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Lesbianism: Deconstructing the Christian church and social hierarchies in South Africa

ABSTRACT

Christianity's emphasis on faith in Jesus Christ can shape perceptions of LGBTQI individuals. The notion that heterosexuality is the only biblically sanctioned sexual orientation, rooted in patriarchal ideals, presents a religious challenge for the LGBTQI¹ community. Lesbian couples and their children often face hostility and exclusion from local religious communities, due to their departure from heterosexual norms. This article employs Michel Foucault's discourse and power theory to examine how the Christian church and society maintain a fixed social hierarchy. It focuses on biblical discourses shaping lesbian identity and highlights how colonial influences have fuelled a homophobic interpretation of the Bible. The argument advocates for a more positive relationship between churches and the LGBTQI community, asserting that the Christian church and social hierarchies negatively impact on lesbian identity through the use of biblical text and patriarchal views.



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1 The word LGBTQI is meant to encompass a wide range of sexual identities and expressions. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer are all terms that can be abbreviated as in this term (West *et al.* 2016:1).

1. INTRODUCTION

Michel Foucault (1978:35) once stated:

What is distinctive about modern civilisations is not that they have relegated sex to the shadows, but that they have devoted themselves to endlessly discussing it while exploiting it as a secret.

The lesbian identity is often confronted with the assumption that heterosexuality is the only sexual orientation that is acceptable in the Christian society, a notion that stems from religious texts and church-imposed doctrine (Westwood 2022a:1450; Dreyer 2008:739). Within the context of the African continent, and despite the diversity of cultures and cultural perspectives represented, Africa's hetero-patriarchal culture continues to influence this religious issue (Lewis & Marshall 2012:37). In the Christian community, the marginalisation of LGBTQI people is exacerbated by the assumption of a predetermined social structure and hierarchy that favours heterosexuality (Smuts 2023:3). Evangelical and fundamentalist Christians oppose LGBTQI rights and regard same-sex unions as being blasphemous, sinful, and not a valid marriage, whereas more liberal Christians embrace LGBTQI (Westwood 2022b:3-4). Christianity places a high value on one's faith in Jesus Christ (Baham 2020:3) and how that faith should impact on one's attitude and behaviour toward LGBTQI people (Westwood 2022a:1449). The patriarchal belief that heterosexuality is the only natural, biblical sexual orientation is a Western import that has contributed to the marginalisation of all other sexual orientations on the African continent (Sibisi & Van der Walt 2021:67). This false ideology paved the way to discrimination and opens the call to a deconstruction of the biblical text and discourses that surround homosexuality and promote exclusion, by investigating the social hierarchies that underpin society and sexuality. I aim to bring forth why this false ideology has become fact rather than fiction.

Lesbian individuals, their spouses, and their children are sometimes met with animosity and rejection in the local community when they wish to join in religious activities because lesbian homes deviate from the so-called heterosexual norm. With Foucault's (1978) theory of discourse as a guide, I intend to discuss the biblical discourses that support the idea of a fixed social and gendered hierarchy within the church and society. More specifically, I examine the effects of these biblical discourses and how they shape the perception and reception of biblical texts regarding homosexuality and lesbianism, in order to elude how the preconceived social hierarchy has solidified the heteronormative ideology and exclusion of lesbianism.

2. PROBLEM

The question arises: Is the church² welcoming and accepting of lesbian families, or do biblical discourses, transmission, and reception imply that lesbian families are less significant because of a preconceived social hierarchy duly influenced by a patriarchal ontology? This inquiry delves into the intricate relationship between biblical interpretations and the experiences of lesbian families within the church. The paper's primary focus is to uncover the underlying biblical discourses that shape perceptions of lesbian identity within religious communities.

This paper seeks to address the complex interplay between religious doctrine, societal attitudes, and the experiences of lesbian families, particularly how colonial influences have contributed to a homophobic reception of the Bible. The overarching goal is to advocate for a positive reimagining of the relationship between churches and the LGBTQI community.

3. METHODOLOGY

The study paper employs a qualitative descriptive-analytical approach, with many scientific publications, articles, as well as worldwide and local literature as the foundation for presenting key themes and concepts.

