judgments from the queer community, and the gender binary. Another central theme in this study is the focus on the conditional marker of tolerance, focussing on the paradox of tolerance in relation to liberal secularism in Dutch society. Within this manoeuvring, reframing the narrative of God and faith becomes crucial, leading to self-love and acceptance. Despite imposed 'versusses', and the feeling of being caught in the power of the versus, queer Christians demonstrate strength and agency: resulting in the reconciliation of queer Christian identity. The research advocates for attentive listening, highlighting the significance of positionality and integrity in engaging in research regarding sensitivities and vulnerabilities. Here, the individuality of queer Christians is underscored within their collectivity, portraying them not as 'victims' of power structures, but as individuals engaged in a continual (re)negotiated road to self-acceptance and (self)love.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	6
Introduction	7
Methodology, analysis, epistemology/positionality	10
Ethics and dilemmas.....	14
Structure of the thesis	17
1. Theoretical approaches to identity making processes, post-secularism, tolerance, and (re)negotiation	19
The conceptualisation of identity	19
The process of Othering	21
Stigmatising the Other	22
Boundary making processes and (in)tolerance in a post-secular environment	23
Post-secularism and ‘liberal’ tolerance.....	25
Queer and Christian: a (re)negotiation?	27
Negotiated identities	28
Agency.....	30
2. Dutch context: State, church, and queerness	31
The Dutch intersection of church and state	31
The ever-changing landscape for LGBTQIA+ people	33
3. I’m one of ‘them’ that has to leave	37
‘The Institute’ is ‘vile’.....	38
Claiming space	40
‘Psychological instability’	42
Being caught in the power of the versus	43
Conclusion.....	46
4. She moved with shameless wonder. The perfect creature rarely seen.	48
The body as: shameful.....	48
The body and clothing: a playing field?	50
‘Physical adjustments’.....	52
Sex and celibacy.....	55
Conclusion.....	57
5. Finding the rainbow within the black and white	59
‘Contradiction in terminus’	59

Reframing God	63
The supermarket	65
Vulnerability is a strength	66
Influencing others	68
Conclusion.....	69
6. Lenny and his Bob: A remembrance	71
Conflicting feelings with ‘the Church’	72
God made you the way you are.....	74
Bob’s illness	75
Being a good person.....	77
Conclusion.....	78
Conclusion	79
Reflection and discussion points	83
Further Research	84
Bibliography	87
Appendix 1: Translation of empirical data	93

Acknowledgements

This thesis would not have been possible without all the support of the people around me. During the past years of my studies, I have met many inspiring, amazing, and passionate people both within and outside of academia. Specifically, I would like to offer my thanks to the following people:

My supervisor, Lucien van Liere, for the help and guidance. Especially, reminding me to be realistic and helping me not to drift into the open ocean of academia and its theories. Thank you for your insights, calmness, trust, and enthusiasm as it was invaluable to my thesis and encouraged me throughout this process. I would also like to thank Mariecke van den Berg and Anne-Marie Korte, for the help of using your network, expertise, and the appreciated feedback.

Naturally, I want to thank my family for their calls or texts, critical questions, and welcomed distractions. Especially, I want to thank my mum who has not only helped me through opening up her network in search of participants for my research, but also opened her already busy work schedule in order to do what she believes is the most important in life: to be there for her children. Thank you for being there for me.

Also thanks to all of my friends, who have been a consistent rock in my life and taking care of me when I forgot to do so. Particularly, Tara, for offering a hiding place at her office and for crying/laughing together about everything that we, as ‘symbiotic worms’, can often do. My fellow Anthro lovers, Daphne and Kirsten, the unconditional support and love is something that I know will bind us until we are shrivelled raisins. My ‘housespouse’, Raeven. Thank you for listening to my stress rants, for calmly raising one eyebrow when I repeatedly showed you my unhinged time-planning schedules, and for giving me a sunflower at a time when I needed it the most. Jing-Yi, who shared her (hidden) gems of different cuisines in Rotterdam and was always ready to give feedback. Lex and Eva, who were always open to shenanigans at random times of the day and our endless conversations about theory and concepts: May we one day solve the world’s problems together.

Most of all, this thesis would not at all have been possible if my participants had not opened up about telling their story the way they did. To most, I was a complete stranger. I admire their openness, courage, perseverance, and above all compassion for themselves and others. I can only say that I certainly take this as a wise lesson. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for giving me the opportunity to listen to your experiences.

Introduction

Religie is een zelfreflectie. Je moet de ander vrij laten en niet oordelen. Degene die God echt kunnen zien, die zijn puur van hart en die zien gewoon de persoon en daarin God. God is alles. Maar ja, elkaar vrijheid gunnen in elkaar laten zijn, ongeacht wat dan ook, blijft moeilijk. Die worsteling met mezelf breekt dan een beetje op, ik zit niet in mijn vrolijkste fase.^{1A}

In the intricate dance of identity, religion, and queerness, as illustrated by the quote from Marko above, Dutch queer Christians emerge as protagonists in the narrative of self-discovery and identity construction and (re)negotiation. Particularly as to how these strands of religion, identity, and queerness weave together and transgress boundaries. Here, individual narratives and lived experiences of queer Christians in The Netherlands present a worthwhile story, where the focus on individuality remains largely unexplored. Thus, this thesis, with the use of ethnographic research, embarks on exploring these individual narratives and lived experiences delving deeper into the complex processes of construction and (re)negotiation of Dutch queer Christians' identity and corporeality. At the heart of this research lies the question: How do queer Christians in The Netherlands construct and (re)negotiate their identity and corporeality with regards to their individual narration and lived experience of faith, God, and 'the Institute' as a social collectivity amidst in- and exclusion processes?

This research delves into theoretical frameworks established by prominent scholars, exploring identity theory, social in- and exclusion, Othering, accompanying boundary making processes, and the performance of gender and identity. Next to this, in the context of the post-secular and liberal tolerant landscape of The Netherlands, the thesis examines the profound impact of homonationalism and heteronormative frames on the lives of queer Christians. Amidst societal expectations, where conformity is evident and perhaps needed, the negotiation of faith and identity becomes a delicate, of what I like to call, 'performative dance': navigating in- and exclusion processes, frames, and other (invisible) boundaries. The challenge arises from the expectation to conform to broadly 'accepted' norms, manoeuvre between (invisible) boundaries, and grapple with the static dichotomous notion of 'queer

¹ The explanation to the reasoning behind the use of the original vernacular and language of the empirical data is addressed later in this introduction under the section titled 'Methodology, analysis, epistemology/positionality'.

versus Christian' identity. These factors shape the lived experiences of queer Christians, and thus influence their individual narratives. The concept of tolerance, and the previously mentioned boundary making processes hereto, serve as a cornerstone of Dutch societal values. The thesis explores this concept of tolerance elaborately, emphasising the conditional markers inherent to this. Recognising the power dynamics and boundary making processes associated with tolerance, the research aims to decipher how these conditions impact the construction and (re)negotiation of identity and corporeality for Dutch queer Christians. The seemingly inclusive facade of tolerance reveals itself as a nuanced terrain of (re)negotiation and manoeuvring. Moreover, this study contributes to the deconstruction of the static – and perhaps normative – portrayal of queer and Christian identities as intrinsically 'dichotomous'. Within this framework, the thesis questions existing assumptions and highlights the complex ways individuals reconcile, incorporate, and embrace both their queerness and Christianity. Going beyond the often imposed societal narrative of a dichotomy, this nuanced exploration unveils the fluid and intersectional essence of identities.

That said, the research population of this ethnographic study centres on a diverse group of nine self-identified queer Christians in The Netherlands, spanning an age range from about 20 to 70 and encompassing various Christian denominations. The denominations include Roman Catholic, Protestant (PKN), Reformed Bond, 'Reformed Church liberated' (GKV), Reformed Congregation,² and some participants who chose not to disclose their specific denomination for reasons of privacy and anonymity. The level of engagement with their respective religious communities varies among participants, with some actively participating or living within religious communities, some having joined religious student associations, others attending church weekly, and a few holding official positions within their church structures. For some, their faith is perceived as a life source, even if they do not actively engage in religious events. It is essential to note that the labels participants use to

² Transl. Rooms-Katholiek, Protestantse Kerk Nederland (PKN), Gereformeerde Bond, Gereformeerde Kerken Vrijgemaakt (GKV), Gereformeerde gemeente.

describe their identities vary.³ Additionally, the participants share the commonality of being white and predominantly possessing higher education diplomas or are currently in the pursuit of a higher education. Despite efforts to achieve diversity, it is crucial to acknowledge potential gaps and biases. Furthermore, the participants reside in different locations across the country, contributing to the multifaceted nature of their experiences.

Consequently, this study contributes significantly to the expanding academic qualitative data trajectories within the realm of lived experiences of Dutch queer Christians, delving into their meaning-making processes. It explores their individual narratives and lived experiences concerning faith, God, and the self, while also engaging with established theories on identity constructions, lived religion, the performance of identity, tensions within gender/sexuality, and individual narratives of corporeality. This interdisciplinary exploration extends across fields such as Cultural and Social Anthropology, Sociology, Religious Studies, Gender Studies, Queer Studies, and beyond. Furthermore, the study enriches existing theories related to boundary making processes, transgressions within the self and the body, and offers a potential conceptual framework for future research. Concepts introduced in this thesis such as ‘caught in the power of the versus’ and ‘the performative dance’ prove particularly valuable in the exploration of (re)negotiated identities within power laden contexts. This research is also relevant for understanding power dynamics within the field and addresses epistemological stances, questions of positionality, and embodiment in the context of ethnographic research. Beyond its academic contributions, this research holds essential social significance by emphasising the importance of attentive listening to individuals’ stories. Particularly relevant are the experiences shared by individuals that may be overlooked otherwise, due to certain socially established biases. I also advocate for a more transparent, reflexive, and empathic approach, and encourage a collective commitment (both within and outside of academia) to actively listen to one another’s experiences and contribute to a deeper understanding among individuals.

³ The reason for my choice to use the term ‘queer’ when referring to my participants is because I perceive queer as an all-encompassing ‘label’ that captures multiple facets of one’s LGBTQIA+ identity (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, and more). However, I want to emphasise that attempting to label identity markers is inherently challenging. One should even abstain from labelling, especially when it does not pertain to one’s own identity. This aligns precisely with the aim of this thesis, highlighting that identity is fluid and should be seen from its multiple facets and with an intersectional lens.

Thus, the primary objective of this master thesis is to further shift the scholarly focus from looking at generality to paying close attention to individual experiences. The aim is to explore the notion that identity is fluid and dynamic, and that each person is made up of many different aspects, not just one particular identity marker. By adopting a more inclusive perspective, this research provides a valuable opportunity for individuals identifying as queer Christians to articulate their individual narratives, opinions, and share their lived experiences. Additionally, in combining emic and etic approaches, this research framework deepens one's understanding of how insider perspectives and external analytical viewpoints interact, adding insights and cultural context to the overall subjectivities and discourses.

Methodology, analysis, epistemology/positionality

Naturally, I believe it to be imperative to be constantly reflexive, transparent, and empathic when doing ethnographic research on topics that are, or may be, personal and sensitive. Therefore, I delve deeper into the characteristics of this research, particularly its methodologies, an explanation as to how data analysis has been carried out, as well as epistemology and positionality. In this paragraph, there are allusions to ethical dilemmas and choices made during the research. However, a more detailed elaboration of these aspects is provided in a distinct paragraph.

First, this ethnographic research has been carried out over the course of four months, starting from accessing the field to finishing the research data collection all together. Within these four months, I have had ample opportunity to visit church services, small talk to (queer) Christians, and have done extensive interviews with a group of nine self-identified queer Christians. The interviews ranged from one hour up till four hours, differing from conversations, unstructured, to semi-structured interviews. Mostly, I have adapted my interview techniques – pertaining to structural choices such as conversations, unstructured, or semi-structured – to the ability of participants themselves. Naturally, this research topic is personal and sensitive for many of the people I have spoken to, so therefore, it was crucial to me that all participants – and others that I have spoken to – felt comfortable and in control of their own process of research participation. As a result, the data collected has been extensive and vast. As said earlier, I have ‘spoken’ to nine people in total, however one of whom has unfortunately passed away previous to the start of this research: Bob. My choice for including him in this research as a participant is due to the fact that I had the privilege of reading many of his written thoughts, scripts, sermons, essays, and more, given to me by his spouse Lenny.

Not only did this give me the opportunity to understand Bob's point of view with regards to his queer Christian identity, but it also helped me understand his relationship with his partner Lenny, 'the Church', and simultaneously get to know him more as an individual. Due to this, I have chosen to include Bob as an extra participant in this research to, on the one hand, give credits to his (activist) work about queer Christian acceptance and self-acceptance, and on the other hand, show respect to his legacy, love life, and Lenny's wish. All interviews took place in comfortable settings; participant's houses/living accommodations and quiet coffee shops. Next to this, I have attended some church services, particularly 'pink services', as to why not all of this data has been 'visibly' included in this research is due to ethics and privacy issues which will be explained later on. Consequently, before participants had agreed to participate in this research, and thusly before the 'official' first interview, I had off the record phone calls with everyone interested in participating in the research. Here, I introduced myself, explained my research, goals, scope, and also made clear that anyone could stop participation at any time during the research. Oral consent was asked in the first official (on the record) interview which was recorded and transcribed later in time.

With that being said, it must be mentioned that I have made an active choice to solely include the empirical data in its original language. Meaning, all quotes made by participants have not been translated, in text, to the English language. However, I have added an appendix with the translated quotes for those that need it. The choice of solely including original vernacular rather than translated versions of the empirical data is due to the fact that I firmly believe that the direct lived experiences and narratives of research participants is not my story to tell. Hence, this choice has been made to incorporate my participants' own individuality – the way one speaks and narrates their experiences is, in the end, inherent and particular to the individual themselves. In line with this thinking, I argue that the original vernacular should have a prominent spot instead of the English translation, not only due to the translation bias, which is perhaps already inevitable in ethnographic research, but also because of the agency of participants' to tell their story. I am merely a listener, mediator, and collector of those stories, but ultimately I am not the one who tells their story. Naturally, this choice is connected to the epistemological stance and positionality of myself as a researcher, and the inescapable power dynamics between and of the researcher and researched. The explanation for this will be provided later in the upcoming paragraphs.

Second, as previously mentioned, the data collected over these months of research had been vast and extensive. Mainly due to the fact that some interviews were long and primarily consisted of participants talking about their experiences in a broad sense. Due to privacy and

anonymity reasons, I have chosen to carefully and delicately handle my data and the analysis thereof. Consequently, I transcribed all my interviews myself. Thus, making an active choice, based on privacy and anonymity reasons, to not use any transcribing companies or online tools. Next to this, I made another active choice to take the time to analyse my data. I coded all my data, first on paper sticky notes and mind maps that essentially took over my living room and eventually reorganised all codes into a structured and coherent code tree in NVivo. All data had been stored separately on an extensive hard drive which I took with me at all times.

Third, it is my strong belief that in conducting (qualitative) research, one has to be aware of the power dynamics and tensions within doing research and one's own positionality. Essentially, the choice for an empathic reflexive stance in this ethnographic study is due to this belief. Herewith, I argue – concurring with Verhallen's (2016) argument – that ethnographic research is “embedded in theoretical reflexivity, and instrumentalised through the embodied subjectivity of the ethnographer” (2016, 457). In other words, this stance and principles question one's aims of the quality of data collection and its representations. Herewith, epistemology, or epistemics, are thus of crucial importance to reflect, deconstruct, and analyse before, during, and after conducting research; making this a continual process. This position of epistemics is found within those reflexive and proactive choices of the ethnographer, to which ethical questions are linked. What I mean to say, the data collected within research conducted in this manner is imminently influenced by the researchers' own position, to which this is based on their own contextual background, identity, and history. Therefore, adopting a reflexive and empathic stance is more favourable in enhancing the quality of data and sustaining and developing the relationship, and rapport, with research participants. Consequently, I would like to steer away from an insider/outsider rhetorical binary when doing ethnographic research, but rather focus on, what Nina Hoel (2013) introduced in her article, a pendulum along the insider/outsider continuum where multiple subjectivities of both the researcher and the respondents exist and are equally valuable. Hence, as Hoel (2013, 32) argues, “research encounters have the potential to be co-constructions in which redefinitions of the insider/outsider binary can take place in ways that are more meaningful and inclusive than an either/or paradigm”. In a similar vein, the embodiment of the field transcends mere power dynamics between the researcher and the researched. Rather, the act of embodying the field and the associated research provides a pathway for the body to serve as a mediator, and potentially a barrier, in negotiating both similarities and differences (Hoel 2013).

Following from this, in the investigation of the identity construction and (re)negotiation of Dutch queer Christians, it is thus crucial to acknowledge the role of my own positionality. I am a cisgender, non-heterosexual, non-religious, white, academically educated, Dutch woman.⁴ My upbringing took place in an environment where the exploration of gender and sexual identity was considered a typical feature of identity exploration. In other words, I have not encountered specific boundary transgressions concerning my identity within that context. It was only during the course of my studies, even more so in the context of this thesis focussing on sexual/gender/religious identity, I came to the realisation that in having to label myself as non-heterosexual and non-religious – identity designations I am still grappling with and simultaneously make me question the adequacy of any label pertaining to identity markers – compelled me to provide explanations to others. This experience highlighted the manner in which my perception of the self was constructed by others, and how I had to navigate my own self within these supposedly ‘set’ boundaries. In my previous experience, the various fluid facets of my identity, for instance encompassing gender, sexual orientation, nationality, and spirituality/religiosity, etcetera, had never constituted moments of labelling or boundary transgressions, but was rather, simply a matter of who I am and how I perceive myself. I am acutely aware of the privilege inherent in these experiences pertaining to my identity, let alone delving into discussions about other identity markers, such as my ethnicity or nationality, which have not even been brought up here yet. Thus, allow me to emphasise, yet again, that in undertaking (ethnographic) research, particularly into the construction and (re)negotiation of identities; whether they refer to religious, gender, sexual,

⁴ My identity, particularly concerning my sexual and religious orientation, is articulated in a manner where the application of labels may introduce more confusion than clarity. Interestingly, this thesis precisely demonstrates that efforts to label and categorise identity markers, which are inherently fluid and contingent, frequently lead to ambiguity. Nevertheless, I find it necessary to elaborate upon my use of these labels. In terms of my sexual orientation, I experience attraction to all genders. Consequently, I am least discomforted – due to a lack of a more fitting term – with the label ‘non-heterosexuality’. Other labels such as bisexuality or pansexuality do not seem to fully encapsulate my identity, hence ‘non-heterosexual’ feels more apt. On the other hand, the narration of my religious identity is even more intricate, highlighting the fluid and performative nature of identity yet again. Currently, I do not identify as a religious person, however I do acknowledge certain forms of spiritualities. The debate on whether embracing the existence of spiritualities qualifies one as religious invites a multitude of discussions, and simultaneously reopens the complex discourse on the fundamental question of ‘what is religion?’ – an ongoing discourse inherent to the study of religion.

or any other identity marker, it is crucial for the researcher to maintain a heightened awareness and engage in continuous reflection. This involves recognising and navigating the intricate power dynamics, acknowledging the presence of multiple subjectivities between and of the researcher and the researched, and comprehending the overall positionality of the researcher. Such consideration is fundamental for effectively addressing the vulnerabilities and sensitivities inherent in research of this nature.

Ethics and dilemmas

In the pursuit of an ethically ‘just’ ethnographic research, it is inescapable that certain dilemmas are probable. I argue that in achieving ethically ‘just’ ethnographic research, an overt research role is necessary. Here, communication, transparency, and respect is key to build trust and rapport. Next to this, it is essential to keep the ‘do no harm’ code in mind when experiencing (ethical) dilemmas or other ethical considerations in research. With that being said, in the next paragraph, I address certain ethical considerations that have been made and are thus influential to the understanding of the contextualisation of this research and thesis, as well as certain (ethical) dilemmas as experienced by myself.

As previously mentioned, due to the nature of this research topic, a sensitive, reflexive, and empathic stance is needed. When accessing the field in the beginning stages of this ethnographic research, I have contacted numerous queer Christian organisations, LGBTQIA+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersexual, Asexual, and more) friendly churches,⁵ queer Christian communities, and Christian student associations. Clearly, some have contacted me back which was a decisive factor in finding potential research participants. However, many organisations, specifically related to organised events, had expressed their concerns and hesitation with opening up their network. For example, one particular organisation, which organises monthly events for queer Christians, said they were certainly willing to help in locating potential respondents. However, they also expressed their concern regarding not being able to ask consent to all of their participants due to their walk-in system. At the same time, they also expressed a desire to maintain a secure environment for individuals to openly discuss their experiences, a sentiment that ultimately resulted in their apprehension about inviting a researcher without ensuring the consent of all participants. In

⁵ Wijdekerk.nl, an organisation for queer Christians, offers a map of The Netherlands to which churches can be registered as LGBTQIA+ friendly.

light of this, the primary rationale for this, pivotal to numerous responses I have received from others, stems from the inability to safeguard the individual situations of everyone, particularly those who have not come out of the closet – either gender identity and/or sexual identity. It can be argued that these ethical dilemmas pose potential detriments to conducting (ethnographic) research. Nevertheless, I argue that such choices merit unquestionable respect. Concurrently, these considerations underscore the contextual nuances within this field, where the sensitivities and vulnerabilities of the research topic are unmistakably identified. Hence, this context proves to be an intriguing field to access, revealing distinct and tense dynamics that serve as a valuable apparatus for understanding the contextual backdrop of the field before even having accessed it.

Therefore, in having to deal with these tense dynamics that arise when doing research about sensitive topics, particularly with regards to individual situations that relate to privacy and anonymity matters, I have chosen to give every participant a pseudonym together with leaving certain (individual) information out of the thesis altogether. The reasoning behind this choice, similar to the reasoning of many organisations, is based on the consideration that not all participants have openly disclosed their sexual and/or gender identity to everyone in their lives. Therefore, some factors of certain people's identity markers (e.g. living location, specific Christian denominations, age, and other factors) have been excluded from the thesis. This decision may potentially impact readers' perceptions of the identity of certain participants, creating a sense that certain individuals have not received comparable elaboration. Additionally, it may give rise to questions regarding these aspects. Yet, transparency is key and the desires of the respondents or community take precedence. Thus, participants have had the opportunity to individually check the written pieces written about them, so that certain recognisability factors can be omitted and anonymity can be preserved. In line with this, collected raw data will be terminated when this research master thesis has been completed. Once more, this limitation arises from the necessity to withhold certain data, aligning with the preferences and wishes of most respondents engaged in this research. Taking this into consideration, it is indisputable that certain (ethical) dilemmas are imminent in conducting research within vulnerabilities, sensitivities, and tensed dynamics. Again, I wish to address the importance that individual narratives and lived experiences are central and leading in this research. In other words, statements said by participants are prominent in conclusions, arguments, and remarks and therefore are taken seriously on the basis of their multiple subjectivities. In that sense, subjectivities and narratives that have been expressed by research participants throughout this research, for example concepts such as 'Christianity',

‘the Institute’ or ‘the Church’, are not connected to supposed theoretical or theological explanations of Christianity or how ‘the Church’ as a whole perceives these notions.

Next to this, I wish to address another dilemma that particularly relates to having to deal with sensitivities and vulnerabilities of this research topic. As explained previously, some queer Christians that I have met during this research have not all come out of the closet to everyone in their lives, and participating in this research can seem daunting; some are reluctant in doing so. This meant that in accessing the field some potential participants seemed interested in partaking in this research, but some – after the off-record call and setting a date to meet – have not shown up to our appointments. My first response to this was concern about their wellbeing. Did something happen to them? Do they need help? Naturally, I contacted them through multiple channels in order to check in. Some expressed that they had changed their minds and others have not replied since. This resulted in a dilemma for me. Not for those that responded about changing their minds, but those that have not responded since. There was no way for me to check about their wellbeing or if something had happened, because I could not contact organisations or other people, since I did not know whether these people had told them about participation in this research. If I would have asked around, there would have been a possibility that I could ‘out’ them to people if they were not fully out of the closet. Therefore, I chose not to act any further in other actions apart from contacting them directly. Still, there are uncertainties about their situations. Yet again, I was confronted with the vulnerabilities of this research topic, where I concluded, time and time again, that caution, delicate handling, transparency, and constant reflecting is needed in order to conduct such a research.

Lastly, the point of delicacy and thus having to opt to leave information out of the research, not contact people, nor ask around, is apparent in many different moments during the conducting of this research. The opportunities that I did have in going to events and using participant observation to gain more information about queer Christians’ individual narratives and lived experiences do not have a prominent space in this thesis due to explicit wishes of those people or due to having to hold back too many recognisability factors. They have given me permission to use this as contextual background for myself as a researcher researching this topic to try to understand it as extensively as possible. Nonetheless, they have given no consent for talking about these events extensively and in-depth and I can only adhere to their wishes. Though this data is definitely not ‘lost’, it has created a clear image for me as a researcher about the lives of queer Christians, specifically regarding church services, celebrations, and having to define, claim, and manoeuvre themselves within tense dynamics

in worlds framed as ‘different’. Additionally, one could argue that due to this choice – based on the wishes of respondents or other people involved in this research – more research gaps have been created and ‘interesting’ data is left behind. In taking this into consideration, I agree that this could be regrettable. However, in the end, it would be more regrettable for me not to respect the ethical code and the wishes, wants, and needs of the queer Christians I have spoken to.

Structure of the thesis

In this thesis, the structure unfolds into a narrative that delves into a multitude of layers of identity construction and (re)negotiation among queer Christians in The Netherlands.

