The Routledge Handbook of Religion, Gender and Society

Caroline Starkey, Emma Tomalin

Butch lesbians, femme queens and promiscuous clergy

Publication details
Megan Robertson
Published online on: 31 Dec 2021

How to cite: Megan Robertson. 31 Dec 2021, Butch lesbians, femme queens and promiscuous clergy from: The Routledge Handbook of Religion, Gender and Society Routledge Accessed on: 27 Oct 2023

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT

Full terms and conditions of use: https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
Introduction

In May 2019, the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA) elected the very first woman, Reverend Purity Malinga, as presiding bishop—the highest office in the denomination. She is the first woman in over 200 years of the Church’s existence and over 40 years of the ordination of women in the denomination to hold this position. The commentary on social media in response to Malinga’s appointment has celebrated it as a sign of the MCSA’s progressive inclusivity. Archbishop Thabo Makgoba, the current head of the Anglican Church of Southern Africa, commented, “Thanks MCSA for leading the way”. The current president Cyril Ramaphosa also commented saying, “Her election affirms the centrality of women as leaders across all structures in society”. In a public letter the MCSA itself stated, “Having endured the cross and discrimination of patriarchy for over 200 years, women of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa have finally broken through the stained glass ceiling by the election of the first Presiding Bishop who is a woman”. The underlying sentiments in these statements suggest that through the appointment of Malinga, the institution has finally ‘achieved’ gender equality and inclusion. This has been compounded by the further appointment of four women as district bishops, with two more set to take up this position at the end of 2022.

This celebration of the MCSA’s progressiveness, however, is blemished by the Church’s past and continued inability to effectively foster equitable and affirming spaces for women and queer people. This is most strongly evidenced by one of the most widely publicised cases involving religion and queer rights in South Africa. In 2009, one Sunday in December, Reverend Ecclesia de Lange, then a minister of the MCSA, announced to her congregation that she would be marrying her same-sex partner. Her supervisory minister laid a charge against her, and she was suspended less than a week after her announcement. In February 2010 Ecclesia was officially excommunicated from the MCSA (Kotze & de Lange, 2011). Ecclesia’s story continues in public memory and, while the appointment of Malinga retains the MCSA’s position as a progressive space of inclusion and transformation for women in the public eye, the question lingers . . . for what kind of woman?
The case of Ecclesia and the MCSA brings up for scrutiny the possibilities and limitations of living and working as a woman and queer person in the context of the Church, and institutionalised religion more broadly. In order to do this, I draw on research which suggests that an analysis of “body practices” and the ways in which bodies matter or fail to matter (in a Butlerian sense) in the context of institutionalised religion provides a productive lens through which to explore institutional norms around gender and sex (McGuire, 2008: 182). Mariecke van der Berg, Kathrine van den Bogert and Anne-Marie Korte in their editorial for the journal *Religion & Gender* (2017: 181) support this argument by pointing out that it is mainly in the context of institutionalised religion where body politics informed by gender, sex and race norms and ideologies are constructed and policed.

Thus far, feminist scholars have adopted embodied lenses to critique the ways in which religious communities exclude women to varying degrees from functioning as clergy within the church. For example, Jenny Sprong (2011) and Cheryl Dibeela (2011) have studied the Methodist and Congregational denominations in South Africa respectively and have demonstrated how masculine conceptualisations and patriarchal theologies around clericalism operates to delegitimise the ways clergy women embody and perform their duties and identities as clergy. Within this group of scholars, there are also those who have demonstrated how women clergy have subverted this through embodied practices. For example, Elizabeth Getman (2014) shows how clergy mothers subvert traditional patriarchal clerical spaces. The potential of understanding the constrictions of gender and sex norms as well as the potential for subverting those norms by focusing on embodied experience has been taken seriously by studies focused on woman clergy in South Africa; however, the scholarship on queer clergy has yet to do the same.

In this chapter I aim to bring the queer body into conversation with the clerical body, thus addressing two gaps which I identify in the literature. First, when the queer body is written about in relation to religion it often becomes the abject body, the marginalised body, and the violated body (Matebeni, 2011) or more recently the appalling body (Marchal, 2019). This is especially the case when that body is also black and a woman (Matebeni, 2018; Lake, 2014). When this violated body is considered in relation to religion, it is often the object of either religious oppression or religious salvation and healing, rather than a body which experiences and shapes religion. Second, when clerical identity and sexuality is written about in more agentic and transformative ways, the gendered and sexed body is often absent (Keenan, 2008). In this sense queer identity and possibilities of queer inclusivity in religion become understood only through experiences, feelings and thoughts, while the material gendered and sexed body is rendered silent. These trends construct the queer religious body either as too sexual to be thought of religious or too religious for embodied sexuality to also be considered a significant part of identity and meaning making. The aim of this chapter is to address this lacuna in the field and to explore how queer religious bodies are implicated in possibilities and impossibilities of being clergy and queer in the space of institutionalised religion. I do this by discussing the ways in which queer clergy in the MCSA experienced, enacted and challenged different embodied gender-sex performances of clericalism.