4. SEX, SEXUALITY AND GENDER: AN OVERVIEW

Foucault (1978:3) argues that the discourses on sex began to shift in roughly the 19th century (O'Farrell 2019). Sex was no longer discussed in public and moved into the privacy of the house between husband and wife (Foucault 1978:3). Foucault (1978:10) coined the phrase "repressive hypothesis" to describe the widespread repression of sexuality in modern society. This resulted in "sexuality" becoming a social construct enmeshed in the power and predefined discourses prescribed by religious groups, governments, and mental health professionals, ensuring a regulated and restricted concept of sexuality (Foucault 1978:101).

Gutting (2019:318) indicates that the "repressive hypothesis" expresses how modern societies view sexuality with negativity and oppression, resulting in sexuality censorship and ultimate elimination in any conversation. Although same-sex relationships have existed among

2 When I use the term "church", I refer to it as a generic phrase for all Christian doctrine/dominations in Southern Africa.

human beings since the dawn of civilisation, the concept of homosexuality as a separate category was invented by those in positions of authority and knowledge. This “category” was given distinguishing physiological and psychological traits that set it apart from heterosexuality (Gutting 2019:332). According to the World Health Organization, sexuality encompasses a broad range of cognitive, emotional, and behavioural aspects, including thoughts, fantasies, wants, beliefs, attitudes, values, actions, practices, roles, and relationships. Although sexuality encompasses several aspects, it is important to note that not all individuals necessarily feel or exhibit all of these qualities consistently. Sexuality is shaped by the intricate interplay of several elements, encompassing biological, psychological, social, economic, political, cultural, legal, historical, religious, and spiritual dimensions (World Health Organization 2006).

To Foucault (1978:3), previous discourses on sexuality centred on deviance and so-called notions of morality within a medical norm. This idea led to the control of sex and the stigmatisation of sexuality. Sexual deviation was viewed as a threat to society and deviating from the norm was immoral and deceptive (Eribon 2001:45; Foucault 1978). Therefore, authority repressed sexual desire because it feared the truth. Foucault (1978:82) referred to this view and attack on repression as “juridico-discursive”. In this instance, power produces nothing; it sets the law of speech and restricts it (Mills 2010:54).

In other words, Foucault claimed that sexual discourses were not the true “truth” but rather the fabrication of hegemonic power (Fei 2014:45). He believed that meaning was formed inside discourse, in that “nothing has any meaning outside of discourse” (Hall 1997:22). Foucault viewed discourses as a system of representation, and this discourse constituted a vocabulary for addressing a particular event, topic, or historical period. Discourse is only subjected to a historical period. What is constructed and conceptualised as the truth (discourse) in one particular time might differ in another (Hall 1997:22).

5. FOUCAULT, DISCOURSE, AND DOMINANCE

Foucault (1978:140) introduced the term “biopower” to explicate the prevailing paradigm of societal control in contemporary Western civilisation. Foucault’s perspective posited that power is dispersed throughout the social fabric, intimately interwoven with social connections, institutional structures, and technological frameworks, and evident at various micro-levels of everyday life. According to Foucault, biopower operates by governing physical realms through intentionally adopted self-disciplinary

practices, resulting in self-subordination. The *modus operandi* of this approach relies on the creation of scientific knowledge, which gives rise to normative conceptions and norms, to which individuals strive to adhere (Foucault 1978:140). Biopower is pertinent to sexuality, gender problems, and racism, as it gives a philosophical perspective to the aforementioned concepts (Mills 2010:81). Foucault (1978:141) infers that biopower functions from two poles, one of which is concerned with human species, classification, population, inheritance, marital status, and birth rates, and the other with the human body and its manipulation. Consequently, “biopower” refers to the ability to control human bodies and results from various subjugation and population control strategies (Foucault 1978:141).