The framework is set within a theoretical context in the first chapter, where foundational theories and concepts are explored. The conceptualisation of identity is deconstructed through the lenses of social and individual identity, emphasising power laden processes such as in- and exclusion, Othering, stigma, sameness, and collectivity. The dichotomy of ‘Us versus Them’ is analysed, with a focus on how identity is essentially culturalised, racialised, sexualised, and gendered. Next to this, the power laden messages imposed on queer Christian identity in a post-secular ‘liberal’ Netherlands are investigated through the frames of homonationalism and homonormativity. Within the post-secular, the interplay of ‘liberal tolerance’ as an additional boundary making process is explored. Consequently, this chapter highlights the conditional markers of tolerance, exploring how queer and Christian identities are positioned as seemingly dichotomous. The negotiation of identity emerges as a performative dance, where boundary transgressions become necessary to claim space for the self. The concept of being caught in the power of the versus is explained, and the role of agency within the negotiation of queer Christian identity is thoroughly examined.

The second chapter provides a contextual backdrop to the research, offering a description of The Netherlands, Christianity, secularism, and queerness. This exploration serves as a contextual foundation for the subsequent empirical chapters.

The empirical section comprises four chapters, each offering unique insights into the construction and (re)negotiation of queer Christian identity.

The first chapter delves into the narrated and experienced conceptualisation of the ‘institute versus faith’, exposing how queer Christians grapple with the power dynamics inherent in this dichotomy. The perception of God as a punishing force in their upbringing is elaborated on, revealing the profound impact on their narration of faith.

The second empirical chapter focusses on lived corporeality as another facet of the ‘versus’. It explores how the body interacts within supposedly fixed narratives of ‘the Institute versus faith’, examining experiences of shame and the imposition of societal norms on the body, particularly concerning sex and celibacy. Here, agency becomes a crucial element, as some queer Christians use clothing as a means to express and perform their gender identity.

The third empirical chapter highlights the fluidity of identity through the reframing of religion and God. Queer Christians navigate and claim space within boundary making processes by transforming their understanding of God from punishing to loving and accepting. Here, the reconciliation of supposed ‘dichotomous’ identity markers is achieved through self-acceptance and self-love, particularly focussing on agency within these moments of reconciliation of the self.

The fourth empirical chapter introduces the personal narrative of life partners Lenny and the late Bob, emphasising the importance of self-love and acceptance in navigating the intersection of sexuality and religion. Lenny’s moving remembrance, supported by Bob’s written works, reflects on the complexity of queer Christian identity within the tension of societal dichotomies. Ultimately, showing the importance of (self)love.

In the conclusion, the theoretical implications discussed earlier are interwoven with the empirical findings, to demonstrate how queer Christians in The Netherlands construct and (re)negotiate their identity and corporeality with regards to their individual narration and lived experiences of faith, God, and ‘the Church’ as a social collectivity amidst boundary making processes and transgressions. Reflections, discussion points, and recommendations for further research conclude this thesis, offering a nuanced understanding of the processes shaping queer Christian identity in The Netherlands.

Within the pages that follow, this thesis threads together a mosaic of experiences, echoing the diversity of the identity construction and (re)negotiation of Dutch queer Christians. It is not merely an academic exploration; instead, it is a call for a more inclusive and empathic society.

1. Theoretical approaches to identity making processes, post-secularism, tolerance, and (re)negotiation

In aiming to comprehend the experiences of Dutch queer Christians concerning their identity, their connections with God, and their individual narratives regarding the supposed queer Christian ‘Other’, it becomes imperative to establish a foundation of relevant theories and concepts. This chapter serves as the groundwork, delving into theories and concepts that are intricately intertwined with the lived experiences and realities of Dutch queer Christians. Here, these foundational ideas are thoroughly explored and elaborated upon.

Firstly, to grasp the significance of identity’s fluidity, it is imminent to delve into the processes of (social) identity formation. Concurrently, I elaborate on the dynamics of Othering, encompassing in- and exclusion, as well as the accompanying feelings of stigmatisation, fear, and insecurity.

Secondly, I portray notions of Dutch nationalism, particularly integrating the impact of homonationalism on the concept of Dutch citizenship as theorised by Puar (2006) and Bracke (2008). Additionally, I explore the process of heterosexualisation within Dutch ‘secular’ citizenship, examining the framing of ‘what is tolerated and what is not’, with a specific focus on the conditional markers of tolerance. This involves introducing the notion of boundary making again, both within individual identity formation processes and as an integral aspect of broader systematic structural constructions within post-secular and liberal Dutch society.

Finally, building upon the previously mentioned concepts, I delve into the (re)negotiation of identities through boundary making processes, highlighting the power loaded frame of queer Christians as a ‘supposedly’ (re)negotiated identity. In doing so, I analyse the concept of the performativity of identity, introducing the notion of ‘the performative dance’ and ‘caught in the power of the versus’. Through this lens, I investigate agency within a (re)negotiated identity, particularly in the context of queer Christian identity.

The conceptualisation of identity

Conceptualising identity is a study on its own which requires continuous nuancing and structuralising, and above all constant reflection. With this in mind, in conceptualising the construction of identity and its (re)negotiation of queer Christian identity, one has to deconstruct the notion of identity in itself. An identity is a marker of one’s personhood. This personhood is made up of different facets within a specific identified identity. How one

perceives themselves is part of the conceptualisation of identity, while simultaneously, and equally important, is the marker of how others perceive someone. Both, internal markers of one's own perception – and experience – of identity as well as external markers, are what constitutes an identity of an individual. In essence, identity is to classify and identify questions of 'Who and what am I?' and 'Who and what are you?' which ultimately helps us to associate one another with others, as well as the self (Demmers 2012; Jenkins 2014). The external markers, as I mentioned before, could also be conjoined under the term social identity, as demonstrated by Demmers (2012), in which the specific questions of 'who and what are *you*' come into play. Here, identity markers rely heavily on external and contextually based perceptions of others and the environment. Therefore, it is almost logical to state that these 'opinions' and perceptions within one's own individual context and environment changes, as contexts and environments change within social settings. In other words, I argue, concurring with Barth (1998), that identity should be seen as fluid and dynamic rather than being a static and reified image. Thus, identity is situationally based, contingent, and is in constant negotiation, may it be by the person themselves or their surroundings (Barth 1998).

Then, to understand these internal markers as well as the external markers of identity, it is essential to look at how these 'sides' interact with one another to 'create' an identity, or even identity groups. Social identity is those external markers specifically relating to how others perceive an individual, whereas individual identity is one's own experiences and view of the individual. Different scholars (Jenkins 2014; Verkuyten 2005) have elaborated on the notion of whether one's identity is solely constituted out of the so-called 'social identity' where others (Barth 1998; Demmers 2012; Tajfel 1981) argue for a rather 'mixed' take on both social external markers as well as individual internal markers. With regards to this thesis, I prefer a 'mixed' approach to individual's identities where they constitute of both individual identity markers as well as social identity markers, in which I use Tajfel's (1981, 63) approach to social identity as "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership in a social group". Inherently, identity should be regarded as fluid, contingent, and constantly (re)negotiated. In light of this, it is imperative to mention that in this thesis, the importance of the fluidity of identity is emphasised particularly in combination with the notion of intersectionality. Intersectionality was conceptualised by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), an American black feminist activist and scholar of critical race theory, and has further developed as a critical apparatus in discourses about identity construction particularly in European and postcolonial feminism. Essentially, intersectionality

emphasises the different axes one's identity markers are made out of – all are co-constructive and equally valuable – such as gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race, religion, and nationality.

The process of Othering

As said, identity is set up out of both external as well as internal markers – one's social identity as well as one's individual identity. I do not mean to say that these markers are finite and levelled, as these constantly change and are also part of one's own tacit constructions of the self. However, relating back to previous statements used by Tajfel (1981), one's identity belongs to multiple groups or categories, and its membership. Therefore, making identity intrinsically loaded with ideas of power; categorising, in- and exclusion, Othering, and perhaps for some stigmatisation. Essentially, identity being (re)negotiated makes it unavoidably a matter of boundary making and its transgressions thereof of supposed other (socially constructed) boundaries. Boundaries define groupness, as it essentially separates the question of 'Us' and 'Them'. Sameness and collectivity herein are therefore interchangeable and adaptable just as identity is (Barth 1998).

In reference to this, I will address the process of in- and exclusion based on notions of collectivity as introduced by Jenkins (2014) and Verkuyten (2005). First, as explained by Jenkins (2014), a collectivity is established by the perception of members of the group; the group would be the in-group. Second, members within a group are ascribed to this collectivity, sometimes making these members unaware of their placement within a group. Therefore, one's identity could be ascribed in a certain way that one does not necessarily experience it accordingly. The ascription to a collectivity would better be termed as categorising. In other words, the notion of collectivity in this manner turns into a category. Categorising groups and others is imperative in understanding where one belongs, thus assisting in boundary making (Demmers 2012; Jenkins 2014; Verkuyten 2005). Systematically ascription of individuals within groups and categories is formed by sameness, boundaries, as well as differentiation. Sameness in essence creates recognition and brings people together, whereas differentiation is exactly those boundary making principles in establishing a distinction between social relations and individuals (Verkuyten 2005). Due to this, in- and exclusion can eventuate; an in-group (Us) and the out-group (Them) are created.

Within this process of categorising, the process of exclusion is inescapable. The existence of categories based on members and non-members (Us and Them) within a collectivity or group allow for the creation of stereotypes and stigmas. Baumann (1999), a sociologist and philosopher, who dedicated his work to the study of in- and exclusion

processes and stratifications within society, states as follows: “It [i.e. categorising] helps one to stereotype them with the greatest of ease and to make common sense predictions of how these others might think and what they might do next” (84). Thus, stereotyping is an addition to the process of boundary making. The ascription of general stereotypes – as well as the application of collective categories – to individuals can construct a classification of ‘incompetence’ (Jenkins 2014). In other words, ‘they are not part of us, so therefore they must be Other, strange, and incorrect’. The process of Othering within exclusion relies heavily on power loaded frames of the perception of the self in relation to the Other. In this line of thinking, The Other is framed as ‘them who is not us, so therefore different, unknown, exotic,’ even fear and/or disgust of the Other is conceptualised when one believes it to be so. It is imperative to mention that Othering is a socially constructed process and not a reflection of an objective ‘reality’. In other words, the process of Othering is a result of cultural, historical, and social dynamics where these are not set in stone. Othering can be objected to and disassembled through the increase of awareness of difference, empathy, and the promotion of inclusivity; again realising and emphasising that identities are fluid and dynamic. However, focussing on those differences and creating stereotypes and ascriptions to identity could result in the construction of stigmas.

Stigmatising the Other

The stigmatisation of the Other can have disastrous effects on the individual perceptions of the individual who is Othered, and simultaneously adds to the process of exclusion. Erving Goffman (1961; 1963), an influential sociologist and social-psychologist in the twentieth century, proposes that within the concept of stigma, frames of normality and abnormality are present. Herewith, stigma is defined as inherently linked to disaccreditation, reducing individuals to the ‘polluted and discounted’ Other. Again, these frames are socially constructed – within those boundary making processes. Here, the stigmatised Other is ‘marked’ as the ‘one deviating from ‘normal’’. Yet again, both these frames are socially constructed within those boundary making processes. The stigmatised individual – or group – may experience feeling threatened, hated, and marginalised (Goffman 1963; Ryan 2011). Herek (2009), a psychologist who further build on the notions of Goffman’s stigma and researches sexual stigma specifically, defines stigma as “the negative regard, inferior status, and relative powerlessness that society collectively accords to people who possess a particular characteristic or belong to a particular group or category” (441). Herewith, stigma is not only produced as being part of individuals and their bodies, but also inherently netted

on a societal level. Within this concept, stigma is then placed within its socio-cultural and historical contexts that continuously move and change over time. In other words, stigma is not necessarily limited to certain minorities, however it is repeatedly found within and perpetuated by those with power against those with less power (Frost 2011). Ultimately, reminding us how these processes are fundamentally loaded with power.

Being categorised as abnormal, the strange Other, or any frame that could fall within these categories is exactly what counteracts feelings of inclusivity. Herewith, identity is perpetually assaulted where one has to (re)negotiate their identity in order to gain that feeling of inclusiveness and sameness.

Boundary making processes and (in)tolerance in a post-secular environment

Previously, I have introduced processes of boundary making, specifically related to identity formation and construction. Herewith, I delve deeper in these boundary making processes, specifically relating it to ‘nationness’ and tolerance. Especially paying attention to frames of a supposed heterosexual Dutch citizenship and those tolerators and those tolerated. This not only gives an insight into these boundary making processes, but also serves as a baseline of the contextual and theoretical background in which queer Christians in The Netherlands (re)negotiate and construct their identity and corporeality, as well as experience their faith.

Anderson (2006, 6) explores the nation as “an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign”. The nation as imagined does not mean it should be simplified to ‘not being real or non-existing’. The imagined nation, and thus its imagined communities, are existent through boundaries that are socially constituted and gatekept. Again, relaying back to boundary making processes in who is part of the in-group and who is in the out-group. Anderson further argues that the state is imagined, because no one *knows* everyone within a state, but they all share a common sameness. This perception of the national community is often perceived as “a deep, horizontal comradeship” (Anderson 2006, 7). Stuart Hall (1997), a postcolonial and transnational theorist and activist, has explored the boundaries of citizenship within this imagined nation state. He argues that the constant dynamics of boundaries and its reproduction, citizenship – and accessing it – is controlled. Again, citizenship as well as nationalism serve as a discourse of both inclusion as exclusion. Therefore, the imaginings of supposed Others as not being part of the state is central and crucial to the process of boundary making within nationalism and cultural citizenship. Here,

citizenship functions as exclusive to only those that are deemed as 'fit'. Triandafyllidou (1998), explores these boundary making processes and also states its contradictions within the ascription of citizenship. Here, she emphasises that defining citizenship by nationalists is limited to the main question of who is 'Us' and who is 'Them'. The limits and contradiction of defining nationness and citizenship in such a way does not align with previous explorations of an identity as being dynamic and fluid, thus creating a narrow minded boundary that seems static by some and should be protected. Thus, due to its limits and contradiction of constructing citizenship, particular bodies are praised as national subjects while others are excluded. Herewith, nationness is again dependent on a supposed Other to define itself (Anderson 2006; Hall 1997). This Other is not only culturalised or racialised, but is also sexualised and gendered.

Jasbir Puar (2006; 2007), a philosopher and queer theorist, has theorised further on the argument of nationness and its intersecting components with gender and sexuality. She conjoins the term of *homonationalism*. Here, Puar (2006; 2007) elaborates on the previously explored concept of homonormativity by Duggan (2003), a professor of social and cultural analysis. Duggan introduces the concept of homonormativity as the normalisation of gay 'culture' embedded in society, specifically relating to consumption and domesticity. Herewith, within homonationalism, LGBTQIA+ people are included in the imaginings of the nation and nationalism. Though, as long as these LGBTQIA+ people 'conform' to those homonormative frames within society, certain processes of tolerance with finite limits are constructed. In Puar's (2006) article, she explores the way in which homonationalism is constructed, in the United States of America, to frame Islamic culture to a completely supposed Other that is sexually oppressive and has repressive morals that counter the supposed American 'secular liberal morals'. Thus, this process of homonationalism becomes a marker to characterise national sovereignty while, simultaneously, instrumentalising this supposed tolerance to exclude certain purported 'threats' from the Other. Several authors have argued that the process of homonationalism is also apparent in The Netherlands (Akachar 2015; Bracke 2008; 2013). In The Netherlands, similar to the United States of America, tolerance is a necessary marker or instrument for Dutch citizenship and its accompanying morals and values. However, important to note is the limitlessness to this tolerance, as only certain bodies of the LGBTQIA+ people are included in the frame of homonationalism, mainly gay men. Again, showing that homonormativity and homonationalism are indeed markers of progressiveness in The Netherlands and Dutch

citizenship, but they are also inherently conditional. LGBTQIA+ people can only have this conditional aspect of citizenship within this frame of homonationalism and homonormativity if they reiterate and conform to heteronormative frames in society (Akachar 2015; Bracke 2008; 2013; Puar 2006; 2007). In this line of thinking, LGBTQIA+ people, since the notion of homonormativity and homonationalism is conditional, can easily become a ‘threat’ to the nation’s boundary making and morals. This partial inclusion of LGBTQIA+ people as seemingly static identities emphasised on the sameness of heterosexual couples, serves as a form for people to be controlled.

Post-secularism and ‘liberal’ tolerance

As previously stated, LGBTQIA+ people and the supposed heterosexual Dutch citizenship have a conditional marker in relation to homonationalism and homonormativity. Herewith, the reiteration and conformation of frames in society, frames that are crucial for the creation of this frame of progressiveness and liberal moral values relating to sexuality, is impediment in understanding the boundaries of society. However, simultaneously, these boundaries are thus threatened by those same people due to the conditional aspect. One can transcend these boundaries and LGBTQIA+ bodies can move between those thin lines of ‘respectable and proper’ behaviour (based on heteronormative frames) or not. In the upcoming paragraph, I explore the challenges arising from Dutch post-secularism in shaping the identity of Christian LGBTQIA+ individuals, emphasising the introduction of conditions that determine ‘acceptable’ or ‘not acceptable’ queer behaviour. Subsequently, I delve into Forst’s (2013) concept of the paradox of tolerance, explaining its relevance to these specific conditional markers.

In The Netherlands, religion has been privatised in the public sphere. Though, essentially, religion – and Protestantism in particular – has strong ties to Dutch national identity. This want for liberal secularism through the privatisation of religion in public spheres, while simultaneously having the combination of religion still being present in media and politics, is what typifies a post-secular society. José Casanova (1994), a sociologist of religion who has focussed his research on globalisation, religion, and secularisation in particular, has conceptualised the post-secular as the reduction of religion within the public sphere, as well as political spheres, while also having, contrarily, the habituation of religion within alternative (de)institutionalised forms (Casanova 1994). What is particularly fascinating about secularism and religion in a post-secularist society such as The Netherlands, is the

supposed created binary workings within secularism *versus* religion. Many scholars have argued that religion and secularism are not that different as it is framed to be (Asad 2003; Cavanaugh 2009; Mahmood 2009b; Van Liere 2014). Within secularist societies, specifically liberal secularist, (post)secularism has “‘copied’ this religious loyalty and transformed it into nationalism, but secularism nevertheless needs the image of an essentially ‘barbaric violent religion’ in order to legitimise its own (national or nationalistic) violence as liberating and necessary violence.” (Van Liere 2014, 198). In other words, one could argue that the existence of religion is integral to the construction and conceptualisation of secularism as it relies heavily on the power loaded boundaries of when something is secular or religious, and thus could be classified as such.

With that being said, even though many scholars, such as Casanova (1994), have dedicated their work to the conceptualisation of the post-secular and secularisation within societies, many queer and feminist theorists have criticised the lack of the analysis of gender and the body within these (post)secular theories (Bracke 2008; Braidotti 2008). According to Bracke (2008) and Braidotti (2008), the intricacies of the conceptualisation of the (post)secular should also include gender and sexuality as identity markers besides solely the social and political. An influential gender theorist, who has spoken about the inclusion of gender and sexuality within the study of religion and the secular, is Joan Scott (2009). Scott introduces the concept of ‘sexularism’ as an essential conception to include gender and sexuality within the discourses of the secularisation theories. Next to this, Scott also underlines the power structures embedded within gender and sexuality, as she argues, that “gender (and other) discriminations which remain in secular societies, are obscured when secularism and religion are categorically counterposed.”(2009, 6). In essence, Scott is advocating for the move away from approaching religion as solely oppressive, in which the framework of ‘religion versus secularism’ is strongly present as a supposed dichotomy. Here, Scott further mentions that by adding this new perspective to the theories of post-secularism, sexual liberation is necessary (Scott 2009).

Within this context, where gender and sexuality are already given little space, queer Christians must move between those conditional aspects that both set up their identity; queer as supposedly ‘progressive’ and Christian as supposedly ‘conservative’. Within these boundaries, purported claims of what is tolerable and what is not tolerable behaviour is carried out. The concept of tolerance in this supposedly progressive liberal secular state, like The Netherlands, is integral to (Dutch) national identity. Tolerance is framed as virtually equivalent to progressivity and acceptance of the self – the secular – and on the other hand,

intolerance, or the frame accompanying this within this liberalist secular state, is attributed to social groups (often religious groups) who deviate from certain so-called ‘tolerant’ values that represent a ‘modern’ democracy (Van Liere 2014). Taking this into consideration, it is particularly interesting to turn to Rainer Forst’s (2013) notion of the paradox within tolerance. Here, he mentions five different types of paradoxes of tolerance, to which one in particular is interesting for the case of queer Christians who have to construct and (re)negotiate their identity and corporeality within these liberal (post)secular boundaries: The paradox of drawing limits. Forst essentially denotes tolerance to a play of power, where normative conceptions of tolerance are thus inherently power loaded – may it be because of minority/majority conceptions or other power loaded frameworks. Forst explains the paradox of drawing limits as follows: “That which lays claim to the name of toleration merely serves to protect and strengthen one’s own evaluative convictions and practices and to claim a higher form of legitimacy for them (...) Toleration is always also a matter of power.”(Forst 2013, 24). In light of this, tolerance becomes a subjective matter of power of those tolerators and those tolerated, to which queer Christians are supposedly categorised as both fitting within the classification of ‘Us’ and simultaneously ‘Them’. Hence, queer Christian identity becomes a constant (re)negotiation, transgression, and claiming of space within these boundary making processes in a post-secular liberal state such as The Netherlands.

Queer and Christian: a (re)negotiation?

Considering this thesis is ultimately about the experiences of queer Christians in The Netherlands and the construction and (re)negotiation of their identity and experiences of faith, I will delve deeper into the concept of a queer Christian identity as supposedly ‘dichotomous’. Previously, I have explored the concept of identity from a more generalised point of view, where I explained the processes of in- and exclusion as well as stigmatisation. These concepts are crucial in the understanding of the position of identity making for queer Christians. Next, I have somewhat contextualised The Netherlands with regards to Dutch specific concepts such as homonationalism, tolerance, and post-secularism.⁶ In this next section, I ask the question whether queer Christian identity could be considered a (re)negotiation of identity.

⁶ A more specific explanation of the intersection of Christianity and queerness in The Netherlands is explored in the next chapter.

Negotiated identities

Earlier, I stated the importance of understanding identity as fluid, dynamic, and contextually situated. However, the constant going back and forth of ‘defining’ one’s identity – may it be the ascription by the self or by the social surroundings – is a new concept that should be conceptualised to lay the groundwork of theories for this thesis. In studies conducted by other scholars (Ganzevoort, van der Laan, and Olsman 2011; Gardner 2017; Levy and Reeves 2011; O’Brien 2004; Thumma 1991), in The Netherlands and in the United States of America, about the experiences of queer Christians, some have analysed these identities as supposedly contradictory or experienced by queer Christians as contradictory. Hence, one could argue that queer Christians carry something of a ‘supposed Other’ while also carrying something of the ‘Us’, whereby these are often different in specific social communities (e.g. Christian community, queer community). In this line of thinking, social identity – as has been previously explained – is again shown to be contextually contingent and changing.

Since an identity is constructed through social markers in society, as well as by the self, it is interesting how a negotiated identity is established and constructed. Swann, Johnson, and Bosson (2009), argue that identity negotiation, formulation, and conceptualisation can be traced back to the theory of symbolic interactionism. Specifically, focussing on the social interaction between identities – essentially what I have earlier explained and termed as social ascriptions of identity. Identity negotiation is thus a “facet of adult socialisation” (Thumma 1991, 334). Scott Thumma, a scholar researching the negotiated identities of gay Evangelicals, has explored the theories of negotiation of identity through a psychological lens and a symbolic interactionist perspective. Here, he states that through the interaction of the self and its surroundings certain “meaning systems are created and sustained.”(334). He then proceeds to explain the concept of socialisation in this process, stating: “Socialisation is the process by which the self internalises social meanings, reinterprets them, and in turn, responds back upon society. As such, socialisation can be viewed as the continual formation of self-concept over time.” (Thumma 1991, 334). On the basis of this, identity negotiation is an ordinary process in which people create a concept of the self. Hereafter, Thumma (1991) argues for an understanding of a supposed ‘core identity’, which he derives from other scholars such as Hart and Richardson (1981) and Gecas (1986). This supposed ‘core identity’ gives a certain baseline for a person that can serve as a form of unity and consistency for the individual’s other identities. Crucial to note is that this ‘core identity’ is not necessarily static and “does not imply that all person’s self-concepts are directed by a strong core identity” (Thumma 1991, 335).

Though, in explaining the negotiation of identities and therefore its accompanying socialisation processes, it is imperative to mention that in this thesis, I will not delve deeper into the psychological ways and processes of how exactly this negotiated identity occurs and its way of working. However, I believe it is crucial for my argument that the experiences of my participants' negotiation of identity and socialisation processes are again inherently loaded with power. Therefore, I argue that these individual experiences of identity negotiation and socialisation is a constant mingling, (re)negotiating, and perhaps reorganisation of the sense-making of the self in the midst of the imposed and power loaded binary of 'Us versus Them' and the boundaries hereto. With this in mind, I introduce a novel concept in this thesis, which I term 'caught in the power of the versus'. This concept illuminates the complex dynamics within the identity (re)negotiation of queer Christians. Consequently, being 'caught in the power of the versus' is inherent to the experience of queer Christians as they navigate, manoeuvre, and perform amidst power laden binaries and dichotomies. Naturally, these lived experiences are elaborated on in the empirical chapters. In this line of thinking, I also consider how the socialisation of identity in these theories is similar to the works of other scholars regarding the performativity of identity (Butler 2002; Guadeloupe 2009). Butler (2002) introduces the concept of the performativity of gender, urging the understanding of gender as a socially constructed experience. They state: "Gender as a relation among socially constituted subjects in specifiable contexts. This relational or contextual point of view suggests that what the person 'is', and, indeed, what gender 'is', is always relative to the constructed relations in which it is determined. As a shifting and contextual phenomenon, gender does not denote a substantive being, but a relative point of convergence among culturally and historically specific sets of relations."(2002, 14). In their book *Gender Trouble*, Butler pleads for a deconstruction of the binary workings of gender, showing that gender is inherently 'performed' through social interactions. Important to address is that in Butler's works, gender being performed does not mean the same as 'play' or 'pretending'. Guadeloupe (2009), an anthropologist who studied Radio DJs on the binational Caribbean island of Saint Martin/Sint Maarten, adds to Butler's notion of the performativity of gender, and explores this through the lens of performativity of identity as a whole. Here, he analyses the performance of identity as a way to gain social access and acceptance in different groups, instrumentalising various identity markers that jump forward while other markers of someone's identity are underexposed. In using these scholars' theories, in addition to theories of negotiated identities, I argue that queer Christians are on this constant, of what I

like to call, performative dance in claiming space for their existing identity, having to constantly adapt, and (re)negotiate.