**Researching queer clergy and their lived experiences**

This chapter draws on my doctoral research which was conducted with five queer clergy and one former queer clergy in the MCSA. I employed extensive ethnographic and participatory interview and observation methods which involved spending over a week getting to know the lives and experiences of each participant. During my time in the field, we spoke about their
childhood experiences of Christianity, church and the MCSA, their narratives of becoming an ordained minister and their struggles and celebrations during their time as clergy.

All the participants in this study are South African, and the denomination’s policies largely speak to South African realities. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling and self-identified as queer. I have intentionally chosen to use queer as a descriptor of identity as it allows me to explore a wide variety of sexual identities without compelling anyone to fit into certain essentialist categories (Stella, 2010: 213). However, at the same time, I recognise the imposition of the term ‘queer’ within the context of Africa. Therefore, following research by Linda Garber (2003) I use other terms to reflect participants’ own terminology for identifying themselves and others. At times this also means relying on no terms at all. Before entering into a discussion of findings, a brief introduction to those whose lives the reader will encounter in this chapter is necessary.

Ecclesia, who exercised her agency in allowing her name to be revealed in my work, identifies as a white, lesbian women. She was excommunicated from the MCSA in 2010 and currently leads a non-profit organisation working toward developing more affirming Christian communities. Bradley is a white clergy person who recently re-entered the ministry and identifies as both ‘queer’ and ‘gay’. Lebo is a young black woman who identifies as lesbian but more often, in our interactions, used no set terms to describe her sexuality. Sam is a mixed-race person who, while often being labelled a woman, felt uncomfortable with any fixed gender labels being attached to her. She still opted, however, to largely use feminine pronouns and referred to her experiences in relation to the experiences of women. Kagiso described himself as a black, Xhosa man and most commonly described himself as gay. Finally, Anele is a black man who self-identified as queer for my study but rarely used any terms to talk about his sexuality.

Conceptualising materiality and embodiment through a queer lived religion approach

In this chapter I make use of theoretical frameworks which enable me to account for the lived experiences of my participants in thoroughly queer ways but which also allow me to theorise their embodied relationship with institutional religion. In my readings of queer theory (Butler, 1988, 1990, 1993a, 1993b; Foucault, 1980, 1997) and lived religion (McGuire, 2008; Nyhagen, 2020), I found that, in many ways, these theories were suggesting similar lenses through which to understand gender-sex and religious identities respectively. Lived religion, for example, theorises religion as a “mode of conduct and being, a performance of identity” (Avishai, 2008: 413). This echoes the deconstructive approach to identities taken by queer theorists, most notably Judith Butler (1990), who collapses the gender-sex distinction and argues that both are performed and are in a never completed process of being made and remade. This renders an authentic or ‘core’ religious or gender-sex identity impossible. In arguing this, however, it should not be assumed that these deconstructive approaches to identity wish away identity categories altogether.

As Christina Hutchins (2006) explains, a deconstructive lens can be opportunistically taken up by those who would benefit from a disregard of the material importance of identity categories in order to make arguments that wish away these categories. Hutchins (2006: 139) uses the example of a man whom she describes as “comfortably liv[ing] the hegemonic norm of compulsory heterosexuality” in a church meeting she attended, who responded to her explanation of identity categories as fluid and unstable by saying, “Yes, these categories are, after all, just categories. We are, after all, all human together. We are all one in Christ”. She argues that because
he more easily fit into normative moulds, it benefited him to use fluidity to obscure difference in ways which left his normativity and power unchallenged. It is, therefore, important to consider that, because social relations of power are implicated in the construction of identities, they have also shaped material realities. By casually dismissing the validity of material realities, one runs the risk of erasing important ways in which people tell their narratives and make sense of their lived realities. Therefore, it is important to incorporate conceptualisations of embodiment in studies with participants whose gendered and sexed bodies are often erased in ways which make it easier for a religious institution like the MCSA to argue that it is a community of “love rather than rejection” (MCSA, 2016).

Karen Alliaume (2006: 98) argues that Butler is not dismissive of material reality. Rather, she argues, Butler’s theory of citationality acknowledges the material body but emphasises the constructed nature of this materiality as it is produced through the repetitive ways in which norms of gender and sex are cited and re-cited and thus gives meaning to a seemingly stable material body and reality which the process itself has produced. These repeated citations create the illusion of an authentic identity or core self which Butler (1993b: 15) refers to as “sedimentation”. As Christian Hutchins (2006: 134) explains, Butler does not advocate for the erasure of identities but rather considers them “permanently unfixed, open sites of becoming” (Hutchins, 2006: 134). McGuire uses a similar understanding to make sense of the materiality of religion. Lived religion helpfully queers the binary between the spiritual or religious and material as evident in McGuire’s (2008: 97) discussion of lived religion,

"Spirituality fully involves people’s material bodies, not just their minds and spirits. The key connection here is not ideas about the body, or simply moral control of the body and its impulses. Rather spirituality is closely linked with material human bodies—and not just bodies in the abstract."