One might infer from the Foucauldian text that the church, as an authoritarian institution, exercises a particular authority over sexuality. One such example is in the Council of Nicaea (325 AD), which indicates how religious doctrine has led to the sexual subjugation of women and that this philosophy is still imposed in many churches (Bradshaw 2012:643). Therefore, the power exercised by authoritative institutions directly impacts on the bodies of those who are controlled. Even though same-sex relationships have been a part of human existence since the dawn of civilisation, dating as far back as the 8th and 2nd centuries BC (Dover 2016:xxix), homosexuality as a distinct category was created by power, as the “category” acquired distinguishing physiological and psychological characteristics to differentiate it from heterosexuality (Gutting 2019:336). This means that homosexuality was categorised against its counterpart, heterosexuality, and in doing so, homosexuality became the deviant aspect of these two polarities. Foucault argued that sexual discourses are not “the reality” but rather the fabrication of dominating power (Fei 2014:45). Tamale (2011:12) claims that colonial discourses portrayed African sexuality as primitive or animal-like in that people of African descent were viewed as exotic or nymphomaniacs (Tamale 2011:11). In this instance, colonialists used religion to justify their tyranny and dominance, by declaring that Africans are savages who must be civilised and converted (Tamale 2011:14). Although colonial attitudes asserted that homosexuality did not exist in African culture and that Africans were hypersexual (Lewis 2011:200-201), the statement was nothing more than a myth surrounding African sexualities and a product of post-colonial attitudes and ideology. Several calls for acceptance of the LGBTIQI community have been made, and the stigmatisation of the term “homosexual” within African and South African Christian culture has led to a theological crisis within the church, as the term became demonised (Van Klinken 2015:9). The idea put forward by Foucault regarding domination is not presented in a vacuum; rather, it provides insight into the intricate workings of power relations within

society. Foucault's theoretical framework on power frequently incorporates the phrase "disciplinary power", so challenging the conventional notion that power is unilaterally enforced by a dominant group upon subordinate individuals or groups. As a result, power becomes allocated among many institutions, practices, and knowledge systems, reshaping knowledge and discourse, forming a set normative paradigm to which all should aspire.

6. LESBIAN IDENTIFICATION

When one deviates from the set normative paradigm, as in the instance of homosexuality, the realm of power becomes unstable and unbalanced and this is evident as one can note in Christianity. Homosexuality in the Christian religion and culture is perpetually stigmatised and discriminated against, and the LGBTQI community are continually reminded that heterosexuality is the only acceptable sexual orientation, and that homosexuality is lower on the social hierarchy scale (McQueeney 2009:151). For many years, Black homosexuality has been rendered invisible by Euro-centric, Western philosophy. The concept of homosexuality was introduced to Africa as sinful, wrong, and uncivilised (Clarke 2013:175). Therefore, as Clarke (2013:175) stated, decolonisation is needed, allowing an African perspective and theoretical framework to view and study homosexuality and repel Western beliefs. In an attempt to ensure some form of dominance, ethnocentric ideologies emphasised the establishment of the "other" (Nyanzi 2011:477). As a result, the stereotypical image of Africa and her people grew, and derogatory terms such as "savage", "primitive", "barbaric", "uncultured", and "uncivilised" were applied to the continent based on the belief that its people needed to be saved (Nyanzi 2011:477). In this regard, if we revert to Lesbian women in South Africa, many experience severe prejudice and violence, including a high rate of corrective rape and murder (Bonthuys 2008:730). This cruelty causes cisgender men to view lesbian women as "other" and provides a rationale for sexual assaults.

West *et al.* (2016:2) argue that African churches are not apolitical in their theology since they are predominantly hetero-patriarchal. Therefore, West *et al.* (2016:3) propose that one cannot simply disregard or marginalise the Bible, but that we, South African scholars, need to research sexuality in Africa, and the voices of the lived experiences of the LGBTQI are vital to the newly developing literature in Africa. I opine that it is essential to comprehend the lived experiences from the perspective of South African LGBTQI people, in order to firmly understand the difficulties they face daily, due to religious discrimination and stigma. To Lubbe (2007:260), same-sex couples (or lesbian couples for this paper) pose a political and social

challenge to the traditional two-parent heterosexual family based on the biological basis of reproduction. In this instance, same-gendered families are negatively impacted by the persistence of homophobia, discrimination, and heteronormativity that stigmatises non-heterosexual identities, in that these dominant narratives of what a family should be are shaped by widely held and unchallenged notions about the ideal family within a heterosexual paradigm (Lubbe 2007:261-262).

Fanon notes that othering originated from the White coloniser who provided information to African individuals that rested on what the Europeans thought appropriate and accurate (Clarke 2013). Through prejudiced and uninformed notions, the coloniser eliminated homosexual evidence in Africa and hid it in the shadows (Clarke 2013:175). Therefore, governing or controlling human behaviour, including sexuality, lies at the heart of politics (Nyanzi 2011:480) or as Foucault coined the term “governmentality” to describe how governments and their policies shape people’s actions and decisions through coercive tactics (Nyanzi 2011:481).