Agency

The performative dance of identity, and how this affects queer Christians, seems as if this performativity is solely a subservient act. Thus, previously talking about power structures and boundary making processes, it could seem as if queer Christians are considered being ‘victims’ of these power structures and ascriptions of their identity and therefore, lack a certain agency. Certainly, the stigmatisation and marginalisation characterising these power structures, and that are often hidden within them, have an effect on the construction and (re)negotiation of identity of queer Christians. However, completely lacking agency is something that I would definitely argue against.

In the work of scholars, such as Puar (2007) on queer Muslims in the United States of America and Van Klinken’s (2017) research on queer Christians in Zambia, they critique the perception of agency mainly stemming from Western and Eurocentric frames of understanding. Here, agency is formulated as a way of resistance and demonstrations to norms, rather than inhibiting religious forms and piety (Puar 2007; Van Klinken 2017). Their critiques on agency are in line with the thinking of feminist anthropologist Saba Mahmood (2009a), who has devoted a great deal of her study on the understandings of agency in relation to Muslim women. Even though Mahmood has conducted fieldwork among Egyptian Muslim women, I still believe that her notion of agency is conducive for this thesis on queer Christian identity. Mahmood analysed the notion of agency through pious movements, making agency not only as resisting to certain powers and norms, but also as “lived and inhabited, aspired to, reached for, and consummated” (Sjørup 2009, 2). Mahmood pleads for an approach of agency “not as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but as a capacity for action that historical specific relations of subordination enable and create” (Mahmood 2009a, 15). Herewith, agency is considered an open-ended understanding. Thus, a performative dance of identity – constant (re)negotiation, mingling, and reorganisation within binary frameworks – could indeed insinuate a lack of agency, though this is far from the case for queer Christians in The Netherlands, as will be shown in the four empirical chapters.

2. Dutch context: State, church, and queerness

In the previous chapter, the theoretical framework of this thesis introduced concepts that are relevant to understand the Dutch context. This chapter extends the discussion to a contextual analysis, with a particular focus on previously explained notions such as secularisation in The Netherlands. Additionally, it introduces perspectives concerning the contextualisation of The Netherlands within the range of this master's thesis and ethnographic study. An examination of this context is crucial, given its significance in shaping the individual narratives and lived experiences of Dutch queer Christians as they navigate the construction and (re)negotiation of their identity and corporeality. These experiences, by their very nature, are distinctive and contingent upon the prevailing context. This chapter elaborates on the complex interplay of the intersection of church and state in The Netherlands, followed by the introduction of the notion of LGBTQIA+ liberation and 'tolerance'.

The Dutch intersection of church and state

The concept of 'secularity' in Dutch governance is deeply anchored, reflecting the Dutch historical path in navigating the supposed intersection of religion and state. Founded on the principle of 'pillarisation', The Netherlands has traditionally adopted a societal structure characterised by multiple pillars, aiding in the coexistence of both religious and non-religious groups within their distinct (social) spheres. However, the expansion of the state's role in social domains, mainly during the 19th and 20th century, led to a shift in the organisational structure of the involvement of religion. The government supported efforts from religious organisations, leading to the creation of two types of state facilities – one that is neutral with regards to religion and the other inherently connected to a specific religious affiliation (Van Bijsterveld 2010). Hence, this allowed for the existence of diverse beliefs while maintaining shared quality standards. As mentioned before and within the theoretical framework, the Dutch understanding of secularism is perceived as a liberal and progressive influence fuelled by claims of 'tolerance'. Due to this, religion – framed in this discourse as a supposed explicit public interaction and action – has, over the years, been pushed to the outer spheres of (social and public) life to which the decline in church membership and attendance have been slowly becoming a prominent feature in Dutch society (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek 2020; De Hart and Van Houwelingen 2018; Lechner 1996). In his exploration of a secular age, such as the developments in The Netherlands, Taylor (2007), a political religious philosopher, argues that the individualisation and privatisation of religion is a common process. This

commonality within a secular age or shift, is also apparent in the current Dutch conceptualisation of secularism as a liberal and progressive force. This has confined religion not only to the realms of the private spheres, but also resulted in a decline in its public visibility. In Dutch contemporary political, cultural, and social discussions, religion is commonly perceived as an individual and private expression that should be kept out of the public sphere (Lechner 1996; Knippenberg 1998; Van Bijsterveld 2010; Van Liere 2014). This historical and cultural framework shapes The Netherlands' self-perception, where it emphasises a supposed commitment to a secular state that still accommodates diverse beliefs while also maintaining a distinctive national identity shaped by both religious and non-religious influences.

However, interestingly, these complex dynamics of the intersection between church and state in The Netherlands contribute to the fact that 'actual' separation between church and state is not realised and, therefore, remains incomplete. This is due to the dominant and continued claim of a purported 'Judeo-Christian culture' in The Netherlands within both political and cultural discourse. As to what precisely this 'Judeo-Christian culture' entails or means, remains surrounded in vagueness and politicians referring to this apparent culture often struggle to articulate or define this. An example of the heavily influence of religion in political and cultural discourse is the presence of religion within political parties. Presently, there are three political parties with a Christian influence or foundation, and one political party with an Islamic foundation or influence represented in the Dutch House of Representatives.

The normative (national) trajectory regarding the separation of 'church and state' in The Netherlands is prominent, although one could argue that claims of a 'Judeo-Christian culture' significantly unsettle this narrative. It paradoxically adds a considerable contradiction to the discourse. With that being said, another intriguing development in the past twenty years, is the discourse emerging in Dutch political and social landscape concerning the increasing prominence of Islam in Dutch society. During the writing stages of this thesis, the Party for Freedom (PVV), known for its xenophobic and Islamophobic stance, secured a majority of Dutch votes during the general elections of November 2023. This increase in support of right-wing extremist parties with strong Islamophobic and xenophobic political beliefs illustrates the increasing ingrained perception of Islam as a threat to the secular ideals deeply rooted in Dutch society. Herewith, Islam becomes a 'threat' to the boundary markings of 'secularism' in The Netherlands. Next to this, Islam is framed as an 'absolute Other', standing in stark contrast to the foundational 'Judeo-Christian roots' of

Dutch secularism (Knippenberg 1998). This portrayal, and increase in political debates, introduces an ambivalent dichotomy, wherein Dutch Christians inhabit a 'dual identity'. On the one hand, they are framed as 'The Other' emphasising their supposed 'religious backwardness'; marking a 'non-national' status. And on the other, they are perceived as an integral element in the narrative of 'Dutch Judeo-Christian national identity and culture', representing a 'national' status. In essence, the frame of the 'threatening' and fixed perception of the 'exotic Muslim Other' is highly contrasting and paradoxical to the ambivalent categorisation of Dutch Christians, who exist in a complex interplay of being both non-national (as a distinct 'Other') and national (as an intrinsic part of 'Us'). In other words, it essentially shows how the perception and tolerance of religion within a (post)secularist state is conditional upon different identity and boundary markers (Knippenberg 1998).

These dynamics reflect the complicated interaction between religion, national identity, and the ambiguous bordered landscape of secularism. In light of these complexities, according to previous explained post-secular theory, The Netherlands can be characterised as a post-secular state. Here, secularism functions as a marker for national identity, shaping (social) imaginaries and narratives that are culturally and politically influenced. In this post-secular state, 'religion', essentially meaning 'the Othered Islam', is positioned as an absolute outsider. In this line of thinking, Islam 'challenges' the supposed secular order, while Christianity is portrayed as a crucial element in the development of Dutch national identity (Bracke 2008; 2013). Hence, The Netherlands as a post-secular state shows how religious groups are pushed to the margins and essentialised in the changing (political and cultural) landscape of Dutch society. That being said, the intersection of church and state have undeniably played a significant role in politics. It is equally undeniable that these intersections have had, and continue to have, an impact on the lives of Dutch queer individuals, especially Dutch queer Christians.

The ever-changing landscape for LGBTQIA+ people

The Netherlands has long prided itself on its image of being a tolerant and liberal state, particularly in relation to gay rights and sexual freedom. Within the previously explained secular ideology, sexual freedom and gay liberation is emphasised within this secularist framework and has gotten increased and significant political attention. Here, it is particularly interesting that sexual freedom is imagined and presented as an emancipation from the authoritarian structures of Christianity.

In the 1960s, the press towards the emergence of a liberal secular nationalism in The Netherlands resulted in the opening up of spaces and perceptions to address and explore non-normative forms of sexuality (Hekma and Duyvendak 2011). Over the years, these spaces grew and eventually led to an increase in activist work for gay rights and freedom. In the 1980s, the increase in activism and sexual expressions grew and eventually led to the first advocates for same-sex marriage. Over time, this activism gained momentum, and eventually culminating in the legal acceptance of same-sex marriage in 2001. In Dutch vernacular, same-sex marriage is also referred to as ‘homohuwelijk’.

With that being said, my emphasis has primarily been on the political-cultural context that may impact the experiences of queer Christians in The Netherlands. For instance, delving into topics such as secularism and the role of sexual freedom within post-secularism. Nevertheless, it is important to address the context that queer Christians often grapple with, specifically relating to experiences and perspectives with regards to their own religious denominations or backgrounds. The numerous challenges and contradictions, often stemming from the viewpoints of established religious institutions, have an effect on the individual narratives and lived experiences of queer Christians in The Netherlands. An example of this is found within the Protestant Church (PKN), where discussions surrounding same-sex marriage play a prominent role. Even though some denominations within Protestantism embrace the diversity and inclusivity of LGTBQIA+ rights, others still grapple with fully accepting queer members and the recognition of their marital rights (“Protestantse kerk en het homohuwelijk” 2022). Another example of how current trajectories within religious denominations could have an effect on the experiences of queer Christians in The Netherlands, is the similar dynamic evident within the Roman Catholic Church, particularly with recent developments led by Pope Francis. Despite the Pope’s calls to end anti-LGBTQIA+ laws and extend a welcoming hand to queer individuals within the church, this has sparked division among conservative Catholics (Grace 2023; Mol 2023). These complex dynamics highlight that the socio-cultural context within which queer Christians navigate is frequently unstable and uncertain. Interestingly, this could emphasise, what has previously been elaborated on in the theoretical conceptions, how only certain LGBTQIA+ bodies are perceived as markers of ‘tolerance’ – mainly gay men. Yet again, it is crucial to note how homosexuality, or gay liberation in general, is solely conditionally accepted within heteronormative frameworks.

Given this consideration, it is integral to the Dutch narrative of the self, as a tolerant and liberal country, to instrumentalise the legislation and acceptance of gay liberation and

sexual freedom as a marker of progressiveness. The Netherlands being the first country in the world to legalise same-sex marriage has been used as an implicit argument to not persist in the development of LGBTQIA+ freedom and equality. In other words, the legislation of same-sex marriage seems to have implicitly granted The Netherlands its status as a liberal nation, though this is not entirely accurate. The legal landscape for LGBTQIA+ people's freedom and equality remains somewhat incomplete due to these persistent gaps, as Dutch narratives often hide behind those conditional markers of tolerance. In light of this, recent studies have indicated a rise in homophobic violence in The Netherlands (COC Nederland 2022). In April 2023, pride flags were burned at meeting centres for Dutch queer youth, which sparked national controversy. Interesting to note, is the fact that The Netherlands does not have specific hate crime laws against these actions. In addition to this, the new introduction to the 'transgender law' in 2021 also sparked many protests, reflecting the radicalised ideas about gender identity as 'illnesses', 'threats', and 'psychological instabilities'(COC Nederland 2022; NOS 2023). Over the past years, some right-wing parties have expressed anti-LGBTQIA+ sentiments – specifically towards trans and non-binary individuals. Precisely this change challenges the perception of The Netherlands as a 'tolerant' and 'liberal' society. It also challenges the framed perception of what is perceived as acceptable 'queer behaviour' and what is seen as not-acceptable behaviour.

Consequently, The Rainbow Europe Index, established by ILGA (International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Intersex Association), ranks European countries based on LGBTQIA+ legislation and regulations. For the second consecutive year, The Netherlands has dropped in its ranking on the list of LGBTQIA+ rights (ILGA-Europe 2022; n.d.). LGBTQIA+ organisation COC has expressed concern over this decline, attributing it to other countries' progressive and rapidly evolving LGBTQIA+ legislation (NOS 2023). To which, The Netherlands is lacking. Furthermore, and remarkably so, and notably relevant to Dutch queer Christian experiences, The Netherlands currently lacks official laws prohibiting conversion therapy for both gender and sexual identity. However, there has been an emergence in (political) discussions about the implementation of laws regarding the prohibition of conversion therapy.

All and all, numerous studies, particularly those conducted by the 'Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau' (SCP) and 'Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek' (CBS), have explored LGBTQIA+ experiences in Dutch society. While many of these studies highlight precarious living situations for LGBTQIA+ individuals, potentially influenced by their minority status, it is essential to recognise that all these studies compare LGBTQIA+ experiences with those of

heterosexual individuals. This comparison inadvertently reinforces an implicit narrative of a supposed normality, contributing to the stigmatisation of queer people and implicit boundary making processes and transgressions thereof.

Thus, this short contextual analysis shows the landscape in which Dutch queer Christians have to construct and (re)negotiate their identity and corporeality. Here, they are forced to deal, manoeuvre, and navigate within the complex dynamics of church and state intersections, post-secular politics, views of one's own religious denominations, and the heightened tension surrounding LGBTQIA+ rights. This demonstrates and emphasises the necessity of conducting ethnographic research to gain a deeper comprehension of these individual narratives and lived experiences of Dutch queer Christians.

3. I'm one of 'them' that has to leave

Ondertussen heb ik dat hele proces van ontdekken dat ik transgender ben en die overstap met die transitie doorgemaakt, toevallig buiten de kerk om. Toen terug in de kerk, nadat ik zelf ook al de innerlijke strijd tussen het morele kompas en het rationele had ervaren over het bestaan van God, realiseerde ik me dat dat nog een keer extra was waardoor ik buiten de kerk kwam. Want nu was ik geïdentificeerd van 'één die maar moest vertrekken'. Ik heb wel een paar keer letterlijk gedacht van: Ja, ik moet er gewoon mee ophouden. Dat God bestaat. Het leven is nu, en dat is het dan. Maar... dat kon ik niet! Dat is dan een onderhuidse strijd die je dan leeft. Wat onrust oplevert.^A

This quote of Marko, a 56 year old transgender man who lives in a closed male religious community, shows exactly what many queer Christians in The Netherlands say they experience as being a member of a church: a constant battle within the self, resulting in unrest. Marko has struggled with finding his place, and still does from time to time, within an institute that he feels does not accept him completely for who he is, while still experiencing the presence, power, and love of and for God. This chapter elaborates on how these experiences with 'the Institute' and faith – such as Marko's – are voiced. Here, I show the power of the versus within 'the Institute' versus faith to have an influence on people's construction and (re)negotiation of their queer Christian identity, how they perceive(d) God, and the experienced persistence and forcefulness of – as narrated and experienced by queer Christians whom I have spoken to – the 'the Institutes'' toxic morals and values'.⁷ The exploration of boundary making processes for the sense of self, amidst these power dynamics of in- and exclusion, is often a common experience for many queer Christians I have spoken to. These experiences of being caught in the power of the versus have an effect on how queer Christians experience feelings of angst and for some leading a secretive life, based on perpetually and continually claiming space for themselves and their (new) perception of God.

⁷ It is imperative to mention, and perhaps repeatedly, that this ethnographic research is based on individual experiences. This means that these experiences are written as statements and facts, since they are perceived and experienced as such. Nonetheless, I do want to add that I will not be making any statements with regard to 'the Christian Institute' or Christianity as a whole.

‘The Institute’ is ‘vile’

In many conversations with different queer Christians in The Netherlands, all have expressed the difficulties they have faced when being confronted with the supposed ‘institute’ – also known as ‘the Church’ or ‘the Institute’. For them, they often defined the difference between ‘the Institute’ and the actual faith as Marko adequately says: “De kerk met de kleine k, en Kerk met de grote K”^B. The ‘kleine k kerk’ is characterised as the way religion and ‘the Church’ is shaped in daily life, whereas the ‘grote K Kerk’ is typified as the institution, the hierarchy, and the dogma that have influenced many people in ‘the Church’. Some participants even expressed the way that this notion of ‘de grote K Kerk’ has influenced people in such a way that it has toxified them in their ways of thinking, resulting in people like queer Christians leaving ‘the Church’ because of the exclusion and discriminatory prejudices against them.

Monique, a 22 year old bubbly woman who grew up in the Reformed Congregation⁸ in the Bible Belt and identifies as queer, talked about how she experienced ‘the Institute’: “Ik vind het instituut best wel naar. Ik heb daar ook best wel nare associaties mee gehad. Zeker met mijn vrouw zijn en seksualiteit. En ook in de geschiedenis hebben geloof en religie best wel kutte dingen gedaan. Dus daar sta ik dan een soort van niet achter.”^C In the discourses of my interviewees, ‘the Institute’ in this sense has had a tremendous effect on the lives of many queer Christians that I have talked to. Another experience that many people have shared, is the way they grew up with the perception of a punishing God, where one is merely a bystander of the almighty scary God. This punishing God shaped the perception and narration of faith – during their upbringing – of many participants. This notion of ‘the punishing God’, and the ‘vile institute’ carrying these narratives, was a catalyst for some to turn away from their church. Marko, though later finding his way back into religion, also turned away from his church, years before his realisation of his sexuality and gender identity, due to the pastor’s sermons: “Voor mij was de druppel dat de pastoor bij ons daar nogal van het donderpreken was. Waarbij hij een beetje de tendens overnam van de kerk zuiveren en degene die zich niet thuis voelen, die moeten dan maar weggaan. Dan blijven de goeie over. Dus exclusie. Die preek ging dus over homoseksualiteit.”^D Many have struggled with manoeuvring their identity construction within a framework of the punishing God who supposedly condemns one’s sexuality and/or gender identity, ultimately leading to some painful experiences for participants. Some participants have expressed ‘the Church’s’ ambiguity, for some even

⁸ The Reformed Congregation is a conservative branch of the Protestant Church in The Netherlands.

hypocrisy – and the people within ‘the Church’ – with regards to views and acceptance relating to gender and sexual diversity/identity. Jessie, a cheerful non-binary young adult in their twenties with piercings, has talked profusely with disbelief about their experiences with how, as Jessie puts it, ‘the Church’ clings to conservative traditions and morals:

Je zit in een gemeente met driehonderd mensen of zo. Je kan echt bij iedereen wel iets vinden waarmee je het niet eens bent zeg maar. En over het meeste van die dingen doet de kerk dan ook helemaal geen uitspraak, want dat is helemaal niet nodig. (...) Wat voor dingen je moet zingen in de kerk. Hoe je God precies ziet. En wat er nou precies belangrijker is aan het geloof. Of de schepping nou wel of niet zo precies gebeurd is zoals het in de bijbel staat. Zulk soort dingen. Met die verschillende meningen kunnen we allemaal samen in een kerk zitten. Maar op het moment dat ik zeg: Hey jongens ik wil graag trouwen met een vrouw dan zit iedereen: Nee maar DAAR trekken we de lijn! Dat ik denk: Waarom ligt die lijn dan daar? Ik denk dat ik dat wel moeilijk te accepteren vind of zo.^E

Marko also says something along the same lines when it comes to the acceptance of his gender identity, which is still a secret to the majority of the other men in the religious community, in relation to ‘the Church’s’ tenacity: “Op bepaalde punten. Het feit dat ze [het instituut] zich zo vaststellen, en dat doen ze op geen enkel ander punt. Alles is bespreekbaar. Maar niet dit [man óf vrouw]. Ik snap dat dus niet van de kerk.”^F To him, this tenacity is irritating, as it feels like he has to constantly fight in claiming space for himself within these narratives:

En dat [bestaan van de discussie over genderidentiteit in de samenleving] is dus ook weer een voorbeeld van hoe de historie en de mensheid gewoon al meanderend pelgrimerend op weg gaat naar de toekomst. Maar dan moet je dus niet als kerk zeggen: ‘En nu weten we alles! Ja vroeger.... Nee dat klopt, dat is ook zo, dát is oud. Maar nu weten we alles! En het stopt.’ Nee natuurlijk niet! En die hardnekkigheid, dat is gewoon écht irritant.^G

Renée, a 38 year old lesbian ciswoman with striking dark hair and eyebrows, has extensively talked about her experience with ‘the Church’ and specifically some people that are – according to her – poisoned with those negative ecclesiastical views. Renée has grown up in

the Reformed Bond⁹ and had struggled immensely with her sexuality, as she sincerely believed – and was taught – that her sexuality was a sin against God: “Een gruwel”^H. She came out when she was 28 years old, after almost marrying a man. To her, she explains, her identity was not something she could repress even though she had tried for years. Though, deciding to accept who she was, was far more difficult due to the institution’s view and the consequence of being excluded: “Je staat heel erg in de groep in zo’n kerk. Dus je voelt dat die groep zich tegen je kan keren. Dat je er buiten kan komen te staan. En dat is gewoon bizar wat het met je doet. Een constante worsteling.”^I Renée thinks it is a shame that people within the community that she grew up in believe in her sexuality as being a sin, because she would also want them to find the power and love in God that she later found back in life – away from fear and insecurity. What is clear in Renée’s experience, as well as other queer Christians in The Netherlands that I interviewed, is the fear of being excluded. Coming out for one’s sexuality and/or gender identity could result – and have for many – in loss of friendships, family members, the church community, and for some even a temporary loss of God. ‘The Institute’ as ‘vile’, as Monique described, has disastrous effect on the in- and exclusion of queer Christians, resulting for many in struggles within the claiming of the self while navigating the different boundaries that constitute the community – an Us and a Them, or perhaps even better phrased; an I and Them due to feelings of isolation and loneliness.

Claiming space

As explained previously, some queer Christians in The Netherlands have experienced awful treatment by some of their church members. Due to these experiences, some queer Christians have the feeling that in accepting their identity, and the accompanying struggles, the constant claiming of space is necessary. As I have argued previously, the negotiation of identity within the boundary making processes of defining the ‘us’ and the ‘them’ is inherently loaded with power. This is also shown in how queer Christians in The Netherlands have to claim the space in which they construct, and perhaps perform, their identity.¹⁰ Renée’s experiences with claiming space, and identifying the exclusion markers within her church community, resulted in the constant struggle or wrestling with the self and her identity. This struggle was also severely influenced by how she was taught – as mentioned earlier – about ‘the punishing

⁹ Another conservative branch of the Protestant Church in The Netherlands.

¹⁰ Later, I will further delve into the influence of the queer community on queer Christian identity; this is done in Chapter 5: Finding the rainbow within the black and white.

God', specifically how this related to bible stories and verses. Jarno, a 44 year old gay cisman, talks about his experience of having to deal with redefining and reconstructing his vision of God and what he was taught in the bible. Jarno talked about how he had a very positive experience within his church community, as well as his family, with regards to him coming out as gay. Though, still, it was a struggle with how his upbringing – especially the teachings within the bible – influenced his perception of his sexuality and faith:

En hoe zie ik dan mijn geloof? Hoe zie ik God? Mag ik de ruimte nemen om te zijn wie ik ben? Als kind dacht ik: Ja oké dit is de bijbel en dit staat er in de tekst. Ja. Hm. Dan heb ik niet zoveel keuze, weet je wel. Dan is het best ingewikkeld. Dan kan ik wel heel leuk op mannen vallen, maar dat gaat hem niet worden dan. Dat werkt niet. Dat wringt. (...) Door die teksten ja. Behoorlijk nou ja, negatief wel geladen. Dus in eerste instantie dacht ik: Nou oké, dat is dus blijkbaar mijn lot. En toen dacht ik daarna: Dat kan toch niet waar zijn? Hoe kan het nou zo zijn dat een schepping die je ziet, zeg maar als Gods Schepping dan, zodanig is gemaakt dat een aantal mensen daar niet ten volle deel van kan uitmaken? Ik kon daar niet over uit.^J

These questions, of trying to figure out how one's self-construction fits into the frame of what was taught in one's upbringing, is a theme that many queer Christians in The Netherlands, whom I have spoken to, have experienced. Though, some have endured extreme negative experiences with feelings of insecurity and fear of being excluded, while others – like Jarno – have experienced a less violent way of coming to terms with the self within this religious setting. Devi, a 22 year old pansexual non-binary person who started a queer Christian committee within their Christian student association, talks about their experience with their Christian upbringing, and specifically how their parents responded to them coming out as pansexual and non-binary. Interestingly, Devi's experience, who is one of the younger respondents in this thesis, has a more active and present struggle with their faith and the self, and how their parents view them. Whereas, 'older' participants – such as Jarno and Renée – express more acceptance and calmness within themselves and are less searching in relation to their relationship with family members. Despite this difference, there are still overlaps with Devi's experience and those of Jarno and Renée regarding how parents, or other family members, can perceive them being queer 'and' Christian. Devi says that their parents were afraid that they would lose their faith:

Maar mijn ouders zijn nog wel heel erg zoekend in het [panseksualiteit en non-binaire identiteit] te begrijpen. Ze gebruiken ook nog niet mijn nieuwe naam, en soms weer wel. Het is een beetje ingewikkeld. En ze waren in het begin vooral heel bang ergens, dat ik het geloof kwijt zou raken. En daar heel veel gesprekken over gehad, en een soort van... dat zijn een soort van gekke gesprekken, omdat je jezelf een soort van moet verdedigen terwijl het je ouders zijn. Eigenlijk wil je gewoon liefde en begrip. Nog steeds heel veel liefde hoor, echt alles uit geknuffeld. Ik houd heel veel van ze. Maar in dat aspect vinden ze het gewoon heel lastig om hun hoofd eromheen te krijgen.^K

Devi expresses their feeling of having to defend themselves, which concurs with other participants' experiences of claiming space and defending the self in relation to the Christian faith – specifically to what is said in the bible. Once again, there is a striking difference between the experience of faith and the way the institution's rules and norms are felt.