McGuire (2008: 101) argues that by excluding the embodiment of religion, religious belief becomes invisible and relevant only to the invisible thoughts of the believer. She further explores the idea that lived religion is integrally linked to the idea of religion manifesting in practice. For McGuire (2008: 118), lived religion is based on daily life and repeated everyday practices which people use to “remember, share, enact, adapt, and create” narratives which manifest religious meaning in material realities. Lived religion, therefore, not only focuses on people’s narratives or stories, but it also allows for analysis of how these play out in embodied performances.

It is important to note that Butler (1993a: 226–227) argues that these repetitive acts are not ungoverned but are shaped (although not wholly constituted) by socially and relationally defined norms. Bringing this idea into conversation with McGuire (2008: 160), I argue that religion has circumscribed the boundaries which define gender and sex and the accompanying appropriate embodied behaviour and practice. Alliaume (2006: 105) demonstrates that this can be especially useful for understanding the ways in which women and queer bodies are rendered abject when they are excluded as candidates for ordination.

In arguing that lived religion is a queer thing, I demonstrate that to do religion, in many ways, is to do gender and sex. This theoretical lens allows me to explore the ways in which my participants’ experiences are grounded in the sedimentation of their identities as well as how systems of power interact with these identities in multiple and fluid ways. It also accounts for the ways in which participants shift and subvert the identity categories by using performances, various terms or no terms at all related to sexual identity, gender, religion and race to explore their experiences.
Body politics in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa

In discussing the body politics of the MCSA, I look at how seemingly ‘butch lesbians’ and ‘femme queens’ are conceptualised as rebellious and non-conforming as clerical bodies and how they are policed in the MCSA. Butch has been used in scholarship to refer to and construct queer women who dress and act in more traditionally masculine ways, while femme is more commonly used in relation to gender performances, dress codes and behaviours typically associated with femininity. It is important to note that the terms ‘butch’ and ‘femme’ are not reflective of how participants identified themselves in the study. Rather, I have used these terms to reflect the gender assumptions, cultures and politics which the MCSA seems to impose upon queer clergy in policing ways. By using these terms, I argue that queer clergy in the MCSA who do not conform to traditional ways of being feminine or masculine are framed as problematically gender non-conforming.

I go on to explore the concept of ‘promiscuity’ within the MCSA. I use this concept to explore the ways in which it becomes acceptable, or at least accepted, that queer clergy have sex with other clergy at MCSA events or gatherings. However, it is only acceptable when framed within normative frames of gendered power and Church hierarchy. This is clear when compared to the experiences of those who identify or who are identified by the Church as women of colour. These women are largely excluded from the acceptable promiscuous culture of the MCSA and are otherwise erased, violated and violently sexualised as queer women.

Butch Lesbians

I did not enter the field with the expectation that participants’ clothing would be especially significant for my research; however, for both Sam and Lebo, I found that clothing and “presenting” were especially significant in framing their everyday experiences.

Lebo’s everyday attire consists of All-Star sneakers, shorts or torn jeans, a golf shirt and a flat peak cap. When performing in her capacity as minister she would pair her sneakers with a clerical shirt, a collar and long formal pants. In interviews with Lebo, she emphasised that many of her negative experiences in the Church involved the policing of her clothing.

LEBO: The first time I got there [in Swaziland], I was wearing pants, my head was not covered and I was ready. And [the superintendent] said to me, and I appreciate the gracious way in which he said [it], he said, he won’t dictate to me what to wear, that’s not his job, but as someone that has been with the Swazi people for a long time, and understands the culture and the dynamics within that, he feels, people would walk with me better, if, in my appearance, I show them that I’m willing to meet them half way . . . But if I am to go in there wearing pants, and my head not covered, it would then say to them that I am who I am, I come with this sense of authority and to hell with them and it wouldn’t have helped them. And I compromised, but it was difficult for me, it was very difficult.

MEGAN: Was it just that that you felt like you had to change?

LEBO: Yes. But that for me, it made me feel like I was not being true to who I am. Because I’m not that type of person. That was just a very, very hard thing that I had to do in terms of adapting to meet the people where they are. But then when I got out of there, I kind of had a conversation with myself, that in order for me to be able to minister to people effectively, I need to first be true to who I am, and then I need to become a person who can stand for my values, because it just, it just wasn’t a way of dressing, but it was a way of
patriarchy saying, this is how you become a respectable woman. And, if I then allowed that, the women that come after me, the young girls, how do they learn to say no to patriarchy? How do they learn to say, “I am a woman, but I am not the kind of woman that raised you, I am a different woman . . . ” I had that conversation with myself and I came [to her new church], I said we would just have to have a conversation with the people because I’m not going to do it again. I can’t.