According to Lubbe (2007:261), the traditional nuclear family and the extended family structure face several issues when dealing with same-gendered families. Some people are sceptical and suspicious of same-gendered families because they question the definitions of what it means to be a parent, a family, a father, and a mother when the family unit deviates from the norm. Often, the parenting styles of lesbian couples are questioned, which can result in stigma and the idea that children raised by two women are “missing out” on a father role (Lubbe 2007:262). This notion is fully embedded within a patriarchal society in Africa and globally.

7. COMPULSORY HETEROSEXUALITY AND THE PATRIARCHAL SOCIETY

For generations, the assumption that heterosexuality is the sole “real” sexual orientation has underpinned civilisation (Thompson 1992:387). Western tradition believes that women are irresistibly attracted to men, that the connection between the sexes is “normal”, and that women require men for economic and social safety (Rich 1980:652). Women, however, may resist the conventional (heterosexual) social order that places men at the top and women at the bottom (Thompson 1992:388) and opt for lesbianism, which may be interpreted as women who have romantic feelings and relationships with other women (Thompson 1992:388).

According to Rich (1980:652), heterosexuality is enforced upon women by patriarchal, heteronormative societies that state that heterosexuality

is a “natural” human instinct, rendering women subordinate to men. In her text *Compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence*, Rich (1980:652) uses the term “compulsory” to refer to the mandatory nature of heterosexuality. If one deviates from the norm of heterosexuality, as in the case of lesbianism, one must explain oneself to the broader society. For Rich (1980:653), heterosexuality is a politically loaded concept that oppresses women economically, socially, and emotionally. Lesbianism forms part of an extension of feminism (Rich 1980:648).

As the fundamental concept of “heterosexuality” is rooted in social constructions, Rich (1980:648) argues that women may not prefer heterosexuality. Lesbian culture dismantles the universalist concept and description of women’s society (Wittig 1992:9). Because of political considerations, males have historically reduced women to objects, which has had adverse effects on women’s mental health along with their physical well-being (Wittig 1992:10). Nowadays, lesbianism is a stigmatised term that emphasises sexuality alone, and Rich (1980:623) characterises lesbianism as encompassing the following three factors, namely a battle against patriarchal institutionalisation and a given right and option; vital beyond the heterosexual arena, and a sense of self in which a woman bonds with another sexually and is independent of a man. In Wittig’s (1992:9) opinion, lesbianism is not out to destroy the concept of being a woman; if this were true, lesbianism would have been eradicated in the process, but should instead be viewed as an identity that provides freedom. According to Wittig’s theory, being a lesbian means not being a woman. Because of her, women symbolically embodied the social relationship with men, which requires obligations. In her text, “One is not born a woman”, Wittig states that lesbians are escapees from class and patriarchal slavery and are thus free to live. Still, heteronormativity oppresses women by categorising sexual differences (Wittig 1992:15). The concept of “lesbianism” transcends traditional gender boundaries, as it does not align exclusively with the female sex in terms of economic, political, or ideological aspects. The essence of womanhood can be understood as a distinct social connection to men, which has been referred to as servitude. This connection entails various personal and physical responsibilities, as well as economic obligations such as forced residence, domestic labour, marital duties, and the expectation of bearing children. However, lesbians reject this connection by choosing not to conform to or maintain a heterosexual orientation (Wittig 1992:20).

8. HIERARCHIES, POWER, AND RELIGION

Social dominance theory posits a social group-based hierarchy of power in a society, in which different groups have varying degrees of social legitimacy, acceptability, prestige, and influence in social discourse (Sidanius & Pratto 1999:31). Group-based dominance institutions such as patriarchy in households or racial segregation in countries are effects of social dominance and people's perception of the terms. In this regard, people acquire psychological perspectives favouring group-based dominance (Pratto *et al.* 2013:133).

Institutions and cultural meaning systems that contribute to social cohesiveness are responsible for maintaining temporal, spatial, and individual patterns of behaviour and thought. With coherence, social organisations can succeed (Pratto *et al.* 2013:136). One of the many elements that help a group stay cohesive is having a shared language and cultural meanings, the capacity to communicate with and learn about one another, a sense of purpose, a sense of belonging, and socialisation to the point where members can control their own and others' behaviour following established norms and roles. Societies may disintegrate or face instability, violence, or unmet needs without effective institutions (Pratto *et al.* 2013:136).