'Psychological instability'

'The Institute's' norms and values – at least as is experienced by participants – have a tremendous effect on the claiming of space for their identity, as well as their narration of faith. Having to defend oneself is another factor that is deeply prominent in the experience of queer Christians whom I have spoken to. This defending of the self is regarded as a way to deal with the prejudices from other churchgoers – or perhaps family members and friends – as well as ultimately preventing and protecting oneself from being excluded from a group. The boundary making processes in which queer Christians have to, or are forced to, transgress and move between is ultimately a powerplay of deciding who is 'us' and who is 'them', perhaps leaving them both in the centre and simultaneously, interestingly, on the peripheral. Another experience which is also common for many queer Christians whom I have talked to, specifically for those that have experienced negative treatment or are still struggling with their gender/sexual identity, is the difference between bible stories and the actual lived experience of faith. Marko, who has previously talked about his 'subcutaneous struggle' with his faith and gender identity, also shared how he struggled with the moral judgement he feels 'the Institute' has on his life. When Marko decided to join a religious community and asked for an official by the Church confirmed membership within this community, the main leader of this community had to ask whether this was accepted. As Marko also told me, not everyone in this community knows about him being a trans man.

When the leader had to send a letter to the authorities of the Church to ask for permission whether Marko could join, and also have an active role within the community, the answer was simply put: No, but it was encouraged to find a way to prevent losing him from ‘the Church’. Thus, Marko does indeed live within this religious community, but is not allowed to have an active role within it. Marko said: “Zij [het instituut] vonden dus dat er zodanig is gebleken van psychische instabiliteit dat ik niet geschikt was voor het religieuze leven. Ja, daar ben ik het natuurlijk niet mee eens [schaterlach].”^L Even though Marko does laugh loudly when saying this, he also told me how he truly struggles with these contradictory messages from ‘the Institute’. The same goes for other participants when they talk about these contradictory messages of ‘the Church’ which can, according to Renée, toxify the community feeling within religious communities. The fear of exclusion results for some in leading a secretive life, or having led a secretive life, accompanied with feeling unsafe and doubting oneself.

Being caught in the power of the versus

A core theme throughout this chapter is the clear experienced distinction between ‘the Institute’ and ‘actual faith’. This clear distinction results for many queer Christians, whom I have spoken to, in what I like to call: ‘being caught in the power of the versus’. Queer versus Christian, church versus faith, the community versus the self. The experiences of getting caught in the power of the versus is common for many queer Christians, whom I have talked to, and are inherently power loaded with boundary making processes. It is about what they experience in relation to others, the interaction and the accompanying boundaries, whatever these boundaries are and who they belong to: Their own boundaries? Boundaries of fellow church goers? Boundaries of family members? Boundaries of friends? Boundaries of the study association? It is within that interaction of expectations, experienced impositions, the bible, and God, that one has to navigate the self and thus, for some, result in experiences of doubting, giving up a part of the self, and feeling stuck.

All participants have expressed wanting to fit in a certain group and feeling different, though the groups they want to fit in are, naturally, diverse. Renée, as previously introduced, has had a hard time finding the space for herself and her sexuality within the Christian paradigm that she grew up in. Her struggle of finding herself is closely linked to not wanting to go into self-denial, an experience that is felt the same for many other participants. This feeling of abnegation, or self-denial, resulted for Renée in the experience of total loneliness and questioning the self:

Het [seksualiteit] was voor mij niet iets wat ik kon onderdrukken. Het werd een soort worsteling in mezelf. En het ging ook psychische problemen geven. Tot aan dagelijks aan toe dat ik hier mee [de worsteling] bezig was. Een soort existentieels. Het gaat over je eigen identiteit, dat bijna verweven is met alles. Met je toekomstbeeld. Met je verlangen. Dus dat stukje, dat kan je niet uitschakelen. En wat gebeurt er dan als je dat wel doet? Ja en ook sterker nog, dat je dat gaat afwijzen in jezelf? En in combinatie met een soort totale eenzaamheid die je voelt. Ten opzichte van de mensen om je heen. En je bent ook wat aan het verloochenen eigenlijk hè. Je vertelt het tegen niemand. Want je houdt iets geheim. En dan vervolgens ook nog eens het idee dat ik nooit een relatie kon gaan hebben met een vrouw dan. ^M

Questions of having to give up a part of the self, due to what was taught or maybe because of experienced impositions or expectations, is also something that Jessie experienced in their search:

Kijk op het moment dat je heel erg gaat nadenken over: Mag dit eigenlijk wel van mijn God? Moet ik nu mijn geloof gaan opgeven? Dat wil ik ook niet, want daar is het me te veel voor waard. Maar moet ik dan een deel van mezelf gaan opgeven? Dat voelt eigenlijk ook een soort verkeerd. Dat je denkt van wat is nou.. ben ik dan niet christelijk genoeg? Maar kan ik wel op deze manier christen zijn of ben ik dan heel erg tegen mezelf aan het liegen? ^N

Feelings of not being Christian enough, and for some not being queer enough¹¹ is precisely what I relate to getting caught between the power of the versus. The imposed versus implies there is a strict boundary within identity making processes, shaping the way individuals navigate and define themselves. The struggle that these imposed boundaries give on the self are based on identity processes framed – or interpreted – as static, unchangeable, and even involving the inability to fuse. Next to this, it also implies that identity components of ‘Christian’ and ‘queer’ are seemingly unable to be combined. All queer Christians that I have spoken to, have expressed their frustration with these frames and their severe dislike for labels. For Marko, who mostly still leads a secretive life, this weighs much harder because,

¹¹ See Chapter 5: Finding the rainbow within the black and white, for more information about feelings of ‘not being queer enough’.

for him, being excluded by the other members of the religious community could result in the loss of his home. This weight that presses on him, and especially the fear and angst of being excluded, is tremendous and he has “his ups and downs” when it comes to being caught in the versus:

Ik zit een beetje in een spagaat. We hebben toegang tot het internet. En er wordt gepraat. Die Nashville verklaring, daar wordt wat van gevonden. Trump die de transgenders het leger uit wil gooien. Er wordt wat van gevonden. Dat hoor ik. Die ongezouten kritiek die er dan komt... Ik kan hen dat niet kwalijk nemen, omdat ze niet weten dat er ‘zo’n eentje’ bij loopt. Maar aan de andere kant weet ik dus wel hoe ze erover denken. En hoe langer dat duurt, hoe groter die kloof wordt om dat te overbruggen. En met name bij twee van de drie of vier heb ik zoiets van die kunnen hun fatsoen met name wel houden. Die hebben het er dan gewoon niet over. Maar twee heb ik zoiets van oh [kreun] dat wil ik niet. En dat dat heel gemakkelijk kan verzanden in een onveilige omgeving met pestgedrag. Of gewoon negeren. Of exclusie. En daar weet ik van ja, daar moet je je niks van aantrekken, dat is dan het standaard antwoord. Maar ja, zo werkt dat niet. Het is je thuis. ^o

For Marko, this results in him having his ups and downs in life and simultaneously avoiding confrontations and solely having superficial relationships with the other members of the religious community, especially those that do not know about his past: “Ik kan het niet hebben over mijn jeugd bijvoorbeeld. Want als ik teveel zeg van, ja op de lagere school met vriendinnen, dat je dan ging spelen. Ja hoezo vriendinnen? Heb je geen vriendjes gehad? Nee die had ik niet. Ja waarom? Nee, niet omdat ik transgender was, maar omdat ik toen gewoon een meisje was. En dat kan je dus niet zeggen. Dus ik blijf vrij oppervlakkig over mijn jeugd. Mensen voelen dat. Dan blijven zij ook oppervlakkig.”^p Avoiding the confrontation in fear of not being accepted is also something that affects Monique’s choices in taking a woman as her date to the gala, because of her role as a board member of a Christian student association:

Ja misschien iets intens om dan met een vrouw te gaan. Maar mij lijkt het wel leuk om met een date te gaan, maar toch durf ik dat dan niet uiteindelijk. Want ja ik ben bestuur, en bestuursfunctie, ik ben het voorbeeld bla bla bla. Ja. Ik weet niet, ik vind dat toch eng. ^q

When asking why she finds this scary, she replies with: “Ja, omdat ik blijkbaar toch nog veel af hang van mensen hun oordeel denk ik. Of bang ben voor een oordeel hierover.”^R Not completely being able to open up about the self, in different groups, in fear of being excluded or judgement is experienced by some as lying to yourself and for others, such as Marko, resulting in an unsafe feeling. Renée also shares her dilemma with the relationship with her and her grandmother. Her grandmother is still heavily involved in the Reformed Bond and has, over time, come to terms with her granddaughter’s sexuality and marriage, though actually talking about ‘it’ is not something that they do. Renée still struggles with this as, to her, it feels like going back in time and keeping parts of herself hidden. What she struggles with the most is keeping her wife, the love of her life, hidden to a certain extent:

En Naomi [Renée’s vrouw] zegt heel vaak van: Doe je de groeten aan je oma? En dan zijn er keren dat ik daar dus ben. En dan zelfs dat niet kan doen... Ja dus dat ik eigenlijk ook Naomi een beetje weg maak. En dat vind ik misschien nog wel het aller moeilijkste. Hoe daar dan mee om te gaan? Dat ja. Daar ben ik nog steeds niet uit. Oma is 94 en ze kan zomaar doodgaan. En hoe zou ik het dan vinden dat we zo’n intiem contact hebben, maar eigenlijk toch nog een afstand is? Zou ik daar dan spijt van krijgen? Dat weet ik niet.^S

Later in our conversation, Renée revisits the point about how she still has a way to go in relation to this. And that old feelings, like shame she felt in her youth and early twenties, still rise in certain situations with her grandmother. She relays how she almost experiences a block when it comes to talking about her wife, or her life and sexuality, to her grandmother: “Ik krijg het gewoon niet uit mijn mond. Daar zit echt iets ouds in. Wat zij vertolkt. Dat ik echt.. ja.. Veel schaamte. En angst voor oordeel. Dus dat iemand anders, anders tegen me aan gaat kijken. Dat had ik ook wel vroeger. Dat ik dus bang was dat mensen definitief anders naar mij zouden gaan kijken. En zij [oma] oordeelt het ook. Dus er komt oordeel op me af. Van iemand die heel belangrijk voor mij is. Ja dat weegt wel zwaar. Ja. Dus in die zin heb ik zelf ook nog een weg te gaan.”^T

Conclusion

In this chapter, I aimed to show how Dutch queer Christians, whom I have spoken to, navigate the self within a strict and often experienced as harsh, dogmatic narrative they relate to ‘the Institute’. Here, ‘the Institute’ is expressed as ‘vile’ and one could at any moment be

excluded from this community, because of the harsh comments or narratives existing within this institute. 'The Institute' as a concept is narrated as a negative 'signifier' in which exclusion processes and judgements by social groups are apparent and simultaneously constructed, to which queer Christians feel as if they need to adhere to. The difference between 'the Institute', seen as the 'Grote K Kerk', and the actual experience of faith, seen as the 'Kleine k kerk', is distinctly felt as something that one should manoeuvre between.

Manoeuvring one's identity construction within a narrative of 'the punishing God', is experienced as extremely complicated. Herewith, the tenacity and hypocrisy of 'the Church's' norms and values, often relying on conservative traditions, is unfathomable and annoying for many queer Christians that I have spoken to. Within this framework, queer Christians in The Netherlands have to constantly claim space in their own experience of faith while accepting their supposed 'unacceptable' identity of being queer. Due to these experiences and narratives of 'the Institute', many queer Christians feel as if they are caught in the power of the versus. This is due to the imposed frame of a static conception of identity ascriptions. Here, queer Christians have to navigate the self within these boundary frameworks and identity ascriptions, which often results in feelings of fear, being excluded, or the fear of judgement. The experienced imposition of 'the Institute' on queer Christians' identity is perceived as if there is a 'versus' concerning queer Christian identity, rather than an 'and' – suggesting a contradiction within identity. Seemingly this results for many to keep parts of themselves hidden, to navigate, manoeuvre, and constantly adjust and claim space within these frameworks of identity ascriptions and frames of having a supposed non-coexisting identity.

In the following chapter, I explain how these feelings are related to the body and sex, where, once again, this performative dance between different binary frameworks comes to the fore.

4. She moved with shameless wonder. The perfect creature rarely seen.¹²

Ken je Hozier? Hij heeft een nummer en dan zingt hij over een vrouw en over hoe schaamteloos ze door het leven gaat in feite. Maar ja, dat nummer is echt mijn goal! (...) Binnen de gergem [gereformeerde gemeente] is mijn lichaam bijna een soort schaamte. Mijn lichaam zou bijvoorbeeld zonden aandoen bij een man, of die zou een man seksuele dingen laten denken en dat mag natuurlijk absoluut niet. Dus ja, puur dat je bestaat is schaamte.^A

This quote by Monique relates to her struggles with her body, her femininity, and her sexuality within the boundaries set – or at least experienced as – by the Reformed Congregation she grew up in. Her goal is to, as stated in the title of the song by Hozier, “move with shameless wonder”. This chapter explores queer Christians’ experience with the previously explained ‘institute versus faith’ and yet again being caught in the power of the versus. In this chapter, these themes are intertwined with the embodiment of the self, judgments and feelings of shame, and sex/celebrity. The focus is on understanding the experience of corporeality of queer Christians and how they navigate within and between these tense dynamics. Here, this interrelationship between corporeality and faith introduces the potential for contradictions within the framework of ‘faith’.

The body as: shameful

As expressed by Monique, she is looking for a way to shamelessly move her body, may it be with the use of clothing or sex, it is a way for her to feel empowered. Some queer Christians, that I have talked to, have expressed and narrated some of their experiences with their body and faith and how that may have influenced them in the construction of the self. As previously stated by Monique, she experiences ‘the Institute’ as ‘vile’. Growing up in the Reformed Congregation in the Bible Belt has had a lot of influence on her construction and (re)negotiation of herself, both in her experience of faith, but also in her experience of her body and femininity. Monique, being a 22 year old queer ciswoman, said that she still experiences the deep-seated shameful feelings towards her body and her femininity. She states that this is because of her upbringing within the Reformed Congregation. Here, the

¹² A song by Hozier called Foreigner’s God.

female body was conceptualised as a tool, a vessel. This vessel of her body, that she does not always feel connected to, is deeply associated to what she calls, the ‘Calvinistic work ethic’:

Ik vind het vooral op lichamelijk gebied, heb ik van de gereformeerde kant best wel veel meegekregen. Je hebt uit de gereformeerde kant zo’n calvinistische werkeethos meegekregen. Gewoon altijd werken en door. Je kan meer. Ik denk dat dat ook wel bij je lichaam hoort. Je bent niet zo vergevingsgezind voor je lichaam, naar mijn idee. Tenminste dat ben ik dan, denk ik.(...) Je hoeft niet verbonden te zijn met je lichaam want je moet [vanuit de gergem] werken met je lichaam en met je geest ga je naar de hemel. Dat is niet verbonden. ^B

This Calvinistic work ethic, as she explains, results in her not being connected in her body fully, though she wishes that she was. Now, having moved to a student city away from the Bible Belt, she realises that the influence of her upbringing within the Reformed Congregation had an immense effect. Currently, she is finding ways of how to feel connected with her body again, as well as redefine her relationship with religion. With regards to her body, she is sometimes jealous of other people and how they move and use their bodies, away from shame, but fully embracing the beauty. Sometimes, she tells me, she has to redirect her thoughts that she used to have about her body, heavily influenced by the Reformed faith, to new thoughts:

Ik vind het ongemakkelijk nog steeds als ik een beetje naakt ben, alhoewel dat dat wel makkelijker gaat, maar voordat ik de deur uit ga, moet ik soms nog wel een meditatie momentje hebben van: Oké dit mag, dit is mijn lichaam. Ik mag ermee doen wat ik wil, een soort van, maar dat moet ik soms wel nog even bewust doen, omdat ik me anders gewoon nog soms zo oncomfortabel voel in wat ik doe. ^C

Coming more into contact with one’s own body, is an experience that many queer Christians that I have spoken to have experienced. For Monique, it was because of her being raised in the Reformed Congregation in the Bible Belt and coming to terms with the negative connotations that surrounded her vision and narration of her body and femininity. And for Devi, Jessie, and Marko; who have all experienced struggles with their gender identity on its own, as well as coming to terms with this within a Christian context. In this sense, the body as shameful was, for them, more a matter of trying to connect with the self and figuring out

how to move outside, or perhaps between, the binary of gender. Marko says that for ‘the Institute’ the gender binary is strongly present, often dependent on normative gender roles – overlapping with Monique’s experience of her normative female gender roles within the Reformed Congregation. Marko, a transgender man who, as he states himself, ‘luckily’ transitioned when he was not involved that much within ‘the Church’ said:

Maar het gaat, ja, echt het gender *zijn* zelf. Zo als het strikt wordt uitgelegd [door het instituut] bestaat er gewoon niks anders dan vrouw óf man. Niet vrouw én man. Maar dus óf. En dat dat [genderidentiteit] één op één gekoppeld is aan je lichaam. Dus jouw lichaam zegt wat je bent.^D

Here, Marko explains how his physical body is directly translated into gender identity. In other words, the body is innate to one’s sex, rather than one’s gender identity. These frames regarding the understandings of gender identity are still developing in current societal discourses, sometimes leading to heated and polarised discussions. Devi, who has always felt different and, due to their experience of not identifying strictly as a woman nor a man, still struggles at times to find self-acceptance within their body. They often grapple with questions such as: Am I attractive? What do I consider attractive? Frames of the body and how one transgresses these imposed boundaries, due to the binary workings of gender that are still strongly ingrained in Dutch patriarchal values and norms, is a tensed field where the performative dance of identity construction is regularly carried out. A manner for both Monique and Devi, is to use clothing as a tool to express themselves and feel connected to their queerness, either as a ciswoman or as a non-binary person. Like Monique also says: “Ik zou willen dat ik kan doen met mijn lichaam wat ik wil. Dat ik juist heel bedekt gekleed ga of juist heel naakt ga, omdat ik dat wil op dat moment bijvoorbeeld. En ook bijvoorbeeld seks kan hebben voor mijn eigen genot en niet per se dat ik aan een verwachting moet voldoen op dat moment.”^E

The body and clothing: a playing field?

Using clothing as a tool to express one’s identity, is one of the visible boundary markers to which someone can categorise the person. The ascription of this identity, with the use of explicit and visible characteristics such as clothing, hairstyles, or other visual representations of the body, is contextually situated in its own dynamic socio-cultural construct and narrative. In other words, one’s way of expressing the self with the use of clothing is different per

collective group in its specific social setting. Previously, Monique explained that in order to feel more connected with her body, she dreams to let go of the shame and deconstruct the frame of her body being a vessel and/or tool. With the use of clothing, she expresses her identity. Clothing, specifically related to gender and/or sexual identity, can be a tool or a playing field to transgress boundaries within heteronormative frameworks of Dutch society and gender binaries. Thus, creating the space to express oneself in clothing and feel connected to someone's queerness. Monique explains this as follows:

Ik vind het soms leuk om stereotypen uit te hangen. Dus ik vind het af en toe leuk om soms heel erg femme met super veel make-up, en helemaal in het roze, en dan rond te lopen in de stad. Of heel erg dat 'mannelijke'. Ja, ik vind het leuk om met kleding te spelen als ik daar zin en tijd voor heb. Dus dan voel ik me ook meer verbonden met mijn queer identiteit.^F

Monique, basing her clothing preferences and 'stereotypes' to transgress the binary framework of gender and what is perceived as womanhood in particular, uses clothing to feel more in contact with her body and queerness. Especially, due to her experience in the Reformed Congregation of always having to wear long skirts and mostly be covered. For others, such as Jessie, clothing can be a tool to express their gender identity, but simultaneously it can also create different obstacles relating to clothing and supposed cultural rules. Jessie, an avid member in their Christian student association, expresses that there are certain norms and rules in their student association regarding clothing. These rules are framed within the gender binary such as taking a date to the gala or wearing formal clothing at general member meetings. Jessie says that they are still discovering how to shape their non-binary identity within these rules and supposed conformations:

Dat [genderidentiteit] is echt heel ingewikkeld. Dat is voor mezelf ook nog ja... Ik ben afgelopen zomer bij mijn dispuut uit de kast gekomen hier mee. Ja, ik heb daar dus wel al langer over nagedacht voor mezelf, maar toen pas een beetje gaan ontdekken hoe ik dat wil vormgeven in mijn leven. En hoe mijn voornaamwoorden belangrijk zijn. Daar ben ik nog steeds over aan het nadenken. Hoe erg is het nou eigenlijk echt als mensen je zij/haar noemen? Dat voelt toch net een soort van vervelend. Dan denk ik, dat is gewoon genoeg reden. Dan kan ik dat aan de kant zetten. Maar, bijvoorbeeld

wat voor kleding je aantrekt naar het dispuut vergaderingen of zo. Dat heeft natuurlijk altijd hele strenge regels.^G

These rules, heavily relying on gendered frames enforced on pieces of clothing, are strict. Men wear pants, suits, and ties, while women wear skirts, broches, and high heels. In navigating between these cultural rules in Jessie's Christian student association, the performative dance of identity is being carried out, especially because of their non-binary identity. They explain:

Zulk soort dingen ben ik dan heel erg mee bezig. Dat ik denk: Maakt me dat dan echt heel erg veel uit? Bijvoorbeeld, ik ben er nu over aan het nadenken of ik een das van mijn dispuut wil. Alle mannen hebben een das. En alle vrouwen hebben een broche. En ik heb ook een broche. Ik ben daar nu over aan het nadenken. Hoe belangrijk vind ik dat eigenlijk? Wil ik echt een das? Of wil ik alleen maar een das zodat mensen me niet meer zien als vrouw?^H

For Jessie, experimenting with clothes is a way to perform their gender identity, while having to deal with certain cultural norms and rules that could be transgressed. Yet, the question whether Jessie should or should not transgress certain rules or boundaries, is still an ongoing process in how Jessie wants their body and gender identity to be perceived. Both Jessie and Monique state that playing with clothing and style, is a means to personally push those gendered boundaries. Who am I within these boundaries, when transgressed or adhered?

'Physical adjustments'

Manoeuvring, adjusting, (re)negotiating between binary frameworks, such as the gender binary or 'queer versus Christian', is a common experience for many queer Christians that I have spoken to. Marko previously explained how 'the Institute' classifies gender identity under the same denominator as sex. Thus, making one's gender identity identical to one's body. In my conversation with Marko, as well as with Jessie, we talked extensively about how they perceive and feel their body within these binary frameworks, as well as experiencing gender dysphoria. Marko explained that his transitioning happened outside of faith, at a time when he was not as involved with faith as he is now:

Er zijn mensen die daar [narratief van de kerk over gender transitie] dan juist ook heel erg mee worstelen. En ik ben dan ook heel blij dat mijn besef en dat hele proces rondom die transitie dat dat gewoon buiten het geloof heeft plaatsgevonden. Klinkt misschien heel erg gek. (...) Ik werd tenminste niet belast met nog een keer morele kant van mijn beslissingen. Ik had genoeg aan mezelf.¹

For Jessie, the way they perceive their body and how they want some parts of their body to change is a current process. Here, the tenacity of ‘the Church’, or the hypocrisy as has also been mentioned before, with regards to certain stances and boundaries is also experienced in this concept of making ‘physical adjustments’ (e.g. top-surgeries, bottom surgeries, taking hormone pills). Jessie explains:

Er zijn wat mensen van: Ja, je moet blij zijn hoe God je gemaakt heeft, dus je mag je lichaam niet aanpassen. Dat ik denk: Ja, dat is ontzettend hypocriet! Volgende week sta jij je lippen op te spuiten! Laten we eerlijk zijn. Volgens mij slaat dat nergens op, want dan sta je je haar te verven en dat vinden we ook geen probleem. Dus waar leg je dan die grens weet je wel?^J

The making of ‘adjustments’ in a ‘healthy body’ is a narrative that has been mentioned by Marko, Jessie, and Devi. Marko also states that these arguments were used when he asked permission to become an official member of the community, which was eventually declined – though he does live within the community and actively participates in almost everything with them. Physical adjustments like Botox or hair dye seem to be more acceptable. Yet, when it comes to gender healthcare, there seems to be a strict boundary as to what is acceptable and what is not. The body is conceptualised as God’s creation, to which no alterations should be made. Nonetheless, queer Christians seem to repeatedly fall between these frames and boundaries: being caught in the power of the versus. For Marko, it is a difficult task to overlap these polarised views with regards to gender identity and the body – partly due to the fact that most of the other men in the religious community do not know about his transition or gender identity:

Nou het erkennen dat het [transgender] bestaat überhaupt, is het ene. Maar, dan ook nog een keer uitleggen van dat gezonde lichaam waarin ik zogenaamd heb gesneden, niet zo gezond is. En dat ook daar natuurlijk een mensbeeld botst en hoe krijg je dat

duidelijk dat het gaat om lijden? En op het moment dat er echt lijden is, dan moet je dus niet vergeleken worden met iemand die de lippen wilt veranderen, omdat het dan mooier is of last heeft van te kleine borsten of te grote borsten zonder dat er medische indicatie is. Daar kan je het niet mee vergelijken. De stappen die iemand die transgender is, neemt om in het reine te komen of in ieder geval zijn conditie leefbaar te maken: Dat is echt anders.^K

In this quote, Marko discusses the concept of ‘actual suffering’ and emphasises that when considering gender dysphoria and making decisions about surgeries and hormones, it should not be compared to someone altering their bodies for cosmetic reasons. Jessie and Marko both refer to this in their experience with how people within the Christian community, or even ‘the Institute’, would react to their body alterations. In my conversation with Jessie, they also talk about how they do not feel comfortable in their current body and what they would like to change in order to feel more connected and comfortable. Due to the long waiting lists for gender healthcare,¹³ Jessie has not had an appointment yet. They try to explain their feelings with regards to their body:

Ja ik weet niet zo goed hoe je dat gevoel moet uitleggen of zo, dat vind ik moeilijk. Maar gewoon het feit dat je wakker wordt en gelijk denkt: Uh, dit hoort niet. Dat als je het strand op loopt dat je dan denkt hmm... dit is net niet hét. (...) De manier waarop je kleding over je heen valt, dat je dat dan net vervelend vindt. Elke dag.^L

Marko explains his experience with his top surgery, also having similar feelings beforehand as Jessie has: “Het enige aan mijn lichaam waarvan ik echt opgelucht was dat het niet meer was, waren mijn borsten. En dat realiseerde ik me pas na de operatie. De ochtend dat ik wakker werd had ik zoiets van: Oh... ja dit is het! Dat is wel heel fijn [lachen].”^M Marko explains that, despite the fact that ‘the Institute’ may view these ‘physical adjustments’ as going against the will of God, he is extremely content with his decision. He says: “Ik heb dus ook absoluut geen spijt van de stappen die ik heb genomen. Hetgeen wat ik heb gedaan, is om te zorgen dat mijn omgeving op mij reageert zoals ik ben! En dat is een man.”^N Essentially,

¹³ A general known societal issue in The Netherlands is the long waiting list for gender healthcare. Due to this, people have to wait for years to receive the care they want and need.

the way one's body aligns with, or is experienced by, the individual themselves is far more important than what other people might ascribe to someone's body.