This happened to Lebo at her first station\(^1\) in Swaziland, and at the time Lebo tried to conform to the gendered expectations of her style of dress in order to gain cooperation and favour with her church members. Lebo explained to me that she was expected to wear a skirt and cover her head—even outside of the boundaries of church. This was not something expected of all women in this context but specifically of her as a woman minister. Therefore, her body as a clerical body was gendered differently to lay women’s bodies.

For Lebo this was an unsettling experience and one which influenced the ways in which she chose to resist and subvert normative gendered expectations of her dress. For example, in the previous extract Lebo frames her refusal to change the way she dresses as a resistance to patriarchy and as a subversion of the norms attached to being a woman. In the following extract, Lebo resists ideas that she needs to present herself in normative ways associated with a woman “Reverend” in order to be perceived as a minister. While she acknowledges that the way she presents herself may diminish her status as “holy” and clerical, she also reinterprets her current style of dress as a strength which she can use to attract young people and to portray a more relaxed, accessible version of Jesus.

MEGAN: Are there other expectations that you found are placed on you [in this congregation]?

LEBO: Like, hair too, uhm, most of my shoes are All-Stars, that’s all I wear really. If people see me in town, I’m wearing my All-Stars and I’m wearing shorts, or I’m wearing All-Stars and I’m wearing my torn denim jeans and [if] somebody else says hello Reverend, [others are] like, “What? You said who?” And I think, there’s a disconnect for people that even though a person is clergy, they [are] still a person. It’s like, I’m 26, and that’s not going to change because I’m a minister. I want to experience my life as I would if I wasn’t in the Church. And, there is a code of ethics that I live by, but that does not mean I must suffocate myself. And if I’m somehow now all stuck up and stuffy and [if] there’s a 26-year-old who wants to come to church but [they look at me] and [I] look like a Gogo\(^2\) [then they won’t want to come to church]. So [they will think] in order to join them I must look like that—it’s not appealing. So I think I can somehow appear to some demographics as not holy, because I’m not who they expect me to be, but to another demographic, it can be like, “I can do this Jesus thing. Look at her, she’s getting her Jesus on and she’s not stuck up at all”, you see?

Sam seemed to share a similar experience. Sam often wore flip-flops and golf shirts and, as she jokingly put it, had a “passion for cargo shorts”. Sam would change into seemingly more “suitable” ministerial wear when preaching or performing other clerical duties but often maintained a relaxed approach even with her more formal attire. Sam, like Lebo, also described multiple experiences in which she felt pressure to dress and present herself not only in acceptable ways as a minister but also in more normatively “feminine” ways.

In different interviews, Sam described that her style of dress affected the ways in which she was assessed (institutionally termed as being ‘on trial’) when she was a lay preacher hoping to be a candidate for the ministry.
Extract 1:
Sam: So early on that was the kind of thing, so that I toed the line but I could never toe the line well enough, like I always seemed to miss the mark and it became like a constant criticism. Like, her preaching's fine, but [her] body language sucks (uhm), [she] doesn't dress properly, has no decorum . . . and so a lot of the time I felt like people, they didn't put my mind on trial or my sense of call on trial, they put my body on trial and me on trial. You know, they couldn't see it as an integrated whole.

Extract 2:
Sam: But there was always problems with the way I dress, always. So even as a local preacher I was told, “You can’t dress like this”, “You’re too sloppy”, “You’re too boyish”, “Be decent”. So I would give them my interpretation of what decent is and it was never good enough.

In the prior extracts a discourse of ‘neatness’ is continually invoked in relation to Sam’s body and presentation. She is at different times described as sloppy, having no decorum and as if she “rolled out the couch”. Rather than these reflecting Sam’s neatness, these statements seem to tacitly allude to the “boyish” way in which she presents herself. In this way, embodied performances of gender which do not fit comfortably within normatively feminine or masculine framings are policed through subtle reprimands or in more formal procedures of assessment. In fact, in Sam’s experience of being on trial, rather than assessing her preaching ability or her calling, the evaluator assessed her body. In this sense gender normative dress codes seem to be the unofficial uniform for clergy in the MCSA. Yet, although Sam’s body and clothing choices are policed, she also resisted these restrictions. While Sam, in her retelling of the ways in which her body was assessed while she was on trial, argues that the assessor failed to see her body as part of an “integrated whole” and in so doing, she frames her body and the ways in which she chooses to present herself as integral to her calling and her adeptness at preaching.