According to Koski *et al.* (2015:572), social dominance theory posits that ideologies will perpetuate hierarchies to the extent that they are integrated into cultural world views and behaviours. Ideological differences may influence the acceptability of viewpoints and behaviours. Nearly all social groupings tend to create a social hierarchy, where those at the top have greater prestige, power, and material rewards than those at the bottom (Koski *et al.* 2015:527). This theory poses the question of the fixed ideology against homosexuality, lesbianism, and LGBTQI families.

9. LESBIAN THEOLOGY

Lesbian theology has evolved as a scholarly discourse in reaction to the marginalisation encountered within the realms of both homosexual and feminist theological communities. This particular perspective has a greater alignment with feminist theology rather than liberation theology, and it demonstrates a preference for a thorough deconstruction of current religious standards in comparison to gay theology (Stuart 2003). Scholars such as Lisa Isherwood in the field of queer theology provide a unique and diverse viewpoint about the nature of the divine. Individuals alter their attention and utilise an innovative approach inside the realm of

religious discussion. They demonstrate bravery in challenging traditional religious narratives, by exploring the aspects that have been overlooked or concealed in theological discourse. This theological approach challenges dualistic interpretations and binary oppositions, aiming to deconstruct them. The act of interpreting sacred scriptures frequently involves challenging heteronormative perspectives and identifying instances of resistance to standard sexual norms across many religious traditions, including alternative ones. According to Isherwood (2015), queer theologians examine in-depth the intricate aspects of human embodiment, wholeheartedly embracing its unadulterated essence as a significant pathway for discovering and establishing a connection with the divine. This study employs a lesbian theological framework, drawing on the foundational principles of queer theology, to examine the phenomenon of lesbianism within the context of the church.

Religion and culture play significant roles in the lives of many South Africans. According to statistics, 84.5 per cent of South Africans value their culture and religion (NationMaster 2014). The concept of “family” in South Africa is multifaceted. As a result, in South Africa, the term “family” encompasses not only immediate relatives living under one roof, but also broader social networks such as those in which a child serves as the primary breadwinner. The situation is complicated by the high rate of parental mortality in South Africa, which results in many orphans. South Africa has suffered greatly from the ravages of colonialism and apartheid, which has contributed to the collapse of family life (Mkhize & Vilakazi 2021:4). Within South African Christian culture, there is resistance to homosexual individuals entering the church (Eybers 2020:10). The widespread myth propagates this incorrect assumption that homosexuality is un-African, which leads to the stigmatisation of the LGBTQI community (Thompson 2018:3). Thompson hints further that culture is crucial, but that patriarchal ideals impact highly on it, based on heteronormative morality. Pope Francis stated the following and advocated for the LGBTQ (in Daniels 2020:1):

Homosexual people have the right to be in a family. They are children of God ... You can't kick someone out of the family nor make their life miserable for this.

Even though he claimed to be a high-profile religious leader in a Christian domination, homosexuality remains a debated topic. Considering the information mentioned above, one can note that a long-standing debate on homosexuality can be found in Africa and globally, especially within Christianity (Thompson 2018:3). Although the Bible seldom mentions homosexual behaviour, many individuals have observed, according to

Kraus (2014:99), that none of the often-cited verses supports the idea that Jesus would condemn homosexuality. However, these texts are still used to criticise the LGBTQI community. According to Van der Walt and Davids (2022:33), the gendered script relates to how our bodies are portrayed and how they reflect societal and religious standards, beliefs, and values. Heterosexuality, the sexual orientation upon which heteropatriarchy is based, is the sexual orientation that codes society into a binary male or female framework. The biological representations of these bodies are rooted in the predetermined “gender roles” given to each of the two polarities: the masculine, which eludes positivity, and the feminine, which is deemed negative (Van der Walt & Davids 2022:36).