Sex and celibacy

Earlier, I have shown the experiences of Monique with how she experiences her body and feels connected to her body. She briefly mentioned how sex is a way to connect with her body, but due to her upbringing in the Reformed Congregation she sometimes still feels shame within her body – also relating to sex. Her goal is to shamelessly move her body and to be able to have sex for her own pleasure rather than to meet any expectations of others. Having sex, and one's connection with the body, is another theme that plays a crucial role in the lives for many queer Christians that I have spoken to. Monique states that if she is more comfortable and safe in her own body, to which she is often jealous of other people, she will be able to enjoy sex more:

Ik leg mezelf misschien dingen op die ik anderen ook niet op leg met betrekking op mijn lichaam. En ook wel op seksueel gebied, merk ik het [de invloed van de gergem] ook. Dat ik, vooral als ik met mannen seks heb dan, dat ik merk dat ik eigenlijk meer doe wat ik denk dat zij willen in plaats van waar ik van geniet bijvoorbeeld. En dat hoort denk ik ook wel bij het beeld van wat ik heb meegekregen uit de gergem met: Ja je doet seks niet voor jezelf, je doet seks voor een ander. ^o

According to Monique, within the Reformed Congregation sex is seen as an act a woman does for the man – heavily relying on heteronormative conceptions and frameworks of what precisely entails sex. Views on sex, and how one should interact or move with their body in society is for some queer Christians a topic that is occasionally difficult to talk about or feel understood in. Like Devi, questions of whether one is attractive are asked, may it be because someone is unhappy with their body, or does not feel as if their body aligns with their gender identity.

Filip, a 42 year old devoted Catholic, pastoral worker, and a philosophy and religion teacher at a secondary school, talks about his experience with sex, celibacy, sexuality, and his Catholic faith. To him, celibacy is a natural way of life as he wants to become a priest someday: “Van jongs af aan wilde ik priester worden. Of monnik. Of in ieder geval iets in de kerk. En daar zit celibaat bij. Ik vind dat een natuurlijke manier van in het leven staan. Als je daar tenminste niet al te overspannen over doet.”^p Filip refers to people not being ‘too

worked up' about celibacy, this is due to his experience with 'the Church' and how they criticised him for having had a relationship with a man – he still lives with this man, but they have redefined their relationship. When asked how Filip would identify himself, he is more comfortable with the label 'non-heterosexual', though, as almost all participants have said, he does not like labels in this regard. For Filip, being celibate is essential to completely devote himself to religion and God. His first priority will be this job, and one day hopefully priesthood. He says that family life and sex is not his priority. However, Filip also explains that he still needs to justify some of his decisions to 'the Church'. He thinks that due to past experiences – such as having a relationship with a man, having had sex before, and talking openly about sexuality and sex – he is not a priest yet:

De opeenstapeling van dingen is dat ik in het verleden heb meegedaan of dingen heb gedaan in de studentenkerk hier in [woonplaats] rondom roze vieringen. En dat ik een relatie heb gehad met een man. En dat ik in de tijd dat het weer ging over, ik weet niet meer precies wat het onderwerp toen was, in ieder geval, er was weer iets met de katholieke kerk en homoseksualiteit. En toen heb ik me in die discussie gemengd in [naam van krant], en ik heb daar stukken over geschreven op het internet. (...) Dat vinden ze niet passend bij een priester. (...) Althans dat idee [open praten over seksualiteit en seks]. Dat is ook het idee van priester en wijding, dat de priester een soort niets mens is.^Q

Filip refers to how 'the Church' views priesthood and priests as a *niets mens* – a nothing person: "Dus iemand zonder al teveel eigen emoties en zo. Dus daar hoort ook geen beleving van seksualiteit bij. Of daar zelf maar ideeën over hebben. Dat hebben ze [de kerk] liever niet."^R Filip also explains how 'the Church's' view of sex and virginity, celibacy in particular, is un-Christian to him:

Celibaat zou dan vanaf de moederschoot moeten zijn, tja. Ik vind het een onchristelijke opvatting van maagdelijkheid. Het gaat juist om een state of mind en niet per se om iets wat je ooit gedaan hebt. Als je dat denkt, dan is alles wat daar dan ook maar in de buurt komt besmettelijk. (...) Het idee dat als je ooit seks beleefd hebt, ja dat je dan eigenlijk voor het leven verloren bent.^S

Filip clearly disagrees with some of the perception of ‘the Church’ when it comes to sex, and particularly as to how this has had consequences for him – though ‘the Church’ has never factually told him this. He feels as if he has to justify his relationship to ‘the Church’, something that his partner, who is not a Christian, does not have to do in this same manner:

Kijk het feit dat ik daar [hoe je je relatie verwoordt naar anderen] veel over moet nadenken en daar perse woorden aan moet geven, dat heeft ermee te maken dat het naar de kerk verwoord moet. Ik moet daar kunnen uitleggen hoe dit zich verhoudt met het celibaat. Ik denk dat ik daar een heel goed verhaal in heb. Althans, een verhaal dat mij overtuigt. En wat ik uit de grond van mijn hart echt denk. Dat is geen cover-up. Als dat zo zou zijn, dan zou ik niet met mezelf kunnen leven.^T

Again, navigating within and between the boundaries set by themselves and how ‘the Church’s’ influence is perceived is a common search for some queer Christians that I have spoken to. However, as many have also expressed, navigating through these tense and power loaded fields is ultimately essential and a must for them to fully accept themselves. Naturally, it is indeed a question of power loaded binaries, however the agency found within the performative dance of identity negotiation – to which justification and taking accountability is a given – is essentially crucial for the self-identification and queer Christians’ way of finding self-love and the power of God (back) into their lives.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown how Dutch queer Christians that I have spoken to manoeuvre between boundaries with regards to narrations and perceptions of the body and the self. Here, ‘the Institute’ is experienced as having an intense and strong opinion on how one should use their body and what they should do with their body. For some, the body is experienced as shameful, where it is perceived as a vessel and/or a tool rather than the connection that is preferred. In attempts to connect oneself with one’s body, clothing is used to express someone’s gender and/or queer identity, both as an internal signifier of connection to one’s own body and as an external signifier of one’s ascribed social identity and acceptance by others. Herewith, clothing becomes a tool to personally push gendered boundaries and transgress supposed cultural norms, showing the importance of agency through self-expressions via clothing. Next to this, the gender binary is strongly present in ‘the Church’s’ value and norms, identifying the body as directly connected to gender. In other words, sex is

gender and gender is sex. Yet again, some queer Christians are caught in the power of the versus, this time because of their ‘physical adjustments’ (e.g. gender transitioning) being framed as ‘against God’s will’. The heteronormative framework, and the gender binary, is not only felt within these instances, but also in how sex is experienced. Being open about sexuality and sex could be a catalyst, as experienced by some, for not being fully accepted or being denied certain church positions such as priesthood. One has to justify their choices, relationships, and body in order to eventually feel comfortable in their own, quite literal, skin. Essentially, the navigation and justification is needed for some to discover their body away from shame and find their own self-love and acceptance of God.

In the following chapter, I explain how these feelings of justification and navigation are essentially about someone’s right to exist. The chapter explores how the vision of faith and God needs to change in order to find one’s way to self-love and acceptance.

5. Finding the rainbow within the black and white

Beste familie,

We kunnen ons goed voorstellen dat de uitnodiging voor deze bruiloft niet voor iedereen even makkelijk is. Om die reden willen we laten weten dat we er alle begrip voor hebben als je niet wilt komen. Voel je vrij om dat aan ons door te geven. Als je nog vragen hebt of met ons in gesprek wilt gaan, dan staan we daar ook voor open. Dit kan via telefoonnummer.... Of via emailadres....

Lieve groeten,

Naomi en Renée ^A

This small note was sent by Renée and her wife, Naomi, as an attachment to their wedding invitation. Renée explained that it is important to stay connected, even though she might disagree on certain things with others in her surroundings. It is crucial for her to find the connection through love. When some family members and friends took the opportunity to tell Renée she was making a grave mistake by marrying a woman and that she would go to hell, she said that she could also see the bravery and love her family members and friends have for her in giving that warning. This deep founded compassion and love for others, and themselves, is for many queer Christians inherently related to their new perception of God. In this chapter, I delve deeper into feelings of the supposedly ‘dichotomous’ queer Christian identity, where constant claiming of space and justification processes are necessary. Next to this, I explain how, in this line of thinking, queer Christians have to reframe their experience of faith, and reformulate how they perceive God and how God perceives them. Essentially, the acceptance of the self – and accepting that vulnerability is a strength – is what typifies queer Christians that I have spoken to, since, ultimately, identity is fluid and one is worth existing within their own unique individuality.

‘Contradiction in terminus’

In the search of queer Christians for self-acceptance and self-love, perhaps by finding their way back to God, being caught in the power of the versus is a common factor in this process. Previous chapters have explored the notion of ‘the Institute’ versus religion and ‘the Institute’

experienced as 'vile'. Though, on another note, and equally interesting to the concept of being caught in the versus, is the 'other side' of this search, namely: the queer community. Queer Christians have expressed that sometimes it feels as if queer Christian identity is seen as a contradiction in terminus. On the one hand, they have to navigate between the frameworks and boundaries of 'the Institute' and on the other hand, they also have to navigate between frameworks and boundaries of people outside of 'the Institute': non-Christian people in particular. For many participants, 'combining' these two 'worlds' is a constant mingling, (re)negotiation, and reframing of the self and how one fits within groups. Jessie explains that due to these feelings it can feel like one is always on the outside of either 'worlds':

Dus we [de queer christelijke commissie in studentenvereniging] hebben het bijvoorbeeld ook wel eens gehad met z'n allen hoe je eigenlijk binnen de christelijke wereld er net buiten valt. Maar ook binnen de queer wereld er net buiten valt. Op het moment dat ik in [de lokale gay bar] sta en iemand erachter komt dat ik christelijk ben. Weet je wel. Dat je zegt dat je bij [de christelijke studentenvereniging] zit. En dan: Oh, je bent christelijk!? En dan kijken ze je gelijk aan van ohhh..... nou die is dus niet queer. En dan draaien ze zich om. Dat je denkt: Nou ja! Dat dat linkje door heel veel mensen gelijk wordt gelegd, dat dat zó erg niet samen kan. Dat je dus binnen allebei de werelden er een soort buiten valt.^B

The way that others perceive queer Christians, based on their own frames and judgments, and how this has an effect on queer Christians' feelings of inclusion is precisely what the performative dance of negotiated identity is about. Here, queer Christians clearly feel that they are having to perform between supposed contradictory worlds, where trying to find the middle road seems like an impossible and difficult task sometimes. The notion of 'Us versus Them' is constantly present. For some, these feelings recur over time and for others it is a matter of the past. Marko says that for him this is a recurring struggle, especially because of his choice to live in a closed religious community, a seemingly "radical choice":

Dus dat [niet accepteren van zijn] is een conflict waar ik nou weer in terecht kom. Dat is ook een beetje het conflict naar buiten toe. Want als ik dat vertel naar mensen die niets met het geloof hebben, die hebben zoiets van: Ja, wat moet je ook met die club? Die jou niet wil. Hè. Dan ga je toch weg? Ja, ik sta met één been buiten, zo voel ik het

ook wel. Maar dit is wel het leven wat ik eigenlijk wil leiden. En als ik mij voorstel om weg te gaan dan krijg ik gewoon een knoop van heimwee.^C

For Marko, the religious community is his home. God is his home and his security. Other people, for instance his friends and family, might not understand his choice of trying to live in a community where he is not fully accepted. However, for him, the choice is very clear. A life without God is impossible. For Renée, she has come to terms with herself fully and believes that the ‘combination’ of these worlds is certainly possible, even though others might still disagree with her: “Ik zie nu juist dat dat voluit samen kan gaan. Ja. Alles van mezelf is wie ik ben. In mijn mens zijn. Dat het allemaal mag zijn.”^D Essentially, it is a matter of existing and respecting the decision that one can exist in their full individual beauty and identity. Nonetheless, the judgements and having to perpetually justify themselves for others is seemingly seen by some queer Christians as an ordinary part of life. The stigmas surrounding Christianity, as supposedly ‘conservative and unaccepting’, and queerness, as supposedly ‘progressive and accepting’, is a power loaded field in which queer Christians that I have spoken to have to manoeuvre between. For instance in the way that Jarno explains in our conversation that some people within the queer community do not understand his ‘choice’ of being a Christian: “Dat mensen zeggen: Nou! Hoe kun je jezelf nou nog steeds christen noemen en bij die kerk willen horen? Want ja... er was van beide kanten toch wel een... soms ja, vijandelijkheid is een té groot woord. Maar onbegrip om die keuze dan te maken.”^E Filip also states that both the queer community and ‘the Church’ carry something of the ‘same battle’ against the supposed static ‘norm’ in society:

Het feit dat de kerk eigenlijk... of dat de LHBTI-gemeenschap en de kerk geweldige bondgenoten zouden zijn. Want ze voeren allebei hetzelfde soort strijd tegen de huidige norm in de samenleving. En weliswaar allebei een andere kant op. (...) Het is niet de norm, allebei niet. Je zou elkaar kunnen steunen als niet de norm zijnde. Maar dat voelen van beide kanten... ik heb het idee dat van beide kanten niet het idee komt van: Laten we dat eens gaan doen.^F

The battle against the norm that is often experienced by queer Christians is not only internally, but is forced to be carried out ‘externally’ and in social settings in the form of having to justify and claim the space of the self. Marko talks about this extensively, the

claiming of space is needed in both worlds and the central theme in this is not being understood:

Dus het is én én. De buitenwacht die je dan niet begrijpt, en de binnenwacht dus ook niet. Ook familie en vrienden, of sommigen. Maar dat je daar dus ook voelt van je wordt elke keer maar getrokken. Dus vroeger was het dan zoiets van wat ik inwendig, wat niet goed voelde, en waar elke keer van de buitenkant wordt geappelleerd aan mijn vrouw zijn wat ik niet was, dat heb ik opgelost. Maar nu is het weer van, ik moet de buitenwacht uitleggen van hoe de kerk het bedoelt en dat er toch meer nuance in zit dan alleen maar ‘het instituut’. En ook nuance hier in de gemeenschap. En aan de andere kant dan ook weer de binnenwacht die je dan moet uitleggen dat ‘de transgender’ niet Dame Edna¹⁴ is, maar dat dat gewoon meer zijn. Dat het meer inhoudt. En dat je sommigen ook niet ziet. En ook niet herkent. En maar ja, daar kan ik dan verder niet over uitweiden. Dat levert gewoon een continue spanning op.^G

Having to explain, adjust, and claim space is common for many queer Christians. Jarno also explains that in conversations with people – both people outside of faith, the queer community, or other Christians – it is always a matter of guarding your own boundaries as well. He explains that sometimes he has conversations that ultimately help the other person come to a new ground and new perspective, but other times he also has conversations where he feels as if he needs to convince the other person. This is something he refuses to do:

Dat ik zelf zei van halverwege het gesprek van: We stoppen dit gesprek, want we komen echt niet ergens. Want dan moest ik overtuigen. Dan wordt het een loopgraven van: Ik zeg A. Hij zegt B. En we gaan elkaar niet vinden. Ook omdat je niet dezelfde argumenten gebruikt. Dat was vaak in de community, zo van: Hoe kun je dat [het geloof] nou op rationele gronden verklaren? Dan is het toch allemaal onzin? Ik dacht ja, als je zo begint dan ja... Het [geloof] is niet rationeel. Dat is dan hopeloos. En hetzelfde was dan op theologische gronden, aan de andere kant van: Er staat toch dit en dat? Dus aan beide kanten moest je die verantwoording aangaan. Dat is wel vervelend.^H

¹⁴ Dame Edna was a fictional television presenter. She was played by Australian comedian actor Barry Humphries. Dame Edna was known for her satire, extravagant hair, clothing, jewellery, and glasses.

Ultimately, within either community – may it be the queer community or the Christian community – many participants feel as if they have to convince the other person of their existence, since to them it is not a choice to be queer or Christian. Jarno also explains that he sometimes finds it difficult when the queer community is harsh and judgemental towards religious communities or people. He says: “Dat wat je niet wilt dat mensen bij jou doen, doe je juist dan bij anderen. Je mag het er niet mee eens zijn. Prima. Maar je kan nog steeds respectvol zijn naar iemand anders zijn overtuiging. Ja, dat was wel dat ik dacht: Oeh. De community kan ook wel hard zijn.”^I Within these boundary making processes and categorisations of ‘who is us and them’, queer Christians seem to be caught in between both sides. However, all state that they have a common source of life which gives them power: God. Essentially, finding their way between the power of the versus also meant to reframe their experience of faith and God; from the previously explored notion of ‘the punishing God’ to ‘the loving God.’

Reframing God

In finding ways for queer Christians to feel self-accepted one needs to reframe their narrative and experience of God and faith. Some participants, such as Renée and Marko, have had times in their life when they were not involved in ‘the Church’ nor with God and faith in general. For Renée due to her struggles with trying to come to terms with the self and for Marko, it was rather a fortunate coincidence that he went through the process outside of ‘the Church’. Jarno also explains that there are many examples for queer Christians that have broken their background with faith: “En daar heb ik ook alle respect voor. Maar dat lijkt mij zo verdrietig, in de zin dat je dan toch ergens ook afscheid van moet nemen van iets wat je ook wel heel dierbaar is. Dus ik heb gezocht naar een manier om ze met elkaar te verzoenen. En dat is goed gelukt! Voor mijn gevoel.”^J In trying to find a way to reconcile both factors of his identity, he has found many ways in order to do so:

De manieren van hoe ga je om met teksten? Hoe ga je om met de gemeenschap? Hoe ga je om met elkaar? Dus hoe leef je je leven? Eigenlijk!?! Het idee dat je nog steeds beantwoordt aan je oproep die ook wel vanuit de bijbel klinkt: Doe het voor elkaar en doe het met elkaar. En leef niet voor jezelf, maar juist mét de mensen om je heen. Dus dat je dat doet terwijl je ook jezelf geen geweld aandoet. Daar zit een soort van balans in.^K

All participants have redefined their narrative and definition of what God means to them, and who God is precisely. For most, God means power and love. A life force who accepts everyone for who they are. Devi explains that coming to terms with this image of God works for their acceptance of the self of not ‘fitting in certain boxes’: “Ik zie God als iemand die juist niet zou verlangen dat mensen in hokjes en vakjes geplaatst zouden moeten worden en zouden moeten voldoen aan de regels van de maatschappij.”^L Not wanting to fit into categories, is a common experience for the queer Christians that I have spoken to. Many have expressed, when asking about how they would define their gender identity or sexual identity, that no label is preferred, though society still wants a label from them in order to categorise. Monique sees godliness in love, beauty, and connectedness: “God kan je overal vinden. Schoonheid en verbondenheid vind ik altijd wel iets goddelijks hebben. Ja liefde, schoonheid en verbinden, dat vind ik goddelijk.”^M The notion of love and God is strongly present in the reframing of God in the narration of queer Christians’ perspectives on faith. Marko expresses his love for God and that, to him, God is life who has unconditional love. God gives him safety, structure, and is someone on which he can always count on:

Hij is het leven. Hij is er wel. Zij is er wel. Je kan er van alles van maken. Om het onder woorden te brengen, God is toch dé schepper met compassie. En de schepper die overloopt van liefde. Dus dat wij als schepselen eigenlijk het resultaat zijn van die liefde die alleen maar kan geven. Die alleen maar kan uitstorten.^N

The reframing of God and faith is crucial to the experience of faith of queer Christians, as well as their identity construction and (re)negotiation. The reconciliation between two supposedly categorised ‘extremes’, queer and Cristian, is essentially a matter of trying to, as Monique adequately puts: ‘Finding the rainbow in the black and white’. Jarno adds to this by saying: “Het kan dus wel met elkaar samen zijn! En het is minder zwart-wit dan je op voorhand zou denken.”^O This new narration of faith, from ‘the punishing God’ to ‘the loving God’, is an intense bodily experience for some. Jarno explains that he can feel God in his body at times. To him, God feels like a warm glow that starts from the top of his head all the way down to his toes: a pure connection to God: “En dat geeft ook gewoon altijd meteen het gevoel van, oeh, ik mag het even allemaal loslaten. Ik hoef het niet alleen te doen. Ik mag vertrouwen op wat er is.”^P This intense experience, and especially embodied feeling of God after always having been afraid of God, is something that Renée explains as an enlightenment experience:

Ik had zelf een heel ander Godsbeeld meegekregen van een straffende God die je voor eeuwig kon afwijzen. En nu kwam er opeens een heel andere God.¹⁵ Als bron van liefde. Die onvoorwaardelijk is. En voor altijd. Waar je niet van af gescheiden kan worden. Dat was een keerpunt. En dat is ook wel heel apart dat ik een soort helderheid in mijn hoofd kreeg alsof... nou ja men zegt wel eens dat het je kunt ontwakken of zo. Of een soort verlichtingservaring. Dat is het wel geweest, want het stroomt opeens.. Het stroomt door me heen, die liefde ook. ^Q

The supermarket

However, in trying to reframe the narrative of God into this new image of ‘the loving God’, many still experience or have experienced feelings of having to justify themselves for others or themselves. Jarno calls this the “supermarket idea”. This supermarket idea is specifically present in relation to how some queer Christians interpret the bible texts. Jarno says: “Dus van oké, ik accepteer die tekst niet. Mag ik dat wel doen? Als individu. Nou dat bevalt me wel? En dat bevalt me niet? In hoeverre is dat nog oké? Een soort supermarkt idee van dit komt me wel handig uit en dit komt me niet handig uit.”^R This notion of having to choose between bible texts that might speak to someone and others that do not, is an experience that Devi also shares:

Ik heb heel lang nagedacht van: Oke, maar vergeet ik dan niet een heel stukje van dat ik wel wat... ja het hele zonde aspect wat nog veel met het christendom wordt geassocieerd. Laat ik dat niet dan links liggen, omdat ik dan een soort van de bijbel wil lezen zoals het past bij mij?^S

This struggle is experienced by some as questioning whether they are lying to themselves. In this justification process within one’s self-acceptance, not wanting to lie to others or themselves is an important factor within the identity construction and (re)negotiation of queer Christians whom I have spoken to. Jessie also explains that this ‘supermarket idea’ sparked many conversations with their parents when they came out. They explain:

¹⁵ This new or other God is a new individual experience of God. It is not based on newly discovered theological narratives.

Hmmm, liegen tegen mezelf misschien? Dat zegt mijn pa bijvoorbeeld tegen me van: Ja, je moet niet de bijbel maar invullen zodat het goed voor jou uitkomt. Dat ik geloof dat ik queer mag zijn van God of in ieder geval die relaties ook mag aangaan. Geloof ik dat alleen maar omdat dat goed voor mij uitkomt? Of geloof ik dat omdat ik daadwerkelijk zo de bijbel lees zeg maar? ^T

By questioning themselves and their motives to eventuate the reconciliation between the supposed ‘extremes’ of queer and Christian, queer Christians take an active choice in analysing and reflecting on their own position and upbringing. The struggle that is experienced is an ongoing process, however eventually God’s love is what is crucial for them. God is all accepting and will not judge them on factors that others might. In taking this active choice, many queer Christians show the importance of their agency regarding the construction and the (re)negotiation of the self, and how it is in the end a matter of finding compassion for the self, just like God does for them.