Sam’s and Lebo’s experiences of being policed illustrate the subtler, taken-for-granted ways in which the informal culture of the Church marginalises particular types of women, most notably those who embody disruptions to heteronormative ideas of gender. By dressing in ways traditionally associated with masculinity, Lebo and Sam threaten the normative persona of clergy and the ways in which women are marginally permitted to occupy that persona—not in the same ways as men but differently—softer. Mimi Schippers (2007: 95) terms these undesirable performances of femininity “pariah femininities” to reflect the ways in which these performances are not only inferior but are disruptive of the very relationship between masculinity and femininity. By putting on their ‘butch’ clothing, Sam and Lebo are occupying the persona of clericalism in ways which were not ordained for them. Therefore, dressing in the ways that they choose, despite institutional pressure to modify the way they embody their clerical identity, becomes in itself an act of “redress” (Crawley, 2008: 208).

Femme Queens
The policing of gender performance was not only confined to the experiences of women clergy in my study but was something which Bradley also experienced. Bradley would often describe himself as “obviously” queer, which he expressed through phrases such as, “Hellen Keller from a helicopter could see I’m as queer as Christmas”. He attributed this obviousness to what he deemed
feminine behaviour and mannerisms. While Bradley’s clothing choices are not policed in the ways that Sam and Lebo experience, he had often been told, particularly by other queer clergy men, to monitor his behaviour so as to not seem to be obviously feminine.

MEGAN: And you were saying like there’s a legitimacy to looking masculine and being masculine, in a masculine body right? Doing masculinity well in a way [Bradley: Yes]. And have you found yourself maybe playing into either?
BRADLEY: Oh, ya, every day.
Megan: Oh really?
BRADLEY: Every day I have to watch out how I talk, I have to watch how I move my hands. Every day I check my give-away comments. So going into my congregation, I have to be careful what my safe spaces are to really just be myself.

Unlike the gender policing Sam and Lebo experience from the institution and other clergy, Bradley polices his own gender expression. This is influenced by the fact that he is not open to all the members of his congregation about his sexuality, partly in order to avoid “rocking the boat” and potentially causing division and upset amongst his congregation.

Another form of policing imposed upon femme men was through the discourses of other queer men.

ANELE: But I am now at a point where, or in this space where, I am not worried if you know, you know [about my sexuality]. If you don’t know, you don’t. Why do I need to shout to people about it? It’s like straight people they don’t go out and shout, “Hey! I’m straight!”
Megan: I’m straight! (Laughter)
ANELE: And so when you’re a drag queen to me it’s like you’re doing it for people. That is how I feel about it. (Uhm) I’m not saying there’s anything wrong with it. But, I don’t see why.

When Anele speaks about “drag” he is not speaking about the cross-dressing performances associated with drag queens; rather, he used the term throughout our interactions to refer to men who perform their sexuality in what he construes as typically feminine ways. At other times in our interviews Anele referred to these femme performances as “soft” or as a desire to wear dresses. I found that the undesirability of femininity motivated Anele to disidentify with particular types of homosexuality where being gay is associated with femininity.

While femininity is therefore policed in various ways, for women (or those who are placed into the category of women) it often denied them legitimacy as clergy. However, for men, it instead granted them access to clerical power. In the following extract, Bradley and Sam use Foucauldian theory (1977) to make meaning of the ways in which they legitimately claim clerical identity and power by performing in normatively masculine or feminine ways.

BRADLEY: Sam helped me to understand this because she does it with race and gender, and then it extends to LGBT people, because she thinks about the vulgarity of the local, using Foucault and saying just like the local, who dresses like the coloniser, who talks like the coloniser, therefore he’s given some form of legitimacy, but the local who embodies their own culture is seen as vulgar. The same with women, you know the woman who wears the heels, and the perfumes, and defers at the right times, gets a certain amount of legitimacy, the girl who doesn’t, you know, abide by the rules is seen as vulgar and mouthy. And I’ve come to realise, I think, and this is particularly big in the Church . . . So, the gay man
who looks like a straight man, who talks like a man, who dresses like a man, who is very masculine, gets a certain amount of legitimacy when they present. . . [But I don’t] when I’m wearing my poncho and I’m, you know, clearly not someone who comes across very masculine all the time.15

This theoretical exposition illustrates that not only are Sam’s, Lebo’s and Bradley’s experiences of being policed reflective of the heteronormative culture of the MCSA, but their ability to put up the required gender performances to maintain their clerical legitimacy mocks and subverts the very gender norms they cite. Just like the drag queens in Judith Butler’s (1990) work, participants’ ability to perform their gender appropriately in contexts which they deem fit reveals the constructed nature of gender as well as the absurdity of policing the ways in which clergy present themselves and indeed live their gendered and sexual lives (Alliaume, 2006: 95, 103). However, it should also be noted that Bradley has significantly more scope than other participants to enact his agency and to choose when and where particular performances are more beneficial. It is significant that Bradley rather than Lebo or Sam could do this, as it suggests that gender and sex cannot be understood as separate categories of identity to be discussed in different policies and doctrines on transformation in the Church—but rather they are co-constitutive of each other and of the norms which are produced within the MCSA.