In a patriarchal culture, women may hold positions of authority. Still, in many, they are positioned at the bottom of this hierarchy, as their acquired power and authority rest and depend on the approval of men (Van der Walt & Davids 2022:36). It is thus apparent that women are viewed as inferior to men, which leads to unjust subjugation and dominance. This concept is imposed on women by the biblical text, as evident from Paul’s philosophy in Ephesians 5:22-28. Lesbians, in particular, are dehumanised by the hierarchical pyramid already viewing women as lesser than men and, in return, disproportionately affects the entire LGBTQI population. If the biblical descriptions are to be held accountable for the discrimination and exclusion of the LGBTQI community, this raises a hermeneutics-related concern. In South Africa, especially from a religious standpoint, violence is often enforced on the LGBTQI communities through faith and the maintenance, or rather, implementation, of hetero-patriarchy by religious communities (Van der Walt & Davids 2022:38). Thus, Van der Walt contends that hetero-patriarchy is frequently guided by intolerable practices of biblical interpretation, which leads to the justification of this intolerance through the application and literal reading of biblical scripture, which leads not only to exclusion in the church but also to discrimination and violence. Based on Van der Walt and Davids (2022:39), Genesis 1-3, 19; Judges 19; Leviticus 18:22, 20:13; Romans 1:26-27; 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, and 1 Timothy 1:10.37 eventually became the doctrine on sexuality, especially Genesis 1-3. This false notion has resulted in discriminatory policies that target homosexual individuals based on their perceived immorality.

If a man lieth with mankind as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall surely be put to death; their blood shall be upon them (Leviticus 20:13).

The term “homosexual” is derogatory to many lesbians because it emphasises only the sexual component of their connection with someone of the same gender rather than its “capacity for stability, growth” (Kraus 2014:102). Kraus (2014:103) further implies that heterosexual relationships are judged based on the strength of their love for one another and their devotion to God rather than their private sexual behaviours. This means that same-gendered attraction is viewed through a different lens and that relationships between gays and lesbians should not be judged according to their sexual practices but according to the same criteria as heterosexual couples. Defending the morality of same-sex behaviour as anything other than a presumption of immorality is an unfair evaluation of LGBTQI relationships (Kraus 2014:103). Those who do not identify as heterosexual men or women have trouble fitting in with current Christian teachings (Kraus 2014:103). When engaging in a scholarly examination of lesbianism within the context of biblical literature, it is imperative to acknowledge the narrative of Ruth and Naomi. Some readers within the queer community understand the relationship between Ruth and Naomi through a lens of romance and sexuality, perceiving them as potentially being involved in a romantic and sexual partnership (Nortey 2015:2). An in-depth examination of the story concerning Ruth and Naomi offers an alternative viewpoint on their relationship. The perception of the relationship between Ruth and Naomi exhibits variation among individuals, with interpretations positing it as a lesbian affair, while others view it as a planned effort by Ruth to uphold her deceased husband’s legacy through a profound emotional bond with her mother-in-law (Nortey 2015:3). The determination of whether the depicted relationship qualifies as a genuine lesbian love story remains uncertain. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that this narrative stands out within biblical literature as one of the few instances that indicates the affection shared between two women. This may be observed in Ruth 1:16-17 (NIV):

Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me.

This text serves as a compelling depiction of the deep connection that exists between Ruth and her daughter-in-law Naomi. This behaviour exhibits a degree of fondness that is commonly associated with interpersonal connections of a romantic nature.

Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God.

Ruth's words demonstrate unwavering loyalty and devotion to Naomi. Ruth is willing to abandon her homeland and her beliefs, in order to be with Naomi. This is an extraordinary promise. Ruth's declaration, "Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried", emphasises the intensity of their relationship. In biblical literature, this profound expression of loyalty and unity exemplifies the capacity for profound love and companionship that can exist between two women. It exemplifies the enduring strength of human connections and the lengths to which people are willing to go for those they love. Jesus has been portrayed as the epitome of heterosexuality and celibacy because of heterosexist Christian doctrine. Given that Jesus never married, it would be misleading to describe him as an advocate for traditional marriage and the nuclear family (Kraus 2014:104). The misunderstanding of the unconditional nature of Jesus' love for all people, depicting him as exclusively heterosexual, is ungrounded (Kraus 2014:104-105). From a South African and African setting, the emergence of the sexual citizen in post-colonial Africa illustrates Christianity's continued use and the state's use to regulate sexual behaviour. Leaders of the post-colonial nationalism movement have effectively promoted the predominant heterosexual identity (Chigudu 2016:21).