Vulnerability is a strength

In the search for the reconciliation between supposed dichotomous identity ascriptions, agency is a factor that is certainly not lacking. Here, agency is used as an apparatus to take back the control and self-identification processes on an individual level rather than basing their identity construction and (re)negotiation on the opinions, frames, and judgements by others. Naturally, God, as a life force and all accepting, is a part of this claim on agency and self-love. Devi says, believing in God as all accepting, it is incomprehensible for them why an all accepting God would not accept them as non-binary and pansexual: God houdt van me zoals ik ben. En als ik ergens mee zit, dan kan ik daar bij God terecht.”^U An example, as referred to by many Queer Christians I have spoken, which essentially confirms why God made you who you are and therefore accepts you, is the biblical Psalm 139. This Psalm is essential in the narration of faith for queer Christians, one sentence stating: “Ik loof U omdat ik ontzagwekkend wonderlijk gemaakt ben.”^{16V} Marko explains why this quote helped him find self-acceptance through the love of God as well as changing his view on who God is:

Een voorbeeld, die Psalm is een hele warme persoonlijke Psalm. Waarin je ook beseft of uiting geeft aan het besef aan dat God jou gemaakt heeft en mij kent zoals Hij mij

¹⁶ This quote is from Psalm 139.

gemaakt heeft, maar dus ook echt met mijn transgender zijn, mij gemaakt heeft. En in eerste instantie was die Psalm meer zoiets van U kent al mijn gaan en mijn gedachte mijn gaan en staan, U weet wanneer ik dit doe. Dat was meer een soort van de politieman die je controleert. Dat was mijn godsbeeld. Dat ging heel snel over naar gewoon die warmte van die Psalm zoeken. Van Hij heeft mij gemaakt. En Hij zag dat ik goed was.^W

Here, the Psalm essentially motivates queer Christians to take matters into their own hands and find self-acceptance in themselves with the help of God. Jarno also explains that God is love to him and that love – may it be self-love or love between people – is essential in living a fulfilling life. He made an active choice to live life from love, rather than fear: “Ik wilde niet leven vanuit angst door dat godsbeeld, ik wilde leven vanuit liefde.”^X

Through these active choices, for some through pious movements, concurring with Mahmood’s (2009a) definition on (religious) agency, the self-identification and negotiation processes are based on (self)love, acceptance, and agency. Herewith, many queer Christians explain that their vulnerability, for instance, having dealt with their experiences of coming to terms with the reconciliation of supposed dichotomous identities, is essentially a strength that can be used to help other queer Christians. Renée, an active advocate for queer Christian identity in numerous non-profit organisations, says that because of her enlightenment experience she can use the lifeforce of God by helping others. Again, she sees Jesus and God as her example:

Het helpt mij om de ogen van Jezus te hebben. En dat is ook echt zo. Dat ik oog heb gekregen voor mensen die erbuiten vallen. En hoe hard dat kan zijn. Ja, voor mensen die door hun eigen medemensen erbuiten worden geplaatst. En inzien dat dat niet is wat onze bestemming is ofzo. Ik denk dat Hij wel om me geeft. En ik denk ook dat doordat ik zelf inmiddels mijn kwetsbaarheid durf te laten zien, dat dat ook andere mensen helpt om dat te doen. En daar ook juist laten inzien dat dat een kracht kan zijn. Die iets kan brengen als je dat in het licht brengt.^Y

Renée essentially explains that God not only accepts her for who she is, but that He is also an example for her and a motivator to do good in life. Many other queer Christians that I have spoken to have explained that religion in general is a way to connect with others. Jessie believes it is a shame that some Christians feel the need to polarise and exclude. To Jessie,

religion, and Christianity in particular, is fundamentally about togetherness and sameness. They also share that it is comfortable when they meet someone who is also Christian: “Het mooiste aan geloof is dat je het samen doet. Het is een hele mooie saamhorigheid binnen je gemeente of vereniging. En dat als ik bij mijn studie aan kom dan bij een vak, dat ik er dan achter kom dat er één andere christelijke zit dan ja is het toch erg fijn want je deelt gelijk wat.”^Z Jessie also adds that this is the same case for when they meet other queer people, it is an instant connection of understanding one another: “Ja dan denk ik, oh ja wij begrijpen elkaar weet je wel? En dat gevoel van dat samen doen voor een hoger doel of zo.”^{AA} The experience of togetherness within religion is something that Filip also explains. He explains that it is fundamental within the Catholic church that everyone is a human, and this common ground should be enough to find connectivity:

Het fundamentele van elke mens is het feit dat die mens is. En de kerk zegt ook, je mag die mens niet op andere manieren benaderen. Je mag niet tot het een óf het ander reduceren. Terwijl dat natuurlijk wel heel vaak wel gebeurt. Tja, dat is ook weer één van de mooie dingen dat de christelijke traditie zou kunnen bijdragen aan deze wereld. Iedereen mag mens zijn. En je mag niemand reduceren tot één aspect. Alleen volledig mens.^{BB}

Even though many queer Christians, whom I have spoken to, have experienced or are still experiencing struggles in reconciling these supposed dichotomies within their identity, all have also expressed that they have active choices in changing their own narrative for themselves. Eventually, to turn to (self)love and acceptance, where God helps as a forceful and accepting motivation to reach this goal, as well as help others in reaching this goal.

Influencing others

In the creation of active choices in order to find (self)love and acceptance within the self, many queer Christians also have made active choices for others, by which they have influenced many people. Renée has expressed that because of her experience, she can now become a pioneer for the voices of other queer Christians, or other queer religious people. She and her wife have opened their house for queer refugees, often from religious countries where LGBTQIA+ identities are severely threatened. Next to this, Renée is also active within her own church concerning the acceptance of queer Christian identity as well as with an organisation that travels the country to spread the word about queer Christian identity,

especially in areas in the Bible Belt. To Renée, spreading the message of acceptance and love is a must; here too, she sees God's influence:

Ik moet die boodschap vertellen. Mensen moeten dat horen. En toen is er een heel proces gekomen in [eigen kerk] dan. Met uiteindelijk de stappen die gemaakt zijn. Vanuit [queer christelijke organisatie] ben ik echt op heel veel plekken geweest. Ook op mijn middelbare school, uiteindelijk. Met de directie in gesprek gegaan. En allerlei school, ja leidinggevende types. En met hen ook zelf in een docu geweest.

Documentaire. Dus ja ik vind het heel wonderlijk. Er kwam iets vrij in mij. Een soort kracht en opstaan voor liefde. En dat heeft zoveel bijzondere dingen teweeg gebracht.
cc

Devi on the other hand, is the chair of the queer Christian committee within their student organisation. For them, it is a way to connect with other queer Christians, as well as talk about topics that other Christians or non-religious queer people would not understand. Yet again, Devi finds a way to search for sameness and collectivity: "Er zijn mensen naar die groep gestapt en ze zeiden: Hoi! Wij zijn queer, lesbisch, homo, wat dan ook, wij willen mee praten en wij willen hier in de vereniging ook ruimte bieden over onszelf. Wij willen het hier over hebben."^{DD} This turn of actions, to claim space for themselves essentially, is what typifies the actions and characteristics of many participants in this research.

Conclusion

This chapter aimed to show the experiences of queer Christians in relation to their search for the reconciliation between supposed dichotomous identities: queer and Christian. Here, some expressed that they felt as if their identity construction and (re)negotiation was a 'contradiction in terminus'. In finding ways to reconcile these framed opposites of identity, and especially combining the 'worlds' of queer and Christian, they have to constantly adjust, claim space, and sometimes convince other people – may it be other Christians or other queer people – with regards to their faith or gender/sexual identity. Not only, as seen in previous chapters, is the concept of 'the Institute as vile' experienced as a harsh community to manoeuvre one's identity, but many queer Christians that I have spoken to have expressed that the queer community can be quite harsh as well. Here, they feel as if they have to explain and justify their 'choice' for being religious, adding to the framed narratives of the seemingly irreconcilable identity of queer Christian. Due to these struggles and search for reconciliation

within the self, (self)love, and acceptance, many have had to reframe their faith. Here, God is reframed from ‘the punishing almighty God’ to ‘the loving and accepting God’. This reframing of faith, and God in particular, helps queer Christians in this research to accept themselves. Essentially, God has made them who they are. However, some have also experienced some struggles in the reframing of faith, and they classify this as: ‘the supermarket idea’. The supermarket idea is specifically experienced with regards to the interpretation of bible texts. By questioning themselves and their motives, all queer Christians do not want to lie to themselves or their family members and friends. In the reflection of their upbringing, and the bible texts, some question and reflect on whether they interpret the bible in ‘advantage’ to themselves rather than what God actually wants from them. However, in the end, many come to the conclusion that God is all accepting and taking active choices is crucial in self-acceptance and love. With this in mind, many queer Christians use their vulnerability as a strength to influence other queer Christians to reconcile their inner struggle. Yet again, God is seen as a life force behind these active choices where finding sameness and collectivity is crucial in the acceptance of the self. Ultimately, embracing the idea that identity is fluid, and every individual is valuable within all their uniqueness.

The next chapter delves deeper into what others have said: The importance of self-love and acceptance. However, in this chapter, this story of (self)love is told by Lenny and Bob. Here, the remembrance of Lenny and the love of his life, Bob, within a tensed field of sexuality versus religion is shown.

6. Lenny and his Bob: A remembrance

“Look, that mistletoe in the jar. Do you see it? That’s also for my Bob.” Oh? I did see the one on the chimney! “Yeah, definitely. He adored mistletoe. You know it’s a symbol of love right? Then, you have to stand under the mistletoe and give each other a kiss.” Why is mistletoe so important to the both of you? “Well, we met in January and then in February we went to Paris for one week. So, we plucked that mistletoe from the trees on the way back from France. And there’s a small jar in the cupboard somewhere, at the bottom you see? That’s that mistletoe. And the one on the chimney is from his funeral. Bob would tell me the meaning behind the mistletoe, I didn’t know that before. He taught me a lot. Yes, we always loved that. So beautiful.” The sprigs of mistletoe from the funeral, now dried up which has made the formerly vibrant green colour turn into a dusty olive brown, hangs bundled up against the dark stone chimney. In the cupboard, the 50 year old branches of mistletoe are carefully put in a little jar. A small white candle is burning next to the chimney. A candle for Bob with a drawn picture of his face. “Yes, I light it every day and it burns throughout the day. I talk to him as well”. Lenny’s house is full of stuff and trinkets. He has explained to me that every single object has meaning to him. “Of course people would think of this stuff as junk! And when I die, I don’t care what they do with it. For now, it has meaning and that meaning will exist as long as I exist. It’s pieces of him as well you know, of us together.” For Lenny, it is a way to remember. To cherish the experiences within an object. I ask about the different objects, such as the mistletoe, and all objects with its accompanying experiences and remembrances are shared with his beloved husband. ‘His Bob’, as he would say.

The story of Bob, who unfortunately passed away in 2018 after a short battle with cancer, and Lenny, a 71 year old gay cisman with laugh lines and relaxed aura, is one that deserves a special place within this research. Their story certainly touches upon shared themes discussed in the experiences of other queer Christians in previous chapters. Yet, it goes further, standing out the most here, as it captures the essence of all the stories explored so far: a story of love. Thus, in this chapter, I try to explain, explore, and above all, retell the story of Bob and Lenny to the best of my capacity. Here, I delve deeper into the shared love story and memories of Bob and Lenny, as told by Lenny and accompanied with Bob’s eloquently

written sermons, critiques, and thoughts that I had the privilege of reading, the development of their relationship, dealings with sexuality, and faith in Roman-Catholic Brabant in the mid-1970s as well as Bob's struggles with navigating his love for religion and his compassion for others, within an environment where the harsh institute turned their backs on him.

Conflicting feelings with 'the Church'

The love between Lenny and Bob has existed over the last five decades, therefore contextualising the start of their relationship in the mid-70s. As we sit on the dining table in the living room of Lenny's apartment while drinking loads of tea, he starts telling me the story of how they met and what Bob, an active member in the Roman Catholic church and back then on his way to become a priest, had to endure in the beginning, and perhaps throughout, their relationship with regards to his faith. With the cheeky smile the 71 year old Lenny often has on his face, he tells the story of how they first moved in together and how that resulted in Bob having to come out as gay:

En wij hebben elkaar leren kennen en wij werden heel snel in contact gebracht met de gemeente die dit huis verkocht. Nou, een huis huren dat kon helemaal niet. Dat mocht helemaal niet, want dat is toch 45 of 46 jaar geleden. Ja, toen wilden we gaan samenwonen en toen had ik zoiets van: Ja dat wil ik wel, maar niet stiekem. Weet je wel, zo. Dat betekent dat je na moet denken of dat je uit de kast moet komen of niet, want ik ga niet hier... Maar ja Bob wilde dat ook niet. (...) Toen is Bob dus uit de kast gekomen. Hij begon bij het kerkbestuur dat uiteindelijk zijn baas was. De dames van het kerkbestuur die gaven hem z'n ontslag van de ene dag op de andere dag. En dat heeft bij Bob gewoon heel veel gedaan, omdat dat bij hem zo'n impact had, heb ik daar natuurlijk ook een hoop van meegekregen. ^A

The experience of having the backs turned on by 'the Institute' is an experience that is quite common for my participants. Most of my participants have also experienced a similar experience with regards to their coming out, while others still share a secret and have not come out fully to everyone in their lives. Bob also expressed this in his written works that I had the privilege of reading. Here, he talks about how keeping silent was even recommended by a good friend of his, a gay priest: "Toen ik in de jaren zestig een bevriende priester confronteerde met mijn homo zijn, was diens advies: Stil houden, dan is er niets aan de hand. Een advies dat me letterlijk de kop zou hebben gekost, als ik het was blijven opvolgen. Voor

dit soort bijeffecten is de kerk stekeblind.”^B Keeping silent, and not letting your true self ‘exist’ is an experience that many queer Christians struggle with. This example also concurs with other scholars’ studies (Ganzevoort, van der Laan, and Olsman 2011; Gardner 2017; Levy and Reeves 2011; O’Brien 2004; Thumma 1991), where the supposed and framed contradiction within a queer Christian identity results in people feeling unsure about ‘what to choose’ and thus keeping parts of themselves secret to specific groups. The performative dance of identity in this sense, is the choice of what to tell and what not to tell – though some might not consider it as a ‘choice’, but rather a forced decision on the basis of not wanting to be excluded, ultimately for their own safety: “”Als je homoseksueel bent, moet je hier weg!” werd me meegedeeld toen ik als nieuwsgierige puber een keer aan het piemeltje van een andere jongen had gevoeld en hij dat in gewetensnood had opgebiecht bij een pater. “Ik ben geen homoseksueel” dacht ik bij mezelf, maar de berisping is wel tot op heden in mijn geheugen en in mijn hart gekerfd. Dat was de eerste bewust uitgesproken confrontatie met mijn homo-zijn”^C Bob writes. Bob also writes about how ‘the Church’¹⁷ turns their backs on people, and especially his experience of people not wanting to fight for him. In my conversation with Lenny, he relays his experiences of witnessing, and also feeling, the pain that Bob experienced while going through this revelation of feeling abandoned by his colleagues in ‘the Church’ that he had known for many years. Lenny said:

En hij is daarover gaan praten met de pastoor uit de parochie en toen zei de pastoor tegen hem van: Luister eens Bob, ik heb er helemaal niks op tegen hoor. Het maakt mij niet uit of jij homoseksueel bent of niet. Dat is wat mij betreft prima, dat is niet aan de orde. Maar... Wat zal de deken daarvan zeggen? Van het dekenaat. Nou dan ga ik [Bob] met de deken van het dekenaat praten. En de deken zei: Luister meneer, ik heb er geen enkel probleem mee, het is verder allemaal prima, maar wat zal de bisschop in Den Bosch zeggen? (...) En die deed precies hetzelfde, die zei: Ik heb er geen enkel probleem mee, maar wat zal de kardinaal in Utrecht zeggen? En toen zei Bob tegen hem van: Luister, als ik naar de kardinaal ga, dan zegt hij: Wat zal de paus zeggen? En als ik naar de paus ga, dan zal de paus zeggen: wat zal God zeggen? En wat ben ik er mee opgeschoten? Jullie steken allemaal je kop in het zand! En uiteindelijk, als je een gelovig mens bent, zijn dat behoorlijke harde klappen. Dus daar

¹⁷ Bob refers to ‘the Church’ as the Roman Catholic Church.

heeft hij zolang als onze relatie duurde, heeft hij steeds die worsteling gevoeld met het instituut en wat de kerk voor hem eigenlijk betekent, en dat voelde ik ook.^D

The struggles that Bob experienced in his life, made him realise that there are, according to him, two different types of churches, like Marko has also said. On the one hand, there is the institution Church and on the other, the “real Roman-Catholic faith”. The institution has rules and hierarchy where homosexuality is not accepted, and the real Roman-Catholic faith is the experience of faith and God, and how one uses the Bible in practice. Lenny said that this is exactly what made his Bob remarkable to him, as Bob taught Lenny happiness and self-acceptance: “Dat is wat ik van hem geleerd heb, dat het gewoon heel belangrijk is dat je gewoon gelukkig bent. Dat je een gelukkig mens kan zijn en dat je.. dat je mag zijn wie je bent. Als je homo bent, dan betekent dat niet dat je niet een goed gelovig mens kan zijn.”^E Bob’s message of happiness and self-acceptance – though self-taught by the struggles he experienced in his life – created a way for Bob to use his experience in his work as a spiritual carer in a hospital and a pastor in a prison.

God made you the way you are

The translation of the Bible, or the ‘institutional actions’ as Lenny calls it, to present time is something that typifies Bob. This translation was based on immense respect for the other, and feeling heard, as well as his own feelings. When I asked Lenny if he knew why Bob did this, he said: “Dat heeft hij zelf niet ervaren of gekregen. Daar heeft hij véél te hard voor moeten knokken. Hij heeft altijd gedacht: Als ik dat niet kan vinden bij jullie, dan zorg ik dat andere mensen die naar mij toe komen het wel bij mij kunnen vinden.”^F The active choice of Bob to give to others, especially in his sermons, what he had not received in his life concurs with Mahmood’s (2009a) definition of agency in pious movements. This agency found in self-acceptance of sexuality and the strength of faith is clearly present in how Bob has lived his life. ‘Finding the human in faith’, as Bob calls it, is something that was crucial to him and to show that God has truly made you who you are, as he also said in his sermon in prison:

God kijkt naar je om, niet omdat je het verdient, maar omdat Hij goed is. Een prachtig oud woord daarvoor is barmhartigheid. En eigenlijk betekent dit dat je van zijn goedheid mag genieten zonder dat je het verdient, zonder dat je het hoeft te verdienen. God heeft een plan met jou. Je bent geschapen naar Zijn beeld en je mag er zijn. Wie of wat je ook bent. Maar weinig mensen die het op kunnen brengen om zo goed, zo

barmhartig te zijn voor elkaar en voor zichzelf. Fijn toch, dat er een God is die dat wel kan, een God die niets liever wil dan dat. Probeer dat op te pikken! Je bent het waard. Je verdient het niet omdat je goed bent, je verdient het omdat je mens bent. (...) Geloven heet dat, of vertrouwen, geloven in jezelf, geloven in elkaar en, als je dat aandurft, geloven in God.^G

God has a plan with everyone according to Bob, and God is the one that created you the way everyone is perfect in their own way. The love for God seen through this self-acceptance and self-love is what typifies many experiences of queer Christians in The Netherlands. All have experienced a form of struggle within the acceptance of the self, may it be because of family and friends, through ‘the Institute’, or both. These struggles – and dealing with stigmas regarding being both queer and Christian ascribed by different groups – are a part of this negotiated form of identity. One could think this negotiated identity, and this performative dance of identity, is inherent to the experiences of queer Christians in The Netherlands, however, as Bob shows in his work, the decisiveness and compassion that all participants show relating to the acceptance of the self is far more valuable to remember when talking about queer Christian identity. As Bob also says in his sermon: “Vooroordelen horen bij mensen. Ze geven ons de mogelijkheid om in een onverwachte situatie snel te kunnen reageren op iets dat we niet goed kennen. In onze vooroordelen spelen vaak onze eigen levenservaringen mee, alles wat het leven ons geleerd heeft. (...) Op zich zijn vooroordelen een handig en waardevol instrument, bieden ze ons veiligheid en zekerheid. Maken ze het ons mogelijk in te schatten waar het veilig is en waar niet.”^H

Bob’s illness

Turning back to the living room of Lenny and Bob, the memories of Bob are still present. Through images, trinkets, and other objects. I can also see it in the eyes of Lenny when he talks about “Mijn Bob”^I, his love for him and the sadness of him not being here. In November 2017, Lenny had just retired from his work as a primary school teacher and both he and Bob were ready for this new phase in life of spending time together as retirees. Shortly after Lenny’s birthday on the 23rd of February in 2018, they heard Bob was extremely ill with cancer and he had only fourteen days to two months to live. In the following days Bob’s illness got progressively worse and he passed away in his home on the 7th of March 2018, only one week later after hearing his diagnosis and prognosis. After years of living with the love of his life, Lenny lost him in the time span of less than two weeks. During the days in

the hospital, Lenny visited Bob every day. One day, they talked about Bob's funeral and how they wanted to plan this. One thing was sure, not in a church:

Hij is eigenlijk nooit... of ja hij was sowieso nooit boos op mij, maar hij had echt zoiets van: Luister, alles is goed. Denk er om, met die vinger [zwaait met vinger], niet in de kerk! Ik wil geen afscheidsviering in de kerk! Denk erom dat je dat niet doet! Ja waar wil je dat dan? En toen zei Bob van: Ik wil dat waar ook andere dingen gevierd worden. Doe maar in de [naam lokale kroeg]. En in de [naam lokale kroeg] hebben we een half jaar daarvoor dat we 15 jaar getrouwd waren. Zo'n feest. En weet je, dat was gewoon zo ontzettend belangrijk voor hem.^J

During the time of Bob's illness and him progressively getting more ill, Lenny kept a diary that was meaningful in Lenny's process of Bob's illness and death. In the diary, he talked about everything that he experienced, as for him it felt like something he should never forget. Planning the funeral together was one of the few presents – as Lenny called it – they still had together. However, the most beautiful present was Bob coming home nearing the end of his passing, so that he could peacefully rest at home. The hospital bed had not been delivered yet, and at first this seemed like an obstacle:

En toen kwamen ze met die brancard, hartstikke doodziek, aan de beademing. En toen zeiden ze van: Ja dan nemen we hem maar mee terug. Ik zei: Dat gaat echt niet gebeuren. Hij wil zó graag naar huis. Die ziekenbroeders dachten dat we daar sliepen [wijst naar de vide boven]. Ja, we kunnen hem echt niet naar boven krijgen hoor, naar zijn eigen bed. Dus ik zei: Ja maar zijn eigen bed staat daar helemaal niet! Ons bed is daar [wijst naar rechts richting slaapkamer], hiernaast in de slaapkamer. Oh, maar dan leggen we hem gewoon in zijn eigen bed. En toen dacht ik: Dat is het mooiste cadeautje wat we nog gekregen hebben, want we konden niet meer bij elkaar slapen. En toen konden we nog bij elkaar slapen.^K

During the planning in the hospital for Bob's funeral, Bob had told Lenny that he wanted a Catholic candle in the "celebration" and he also knew which people should give speeches. For Lenny, losing the love of his life was extremely difficult. In our conversation, Lenny told me that he wanted Bob to be part of the celebration and not immediately be taken to the crematorium. He had to be part of the party and be surrounded by people: "En toen de viering

afgelopen was, waren er heel veel mensen die dat een beetje vreemd vonden dus toen ben ik gewoon gaan staan en ik ben gaan rondlopen. En gelijk zagen mensen: Oh zo bedoelt Lenny dat. Nou hup. (...) en Bob stond daar en op een goed moment stond naast de brandende kaars op z'n kist, stond er ook een halfleeg pilsje. Iemand had dat daar neergezet. Mensen konden bij hem zijn.”^L The importance of Bob being surrounded by people and part of the celebration of his life is what characterises Lenny’s love for Bob, as well as what both Bob and him believe is important in life. Lenny said that it all had to do with their interpretation of faith, the bible, and the bible stories. What one can do with it and explain, and especially how people can help other people: “Het instituut heeft hij [Bob] gelijk helemaal verbannen. Niet de mensen van het instituut, maar het instituut zelf.”^M The way in which Lenny and Bob navigated their love, sexuality, and faith had immense influence on their relationship which in turn influenced others to learn the beginnings of self-love and acceptance, ultimately showing their shared belief in being a good person.

Being a good person

Lenny’s faith is somewhat differently conceptualised. He says that he would not call himself Christian, though he was raised Christian, however he would call himself spiritual or a faithful person. What Bob and Lenny have in common when it comes to the definition of their faith, though Bob certainly being more linked to Christianity, is the importance of being a good human being and giving back to others. To Lenny, his faith is central to the understanding of human beings as part of the world and life as much as other animals. After death, he says, it is done. There is nothing left. Both Bob and Lenny did not believe in an afterlife. Lenny said: “In de tijd van je leven moet je er voor zorgen dat je een gelukkig mens bent en de goede dingen doet. En dat je de goede besluiten neemt.”^N Their shared belief of doing good and being a good person developed over the years of their relationship, particularly with navigating their love and sexuality within a Christian context. During our conversation, Lenny talked about all the things that Bob has taught him, all relating to their goal of being happy and a good person. Being a good person is related to the actions and choices you take and make in life, where every human being is equal: “Op het moment dat je geboren bent heb je het recht er te mogen zijn. En ja dat zei Bob altijd. Je wordt in je blootje geboren, je komt zo bezitloos als je bent op de wereld, maar je gaat er zo bezitloos als je gekomen bent, zo ga je er ook weer vanaf. Zo eindigt het ook. Je neemt niks mee.”^O This intense principle relating to equality and acceptance, is based on the reasoning of ‘I am allowed to exist, I am enough’. This is especially what shaped Lenny and Bob’s relationship,

emphasising the importance of choice and doing what makes you happy, at least not at their own expense. This active choice is what Lenny defines as not being a ‘yes-but’ thinker but a ‘so-what’ thinker, which was again something that Bob taught him:

En ik [Bob] ga geen priester worden en dat [homoseksualiteit] in een hoek zetten of zo. Hij heeft echt voor zichzelf gewoon gedacht, ik wil gewoon een goed en gelukkig leven hebben. En me daar prima in voelen en niet iedere keer teruggeworpen worden van Ja, maar... Dat is bijvoorbeeld wat Bob mij ook geleerd heeft door de jaren heen. Je kunt een ja-maar denker zijn of je kunt een nou-en denker zijn. Als een probleem op je af komt en je hebt een insteek van Nou, en?! Dan moet je precies dezelfde dingen oplossen, en precies dezelfde dingen weg vinden, maar het gaat langs een andere route hè. Een ja-maar route of een nou-en route.^P

Conclusion

In this chapter, I aimed to show the love story of Bob and Lenny, how they navigated their love, sexuality, and faith. The need to find agency in the judgments and prejudices of others regarding Bob’s struggles with his homosexuality and his love for ‘the Church’ was crucial in his newfound conceptualisation of faith, thus leaving ‘the Institute’ behind him. The claiming of identity, and the performance of identity thereof, is inherently connected to the actions Bob and Lenny have taken over the course of their life that has affected others as well as shaped their life and shared belief of being a good person. Being a good person is shown through actions according to Ben and Lenny, where one should accept the love of the self and others. The chapter showed how themes that have been discussed in previous chapters, specifically the ones relating to the harsh institute and the navigation of the self, are recurring experiences of queer Christians in The Netherlands. Above all, this chapter ultimately shows the love story of Bob and Lenny, which I believe is fundamental to the experiences of queer Christians in The Netherlands and their (re)negotiation of identity construction, corporeality, and narration of faith. Certainly, many have experienced struggles, loss, and sadness like Bob and Lenny have experienced, however all have also expressed the importance of love – may it be love of the self, love of God, or love with a partner. The acceptance of queer Christian identity is, after all, a story of love.