**Normative queer promiscuity**

KAGISO: There is a tale of a man who is about to die. So he gathers his sons and says, “my children you know me, I’ve been very active in the ministry and a lot of people here from different churches, if I die they’re going to come here and they’re going to have evening prayers. If the Presbyterians come here and pray, please my children hide all my cigarettes and cigars in the studies. If the Anglicans come here please hide all the alcohol in the house. For that is how Anglicans are viewed. They drink a lot.” And then he says, “if the Methodists come, please go and hide your mother.” (Laughs) So [this] already tells you that there is a general perception about Methodist people. That they’re very promiscuous and they’re socialites.

Kagiso related the joke to me to describe the ‘promiscuities’ associated with the MCSA. This anecdote illustrates a common experience or conceptualisation of the MCSA acknowledged by all of my participants—one in which promiscuities are commonplace. Promiscuities are commonly associated negatively with discursive projects that pathologise and demonise queer people and particularly queer men. However, Kathleen Talvacchia, Michael Pettinger and Mark Larrimore (2015) and Elijah Nealy (2015) argue that the term can be reclaimed in much the same way as the term ‘queer’ has been and can be productive in queering understandings of love and hospitality. However, in making this argument these authors often remove any erotic or sexual connotations which this concept might evoke. My participants, on the other hand, made no attempts to hide the erotic activities which they attached to what Kagiso termed the promiscuous culture of the MCSA.

KAGISO: If you go to those conventions, it’s scary to say and almost unbelievable that we admit to this truth. There are women who go to the Women’s Manyano convention. And who leave their husbands for five or six days. And when they get there they engage in sexual intercourse with men who are married with other women in the Young Men’s Guild.
There was in fact one bishop, and I laugh at it now but it was not funny then, he was talking to another group and I happen to be with that group. And he says yes, I know if you guys had gone to Thaba Nchu, you would know exactly what I’m talking about. There was a feast in Thaba Nchu. There were men f’ing other men, women f’ing other women. It was just an ‘f’ fest. And we were laughing at it. But again, it shows you where we are in terms of how we act.

What Kagiso is explaining to me in this extract is something which all participants were familiar with. There seemed to be a normalised and somewhat accepted idea that Methodist gatherings were also erotic spaces. Even though Kagiso at times admonishes the ease with which it is accepted in the Church, the prevalence of promiscuity was hardly ever presented to me by Kagiso or other participants as a ‘dirty secret’. Rather, it was told as a well-known and accepted fact and something which people at various levels of leadership openly acknowledged.

Within the promiscuous culture of the institution, Kagiso was not frowned upon for having multiple partners or for having sex with men at Church events but, rather, he became part of a subculture in the institution which promoted this. According to Malory Nye (2004: 49), “sub-cultures do not simply exist in themselves, but are articulations of resistance to the prevailing dominant culture”. The general acceptance of this subculture disrupts normative ideas of what it means to be Church. In fact, it is subversive because it highlights the inadequacies and hypocrisies of a religious institution which claims its power through producing norms of marriage and monogamy.

While subversive in some ways, Kagiso’s narrative of the culture of promiscuity in the Church also points to the patriarchal power relations which are perpetuated even within this seemingly subversive, queer space. Kagiso, for example, maintained a strict delimitation of who he would sleep with and who he would not.

KAGISO: You’d find also that within the clergy, those who are ministers and would date other males would always come out as being the dominant one in the relationship. So, if you know the gay language of the top and the bottom?
MEGAN: You can educate me.
KAGISO: Loosely speaking, top one would be, in heterosexual language, the male and the one who’s on the bottom, the receiver, in heterosexual language, the female. In terms of sexual positions, that is. Not necessarily in terms of their physique. Generally, from my experience, and I’m speaking from an experience of the fair amount of the Church, of those who are ministers in the Church and homosexually inclined—they would be top. And therefore, they are more inclined to date or to have sexual relations with the younger bottom so that we, and I am saying “we” because I’m one of them, so that we remain dominant. And the majority of those who are bottom tend to socialize outside the Church because even if they were to choose to be with younger men, at least it is without the safe space of the Church where they still have to maintain discipline. Remember, I am top and if my partner is Methodist, they remain younger and I am dominant. At least I can still maintain the discipline there.

The patriarchal norms in the relationships or sexual encounters which Kagiso describes are maintained, not only through how he performs and embodies particular gendered and religious identities, but through who he chooses to be promiscuous with.
In Kagiso’s narratives, it also seems that it is predominantly black male heterosexual promiscuity that is more openly accepted within the MCSA.

MEGAN: And do you think the promiscuity that does happen, like the bishop was saying the f fest. Is it seen as a more male thing to do? Even though he said there was woman with woman. Is it seen as more men?