According to Rowlands (2021:24), this idea has encouraged African men to demonstrate their masculinity by controlling women, which has helped form patriarchal and heterosexist sexual institutions. Consideration of the evolution of sexualities in Africa over time may reveal intriguing insights. In this view, power dynamics, together with time and place, influence how individuals express themselves and make meaning of the world around them (Chigudu 2016:21). The so-called "homosexual problem" goes beyond issues of ethics and norms. The formation of homosexual and heterosexual identities is a historical topic that involves several factors, including the perspectives of indigenous communities, colonial rhetoric, and modern political identity declarations, all of which lead to the societal discourse on homosexuality (Chigudu 2016:28).

10. THE BIBLE, THE RECEPTION, AND THE TRANSMISSION OF SCRIPTURE

Human rights are important in safeguarding sexual minorities, particularly in terms of sexual orientation and gender identity. Human rights and LGBTQI rights are violated worldwide in several political, cultural, and religious circumstances because of their actual or perceived sexual orientation and gender identity (Gontek 2009:1). The Holiness Code of Leviticus prohibits

men from “acting like women” with other men. The Holiness Code, like contemporary culture, required men and women to perform as expected. In Christ, there is no male or female (Gontek 2009:1). The Leviticus Code is spiritual, and the Holiness Code encourages purity and peace. Applying this spiritual truth to lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgender people, and heterosexuals challenges LGBTQI constantly (Gontek 2009:2). Governments and religious groups must recognise diversity, enact justice, and guarantee equal rights. In this regard, Christians should be aware that Jesus never denounced homosexuality; instead, he defended eunuchs, who were regarded as homosexuals by religious law despite being incapable of reproducing (Gontek 2009:2). Jesus declared that eunuchs would be accepted in the kingdom of heaven, just as God predicted through the prophet Isaiah that they would be allowed (Gontek 2009:2). God is said to have created humanity in Genesis 1:26-31. After blessing them, God observed that everything he had created was good – indeed, it was exceedingly good – and that he had made them both male and female (Wood 2019:1). To uphold the customs of governing, procreating, and raising future generations, both sexes were required to take care of the family (Wood 2019:1).

Nowadays, however, inequality is one of the most common forms of social construction; it is defined by the differences between men and women, most notably when men and women do not share equally in a society’s wealth and decision-making (Wood 2019:2). The rise of the sexual citizen in post-colonial Africa demonstrates how the state and Christianity are still used to control sexual behaviour, rather than a liberation from colonial restraints. It may be enlightening to consider how sexualities have changed throughout African history. According to this perspective, power dynamics as well as time and place affect how people express themselves (Chigudu 2016:22). As women are already recognised as second-class citizens in our society, one might ask: “Where does the lesbian family fit in?”. Suppose many churches use and uphold the ideology that a woman should be submissive to her husband as he maintains authoritative power. In that case, the lesbian family will undoubtedly be eradicated from the church. One must closely examine biblical transmission and reception to understand the position of the LGBTQI community and the church, especially lesbian families and their children. Consideration must be given to the age-old patriarchal dilemma. In the past and now, patriarchy has manifested and influenced cultures across human history (Wood 2019:2). It is widely held that patriarchy is unchanging, has biblical support, can be traced back to ancient times, is inherently harmful, restrictive, and oppressive, and deserves to be opposed as a supremacist ideology. Patriarchy promotes the idea that men are inherently superior to women

in every aspect of life (Wood 2019:2). According to Wood (2019:3), patriarchy promotes the ideas that women should not be allowed to hold positions of power outside the home and the family, that their bodies are inherently sinful, that sexual desire serves only a reproductive function, that the church, as Christ's body, is predominately male. Thus women are not allowed to hold such positions and have no place outside the home and family, all of which illustrate society's deeply rooted patriarchal and hierarchical nature.

The church must confront destructive issues such as gender imbalance to reform and heal women from the disease of gender subjugation. Genesis accounts of creation and fall are often used to oppress women and blame them for their subjugation. Women have always been a part of the church, but their authentic stories have been forgotten. They are not reflected in the larger narrative of the church (Wood 2019:3). The literal interpretation of the Bible is founded on an indoctrinated ideology based on the so-called "literal interpretation" of Genesis 1:27, which denotes heterosexuality as the only proper sexual orientation, in that God created one man and one woman.

According to the Gauteng High Court, the LGBTQI community suffers from the Dutch Reformed Church's intentional stance against same-sex marriages. The judgement was delivered by Judges Sulette Potterill, Joseph Raulinga, and Daisy Molefe, who determined that the church's policy of 2016 was deemed unconstitutional and invalid, and thus nullified. The court determined that the act of excluding individuals from the church, solely based on their sexual orientation, was deemed unjust as it impeded their ability to fully and equitably share in all the rights and freedoms provided by the church (Mitchley 2019).