Conclusion

This ethnographic study has centred on the construction and (re)negotiation of identities and corporeality among Dutch queer Christians, delving into their individual narratives and lived experiences related to these concepts. Within the boundary making processes, and transgressions thereof, one can notice that the navigation of the queer Christian self and questions such as ‘Who am I?’ and ‘Where do I belong?’ are inherent to the experiences of Dutch queer Christians whom I have spoken to. This research was conducted through extensive and in-depth ethnographic research into the meaning-making and sense-making processes of these individuals. By combining insights from literature with this ethnographic approach, the thesis has addressed the following question: How do queer Christians in The Netherlands construct and (re)negotiate their identity and corporeality with regards to their individual narration and lived experience of faith, God, and ‘the Institute’ as a social collectivity amidst in- and exclusion processes? To answer this question, multiple objectives have been explored, identified, and elaborated on, ultimately leading to the main objective of this thesis. This main objective consists of five key objectives that I would like to briefly elaborate on before elaborating on the main conclusion points.

Firstly, the thesis has made a contribution to the deconstruction of the static and perhaps normative concept of queer Christian identity as intrinsically ‘dichotomous’. In doing so, the thesis actively engaged in questioning existing assumptions on a social and academic, as well as on a personal level for me as a researcher. Moving beyond the social narrative of dichotomies, the thesis sought nuance in fluidity and intersectionality concerning issues of identity construction processes. Secondly, the thesis has contributed to academic qualitative trajectories concerning the lived experiences of Dutch queer Christians, with a focus on meaning-making processes. Thirdly, engaging with established theories and enriching existing theories related to boundary making processes and transgressions within the self and the body has contributed to the introduction of new concepts such as ‘the performative dance of identity’ and ‘being caught in the power of the versus’. These concepts could be used in further research regarding these matters. Fourthly, the thesis has critically demonstrated the essential engagement with theoretical and academic discourses concerning positionality, epistemology, and embodiment in the context of ethnographic research. In doing so, I have advocated for a more transparent, reflexive, and empathic approach in the study, while simultaneously maintaining a critical stance on my position in conducting research into vulnerabilities and sensitivities. This, in my opinion, is immensely important. And lastly, and

perhaps most importantly, is the social relevance that this thesis carries. The thesis and the research have contributed to emphasising the importance of attentive listening to individuals' stories, particularly those that may be overlooked in day-to-day conversations. This, ultimately, aims to contribute to a deeper understanding among individuals. Thus, the main objective of the thesis, to which these five objectives all contribute to, is to add to the shift of scholarly focus from looking at generality to paying close attention to individual experiences. Here, identity is recognised as fluid and dynamic, and the awareness of multiple subjectivities is inherently intertwined.

With that said, in the paragraphs to follow, the main conclusion points are discussed and elaborated upon in a fourfold manner. Concepts, experiences, and narratives such as 'the Institute', boundary navigation and manoeuvring, reconciliation of the self, reframing faith, agency, and self-love are addressed. Additionally, the relevant literature to these conclusion points are connected. All these aspects have an impact on the construction and (re)negotiation of Dutch queer Christians' identity and corporeality. Furthermore, this conclusion also allows space for critical reflection and discussion and ends with recommendations for further studies.

First, it is incredibly intriguing that in this research, the narrative and experience of 'the Institute' have been perceived as so significant. Several participants have shared their experiences, often negatively charged, with the concept of 'the Institute'. It is important to repeat that this thesis is entirely based on individual narratives and lived experiences, and thus, no conclusions are drawn here regarding 'the Institute' or 'Christianity'. Nevertheless, 'the Institute' is perceived in the identity construction and (re)negotiation of Dutch queer Christians as well as in their corporeality as a negative signifier in which power dimensions seem to play a significant role. The main narrative within 'the Institute' as a negative signifier of feelings and experiences stems from early (childhood) experiences within their faith of 'the punishing almighty God.' The experience of 'the Institute' as a negative signifier, appears to contrast with their own agency and individual narration of faith. This experience of 'the Institute' could align with theoretical conceptualisations about power dimensions of the dominant majority group who conceptualise stigmas and Othering onto the minority group. As discussed in the theoretical framework of this thesis, these feelings of Othering and being stigmatised can leave a profound impact on the sense of sameness and collectivity (as argued by: Barth 1998; Baumann 1999; Frost 2011; Jenkins 2014; Ryan 2011; Verkuyten 2005).

With that being said and bridging to the second conclusion point, it is within this narrative of ‘the Institute’ as a signifier for negative experiences and feelings concerning identity constructions and corporeality that power loaded dimensions play a significant role. Another aspect, as described in the theory of in- and exclusion processes and the formulation and construction of one’s (social and individual) identity (see Barth 1998; Baumann 1999; Frost 2011; Jenkins 2014; Ryan 2011; Verkuyten 2005), is the boundary making processes of Us and Them, and perhaps for queer Christians, I and Them. In this process, Dutch queer Christians, whom I have spoken to, must engage in continuous manoeuvring with the self, the notion of God as punishing, and ‘the Institute’. And simultaneously with additional external frames and factors such as heteronormative frameworks in Dutch society, judgments from the queer community influenced by the overall idea of religion in a post-secular liberal society like The Netherlands, and for some, the gender binary. Within this manoeuvring and navigation of the self and their corporeality, ‘the performative dance’ becomes incredibly important to navigate these boundaries and perhaps understand who the self is exactly in all these complex dynamics. Additionally, the concept of ‘being caught in the power of the versus’ is an example that strongly emerges in these experiences. The multiple ‘versusses’ appear to engage on various realms, within the gender binary of man versus woman, queer versus Christian, progressive versus conservative, accepting versus non-accepting, corporeality versus institution, rational versus moral, faith versus institute, and so on. Within all these intrinsic, challenging, and complex dynamics, there exists a field of choices and question marks where some queer Christians must or have had to wrestle through, while others perceive it more as manoeuvring or navigating. With this, I also identify the conditional markers of acceptance, where the various ‘versusses’ each have specific conditional markers of acceptance and tolerance. Inherently, it demonstrates that the paradox of tolerance, as clearly described by Forst (2013), and homonationalism in a post-secular liberal society outlined by Akachar (2015), Bracke (2008; 2013), Duggan (2003), and Puar (2006; 2007), are deeply connected to this experience of (re)negotiated identity formation and ‘being caught in the power of the versus’.

Third, the concept of (re)negotiation, visible within the identity constructions and corporeality of queer Christians that I have spoken to, as clearly described by other scholars such as Gecas (1986), Hart and Richardson (1981), Swann, Johnson, and Bosson (2009), and Thumma (1991), is also apparent in how Dutch queer Christians, within this navigation of boundary making processes, ultimately engage in the (re)negotiation with themselves and

their experience of faith. In other words, there is a necessary shift in reframing the narrative of God (from punishing to loving) and the interpretation of faith (for instance, by reading biblical texts differently) to ultimately reach the reconciliation of these supposed – as externally framed – dichotomous identity markers. Through reframing God and faith, self-love and acceptance grows among queer Christians that I have spoken to. Here, one could apply Mahmood's (2009a) concept of agency within pious movements to, thus, claim space for individuality and intersectionality within identity that these individuals rightfully deserve and experience themselves.

Last, as the fourth main conclusion point, building on the concept of agency, is that the experience of identity for queer Christians in The Netherlands whom I have spoken to is fundamentally fluid, dynamic, and intersectional (concurring with Barth 1998; Crenshaw 1989). Self-love and acceptance are focal points in this narrative. Essentially, the stories of queer Christians regarding their individual narratives and lived experiences with the self, corporeality, faith, and God are stories of love. Love for God, love for oneself, love for and with one's partner, and love for others. Here, the notion of redirection and claiming space emerges, where all participants have expressed that they have compassion for others because that is what God would do for them as well. Using vulnerability as a strength – to help others, help oneself, claim space, and/or come closer to God – is what characterises the experiences of queer Christians whom I have spoken to. Again, the narration of faith is crucial. God serves as a driving force and example to use and feel this compassion and love. What I particularly want to emphasise here is that despite the immense complex navigation between various imposed 'versusses', power dynamics, and one's own self-understanding and self-image, it is all the more important not to position queer Christians as victims or subservient subjects, quite the opposite in fact. The strength and agency characterise the individuals I have spoken to in this research significantly. The 'other side' of boundary making processes becomes clear here. Namely, sameness and collectivity also contribute to the acceptance and construction of the self in a positive sense (Frost 2011; Jenkins 2014; Ryan 2011; Tajfel 1981). Here, it is essential to recognise queer Christians as unique individuals, each with many different identity markers – not only limiting this to queer and Christian but many more – within their already existing collectivities. As most participants in this research have expressed in their experiences: it is definitely possible to reconcile these supposed categorised dichotomies within one identity. With that said, I would like to conclude with a quote from Jarno that essentially summarises this experience: "Ik dacht aan dat spreekwoord,

het moet eerst schuren voordat het kan gaan glanzen. Dus toen dacht ik: Ja daar waar dingen soms op elkaar in wrikken... Uiteindelijk komt er dan iets moois uit.”^A

Reflection and discussion points

Previously, in the introduction, I extensively addressed my understanding and critique of epistemology and positionalities, emphasising the significant role in (qualitative) research. To me, awareness of power dynamics in research concerning vulnerabilities and sensitivities is crucial. However, it is intriguing to stress and reflect on the fact that when a researcher investigates in- and exclusion processes, Othering, and the fluidity of identity, it is also noteworthy that the researcher themselves has to detach identity markers into loose conceptions. What I mean to say with this, in exploring queer Christian identity, I essentially contribute to these static concepts of identity, only to later reintegrate them within the framework of fluidity and intersectionality. Perhaps, at its core, the research unintentionally perpetuates the dichotomy of identity, and it may be a difficult task to avoid doing so. I may have played a role in Othering this group by choosing them as the focus of my research. In other words, I may be amplifying differences of queer Christians by focussing on differences in the first place.

Despite my critical self-examination in this context, my advocacy for individual narratives and lived experiences, and a focus on queer Christians and other supposed ‘dichotomous identities’, I acknowledge that I am, in some way, part of the problem that I identify and discuss. Engaging in research on in- and exclusion processes, particularly regarding identity processes, may make it nearly impossible to avoid viewing frames of ‘The Other’ in relation to ‘Us’. Trying to deconstruct an identity, in research, is inherently influenced by the markers and boundaries assigned to it.

Additionally, I have previously and consistently addressed the notion that labelling identity markers for others is something that should cease to exist all together. I firmly believe that ‘who you are and belong to’ is not something that should be imposed by others, but rather defined by the self. However, perhaps this is a somewhat romanticised ideology. The reason I reflect on this is that, in this research, I also employ labels to signify, categorise, classify, and understand who belongs to what and where. Yet again, one can see that it is particularly important to reflect and be critical of your position as a researcher. In essence, I strive towards a goal in which the non-use of labels and the intersectionality of identity should receive more recognition, yet at the same time, I do not always adhere to this in my own research. To address this concern and simultaneously acknowledge my own efforts, I am

convinced that when a researcher is reflexive on these aspects, demonstrating an awareness of these intricate matters, it significantly contributes to the discourse in academia.

Concurrently, there must be an awareness that constructing identity markers without labels is perhaps impossible. In essence, this aligns with what has been discussed in the theoretical framework: it is an inevitable fact that a 'Them-group' must exist to create an 'Us-group'; the construction of (social and individual) identity is, at its core, an interplay within these dynamics. Unfortunately, within society, we are witnessing a growing polarisation concerning 'the power of the versus', not only in the context of queer Christian identities, but also in different other societal domains where polarisation appears to be on the rise. What I mean to say by this, while my intention is certainly not to portray a sceptical or negative picture on the future – in fact, quite the opposite –, removing all frameworks and labels, a stance I personally lean towards, would also create a certain chaos. As I have argued, concurring with other scholars, boundaries and categorisations are necessary to recognise and construct collectivity and feelings of sameness. If boundaries and labels are entirely eliminated, what would happen? Is this even possible? What boundaries are established then? Are they even established? When do I become part of a group? Who am I?

In other words, I do advocate for boundaries that are somewhat perhaps less static, allowing for easier movement to create space for individuals who fall between the cracks of these rigidly defined boundaries which are socially constructed and gatekept. Being caught in the power of the versus, a common experience for the queer Christians that I have spoken to, is an experience that I would not wish upon anyone. I believe there is much to learn from actively listening to others and placing an understanding of the other and individuality at the forefront. Rather than viewing individuals from our own perspective, narratives, and as a generality. Eventually, the end goal is to soften the sharp edges of a boundary or frame that one inevitably has to deal with in groupness and collectivities.

Finally, despite the potential involvement in this thesis regarding boundary making processes, transgressions, and even Othering, arising from the linguistic and visual nature of labels and decisions that are inevitably shaped by my own context, I maintain the argument and affirmation that this 'end goal' is intentionally highlighted as the central aim and objective of this research – an accomplishment that has been realised.

Further Research

In relation to recommendations for further research exploring topics addressed in this thesis concerning the construction and (re)negotiation of Dutch queer Christians' identity and

corporeality, there are various scopes to choose from and build upon. While multiple points deserve attention, I will mention a few in the upcoming paragraph.

Firstly, it is interesting to incorporate the perspective and experience of ‘the Institute’ alongside this ethnographic data, where individual narratives and lived experiences are central. This could be achieved, for example, by employing more theological concepts or theories, or by conducting interviews with certain officials from ‘the Church’, perhaps done by conducting ethnographic research within a church. Additionally, in expanding this research further, consideration could be given to a more historical inquiry that might underpin the narratives and experiences discussed in this thesis.

Secondly, as I have previously pointed out, despite efforts to achieve diversity, my specific research population poses biases and gaps. Most have pursued or are pursuing higher education, all are white, and I have not differentiated among specific Christian denominations. Naturally, there are research gaps here that could be addressed by other scholars, or myself, in further research. For instance, exploring how ethnicity plays a role in these experiences and uncovering the dynamics involved. This invites for more research to be conducted into the intersectionality regarding identity markers. Research could be conducted into the lived experiences of queer Christians with a migration background, focussing on the notion of being caught between the power of the versus in the context of Dutch homonationalism. The same could be done extensively for the lived experiences of Dutch queer Muslims. Next to this, it would also be interesting to highlight specific denominations, possibly conducting a comparative study on multiple denominations. Additionally to conducting a comparative study on multiple denominations, it could be an intriguing addition to also focus on different theological aspects within these denominations. Furthermore, research could be conducted on specific groups with, for instance, a lower socio-economic status to examine how they perceive this additional dimension alongside the already existing ones. Of course, it is important to acknowledge that changing the demographics of individuals in any research will undoubtedly allow for different results, as this is precisely what makes ethnographic research so captivating. Nonetheless, it is worthwhile to mention this potential aspect.

Lastly, something I have developed a specific interest in during this research is the individual experiences of non-cisgender Christians. There is still limited knowledge about the particular experiences of, for instance, transgender, non-binary, and intersex Christians in relation to corporeality and how this interplays with theological concepts. Here, I identify a

notable gap that could be addressed in future research. What also became clear in this research regarding corporeality and the experiences of transgender and non-binary individuals were the Christian values surrounding corporeality and how they might conflict with the experience of gender dysphoria and the desire for physical adjustments. This could be an interesting focal point to depart from and initiate further research.

Finally, in this thesis, my aim was to contribute to the ongoing shift in scholarly focus from examining generality to closely attending to individual experiences, emphasising the fluid and dynamic nature of queer Christian identity and corporeality. It is, therefore, of invaluable significance that multiple subjectivities are inherently crucial in this context. I hope to have done justice to the stories told by the individuals that I have spoken to. Additionally, I hope that this thesis contributes to the broader discourse – both within academia and on a societal level – regarding identity constructions and (re)negotiations of those stories that are often overlooked, but deserve every right to be heard.

Bibliography

- Akachar, Soumia. 2015. "Stuck between Islamophobia and Homophobia: Applying Intersectionality to Understand the Position of Gay Muslim Identities in The Netherlands." *DiGeSt. Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies* 2 (1-2): 173-187.
- Anderson, Benedict. 2006. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso books.
- Asad, Talal. 2003. *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Barth, Fredrik. 1998. *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference*. Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press.
- Baumann, Gerd. 1999. *The Multicultural Riddle: Rethinking National, Ethnic, and Religious Identities*. New York: Routledge.
- Butler, Judith. 2002. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.
- Bracke, Sarah.
2008. "Conjugating the Modern/Religious, Conceptualizing Female Religious Agency: Contours of a 'Post-Secular' Conjunction." *Theory, Culture and Society* 25(6):51-67.
2013. "From 'Saving Women' to 'Saving Gays': Rescue Narratives and their Dis/continuities." *European Journal of Women's Studies* 19(2):237-252.
- Braidotti, Rosi. 2008. "In Spite of the Times: the Post-Secular Turn in Feminism." *Theory, Culture and Society* 25(6):1-24.
- Casanova, José. 1994. *Public Religions in the Modern World*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- Cavanaugh, William T. 2009. *The Myth of Religious Violence*. Oxford: Oxford UP.
- Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek (CBS). 2020. "Ontwikkelingen in religieuze betrokkenheid." CBS. Accessed January 20, 2024. <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/longread/statistische-trends/2020/religie-in-nederland/2-ontwikkelingen-in-religieuze-betrokkenheid>
- COC Nederland. 2022. "Opnieuw stijging meldingen LHBTI-discriminatie." COC Nederland. Accessed January 20, 2024. <https://coc.nl/opnieuw-stijging-meldingen-lhbt-discriminatie/>
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 1989. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." University of Chicago *Legal Forum*:139-167.
- De Hart, Joep, and Pepijn van Houwelingen. 2018. *Christenen in Nederland: Kerkelijke deelname en christelijke geloofsgelovigheid*. The Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP). Accessed January 20, 2024. <https://www.scp.nl/publicaties/publicaties/2018/12/19/christenen-in-nederland>
- Demmers, Jolle. 2012. "Identity, Boundaries and Violence." In *Theories of Violent Conflict*, 20-40. Hoboken: Taylor and Francis.
- Grace, John. 2023. "Pope Francis calls for end to anti-gay laws and LGBTQ+ welcome from church." The Guardian. January 25, 2023. Accessed January 20, 2024. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jan/25/pope-francis-calls-for-end-to-anti-gay-laws-and-lgbtq-welcome>
- Duggan, Lisa. 2003. *The Twilight of Equality: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Forst, Rainer. 2013. "Toleration: Concept and Conceptions." In *Toleration in Conflict: Past and Present*, 17-35. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Frost, David M. 2011. "Social Stigma and its Consequences for the Socially Stigmatized." *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 5 (11): 824-839.
- Ganzevoort, R. Ruud, Mark Van der Laan, and Erik Olsman. 2011. "Growing Up Gay and Religious. Conflict, Dialogue, and Religious Identity Strategies." *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 14 (3): 209-222.
- Gardner, Christine J. 2017. "'Created this Way': Liminality, Rhetorical Agency, and the Transformative Power of Constraint among Gay Christian College Students." *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 14 (1): 31-47.
- Gecas, Victor. 1986. "The Motivational Significance of Self-Concept for Socialization Theory," in *Advances in Group Process* 3, edited by Edward Lawler, 131-156. Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.
- Goffman, Erving.
 1961. *Encounters: Two Studies in the Sociology of Interaction*. Indianapolis: The Bobbs Merrill Company Inc.
 1963. *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall.
- Guadeloupe, Francio. 2009. *Chanting Down the New Jerusalem: Calypso, Christianity, and Capitalism in the Caribbean*. Berkeley : University of California Press.
- Hart, John and Diane Richardson. 1981. *The Theory and Practice of Homosexuality*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Hall, Stuart. 1997. "The Global and the Local: Globalization and Ethnicity." In *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation and Postcolonial Perspectives*, edited by Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti and Ella Shohat, 172-187. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.
- Hekma, Gert and Jan Willen Duyvendak. 2011. "Queer Netherlands: A Puzzling Example." *Sexualities* 14 (6): 625-631.

- Herek, G.M. 2009. "Sexual Prejudice." In *Handbook of Prejudice, Stereotyping, and Discrimination*, edited by Todd D Nelson, 441-467. New York: Psychology Press.
- Hoel, Nina. 2013. "Embodying the Field: A Researcher's Reflections on Power Dynamics, Positionality, and the Nature of Research Relationships." *Fieldwork in Religion* 8 (1): 27-49.
- ILGA-Europe.
 2022. "Rainbow Map 2022." Accessed January 20, 2024. <https://www.ilga-europe.org/files/uploads/2022/06/rainbow-map-2022.pdf>
 n.d. "Rainbow Europe." Accessed January 20, 2024. <https://www.rainbow-europe.org/#8651/0/0>
- Jenkins, Richard. 2014. *Social Identity*. Hoboken: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group.
- Knippenberg, Hans. 1998. "Secularization in The Netherlands and its Historical and Geographical Dimensions". *GeoJournal* 45: 209-220.
- Lechner, Frank J. 1996. "Secularization in The Netherlands?" *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 35(3): 252-264.
- Levy, Denise L. and Patricia Reeves. 2011. "Resolving Identity Conflict: Gay, Lesbian, and Queer Individuals with a Christian Upbringing." *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services* 23 (1): 53-68.
- Mahmood, Saba.
 2009a. "Agency, Performativity, and the Feminist Subject." In *Pieties and Gender*, edited by Lene Sjørup and Hilda Rømer Christensen, 11-45. Leiden: Brill.
 2009b. "Religious Reason and Secular Affect: An Incommensurable Divide?" *Critical Inquiry* 35 (4): 836-862.
- Mol, Ronald. 2023. "Paus Franciscus: LHBTIQ+ Personen Welkom, Maar Houd Je Aan de Regels." *Gaykrant*. August 13 2023. Accessed January 20, 2024

www.gaykrant.nl/2023/08/13/paus-franciscus-lhbtq-personen-welkom-maar-houd-je-aan-de-regels/

NOS. 2023. "Nederland opnieuw plaats gezakt op Europese lijst voor LHBTI-rechten." NOS. Accessed January 20, 2024. <https://nos.nl/artikel/2474723-nederland-opnieuw-plaats-gezakt-op-europese-lijst-voor-lhbt-rechten>

O'Brien, Jodi. 2004. "Wrestling the Angel of Contradiction: Queer Christian Identities." *Culture and Religion* 5 (2): 179-202.

"Protestantse kerk en het homohuwelijk." Protestantsekerk. 2022. Accessed January 20, 2024 <https://protestantsekerk.nl/verdieping/protestantse-kerk-en-het-homohuwelijk/>

Puar, Jasbir.

2006. "Mapping US Homonormativities." *Gender, Place and Culture* 13(1): 67-88.

2007. *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Ryan, Louise. 2011. "Muslim Women Negotiating Collective Stigmatization: 'We're just Normal People'." *Sociology* 45 (6): 1045-1060.

Scott, Joan. 2009. Sexularism. Ursula Hirschmann Annual Lecture on Gender and Europe April 23. Florence: European University Institute.

Sjørup, L. E. 2009. "Introduction." In *Pieties and Gender*, edited by Lene Sjørup and Hilda Rømer Christensen, 1-9. Leiden: Brill.

Swann, William B., Russell E. Johnson, and Jennifer K. Bosson. 2009. "Identity Negotiation at Work." *Research in Organizational Behavior* 29: 81-109.

Tajfel, Henri. 1981. *Human Groups and Social Categories: Studies in Social Psychology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Taylor, Charles. 2007. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Thumma, Scott. 1991. "Negotiating a Religious Identity: The Case of the Gay Evangelical." *Sociological Analysis* 52 (4): 333-347.
- Triandafyllidou, Anna. 1998. "National Identity and the 'Other'." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 21 (4): 593-612.
- Van Bijsterveld, Sophie. 2010. "Religion and the Secular State in the Netherlands." *Religion and the Secular State: Interim National Reports*.
- Van Klinken, Adriaan. 2017. "Queer Love in a "Christian Nation": Zambian Gay Men Negotiating Sexual and Religious Identities" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 83 (4): 947-964.
- Van Liere, Lucien. 2014. "Teasing 'Islam': 'Islam' as the Other Side of 'Tolerance' in Contemporary Dutch Politics." *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 29 (2): 187-202.
- Verhallen, Tessa. 2016. "Tuning to the Dance of Ethnography: Ethics during Situated Fieldwork in Single-Mother Child Protection Families." *Current Anthropology* 57 (4): 452-473.
- Verkuyten, Maykel. 2005. "Ethnic Group Identification and Group Evaluation Among Minority and Majority Groups: Testing the multiculturalism hypothesis." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 88 (1): 121-138.

Appendix 1: Translation of empirical data

Introduction

A: “Religion is self-reflection. You must let the other person be and not judge. Those who can really see God, are pure of heart and they simply see the person and God in that. God is everything. But yeah, allowing each other freedom to be themselves, no matter what, remains difficult. The struggle within myself sort of breaks me, I am not in my happiest phase.”