KAGISO: Well it’s surprising that when we talk promiscuity in the Church, we don’t talk about heterosexual promiscuity. In fact the Church would rather lambaste alcoholics and gays. Because it is almost acceptable for a minister who is married and has a family, who is heterosexual, to have six or ten mistresses. A few in the circuit where he is serving. A few where his friend is a minister and a few where his other friend is a minister. So that when he visits, he sleeps with the other one and then, it’s almost natural. It’s almost acceptable that heterosexual ministers must cheat. There’s a Xhosa saying that loosely translated is ‘the axe must be sharpened outside’.

Significantly, in talking about promiscuity, none of my participants spoke about women sleeping with women at denominational gatherings. I was trying to tease this out in my question in the previous extract when I asked, “Is it seen as a more male thing to do?”. Yet, when I asked about women and even when I explicitly raised the topic of “woman with woman”, Kagiso assumed that I was talking about heterosexual relationships. Possibilities of promiscuity between women are therefore silenced in this narrative of the ‘promiscuous Church’. The ways in which Kagiso speaks to me about the erotic space of the MCSA is almost as if Zethu Matebeni (2014: 61) has whispered into Kagiso’s ear before he answers me, “Do not be bothered to [talk] about lesbians who love each other, or the sex they have, no one is interested in that”, and instead of interpreting it as a facetious warning, he concedes.

**Sexualised queer women**

In some ways the construction of the MCSA as a sexually promiscuous Church does seem, almost by accident, to open up a space for the acceptance of broader sexual expression, for example male-to-male sex and sex outside of marriage. However, based on my conversations with Kagiso and other participants, it does so in problematically heteronormative ways. The promiscuity which is seemingly acceptable continues to celebrate patriarchal masculine sexual prowess and obscures the eroticism of the queer woman. In fact, when women’s bodies were brought into research encounters, unlike the bodies of queer men that were allowed spaces in the Church to be promiscuous, they were surrounded by narratives and experiences of violence.

Sam had previously experienced numerous cases of violence perpetrated by male clergy and male lay people on her body. In the following extract, she speaks about a particularly harrowing incident which occurred while she was a student minister.

SAM: Tuesday morning was always communion day [at the clergy training facility], and then you were on a roster and so, on your day, you were hosting communion. So the one day we’re [standing] around in a circle and the communion is served and I’m standing next to [a] group of boys, guys, young men, men, and they consecrate the elements and it’s time to pass the peace, so we all, like, hug each other because it’s like a normal thing, you hug or whatever. This dude picks me up and he has an erection, like a hard on, and he pulls my bits to his bits. Basically like pulls me into him and picks me up and holds me there and whispers in my ear with very hot sticky breath, that I can still feel, “I almost have you open
now” and then puts me down. [He then] turns around to his friends and they all giggle and high five and you’re standing there and like this has happened in front of everybody but no one acknowledges it—it’s like no one knows. And this was the whole year, incidents like this would happen.

Research focusing on the experiences of black lesbian women in South Africa argue that while homophobic violence is generally high, black lesbians are particularly vulnerable to violence and in particular ‘corrective rape’ because of the potential their sexual identity holds to destabilise the patriarchal gender order and its heteronormative practices (Lake, 2014). Sam’s embodiment of ‘woman’ which is not ”girly” or “pretty” poses a particular threat to male privilege. Thus, instead of receiving a sacrament of peace through communion, her body becomes a sexualised site for a violently patriarchal act of imposed dominance and gender ‘correction’. It is important to note that Sam felt increasingly alienated by the institution and was the only participant who, by the end of our time together, could not motivate why she was still a member of the MCSA.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I draw on the work of scholars who have argued that neither lived religion nor queer deconstructionism should exclude the materiality of identities. I argue that religion, and specifically religious institutions, has circumscribed the boundaries which define gender and sex and the accompanying appropriate embodied behaviour and practice. By investigating how religion is lived in and through queer bodies, I have explored the ways in which normative bodies are produced in the MCSA but also the creative ways in which these norms are inhabited and resisted. The way bodies are viewed, what we do with our bodies, and who has the power to decide both are intensely political. In fact, in terms of the contemporary struggle to leave behind entrenched patterns of domination and violence, they are key political issues.

Participants’ experiences of being constructed and reconstructed as ministers in the MCSA demonstrates the gendered ways in which legitimacy is attached to their identity as clergy. The question raised in the introduction to this chapter posed the question, “For what kind of woman?” is the MCSA an open, affirming and equitable space. Through a discussion of the ways in which bodies matter and fail to matter in the MCSA, this chapter has illustrated that the Church’s progressive gender activism is deeply limited by the kind of woman, and indeed clergy, it envisages for its transformative agenda. This kind of woman is not one who wants to marry her same-sex partner, she is not the kind of woman who transcends the unofficial dress codes for women by dressing ‘boyishly’, and she is most certainly not the kind of woman who does not desire penetration by a man. In fact the data suggests that the kind of woman clergy that is envisaged by the transformation agenda of the institution is a statistical ideal—“one that can touch the heteronormative hallowed stained glass ceiling if she stands quietly on the tippy toes of her not too high heels” (Nadar, 2019: no pagination).