Togarasei (2020:20) suggests that sexuality in both African and Christian cultures is characterised by silence, with sex occurring but not being spoken about; this may be related to biblical scripture that forms the foundation of this Christian belief. Therefore, biblical writings are to blame for controlling sex and sexuality. As Leviticus 18:22 indicates, the Bible condemns same-sex relationships. Christians must interpret the Bible, in order to reach an agreed-upon interpretation because, according to Togarasei, Christians selectively use scripture, picking and selecting what they like and excluding what they think should be discarded. Patriarchy influences Christianity and biblical interpretation. From a Christian perspective, sexuality has a profoundly patriarchal foundation (Togarasei 2020:21).

Given that the spiritual issue of sexuality has the potential to bring down not only our churches, but also our societies, Togarasei (2020:34) suggests that the extent to which one uses the Bible in spiritual conflicts on matters of sex and sexuality should be evaluated. Religion serves as the fulcrum and centre of many Christians' lives. Religious groups offer a network of friends, a moral foundation, and emotional support. Many people consult religion before making important decisions because religious concepts provide solutions to some of life's most urgent problems (Levy & Reeves 2011:53). What transpires, though, when a person's religious convictions clash with his/her other components of identity? The vast majority of Christians and Christian denominations hold that homosexuality is a sin (Levy & Reeves 2011:54). McQueeney (2009:151) indicates that most of the conservative Christians (for instance, fundamentalists and evangelicals) believe that God desires to create heterosexual families where men and women complement one another and where having children is the primary goal of sex. The idea that only heterosexual marriage should be the basis for sexual activity is supported by the idea that gay relationships are sinful and should be contested. The gendered, heterosexual family continues to be the cornerstone of Christianity (McQueeney 2009:151).

Several factors contribute to the general public's negative perception of lesbians, including the fact that lesbians are women in a culture that places a premium on heterosexual ideals, the pervasiveness of the media, and culture's glorification of heterosexual men (Swarr & Nagar 2004). According to Foucault, sexuality is always the result of historical claims to power since it is a product of the time and cultural milieu in which it develops. Therefore, sexual orientation is neither fixed nor genetically determined (Swarr & Nagar 2004). Gontek (2009) elucidates that a heteronormative culture might contribute to the development of homophobia. As a result, voices that challenge the heteronormative norm are often marginalised or silenced. Even if the LGBTQI population in South Africa now has more substantial legal rights, heterosexist realities entrenched in heteronormative terms continue to impact on South African institutions and society significantly. One may wonder if the acceptance and transmission of these biblical discourses and the already existing social hierarchy, which has a strong colonial influence, had contributed to the rejection of lesbians and other LGBTQI people in the church.

11. FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATION

When analysing the material offered and using the lens of Foucauldian power relations, the Christian church promotes a hierarchy that places men above women; in this way, patriarchal ideas underlie society and religion in our 21st-century environment. If women are already considered second-class citizens, how does the church view lesbian families, marriage, and children? Is this concept guided by the social hierarchy derived from the colonial perspective of oppressor and oppressed? The rise of the sexual citizen in post-colonial Africa demonstrates how the state and Christianity are still used to control sexual behaviour rather than a liberation from colonial restraints. Reverting to my initial question, “Is the church welcoming and accepting of lesbian families, or do biblical discourses, transmission, and reception imply that lesbian families are less significant because of a preconceived social hierarchy duly influenced by a patriarchal ontology?” The answer would be “No!”. The church, in some instances, still upholds negative ontologies on homosexuality, and it is thus clear that the reception and transmission of biblical texts and colonialism contributed to the sexuality “problem” the LGBTQI face nowadays. One must closely examine biblical transmission and reception, in order to understand the position of the LGBTQI community and the church. The church must confront destructive issues such as gender imbalance to reform and heal women and the LGBTQI (Chigudu 2016:22). The vast majority of conservative Christians believe that God wants to make heterosexual households, where men and women complement one another and where the primary purpose of sex is to produce children. Despite increasing improvements in South Africa’s legislative, protection for the LGBTQI community is still lacking, and heteronormative discourses impact on society and institutions, leading to unfavourable opinions duly influenced by Scripture.

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