Chapter 1: Theoretical approaches to identity making processes, post-secularism, tolerance, and (re)negotiation

N/A

Chapter 2: Dutch context: State, church, and queerness

N/A

Chapter 3: I'm one of 'them' that has to leave

Introduction

A: “In the meantime, I have gone through the whole process of discovering that I am transgender and going through that transition, coincidentally outside of ‘the Church’. Then back in church, after I had already experienced the inner struggle between the moral compass and the rational about the existence of God, I realised that that was one more thing which placed me outside of ‘the Church’. Because, now, I was identified as ‘one of those who has to leave’. A few times, I literally thought: Yes, I should just stop doing this. That God exists. Life’s now, and that’s it. But... I couldn’t do that! That’s an underlying struggle that you live with. Which causes unrest”.

‘The Institute’ is ‘vile’

B: “The church with the small c, and ‘the Church’ with the capital C”

C: “I think ‘the Institute’ is quite vile. I’ve also had some pretty bad associations with that. Especially, with me being a woman and my sexuality. And also in history, faith and religion have done some pretty shitty things. So I kind of don’t support that.”

D: “For me, the last straw was that our pastor was quite negative in his sermons. He somewhat adopted the trend of purifying ‘the Church’ and those who do not feel at home should just leave. Then, only the good ones remain. So, exclusion. That sermon was about homosexuality actually.”

E: “You’re in a community with three hundred people or something. You can find something in everyone that you don’t agree with, so to speak. And ‘the Church’ makes no statement at all about most of those things, because it’s not necessary. (...) Like, what kind of things you should sing in church. How you see God. And what exactly is more important about faith. Whether or not the creation happened exactly as it says in the Bible. Things like that. With those different opinions, we can all sit together in a church. But the moment I say: Hey guys, I would like to marry a woman, then everyone says: No, but THAT is where we draw the line! That I think: Why is that line there? I think I find that difficult to accept or something.”

F: “On certain points... The fact that they [the Institute] establish themselves that way, and they don’t do that at any other concept. Everything is negotiable. But not this [man or woman]. I just don’t understand that about ‘the Church’.”

G: “And that [existence of the discussion about gender identity in society] is another example of how history and humanity simply meander and pilgrimage towards the future. But, then as a church you should not say: ‘And now we know everything! Yes in the past.... No, that’s right, that’s true, that’s old. But now, we know everything! And it stops.’ No, of course not! And that tenacity is just really irritating.”

H: “An abomination”

I: “You’re very much part of the group in a church. So you feel that the group can turn against you. You can be left out. And it’s just bizarre what that does to you. A constant struggle.”

Claiming space

J: “And how do I view my faith? How do I see God? Can I claim the space to be who I am? As a child I thought: Yes, okay, this is the Bible and this is what the text says. Yes. Hmm.

Then I don't have that much choice, you know. Then it's quite complicated. I can like men, but that's just not going to work you know. It doesn't work. That's annoying. (...) Because of those texts, yes. Quite, well, negatively charged. So, at first I thought: Well, okay, apparently that's my fate. And then afterwards I thought: That can't be true, can it? How can it be that a creation, say, God's Creation, is made in such a way that a number of people cannot fully participate in it? I couldn't accept that.”

K: “But my parents are still very much trying to understand [their pansexuality and non-binary identity]. They don't use my new name yet, and sometimes they do. It's a bit complicated. And in the beginning they were especially afraid that I would lose faith. And we had a lot of conversations about that, and kind of... those are kind of crazy conversations, because you kind of have to defend yourself, but they're your parents. You just want love and understanding. Still a lot of love between us, we really hugged everything out. I love them very much. But in that aspect, they just find it very difficult to get their head around it.”

'Psychological instability'

L: So they [the Institute] felt that there's enough evidence of psychological instability that I wasn't suitable for religious life. Yes, of course I don't agree with that [loud laughter].”

Being caught in the power of the versus

M: “For me it [sexuality] was not something I could suppress. It became a kind of struggle within myself. And it also caused psychological problems. Even to the point where I was dealing with this [the struggle] daily. Sort of something existentials. It's about your own identity, which is almost intertwined with everything. With your vision of the future. With your desire. So you can't turn that part off. And what happens if you do? Yes, and even more so, that you reject that within yourself? This in combination with this feeling of complete loneliness. With respect to the people around you. And you're actually denying something, right. You don't tell anyone. Because you're keeping something a secret. And then, simultaneously, the realisation that I could never have a relationship with a woman.”

N: “Look, the moment when you really start to think about: Does my God allow this? Should I give up my faith now? I don't want that either, because it's worth too much to me. But do I have to give up part of myself? That actually feels kind of wrong. You think, well, am I not Christian enough? But can I be a Christian in this way or am I really just lying to myself?”

O: "I'm in a bit of a split. We have access to the internet. And there is talk of course. The Nashville statement, something is being said about it. Trump wants to kick transgenders out of the military. Something is being thought about this. I hear these things. I hear this blunt criticism. I can't blame them for that, because they don't know that there is 'one of those' around. But on the other hand, I do know what their opinion is about it. And the longer this takes, the bigger the gap becomes to eventually bridge it. And two of the three or four in particular, I think they can maintain their decency. They just won't mention or talk about it. But with two others, I'm like oh [groan] I don't want that. And that can very easily get bogged down in an unsafe environment with bullying behaviour. Or being ignored. Or exclusion. And I know that, yes, you shouldn't worry about it, that is the standard answer. But yeah, that's not how it works. It is your home."

P: "I can't talk about my childhood, for example. Because if I say too much like... in primary school with female friends you play with them.. Yes, what do you mean, female friends? Didn't you have any male friends? No, I didn't have that. Why? No, not because I was transgender, but because I was just a girl at the time. So, you can't talk about that. Thus, I remain quite superficial about my childhood. People feel this distance. Then, they also remain superficial."

Q: "Yes, maybe it's too intense to go with a woman. I think it would be fun to take a date, but in the end I don't dare to. Because yes, I am a board member, and a board member, I am the example blah blah blah. I don't know, I still find that scary."

R: "Yes, because apparently I still depend a lot on people's judgments, I think. Or I'm afraid of being judged about this."

S: "And Naomi [Renée's wife] often says: Say hi to your grandma for me! And then there are times when I am there. And then, I can't even do that... Yes, so I actually also make Naomi disappear a little. And I think that is perhaps the most difficult thing. How to deal with that, you know? I'm still not sure. Oma is 94 and she could just die. And how would I feel that we have such intimate contact, but there's still a distance? Would I regret that? I do not know."

T: "I just can't get it out of my mouth. There's something really old in there. What she expresses. That I really... yes... A lot of shame. And fear of judgement. So, that someone else will look at me differently. I had this in the past too. I was afraid that people would definitely start looking at me differently. And she [grandma] judges too. So like, this judgement is

coming at me. From someone who is very important to me. Yes, that does weigh heavily. In that sense, I still have a way to go.”

Chapter 4: She moved with shameless wonder. The perfect creature rarely seen.

Introduction

A: “Do you know Hozier? He has a song and then he sings about a woman and how shamelessly she goes through life. Yes, that song is really my goal! (...) Within the Reformed Church, my body is a kind of shame. For example, my body would cause sin to a man, or it would make a man think sexual things and that’s absolutely not allowed of course. So yes, the mere fact that you exist is shameful.

The body as: shameful

B: “I think it is mainly with regards to the physical area, I have been influenced quite a lot by this Reformed side. You’re taught this Calvinistic work ethic within the Reformed Church. Just always working and keep going. You can do more. I think that’s also part of your body. You’re not that forgiving of your body, in my opinion. At least that’s what I am, I think. (...) You don’t have to be connected to your body because you have [according to the Reformed Church] to work with your body and with your spirit, you go to heaven. That’s not connected.”

C: “I still find it uncomfortable when I am a little naked, even though it has been getting easier. But, still, before I go out the door, I, now and then, have to have a moment of meditation like: Okay, this is allowed. This is my body. I can do whatever I want with it, sort of, but sometimes I have to do that consciously, because otherwise I sometimes still feel so uncomfortable in what I do.”

D: “But it’s really about *being* gender itself. Like it’s strictly interpreted [by the institute], there is simply nothing other than woman or man. Not woman and man. But either. And that [gender identity] is linked one to one to your body. So your body says what you are.”

E: “I wish I could do whatever I want with my body. That I dress very covered up or go very naked, because that’s what I want at that moment, for example. And also, for example, being

able to have sex for my own pleasure and not necessarily that I have to meet an expectation at that moment.”

The body and clothing: a playing field?

F: “I sometimes like to play up stereotypes. So every now and then, I like to be very feminine with a lot of make-up, and all in pink, and then walk around the city. Or very 'masculine'. Yes, I like to play with clothes when I feel like it and have time. Then, I also feel more connected to my queer identity.”

G: “That [gender identity] is really complicated. For me, that’s also something yeah... I came out of the closet to my fraternity last summer because of this. Yes, I have been thinking about that for myself for some time, but only then did I start to discover how I wanted to shape that in my life. And how my pronouns are important. I'm still thinking about that. How bad is it really when people call you she/her? It just feels kind of annoying. Then I think, that's enough reason. Then, I can put that aside. However, for example, what kind of clothes you wear to fraternity meetings or something like that. Of course, that always has very strict rules.”

H: “I'm very concerned with things like that. Like: Does that really matter to me? For example, I'm now thinking about whether I want a tie from my fraternity. All men have a tie. And all women have a brooch. And I also have a brooch. I'm thinking about that now. How important do I actually think that is? Do I really want a tie? Or do I just want a tie so that people no longer see me as a woman?”

'Physical adjustments'

I: “There are people who really struggle with that [‘the Church’s’ narrative on gender transitions]. And I’m very happy that my realisation and the whole process surrounding my transition took place outside of faith. Might sound very crazy. (...) At least I wasn't burdened with another moral aspect of my decisions. I had enough with just myself.”

J: “There are some people who say: You should be happy with how God made you, so you shouldn't change your body. Then, I think: Yes, that’s incredibly hypocritical! Next week you’ll be injecting your lips! Let's be honest. I don't think that makes any sense, because someone’s dyeing their hair and we don't think that’s a problem. So where do you draw the line, you know?”

K: “Well recognising that it [transgender] exists at all is one thing. But then I have to explain again that the healthy body I supposedly cut into, is not so healthy. And that there’s also a clash of views on humanity and how do you make it clear that it is about actual suffering? And when there’s actual suffering, you shouldn’t be compared to someone who wants to change their lips, because it’s more beautiful or suffers from breasts that are too small or too large without there being a medical indication. You can’t compare it to that. The steps that someone who is transgender takes to come to terms with it or at least make their condition viable: That’s really different.”

L: “Yes, I don't really know how to explain that feeling or anything, I find that difficult. But just the fact that you wake up and immediately think: Uh, this isn't supposed to be like that. Or when you walk onto the beach you think hmm... this is just not it. (...) The way your clothes fall over your body, you find it annoying. Every day.”

M: “The only thing about my body that I was really relieved to have gone. was my breasts. And I only realised that after the operation. The morning I woke up I was like: Oh... yes this is it! That's really nice [laughing].”

N: “I have absolutely no regrets about the steps I’ve taken. What I’ve done is to ensure that my environment responds to me as I am! And that's a man.”

Sex and celibacy

O: “I may impose things on myself that I don't impose on others regarding my body. And I also notice it [the influence of the Reformed Church] sexually. That, especially when I have sex with men, I notice that I actually do more of what I think they want instead of what I enjoy, for example. And I think that’s also part of the image of what I received from the Reformed Church: You don't do sex for yourself, you do sex for someone else.”

P: “From an early age, I wanted to become a priest. Or monk. Or at least something in church. And that includes celibacy. I think that’s a natural way of looking at life. At least if you don't get too worked up about it.”

Q: “The accumulation of things is that in the past I’ve participated or done things in the student church here in...[hometown] around pink celebrations. And that I had a relationship with a man. And that, at the time, it was about again, I don't remember exactly what the subject was in any case there was something about the Catholic Church and homosexuality

again. And then I got involved in that discussion in... [name of newspaper], and I wrote pieces about it on the internet. (...) They don't think that's appropriate for a priest. (...) At least that idea [talking openly about sexuality and sex]. That's also the idea of priest and ordination, that the priest is a kind of nothing person."

R: "So someone without too many emotions of their own and such. So that doesn't include an experience of sexuality. Or have ideas about it yourself. They ['the Church'] would rather not have that."

S: "Celibacy should then start from the womb, well... I think it's an un-Christian concept of virginity. It's about a state of mind and not necessarily about something you've ever done. If that's what you think, then anything even close to that is contagious. (...) The idea that if you ever have sex, then you are actually lost for life."

T: "Look, the fact that I have to think a lot about that [how to express your relationship to others] and have to put it into words, that has to do with the fact that it has to be justified to 'the Church'. I have to be able to explain how this relates to celibacy. I think I have a very good story for that. At least, a story that convinces me. And what I really think from the bottom of my heart. That's not a cover-up. If that were the case, I wouldn't be able to live with myself."

Chapter 5: Finding the rainbow within the black and white

Introduction

A: Dear family,

We can well imagine that the invitation to this wedding is not easy for everyone. For that reason, we would like to let you know that we fully understand if you do not want to come. Feel free to let us know. If you have any questions or would like to converse with us, we are open to that as well. This can be done via telephone number.... Or via email address....

Warmly,

Naomi and Renee

'Contradiction in terminus'

B: “So, for example, we [the Queer Christian committee in the student association] have all discussed how you actually fall outside of the Christian world. But, at the same time, fall outside of the queer world. The moment I'm in [the local gay bar] and someone finds out I'm Christian. You know. You tell them you are part of ... [the Christian student association]. And then: Oh, you're Christian!?! And then they immediately look at you like ohhh... well, that one isn't queer. And then they turn away. Like: That link is made immediately by a lot of people, that it just can't go together. So, in both worlds, you are kind of on the outside.”

C: “So that [not accepting of self-being] is a conflict that I find myself in again. That's also a bit of the external conflict. Because when I tell that to people who have no association with religion, they are like: Yes, why are you with that club? Who doesn't want you. Then just leave, right? Yes, I have one foot outside the door, that's how I feel. But this is the life I actually want to lead. And when I imagine leaving, I just get homesick.”

D: “Now, I see that this [queer and Christian] can go completely together. Yes. Everything about myself is who I am. Being my own human. It's all allowed to exist.”

E: “People say: Well! How can you still call yourself a Christian and want to belong to that church? Because yes... there were some, on both sides... sometimes yes, hostility is too strong a word. But a misunderstanding to make that choice.”

F: “The fact that ‘the Church’.. or that the LGBT community and ‘the Church’ would be great allies. Because they are both fighting the same kind of battle against the current norm in society. And admittedly, both have different directions. (...) Neither of them are the norm. You could support each other as both not being part of the norm. But feeling that from both sides... I have the feeling that neither side has the idea of: Let's do that.”

G: “So it's both. The outside guard doesn't understand you, and neither does the inside guard. Also family and friends, or some others. Also in this, you feel like you are being pulled in all directions every time. So, in the past it was something that I felt internally, that didn't feel right, and every time the outside world appealed to me being a woman, who I wasn't, I solved that. But now it's like, I have to explain to the outside world what ‘the Church’ means and that there's more nuance to it than just ‘the Institute’. And also nuance here in the community. And on the other hand, the inside guard whom you have to explain that ‘the transgender’ is not Dame Edna, but that it's simply more than that. It means more. And that

you don't see some of them either. Nor recognise them. Yeah, I can't really elaborate further on that. And this creates continuous tension."

H: "I said halfway through the conversation: We're going to stop this conversation, because we're really not getting anywhere. Because, then I had to convince them. Then, it becomes a trench of: I say A. He says B. And we're not going to find each other. You don't use the same arguments. That was often the case in the community, like: How can you explain that [faith] on rational grounds? Then it's all nonsense, isn't it? I thought yes, if you start like that then yes... It [faith] is not rational. That's hopeless. And the same was done on theological grounds, on the other side of: Doesn't it say this and that? So you had to justify yourself on both sides. That's annoying."

I: "What you don't want people to do to you, you do to others. You are allowed to disagree. Fine. But you can still be respectful of someone else's beliefs. Yes, that was when I thought: Ooh. The community can be harsh too."

Reframing God

J: "And I have all the respect for that. But it does seem so sad to me, in the sense that you have to say goodbye to something that's also very dear to you. So I've been looking for a way to reconcile them. And that worked out well! In my opinion."

K: "How do you deal with texts? How do you interact with the community? How do you deal with each other? So how do you live your life? Actually!?! The idea that you still answer to the call that's in the Bible: Do it for each other and do it with each other. And don't live for yourself, but with the people around you. So, do that while not doing violence to yourself. There's some kind of balance in that."

L: "I see God as someone who wouldn't want people to be put into boxes and to have to comply with the rules of society."

M: "God can be found everywhere. I always think there's something divine about beauty and connection. Yes, love, beauty and connection, I find that divine."

N: "He is Life. He is there. She is there. You can make anything from it. To put it into words, God is *the* creator with compassion. And the creator who is overflowing with love. We as creatures are actually the result of that love, the love that can only give. Which can only pour out."

O: “So it can coexist together! And it’s less black and white than you might think beforehand.”

P: “And, immediately, that always gives me the feeling of, ooh, I can let it all go for a while. I don't have to do it alone. I can trust what’s there.”

Q: “I had received a completely different image of God: a punishing God who could reject you forever. And now, suddenly, a completely different God was there. As a source of love. Which is unconditional. And forever. From whom, you cannot be separated. That was a turning point. And that’s also very strange, that I got a kind of clarity in my head as if... well, people sometimes say that it can wake you up or something. Or some kind of enlightenment experience. It certainly was, because it suddenly flows... It flows through me, that love too.”

The supermarket

R: “So okay, I don't accept that text. Can I do that? As an individual. Well, I like that? And I don't like that? To what extent is that still okay? A kind of supermarket idea, like this is convenient for me and this is not convenient for me.”

S: “I thought for a long time: Okay, but am I not forgetting a whole part of that... yes, the whole sin aspect that’s still often associated with Christianity. Am I ignoring that because I want to kind of read the Bible in the way it suits me?”

T: “Hmmm, lying to myself maybe? For example, that's what my dad says to me: Yes, you shouldn't just fill in the Bible so that it suits you. That I believe that God allows me to be Queer or at least allows to have those relationships. Do I believe that just because it suits me? Or do I believe that because I actually read the Bible that way, so to speak?”

Vulnerability is a strength

U: “God loves me for who I am. And if I’m struggling with something, I can go to God.”

V: “I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made”

W: “An example, that Psalm is a very warm, personal Psalm. In which you also realise or express the realisation that God made you and knows me as he’s made me, but also really made me with me being transgender. And initially, that Psalm was more like, you know all

my comings and goings, and my thoughts, you know when I do this. That was more like the policeman who checks on you. That was my image of God. That quickly transitioned to just looking for that warmth of that Psalm. He made me. And He saw that I was good.”

X: “I didn't want to live out of fear because of that image of God, I wanted to live out of love.”

Y: “It helps me to have the eyes of Jesus. And that’s really true. I have started to pay attention to people who are excluded. And how hard that can be. Yes, for people who are excluded by their own fellow human beings. And realising that that’s not what our destiny is or something. I think He does care about me. And I also think that because I dare to show my vulnerability now, it also helps other people to do so. And also show that that can be a strength. Which can give you something if you bring it into the light.”

Z: “The best thing about faith is that you do it together. It’s a very beautiful solidarity within your association or group. And when I go to my studies or at a course, I find out that there’s one other Christian there, then yes, it’s very nice because you immediately share something.”

AA: “Yes, then I think, oh yes, we understand each other, you know? And that feeling of doing that together for a higher purpose or something.”

BB: “The fundamental thing about every human being, is the fact that they are human. And ‘the Church’ also says, you are not allowed to approach that person in other ways. You cannot be reduced to one thing or the other. While this happens very often, of course. Well, that's one of the great things that the Christian tradition could contribute to this world. Everyone is human. And you cannot reduce anyone to one aspect. Only fully human.”

Influencing others

CC: “I have to tell that message. People need to hear that. And then there was a whole process in ... [name of her church]. Finally, with the steps that have been taken. Through [name of queer Christian organisation] I have really been to a lot of places. Also at my old high school, eventually. I talked to the school’s management team. And all kinds of school-managerial types. And I’ve also been in a documentary with them. So yeah, I think it's very wonderful. Something was released in me. A kind of strength and standing up for love. And that has brought about so many special things.”

DD: “People have gone to that group and said: Hi! We are Queer, lesbian, gay, whatever, we want to have a say and we also want to offer space about ourselves here in the association. We want to talk about this.”

Chapter 6: Lenny and his Bob: A remembrance

Introduction

N/A

Conflicting feelings with ‘the Church’

A: “And we got to know each other and we were quickly put into touch with the municipality that sold this house. Well, renting a house was not possible at all. That wasn’t allowed at all, because that was 45 or 46 years ago. Yes, then we wanted to move in together and then I thought: Yeah, I want that, but not secretly. You know, like that. That means you have to think about whether you should come out of the closet or not, because I’m not going to live here... But then again, Bob didn't want that either. (...) Then, Bob came out of the closet. He started with the church board, which was ultimately his boss. The ladies of the church board gave him his resignation overnight. And that had a huge impact on Bob, because it had such an impact on him, and of course that had an effect on me as well.”

B: “When I confronted a priest friend in the 1960s with me being gay, his advice was: Keep quiet, then nothing will happen. An advice that would literally have cost me my head if I had continued to follow it. ‘The Church’ is completely blind to these types of side effects.”

C: “‘If you are homosexual, you need to get out of here!’” was told to me when, as a curious teenager, I once touched another boy's penis and he, out of conscience, confessed it to a priest. “I'm not a homosexual,” I thought to myself, but the reprimand remains etched in my memory and in my heart to this day. That was the first consciously expressed confrontation with me being gay.”

D: “And he started talking about it with the pastor from the parish and then the pastor said to him: Listen Bob, I have nothing against it at all. I don't care if you're gay or not. That's fine as far as I'm concerned, that's not an issue. But... What will the dean say about that? From the deanery. Well then I [Bob] will go talk to the dean of the deanery. And the dean said: Listen,

sir, I have no problem with it, it's all fine, but what will the bishop in Den Bosch say? (...) And he did exactly the same, he said: I have no problem with it, but what will the cardinal in Utrecht say? And then Bob said to him: Listen, when I go to the cardinal, he says: What will the Pope say? And if I go to the Pope, the Pope will say: what will God say? And what have I gained from it? You're all burying your heads in the sand! And ultimately, if you're a religious person, those are pretty hard blows. So for as long as our relationship lasted, he always felt that struggle with the institution and what 'the Church' actually means to him, and I felt that too."

E: "That's what I learned from him, that it's just very important that you're happy. That you can be a happy person and that you... that you can be who you are and want to be. If you're gay, that doesn't mean you can't be a good religious person."

God made you the way you are

F: "He didn't experience or receive that himself. He had to fight way too hard for that. He always thought: If I can't find that with you, then I will make sure that other people who come to me can find it with me."

G: "God looks out for you, not because you deserve it, but because He is good. A beautiful old word for this is mercifulness. And actually this means that you can enjoy His goodness without earning it, without having to earn it. God has a plan for you. You were created in His image and you can be here. Who or whatever you are. Very few people can bring themselves to be so good, so merciful to each other and to themselves. It's nice that there is a God who can do that, a God who wants nothing more than that. Try to pick that up! You are worth it. You don't deserve it because you are good, you deserve it because you are human. (...) That's called faith, or trust, believing in yourself, believing in each other and, if you dare, believing in God."

H: "Prejudices are part of people. They give us the opportunity to respond quickly in an unexpected situation to something we do not know well. Our own prejudices often play a role in our own life experiences, everything that life has taught us. (...) Prejudices in themselves are a useful and valuable tool, they offer us safety and security. They allow us to estimate where it is safe and where it is not."

Bob's illness

I: "My Bob"

J: "He was never actually... or yes, he was never angry with me anyway, but he was really like: Listen, everything is fine. Remember, with that finger [waves finger], not in church! I don't want a farewell celebration in church! Make sure you don't do that! Yes, where do you want that? And then Bob said: I want that where other things are also celebrated. Just go to [name of local pub]. And in the [name of local pub] we celebrated our 15th wedding anniversary six months previous. A party like that. And you know, that was just so incredibly important to him."

K: "And then they arrived with him on that stretcher, very sick, on a ventilator. And then they said: Yes, then we'll take him back. I said: There's no way that's going to happen. He wants to go home so badly. Those paramedics thought we were sleeping there [points to the upstairs loft]. Yes, we really can't get him upstairs to his own bed. So I said: Yes, but his own bed is not there at all! Our bed is there [points to the right towards the bedroom], next door in the bedroom. Oh, but then we'll just put him in his own bed. And then I thought: That's the best present we have ever received, because we could no longer sleep together. And then we could still sleep together."

L: "And when the celebration was over, there were a lot of people who thought that was a bit strange, so I just stood up and started walking around. And people immediately saw: Oh, that's what Lenny meant. Well let's go. (...) and Bob stood there and at a good moment, next to the burning candle on his coffin, there was also a half-empty beer. Someone had put that there. People could be with him."

M: "He [Bob] immediately banned 'the Institute' completely. Not the people at 'the Institute', but 'the Institute' itself."

Being a good person

N: "In the time of your life you have to make sure that you're a happy person and do the right things. And that you make the right decisions."

O: "The moment you are born you have the right to be there. And yes, that's what Bob always said. You are born naked, you come into the world as propertyless as you are, but you leave it as propertyless as you came, and that's how you leave it. That's how it ends. You don't take anything with you."

P: "And I [Bob] am not going to become a priest and put that [homosexuality] in a corner or something. He really just thought to himself, I just want to have a good and happy life. And I feel fine about that and don't get thrown back every time with Yes, but. That, for example, is what Bob has also taught me over the years. You can be a yes-but thinker or you can be a so-what thinker. If a problem comes your way and you have an approach of So, what. Then you have to solve exactly the same things, and find exactly the same things, but it takes a different route. A yes-but route or a so-what route."

Conclusion

A: "I was thinking about that proverb, you know, how things need to rub against each other before they can shine. So, I thought, yeah, exactly those places where things sometimes clash a bit.. In the end, something beautiful will come out of it."