The body imagined by the Church as worthy of ordination is one which is modest, neat and tidy and appropriately gendered. Anything outside of those boundaries is policed through formal procedures, hushed warnings and violence. It is significant also to consider which bodies experienced the policing and, in particular, the more violent expressions thereof. The fact that queer women of colour were the ones to experience the most violent forms of policing, through sexual violence and marginalisation, demonstrates how the intersectionality of identities functions to expel those bodies which are most threatening of the normative values that maintain the existent power hierarchy. Thus, we see that queer men are able to attain power and legitimacy as clergy by minimising their femininity and by displaying masculine performances
of sexual prowess (even when this is done with other men). Yet, women’s bodies fail to matter even when they do their best to appropriate and conform to the institutional norms.

It is clear that the patriarchal and heteronormative culture and value system of the MCSA has remained relatively intact despite policy changes which are inclusive of women clergy and even when women clergy have entered the highest offices of leadership. This is because the kind of woman that has been ‘allowed’ entry is the women who can and must comply with the normative and binary ideas of gender on which the institution relies. The participants’ narratives and experiences in this study suggest that inclusion and institutional transformation rhetoric must consider the diverse and sometimes competing ways of ‘being’ in the institution. This is important in considering the way forward for the inclusion of queer clergy. This is not a separate matter to the inclusion of women clergy; rather, it signifies how vacuous the inclusion rhetoric and policies have been thus far. More optimistically, it also provides an opportunity to reshape the ways in which institutional transformation is understood and allows for a broader praxis of inclusivity.

Notes

1 This work is based on research supported by the National Research Foundation of South Africa under the auspices of the Desmond Tutu Chair in Religion and Social Justice [Grant Number: 118854].
2 A grouping of a number of circuits, which in turn are made up of a number of individual congregations, within a geographic region.
3 Ecclesia was a participant in this research and has opted to use her real name. While anonymity is the standard required by research ethics, the feminist and queer framing of my research also requires an acknowledgement of participants’ agency within the study; this includes the agency to choose how they are represented in research. Ecclesia was provided with a summary of the quotes used in this study as well as extracts used in the chapter which were approved before publication.
4 Considering that homosexuality is still criminalised in other countries such as Eswatini (previously Swaziland), Zimbabwe, Botswana and Namibia, which form part of the MCSA, this chapter focuses on a South African–centric conceptualisation of the denomination.
5 While a narrative introduction would be ideal to reflect the nuance and fluidity of participants, it is beyond the scope of this chapter.
6 At its 2001 Conference (a gathering of various representatives) the Church maintained that, in relation to same-sex marriage, it sought to be a “community of love rather than rejection”.
7 The term queen is used to invoke participants’ use of terms and phrases such as “clergy queens”, “drag” and “queer as Christmas” in order to equate an ‘obvious’ gay identity with femme performances of gender.
8 The terms ‘butch’ and ‘femme’ have been examined in scholarship as historical constructs often associated with lesbian or transgender identities which continue to find expression in current meaning-making systems (Kennedy & Davis, 1993; Levitt & Hiestand, 2004).
9 While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to detail the scholarly debate regarding whether these terms are essentialist or feminist, it is clear that they are contested terms (see Smith, 1989; Gibson & Meem, 2002).
10 In-text quotations from participants have been italicised in order to distinguish them from quotations in literature.
11 A popular brand of sneakers.
12 Superintendents have oversight over particular circuits which are constituted by individual Methodist congregations in a defined geographic area.
13 “Station” is an institutional term used to refer to the congregation to which a minister has been appointed.
14 Gogo is a vernacular term for grandmother.
15 In this extract, Bradley as well as Sam (by virtue of Bradley’s citation of her) become not only participants in the study but co-producers of knowledge as they make theoretical meaning of their gendered performances.
16 A town where the largest youth organisation of the Church, the Wesley Guild, had held its conference.
Instead of using the word “fucking”, Kagiso shortened it by saying “f’ing”.

Instead of using the profanity “fuck”, Kagiso opted to shorten it to “f’” in our conversation. Here is referring to the ways in which an MCSA convention became an occasion for sexual activity amongst the attendees.

A contested term which is used to refer to the raping of women to ‘correct’ them to heterosexuality (Lake, 2014).

Bibliography


Dibeela, C. 2011. A Quest for a Liberatory Learning Ethos: A Case Study Of the Women’s Associations in the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa. PhD. University of the Western Cape.


Butch lesbians, femme queens and clergy


207